In the summer of 1976, my family took a hot car trip in our Chevy Impala from our home in the middle of the country to be part of the bicentennial. I remember that visiting Philadelphia and colonial Williamsburg in Virginia made being an American feel tangible—a proud if vague connection to tri-cornered hats, seas of Betsy Ross flags and the spirit of ’76. The 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States is coming up in 2026, and now, no less than in 1976, the country could use reminders of how difficult and important becoming a democracy was. The U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, commissioned by Congress to commemorate the upcoming anniversary, has the mission “to catalyze a more perfect union by designing and leading the most comprehensive and inclusive celebration in our country’s history.” This seems like an appropriate time to read a good overview of the American Revolution, as a lesson in what happened and why it mattered.

Unfortunately, Joseph J. Ellis’s “The Cause” is not that book.

**The Cause: The American Revolution and Its Discontents, 1773-1783** By Joseph J. Ellis

Mr. Ellis does cover the basics of the Revolution. The British Parliament imposes new taxes, colonists protest, tea is dumped, congresses meet, shots are fired, independence is declared, more shots are fired, winters are weathered, and a treaty is signed. The title aptly reflects how the revolutionaries drew supporters to a glorious cause without necessarily specifying its parameters. Artisans and laborers taking to the streets of Philadelphia did not want exactly the same revolution as wealthy merchants and planters did. Some ambiguity as to ends and means can make leading a coalition into revolution a little easier.

When King George III declares the colonies to be in a state of rebellion and appoints as Secretary of the American Colonies hard-liner George Germain, who had called the colonists “overindulged children,” Mr. Ellis ably conveys diverse reactions. Bostonian John Adams felt confirmed in his assumption that compromise was impossible. New Yorker John Jay recalled surprise among many of his friends—a common feeling of being slapped in the face like a naughty child. Pennsylvanian John Dickinson was filled with dread.

Yet, for most of its pages, “The Cause” is written in the ponderous self-referential style of a professor to whom students are required to listen. Clubby asides about professors Mr. Ellis has known seem of doubtful interest to any reader. Footnotes at the bottom of the page add tedious details, such as a rumination on the label “Treaty of Paris” versus “Peace of Paris” and the least interesting tidbit I have ever read about the usually fascinating Marquis de Lafayette.

The book reads as though it had been written for someone who hasn’t picked up a book or newspaper since 1976. One footnote picks a bone with Marxist scholarship in a long-dead historiographic battle. The cultural references tend toward Dr. Spock and World War II air raids. If Mr. Ellis had published “The Cause” in 1976, it might have been correct that American readers were “perhaps for the first time” equipped to empathize with Britain’s 18th-century plight as a “newly arrived world power moving onto the global stage with overwhelming confidence, brimming over with a bottomless sense of its omniscience and invincibility, stepping into a military quagmire.” But nearly half a century after the fall of Saigon, readers in 2021 won’t find the idea of a military quagmire and a lost sense of invincibility anything new.

Of course history books don’t have to tell us anything new. An engagingly written work of history can cover old ground and still be enjoyable, like reading a beloved classic. Yet “The Cause” combines the worst quality of popular history (not saying anything original) with the worst qualities of academic writing (it is dully written). Reading the book means slogging through cluttered and repetitive sentences. Read this one: “While The Cause provided at least a measure of verbal focus before ‘War for American Independence’ or ‘American Revolution’ became viable labels, the fundamental ambiguity of The Cause is symptomatic of the inherently elusive character of American resistance to British rule in 1775-76, which simultaneously embraced the sword and the olive branch.” This states an important point: American rebels weren’t ready to call their protests a revolution or independence movement before the Declaration of Independence. But the observation is neither original nor well-put.

