

Book Review

JANUARY 30, 2022



ARD SU

KING OF PAIN How one pharmaceutical executive cashed in on opioids

THE BLUE AND THE RED Two books raise the prospect of another Civil War

HONORÉE FANONNE JEFFERS reviews Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif'

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Killer Instincts

By Katie Kitamura

BY STRANGE COINCIDENCE, while I was reading “Notes on an Execution,” the second novel by Danya Kukafka, I was followed online by advertisements for the television series “Dexter.” They jumped from site to site, images featuring the eponymous character in a turtle-neck sweater, striking various poses of menace and seduction: the ideal of the all-American serial killer.

For all its queasiness, the figure of the serial killer has long been a fixture in popular culture, at once enormously profitable and sur-

NOTES ON AN EXECUTION

By Danya Kukafka

304 pp. William Morrow. \$27.99.

prisingly tenacious. According to Google, there are “at least five” movies about Ted Bundy and “at least 15” about Charles Manson. Serial killers proliferate through television series and books of all genres. But the figure that emerges in these works — monstrous, charming, seductive and hyper-intelligent — has less to do with the reality of the people committing these crimes and more to do with the way we experience and explain our lurid fascination with violence and extremity.

In “Notes on an Execution,” Kukafka seeks to interrogate that cultural preoccupation and cliché. The novel focuses on a man on death

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

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— **Booklist** (starred review)

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Book Review

The New York Times

JANUARY 30, 2022



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CHARLES (CHUCK) VERRILL

1951–2022

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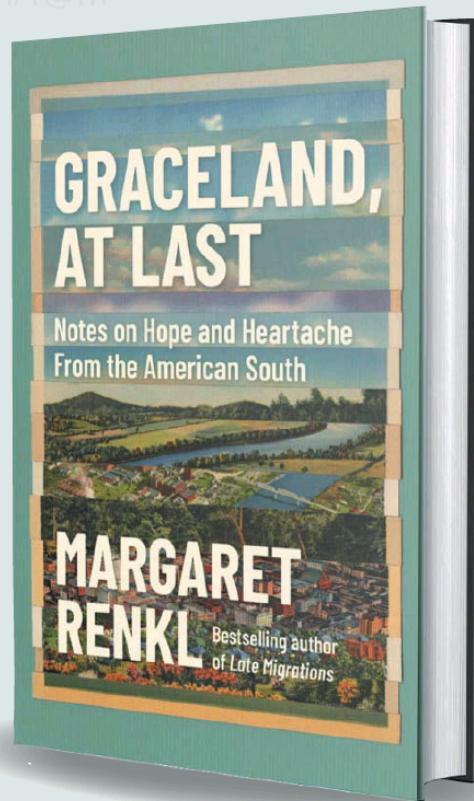
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in color for the first time."

—Literary Hub, "Most Anticipated Books of 2021"

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Newly Published / Visuals



NADINE IJEWERE: Our Own Selves, by Nadine Ijewere. (Prestel, \$55.) The debut monograph by the first Black woman to shoot a *Vogue* cover reflects the photographer's roots in Nigeria, Jamaica and South East London.



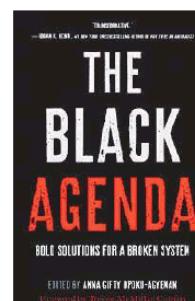
BIRD: Exploring the Winged World, by Phaidon Editors. (Phaidon, \$59.95.) Including contributions by Nick Cave, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Lorna Simpson, this volume of 300 images, spanning art to fashion to ornithology, documents the importance of the avian world to all of human society.

AFRO-ATLANTIC HISTORIES, edited by Adriano Pedrosa and Tomás Toledo. (DelMonico Books/Museu de Arte de São Paulo, \$69.95.) This five-century survey boldly seeks to trace the lines of artistic influence, dialogue and conflict across Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF HEALTH: Hospital Design and the Construction of Dignity, by Michael P. Murphy Jr. with Jeffrey Mansfield and MASS Design Group. (Cooper Hewitt/Smithsonian Design Museum, \$45.) Emergency rooms as you've never seen them before: how and why medical institutions evolved into the spaces they are today.

...Also Out Now

THE PAGES, by Hugo Hamilton. (Knopf, \$28.) Lena Knecht is traveling from New York to Berlin carrying a first-edition copy of Joseph Roth's "Rebellion," which illuminates the political situation in Europe as the region increasingly mirrors Weimar Germany's slide toward the Third Reich.



THE BLACK AGENDA: Bold Solutions for a Broken System, edited by Anna Gifty Opoku-Agyeman. (St. Martin's, \$28.99.) This collection pulls together essays by Black academics to address how race interacts with everything from climate policy to health care to technology.

FREE LOVE, by Tessa Hadley. (Harper, \$26.99.) Phyllis Fischer, a 40-year-old housewife in 1960s London, turns her life upside down after having a compulsive affair with the son of family friends.

THE REVOLUTION THAT WASN'T: GameStop, Reddit, and the Fleecing of Small Investors, by Spencer Jakab. (Portfolio, \$28.) A former stock analyst gives a month-by-month account of how Reddit users collectively began short-selling stock in GameStop in an attempt to bring some of Wall Street's wealthiest players to their knees.



Elizabeth Taylor

Storytime

TO THE EDITOR:

I was interested to read Geoff Dyer's consideration of "Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont" (Jan. 16) and its wonderful creator, the novelist Elizabeth Taylor. It had a whole first life in England in the 1970s.

I read the book when it came out in 1971 and thought it had all the qualities that would make for a funny, sharp-eyed, deeply poignant TV drama. I got the BBC to take out an option on the book. Ray Lawler did a good adaptation capturing the behavior and evasions and apprehensions of the older group of women who lived at the Claremont, a residential hotel. And off we went with the perfect Celia Johnson as Mrs. Palfrey, the cut-glass Alan Webb as Mr. Osmond and Joseph Blatchley as Ludo Myers, the much-loved fraudulent grandson.

Taylor came to a couple of rehearsals, a tidy woman in a tweed suit, with a shy, friendly manner, but in no way cowed. She offered a couple of notes on line readings and then sat and had tea with Celia, who was already making the character as unforgettable as the unhappily married woman she played in "Brief Encounter."

At the 1974 BAFTA awards, "Mrs Palfrey" was nominated for best single play and Celia for the lead role. Celia was the winner, going away, as they say on the track. (My friend Michael Apted won the other one.) Then, after a year or so, Celia, Elizabeth and I

talked about a theater version, ideally for the Haymarket Theater, one of the most beautiful in London, and Elizabeth and I started to work. She was a great collaborator and a slyly funny woman. She got a little harder to reach on the telephone and then told me she was having treatment for cancer. She died in 1975.

You can divide writers perhaps by BSM and ASM — "Before Social Media" and "After." The society and the characters she wrote about were definitely BSM, but the human beings that they were, accepting transient happiness, looking for something fixed to hold onto, dealing with inevitabilities, are as we all are.

MICHAEL LINDSAY-HOGG
HUDSON, N.Y.

The writer is a recipient of a BAFTA award for "Brideshead Revisited" and directed the Beatles film "Let It Be."

TO THE EDITOR:
In answer to the question Geoff Dyer asks at the end of his review of Elizabeth Taylor's novel "Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont" ("Was there any better chronicler of English life as it unfolded in the 30-year period after the end of World War II?"), I offer one name: Barbara Pym.

VICTORY VAN DYCK CHASE
PRINCETON, N.J.

Poetry or Prose?

TO THE EDITOR:
Troy Jollimore's excellent critique of Jim Harrison's "Com-

plete Poems" (Jan. 16) points out the vigor and wisdom Harrison brought to his favorite themes: pleasure and death. Harrison was engrossed in his pursuits and the literary world is much richer for his journeys through varied natural topographies: Michigan, Montana and Arizona, along with the abundant emotional vistas he traversed with wisdom and humility. Harrison's masterful diction could bring you completely into the moment as he brought to life the jarring physicality of a bitter cold river startling the skin and piquing a sense of the divine.

MATT TANGUAY
ANN ARBOR, MICH.

TO THE EDITOR:
I enjoyed the Jollimore piece on Jim Harrison's oeuvre. One can be grateful for the easy-to-understand nature of his poetry. The problem for me is that, as with much of our current poetry, it might as well be prose. It lacks depth, magic, mystery and music. Yes, it has clarity and insight. But where is the poetry?

DAVID EBERHARDT
BALTIMORE

Motion to Dismiss

TO THE EDITOR:
I, and the millions of other readers of the Book Review, recognize blatant prosecutor-speak when we read it. Even so, I don't think I've ever been presented with a more disingenuous, jury-tailored statement than the quotation offered by David Lat, reviewing Laura Coates's "Just Pursuit" (Jan. 16): "The pursuit of justice creates injustice. Before I became a prosecutor, I never imagined that could be true." Excuse me? Did the author fall into an amnesiac coma following law school? The primary reaction of first-year law students encountering criminal and constitutional law is horror at the profundity of injustice. I respectfully suggest, if you choose to become a federal prosecutor and want credibility for your war stories, own it.

ILENE YOUNG
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THE GUARDIAN



"A playful exploration of multiple identities"

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NEW YORK TIMES

"In this award-winning autofiction,

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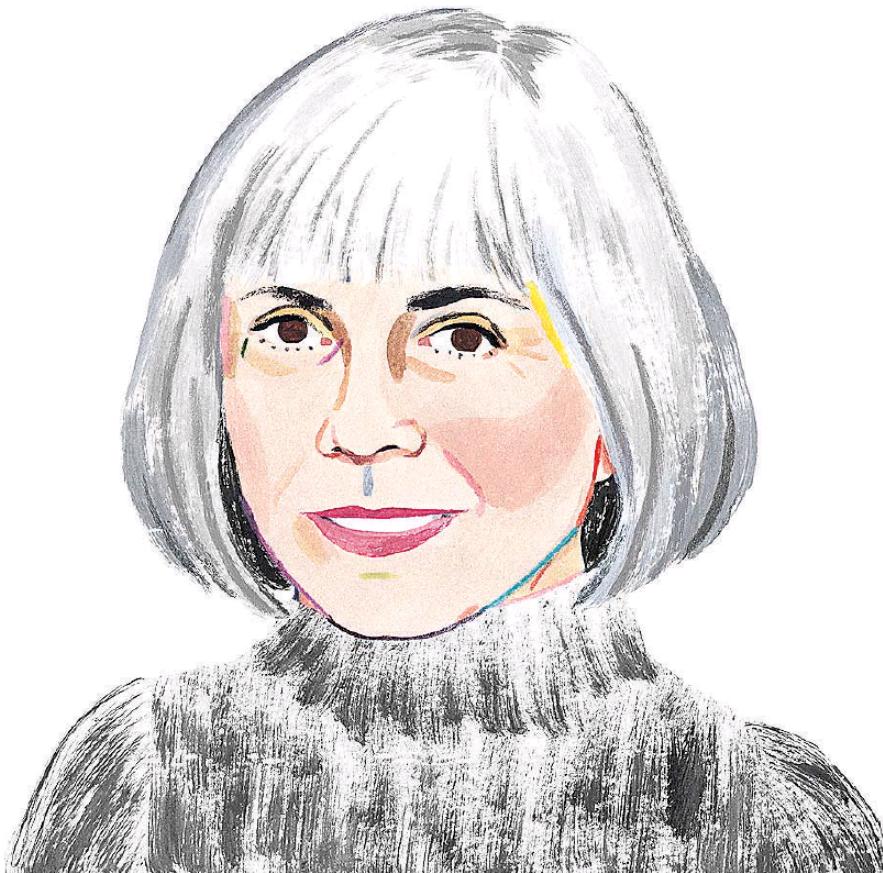
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By the Book



Anne Rice

In her final interview, the author of 'Ramses the Damned: The Reign of Osiris' (written with her son, Christopher) says that 'cynicism in fiction repels me.' Rice died last month at the age of 80.

What books are on your night stand?

Currently it's Peter Ackroyd's biography of Shakespeare, and "The World Before Us: How Science Is Revealing a New Story of Our Human Origins," by Tom Higham.

Describe your ideal reading experience.

When I'm not at my computer I'm reading almost constantly in my recliner with a gooseneck lamp angled over my shoulder. I'm a diligent underliner and I take notes in the margins almost constantly. This is as true with the books I read for research as it is for the fiction I savor and enjoy again and again. My son, Christopher (who is also my co-author on "Ramses the Damned: The Reign of Osiris"), has tried repeatedly to get me to join the digital reading revolution, but I'm a hold-out. I'm too enamored with making handwritten notes all over the page. Recently I asked people not to laugh at me on Twitter when I suggested using potato chip bag clips to hold open large hardcover novels on your lap. But it works

beautifully. Try it if you don't believe me.

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

"Kings Row," by Henry Bellamann. It's so terribly sad to me that Bellamann's novels have been all but forgotten today. I regard this as a lost American classic. It was a great success upon its release and made into a film that featured a young Ronald Reagan. I discovered it after stumbling across the film, and then I rushed out to obtain a copy of the novel. It's such a rich exploration of how we survive in a world full of ugliness, loneliness and suffering. As soon as I finished it, I went right to Amazon and posted a five-star review.

What do you read when you're working on a book? And what kind of reading do you avoid while writing?

I have to say, I don't consume nearly as much contemporary fiction as I do scholarship and nonfiction on the topics that obsess me and fill my work. Some excep-

tions have been my delightful discovery of novels by Kristin Hannah and Louise Penny in the past few years. But when I'm working on a novel, I feel as if the research never ends, and I'm blessed to be able to keep an extensive library here in my home.

What moves you most in a work of literature?

Nothing rivals the deep seriousness and compassion with which Tolstoy depicts his characters. And I feel strongly he wrote about women in a way that was deeper and more sophisticated than many writers today. I have always possessed a profound and abiding love for my characters, and I am moved when another writer exhibits the same passion. Cynicism in fiction repels me as does an author's simmering contempt for all of their subjects.

Which genres do you especially enjoy reading? And which do you avoid?

I voraciously consume nonfiction, specifically history and biographies of great artists and historical figures. When I do consume fiction, which is rare, it's mostly works of grand ambition from generations past. Stories of immense scope such as those by Dickens and Tolstoy. What is considered today to be the modern literary novel, with its focus on pedestrian realism, has never deeply moved me. I saw myself as deeply at odds with it when I first began publishing in the 1970s.

Do you distinguish between "commercial" and "literary" fiction? Where's that line, for you?

I don't, and I believe the great novelists of our time have taken battering rams to the distinction by attempting works of immense grandeur and scope.

What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?

I'm not sure there's a particular book, but I think some might be surprised by the sheer volume of science writing I own. When you invent alternate worlds and supernatural cosmologies it can be incredibly inspiring to read about how little we still know about the underlying fabric of the universe.

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

Tolstoy and Dickens, without a doubt. And perhaps my late husband, Stan, who was a brilliant poet and painter. I miss him terribly. We were married for over 40 years before he died of a brain tumor in 2002. □

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

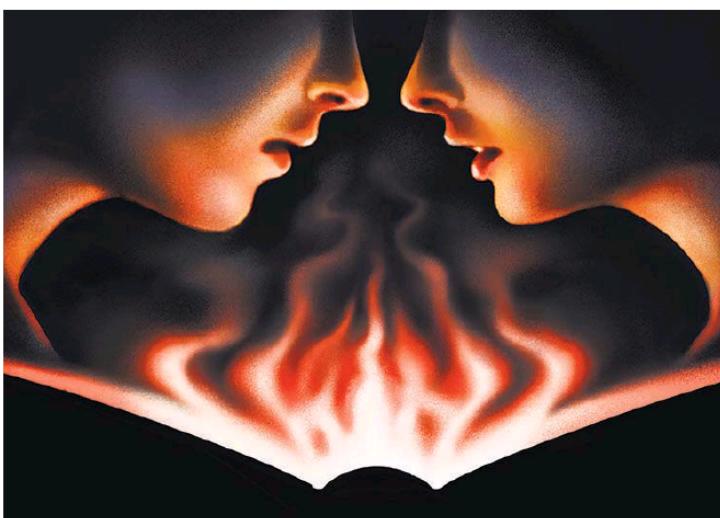
Ghosts of Ordinary Objects

IN SARA GRAN'S sensational occult thriller, **THE BOOK OF THE MOST PRECIOUS SUBSTANCE** (Dreamland Books, 319 pp., paper, \$18.95), the rare-book dealer Lily Albrecht is swept into a hunt for a copy of "the most precise and most effective grimoire of sex magic ever written."

