

Book Review

MARCH 28, 2021

MODERNIST MAINSTREAM In a single year, four books changed everything

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

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



THE AMERICANS

WRITERS WHO SHOW US WHO WE ARE

THE FOURTH IN A SERIES

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

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

Tillie Olsen

BY A. O. SCOTT

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



THE INSTANT *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

“A knockout of a novel...which we predict will be viewed as one of 2021’s best.”

—*O, THE OPRAH MAGAZINE*

“This is a **profound and moving** novel.” —*PEOPLE*

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

“A **breathhtaking story** of the unimaginable prices paid for a better life.” —*ESQUIRE*

“As moving as it is riveting...poised to be **one of the most stirring page-turners of the year.**”

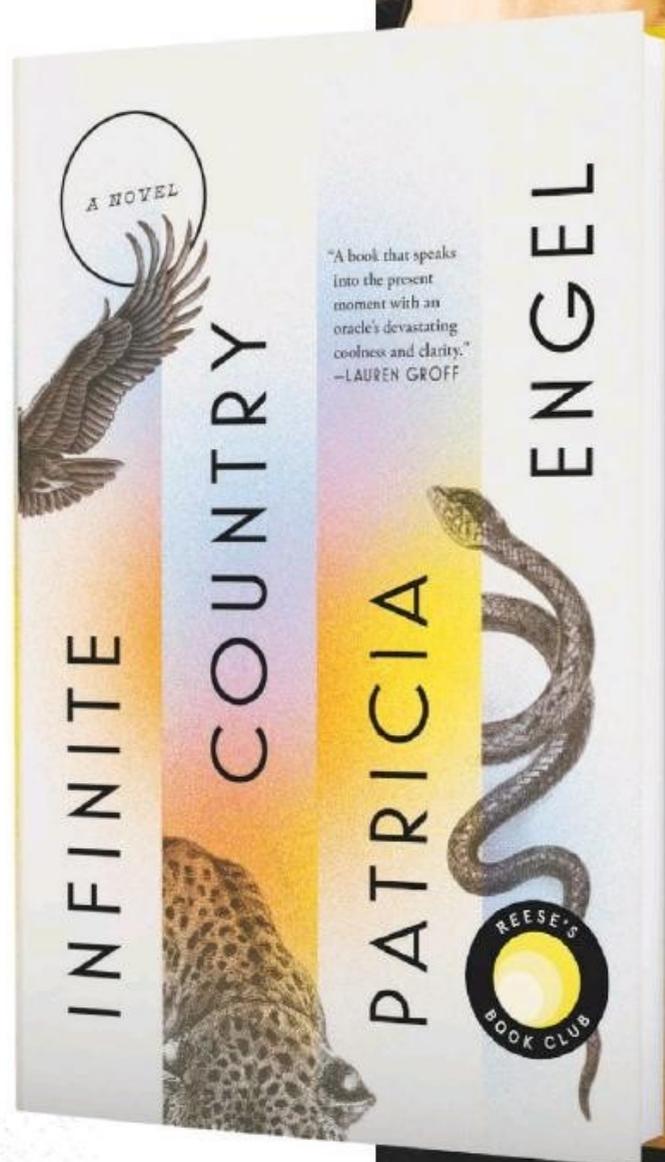
—*THE A.V. CLUB*

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

“A **gorgeous, moving** novel.” —*NEW YORK POST*

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

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



REESE'S BOOK CLUB PICK
INDIE NEXT LIST PICK
AMAZON BEST OF THE MONTH

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PRESS



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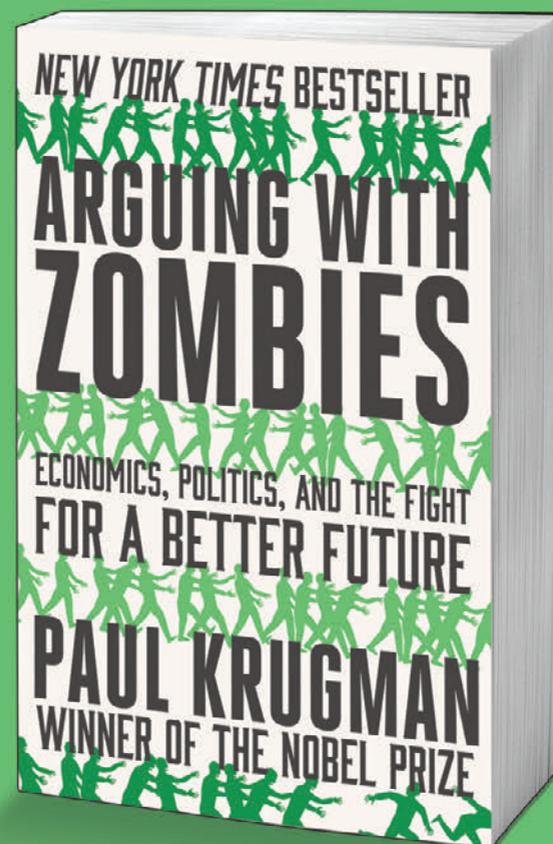
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On the cover: Tillie Olsen at the Radcliffe Institute in the early 1960s.

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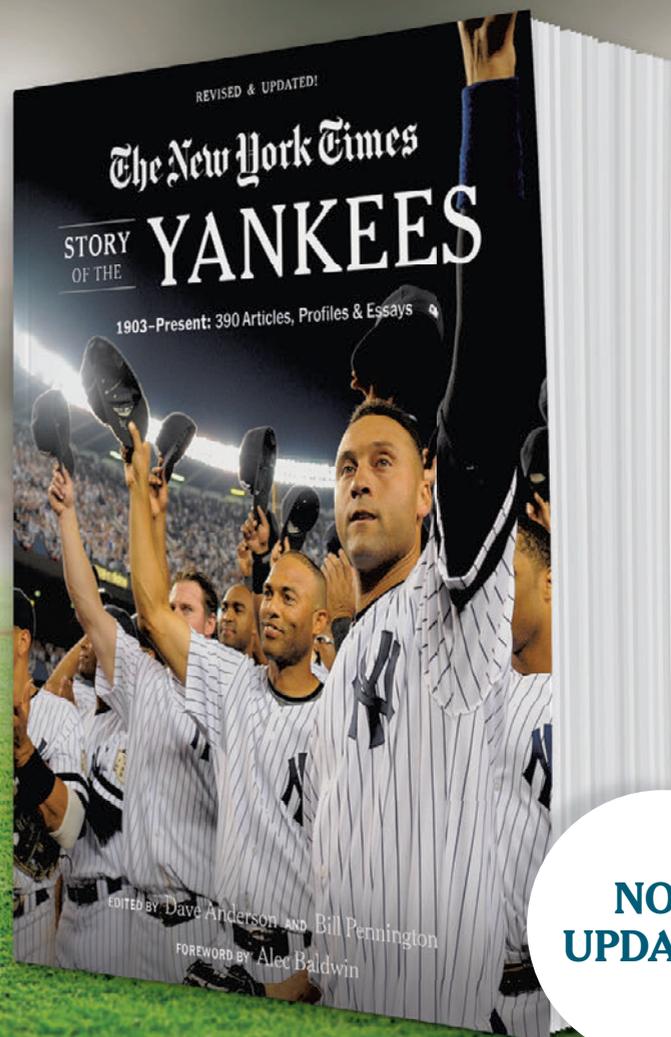
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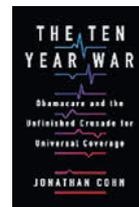
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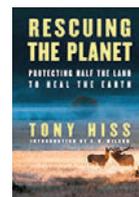


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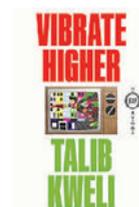
New & Noteworthy



THE TEN YEAR WAR: OBAMACARE AND THE UNFINISHED CRUSADE FOR UNIVERSAL COVERAGE, by Jonathan Cohn. (St. Martin's, \$29.99.) A health reporter and policy expert, Cohn takes readers behind the scenes of the struggle to pass and preserve the Affordable Care Act.



RESCUING THE PLANET: PROTECTING HALF THE LAND TO HEAL THE EARTH, by Tony Hiss. (Knopf, \$28.) Traveling across North America to illustrate how the planet is a complex system, Hiss (a former staff writer for *The New Yorker*) calls for protecting 50 percent of the Earth's land by 2050 to counter climate change.



VIBRATE HIGHER: A RAP STORY, by Talib Kweli. (MCD/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$27.) Growing up in Brooklyn with hip-hop as a constant soundtrack, Kweli embraced the music's political potential and became a star in his own right, collaborating with rappers from Mos Def to Kendrick Lamar.



WHEN WOMEN INVENTED TELEVISION: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE FEMALE POWERHOUSES WHO PIONEERED THE WAY WE WATCH TODAY, by Jennifer Keishin Armstrong. (Harper/HarperCollins, \$27.99.) The surprising history of four women who seized on TV's early potential.



THE TRANSIT OF VENUS, by Shirley Hazzard. (Penguin Classics, paper, \$18.) Originally published in 1980, Hazzard's novel rigorously traces the love lives of orphaned sisters in midcentury England.

WHAT WE'RE READING

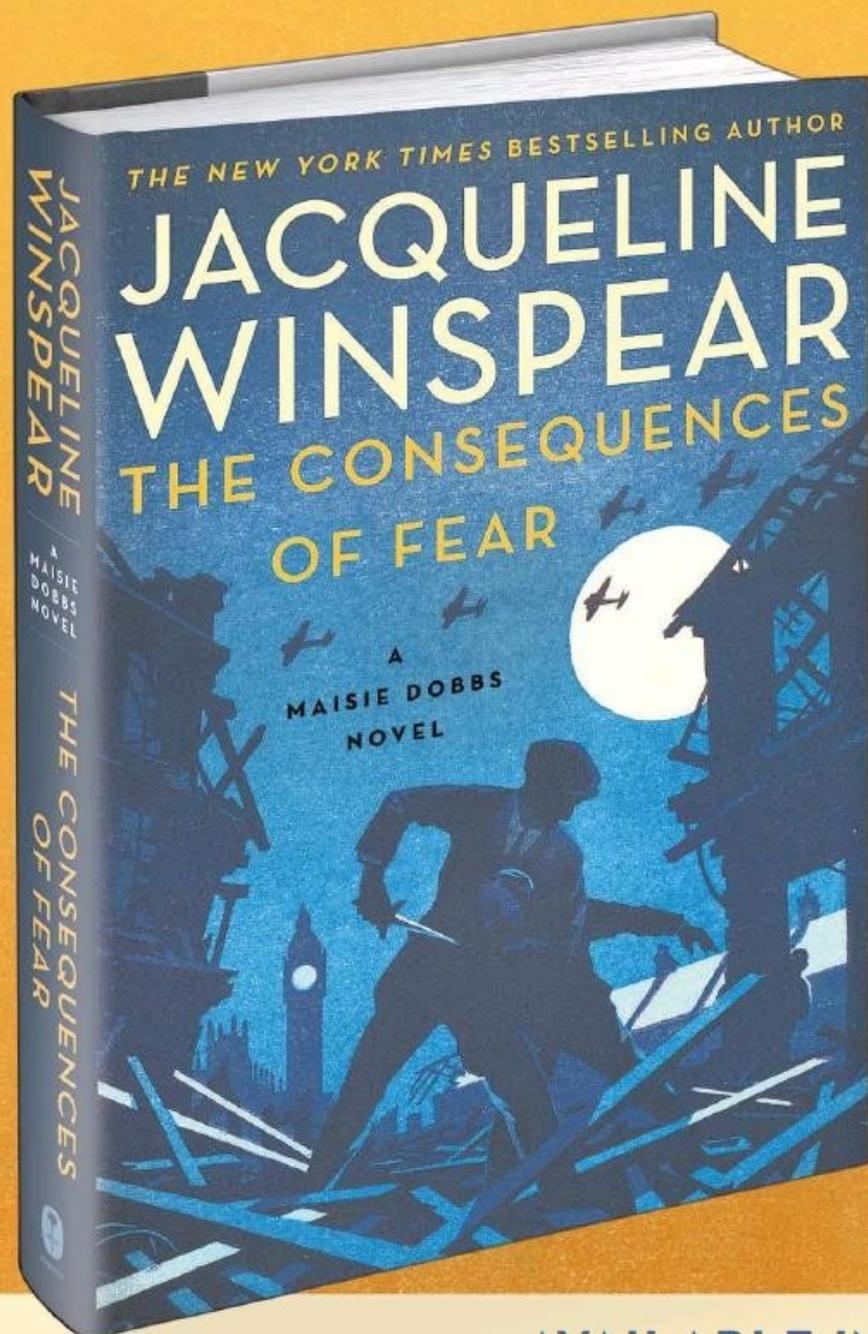


There are words we say a lot when we talk about the queer community: accountability, justice, harm reduction, intersectionality. I can convincingly use each of these words in a sentence, but press me on the brass tacks of how to apply these concepts? I become less eloquent. Kai Cheng Thom is only 30, but she's been enmeshed in the queer scene long enough to understand the value of lofty ideas and the complexities of trying to implement them. In her collection of essays and poems, **I HOPE WE CHOOSE LOVE**, Thom doesn't avoid difficult topics like partner violence, consent, suicide and (OK, fine, yes) “cancel culture.” Her prose easily floats between humor and pain, and her pragmatic but gentle approach to complicated topics sets her apart from some of her more dogmatic peers. Thom calls her book “a trans girl's notes from the end of the world,” but her book made me wonder if we're actually just in the painful process of a new world being born.

—SHANE O'NEILL, SENIOR VIDEO EDITOR

“AN OUTSTANDING HISTORICAL SERIES ...
A HEROINE TO CHERISH.”

—New York Times Book Review



“Winspear is writing
at the top of her game.”

—Publishers Weekly, starred review

“Fast-paced.”

—Booklist, starred review

October, 1941.

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

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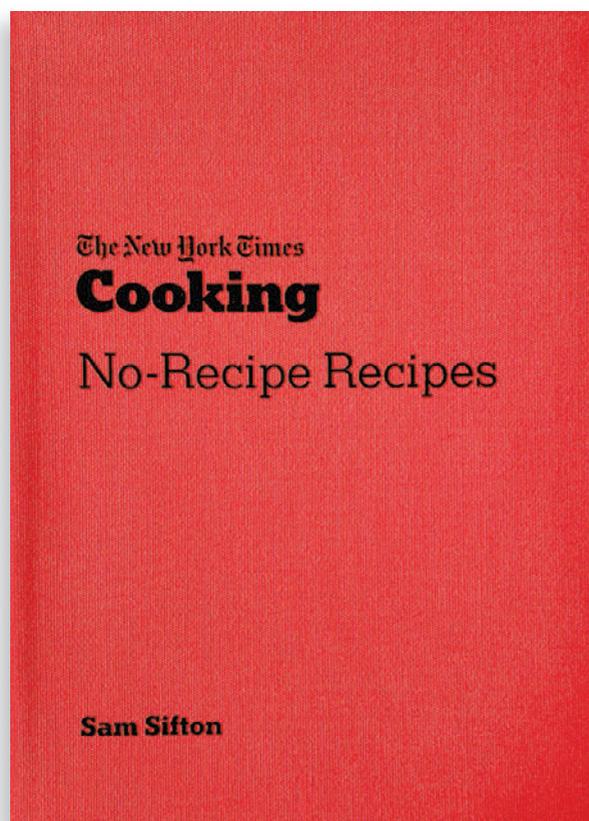
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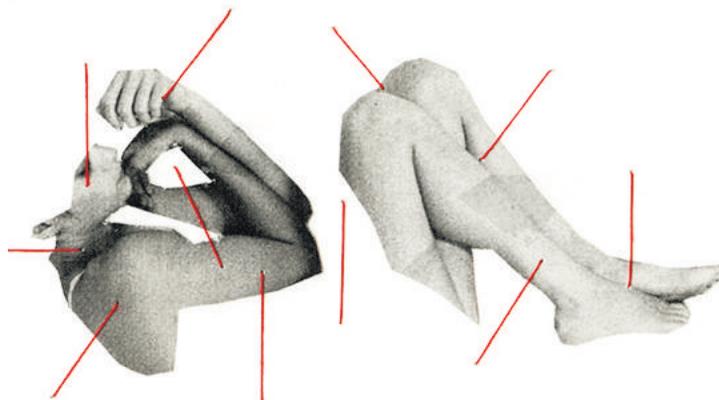
“Join me in cooking this new, improvisational way, without recipes.” —Sam Sifton



The New York Times
Cooking

10
TEN SPEED PRESS

Letters



NAJEEBAH AL-GHADBAN

Self-Created Disasters

TO THE EDITOR:

Thank you, Lucinda Rosenfeld, for highlighting in “Heroines of Self-Hate” (March 14) a trend in the development of female characters that aggravates me regularly in contemporary literature.

Where have the Becky Sharps and Undine Spraggs gone? In their place, we have woman after woman who is her own worst enemy. Usually, these women are white and perhaps white women of a certain class no longer experience enough external barriers to self-realization.

The self-created disaster is a tidy solution to the absence of any more meaningful conflict. Though Rosenfeld’s piece focuses on writing by women, I see this continually in fiction from male writers as well, where I call it the “cup size + emotional damage” approach to character development; in these cases, however, I ascribe it to pure laziness.

ELIZABETH SYLVIA
MATTAPoisett, MASS.

Bearing Witness

TO THE EDITOR:

In her true crime shortlist (March 14), Kate Tuttle notes that the author of “Two Truths and a Lie,” Ellen McGarahan, was totally in favor of the death penalty until she saw one being carried out.

Russell Baker once wrote that as a reporter for a Baltimore newspaper, he was offered the opportunity to witness three executions by hanging. This was touted as a rollicking entertainment that any red-blooded journalist should jump at the chance

to experience. Baker hesitated and let an eager colleague take his place. It turned out to be hideously prolonged, and the colleague was physically sick afterward and again several times over the ensuing few days.

Any person in favor of capital punishment has a moral responsibility to witness an execution — a real one — at least on video. If you endorse state-engineered death, you need to see what the grim reality of a human life being ended really looks like.

DAVID ENGLISH
ACTON, MASS.

Risking Business

TO THE EDITOR:

Thank you, Emily Mortimer, for the delightful perspective on “Lolita” in your essay, “Witness for the Defense” (March 7).

It saddens me to wonder whether nowadays an author would write and a publisher publish such a book. As I think about it and other works like the creative tour de force “Infinite Jest,” part of what separates them from the prosaic and anodyne is the risk the authors take by challenging and perhaps offending us; by making us uncomfortable; by giving voice to thoughts and ideas we may wish remained silent.

Yet this is what gives depth and meaning to art. I fear the zeitgeist represses its expression.

JAY MARKOWITZ
POUND RIDGE, N.Y.

In Service

TO THE EDITOR:

In his review of Rosa Brooks’s

“Tangled Up in Blue” and Justin Fenton’s “We Own This City” (March 14), Maurice Chammah suggests that the desire of many ordinary beat cops to move from patrol duty to “tactical” — the work of SWAT teams and specialized units — is the result of boredom and dreams of “shoot-outs and high-risk situations.”

Perhaps. But Brooks’s “Tangled Up In Blue” suggests a more nuanced explanation, namely that the real-life experience of policing doesn’t remotely approach the Hollywood version. Brooks describes the many complex and intractable social problems that police officers deal with day to day — the effects of “poverty, addiction and violence,” in Chammah’s words — and the cynicism and fatigue that that experience can give rise to.

A police chief I worked with years ago put it best: “Policing is not about adventure; it’s about service.” As a lawyer who has represented victims of police misconduct for more than a quarter century, my conclusion is that people who go into policing, an honorable profession, need to better understand what it’s all about before signing up. And police agencies need to sort for folks who are ready to do the difficult and thankless work of “service.” When that happens, I will have fewer cases to bring.

