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Christina Lauren

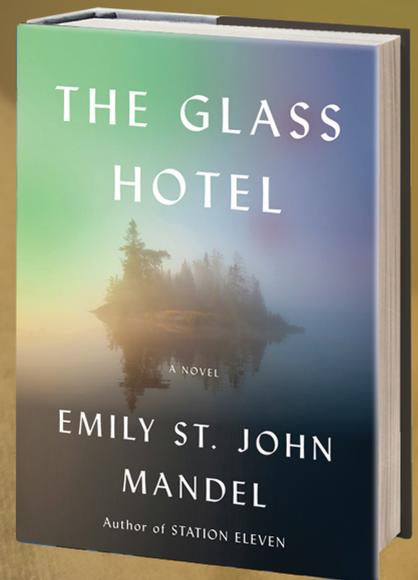
Julia Alvarez

Mark Doty

&

EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL

Time plays tricks in the masterful new novel
from the author of *Station Eleven*



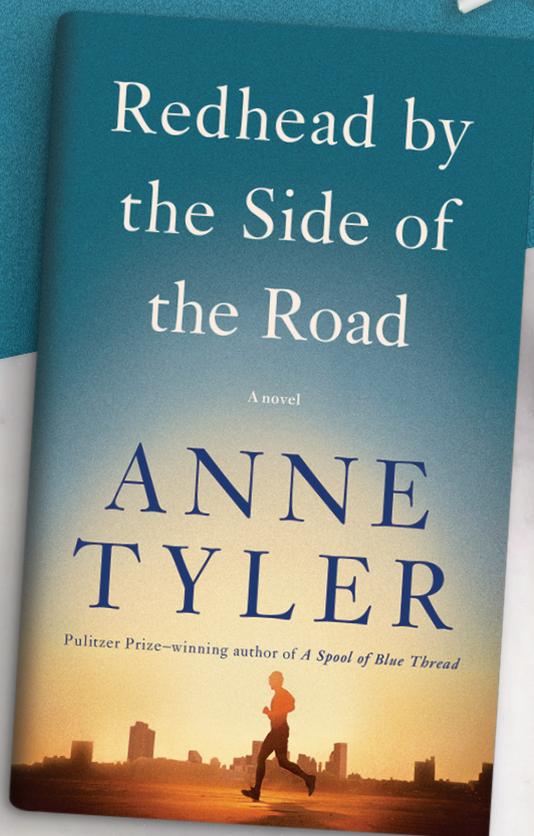
Redhead by the Side of the Road

ANNE TYLER

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TYLER IS
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“HEART-
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REDEMPITIVE

*...sweetly dramatizes
the absurdities of
flawed perception and
the risks of rigidity.”*

Booklist

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SUFFUSED
WITH
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...very moving.”

Kirkus
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(STARRED)

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An intimate reading of Whitman

One of America's most perceptive contemporary poets digs deep into the work of Walt Whitman in search of personal—and communal—signposts.

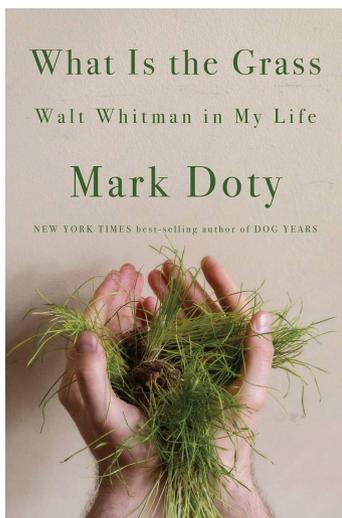
The poet and memoirist Mark Doty (*My Alexandria*, *Dog Years*) has lived intimately and intensely with Walt Whitman's poetry for decades. As a reader, a teacher, a poet and a gay man, Doty has sought answers in the great American poet's life and work, and through a lifetime's deep dive into the muscular and elusive lines of *Leaves of Grass*, he has continually rediscovered and refined his own connection to Whitman.

In *What Is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life* (Norton, \$25.95, 9780393070224), an elegant blend of literary criticism and personal memoir, Doty positions this essential American poet in the larger framework of our national literature while chronicling his own deeply personal relationship to the writer who gave birth to new ways of looking at poetry and the world.

Doty draws our attention to Whitman's great innovations: the invention of American free verse, the transformation of the colloquial into poetic discourse and his unabashed "open inscriptions of same-sex love." Yet Doty, from his 21st-century vantage point, isn't content with merely enshrining those daring advances. For him, Whitman is a living voice that reaches across time, "stepping into a readerly present with a directness and immediacy that have never lost their power to startle." So, as Whitman's words accompany Doty into intimate moments in his

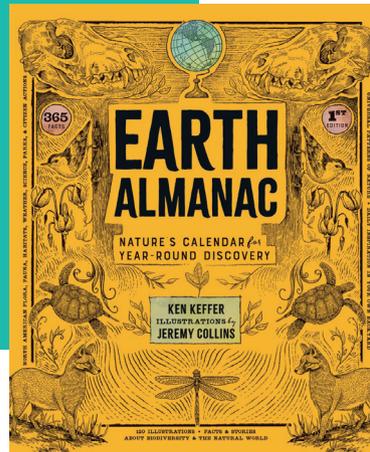
own life—often physical and spiritual encounters with lovers—they come to embody the great human embrace that the 19th-century poet propounded. Doty, of course, can be far more candid with details than his beloved forebear could have ever dared be. He notes that it was Whitman's depictions of women's sexuality that often got the poet in trouble in his own time, the meaning of his vibrant homoerotic imagery mostly lost on a society where same-sex relationships were not able to be openly acknowledged.

Doty calls Whitman "the quintessential poet of affirmation, celebrant of human vitality." *What Is the Grass* repeatedly confirms that appraisal as Doty seeks the intersection of the spiritual and the corporeal. The details of Whitman's sexual life remain veiled, and scholars have been reading between the lines for years to parse the truth. Doty is no exception, as he convincingly draws out the elusive meanings suggested by the monumental text. He reminds us that we can never know the whole truth about the dead (or really, about the living) but that "Walt Whitman is language now. . . . His body of work is his only body now, gorgeous, revelatory, daring, contradictory, both radically honest and carefully veiled. Its meaning resides in us," Doty insists, "in the ways we readers use these poems as signposts, maps, temporary inhabitations—even, sometimes, dwelling places."



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

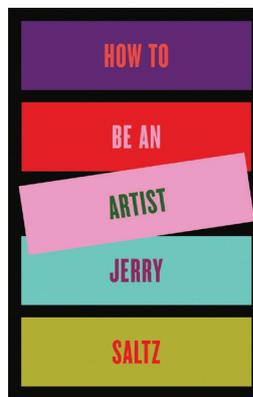
★ Earth Almanac



The internet's useful and all, but have you picked up an almanac lately? Ken Keffer's *Earth Almanac* (Skipstone, \$24.95, 9781680512823) is a fine specimen, focused on phenology, the interconnection of living things through seasonal change. Each of its 365 entries explores a particular natural creature, phenomenon or feature; on the day of this writing, Keffer looks closely at the "twittering flights

of the American woodcock," aka bog sucker, mud bat or brush snipe. Beautifully illustrated, *Earth Almanac* makes a delightful daily read-aloud with family. Keffer's generalist approach offers encouragement to budding naturalists, inviting us to action as field data collectors and advocates for the earth. "People are more likely to protect what they are familiar with and what they care about," he writes.

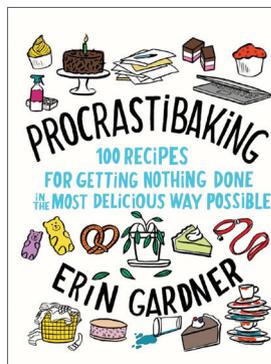
How to Be an Artist



In 2018, Jerry Saltz, senior art critic for *New York* magazine, wrote a piece on how to live more creatively, featuring 33 "nodes and nubs of advice." It proved wildly popular, so Saltz kept going, thinking more deeply about how to make art a part of one's life—and what is art, anyway? The result is the trim, brilliant *How to Be an Artist* (Riverhead, \$22, 9780593086469), which combines color reproductions of famous works with inspiring directives, pep talks and juicy reflections on art-making and sustainable creative practice.

Whether you're a proud amateur or a frustrated expert, these are words worth taking to heart. Saltz's knowledge veins run deep, and his voice is crisp, frank, intimate and urgent.

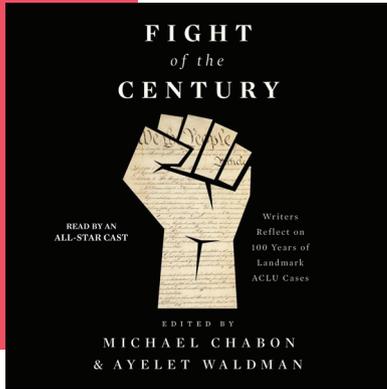
Procrastibaking



As I polish off this column a day past my deadline, you can bet that I'm loving a new cookbook with chapter headings like "Better-Late-Than-Never Brownies and Bars," "Late-for-Everything Loaf Cakes" and "Sorry-for-the-Delayed-Response Savory Bakes." This is Erin Gardner's *Procrastibaking* (Atria, \$24.99, 9781982117740), and it is giving me life. Never mind that I absolutely want to try every delicious-sounding recipe, of which there are more than 100, and

most of which are making a successful appeal to my sweet tooth. I also want to nail the word search, mazes and other games that are sprinkled throughout the book like finishing sugar. But first I must finish this column . . . or *must I*? After all, the majority of these treats can be turned out in under 50 minutes, I'm told.

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



★ Fight of the Century

Fight of the Century (Simon & Schuster Audio, 11 hours), edited by Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman, includes essays by 40 writers on different ACLU court cases that helped define and protect our civil liberties over the past century. Anyone with even a passing interest in constitutional law and

the Bill of Rights will be enthralled by this audiobook. The writers make history personal and breathe life into what could be a dry subject. For example, *Homegoing* author Yaa Gyasi takes on *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Reflecting on growing up in the Huntsville, Alabama, public school system, she provides new insight and reminds us that our work is not finished. The narration is performed by an all-star voice cast including Samuel L. Jackson, Lucy Liu, Zachary Quinto, Patrick Stewart and many others. The changing voices keep things lively, and many actors bring a personal element to the narration, their own backgrounds reflective of those in the cases being discussed.

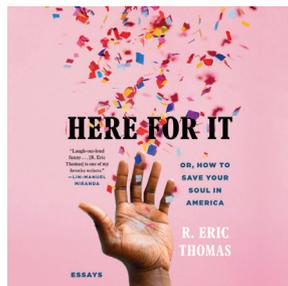


Followers

Megan Angelo's **Followers** (Harlequin Audio, 13.5 hours) tells two parallel stories in the 2010s and 2050s about how far people will go to achieve fame—and to escape it. This pop culture sci-fi book's grim (or maybe just too-real) vision of the not-so-distant future pushes the concepts of social media influencers and reality stars to their extremes. In

the future, stars have product sponsorships and live their whole lives on camera. But instead of staring at devices all day, the technology is implanted directly in your body, and it's very hard to disconnect. Narrator Jayme Mattler has a cold, dissociated style that adds to the story's eeriness. It's like *The Truman Show* for the 21st century.

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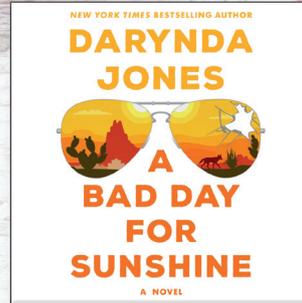
Here for It

Here for It: Or, How to Save Your Soul in America (Random House Audio, 7.5 hours) is a collection of funny, touching essays about R. Eric Thomas' life. As a black kid growing up in urban Baltimore, Thomas imagines the horrors that lurk in the suburbs of his mostly white classmates' neighborhoods. As a gay Christian, he navigates

dating a horror-loving agnostic and dealing with his certainly bedeviled Krampus Christmas decoration. When Thomas falls in love with a preacher, he realizes that his life doesn't fit into the expectations for a preacher's spouse. Thomas doesn't shy away from strong opinions, and his narration provides the perfect tone for sassy asides, making these deeply personal stories even more so.

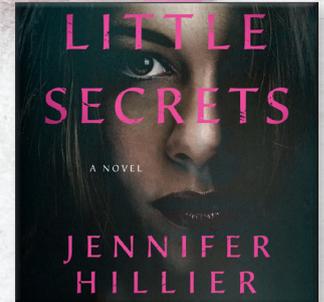
Anna Zeitlin is an art curator and hat maker who fills her hours with a steady stream of audiobooks.

A NEW CROP OF AUDIOBOOKS



READ BY LORELEI KING

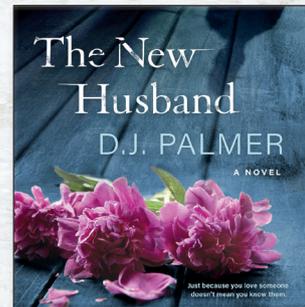
Darynda Jones is back with the first novel in the brand-new, snarky, sassy, wickedly fun Sunshine Vicram series



READ BY KIRSTEN POTTER

"Unflinching and unforgettable... everything you want in a thriller."

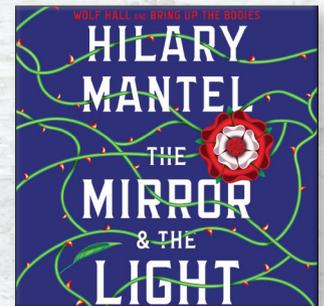
—Riley Sager, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Lock Every Door*



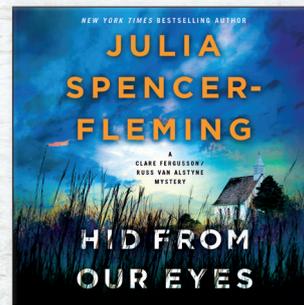
READ BY JANUARY LAVOY & REBECCA SOLER

"A pulse-pounding winner of a thriller."

—Lisa Gardner, *New York Times* bestselling author on *Saving Meghan*



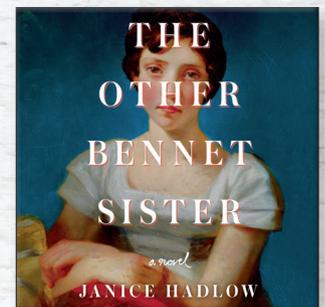
READ BY BEN MILES, WHO PLAYED THOMAS CROMWELL IN THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY ADAPTATIONS OF *WOLF HALL* AND *BRING UP THE BODIES*



READ BY SUZANNE TOREN

"Stellar... Spencer-Fleming combines a first-rate mystery with flawed but endearing characters."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

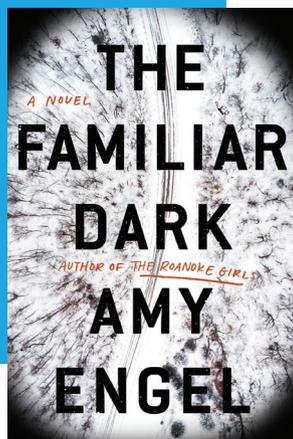


READ BY CARLA MENDOÇA

"Exceptional storytelling and a true delight."

—Helen Simonson, *New York Times* bestselling author

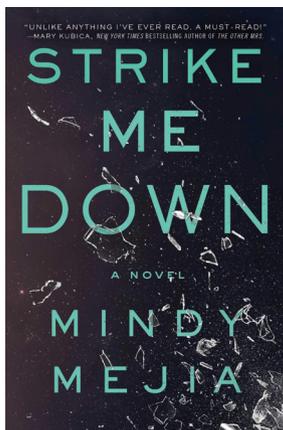
AVAILABLE FROM MACMILLAN AUDIO



The Familiar Dark

Raised by a drug-addicted single mother in an all-but-forgotten Ozark town, Eve Taggart has persevered in the face of adversity, scratching out a meager but respectable living as a waitress. And then Eve's 12-year-old daughter gets murdered in a neglected playground, along with a school classmate, her best friend. No clues are immediately forthcoming, and the police are inept at best, so if justice, even rough justice, is to be done, it will fall to Eve to dispense it in Amy Engel's thriller **The Familiar Dark** (Dutton, \$26, 9781524745950). Complicating matters are two family factors. The first is Eve's brother, who is a police officer connected with the investigation; the second is her mother, who is a meth dealer. Either or both may bear some responsibility—if not for the murders themselves, then at least for the surrounding toxic situation that may have put the girls in the radius of collateral damage. There aren't

many happy endings in towns where meth is the leading industry, but **The Familiar Dark** certainly has a satisfying ending, and perhaps, as in life, that is the best one can hope for.

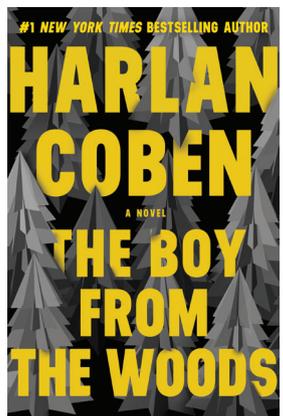


Strike Me Down

You wouldn't think that a book featuring an accountant as the protagonist would make for an edge-of-your-seat read, but you would be wrong. Mindy Mejia's latest thriller, **Strike Me Down** (Emily Bestler, \$27, 9781982133238), is a page turner of the first order, a brutal mashup of world-class martial arts and high-stakes embezzlement. Twenty million dollars in prize money goes missing shortly before a kickboxing extravaganza. Forensic accountant Nora Trier has been hired by the owners of sporting goods company Strike to investigate the theft and hopefully recover the purloined funds. Nora has personal connections with both co-owners of Strike: Logan Russo, a noted kickboxer, has been Nora's personal trainer; and Logan's husband, Gregg Abbott, was Nora's partner in a one-night stand, perhaps the steamiest of her life. So when conflict erupts between the two owners, Nora finds herself caught uncomfortably in the crossfire as suspicions flare

and supporting evidence follows close behind. This is not a book that will make you want to seek out a career in accounting, the way Michael Connelly's *The Lincoln Lawyer* might have inspired a budding generation of legal eagles, but without a doubt it will give you a new appreciation for the field and its practitioners.

Sign up for our mystery newsletter at BookPage.com/enews.

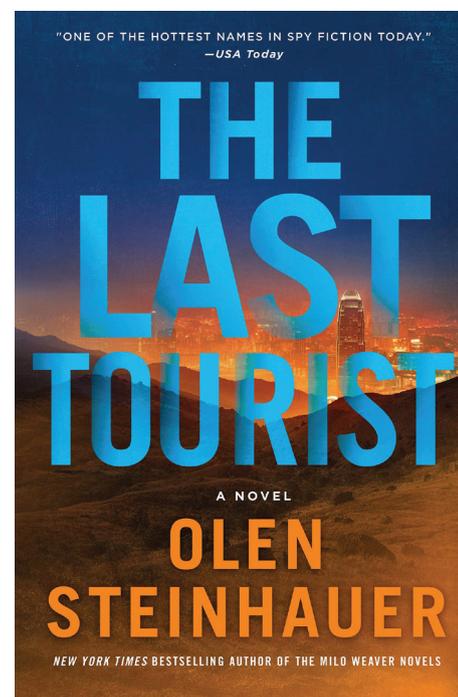


The Boy From the Woods

How about this for an offbeat protagonist? A boy, living wild and with no memory of his name or the beginnings of his circumstances, is discovered by a pair of hikers in the wilds of New Jersey. (Yes, New Jersey has wilds.) Now, 30-odd years later, he has become a private investigator, and whether by design or coincidence, he goes by the name of Wilde—no first name, no middle initial. This unlikely premise kicks off Harlan Coben's intriguing new thriller, **The Boy From the Woods** (Grand Central, \$29, 9781538748145), which sees Wilde investigating the disappearance of a bullied teenage girl, Naomi Pine, in the same woods where he was once found. Wilde's investigation uncovers dirty politics by which even current-day shenanigans pale in comparison, including a figure who makes Donald Trump look like a choirboy, and folks, whichever side of the political divide you may occupy, you gotta admit that ain't easy! Much in the manner of Ed McBain and Carl

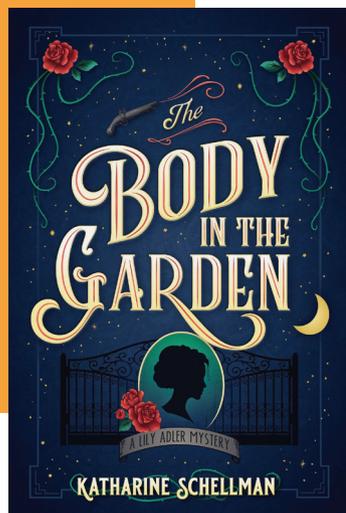
Hiaasen, Coben stretches his characters and situations paper-thin, almost to caricature, and then page by page brings the story around to a rousing conclusion.