Created by an alchemist in the 17th century, and once enacted by the dark magician Aleister Crowley — "the world's leading authority on sex magic," who "learned everything he knew about sex" from it — "The Book of the Most Precious Substance" is a dangerous, powerful treasure. With the help of Lucas, a sexy librarian, Lily tracks down some of the rich and powerful people rumored to have used the book to fulfill their

tions of desire sexy and subtle. Like Lily Albrecht, readers have little choice but to follow the book to its sinister conclusion.

CHRISTOPHER GOLDEN'S **ROAD OF BONES** (St. Martin's, 228 pp., \$27.99) opens with the documentary TV producer Felix Teigland, known as Teig, and his cameraman, Prentiss, speeding down an inhospitable and brutally cold stretch of Russia's Kolyma Highway to capture proof-of-concept footage for a Hollywood pitch meeting. They're drawn by the infamous history of the Stalin-era highway. Countless men and women, all sentenced to gulag camps, died while building it. "They were driving across potholed, rutty, icy graves — had been since they'd



DEENA SO OTEH

dreams: rock stars and witches, an admiral scheming for the White House, a dominatrix duchess in southern France and a seedy businessman. Along the way, Lily and Lucas discover fragments of the book, just enough to begin dabbling in the rituals, and soon fall under its spell.

Gran's writing, like the grimoire, is palpably seductive. The search for pleasure and magic is an aphrodisiac, one that pulses on the page. Gran's plotting is hairpin in its curvature, her descrip-

begun the trip — and there were hundreds of miles to go." If a landscape can absorb trauma, this place is saturated.

Teig and Prentiss expect frostbite and treacherous terrain. They'd like to find proof "that the supernatural existed alongside the tangible world." But that's before their local guide brings them to the village of Akhust, where they plan to spend the night. The place is inexplicably abandoned, its houses left open to the elements; only a young girl, Una, remains. Vicious, wolflike creatures soon appear from the forest. When their guide is killed, they flee with Una, and Teig's focus shifts from saving his career to saving her life.

DANIELLE TRUSSONI is the Book Review's horror columnist and the author of five books. Her latest novel is "The Ancestor."

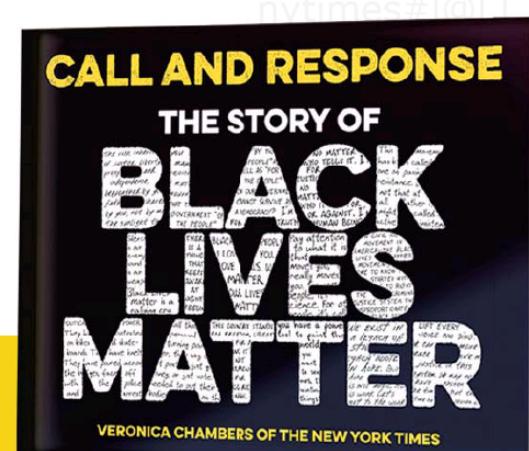
Golden, an economical writer, creates a mother lode of terror in just over 200 pages. There is little lingering as he pushes his characters deeper and deeper into the Road of Bones. Despite a somewhat clichéd back story that explains Teig's connection to Una, his need to protect her creates a warm emotional center to this cold world. Shamans and spirits, the undead and the feral, the creatures of the Kolyma Highway and the unimaginable horrors of its history make for riveting reading.

THE STRANGE AND WONDERFUL define Kim Fu's story collection, **LESSER KNOWN MONSTERS OF THE 21ST CENTURY** (Tin House, 214 pp., paper, \$16.95), where the line between fantasy and reality fades in and out, elusive and beckoning as shadows flitting on a screen. In "Liddy, First to Fly," a mysterious growth appears on a pubescent girl's ankles: "bubbles of clear fluid, about the diameter of a quarter, the skin almost completely transparent," that reveal themselves, when lanced, to be wings. Liddy's friends are fascinated, horrified, even jealous of her transformation. She "had become what she was meant to be," one friend notes. "And maybe we all would."

The question of becoming, however painful that process, is also at the heart of "June Bugs," a novella that follows a woman who has fled an abusive relationship, only to rent a house infested with "a seething sea of beetles — their color of dried blood, the sheen of their glassy wings like cresting waves."

The toxicity that had permeated her life in her previous home — shared with a lover who sapped her vitality with the persistence of a vampire — begins to seep into her new life. The bugs are ever-present, small and seemingly harmless, and yet they take over every space she inhabits, "the living mixed with the dead . . . moving radially toward the light fixture, a concave flower-shaped chandelier, as though mesmerized." While extermination would be the best solution, she finds herself stuck, waiting for the chill of winter to free her. □

THE POWER OF PROTEST



A powerful exploration of Black Lives Matter for young readers as told through photographs, quotes, and informative text from Veronica Chambers and Jennifer Harlan of The New York Times

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Shades of Black and White

In her only short story, Toni Morrison stripped her characters of all racial markers.

By HONORÉE FANONNE JEFFERS

IT'S A TERM I invented, while watching the late, great Toni Morrison masterfully take down her critics: "The Morrisonian Moment."

My favorite of these instances took place during a 1998 interview with Charlie Rose, who verbally poked Morrison — at least, it appeared that way to me — with questions about race. Specifically, why did it annoy her so much when journalists asked, when would she stop writing about race, meaning, writing about Black culture and Black people?

And Morrison answered, "The person who asks that question doesn't understand he is also racist."

At this point, I always giggle. (Oh, I've watched this interview at least 10 times.) Not only did Charlie Rose

RECITATIF

A Story

By Toni Morrison

Introduction by Zadie Smith

96 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$16.

seemingly misunderstand what "race" meant, he didn't realize that he'd brought a knife to a gunfight. He'd thought himself capable of outwitting Toni Morrison, an African American woman who'd won the Nobel Prize in Literature, in a debate about Blackness and its profound creative relevance.

What I loved about Morrison's response — besides her melodious, withering tone — was her historically informed argument that, although her critics might not understand how race works exactly, "white" has always been a racial category, just like "African American." After all, white folks are the ones who invented the concept of race in the first place.

Morrison's unflustered logic is what I love about "Recitatif," her short story originally published in 1983 and now being released for the first time as a stand-alone book. "Recitatif" depicts an interracial friendship between two girls — one white, one Black — who meet in a shelter. They have different reasons for being there: Roberta's mother is sick, while Twyla's "likes to dance." In the story, told from Twyla's point of view, we encounter the girls over many years, but Morrison never identifies either's race.

HONORÉE FANONNE JEFFERS is the author of the novel "The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois."

As she later explained in "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination," "The only short story I have ever written, 'Recitatif,' was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial." Absence is Morrison's central point; once racial markers are stripped from the girls, each reader of "Recitatif" will experience the story in a purely subjective fashion.

This subjectivity appears in literary criticism as well. Some scholars insisted

whiteness, the "normative" identity. (Some might say it remains the norm.) Most readers would have searched for *Blackness* — its imagery, its music, its vernacular, its performance. Its static, American stereotypes.

Remember, though, that Morrison tells us in "Playing in the Dark" that race is still there in the story. We (her readers) just can't identify it. Twyla and Roberta — two wounded, mostly unmothered girls, growing up with material and emotional uncertainties — are playing the racial hands they've been dealt. Yet because we don't know who holds which hand, their social realities increasingly become more absurd.

There are no men in "Recitatif." Thus, the power of white supremacy isn't quite as obvious. This is a story about women, and it seems that Morrison asks us: "Are we really going to play this game invented by white men? Are we that weak-minded, that susceptible to a power we don't truly — and won't ever — possess?"

IN PREPARATION FOR writing this review, I immersed myself in rereading Morrison's nonfiction, her ideas about what is still (unfortunately) called "writing about race." I felt her outrage over the question that I'm still asked in this Year of Our Lord: "Why did you feel the need to write about Black people in your novel?" As if an African American writer deciding to creatively depict Black people — *our own people* — represents a wading through brackish, non-potable waters.

When I return to "Recitatif," it is with a renewed understanding that, along with a handful of other African Americans, Morrison was among the first to depict Black culture while also considering politics, while also considering United States history, while also considering white supremacy, while also considering economic class, while also considering gender, while also considering intergenerational trauma.

As the kids might say, Toni Morrison did that.

And she did that decades ago, so it's not her fault that we haven't learned simultaneity, that we need a blunt hammer to break the American experience into tiny, sharp-edged pieces that we can touch — and maybe hold — only one at a time.

The fault is ours. The lack of understanding is ours — but within any lack, there exists possibility. And that is ours as well. □



Toni Morrison in the 1980s.

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Bible Stories

Roberto Calasso, the great Italian polymath, takes on the holy book.

By STEPHEN GREENBLATT

"THE BOOK OF ALL BOOKS" is one of the last in a series of studies of myth by Roberto Calasso, who died in Milan this past July, at the age of 80. For much of his career Calasso owned and ran the distinguished Italian publishing house Adelphi, but he also managed to bring forth a dazzling array of essays and book-length studies on such subjects as prehistoric humans, modern thought, the publishing industry, Tiepolo, Kafka, Baudelaire, Hitchcock, Central Europe, Freud and the Indian Vedas — as if there were no limits to his curiosity or his knowledge.

THE BOOK OF ALL BOOKS

By Roberto Calasso

Translated by Tim Parks

464 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$35.

Moving with confident ease through texts in French, English, Spanish, German, Latin, ancient Greek, Sanskrit and Hebrew (not to mention his native Italian), Calasso is among those rare people, ever diminishing in number, who can persuade you that it is still possible to grasp almost the whole of human culture. It is something of a conjuring trick, of course, but an impressive one. At its best, as in his celebrated 1988 study of Greek myth, "The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony," it is thrilling.

The subject of "The Book of All Books" is the Hebrew Bible, and Calasso's principal technique, as in "The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony," is to select and retell a great many stories. This is more interesting than it sounds, in part because his selection is cunning and his narrative gifts considerable.

Calasso begins not, as we might have expected, with Adam and Eve in the garden; that story doesn't come until Page 287 of almost 400 pages of text. He begins instead with Saul, David and Solomon, and in retelling their stories he indulges in some of the pleasures of fiction-making: "It was one of the first days of spring and David was napping on the roof after lunch. Then he got up and began to look around. He heard water splashing, but couldn't work out where. He leaned out and saw 'a woman taking a bath, and the woman was very beautiful to look at.' It is not unreasonable to surmise that, as he walked on the roof, David's attention was drawn by a sound of splashing, but the account in II Samuel says only that 'from the roof he saw a woman washing herself.' So too the details of the first days of spring, the nap, the lunch, the puzzlement about where the sound was coming from, and the leaning out in order to see are all surmises. As Calasso puts it, "The Bible has no rivals

when it comes to the art of omission, of not saying what everyone would like to know." He undertakes repeatedly to fill in the blanks.

But the principal interest of "The Book of All Books" lies not in its fictional embellishments but in the stories themselves. Most of us have lost the practice of daily Bible reading that characterized earlier generations, just as we have lost the deep dive into ancient Greece that was once a standard part of secondary school education. I think of myself as reasonably familiar with the Bible, and yet I found myself checking again and again to be sure that Calasso was not making it all up: "When he climbed up to Bethel a swarm of boys surrounded him, jeering: 'Climb on up, baldie! Climb on up, baldie!' Elisha looked up, sent them a withering look, and cursed them. Then 'two she-bears came out of the forest and tore apart 42 of the boys.'" The "withering" is a tiny invention — in Hebrew, as far as I can tell, Elisha just gives them a look — but otherwise it is all there in II Kings 2:23-24.

Apart from remarking that "not everyone considered him a benefactor," Calasso relates this little story about the prophet Elisha without comment. It appears, along with other anecdotes, to convey both the power and weirdness of the Hebrew prophets. "These men," he remarks, "shared a certain spitefulness, spoke with great vehemence and as a matter of principle deployed only two registers: condemnation and consolation, vast deserts of condemnation, that is, relieved by rare oases of inconceivable sweetness." Their character traits reach a climax in the weirdest of all the prophets, Ezekiel, and it is with Ezekiel's supremely strange visions that Calasso's book approaches its end.

Ezekiel brings fully into focus the key principles that, in Calasso's view, weave together all the diverse stories that he retells and that define the destiny and the identity of the Jews. (Notably, it is as Jews — not as Hebrews or Israelites in their historical and geographical particularity — that he identifies the figures in his book.) The first of these principles is separation. Yahweh insists that his people be different, and zealously maintain this difference, from all the surrounding peoples, just as he insists that he, Yahweh, be their only god. All manifestations of the desire to be like others — for example, to have kings, the way the surrounding peoples do — arouse his blinding wrath.

In a chapter-length digression, Calasso gives an account of Freud's late essay "Moses and Monotheism" as a tormented at-



An illustrated Bible shows children mocking the prophet Elisha.

tempt to undo this founding separation, Freud argued that Moses was himself a foreigner, an Egyptian marked in the ancient custom of Egypt by circumcision. What had seemed like the defining Abrahamic sign of tribal distinction for all males was in fact a sign of assimilation. "Assimilation came before separation," as Calasso sums up Freud's argument, "and that separation had been introduced by an Egyptian, hence the Jew had no real nature of his own." But try telling that to Ezekiel.

On one occasion, Yahweh told Ezekiel the story of Jerusalem as if it were the story of a woman. Yahweh took the woman out of the filth and blood in which she had been tainted at birth, washed and anointed her, dressed her in fine clothes and bedecked her with jewels. And what did she do? She opened her legs to any stranger who passed by. "You prostituted yourself with the sons of Egypt, with their big members, whoring more and more to vex me," Calasso writes, taking on the voice of Yahweh. Now, the prophet declares bitterly, the consequences of this gross infidelity have been made clear: Jerusalem has fallen to its enemies and the people of Israel have been carried into captivity in Babylon.

Exile from Jerusalem means exile from the other great principle on which, in Calasso's view, the whole of Jewish identity was founded: sacrifice. Yahweh has always demanded sacrifice — the practice appears as early as the story of Cain and Abel, and was renewed when Noah's ark reached dry land. But after the building of

the Temple in Jerusalem, there was one place and one place only where the Jews could fulfill their obligation to offer Yahweh his daily *holocaust* — the priestly killing of the designated animal, the draining of its blood over the altar and the burning of its body. Pagans could sacrifice to their worthless gods anywhere they wished; if one site was unavailable, another would always do. But for the Jews — and for their one true god — there were no alternatives.

CALASSO'S INSISTENCE on the centrality of sacrifice is the key to an organizing thread that runs half-hidden through his sprawling book. That thread is what in Christian theology is called *supersessionism*, that is, the notion that the Hebrew Bible is the "Old Testament" and that Jesus Christ, as disclosed in the "New Testament," has superseded the Mosaic covenant. The separation that marked the Jews off from the rest of humanity has been healed by Jesus' message of universal salvation, and the sacrifice — the killing of the innocent creature in keeping

with God's implacable demand — has been at once abrogated and fulfilled by the Crucifixion and by the ritual consumption of the Savior's blood and body. If we wonder why Calasso's imagination lingers over the bather, it is because she figures in the genealogy of Jesus. And if we ask ourselves why Elisha, the baldie, makes his odd appearance, it is because he brought back to life a dead child, just as Jesus brought back to life a dead Lazarus.

