

The New York Times

Book Review

OCTOBER 11, 2020

PRODIGAL SON The novel ‘Jack’ continues Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead series

HOW THE WEST IS WEIRD A Harvard anthropologist on cultural difference

PLUS Jimmy Carter, Sigrid Nunez and the college admission scandal



Lost in America

By Joe Klein

IN 2015, CARLOS LOZADA, The Washington Post’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book critic, took on a harrowing task: He read eight books “written” by Donald Trump. Soon, he expanded the mandate, reading everything he could about Trump and the Trump era — 150 books in all. It was an act of transcendent masochism, but we should be grateful he did it because “What Were We Thinking” looks past the

WHAT WERE WE THINKING
A Brief Intellectual History of the Trump Era
By Carlos Lozada
260 pp. Simon & Schuster. \$28.

TRUMP ON TRIAL
The Investigation, Impeachment, Acquittal and Aftermath
By Kevin Sullivan and Mary Jordan
Edited by Steve Luxenberg
Illustrated. 532 pp. Scribner. \$32.

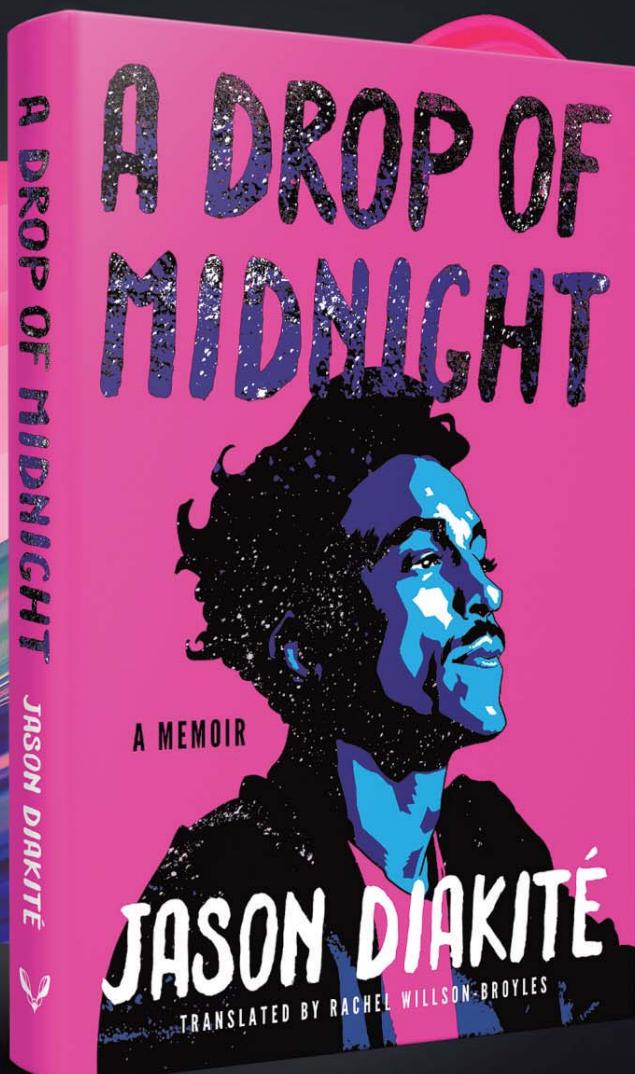
obvious and perverse — that is, past Trump himself — to the troublesome questions raised by the elevation of a soulless carnival barker to the nation’s highest office. “The books that matter most right now are not necessarily those revealing White House intrigue . . . or official scandals,” he writes. “They are, instead, the books that enable and ennable a national re-examination.” And this, he believes, is a crucial moment for that re-examination. We have become a society “that has forgotten its civics lessons or, remembering them still, has decided they don’t matter.”

TYLER COMRIE

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

I am all the colors of my forefathers.

I am their rage, longing, hardships, and dreams.



"Nimble and observant, sharply considering the burdens surrounding race and masculinity. A vibrant, thoughtful memoir reflecting contemporary black cultural concerns."

—Kirkus Reviews

[Amazon.com/ADropOfMidnight](https://www.amazon.com/ADropOfMidnight)

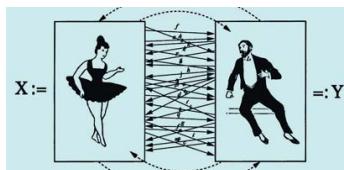
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Book Review

The New York Times

OCTOBER 11, 2020



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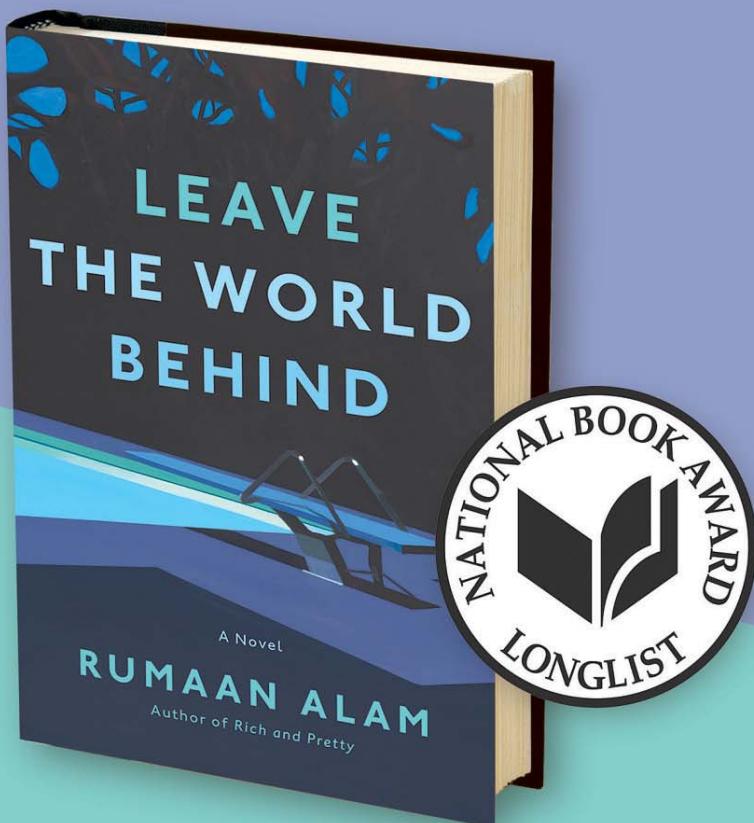
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THE MOST ANTICIPATED BOOK OF THE FALL

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"Cuttingly prescient about the current emotional atmosphere. A thrilling book—one that will speak to readers who have felt the terror of isolation in these recent, torturous months and one that will simultaneously, as great books do, lift them out of it."

—VOGUE.COM

"A beautifully written, emotionally resonant page-turner. Alam explores complex ideas about privilege and fate with miraculous wit and grace."

—JENNY OFFILL, AUTHOR OF WEATHER

"Perfectly paced, clever and haunting. So easily the best thing I've read all year."

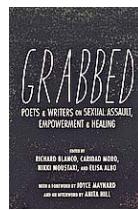
—KILEY REID, AUTHOR OF SUCH A FUN AGE


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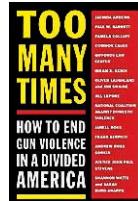
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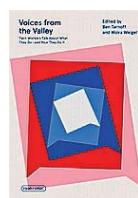
New & Noteworthy



GRABBED: POETS AND WRITERS ON SEXUAL ASSAULT, EMPOWERMENT, AND HEALING, edited by Richard Blanco et al. (Beacon, paper, \$15.) Inspired by the #MeToo movement, the editors asked poets and other writers to reflect on their own experiences as assault survivors.



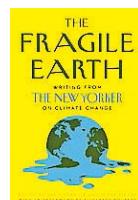
TOO MANY TIMES: HOW TO END GUN VIOLENCE IN A DIVIDED AMERICA, edited by Melville House. (Melville House, paper, \$16.99.) From Pamela Colloff and Jill Lepore to Ibram X. Kendi and Common Cause, journalists, academics and non-profit groups address the problem of gun violence and propose a series of solutions.



VOICES FROM THE VALLEY: TECH WORKERS TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY DO — AND HOW THEY DO IT, edited by Ben Tarnoff and Moira Weigel. (FSG Originals, paper, \$15.) Tarnoff and Weigel, tech writers who founded Logic magazine, here offer in-depth interviews with anonymous tech industry workers about their jobs.



WHICH SIDE OF HISTORY?: HOW TECHNOLOGY IS RESHAPING DEMOCRACY AND OUR LIVES, edited by James P. Steyer. (Chronicle Prism, \$17.95.) Essays on the real-world consequences of technology, for better and worse, from Kara Swisher, Aaron Sorkin, Chelsea Clinton and others.



THE FRAGILE EARTH: WRITING FROM THE NEW YORKER ON CLIMATE CHANGE, edited by David Remnick and Henry Finder. (Ecco, \$29.99.) The magazine has long been a force in climate reporting: See Bill McKibben on greenhouse gases in 1989.

WHAT WE'RE READING

What if Alice didn't fall down the rabbit hole and instead joined TaskRabbit? That's the vibe you get with Hilary Leichter's novel **TEMPORARY** a deeply hilarious, surreal manifesto against late-stage capitalism, all wrapped up in a mushroom trip. So, you know, exactly what we need in 2020. The story follows an unnamed gig worker as she navigates a series of absurd temp jobs: ghost pal, pirate, assassin's assistant. Everything is work now, from motherhood and family to dating and sex, with no line between one's personal and professional lives. (Uh, sound familiar?) I stumbled onto the book in early quarantine as many of us settled into our new lives of endless Zooms and Slacks, and as our main character takes a gig as a barnacle — no, not a hanger-on to a corporate structure, a literal barnacle, clinging to a rock in the sea — I felt as if Leichter knew just what this year had in store for us.

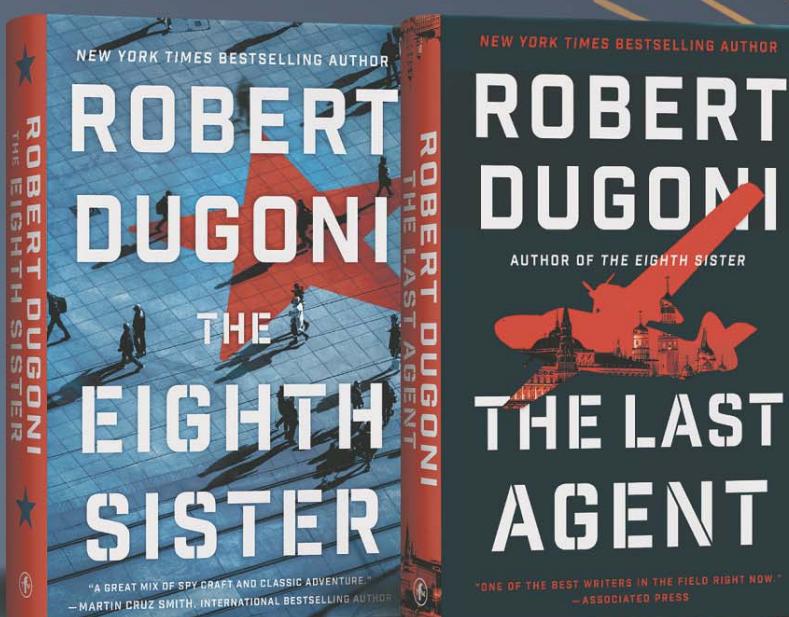


—TIM HERRERA, SMARTER LIVING EDITOR

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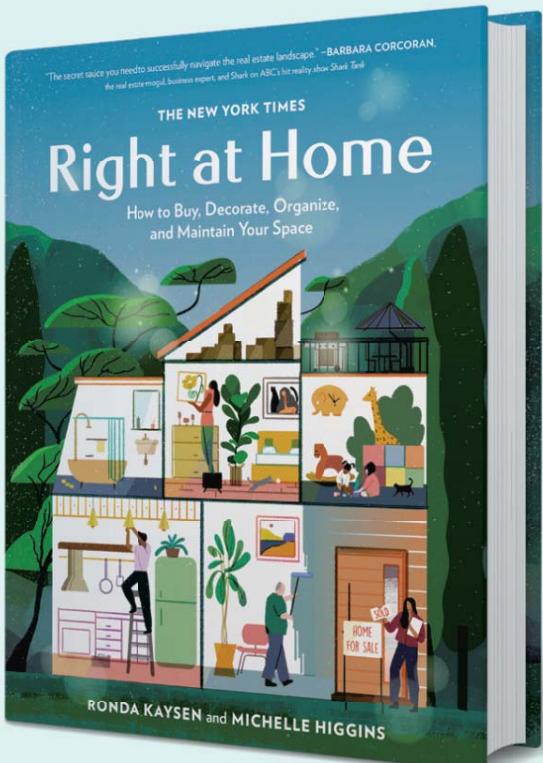
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Letters



Secretary of State James Baker with President George H.W. Bush, 1991.

The Insider

TO THE EDITOR:
In reading Samantha Power's review of "The Man Who Ran Washington: The Life and Times of James A. Baker III," by Peter Baker and Susan Glasser (Sept. 27), I was jarred by the former national security adviser Thomas E. Donilon's genuflection to Baker as "the most important unelected official since World War II." What about George C. Marshall, whose European Recovery Program rebuilt the western part of that war-torn continent?

Certainly Baker was a reliable consigliere for the Bush family and a "political knife fighter," as the authors noted, but hardly a man to admire as a statesman, much less as a principled Republican, for as Power concluded, "Baker refused to speak up" about George W. Bush's disastrous invasion of Iraq and throughout the debased Trump presidency, "because he was afraid of being frozen out of the corridors of power."

KITTY KELLEY
WASHINGTON

The writer is the author of "The Family: The Real Story of the Bush Dynasty."

TO THE EDITOR:
I admire much of what Samantha Power has done and written, but I take exception to her affirmation of George H. W. Bush's and James Baker's handling of the fall of the Soviet Union. She talks of Baker and, by implication,

Bush as having "deftly managed" the collapse. But their decision to advance economic liberalization without first putting a viable legal and political framework in place led directly to Putin — the corrupt replacement of the first wave of corruption — who is of course responsible for some of the bleak situations we find ourselves in today, from the Syrian refugee crisis to the current occupant of the White House.

JOSHUA KATES
BLOOMINGTON, IND.

TO THE EDITOR:
The Sept. 27 issue was particularly revealing. James Baker countenanced the slandering of Michael Dukakis and the physical intimidation of Florida Democrats in 2000, but is an old-fashioned establishment Republican. We learn in the review of Rick Perlstein's "Reaganland" that Ronald Reagan was uncomfortable blowing a racist dog whistle while campaigning and did it anyway. And we learn in the review of Michael S. Schmidt's "Donald Trump v. the United States" that Donald F. McGahn II, formerly of the George W. Bush administration and more recently with Donald Trump, engaged in "frequent attempts at principled stands" but stayed in an obviously corrupt White House until he found Kim Kardashian having influence on policy. History doesn't repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme.

MICHAEL GREEN
LAS VEGAS

Tale as Old as Terrain

TO THE EDITOR:
Reading Héctor Tobar's review of Chris Hamby's book "Soul Full of Coal Dust" (Sept. 20) — a "timeless" tale about "coal miner fortitude and company malfeasance" in Appalachia, as Tobar describes it — I was reminded of Harry M. Caudill's 1962 book "Night Comes to the Cumberlands." Caudill dealt with the predatory practices of the Kentucky coal industry. Writing at a time when coal production had been nominally under federal and state regulation for decades, Caudill still could warn: "And we just can't afford to sit back and watch all that [land] be destroyed so a few people can get rich now. One of these days the dear old federal government is going to have to come in and spend billions of dollars just to repair the damage that's already been done. And guess who will have the machines and the workers to do the job? The same coal operators who made the mess in the first place will be hired to fix it back, and the taxpayers will bear the cost."

Destroying terrain and human bodies, a "timeless" tale.

LEO S. LEVY
SLINGERLANDS, N.Y.

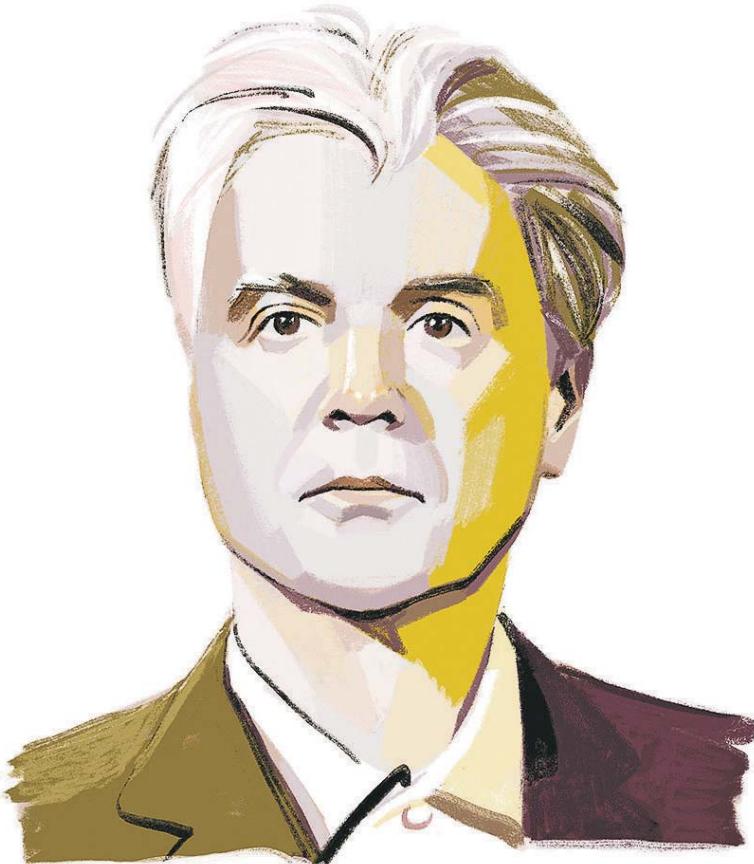
Reading Reed

TO THE EDITOR:
How I hope that the Book Review was well paid for the Netflix ad it ran, thinly disguised as a By the Book interview with the Netflix founder Reed Hastings (Sept. 27). Subscribers expect better!

PATRICK WOLFE
NORTH VANCOUVER,
BRITISH COLUMBIA

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The Times welcomes letters from readers. Letters for publication should include the writer's name, address and telephone number. The email address is books@nytimes.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity. We regret that because of the large volume of mail received, we are unable to acknowledge unpublished letters.



David Byrne

The musician and former Talking Heads frontman, whose new book is ‘American Utopia,’ with Maira Kalman, likes reading aloud to friends: ‘Sharing words is like sharing food.’

What books are on your night stand?

“The Overstory,” by Richard Powers, taking the long view: a poetic view of human generations and activity measured in tree-time. The writing is beautiful and often heartbreaking.

“Black Leopard, Red Wolf,” by Marlon James.

“The Economics of Belonging,” by Martin Sandbu.