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



★ The Last Tourist

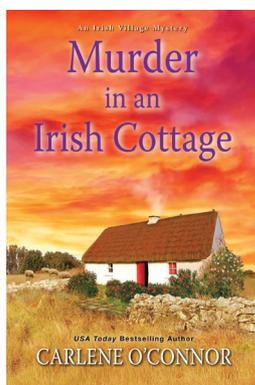
Milo Weaver, the protagonist of Olen Steinhauer's **The Last Tourist** (Minotaur, \$27.99, 9781250036216), surely must be the standard bearer for disillusioned spies the world over. He is semiretired, now serving the CIA as an information broker after beating a hasty retreat to one of the world's most remote outposts, the Western Sahara, in hopes of keeping a low profile. But when a somewhat green CIA interrogator comes to question Milo about a series of mysterious deaths in which he peripherally features, he discovers that his life is perhaps even more in peril than it was in the old days when he worked as a field agent. And after the pair is attacked in the supposedly safe Sahara outpost, you will find yourself wondering if they'll survive the next 48 hours. When the series kicked off with 2009's *The Tourist*, the Department of Tourism (Steinhauer's euphemistically named CIA spy shop) was the bastion of the good guys—or at least that was how it was fashioned. Not so much anymore. It isn't imperative that you read the three volumes that precede **The Last Tourist**, but it helps. And in any event, once you read this one, you will want to go back and read the others, so just get them all and block out a long weekend to enjoy some of the finest modern spy thrillers.



★ The Body in the Garden

Lily Adler is a widow in mourning. Fortunately, dipping a toe back into the social whirl at Lady Walter's ball should be a doddle; they are old friends, after all. But Lily overhears an argument and then a gunshot, which all leads just where you might expect considering the title: **The Body in the Garden** (Crooked Lane, \$26.99, 9781643853567). First-time author Katharine Schellman tosses Lily into a moral conundrum, as after the body is found, Lily sees Lord Walter paying someone off to drop the

investigation. Finding the truth is the right thing to do, but it might compromise her friends. Sensitive handling of class and race issues common to London in the early 1800s give the story depth, and there are some truly nail-biting moments as Lily finds her way as a sleuth. Readers will love her and be eager for more after finishing this smashing debut.



Murder in an Irish Cottage

Carlene O'Connor's Irish Village series tangles with ancient superstitions in its fifth installment, **Murder in an Irish Cottage** (Kensington, \$26, 9781496719058). Garda Siobhán O'Sullivan fears that her fiancé, Detective Sergeant Macdara Flannery, may be too close to the crime to check his emotions, as the murder victim in question is his Aunt Ellen. Ellen's daughter, Jane, appears to know more than she lets on, and their wee village doesn't disguise its collective relief at being able to knock down the small

home Jane shared with Ellen, which they believe to be cursed due to its location on a fairy path. A good old-fashioned finale in which the killer is exposed at a gathering of all the suspects closes this eerie tale with a bang.



Mrs. Mohr Goes Missing

In 1893 Krakow, Poland, class is everything, appearances must be kept up, and women should know their place. Zofia Turbotyńska does her best, volunteering for a charity auction while her professor husband rustles behind the daily papers. When one of the auction's donors dies mysteriously, Zofia feels called to learn the truth. **Mrs. Mohr Goes Missing** (Mariner, \$15.99, 9780358161462) is an unexpectedly hilarious whodunit from Maryla Szymiczekowa, a pseudonym for authors Jacek Dehnel and Piotr Tarczyński. Szymiczekowa shows us Zofia's world through her eyes. She isn't afraid to critique a funeral for lacking in pomp, and she outdoes the police thanks to long hours in the library with Edgar Allan Poe and a desire to do more with her life than simply micromanage her household. Let's hope this adventure is the first of many.

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

Where Murderers Meet Their Match!

Wonderful Journey

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MURDER AT THE MENA HOUSE
ERICA RUTH NEUBAUER
A Jane Wanderly Mystery
HARDCOVER

Murder in an Irish Cottage
An Irish Village Mystery
CARLENE O'CONNOR
USA Today Bestselling Author
HARDCOVER

Hello

For armchair travelers

Murder Makes Scents
A Nanooka Candle Make Mystery
Christin Brecher
PAPERBACK

ELLERY ADAMS
MURDER IN THE STORYBOOK COTTAGE
Once upon a crime...
A Book Retreat Mystery
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For candle lovers

For bibliophiles!

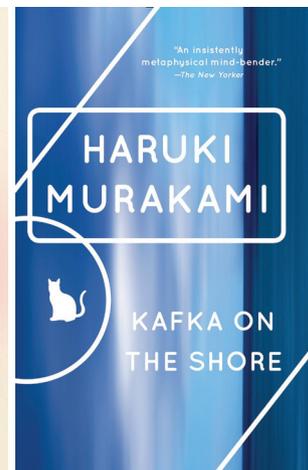
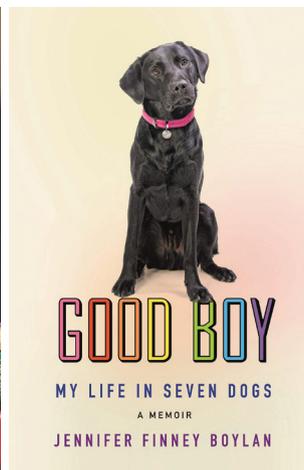
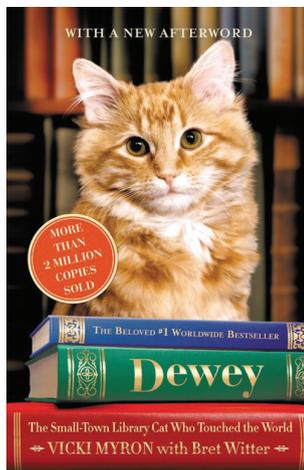
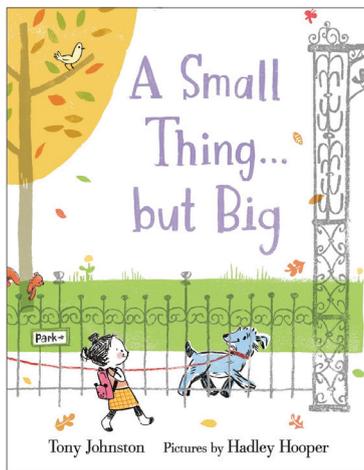
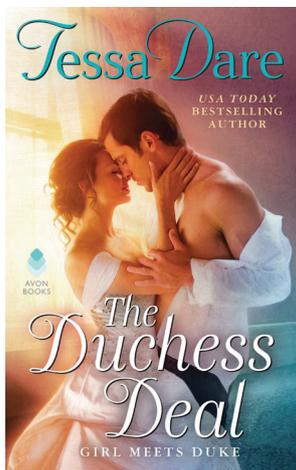
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It's raining cats and dogs

The battle of cats versus dogs has raged among BookPagers for more than 30 years. This month, we're picking sides and sharing some of our favorite literary cats and dogs.



The Duchess Deal

By Tessa Dare

Taken aback by a duke's proposal of marriage (he wants an heir to spite his annoying cousin, just go with it), Emma Gladstone insists on bringing her cat to their new home. Emma doesn't actually *have* a cat, but she wants something she can love while entering into a marriage that promises to be little more than a business arrangement. But a harried Emma only has time to find Breeches, the angriest and ugliest alley cat in all the land. Breeches proceeds to stalk through the chapters of Dare's hilarious historical romance like the xenomorph from *Alien*, interrupting love scenes, stealing fish from the dining table and generally being a total nuisance. The reveal of why Emma named him Breeches in the first place is both giddily funny and oddly touching, which is basically **The Duchess Deal** in a nutshell.

—Savanna, Associate Editor

A Small Thing . . . but Big

By Tony Johnston
Illustrated by Hadley Hooper

A Small Thing . . . but Big is a deceptively simple charmer. A little girl goes to the park and, gradually, overcomes her fear of dogs, thanks to a fuzzy muppet named Cecile and the dog's owner, who is only ever referred to as "the old man." Illustrator Hadley Hooper's spreads are a masterclass in expression and framing, and Tony Johnston's language is delicate and playful, as Lizzie "carefully, oh carefully" pats Cecile, then works her way up to "springingly, oh springingly" walking her around the park. "All dogs are good if you give them a chance," Cecile's owner tells Lizzie, and by the end of the book, it's clear that Lizzie agrees. It's a practically perfect picture book: a small thing . . . but big.

—Stephanie, Associate Editor

Dewey

By Vicki Myron

When you are a notorious cat lady, people send you cat stuff—cat memes, cat socks, cat salt and pepper shakers and, occasionally, cat books. My grandma sent me a copy of **Dewey** when I was in college, and initially I thought, "Thanks, Grandma, but I've got a lot of Sartre to get through before I have time for a heartwarming cat memoir." Reluctantly, I started skimming. A helpless kitten is abandoned through the book-return slot of an Iowa library. A librarian fallen on hard times discovers and raises him. A community is transformed through the affections of a bushy, orange cat. Before I knew it, I was reading this book every night before bed, and by the end, I was openly weeping. Fellow cat ladies and laddies, put your pretensions aside and give this one a chance.

—Christy, Associate Editor

Good Boy

By Jennifer Finney Boylan

Jennifer Finney Boylan knows that to write about dogs is to write about the very nature of love. "Nothing is harder than loving human beings," she writes, but loving a very good dog has the power to remind us of our best selves—and to reveal who we are in our human relationships. Boylan offers an ode to all the dogs she's loved before in **Good Boy**, a memoir-via-dogs coming April 21. Dog books are sometimes just a vehicle for crying, so for me, the inevitable bittersweetness can never be maudlin. And if memoir can help us better understand our own stories, then breaking up our memories into dog treat-size bites is a special exercise for anyone who puts unreasonable expectations on their best friend. (For the record, my dog is very good. Perfect, even.)

—Cat, Deputy Editor

Kafka on the Shore

By Haruki Murakami

Cats are intelligent, if not outright magical creatures. Their attitudes, their curiosity, the uncannily human pathos in their meows all let us know there is something going on beneath the surface. Japanese author Haruki Murakami is aware of this, and so he took advantage of cats' magic in **Kafka on the Shore**. In the story, Mr. Nakata, one of two central characters, has the ability to speak to cats and makes a living searching for lost felines. We see Mr. Nakata use his abilities in a few hilarious scenes before he loses his ability to speak to cats, but as the story unfolds, cats become a central part in unlocking the mysteries that send Mr. Nakata on a journey across Japan. Murakami uses the whimsical magic of cats to unfold grand metaphysical mysteries.

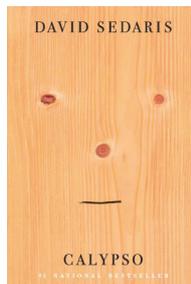
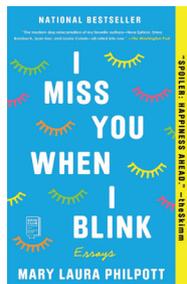
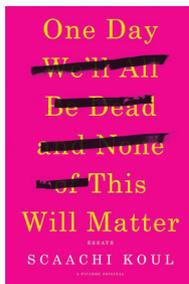
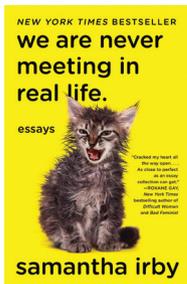
—Eric, Editorial Intern

Heavy topics, light touch

Four essay collections balance wisdom and high-spirited humor, tackling weighty topics with exhilarating playfulness that will encourage freewheeling discussion.

In her funny, fearless **We Are Never Meeting in Real Life** (Vintage, \$15.95, 9781101912195), Samantha Irby—a popular blogger who writes for the Hulu comedy series “Shrill”—opens up about what it’s like to be a bisexual black woman in today’s world. Irby is frank and unfiltered in essays on her troubled childhood and alcoholic father, her adventures in dating and sex, and the strange nature of personal connection in the digital age. Themes of gender, race and self-love run through these bold autobiographical set pieces. Irby’s progressive sensibil-

I Miss You When I Blink (Atria, \$16.99, 9781982102814)—new in paperback this month—Emmy Award-winning co-host of “A Word on Words” and bestselling author Mary Laura Philpott offers insights into the vicissitudes of modern womanhood. Whether she’s reflecting on the challenges of being a mom, her struggles with depression or the nagging need so many of us feel to have an Instagram-worthy life, Philpott is a companionable presence on the page, and her compassion for like-minded readers is palpable. Book clubs will find weighty top-



ity and cutting-edge comedic attitude will set the tone for spirited and unrestrained conversation.

Scaachi Koul ponders her background as the daughter of immigrants in her slyly humorous debut, **One Day We’ll All Be Dead and None of This Will Matter** (Picador, \$16, 9781250121028). In this wide-ranging collection, the BuzzFeed staffer writes about interracial romance, internet harassment and the unique blend of cultures that has informed her identity. Book clubs will find much to dig in to here, as Koul shares her thoughts on minority issues and sexism. Her shrewd observations and well-honed sense of humor will inspire rousing conversation—and lots of laughter.

In her delightful book of essays,

ics in this collection, but the author’s sparkling wit and lively narrative style make for an all-around upbeat reading experience.

With his 10th book, the essay collection **Calypso** (Back Bay, \$17.99, 9780316392426), David Sedaris proves again that he’s a master of the amusing anecdote. From the vagaries of book tours to his experiences as a litter collector in England, Sedaris’ comic scenarios are sure to make readers smile. His one-of-a-kind views on the human condition, the passing of youth and the inescapable bonds of kin will fire up book club conversation without dampening spirits. Pieces focusing on family matters, such as the suicide of Sedaris’ sister Tiffany, can feel wistful, yet the author’s trademark hilarity prevails.

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

BOOK CLUB READS FOR SPRING



THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW

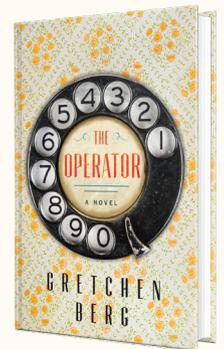
by A.J. Finn

#1 *New York Times* Bestseller –
Soon to be a Major Motion Picture
“Astounding. Thrilling. Amazing.”
—GILLIAN FLYNN

THE OPERATOR

by Gretchen Berg

“Think *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* in the suburbs with delicious turns of jealousy, infidelity, bigotry, and embezzlement thrown in for good measure. *The Operator* is irresistible!”
—KATHRYN STOCKETT,
bestselling author of *The Help*



AFTER ME COMES THE FLOOD

by Sarah Perry

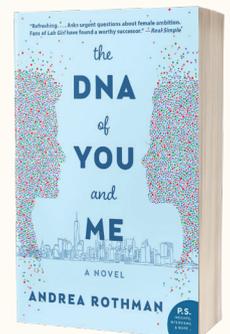
“A beautiful, dream-like, unsettling narrative in which every word, like a small jewel, feels carefully chosen, considered and placed.”
—SARAH WATERS,
New York Times bestselling author



THE DNA OF YOU AND ME

by Andrea Rothman

“Refreshing.... Asks urgent questions about female ambition. Fans of *Lab Girl* have found a worthy successor.”
—REAL SIMPLE



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William Morrow

Book Club Girl



A perfect match

Lovable and dynamic writing duo Christina Lauren celebrate their 25th book together with *The Honey-Don't List*.

Twenty-five books is a milestone that few writers reach, and doing so in little over a decade is nearly superhuman.

The partnership between Lauren “Lo” Billings (pictured above left) and Christina Hobbs (right) began over fan fiction but quickly transitioned into a whirlwind publishing career under the name Christina Lauren, which both the authors and their fans affectionately abbreviate as CLo. “We didn’t have time to think or do anything besides keep our heads down and write,” Billings says, laughing about those early publishing days. “We were just drinking from the fire hose at that point.”

A “fugue state” is the best way to describe their original expeditious schedule, which saw them release four novels and two novellas in the span of just 10 months, beginning with *Beautiful Bastard* in February 2013. Hobbs quips, “If there’s anything I’d tell early CLo, it’s to not eat at your desk. Take care of yourself more.”

This isn’t the first time I’ve talked with CLo. I’ve interviewed them several times and attended a few of their signings. They once even located the house keys I didn’t know I’d lost at a book convention. Billings is the more talkative of the two, while Hobbs interjects with a one-liner or funny aside. Their conversation flows easily, and both take turns acting as either wingwoman or playful provocateur to the other. When I tease Billings about her bemusement at Adam Driver’s heartthrob status, Hobbs is quick to note that she’s indifferent either way but won’t miss a chance to rile Billings up. This push-pull also appears in their books, keeping readers

laughing whether it’s between friends, siblings or lovers.

Their latest novel, *The Honey-Don't List* (Gallery, \$28, 9781982145217), follows a hero and heroine who are roped in to playing mediator for Melissa and Rusty Tripp, a golden couple of home-renovation reality TV whose once loving relationship has totally devolved. Carey Douglas has worked for the Tripps for years, and the downward spiral of their marriage has taken a toll on her. Engineer James McCann was brought on to help with the Tripps’ new show but is quickly pushed into the role of babysitter for the philandering Rusty. Put them all in close quarters during a stressful book tour and show launch, and it’s a powder keg waiting to go off.

Dedicated fans of the authors’ work may notice a pattern of forced proximity. “We make their worlds stressful and small. . . . It’s like putting them under a microscope,” Billings says, though she insists they “don’t do it by design.”

But Carey and James *were* created by design—specifically, the way they complement one another. “When we’re writing romance novels, we want to think about why *this person* is perfect for this other person,” Billings says. “[James] is really perfect for Carey, and that pairing comes through really clearly. You can see why he is perfect for her.”

CLo wanted to show the layers of Carey’s vulnerabilities, both in inhabiting a toxic workplace and living with dystonia, a movement disorder that affects the muscles. Billings speaks candidly about her experiences with movement disorders, a chronic condition that affected her late father and currently affects her sister.

“Dystonia was part of Carey’s story from the get-go,” she says. “I think the reason why we put this in the book was not necessarily to shine a light on dystonia, although that will be a nice side effect to have more people aware of it. . . . When I look at my sister, she’s this incredible person who just happens to also have a movement disorder. It doesn’t define her or change the deep romance she has with her husband. I think sometimes we forget that people are not their illnesses. Dystonia isn’t who Carey is; it’s just part of her day.”