That the last chapter of Calasso's book is called "The Messiah" is therefore not surprising. Jesus has been hovering just below the surface — and occasionally rising into visibility — throughout the vast array of stories. What is surprising is that the final pages are not about the Messiah at all. Rather they are about what the Jews did after Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and therefore, made it impossible to continue offering the daily sacrifice to Yahweh. They turned to *reading*. The Jews did not imagine that the daily recitation of the Torah was a burden that would be lifted at the longed-for end of days. On the contrary, the coming of the Messiah would mean only that there was more time for the Torah, without any vexation or interruption. "To substitute sacrifice with study": This was the great innovation of rabbinical Judaism, an innovation that committed the Jews to the dream of a life centered on ceaseless, boundless study. It is not difficult to glimpse the polymathic spirit of Roberto Calasso drawn to this dream. □

Bad Medicine

How one opioid company rose — and fell.

By DAVID ENRICH

THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY is enjoying a very good crisis. The rapid development of safe and effective Covid-19 vaccines and treatments has turned drug companies into much-feted heroes. Chipper executives are boasting about saving billions of lives. Shareholders are swimming in profits.

It is a remarkable turnaround for an industry that had been widely reviled. Pre-pandemic, pharmaceutical companies were routinely berated for the outrageous

regulators, investors and business partners, managed to emerge, over and over, with his fortune and reputation largely intact. (A judge found one of his early companies to have been, as Hughes puts it, “rife with misconduct,” and the Food and Drug Administration reprimanded it for endangering patient health.)

Kapoor was cut from a mold that will be familiar to readers of “Bad Blood” or “The Cult of We” (about the Theranos and WeWork debacles, respectively). He was blindly ambitious, with a sympathetic origin story that disguised his broken moral compass. Whereas Elizabeth Holmes would tell people that she started her pinprick blood-testing company because she feared needles, Kapoor claimed to have come up with the idea for Subsys after watching his wife endure excruciating pain as she died from breast cancer.

Hughes is skeptical about this cover story. The more likely explanation, he suggests, is that Kapoor detected a lucrative opportunity to jump into the booming opioid market with a newfangled narcotic.

The innovation with Subsys was not the drug itself — its active ingredient, fentanyl, has been around since 1960 — but the delivery mechanism. An arms race was underway to develop the fastest-acting opioids. Spraying fentanyl molecules under your tongue turned out to be a super-efficient way — “close to the speed of IV drugs administered in a hospital,” Hughes writes — to deliver pain relief.

Kapoor’s company won F.D.A. approval for Subsys to be used as a treatment for cancer patients. But that was a limited and already crowded market. From the get-go, Insys’ goal was to tap into the much larger pool of people who suffered from a broad range of pain. To do that, Kapoor and his team at Insys borrowed tactics from their rivals and exploited the peculiarities of the pharmaceutical industry.

The company bought access to pharmacy data that showed which doctors were prescribing lots of fast-acting synthetic opioids. About 170 doctors nationwide were responsible for roughly 30 percent of all prescriptions for these drugs, and Insys dispatched its sales force to persuade this tiny group of like-minded physicians to start prescribing Subsys. (Yes, it is crazy that drug companies are permitted to access this sort of easily abusable data.)

Allowing for even more precise targeting of amenable doctors, the F.D.A. required drug companies like Insys to closely monitor who was prescribing their drugs. “The purpose of collecting this data was to protect patient safety, but Insys found itself with a marketing gold mine,” Hughes writes. Soon doctors who prescribed Subsys began finding Insys salesmen in their offices, pushing them to write more scripts.

The Insys sales force initially tried to pitch Subsys on its merits, but there was a problem: Competitors were showering this small band of doctors with free meals, gifts

and money. To succeed, Insys needed to play the same game.

Bribery is frowned upon, so, in addition to being plied with food, booze and fun, the doctors were paid to give speeches about Subsys to small audiences — sometimes to the staffs of their own offices. “The idea was to funnel cash to the speaker so that he would prescribe Subsys in return,” Hughes writes. “If he didn’t live up to his end of the deal, he wouldn’t get paid to speak anymore. It was a quid pro quo.”

The entire opioid business seems to have been awash in these underhanded tactics; as Hughes notes, “Nothing that Insys did

and process paperwork on doctors’ behalf.) Insys went public in 2013 and was the year’s best performing I.P.O., with its shares more than quadrupling.

BY THEN, even as Wall Street and the business media celebrated Insys, the wheels were beginning to come off.

Conscientious insiders warned the government about the company’s fraudulent and abusive practices. Soon federal investigators were closing in. Kapoor and his inner circle would be the rare corporate executives to face criminal prosecution. Hughes recounts the chase and trial in dramatic fashion.

THE HARD SELL Crime and Punishment at an Opioid Startup

By Evan Hughes

288 pp. Doubleday. \$28.95.

prices they charged for drugs developed with taxpayer support. They were hauled before grand juries for their roles in what was, until the onset of Covid-19, the country’s most pressing public health crisis: the opioid epidemic.

Even as it has been overshadowed by the coronavirus, the opioid crisis has grown worse. In the most recent 12-month period for which data are available, more than 100,000 Americans — a record number — died of overdoses. Many were killed by fast-acting synthetic opioids like fentanyl, which is found in illegal street drugs and prescription painkillers.

Anyone who has read “Empire of Pain,” Patrick Radden Keefe’s epic exposé of the Sackler family behind Purdue Pharma, is aware of opioid peddlers’ dirty hands. But until I read “The Hard Sell,” about the outrageous behavior of an obscure drug company, I hadn’t appreciated the full extent of the filth or the dark stain the opioid sector has left on the entire industry.

“The Hard Sell,” by the journalist Evan Hughes, is a fast-paced and maddening account of Insys Therapeutics, whose entire business model seemed to hinge on crookedness. (The book is based in part on a 2018 article Hughes wrote for *The New York Times Magazine*.) Its sole branded product was Subsys, a fentanyl-based liquid that patients sprayed under their tongues. Insys executives went to extraordinary — and at times criminal — lengths to get their addictive and dangerous drug into as many mouths as possible.

The company was founded in Arizona by “an Indian-born visionary,” John Kapoor. He was a serial drug company entrepreneur who, despite repeated scrapes with

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The Insys Therapeutics founder John Kapoor leaves federal court in Boston in 2019.

A lucrative opportunity to jump into the booming opioid market with a newfangled narcotic.

was truly new.” Indeed, what’s most surprising and powerful about “The Hard Sell” is not one company’s criminality — we’ve grown inured to corporations behaving badly — as much as how institutionalized these practices were across the modern drug industry.

For Insys and its top executives, this was highly profitable. The price of some Subsys prescriptions ran into the tens of thousands of dollars. (When insurance companies began balking at covering these costs, Insys set up a centralized office to secretly file

My one big complaint about “The Hard Sell” is that it’s unclear how much damage Subsys did in the context of the broader opioid epidemic. Hughes includes tales of people overdosing and becoming addicted, of lives and families shattered, but I was left unsure whether prescription drugs like Subsys were a root cause of the fentanyl crisis, a contributing factor or a meaningless blip.

At times I wondered if the answer might be the latter and if Hughes was dodging an inconvenient fact so as not to deflate an otherwise compelling story. If so, he needn’t have worried. Even if Insys turns out to be a footnote in the opioid epidemic, there is value in exposing the world to the scummy underbelly of a powerful industry — especially one that has become the sudden object of so much public gratitude. □

Is Civil War Coming?

Two new books present a harrowing prospect.

By IAN BASSIN

LAST MONTH, three retired generals warned that the U.S. military needs to start preparing for the possibility of internal breakdown over the 2024 election. "In a contested election," they wrote, "some might follow orders from the rightful commander in chief, while others might follow the Trumpian loser. . . . Under such a scenario, it is not outlandish to say a military breakdown could lead to civil war." Two new books suggest their concern is not misplaced.

The generals are likely familiar with the Political Instability Task Force (P.I.T.F.), a group of analysts that has been crunching enormous amounts of data in order to predict where conflict might erupt. Barbara F. Walter is a member of the task force who has spent 30 years studying civil wars

dan Milosevic in Serbia or Omar al-Bashir in Sudan — stirs up fears within one group that they are under threat from another group and must band together.

Finally, Walter details a third factor: a dominant group's loss of status. Called "downgrading," this predicts which groups are most likely to initiate conflict: those experiencing not just political defeat, but "status reversal."

The power of Walter's model is that she does not need to reference the United States. One plots our nation automatically as one reads. (The United States currently has a polity score of +5, within the anocracy zone for the first time since 1800.) Her conclusion: "We are a factionalized anocracy that is quickly approaching the open insurgency stage, which means we are closer to civil war than any of us would like to believe."

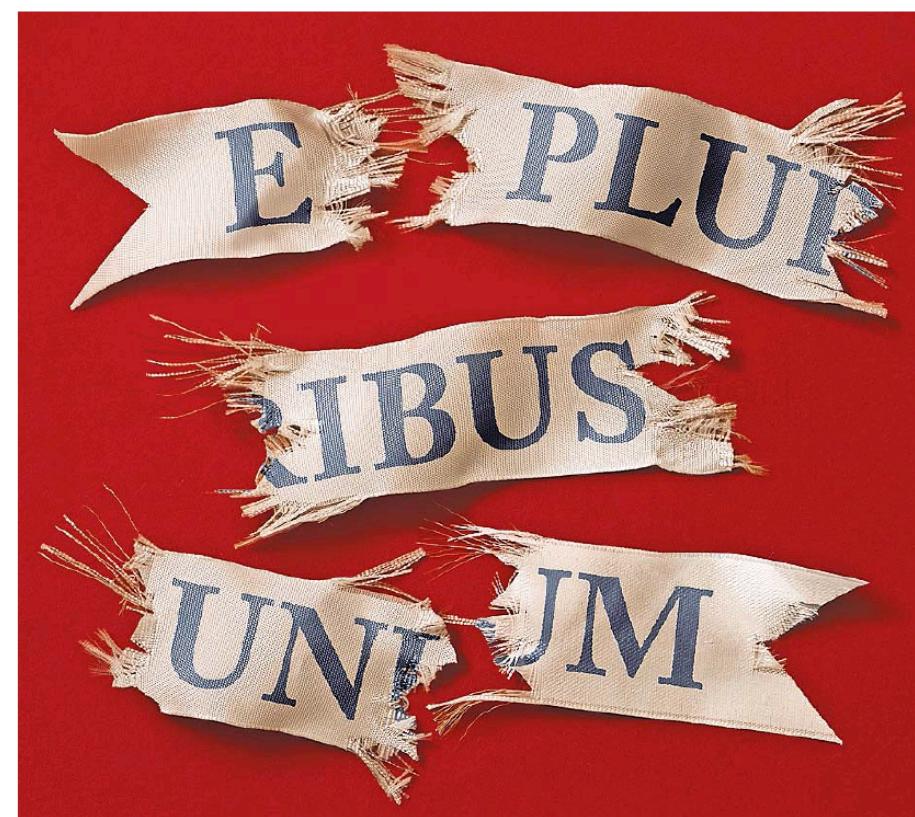
Walter's otherwise harrowing book stumbles when describing how greater violence might erupt, focusing on fringe groups over likelier flash points. According to recent polling, only one-third of Republicans say they'll trust the results of an election their candidate loses. With a strongman-in-exile who's already got one violent insurrection under his belt actively stoking those dynamics, Walter's concentration on extremists like the neo-Nazi Atomwaffen Division feels like a distraction.

"The Next Civil War," by the Canadian essayist Stephen Marche, provides a more recognizable narrative of what a civil rupture might look like. Marche interviewed military officials, law enforcement, food supply experts, historians and political scientists to make "more than educated guesses" about a potential upheaval.

The book alternates between fictional dispatches from a coming social breakdown and digressions that support its predictions with evidence from the present. The effect is twofold: The narrative delivers Cormac McCarthy-worthy drama; while the nonfictional asides imbue that drama with the authority of documentary.

Marche's first "dispatch" starts with a defiant sheriff reopening a bridge the feds have closed as structurally unsafe. The choice of a local law enforcement officer as an instigator is a well-informed one. The Claremont Institute has announced the creation of a "Sheriffs Fellowship" to urge local officials not to be "beholden to the centralized . . . bureaucracies of federal or state governments." And the commander of the Oklahoma National Guard recently directed his members to ignore the Pentagon's vaccine requirements.

If there's a frustration in reading Marche, it's that his book is negative to the last and therefore fails to capture the full complexity of our moment. After all, we recently did something few countries ever do: turn an autocrat out of office. The reality is that the threat has shifted. At the state level, legislatures are changing election laws to make a future coup more possible.



DOUG CHAYKA

At the federal level, the autocrats are storming government buildings from without rather than commanding them from within.

YET AS BOTH BOOKS make clear, even the worst-case scenario isn't civil war in the 1860s sense. Neither envisions armies massing across the Potomac. Instead, they predict a conflict more like the Troubles in Northern Ireland or the guerrilla war in Colombia — a normalization of political violence that endangers basic security.

This makes even the use of the term "civil war" a misleading one: first because it can turn the authors into Cassandras; second because (as Fintan O'Toole argued in his review of Marche's book in *The Atlantic*) fears of civil war can precipitate one if both sides are encouraged to arm up and pre-empt an attack by the other.

What we need instead is that rare convergence of uncanny leadership from above and below that has marked this country's previous existential moments: the Revolution, the Civil War, World War II, the civil rights movement. We need Republicans in Congress joining with Democrats to oppose the subversion of future elections (and Democrats passing voting protections alone if necessary); business leaders coming off the sidelines to make democracy a core value of their companies; news media telling unflinching stories about the threats facing our form of government; and neighbors talking to neighbors with empathy to bridge divides.

The two books have divergent takes on those possibilities. Walter nods to them by invoking Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk as past examples of leadership averting a national implosion. Marche on the other hand views the future as hopeless. His prescription is not reform, but secession and disunion.

But solutions are not the point of these books. Marche's agenda, as he explains, is to do for a second civil war what the 1983 television film "The Day After" did for nuclear war: scare the country into action. (He reminds us that Ronald Reagan credited "The Day After" with inspiring the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia.)

Both books provide a sobering vision of where we may be headed, and for that reason they should be required reading for anyone invested in preserving our 246-year experiment in self-government. Because whether we're heading toward civil war, just instability and strife, or something different altogether, we've rarely been this divided as a nation.

Consider this observation from a local paper in Augusta, Ga.: "The differences between Red and Blue have been growing more marked for years, and the mutual repulsion more radical, until not a single sympathy is left between the dominant influences in each section."

Except the actual quote didn't say "Red and Blue." It said "North and South." And it was published Nov. 16, 1860 — 10 days after Abraham Lincoln's election. □

HOW CIVIL WARS START

And How to Stop Them
By Barbara F. Walter
320 pp. Crown. \$27.

THE NEXT CIVIL WAR

Dispatches From the American Future
By Stephen Marche
256 pp. Avid Reader Press. \$27.

around the world. Her new book, "How Civil Wars Start," explains that studies have identified three factors that predict which countries are most likely to descend into civil conflict.

The first is whether a country is in transition toward or away from democracy. A data set known as the "polity score" rates every country on a scale from +10 (most democratic) to -10 (most authoritarian). Those countries in the middle — between +5 and -5 and therefore neither full democracies nor full autocracies, or what the experts call "anocracies" — are twice as likely as autocracies to experience political instability or civil war and three times as likely as democracies.