“Perfumes: The Guide,” by Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez. A book that attempts to answer the question how to capture a smell in words. I don’t often wear a scent, but their writing is inspirational nonetheless — it’s a kind of crazy poetry. For example: “I don’t mean... ‘I want a smell like rotting meat and genitals,’ with which she scents her disturbing postmodern gallery installation. I mean perfume for collectors, people interested in the different messages it’s possible to get across in perfume, in how wearing it changes the way we live and think.”

“The Hidden Life of Trees,” by Peter Wohlleben. Yes, there’s a tree theme.

We’ve learned a lot about trees recently. Apparently they communicate with one another via chemicals that waft on the wind and via a fungal network underground. They warn of parasites, they feed their fellows in time of need. Like people, trees are surprisingly social — they are at their best when there are many grouped together.

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

On a train. Midafternoon, taking a work break. At a counter. Before the pandemic I would often eat dinner at a counter at a nearby restaurant and bring a small tablet to read from. It’s not sad, I do have friends, but immersing myself in a good book or essay is a joy. And for some reason reading among strangers is something I miss very much.

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

“Exact Thinking in Demented Times,” by Karl Sigmund: a history of the Vienna

school of philosophers, physicists, economists and lunatics. Ernst Mach was part of this group — he was not convinced that atoms exist, though in many other ways he was prescient. The much-admired philosopher Wittgenstein didn’t seem to get along with anyone. At one point he believed he had said all there was to say about philosophy and logic, so he became a schoolteacher. He was forced to transfer a few times for beating his pupils too severely.

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

Some of Ted Chiang’s stories, which might be called science fiction, and Samanta Schweblin’s very disturbing short stories in her collection “Mouthful of Birds.” There are song lyricists I admire — many of whom are songwriters who write very different from the way I do. Mark Kozelek, who goes by the name of Sun Kil Moon, and Kurt Wagner of Lambchop both often write about banal situations in ways that have large emotional resonance. Their lyrics are conversational — something I haven’t been able to do.

What are the best books about music you’ve read?

“Fargo Rock City,” by Chuck Klosterman, was pretty great.

Also “Waves Passing in the Night,” by Lawrence Weschler, about Walter Murch. The old idea of a harmony of the spheres might have a bit of truth to it! The universe operates by “musical” laws was the old belief — we musicians might nod in agreement. Murch has also written about sound as it manifests in his work as a sound editor of movies. (“Blink of an Eye.”) While not exactly music these insights influence how I listen to the world.

Do you have any comfort reads?

Haha, a guilty pleasure — H. P. Lovecraft.

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

Oh yes, I often send clippings of inspiring passages. And often I then get others back. I have read passages aloud to friends. Sharing words is like sharing food.

Which subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

I’ll turn it around — most writers should avoid writing about writers as their main characters. I know, I know, “write what you know.” □

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

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Life and Death Collide

The title of Sigrid Nunez's book asks a timely question.



TALLULAH FONTAINE

By JANICE Y.K. LEE

READING SIGRID NUNEZ'S absorbing new novel is somewhat akin to having a long conversation with someone who is telling you something very important, but is telling it in a very quiet voice. You have to really pay attention. Be assured, however, that the experience will be worth it. You will emerge calmer, meditative, more

WHAT ARE YOU GOING THROUGH

By Sigrid Nunez

224 pp. Riverhead Books. \$26.

thoughtful, as if you have benefited from an excellent literary massage of sorts.

In "What Are You Going Through," Nunez tells the simplest of stories — about a woman accompanying a terminally ill friend through her last months — and expands it into an exploration of the largest of themes: nothing less than the realities of living and dying in this world and how we feel about both. In the opening pages, the woman goes to visit her dying friend in the hospital and attends a talk at a local college given by a famous academic we later discover is her ex. He is the author of a viral

article about the imminent apocalypse of climate change, how "It was all over," that "Our world and our civilization would not endure" and "We must live and die in this new knowledge." He goes on to say that it is useless "to deny that suffering of immense magnitude lay ahead, or that there'd be any escaping it." The stoic dispassion of the speaker belies the horror of what he is foretelling, and the narrator wonders if he will offer "a crumb, if only a crumb it be, of hope."

This is, of course, a parallel to what the narrator's friend is experiencing as she faces the end of her life. After recovering enough to go home and plan how she wants the remainder of her life to be, she decides to end her life on her own terms. To this end, the sick friend persuades the narrator (the lack of names renders the prose plain-spoken and somehow transcendent) to be her companion on her last chapter, although she confides with an amused expression, "I know your feelings won't be hurt when I say that you weren't my first choice." After the narrator agrees, the friend texts, "I promise to make it as fun as possible," then sends her photos of the house she wants to rent as if they are going on vacation together.

Her sick friend is perhaps more ambivalent than she seems. Upon arriving at the rental, she bursts into tears when she realizes she has forgotten the pills back home.

Like the best of our writers, Nunez is a bit of a seer and a prophet.

Later, pills safely retrieved, she curses at the narrator for daring to suggest she might harbor any doubts. They settle in to make the business of dying as pleasant as possible.

The specter of future generations hangs over all of these issues: the moral question of whether to bring children into such a bleak and foundering world. The ex (who becomes a somewhat regular confidant) posits this as a moral dilemma; he is alienated from his son by having been vocally appalled that he is choosing to have multiple children. The friend's relationship with her daughter has been fraught since birth ("I'd swear the kid was a changeling") and they have minimal contact or warmth. And there is an odd and distinct lack of pleasure in children ("The truth is, every time I see a newborn now my heart sinks," the ex admits), although it's more melancholy than misanthropic.

Like the best of our writers, Nunez is a bit of a seer and a prophet (to wit: "Salvation City," her 2010 novel about a flu pandemic), and so it is discomfiting to imagine that what she presents here as the state of

the world could be true. It was with some relief I read these lines of beauty and hope during the friends' stay in the house: "Golden hour, magic hour, *l'heure bleue*. Evenings when the beauty of the changing sky made us both go still and dreamy. Sunlight falling at an angle across the lawn so that it touched our elevated feet, then moved up our bodies like a long slow blessing." And then, at the end of this elegant passage: "Infinitely rich, infinitely beautiful. Everything was going to be all right."

As her friend moves inexorably closer to the end, they stop speaking as "the farther along she was on her journey, the less she wanted to be distracted." They are now back in the friend's apartment after an accidental flood in the rental and the narrator spends her time quietly ministering to her friend's needs. During this period, the narrator vividly recalls past friends, past situations, as if vicariously experiencing the flashes of one's past life that are said to occur on the eve of death. Nunez's unerring and quietly observant eye burrows further and further into these experiences as if they will unearth an answer of sorts. And she realizes that "this saddest time that has also been one of the happiest times of my life will pass. And I'll be alone." Beauty, friendship, nature, art: These are the salves to loneliness and despair, and Nunez offers them all in this searching look into life and death. □

JANICE Y.K. LEE is the author of "The Piano Teacher" and "The Expatriates."

Toil and Trouble

LOUISE PENNY SENDS her Canadian detective to Paris in **ALL THE DEVILS ARE HERE** (*Minotaur, 448 pp., \$28.99*) — and not a moment too soon. Over the course of this endearing series of village mysteries, Chief Inspector Armand Gamache of the Sûreté du Québec has examined so many corpses and caught so many murderers that the Canadian hamlet of Three Pines must be running out of bodies, both warm and cold.

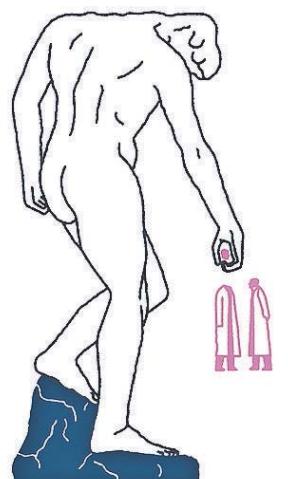
Gamache and his wife, Reine-Marie, are in Paris to attend the birth of their fourth grandchild, which gives Gamache the chance to visit his godfather, Stephen Horowitz. Their reunion takes place in the garden of the Musée Rodin, where the haunting statue of “The Burghers of Calais,” headed for the gallows to save their town, moves them to reflect on the notion of self-sacrifice. Penny will return to that theme at the end of the book, when someone observes: “It’s an amazing thing, to be willing to die for each other.”

Gamache’s love is put to the test when someone in a van tries to run down his godfather, sending him to the hospital near death. An accident? The inspector thinks not. But what has Horowitz, a kind and generous old billionaire, ever done to make someone want to murder him? To answer that question, Gamache undertakes a dizzying investigation that takes him all over the city, from the top of the Eiffel Tower to the depths of the national archives.

Although Penny touches on a wide range of subjects in this expansive story, her main concern is with the sacrifices we make for those we love. Here, even the loving relationship between Gamache and his son, Daniel, is challenged. If you think about it, the underlying theme of all of Penny’s books is Honor Thy Family — the one you were born with, the one you’ve acquired during your lifetime and the Family of Man.

MARILYN STASIO has covered crime fiction for the Book Review since 1988. Her column appears twice a month.

♦
HOWEVER MUCH we may romanticize the Middle Ages, visions of primitive dentistry invariably kill that fantasy. To take the edge off the agony, Adelia Aguilar, the skilled herbalist and healer in Ariana Franklin’s superb medieval mysteries, might offer the sufferer a cup of poppy-head tea, which is basically pure cocaine. **DEATH AND THE MAIDEN** (*Morrow, 412 pp., \$27.99*), written by the late author’s daughter, Samantha Norman, completes the “Mistress of the Art of Death” series with an appropriate homage, a story featuring mother-and-daughter



PABLO AMARGO

sleuths. Both Adelia and her daughter, Allie, address their skills to solving the murders of young women whose violated bodies are discovered in the Fens. But the urgency to find a husband for Allie also drives the story.

The forensic procedures are appropriately grotesque (leeches, anyone?), and the period settings run to luscious details, like “a perfect pastry sculpture of the baby Jesus” at a sumptuous Christmas banquet. Don’t be distracted from Norman’s true theme; namely, the crushingly limited life choices for women — even the most highborn women — of this period.

♦
WHO DOESN’T LOVE “large and shabby” Vera Stanhope, the blunt detective in Ann Cleeves’s

Northumberland police procedurals? She is already one of the genre immortals. Cleeves delivers some choice Vera moments in **THE DARKEST EVENING** (*Minotaur, 373 pp., \$27.99*), beginning with her rescue of a toddler in the middle of a blinding blizzard. (Nature red in tooth and claw is a favorite subject of this author, whose early mysteries about pretty birds and homicidal bird-watchers are unsung classics.)

“Vera’s experience of small children was limited,” we are drolly informed, so she hastily deposits the child at the nearest house. This proves to be a gracious old pile known as Brockburn, where a party of vacuous people are sitting down to eat dinner and assassinate the characters of absent friends. But after a farmer on a tractor uncovers a woman’s body half buried in the snow, dinner is once again interrupted and the guests couldn’t be more delighted “about being in their very own country-house murder mystery.” And who could blame them?

♦
NOIR, NOIR, NOIR — everybody wants to write noir fiction. But most self-anointed “noir” narratives just don’t hack it. They’re dark and dreary, to be sure; but a true noir mystery must also have a black heart. This kind of spiritual despair comes naturally to Stuart Neville, whose Belfast crime novels bleed. The title novella in **THE TRAVELLER AND OTHER STORIES** (*Soho Crime, 336 pp., \$27.95*) features his brilliant contract killer, Gerry Fegan, who gave us the miseries in “The Ghosts of Belfast” and returns here as a revenant.

Bearing the ghastly physical scars from being burned to death, the hit man is still plying his merciless trade. His current assignment is to eliminate Jack Lennon, after first killing his little girl, Ellen, in front of his eyes. Fegan goes through some mental anguish about this, but a job is a job. Only this time, he’s being pursued by “the Others” — the souls of all the people he murdered — and that makes all the difference in the world. □

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Mapping the Mind

A theory that hopes to account for why people from Western countries think differently.

By DANIEL C. DENNETT

ACCORDING TO COPIES of copies of fragments of ancient texts, Pythagoras in about 500 B.C. exhorted his followers: *Don't eat beans!* Why he issued this prohibition is anybody's guess (Aristotle thought he knew), but it doesn't much matter because the idea never caught on.

According to Joseph Henrich, some unknown early church fathers about a thousand years later promulgated the edict: *Don't marry your cousin!* Why they did this is also unclear, but if Henrich is right — and he develops a fascinating case

genetically indistinguishable but profoundly different psychologically.

WEIRD folk are the more recent development, growing out of the innovation of agriculture about 10,000 years ago, the birth of states and organized religions about 3,000 years ago, then becoming "proto-WEIRD" over the last 1,500 years (thanks to the prohibition on marrying one's cousin), culminating in the biologically sudden arrival of science, industry and the "modern" world during the last 500 years or so. WEIRD minds evolved by natural selection, but not by genetic selection; they evolved by the natural selection of cultural practices and other culturally transmitted items.

Henrich is an anthropologist at Harvard. He and his colleagues first described the WEIRD mind in a critique of all the work in human psychology (and the social sciences more generally) built on experimental subjects almost exclusively composed of undergraduates — or the children of academics and others who live near universities. The results obtained drawing on this conveniently available set of "normal" people were assumed by almost all researchers to be universal features of human nature, the human brain, the human emotional system. But when attempts were made to replicate the experiments with people in other countries, not just illiterate hunter-gatherers and subsistence farmers but the elites in Asian countries, for instance, it was shown in many cases that the subject pool of the original work had been hugely biased from the outset.

One of the first lessons that must be learned from this important book is that the WEIRD mind is real; all future investigation of "human nature" must be complicated by casting a wider net for subjects, and we must stop assuming that our ways are "universal." Offhand, I cannot think of many researchers who haven't tacitly adopted some dubious universalist assumptions. I certainly have. We will all have to change our perspective.

Many of the WEIRD ways of thinking, Henrich shows, are the result of cultural differences, not genetic differences. And that is another lesson that the book drives home: Biology is not just genes. Language, for instance, was not *invented*; it *evolved*. So did religion, music, art, ways of hunting and farming, norms of behavior and attitudes about kinship that leave measurable differences on our psychology and even on our brains.

To point to just one striking example:

Normal, meaning non-WEIRD, people use left and right hemispheres of their brains about equally for facial recognition, but we WEIRD people have co-opted left-hemisphere regions for language tasks, and are significantly worse at recognizing faces than the normal population. Until recently few researchers imagined that growing up in a particular culture could have such an effect on functional neuroanatomy.

The centerpiece of Henrich's theory is the role played by what he calls the Roman

tion, aside from noticing that by weakening the traditional bonds of kinship, the church got rich fast. One of Henrich's goals is to devalue the residual traces of "Great Man" history, so he would be reluctant to rely on any ancient documents that came to light recounting the "real" reasons for the church's embattled stand on these issues. As a good evolutionist, he can say, "The church was just the 'lucky one' that bumbled across an effective recombination of supernatural beliefs and practices." But as for why the church fathers enforced these prohibitions so tenaciously against resistance over the centuries, this is still a bit of a mystery.

Around the world today there is still huge variation in the societies where cousin marriages are permitted and even encouraged, and societies in which it is close to forbidden. There are good reasons for supposing that our early hominin ancestors were organized for tens of thousands of years by tight kinship relations, which still flourish today in most societies. So what happened in Europe starting in the middle of the first millennium was a major development, largely restricted to or at least concentrated in certain cultures where positive feedback turned small tendencies into large differences that then turned further differences into the birth of WEIRD culture and WEIRD minds.

This is an extraordinarily ambitious book, along the lines of Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs and Steel," which gets a brief and respectful mention, but going much farther, and bolstering the argument at every point with evidence gathered by Henrich's "lab," with dozens of collaborators, and wielding data points from world history, anthropology, economics, game theory, psychology and biology, all knit together with "statistical razzle-dazzle" when everyday statistics is unable to distinguish signal from noise. The endnotes and bibliography take up over 150 pages and include a fascinating range of discussions.

The book bristles with apologies for not having gathered quite enough data on various questions and hence settling for somewhat tentative hypotheses, warnings about not confusing correlation with causation, and occasionally tart admonitions, like "Some critics will ignore these points and pretend I never made them." One can often discover a lot about an organism's predators by seeing what defenses it has put in place. Henrich is ex-



Catholic Church's Marriage and Family Program, featuring prohibitions of polygamy, divorce, marriage to first cousins, and even to such distant blood relatives as sixth cousins, while discouraging adoption and arranged marriages and the strict

If you are reading this you are very probably WEIRD.

norms of inheritance that prevailed in extended families, clans and tribes. "The accidental genius of Western Christianity was in 'figuring out' how to dismantle kin-based institutions while at the same time catalyzing its own spread."

The genius was accidental, according to Henrich, because the church authorities who laid down the laws had little or no insight into what they were setting in mo-

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pecting a battle, and well he might.

There has long been a hostile divide between physical anthropologists, who have labs and study hominid bone fossils, for instance, and cultural anthropologists who spend a few seasons in the jungle learning the language and ways of a hunter-gatherer tribe, for instance, or today, spend a few seasons studying the folkways of stock traders or baristas. Henrich is a cultural anthropologist but he wants to do it right, with controls, experiments, statistics and factual claims that can be shown to be right or wrong. In 1960 the field of clometrics was born, history done with large data sets and statistics, and Henrich wants to show just how far this approach can be pushed. Traditional historians and the more informal cultural anthropologists will see themselves being confronted with a methodology few of them use and challenged to de-

fend their impressionistic hypotheses against his lab-based results.

The virtues of having a theory to guide investigation are vividly displayed. Who would have thought to ask if the prevalence of rice paddies in different small regions of China played the same causal role that distance from a monastery played in Europe? Or why blood donations are strikingly lower in southern Italy than in northern Italy today. Or how testosterone levels differ dramatically during the life histories of men from WEIRD societies and men from kin-intensive societies. Henrich has found dozens of ways of testing aspects of his theory, and it stands up remarkably well, yielding many surprising predictions that find multiple sources of confirmation, but that is not enough.

He admits that his research overlooks (so far) large portions of the world's popu-

lation, and when he counts societies instead of people to get his measure of how abnormal we WEIRD people are, one can wonder what percentage of the world's population is WEIRD today. The normals are turning into WEIRDS in droves, and almost nobody is going in the other direction, so if we WEIRDS aren't the majority yet, we soon will be, since societies with high Kinship Intensity Indexes evolve or go extinct almost as fast as the thousands of languages still in existence.

A good statistician (which I am not) should scrutinize the many uses of statistics made by Henrich and his team. They are probably all sound but he would want them examined rigorously by the experts. That's science. Experts who don't have the technical tools — historians and anthropologists especially — have an important role to play as well; they should scour the book

for any instances of Occam's broom (with which one sweeps inconvenient facts under the rug). This can be an innocent move, since Henrich himself, in spite of the astonishing breadth of his scholarship, is not expert in all of these areas and may simply be ignorant of important but little-known exceptions to his generalizations. His highly detailed and confident relaying of historical and anthropological facts impresses me, but what do I know? You can't notice what isn't mentioned unless you're an expert.