While the authors establish some things early on, like characterization and setting, their process changes from book to book. It also never gets any easier. “We were outlining our 27th book, and we just had this feeling of, ‘What are we doing?’” Hobbs says. “‘Maybe we should use Post-its and just put them all over the windows. Do you think we need dry erase markers? Oh, my God, we could just write on the windows!’”

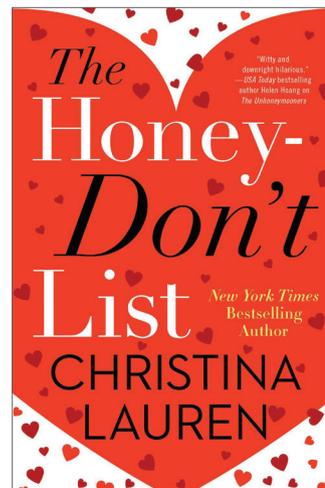
Billings adds, “I think that when people ask us how we write together, they expect to hear a bulleted outline of how a book gets done, but we honestly don’t know. We do it a little bit differently every time. Part of that is because we have different things in our lives going on when we start a book, and our process has to be a bit fluid. And part of it is because I think we are 80% idiot, and we just don’t know how to write a book.”

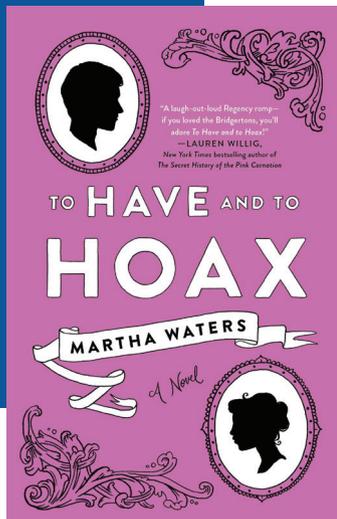
With their 26th book publishing in October (a holiday romance titled *In a Holiday*) and their 27th in the editing process, it’s clear that Christina Lauren has plenty more stories left to tell. And despite Billings brushing off their planning process as luck, their partnership is undeniably something special. “We put in just as much time making sure our friendship is strong as we

do our business partnership,” Billings says.

“Lo is my best friend and my favorite person in the world, aside from the one I’m married to and the one I gave birth to,” Hobbs says. “We love each other as friends, as much as we love each other as co-authors.”

—Amanda Diehl





★ To Have and to Hoax

Debut author Martha Waters delights with a clever Regency comedy of manners, **To Have and to Hoax** (Atria, \$16, 9781982136116). Lady Violet Gray and Lord James Audley married in haste, madly in love. Five years on, they're barely speaking. James' fall from a horse could break the ice, but when Violet arrives at his side and finds him perfectly fine, she gets her revenge by pretending to be gravely ill. At the center of this ever-escalating war of words and wits is a broken partnership, and Waters

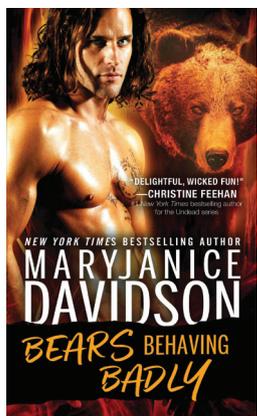
makes readers eager for Violet and James to fight their way back to trust. The London Season, complete with dance cards and theater outings, serves as the setting, which will further please fans already delighted by the beloved trope of an estranged married couple reuniting at last.



The Happy Ever After Playlist

A grieving woman falls in love with a musician on the rise in **The Happy Ever After Playlist** (Forever, \$15.99, 9781538715642) by Abby Jimenez. Sloan Monroe meets Jason when she rescues his dog. They're instantly attracted, first via texts and calls and then in person, but Sloan is leery of their connection. Obstacles litter the path to true love in the guise of a vengeful ex and the pressures of fame. Sloan thinks a breakup is for the best, but Jason is impossible to get over. He fixes leaky pipes! Donates bone marrow! Writes love songs dedicated to

her! The dazzling and very public finale to the story is no surprise, given the title, but readers will enjoy this enchanting and unabashed romantic fantasy, complete with the perfect playlist, all the same.



Bears Behaving Badly

MaryJanice Davidson follows shifters on the brink of trouble in her new paranormal romance, **Bears Behaving Badly** (Sourcebooks Casablanca, \$7.99, 9781492697015). Bear shifter Annette Garsea teams up with her secret crush, fellow werebear David Auberon, to protect some at-risk juvenile shifters. Davidson doesn't clobber the reader with world building, yet it's easy to slip into the reality she's conceived, where the bears are always hungry for sugary snacks. Annette and David have very human doubts about getting involved with each other, and only by relaxing their guards can they find happiness.

This madcap adventure is written in an irreverent, tongue-in-cheek style, with the author occasionally addressing the reader directly. The language and lovemaking are gritty, and the wordplay is nonstop in this fun read.

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

New worlds, new dangers

This spring, YA superstars Sarah J. Maas and Veronica Roth make their adult debuts.

Veronica Roth is best known for her intense, mega-bestselling *Divergent* trilogy, and Sarah J. Maas' sweeping *Throne of Glass* and *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series have garnered her a massive following. With their new novels, the two YA authors fully cross over for the first time into fiction for adults. Both books sit squarely within the realm of science fiction and fantasy, but each represents a very different approach to the genre.

Maas' **House of Earth and Blood** (Bloomsbury, \$28, 9781635574043), the first book in her new *Crescent City* series, introduces half-Fae party girl Bryce Quinlan. After Bryce comes home to find her closest friends literally ripped limb-from-limb by a demon, she is left alone and devastated, her only solace that the perpetrator is behind bars. But

two years later, a string of similar murders begins, and Bryce realizes that her friends' killer was never caught. With the help of Hunt Athalar, a fallen angel and assassin enslaved to the city's governor, Bryce must navigate the darker side of *Crescent City* to try to bring the killer to justice.

Maas' world is rich and sensuous, a dark urban fantasy with mythic overtones. Perfect for readers looking for both dramatic and romantic tension, it will make you hold your breath and leave your heart pounding.

Where **House of Earth and Blood** straddles the line between romance and mystery, Roth's fantasy

novel **Chosen Ones** (John Joseph Adams, \$26.99, 9780358164081) takes a more traditional approach to the genre. The novel opens 10 years after the defeat of the Dark One, a mysterious and magical entity responsible for the deaths of

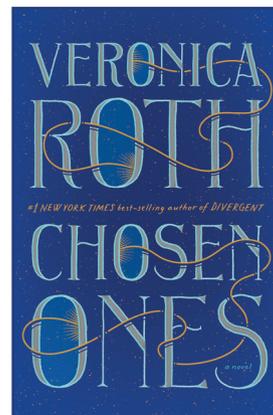
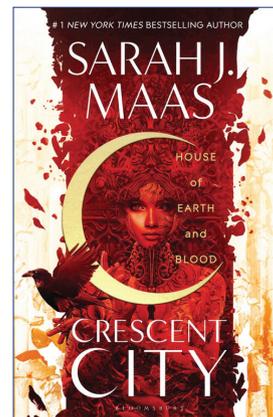
thousands of people. The *Chosen*—the five teens responsible for the Dark One's downfall—have grown up and moved on, creating lives that are as close to normal as they can get.

But not everyone can move on. Sloane is plagued by PTSD and the feeling that she'll never be anything more than one of the *Chosen*. But then the death of one of the *Chosen* forces the remaining four to reckon with a new terror: the idea that the Dark One might not be as vanquished as they once thought.

Chosen Ones gives us a glimpse into a world after the heroes have won, and the result is stunning. Simultaneously heart-wrenching and heart-pounding, Roth's latest will leave you gutted and wishing for just 10 more pages.

For readers who already love Roth or Maas, **Chosen Ones** and **House of Earth and Blood** will be automatic additions to their collections. For adult readers who have been hesitant to delve into the world of YA, both books serve as perfect introductions to their authors' work. Take your chance now, and pick either (or both) as your next thrilling ride.

—Laura Hubbard



Medicine, misogyny and memoir—oh my!

With a high dosage of humor and hope, Sarah Ramey's memoir makes the suffering of women with chronic illnesses visible at last.

Sarah Ramey's **The Lady's Handbook for Her Mysterious Illness** is at once a comforting embrace and a call to arms for people (mostly women, alas) who experience mysterious chronic illnesses. The book is a figurative finger, trembling with rage, pointing directly at the deeply held sexism at the root of so many problems in American health care. It's also a funny, honest, often beautiful recounting of the author's personal journey through illness after illness after illness, during which she maintains her hope and optimism.

Ramey spoke with BookPage about her powerhouse memoir in a call to her home in Washington, D.C.—an auspicious conversation, considering that getting her book to publication has been such an astounding journey, thanks to years of health challenges. “I wrote it over a 15-year period,” she says. “It's so funny—someone told me I'm the most overdue author they've ever encountered!”

That's impressive in its own way, of course, but Ramey used the delay as an opportunity for more research, and thus more potential for greater impact. “In the beginning, nobody was talking about [the things I was writing about],” Ramey says. “I don't think the microbiome was even mentioned in the original proposal, and gut health was not yet a common term . . . but as every year has gone by, it's come more and more into the mainstream. . . . I learned so much in that interim period.”

The author has conducted an enormous amount of research into the conditions common to what she calls “WOMIs”—a “woman with a mysterious illness” who is “exhausted, gluten-free, and likely in possession of at least one autoimmune disease. She is allergic to . . . (everything), aching from tip to toe, digestively impaired, and on uneasy terms with her reproductive system. She is addled, embarrassed, ashamed, and inflamed. She is one of us.”

Clearly, being a WOMI isn't an easy existence, not least of all because the inability to diagnose and prescribe a sure fix for these conditions typically leads to skepticism and dismissal from medical practitioners. And it definitely doesn't help that WOMIs may not always look sick. The number of times Ramey (who has gyno-rectal disease, gut issues and more) has been dismissed, doubted, scoffed at and much worse—botched surgeries and unapologetically cruel doctors, for starters—is staggering.

But Ramey is an engaging and witty narrator, and readers will nod along with her as she describes the arc of her reactions to such treatment. In the beginning, she says, “I was a lot nicer to doctors” who treated her poorly because—well, she needed them. But as time went on and her motives and sanity were repeatedly questioned, Ramey got angry. She began speaking up for herself, and she began writing the book so that other women like her wouldn't feel alone. (And these women are legion. Autoimmune illness numbers have tripled in the last 30 years.)

The author says she believes the American health care system can and must change. “It became clear that mine was not a psychological condition. It was a problem in the psyche of the doctors—the programmed assumptions, unconscious bias, prejudice against this type of patient, particularly against women,” she says. “If you can't prove what's wrong with you, it's much more likely you will get swept away. That is part of the culture, and it's wrong, and it's very difficult to combat as a single person in the moment because of the power dynamic.”

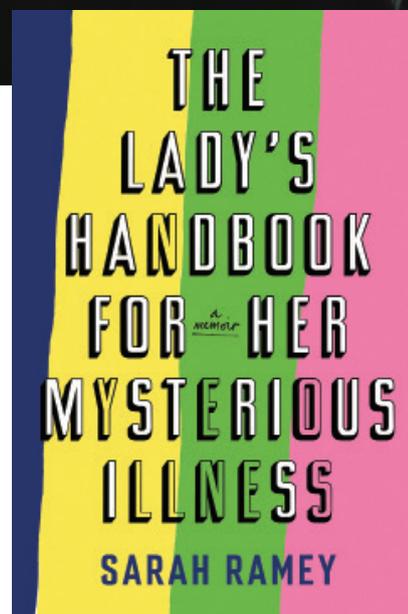
For Ramey, changing her mindset has been a key part of her adjust-



© JULIUS SCHLOSBERG

The Lady's Handbook for Her Mysterious Illness
Doubleday, \$27.95
9780385534079

Memoir



ment to living with chronic illness. She writes, “In the alternative medicine world, following your bliss is highly correlated to healing.” Thus, rather than pushing through the pain and trying to get better faster, she's engaged in “a lot of phases of trying to figure out how to make my life as good as it could be within really tight parameters.” That's included adopting a cat (who was “right here looking at me encouragingly” during our interview), as well as inhabiting her singer-songwriter alter ego, Wolf Larsen, whenever she can.

Ramey says she hasn't performed in the last couple of years because she's been having “surgeries and interventions to reconstruct and make things better” in her poor, beleaguered pelvis, “but when things quiet down and this overdue book is out, I'm going to record an album I've had written for quite a while.”

She adds, “I'm a hope-monger! I used to say every year, ‘This is the year I get better and do this many shows.’ I don't do that anymore. I now accept that I'm a studio musician I'm not going to perform live very often, and that's fine.” (However, her all-female band, GlitterSnatch, does plan to perform at a couple of her book events.)

And when it comes to **The Lady's Handbook for Her Mysterious Illness**, Ramey says, “I'm hoping that it can help change the conversation a little bit, the dynamic between the patient and the people around them. A main goal for me is to be another person helping to make this invisible problem visible.”

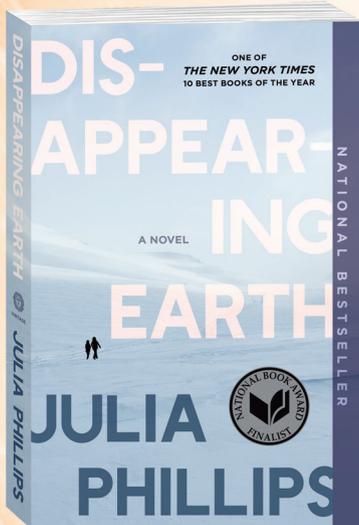
—Linda M. Castellitto



Visit BookPage.com to read our review of *The Lady's Handbook for Her Mysterious Illness*.

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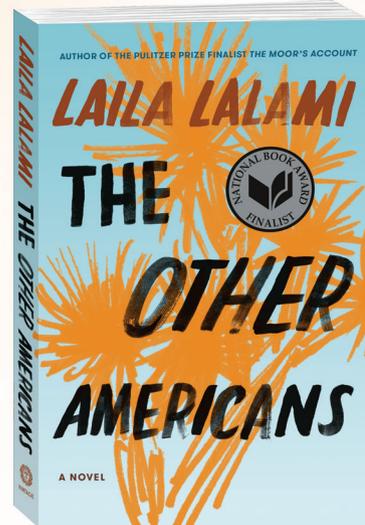


One of the New York Times 10 Best Books of the Year

National Book Award Finalist

"Superb.... Brilliant.... Phillips's deep examination of loss and longing... is a testament to the novel's power."

—The New York Times Book Review



National Book Award Finalist

"A page-turning mystery.... Lalami may be our finest contemporary chronicler of immigration and its discontents."

—The Washington Post

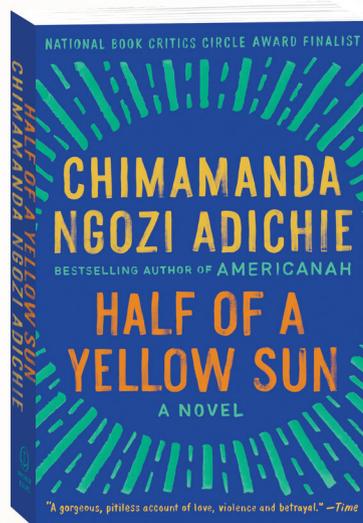
Winner of the Orange Prize

National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist

Bestselling author of *Americanah* and *We Should All Be Feminists*

"Ingenious.... Adichie has created an extraordinary book."

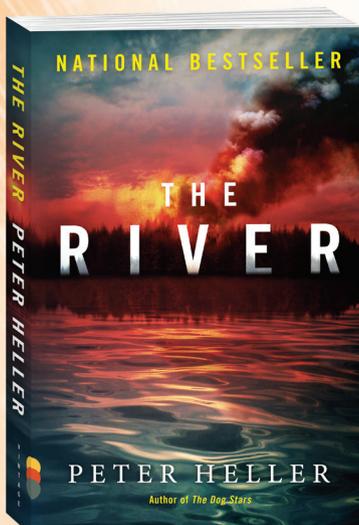
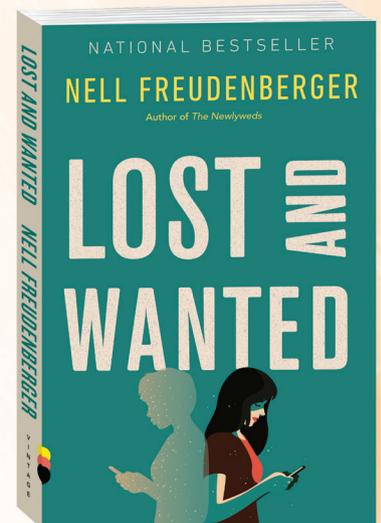
—Los Angeles Times



A Best Book of the Year
Vogue and Fresh Air

"Dazzling, ingenious.... A gorgeous literary novel about loss and human limitations."

—The Washington Post

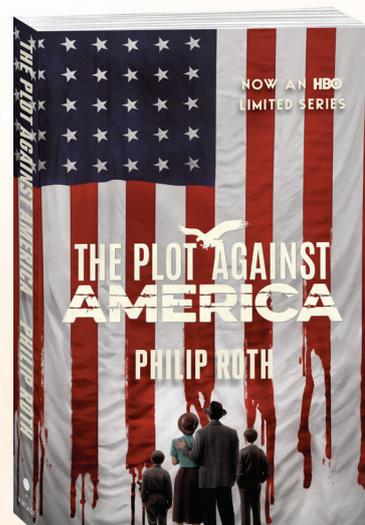


An Edgar Award Nominee

From the bestselling author of *The Dog Stars*

"A poetic and unnerving wilderness thriller."

—USA Today



Now an HBO® Limited Series

"A terrific political novel.... Sinister, vivid, dreamlike.... You turn the pages, astonished and frightened."

—The New York Times Book Review

Greed & Ghosts

More complicated, weirder and far more haunted than *Station Eleven*, the new novel from Emily St. John Mandel defies all expectations.

Success, we often hear, is a double-edged sword. Just ask Emily St. John Mandel. Her surprise bestselling fourth novel, *Station Eleven* (2014), launched her into the literary stratosphere. That was a very good thing. For the most part.

“When you have a wildly successful book, you have a sense of audience that wasn’t there before,” Mandel says during a call to her home in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where the Vancouver Island native has lived for almost 17 years. “That’s about the least sympathetic problem in the entire world, so I don’t talk about it too much. But before *Station Eleven*, I had no sense of anybody waiting for my next book. I could just go out and write. Afterward, I had this internal pressure that I needed to replicate its success. I was aware that people were waiting for the new book, speculating about it.”

Much of that speculation had to do with whether or not the new novel would also be a chilling, post-apocalyptic tale like *Station Eleven*. It is not.

Instead, **The Glass Hotel** tells a more intricate, haunting and enthralling story, drawing some of its narrative energy from Bernie Madoff’s Ponzi scheme. It’s about money and the compromises and moral panics of gaining it, having it and losing it—a topic that Mandel acknowledges is rarely talked about, let alone written about in fiction.

“I grew up in a very working-class environment,” Mandel says. “I have no complaints. I had great parents and a really good childhood, even though we really didn’t have much. But what growing up without much money gives you is a sort of painful awareness of money. You’re very aware that you’re wearing secondhand clothes and your friends aren’t. Then, as you get older, you encounter people who have grown up in very different circumstances, and you start to see how much of life can be influenced by how much money your family has.”