The second factor is what the P.I.T.F. calls "factionalism," which in Walter's definition arises when a political party is based on ethnicity, religion or race instead of ideology. According to a study of hundreds of countries over 70 years, the presence of anocracy and factionalism was the best predictor of where civil wars were likely to erupt. It's in this zone, Walter writes, that "politics goes from being a system in which citizens care about the good of the country as a whole, to one in which they care only about members of their group." These factions tend not to harden on their own. Frequently, what the researchers call an "ethnic entrepreneur" — for example, Slobodan

IAN BASSIN, a former associate White House counsel, is the co-founder and executive director of Protect Democracy.

A Vein of Silver

This memoir tackles an age-old question: What happens when pain and joy collide?

By ROBIN ROMM

A FEW TIMES IN Kathryn Schulz's eloquent memoir about losing her father and falling in love, she mentions that happy families get short shrift as a subject for serious writing. She takes issue with this idea, and by extension, the expectation that a memoir must unearth dysfunction or trauma to hold the reader's attention. While her father's death shook her, transformed her, stripped the light from her gaze in the way death does, she notes that it was "not a

LOST & FOUND

By Kathryn Schulz

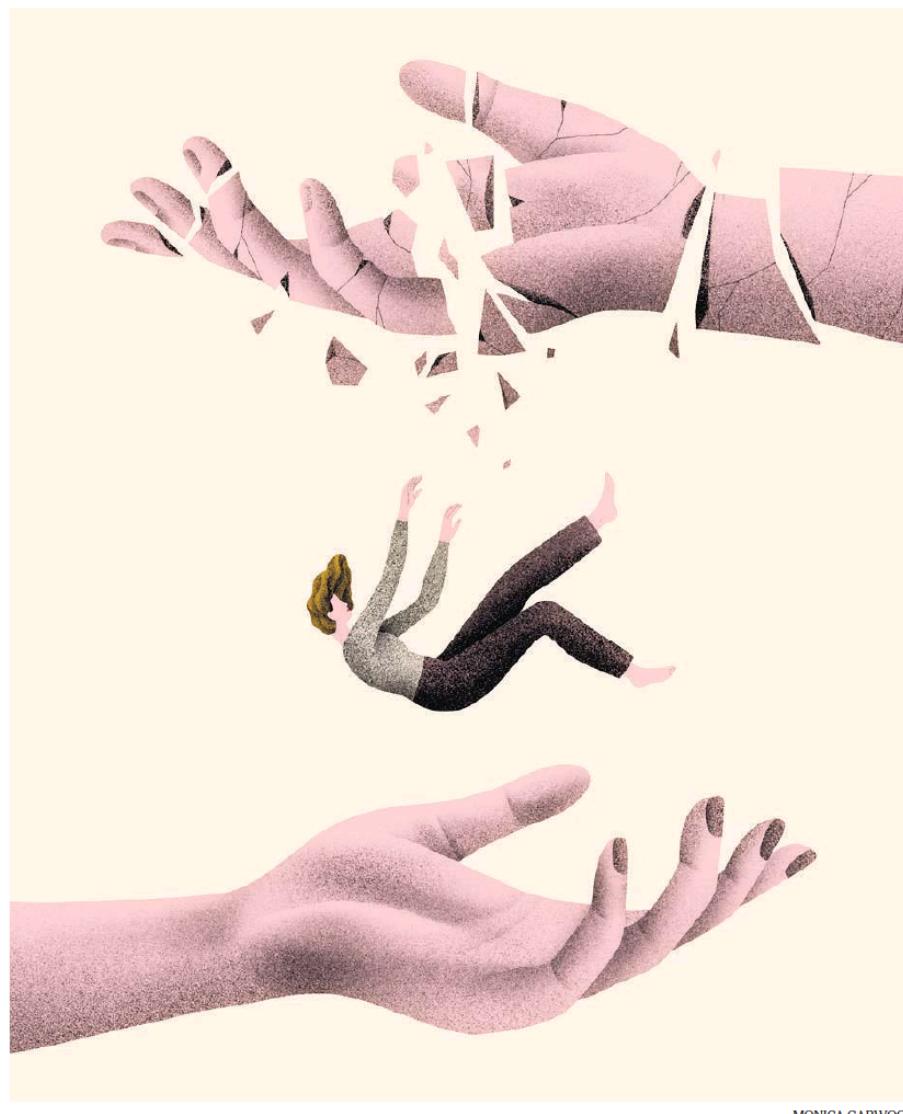
256 pp. Random House. \$27.

tragedy." He was 74 when he died, successful in every important way, and surrounded by adoring family.

What happens when a bright, successful, well-adjusted adult loses her loving father to a peaceful death? Or, in the same period of time, falls in love with a similarly brilliant and well-adjusted partner? So much, Schulz insists. Enough to fill a book. Grief and love — and the profound transformations they put into motion — don't belong only to the traumatized, tragic, marginalized or maligned. They are universal, indiscriminate in their ability to alter perspective, introduce awe or wonder. And so, they are of universal interest.

Schulz describes her father as having "panoptic curiosity" and an original mind, qualities she deeply admired and mirrors in her own work. Her writing style indicates that she shares these traits. In examining loss, she looks at her own life, reflects on cultural assumptions and considers some of the literature on the subject. She folds in the work of Elizabeth Bishop, Philip Larkin, C. S. Lewis, even L. Frank Baum's obscure children's book "Dot and Tot of Merryland." This story features a "Valley of Lost Things," providing an answer to the question of where things go when they're no longer with us — one that Schulz, in her quest for historic connectivity, notes harks back to the Renaissance writer Ludovico Ariosto.

She marvels, too, at the semantics of loss. "I lost my father last week," Schulz hears herself saying and is "struck, as I had never been before, by the strangeness of the phrase." To her, it feels accurate, free of pat euphemism. The dead are as lost to us as anything lost is — a necklace, a stuffed animal dropped in a train. They cannot and will never be found, as much as we may search, yearn, pray or rage. Schulz writes, "From the first time I said it, it felt like something I could use, as one uses a shovel or a bell-pull: cold and ringing, containing within it something desperate and



MONICA GARWOOD

something resigned, accurate to the confusion and desolation of bereavement." And so, she uses the phrase — both as a way of thinking about the epicenter of grief, which is always loss, and as a way of thinking more generally about the place of losing in our lives.

Though Schulz begins the book writing about her father, she spends more time marveling at and celebrating loss's opposite: the bounty of finding. The second and third sections of her book are focused primarily on finding love. In these sections, too, she makes connections to a wider range of thought, considering astronomy alongside writers like Neruda, Plato, Nabokov, Dante and Keats.

While Schulz writes with tenderness and honesty about love, her sharpest and most moving passages are about loss. "Popular wisdom will tell you that it comes in stages — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance — and that may be true. But the Paleozoic Era also came in stages . . . and it lasted 290 million years," she writes, in one of my favorite lines. She

remembers her father's final hours, surrounded by family "listening to all the things he loved, all the remarkable things people have forged out of ideas and emotion and sound," then adds: "All of this makes dying sound meaningful and sweet, and it is true that, if you are lucky, there is a seam of sweetness and meaning to be found within it, a vein of silver in a dark

Schulz wants to see the glitter and intrigue of the world, but she can't — she won't — blow smoke.

cave a thousand feet underground. Still, the cave is a cave."

Schulz is, herself, ebullient like her father (when she could give you one example, she often gives six). She's also a wincing optimist (except, perhaps, about earthquakes in the Pacific Northwest, a topic she covered with notable gloom in her 2015 Pulitzer-winning work for The New

Yorker). She tends to "hope against hope for more hope." Schulz wants to see the glitter and intrigue of the world, but she can't — she won't — blow smoke. Loss strips her of buoyancy, causing her to lose track of work, lose track of herself.

But, the book suggests, if losing and finding function as a dialectic, therein lies the hope. Eighteen months before her father died, Schulz, who had been holding out for true love for decades — and, as most of her friends partnered up and made families of their own, had started worrying she'd never find it — was introduced to a woman she calls "C," and almost instantly fell into an intoxicating, healthy and brainy love affair.

In some ways, it's the dialectic itself that Schulz marvels at, the cosmic playfulness of a harsh but life-granting universe. She considers many types of finding. She shares an anecdote about a young boy standing in a field at the moment a meteorite hits; he barely avoids being killed. What are the chances? She marvels that the same is true for love: "Rotate history a billionth of a degree" and C. would have remained a stranger to Schulz forever. What can seem as mundane as a biographical note becomes the key to the future you will have, to the family you will create, to the happiness or unhappiness you will know.

At some point, all of us will lose everything we love. But Schulz's memoir suggests that, if we remain open to finding, the lost things might return to us, just not in their original forms. In C., Schulz sees aspects of her father. She, too, "has the kind of relationship to knowledge that comes from early scarcity — or, maybe, more aptly, from later and sudden abundance, from first picking up a newspaper or venturing off to the library and realizing that you could simply choose to sit down and learn." Schulz admires and finds comfort in the way both C. and her father are defined by their "deep, serious, original minds."

After Schulz's father's death, the seeds he planted in her life continue to bloom. In her case, these seeds were healthy ones. She writes: "I'd recognized love when I'd found it because I had seen it from my earliest days. . . . I had always known what it would look like: loyal, stable, affectionate, funny, forbearing, enduring." She quotes her sister, who says their parents "had given us a love of ideas, and also the idea of love." This is an enviable stance; I found it refreshing.

I am the mother of two young daughters, and the idea that love, intelligence and joy, poured into one's children, can result in resilience, self-knowledge and attentiveness feels deeply hopeful. Schulz lost her father, but by the end of "Lost & Found," we understand that while his absence is devastating, shocking and total, she will continue to find gifts he left for her. He's still there in her verve and curiosity, in her clear-eyed ability not just to write about love, but to love. □

What Lies Beneath

Recounting the discovery of America's last slave ship, and the enduring community founded by its survivors.

By W. CALEB McDANIEL

ON ELECTION DAY in Alabama in 1874, Cudjo Lewis, Pollee Allen and Charlie Lewis appeared at their polling place to cast their ballots, only to be stopped by Timothy Meaher, the man who had once enslaved them.

"See those Africans?" Meaher told election officials. "Don't let them vote. They are not of this country." They were turned away.

Such confrontations occurred across the Reconstruction South as white reactionaries sought to wrest the ballot from Black voters. But this experience was unique. Unlike African Americans whose ancestors had endured the Middle Passage in previous generations, these three men had

plantations where Meaher had divided them. They hoped to return home. When this proved impossible and Meaher refused to repay them with land, the group saved money to purchase plots from him and other former enslavers, establishing a community in Alabama called Africatown.

Though much diminished today, the place survives, a monument to its founders' courage. As Raines writes, "They stuck together and they fought back." Even after Meaher challenged their right to vote in 1874, Cudjo, Pollee and Charlie (all naturalized citizens) eventually cast their votes at a different poll in Mobile, outwitting their former enslaver.

We know that story because the shipmates later dared to recount it. In the early 20th century, at the height of Jim Crow, Emma Langdon Roche interviewed residents of Africatown and published many of their stories. In 1927, Zora Neale Hurston visited Cudjo Lewis. He told her about the raid on his village by Dahomean warriors, who killed his family members and kidnapped those later forced onto the Clotilda. "Barracoon," Hurston's account of those conversations, was published in 2018.

Raines relies on these and other accounts to retell the captives' story, while also sketching the geopolitical context that led Meaher to wager, correctly, that he could violate a congressional ban on international slaving (in effect since 1808) and get away with it.

The book makes some missteps. The founders of Africatown were not the first freed people to seek land or reparations, as Raines implies. Efforts to reopen the slave trade in the 1850s were not actually driven by fears of a "collapsing Southern economy." Readers looking to better understand American complicity in trans-Atlantic slaving before the Civil War should consult John Harris's "The Last Slave Ships," plural. Detailed accounts of the Clotilda and Africatown have been published by Natalie S. Robertson and by Sylviane Diouf, whose scholarship Raines credits for helping him to locate the vessel.

What distinguishes Raines's book is not only the story of that discovery, but also his perspective as a river guide in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, the subject of his previous book, "Saving America's Amazon." Raines vividly conjures the watery landscape into which the Africans stepped, an alligator-filled swamp once thick with canebrake, now transformed by hydroelectric dams. Knowledge of these waterways also led Raines to locate the Clotilda in a place previous searchers had ignored.

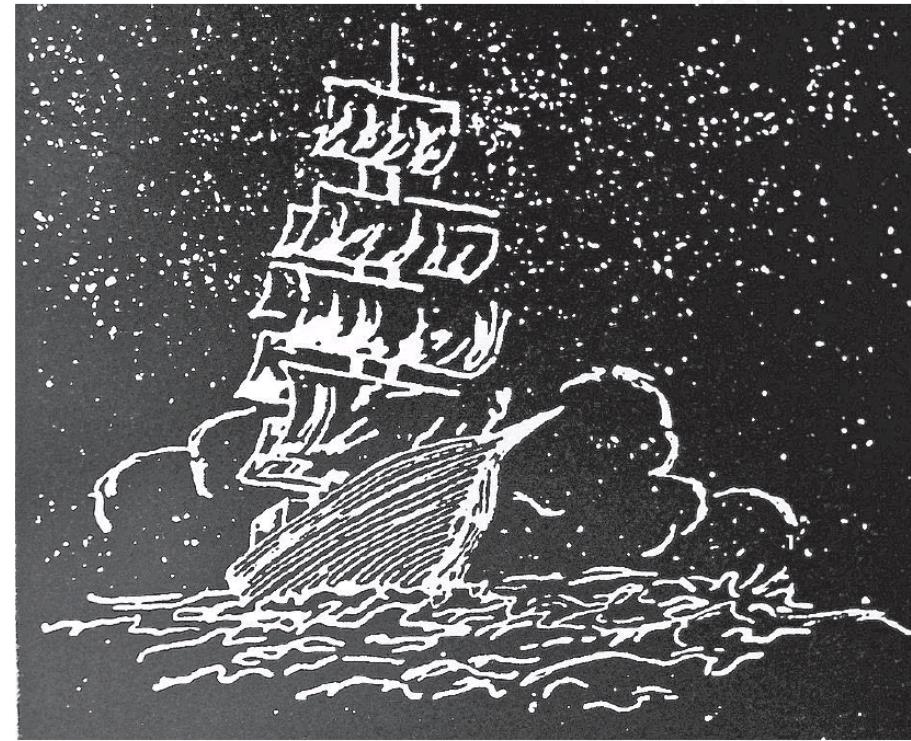
Raines's work as an environmental reporter helps him explain Africatown's modern struggles, too. In 1927, a new freeway bridge was built that split the community. Heavy industry moved in, as Meaher's descendants, still large landowners, leased real estate to paper mills. Their smokestacks rained ash and other harmful pollutants on the town the shipmates had built.

The 1960s incorporation of Africatown into Mobile brought city utilities but also more industry. As developers and landlords destroyed housing stock, many residents of the once thriving Black community left. Cudjo Lewis's home was torn down. The area is now blighted by toxic landfills overseen by officials who view federal environmental regulation as disdainfully as Meaher once viewed Congress's ban on the slave trade. A small welcome center housed in a mobile home was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

great-grandson of the Clotilda captain's brother. After a nervous apology from Foster, he and several Clotilda descendants share hamburgers, hugs, laughter and tears at a bar called Kazoola's, in homage to Cudjo Lewis's African name. Raines writes that "reconciliation had begun."

Yet given what Raines has related about the traumas of slavery, racial injustice and the powerful forces that despoiled Africatown, that moment feels less like repair than the smallest of starts.

Raines was unable to get direct descend-



An image of the slave ship Clotilda.

The boat brought enslaved Africans to Alabama in 1860, defying federal and international bans.