This book calls out for respectful but ruthless vetting on all counts, and what it doesn't need, and shouldn't provoke, is ideological condemnations or quotations of brilliant passages by revered authorities. Are historians, economists and anthropologists up to the task? It will be fascinating to see. □

Piano Forte

A quest for rare instruments and the historical figures who played them.

By SOPHIE PINKHAM

NO MUSICAL INSTRUMENT connotes bourgeois European respectability like the piano. Large, unwieldy and expensive, a good piano is a mark of affluence and stability. With its delicate balance of wood and strings, it also requires a stable climate. For all these reasons, the piano is not often associated with Siberia.

In "The Lost Pianos of Siberia," the Eng-

the 19th century." In the end, Sampilnorov gets her piano, and Roberts a travel narrative in which Siberia's sublimely harsh natural setting, brutal history and exotic folk traditions are placed in contrast with the great percussive symbol of European civilization.

In 1774, Catherine the Great ordered a square *piano anglais* — then the hot new instrument — from England. By the beginning of the 19th century many affluent Russian households had pianofortes, and piano lessons and recitals were in high demand. Russia eventually produced outstanding classical composers and musicians, among them pianists like Anton and Nikolai Rubinstein and Sergei Rachmaninoff. The 1917 Revolution scattered and destroyed many of Russia's pianos, but the Soviets later brought affordable pianos, as well as musical education, to people who could not otherwise have afforded to touch such an instrument.

As Russians and other travelers moved east — first as explorers, traders and colonizers and later as political exiles and prisoners — their musical instruments went with them. Anna Bering, the wife of the Danish maritime explorer Vitus Bering, brought a clavichord from St. Petersburg to the Sea of Okhotsk in the 1730s, traveling 6,000 miles by sleigh, boat and horse, and then brought it back again. Maria Volkonsky, the famously devoted wife of one of the Decembrists, brought a piano when she joined her husband in exile in Irkutsk, soon dubbed the "Paris of Siberia."

Another Siberian town, Kyakhta, was known in its 19th-century heyday as Asia's

"Sandy Venice": a stopping point on the tea-caravan road from Mongolia. There rich merchants bought pianos and hired exiled Poles (their country had produced Chopin, after all) to teach their children to play. Much later, Stalin-era music education campaigns sent Soviet-made upright pianos to Siberian music schools. There were even pianos in the Gulag, where prisoners put on musical performances. Roberts tries to locate some of these instruments, with varying degrees of success. In the process, she discovers and recounts stories of Siberian musicians and music lovers.

Much of "The Lost Pianos of Siberia" consists of neat summaries of major events in Russian history — the Decembrist uprising, the Gulag — and well-known anecdotes, such as Chekhov's trip to Sakhalin Island, and the composition and debut of Shostakovich's "Leningrad" Symphony during World War II. This is not a book for readers already familiar with Russian history.

Nor is it a book for music buffs. There are many pianos, but there is remarkably little about music. Roberts's descriptions of landscapes are as lovely as fine embroidery, but when she searches for words to describe music she comes up empty. She describes the "pace" of Russian bells as "an exhilarating distillation of music's power." When she fails to locate the Romanovs' last piano in Tobolsk, she reminds herself to "just find a piano with a pure sound . . . something humble, human and loved." In the epilogue, as she listens to Sampilnorov play her new instrument, she

thinks, "This was music at its best: intimate, pure and true."

Pianos are delicate instruments that do not endure forever, especially under harsh weather conditions. Like Lenin's corpse, a very old piano will have to be reconstituted from new materials if it is to persevere. But Roberts loves a relic, and she is convinced of the value of individual pianos as testaments to the lives and experiences of their owners, and to history. "Each piano sings differently because of the people who used to play it and polish its wooden case," she writes. This is the magical approach to objects that prevails in house museums, which rely on possessions as a kind of spirit medium. But a reader cannot finger the keys of these instruments or peep inside at the strings and hammers, touching the piano and communing with its former owner. A reader is reading, and words will have to do.

At one point Roberts fails to find the pianos she's seeking in the Chinese city of Harbin, which became a haven for refugees from the 1917 Revolution. "It was as if there was no past before Mao . . . no spectacular refugees who had brought with them (and left behind) that brilliant early sound of jazz," she writes of the experience. "The sense of dystopia struck me forcefully, how an object can lose its meaning when it has lost its owner's story, like a body detached from its soul, or a refugee from his homeland." It's a thin line between memorabilia and the detritus of the past; every piano will rot eventually. But stories, like songs, you can carry with you forever. □

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Against Destiny

The latest novel in Marilynne Robinson's Gilead series features an unlikely romance in a Jim Crow city.

By ELAINE SHOWALTER

FOR MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S devotees, John Ames Boughton, the titular Jack of the fourth volume of her award-winning Gilead novels, is one of the most eagerly awaited literary figures since Godot. He is a prodigal son who returns home bearing heavy secrets. A self-styled Prince of Darkness, an atheist who fears he is "irretrievably consigned to perdition," Jack gives off a raffish existential allure. His sister compares him to Cary Grant and Raskolnikov; his godfather describes him

JACK

By Marilynne Robinson

309 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$27.

as a man whom "you wouldn't much want your daughter to marry," yet who is "somehow elegant and brave."

Readers of the previous novels — "Gilead" (2004), "Home" (2008) and "Lila" (2014) — have seen Jack through the eyes of other characters, whose stories mesh, contradict and complicate one another in patterns so beautifully intricate that I envisioned Robinson drafting the series from an enormous storyboard. (Astonishingly, however, as she explained in an interview, she "never actually planned to write a second Gilead novel," let alone four.) In the latest book, we get Jack's story from his own perspective and learn what happened during the first decade of his exile.

Until now, the series was set in Gilead, Iowa, a fictional rural village that was once a stop on the Underground Railroad, when Ulysses S. Grant called Iowa the "shining star" of Midwestern abolitionism. Robinson is acclaimed for her numinous accounts of faith, forgiveness and hope, but read in this electrifying year of national crisis, the Gilead books are unified as well by her unsparing indictment of the American history of racism and inequality, and Christianity's uneven will to fight them.

Jack first appears in "Gilead" as a disturbing presence in the quiet life of the elderly Rev. John Ames. "Smart as the devil," but a petty thief and delinquent, Jack is Ames's namesake and a child of his best friend, the Presbyterian minister Robert Boughton. The young renegade disgraced his family by impregnating a local girl and abandoning her and the baby. The child died before her fourth birthday; the girl ran off to Chicago, and Jack stayed away for 20 silent years, refusing to come home even for his mother's funeral.

When he returns in 1956, ostensibly to comfort his ailing father, Ames is hostile. But he forgives him after hearing Jack explain his situation: He has come home to Gilead in desperation to find a place to live

safely with his Black common-law wife, Della, and son, Robert. But Gilead is no longer a sanctuary. Its small Black church was set ablaze, in an arson Ames calls "a little nuisance fire," and the congregation left town. Although Ames feels some compassion for Jack, he can't offer any real help, and only bestows a farewell blessing as Jack leaves town again.

"Home" is set at the same time, but told through the point of view of Jack's youngest sister, Glory. Despite Jack's "inaccessible strangeness," she figures out that her brother is separated from the woman he loves, and that his daily letters to her in Memphis are returned unopened. He doesn't tell Glory that Della is Black. Yet he is following the burgeoning civil rights movement in the South, and is outraged by the violent abuse of young Black protesters. His father, however, is comfortable with the situation: "So much bad blood. I think we had all better just keep to ourselves." In his complacent orthodoxy, segregation is another form of predestination; the races were meant to be apart.

Lila, Ames's wife, whose early years as an impoverished migrant Robinson recounts in the third volume, is most in sympathy with Jack, another outsider who senses his fundamental goodness. She insists that no life is predestined: "A person can change. Everything can change." Anyone who has read these radiant novels, I think, will be interested in reading Jack Boughton's own narrative, and seeing how and why he has changed.

"Jack" is a love story set in post-war St. Louis, where he went after he left Gilead. While his family thinks he is unrepentant, Jack is actually tormented by guilt and shame. Alcoholic and suicidal, he has eaten at soup kitchens, compulsively pocketed a few shiny objects, been in prison and spent many cold days in the public library reading poetry. He has given up on his future, aspiring only to "utter harmlessness."

On a rainy afternoon, when he is half intending to go home to his mother's funeral, he encounters Della Miles, an English teacher at a Black high school, the highly educated daughter of a distinguished Memphis bishop, and an aspiring poet. She and Jack bond through a mutual interest in poetry; Poe, Frost, Auden, H.D., William Carlos Williams, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Shakespeare and especially Milton will come up in the course of their romance. In defiance of maidenly decorum and racial taboos, she asks Jack in for tea.

But their courtship has to be conducted in a Jim Crow city where an interracial couple is a highly visible target. In her Black neighborhood, he is That White Man; in his boardinghouse, she is a conspicuous "col-

ored gal," and their first date is a humiliating disaster for Jack. Della forgives him, and continues to see him despite his unreliability, drunkenness and poverty, not to mention the horrified opposition of her family. But where can they go? There's no friendly friar to help these star-crossed lovers, and they first speak freely to each other in a strange dreamlike episode, composing about a fifth of the novel, when they are locked overnight in a cemetery.

It's a scene out of Shakespearean romance. They wander barefoot among the monuments; she quotes a line from "Ham-

threadbare Fred Astaire, plays piano for the choir of a Black Baptist church. Redeemed by Della's love and loyalty, he goes to Memphis to meet her father, who tells him that "Della and any children can come here if they want to, or need to, so long as they come without you." A follower of the Pan-African separatist Marcus Garvey, Bishop Miles believes that Black Americans must change their circumstances, but that they alone can decide "what form the change will take and how it will be achieved." He doesn't believe in interracial marriage, and Della says, "I probably don't either." But she also believes that her attraction to Jack's soul is divinely ordained, "and if you love God, every choice is made for you. There is no turning away."

Loneliness and love, race and grace; the romance of Jack and Della seems hopeful, courageous and moving. But "Jack" also presents a number of problems — to new readers who may not pick up the oblique references to Jack's troubled youth, and to faithful readers who may find the scrambled time scheme of his relationship with Della frustratingly difficult to follow.

Jack's redemption and development, his sensitivity and sardonic humor, are most winningly represented in his exchanges with other characters. But he doesn't have much insight into his own motives, and his self-obsessed ruminations about his doomed "Jackness. Jackitude. Jackicity" also exclude interest in other people. Although he doesn't have any conscious prejudices or beliefs about race, Jack also hasn't noticed or thought about it much. Della warns him that if they marry, their children will "be Negroes and they'll live Negro lives. And you won't have any effect on that at all"; he says that doesn't bother him. He has a lot to learn.

It's easy to see why Jack wants Della, but hard to see why this intellectual, perceptive, charming and secretly angry woman wants him, and risks her family, career and security not only to join but also to save him. Her rapturous embrace of his soul seems premature and worrisome, especially because he has concealed the worst of his past from her. And we know from "Home" how their fairy-tale romance will turn out. What is her back story?

Asked whether she might write another Gilead novel, Robinson has been evasive, although the publisher will not say that "Jack" is the final book. In 1956, when Jack and Della are separated and their lives are seemingly destroyed by racism, they are still relatively young, the civil rights movement is beginning, and there is time for them to change. I am looking forward to a fifth volume that will fill in their saga, and I hope it will be called "Della." □



Marilynne Robinson

An unsparing indictment of American racism, and Christianity's uneven will to fight it.

let" and he comes right back with the next one. As their conversation grows more serious and intimate, they imagine that in the dark graveyard they have become "ghosts among the ghosts," spirits free from racial regulations. Della confides that behind her facade as "a perfect Christian lady," she too is tormented by a rage that "never goes away." But she does not believe in self-pity, and calls on Jack to take control of his life.

Enamored and inspired, he vows to become a respectable suitor, stop drinking and get a job. In the more lighthearted second half of the novel, he sells shoes in a dusty Dickensian shop, teaches fox trot and mambo to St. Louis matrons like some

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A Better Binary

How math might help us end the gender wars.

By CATHY O'NEIL

EUGENIA CHENG IS A MATHEMATICIAN, a musician and a writer. In her newest book, “*X+Y: A Mathematician’s Manifesto for Rethinking Gender*,” she introduces mathematical structure to the debate on gender in order to clarify and focus the conversation in helpful, nondivisive ways.

Specifically, Cheng draws from her field of category theory the concept of characterizing things by their relation to other things rather than by explicit descriptions of their makeup. In its simplest form, that

X+Y
A Mathematician’s Manifesto for Rethinking Gender

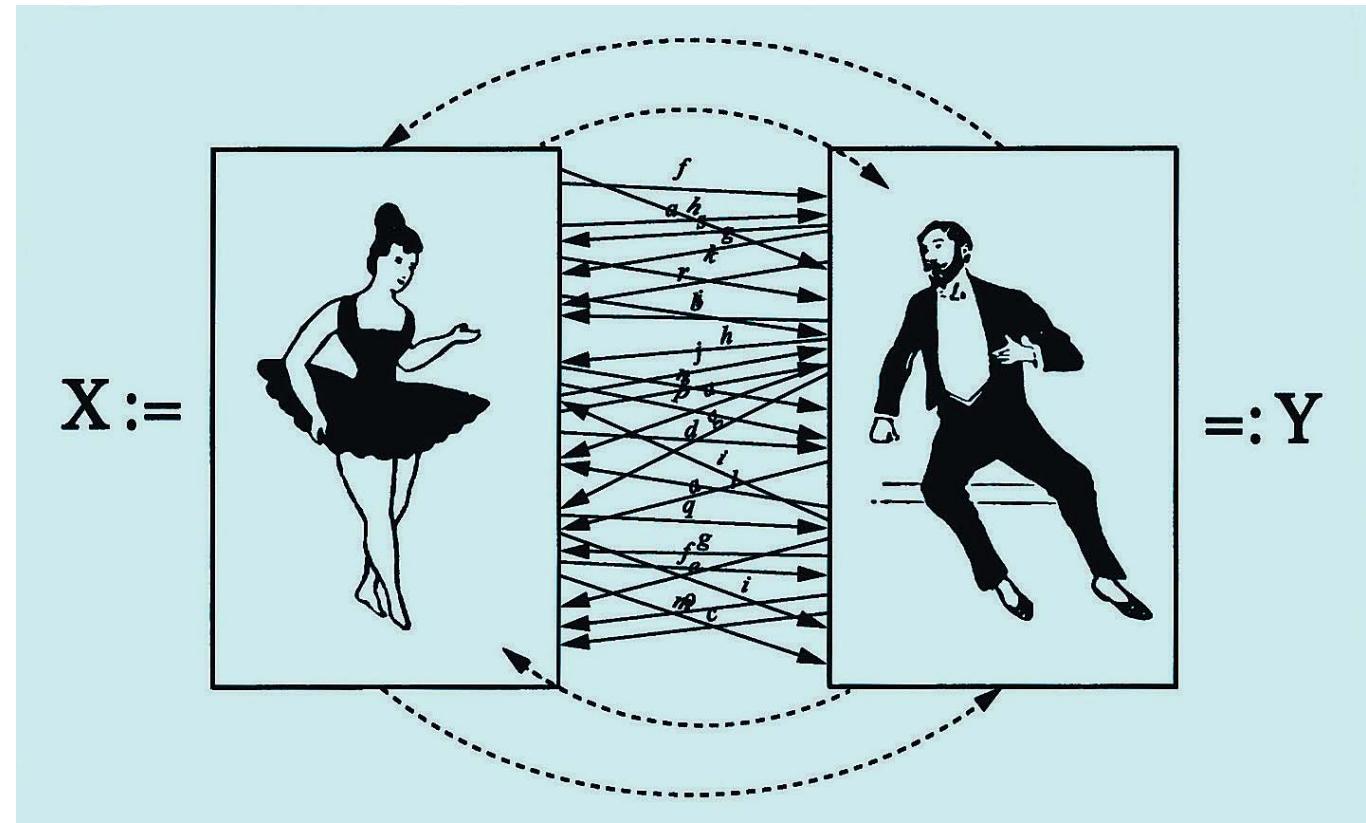
By Eugenia Cheng
288 pp. Basic Books. \$28.

means describing a human as a parent or worker rather than by unique identifiers or DNA sequences. But in this case, she wants to do that with something we already consider abstract, namely gendered behavior traits. Instead of defining people and their daily activities explicitly by gender, she’s devised a notation — the words “ingressive” and “congressive” — that describes the social behavior of people while ignoring the specific individuals behind those behaviors.

Her argument is that doing this will strip away unnecessary and confusing details, “a bit like the fact that it would be hard to carry a concealed weapon on a nude beach.” So, even as she adds what she calls a mathematical abstraction to the discussion, she claims it will allow us to remove confusing and unnecessary scaffolding.

To set up this “removing by adding” metaphor, she discusses mathematical notations that have done similar things. For example, she argues that by introducing the concept of i — the square root of negative one — and the accompanying notion of a complex plane, we may have temporarily made things more confusing, but we get so much clarity from it (the geometric understanding of the n th roots of unity, for example) that the added complexity pays off. It adds clarity even as it adds a dimension to our thinking, or to her point, perhaps because it adds a dimension to our thinking and gives us more room to move.

The first half of the book is devoted to preparing the reader for the big reveal: the added structure to the concept of binary gendered people and roles that will add a dimension to our thinking and reveal better approaches to our discussions. By relating personal stories, historical examples and mathematical analogies, Cheng explains how, when we rely on simplistic concepts like female and male, and the



TALA SAFIE

crusty logic that accompanies those concepts, we cannot have good conversations. As Cheng puts it: “If we object to the idea that ‘men are better,’ it’s not that helpful to declare instead that ‘women are better.’ It pits men and women against each other and sets up a prescriptive framework

Eugenia Cheng’s notions bring clarity even as they add a dimension to our thinking.

rather than a descriptive one.” She motivates us to strip away consistent triggers for dumb fights that lead nowhere.

What would she have us strip away? This is where Cheng becomes a logician. She wants to carefully think through our associations with the word “success” as they relate to gender. For example, she argues, it’s common enough to question why men are considered deeply different from women when the actual distributions overlap in most ways you can measure them, besides exceptions like the ability to bear children (yes, she mentions transgender men who can bear children). It’s also common to point out that “men’s attributes” such as competitiveness are more associated with success and are thus more rewarded, leading to all kinds of bad causal arguments that justify misogyny. What Cheng does now, though, is root out the underlying assumption that competitiveness is actually a good thing. What if it

isn’t? That’s a question we often don’t get to, but when we refuse explicit mention of gender in behavior, we can discuss competitiveness’s flaws and benefits without specifically pointing fingers or assigning blame.

Armed with her new notation, Cheng goes on to describe examples of group or individual behavior as *ingressive*, which broadly means individualistic, or *congressive*, which broadly means communitarian, in the realms of mathematics, musical competitions or business meetings.

Cheng is not neutral. She definitely prefers a world that is less ingressive and more congregative. She identifies as someone who had to learn to adapt to the ingressive world of mathematics but has since found a better path, and she suggests we’d all be better off doing what she’s done.