Mandel’s literary success has placed her at events where she spends time with very wealthy people like the ones she so sharply characterizes in **The Glass Hotel**. “To be clear, they’re often lovely people I adore,” she says, “but I do sometimes feel like a tourist in the kingdom of money.” This phrase is echoed in the novel by one of Mandel’s most riveting characters, a woman named Vincent who grows up in working-class circumstances

on Vancouver Island and, through intelligence and personal magnetism, goes on to become the “trophy wife” (loosely speaking, since they’re not actually married) of a Madoff-style investment-scheme mogul named Jonathan Alkaitis. (This is one of three lives Vincent inhabits in the story; she also takes on the roles of bartender at the titular hotel and, later, cook on an international shipping freighter.)

Now that Mandel has some money herself, she is paying for a younger brother’s college education. “It’s an honor to do it,” she says. “For him it would have been a matter of deciding between getting an education and taking on massive debt.” Her newfound affluence is also helping her and her husband (and their very young daughter) renovate their Brooklyn home. At the time of our conversation, her house is in chaos. Her office, she says, is filled with all the couple’s books and “thousands of boxes.” The hammering thunder of workers is, to say the least, distracting.

Her husband, Kevin Mandel, is also a writer. “Probably it’s not the

easiest thing to have two anything—two writers, two lawyers, two therapists—in one household,” she says, laughing. “But I would say that it’s wonderful to live with someone who profoundly understands the way you want to spend

your days. . . . There’s not that kind of bafflement you sometimes get from people who don’t understand why you would want to close yourself in a room for six hours just to write about fictional people. Also, having an in-house editor is a really nice thing.” Kevin, she says, is her first reader.

Regarding the ideas that eventually bodied forth as **The Glass Hotel**, Mandel says she didn’t have much interest in Bernie Madoff himself. “He seems like a garden-variety narcissist,” she says. “What was fascinating to me was that this was a sort of double mass delusion, where on the one side there were the investors, who were smart people who were getting [financial] statements that really made no sense but were just letting it go because they were making so much money. And on the other side was the staff that was actually carrying out the Ponzi scheme.”

At the time the Madoff story broke, Mandel still had a day job as an administrative assistant in the Rockefeller University’s cancer research lab. “For years, I couldn’t stop thinking about the camaraderie that one has with one’s co-workers,” she says. “Just think of how much more intense

“Everybody in [this novel] is haunted in some way by memory or by actual ghosts.”

that camaraderie would be if you were showing up at work every Monday to perpetuate a massive crime. These people had to somehow convince themselves that they weren't bad people, that what they were doing was somehow OK."

Each of Mandel's characters is haunted in one way or another. Vincent is haunted by the death of her mother, who drowned off the coast of Vancouver Island when she was a child. Her half brother, Paul, is haunted by his betrayal of his sister and others. While in prison, Ponzi-schemer Alkaitis is visited by apparitions and vivid images of an un-lived counter-life. Alkaitis' mostly younger criminal associates have their own ghosts and regrets. In the novel, Mandel writes, "There are so many ways to haunt a person or a life."

"I see that as almost the entire thesis of the book," Mandel says. "Everybody in every section is haunted in some way by memory or by actual ghosts. . . . I've always loved ghost stories. I've found them fascinating since I was a kid. I can offer a lot of very plausible reasons for why it makes sense to put that in the story, but the real truth is, I just wanted to write a ghost story. It just kind of developed."

Still, Mandel says, the development of this novel was difficult. First, she was writing it after having just given birth to her daughter. And then there is her standard messy process.

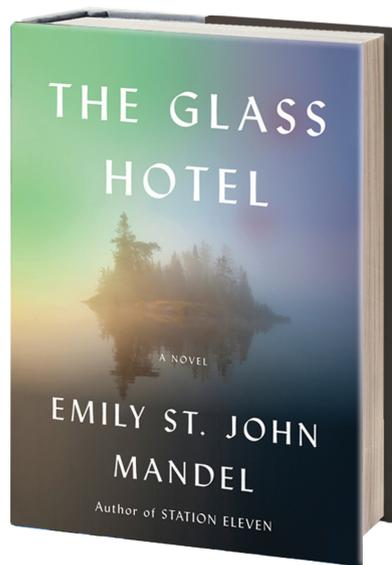
"I've never had an outline for any novel I've written," she says, laughing. "That has some plusses and minuses. The downside is my first draft is a big mess. The positive is there's a good possibility of surprise. You might start out writing a white-collar drama about a Ponzi scheme that somehow evolves into a ghost story."

And about Vincent's dangerous post-trophy wife existence as a cook on a freighter? "Until I did my research, I hadn't really thought about how vulnerable people are [when] working in international waters," she says. "I read a story about a young woman working on a container ship who

accused a co-worker of rape. She disappeared from the ship that night. It was in international waters, under the jurisdiction of no country nearby. Legally a ship is a tiny floating piece of whatever country it's flagged to. So if you're flagged to Mongolia, Mongolia is not going to investigate a possible crime in international waters. That's just not happening."

The perplexing practical and moral predicaments that build throughout *The Glass Hotel* may seem random—but in the end, the story packs a powerful punch.

"To my eye," Mandel says, "*The Glass Hotel* is a more interesting novel than *Station Eleven*. Because it's weirder. It has a lot of different threads. It's more complicated than



The Glass Hotel
Knopf, \$26.95, 9780525521143

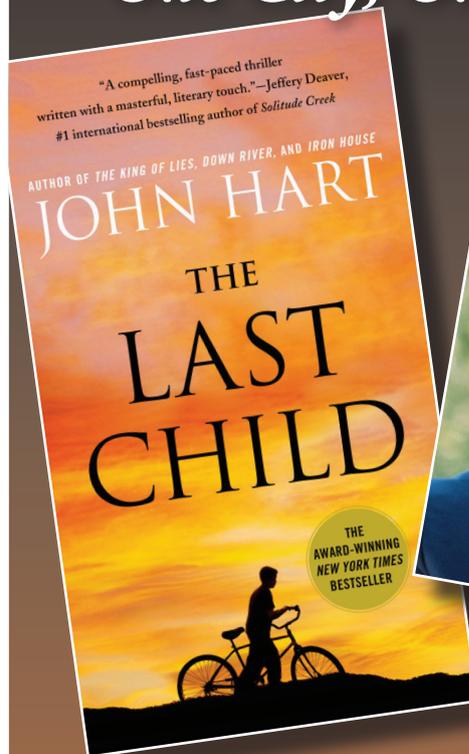
Literary Fiction

my previous novels. And more subtle. Because it was so much harder to write than my previous books, it feels like more of an achievement. I'm proud of it."

—Alden Mudge

 Visit BookPage.com to read our review of *The Glass Hotel*.

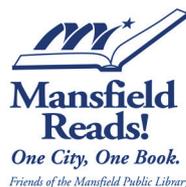
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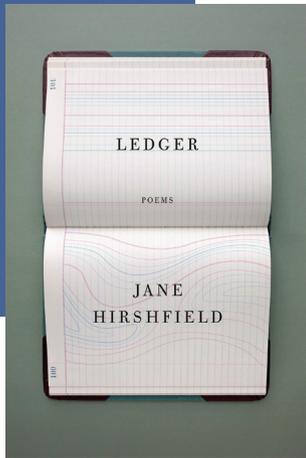


Evening with the Author

Friday April 24, 2020 7:00 pm
Mansfield Legacy High School
Performing Arts Center
1263 N Main St.,
Mansfield, TX 76063

Come meet bestselling author John Hart. Ask questions, enjoy dessert and get your book signed. To register and RSVP for this event, go to mansfieldlibraryfriends.org.

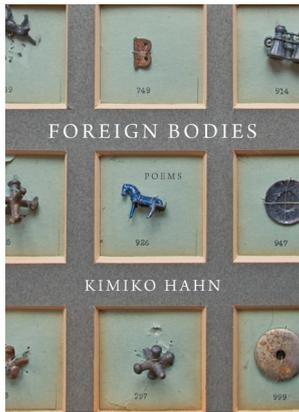




Ledger

Jane Hirshfield's ability to distill a single image with vodka clarity is on full display in her ninth collection, **Ledger** (Knopf, \$27, 9780525657804). While reading these poems, "You go to sleep in one world and wake in another," and before you know it, hours have passed, emails have gone unanswered, and the dog is scratching at the door to be let out. But you also feel human, humane and a little less worn by the world's swirling. During what will likely be a divisive election year, I'll surely return over and over to poems such as "Let Them Not Say," "Cataclysm," "Spell to Be Said Against Hatred" and "Things Seem Strong" to remind me of the power of witnessing and the power of resisting, not surrendering to, simplifications. Whatever exquisite form these poems take, they carry a haiku spirit. **Ledger** moves through a public and private accounting of sorts, but instead of striving for balance, as

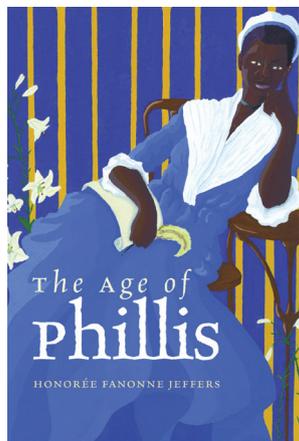
most ledgers do, these poems herald a natural world full of shifts, tilts and breaks, where "A house seems solid, and yet, in the living, any footstep shakes it."



Foreign Bodies

Consumption is more than a measure of economic power in Kimiko Hahn's **Foreign Bodies** (Norton, \$26.95, 9781324005216). It is a measure of adoration and memory and a cataloging of lives. Inspired by a museum exhibition of ingested objects, these poems explore dynamics of ownership, objectification and personal history. Whether a coin, shell, harmonica, piece of broken jewelry or whale tooth, "Each feels like a story's climax." Initially the mind might wander to the TV series "My Strange Addiction," in which people eat all sorts of objects. But there is nothing sensational about the big questions these poems conjure, like "How to store the object of your ardor," especially as the speaker grapples with understanding childhood in the rear-view mirror and the ways we nestle parents in our minds as we grow older. Our relationships with things tend to shift when "Memory is

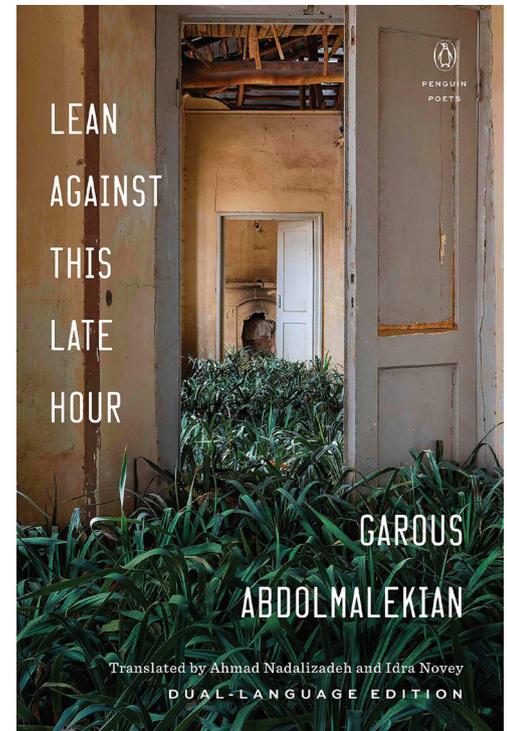
falling away / as if an image shattered to shards then / re-collected for a kaleidoscope." These poems pull at the delicate thread linking past with present, with versions of the truth desperately in need of closer investigation. Things—objects—provide the looking glass. Under Hahn's masterful hand, these **Foreign Bodies** feel quite familiar.



The Age of Phillis

In 1773, Phillis Wheatley, a black woman enslaved in America, published a book of poetry. The text challenged a nation that would have preferred to view the writer through the lens of chattel slavery. Future generations of poets would hold Wheatley in the blinding light of legend. Now, 247 years later, Honorée Fanonne Jeffers rights the light and lens with **The Age of Phillis** (Wesleyan University, \$26.95, 9780819579492). Here Jeffers is a researcher and historian, offering context through dates, quoted briefs, articles, letters, lists and, most satisfyingly, her account of the 15 years spent crafting this collection. But most assuredly, Jeffers is a poet. History is at the forefront of this collection—but gracious, these poems are deliciously good. Traditional and inventive forms deftly admit, "This is a complicated space. / There is slavery here. / There is maternity here. / There is a high and low / that will last centuries." These poems teeter in the space between inhale and

exhale, bidding the reader to continue. One poem asks, "And who must speak for me / in order for you to believe?" After reading **The Age of Phillis**, the answer will clearly be Honorée Fanonne Jeffers.



★ Lean Against This Late Hour

Some works of art can simultaneously break and build up your heart, a marbling of devastation and hope. **Lean Against This Late Hour** (Penguin, \$20, 9780143134930) by Garous Abdolmalekian offers such an experience. These nuanced, nimble poems remind readers to "Take care of your sorrows." Whether those sorrows are the public grief of war or more private, familial grief, the speaker laments that "We ought to accept / that no soldier / has ever returned / from war / alive." These are poems written out of and for difficult days, but they succeed at a fundamental lift that feels natural, no sugar-spooning or sentimentality to be found. This lift is the hard-won hope found in self-awareness. "Staring at me from the table / an injured poem / has accepted its last lines." Abdolmalekian is a major Iranian poet who should be a mainstay on bedside tables, syllabuses and award shortlists around the world. This is the first of his seven collections to be translated into English, and the transformation from the original Persian has been handled beautifully by translator Ahmad Nadalizadeh and novelist Idra Novey.

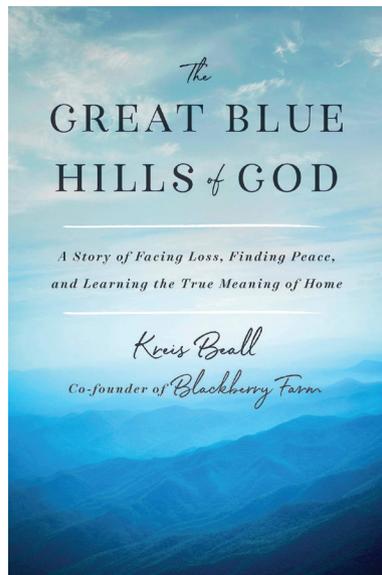
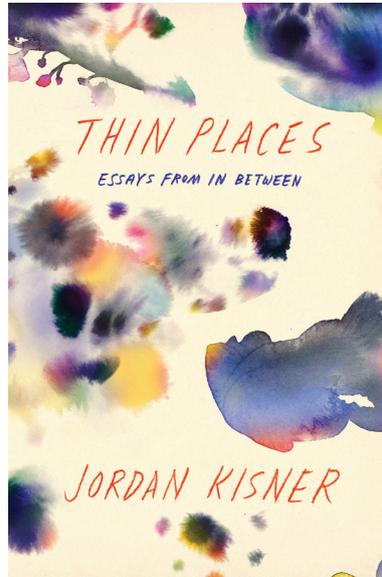
Searching for meaning

Four books help readers make sense of the world through faith, storytelling and political action.

When our relationships falter under the pressure of political or religious demands, when ambiguity more than certainty guides our lives, we may be tempted to succumb to our malaise. However, there is another option: We can stumble through the shadows, searching for some thread of meaning that will guide us out of the darkness. The authors of these books have chosen the latter path, peeling away the detritus of life to discover meaning—personal and political—and plumbing the spiritual depths that accompany their searches.

With humor and razor-sharp insight, Jordan Kisner's **Thin Places: Essays From in Between** (FSG, \$26, 9780374274641) captures the visceral, palpable feeling of loss. The ways we inhabit space occupy many of these evocative essays, such as in a piece on an art installation at New York City's spacious Park Avenue Armory, in which Kisner encourages readers to find someplace "big and empty" when they are "stuck somewhere small . . . somewhere unhappy or afraid or paralyzed or heartbroken." In her celebrated essay "Thin Places," she discovers the age-old concept of the space between the spiritual and physical world. This "thin place" is porous, a space where distinctions between "you and not-you, real and unreal, worldly and otherworldly, fall away." It's in these thin places that we can find ourselves, absorb glimpses of new meaning from another world and live in the moment. Kisner weaves together reflections on Kierkegaard, her early Christian conversion (and later "unconversion") and waiting for the subway to gracefully guide us through our own emptiness in search of fullness.

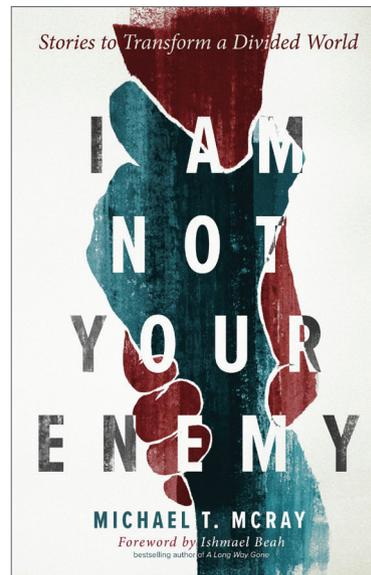
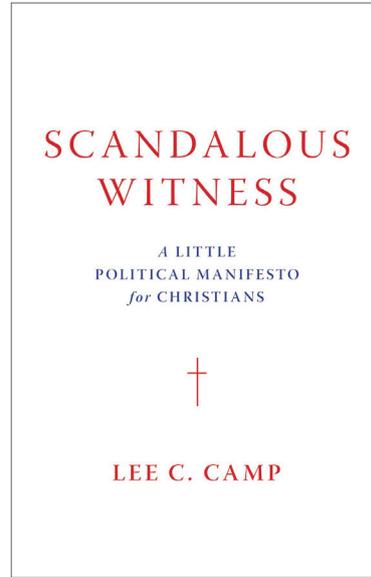
Kreis Beall's **The Great Blue Hills of God** (Convergent, \$27, 9781984822246) explores in lyrical prose what happens when her life falls apart. Beall, who helped create Blackberry Farm, one of the South's most heavenly resorts, appears to have it all: a loving marriage, great wealth, a beautiful family and a satisfying career. But the demands of building up several properties slowly erode her marriage, and she finds that her and her husband's financial bank is full but their "emotional bank" is being emptied. As her marriage fades away, Beall falls, and suddenly her health is compromised, and she temporarily loses her hearing. She experiences further devastation when her son, Sam, dies in a skiing accident. Despite the loss of her family, health and wealth, she discovers glimpses of grace



in her reading of the Bible, discussions with her pastor and friends and meditations on the nature of home. Throughout the book, Beall sprinkles in fruitful bits of wisdom, embracing the conclusion that, "to me, home is God, family, friends, and legacy. . . . A home is a heart. It is love, people, relationships, and the life you live in it."

Lee C. Camp's **Scandalous Witness: A Little Political Manifesto for Christians** (Eerdmans, \$19.99, 9780802877352) offers a brilliant summary and exposition of the ways that Christianity is a politic, not a religion. Camp (*Mere Discipleship*) asks a series of questions that frames Christianity as not just a private spiritual practice but a guide for our life together: "How do we live together? Where is human history headed? What does it mean to be human? And what does it look like to live in a rightly ordered human community that engenders flourishing, justice, and the peace of God?" In the end, the Christian community embraces its mission when it "sets captives free, demolishes strongholds, and . . . [sows] the seeds of the peaceable reign of God." Camp's manifesto is a must-read in a world in which Christianity has become either a bedfellow of political parties or an isolated, private practice.