The table of contents for “The Cause” promises some new characters beyond those Mr. Ellis has written about before, including George Washington’s enslaved valet, William Lee, and Catharine Littlefield Greene, the wife of Gen. Nathanael Greene. Yet these sections of the book turn out to be thin two-page profiles with little connection to the book’s main text. Mr. Ellis shoehorns Mohawk war leader Joseph Brant into being “the George Washington of the vaunted Iroquois Confederacy.” Yet writing about Brant doesn’t make Mr. Ellis rethink the bromide that he delivers in the main text—that, because of viruses, “the Native population collapsed upon contact with the front edge of white settlements.” Never mind that Mohawks had traded, lived with, and intermarried with the Dutch, French and English (and their germs) for nearly two centuries by the time of the Revolution.

In another brief profile, Mr. Ellis writes (twice) that Mercy Otis Warren was the “best friend” of Abigail Adams but omits her stinging published condemnation of the Constitution. In her pamphlet “Observations on the New Constitution,” Otis Warren accused the drafters of the Constitution of a “deep-laid plot” against “a people who have made the most costly sacrifices in the cause of liberty—who have braved the power of Britain, weathered the convulsions of war, and waded thro’ the blood of friends and foes to establish their independence.” In a work about different goals subsumed under “The Cause,” surely her charge that the Constitution would betray that cause deserves further exploration.

Since 1976, historians have been moving away from this kind of sidebar treatment of everyone but the Founding Fathers. Thus, we have such books as Serena Zabin’s “The Boston Massacre: A Family History” (2020) which by integrating the stories of British and American soldiers and their wives demonstrates how intimate a breakup the Revolution was. Colin G. Calloway’s “The Indian World of George Washington” (2018) traces Native American influence on Washington’s life, from his childhood, through his military career, to the Native diplomacy and warfare that commanded his attention during his presidency. Annette Gordon-Reed’s “The Hemingses of Monticello” (2008) reveals the deep intertwining of the white and black relations of Thomas Jefferson and his wife, Martha Wayles Jefferson.

By not using the lives of Joseph Brant, Mercy Otis Warren or William Lee to deepen the story of the American Revolution, Mr. Ellis is left presenting the shallow interpretation that the Revolution merely deferred including women and nonwhite men in political equality. It’s true that many of the Founding Fathers lamented slavery and the slave trade and hoped that they would end eventually, but they rarely imagined extending full citizenship rights to black men. Because women were considered dependents, they were by definition incapable of exercising the independence required of citizens in a republic. Abigail Adams urged her husband to “remember the ladies” in making laws that affected them, but her husband decidedly opposed expanding the franchise to anyone whose wealth, position and gender didn’t allow them to be independent. The common law of coverture, which made married women legal dependents of their husbands, survived the Revolution without even much being mentioned. After Thomas Jefferson won the presidency in 1800, his supporters in the Maryland state legislature changed the state’s rules to take the vote away from “free negroes and mulattoes” who had voted in previous elections. In 1807, New Jersey added the words “male” and “white” to its state constitution. Political equality for women and nonwhite men wasn’t deferred after the revolution; it moved further away.

In my decades as a historian, I have never seen early American history as urgently consumed and debated as it is now, from all parts of the political spectrum. Who is an American? What makes a good and lasting republic? Should legislators be responsible to the people or govern from their own sense of right and wrong? How do we build and maintain lasting representative institutions? What should happen when a candidate loses an election but thinks the election was run unfairly? How does a minority change the majority’s mind? These are all questions that Americans struggled with 250 years ago. The founding of our country began to answer some of them in revolutionary ways, but they are certainly not settled today.

There are good general histories of the American Revolution to read as the semiquincentennial approaches. Alan Taylor’s “American Revolutions” (2016) is a gripping and original synthesis. Classics such as Robert Middlekauff’s “The Glorious Cause” (1982, revised 2005) and Edward Countryman’s “The American Revolution” (1985, revised 2003) may already be on your shelf and ripe for a reread. Grab one of those, and get those Betsy Ross flags ready.