ANDREW G. CELLI JR.
NEW YORK

Same Odes

TO THE EDITOR:

In his engaging review of Annalee Newitz’s “Four Lost Cities,” Russell Shorto notes that a woman living in a Turkish city 9,000 years ago replastered her walls, swept and decorated her home with art “much like us,” but was unlike us in burying ancestors beneath her bed and keeping the skulls of deceased loved ones in niches in the walls.

But we also keep ancestors and people we loved in our homes — framed in photographs sitting by our beds and hanging on our walls. Often things others do that seem very different from what we do, are really different ways of doing the same thing.

DEBORAH TANNEN
WASHINGTON

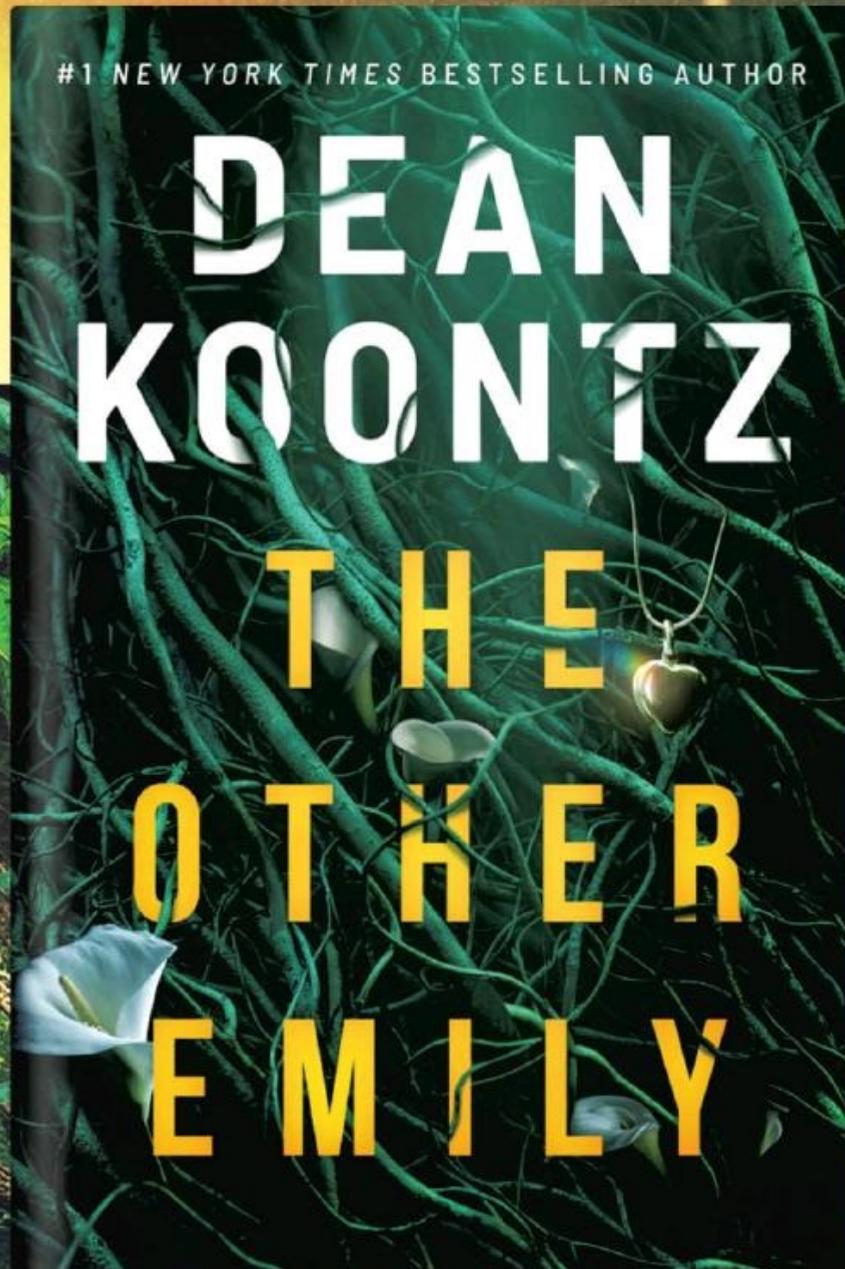
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By the Book



Tammy Duckworth

The Illinois senator, whose new memoir is 'Every Day Is a Gift,' read widely as a child, especially 'anything that had kid detectives solving mysteries.'

What books are on your night stand?

As a busy mom of a 6-year-old and a 2-year-old, I mostly listen to audiobooks. I'm currently listening to Susan Cain's "Quiet," Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner's "Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction" and, for fun, Kevin Kwan's "Sex and Vanity." And I just finished Yuval Noah Harari's "Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind."

Tell us about the last great book you read.

When I picked up "Born a Crime," by Trevor Noah, I figured it would be funny and engaging, since he's a comedian. What I didn't expect was how much it would teach me about South African history. I learned so much more about apartheid by reading his personal stories of living through it. And his experience spanned both the Black and white communities, giving him a deeper perspective on the country. It's such a human book, and a great read.

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

I recently finished "The History of Ancient Egypt," by Bob Brier, and learned the steps to mummifying human remains. I haven't found a use for that yet, but you never know.

What books do you think best capture your own political principles?

I really enjoyed "Team of Rivals," by Doris Kearns Goodwin. I'm not sure it captures my political principles, but I do like the idea of bringing together people from different perspectives to serve the same cause.

What are the best books you've read about the Iraq war?

"The War I Always Wanted," by Brandon Friedman captured the coming of age for my generation of service members. It spoke to the illusions I had in the first half of my military career about what war was, versus the reality of war once I experienced it.

Are there books that you think it's important for your children to read?

The diary of Anne Frank, Jane Austen's works, "Charlotte's Web" all come to mind. My girls are still young; Abigail is just learning to read, and Maile won't start for a few years, so we're at the beginning of their journey. I want them to be widely read, so I try to make sure there's range in their reading materials.

Which writers — novelists, playwrights, critics, biographers, historians, journalists, poets — working today do you admire most?

I love Doris Kearns Goodwin's biographies. She goes deep into the relationships between people in power, which we don't think enough about. In "The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys," she explored how personal relationships affected policies, which in turn affected the whole nation. And in "Team of Rivals," she wrote about how Lincoln used relationships — human interaction — for his own ends.

Which genres do you like best, and which do you avoid?

I read just about everything and usually have three to four books going at a time. I love the "Great Courses" books, because they're accessible overviews for a working mom like me with a crazy schedule. Then I'll usually have a science or natural history book, and a political book or memoir. I also like to have a brain-junk-food book going, like "Crazy Rich Asians" or a mystery. I read everything except for horror.

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

I was a voracious reader as a child. I loved the Nancy Drew books, fantasies like the Lord of the Rings trilogy, and anything that had kid detectives solving mysteries.

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

I'd put together a dinner with Doris Kearns Goodwin and the subjects of her biographies, like President Lincoln, President Kennedy and Eleanor Roosevelt. It would be fun to watch what they confirmed or denied, and then Doris could call their bluff by saying, "I read your letters." And as a fellow Illinoisan, I feel like it's mandatory to put Lincoln on my list. □

An expanded version of this interview is available at nytimes.com/books.

ILLUSTRATION BY JILLIAN TAMAKI

Get Busy

BOOM CHICKA BOOM CHICKA WAH WAH. A-BOOM CHICKA BOOM CHICKA WAH — *It's time for sex!*

Wait, where are you going? Get back here.

Admittedly, 2020 wasn't the sexiest year on record. As I write, there are ongoing studies by the National Institute of Mental Health and various health organizations trying to determine what the pandemic has done to our sexuality. There are studies that find married couples having more sex (because really what else do they have to do?); and single people having way less, abandoning their quest for *la petite* mort to avoid *la grande* one. The public service messages want to sound sex-positive in the midst of uncertainty, but somehow I didn't find myself cheered by the oft-quoted "You are your safest sex partner" — and even after *that*, we were admonished to wash our hands.

But slowly we are being vaccinated, we are being freed; and soon Thanatos and Eros may not be so scarily intertwined. Here's hoping.

THE 80/80 MARRIAGE: A New Model for a Happier, Stronger Relationship (Penguin Life, 240 pp., \$26) is extremely well intentioned. Nate and Kaley Klemp, an executive coaching duo, found their marriage was foundering because of a very modern problem: the quest for "fairness." With the idea that everything needs to be 50/50, life becomes a constant negotiation: If I'm stacking the dishes in the dishwasher, why are you playing Civilization and not reading to the kids? The bickering was endless — and was not even an improvement on what they deemed the 80/20 model of "traditional" married couples, where the women generally had most of the responsibilities for the home. At least, the Klemps theorized, there was comfort in clearly defined gender roles. No one argued over who stacked the dishes.

So Nate and Kaley came up with the concept of the 80/80

JUDITH NEWMAN is the author of "To Siri With Love: A Mother, Her Autistic Son and the Kindness of Machines."

marriage, where you don't strive for perfection but everyone gives 80 percent (yes, the number is random, don't worry about it). Here, the mind-set is not "If I win, you lose," it's "If I give a lot and you give a lot, we both win."

They take their idea of "radical generosity" into the bedroom, quoting the marriage therapist Corey Allan: "How you do life is how you do sex. How you do sex is how you do life." So you have to put yourself out there, sometimes in uncomfortable ways. If, for example, you are the less randy



NISHANT CHOKSI

partner, you don't just say, "I'm not in the mood." You say, "I'm not in the mood now, but how about tomorrow?" This not only softens the sting of rejection; it quiets anxiety and keeps the affection bubbling. (The caveat being, put out, and do it with joy.)

I love the idea of making generosity the focus of a book, and a relationship. Then I think about actual human beings. The book has a chapter devoted to what you do when you have a spouse who is unwilling to change from being a taker to being a giver. Let's just say that I think that's the first chapter most readers will turn to.

In **SEX POINTS: Reclaim Your Sex Life With the Revolutionary Multi-Point System** (Hachette Go, 320 pp., \$28), Bat Sheva Marcus has come up with a way to visualize your sex life as a circle with four quadrants — desire, pain, arousal and orgasm — and how many points you

gain or lose when taking the mother of all quizzes determines where you are in your satisfaction levels. You might be anywhere from 160 (swinging from the chandeliers) to well below 100 (hanging by a thread). It's like Sudoku for shtupping.

The book then tackles the most common problems that keep us from having great sex; Marcus believes in doing whatever it takes to surmount a sexual obstacle. What's refreshing about "Sex Points" is that it starts with the assumption that bad sex isn't always some deep-seated psychological problem — that, for both men and women, it is often physical, and it's the physical problem left unsolved that *leads* to anxiety, stress and avoidance.

"I've had patients quote their therapist's telling them that their vaginal pain was their vagina's way of telling them that they 'weren't ready' to have sex," Marcus writes. "Oh, really? Or maybe it was actually their vagina telling them that it was actually time to find a new therapist."

THE GREAT SEX RESCUE: The Lies You've Been Taught and How to Recover What God Intended (Baker Books, 272 pp., \$16.99) is brought to you by the people who run the popular Christian marriage blog To Love, Honor and Vacuum, and the author, Sheila Wray Gregoire, begins with this premise: "What if our evangelical treatment for sex issues make things worse?"

"The Great Sex Rescue" explores Christian teachings on sex against a backdrop of academic research on evangelism and sexuality. A chapter entitled "Your Spouse Is Not Your Methadone" explores how one idea central to Christian sex education — that men must have to control their lust and women are sexual gatekeepers — has been disastrous for many couples. Traditionally women are blamed for men's porn addiction. Gregoire puts the blame squarely with the addict.

I don't want to leave the impression that Gregoire writes about sex in a punitive fashion, though. Far from it. There is a lot of joy in these pages. In fact, I'd like to suggest she retitle her book: "Oh God, Oh God, Oh God." □



The New York Times

Cooking

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House of Horrors

In this harrowing novel, seven siblings are held captive by their parents.

By **FLYNN BERRY**

A TEENAGE GIRL breaks a bedroom window and drops to the ground, then starts to run. For days, she has practiced what she will say when she finds help: “My name is Alexandra Gracie, and I am 15 years old. I need you to ring the police.”

Lex must have a long trek ahead of her; surely the house where her parents have kept the girl and her six siblings hostage is isolated and remote. But within seconds, Lex is running past other homes. Her neighbors were just down the road, almost in earshot, the whole time our narrator was chained to her bed.

“I screamed, trying to summon them from their living rooms, from their sofas, from the evening news,” she recalls. “Festive lights hung from trees and over front doors, welcoming their inhabitants, and I thought, stupidly: Christmas.”

“Girl A,” Abigail Dean’s debut novel, shares a kinship with Emma Donoghue’s “Room” and Alice Sebold’s “The Lovely Bones” in its harrowing portrayal of

GIRL A

By **Abigail Dean**

352 pp. Viking, \$27.

trauma. Like those titles, “Girl A” is certain to rouse strong emotions. It is a haunting, powerful book, the mystery at its heart not who committed a crime, but how to carry on with life in its aftermath.

By the opening chapter, the crime’s perpetrators, Lex’s father and mother, are, respectively, shot dead in a kitchen and about to be buried in an unmarked prison grave. Their children have wildly different fortunes. Each chapter is named for one of them, a canny structure that gradually moves the spotlight of Lex’s attention across her family. The siblings are sharply drawn and distinct, their ties weighted with rivalry, guilt and betrayal, the novel operating partly as a meditation on the vagaries of birth order.

After their escape, the siblings are placed in different adoptive homes, where they receive varying levels of love and support. The luckiest must be Noah, the baby, raised by affectionate parents with no memory of his past. The position of unluckiest is hotly contested. Perhaps it is Ethan, the eldest, who capitalizes on his family’s notoriety, writing a newspaper article on “The Problems With Forgiveness,” which, Lex observes, “were many and predictable.” Or perhaps the least fortunate is Gabriel, the “troubled” one, or Delilah, who seems suspiciously healed, having “surpassed Survivorhood and reached Transcendence.”

FLYNN BERRY is the author of the novels “Under the Harrow” and “A Double Life,” and the forthcoming “Northern Spy.”



CAT SIMS

Or is the unluckiest Lex herself, Girl A, the one who escaped?

Now a lawyer based in New York, Lex is good at her job, has friends and lovers, can afford spritzes and weddings abroad, but also seems utterly exhausted by the effort of resilience. As a narrator, Lex never tries to win over her audience, or to present herself as plucky or heroic. Her tone is controlled and understated; the flatness is effective but highly unsettling.

Early on in their captivity, the children watch their parents cover the windows and remove the clocks from the house, “old disorientation techniques.” Lex finds that her sense of time remains unstable. As short chapters swing between the past and present, you long for more forward movement — for the heavy weather to break. But that frustration seems deliberate on Dean’s part, mirroring Lex’s own rage to escape her past. And the suppressed tension acts like the winding back of a slingshot, which about halfway through the novel suddenly rockets forward, propelling the story through scenes of genuine fear to its moving, pitch-perfect ending.

I kept wanting to read “Girl A” as a fairy tale or parable, to cauterize some of the suffering in its pages, but Dean resists that impulse at every turn, always rooting Lex’s story in the real. Dean looks squarely at the sort of parents who humiliate their children, or hit them, or deny them food, and the consequences of such monstrousness. In one heartbreaking scene, Lex recalls how during her first holiday in her adoptive home, she “ate Christmas,” wak-

ing in the night and stealing down to the dark kitchen to devour the cheeseboard, the gingerbread men, the fruitcake. Faced with the crumbs, her adoptive mother loses her patience. As in life, even the heroes in this novel have their breaking points.

Except, perhaps, for Lex’s adoptive father, who is good as gold, and whose compassion illuminates the novel. Lying on a trampoline beside his adult daughter, he recalls dreams in which he meets her as a child: “You were tiny. Just 6 or 7. Long be-

The suppressed tension acts like the winding back of a slingshot.

fore I could have known you. They started off as nice dreams, really. But then there would always be the moment when you would have to go. It was like I knew all along that it was coming. And somehow — somehow I knew what you would have to go back to.”

The reader shares his aching sense of powerlessness. Dean tells this story with such nuance and humanity, you’re desperate to step into its pages. To help.

As adults, Lex and her sister Evie imagine an alternate childhood for themselves, in a house on a beach, filled with books. Evie asks:

“Do they know how lucky they are?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“I wish I could tell them.”

“No. Let them be.” □

Forging an Empire

How Queen Elizabeth I and Francis Drake together made England a global power.

By NIGEL CLIFF

ENGLAND IS A nation divided. In one camp, nationalists decry the diabolical threat to their freedom posed by dastardly Continentals, instead throwing their hopes on a shadow empire of boundless trading opportunities. In the other, pro-Europeans bitterly protest that their country is making a cataclysmic mistake and bide their time. Sound familiar? Just kidding. It's not Boris Johnson's Brexit Britain but the England of the late 16th century, the subject of "In Search of a Kingdom."

In Laurence Bergreen's colorful assessment, an unlikely alliance between Queen Elizabeth I and Sir Francis Drake empowered English Protestants to see off Conti-

ish ships on the high seas. As Bergreen notes, the young Drake started his career under his Plymouth cousin, the state-backed buccaneer John Hawkins, by seizing slave ships and illicitly selling the captured cargo in the Spanish Caribbean. Plymouth recently voted to remove Hawkins's name from a city square after protests against monuments to philanthropic slavers. As the future overseer of the Royal Navy, Hawkins had at least as much to do with the defeat of the Spanish Armada as his younger cousin. Yet a seafront statue of Drake still stands in Plymouth, defying a petition demanding its removal.

It might yet survive, along with the Drake naval base, roundabout and mall. After two voyages, Drake quit and formed an

ingly recounts, he did far more. Setting sail in 1577, he pushed across the Atlantic to Brazil, bellowing psalms into the wind and dining to airs played on viols. He swung down the coast, briefly stopping to behead a minor nobleman for alleged mutiny and witchcraft, before dashing through the treacherous Strait of Magellan at twice the clip of Magellan himself. There he emerged into a ferocious storm that swallowed up all but his own plucky little galleon, which he proudly renamed the Golden Hind.

Coasting along Chile and Peru, he picked off groaning Spanish treasure ships and unsuspecting Spanish encampments; at one landing, he made off with a stack of silver bars without disturbing the sleeping sentry. He claimed California for Elizabeth, tried and failed to find a Northwest Pas-

extracting the greatest possible wealth at the least possible cost. And what wealth. Golden indeed, Drake's galleon disgorged the century's biggest haul of precious metal; Elizabeth's own share exceeded the crown's annual income. Rewards followed: the knighthood, coat of arms, country mansion, estates, marriage to an heiress and, most important, favorite status at court. Full acceptance never came, and neither in his lifetime did recognition of his spectacular but illegal circumnavigation. Elizabeth still hoped to avoid outright conflict with Spain and put about the barefaced lie that he had limped home empty-handed.

Bergreen, who has written well-regarded biographies of Columbus and Magellan, proposes the haul as the golden counterweight that tipped the balance of power in Europe. This is leaning heavily on the scales; the financial upside for England was greater than the downside for Spain. Yet psychologically, the voyage unquestionably electrified both. It emboldened England to project power at sea and conceive a global trading empire. Conversely, it humiliated the Spanish, to whom the man they called *El Draque* — the dragon — became the stuff of legend, credited with diabolical powers and, like a Protestant Saladin, admired for gallantry to his foes.