Michael T. McRay's **I Am Not Your Enemy** (Herald Press, \$29.99, 9781513805948) takes Camp's idea to the personal level. We create meaning in the stories we tell each other, and if we tell a good enough story, we can convince others that certain individuals are our enemies. But just as stories have the power to cultivate hate, they also have the power to reconcile and redeem. Throughout his travels across Israel and



Palestine, Northern Ireland and South Africa, and through his work as a conflict and resolution counselor, McRay hears violence-filled narratives with shattered endings. Yet, as he illustrates, not every story needs to end this way. McRay shares stories of a mother who refuses to seek vengeance for her son's death, a community theater director who helps people who are marginalized find their voices and discover beauty in their lives and a woman who forgives the man who murdered her father. With the verve of a great storyteller, McRay regales us with spellbinding narratives that illustrate the power of words to change our lives and bring meaning to the world.

—Henry L. Carrigan Jr.

★ Afterlife

By *Julia Alvarez*

Literary Fiction

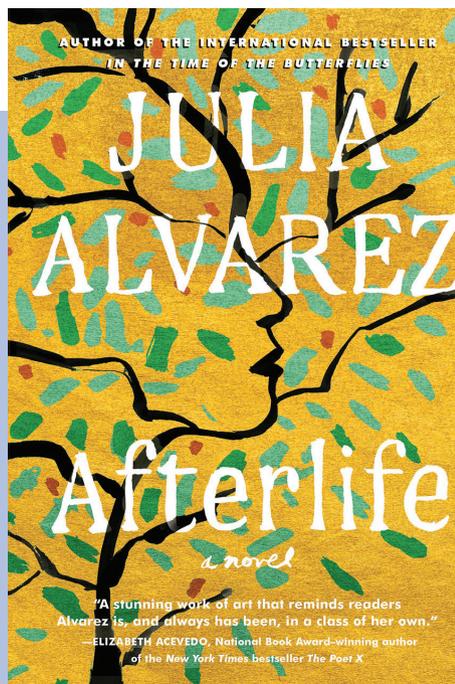
The first months of the 2020s have brought us excellent books by Latino authors. One is Marcelo Hernandez Castillo's memoir, *Children of the Land*. Another is **Afterlife** (Algonquin, \$25.95, 9781643750255), Julia Alvarez's first novel for adults in over a decade. It couldn't be more timely, a moving portrait of a retired English professor and novelist dealing with her husband's sudden death and the plight of fellow Latinos in her Vermont town.

Antonia Vega is still reeling a year after the death of her husband, Sam, a beloved local doctor. Since then, she has been so adrift that she sometimes pours orange juice into her coffee. Ever the novelist, she often quotes favorite authors, from Wallace Stevens to Shakespeare, to help her cope.

Family and neighborhood events complicate Antonia's grief. As Alvarez has done so beau-

tifully in previous books, she offers a memorable portrait of sisterhood, as Antonia is one of four sisters who emigrated years ago from the Dominican Republic.

The oldest sister and a former therapist, Izzy has been known to engage in irregular behavior, as when she wrote to Michelle Obama "to offer to design her inauguration gown." Her latest escapade is more consequential: She gets lost on the drive to Antonia's 66th birthday party, and the other sisters, including Tilly and fellow therapist



Mona, frantically search for her.

In a parallel story, a man named Mario, one of several undocumented Mexicans who work at the dairy farm next to Antonia's house, asks her to help him bring his girlfriend to Vermont. But he doesn't tell Antonia the whole truth about their situation. The withheld information leads to complications neither he nor Antonia could have anticipated.

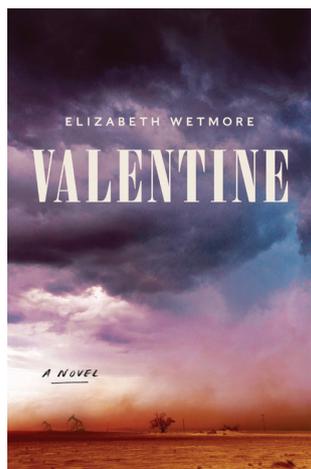
In one moving scene after another, Alvarez dramatizes the sustaining power of stories, whether for immigrants in search of a better life or for widows surviving a spouse's death. True to its title, **Afterlife** cannily

explores what it means to go on after a loss. As Alvarez writes about Antonia, "The only way not to let the people she loves die forever is to embody what she loved about them." This is a beautiful book.

—Michael Magras

★ Valentine

By *Elizabeth Wetmore*



Historical Fiction

The harrowing, heartfelt debut novel from Elizabeth Wetmore tells the story of a West Texas town reeling from an oil boom and a brutal rape case

in the late 1970s. Surrounded by a harsh and beautiful landscape, the town of Odessa serves as a microcosm of the U.S., allowing Wetmore to explore themes of motherhood, sexism, capitalism, violence, immigration and race.

The story opens on 14-year-old Glory, the unrelenting sun shining down on her, her rapist fast asleep. Covered in cuts and bruises and suffering from organ damage, Glory silently wills herself to walk, to escape. To live. She comes to the farmhouse porch of pregnant Mary Rose, who sends Glory inside when the assailant, a young white man, comes to claim his "girlfriend." Mary Rose denies Glory's

presence and holds tight to her rifle as she waits for the cops to arrive. After they take the villain into custody, Mary Rose can't shake the feeling that she's failed the girl. She's compelled to testify in the case, which causes a rift between her and her husband. When Mary Rose subsequently moves into town, she meets her new neighbor Corrine, who's drinking herself into oblivion as she mourns the recent loss of her husband. We also meet spunky 11-year-old Debra Ann Pierce, who steals cans of food to help a homeless war veteran. As the trial nears, Mary Rose receives daily threats from drunk townfolk who call her horrible things.

With her children at home with Corrine, Mary Rose takes the stand to testify. It's been hours and hours since she's breastfed her newborn baby, and her vulnerability in this moment—and her sacrifices to get here—will leave readers contemplating the very nature of justice.

As these women navigate what is decidedly a man's world with feminine grace, **Valentine** (Harper, \$26.99, 9780062913265) becomes a testament to the resilience of the female spirit. Wetmore's prose is both beautiful and bone-deep, and this mature novel hardly feels like a debut. You'll wish you had more time with each of these powerful women when it's over.

—Jessica Bates

The Southern Book Club's Guide to Slaying Vampires

By *Grady Hendrix*



Horror

In his funny, gory new romp, Grady Hendrix conjures horror heroines out of a surprising demographic—the carpool moms of 1990s suburbia. They looked like "car-

pool drivers, skinned-knee kissers, errand runners, secret Santas and part-time tooth fairies, with their practical jeans and their festive sweaters. . . . But when the time came, [they] went the distance." And how.

Life in the Old Village, Patricia Campbell's suburban South Carolina enclave, has always been safe, if a little unstimulating. But that's before Patricia is attacked in her yard by an elderly neighbor gone feral, and soon she finds herself driving around her neighbor's attractive relative, James Harris, and inviting him into



Visit BookPage.com to read a Q&A with Elizabeth Wetmore.

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her house for ice cream with the family. Life is suddenly far from boring, but when Patricia's suspicions about James begin to escalate, she takes the matter to her true crime book club.

According to her friends, Patricia's just projecting a titillating plot onto their ploddingly dull daily lives. But when children from the poor neighborhood across town start dying, the club is forced to grapple with the possibility that Patricia's new friend just may be the monster she claims he is. And as if one monster isn't enough, the women must confront another enemy at least as terrifying: the patriarchy.

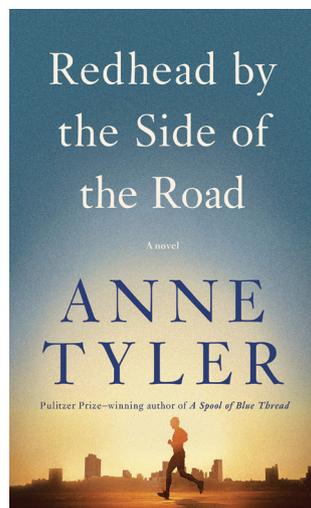
The Southern Book Club's Guide to Slaying Vampires (Quirk, \$22.99, 9781683691433) takes place in the same universe as Hendrix's Stoker Award-winning horror novel, *My Best Friend's Exorcism*, which is loosely based on his own childhood. Hendrix writes in an author's note that his latest novel was inspired by the strength of his own mother and others like her: women easy to write off, but hard to defeat. "I wanted to pit Dracula against my mom," Hendrix explains. "As you'll see, it's not a fair fight."

In turns heartwarming and enraging, bloody horror and social critique, this genre-bending vampire story helps cement horror as a frontier for feminist storytelling.

—Kathryn Justice Leache

★ **Redhead by the Side of the Road**

By Anne Tyler



Family Drama

Micah Mortimer is a single, middle-aged man whose life is governed by routine. On Mondays, he mops his floors. Fridays are for vacuuming. He runs every morning. He

lives alone, managing an apartment building. And he finds most people perplexing. "Sometimes when he was dealing with people, he felt like he was operating one of those claw machines on a boardwalk, those shovel things where you tried to scoop up a prize but the controls were too unwieldy and you worked at too great a remove."

Micah's carefully calibrated world is upended

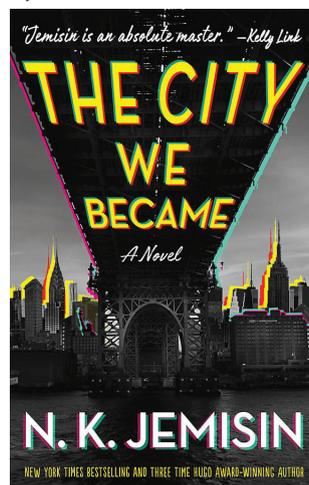
when he returns from his morning run to find a teenage boy named Brink on his stoop. Brink is the son of Micah's college girlfriend, and he is convinced Micah is his father. They quickly determine the math makes that scenario impossible, but Brink lingers. He's gotten into some trouble in college and is reluctant to go home and face his parents. Brink's presence triggers a chain of events that threaten not only Micah's daily routine but also his entire carefully structured life. Soon he finds himself rethinking his place in the world.

Not a word is wasted in this slim, beautiful novel. Reading Anne Tyler is always pure pleasure, and **Redhead by the Side of the Road** (Knopf, \$26.95, 9780525658412) is the author at her best. This joyful book is a powerful reminder of how much we need human connection.

—Amy Scribner

The City We Became

By N.K. Jemisin



Science Fiction

What makes a city feel the way it does? Is it the art and the music? The people and how they view themselves? What about the infinite, minuscule details of the place, whether they are recognized or ignored completely? Three-time Hugo Award winner N.K. Jemisin shows us her version of the answers, and they add up to something bigger than the sum of its parts. In **The City We Became** (Orbit, \$28, 9780316509848), a magical novel of breadth and precision, Jemisin builds a version of New York City that is more than the borders of its boroughs. This New York is *alive*.

Cities, we learn, are like any other living organism. They are born, they develop, they get sick, they can die. Like a hive communicating through a shared consciousness, a city is sustained by everyone and everything in it. At a certain stage of life, cities awaken avatars, people who are attuned to this consciousness, able to understand it and, from time to time, channel its power.

Cities also have enemies. When a primordial evil arrives through space and time, hellbent on corrupting and destroying New York, the avatars of all five boroughs awaken to do battle—and

fight off what could be the death of the city.

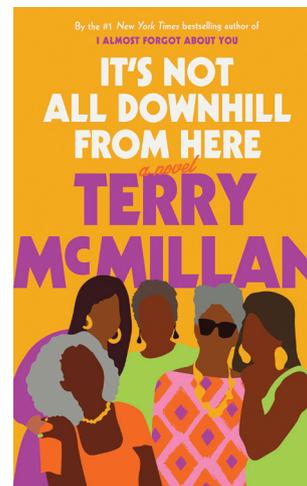
I've not read another book like this in years. Jemisin takes a concept that can be abstracted to the simplest of questions (What if cities were alive?) and wraps an adventure around it. That adventure takes center stage in the many scenes that read more like a superhero movie than a fantasy novel, such as when a towering Lovecraftian tentacle bursts from the river to destroy the Williamsburg Bridge. However, Jemisin's most beautiful passages deliver attentive descriptions of New York's melting pot of people. Her characters' life experiences—racial, sexual, financial—bring perspectives that are deeply important to and often missing from contemporary literature, particularly in the fantasy genre.

Jemisin lives in Brooklyn, and it's clear that New York has impacted her life in innumerable ways. I confess, I don't know New York well myself, but reading this book left me thinking about my own city, how I'm connected to it and how far I would go to save it. To what parts of the whole have I contributed? If it were alive, what would it say?

—Chris Pickens

It's Not All Downhill From Here

By Terry McMillan



Popular Fiction

For over 30 years, Terry McMillan has delighted readers with tales of the lives, loves, foibles and triumphs of black women. She continues

with the hilarious, poignant and bighearted **It's Not All Downhill From Here** (Ballantine, \$28, 9781984823748).

McMillan claims she writes about things that break her heart, but she clearly also writes about what makes her laugh or shake her head in gentle bemusement. In her latest novel, the narrator and star of the show is Loretha Curry, who is turning 68 (the same age as the author!). The owner of a successful beauty product business, Loretha is rich both monetarily and in most of her relationships. Her third husband, Carl, is doting and, despite his arthritis, ready, willing and able when he takes his little blue pill. Loretha has a fiercely loyal posse of

girlfriends she's known for decades, including statuesque Korynthia, mean-spirited Lucky, sort of God-fearing Sadie and long-suffering Poochie, a character as close to Beth March as you're going to get in a McMillan novel. Loretha's mother is still alive and a corker. Her granddaughter Cinnamon adores her, as does her son, Jackson, who lives in Tokyo with his wife and two girls. Loretha, generous with both her love and her money, adores them right back.

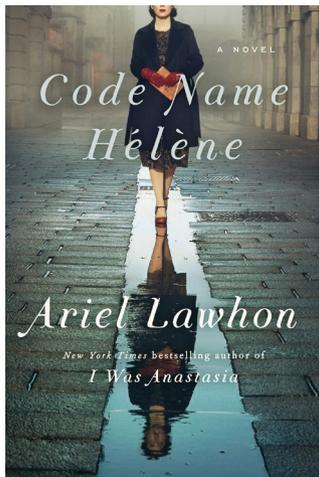
Yet there's that heartbreak. An early tragedy in the book sends Loretha reeling, though her loved ones rally around her. Relations with her twin half-sister are sketchy, and her daughter is anchorless and an alcoholic. Loretha, who's a bit hefty and loves her soul food, finds out she has diabetes.

McMillan has no trouble creating a crowd-pleaser—even her “unlikable” women redeem themselves in the end—but she also promotes radical self-love for her characters, whether it's through taking care of their bodies, minds and spirits, deciding who to love or deciding, indeed, whether to live at all. This is another winner from McMillan.

—Arlene McKanic

★ Code Name Hélène

By Ariel Lawhon



Historical Fiction

Ariel Lawhon's **Code Name Hélène** (Double-day, \$27.95, 9780385544689) is a spellbinding work of historical fiction inspired by the

real story of Nancy Grace Augusta Wake, a woman so extraordinary that your first instinct might be to believe she is imaginary, like James Bond.

In 1936 Paris, Nancy, an Aussie expat, cleverly bluffs her way into becoming a freelance journalist at the European branch of the Hearst newspaper group. It's a career chosen out of necessity rather than a calling, but Nancy is nonetheless very good at it, earning respect from her male colleagues for her bravado and instincts. It isn't long before she falls in love with a wealthy French industrialist named Henri Fiocca. The two marry and make Marseille their home, where Nancy is ready to spend the

rest of her life as Henri's supportive housewife. Truthfully, Lawhon could have stopped Nancy's story here and left it as one of the most sensual romance novels you've ever read.

But there is more to life than romance, as Nancy discovers in 1940 when Henri is drafted to fight the Germans. Alone, anxious and restless, Nancy starts by driving an ambulance for the wounded but soon finds her way deeper and deeper into the French Resistance until she emerges as one of its most powerful leaders. Nancy, also known as Madame Andrée the fighter, Lucienne Carlier the smuggler, Hélène the spy and the White Mouse, becomes the most wanted person on the Nazi target list. *She is real, this really did happen* is the mantra you may find yourself repeating, in awe at every page.

In her acknowledgments, Lawhon describes the extraordinary life of Nancy as first and foremost a story about love and marriage. Right away it seems preposterous to consider a story about a woman who seemed to magically summon weapons for the Allied Forces, who killed a Nazi with her bare hands, who saved thousands of lives, a love story. But let the story sink in, and Nancy and Henri's enduring love will indeed rise to the surface.

—Chika Gujarathi

The Prettiest Star

By Carter Sickels



Family Drama

Carter Sickels' **The Prettiest Star** (Hub City, \$26, 9781938235627) imagines a difficult prodigal son home-

coming. It's 1986, and Brian Jackson has returned to his small southern Ohio hometown. Six years before, Brian left home for New York City, where he found friends, a measure of acceptance and love with his partner, Shawn. Now Brian is 24 and ill with late-stage AIDS. He's also alone; Shawn has already died, isolated in a hospital ward.

Brian's family doesn't know—or rather, they've chosen not to accept—that he is gay. The novel rotates through the first-person perspectives of Brian; his mom, Sharon; and his 14-year-old sister, Jess. Sharon is paralyzed, unable to figure out how to be a parent to Brian

and remain a wife to Travis, who pretends that his son isn't gay and isn't sick. Observant Jess, who shares with her brother a love of whales and David Bowie songs, struggles to find her place in this changed world. And Brian narrates through a series of video recordings from the camera he carries with him, as Shawn asked, so those who die of AIDS won't be forgotten.

Soon, word of Brian's return, along with the suspicion that he has AIDS, gets around town. Friends, strangers and their own extended family begin to shun Brian, Sharon, Travis and Jess, often in overtly hateful ways.

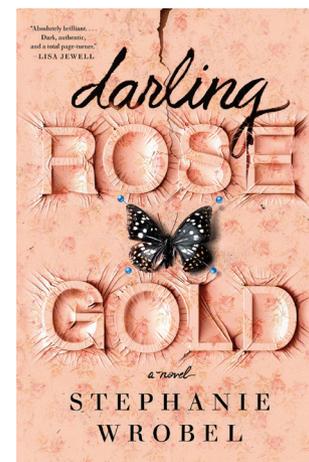
Sickels does an excellent job showing the mix of panic, homophobia and bullying that AIDS once engendered. He also evokes the mid-1980s and rural small-town life with the right amount of period and place detail. Brian's narration occasionally feels too composed and lyrical for a 24-year-old man talking into a camera, but that's a small quibble.

While the story is bleak, it moves along at a clip, offering some surprises and a couple of unlikely, brave heroes. **The Prettiest Star** is a sensitive portrayal of a difficult time in our recent history.

—Sarah McCraw Crow

Darling Rose Gold

By Stephanie Wrobel



Thriller

Stephanie Wrobel's compulsively readable debut, **Darling Rose Gold** (Berkley, \$26, 9780593100066), explores Munchausen syndrome by proxy (MSP), a

psychological disorder in which a child's caregiver, often the mother, seeks to gain attention from the medical community for made-up symptoms of the child in her care.

Earlier novels about this rare phenomenon focus on the modes of abuse the mother employs to gain attention, like starvation or putting ipecac in her child's food to induce vomiting. Wrobel instead begins her eerie tale when Patty Watts is about to be released from prison after serving five years for aggravated child abuse. The reader learns the details of what Patty did to her daughter, Rose Gold, only in flashback chapters: “By the time I was ten,” Rose Gold

remembers, “I’d had ear and feeding tubes, tooth decay, and a shaved head. I needed a wheelchair. . . . I’d had cancer scares, brain damage scares, tuberculosis scares.” Despite finally realizing that her own mother was the cause of all her suffering, Rose Gold still has ambivalent feelings about her mother’s sentencing and imprisonment: “Some days I was thrilled. Some days I felt like a vital organ was missing.”