What would that look like? She has advice. The last few chapters of the book are devoted to responding congregatively to ingressive situations. And although she acknowledges that some people who have already made it in an ingressive world will not benefit from a more congregative one, she urges the reader to try anyway.

It’s easy to criticize this book. What good are two new words for stuff we already associate with male behavior or female behavior? For that matter, some of her advice for behaving congregatively sounds a lot like signing up for emotional labor that — yes, I’ll say it — women already do too much of. More generally, just because she seems aware of institutional power doesn’t mean

she has a viable approach to dealing with it.

And yet, as a female mathematician who also grappled with the exact environment that she describes so well, I realize she’s put her finger on something that I hadn’t been able to articulate before, and her new notation helps. I’ve been by turns a mathematics professor, hedge fund quant and data scientist, working in nearly-all-male environments. It doesn’t appeal to me to describe my discomfort in those environments as a result of sexism, because to be honest I mostly didn’t feel singled out for being a woman (although sometimes I did). I simply felt as if the environment was unappealing, and would be deeply unappealing to anyone who wanted to feel like part of a generous community. I can now say it efficiently: I want to work in congregative environments, and I want to work with other people who also want to work in congregative environments. It feels like progress to be able to say this without reference to gender.

This is an important topic and an important time to find better ways to have conversations. So even if there are weaknesses in this paradigm, most of them are identified and admitted by Cheng herself. She even suggests a generous reading of her manifesto, again by analogy: “In mathematics a theory is judged by the breadth of examples it unifies and the amount of light it sheds on those examples.” A theory doesn’t have to be perfect to be useful. I’d say the same for Cheng’s manifesto on gender. □

The Man From Plains

A new biography chronicles the feats and failures of Jimmy Carter.

By DAVID GREENBERG

READING JONATHAN ALTER'S weighty new biography, "His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, a Life," one can't help thinking of a mischievous question: Is it possible to pick a single most humiliating moment of Carter's presidency?

Was it the day Islamic revolutionaries overran the American Embassy in Tehran, beginning a 444-day captivity drama? When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, effectively restarting the Cold War? When the "misery index" — the unemployment rate

tackling the nation's problems at a turning point in history.

In his preface, Alter promises to advance a revisionist brief for Carter's presidency. And he has some persuasive evidence, including Carter's "prescience on the environment," his reintroduction of human rights into foreign-policy making and his appointment of women and minorities to the federal judiciary. But the book is no apologia. It exposes Carter's weaknesses as well as his undervalued strengths, his reverberating failures as well as his unsung triumphs. Above all, it shows how the qualities that propelled Carter to the pin-

the region's pervasive racism. His stern, conservative father, Earl, "prided himself on treating Black people with what he, in blinkered fashion, considered respect," Alter writes, while still very much a creature of the white rural South. In contrast, Jimmy's mother, Lillian, a nurse, was liberal and tolerant, treating Jimmy's Black friends as equals — although as Alter shows, she too harbored her prejudices. (As late as 1977, she opposed interracial marriage.) When Joe Louis fought Max Schmeling, Earl cheered for the German, Lillian for the Brown Bomber.

These mixed messages about racial dif-

HIS VERY BEST

Jimmy Carter, a Life

By Jonathan Alter

782 pp. Simon & Schuster. \$37.50.

plus the inflation rate — scraped 20 percent?

Or would it be a personal embarrassment, as when Carter, having taken up the jogging craze, collapsed during a 10K race in the Catoctin Mountains? When he reported having been attacked by a "vicious-looking, oversized swamp rabbit" while fishing? Or when The Boston Globe mistakenly headlined its story about one of his speeches, "Mush From the Wimp"?

No presidency evokes feelings of frustration and missed opportunity more than that of James Earl Carter Jr. Turned out of office after one term amid a cratering economy and a shambles of a foreign policy, deemed too conservative by liberals and too liberal by conservatives, Carter has been orphaned by biographers. He can boast of no Boswell, no library of must-read studies like those that exist for Reagan, Nixon, Johnson or Kennedy.

But this is changing. In 2018, the former Carter aide Stuart Eizenstat published a detailed account of his boss's career, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Kai Bird has one in the works. Jonathan Alter's important, fair-minded, highly readable contribution to this literature provides not just an authoritative introduction to Carter's feats and failures but also insight into why a man of such intelligence, drive and noble intentions floundered in the White House as haplessly as he did.

The reception of presidential biographies usually centers on how to rank the chief executive in question — a perennial parlor game. Was the president overrated or underrated? Does he merit new appreciation or a thorough debunking? But these evaluative questions are the least interesting ones to ask. More meaningful are analyses that locate a politician in context — that explain how an individual, with a unique character and set of ideas, fared in



President Carter at the 1980 Democratic National Convention.

nacle of American politics also kept him from rising to his historical moment.

A longtime magazine journalist, Alter has written acclaimed books on Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Barack Obama (and an essay for a volume I co-edited about the historian Alan Brinkley, a mentor to both of us). For this biography, he conducted scores of interviews, including more than a dozen with Carter himself. He has sifted through archives, oral histories, unpublished diaries and secondary literature. His assessment of Carter the man — disciplined, driven, stubborn, detail-oriented, technocratic, pious — doesn't break radically from that of other historians. But Alter keeps Carter's myriad facets in view throughout, rendering his subject with a depth rarely achieved by political journalism.

Although Carter's presidency constitutes the heart of the book, Alter spends 300 pages on his pre-presidential years, tracing the formation of Carter's character and politics. He illuminates the racial climate of Carter's boyhood in the Jim Crow South of the 1930s — hanging out with friends who were Black while still imbibing

ference rippled unevenly through Carter's early career. At the Naval Academy, cadets mocked the earnest, toothy lad for sticking up for Wesley Brown, their one Black classmate; later, Carter faced down the local White Citizens' Council in his hometown of Plains, Ga. But he pretty much sat out the civil rights movement, and managed never to meet his contemporary and fellow Georgian, Martin Luther King Jr. Worse, in 1970 Carter ran what Alter calls a "code word campaign" for governor, courting admirers of Alabama's George Wallace — only to pivot after winning and announce at his inauguration that "the time for racial discrimination is over." The ensuing encomiums, as much as anything, draped Carter in the credibility he needed to become a presidential contender in 1976.

When Alter reaches Carter's presidency, the theme of race drops away; economic and foreign issues dominated the agenda and the president's attention. In these chapters, the imperatives of analytic and narrative history come into conflict. To mount the revisionist argument that he hints at in his preface, Alter would have needed to rely on a

more analytical mode. But when it comes to Carter's unsung policy achievements, he cites or recounts them straightforwardly — the major exception being a riveting chapter on the landmark 1978-79 Israeli-Egyptian peace accords. Alter quotes the Carter aide Frank Moore boasting of some 26 legislative victories on the Hill, including on the environment, Civil Service reform, airline deregulation and more, but those battles receive nothing like the ticktock treatment that Alter gives the Camp David negotiations.

Ironically, when the book hits its narrative stride, it is largely a chronicle of defeat and drift. Alter's most gripping sections detail such unhappy stories as the hostage saga, the 1979 "malaise" speech (Carter's awkward rhetorical bid to confront the economic and energy crises), and the primary challenge he faced in 1980 from Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts — a challenge Carter repelled, but which dissolved the (provisional) loyalty of many liberal Democrats. In recounting these episodes, Alter digs up forgotten details that make Carter's travails even more excruciating than we might recall. Who remembers that, amid the Iranian crisis, Islamist radicals also torched the United States Embassies in Islamabad and Tripoli? Carter simply couldn't catch a break.

Throughout these later chapters, a weary, battered Carter struggles to summon his best self to face historic challenges, but continually runs into the limits of his own experience and character. His impulse to master the details of policy, so often an asset, kept him from trusting others. His fierce moralism, a welcome corrective to past administrations' realpolitik, prevented him from developing into a geopolitical strategist. Thoughtfulness in making decisions degenerated into dithering. Carter's approval rating sank as low as 28 percent — Nixon levels — and on Election Day in 1980, he was routed by the former B-movie actor and California governor Ronald Reagan. Twelve years of conservative governance followed, which may stand as Carter's ultimate legacy.

On Carter's post-presidency, Alter is also provocatively revisionist. He notes that besides building homes for Habitat for Humanity and monitoring foreign elections, Carter infuriated his White House successors by meddling in their foreign affairs. His exaggerated, one-sided criticisms of Israel tarnished his image as an honest broker in the Middle East.

Yet today at 96, Carter still teaches Sunday school in Plains, drawing hundreds of tourists who sleep in the church parking lot to snare a seat. Few of these pilgrims, surely, consider Carter a Rushmore-worthy president, but they admire what Alter calls his "core decency." In the lives of even those presidents who falter, after all there is drama and significance, pathos and inspiration — and a welter of experiences that are worth understanding if for no other reason than that they altered the course of our nation. □

DAVID GREENBERG, a historian at Rutgers University and the author of several books of political history, is writing a biography of Congressman John Lewis.

Deep Background

Two award-winning journalists share stories about how race has affected their careers.



From left: Jake Tapper of CNN and Univision's Ilia Calderón at a Democratic presidential debate; Maria Hinojosa of National Public Radio.

By FERNANDA SANTOS

"VOICE" IS ONE of the key elements of good writing. It's a writer's own twist and rhythm applied to a shared language, a patois of sorts. It's what makes words memorable and a text recognizably yours. For readers, it's what keeps us wanting more.

In the midst of a national reckoning about race, justice and equality, there has been a resurgent discussion around the idea of voice — one centered on who is telling stories, who should be telling them,

ties that pave the way to the top. These are distinctive narratives in tone and approach, ushering readers through time and space in situations where the authors are often defined by their status as immigrants and Latinos.

In her opening, Calderón turns the camera on herself, recalling her interview with a Ku Klux Klan leader who threatened her: "We're going to burn you out." She writes: "There's no doubt: I, Ilia Calderón Chamat" — she uses her full name here, highlighting the Syrian lineage she inherited from her mother's side of the family — "am Black. Colombian, Latina, Hispanic, Afro-Colombian, mixed and anything else people may want to call me or I choose to call myself, but I'm always Black." Race is a central theme of her story, underlining the significance of Calderón's professional ascendance in her native and adopted countries: She was the first Afro-Latina to anchor leading national newscasts in Colombia and on a major Spanish-language broadcast network in the United States.

Hinojosa focuses her introduction on a girl from Guatemala whom she encounters at an airport in McAllen, Texas, one of nine immigrant children about to be escorted onto a flight to Houston — and from there, who knows? Hinojosa and the girl stare at each other, a grown woman on her hands and knees looking for a plug to charge her phone and a "numb girl, the one with the gaze of nothingness, of just barely being human"; a child "anesthetized by some mysterious poison that kept you alive on the outside but dead on the inside." It's a jarring scene, punctuated by the bureaucratic coolness of the girl's chaperones, Hinojosa's tender reassurances in Spanish and the outrage she feels while witnessing "one of the greatest modern horrors of the U.S.A.," as she puts it, "the holding of innocent children; the transporting, trafficking, kidnapping of children by a government."

and how. Black, brown and Indigenous journalists, whose voices have been restrained time and again by the boundaries of objectivity framed by white counterparts, are mixing their own narratives with current events to create new guiding standards. Some may call this a biased approach to storytelling. I call it necessary perspective.

In their new memoirs, the Emmy Award-winning journalists Ilia Calderón ("My Time to Speak") and Maria Hinojosa ("Once I Was You") embrace their whole selves to offer evocative portrayals of their experiences as women of color in an industry where whiteness is still a factor in determining who gets first dibs on opportuni-

FERNANDA SANTOS teaches journalism at Arizona State University and is the author of *The Fire Line: The Story of the Granite Mountain Hotshots.*

Hinojosa's book is as much a manifesto as it is a memoir. The narrative is chiseled

by points of convergence between her own story and the history of immigration in this country. In one vivid passage, she recalls a childhood memory of desperate families fleeing Vietnam in small fishing vessels after the fall of Saigon. She notes the term used by newspapers at the time — "boat people" — then asks: "Should we call those waiting on the sidewalks at the border in Mexico 'concrete people'? What's next? How else can we otherize people from different places?"

There's an almost perverse similarity between Hinojosa's description of her arrival as a green-card-carrying child from Mexico in the 1960s and the arrival, in 2018, of a "mute and blind" asylum-seeking boy from Guatemala whom she introduces in the final pages of her book. Hinojosa is a child of privilege: Her family moved to the United States because her father, a doctor and researcher, was offered a full-time job at the University of Chicago. The boy she writes about has a different story: His family came to the United States to escape the mafia that had killed his grandfather and threatened to kill him and others in his family. Yet the overlap is telling. The government attempted to remove each of them from their mothers' arms as they arrived — Hinojosa while at the airport, where a customs agent threatened to quarantine her after mistaking an allergic rash for German measles; and the boy while at an immigration detention center, just because.

Her message is clear: Pedigrees don't matter much when you're brown. As a result, Hinojosa has made it her mission to shed light on the lives and stories that others refuse or aren't equipped to see. She has earned distinction after distinction in nearly 30 years as a journalist, working at public radio stations and for public, network and cable television news channels, often as the only Latina in the newsroom. Again and again, she recalls stories like one she worked on at NPR, about young boys who earned money by performing

back flips and other tricks outside an El Salvador hotel that housed foreign reporters during that country's civil war: "It was a story that had been right in front of journalists' faces for years and yet for them and therefore for the rest of us, these kids were invisible. Their stories didn't matter."

CALDERÓN IS LESS pointed in her criticism, whether she's considering media, government or general attitudes toward people of color in this country. She raises questions, but leaves them hanging. There were times when I wished she had dug more deeply into her own story and the broader dynamic of racial and ethnic strife that fuels so much of the discontent about our institutions these days, including the mainstream media. How, exactly, did she get used to the "army of girls with straight, long, silky hair" that she encountered in "white Medellín" as the only Black student in her Catholic school? How did it feel to be the only one left out of a call to audition for the anchor role in one of Colombia's leading national news programs? What does it say about Latinos if they, too, place a priority on white skin?

"My Time to Speak" shines when Calderón takes us to her family's hometown of Istmina, where "being Black wasn't 'out of this world.'" She brings adventure to the act of crossing a river by canoe, and depicts the aftermath of a machete attack on her grandfather as an act of shared love. She writes: "One by one, the neighbors — though no one had called them — began arriving at the door of the medical center to offer him their gift of life. There were so many blood donors, it was impossible to remember their names and thank them." Istmina is on her mind as she interviews the white supremacist — but in Istmina, "poverty wasn't so sad," her skin was "neither strange nor despised" and "mixed doesn't mean mestizo, mulatto, or simply Black and white," but "something much bigger, richer and more complex, which we carry with pride." □

Parental Control

In two memoirs, the scars of childhood trauma run deep.

By HELEN FREMONT

MANY OF US SPEND OUR ENTIRE LIVES coming to terms with what our parents have wrought (see Philip Larkin). In two very different debut memoirs — Vicki Laveau-Harvie's "The Erratics" and Gretchen Cherington's "Poetic License" — the authors, both now grandmothers, also have in common a financially privileged background, and an extremely narcissistic parent.

Laveau-Harvie, the winner of Australia's prestigious Stella Prize, was raised in

THE ERRATICS

By Vicki Laveau-Harvie

202 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$25.95.

POETIC LICENSE

A Memoir

By Gretchen Cherington

268 pp. She Writes Press. Paper, \$16.95.

the foothills of the Canadian Rockies by a charismatic, floridly psychotic and often violent mother who legally disinherited both her children decades before her death, and manipulated her successful but docile husband to do the same.

After being banished for over 15 years, Vicki and her younger sister return to their childhood home upon learning that their elderly mother is in the hospital, having shattered her hip in a fall. They discover that their mother had not only kept herself and their father isolated in their remote prairie home for years, but she has also systematically starved her husband to the point of severe mental and physical decline. The sisters seize the moment of their mother's incapacitation to have her mental health evaluated, entering their own assessment of "M.M.A." into their mother's chart: "mad as a meat-ax."

While in rehab, their mother instantly wins over her caretakers, convincing them of the two sisters' evil intentions. (She tells some people she has no children, that "those girls are just after the money"; she tells others that she had 18 children, all of whom abandoned her; she tells others still that her older daughter fled to Venezuela and is being sought by Interpol.) Watching her in action, Laveau-Harvie muses, "She is a kind of flesh and blood pyramid scheme, a human Ponzi. You buy in and you are hooked."

Over a period of months, Vicki and her sister are finally able to obtain confirmation of their mother's legal incompetence, thereby ensuring her permanent hospitalization and saving their elderly father from what would be certain death at his wife's hands.

HELEN FREMONT is the author of "After Long Silence" and "The Escape Artist."

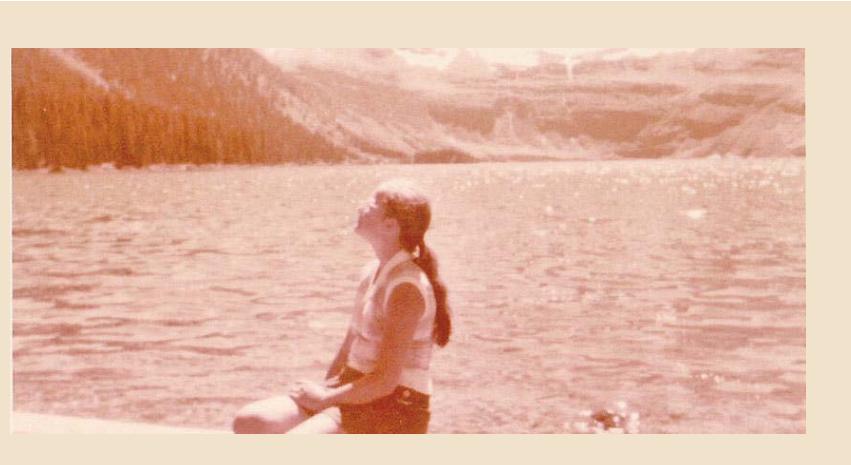
As sinister as this sounds, Laveau-Harvie tells the story with laugh-out-loud humor, and tremendous heart and insight. She has a poet's gift for language, a playwright's sense of drama and a stand-up comic's talent for timing. But perhaps most remarkable is the generosity of spirit with which she writes about family trauma.

Focusing on the six-year period at the end of her parents' lives, Laveau-Harvie barely mentions the nightmare of her childhood, comparing her lost memory to the landscape around active volcanos: "If you pause to look beyond your feet and raise your eyes, you see that in the distance, farthest from the volcano, the surface has hardened. It is black and shiny, making inaccessible most of your childhood, but you can distinguish from early on some signs of the long apprenticeship of duplicity that allows you to be standing where you are now, picking your way cautiously through life, not just a puff of smoke and a carbonized crisp of memory in the depths."

Unlike her sister, who lives outside Vancouver, Laveau-Harvie has managed to "shake free and flee" Canada to Australia, where she feels "reasonably safe because I do not carry a lot of my past. My sister carries it for me, her foot in the bear trap of our childhood, unable to extricate herself no matter how hard she pulls."