The Elizabeth-Drake combination is fascinating, but perhaps unavoidably it results in a patchy telling. Events at sea and court unfold separately, with few actual interactions between queen and captain. Both make sporadic appearances in the second half, an account of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, to which Drake's key contribution was a wildly successful pre-emptive strike on the enemy's preparations at Cádiz. There are oddities, too. The Golden Hind was named after the whole of a female

IN SEARCH OF A KINGDOM

Francis Drake, Elizabeth I, and the Perilous Birth of the British Empire

By Laurence Bergreen

Illustrated. 464 pp. Custom House. \$29.99.

mental Catholics and stake out the beginnings of the British Empire. Drake, a flame-bearded firebrand who resembled a cross between Errol Flynn and Yosemite Sam, has a peculiar status in English history. On the plus side, he was a superlative navigator who helped defeat the Spanish Armada. In the debit column, he had an incurable habit of piratical thieving that leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

Among other attractions, this makes him an excellent candidate in whom to consider the warring passions of the English character: the stiff upper lip and the devil-may-care. A tenant farmer's son — the oldest of 12 brothers — with the accent and manners to match, Drake was despised by courtly patricians for his passing acquaintance with protocol. Yet to a scrappy island nation that was spoiling to stick it to the overweening Spanish Empire, a dose of "yah-boo-sucks" went a long way. Wrap it in a flag, and it ran and ran — and still does. Bergreen does not make the link to modern-day Britain, but can it be coincidental that "Brexit" echoes "privateer," the old term for a state-licensed sea raider?

In Drake's own time there was no British Empire, and no Britain (something to watch again). In England there was a shaky national church, which Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, had made himself head of, splitting the country in two. The papist powers in Europe considered England a wicked backwater ruled by a heretical witch — justification enough for the governing Protestant clique to knock off Span-



Queen Elizabeth I knighting Francis Drake, 1581.

alliance with escaped slaves to knock off a Spanish mule train carrying gold and silver across Panama. By then he had conceived a violent and self-justifying hatred of the Spanish Empire with its atrocities and rapine and Inquisition; abuses that confirmed him in the reasonable belief that those most convinced of their own certainties do most damage to others. This animus, together with his navigational prowess, lust for lucre and staunch Protestantism, made him a godsend for Elizabeth, whose only safe path to ocean trade was to outsource empire-building and claim to have absolutely nothing to do with it.

Drake was to voyage to the west coast of the Americas to break ground for future trade missions. If he plundered Spain's plundered wealth in the process, so much the better. In the event, as Bergreen engag-

sage back home through Canada, and headed across the Pacific. Bagging spices in the Moluccas, encountering killer crabs, courteous kings and deadly shoals, he crossed the Indian Ocean, rounded the Cape of Good Hope and sailed into Plymouth Harbor after a voyage of nearly three years, the first captain to circumnavigate the globe and return alive.

Whether that feat was intentional or extemporized — Bergreen appears to lean toward the first — it was no fluke. Captaincy in the Age of Discovery was about managing men and disasters. Hunger, thirst, disease, exhaustion and dissent were greater hazards than defective charts. Drake had the iron resolve and high spirits for the job. He got on famously with Indigenous people and sent off his Spanish captives with a full belly and a parting gift, all in the interest of

Can it be entirely coincidental that 'Brexit' echoes 'privateer'?

red deer, not its rear legs. Galicia is not due south of London. Flurries of repetitions and recapitulations trip up the narrative. After being sent back once more into the thick of an apparently concluded story line, for this reader it felt like déjà vu all over again.

This is a shame, as Drake's story is both dramatic and timely. His global joy ride may not have been intended as a geopolitical statement, and his later adventures ended in disaster. But he helped chart a course for the future British Empire, which learned to be more freewheeling and commercial, less draconian and statist than its Spanish forebear. Along the way Drake came to embody a streak of Englishness — bumptious, tenacious, patriotic, crafty, vainglorious and defiantly exceptionalist — that is back with a vengeance. Welcome to the new Elizabethan Age. □

A Case Against Fatalism

In these essays, art is not a tool of political power, but a power itself.

By JERALD WALKER

JESSE MCCARTHY WELCOMES everyone to read “Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul?” but he’s expressly keen to reach “the younger generations struggling right now to find their footing in a deeply troubled world.” Some of that potential readership came of age in the period bookended by the police killings of Michael Brown, in 2014, and both Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, in 2020 — the same period during

WHO WILL PAY REPARATIONS ON MY SOUL?

Essays

By Jesse McCarthy

324 pp. Liveright. \$27.95.

which McCarthy wrote the essays in this stunning debut collection. For African-Americans in particular, these were years that yielded much about which to despair, and no doubt much despairing occurred, and does still. The risk of succumbing to that despair is real; but doing so would be at odds with the Black tradition. The Black tradition, McCarthy understands, is resistance.

Its most visible form perhaps is social and political activism — the Black Lives Matter movement, as a recent example, arose in direct response to the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin. But, as McCarthy illustrates, Black resistance just as often happens in the arts, the church, the academy, the streets. All are required. What the author — an assistant professor of English and African-American studies at Harvard — mainly hopes to convey is “the basic premise that nothing is outside of our purview, that there are no limits to the ideas, realms of knowledge, creative traditions or political histories that we can lay claim to and incorporate.” Further, he stresses that “the knowledge of the accumulated genius of our literary, intellectual, political and religious traditions is crucial to determining a course not only through the present crisis, but through those still to come.”

“Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul?” is a representative sample of that genius. McCarthy’s analyses and observations are masterfully articulated, as are his dissents — for instance his convincingly explained, personal decision to resist the trend of capitalizing “Black” in reference to the community to which he happens to belong, in part because of the precedent set by Toni Morrison.

McCarthy’s essays are richly varied, and one surmises the abundant intersec-

tions of art and race were in large measure informed by his own experiences growing up Black in America and in France. Topics range from the troubling lessons gleaned from the 2015 Bataclan massacre in Paris; to the globalization of Harlem’s artistic mecca; to trap, or, as McCarthy aptly describes it, “the funeral music that the Reagan revolution deserves.” He asks what Kara Walker’s colossal 2014 sphinx sculpture, entitled “A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby,” says about history; profiles the influential poet and scholar Fred Moten; and composes an “open letter” to the R&B artist D’Angelo, whose 2014 album, “Black Messiah,” McCarthy observes, “speaks plainly to the unquenchable, unmistakable sweetness of black life.”

Importantly, McCarthy dedicates some plainspeak to the “unquenchable, unmistakable” bittersweetness of Black life, too. Consider, for instance, as he notes in “Language and the Black Intellectual Tradition,” how the abolitionist David Walker responded to the antebellum suggestion of sending Black people back to Africa: “America is more our country, than it is the whites — we have enriched it with our *blood and tears*,” he wrote in 1829. “The greatest riches in all America have arisen from our blood and tears: — and will they drive us from our property and homes, which we have earned with our *blood*?” Black Americans would not be driven from their property and homes and sent anywhere. To the contrary, they would, over time, acquire homes and properties that were once denied them.

These acquisitions were, are, a kind of appropriation, a laying of claim. And appropriation has been a key form of Black resistance not only materially but also artistically. In the first essay in the book, “The Master’s Tools,” McCarthy takes as his primary example Kehinde Wiley’s 2005 painting “Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps,” which depicts a Black man in contemporary urban attire posing on a horse as the French emperor — a remix of Jacques-Louis David’s 1801 portrait of “Bonaparte Crossing the Alps.” Then there’s the Spanish slave Juan de Pareja, who upon gaining his freedom put brush to canvas as if he too were a member of the royal court, just like his former owner, Diego Velázquez. And in their 2018 music video for “Apushit,” Jay-Z and Beyoncé actually hold court in the Louvre, an act alone that requires a reconception of the masterpieces therein. “Harnessing the instruments of power to a distinctly insurgent posture,” McCarthy writes of their subversion, “is not *only* done to protest discrimination; it also signals the intervention of a new intelligence, a spirit in the process of discovering the true extent of its untapped potential.”

Written language, of course, is another such instrument of power, whose potential, when fully tapped, begets such authors as

Colson Whitehead, John Edgar Wideman, Claudia Rankine, Terrance Hayes, Phillis Wheatley and Toni Morrison. McCarthy offers close reads of them all, but Morrison’s moral and social criticism and the Black humanist tradition in which she wrote are the underpinning of this collection. It’s distinctly evident in the title essay, wherein McCarthy argues against monetary recompense for slavery. “Black American music has always insisted upon *soul*, the value of the human spirit,” he writes. “It’s a value that explicitly refuses material boundaries or limitations.”

Here he engages in direct conversation with Ta-Nehisi Coates’s 2014 essay “A Case for Reparations,” although the rebuke is mild; McCarthy agrees with Coates that even if it’s not money, *something* is owed to the descendants of enslaved people. Less mild is McCarthy’s criticism that as an intellectual working in the Black radical tradition, Coates has fallen short. In reference to Coates’s “fatalism,” McCarthy writes: “Like all those who have taken up the pen to strike at America’s racial injustice, he is also the inheritor of a proud tradition that has relentlessly and defiantly believed that we have it in our means to break the spell

It is not enough to diagnose social ills; one must emphasize our resourcefulness in overcoming them.

of oppression, and that speaking truth to power is not an act of despair, but one of candescence.” It is not enough to diagnose social ills, McCarthy says; one must emphasize our resourcefulness in overcoming them.

McCarthy’s strongest rebuke, however, is reserved for Frank Wilderson, who, in his recent philosophical memoir, “Afropessimism,” argues that Black people today are still enslaved, that the plantation is inescapable. On the contrary, McCarthy says, Black Americans today “are once again trying to save the country.” In what he calls a longstanding pattern, “the ‘colored citizens’ of this country are at the forefront of practicing civics.”

With a younger readership at the top of his mind but an open invitation to all, McCarthy seems determined to draw attention to African-Americans’ “true strength” and “worth.” He well knows that if despair brought on by a troubled world is to be kept in check, the right prescriptions must be offered, the right traditions advanced, the right lessons drawn, and from the right people. “What would Frantz Fanon, or David Walker, or Ella Baker tell us if they saw the streets today?” he asks at the end of his critique of Wilderson. “Surely, not that we are at an impasse against an implacable enemy. They would insist that we lift each other and rise together with the spirit of history at our backs. We have done it before. Every time we do it’s a new day.” □



Jesse McCarthy

The Dead Can't Lie

Stephen King's latest novel is part detective tale, part thriller, with a horror story filling in the seams.

By CHARLES YU

IN HIS CRAFT MEMOIR, "On Writing," Stephen King describes a moment in his process when he asks himself the "Big Questions." The biggest of which are: "Is this story coherent? And if it is, what will turn coherence into a song?"

You can feel King reaching for some Big Questions in his most recent novel, "Later." Told from the perspective of Jamie Conklin, the narrative shuttles between the immediacy of now and the hindsight of "later" to tell a kind of coming-of-age-as-mystery story, an exploration of innocence and what's on the other side of childhood.

The only child of a literary agent named Tia Conklin, 8-year-old Jamie is a perceptive kid. Unusually so. He can see dead peo-

LATER

By Stephen King

272 pp. Hard Case Crime. Paper, \$14.95.

ple. If the premise sounds familiar, don't worry — the novel assures us that his ability is "not like in that movie with Bruce Willis." For one thing, unlike the boy in "The Sixth Sense," Jamie can see the deceased for only a short time after their deaths (a "week or so"). And most relevant for this story: The dead can't lie. If Jamie asks a question, the departed have no choice but to answer with the truth.

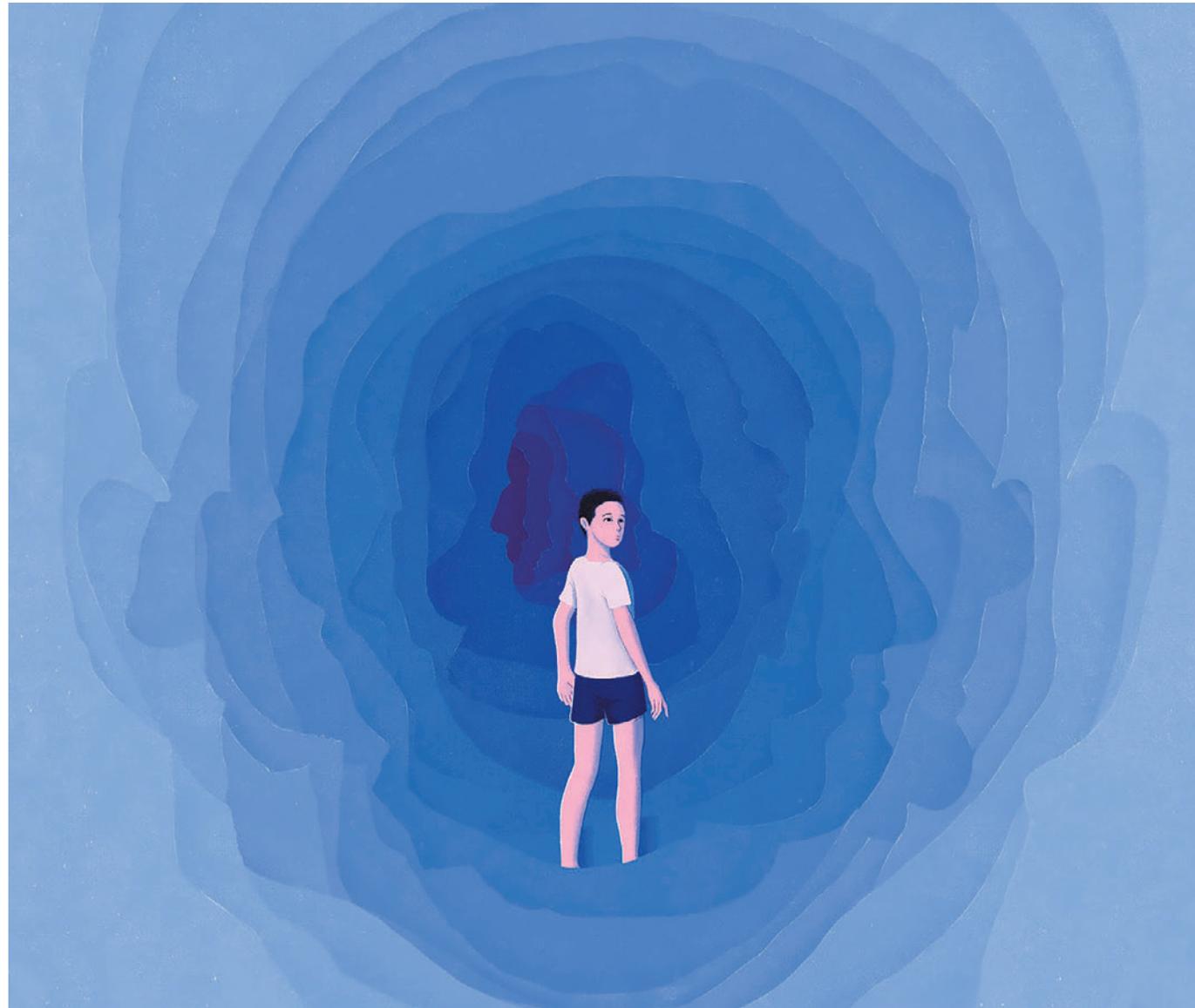
Jamie's gift (or curse) is exploited by adults, including his mother, who uses it to extract the text of the last unpublished novel written by her recently deceased star client, Regis Thomas, an understandable act of desperation by a single parent on the verge of financial ruin. When Tia's onetime girlfriend, a dirty cop by the name of Liz Dutton, sees that Jamie's ability is for real, she uses it to her own career advantage, exposing Jamie to a host of dangers that will lead to dire consequences for both of them. The result is something of a genre hybrid: part detective tale, part thriller, with a horror story filling in the seams.

And the horrors are many. There are hints of evil from another dimension, things from "outside the world" and "outside of time." But mostly the horrors are familiar ones. Plain old human cruelty. The loss of loved ones to disease or old age. Alzheimer's. Also, less morbid though no less heavy: the loss of innocence. Growing up too fast. The unexplainable, the incomprehensible in our everyday lives. (Another horror for Jamie: people calling him "Champ" even after he's asked them to stop.)

On top of all that are economic precarity and downward mobility, being one unplanned health emergency from disaster:

"First, Mom's wisdom teeth went to hell

CHARLES YU'S latest novel is "Interior Chinatown," which won a National Book Award.



DANIEL LIÉVANO

and got infected. She had to have them all pulled. That was bad. Then Uncle Harry, troublesome Uncle Harry, still not 50 years old, tripped in the Bayonne care facility and fractured his skull. That was a lot worse.

"Mom talked to the lawyer who helped her with book contracts (and took a healthy bite of our agency fee for his trouble). He recommended another lawyer who specialized in liability and negligence suits. That lawyer said we had a good case, and maybe we did, but before the case got anywhere near a courtroom, the Bayonne facility declared bankruptcy."

Surprise medical bills, shady lawyers, back taxes — here are the true horrors of life. For Tia, who works in publishing, it's hard enough trying to make a steady living.

From all of this, King weaves a story of adolescence with a sweetness at its heart — the touching and genuine relationship between Jamie and Tia. Therein lies the book's strength. King captures in dialogue and description a sense of closeness, the

specialness of those key years between childhood and teens, when your mom can be not just your parent but also your best friend and hero.

But this strength is also a liability. Despite its early assurance to the contrary, "Later" is like that movie with Bruce Willis. Beyond the superficial similarities (sensitive kid, single mother, talking to dead people), the emotional core of King's story — in particular, the parent-child relationship at its center — is also reminiscent of M. Night Shyamalan's. Whereas the movie evokes depth of feeling through stillness and restraint, King's novel is more effusive, stating things that could have remained unsaid. And while the earnestness is not necessarily unwelcome, especially given our young narrator, it has the effect of diluting the emotional power of that central relationship.

On a more granular level, King's sentences snap into each other like Lego bricks, standardized, expertly molded pieces engineered to fit together perfectly.

This is not necessarily a complaint; the prose reads easily and enjoyably. To continue the analogy, it's a bit like seeing an accurate-to-scale roller coaster made entirely of Legos. When you step back, it's impressive to see what he has built, even if one can't help wondering whether it would be better if the pieces weren't quite so fungible. And on further inspection, one sees the places where the rendering only approximates reality, where curves become right angles and true diagonals don't exist. There's a trade-off: more coherence, perhaps, but at the expense of making it sing.

But maybe the fungibility of the pieces is the very quality that makes them work. "Later" is yet another example of King's talent in building stories out of the materials of his choosing, and like so many of his creations, it's remarkable how well the thing holds together. The pace and ease of reading, the ratio of familiar to new. A roller coaster made of Legos is still a roller coaster, and even if I've been on this ride before it doesn't make it any less fun. □

An Accident in the Laguna

In Donna Leon's mysteries, the setting — Venice — is the most important character of all.

By **MARILYN STASIO**

THE CITY OF VENICE is such a beguiling presence in Donna Leon's mysteries, it can eclipse the serious crimes that drive her modern-day plots. Over the course of 30 novels featuring her compassionate police detective, Commissario Guido Brunetti, the American-born author has seized on fundamental Venetian plagues like government corruption, illegal immigration and badly behaved tourists. Which is not to

TRANSIENT DESIRES

By **Donna Leon**

272 pp. Atlantic Monthly Press. \$27.

overlook such scourges as bureaucratic inertia, rampant nepotism and rising seas.

In "Transient Desires," Brunetti raises a judgmental eyebrow at the follies of youth, who tend to get rowdy on warm Saturday nights in Campo Santa Margherita. Two

MARILYN STASIO, who wrote the *Crime* column for decades, continues to review mysteries and true crime for the *Book Review*.



young local men pick up a couple of American girls there and — after an accident in the lagoon — abandon them on a dock outside the hospital.

Marcello Vio and his best friend, Filiberto Duso, claim that the romantic midnight boat tour came to an unhappy end when they plowed into an underwater pylon. "Water came over the sides and prow and soaked us," Filiberto remembers. "The

boat just stopped, the way you can walk into a wall when there's *caigo*," or dense fog. Now Marcello is in deep trouble for damaging the powerful motorboat he borrowed from his uncle, who uses it in his clandestine smuggling operation, and both men have been identified by security tapes from the hospital. But why did they dump the badly injured Americans and flee into the night? As Brunetti teases out the connections between the accident and Marcello's uncle, dramatic scenes play out in the dark and on the water with combat troops from the Guardia Costiera, who snake through the canals where traffickers in small boats with whisper-soft engines can access the mainland. Slipping untaxed goods like cigarettes into the city is an old smuggling tradition, to be sure, but in a new twist, some shipments contain human cargo.