The rippling effects of Rose Gold’s horrific childhood build up over the five years she’s on her own, until she’s 23 and the need for revenge begins to take hold. After Patty is released, their small town’s inhabitants are amazed to hear that Rose Gold has taken her mother into her own home—and even lets her care for her newborn son.

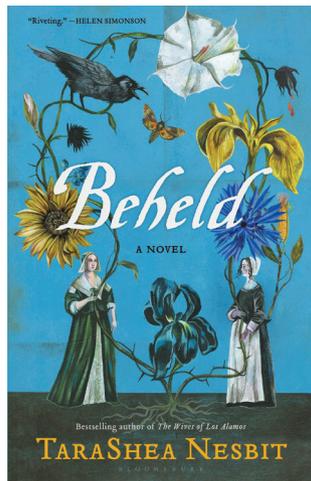
Wrobel explores this bizarre mother-daughter relationship in chapters that alternate between each woman’s point of view, both past and present. Each woman displays Jekyll and Hyde-style personalities, and the reader is kept guessing about which one will emerge the stronger.

This creepy psychological thriller is sure to be enjoyed by those who devoured *Gone Girl*, *Girl on the Train* and domestic thrillers from authors like Megan Abbott and JP Delaney.

—Deborah Donovan

Beheld

By TaraShea Nesbit



Historical Fiction

Most Americans learn about the pilgrims of Plymouth Plantation in elementary school. But few know that besides the men and women

seeking religious freedom, more than half of the *Mayflower* passengers were investors, indentured servants and crew members who were hired to stay the first year in the New World. Even fewer know about the murder of one colonist by another that occurred in the settlement’s early years. This crime and the social, political and religious anxieties that surround it are at the heart of TaraShea Nesbit’s new novel, **Beheld** (Bloomsbury, \$26, 9781635573220).

In 1630, 10 years after the *Mayflower* landed, the inhabitants of the Plymouth colony eagerly

await the arrival of a new ship bringing fresh supplies and more colony members—members who will help grow the community and pay off debt to their initial investors. But not everyone is optimistic. Alice Bradford, wife of the colony’s governor, longs to meet her stepson but worries he won’t accept her as his father’s second wife. Former servants John and Eleanor Billington, resentful of perceived mistreatment at the hands of Governor Bradford and military adviser Myles Standish, are keen to share their grievances with the newcomers. When the Bradfords spot religious agitator Thomas Morton among the passengers, it seems like the new ship is bringing nothing but potential problems to their struggling shores.

Nesbit tells this story of conflict and contradiction in alternating chapters from both the empowered and the powerless. The voices of the women are especially strong, particularly Elizabeth, whose friendships and reminiscences of the colony’s earlier days offer insight about the women of the plantation.

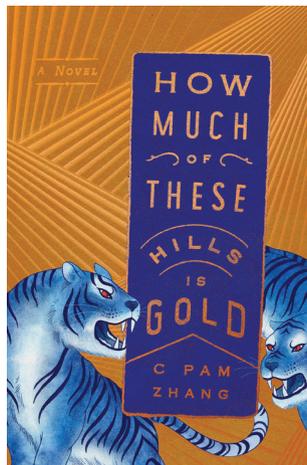
There were many crimes that occurred in Plymouth Plantation, and the killing that took place in 1630 was obviously not the first murder. Wampanoags had been killed since the Europeans’ arrival, and Myles Standish himself was involved in the death of Neponset warrior Wituwamat, an incident that even many of Standish’s white peers found troubling. But the murder of one settler by another was the first death that made the community question whether the colony was truly following a righteous path.

Land ownership, religious observation and differing accounts of events all play their part in this clever, insightful novel that digs deeply into our country’s conflicted origins.

—Lauren Bufferd

★ How Much of These Hills Is Gold

By C Pam Zhang



Coming of Age

After their gold-prospecting father dies, 12-year-old Lucy and 11-year-old Sam are left to fend for themselves in the gold rush days of the American West. The first task of these Chinese

American sisters is to bury “Ba,” and tradition dictates they place two silver dollars over his eyes—two coins they don’t have. The girls head to a bank, and all hell breaks loose when a banker casts them out with a hateful epithet.

What makes a home? C Pam Zhang’s daring novel seeks an answer in the gold rush-era West.

That’s just the first of many action-packed scenes in C Pam Zhang’s standout debut. Lucy and Sam’s odyssey unfolds in a series of edge-of-your-seat twists and turns, bringing to mind the classic *True Grit* and Paulette Jiles’ *News of the World*, two Westerns that also feature fierce young heroines. Yet Zhang turns the genre on its head by writing a historical saga that also serves as a modern immigration novel. Before dying, Ba tells his eldest, “I grew up knowing I belonged to this land, Lucy girl. You and Sam do too, never mind how you look. Don’t you let any man with a history book tell you different.” Ma, however, offers polar-opposite advice. While Ba dreams of having a large, isolated parcel of property, Ma warns, “Gold can’t buy everything. This will never be *our* land.”

Unfolding in a carefully structured, nonlinear fashion, the novel repeatedly questions what makes a home a home and what makes a family a family. Zhang was born in Beijing and, she writes in her bio, has lived “in thirteen cities across four countries and is still looking for home.”

The book also wonders at the nature of truth and who can be trusted. Because boys earn a higher wage working in the coal mines, Sam begins wearing boys’ clothes and finds that this new identity suits her, thus bringing to the forefront issues of gender, identity and cultural and sexual prejudice.

Zhang’s sparse prose style may initially take some getting used to, but both language and plot remain clearly focused. Daringly original, **How Much of These Hills Is Gold** (Riverhead, \$26, 9780525537205) is gritty and frequently gruesome, yet at times magical and ethereal, incorporating tiger paw prints and a buffalo sighting, along with a fog-filled view of San Francisco and the wild ocean beyond.

Zhang’s laser-sharp reexamination of America’s myth-laden past is likely to help bring clarity to many issues that continue to challenge us all.

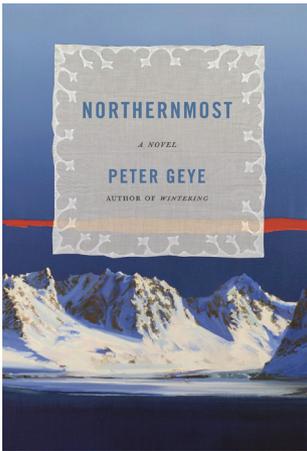
—Alice Cary



Visit BookPage.com to read a Q&A with C Pam Zhang.

★ Northernmost

By Peter Geye



Family Saga

Following *The Lighthouse Road* and *Wintering*, Peter Geye's latest novel about the Eide family, **Northernmost** (Knopf, \$26.95, 9780525655756),

combines a contemporary love story with a historical tale of Arctic travail.

Minnesota, 2017: Greta no longer loves her husband. On her way to confront him in Oslo, where he has a work event, she spontaneously detours to Hammerfest, a town in northern Norway. There, she visits her family's graves and discovers a link to her past she'd never known: Her ancestor Odd Eide survived two weeks alone in the Arctic in 1897. His story inspires Greta to tell her own.

Toggling between Odd's and Greta's stories, **Northernmost** has something for everyone: history, adventure, romance and spiritual awakening. Inspired by Fridtjof Nansen's true expedition to the farthest point yet reached in the Arctic Circle, Odd's journey across a sea of white and cold, complete with riveting bear encounters and near starvation, is as harrowing as his return home, where his wife and fellow villagers think he's dead. Intertwined with the story of the slow rejuvenation of his marriage is the story of Greta's renewed passion. Both Greta and Odd experience longing and loneliness, stark emotions depicted as clearly as the breathtaking wintry settings. And then, out of the darkness come peace and love as warm as the tropics.

Strong characters steer the narrative with conviction. Stoic Greta is an independent woman, navigating divorce with both relatable mistakes and self-aware intention. Although not a believer in God, Odd is faithful, living each day for his family. His pithy and personal manner of describing what happens to him, and his feelings about these events, dignify the text. As Greta learns about Odd's admirable bearing and spirit, she gains resolve, as well as a newfound buoyancy.

Geye rounds out his Eide family trilogy with a beautiful ode to the enduring human spirit.

—Mari Carlson

Life on battle-scarred land

Two novels offer intimate new perspectives on the Civil War-era South.

The political, social, technological and environmental repercussions of the American Civil War are still felt today. Two excellent new novels join the canon of Civil War fiction, highlighting this crucial period from different perspectives: one from a community of emancipated slaves, the other from a former Confederate soldier roaming the Texas landscape.

In her stunning debut novel, **Conjure Women** (Random House, \$27, 9780525511489), Afia Atakora explores life during the Reconstruction era for a community of formerly enslaved people living amid the ruins of their old plantation. Rue, a young woman versed in healing, midwifery and crafting curses—skills learned from her hoodoo-practicing mother, Miss May Belle—assists at the birth of a strange, pale baby born in a black caul and with black eyes. When a devastating illness begins rapidly killing the community's children while the pale child remains seemingly unaffected, the superstitious community, recently “saved” by a charismatic traveling preacher, begins to turn against Rue and the child.

As chapters toggle between life on the plantation before and after the war, Atakora slowly reveals the complex web of stories tying Rue, May Belle and the plantation owner's strong-willed daughter, Varina, together. Atakora, a Pushcart Prize nominee who earned her MFA from Columbia University, relies on first-person accounts, diaries and autobiographies from the period to inform her writing, to great effect. The community's characters and the harsh realities of the black experience before and during Reconstruction come vividly to life. At the same time, Atakora paces her novel beautifully, slowly unwinding the plot in unexpected ways as she examines a relatively unexplored aspect of American history.

In **Simon the Fiddler** (William Morrow,

\$27.99, 9780062966742), bestselling author Paulette Jiles, whose novel *News of the World* was a National Book Award finalist, begins with a premise that seems impossibly far-fetched: A penniless young man finds love at first sight with a woman who is essentially a prisoner of her employer, just as she is about to leave for a distant town in a wild landscape. But Jiles makes the impossible plausible.

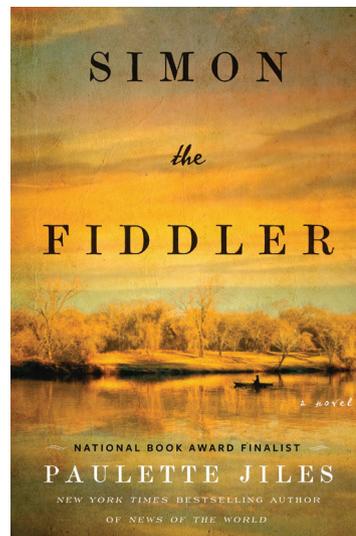
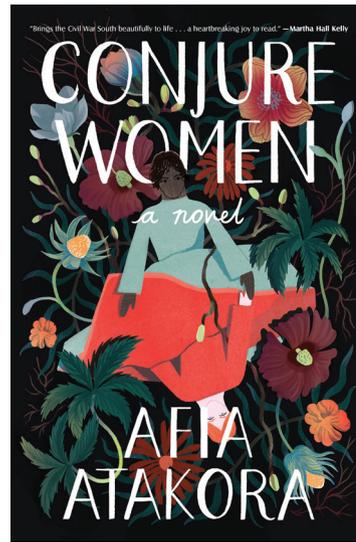
Twenty-three-year-old fiddler Simon Boudlin avoids conscription into the Confederate Army until the last days of the war. After one of the war's final battles, Simon becomes part of a group of Union and Confederate musicians brought in to provide music for an event to celebrate the Confederacy's impending surrender. While playing, Simon sees the beautiful Doris Dillon, an indentured Irish governess to the daughter of a dangerous Union colonel. After speaking only a few words to her, Simon is completely smitten, but he and Doris must unfortunately go their separate ways.

Despite owning nothing but his talent and a Markneukirchen violin, Simon decides he will marry Doris and purchase land for them to settle. Without a plan but with his goal firmly in mind, Simon sets forth with a rag-

tag band of musicians through Texas, which is still transitioning from the war. Simon overcomes hardships and danger to make steady progress toward his dream, but when he reaches San Antonio, where Doris lives with the colonel and his family, he faces his most difficult trial: rescuing Doris from the menacing colonel in a state still under military law.

In this enthralling novel, Jiles pairs the hard-luck terrain of her Texas setting with a succinct, unadorned writing style. **Simon the Fiddler** not only entertains but also brings a fascinating period in Texas history to life.

—Annie Peters



★ Wow, No Thank You.

By Samantha Irby

Humor

The ability to write 240 witty characters on social media does not necessarily translate to being someone whose books you want to read. But that's what happened with Samantha Irby, whom I first knew as the person consistently killing it on Twitter, making me laugh out loud with her tweets on "Judge Mathis" and "Succession." (She's obsessed with both.)

It was later that I realized she also writes stunningly astute, hilarious essays about topics both serious (becoming a stepmother) and less so (her slightly lazy beauty rituals). But like all the best essayists, Irby brings deeper insights to even her most lighthearted work.

In "Girls Gone Mild," Irby reflects on her extreme reluctance to go out, now that she's rounding the corner to 40: "Remember when

you could be roused from a night being spent on the couch in your pajamas, curled around a pint of Chubby Hubby, and goaded into joining your friends at the bar even though you'd already taken off your bra? Yeah, I can't either, but I know those days existed. I have the liver damage to prove it." By the end of the essay, Irby has made peace with her new slower pace of life. It's simultaneously funny and poignant, as are all the entries in this unflinching collection.

Perhaps the most powerful is "Body Negativity," in which Irby catalogs the many ways

WOW, no thank you.

essays



samantha irby

Bestselling author of *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life.*

women are expected to perform upkeep on our appearances so we have glowing skin, flowing eyelashes, smooth foreheads and snow-white teeth. But guess what? Irby has discovered that, unless it makes you feel good, *none of that really matters*: "I have threaded, I have microbladed, I have trimmed, I have tinted, I have filled in, I have styled, I have contoured, and I have microfeathered my stupid eyebrows, and none of those things has ever had a discernible impact on my life. Now I do nothing, and it's fine!"

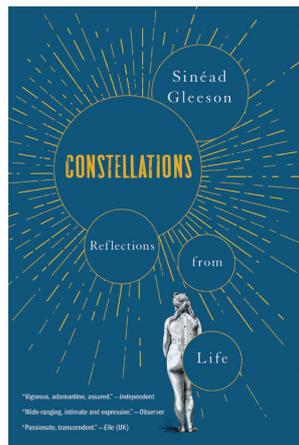
Frankly, Irby's radically honest writing in **Wow, No Thank You.**

(Vintage, \$15.95, 9780525563488) makes me feel better—or at least less bad—about myself. She gives a welcome voice to what so many women in 2020 are feeling: overleveraged, underappreciated, exhausted, bloated—but hopeful.

—Amy Scribner

★ Constellations

By Sinéad Gleeson



Essays

"In illness," writes essayist Sinéad Gleeson, "it is hard to find the right words." Gleeson knows what she's talking about. Her short life has been full of medical difficulty—can-

cer, arthritis, as well as the more common experience of carrying and bearing two children. Her relationship with her body is both intimate and mundane, and she writes about pain with an absorbing intensity, telling stories of condescending doctors, creating metaphors that push the sanitized pain scale to its limits and, most passionately, describing artists who have rendered their pain into something more.

"I gravitated towards writers and painters," Gleeson explains as she details her early response to an illness. "People who . . . transformed their damaged bodies into art."

Readers are introduced to dozens of artists, some Irish like Gleeson, others from all over the world. Some readers may, like me, find themselves searching for the images described in the book, eager to see for themselves the works that Gleeson writes about so well.

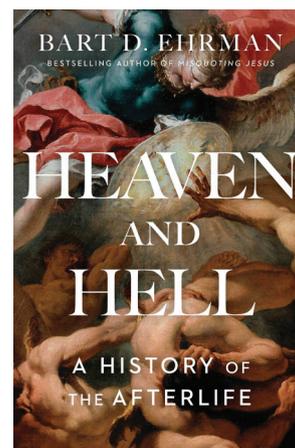
One such piece is featured in Gleeson's essay "60,000 Miles of Blood." In addition to telling her own stories of blood transfusion, which are contextualized by fascinating medical insights about how much blood humans have and how it moves through our bodies, she details the work of American artist Barton Beneš, who took the artifacts of his AIDS illness—including his own blood—and created a new type of iconography. He fashioned a crown of thorns out of IV tubes filled with his own HIV-positive blood; in lieu of thorns, he pierced the circlet with needles. Gleeson calls the work "delicate and devastating."

Constellations: Reflections From Life (Mariner, \$15.99, 9780358213031) will make you think differently about the body in all its weaknesses and feel grateful to the artists and writers who—like Gleeson—have transfigured their suffering into a sacred creative release. Though Gleeson is skeptical of heaven, she finds solace in the stars and their many constellations. In this book, she offers us a unique map of her own constellations, one that has clearly helped her find her way when navigating a wide and painful world.

—Kelly Blewett

★ Heaven and Hell

By Bart D. Ehrman



Religion

According to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, 72% of Americans believe in heaven, a place where "good people are eternally rewarded." A sizable majority (58%) also

believes in hell, the place "where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished." These rates are even higher among Christians. If these beliefs truly guide the actions of their adherents, then it's arguable that heaven and hell are the two most influential pieces of real estate in American society. It was therefore fascinating to learn from Bart D. Ehrman's **Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife** (Simon & Schuster, \$28, 9781501136733) that this concept of the afterlife is nowhere to be found in the Bible.

Ehrman's subtitle is a bit misleading, since it's not an actual history of these places. He is

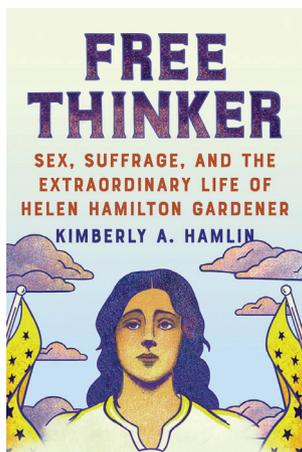
not rewriting *Paradise Lost*. Instead, he details the development of our *ideas* about heaven and hell. Starting with Mesopotamia, Ehrman carefully traces how ancient ideas of death as an “eternal sleep” developed into our current conception of death as a place of retribution or reward. Ehrman argues that, far from being set in stone, our views of heaven and hell have evolved in response to crises confronting the societies that ultimately created modern Christianity. Our view of the afterlife, it turns out, owes more to Greek mythology, Plato and Greek theologians of the first millennium than it does to the Old Testament or even Jesus’ words and actions.

This is a complex history, and it could easily become confusing or, worse, boring. But Ehrman has avoided both pitfalls. As the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ehrman has the expertise necessary to make this difficult subject comprehensible. Even better, his witty, self-deprecatory style makes **Heaven and Hell** an enjoyable read. Most importantly, this is an optimistic book. Professor Ehrman invites us to revisit a “truth” that most of us hold almost instinctively and, in the process, to lose the fear of the afterlife that can prevent us from fully living our present lives.