But despite everything, Laveau-Harvie does not take herself too seriously, and by holding the reins of her story lightly, she gives us the ride of our lives. The book flows with kinetic energy, wit and wisdom. Upon reaching the last page, I found myself turning to the beginning and starting again, not wanting it to end.

By contrast, Cherington's "Poetic License" feels arduous and labored, making us conscious of the enormous amount of studied control other authors must exert



Vicki Laveau-Harvie, age 12, by a lake in the Rocky Mountains.

when writing intimate memoirs. In this one, instead of gliding along the narrative track, the reader feels the painful grinding of gears, the sheer effort required to chronicle her experience.

The daughter of the acclaimed American poet Richard Eberhart, Cherington describes growing up surrounded by literary gods. Her parents were both "superb entertainers" and their house was always full of literati, including Robert Frost, W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, T. S. Eliot and Allen Ginsberg. At the center was Eberhart, "a supernova, receiving one accolade after another." His friends gathered around him, "occupying our living room like he was their guru. All our eyes were on him. It was his voice that mattered." Booze flowed, egos bloomed and, in a room full of self-in-

that little girl is still sad."

Cherington marches us through the years, from her family's various homes along the East Coast to her year at a boarding school in Lausanne, where she learned not only French but also how to apply makeup, style her hair and date boys. As she grew into a curvaceous teenager, the attention she suddenly attracted from her father was unwelcome and shocking. On one bourbon-infused night, he came upstairs from a cocktail party, walked into his sleeping 17-year-old daughter's room, sat at her bedside, slipped his hands under her shirt, and fondled her. Speechless, she kicked him away; he chuckled and retreated. Silence ensued, a silence that consumed Cherington for half a century. "Deeply buried secrets only prolonged my suffering," she writes. "Silence is isolation, as bad as the abuse itself."

Cherington drops out of the University of Washington, where Eberhart had once taught, and becomes a young wife and mother in New Hampshire, where Eberhart was once poet laureate. She works the land on her husband's farm, and eventually establishes her own consulting business for corporate executives, taking pride in being recognized as a respected professional by powerful men like her father. There is little subtlety here.

At the age of 40, Cherington decides to delve into the archives at Dartmouth in search of her father's records. Reading his journals and letters, she gains a new perspective on his own childhood trauma, when he nursed his beloved mother through her final stages of cancer. Cherington finally forgives her father, at his deathbed. Twelve years later she takes the podium at an International Women's Day celebration in Hanover, N.H., and tells her own truth.

Both Cherington and Laveau-Harvie struggle to come to grips with harmful, even abusive parental behavior. But only Laveau-Harvie's book truly stays with the reader, for the quality of her original and powerful narrative voice. □



Gretchen Cherington, circa 1974.

Solitary Refinement

A poet channels the voice of a seventh-century Christian hermit.

By DAVID ORR

"WE LOVE THE THINGS WE LOVE for what they are," Robert Frost declares at the end of "Hyla Brook." But as Frost knew, that's only half the truth. We also love the things we love because of how they make us feel about ourselves, which is itself often a function of how we think they make us appear to others. Or so roughly 97 percent of social media postings, particularly those involving boats, would suggest.

This fact has a special relevance for poets, because while our culture generally has little interest in poems as such, there is still cachet in being seen as a Person Who Reads Poetry. A writer who aspires to rec-

tage to the project book is that its contents are easy to describe ("readily identifiable") even if the individual poems are filled with airy poeticisms ("mystifying"). If it sounds as if project books are usually tedious, that's not the case — some are quite good. But in an era in which poets often need to produce collections in order to remain employed, it's reasonable to look skeptically on a form that can resemble a paint-by-numbers kit.

The "project" here is twofold: First, we have the story of a seventh-century Scottish hermit named Ethernan who supposedly withdrew to the titular caves (which are about 20 minutes southeast of St. Andrews) to decide whether to open a monastery; and second, there is the history and

notes for the 105 pages of poetry here). You might suppose this would result in a little too much self-conscious literariness, but Solie tempers her lines with good humor and an attractive populism. If she's going to write about the nature of truth, she's going to involve an "AEG 365 washer/dryer"; if she's going to write about solitude, she's also going to talk about "short-term RVers" trying to park to see Leonard Knight's gloriously weird Salvation Mountain in the California desert.

You can see the best of Solie in a shorter poem like "A Lesson." Here's the first stanza:

*The tide rises, a crowd returning from a stadium,
abstract sound of innumerable specifics*

quite a bit of the rest of "The Caiplie Caves." There are two primary difficulties here. The first is that ventriloquizing a hermit who lived over a thousand years ago and left no written record means inventing a voice, and Solie — in some ways to her credit — can't quite commit to the notion that she's writing as someone other than herself. So her Ethernan swings back and forth between, on one hand, saying things like "and as my colleagues grew incapable / of speaking off-brand" and comparing an island to a car "idling at the curb in a cloud of exhaust"; and on the other hand, offering up grandiose announcements that probably wouldn't make it into a poem if not licensed by a persona ("in this foggy, dispute-ridden landscape / thus begins my apprenticeship to cowardice"). There are many reasons one might use a hybrid voice, of course; none of them change the fact that this particular voice gets old fast.

The second difficulty is that while Solie's speed can be a virtue, it can also lead to lines that look hurried and unhelpfully baroque. This has been true of her earlier collections, though not debilitatingly so. For example, the first poem in "Pigeon" begins, "Oligotrophic: of lakes and rivers. The heat / an inanimate slur, wool gathering, hanging / like a bad suit." It's easy to be so distracted by "oligotrophic" that you don't

THE CAIPLIE CAVES

By Karen Solie

118 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$25.

ognition beyond the thorny borders of the poetry world accordingly faces two countervailing challenges: On one hand, she'll need to produce something that "looks like poetry" to the audience she hopes for (usually readers of literary fiction); on the other hand, what looks like poetry to that audience is partly defined by its unfamiliarity. In order to satisfy, then, the work must somehow be both readily identifiable and mystifying.

This peculiar phenomenon helps explain the oddity of Karen Solie's new book, "The Caiplie Caves." This is Solie's fifth collection of new work; her previous efforts have won an array of honors and awards, including Canada's lucrative Griffin Prize (Solie is from Saskatchewan). Indeed, Solie is "now considered one of Canada's best poets," according to the back of her 2009 collection "Pigeon." Her American debut, "The Road In Is Not the Same Road Out," appeared in 2015; on its cover the critic Michael Hofmann declared, "Solie's work should be read wherever English is read" — high praise for sure, even if that "should" seems a little poignant. So Solie has reached the point at which, as a poet, you begin to notice you're being noticed, and to wonder if the attention means you should try something different.

"The Caiplie Caves" is certainly that. For one thing, it's Solie's first project book. In the poetry world, this vague-sounding description has a very specific meaning; it refers to collections in which many or all of the poems, rather than being about the usual variety of poetic stimuli (trees, exes, dead relatives), instead relate to a unitary subject, which will typically be a hefty political or historical matter rather than, for instance, laundry or houseplants. The advan-



culture of the coast of Fife. About a third of the book is written in the voice of Ethernan; the rest consists of lyrics wandering from Kilrenny to Tentsmuir Forest (and occasionally non-Scottish locales) under Solie's own command.

In the non-Ethernan poems, Solie sticks with the approach that has worked for her in previous books. That approach depends on associative leaps, rapid changes in register (from, for example, "it's just okay" to "the eradication of desire" in four lines) and diction plucked from every nook in the dictionary ("Aleve," "histoplasmonic," "griskin"). Compression, stillness and plainness are largely absent; quick shifts, volubility and references to Barthes are fully present (there are four pages of end-

*reentering the shoreline's boroughs.
Wheels clatter
on the rocks of your driveway, headlamps
light the wall.*

A door opens in the place in you joy leaps to.

The awkwardness of that last line echoes the vulnerable openness of its sentiment. Solie continues the tide metaphor ("the nightmare rocks and fingery weed-beds banished") for another seven lines, and concludes: "Nothing exists in darkness that doesn't in the light. / Once, this comforted you." It's a focused, intentionally ambiguous ending that feels unforced but inevitable, as if it were arriving on a wave itself. The quiet assurance is astonishing.

This is unfortunately not the case for

Poems marked by volubility, quick shifts and external references, tempered by humor and populism.

notice that "an inanimate slur" makes no sense (are there animate slurs?), or that the idea of heat "hanging like a bad suit" becomes less satisfying the more you think about it (Is the heat baggy? Is it mauve?). The project form seems to have aggravated this tendency. In the book's last poem, "Clarity," for example, the speaker has just noticed a dead bird: "When did my sixth receiver / register the hydrostatic pressure / of fluid newly at rest / between subject and object?" "My sixth receiver"? Or in another poem, trying to warm up a cold house: "I tried to convince the storage heaters / to take our relationship to the next level." How about just, "I turned on the heater"?

"The Caiplie Caves" has its moments — "White Strangers" is a shivery take on what it feels like to be a woman at home alone at night when two men knock on your door — and Solie is much more capable than the average reading circuit regular. But this feels like the work of a poet who has set out to write poetry, rather than of a writer who has turned out to have written some poems. This will get applauded; people like poetry that looks the way it's supposed to. But it would be good to see this talented writer disappoint such readers in the future. □

Bird's-Eye View

Helen Macdonald offers odes to the wonders of animal behavior.

By JOSHUA HAMMER

AT THE HEIGHT OF WORLD WAR II, the ornithologist and evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley, brother of the dystopian novelist Aldous Huxley, rallied his countrymen on the radio by celebrating Britain's birds as "the heritage we are fighting for."

Britain's veneration of wildlife, particularly the avian kind, has been a defining national trait for generations. The country has strict animal protection laws, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, founded in Manchester in 1889, is Europe's largest wildlife charity — with more than a million members. Britons delight in such

VESPER FLIGHTS

By Helen Macdonald

288 pp. Grove Press. \$27.

rituals as the "swan upping" — an annual journey by census takers along the upper reaches of the Thames to check the parentage of cygnets and identify them with markings.

That infatuation also has a destructive side, exemplified by a dwindling army of oologists, or egg collectors, who raid nests illegally — and in the case of the red-backed shrike in the 1970s, eradicated one species from the United Kingdom.

In "Vesper Flights," an anthology of writings by the English poet and naturalist Helen Macdonald, she celebrates her country's wild bounty, while exploring its fragility and its relationship to national identity. Macdonald is best known for her memoir, "H Is for Hawk," a meditation on the healing powers of human-avian bonding. Here, fragments of autobiography mix with impressionistic snapshots and deeper observations that peel away our anthropomorphic preconceptions and reveal the intelligence and mystery of birds and other creatures.

"Someone once told me that every writer has a subject that underlies everything they write," she declares in her introduction to the collection. "I choose to think that my subject is love, and most specifically love for the glittering world of nonhuman life around us."

As a child growing up in rural Surrey, Macdonald developed a precocious reverence for the natural world. She lived with her parents in a cottage on the grounds of a 50-acre estate owned by the Theosophical Society, a mystical movement that inter-

grated Hindu and Western philosophy, and spent many of her days roaming alone through the woods and a nine-acre meadow, armed with a pair of binoculars. The fecundity of this world, from its richly diverse vegetation to its birds to its butterflies — "common blues, small skippers, grizzled skippers, marbled whites, small coppers" — sharpened her observational powers and instilled a longing to study and understand these creatures. As Macdonald describes it, "It was richer, more interesting, had more stories to tell than any other environment in my life."

Macdonald's essays are often odes to the wonders of animal behavior — the ability of moths to migrate vast distances, possibly by sensing the earth's electromagnetic fields, the synchronicity in flight of Eurasian cranes. A piece about nests ponders whether birds weave their homes according to a pre-existing mental image, and marvels at their craftiness and opportunism: "How we humans are intrigued when birds make nests out of things that belong to us," she writes. "House finches lining their nests with cigarette butts, nests of Bullock's orioles fashioned from twine, kites decorating their tree platforms with underwear stolen from washing lines."

A profile of Maxwell Knight, a legendary MI5 chief turned BBC naturalist (and model for "M" in Ian Fleming's James Bond novels), probes the links between spycraft and the behavior of Knight's favorite bird, the cuckoo, which breeds by camouflage and stealth — planting its eggs in the nests of other species.

Macdonald's writing here, as in "H Is for Hawk," can be hard going. It sometimes bogs down beneath the weight of its adjectives: She describes "endless indigo afternoons," the "zoetrope flicker of pines," and "the cradled mathematical branches of a monkey puzzle" — and that's just in a few pages of one essay. Still, her evocative sense of place and her meticulous observations burst through the purple prose.

Macdonald laments human encroachment and the steady disappearance of nature. But she also points to unlikely places where it flourishes. In "The Falcon and the Tower," she visits Dublin's Poolbeg Power Station, "a giant's playset of brutal turbine halls" where a pair of long-defunct cooling chimneys serves as a nesting site and hunting perch for peregrines. Watching a male raptor, or tiercel, swoop down on pigeons in this gritty urban landscape, Macdonald finds solace in the image of nature reasserting itself, a rebuke to the human tendency to regard the wild "as something disappearing or already lost." □



Schoolchildren see a rare parrot from St. Vincent's Island during a lecture in London in 1938.

Mommy Dearest

Left to fend for himself, an author survives to tell the tale.

By JASON SHEELER

I READ THE FINAL PAGES of Kirkland Hamill's "Filthy Beasts" as the Los Angeles solidarity march reached my apartment off Sunset Boulevard. I arrived downstairs to hundreds of rainbow flags framed between Mexican fan palms and the jagged Hollywood Hills. A question scrawled on a piece of cardboard stopped me cold: Do You Feel Liberated?

Returning to Hamill's tragicomic memoir of a mother-son relationship, I couldn't help wondering: What if Hamill's childhood had been swaddled in the optimism of Obama-era rainbows? If he'd grown up watching "Will & Grace," "Pose" and "Ellen," would the author, who is gay, ever have spent a moment — let alone 35 years — in shame? Also, I wondered, what will I be reading two decades from now, when today's L.G.B.T.Q. youth write their memoirs? With little doubt, few will share Hamill's formative queer moment: dressed up at the age of 4 in a pink hal-

FILTHY BEASTS

A Memoir

By Kirkland Hamill

320 pp. Avid Reader Press. \$27.

ter top and heels for a skit at his family's Adirondack lodge, with a placard announcing "Gay Liberation" dangling from his neck. The crowd laughed; his mom was proud. Hamill would spend the next three decades struggling to keep her attention.

"Wake up, you filthy beasts!" Hamill's mother hollered to her three sons on school mornings. Those were the all-too-brief good years, before divorce and alcoholism took her under; before Hamill and his brothers' lives took on a feral quality. As with many gay men before him, Hamill's axis of identity/sexuality hinges on his relationship with his mother. And, whoa, did Wendy Hamill ever deliver as an archetype: a beacon of distant fabulosity coupled with deft microaggression. As written here, Wendy (who died surrounded by her sons) deserves placement in the gay canon, somewhere between Endora on "Bewitched" and Jessica Lange in anything directed by Ryan Murphy.

Born working class in Bermuda, Hamill's mother was an exceptionally beautiful and childlike woman. Over 61 years, two marriages and two countries, through alcoholism and megalomania, she nearly destroyed her children. Wendy watched them fend for themselves through the bottom of a highball.

But Hamill's memoir is about survival — and recovery: of his identity, memories and compassion for his mother.

Wendy married into extreme wealth, but her son was born into it — immense, Nantucket-red-pants wealth. From an early

age, Hamill became an astute observer of privilege, picking up the codes of the rich with a fluency only a formerly rich person could master.

His parents divorced when he was 8. Hamill and his brothers then fell from the Mayflower-stock private clubs of the Northeast to Bermuda, where there wasn't enough food; there was barely enough water. From that point on, Hamill's adolescence was shaped by a lack of supervision and his siblings' intense heterosexuality.



Kirkland Hamill, right, and his brothers, 1983.

He writes, "My two brothers roamed the earth figuratively lifting their legs on everything around them and trotting off in new directions without feeling the slightest sense of shame."

Without their father (who quickly remarried) and household staff, the Hamill boys discovered they were living with an alcoholic: "The gentle sloshing of the liquid in the bottle made my body tense." These pages are steeped in gin. The collateral damage of a home with an alcoholic parent floats to the top. Hamill knew that "no one is coming to save us. I realized that I was increasingly living in a world in which I had no choice but to heal myself." (Hamill found his way to Al-Anon. Both of his brothers have struggled with alcohol.)

In Bermuda, during his mother's "self-imposed exile," Hamill's middle-child syndrome expanded. He was neither Bermudian nor English expat. At home, "I didn't want to be a girl, but I knew I wasn't performing boy correctly." At Andover for high school, he was too poor to be at prep school, too privileged to be a townie. At Tulane, where he fell in love for the first time, Hamill was struck with the innate feeling of being "other." The pop-psych term hadn't yet arrived, but he had a scorching case of impostor syndrome. The screws began tightening with a sense of *they're going to find out* — and that feeling would not begin to dissipate until he came out as gay. He did so at 35. Two years later, Hamill's mother died, of liver failure.

"If it's not one thing, it's your mother," goes a popular bumper-sticker slogan oft refrained in the rooms of 12-step programs. At his mother's funeral in Bermuda, Hamill and five other pallbearers struggled to get his mother's coffin up the aisle of the church. The aisle was too narrow, and she was too heavy. "I let go," Hamill writes. "I was tired of carrying her." □

JOSHUA HAMMER is the author, most recently, of "The Falcon Thief: A True Tale of Adventure, Treachery, and the Hunt for the Perfect Bird."

JASON SHEELER is the deputy West Coast editor of People.

It's No Object

A chatty history of the world's most powerful abstraction.

By RICHARD DAVIES

OF ALL THE INVENTIONS we rely on to get through the day, nothing is as strange as money. Currency is a national bedrock that sits alongside anthems and flags; our cash — from pristine \$100 bills to dog-eared 5 pound notes — seems solid, official and enduring. At the same time money is a confidence trick: an i.o.u. printed on cheap material that promises the holder nothing but more paper money. The evolving paradox of modern currency — foundational yet resting on faith — is the central theme of “Money,” a sweeping new history by Jacob Goldstein.

MONEY

The True Story of a Made-Up Thing

By Jacob Goldstein

257 pp. Hachette. \$28.

A health reporter during the mid-aughts, Goldstein describes being drawn toward money and economics by the beguiling turbulence of the 2008 crisis. Now a host of NPR’s “Planet Money,” he features that show’s trademark storytelling throughout his new book. Histories of money need lots of facts and dates; as a result many are turgid. “Money” is fast-paced and chatty: We meet all the characters an academic book would include, their ideas and innovations blended with scandal and gossip to propel the story along. The effect is a history of currency full of astonishing tales you might tell a friend in the pub.

The main thread is set out right away: Money “seems cold and mathematical and outside the realm of fuzzy human relationships,” Goldstein asserts. But it’s really “a made-up thing, a shared fiction. Money is fundamentally, unalterably social.” The early chronicles of cash show how societies move from monies with intrinsic value (commodity currencies, like salt, or coins made from precious metal) to paper currencies that are valuable because they are tools — ways to exchange goods and services.