The action in "Transient Desires" takes place largely on the water and focuses on the many manual jobs — and those lucky enough to work at them — that keep this ancient city running. Reflecting on the current state of "the country of Dante, Michelangelo, Leonardo, Galileo and Columbus," Brunetti notes that 2,000 men — most of

them college graduates — recently applied for three open jobs as garbage collectors. In the course of his investigation, the commissario interviews one of the garbage men, or *spazzini*, from whom he gleans a damning piece of evidence. In order to do so, Brunetti is forced to speak the local vernacular, *Veneziano*, "almost choking on the thickness" of it.

Leon has a lot to say in this book about prejudices, many of which declare themselves through accents. *Veneziano* may be protectively incomprehensible to outsiders, but as Brunetti ponders a Neapolitan colleague and that city's inflections of "amiability, flattery, joviality, deceit," he stops himself. "It was too easy to read history as you pleased, to see what you chose to see in the actions of people and cultures long gone." Still, he reveals his own biases once again when the case leads him to the working-class district of Giudecca. "For me, going to the Giudecca is like going on an Arctic expedition," he admits.

Needless to say, by venturing outside the comfort zone of his own prejudices, this deeply simpatico detective learns a lot about his city, his countrymen and himself. And so do we. □

On the Couch

An unorthodox therapist recounts her sessions with a sex-obsessed patient.

By **HERMIONE HOBY**

AS CHEKHOV DID not quite say, if an analyst describes an analysand as a gun on Page 4, you better bet your bottom dollar that gun's going off by Page, oh, 200 and something. The nameless narrator of Laura Lindstedt's sly, intriguing novel "My Friend Natalia," translated from the Finn-

MY FRIEND NATALIA

By **Laura Lindstedt**

Translated by David Hackston
225 pp. Liveright. \$24.

ish by David Hackston, is a psychologist flouting professional protocol by divulging the story of "Natalia" — "from whose name I will now remove the quotation marks as I might remove the safety catch from a gun."

We're primed then, to see this patient as explosive; we await a dangerous denouement. Natalia's problem is an exciting one but, stated as it is with unequivocal bluntness — "I think about sex all the time" — it also has the flavor of Freudian burlesque.

HERMIONE HOBY'S second novel, "Virtue," will be published in July.

It's just too on the nose (or too on the somewhere else). Elaborating on her predicament, Natalia speaks in what a dutiful therapist might note as phallic terms: "The act forces its way into my mind like a tumor, and I am lost." Our narrator is indeed dutiful but simultaneously unconventional and puffed with defensive pride over an unorthodox technique: "layer therapy." (That the therapist's gender remains undisclosed occurred to me only after I'd finished the novel and read its jacket copy; I'd assumed — analyze this — that the psychologist was female.)

Bragging that his or her or their Ph.D. "received a grade of *cum laude approbator*, no less," the therapist carps that "the Finnish Association of Psychoanalysis did not accept me as a member, a matter that my mentor thought scandalous." In other words, this narrator's unreliability may well reside in insecurity and the need to prove something. Under the therapist's novel methodology, patients' memories are mere raw material: Via writing assignments, Natalia will, through a kind of Lacanian logic, "uncover different strata of memories and layer them up again," forging new mental paths that constitute her recovery. The patient will rewrite herself while being semi-authored by the psychologist.



Perhaps novelist chauvinism made me read the assignments more as creative writing prompts than credible therapeutic exercises, but then again hasn't that distinction always been somewhat moot? A glib observation, but also a truism playfully inhabited within these pages as the psychologist laments and celebrates "this hall of mirrors that we call life."

The instructions for "Recovery Program Week 2" — "Thoughts on pornography" — come with the directive to "use the supporting words I wrote down." The story that Natalia duly tells involves remembering an explicit comic strip in which the

male genitalia "juted upward as a plea!" I experienced something of the psychologist's discomfiture when, a few pages on, I discovered a life-size, photorealistic rendering of a well-veined erect penis. (Natalia gives her psychologist this pencil drawing at the end of the session.) Ostensibly recounted with nothing but clinical curiosity, the transgressive patient's evasions, provocations and sleights of hand are in this way craftily enacted by the novel itself.

At one point, Natalia recalls rummaging through paper recycling bins as a child, hoping to find "something forbidden, something that we had no business holding in our hands. And which, for that very reason, belonged to us." This sounds like the naïve dream of analysis itself — dig deep and you'll retrieve that interdicted memory, the missing piece that will bring the whole puzzle of selfhood into shining, legible meaning. This is the book's tease, that Natalia — eccentric, unruly, compelling — will be definitively "solved." But she's not a dramatic principal, not a thing able to fire real bullets. This was her psychologist's figure of speech and as such probably tells us more about the psychologist than the patient. The deeper, indeed more *layered*, mystery is, it emerges, the novel's chimerical narrator. □

Crime Seen

Tracing the evidence of genocide in a single photo.

By SUSIE LINFIELD

“WHAT DOES ONE do upon discovering a photograph that documents a murder?” Wendy Lower asks in her new book, “The Ravine.” Lower, a historian of the Holocaust who has worked with Nazi hunters, ponders a photograph, taken in October 1941, in the once thriving, now desolate Ukrainian town of Miropol. It shows several men — Ukrainians and Germans — shooting a woman who, bent over, holds the hand of a small, barefoot boy just before they tumble into a death pit. (The boy would be buried alive, not shot, since Nazi protocol forbade wasting bullets on Jewish children.) Smoke from the gun blasts ob-

THE RAVINE

A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed

By Wendy Lower

Illustrated. 258 pp. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. \$28.

scures the face of the woman, who wears a polka-dot housedress; later, on closer inspection, Lower will discover another child nestled in the woman’s lap. The photograph reveals the “Holocaust by bullets” in Ukraine, where more than one million Jews were murdered not in terrifying death camps but in prosaic “fields, swamps and ravines.” The Jews’ tormentors were, very often, their lifelong Ukrainian neighbors.

The scene was not unusual; neither was the photograph. During the war, German soldiers took troves of photographs — perhaps hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions — some of which memorialized, indeed celebrated, their cruelties, tortures and crimes. Nazi authorities forbade these unofficial images, but to little avail; they circulated widely to friends and families back home. These celebrations of sadism — which shake our ideas about an innate human capacity for either shame or guilt — are sometimes referred to as “trophy photos,” though I think “atrocious selfies” is a better term. (Lower claims that, in showing the actual moment of death, the Miropol photograph is rare, though there is no way that she — or anyone else — could know this: For obvious reasons, many of these amateur photographs have never surfaced.)

Lower wants to do several things with this image. She hopes to discover who, exactly, the Jewish victims were: to say their names. Though she is an admirably dogged researcher — she uses, among other sources, live and videotaped witness

SUSIE LINFIELD is the author of “*The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*” and “*The Lions’ Den: Zionism and the Left From Hannah Arendt to Noam Chomsky*.”



German guards and Ukrainian militia shooting a Jewish family in Miropol, Ukraine, in 1941.

testimonies, legal documents and grave excavations — in this she fails; their names are lost to history.

She also hopes to recreate the details of that day in Miropol and thus reveal the networks of complicity that made the Holocaust possible. Here, she succeeds with a vengeance: Her chapter “*The Aktion*” is devastating. Finally, she wants to expose the killers.

Knowing how an event occurred removes it from the realm of abstraction — and genocide has, unfortunately, become an almost abstract term. Photographs are particularly good at piercing haziness, since they often capture individuals taking action, not so-called cogs in a machine. As the historian Jan Tomasz Gross wrote in “*Golden Harvest*” (2012), his own book about a Holocaust image, photographs “remind us most directly of human agency in what otherwise we would know only as a numerical phenomenon.”

Lower shows that it takes a lot of people to kill a lot of people. There are the Ukrainian teenage girls forced to dig the mass graves; the Nazi customs guards (including volunteers) and Ukrainian policemen who rounded up the Jews and forced them to the death site; the Ukrainian neighbors who plundered their homes and “assaulted

them — throwing stones and bottles.” Then there are the Ukrainian militia who, “armed with clubs, tools and Russian rifles, chased Jews, bludgeoning some to death. . . . They chased young Jewish women, ripped off their clothes and raped them.”

The town rang out — who could miss this? — with gunshots, “yelling, screaming and howling.” This was not the bureaucratic killing many associate with the

For obvious reasons, many of these photographs have never surfaced.

Holocaust. This was mass murder at its most intimate: The Ukrainians “taunted the victims by name. . . . The victims were known to them from the dentist’s office, the cobbler’s shop, the soda fountain and the collective farm. They grabbed small children and babies by the legs and smashed their heads against the trees.”

There is a vociferous debate among historians and photography critics about whether “perpetrator photographs,” especially from the Nazi era, should be viewed. Some argue that they revictimize the victims. Lower, rightly, disputes this, though

in a sparse and not especially illuminating way. Yet her book is a refutation of those who urge us not to look. Indeed, the big surprise of “*The Ravine*” is the identity of the Miropol image’s photographer: a Slovakian soldier named Lubomir Skrovina. He took the photograph with the full knowledge of his German superiors, but he did not take it in service to their aims. In fact, Skrovina was, or at least became, a member of the Resistance. He smuggled atrocity images to his wife back home as possible material for anti-Nazi forces; wrangled out of further military duty; hid Jews in his home and helped some escape; and joined the antifascist Slovakian uprising of 1944. Lower describes Skrovina’s photograph as “an expression of defiance.”

Though the Jews in the photograph remained anonymous, the names of their killers were known. West German authorities opened an inquiry in 1969, then quickly dropped it. But a Soviet K.G.B. major named Mikola Makarevych was more determined. In 1986, his investigation yielded convictions for three of the Ukrainians in the photograph. Two were executed, one sentenced to prison. I oppose the death penalty. But I read this chapter of Lower’s book — entitled “*Justice*” — with deep and unshakable satisfaction. □

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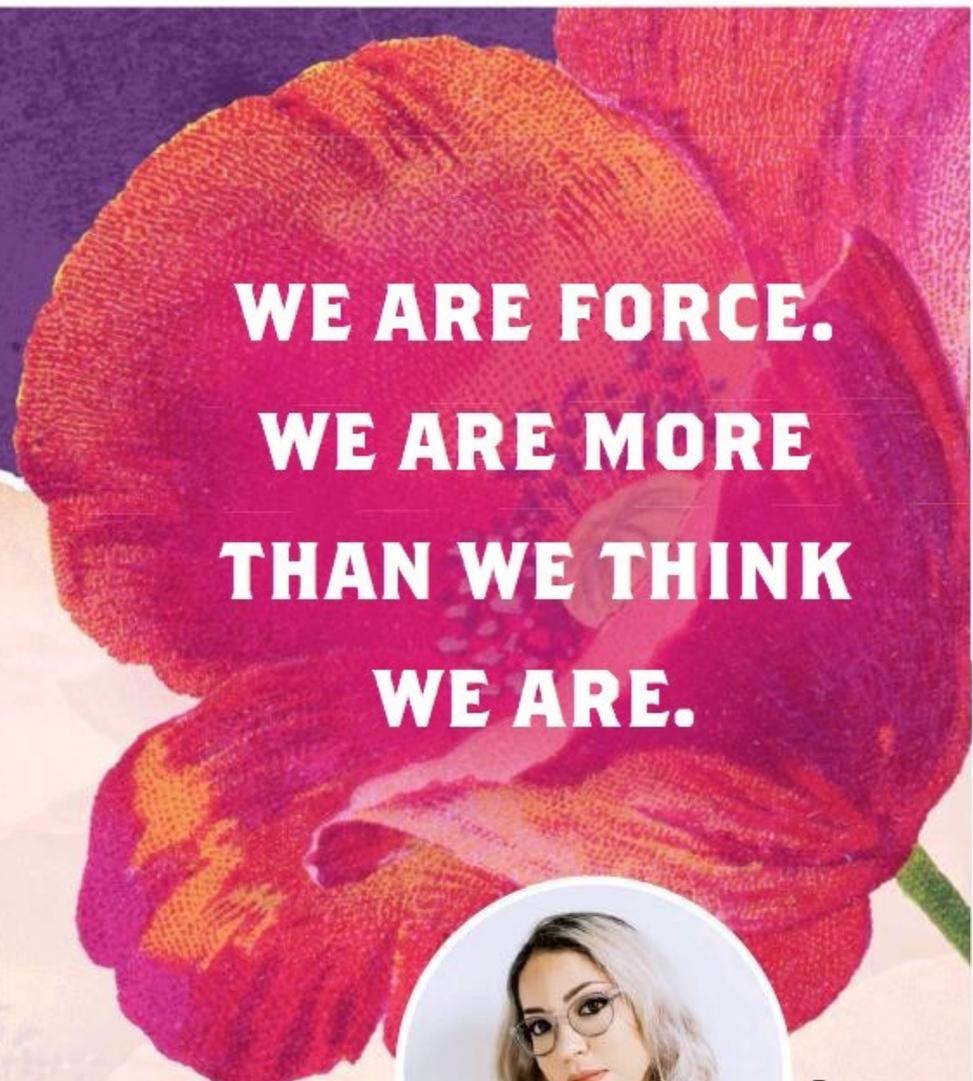
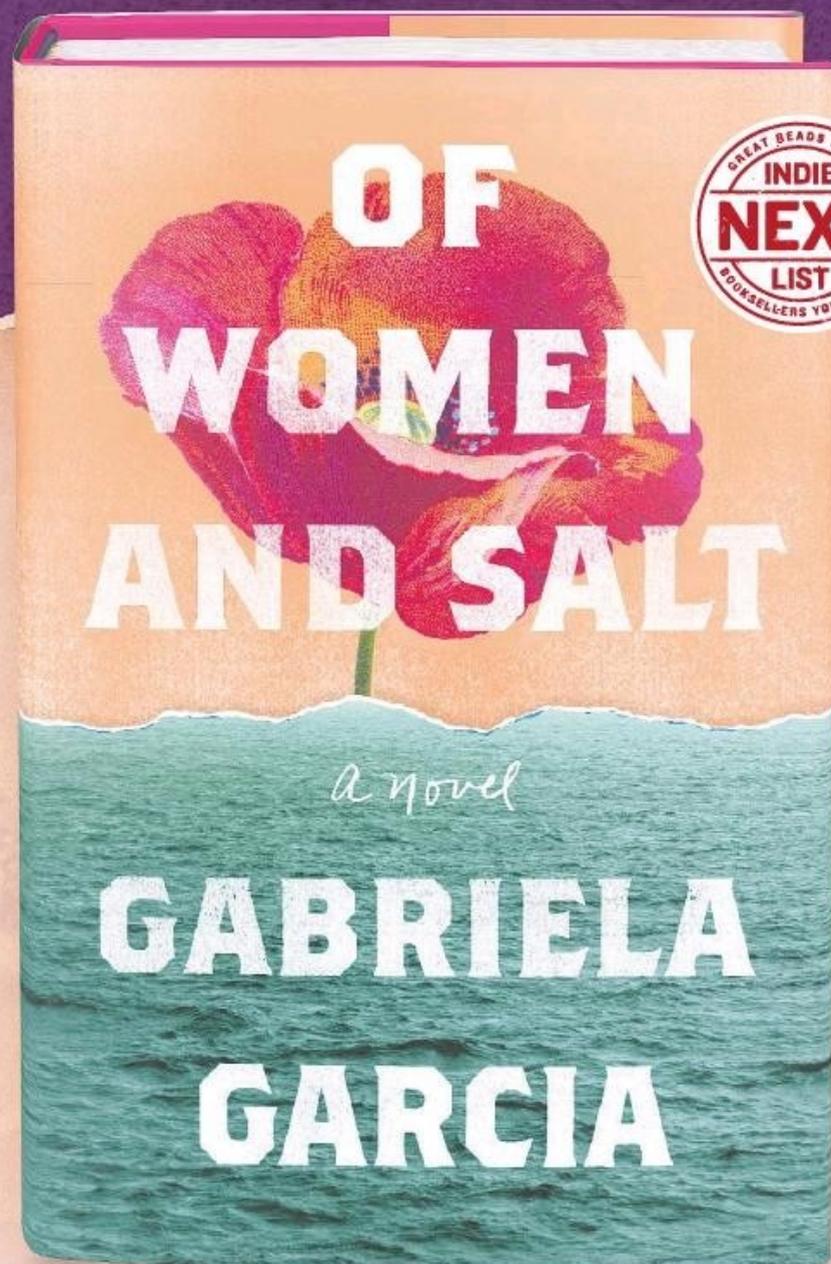
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👁️ **Roving Eye** / **Translating the Untranslatable** / By Benjamin Moser

A book caught between two languages.

IN 1963, a 12-year-old Minae Mizumura left 東京 for **New York**, when her father was transferred to his company's American office. 美苗, her sister 奈苗 and their mother came to a **suburb on Long Island**.

I'm trying to give a feeling for what it's like to read the newly published English translation of **AN I-NOVEL** (Columbia University, paper, \$20), Mizumura's fictionalized account of her American life. In Japan, where book text is normally printed from right to left and in vertical lines, the original version was published in 1995 the way you're reading this now — horizontally, from left to right. It also included a large number of words and even entire dialogues in English. This created the effect of a book caught between two worlds, two languages, two ways of being — exactly how Mizumura felt during her 20 years in America.

In bringing this book to Anglophone readers, she and her distinguished translator, Juliet Winters Carpenter, faced an unusual challenge. For editions in any other language, they could have left the English words as they were to preserve their foreignness. For the English translation, though, they came up with another solution: placing that text in bold. This has the funny effect of calling attention to the particularly local echoes of words that don't usually sound strange to American ears. **Catnip, mug, New Jersey, I don't care, zillions, thrift shop and cafeteria** stand alongside **Cindy, Robin and Linda**. The shift makes the whole country seem exotic, as do the novel's photographs of things we wouldn't ever notice: "Colonial house," for example, or "Sidewalk."

But in this coming-to-America novel, the promised land is somewhere else. Mizumura moved to New York when she was a bit too old for English to become a natural language for her. As it was, she already had one. "I loved the Japanese language," she writes, "and, more than anything, Japanese literature written with the three distinct systems of Japanese writing: graceful *hiragana* ひらがな, spartan *katakana* カタカナ, and dense *kanji* 漢字." She arrived in the 1960s, before everywhere was "multicultural," before there was a sushi restaurant on every corner, before Japan was considered posh. It's not long before home becomes an obsession. She feels at home only in the novels she has brought with her, though they are set in a Japan that — she is painfully aware — exists only in literature. As the years pass, she feels

BENJAMIN MOSER'S latest book, "*Sontag: Her Life and Work*," won the Pulitzer Prize in 2020.

trapped: by inertia, by a rising yen, by the need to finish school, by her father's illness, by her parents' failed marriage, by being too old to marry. (Twenty-five was the upper limit for a decent Japanese girl.) Her own mother scoffs when she says she longs to become a Japanese writer, telling her daughter that she can't even write proper Japanese.

Yet Mizumura is sure she can. What she's not sure about is how or when to return. "An I-Novel" takes place on a single day: Friday the 13th, appropriately enough, the 20th anniversary of her exile.



Minae Mizumura

Sitting in her apartment in a dingy college town (**New Haven**), she hears the phone ring, and when her sister, Nanae, asks if she knows what day it is, she at first has no idea. She's shocked that she has managed to forget such a crucial anniversary, and the realization forces her to make some long-postponed decisions. She will wrap up her work at the university and go back home, if she still has one. "I don't know if it's ever a good idea to go back home," an Israeli professor says. Mizumura doesn't know either. She suspects that things would be easier if she just melted into the melting pot. But inside her is a flinty refusal to surrender her identity. However tacky, modern and rootless, Japan is where she belongs.