—Deborah Mason

Free Thinker

By Kimberly A. Hamlin



Biography

Helen Hamilton Gardener, née Alice Chenoweth, may be the most famous suffrage activist you’ve never heard of. Her eventful experiences took her from the Civil War,

to life as a so-called “fallen woman,” to a name change and political work in support of women’s issues, culminating in the adoption of the 19th Amendment in 1919. In **Free Thinker: Sex, Suffrage, and the Extraordinary Life of Helen Hamilton Gardener** (Norton, \$28.95, 9781324004974), historian Kimberly A. Hamlin knits together the many strands of Gardener’s story into a compelling narrative about a woman who advocated tirelessly for the freedom to control her body, money and intellect.

A “fallen woman,” in 19th-century parlance, meant an unmarried woman who’d had any sexual experience whatsoever. Young Alice Chenoweth worked as a teacher, one of the few “respectable” professions open to single women in Cincinnati in the 1870s. She fell afoul of the sexual double standard when she entered into an affair with a married man who claimed to have left his wife. She lost her job because of the relationship; her partner, Charles Smart, did not. The situation prompted her to move to New York with Smart, change her name to Gardener and become a lifelong advocate for women’s independence.

Gardener advocated for the freedom to control her body, money and intellect.

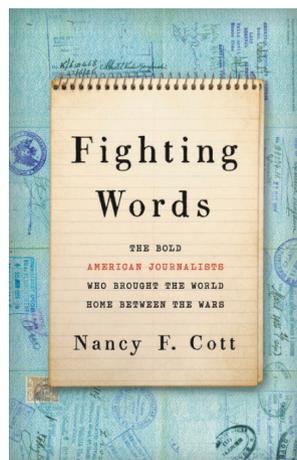
As Helen Hamilton Gardener, she wrote books, gave lectures and became a champion for many women’s issues, including raising the age of consent and obtaining the vote. Gardener became a leader in the women’s suffrage movement, but within this movement, Gardener advocated for the vote to be obtained first by white women. This strategy was intended to gain the support of Southern states, but it cruelly denied an alliance with black women for the universal right to vote.

With this biography, Hamlin has written a nuanced history of the suffrage movement through the life of a remarkable woman. Gardener wasn’t perfect, but this biography does an excellent job balancing her extraordinary achievements against her cultural blind spots.

—Catherine Hollis

Fighting Words

By Nancy F. Cott



U.S. History

During the 1920s and ’30s, Americans who wanted to learn what was happening in other parts of the world depended on newspapers, magazines and books. In her beautifully

crafted and engrossing **Fighting Words: The Bold American Journalists Who Brought the World Home Between the Wars** (Basic, \$32,

9781541699335), Harvard historian Nancy F. Cott vividly portrays the important work and complicated lives of four prominent foreign correspondents during a time of monumental change. Bright and resourceful, they let Americans know what was happening in the devastating aftermath of World War I—in Europe as fascism was on the rise, in a deeply divided Middle East, in Russia when Stalin ruled and in China as revolution grew. They were astute observers and often better than diplomats in assessing what was going on.

Aspiring novelists Vincent Sheean and John Gunther were eager to get to Europe, where they hoped to find work as journalists to support themselves. Dorothy Thompson wanted to get to Europe, too, uncertain of how she would earn a living but proving to be a natural reporter. Rayna Raphaelson Prohme yearned to go to China, where she believed a historic transition, “the biggest struggle that is taking place in all the world,” was happening.

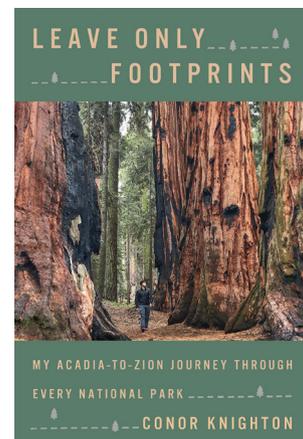
Sheean became best known for his *Personal History*, a bestselling account of his life during the 1920s. Gunther wrote the bestsellers *Inside Europe* and *Inside U.S.A.* but is best remembered for his *Death Be Not Proud*, a portrait of his son’s illness and death. Thompson’s reporting, including an interview with Hitler, was exceptional, and she became an influential newspaper and magazine columnist and radio commentator. Prohme’s path was quite different from the others but certainly fascinating.

This wonderfully readable narrative will hold your attention from beginning to end and features cameos by journalist Louise Bryant (the widow of fellow journalist John Reed) and the prominent authors Rebecca West and Sinclair Lewis, who was Thompson’s husband when he received the Nobel Prize in literature.

—Roger Bishop

Leave Only Footprints

By Conor Knighton



Travel

Part travel monologue, part heartfelt, healing memoir, the uniquely structured debut book from CBS news correspondent Conor Knighton, **Leave Only Footprints:**

My Acadia-to-Zion Journey Through Every National Park (Crown, \$28, 9781984823540), is essentially a love letter to America, and to himself.

Following a broken engagement, Knighton decides to take his mind off his pain by visiting all of America's national parks, taking just a single year to do it. It's an admirable endeavor for anyone, particularly someone nursing a broken heart, but Knighton rises to the occasion, ultimately gaining the inspiration to move on with his life through the "healing, strengthening power of nature."

Instead of lumping the parks together by state or region, Knighton creatively organizes the chapters into themes such as canyons, food, people and animals. Throughout his road tripping, he finds little nuggets that encapsulate America's distinctiveness and beauty, such as Oregon's vibrantly blue Crater Lake (the deepest in the U.S.), Death Valley's Devils Hole pupfish (one of the world's rarest fish species, found only in one water-filled cavern in the middle of the Nevada desert) and Michigan's Isle Royale

(a group of islands so remote that they're only accessible by seaplane or boat).

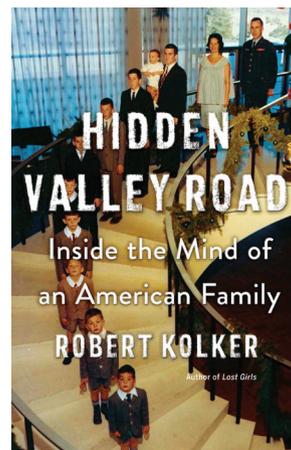
Knighton finds that America's national parks are as varied as the nation's demographics and geography—the people who make up the melting pot that is the United States as well as its varied, gorgeous landscapes. He also chronicles his own life experiences, incorporating memories of family and friends, relating how they tie in to each chapter's theme. Along the way, he cleverly weaves in bits of history, science, geography, statistics and little-known fun facts. For example, California is home to not only the world's highest tree (located in Redwood National Park) but also the oldest tree in the U.S., the exact location of which is a closely guarded secret.

Entertaining, informative and inspirational, **Leave Only Footprints** will appeal to anyone who wants to learn more about America's "best idea" and how challenging yourself can help with spiritual, emotional and personal growth.

—Becky Libourel Diamond

★ Hidden Valley Road

By Robert Kolker



Biography

Ten children. Six diagnoses of schizophrenia. Two parents navigating a meager mental health care system in midcentury America.

At the center of **Hidden Valley Road: Inside**

the Mind of an American Family (Doubleday, \$29.95, 9780385543767) are the Galvins, who are unlike any family you'll ever read about. "This could be the most mentally ill family in America," writes author Robert Kolker.

meet MISHA MAYNERICK BLAISE

Describe your book in one sentence.

It's ABOUT THE CRAZY-AMAZING WINGED CREATURES with whom we SHARE THIS PLANET!



What bird makes you glad that birds aren't dinosaurs anymore?

Actually, PALEONTOLOGISTS CONSIDER MODERN BIRDS to BE AVIAN DINOSAURS! THE SOUTHERN CASSOWARY DRIVES the POINT HOME...



Which bird is the best-dressed bird? Which is the worst-dressed bird?



What's one thing birds do that you wish humans also did?

GROW FEATHERS!

FOR INSULATION, CAMOUFLAGE, REPELLING WATER, BOLD STYLE... ...AND FLIGHT!



What's your favorite bird from literature?

I WAS BLOWN AWAY BY THE HISTORY OF CHICKENS IN



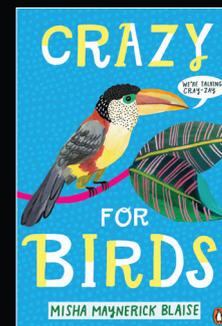
WHY DID THE CHICKEN CROSS THE WORLD? The EPIC SAGA of the Bird That Powers Civilization BY ANDREW LAWLER

Why are you crazy for birds?

BECAUSE THEY ARE CUTE, MYSTERIOUS, BEAUTIFUL, AND SOOO WEIRD!



From vivid wildlife documentaries to the "put a bird on it" trend, birds are so hot right now. If you can't get enough of their weird dances, one-of-a-kind songs or otherworldly plumes, look no further than Misha Maynerick Blaise's **Crazy for Birds** (Penguin, \$20, 9780143134398). Blaise's humor shines as brightly as her whimsical, vibrant illustrations, and both work together to perfectly capture the dazzling strangeness of our avian friends.



Hidden Valley Road blends two stories in alternating chapters. The first is about the overwhelmed Galvin parents, Don and Mimi, and how raising a boisterous Catholic family of eight sons from the 1950s to the '70s may have allowed mental illness to hide in plain sight. A “boys will be boys” attitude excused much aberrant behavior.

The Galvin daughters, the two youngest, provide the emotional heart of the book. They grew up watching their brothers suffer, while also being terrified of—and terrorized by—them. Granted access to the surviving Galvin relatives, Kolker brilliantly shows how mental illness impacts more than just those who are sick, and how festering family secrets can wreak generational damage.

Hidden Valley Road is a must-read for anyone who seeks to understand how far we've come in treating mental illness—and how far we still have to go.

The second story in **Hidden Valley Road** details the thankless psychiatric research that has gone into defining schizophrenia and establishing treatments. This research has run parallel to the Galvins' lives—from early beliefs that bad mothering caused schizophrenia to an institutional reliance on Thorazine, an antipsychotic medication, to more contemporary treatments involving talk therapy and other medications. Kolker walks readers through to the present day, where genetic research into schizophrenia happens largely at the whims of pharmaceutical companies.

The author creates a powerfully humane portrait of those diagnosed with schizophrenia. The Galvin brothers have done terrible things—sexual abuse, domestic violence, murder—but Kolker is a compassionate storyteller who underscores how inadequate medical treatment and an overreliance on “tough love” and incarceration underpin so much of the trauma this family experienced.

Hidden Valley Road is heavy stuff, especially for readers with mental illness or sexual abuse in their own families. But it's a must-read for anyone seeking to understand how far we've come in treating one of the most severe forms of mental illness—and how far we still have to go.

—Jessica Wakeman

A down-to-earth approach to environmentalism

Celebrate Earth Day with two books that remind us of our own power to honor, protect and save our threatened planet.

The perilous state of our planet is a grim subject that often makes us feel powerless. Is it even possible as an individual to mount much of a defense against such a complex global threat? Two books help cut through the anxieties of climate change and suggest a place to start.

In **The Future We Choose: Surviving the Climate Crisis** (Knopf, \$23, 9780525658351), Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac urge readers to push back against overwhelmed, hopeless mindsets. Far from ill-informed but earnest optimists, the authors led negotiations for the United Nations during the Paris Agreement of 2015 and are the co-founders of Global Optimism, working to incite environmental change from the personal level and extending globally. Their book is indeed a manifesto, but an elegant and hopeful one that acknowledges difficult realities while refusing to sink beneath them. They present a faultless argument supported by hard science and, alongside it, paint mesmerizing images of a potential future—re-forested cities, shaded and carless streets, skyscrapers trailing vines and wall gardens, and neighbors who come together to grow food and share resources.

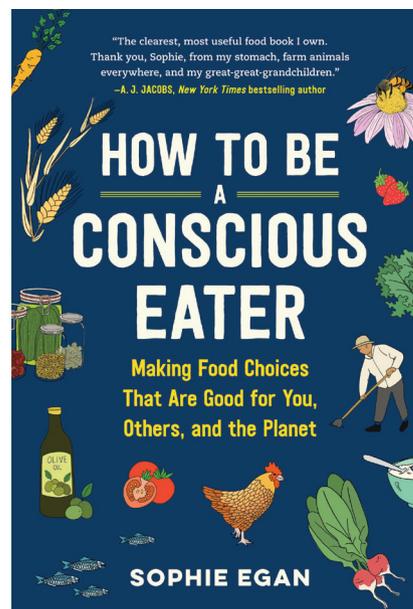
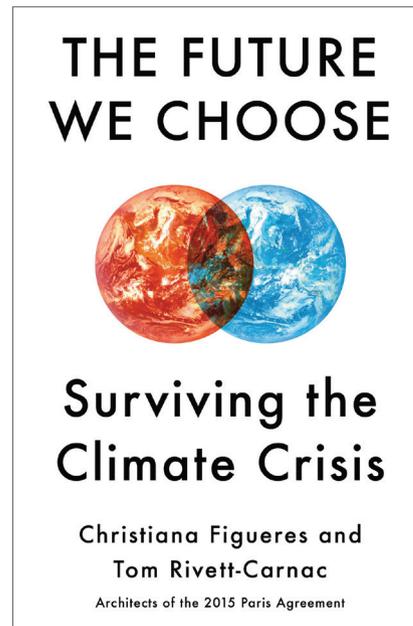
Equally appealing is their argument that, far from an austere world where we miss the extravagances of our past, a clean future would not only be healthy for the planet but would also provide mental and physical advantages for human beings. Great-

er community, better health through more exposure to the beauty of nature and more flexibility for spending time with loved ones are all benefits of their vision of a new society.

Chief among the benefits Figueres and Rivett-Carnac foresee for us is better health through better eating, and in **How to Be a Conscious Eater: Making Food Choices That Are Good for You, Others, and the Planet** (Workman, \$16.95, 9781523507382), Sophie Egan takes a deeper look at the personal and global effects of ethical eating. While acknowledging that individual effort on a collective level creates large-scale change, Egan opts to address her reader one-on-one. A food writer for publications such as *Bon Appétit* and the *Washington Post*, she understands the tension between wanting to do what's right and wanting to preserve what food often means to us. Therefore, she doesn't guilt readers or hold them to unrealistic standards. With illustrations and a conversational voice, Egan takes note of the many ethical issues associated with the food industry and then lays out the options available to us to improve them.

Though we might think of dedicated ethical eaters as belonging to the ranks of ultra-healthy, well-moneyed vegans—those with resources to burn at the co-op and untold willpower—Egan's common-sense tone makes eating according to our values an accessible and relatively stress-free realm for everyone.

—Anna Spydell



★ They Went Left

By Monica Hesse

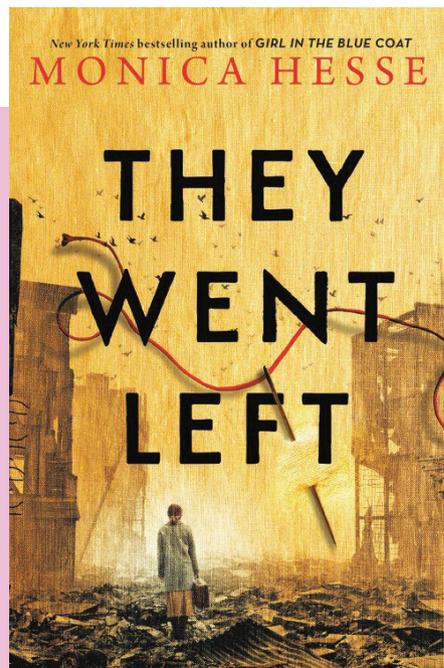
Historical Fiction

The aftermath of World War II is rarely addressed in YA fiction. Narratives typically conclude with scenes of liberation and celebration as good triumphs over evil, and everything returns to normal. Monica Hesse's **They Went Left** (Little, Brown, \$17.99, 9780316490573) begins where those narratives end.

Zofia's story opens in 1945, a few months after she and thousands of others were liberated from concentration camps and sent back into the world to reclaim what they lost. For Zofia—who witnessed her entire family except her little brother, Abek, being sent into the titular left line that led to the camp's gas chambers—

this is not a simple or easy task.

Zofia is broken, physically and mentally, and has spent the months after liberation in a hospital. She clings to the memory of her final goodbye to Abek, and to the promise she made in that moment that she would find him after the war. Released from the hospital, Zofia returns to her family's home, only to discover that all of their possessions are gone and their neighbors are openly hostile to the idea of Jewish families reclaiming their residences. Desperate, Zofia sets out across war-torn



Europe to find Abek while trying to piece together the truth behind her memories.

They Went Left takes readers deep into Zofia's thoughts, pulling us along through her experiences, past and present, even as she begins to wonder whether she can trust her own perceptions and memories. Hesse's meticulous research is evident on every page but never distracts from her propulsive plot.

Combining history, romance and mystery, **They Went Left** is a heartbreak-

ing yet hopeful story of what it takes to survive after trauma.

—Kevin Delecki

What I Like About You

By Marisa Kanter



Fiction

Halle Leavitt, whose parents are filmmakers, has bounced from town to town so many times that she's never invested in IRL friendships. All her friends are online, where they know her as

Kels, a successful blogger who showcases cupcakes she's baked to accompany book reviews. Frequent among her DMs is Nash, a cute web comic artist who's never seen Halle's face.

While her parents film a documentary in Israel, Halle moves in with her recently widowed grandfather. When she runs into Nash at the library in her new town, she's too shocked to tell him they already know each other. Then "Kels" is offered a publishing opportunity that could guarantee Halle's spot at her dream college—but could also expose her ruse and cost her the only friend who matters.

Debut author Marisa Kanter, who has worked in book sales and publicity, peppers **What I Like About You** (Simon & Schuster, \$18.99, 9781534445772) with publishing in-jokes, which

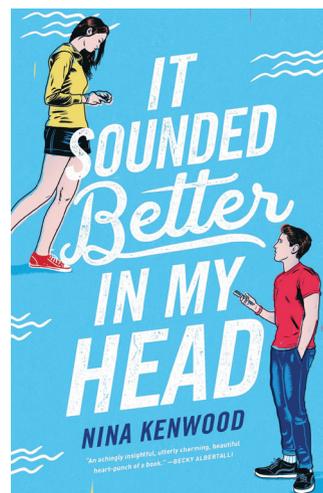
are counterbalanced by Halle's earnest championing of the books she loves. Snippets of DMs and texts also add personality and levity.

The book's emotional landscape is deepened by its exploration of Halle's and her grandfather's grief at the death of Halle's grandmother, with whom Halle shared a strong bond. It's a powerful reminder that everyone processes loss in different ways. It's also refreshing to see a Jewish family represented in a contemporary narrative that never mentions the Holocaust. It all adds up to a charming, witty story about authenticity in the social media age, told with a wink and a string of heart-eyes emojis.

—Kimberly Giarratano

It Sounded Better in My Head

By Nina Kenwood



Fiction

It Sounded Better in My Head (Flatiron, \$18.99, 9781250219268) takes place in Australia, where summer is in January and senior year ends before college admissions

are announced. The novel's narrator, Natalie,

feels in between. She's in between her parents, who have blindsided her with an amicable announcement that they are divorcing, and in between her best friends, Zach and Lucy, who have started dating. But mostly, Natalie is in between being an introvert with severe acne and being an outgoing teenager who goes to parties. And then at one of those parties, she plays a game of spin the bottle and kisses Zach's brother, Alex.

In this deceptively complex book, superficial questions about the intricacies of texting your crush accompany serious explorations of body image, sibling dynamics and interpersonal trust. Debut author Nina Kenwood hilariously chronicles Natalie's bumbling attempts to pursue Alex through an awkward first date, unintended mishaps and more. But Kenwood also follows Natalie as she engages in meaningful conversations with Alex about physical intimacy. The pair's on-the-page discussions of contraception, past partners, STIs and infidelity are frank and honest, and would serve as excellent models for readers in need of a script for such conversations in their own lives. It's also heartening to read Natalie's realization that intimacy and intercourse don't need to be synonymous: "I never thought about how nice it would be to just have someone touch you softly and gently. . . . I thought it was sexy stuff or nothing."