The case of Kublai Khan, the leader of the Mongol empire in the late 1200s, is an early example of this innovation. His first paper money, the “treasure exchange voucher,” guaranteed the holder bronze coins. Then the Khan took a magical and modern step, stripping the link with bronze so that his money was “almost pure abstraction, backed by nothing.” The success of this currency and those that followed is essentially social: They circulate when everyone in an economy agrees they will.

There is much ground to cover as “Money” moves from traders in Sichuan to



TAMARA SHOPSIN

goldsmiths in London to investors in the Mississippi Territory. Each treatment is necessarily brief, and some readers may want more detail. But stacking up case studies like this means a bigger story — a recurring pattern — begins to appear. Cash evolves in fits and starts; there are long periods of stability where nothing much happens followed by rapid bursts of change. The Federal Reserve is a case in point: The world’s most important bank exists because of a financial panic in 1907 and decisions taken by a small group of bankers immediately after it. These bursts of innovation happen when the wants, needs and trades in an economy shift. Money changes when society does.

Recent history is a challenge when attempting to tell fresh stories about money: More than a decade has passed since the chaos of 2008 and by now the players, motives and failures are familiar. But Goldstein’s emphasis on the social side of currency — on belief and behavior — gives him an interesting lens. “Money” skips over reckless investment banks and credulous regulators to land on the money-market fund as its key character. These funds took on risk, allowing them to offer interest to depositors, but were marketed and regulated as cashlike entities, leading people

This is a history of currency full of astonishing tales you might tell a friend in the pub.

to believe they were as safe as a physical greenback. Money-market funds, in other words, had become a new kind of money. When these funds “broke the buck” by returning less than \$1 for every dollar invested, it was a violation not of the financial markets, which are allowed to go up and down, but of money itself, which is supposed to be solid. The damage was not just economic, but psychological.

This story gets to the heart of why money matters. Since currency is partly a social compact, the biggest damage to an economy comes when expectations are violated, confidence drains and people begin to fear holding money. Goldstein concludes this chapter: “What is the thing that is like a piece of paper from a goldsmith in 1690, or a deposit in a bank in 1930, or a money-market fund balance in 2007? When everybody who holds that thing decides to cash it in at once, the world will get very ugly very fast.” For this paragraph alone “Money” should be required reading for every financial regulator.

Looking to the future, Goldstein unpicks the origins of bitcoin, a new digital currency that many are betting is the money of tomorrow. Yet he argues that new forms of cash often emerge by accident from unexpected places, rather than by design, as is the case with cryptocurrencies. For this reason, I would have liked a chapter on underground and informal currencies. People living in the world’s toughest economies use all sorts of monies that are “made up.” From powdered milk in Syrian refugee camps to prepaid debit cards in United States prisons to pawnshop tickets in postindustrial British cities, a world of hidden currency innovation by economic outsiders exists. These shadow monies too are social, unofficial and come to the fore where the mainstream system fails.

So where is money heading next? Written before Covid-19 ravaged the global economy, Goldstein’s book leaves readers to make their own predictions. The pandemic is imposing rapid changes — to the cost of travel, trust in the state, reliance on neighbors — that surely mean we should get ready for another burst of innovation. “Money” is great preparation for turbulent times: a vibrant and accessible grounding in how the evolution of cash — organic, random and social — really works. □

RICHARD DAVIES is a fellow at the London School of Economics and author of “Extreme Economies.”

Lost in America

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"What Were We Thinking" is crisp, engaging and very smart. Lozada can be laconic. The former F.B.I. director James Comey "doesn't just quote Shakespeare but quotes himself quoting Shakespeare." Robin DiAngelo's best seller, "White Fragility," reads like "a pharmaceutical ad for treating whiteness." Beyond the snark, though, there is a simple, piercing clarity to many of Lozada's observations. The Mexican border wall "is like Trump: big and bombastic, more artifice than utility, a blunt solution to a complex and ill-defined problem. . . . You are on one side or the other, you are with him or against him."

And that, he argues, is also the problem with most of the literature about the Trump presidency. There is nonstop righteousness in the "resistance" books of the left, which call for a national conversation "but restrict . . . the speakers" and exclude "anyone who fails to espouse the full worldview that the writers and activists champion." The conservatives writing about Trump are all "in denial," even the Never Trumpers with their agonized *mea culpas* (which he calls *meh culpas*). "The Never Trumpers are engaged in a worthy exercise — yet it took the . . . presidency of Donald Trump to make it happen. In a sense, the Never Trumpers are also the Only Trumpers. Only with the rise of Trump did they think to interrogate the conservative dogma they'd long defended."

The writers Lozada admires, left and right, step beyond the usual polemics about "fake news" and "identity politics" and the #MeToo movement. The enduring irony of the Trump presidency may be that it brought national attention to, and action against, the systemic racism and casual misogyny that have crippled our society. Of the #MeToo canon, he writes, "I found so much that I had not bothered to know" about the brutality of male dominance. As a Peruvian immigrant, Lozada writes with great sensitivity about the sense of loss — of home, of culture — that accompanies the thrill of American opportunity for new arrivals. This leads him to favor identity politics as a transitional state, a way of finding "individuality, through community." But, in a rare lapse, he fails to consider the insidious effects of writing racial advantage into law through programs like affirmative action and the creation of majority-minority electoral districts. Worthy as they may be, they've given ballast to white working-class tribalism.

More often, though, Lozada finds subtleties in areas we've assumed clear-cut. Take the president's mind-numbing spew of lies. Lozada praises the former New York Times book critic Michiko Kakutani

for lambasting "lefty academics who . . . argued that truth is not universal but malleable, a reflection of economic, political and cultural forces." Or, as the philosopher Lee McIntyre put it, postmodernism is "the godfather of post-truth."

And here Lozada comes close to the core of the matter: Messing around with the notion of truth is a luxury that comes with affluence. We have spent the past 50 years undermining the basic institutions of society — not just our sense of common purpose and identity, but also normative values like truth and duty and expertise. The politics of consumerism — and grievance — have overwhelmed the politics of unity and responsibility. Among Lozada's favorite books is the conservative thinker Yuval Levin's "A Time to Build": "Popular culture compels us to ask: 'What do I want?' Institutions urge a different query, Levin ex-

mamie conspiracy theory about a Ukrainian oligarch harboring the Democratic Party's computer server. You may remember the players, especially the disciplined and eloquent representatives of the State Department and the National Security Council. "Trump on Trial" burrows into the so-called deep state, down to bureaucrats like the Pentagon's acting comptroller Elaine McCusker, "a career civil servant" who knew that the Ukraine military aid had to be spent by Sept. 30, 2019, or it would be voided, and "wanted to make sure 100 percent that the law was followed." That is, she created institutional pressure to overturn Trump's suspension of the aid. (McCusker was forced out for doing her job.)

People like McCusker, Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch and the N.S.C. expert Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman are the sort of civil servants Michael Lewis celebrated in his

people that don't respect you." The Michigan Democrat Elissa Slotkin, a former intelligence analyst and senior Defense Department official, saw herself in civil servants like Yovanovitch and Vindman: "Their life was her life. . . . It was an ethos shared by her friends, especially the ones who had sworn an oath in the military." Slotkin went back to the nation's founding documents: "The framers had warned against the danger of America's leaders soliciting foreign interference in the country's internal affairs. Hadn't this president admitted to doing exactly that?"

There could not be a more obvious example of Yuval Levin's dialectic. The Republicans were all about "What do I want?" The Democrats worried, "How should I act?" The parties had traded their traditional places. "The counterculture never died," Lozada writes of the alt-right movement, summarizing the views of the journalist Angela Nagle. "It just switched sides. Transgression now lives on the right, dogmatism on the left." The Democrats have become traditionalists. The Republicans, a most illiberal group of libertarians, tear down the pillars of the temple. The former Trump adviser Steve Bannon's nihilism is the spiritual heir to Abbie Hoffman's jolly anarchy in the 1960s. What "losers" and "suckers" the traditionalists were! To read "Trump on Trial" in the context of "What Were We Thinking" is to be scalded. The pain is excruciating.

Carlos Lozada is a book critic, not a policy wonk. He doesn't propose specific solutions to our current state of disgrace, but he does offer a vision of American stability being eviscerated by the public's need to be entertained. This reminded me of the dichotomy that Machiavelli posited in "The Discourses": the contest between *virtù* and *ozio*. *Virtù* is the quality that keeps a republic strong: It is rigor and responsibility and intellectual achievement, albeit with a distressing tinge of militarism. *Ozio* is indolence; it is the laziness that overtakes a republic when it is not at war or in crisis. In America, we experienced 70 years of unprecedented peace and prosperity, without a perceived existential threat, from 1946 to 2016, a bacchanal of *ozio*. In the process, far too many of us lost the habits of citizenship. Truth became malleable. Morality became relative. Achievement became pass-fail — and, more recently, just showing up. Rigor was for chumps. You didn't have to do anything to become famous, except be an "influencer." And to be an influencer, you didn't need to train or study, although plastic surgery — branding — certainly helped. You didn't have to serve or sacrifice; that was for chumps, too. This was the America that elected Donald Trump president. *What were we thinking?* We weren't. Critical thinking was just too hard — and another episode of "Duck Dynasty" or "Keeping Up With the Kardashians" always beckoned. □

The enduring irony of the Trump presidency may be that it brought national attention to, and action against, the systemic racism and casual misogyny that have crippled our society.

plains: 'Given my role here, how should I act?' It is a relevant question — perhaps the most relevant — for this time and for this presidency."

It is the question at the heart of "Trump on Trial," another book from The Washington Post about a topic you're probably sick of: the impeachment of Donald Trump. Lozada would doubtless categorize "Trump on Trial" as a "Chaos Chronicle." It is a day-by-day compendium of The Post's reporting on the Trump impeachment, written by the husband-and-wife team of Kevin Sullivan and Mary Jordan, and there aren't many "reveals" in it, unless you count the revelation that Representative Adam Schiff had a toothache when he read the articles of impeachment to the Senate. And yet, "Trump on Trial" doesn't plod; it is well written and the reporting is panoramic. Its theme insinuates itself gradually: The impeachment proceedings were a clear contest between those who believed in institutions — like truth, expertise, the State Department, congressional budget power — and those who wanted to tear them down.

You remember the story: Donald Trump tried to withhold military aid from Ukraine to force "investigations" of Hunter Biden's smarmy payday as a director of a Ukrainian energy company — and also, of a cocka-

book about Trump's assault on the bureaucracy, "The Fifth Risk," another of Lozada's favorites. They do due diligence, they adhere to protocol. Their truth is not postmodern. They do their jobs without fanfare; they do not turn their work into self-aggrandizing performance art. Their rigor is what makes our federal government legitimate and credible, despite its flaws.

Impeachment was a hard case. Trump's shenanigans were illegal, and definitely unseemly, but they didn't rise to the level of bipartisan horror necessary for a successful conviction. In the end, the Democrats probably did themselves more harm than good. But what "Trump on Trial" makes clear is that the Republican response was an all-out assault on regular order, expertise, law, diplomacy and the quotidian chores of holding a democracy together. I had forgotten how blatant it was. "Elements of the Civil Service have decided that they, not the president, are really in charge," said Devin Nunes, the California Republican. Matt Gaetz, the Florida Republican, paraphrased what he thought was the Democrats' message: "We the elite, we the permanent Washington, we the smart folks, have decided that . . . this is not acceptable conduct." Or, as Trump told one of his rallies, "We're dealing with

College Try

How admissions is rigged in favor of the privileged.

By ANTHONY ABRAHAM JACK

MONEY TALKS AND PRIVILEGE WALKS. In the case of college admissions, it saunters through wrought-iron gates, past signs emblazoned with “Welcome Class of” and into seats at convocation. Timely and engaging, “Who Gets In and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions,” by Jeffrey Selingo, and “Unacceptable: Privilege, Deceit & the Making of the College Admissions Scandal,” by Melissa Korn and Jennifer Levitz, detail how college admissions is rigged in favor of the privileged and how it came to be gamed even further.

Announcing charges against celebrities and corporate executives, as part of the cheating investigation known as Operation Varsity Blues, the U.S. attorney for the District of Massachusetts said, “There can be no separate college admissions system for the wealthy.” I laughed, mirthlessly, almost missing his equally dubious claim that “there will not be a separate criminal justice system either.” His words jolted me

WHO GETS IN AND WHY
A Year Inside College Admissions
By Jeffrey Selingo
306 pp. Scribner. \$28.

UNACCEPTABLE
Privilege, Deceit & the Making of the College Admissions Scandal
By Melissa Korn and Jennifer Levitz
368 pp. Portfolio/Penguin. \$28.

back to when privileged classmates informed me that I was admitted to Amherst College because I was Black or poor; they couldn’t decide which. They saw my biography as my hook. Yet they refused to see their pedigree as theirs. Instead, my peers offered evidence of hard work, their words buoyed by blind faith in meritocracy.

In “Who Gets In and Why,” Selingo challenges the facade of that meritocracy. Through revealing interviews with industry leaders and observations of admissions committee deliberations at three schools, Selingo unpacks the myriad ways that colleges’ desperate attempts to climb up in the rankings further open doors to students from more affluent families. Universities want to raise their profile, knowing that selectivity is a key measure in rankings. They also want to lock in their full payers early, a desire that may only grow stronger as colleges grapple with budget deficits brought upon by Covid-19. They accomplish both objectives through early decision, the process where students apply to one college and commit to enroll if accepted. Many of the nation’s top-ranked colleges admit a third to half of their incom-



“Separate but unequal”: A scandal lays bare the dark side of college admissions.

ing classes that way. Selingo, a former editor of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, witnessed how early-decision applicants receive more attention and are admitted at two or three times the rate of their peers.

Only 5 percent of applicants apply through the early-admissions route. Everyone else vies for the remaining spots. This two-round system drives the overall admit rate lower, overstating exclusivity. Why don’t more students apply via early decision? The answer is mostly arithmetic: If you are like the majority of families who need to compare financial aid packages, you simply can’t.

There has always been a separate and unequal system of college admissions. Through “Unacceptable,” Korn and Levitz grant us access to its seedy underbelly. From the social-climbing antics of Rick Singer, the mastermind behind the cheating scheme, to the velvet-gloved F.B.I. raids of celebrities’ homes, they take us along the roller-coaster ride of Operation Varsity Blues. Piercing the veneer of perfection worn by Hollywood A-listers and corporate elites, Korn and Levitz show how wealthy families bribed their way into colleges like Stanford and the University of Southern California rather than bet on their children’s potential.

“Some people go through the back door,” Singer told parents. “I go through the side door.” Rich parents already know the back door: donations that prime colleges to say yes come admissions time. New names on benches and buildings on campus often have curious — perhaps convenient — timing. But philanthropic giving is not a sure thing. These parents sought guarantees.

Korn and Levitz, both reporters for *The Wall Street Journal*, document how Singer carried out his plans and how parents were in on the fraud, even writing off \$400,000 bribes as charitable donations. Wealthy

families often hire expensive SAT tutors and college consultants to shepherd them through applications. Singer took the job many steps further. He instructed clients to sit for the SAT at specific locations so that an inside man could take the test for them. Parents pressed doctors for A.D.H.D. diagnoses to secure additional time on standardized tests. To seal the deal, Singer and parents doctored photos and fabricated dossiers that called clients nothing short of future all-Americans.

“Who Gets In and Why” and “Unacceptable” outline the role that legacy and athletic preferences play in admissions, and force us to grapple with whether their dominance is fair. Drawing on sociological research, Selingo notes how the former is a holdover from when elite colleges discriminated against Jews. Today, legacy admissions is a powerful fund-raising strategy; part carrot, part stick, it is a key way that schools keep alumni involved. Children of alumni have a 25 percent higher chance of getting admitted than nonlegacy applicants with the same SAT scores.

Korn and Levitz document in painstaking detail how Singer’s “side door” scheme was possible only because of the near sovereignty of athletic coaches. They reveal how Singer, knowing which sports to target, bribed water-polo and crew coaches to fill their rosters. Korn and Levitz debunk the myth that all college sports teams make money, and Selingo reminds us that most N.C.A.A. athletes are not the Black bodies we see on television. Many teams struggle to break even, and athletes — like their legacy counterparts — are whiter and more affluent than their classmates. They are also three or four times as likely to be admitted as everyone else.

Despite enrolling children in high schools with resources that rival colleges’ and in activities that extend development

beyond the classroom, parents embroiled in the scandal said they had cheated to give their children a fighting chance at a good life. This, of course, was not about mobility; some of these children had trust funds. This was about bumper stickers and bragging rights. Part of me ached for more than a narrative version of court documents from Korn and Levitz. At times their account appears to extend sympathy to recently divorced parents looking to assuage their guilt about the toll the separation took on the family. That stands in stark contrast to the public damning of parents who falsified addresses to register children in crime-free primary schools.

Selingo has a bone to pick not only with parents involved in Operation Varsity Blues, but with all families who believe college admissions is about elite institutions or bust. “In your college search,” he counsels, “worry less about specific name brands and even majors and worry more about acquiring skills and experiences.” Using his own story of going to Ithaca College, Selingo argues that the economic payoff of a top-tier school might not be worth the stress, time or price tag.

For children from more privileged families, Selingo is right: From the odds of graduating to earnings in adulthood, college selectivity does not matter much. Selingo is wrong, however, to claim that this point applies to everyone. The very economists he cites offer “notable exceptions.” For Black, Latino and first-generation college students, the effects of attending a selective college “remain large.” In fact, these groups aren’t even exceptions; they are growing in demographic representation in higher education. Latinos are entering college at unprecedented rates, and elite colleges serve as mobility springboards for first-generation college students. Their heeding of Selingo’s prescient advice for the privileged could further deepen racial and socioeconomic stratification in higher education.

Despite these critiques, “Who Gets In and Why” and “Unacceptable” both speak to the current moment, particularly when we consider the other perennial debate in admissions: affirmative action. Students for Fair Admissions maintains that Harvard University discriminates against Asian applicants. In August, a Department of Justice investigation accused Yale of discriminating against whites and Asians. It remains to be seen if ballot initiatives to overturn affirmative action bans like Proposition 209 will survive vitriolic backlash. Such bans and similar efforts masquerade as attempts to restore fairness and equality to college admissions. These books invite us all to a conversation about preferences in college admissions, but they put the privilege-hoarding pathways for the elite front and center. The lesson: Turning a blind eye to how money puts full fists on the scale permits affirmative action for the rich to run amok. □

ANTHONY ABRAHAM JACK is the author of *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*.

The Road to the Vote, With Poems and Songs

By JEWELL PARKER RHODES

DIVERSITY IN LITERATURE IS about more than just authorship and characters' skin tones. Cultures generate unique storytelling strategies that are often overlooked or afforded less critical significance than white, Western master narratives.