In an age of so many books about identity, "An I-Novel" stands out for the tough questions it poses. It's not difficult to read, since Mizumura is a fluent and entertaining writer. Though "An I-Novel" leaves the question open, Mizumura did go back, nearly 40 years ago, and became exactly what her mother doubted she could be: a respected novelist in her own

language, and a best-selling one at that. She came to national prominence with her debut, "Light and Dark Continued," its title derived from that of Natsume Soseki's unfinished final work, "Light and Dark," which Mizumura "continued" and completed. Her mastery of Soseki's highly refined classical Japanese was especially surprising to readers who learned that she had been educated, for the most part, in New York, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Because the great achievement of this novel was the way it mimicked Soseki's style, "Light and Dark Continued" was impossible to translate. Her subsequent works, including the best book I've ever read on translation and multilingualism, "The Fall of Language in the Age of English," reflect on what one gives up when one starts to write for an international audience. The books might look like Kenzaburo Oe's "A Personal Matter" (1964), in which the protagonist has an English name, drinks Johnnie Walker, drives an MG and quotes Shakespeare. Japan — its culture, its language, its literature, its history — is an incidental footnote. Like so much international writing then and now, the book aspires to a fake universality that confuses "English" with "everywhere," an omission of the local that is all the more pernicious because it can be successful. Oe eventually won the Nobel Prize.

Mizumura's books reclaim the particularity, the untranslatability, of her own

Bringing this novel to Anglophone readers posed an unusual challenge.

language. And they do so without the slightest whiff of nationalism. She speaks warmly of the kindness she encountered in America, and has said that the modern Japanese literature she cherishes, including that of writers like Soseki, emerged from engagement with the West. (Her riveting "A True Novel" was inspired by "Wuthering Heights.") What's difficult about her work is the questions it raises. How to be national without being chauvinistic? How to be local without being provincial? How to use identity as the beginning of the discussion rather than — as it is so often today — the final word? In Mizumura's works, the question is always open. She knows, from the very beginning of her American story, that this is not her country, not her language. But it's one thing to realize that. It's another thing to get back home. □

Go West

This novel begins with one ending — and then another.

By LIZ MOORE

THE BIGHEARTED “We Begin at the End,” by the British crime writer Chris Whitaker, straddles a host of genres. Part thriller, part bildungsroman, part Dickensian tear-jerker and — most startlingly — part western, the novel centers on 13-year-old Duchess Day Radley, a self-described “outlaw” who has been forced to grow up quickly by her troubled mother, Star.

In the prologue of the novel, the roots of Star’s trouble are made clear: When she was a teenager, her little sister was killed, a

WE BEGIN AT THE END

By Chris Whitaker

384 pp. Henry Holt & Company. \$27.99.

tragedy from which the remaining members of the family have never recovered. The rest of the story takes place 30 years later, in 2005, when the man held accountable for Sissy’s demise is released from prison. Vincent King’s return to Cape Haven sets off a series of events that imperil the lives of Star, Duchess and Duchess’s younger brother, Robin.

The present-day narrative of “We Begin at the End” centers on another death in Cape Haven — only this time, the culprit isn’t clear. Chief Walker, known as Walk, a childhood friend of both Vincent and Star, begins an investigation. But the procedural aspects of the novel, while satisfying, aren’t the main attraction. What stands out about this novel is Whitaker’s portrayal of Duchess and Robin, Star’s children, who suddenly find themselves on their own, afflicted by tragedy after tragedy. While Walk continues to hunt for answers in Cape Haven, Duchess and Robin are dispatched to rural Montana to live with a series of people they’ve never met.

The sibling relationship at the heart of the book is affecting. I found myself worried for both children, wanting badly for them to catch a break, or just a breath — much in the same way I once wanted Oliver Twist to find a home, or Dicey Tillerman, or any of the archetypal orphans I’ve encountered in literature. It’s never easy to read about children in distress.

Despite this promising foundation, a few issues in the novel’s writing hinder its ability to be truly transporting. First, there is the problem of setting. Neither Cape Haven (near Mendocino, if I understood the context clues correctly) nor the Montana countryside is described sufficiently to feel immersive. Instead, the author reduces both places to their stereotypes: Coastal California equals beaches, landslides, fancy cars and upscale small businesses; Montana equals big sky, barns, horses, small-town parades and snow.

Whitaker has a similar tendency to rely

LIZ MOORE’S most recent novel is “Long Bright River.”



LILY PADULA

on writerly shortcuts when it comes to his characters. For one thing, there is the matter of their names: Dickie Darke, Vincent King, Thomas Noble, Star Radley (who has a knack for singing) — even Sissy Radley, whose role in the book is primarily to be, well, a sister. If this choice felt more playful, it might work; there is, after all, a long tradition of aptronym in crime writing and westerns, two of the genres to which Whitaker seems to be paying homage.

But Whitaker seems deadly earnest in this choice, and I fear this earnestness has infected his characters as well. When they speak, it is often in blunt declarations about themselves and their circumstances. Duchess, in particular, has a sort of catchphrase she often employs: “I am the outlaw, Duchess Day Radley,” she says at one point, to a man who has heckled her mother, “and I’ll cut your head clean off.”

This diction, from a 13-year-old living in Mendocino in 2005, is not completely implausible. But it’s so stilted and formal that it implies a level of social unawareness — even nerdiness — in Duchess that the author doesn’t seem to intend. When she isn’t making such proclamations, Duchess sometimes speaks in full poems: “‘This purple’ — she waved a hand at the huckleberries beside — ‘makes me think of her

‘We Begin at the End’ is part thriller, part Dickensian tear-jerker and part western.

ribs, beat dark like that. The blue water, that’s her eyes, clear enough to see there’s no soul behind them anymore.”

Yes, Duchess is meant to be precocious; but this version of precocity feels scripted. It does not have the rhythm of human speech.

One explanation might be that “We Begin at the End” is an extended homage to the work of American writers of the West, Charles Portis in particular. Duchess — who is said to be descended from an outlaw — feels a lot like Mattie Ross, the 14-year-old protagonist of Portis’s “True Grit,” who also speaks in an unusual cadence. But unlike Mattie, who narrates her own story with a sort of quiet assurance that immediately affords her both agency and respect, Duchess is described only from the outside, by a narrator who seems to have a particular agenda.

Despite how often we are assured that Duchess is acerbic and tough, she seems in this novel more like an adult’s fantasy of

what a tough 13-year-old girl would sound like. In several scenes, Duchess is shown to inspire fear and awe in her peers, but in real life her snappy retorts might be likelier to provoke something akin to second-hand embarrassment.

Descriptions of her appearance also serve to remind us that someone else is telling Duchess’ story. “She was too thin,” Whitaker writes, “too pale, too beautiful like her mother.” And again: “Her hair was tousled, blond like her mother’s. . . . She was pretty enough that the boys would have lined up, if they didn’t know, if everyone didn’t know.” And once again, as Walk drives her away from a traumatic incident: “She wore shorts. He saw grazed knees and pale thighs.”

It is possible that Whitaker, here, is trying to demonstrate that good looks have been a misfortune in the lives of Duchess and Star. Another explanation might be that describing women’s appearances in this way is simply a convention of the genre in which the author is writing. (Particularly their legs, as when the young Walker first sets eyes on Star: “The rear door opened to the longest legs Walk ever saw.”) The femme fatale is a familiar trope. The problem is that Whitaker doesn’t seem to be doing much with it beyond employing it.

A final issue worth noting is Whitaker’s prose. He writes in a style that is self-consciously poetic and often difficult to follow, relying heavily on sentence fragments, misplaced modifiers and comma splices. I’m in favor of disposing with conventional grammar if a written voice calls for it; here, though, the writing isn’t assured enough to convince us Whitaker is in control. At one point, Whitaker writes: “If it wasn’t for the wire that carved the landscape with such brutality it might have been a scene that stopped breath, ‘Our Good Earth,’ men in jumpsuits nothing but the lost children they once were.”

The novel’s confusing syntax often makes the reader double back, checking for understanding. Whitaker is clearly attempting the style of writers of the American West, but in his hands the voice sounds like a parody.

I’d like to be clear about something, lest anyone think that I’m looking down on the genres in which Whitaker is working (and in which I myself often work): “We Begin at the End” struggles hardest when it ventures toward the literary, not away from it. Self-consciously elevated diction that includes word usage errors can work well in a first-person voice when it’s serving to characterize the narrator, as in “True Grit”; in “We Begin at the End,” which is written in third person, it seems instead to characterize the author.

In the end, Whitaker’s prose — both within the context of his narration and within his characters’ forced-sounding dialogue — hampers what is otherwise a moving, propulsive story. □

Impossible Position

A novel revisits a thorny episode in the Algerian War.

By **KAIAMA L. GLOVER**

FRANCE HAS NEVER BEEN very good at grappling with its colonial past. Among the most stubborn ghosts to haunt the contemporary republic is the brutal war it waged in Algeria, its former colony, from 1954 to 1962. After the conflict, France long denied the human rights abuses committed in its name and censored numerous works of fiction and nonfiction that exposed facts to the contrary. This censorship has had the effect of muting the tangled personal and political realities underlying the grand narrative of this anticolonial struggle — the distinct and shifting investments of communists; *pieds-noirs*, or Algerian-born European settlers; colonial soldiers and officials; pro-French Indigenous *harkis*; and Algerian militants, among others.

TOMORROW THEY WON'T DARE TO MURDER US

By **Joseph Andras**

Translated by Simon Leser
137 pp. Verso. Paper, \$18.95.

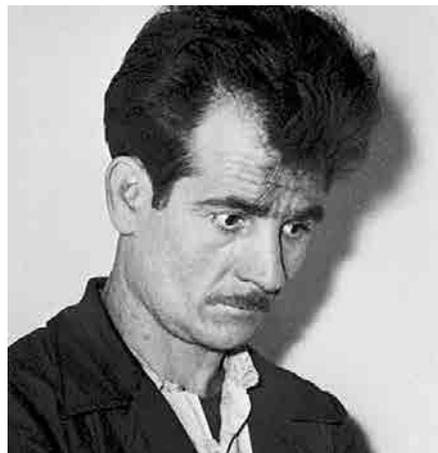
It is precisely this complexity that colors Joseph Andras's electrifying debut novel, "Tomorrow They Won't Dare to Murder Us." Originally published in France in 2016, the novel won the Prix Goncourt for first novel (which Andras refused) and was heralded as a singularly vivid re-creation of this tragic period in French and Algerian history. Andras gives an unsparing account of the capture and execution of the real-life revolutionary Fernand Iveton at the hands of the French Army. Iveton, a *pied-noir*, communist and supporter of Algerian independence, planted a bomb in a factory just outside of Algiers in November 1956. He timed the bomb to detonate after work hours, intending to avoid casualties, but it was discovered and defused. Still, Iveton was savagely tortured, hurriedly tried and guillotined — the only European to meet this fate during the Algerian War.

Andras is most interested in the intimate dimensions of this radical life. He hurries the first pages of his novel through Iveton's would-be act of sabotage and his subsequent arrest, and then asks us to bear witness not only to the excruciating details of his brutalization, but also to the concatenation of family history, political conviction and love that ultimately landed him in that "interrogation" room in the first place. Despite a translation that struggles to render the tautness and lyricism of Andras's prose, the intensity of both Iveton's principles and the political moment he's embroiled in still manages to shine through. Toggling between past and present, Andras allows multiple voices onto the same page — into the same sentence, even —

KAIAMA L. GLOVER is a professor of French and Africana studies at Barnard.

and so sketches the landscape of politics and emotions that sealed Iveton's fate. In Andras's telling, it is Iveton alone who seems convinced that "barbarity cannot be beaten by emulation," that "blood is no answer to blood."

"I love France, I love France very much, I love France enormously, but I have no love for colonialists," Iveton says to the presiding judge in the middle of his trial. This was an impossible position to take in the French imperial world of the mid-1950s. There was no France without its colonies. If Iveton aspired only to a future for Algeria that would see France "recognizing all of its children, wherever they're from," as Andras makes the case, the unlikelihood of that humanist dream coming true is made equally clear. This moment in history had no room for the idealism that animated Iveton or others like



Fernand Iveton in 1956.

him. The insidious poison of political cynicism stood firmly in the way of fellowship and forgiveness during the Cold War.

The year 2022 will mark the 60th anniversary of Algeria's war of independence, and France has begun to prepare the necessary rituals of reckoning. In January, the French historian Benjamin Stora submitted a 147-page report on "the progress made by France on the memory of the colonization of Algeria and the Algerian War" to President Emmanuel Macron, a report Macron commissioned to signal his "willingness to promote reconciliation between the French and Algerian people." Macron has made clear that while "recognition" of this gruesome history is on the table, "repentance is out of the question." So while the report appears to be a step forward in reconciling the French postcolonial present with its troublesome colonial past, it will most likely fall short of true reconciliation for those who survived that past or who remain haunted by its ghosts. "Tomorrow They Won't Dare to Murder Us" insists on plumbing the thorniest details of history's scandal, suggesting — convincingly — that certain truths are best revealed in fiction. □

Little Green Men

A zoologist uses his knowledge to imagine extraterrestrial life.

By **KERMIT PATTISON**

IS ANYBODY ELSE out there? For as long as humans have recognized Earth as but one planet in a vast, orb-speckled universe, we have pondered the mystery of extraterrestrial life.

After Nicolaus Copernicus introduced heliocentric theory to 16th century Europe, astronomers began to dream about "other worlds" — and populate them with imaginary creatures. Pioneering astronomers such as Johannes Kepler (father of planetary motion) and William Herschel (discoverer of Uranus) believed in the existence of alien life. Peering through his telescope, Herschel thought he spied towns and forests on the lunar surface.

We're still looking. In 2017, a mysterious object named "Oumuamua" was observed

THE ZOOLOGIST'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY What Animals on Earth Reveal About Aliens — and Ourselves

By **Arik Kershenbaum**

Illustrated. 356 pp. Penguin Press. \$28.

passing through our solar system and some astronomers have made the controversial suggestion that it may be a scout probe sent by an alien civilization. In February, the NASA Mars Perseverance Rover landed on the red planet to search for traces of ancient microbial life.

The search field is incomprehensibly large: Astronomers estimate that there are more than 100 billion planets in the Milky Way alone — plus exponentially more in the rest of the universe.

What might we find elsewhere?

One zoologist suggests some answers actually may be hiding in plain sight, right here at home. In a provocative new book, "The Zoologist's Guide to the Galaxy," Arik Kershenbaum contends that life on Earth provides hints of what we might expect to find on other planets.

Kershenbaum, a scientist at the University of Cambridge, asserts that the "universal laws of biology" that govern life on Earth also apply to aliens. The most important is that species evolve by natural selection, the bedrock idea of evolutionary biology proposed by Charles Darwin. No matter how alien biochemistry might work and no matter how planetary environments might differ, Kershenbaum argues that some version of Darwinian selection would be at work — and would have chan-

KERMIT PATTISON is the author of "Fossil Men: The Quest for the Oldest Skeleton and the Origins of Humankind."

nelled alien evolution to restricted menus of possibilities.

Thus, Kershenbaum predicts that alien life will bear striking parallels to earthly life. Most aliens will be bilaterally symmetrical and use familiar forms of locomotion (such as legs, paddles or jets). "Do aliens have sex?" he asks. "I wish there were an easy way to answer this question." Alas, aliens have kept this private, along with everything else.

The book avoids the fantasy game of proposing any specific vision of what aliens might look like — thus no Wookiees, E.T.s or little green Martians — and focuses on how they might *behave*. Kershenbaum predicts that some aliens will exhibit social cooperation, technology and language ("Teatime with our alien neighbors may be possible after all," he writes). He even posits that aliens will share the quality we hold most dear: intelligence. "We all want to believe in intelligent aliens," he writes. "It seems inevitable that they will, in fact, exist."

Indeed, the word *inevitable* pops up repeatedly in this book. Consequently, some extraterrestrials envisioned by Kershenbaum might turn out to be quite familiar: "Finally, possibly inevitably, a social and intelligent organism, with the skill of language, develops complex technology. It is hard to see how any other outcome is possible. Soon, they will be building spaceships and exploring the universe — if they manage to avoid destroying themselves first."

It has become a cliché in evolutionary studies to repeat a quote from L. P. Hartley: "The past is a foreign country: They do things differently there." With alien planets, that caution might be increased exponentially.

Life on Earth flourished for 3.5 billion years before humans appeared. We are latecomers to the long biological saga on this planet and just one lineage among millions of species. We also are biological oddballs: upright bipeds with big brains, language, increasingly complex technology and the ability to alter our planetary habitat — and even explore other planets.

Our big brains come with big imaginations. Kershenbaum offers some otherworldly ideas, such as musing that "alien seeders" possibly gave us life — which would make us earthlings just an experiment conducted by a superior intelligence.

The author acknowledges that his arguments might not convince all readers and are unlikely to be tested in our lifetimes because the likelihood of meeting intelligent aliens anytime soon is "so remote as to be almost dismissed." Until that first encounter, though, theorists like Kershenbaum will be free to float through an atmosphere unweighed by evidence. □



Arik Kershenbaum

Welcome to paradise. You may want to catch the next flight home.

Welcome to *Group Text*, a monthly column for readers and book clubs about the novels, memoirs and short-story collections that make you want to talk, ask questions and dwell in another world for a little bit longer.

IN THE PAST YEAR, I have booked and canceled three vacations — two to South Carolina (Kiawah Island and Charleston) and one to Brunswick, Maine. Each aborted rental came with its own disappointments: the fleet of mint green beach cruisers my family will never steer down palm-lined lanes at dusk; the pleather-covered hot tub we'll never overflow with our collective mass; the short stroll I will never take from my riverside cottage to my sister's front porch with a warm box of doughnuts in hand. Don't worry, I'll live.

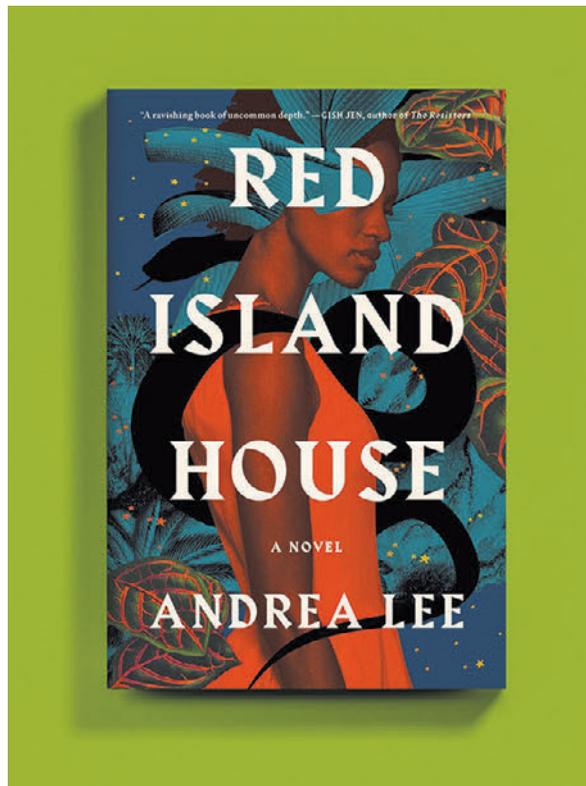
But as we mark the first anniversary of our confinement, I see how the planning of these thwarted trips provided a break from the status quo. Every hour I spent on Airbnb, every moment I whiled away examining amber-lit photos like a jeweler peering through a loupe, added up to a welcome, if imaginary, escape.

Andrea Lee's frangipani-infused new novel, **RED ISLAND HOUSE** (Scribner, 288 pp., \$27), has the same effect — and is all the more enjoyable for its depiction of a complicated Shangri-La. Who wants to read about unadulterated bliss right now? I want to be reminded why I'm better off at home.

"There are houses you don't want, that, nevertheless, enter your life and bring with them other lives, whole other worlds," Lee writes. "There are countries you visit that lay hold of you and don't let go, even if you diligently attempt to remain a tourist."