Today, activists and descendants hope that new grants for tourism centered on the Clotilda can finally bring needed resources to the community. One states his goal to Raines: "Making right what they've done to Africatown all these years."

What does "making right" mean? Raines addresses that question in two final chapters. The first pivots abruptly to a trip to Benin, where Raines finds parallel efforts to boost tourism related to the slave trade and interviews a pastor who preaches "reconciliation" between descendants of the perpetrators and survivors of slavery. In a coda, Raines reports on a meeting between Darron Patterson, president of the Clotilda Descendants Association, and Mike Foster, a great-great-

ants of Foster or Meaher to talk on the record or share artifacts. Before he died in 2020, Joe Meaher, great-grandson of the ship's financier, told another writer that he and his father had once secretly dynamited parts of the wreck. And as recently as 2012, while Africatown foundered, Joe Meaher and his brothers held real estate valued at \$35 million. Today, when Raines takes visitors to the shipwreck, he launches his boat from a state park named for one of the Meahers, who mostly "appear uninterested in reconciliation."

Recently, archaeologists announced that the Clotilda itself is remarkably well preserved, confirming its international importance. But community members remain at odds with local officials, and sometimes with one another, over key questions: whether the Clotilda should be raised, what kind of museum it deserves and what "making right" requires.

Clearly, the story of the last slave ship is still far from over, and the "extraordinary reckoning" hinted at by Raines's subtitle has barely begun. □

W. CALEB McDANIEL is the author of "Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America," which won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for history.

Somewhere Beyond

A new novel puts a magical realist spin on an enslaved group's quest for freedom.

By VANESSA RILEY

YONDER IS AN OLD WORD, originating in the 1300s, meaning a place that is distant but within sight. It's almost in reach but not quite close enough to grasp. It's a beacon of hope — you're not there yet, but you've only got a little farther to go.

The idea of something within sight but just out of reach is at the core of Jabari Asim's new novel, "Yonder." The novel examines the lives of a group of enslaved people living on a plantation in 1852. Here, there are no "slaves" or "masters." Instead, we meet "the Stolen," the men and women who are forced to toil and cater to "the Thieves," the white owners who keep the Stolen in bondage.

The book opens with the senseless killing of a young Stolen boy who has been trapped in a log pen. The other children enclosed with him have all died while waiting

YONDER

By Jabari Asim

257 pp. Simon & Schuster. \$27.

for help, and the boy himself is mistaken for dead when the would-be rescuers — chief among them a Thief named Norbrook, who wants to sell the children for profit, and a captive Stolen boy named William — finally arrive. But upon realizing he's still alive, Norbrook decides the child is not a worthwhile investment and slits his throat instead. Shortly afterward, Norbrook sells William to another Thief, who brings him to his neighboring plantation.

William spends years growing up and meeting the others at this new plantation. There's Ransom, who escaped from bondage, created a new identity as a free man and now travels as a preacher; Margaret, the pragmatist who wants to escape the sorrows of her womanhood; Cato, who's trapped by memories and ghosts of yesterday; Pandora, who copes with the horrors of her life by believing in tales of princesses and fairy godmothers; and many others. Zander, one of the younger Stolen boys on the plantation, will steal hearts. He's Trayvon Martin juggling Skittles. He's Tamir Rice in the park with a toy. Zander believes the Stolen are the mythical Buba Yalis — the captured people of an African folk tale who forget they're magical. Zander wants to remember his power, and he spends his days running and leaping around the plantation, practicing for when he regains his flight.

The chapters alternate between the points of view of each character, an approach that simultaneously offers a wide view of plantation life and an intimate look at the daily realities of each of the Stolen.

VANESSA RILEY is the author of "Island Queen" and 20 other historical novels.

Asim shows the constant state of being under siege — the menacing tactics of an enslaved foreman, a Thief's pickling of a man as punishment, the torment of a woman because of her Thief's sexual advances. Yet he tempers the storytelling with coveted moments of tenderness — the clandestine glances of would-be lovers, the praying over a babe in the wood and the pillow talk of soul mates.

Eventually, William, Cato, Margaret, Pandora and Zander decide to try to escape. "The longer we live here, the more we lose," Margaret explains. They set Canada as their destination, the once ephemeral idea of *yonder* now physically a location just across the U.S. border.

grieves after his beloved is sold away from him, and Margaret, who yearns to be pregnant, *yonder* is love, because the regular threats of rape and torture, and the separation of families, make it a leap of faith for someone who is not free to be devoted to another.

The final third of "Yonder" is about what happens on the group's escape attempt. Here, the story morphs, the struggles of daily life replaced with the thrill of the chase, the fear of getting caught, the untangling of who can be trusted and the questions of whether their directions will help the Stolen successfully avoid slave catchers. In this journey, the unexpected happens, promises are broken and hearts are



LONDON LADD

But spiritually, *yonder* means something different to everybody who envisions it. If I hum the word and close my eyes, I feel the warmth of an early summer morning, when my uncle would visit my mother's house before taking his Ford F-600 to deliver ripe watermelons along a route that took him from South Carolina to D.C. Etched in my memory is that final honk as he drove away, away to *yonder*.

For the characters in the novel, *yonder* invokes something else. The first time a character says the word "*yonder*," it's an enslaved foreman who is stressing the grim realities of the life of the Stolen: "What's over *yonder*?" he says, repeating the oft asked question. "I don't have to go anywhere to be certain that the land I sweat on is no different from any other. Nobody needs a map to know that there's nothing over *yonder* but more blood."

But others believe. To Preacher Ransom, for instance, *yonder* is the call to "share news of the Promised Land with those prepared to hear." To both Cato, who

shattered, but the determination to get *yonder*, and the belief that they are running to a better place, never wavers. And the Stolen are not completely on their own. Whether it's the sudden gentling of a spooked horse, the appearance of advice-giving apparitions, tales of the mythic hero Swing Low or the revelation of a magical

**A central question of the novel is:
What level of hope can one attain in
Black skin, in a Black body?**

people hidden in plain sight, mysterious and otherworldly interventions seem to give the disadvantaged Stolen unexpected help in their quest for freedom.

Jabari Asim is an artist and a professor who has written across a wide range of genres: poetry, nonfiction, fiction and children's literature. "Yonder" sits within a rich oeuvre of historical fiction that centers the lives of enslaved people, situating their

experience in the context of American history. The novel's explorations of love and survival, blended with its examination of violence and servitude, call to mind Alex Haley's "Roots" and, more recently, Robert Jones Jr.'s "The Prophets." The book's depiction of the myriad ways enslaved people sought to cope with their harsh treatment on the plantation is evocative of Sadeqa Johnson's "Yellow Wife." And the novel's use of magical realism is similar to Rita Woods's "Remembrance" and Ta-Nehisi Coates's "The Water Dancer."

What sets Asim's book apart is the way "Yonder" portrays the spiritual resilience of enslaved people. A central question of the novel is: What level of hope can one attain in Black skin, in a Black body, when Black people are deprived of the right to determine their own lives? William, for instance, is reluctant to have children because his seed, his person and the work of his hands are all property of a Thief. There's no guarantee that he will be able to protect any of his offspring. Pandora also notes the lack of agency for the Stolen. "What moved Thieves most was the cold fact of our vulnerability: Our men couldn't protect us. Nor could we protect ourselves."

Still, the Stolen hold onto their humanity. Asim showcases their capacity to dream and seek out faithful commitments in a system of constant change. Black love existed in defiance of massa's thoughts on Black sexuality and in opposition to the daily horrors of slavery, which included the stealing of limbs, lives and children. Though I was at times unsure of the sexually aggressive stance many of the Stolen women in the novel exhibit while selecting their partners, initiating or demanding satisfaction, Asim never strays to the horrid trope of the hypersexualized Black woman. I believe his portrayal offers agency to these enslaved women, giving them the often-denied ability to choose when and with whom to be intimate. With his handling of Black love, showing how it existed amid the worst circumstances, tender and memorable, Asim delivers a fresh, sweeping, must-read tale.

None of us — Black or white or young or old — know what's over *yonder* or if we'll make the journey to reach it. In all those years, my mother never let my brothers travel with my uncle on his watermelon hauls. Today, I realize her reluctance was because of her unstated fears about what her young might face. Dread consumed her, this mother of three boys who, by luck, were not Emmett Till, Michael Griffith or Yusuf Hawkins. It didn't matter that my uncles were savvy men, that my family was middle class — we were still Black and therefore considered a danger by those who never saw us as free. Safety was not certain. But "Yonder" shows that dreams and Black love have always been tools of survival in the quest to reach that better place just out of reach. □

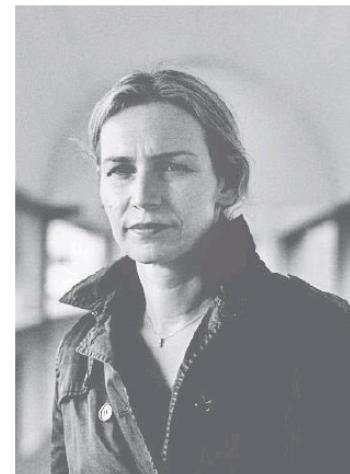
When Everything Changes

A memoir about growing up amid the fall of communism.

By MAX STRASSER

PERHAPS OVER THE past few years, you've sometimes had the feeling of living through history, of experiencing one of those rare ruptures, of witnessing a moment that "changes everything." Between the populist elections and the pandemic shutdowns, I've certainly felt that way. And then I read "Free," by Lea Ypi, and I reconsidered.

Ypi's memoir about growing up during Albania's transition from totalitarian communism to liberal capitalism is the story of a childhood cleaved, sometimes violently, into before and after. In December 1990, after days of demonstrations, the dictatorship fell, and nearly overnight her world transformed: Her parents told her that they had never supported the party, that the family history she knew was a lie, that the end point of human freedom did not



Lea Ypi

world around them. Albania, one of the most interesting and frequently overlooked corners of Europe, followed a uniquely strange and often bloody path through the 20th century. Enver Hoxha, in power from the 1940s until his death in 1985, remained an unreconstructed Stalinist — Ypi grew up learning how Stalin loved her and all children — long after the Soviet Union had moved on. After Hoxha died, his successor followed his example. The government was as repressive as the Soviet dictator's: Family members disappeared into prison camps; classmates and colleagues doubled as informants. Schoolchildren wrote reports on which collective farms had exceeded their grain-production goals under the latest five-year plan.

That was the price for Hoxha of turning his country into a self-sufficient communist fortress. He had divided the world between two camps: the Washington-aligned "imperialists" and the Moscow-aligned "revisionists." Albania was as closed off as North Korea is today. Attempting to leave could mean being shot by border guards.

Consequently, items from the outside world became treasures. Ypi's classmates would pass around Juicy Fruit wrappers discarded by tourists, inhaling the sweet smell of a distant world for as long as it stayed fresh; an empty Coca-Cola can was such a prized tchotchke that the Ypis had a falling-out with their favorite neighbors after it went missing. Neighbors were important amid a life of queues for bread and cheese and kerosene: "We relied on friends and neighbors for everything."

And then came the rupture. Just over a year after the Berlin Wall came down, so did the communist government of Albania. Ypi was 11 years old and the red Pioneer scarf that she had worn to school every day "would soon turn into a rag with which we wiped the dust off our bookshelves."

Albania would now be free and open — not just its elections but its markets, too. The "international community" (in the

form of consultants from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) descended on the country, prescribing break-neck liberalization and privatization, a strategy known as "shock therapy" that was applied across post-communist Europe. It might be painful as the old state was dismantled, the thinking went, but it was necessary. This was the end of history and Albania could follow only one path: toward capitalism, democracy and freedom.

Ypi's highly educated father got a prestigious job running the port, but he was forced to follow the World Bank's "structural reforms" and lay off hundreds of workers, whom he then had to walk past every day as they begged. Her mother worked to reclaim property that the communists had nationalized, but her family, like hundreds of thousands of others, lost their savings to an elaborate pyramid scheme, which in turn helped ignite a chaotic civil war. Albanians fled the country en masse, but would-be migrants were sometimes shot. This time the guards were on the other side of the border.

Ypi's high school experience culminated in a tragic scene at an end-of-school party. It was held at the beachfront "Hotel California," which belonged to the local mobsters. Ypi reflected on the childhood friends who didn't make it to graduation: One was dead from an accident while playing with a gun; another had been trafficked into prostitution in Italy. Before a curfew began, the Eagles started playing on the sound system and the gangsters pointed their guns at the recent high school graduates as they were ushered out of the hotel. Was this what freedom looked like?

That's not to say that capitalism was worse — Ypi never downplays the cruelty and absurdity of life under Hoxha's Stalinist state — just that it was a different kind of bad, and that while both can promise, and deliver, a kind of freedom, each has its own set of limitations.

After graduation, Ypi, like so many Albanians, left her country. (Albania has one of the world's highest emigration rates.) She was luckier than most, though: She went to Italy to study philosophy, and is now a professor of political theory at the London School of Economics. While she never writes like an academic, theoretical questions are laced through "Free" on every page. Does freedom mean elections? Or is it equality? Is what really matters inner freedom, the ability to live according to one's principles — as her family does?

These questions may sound like the work of a cynical academic measuring messy reality against pure theory. In fact, they are hopeful and Ypi's "Free" is meant to inspire. "When you see a system change once," she writes in her epilogue, "it's not that difficult to believe that it can change again." This is the kind of intellectual clarity that comes from living through a genuine rupture in history, a moment when, in fact, everything changes. □

David Eyre's
Pancake

Pamela Sherrid's
Summer Pasta

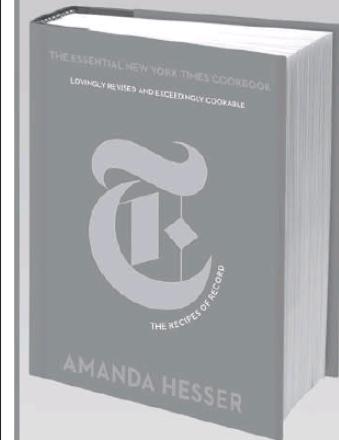
1940s Caesar Salad

meets

Samin Nosrat's
Sabzi Polo

Todd Richards's
Fried Catfish with
Hot Sauce

J. Kenji López-Alt's
Cheesy Hasselback
Potato Gratin



"A gift from
heaven."

—INA GARTEN

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

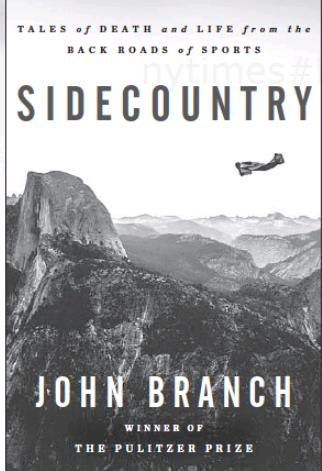
—YOTAM OTTOLENGHI



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Killer Instincts

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

row named Ansel Packer. When we first meet Ansel, he has been convicted of murdering multiple women and is due to be executed in 12 hours. The novel's ticking clock, the well of tension from which it draws, is Ansel's pending execution.

But even as Ansel's crimes and punishment provide the organizing principle for the novel, Kukafka seems more interested in what happens when the idea of the serial killer is set aside. What questions can be asked, and what things can be seen, beyond the shadow of an entrenched construct?

The novel toggles between two timelines: the day of Ansel's execution and the more sprawling story of his life, from his childhood through to his present-day incarceration. The latter story line is primarily told from the point of view of three women whose lives are, in different ways, derailed by Ansel. They include his mother, Lavender, who flees a violent and abusive marriage, leaving her children behind, only to later seek them out; Saffy, a homicide detective who was tormented by Ansel as a child and eventually pursues and apprehends him; and Hazel, the twin sister of his wife.