LORETTA LITTLE LOOKS BACK

Three Voices Go Tell It

By Andrea Davis Pinkney

Illustrated by Brian Pinkney

224 pp. Little, Brown & Company. \$17.99.
(Ages 8 to 12)

The award-winning collaborators Andrea Davis Pinkney and Brian Pinkney excel at presenting biographical tales rooted in Black culture's oral histories, theater, poetry, music, art. Complex and evocative, "Loretta Little Looks Back" spans three

JEWELL PARKER RHODES, a Coretta Scott King Honor winner, is the author of "The Louisiana Girls Trilogy" and "Ghost Boys," among other middle grade novels.

generations of children in one fictional Mississippi family enduring a new type of enslavement (sharecropping, under the Jim Crow laws of segregation) and ultimately triumphing over new types of voter suppression (a literacy test and a poll tax).

Based on interviews and oral histories culled from sharecroppers who lived in the South in the 1920s through the 1960s, including Andrea Davis Pinkney's own family members, the novel interweaves the voices of Loretta (speaking from 1927 to 1930); her little brother, Roly (1942-50); and Roly's daughter, Aggie B. (1962-68). They represent the many who bore witness, from a child's-eye view, to trauma. Pinkney's subversion of adult perspectives and leadership proves all the more powerful when Aggie B. ("B" for bold) becomes the first in the family to volunteer as an activist, the youngest in her town to help register Black people to vote.

Like scenes in a play, each chapter begins with setting, time and action, some literal and specific (as in "Holly Ridge, Miss., September 1927," where we find Loretta standing in a cotton field), others not: "Someplace between here and the other

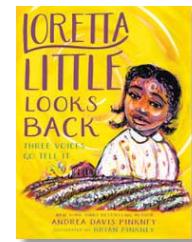
side of tomorrow. Shril siren wail. Flashing lights. Red. White. Blue. Aggie is on her knees, buckled over, hugging herself tightly, working hard to breathe."

Sparkling with Southern diction and rhythms, peppered with poems and songs, Pinkney's monologues invite readers' out-loud participation. "Some say, this what they call oration," Loretta announces. "I call it truth-talking."

One point could use a footnote. Emmett Till, the 14-year-old Chicago boy murdered in Money, Miss., while visiting his cousins, is briefly referred to this way by Roly: "The child's crime was making eyes at a white woman." In 2017, at 82, the white woman, Carolyn Bryant, admitted she'd falsely accused him — though Roly, in 1955, couldn't have known she had lied.

An orphan "found in a bed of hay," Roly is a "Night-Deep child" (out of African diaspora folk magic) with "a special connection to the earth's abundance and its creatures." His gifts lift the Littles from sharecroppers to landowners, thus providing sustenance for generations.

Brian Pinkney perfectly marries art to his wife's prose. Circle-shaped watercolor



and India ink images capture her vignettes' drama, spotlighting the players.

The novel's back matter is a treasure trove: an article about Southern sharecropping, a salute to the real-life heroes in the book (Cassius Clay, Wilma Rudolph, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King Jr.), a photo of Andrea Davis Pinkney's extended family that puts faces to the people who inspired her characters.

Aunt 'Retta, Pa Rollins and Aggie B. conclude their ambitious montage as a chorus. Aggie B. sings out: "My eye is on what's happening next. / On freedom. / On hope. / On the vote." Black voices, "go tell it" for the world to hear. □

Dismantling the Myth of the White Cowboy

By CHANELLE BENZ

THE COVER OF James Otis Smith's graphic novel features Mary Fields, a 19th-century Black woman variously known as Black Mary, White Crow and, more popularly, Stagecoach Mary. It's a fitting image for a book that reimagines the western dime

BLACK HEROES OF THE WILD WEST

By James Otis Smith

Introduction by Kadir Nelson
60 pp. Toon Graphics. \$16.95.
(Ages 8 to 12)

novel, this time with historical context — far more potent than the whitewashed narratives that have long dominated.

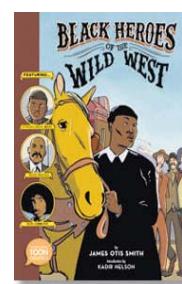
But when we turn the page we see something even more powerful: a photograph of Black cowboys on a plain in Texas, their eyes shaded under their hats, their bodies at home on their horses, their expressions in turn serious, jaunty, assured. On the next page are six smaller photos showing a

mix of Black, Mexican and Native American faces. To look at these expressions, stances, idiosyncrasies of dress (whether a bandanna or woolly chaps) is to look across the years and recognize ourselves. This is not a faceless, oppressed mass; these are regular brown and Black folks, some of whom have led exceptional lives.

If you've read about the Compton Cowboys of Los Angeles or the long tradition of Black riders in Acres Homes, Houston, you may know that in some areas of the Old West, as the Caldecott medalist Kadir Nelson notes in his introduction, up to a third of the population was African-American, and that African-Americans made up one-fourth of the population of cowboys.

We first meet the comics version of "Stagecoach" Mary Fields defending her mail coach one freezing night in Montana by battling back a pack of wolves. Mary is resourceful, fearless and unapologetic, whether helping nuns build their mission, nursing the Mother Superior, opening her own restaurant, gambling, carrying a rifle, wearing pants or drinking in saloons.

Perhaps the amorphous nature of the Old West, where a lawman could easily turn bandit and back again, and towns sprouted up only to be quickly abandoned,



aided her in bucking conventions and refusing the role of submissive Black woman. But it is remarkable that as a former enslaved person, for whom there was no guide, Mary thrived.

The second chapter opens with another photo collage, this one including cowgirls of color. Next to it is a photographic portrait of the impeccable Bass Reeves, the first Black deputy U.S. marshal west of the Mississippi, with his handlebar mustache. The comics devoted to Reeves's daring trickery are the book's most engaging, and further dismantle the white cowboy myth.

The final chapter belongs to Bob Lemmons, a mustanger who single-handedly

brought in herds of wild horses by making the mustangs think he was "one of them."

The book's back matter touches lightly on the relationship between Black Americans and Indigenous peoples. For example, Bass Reeves escaped his enslaver, found refuge with the Cherokee, Creek and Seminole nations, and learned their languages, while Bob Lemmons's wife was Chicana. But though the chapter on Stagecoach Mary briefly shows her looking after Native American children at the nuns' mission, it doesn't delve into the brutality and trauma students endured at mission schools, or what it meant for Black settlers to be among those moving onto stolen Native land. It would be no easy task to weave in such dissonances, but they too were central to the creation of the Old West.

These biographical comics are entertaining overviews that disrupt Wild West mythology. The accompanying photographs, paintings, timelines and maps are fascinating and beautifully arranged. Mary Fields, Bass Reeves and Bob Lemmons had all been enslaved, and carried with them, Smith writes, "the courage and strength to choose to be whoever they wanted to be." This Old West Black American grit and ingenuity is American history. □

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 SEPTEMBER 20-26

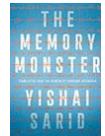
THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		THE BOOK OF TWO WAYS , by Jodi Picoult. (Ballantine) After surviving a plane crash, a death doula travels to Egypt to reconnect with an old flame who is an archaeologist.	1	1		RAGE , by Bob Woodward. (Simon & Schuster) Based on 17 on-the-record interviews with President Trump and other reporting, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist details the president's perspective on multiple crises.	2
2		THE COAST-TO-COAST MURDERS , by James Patterson and J. D. Barker. (Little, Brown) A detective and an F.B.I. agent are baffled by a cross-country killing spree.	1	2		MY OWN WORDS , by Ruth Bader Ginsburg with Mary Hartnett and Wendy W. Williams. (Simon & Schuster) A collection of articles and speeches by the Supreme Court justice.	3
3	1	THE EVENING AND THE MORNING , by Ken Follett. (Viking) In a prequel to "The Pillars of the Earth," a boatbuilder, a Norman noblewoman and a monk live in England under attack by the Welsh and the Vikings.	2	3	2	BLACKOUT , by Candace Owens. (Threshold Editions) The conservative commentator makes her case that Black Americans should part ways with the Democratic Party.	2
4		NEXT TO LAST STAND , by Craig Johnson. (Viking) The 16th book in the Longmire series. A million dollars in a shoebox and a piece of a painting might be clues to an art heist.	1	4	4	KILLING CRAZY HORSE , by Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard. (Holt) The ninth book in the conservative commentator's Killing series focuses on conflicts with Native Americans.	3
5	2	VINCE FLYNN: TOTAL POWER , by Kyle Mills. (Emily Bestler/Atria) When America's power grid is shut down, Mitch Rapp goes after a cyber terrorist.	2	5	5	CASTE , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	8
6	7	THE VANISHING HALF , by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge but their fates intertwine.	17	6	3	DISLOYAL , by Michael Cohen. (Skyhorse) An account of President Trump's business empire, political campaign and presidential administration by his former personal attorney.	3
7	6	ANXIOUS PEOPLE , by Fredrik Backman. (Atria) A failed bank robber holds a group of strangers hostage at an apartment open house.	3	7	7	UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	29
8	3	TROUBLED BLOOD , by Robert Galbraith. (Little, Brown) The fifth book in the Cormoran Strike series. A decades-old cold case might be connected to a serial killer; by J.K. Rowling, writing pseudonymously.	2	8		NOTORIOUS RBG , by Irin Carmon and Shana Knizhnik. (Dey Street) A celebration of the life and career of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.	4
9	8	ALL THE DEVILS ARE HERE , by Louise Penny. (Minotaur) The 16th book in the Chief Inspector Gamache series.	4	9		DON'T LIE TO ME AND STOP TRYING TO STEAL OUR FREEDOM , by Jeanine Pirro. (Center Street) The Fox News host asks how anyone could vote against President Trump in the 2020 election.	1
10	10	ONE BY ONE , by Ruth Ware. (Gallery/Scout) An avalanche tests the bonds of coworkers from a London-based tech startup on a corporate retreat in the French Alps.	3	10	10	LIVE FREE OR DIE , by Sean Hannity. (Threshold Editions) The Fox News host offers his assessment on what is at stake in the 2020 election.	8

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.

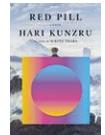
Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



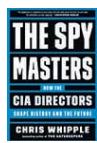
SISTERS, by Daisy Johnson. (Riverhead, \$26.) Secluded in a dilapidated country house, their depressed mother in a room upstairs, the teenage siblings at the center of this hypnotically macabre novel mull a sinister deed from their past. Johnson expertly layers the Gothic atmosphere with dread, grief and guilt.



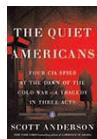
THE MEMORY MONSTER, by Yishai Sarid. (Restless Books, \$20.) This brilliant short novel serves as a brave, sharp-toothed brief against letting the past devour the present. Sarid tells the story of a tour guide to the Nazi death camps and how his mind begins to slowly unravel as his knowledge of the mechanics of genocide becomes an obsession.



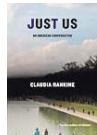
RED PILL, by Hari Kunzru. (Knopf, \$27.95.) A fellowship at a study center in Germany turns sinister and sets a writer on a possibly paranoid quest to expose a political evil he believes is loose in the world. Kunzru's wonderfully weird novel traces a lineage from German Romanticism to National Socialism to the alt-right, and is rich with insights on surveillance and power.



THE SPYMASTERS: How the CIA Directors Shape History and the Future, by Chris Whipple. (Scribner, \$30.) This engaging portrait of the men and one woman who have led the C.I.A. over the past six decades shows them to be, contrary to common impressions, beleaguered more often than omnipotent, stumbling more often than swaggering.



THE QUIET AMERICANS: Four CIA Spies at the Dawn of the Cold War — a Tragedy in Three Acts, by Scott Anderson. (Doubleday, \$30.) Covering the years 1944 to 1956, Anderson's enthralling history of the early years of the Cold War follows four C.I.A. operatives as their initial idealism eventually turns into betrayal and disillusionment, fueled by creeping right-wing hysteria at home and cynical maneuvering abroad.



JUST US: An American Conversation, by Claudia Rankine. (Graywolf, \$30.) As she did in her acclaimed 2014 collection "Citizen," Rankine here combines essays, poetry and visual art to interrogate the ways race haunts her imagination, and America's. "Fantasies cost lives," she writes.



EL JEFE: The Stalking of Chapo Guzmán, by Alan Feuer. (Flatiron, \$28.99.) This granular reconstruction of the capture of Mexico's notorious drug kingpin, written by a Times reporter, has the pace of a thriller peppered with colorful characters — devoted mistresses, a genius hacker and the illiterate, family-loving, coldblooded killer-businessman himself.



PERILOUS BOUNTY: The Looming Collapse of American Farming and How We Can Prevent It, by Tom Philpott. (Bloomsbury, \$28.) Philpott focuses on the environmental costs of industrial agriculture, taking aim at the Corn Belt and the feedlots that supply our meat. "Who profits from this massive bounty?" he asks. Not the farmers, and not the consumers.



A SAINT FROM TEXAS, by Edmund White. (Bloomsbury, \$26.) Twin sisters from Texas set off on starkly different paths, one to an aristocratic life in Paris and the other to a convent in Colombia. White's epic novel sparkles with his trademark wit and erudition.

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

Inside the List

LAUREN CHRISTENSEN

Boys to Men When Daniel Baker, a.k.a. Desus Nice (top), got a call from his agent, reps and lawyer out of nowhere in late September, he panicked. “I was like, oh wow, the show must’ve gotten canceled,” he said in a three-way phone interview with Joel Martinez, a.k.a. the Kid Mero, his co-host on their late-night TV series, “Desus & Mero.” “It scared the hell out of me.”



‘We’re poppin’ right now,’ Martinez said.

But it turned out to be good news: Their debut book, “God-Level Knowledge Darts,” had hit the New York Times non-fiction best-seller list, at No. 13. “You know when you get your Ph.D., you’re like, ‘Don’t call me Mister, call me Doctor?’” Martinez asked. “I’m gonna go to the bodega later and when Papi’s like, ‘Hey Papi! I’m gonna be like, ‘No no no. New York Times best seller.’”

A fitting reference for the Bronx comedy duo behind the “Bodega Boys” podcast, which recently released its 220th episode. This book is the extension of their on-air chemistry, the “sucio” humor and stoned, semi-“washed” wisdom that have made them famous far beyond the New York City borough where they grew up. To preserve their casual repartee in book form, Baker said, they wrote in a shared, “living” Google Doc, the authors and their editor all “freestyle” and feeding off of one another’s energy in real time. Plus, this way, whenever Baker or Martinez wrote something self-incriminating, their editor could flag it on the spot.

Given how much of the finished book is unprintable in The Times, it’s fun to imagine what could possibly have been cut. Many anecdotes mention what “may or may not still be open cases,” Baker explained. “That’s why we say ‘allegedly’ at least 1,000 times.”

For the Boys and their entire Bodega Hive, making the list is a surreal achievement. “I told my wife and she literally did a back flip,” Martinez said. “I’d never seen her do a back flip before.”

The news brings Baker back to his adolescence, when he worked behind the desk at the New York Public Library. “One of my jobs was to look at the New York Times best-seller list, take those books off the shelf and put them in a display,” he said. “Now I’m one of those authors.”

Where do they go from here? Well, anywhere. “We’re firing on all cylinders,” Martinez said. “We’re poppin’ right now.” □

PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF SEPTEMBER 20-26

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		THE BOOK OF TWO WAYS , by Jodi Picoult. (Ballantine) After surviving a plane crash, a death doula travels to Egypt to reconnect with an old flame who is an archaeologist.	1	1	1	RAGE , by Bob Woodward. (Simon & Schuster) Based on 17 on-the-record interviews with President Trump and other reporting, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist details the president’s perspective on multiple crises.	2
2	1	THE EVENING AND THE MORNING , by Ken Follett. (Viking) In a prequel to “The Pillars of the Earth,” a boatbuilder, a Norman noblewoman and a monk live in England under attack by the Welsh and the Vikings.	2	2	4	KILLING CRAZY HORSE , by Bill O’Reilly and Martin Dugard. (Holt) The ninth book in the conservative commentator’s Killing series focuses on conflicts with Native Americans.	3
3		THE COAST-TO-COAST MURDERS , by James Patterson and J.D. Barker. (Little, Brown) A detective and an F.B.I. agent are baffled by a cross-country killing spree.	1	3	2	BLACKOUT , by Candace Owens. (Threshold Editions) The conservative commentator makes her case that Black Americans should part ways with the Democratic Party. (†)	2
4	3	VINCE FLYNN: TOTAL POWER , by Kyle Mills. (Emily Bestler / Atria) When America’s power grid is shut down, Mitch Rapp goes after a cyber terrorist.	2	4	5	CASTE , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	8
5		NEXT TO LAST STAND , by Craig Johnson. (Viking) The 16th book in the Longmire series. A million dollars in a shoebox and a piece of a painting might be clues to an art heist.	1	5	3	DISLOYAL , by Michael Cohen. (Skyhorse) An account of President Trump’s business empire, political campaign and presidential administration by his former personal attorney.	3
6	5	THE VANISHING HALF , by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge as one returns and the other takes on a different racial identity but their fates intertwine.	17	6	8	LIVE FREE OR DIE , by Sean Hannity. (Threshold Editions) The Fox News host offers his assessment on what is at stake in the 2020 election. (†)	8
7	6	WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING , by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.	108	7		DON’T LIE TO ME AND STOP TRYING TO STEAL OUR FREEDOM , by Jeanine Pirro. (Center Street) The Fox News host asks how anyone could vote against President Trump in the 2020 election. (†)	1
8	10	ONE BY ONE , by Ruth Ware. (Gallery/Scout) An avalanche tests the bonds of coworkers from a London-based tech startup on a corporate retreat in the French Alps.	3	8		NOTORIOUS RBG , by Irin Carmon and Shana Knizhnik. (Dey Street) A celebration of the life and career of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.	9
9	2	TROUBLED BLOOD , by Robert Galbraith. (Mulholland) The fifth book in the Cormoran Strike series. A decades-old cold case might be connected to a serial killer; by J.K. Rowling, writing pseudonymously.	2	9	7	UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	29
10	7	THE HARBINGER II , by Jonathan Cahn. (FrontLine) Nouriel, Ana Goren and a figure known as “the prophet” return as revelations are unlocked.	4	10	9	SPEAKING FOR MYSELF , by Sarah Huckabee Sanders. (St. Martin’s) The former White House press secretary shares her perspective on her time working with President Trump. (†)	3

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

Paperback Row / BY JENNIFER KRAUSS



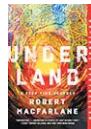
JANIS: Her Life and Music, by Holly George-Warren. (Simon & Schuster, 400 pp., \$18.) “We get the full Janis,” our reviewer, Sheila Weller, wrote of this “masterfully researched” biography of the pop icon. But while George-Warren had access to Joplin’s diaries and letters (the latter of which are peppered with the word “SIGH”), she “zeros in” on her skill in singing, particularly the blues.



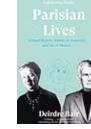
MARY TOFT; OR, THE RABBIT QUEEN, by Dexter Palmer. (Vintage, 336 pp., \$16.95.) By spinning a 1726 medical hoax, in which a British woman claimed to have given birth to 17 rabbits, into a “cracking” and “compassionate” novel about “the nature of belief,” Palmer pays Toft “the compliment of complexity.” Her story, “both happily and unhappily,” our reviewer, Katharine Grant, quipped, “is rather more than the sum of its rabbit parts.”