In "Red Island House," the tourist is Shay Gilliam, a Fulbright scholar and university instructor from Oakland, Calif., who is Black and has "scant interest" in Africa "except as a near-mythical motherland." That doesn't dissuade her older, semi-sleazeball husband ("a rich but stingy Italian businessman") from building a deluxe mansion on Naratransy, a tiny island in Madagascar; he is, as Lee puts it, "dizzied by the infinite possibilities offered by using first world money in a third world country, one of the poorest on earth."

The construction of the place runs parallel to the couple's courtship. Shay won't realize until it's too late — the



house's thatched roof peak already dominating the landscape, staff hired to sweep, cook and minister to the couple's every need, including late-afternoon massages in the garden — that the Red House (so known for its painted floors) will become an unwelcome, perennially problematic third party in her marriage.

How bad could it be? you wonder. The on-demand back rubs sound divine, as do drinks served in tall glasses topped off with bougainvillea blossoms. But Shay learns that her summer home is haunted in more ways than one. Not only does it provide a rotating door for troublesome guests and an effortless backdrop for her husband's philandering, it will force her to reckon with a colonial tradition that makes her deeply uncomfortable. Shay knows what is expected of her as the mistress of the Red House —

WHAT IT'S ABOUT

An unlikely couple spends summers at a sumptuous compound in Madagascar. Except it never feels like home, and island life becomes a metaphor for fault lines in the marriage.

WHY I PICKED IT

Come for views and wildlife, stay for simmering tensions and culture clashes. Lee lays out a dazzling buffet of choices and assumptions that are ripe for questioning.

she is supposed to exert "iron control" over her employees — but, "to a Black American from an academic family in California, the concept has always smacked far too much of plantation life."

For two decades, we follow Shay around Naratransy, with occasional interludes in Milan (also not too shabby). Her son and daughter grow up, cycling through their own mixed feelings about the island; her relationships with the locals deepen, especially with Bertine la Grande, a housekeeper "whose blood seems to flow in the same rhythm as hers" in spite of their "inconceivably different lives"; and her marriage strains under the weight of its fundamental mismatch.

In this slim but sweeping story, Lee shows a woman facing up to contradictions that make her life easier and harder at the same time, and figuring out where she belongs in the world — geographically and on a deeper, psychic (but never woo-woo) level. In her author's note, Lee writes, "'Red Island House' is a novel about foreigners in Madagascar; its viewpoint and its 'voice' are those of an outsider looking in." Never before has this perspective felt so timely and so familiar. □

To join the conversation about "Red Island House," go to our Facebook page, @nytbooks, or our Instagram, @NYTBooks.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What did Shay have to give up for her life with at the Red House? Were the sacrifices worthwhile?

+

Lee doesn't always tell her story in a straight line; sometimes she dips into the past when you least expect it. How did the structure of "Red Island House" contribute to your experience of the story?

SUGGESTED READING

REBECCA, by Daphne du Maurier. Manderley was no picnic either, and the mansion's stone cold vice grip on its inhabitants reads like a British precursor to the abundant but occasionally menacing beauty of the Red House.

DO NOT BECOME ALARMED, by Maile Meloy. Two families far from home find themselves in an unimaginable crisis. How — and whether — they navigate their way out of it will change their perspectives on whom to trust and where they belong.

The masterworks published in 1925 gave the movement its signature style — and influence.

“AN ILLITERATE, UNDERBRED book it seems to me: the book of a self-taught working man, & we all know how distressing they are, how egotistic, insistent, raw, striking & ultimately nauseating.” So goes Virginia Woolf’s well-known complaint about “Ulysses,” scribbled into her diary before she had finished reading it. Her disparagement is catnip to those many critics who like to view “Mrs. Dalloway” — that other uber-famous, if more lapidary, modernist novel that spans the course of a single day — as Woolf’s rejoinder to Joyce. More than that, though, it tells us something important about our literary history. Nineteen twenty-two, the year of “Ulysses,” may well be ground zero for the explosion of modernism in literature. But the resultant shock wave is better captured by another year: 1925, that of “Mrs. Dalloway” and several other works, all now in the spotlight in 2021, as they emerge from under copyright.

If many an English-major ear perks up at the sound of “1922,” it’s mostly because of the two somewhat ornery men who published their masterpieces that year: Joyce and T. S. Eliot. “Ulysses” and “The Waste Land” are taught everywhere and almost without exception as “signifying a definitive break in literary history,” to quote the critic Michael North from his book “Reading 1922.” Both the novel and the poem are notoriously challenging, obscurely allusive and highly uneasy about their modern time and the rubble of tradition astride which it stood. Both are also often distressing, egotistic, insistent, raw, striking and (depending on one’s mood) ultimately nauseating. And it is precisely these qualities that account for their hold on our literary imagination. They represent everything that literary modernism is meant to: rupture, difficulty and, of course, *making it new*.

Yet 1925 is arguably the more important date in modernism’s development, the year that it went mainstream, as embodied by four books whose influence continues to shape fiction today: Woolf’s “Mrs. Dalloway,” Ernest Hemingway’s debut story collection, “In Our Time,” John Dos Passos’ “Manhattan Transfer” and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby.” Compared with the masterpieces of 1922, these books — all slated for reissue in new editions this year — entered our culture in relatively unspectacular fashion. But it’s precisely their unassuming guise that allowed them, by osmosis rather than disruption, to diffuse their modernist conceits throughout the literary field, ensuring their widespread adoption.

In her 1919 essay, “Modern Fiction,” Woolf rebukes the popular novels of her time: “Is life like this? . . . Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being ‘like this.’ Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions — trivial, fantastic, evanescent or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms. . . . Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.”

It’s commonplace to call Woolf an impressionist in this peculiar sense, and yet it nails her novelistic craft. She is an inhabitant of minds. And the mind, in “Mrs. Dalloway” and later, in a more extreme sense, in “The

Waves” (1931), is a kind of nebulous antenna tuning in and out of life’s frequencies, ever enveloped in its luminous halo. As the critic J. Hillis Miller once put it, the reader most often finds that she is “plunged within an individual mind which is being understood from inside by an ubiquitous, all-knowing mind.”

This is evident to us not from the novel’s immortal opening line — “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” — but from the one immediately following, which serves as a kind of mirror to the first, tipping us off that we must reread it as something other than objective assertion: “For Lucy had her work cut out for her.” Suddenly, with the lightly colloquial “cut out for her,” we are in the mind not of an omniscient narrator but of a character — Clarissa Dalloway, as the succeeding lines make clear. The reader ceases to think that she



is being told what Mrs. Dalloway said about getting the flowers, and begins to think instead that Mrs. Dalloway is just remarking on that fact, as if to herself. And that changes everything.

This narrative technique, known as free-indirect speech, was part of Woolf’s quiet revolution. Though she did not invent it — arguably Austen, Flaubert and Edith Wharton got there first — Woolf perfected this mode, coloring it with the anxiety of modern subjectivity. Open any novel of the past 50 years, and you will find the narrator reporting thoughts that, for reasons of diction and tense, can only be those of a character. With varying degrees of indebtedness, each of these is an heir to Woolf and her narrators, who enter the world of their fictions as Clarissa Dalloway enters the world of her relations, “being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best.” That a narrator need not fiddle with chess pieces from on high but might linger like a cloud among foggy minds is a feature of modernism that has, as it were, contaminated literature ever since.

Opposed to the singularity of a work like “Ulysses” or “The Waste Land,” we have in “Mrs. Dalloway” the innovation of an enduring, deep structure — something like geometric perspective in painting, that contributes

to the development of technique, rather than driving it up a dead end. So it is with “In Our Time,” “Manhattan Transfer” and “The Great Gatsby.” With “Big Two-Hearted River,” the last story in Hemingway’s collection, writers on either side of the Atlantic learned about the power of economy in writing. As if by revelation, it became clear that the solution to the problem of representing a collective trauma like World War I was not blabbering effusion, but its opposite.

“I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg,” Hemingway told *The Paris Review* in 1958. The “iceberg” technique became the calling card not only of postwar American writers like Raymond Carver and Cormac McCarthy, but also of the influential cadre of French existentialist novelists, including Céline, Malraux, Sartre and de Beauvoir. Most important, though, Hemingway became an exemplary stylist for the M.F.A. programs that sprang up across America after the war, and through which many of our canonized poets and novelists have since passed. As the scholar Mark McGurl puts it in his book “The Program Era,” “It would be hard to overestimate the influence of Hemingway on postwar writers, and . . . too easy to forget that the medium of his influence has been the school.”

The legacy of John Dos Passos is less distinct, though no less potent. You do not hear his name much now, but in his day Dos Passos was among the most celebrated novelists writing in English. To Sartre, he was “the greatest writer of our time”; there was none other “in which the art is greater or better hidden.” Perhaps this is because novels like “Manhattan Transfer” were among the first to try to recreate the seamless artifice that cinema appeared to lend to its fictions. Dos Passos’ novel takes as its protagonist not a character but New York City itself, and makes liberal use of literary jump-cuts and montage against a backdrop of action-filled narration that moves at a relentless clip. His is a multimedia literature, a modernist twist on the flabby forms of social realism that stitches a collage of press-clippings, newsreels and radio announcers’ voices into the narrative fabric.

With Fitzgerald, by contrast, we have the inverted alternative to Dos Passos’ realist modernism. In “The Great Gatsby” Fitzgerald — just as Eliot would do in fits and starts throughout his career — seeks the preservation of Symbolism in modern American literature. That a writer could opt not to deploy a literalist account of the consequences of American greed but instead vie to refine a handful of supercharged moments of signification, which might bloom as an epiphany in the reader’s imagination, was this novel’s reverberating testament. *Gatsby* is but a symbol of himself, a dream that outstrips the reality to which it refers. Until he is not. And the lasting gift of the novel — which has echoes in the late-modernist pastiches of Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man,” Thomas Pynchon’s paranoid conspiracies of signs and the biblical symbology of Marilynne Robinson’s “Housekeeping” — is to demonstrate the difference between the magic when it is on and the magic when it is gone.

It is fitting that “The Great Gatsby” sold few copies when it first appeared. Like the other great works of 1925, it did not announce itself with the bombast of “Ulysses.” Yet, like those other works, it has quietly endured, living on like a mist in our literary unconscious, spawning and shaping successive generations of writers and readers. □

Bet You Can't Eat Just One

Companies make a profit by manipulating our biological instincts.

By DANIEL E. LIEBERMAN

AS AN ENTREE to Michael Moss's excellent new book, "Hooked: Food, Free Will, and How the Food Giants Exploit Our Addictions," try this experiment. Imagine or — even better — place two bowls in front of you: one with potato chips; the other with whole walnuts. Make sure they are both good quality brands and fresh from a never-opened bag. Sample a walnut first. Enjoy how its initial slightly bitter crunch transforms into something soft, buttery, faintly woody. Next munch a potato chip. Its flavor is less complex than the walnut's,

HOOKED
Food, Free Will, and How the Food Giants Exploit Our Addictions
By Michael Moss

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but every chip instantly delivers an intense combination of salt, sugar and fat. They are so crispy you can hear them snap between your teeth, and then they miraculously dissolve into nothingness on your tongue, making you want another. And another. And another.

Now ask yourself which is more likely to make you fat. From a purely nutritional perspective the answer is easy: the walnuts. According to the nutrition labels helpfully provided on both packages, an ounce of walnuts contains 186 calories, 25 percent more than the 150 calories delivered by an ounce of potato chips. To be sure, walnuts pack more protein and fiber and less salt, but if weight gain is your worry, you should eat the potato chips.

Obviously, it is preposterous to consider potato chips less fattening than walnuts — because potato chips are among the most addictive foods on the planet, along with French fries, pizza, cheeseburgers and Oreos. Too many of us can't help eating too much of this stuff. And that's the chief motivation for "Hooked," which is in many ways a sequel to the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist's 2013 tour de force, "Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us." That book exposed how multinational food companies churn out processed foods that are both cheap and alluring. "Hooked" asks how food manufacturers manipulate these foods to addict us, helping along a national crisis in which 40 percent of Americans are obese.

No one questions that the nutritional quality of foods has health consequences, but "Hooked" redirects our attention to the arguably more important question of quantity. To do so, Moss first focuses nec-

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Multinational food companies, in gastro-Orwellian fashion, hook us by expertly tapping into our memories, introducing endless new varieties.

essarily on the brain, the true fountainhead of addiction, which he defines (using the words of a Philip Morris C.E.O.) as "a repetitive behavior that some people find difficult to quit."

If you are not a neuroscientist, you'll be relieved by Moss's jargon-free approach to this complex biology. Without going into much detail, he describes how foods can be engineered to trigger the brain's "on switch" (mostly the neurotransmitter, dopamine) and inhibit its "off switch" (a region called the prefrontal cortex). These switches and the instincts that turn them on and off have deep evolutionary origins that likely helped our ancestors survive and thrive when food was scarce.

And, wow, are the hard-wired instincts to eat these foods powerful — more so than those that push us toward addictive drugs like heroin and nicotine. Even seeing the pictures of certain foods can cause us to salivate. In unforgettable language, Moss describes how less than a second after you bite into a luscious chocolate or a glazed doughnut, flavor sensations derived from a combination of sugar and fat, as well as other smells and tastes, hit your brain, interact with memories and release a flood of neurotransmitters that stimulate and perpetuate fundamental cravings.

We find out how Big Food innovates to manipulate and intensify these addiction-inducing sensations. We also learn how multinational food companies, in gastro-Orwellian fashion, hook us by expertly tapping into our memories, introducing endless new varieties, and combining sensations and ingredients rarely seen together in nature like sugar and fat, brittle and soft, sweet and salty. None of us are immune.

According to Moss, Big Food is relentlessly and cynically striving to maximize their "share of stomach," industry parlance for how much of the food we eat they can supply. Beyond hunting for genes that predispose us to particular cravings or

quantifying exactly how much sugar our brains prefer, these corporate peddlers perniciously play with serving sizes on nutrition labels to deceive us into thinking we are making healthy choices.

To trick us to eat more they also lure us in with low prices, dazzling packaging, convenience and trumped-up variety. One example among many: Differently colored M&M's taste the same but dupe our brains to consume more than if they were all just brown. Perhaps most cunningly, Big Food has also acquired many major brands of processed diet foods like Weight Watchers and Lean Cuisine. One has to admit it's clever to make money helping us get fat and then profit from our efforts (usually futile) to lose weight.

All in all, "Hooked" blends investigative reporting, science and foodie writing to argue that the processed food industry is no different from tobacco companies like Philip Morris that for decades lied about the harmful and addictive nature of cigarettes. In Philip Morris's case they were the same company (until recently, Philip Morris owned Kraft and General Foods).

Which leads to a question: Who is at fault? No one is forced to eat at McDonald's or drink Dr Pepper, and few Americans are unaware that a salad for lunch is healthier than a cheeseburger with fries. But Moss's argument is that free will is an illusion, at least for certain foods.

He's right. It is sometimes said that for some of us sugar is as addictive as cocaine, but from an evolutionary biological perspective, cocaine is actually as addictive as sugar, because it takes advantage of ancient mechanisms we inherited from our distant ancestors that helped them acquire rare but needed calories. To stay healthy in our current, modern food system, consumers have to overcome instincts and make choices over which we have little control.

Moss's attention to food addiction should open eyes and convert some free market

advocates. On legal grounds, Big Food may be safe in court for now, but their actions raise ethical questions. Should we judge companies solely by their profits or by how they affect the world? Regardless of debates about the law and free will, is it acceptable to market to children breakfast cereals like Cotton Candy Cap'n Crunch, which is nearly half sugar? These and many other harmful habit-forming foods have fattened corporate bank accounts at the cost of fattening hundreds of millions of Americans, contributing to countless premature deaths and debilitating illnesses as well as costing trillions of dollars. Even if you don't consume these foods, you are paying big time for their consequences.

"Hooked" can also help us pay more attention to the relationship between food quantity and quality. Over the last few decades modern, westernized attitudes toward food have increasingly focused on nutrition labels that inform us how many grams of saturated fat, fiber and other stuff are in the foods we buy. These labels can make many highly processed foods seem deceptively harmless compared with more calorie-dense natural foods like avocados, salmon and walnuts. Yet how many people overeat unprocessed wholesome foods?

Nutritionist perspectives on food combined with the challenges of losing weight also generate confusion over the relative merits of alternative diets, sometimes promoting new kinds of disordered eating as we Google the glycemic index of muffins or bananas, and worry about whether chocolate, eggs or peanuts are "good" or "bad."

I've done my share of Googling and fretting, but I'm done with this. One doesn't need a degree in nutrition science to recognize that just about every traditional, non-processed diet from every culture on the planet that isn't loaded with junk food is probably generally healthy. What's more, like those walnuts, those diets are tastier too. □

The Americans: Tillie Olsen

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

In the first story, “I Stand Here Ironing,” a classic almost from the moment it appeared in “Best American Short Stories of 1957,” we don’t just inhabit the mind of the narrator, a woman reflecting, in the midst of housework, on her daughter’s childhood and her own experience as a mother. Her words, addressed directly to someone — a social worker, a teacher or another well-meaning stranger — land with an almost physical weight. “All that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me that I cannot endure it tonight,” she says. You can feel the gravity of the words, and the presence of the body that utters them.

The woman isn’t named, and her situation is shorn of the kind of references that might situate her in a particular place or time. You could say that she speaks for generations of women who have faced poverty and disappointment. But there is nothing abstract or general about the story she tells — which is mostly the story of how, in a period of hardship and domestic instability, she temporarily gave up custody of her firstborn child — because the difficulty of telling it registers in every sentence. Whenever I reread this story, I’m startled by how little space it takes up: less than 10 pages in the most recent paperback edition, from the University of Nebraska Press. And yet it’s somehow as dense, as rich, as packed with life and feeling and “all that compounds a human being” as something 10 or 100 times as long.

The other parts of “Tell Me a Riddle” — “Hey Sailor, What Ship?,” “O Yes” and the long title story — are a bit looser and more discursive, with expansive dialogue and a wider range of characters, but they all share this sense of compression, of experience distilled to a piercing, concentrated essence.

A mother contemplates her own past and the future facing a child “of anxious, not proud, love.” A couple with young children make room for a beloved, difficult family friend who tests their patience and the limits of his charm. Two little girls, one Black and one white, find their friendship undermined as they move toward adolescence by the subtle pressures of social conformity as racial “sorting.” An elderly couple, their seven children grown and scattered, quarrel bitterly about how to spend the years that remain. The husband is full of plans and projects: He wants to sell their house and move to the “happy communal life” of a cooperative senior citizen residence, to join a reading circle, to visit children and

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Tillie Olsen with her daughter Laurie.

grandchildren. His wife, who “would not exchange her solitude for anything,” experiences the need for peace and quiet as a kind of rage. “Always a ravaging inside, a pull to the bed, to lie down, to succumb.”

After a life of hard work, of maternal and conjugal love, she is tired, but the fatigue is felt as hunger, as “tumult,” as a state of restlessness. This weariness links the mothers in the four stories, some of whom may be the same woman encountered at different moments, though it’s also possible that the matriarch in “Tell Me a Riddle” is the mother of the other three. They are all, in any case, always in motion and on their feet, busy with jobs, housework and emotional labor, their overtaxed attention parceled out among babies, toddlers, schoolchildren, teenagers and husbands. Their testimonies are not complaints. Olsen isn’t rubbing the reader’s face in misery, but rather giving an honest assessment of the psychological and physical costs of living. “Oh why is it like it is and why do I have to care?” a girl in “O Yes” asks her mother. The answer is unspoken: “Thinking: *caring asks doing. It is a long baptism into the seas of humankind, my daughter. Better immersion than to live untouched. . . . Yet how will you sustain?*”

In other words: How will you not be worn out? How will you not succumb? The moral and existential danger of tiredness is a widespread modern malady, but an unusual literary subject. The 20th-century novel is enchanted by ennui and seduced by alienation, perpetually fascinated by the stultifying, dehumanizing effects of modern life. But exhaustion

of the kind that these women contend with — the everyday burden of their unending busyness — is rarely represented in fiction. The reason is suggested on the first page of “I Stand Here Ironing”: “And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total?”