Kukafka moves nimbly among those multiple strands, having used a similar structure in her debut novel, “Girl in Snow.” That novel is a more conventional project, opening with the image of a dead female body and dabbling in other clichés of the thriller genre. The murdered high school girl is known primarily as an object of sexual desire; the story's denouement, an infidelity plot twist, is simultaneously effective and familiar.

By contrast, in “Notes on an Execution,” Kukafka aims to undo some of these conventions, including the preoccupation with dead women, in order to explore more ambiguous and ambitious terrain. This novel is defiantly populated with living women; it ruminates on trauma, the criminal justice system and guilt. The narrative tension that animates “Girl in Snow” is again present, but this time it has a different source. There is no question of who did what, or even why. Instead, it is the inevitability of Ansel's execution and the moral abyss of capital punishment that floods the novel with dread.

Cannily, the Ansel sections are written in second person—a “you” address designed both to implicate readers and to draw them into the act of empathy that underscores all reading. These sections are uncomfort-

able, at first because of their proximity to someone who has killed multiple women and then because of their proximity to someone who is imminently about to be executed by the state. In this way, the novel pushes the reader to think about both the uses and the limitations of empathy in fiction. The reader never fully identifies with Ansel, but that seems precisely the point: We don't need to identify with him in order to understand that his execution is a horror and an outrage.

Elsewhere, Kukafka uses the multi-stranded narrative to fill in the lives of the

story's conceptual negative space. He and his crimes remain the axis the story turns around. Lavender's, Saffy's and Hazel's sections are sequenced according to the timeline of his life, starting with his childhood and moving through to his young adulthood and eventual capture. In this way, their sections are structured around, even instrumentalized by, the demands of the serial killer's biography.

And as much as the novel may wish to dismantle the mythos of the serial killer, in many ways, the Ansel who emerges—particularly in the sections centered on the various women—reinforces it. There are familiar biographical elements (childhood trauma, delusions of intellectual grandeur, sporadic impotence), and then there are his extraordinary powers of personal persuasion.

Throughout, Ansel is portrayed as possessing an almost relentless sexual charisma. He is described by Hazel as “a human magnet.” His presence arouses an extreme physical response in women. When she meets him, Hazel blushes “with the attention,” and when he puts out his hand to take hers, “Hazel gathered the muscles in her abdomen—the entire body revolves around the core.” For Saffy, even the idea of Ansel's notice is physically electrifying: “The thought spread through her stomach, then cracked down her legs. Liquid hot, thrilling.”

There's something surprisingly uniform and a little reductive in this female reaction. Once they are outside of Ansel's immediate presence, these characters come more into being. In particular, the relationships between women—sisters, friends, colleagues—are beautifully drawn, dense with detail and specificity. We see Lavender grappling with her trauma from within a community of women in which she has sought refuge, Hazel negotiating the boundaries of her bond with her sister, and Saffy managing complex relationships with friends and mentors.

And as she does in “Girl in Snow,” Kukafka evokes the disarming fog of grief, its wild illogic, its transformative power. As Hazel struggles with a devastating loss, the novel offers a potent reminder of how grief is often an expression of love. In Lavender's horror at the crimes committed by her son, guilt, denial and regret complicate and give dimension to her anguish.

“Notes on an Execution” is nuanced, ambitious and compelling. Perversely, some of the novel's propulsive power comes from the very conventions it fails to abandon. The seduction of the serial killer narrative is difficult to shake, for reader and author alike. We keep watching, and we keep turning the pages. In our fascination, we're all implicated. □



Danya Kukafka

This novel is defiantly populated with living women; it ruminates on trauma, the criminal justice system and guilt.

women in Ansel's orbit. “The book belongs, instead, to the women irrevocably changed by his actions,” Kukafka wrote in a “letter to the reader” included in advance copies of the book. The structure of the novel seems part of that designation, devoting lengthy sections to each of the three female characters. So does its conclusion, a brief but potent invocation of the lives that the murdered women might have led.

“Notes on an Execution” is in part, and often powerfully, a novel about these women. But it is also true that Ansel remains at the heart of the novel, functioning as the

KATIE KITAMURA'S most recent novel, “Intimacies,” was one of the Book Review's 10 Best Books of 2021.

Path to Darkness

This novel traces a young man's ideological descent.

By PETER C. BAKER

WHEN WE MET GUNNAR KAMPEN — the protagonist of “Red Milk,” the new novel from the internationally acclaimed Icelandic author Sjón — it’s 1962 and he’s dead: keeled over in his pajamas on a London train, a swastika-emblazoned map in

RED MILK

By Sjón

Translated by Victoria Cribb
160 pp. MCD/Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$25.

his pocket. From there we jump back to the 1940s and see Kampen as a child, headed out on a day trip with his parents and sisters, not a swastika in sight. The rest of this brisk, slim book, which is best read in a single sitting, is animated by the question of how Kampen got from A to B. How did a boy from rural Iceland become a man traveling abroad as an errand boy for the cause of global fascism?

The chapters move like the prose equivalent of flip-book images, quick and evocative. Here’s Kampen watching his father fearfully listen to news of Hitler’s victories on his shortwave radio. Here he is learning German from the head of a local cycling club, a Nazi sympathizer. Here he is as a teenager, writing passionate letters to neo-Nazis around the world, including a Norwegian uncle he’s never met, briefing them on his efforts to keep the fascist flame alive in Iceland, enjoying the thrill of commiserating with like-minded souls across the globe.

Sjón’s story, based on research into a real-life band of Icelandic neo-Nazis, dovetails nicely with current preoccupations about the resurgence of fascism. The main message — made explicit in an afterword — is that most Nazis were people just like you and me, “normal to the point of banality,” their actions informed by universal emotions like the desire for belonging. This is hardly an original insight, but it’s surely true, and worthy terrain for literary art, still our great form for exploring how ideas live in the real world. Unfortunately, “Red Milk” is too fast-moving to leave much room for banality: Because the total number of incidents is so low, almost all of them are immediately pressed into meaning as another way station on Kampen’s road to Nazism. More than once I was reminded of cheesy biopics, which distort life by including scenes only for their ability to chart a journey the destination of which we already know.

The novel feels boldest when it moves toward embracing the quotidian, letting Nazism drift to the edges of the frame. Writing to his mother during a trip to Germany, Kampen dwells not on the influence of in-



ternational Jewry or the importance of physical strength, but on the luxury of German trains, the pleasure of apple strudel, the beautiful views of the Alps. (“Yesterday we were shown the Dachau concentration camp north of Munich,” he says, and that’s all we hear on the subject.) In an enclosed letter to his mentally ill younger brother, he describes the rabbits he saw in the countryside. By tarrying for a while with the everyday — the ultimate site of real politics — Sjón gets at how endlessly interesting it can be, and how much it can contain and conceal.

But because these moments come so rarely, in the end the novel has a slightness that feels out of step with its themes. (It’s possible that “Red Milk” will feel different to readers in Iceland, where, according to Sjón’s afterword, the existence of Nazi sympathizers is something of a repressed zone in the national psyche.) Many of Sjón’s other novels (my favorites include “The Blue Fox” and “The Whispering Muse”) are equally slim, but feel capacious thanks in part to the casual inclusion of surreal and supernatural elements: golems, enchanted foxes, walking corpses, presented not as explanations for life’s infinite strangeness, or even metaphors for it. They’re just *there*, evoking a current of mystery that runs across eras and traditions, and can’t be reduced to any simple thesis.

It would be easy to see real-life Nazism and fascism as subjects too important for Sjón’s usual trickster tool kit. But transcending the mere facts of history to enter the realm of art will always mean taking risks about how stories are told and retold. In “Red Milk,” the overall feeling of inadequacy might have less to do with the small number of pages and more with the author’s abundance of caution, born — quite understandably — from his awareness of great danger lurking nearby. □

Disaster Relief

A novel explores tragedy and survival after Hurricane Maria.

By CALLAN WINK

“VELORIO,” Xavier Navarro Aquino’s debut novel, is set in Puerto Rico in the immediate aftermath of 2017’s Hurricane Maria. The book follows an assortment of characters as they struggle to find their way through a world that has been completely upended by the storm, focusing on six survivors: Camila, a young girl whose sister was killed during the storm; Banto, an overweight mama’s boy; Moriviví, a young, tough, knife-wielding woman; Bayfish, a street kid; Cheo, a fisherman and poet; and Urayoán, a self-styled visionary who attempts to establish a new society in the countryside after the government fails to provide adequate disaster relief. As each character responds to the storm, the novel explores how a natural disaster can bring out both the best and worst in human nature.

Though the hurricane — referred to as Maria, *la monstrua* or simply she/her — strikes before “Velorio” opens, the storm itself is, in many ways, the main character of the story. On every page we are con-

VELORIO

By Xavier Navarro Aquino

260 pp. HarperVia/HarperCollins Publishers.
\$26.99.

fronted with the devastation left in Maria’s wake. The portrait Navarro Aquino paints is of a storm so violent it is almost incomprehensible.

As the characters attempt to make sense of the destruction, the narrative occasionally takes on a sort of concussed dreaminess. In one scene, for instance, Bayfish and Banto are fishing in a river still swollen with floodwaters. At first they catch nothing; then they begin to hook a series of strange objects — a wig, a blazer, a boot — until eventually they spot dead bodies coming downstream, heads bobbing in the current. At their best, these dreamlike sequences have a Murakami-esque flavor, albeit darker — here, the characters have surfaced from a bad dream, only to find themselves in a living nightmare.

From the beginning, Navarro Aquino establishes a visceral, lyric tone that frequently rises to a fever pitch. “The ocean, how she consumes desire and sets me dreaming, like flame and fire, burning darkness away until you learn to speak our names,” a character thinks. But there are also sentences where one can practically taste the putrefaction in the air. For instance, Camila, unable to accept the death of her sister, Marisol, carries Marisol’s body on her back for days until there are

CALLAN WINK is the author of “Dog Run Moon” and “August.” He works as a fly-fishing guide in Montana. □

“white things, like grains of rice, collecting and wriggling in her sores.” It’s foul, but Navarro Aquino doesn’t shy away from unpleasantness. Instead, he dwells in this post-hurricane liminal space, where death is almost a thing of the past and decomposition begins to reign supreme.

Eventually, the characters give up hope that the government will help them repair their lives. But they’ve heard rumors of a better place: Memoria, an idyllic society that Urayoán is forming in the mountains. Each character sets out to reach this so-called utopia, traveling through a blighted landscape and wrestling with despair, unsure of what he or she will find but clinging to the hope that it can’t be worse than the conditions at present. Once the pilgrims arrive, however, it becomes clear that Memoria is far from paradise — the society is sadistically run by Urayoán, who leads a small army of chanting, red-jumpsuit-wearing child soldiers.

Urayoán has the potential to be a remarkable character. He takes his name from the legendary cacique who ordered the conquistador Diego Salcedo to be drowned to prove that the Spaniards were



Flooded homes in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria in 2017.

The characters have surfaced from a bad dream, only to find themselves in a living nightmare.

not gods. Urayoán is positioned to be an equally complicated figure — he’s an idealistic, troubled cult leader who is grappling with government failure to respond to Maria, as well as the horrible echoes of colonialism. However, after he burns several elderly people alive, crucifies one person and sends another out to sea and certain death, it becomes hard to attach even a thin layer of idealism to his actions. Unfortunately, as the novel reaches its climax, Urayoán begins to resemble an almost comically villainous, one-dimensional plot device, prone to such musings as, “No one lashes out at me and gets away with it.”

Cult leaders, even twisted ones, need a certain amount of charisma, and the smirking, petty Urayoán has none. *La monstrua* could have been villain enough. In “Velorio,” Navarro Aquino, an incredibly talented young writer, is still finding his way. □

Top Chefs

Georgia Gilmore, Alice Waters and Julia Child show kids the hidden powers of food.

By JENNY ROSENSTRACH

WHETHER KIDS KNOW IT or not, the plate of food in front of them can be so much more than sustenance. It can be a source of comfort, a link to their heritage, a teaching moment, a conversation starter, a grounding ritual, a battle of wills, an expression of love, a trigger of memories both fond and dark.

Three new illustrated biographies of women in the food world, who quietly and not so quietly cooked their way into his-

SWEET JUSTICE

Georgia Gilmore and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

By Mara Rockliff

Illustrated by R. Gregory Christie

40 pp. Random House Studio. \$18.99.

(Ages 4 to 8)

"Georgia's wasn't just a place for eating, though," the story tells us. "It was a place to meet and talk and plan."

Georgia's food wasn't just sustenance for the protesters. It was fuel as legitimate and motivating as their rage and their thirst for justice.

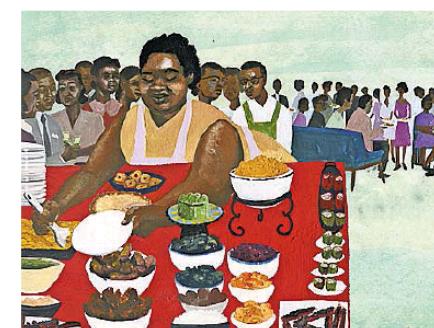
Rockliff weaves this idea through her poetic prose: "Spring had come, but still city officials wouldn't budge. Fortified by Georgia's sweet potato pie, the boycotters were determined to stay off the bus. Summer heated up, frying the sidewalks like a pork chop sizzling in one of Georgia's pans. The boycotters trudged on. Fall passed, with cold mornings and the comfort of hot rolls from Georgia's oven. The boycotters plodded on."

The larger lesson for kids? Movements are bigger than the headliners; behind every Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King is an army of Georgia Gilmores. Anyone can be a hero and a hero can come from anywhere. If you're armed with pies and collards, well, that's as good a ticket to the show as any. (It should be noted that even though the food mostly serves as a lens here, it's nearly impossible not to crave sweet potato pie and crispy chicken upon closing the book.) Christie, a Caldecott honoree, brings the story to life with his stylized art, rendered in rich, saturated hues.

In "Alice Waters Cooks Up a Food Revolution," by Diane Stanley (illustrated by Jessie Hartland), kids will be delighted to read that the most important food movement in the last half-century was launched by one woman just doing what she loves: cooking and eating, for and with her community. In a not unusual beginning to the story, a trip to Paris during college turns a jaunty young Alice into a Francophile, reminding her of the way she grew up, eating only what was fresh and in season — peak deliciousness.

Kids will get the message, and a laugh, when they flip from the illustration of her childhood summer dinner table showcasing the best of summer produce ("Nothing is ever picked till it's ripe, and they eat it that very same day") to the fall spread ("Convenience food" — processed in factories, then packaged, frozen or canned. It's modern! It's easy! It's what America wants!).

Waters's awakening is excellent news for her friends back home in Berkeley (and eventually the world at large) because it inspires one of the most influential restaurants in history: Chez Panisse. When she opens it in 1971 with a bunch of hippie friends (collective restaurant experience: zero), Waters is just a lost college grad trying to earn a living and recapture the magic flavor of a simple soup she ate in Paris ("THE BEST! SOUP! EVER!"), fol-



Clockwise from top: "Alice Waters Cooks Up a Food Revolution"; "Born Hungry"; "Sweet Justice."

ALICE WATERS COOKS UP A FOOD REVOLUTION

By Diane Stanley

Illustrated by Jessie Hartland

48 pp. Paula Wiseman/Simon & Schuster. \$18.99.

(Ages 4 to 8)

BORN HUNGRY

Julia Child Becomes "the French Chef"

By Alex Prud'homme

Illustrated by Sarah Green

40 pp. Calkins Creek. \$18.99.

(Ages 7 to 10)

tory, are built on the premise that food has the power to make our worlds bigger, better and more connected.

The most compelling among them, both narratively and artistically, is "Sweet Justice," by Mara Rockliff (with art by R. Gregory Christie). It tells the story of Georgia Gilmore, an unsung behind-the-scenes hero of the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott.