GRAND UNION: Stories, by Zadie Smith. (Penguin, 256 pp., \$17.) According to our reviewer, Rebecca Makkai, the best pieces in this first collection of Smith’s stories “achieve something less narrative” than her more traditional tales of disillusionment, “and closer to brilliance.” Among them “we find the surreal, the nonlinear, the essayistic, the pointillist”—some of Smith’s “most vibrant, original fiction, the kind of writing she’ll surely be known for.”



UNDERLAND: A Deep Time Journey, by Robert Macfarlane. (Norton, 496 pp., \$17.95.) “You know a book has entered your bloodstream when the ground beneath your feet, once viewed as bedrock, suddenly becomes a roof to unknown worlds below,” our reviewer, Terry Tempest Williams, said about this “epic exploration” of caverns around the world.



PARISIAN LIVES: Samuel Beckett, Simone de Beauvoir, and Me: A Memoir, by Deirdre Bair. (Anchor, 368 pp., \$16.95.) “To our delight, we become voyeurs” in this “gripping account” of Bair’s “fraught journey” (as a fledgling biographer) toward “uncovering the lives” of Beckett and Beauvoir, our reviewer, Alan Riding, marveled. “Can this inexperienced young American tame these two *monstres sacrés*?”



THE SIBERIAN DILEMMA, by Martin Cruz Smith. (Simon & Schuster, 288 pp., \$17.) This Arkady Renko mystery takes the detective into Russia’s “untamed wilderness” in search of a journalist who went missing while covering a Putin opponent. “The case is of special importance” to Renko, our Crime columnist, Marilyn Stasio, wryly noted, “because the reporter, Tatiana Petrovna, is his lover.”

PAPERBACK

SALES PERIOD OF SEPTEMBER 20-26

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	PAPERBACK TRADE FICTION	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	THE INSTITUTE , by Stephen King. (Gallery) Children with special talents are abducted and sequestered in an institution where the sinister staff seeks to extract their gifts.	4
2	2	THEN SHE WAS GONE , by Lisa Jewell. (Atria) Ten years after her daughter disappears, a woman tries to get her life in order but remains haunted by unanswered questions.	63
3	3	CILKA'S JOURNEY , by Heather Morris. (St. Martin's Griffin) A 16-year-old is sentenced to a Siberian prison camp where she cares for the ill.	3
4	4	LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE , by Celeste Ng. (Penguin) An artist upends a quiet town outside Cleveland.	73
5	10	THE TESTAMENTS , by Margaret Atwood. (Anchor) Old secrets bring three women together as the Republic of Gilead's theocratic regime shows signs of decay.	4
6	8	THIS TENDER LAND , by William Kent Krueger. (Atria) Four orphans encounter a cross-section of different people struggling during the Great Depression.	13
7	12	THE HANDMAID'S TALE , by Margaret Atwood. (Anchor) In the Republic of Gilead's dystopian future, men and women perform the services assigned to them.	131
8	14	THE NICKEL BOYS , by Colson Whitehead. (Anchor) Two boys respond to horrors at a Jim Crow-era reform school in ways that impact them decades later.	13
9	11	THE NIGHTINGALE , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's Griffin) Two sisters in World War II France: one struggling to survive in the countryside, the other joining the Resistance.	58
10	9	THE MIDWIFE MURDERS , by James Patterson and Richard DiLallo. (Grand Central) A single mom teams up with an N.Y.P.D. detective to solve a case involving misdeeds at a hospital.	7
11	7	WHAT HAPPENS IN PARADISE , by Elin Hilderbrand. (Back Bay) A sequel to "Winter in Paradise."	2
12		CIRCE , by Madeline Miller. (Back Bay) Zeus banishes Helios' daughter to an island.	18
13	5	HOMEGOING , by Yaa Gyasi. (Vintage) The lives in West Africa and America of seven generations of the descendants of two half-sisters.	8
14	13	LOVECRAFT COUNTRY , by Matt Ruff. (Harper Perennial) During the time of Jim Crow America, Atticus Turner's father is held captive by the Order of the Ancient Dawn. The basis of the HBO series.	6
15	15	THE OVERSTORY , by Richard Powers. (Norton) Winner of the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Nine people fight for the last of the remaining acres of virgin forest.	62

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	15	MY OWN WORDS , by Ruth Bader Ginsburg with Mary Hartnett and Wendy W. Williams. (Simon & Schuster) A collection of articles and speeches by the Supreme Court justice.	10
2	1	WHITE FRAGILITY , by Robin DiAngelo. (Beacon) Historical and cultural analyses on what causes defensive moves by white people.	108
3	3	THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind.	101
4	2	SO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT RACE , by Ijeoma Oluo. (Seal) A look at the contemporary racial landscape of the United States.	19
5	8	STAMPED FROM THE BEGINNING , by Ibram X. Kendi. (Bold Type) A look at anti-Black racist ideas and their effect on the course of American history.	19
6	4	JUST MERCY , by Bryan Stevenson. (One World) A civil rights lawyer's memoir of his decades of work to free innocent people condemned to death.	224
7	5	THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Vintage) An account of the Great Migration of 1915-70, in which six million African-Americans abandoned the South.	39
8	6	BORN A CRIME , by Trevor Noah. (One World) A memoir by the host of "The Daily Show."	85
9	7	THE COLOR OF LAW , by Richard Rothstein. (Liveright) A case for how the American government abetted racial segregation in metropolitan areas across the country.	22
10	9	THE NEW JIM CROW , by Michelle Alexander. (New Press) A law professor on the "war on drugs" and its role in the disproportionate incarceration of Black men.	205
11		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.	24
12		RUTH BADER GINSBURG: A LIFE , by Jane Sherron De Hart. (Vintage) A biography of the late Supreme Court justice, based on 15 years of interviews and research.	1
13	11	ON TYRANNY , by Timothy Snyder. (Tim Duggan) Twenty lessons from the 20th century about the course of tyranny.	75
14	14	MY GRANDMOTHER'S HANDS , by Resmaa Menakem. (Central Recovery) A therapist who specializes in trauma, body-centered psychotherapy and violence prevention explains racism's effect on the body.	9
15		THE TRUTHS WE HOLD , by Kamala Harris. (Penguin) A memoir by the daughter of immigrants who is now a California senator and the 2020 Democratic candidate for vice president.	3

The New York Times

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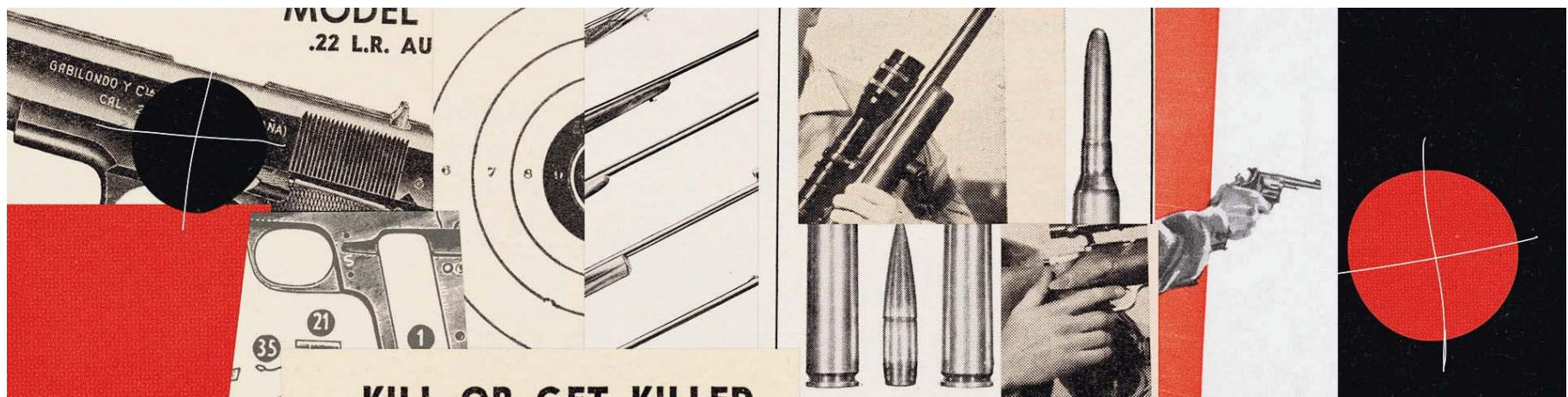
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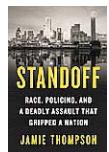
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STANDOFF

Race, Policing, and a Deadly Assault That Gripped a Nation

By Jamie Thompson
320 pp. Holt. \$27.99.



In July 2016, Micah Johnson told his mother he was headed to a Black Lives Matter rally in Dallas. He never returned. Five Dallas police officers also headed to the same rally. They never returned. Dallas, the city where one of the most beloved presidents in the history of the United States was assassinated by a former member of its military, was once again under siege.

In "Standoff: Race, Policing, and a Deadly Assault That Gripped a Nation," Thompson, a journalist, chronicles the events surrounding Johnson's killing of the five officers. In her ticktock, scene-driven account, she presents a cavalcade of characters and carefully constructed episodes, but too often she seems to be writing for the big screen rather than for readers. Still, the book is eerily prescient, documenting yet another moment of great social unrest that preceded the killing of George Floyd and the demonstrations of this year. In 2016 Dallas citizens protested police brutality. For their part, the Dallas police, who are brilliantly and exhaustively profiled in Thompson's book, seem to have seen their work as brutal by necessity.

Thompson's narrative provides multiple points of view. At the memorial for the five officers killed, for example, President Barack Obama also mentioned two Black men killed by the police that month, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Connecting losses of life, he spoke of the affection their friends and family had for them. But this irritated one of the Dallas officers involved in the conflict.

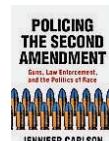
"He should not have said their names," he insisted.

The key negotiator, a Black man who failed to talk Johnson down, overheard the remark and took umbrage. "Why?" he said. "Those are two people who died. They got killed. They have families, too. Philando Castile — he didn't do a damn thing."

POLICING THE SECOND AMENDMENT

Guns, Law Enforcement, and the Politics of Race

By Jennifer Carlson
296 pp. Princeton University. \$29.95.



Carlson, who teaches at the University of Arizona, examines how the National Rifle Association became a driving influence behind American policing for over a century, and emerges with the idea that policing America has not overcome its racially charged beginning.

In 1916, the National Rifle Association began a push for police training in firearms and positioned itself at its center. In Oklahoma, where I live, the state's law enforcement agency recognizes N.R.A. certification as proof that an individual is qualified to teach a course in concealed weapons, under the terms of the state's Self-Defense Act. Earning N.R.A. certification was a crowning achievement for white American gun owners and police officers in an effort to contain men and women of color through what Carlson calls a "war on guns."

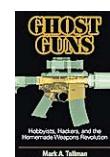
She writes, "This war on guns is made possible by the prisms through which urban gun violence is viewed by the public and by police alike, one that delimits gun violence as a particular kind of problem and that racializes gun offenders as particular kinds of people. It is echoed loudly by gun rights advocates in the National Rifle Association, within police circles and beyond."

In 2016, 51.3 percent of people convicted of gun crimes were Black, and one in three Black men have felony records. Carlson reframes police unions' calls for gun control in the 1990s as an attempt for assurance that police forces would not be outgunned. She explains such calls were actually a means to create an environment that allowed for "gun militarism" — the need for the police "to disarm and overpower the enemy."

HOST GUNS

Hobbyists, Hackers, and the Homemade Weapons Revolution

By Mark A. Tallman
232 pp. Praeger. \$39.



In August last year a California Highway Patrol officer pulled over a driver for illegally using the car pool lane. The man had no license, no registration and was a felon. When the officer moved to begin the process of impounding the vehicle, the ex-con — a 49-year-old man named Aaron Luther — began firing a semiautomatic rifle.

When the shooting was over, at least one officer was fatally wounded and more than 100 rounds had been fired. Despite his having served 10 years in prison for second-degree murder, Luther had still managed to obtain a weapon. His was what law enforcement calls a ghost gun, or an "independently fabricated" small arm.

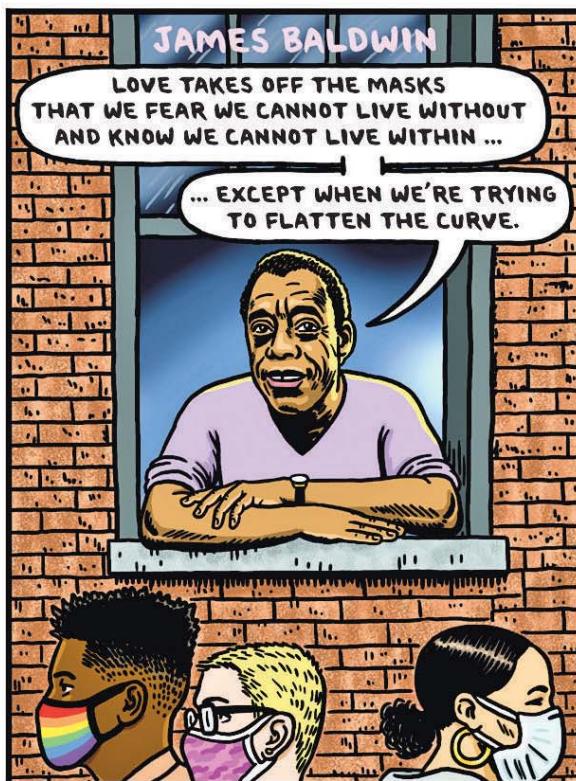
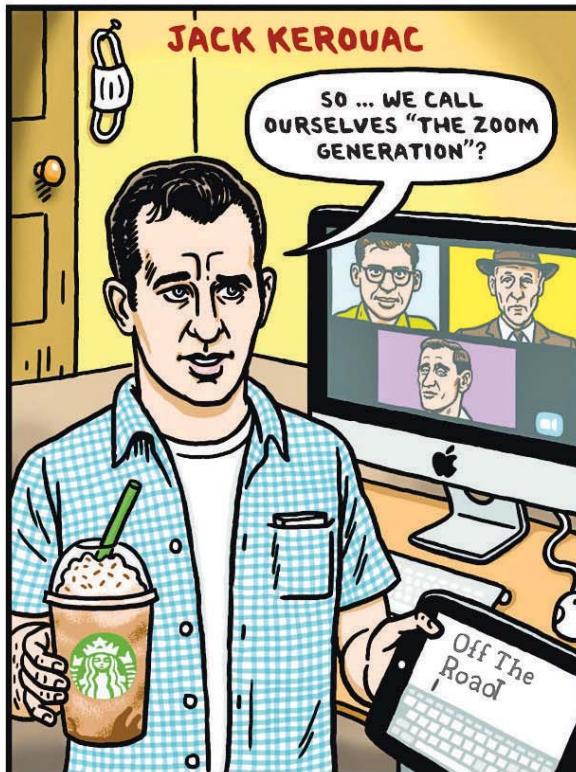
In "Ghost Guns: Hobbyists, Hackers, and the Homemade Weapons Revolution," Tallman, who teaches homeland security at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, describes the great changes brought about by the proliferation of these weapons. While people have been building homemade guns for many years, only as recently as 2001 have traditional media reported on their growing number and chief function: skirting law enforcement because they are untraceable. In fact, Tallman cites 2001 as the first time the term "ghost guns" was popularly used — in reference to a story about the Real Republican Irish Army converting flare guns so that they could fire live cartridges.

Tallman's point is clear: The trend to create guns that state and federal governments cannot trace is growing. And while many journalists and policymakers are now chasing this story, the creators are busily sharing their knowledge. "It's impossible to understand" this kind of gun-making "without understanding the technology behind it," Tallman writes. "Ready or not, the Open Source Revolution is here."

RJ YOUNG is the author of "Let It Bang: A Young Black Man's Odyssey Into Guns" and the forthcoming "Requiem for the Massacre: A Black History on the Conflict, Hope and Fallout of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre."

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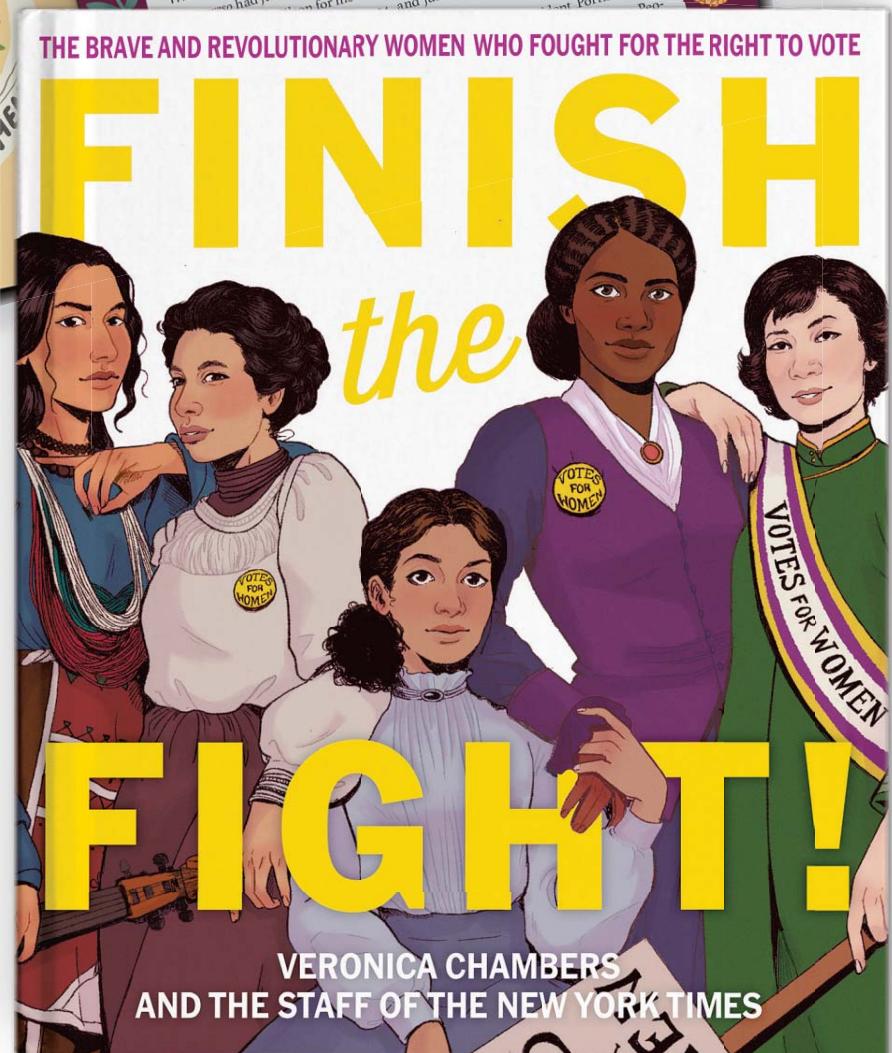




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