IT GOES WITHOUT saying that there is no time to write, and Olsen’s career is built on sifting and weighing the forces that conspire to prevent writing from happening. Even though she was almost 50 when “Tell Me a Riddle” appeared, she wasn’t exactly a late bloomer. Olsen came to her vocation early, embarking on a novel — published in 1974 as “Yonnonidio: From

Olsen’s career is built on sifting and weighing the forces that conspire to prevent writing from happening.

the Thirties” with a title borrowed from Walt Whitman — when she was barely in her 20s. The themes and moods of “Tell Me a Riddle” are prefigured in “Yonnonidio,” an episodic chronicle of a family chasing work and security in the mining camps and factory towns of the Great Plains.

The raw material was Olsen’s own childhood. She was born Tybille Lerner in Omaha, one of six children of Jewish immigrant parents who had fled Russia after the failed revolution of 1905. Like many Americans of her generation and background, she spent the 1930s balanc-

ing — or rather juggling, while riding a unicycle on a high wire — radical politics, artistic ambition, wage labor and domestic life. With Jack Olsen, a printer and labor organizer, she raised four children while working various office and factory jobs. She was also a journalist and an activist, publishing (in an early issue of *Partisan Review*) a vivid account of the San Francisco general strike of 1934, during which she was briefly jailed. “Listen, it is late,” she wrote at the end of that dispatch. “I am feverish and tired. Forgive me that the words are feverish and blurred. You see, If I had time, If I could go away. But I write this on a battlefield.”

The battle continued, even if the terrain shifted. Olsen was a writer her whole life — she died in 2007 — but she didn’t write much. Not because she was blocked or lacked material. The blockage — the obligation of earning a living and tending children, the “immersion” in caring that was a source of fulfillment as well as frustration — was the subject matter. The silence that surrounds those stories is its own kind of statement.

Is there a place in literature — in our canons and course listings, in our criticism and theory — for unwritten work? The idea seems almost preposterous; it’s hard enough to keep up with the books that have been written without worrying over the ones that haven’t. But every writer knows the weight, the power, the literal, palpable reality of silence. It isn’t just that negative space gives shape to words; it’s an active presence, an animating ghost in the machine.

Literary ethics prompts us to attend to the unheard and the marginal; curiosity or impatience with the same old stuff sends us in search of the forgotten and the neglected. But what kind of attention do we owe — what kind of attention is it even possible to pay — to the unvoiced?

This isn’t an epistemological question: It’s a political question, having to do with privilege and visibility, with how the resources that make writing possible — the time, the space, the confidence — are distributed. The best-known articulation of the problem of unequal access to the tools of writing is surely “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf’s clear-sighted feminist polemic from 1929.

In “Silences,” an essay that appeared in Harper’s in 1965, Olsen broadened the terms of Woolf’s argument, surveying the gaps and lost years in various careers and the different reasons (censorship, illness, temperamental reticence) that even outwardly successful writers didn’t write. But she homed in on a vaster silence of “those whose waking hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; the illiterate; women. Their silence the silence of centuries as to how life was, is, for most of humanity.”

She included herself. “Where the gifted

among women (*and men*) have remained mute, or have never attained full capacity," she continued, "it is because of circumstances, inner and outer, which oppose the needs of creation." And she concluded with a brief survey of the circumstances that accounted for her own silence and its occasional breaking: "This was the time of festering and congestion. For a few months I was able to shield the writing with which I was so full, against the demands of jobs on which I had to be competent, through the joys and responsibilities of family. For a few months. Always roused by the writing, always denied. 'I could not go to write it down. It convulsed and died in me. I will pay.' My work died. What demanded to be written, did not. It seethed, bubbled, clamored, peopled me. At last moved into the hours meant for sleeping. I worked now full time on temporary jobs, a Kelly, a Western Agency girl (girl!), wandering from office to office, always hoping we could manage two, three writing months ahead. Eventually there was time."

IN HER 40S, Olsen, who had never gone to college, was admitted to Stanford's creative writing program as a Wallace Stegner fellow. It was there that she found the physical and psychic room, and the material support, to finish three of the stories that would appear in "Tell Me a Riddle." In the wake of that book's success, she was awarded one of the early fellowships at the Radcliffe Institute, which had been established to provide money, office space, collegiality and institutional backing for women scholars and artists. According to "The Equivalents," Maggie Doherty's history of the institute's early years, Olsen arrived in Cambridge with the intention of producing "the great proletarian novel," an epic of toil, oppression and resistance in the tradition of Tolstoy and James T. Farrell.

What she produced instead was "Silences," which originated as a seminar presentation at Radcliffe. Doherty's account of it is one of the most exhilarating passages in her book, dramatizing how a rambling, two-hour talk coalesced around a radical idea, the vision of "a world in which all people could explore their creative capacities and fulfill their ambitions without fear of going broke."

The thesis of "Silences" had been implicit at least since "Yonnonidio." While the narrative dwells on the physical hardships endured by Jim and Anna Holbrook — in particular "the weariness" and brutality that nearly destroy Anna — the reader's attention gravitates toward Mazie, their older daughter, who is graced with the gifts of imagination and perception. A relatively prosperous neighbor recognizes her potential, giving her books ("Those fairy tales. Wilde's,

And the Dickens and Blake, and that book of Greek myths") and advice: "Mazie. Live, don't exist. Learn from your mother, who has had everything to grind out life and yet has kept life."

Mazie's father sells the books before she has a chance to read them, but it's still tempting to see her as a portrait of the artist as a young woman. A different kind of novel might have charted her awakening, her determination (to continue the Joycean paraphrase) to forge in the smithy of her soul the uncreated conscience of her class. But to hitch Mazie's aspirations to a fable of self-making would also be to sell her out, to risk betraying the numberless girls like her — "most of humanity," by Olsen's later estimate — whose minds were just as quick and sensitive but who lacked the luck or the entitlement to be heard.

"Silences" acknowledges many reasons that writers can't or don't write, so it's impossible to say for sure why Olsen's great proletarian novel never came into being. But her own work, and Doherty's shrewd rendering of her circumstances in the 1960s, offer some clues. At Radcliffe, she was both a cherished colleague — especially close to the poets Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, the other principal characters in "The Equivalents" — and an outlier. The other fellows were mostly younger, Eastern, middle-class, academically credentialed women. The standard account of American social mobility would herald the entrance into such company as an overcoming of obstacles, a personal transformation tinged with loss but nonetheless sealed in triumph.

That story, after all — a story of self-making that is also assimilation — is one of the dominant American narratives. It forms the template for countless coming-of-age stories, memoirs and novels, linking such ideologically disparate works as "Black Boy," "The Adventures of Augie March" and "Hillbilly Elegy." But that isn't the kind of story Olsen wanted to tell, even as it mirrored to some extent the arc of her own biography. (After Radcliffe, she went on to teach literature at other institutions, including Amherst College.)

Nor did she entirely trust the idea that a writer could give voice to the voiceless. The voices in her fiction feel very close to her own. To go further beyond the boundaries of self would involve an imaginative leap — and an ethical risk — that she was reluctant to take.

Her strongest belief was the idea that people should have the power to represent themselves.

Doherty cites Marx's famous description of how communism "makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner," Olsen, adding "child-rearing to the mix," imagines a world in which writing (or other artistic creation) would be available to everyone because it would be an aspect of ordinary experience, as valuable and common as any other kind of work, care or play.

THIS UTOPIAN LONGING is perhaps most powerfully realized in a book that Olsen didn't write. In the early 1970s, she came across an old copy of "Life in the Iron Mills," an 1861 novella by Rebecca Harding Davis (who is also mentioned in "Silences"). Olsen persuaded the Feminist Press to publish a new edition, to which she contributed "a biographical interpretation" that is longer than Davis's original text. It's a tour de force of sympathetic scholarship, in which Olsen finds uncanny echoes of her own fiction in Davis's life and work.

Through Olsen's eyes, Davis becomes both an exemplary woman writer and a

cautionary figure, continually wrestling time and space for writing from the demands of marriage and motherhood, and trying to protect her intellectual integrity from the pressures of a fickle, commercially compromised and often hypocritical literary establishment. A prolific and popular author in the 1860s and '70s, Davis (who died in 1910) was hardly silent herself, but in "Life in the Iron Mills" she created an avatar of silence that could have sprung from Olsen's own notebooks.

Hugh Wolfe, Davis's protagonist, is a worker, first seen as part of an undifferentiated mass of men with "brains full of unawakened power" making their way through the smoke and noise of a factory town in western Virginia before the Civil War. He is also an artist. While his fellow workers spend their time off in the saloons and brothels, he makes sculptures out of kornl, the waste product left behind by the smelting process. He is looked at with benevolent interest by some of the local elite, but his talent leads to ruin rather than triumph.

"Life in the Iron Mills," sold to The Atlantic Monthly as an exposé of working conditions in early industrial America, turns out to be a parable about art. And those subjects aren't as far apart as they might appear, at least if you read Rebecca Harding Davis through the lens of Tillie Olsen.

As a teacher, Olsen developed pioneering courses in feminist and working-class literature. She helped change the study of American literature, opening its canon to neglected voices and traditions. This project continues, not without controversy, and is sometimes faulted for politicizing art, for putting matters of gender, class and race in the way of supposedly more universal concerns.

Olsen's slender oeuvre delivers a mighty rebuke to that objection, since there is no experience more common — and also, paradoxically, none more unique — than dwelling in a body that desires, all at once, to work, to love, to create and to rest. This is the essence of both her weary, patient maternal wisdom and her radical criticism of the way things are. How to sustain?

Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom — in how many does it? There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to know — help make it so there is cause for her to know — that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron. □



Tillie with her husband, Jack Olsen.

Children, animals and, yes, a piece of toast try on other identities, and learn not to judge books by their covers.



Clockwise from left: "I Am a Bird"; "Sato the Rabbit"; "Milo Imagines the World."

I AM A BIRD

Written by Hope Lim
Illustrated by Hyewon Yum

"I fly like a bird on Daddy's bike," the narrator joyfully croons as we watch father and daughter whizz through a coastal, colored-penciled town. "CA-CAW!" she calls, and "the birds sing back." We smell the sea air and feel the salty breeze. Suddenly she spies "a woman with a blue coat and a big bag . . . walking very fast," and clutches her dad's sweatshirt, as gouache graffiti demons appear on a wall and a graphite shadow joins the gray-haired figure like an evil twin. Yet there she is one day in the park, "whispering a song to the birds!" Lim's text and Yum's art soar as the two "see" each other at last.

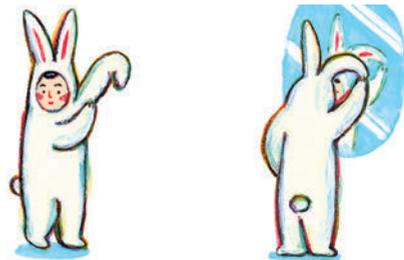
32 pp. Candlewick. \$16.99. (Ages 3 to 7)

ITTY-BITTY KITTY-CORN

Written by Shannon Hale
Illustrated by LeUyen Pham

A kitten who has crafted a horn and tied it on her head (thanks to a handy ball of yarn) "feels so perfectly unicorn-y" when she catches her statuesque reflection in the tall mirror. Unfortunately a taunting parakeet and gecko make her feel small again — like them. She feels even smaller when what looks like a "real" unicorn arrives. But then he reveals he's actually a "kitty-corn" with fuzzy pink ears like hers. Their frolicking shadows merge in a final image that, like the book as a whole, is a tad saccharine but has a big heart.

48 pp. Abrams. \$18.99. (Ages 4 to 8)



MILO IMAGINES THE WORLD

Written by Matt de la Peña
Illustrated by Christian Robinson

In this brilliant new collaboration from de la Peña and Robinson ("Last Stop on Market Street"), a boy sets out with his sister on a monthly subway trip. To occupy himself, he "studies the faces around him" and draws "pictures of their lives." At his stop, Milo is surprised to see a boy he's drawn in a castle join the line to pass through the metal detector. Is he visiting his mother in prison, too? Milo rethinks his pictures. Maybe the whiskered man isn't lonely; maybe the wedding-dressed woman married a girl; maybe the breakdancers live in a fancy building. And what must they all think of him?

40 pp. Putnam. \$18.99. (Ages 4 to 8)

SUNDAY RAIN

Written by Rosie J. Pova
Illustrated by Amariah Rauscher

While a storm rages on the other side of the ship curtains at his bedroom window, Elliott buries himself in a book. A princess endlessly fights a dragon and a watercolor sea keeps "swallowing the royal boat," with Elliott at the helm. Later, he peeks out shyly at two puddle-jumping children on the sidewalk. "Make some friends while I finish unpacking," his mother urges. He joins them with a toy boat. Soon the S.S. Elliott is life-size, the puddles are an ocean and the dragon is a kite. Elliott's new house feels like home.

32 pp. Lantana. \$17.99. (Ages 4 to 7)

SATO THE RABBIT

Written and illustrated by Yuki Ainoya
Translated by Michael Blaskowsky

This first book in a trilogy about a boy who one day "became a rabbit" and has "been a rabbit ever since" won the 2007 Japanese Children's Book Award. In lushly painted, highly immersive vignettes, we're shown that while Sato wears a costume, his sensory nature has been transformed. The taste of watermelon spreads throughout his body. He cracks a walnut and finds rooms inside. He plucks a cloud from a puddle's reflection and hangs it over his bed, where he "sips stories" from melted multicolored ice containing the emotions of a fully lived and dreamed life.

60 pp. Enchanted Lion. \$17.95. (Ages 4 to 8)

TOASTY

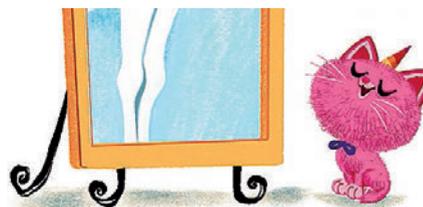
Written and illustrated by Sarah Hwang

Smart, subtle, yet laugh-out-loud wit that will delight both children and adults, plus abundant cartooning talent, mark this stellar debut from a young author to watch. Hwang even manages nuanced character development — for a piece of toast! Toasty wants to be a dog so much that he wears a collar. Getting down on all fours results in a face plant and rolling over is more like folding. But who can resist an aspiring canine who exits a house through the mail slot?

32 pp. Margaret Ferguson/Holiday House.
\$17.99. (Ages 4 to 6)



From "Toasty."



From "We Became Jaguars."

WE BECAME JAGUARS

Written by Dave Eggers
Illustrated by Woodrow White

A refreshingly unusual grandmother — wearing "very, very long" white hair, dark-red toenail polish on bare feet and an animal-print blouse — gets on the carpet and growls. "Let's be jaguars," she says to her grandson, who's "met her once before" and hides behind a large potted plant. By the time we reach the metamorphosis-depicting gatefold, the two are crawling together side by side into a wondrous, breathtakingly painted night of bonding and adventure.

44 pp. Chronicle. \$18.99. (Ages 5 to 8)

BEAR OUTSIDE

Written by Jane Yolen
Illustrated by Jen Corace

Yolen has said a picture by Corace, of a little girl looking out confidently from the mouth of a bear, inspired her to write this book. It's easy to understand why. Innovative in its perspective and moving in its execution (gouache that, like our emotions, sometimes bleeds outside the lines), Corace's art perfectly matches Yolen's words in this nuanced exploration of our inner selves. "Some folks have a lion inside, or a tiger. . . . I wear my bear on the outside." And yes, it's a "she."

32 pp. Neal Porter/Holiday House. \$18.99.
(Ages 4 to 8)



Clockwise from top left: "Itty-Bitty Kitty-Corn"; "Bear Outside"; "Sunday Rain."

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 MARCH 7-13

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	4	THE FOUR WINDS , 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.	6	1		THE CODE BREAKER , by Walter Isaacson. (Simon & Schuster) How the Nobel Prize winner Jennifer Doudna and her colleagues invented CRISPR, a tool that can edit DNA.	1
2	1	LIFE AFTER DEATH , by Sister Souljah. (Atria/Emily Bestler) In a sequel to "The Coldest Winter Ever," Winter Santiago emerges after time served and seeks revenge.	2	2	7	THE SUM OF US , 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.	4
3	2	LATER , 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.	2	3	6	GREENLIGHTS , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	21
4		FAST ICE , by Clive Cussler and Graham Brown. (Putnam) The 18th book in the NUMA Files series. Kurt Austin and Joe Zavala uncover a decades-old conspiracy when they search for a missing former colleague in Antarctica.	1	4	2	CASTE , 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.	32
5		THE ROSE CODE , by Kate Quinn. (Morrow) As a post-World War II royal wedding approaches, an encrypted letter resurrects an alliance between three female code breakers.	1	5	1	HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER , by Bill Gates. (Knopf) A prescription for what business, governments and individuals can do to work toward zero emissions.	4
6		2034 , by Elliot Ackerman and Adm. James Stavridis. (Penguin Press) The global balance of power shifts after new cyberweaponry lowers the defenses of U.S. planes and ships.	1	6	13	THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	29
7	8	THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY , 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.	15	7	12	BECOMING , by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady describes her journey from the South Side of Chicago to the White House, and how she balanced work, family and her husband's political ascent.	100
8	3	DARK SKY , 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.	2	8	4	UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	53
9	6	KLARA AND THE SUN , by Kazuo Ishiguro. (Knopf) An "Artificial Friend" named Klara is purchased to serve as a companion to an ailing 14-year-old girl.	2	9	3	THINK AGAIN , 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.	6
10	9	THE DUKE AND I , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series "Bridgerton." 22	11	10	8	A PROMISED LAND , 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.	17

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.

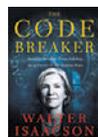
Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



NEW YORK, NEW YORK, NEW YORK: Four Decades of Success, Excess, and Transformation, by Thomas Dyja. (Simon & Schuster, \$30.) This capacious account of New York's recent rise describes the men and women in every facet of life who helped revitalize the city. Yet for Dyja, who sees the need for another reinvention of New York, the city has in many ways fallen prey to its own success.



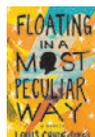
MONA, by Pola Oloixarac. Translated by Adam Morris. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$25.) The title character of this ruthless, very funny Argentine literary satire is vying for an important award at a conference in Sweden. But the comedy gives way to shocking revelations when Mona's deeply repressed memories come back to haunt her.



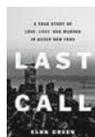
THE CODE BREAKER: Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race, by Walter Isaacson. (Simon & Schuster, \$35.) Isaacson, the biographer of innovators from Einstein to Leonardo, reprises some favorite themes in this book about the woman who won the 2020 Nobel in Chemistry for her work on the gene-editing technology CRISPR.



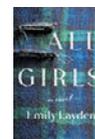
RED WIDOW, by Alma Katsu. (Putnam, \$27.) Katsu, a former intelligence analyst best known for her paranormal and horror novels, finally writes what she's most familiar with: This inside-the-C.I.A. thriller, about the friendship between an agent and the widow of a Russian asset, is replete with falsehoods, betrayals and double-dealing.



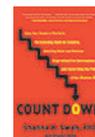
FLOATING IN A MOST PECULIAR WAY: A Memoir, by Louis Chude-Sokei. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$27.) This debut memoir tells the story of a young Black man trying to find himself in a world where he never quite seems to belong. Too African for Jamaica, too Jamaican for America, too American for Nigeria, Chude-Sokei grows up in search of a Blackness that fits him.



LAST CALL: A True Story of Love, Lust, and Murder in Queer New York, by Elon Green. (Celadon, \$27.) Restoring dignity and detail to the lives of four gay men murdered in the 1990s by a killer who picked up victims at Manhattan piano bars, Green's immersive account unfolds against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis and widespread homophobia.