Georgia, a restaurant cook who marches through the pages clad in a satisfactorily bold canary-yellow coat, turned out the city's best meatloaf and sweet potato pie, boycotted the bus for more than a year to protest the arrest of Rosa Parks and segregation at large, and before long found herself in the center of the movement, preparing and selling her famous pies and crispy chicken to raise money for the cause. After testifying at Martin Luther King's trial, she was fired from her job, but with King's encouragement she started cooking from her own kitchen, churning out food to feed the protesters.

JENNY ROSENSTRACH, creator of the website Dinner: A Love Story, is the author, most recently, of "The Weekday Vegetarians."

lowed the next morning by a baguette with fresh-made apricot jam ("THE BEST! BREAKFAST! EVER!").

And by grounding her cooking in local, sustainable ingredients, food "that enriches the earth instead of depleting and polluting it," she starts many other things: the conversation around organic farming; her national Edible Schoolyard project (where schools use homegrown gardens to teach kids about the environment); the return of food cooked with intention and eaten at home with family.

Following her lead, Hartland's accompanying illustrations invite a slowly savored reading experience, all the better to discover their plentiful, happy, whimsical details — a suitcase covered with travel stickers, a fish platter where the fish looks decidedly concerned, a poodle sitting and conversing at the dining room table.

One of the ways Waters immersed herself in French cooking was by watching Julia Child's groundbreaking PBS show "The French Chef," so it stands to reason that the other giant among the crop here is Child herself, a giant both figuratively and literally — she stood 6 feet 2 inches tall. "Born Hungry," written by Child's grandnephew Alex Prud'homme and illustrated by Sarah Green, chronicles Julia's life leading up to her blockbuster book "Mastering

the Art of French Cooking." "Mastering" shifted our country's food worldview away from the cheap-and-easy to the fresh-and-fancy, eventually earning Child the "French Chef" gig.

It's fun to read how she met her adoring husband, Paul Child, while working as a spy for the O.S.S., and how he introduced her to the foods of France, in Rouen ordering Julia oysters, sole meunière, freshly baked bread "with perfect butter," white wine, yogurt and coffee — which (shocker!) set off all kinds of fireworks in her young brain.

The illustrations are colorful and often comical — Julia towering over her all-male classmates at the culinary school Le Cordon Bleu; Julia literally dreaming of food, a stick of butter and chicken legs swirling over her while she sleeps.

An author's note at the end fills out her biography with the fame and fortune that resulted from her TV success, elaborating on how Child was able to so charmingly demystify French cooking for the masses — and one can't help wishing these parts of her life were illustrated as well.

Nonetheless, Julia's message, to any kid who wants to hear it, is clear: "Good results require that one take time and care" — for that plate of food in front of you and beyond. □

Best Sellers

The New York Times

For the complete best-seller lists, visit
nytimes.com/books/best-sellers

COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF JANUARY 9-15

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	IT ENDS WITH US , by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A battered wife raised in a violent home attempts to halt the cycle of abuse.	31
2		SOMETHING TO HIDE , by Elizabeth George. (Viking) The 21st book in the Inspector Lynley series. Lynley pursues a killer who might be hiding in North London's Nigerian community.	1
3	2	THE SEVEN HUSBANDS OF EVELYN HUGO , by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Washington Square/Atria) A movie icon recounts stories of her loves and career to a struggling magazine writer.	29
4	3	VERITY , by Colleen Hoover. (Grand Central) Lowen Ashleigh is hired by the husband of an injured writer to complete her popular series and uncovers a horrifying truth.	6
5	11	THE MAID , by Nita Prose. (Ballantine) When a wealthy man is found dead in his room, a maid at the Regency Grand Hotel becomes a lead suspect.	2
6		THE HORSEWOMAN , by James Patterson and Mike Lupica. (Little, Brown) As the Paris Olympics draw near, a mother and daughter, who are champion horse riders, compete against each other.	1
7	7	UGLY LOVE , by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) Tate Collins and Miles Archer, an airline pilot, think they can handle a no strings attached arrangement. But they can't.	3
8	6	THE LINCOLN HIGHWAY , by Amor Towles. (Viking) Two friends who escaped from a juvenile work farm take Emmett Watson on an unexpected journey to New York City in 1954.	15
9		TO PARADISE , by Hanya Yanagihara. (Doubleday) Difficult circumstances and societal pressures affect characters living in America in 1893, 1993 and 2093.	1
10	8	THE JUDGE'S LIST , by John Grisham. (Doubleday) The second book in the Whistler series. Investigator Lacy Stoltz goes after a serial killer and closes in on a sitting judge.	13

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	2	THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	73
2	1	UNTHINKABLE , by Jamie Raskin. (Harper) The Maryland congressman describes leading the impeachment effort against the former president shortly after his son's death by suicide and the insurrection at the Capitol.	2
3	3	THE 1619 PROJECT , edited by Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilana Silberman and Jake Silverstein. (One World) Viewing America's entanglement with slavery and its legacy, in essays adapted and expanded from The New York Times Magazine.	9
4		HOW CIVIL WARS START , by Barbara F. Walter. (Crown) A political scientist looks at increasing civil wars around the globe and the potential for a second one in the United States.	1
5	10	GREENLIGHTS , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	52
6	5	WILL , by Will Smith with Mark Manson. (Penguin Press) The actor, producer and musician tells his life story and lessons he learned along the way.	10
7	4	CRYING IN H MART , by Michelle Zauner. (Knopf) The leader of the indie rock project Japanese Breakfast describes creating her own identity after losing her mother to cancer.	16
8		CHASING HISTORY , by Carl Bernstein. (Holt) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist details his journey of self-education in the newsrooms of Washington, D.C.	1
9	7	ALL ABOUT LOVE , by bell hooks. (Morrow) The late feminist icon explores the causes of a polarized society and the meaning of love.	5
10	6	THE STORYTELLER , by Dave Grohl. (Dey Street) A memoir by the musician known for his work with Foo Fighters and Nirvana.	15

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

Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review

THE ZEN OF THERAPY: UNCOVERING A HIDDEN KINDNESS IN LIFE, by Mark Epstein. (Penguin Press, \$27.) A warm, profound memoir of a year in the consulting room of Epstein, a psychiatrist and practicing Buddhist. He probes the fundamental wisdom that psychotherapy and Buddhism share, to show how it might help us on the road to fulfillment.



MANIFESTO: ON NEVER GIVING UP, by Bernardine Evaristo. (Grove, \$27.) The debut memoir by the Booker Prize-winning author of "Girl, Woman, Other" recalls her upbringing in an interracial, Catholic household in London, and her long, hard path to literary stardom — and the romantic trials and youthful abandon along the way.



SMALL WORLD, by Jonathan Evison. (Dutton, \$28.) Evison's expansive new novel explores the lives of several passengers on a fateful train bound for Seattle, as well as the lives of their 19th-century ancestors. He weaves together a tale of the West, examining injustices and inequities across generations and cultures while maintaining a steady belief in humanity's capacity for generosity.

THE FINAL CASE, by David Guterson. (Knopf, \$27.) Guterson, perhaps best known for "Snow Falling on Cedars," returns with a tender, closely observed and often surprising father-son novel centered on a criminal trial. The verdict in this case is not just about the people in the courtroom, but about family love and its silent, complicated passions.



THE STEAL: THE ATTEMPT TO OVERTURN THE 2020 ELECTION AND THE PEOPLE WHO STOPPED IT, by Mark Bowden and Matthew Teague. (Atlantic Monthly, \$28.) The authors commemorate mostly unknown Republican officials in local politics who resisted their party's pressures to overturn the 2020 election — and played a key role in preserving American democracy.



I CAME ALL THIS WAY TO MEET YOU: WRITING MYSELF HOME, by Jami Attenberg. (Ecco, \$27.99.) "I was born a writer," Attenberg declares in her plain-spoken, honest and affecting memoir of growing into her destiny. But this is not just a book about craft — it's also one about looking for a place to belong and building a life of one's own.



LUCKENBOOTH, by Jenni Fagan. (Pegasus, \$26.) In this remarkable haunted house of a novel, Fagan tells the stories of nine residents of an Edinburgh tenement over nine decades. From a teenage Nazi assassin to a richly drawn William Burroughs, the characters are all outsiders, all broken in their own ways, reflecting the troubled history of both the building and the world around it.

DEFENESTRATE, by Renée Branum. (Bloomsbury, \$26.) Twenty-something Czech American twins are beset by a generations-old curse in which their family members plunge from high places, in this addictive and philosophical debut novel that opens at a hospital bedside after one of the twins has taken a fall.

BRIGHT BURNING THINGS, by Lisa Harding. (HarperVia, \$26.99.) The Irish writer's fast-paced and lucid American debut follows an alcoholic former actress as she is forced to enter rehab in order to keep custody of her 4-year-old son.

The full reviews of these and other recent books are online: nytimes.com/books

Take Flight If you've never heard of Jacqueline Woodson, I'm not sure I can help you. But I'll try. She's such a prolific writer of fiction and poetry for young people and adults, a reader would have

to be seriously committed to become a Woodson completist. The undertaking might require a spreadsheet but it would be well worth the time. The author of "Red at the Bone," "Another Brooklyn," "Before the Ever After" and "Harbor Me" (among others) is the recipient of so many

honors, awards and distinctions, some of her book covers are almost entirely overtaken by metallic seals. (See "Brown Girl Dreaming," with its bling from the National Book Award and the Newbery Honor and the Coretta Scott King Book Award.) In short, Woodson is to the best-seller list what Norm Peterson was to "Cheers" — a beloved fixture.

Now she has a new title on her menu: "The Year We Learned to Fly," a companion to "The Day You Begin," currently at No. 10 in its second week on the picture book chart. Vibrantly illustrated by Rafael López, who makes a bolt of lightning look like a tree you'd want to climb, Woodson's story revolves around a pair of cooped-up siblings trying to entertain themselves during a season of endless rain. They wisely decide to heed their grandmother's advice: "Lift your arms, close your eyes, take a deep breath and believe in a thing. Somebody somewhere at some point was just as bored as you are now." Imagination and family history become wings that lift these kids out of the doldrums.

Pay It Forward Another reliable presence in best-sellerdom, Elizabeth George is back with "Something to Hide," which enters the hardcover fiction list at No. 3. Not only did George publish her latest Inspector Lynley mystery last week, her foundation announced a round of grants for poets, emerging playwrights, short story writers, unpublished novelists and organizations benefiting disadvantaged children, particularly in the area of the arts. "I have always been a believer in both giving and giving back and I created the Elizabeth George Foundation to do both," George writes on her website. "I wanted to be able to give aspiring writers the opportunity to see if they could develop the discipline needed to complete a writing project during a year in which they would have full financial support, and I also wanted to return to the world of reading and readers something which I had long taken from it: the pleasure of sitting down with a book." □



'Close your eyes, take a deep breath and believe in a thing.'

PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF JANUARY 9-15

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		TO PARADISE , by Hanya Yanagihara. (Doubleday) Difficult circumstances and societal pressures affect characters living in America in 1893, 1993 and 2093.	1	1	1	UNTHINKABLE , by Jamie Raskin. (Harper) The Maryland congressman describes leading the impeachment effort against the former president shortly after his son's death by suicide and the insurrection at the Capitol.	2
2	8	THE MAID , by Nita Prose. (Ballantine) When a wealthy man is found dead in his room, a maid at the Regency Grand Hotel becomes a lead suspect.	2	2	2	THE 1619 PROJECT , edited by Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilana Silverman and Jake Silverstein. (One World) Viewing America's entanglement with slavery and its legacy, in essays adapted and expanded from The New York Times Magazine.	9
3		SOMETHING TO HIDE , by Elizabeth George. (Viking) The 21st book in the Inspector Lynley series. Lynley pursues a killer who might be hiding in North London's Nigerian community.	1	3	7	GREENLIGHTS , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	55
4		THE HORSEWOMAN , by James Patterson and Mike Lupica. (Little, Brown) As the Paris Olympics draw near, a mother and daughter, who are champion horse riders, compete against each other.	1	4	3	WILL , by Will Smith with Mark Manson. (Penguin Press) The actor, producer and musician tells his life story.	10
5	4	THE LINCOLN HIGHWAY , by Amor Towles. (Viking) Two friends who escaped from a juvenile work farm take Emmett Watson on an unexpected journey to New York City in 1954.	15	5	4	CRYING IN H MART , by Michelle Zauner. (Knopf) The daughter of a Korean mother and Jewish-American father, and leader of the indie rock project Japanese Breakfast, describes creating her own identity after losing her mother to cancer.	26
6	5	THE LAST THING HE TOLD ME , by Laura Dave. (Simon & Schuster) Hannah Hall discovers truths about her missing husband and bonds with his daughter from a previous relationship.	35	6		HOW CIVIL WARS START , by Barbara F. Walter. (Crown) A political scientist looks at increasing civil wars around the globe and the potential for a second one in the United States.	1
7	2	THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY , by Matt Haig. (Viking) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.	58	7	5	THE STORYTELLER , by Dave Grohl. (Dey Street) A memoir by the musician known for his work with Foo Fighters and Nirvana.	15
8	6	THE JUDGE'S LIST , by John Grisham. (Doubleday) The second book in the Whistler series. Investigator Lacy Stoltz goes after a serial killer and closes in on a sitting judge.	13	8		CHASING HISTORY , by Carl Bernstein. (Holt) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist details his journey of self-education in the newsrooms of Washington, D.C.	1
9		A FLICKER IN THE DARK , by Stacy Willingham. (Minotaur) When teenage girls go missing, a psychologist in Baton Rouge grapples with echoes from her past.	1	9		A LITTLE CLOSER TO HOME , by Ginger Zee. (Hyperion Avenue) The chief meteorologist for ABC News shares some of her childhood difficulties and ongoing struggles. (†)	1
10	7	WISH YOU WERE HERE , by Jodi Picoult. (Ballantine) Diana O'Toole re-evaluates her seemingly perfect life when a pandemic disrupts her vacation in the Galápagos Islands.	7	10	6	UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	86

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

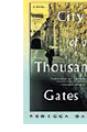
Paperback Row / BY MIGUEL SALAZAR



LET THE LORD SORT THEM: The Rise and Fall of the Death Penalty, by Maurice Chammah. (Crown, 368 pp., \$18.) This thoroughly reported account charts evolving attitudes toward the death penalty in America and covers the people and legal cases that have slowly brought it to near extinction. "Chammah is here to remind us that in our lifetimes a sea change has happened," our reviewer, Anand Giridharadas, commented. "It's not over yet. But it's a triumph all the same."



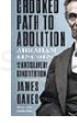
WHAT'S MINE AND YOURS, by Naima Coster. (Grand Central, 368 pp., \$17.99.) This coming-of-age novel centers on two families, one Black and one biracial Latinx, brought together by a busing initiative in 1992 and the unraveling marriages, sibling disputes and revelations that follow. As our reviewer, Lauren Francis-Sharma, observed, "Beneath it all lie tragedy and myriad loves that are tender and rich and fraught."



CITY OF A THOUSAND GATES, by Rebecca Sacks. (Harper Perennial, 400 pp., \$16.99.) In this debut, the lives of Jewish settlers, Palestinian university students and others converge on the West Bank. As our reviewer, Ayelet Tsabari, put it, "The novel digs into the enduring wound of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and offers an unflinching, unforgiving look into the harsh realities of the occupation."



THE FIVE WOUNDS, by Kirstin Valdez Quade. (Norton, 448 pp., \$17.95.) In this modern interpretation of the five wounds Jesus suffered on the Cross, five generations of the Padilla family converge in a small New Mexico town as they grapple with emotional baggage. "Quade has created a world bristling with compassion and humanity," our reviewer, Alexandra Chang, noted.