With candor and affection, **It Sounded Better in My Head** captures a teenager navigating the final moments of one stage of life and the first moments of the next.

—Jill Ratzan

Best books for benchwarmers

You don't need to know your layups from your line drives to love these YA books.

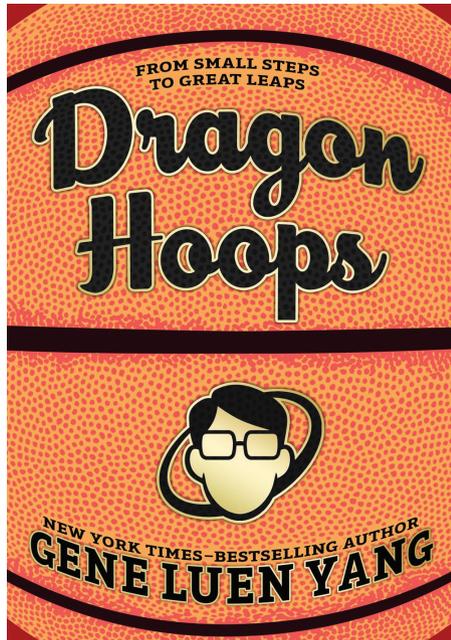
The buzzer-beating jump shot. The walk-off home run. The scrappy gang of underdogs who surprise themselves by making it to the conference final. We've seen all these sports stories before—and for good reason. Even if you're not an athlete or much of a fan, it's hard to deny the drama of sporting events. Two new young adult books use sports as a springboard for exciting storytelling. These tales are as much about courage, teamwork and integrity as they are about the game itself.

Cartoonist and former National Ambassador for Young People's Literature Gene Luen Yang would be the first to admit he's not much of a sports fan. As he confesses in his new graphic memoir, **Dragon Hoops** (First Second, \$24.99, 9781626720794), he grew up as more of a fan of superhero stories, where you know that good will always triumph over evil. "In a well-crafted story, everything makes sense," Yang reflects. "Which is more than I can say for sports."

The book opens when Yang, who teaches math at Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland, California, begins to notice that the whole school is abuzz about the basketball team. Intrigued, Yang interviews Coach Lou, who tells Yang that after three straight years of losses, he is trying out a gutsy strategy—stacking his team roster with senior players—that might finally result in a state championship for the Dragons.

Over the course of the season, Yang travels with the O'Dowd Dragons, profiles many of the players (including some from the equally talented girls' team) and offers a brief history

of basketball. As he gets to know the athletes, whose personalities develop into unforgettable characters, Yang confronts tough topics, such as the racism experienced by the team's Sikh and Chinese players.



Dragon Hoops epitomizes the best kind of storytelling possible in the comics format. Yang incorporates visual jokes that will reward careful readers and masterfully combines words and pictures to generate drama and suspense beyond what either could do independently. As his season with the Dragons comes to a close, Yang is



Illustration from **Dragon Hoops** © 2020 by Gene Luen Yang. Reproduced by permission of First Second.

inspired by the players and finds the courage to make a career-defining decision of his own.

Courage is also at the heart of Siobhan Vivian's **We Are the Wildcats** (Simon & Schuster, \$18.99, 9781534439900). The action in this

field hockey-centered novel takes place not over the course of an entire season but over a single 24-hour period. It opens on a hot day in August, as a week of team tryouts culminates in a final grueling workout, after which the team's charismatic and demanding coach will select 20 new Wildcats. Team captain Mel is eager to host the team's first Psych-Up of the season, a mandatory all-team slumber party at which new players will receive their varsity jerseys, but this year, Coach has something else in mind. Instead of letting the girls take charge as usual, Coach sends them on an all-night odyssey, causing old tensions and resentments from the prior season's humiliating finale to resurface, painful and raw.

Vivian's novel unfolds through six players' perspectives, including incoming freshman Luci (who is flattered and then outraged to be Coach's accomplice), injured Phoebe and goalie Ali, who eventually reveals the role that racism played in the previous season's heartbreaking loss. Creating different voices and backstories for this many primary characters isn't easy, but Vivian does so with aplomb, giving each Wildcat a credible and memorable personality.

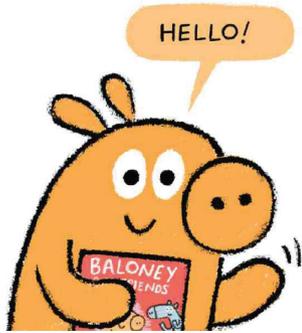
As the teammates gradually open up and share their experiences of Coach's history of emotional manipulation and outright lies, they begin to imagine a new way to seize their own power and reclaim this important season for themselves.

Both **Dragon Hoops** and **We Are the Wildcats** are stories in which happy endings are not foregone conclusions, and the "good guys" aren't guaranteed to win—but that's part of what makes them engrossing, right up to the final play.

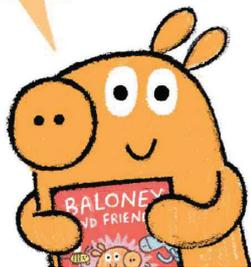
—Norah Piehl

For readers on the rise

Past the “read me a story” stage? Try these books next!



I'M BALONEY!



THIS IS *MY* BOOK.



ALL ABOUT ME!



Illustrations from *Baloney and Friends* © 2020 by Greg Pizzoli. Reproduced by permission of Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

If your young reader's relationship with books has progressed beyond sitting quietly as you read aloud to them, this roundup is for you. We've gathered three titles of varying lengths and difficulty levels that are perfect for readers ready to go it alone. Each is sure to challenge and delight kiddos who are on their way to tackling stories independently.

Greg Pizzoli's *Baloney and Friends* (Little, Brown, \$12.99, 9781368054546, ages 5 to 8), a collection of short tales presented as a graphic novel, is the first entry in a new series. A scene-stealer from the start, Baloney is a precocious pig that little ones are sure to adore. In the introductory tale, he tries to hog the spotlight, but he's soon joined by his pals, who are all equally deserving of attention. There's Peanut, an imperturbably good-natured horse; Krabbit, a crotchety cottontail; and Bizz, a very wise bee.

Pizzoli brings the crew's contrasting dispositions to vivid life in cleverly designed comic panels. When Baloney tries to stage a magic show, Krabbit is skeptical of his skills, while Peanut, a push-over, falls for Baloney's tricks. Bizz, meanwhile, serves as the voice of reason throughout the proceedings. Whether Baloney is feeling sad or trying to disguise his fear of water when his friends go swimming, his chums will always cheer him up. Pizzoli's colorful illustrations and easy-to-take-in text will attract up-and-coming readers and leave them wanting more madcap episodes of “the one and only Baloney!”

Story lovers ready to take on a more intricate tale will enjoy Laurel Snyder's *Charlie & Mouse Outdoors* (Chronicle, \$14.99, 9781452170664, ages 4 to 8). Featuring charming artwork by Emily Hughes, it's the latest entry in Snyder's beloved *Charlie & Mouse* series. This time around, brothers Charlie and Mouse trek into the woods with their parents for an overnight stay that's full of surprises.

On the long car ride to the campsite, the boys are bored, but once they hit the hiking trails, the excitement begins. During a walk, they battle a big bush

monster and get startled by a wild pig. Afterward in their tent, they shut out the spooky stuff by focusing on things that are nice. “You know what isn't ever scary?” Charlie says. “Kittens!” As darkness falls, they roast marshmallows with a little direction from Dad. Sundown also brings storytime, a cozy conclusion to an eventful day.

In Hughes' delicate yet expressive illustrations, Charlie and Mouse are endearing brown-eyed boys awakening to the wonders of the big wild world around them. Their latest chronicle will engage youngsters while helping them build reading skills and confidence.

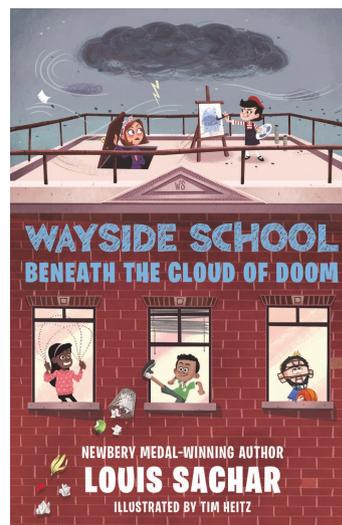
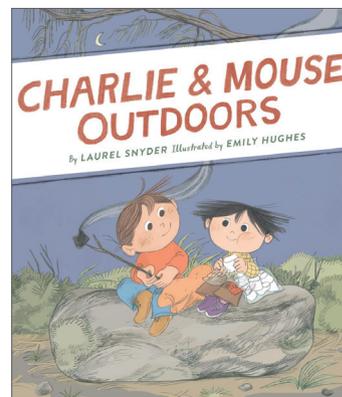
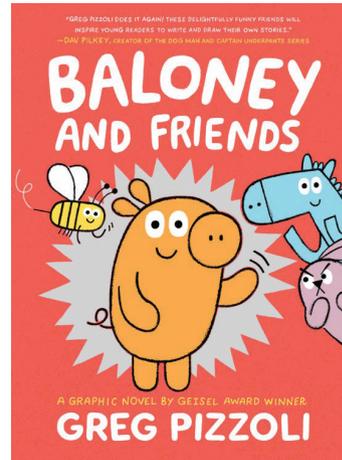
Self-reliant readers primed for a longer, more substantial story will find big fun in Louis Sachar's *Wayside School Beneath the Cloud of Doom* (HarperCollins, \$17.99, 9780062965387, ages 6 to 10). The fourth entry in Sachar's popular *Wayside School* series (and the first new *Wayside* title in 25 years!), *Cloud of Doom* documents the daily doings of the oddball institution. *Wayside* is still no ordinary school; Principal Kidswatter shrieks into a microphone to signal the start of the day, and Miss Mush, who runs the cafeteria, serves up pepper-only pizza and spaghetti and footballs.

Mrs. Jewls' class is back, too, and filled with the usual suspects, including curmudgeonly Kathy; Dana, an expert at making funny faces; and Jason, who somehow manages to read a 999-page book. Everyone is stressing over a big exam called the Ultimate Test when the formidable *Cloud of Doom* appears. All manner of strange incidents ensue, and the students struggle to stay on task.

“Someday, the *Cloud of Doom* will be gone,” Mrs. Jewls predicts. “And the world will be a much better place. . . . Even Miss Mush's food will

taste good.” Does her forecast come true? Readers will have to find out for themselves. Sachar's off-the-wall take on academic life is enlivened by Tim Heitz's ace illustrations. It all makes for an A-plus read from start to finish.

—Julie Hale



The Keeper of Wild Words

By Brooke Smith
Illustrated by Madeline Kloepper

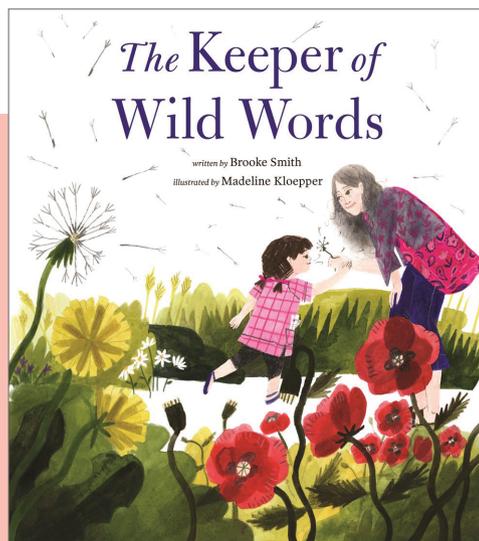
Picture Book

Brook's Mimi isn't "just a grandmother," she's also "a grand friend" who weaves "words into everything." The same could be said of **The Keeper of Wild Words** (Chronicle, \$18.99, 9781452170732, ages 5 to 8), Brooke Smith's celebratory picture book that delivers an urgent plea to young readers.

Brook hopes to find something interesting to bring to show and tell on the first day of school, but on this late summer day, Mimi also has an important mission. She takes Brook on a hike and asks her to be her Keeper of Wild Words, a protector of the words Mimi fears are disappearing. She gives Brook a piece of notebook

paper with wildlife words such as *drake*, *monarch*, *starling* and *wren*. As they walk through woods, meadows and streams, Brook and Mimi marvel at the natural delights they find. "Do wild words dance like this every morning?" Brook wonders.

In an author's note, Smith explains that her story was inspired by *The Oxford Junior Dictionary's* removal of more than 100 entries to make room for words like *database*, *MP3 player* and *vandalism*. The resulting tale is an inspirational commemoration of such "lost"



words. Its final page contains a built-in pouch for readers, along with an appeal: "You can be a keeper too. Your wild worlds will stay safe inside this envelope."

Madeline Kloepper's vivid illustrations are the perfect accompaniment to Smith's rallying cry. Her pages are bright with red poppies, swooping starlings and beavers frolicking in a pond near a grassy shore. Readers will practically feel a puff of wind as Brook blows a cascade of dandelion seeds into the air, and they'll hush

to Mimi's shushing as the pair passes a doe snoozing amid the ferns. Every spread is filled with wonder and warmth, not just for the natural world but also for the bond between grandmother and grandchild.

The Keeper of Wild Words is an irresistible invitation to a wild and wonderful linguistic crusade.

—Alice Cary

MEET CHRIS HAUGHTON

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR BOOK?

It's a story about a little crab going to the sea for the very first time. The pages of the book are the waves. They get hit a few times by some big waves (as you turn the page!) but eventually little crab summons the courage to go under the waves. And it's really nice down there!

WHO HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST INFLUENCE ON YOUR WORK?

My editor and art director...and friend Deirdre Mc Dermott. I feel very lucky to have been working with Deirdre from my very first book. She is the best.

WHO WAS YOUR CHILDHOOD HERO?

Animal from the muppets. And Mahatma Gandhi (!) ...when I was older.

WHAT BOOKS DID YOU ENJOY AS A CHILD?

The muppet annual + Richard Scary's books

WHAT IS THE ONE THING YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN TO DO?

I want to make good non-fiction books.

WHAT MESSAGE WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEND TO YOUNG READERS?

For this book, the message is try it out! Jump in! It'll be great if you just go for it :)



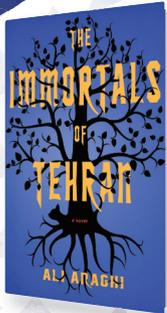
When *Very Big Crab* takes *Little Crab* to the ocean for the first time, *Little Crab* sees the ocean's big waves and begins to wonder if perhaps they should just go home. In **Don't Worry, Little Crab** (Candlewick, \$17.99, 9781536211191, ages 3 to 6), Chris Haughton offers a warm and playful story about the amazing experiences that await us when we find the courage to try new things. Haughton is the creator of *Shh! We Have a Plan*, *Oh No, George!* and *Little Owl Lost*. Originally from Dublin, Ireland, he now lives in London.

DON'T WORRY, LITTLE CRAB
CHRIS HAUGHTON



Diverse Debuts

from
Penguin Random House



FOR READERS OF *EXIT WEST* AND *PACHINKO*

Ali Araghi
THE IMMORTALS OF TEHRAN

Exploring the brutality of history while conjuring the astonishment of magical realism, *The Immortals of Tehran* is a novel about the incantatory power of words and the revolutionary sparks of love, family, and poetry—set against the indifferent, relentless march of time.

Melville House | Available in Hardcover, eBook, and Audio Editions



FOR READERS OF *SWEETBITTER* AND *NORMAL PEOPLE*

Frances Cha
IF I HAD YOUR FACE:
A NOVEL

A riveting debut novel set in contemporary Seoul, Korea, about four young women making their way in a world defined by impossible standards of beauty, secret room salons catering to wealthy men, ruthless social hierarchies, and K-pop mania.

Ballantine Books | Available in Hardcover, eBook, and Audio Editions



FOR READERS OF *CELESTE NG*, *TAYARI JONES*, AND *LIANE MORIARTY*

Stephanie Scott
WHAT'S LEFT OF ME IS YOURS: A NOVEL

A gripping debut set in modern-day Tokyo and inspired by a true crime, *What's Left of Me Is Yours* charts a young woman's search for the truth about her mother's life—and her murder.

Doubleday | Available in Hardcover, eBook, and Audio Editions



FOR READERS OF *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*, *HOMEGOING*, AND *AWAY*

Afia Atakora
CONJURE WOMEN:
A NOVEL

A mother and daughter with a shared talent for healing—and for the conjuring of curses—are at the heart of this dazzling first novel.

Random House | Available in Hardcover, eBook, and Audio Editions



FOR FANS OF *THE MOTHERS* AND *OLIVE KITTERIDGE*

Jeni McFarland
THE HOUSE OF DEEP WATER

In this stunning and perceptive debut novel three women learn what it means to come home—and to make peace with the family, love affairs, and memories they'd once left behind.

Putnam | Available in Hardcover, eBook, and Audio Editions



FOR READERS OF *TOMMY ORANGE* AND *OCEAN VUONG*

C Pam Zhang
HOW MUCH OF THESE HILLS IS GOLD:
A NOVEL

Both epic and intimate, blending Chinese symbolism and re-imagined history, this haunting adventure story is set against the twilight of the American gold rush where two siblings are on the run in an unforgiving landscape—trying not just to survive but to find a home.

Riverhead | Available in Hardcover, eBook, Audio, and Large Print Editions

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Penguin
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Joanna Gaines shares her passion for home

The “Fixer Upper” co-host returns with her second cookbook, full of reasons to gather the whole family and share food, laughter and love.

Until recently, anyone from Texas could tell you there wasn't much to know about Waco. Sure, it's home to Baylor University and the Dr. Pepper Museum, but mostly it was just a little town in a big state, a stop on the trip from Dallas to Austin—that is, until the Gaines family arrived.

In 2003, Joanna and Chip Gaines brought their unique blend of rustic charm and big-city ideas to the small city where Joanna went to college, and Waco has been a tourist destination ever since. It's also become the home base for the Gaines' entrepreneurial endeavors, but thanks to their hard work and good fortune, they've been able to spread their magic across the country. After their construction company, Magnolia Homes, became the focus of HGTV's television series “Fixer Upper,” the Gaines were able to expand their enterprise nationwide. Now, with two stores, a restaurant, a bakery, a lifestyles journal and four books, the Gaines family has brought their old-fashioned, Southern-chic style to the modern American home.

In this follow-up to her bestselling 2018 cookbook, *Magnolia Table*, Joanna Gaines offers 145 more recipes in the same vein: easy-to-prepare, heartwarming Southern meals that will give you a reason to round up the whole family. Imbued with Gaines' warmth and passion for home, the book presents a modern selection of classic

dishes and new experiments to try out in your own kitchen. Delicious gnocchi, creamy polenta, pumpkin cream cheese bread . . . the list goes on.

The central focus of this cookbook is the idea of gathering—ways of gathering and reasons



Magnolia Table, Volume 2

William Morrow, \$35
9780062820181

Cooking

to gather. From holidays to basic family dinners, from simple bites to full meals, **Magnolia Table, Volume 2** gives you a reason and a way to celebrate those you love. Gaines has a deep appreciation for the value of food being shared, and her inspiration for creating this cookbook was her hope that more people might bring their families together. Through the ordinary magic of food, Gaines believes we can express our love honestly and openly.

—Eric Ponce