ALL GIRLS, by Emily Layden. (St. Martin's, \$27.99.) A Connecticut boarding school is rocked by rape allegations in this assured and tender debut novel. Layden explores complex bonds between students and the slow-turning gears of a revered but old-fashioned institution.



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. (Scribner, \$28.) From 1973 to 2011, Western sperm counts dropped by 59 percent. Swan, an epidemiologist, blames chemicals found in everything from plastics to pesticides to cosmetics.



WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU: A Life With Chronic Illness — Lessons From a Body in Revolt, by Tessa Miller. (Holt, \$26.99.) With passion and precision, a reporter describes her fight for competent care after she developed inflammatory bowel disease.

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

Poison Pen(ner) Fans of historical fiction are familiar with the vehicles authors use to transport a story from the present to the past: A bundle of letters tied with ribbon, hidden in a steamer trunk; black-and-white pictures, tucked into a grandmother's jewelry box, or better yet, her diary; a newspaper or map stashed in the rafters.



'About two years ago, someone found a human skeleton.'

Sarah Penner went with a grittier approach in her debut novel, "The Lost Apothecary," which is No. 11 on the hardcover fiction list. In present-day London, an aspiring historian joins a mudlarking expedition on the banks of the Thames; there, she discovers a small blue vial that leads her to a 200-year-old mystery involving a poison-dispensing apothecary and a 12-year-old girl who makes a deadly mistake.

You may be wondering, what in the world is mudlarking? "It's like beachcombing, but you're looking for historical artifacts instead of sea glass or gold," Penner explained in a phone interview. "Every day the River Thames rises 23 to 24 feet. That turns over the riverbed. You can find anything from Roman coins to old clay pipes to leather shoes from the Tudor era. There are animal bones and little sewing pens the Victorians used. About two years ago, someone found a human skeleton."

Suddenly those letters languishing in the attic seem like small potatoes! (Future mudlarkers, take note: You'll need to secure a "foreshore permit" from the Port of London Authority. Restrictions apply.)

Penner described her own riverbank adventure with the fondness of a person recalling a scrumptious meal or a Technicolor sunset. It was the summer of 2019; she was on the water in central London. She stumbled upon several pottery shards and a little piece of a clay pipe, which she brought home to St. Petersburg, Fla. Now, when she's doing virtual events for "The Lost Apothecary," she'll conduct "a little show and tell" with her audience.

"Every so often I'll sift through and wonder, what bowl or plate was this part of," said Penner, who has worked in finance for 14 years and was inspired to enroll in a creative writing class after attending a lecture by Elizabeth Gilbert during her "Big Magic" book tour. "I'll think, who ate from this pottery? How long ago, where did they live, who were they married to, did they have children? There are these histories buried in the sand, waiting for the tide to come up or go back down and then for someone like you or me to find them." □

PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF MARCH 7-13

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	LIFE AFTER DEATH , by Sister Souljah. (Atria/Emily Bestler) In a sequel to "The Coldest Winter Ever," Winter Santiago emerges after time served and seeks revenge.	2	1		THE CODE BREAKER , by Walter Isaacson. (Simon & Schuster) How the Nobel Prize winner Jennifer Doudna and her colleagues invented CRISPR, a tool that can edit DNA.	1
2	2	THE FOUR WINDS , 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.	6	9		THE SUM OF US , 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.	4
3	6	THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY , 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.	15	6		GREENLIGHTS , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	21
4	3	KLARA AND THE SUN , by Kazuo Ishiguro. (Knopf) An "Artificial Friend" named Klara is purchased to serve as a companion to an ailing 14-year-old girl.	2	3		CASTE , 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.	32
5	4	DARK SKY , 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.	2	2		JUST AS I AM , 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.	7
6		2034 , by Elliot Ackerman and Adm. James Stavridis. (Penguin Press) The global balance of power shifts after new cyberweaponry lowers the defenses of U.S. planes and ships.	1	5		UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	53
7		FAST ICE , by Clive Cussler and Graham Brown. (Putnam) The 18th book in the NUMA Files series. Kurt Austin and Joe Zavala uncover a decades-old conspiracy when they search for a missing former colleague in Antarctica.	1	1		HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER , by Bill Gates. (Knopf) A prescription for what business, governments and individuals can do to work toward zero emissions.	4
8	5	THE AFFAIR , by Danielle Steel. (Delacorte) A French author's extramarital relationship affects various members of his wife's family.	2	4		THINK AGAIN , 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.	6
9	14	WE BEGIN AT THE END , by Chris Whitaker. (Holt) Trouble might start for the chief of police and a self-proclaimed outlaw teenager when a man is released from prison.	2	7		A PROMISED LAND , 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.	17
10	12	THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE , by V.E. Schwab. (Tor/Forge) A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie LaRue has across centuries.	20	8		WALK IN MY COMBAT BOOTS , by James Patterson and Matt Eversmann with Chris Mooney. (Little, Brown) A collection of interviews with troops who fought overseas.	5

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



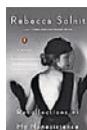
YELLOW BIRD: Oil, Murder, and a Woman's Search for Justice in Indian Country, by Sierra Crane Murdoch. (Random House, 400 pp., \$18.) In this "remarkable first book," our reviewer, David Treuer, observed, Murdoch brings "the same fanaticism and dignity" that Lissa Yellow Bird brought to her search for a missing oil worker to the "search for and meaning of modern Native America."



DEACON KING KONG, by James McBride. (Riverhead, 400 pp., \$17.) "A mystery novel, a crime novel, an urban farce. . . . There's even some western," is how our reviewer, Junot Díaz, described the National Book Award winner's latest work of fiction, set in the Brooklyn housing projects of the 1960s and one of the Book Review's 10 Best Books of 2020. "Fortunately, it is also deeply felt, beautifully written and profoundly humane."



THE UNDOCUMENTED AMERICANS, by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio. (One World, 208 pp., \$17.) One of the first undocumented students to be accepted to Harvard, the Ecuadorian author traversed America over the course of a decade, "gaining access to vigilantly guarded communities whose stories are largely absent from modern journalism and literature," according to our reviewer, Caitlin Dickerson, who called this 2020 National Book Award finalist "captivating."



RECOLLECTIONS OF MY NONEXISTENCE: A Memoir, by Rebecca Solnit. (Penguin, 256 pp., \$16.) The title, our reviewer, Jenny Odell, noted, refers to the author's instinct as a young woman to disappear. Invoking hopscotch ("back up a little, cover the same ground again"), Solnit, of "mansplaining" fame, traces how she found her voice as a person and a writer.



KIM JIYOUNG, BORN 1982, by Cho Nam-Joo. (Liveright, 176 pp., \$14.95.) This Kafkaesque novel about the "everyday horrors" of gender inequality in South Korea begins when a young stay-at-home mother is driven to a psychotic break. "Like Gregor Samsa," our reviewer, Euny Hong, wrote, Jiyoung feels "so overwhelmed by social expectations that there is no room for her in her own body; her only option is to become something — or someone — else."

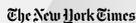


TRUTH IN OUR TIMES: Inside the Fight for Press Freedom in the Age of Alternative Facts, by David E. McCraw. (St. Martin's Griffin, 304 pp., \$17.99.) In the words of our reviewer, Preet Bharara, this "spirited and hopeful" insider's view of what it was like to be a lawyer for The Times in the Trump era is "a love letter to the First Amendment."

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Paperback Trade Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	LATER , 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.	2
2		THE ROSE CODE , by Kate Quinn. (Morrow) As a post-World War II royal wedding approaches, an encrypted letter resurrects an alliance between three female code breakers.	1
3	4	THE SONG OF ACHILLES , by Madeline Miller. (Ecco) A reimagining of Homer's "Iliad" that is narrated by Achilles' companion Patroclus.	21
4	5	THE DUKE AND I , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings.	11
5	3	FIREFLY LANE , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's Griffin) A friendship between two women in the Pacific Northwest endures for more than three decades.	39
6	6	HOME BODY , by Rupi Kaur. (Andrews McMeel) Poems and illustrations by the author of "Milk and Honey" and "The Sun and Her Flowers."	17
7	8	IN FIVE YEARS , by Rebecca Serle. (Atria) A Manhattan lawyer finds herself confronting a vision she had when elements of it come to life on schedule.	2
8	9	CAMINO WINDS , by John Grisham. (Bantam) The line between fact and fiction becomes blurred when an author of thrillers is found dead after a hurricane hits Camino Island.	3
9	10	CIRCE , by Madeline Miller. (Back Bay) Zeus banishes Helios' daughter to an island, where she must choose between living with gods or mortals.	40
10	11	MILK AND HONEY , by Rupi Kaur. (Andrews McMeel) A collection of poetry about love, loss, trauma and healing.	181
11		SPLIT SECOND , by David Baldacci. (Grand Central) Two discredited Secret Service agents find out that the incidents that hurt their careers are more than what they seemed.	1
12	13	THE 20TH VICTIM , by James Patterson and Maxine Paetro. (Grand Central) The 20th book in the Women's Murder Club series.	4
13	14	THE COLDEST WINTER EVER , by Sister Souljah. (Atria/Emily Bestler) The wealthy daughter of a prominent Brooklyn drug-dealing family finds herself in a tough situation.	2
14		ACT YOUR AGE, EVE BROWN , by Talia Hibbert. (Avon) The third book in the Brown Sisters series. Eve's brand of chaos affects a bed and breakfast's owner and his business.	1
15		THE NIGHTINGALE , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's Griffin) Two sisters in World War II France: one struggling to survive in the countryside, the other joining the Resistance.	76

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Paperback Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	125
2	3	BECOMING , by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady describes her journey from the South Side of Chicago to the White House, and how she balanced work, family and her husband's political ascent.	2
3	2	NOMADLAND , 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.	4
4	6	BRAIDING SWEETGRASS , by Robin Wall Kimmerer. (Milkweed Editions) A botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation espouses having an understanding and appreciation of plants and animals.	48
5	4	WHITE FRAGILITY , by Robin DiAngelo. (Beacon) Historical and cultural analyses on what causes defensive moves by white people and how this inhibits cross-racial dialogue.	132
6	11	THE BODY , by Bill Bryson. (Anchor) An owner's manual of the human body covering various parts, functions and what happens when things go wrong.	7
7	13	BORN A CRIME , by Trevor Noah. (One World) A memoir by the host of "The Daily Show."	109
8	7	THINKING, FAST AND SLOW , by Daniel Kahneman. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) When we can and cannot trust our intuitions.	263
9	12	HOOD FEMINISM , by Mikki Kendall. (Penguin) A critique of how today's mainstream feminism overlooks basic needs such as access to food, education, living wages and medical care.	3
10	8	THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Vintage) An account of the Great Migration of 1915-70, in which six million African-Americans abandoned the South.	63
11	9	SAPIENS , by Yuval Noah Harari. (Harper Perennial) How Homo sapiens became Earth's dominant species.	135
12	15	THE COLOR OF LAW , by Richard Rothstein. (Liveright) A case for how the American government abetted racial segregation.	44
13	5	HIDDEN VALLEY ROAD , by Robert Kolker. (Anchor) From 1945 to 1965, a family in Colorado had 12 children, six of whom went on to develop schizophrenia.	2
14		WE DO THIS 'TIL WE FREE US , by Mariame Kaba. (Haymarket) A collection of essays and interviews that articulate the work of abolition and transformative justice.	2
15	14	THE CHOICE , by Edith Eva Eger. (Scribner) Dr. Eger recounts her life and survivor's guilt during and after her imprisonment in Auschwitz.	5

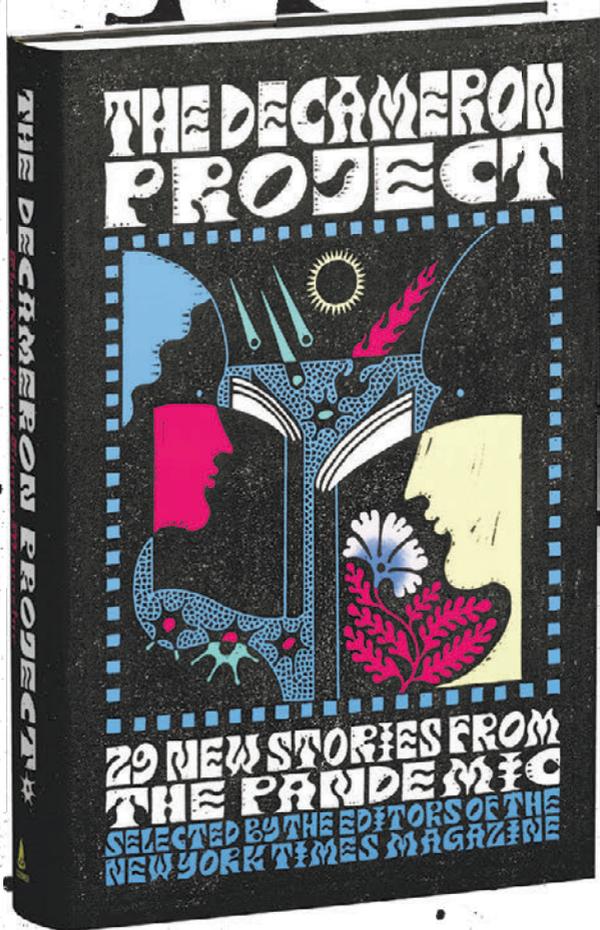
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THE RAIN HERON

By Robbie Arnott

269 pp. FSG Originals. Paper, \$16.



What exactly is a rain heron, the fantastical creature at the heart of the Australian writer Arnott's daring, atmospheric novel? Is it just a "fairy tale" or is it real — and why is the military so intent on tracking it down? These are some of the questions propelling this dark eco-fable set in a no man's land ravaged by marauding soldiers, floods and freezing winds.

It makes sense, then, that Ren, on the run from the army and her past, seeks refuge in a remote cave, foraging to survive. But Ren, it turns out, has actually seen the rain heron and will be forced by a hardened officer named Zoe Harker to lead her to it. And what an amazing sight the bird truly is: an iridescent, translucent being that can transform into water and mist. Even more incredible, it has the power to alter the weather, a coveted tool — or weapon — for whoever captures it.

Ultimately, Harker gets her prey, but at a cost. She is partially blinded by its talons and wounds Ren, who tries to stop her. The heron itself will wreak havoc on the landscape they cross to deliver it to the military. The novel moves at a quicksilver pace, shimmering with menace and electric visions of forests and lake-filled valleys. Harker's own metamorphosis, as she later drifts remorsefully through "the quiet carnage of the world," is as remarkable as the heron's. "I felt suddenly transparent," she says, on re-encountering Ren, "as if she could see through my skin and flesh, and into the air behind me."

AMERICAN DELIRIUM

By Betina González

Translated by Heather Cleary
210 pp. Holt. \$26.99.



"American Delirium," by the Argentine author González, takes place in a Middle American town in the not-so-distant future, also troubled by political turmoil and a natural world gone haywire.

Homelessness and unemployment are rampant, and many are turning their backs on society, heading to the woods to join a Finnish mystic and his commune. There, under the influence of a powerful hallucinogenic plant called albaria, they embrace an "animal time where consciousness disappears."

But these searchers and dropouts, who leave their children to become wards of the state, aren't the only ones acting strange. The deer, too, have become rabid, violently attacking townspeople. Everyone, in one way or another, is affected by the turn of events: Berenice, a "left-behind," who is searching for her disappeared mother; Vik, a refugee from the Caribbean island of Coloma, who discovers a cultist squatting in his closet; and Beryl, whose own experiments in the 1960s have left her slightly gun-crazy and out of whack ("one more passenger in the greatest shipwreck any era, any country, any generation has known"). Her solution: Organize a vigilante group of seniors to hunt down the wild deer.

It may all seem a lot to keep track of, but González manages to merge the stories of Berenice, Vik and Beryl — gradually revealed in alternating sections — into one dizzying vortex, combining colonial history, generational delusions and psychedelic drug trips. Fluidly translated by Cleary, the novel offers an eerily familiar vision of American madness and decay — from an Argentine writer, no less.

ANTONIO

By Beatriz Bracher

Translated by Adam Morris
211 pp. New Directions. Paper, \$15.95.



Several forms of delirium — desire, idealism, grief — infect the privileged family of "Antonio," a novel by the Brazilian writer Bracher. Benjamin, a soon-to-be father, has come to São Paulo to learn more about his own father, Teodoro, who ended up homeless among "the immiserated, the favela dwellers, the landless people."

Benjamin turns to three main witnesses for answers, and they don't always agree. His grandmother, Isabel, proud matriarch of the Kremz family, has one version. "We're not literature, my dear," she warns him. "It's much more complicated than a love story." Raul, Teodoro's closest friend from his youth, has his own take. And Haroldo, a former colleague of Benjamin's grandfather Xavier, is still clouded by his feelings for Isabel and resentment of Raul.

What Benjamin discovers, however, is enough to mess with anyone's head. Teodoro and Xavier, his father and grandfather, both fell madly in love — and had children — with the same woman, Elenir. Xavier married her when she was just a teenager in 1950, but had a mental breakdown when their infant child died.

Unaware of his father's past, Teodoro encounters Elenir years later while roaming the *sertão*, or backlands, in the late 1970s. But, again, tragedy strikes, and Teodoro's collapse is complete. "Sleeping with your father's woman: Can anyone stand it without gouging his eyes out and being condemned to wander?" Raul asks. As in her novel "I Didn't Talk" (also elaborately translated by Morris), Bracher brilliantly picks away at the web of secrets and lies plaguing a family and country.

IF YOU KEPT A RECORD OF SINS

By Andrea Bajani

Translated by Elizabeth Harris
200 pp. Archipelago. Paper, \$18.



Bajani's "If You Kept a Record of Sins," gracefully translated from the Italian by Harris, is a more muted tale of a son's pain and loss, and the viewpoint is wholly his own. Lorenzo arrives in Bucharest for his mother's funeral, flooded with feelings of abandonment that go way back. "You started leaving when I was young," he tells her, beginning an inner conversation that courses through this slim, astonishing book.

As a child in Italy, Lorenzo grew accustomed to being left at home with his stepfather, as his mother, Lula, traveled the world hawking a newfangled weight-loss machine. He recalls the emptiness of their house when she was gone, and the exotic souvenirs that piled up when she returned: "They were from every country, every corner on earth, my room, trip after trip, becoming the world map of your absence." Eventually, though, the gifts stopped coming. Lula, along with her business partner, Anselmi, permanently settled in Romania, a country crawling in the 1990s with "entrepreneurs, pioneers, hunters."

Over a week, Lorenzo wanders the streets of Bucharest, killing time at the former palace of the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer with Anselmi and other workers. At night, he watches the city light up from his mother's apartment, unable to sleep. Who was she, he thinks, this woman he hardly knew? And what was her life like here after leaving him behind? Bajani etches an impressionistic portrait of a young man — like the foreign city outside his window — trapped in a shadow land between past and present.

OUR FIRST-EVER COVER PHOTO

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

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



Credit: Gessford, New York

EDITH WHARTON



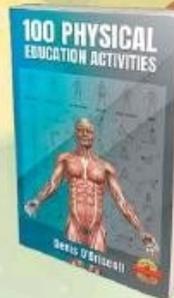
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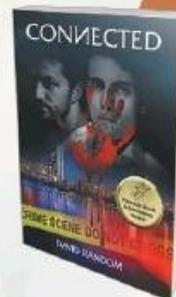
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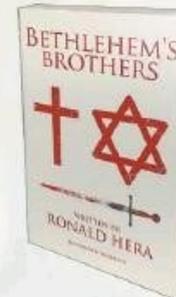
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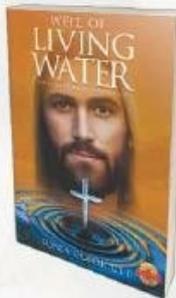
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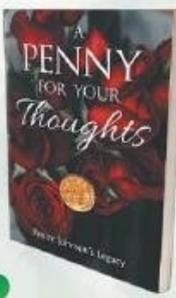
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