THE CROOKED PATH TO ABOLITION: Abraham Lincoln and the Anti-slavery Constitution, by James Oakes. (Norton, 288 pp., \$17.95.) According to our reviewer, Gordon S. Wood, Oakes has written, through this detailed chronology of the political struggle between Northern abolitionists and Southern slaveholders in Congress, a "very solid, carefully and rigorously argued book."



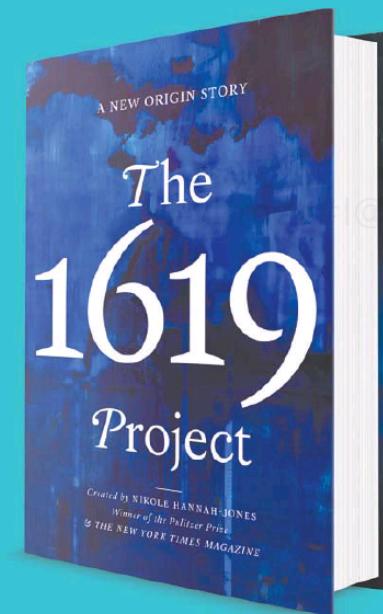
THE DOCTORS BLACKWELL: How Two Pioneering Sisters Brought Medicine to Women and Women to Medicine, by Janice P. Nimura. (Norton, 352 pp., \$16.95.) As our reviewer, Joanna Scutts, noted, the sisters Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell, among the first women doctors in the United States, emerge in this biography as "spiky, complicated human beings who strove and stumbled toward an extraordinary achievement."

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	PAPERBACK TRADE FICTION	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	IT ENDS WITH US , by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A battered wife raised in a violent home attempts to halt the cycle of abuse.	37
2	2	THE SEVEN HUSBANDS OF EVELYN HUGO , by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Washington Square/Atria) A movie icon recounts stories of her loves and career to a struggling magazine writer.	45
3	3	VERITY , by Colleen Hoover. (Grand Central) Lowen Ashleigh is hired by the husband of an injured writer to complete her popular series and uncovers a horrifying truth.	23
4	4	UGLY LOVE , by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A casual sexual relationship between Tate and Miles becomes more complicated than they expected.	25
5	7	WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING , by Delia Owens. (Putnam) A young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.	42
6	5	THE LOVE HYPOTHESIS , by Ali Hazelwood. (Berkley) A young professor agrees to pretend to be a third-year Ph.D. candidate's boyfriend.	17
7	8	PEOPLE WE MEET ON VACATION , by Emily Henry. (Berkley) Opposites Poppy and Alex meet to vacation together one more time in hopes of saving their relationship.	36
8	6	THE SONG OF ACHILLES , by Madeline Miller. (Ecco) A reimagining of Homer's "Iliad" that is narrated by Achilles' companion Patroclus.	65
9	11	NOVEMBER 9 , by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) Ben and Fallon meet on the same day each year but a possible untruth might spoil their relationship.	9
10	9	THE SILENT PATIENT , by Alex Michaelides. (Celadon) Theo Faber looks into the mystery of a famous painter who stops speaking after shooting her husband.	26
11		STATION ELEVEN , by Emily St. John Mandel. (Vintage) After a pandemic, a small troupe of actors and musicians dedicate themselves to keeping the remnants of art and humanity alive.	13
12	10	BEACH READ , by Emily Henry. (Berkley) A relationship develops between a literary fiction author and a romance novelist as they both try to overcome writer's block.	32
13	12	NORMAL PEOPLE , by Sally Rooney. (Hogarth) The connection between a high school star athlete and a loner ebbs and flows when they go to Trinity College in Dublin.	32
14	13	CIRCE , by Madeline Miller. (Back Bay) Zeus banishes Helios' daughter to an island.	76
15		ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE , by Anthony Doerr. (Scribner) The lives of a blind French girl and a gadget-obsessed German boy before and during World War II.	95

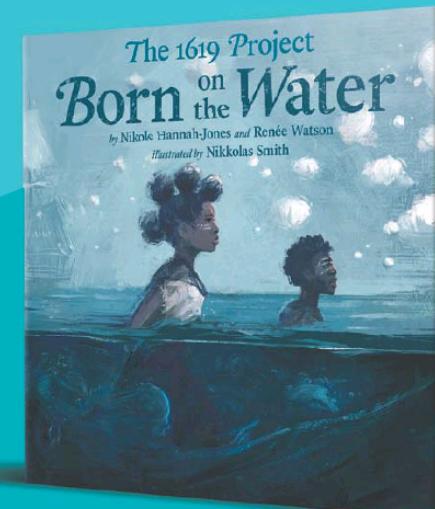
Sales are defined as completed transactions between vendors and individual end users during the period on or after the official publication date of a title. Sales of titles are statistically weighted to represent and accurately reflect all outlets proportionally nationwide. The panel of reporting retailers is comprehensive and reflects sales in tens of thousands of stores of all sizes and demographics across the United States. **ONLINE:** For a full explanation of our methodology, visit www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers.

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	PAPERBACK NONFICTION	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	169
2	2	ALL ABOUT LOVE , by bell hooks. (Morrow) The late feminist icon explores the causes of a polarized society and the meaning of love.	6
3	4	BRAIDING SWEETGRASS , by Robin Wall Kimmerer. (Milkweed Editions) A botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation espouses having an understanding and appreciation of plants and animals.	92
4	3	THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING , by Joan Didion. (Vintage) Winner of the National Book Award in 2005. The late writer recounts her daughter's illness and husband's death.	3
5	5	SAPIENS , by Yuval Noah Harari. (Harper Perennial) How Homo sapiens became Earth's dominant species.	179
6	6	BORN A CRIME , by Trevor Noah. (One World) A memoir by the host of "The Daily Show."	146
7	13	TALKING TO STRANGERS , by Malcolm Gladwell. (Back Bay) Famous examples of miscommunication serve as the backdrop to explain potential conflicts and misunderstandings.	16
8		THE TENDER BAR , by J.R. Moehringer. (Hachette) An 8-year-old boy finds several father figures in the bar on the corner. The basis of the film directed by George Clooney.	1
9	7	THINKING, FAST AND SLOW , by Daniel Kahneman. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) When we can and cannot trust our intuitions in making business and personal decisions.	301
10	8	THE HOUSE OF GUCCI , by Sara Gay Forden. (Custom House) An account of the murder of Maurizio Gucci in 1995; the basis of the film.	12
11	12	JUST MERCY , by Bryan Stevenson. (One World) A civil rights lawyer and MacArthur grant recipient's memoir of his decades of work to free innocent people condemned to death.	272
12		ON TYRANNY , by Timothy Snyder. (Tim Duggan) Twenty lessons from the 20th century about the course of tyranny.	90
13		BEING MORTAL , by Atul Gawande. (Picador) The surgeon and New Yorker writer considers how doctors fail patients at the end of life, and how they can do better.	120
14	11	THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY , by Erik Larson. (Vintage) A story of how an architect and a serial killer were linked by the Chicago World's Fair of 1893.	370
15	10	GRIT , by Angela Duckworth. (Scribner) The MacArthur Fellow argues that passion and perseverance are more important than innate talent in creating success.	99

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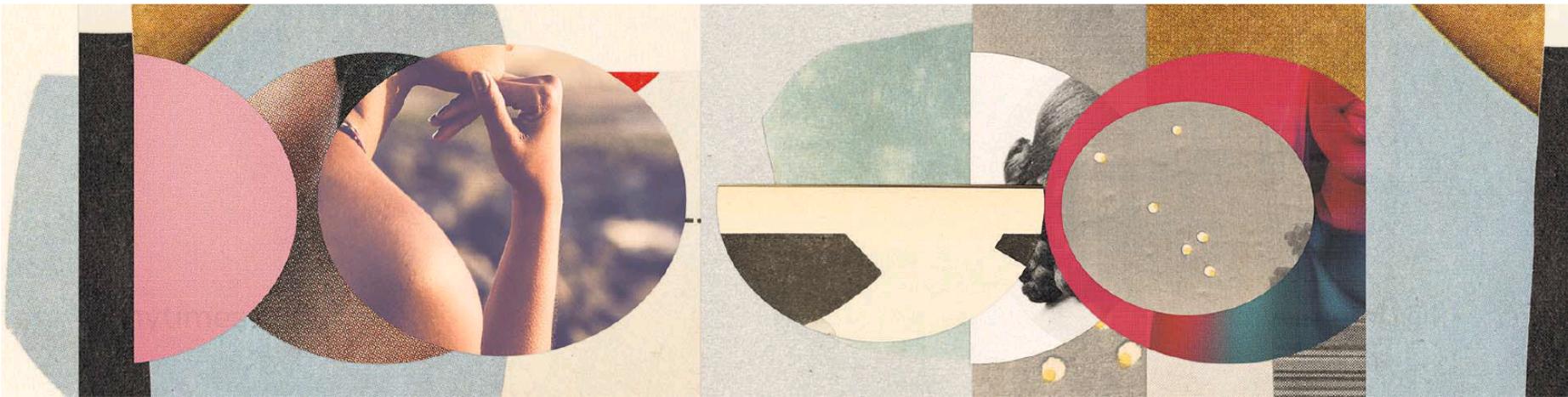
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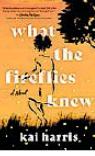
Penguin
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House





WHAT THE FIREFLIES KNEW

By Kai Harris
274 pp. Tiny Reparations. \$26.

 At the start of "What the Fireflies Knew," 10-year-old Kenyatta, or KB, has just lost her father to a drug overdose, and she is about to lose her mother too. When her mother drives her and her older sister, Nia, from their home in Detroit to their grandfather's house in Lansing, Mich., KB thinks they're just visiting. The girls break into horrified laughter when their mother drops them off to stay, giggling out of habit "cause we know Momma's wrong. We ain't ever gon' be thankful for something so bad."

KB is a reader, burrowing into books — especially "Anne of Green Gables" — to escape her difficult life. Both she and Anne are effectively orphaned and put in the care of relative strangers; and yet KB is wholly aware of the ways that Anne's white reality is miles apart from her own. Harris rewrites the coming-of-age story with Black girlhood at the center.

"What the Fireflies Knew" is best when its touch is the lightest. KB finds a deep, innocent pleasure in the natural world of Lansing, capturing fireflies and caterpillars, and collecting rocks instead of recyclable bottles, as she did in Detroit to make a few extra dollars. She disobeys her grandfather's warnings by befriending the white brother and sister across the street, and a complex relationship forms as she both envies and emulates their freedom. The novel affords a nuanced and painful look at adolescence as KB starts to experience the tricky power — and terrifying vulnerability — of inhabiting a sexualized body; as well as the first stirrings of romantic desire. At nearly 15, Nia is also navigating this fraught territory, and KB's longing for her sister's attention and approval propels the younger sister into danger.

At times Harris effectively captures a child's way of naming intense and contradictory feelings: "Lansing is like staying up late on a school night," KB observes, "them times when Momma and Daddy would get in a fight. We'd feel happy to stay up late but couldn't really enjoy it cause of all the yelling." At other points, though, KB's voice feels a little too simple, too innocent, for her intelligence, and for the complicated reality she's up against. Neither do the family secrets driving the story ever feel quite as vivid as the present moment: two sisters and their grandfather trying to understand their obligations to one another, and a girl engaged in the difficult task of growing up.

SHRUTI SWAMY is the author of "A House Is a Body" and "The Archer."

WAHALA

By Nikki May
375 pp. Custom House. \$27.99.



May's gossipy novel centers on the lives and friendships of three mixed-race British-Nigerian women: Boo, a young mother who has recently returned to the work force and feels stifled by the weight of her domestic life; Simi, a fashion-loving career woman with an outwardly perfect marriage; and Ronke, a sweet and successful dentist who longs for a conventional happy ending with her on-again-off-again boyfriend. Into this seemingly stable trio arrives the destabilizing Isobel — "embarrassingly rich," gorgeous and enviable in nearly every sense — a childhood friend of Simi's who might have ulterior motives for insinuating herself in the group. Isobel befriends each of the women, ferreting out their deepest secrets and encouraging their worst — or at least wildest — behavior. In this, her villainy is deliciously uncomplicated: the id come to life.

But while Isobel's intentions are decidedly malicious, her enticements only amplify existing tensions. Simi, Boo and Ronke are best friends, but they are all more invested in upholding the fiction of an ideal life than in seeking one another's confidence and support, especially when it comes to their romantic lives. And Simi and Boo are often unable to suppress their contempt for Ronke's plumper figure and her people-pleasing tendencies; their treatment of her gets harsher and more uncomfortable as the story progresses. As it reaches its conclusion, there is an abrupt shift in tone, and a life-altering event whose consequences don't get the space to play out.

The novel's strength lies in May's attention to her main characters' identities. All the women, including the interloper Isobel, have white mothers and Black Nigerian fathers, yet each has her own particular relationship to her heritage. What unites the women is a feeling of being an outsider in both Black and white spaces, including their own families, and all find a precious acceptance with one another. May's breezy prose is well suited for these moments of casual intimacy, unfolding over drinks, at the hairdresser's or at the kitchen table, where all the best gossip takes place.

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NOBODY'S MAGIC

By Destiny O. Birdsong
355 pp. Grand Central. \$28.

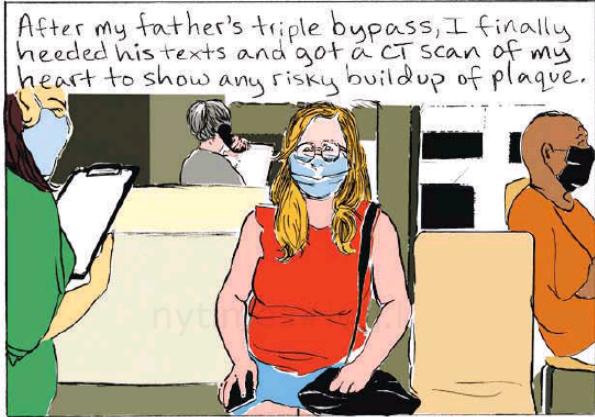


"Nobody's Magic" is billed as a novel, but it's really three novellas, each about a different Black woman with albinism in Shreveport, La. They're all coming-of-age stories, of a kind: Sheltered, 20-year-old Suzette shakes free of her controlling father; Maple grapples with the sudden and violent loss of her mother; and Agnes, a struggling academic, tries desperately to find a way to live on her own terms, instead of a brutal job market's, or a man's. Rather than overlap, the novellas resonate with one another, allowing Birdsong, a poet, to display an impressive range of perspectives. The book also illuminates the lived-in corners of a multifaceted city, where headlines like gentrification, economic precarity and crime take on a human scale.

One striking source of resonance is Birdsong's depiction of her characters' sexuality: frank, unembarrassed and often delightful. Though Suzette is a virgin, her conversations with her best friend about masturbation and sex are casual and knowing — the goal of her own pleasure a given. In a stunning scene, Maple watches the pornographic film her mother made in the year before her death. Watching her perform a number of sex acts, Maple is moved by her mother's evident joy. "She looked like she had found the sweetness of life," Maple thinks, "something I knew, from the moment I saw her on-screen, that I had never tasted." These passages stand in heartbreaking contrast to Agnes's; she consents to sex because she is financially dependent on her partners, and because she doesn't believe she deserves any better. Agnes travels further in her story than the younger women, both literally and metaphorically, to get to a tenuous sense of freedom.

Birdsong risks unlikability with her characters, allowing them selfishness, rage, violence, helplessness and mistakes large and small. As a result, they feel as idiosyncratic, unpredictable and real as people from life, speaking in voices that are melodic and utterly specific. The magic here is not the supernatural kind, but rather an attention to the grace of the ordinary. It is the magic of watching these women come into their power.

Remembering the letters of the novelist Fanny Burney and her mastectomy.





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