A few years ago, an Australian scientist was bushwhacking through the wilderness when he felt a twig snap against his leg. Or so he thought. He’d actually been nipped by an Eastern brown snake, one of the most venomous serpents on Earth. Oblivious, he walked on and even went swimming in a nearby river before blacking out and nearly dying.

**Hurts So Good: The Science and Culture of Pain on Purpose**

By Leigh Cowart

We’ve probably all heard similar stories, about athletes or warriors who suffer serious injury but power through without realizing they’re hurt. What’s surprising is what happened next. Nothing if not intrepid, the scientist plunged back into the bush six months later for another hike—at which point he again felt something snap against his leg. He crumpled to the ground in agony, writhing and screaming.

But this time, it really was just a twig. Identical sensation, completely different reaction. “There is no grievous injury . . . just a very powerful memory of last time,” explains science writer Leigh Cowart about the story. “The basic sensory processing is the same, but the cognitive understanding of the pain differs.” All of which goes to show that, for something so basic to human experience, pain remains a highly subjective and even slippery phenomenon.

There’s possibly no one alive more qualified to write about pain than Leigh Cowart, who uses the pronoun they and prefers the Mx. honorific. A self-described “gorehound,” the author has been, at different points in life, “a ballet dancer, an overexerciser, a serious bulimic and self-harmer, a tattoo aficionado” and a hard-core BDSM enthusiast. This eye-opening book, “Hurts So Good: The Science and Culture of Pain on Purpose,” explores why so many people pursue painful activities like these, and especially what people get out of pain when they encounter—or achieve—it. “Many people engage in the ritual of deliberately feeling bad to feel better,” the author notes, “and once I started looking for the pattern, I saw it everywhere.”

Mx. Cowart’s life as an adolescent ballerina was grueling. Learning to dance en pointe left them with feet looking like “raw hamburger,” and they would regularly wake up in bed at night to find their toes stuck to the blanket due to oozing sores. As for whether ballet made the author a masochist, or whether the author sought out ballet because of an inborn masochistic streak, they can’t say. But this book does take time to explore the psychology of pain, especially the big blaring question of why. Why would anyone willingly subject themselves to such torture?

The author offers several potentially overlapping reasons. When life feels overwhelming, pain clears the mind like nothing else—forcing you to focus, in a sort of twisted Zen way, on the present moment alone. Some people find nobility in agony: As Nietzsche pointed out, Christianity tends to glorify anguish, and the idea of noble suffering still pervades Western life. Other people seek out pain to prove they can master it, instead of letting pain master them. In contrast, during masochistic sex, the power dynamics of submission and helplessness can act as an aphrodisiac. Finally, pain can get you high. Pain floods our brains with chemicals called endorphins that act as natural opioids. Several hot-chili aficionados in “Hurts So Good” are former drug addicts who now chase the dragon in a more socially acceptable way.

Beyond plumbing their personal past, the author also engages in what might be called gonzo science writing. They dive into one excruciating situation after another (a polar bear plunge, a chili pepper-eating contest), and things go hilariously awry. The mush from one superhot pepper (2.2 million Scoville units; jalapeños max out at 8,000) burns the author’s mouth like “Dante’s gazpacho.” In their stupor, they then rub some into their eye. The author is especially good at describing escalating pain: just when you think a passage has reached a crescendo, Mx. Cowart ups the ante with some new turn of phrase. More than once, I found myself sucking in my breath and feeling my feet tingle as some new horror unfolded on the page.

I especially enjoyed the chapter on extreme running, which covers the fiendish Big Dog’s Backyard Ultra in Tennessee. Every hour, the contestants in this ultramarathon have to complete a four-mile circuit. Doesn’t sound too bad, except that the race sometimes continues all day and all night for nearly three days, with zero breaks. Quite literally, the last person standing wins. Overall, the chapter is a beautiful reflection on the capacity for human endurance, and for pushing yourself beyond what you thought possible. It’s also wickedly funny. God help me, but I still laugh at one poor soul who, 40-some hours in, pitched forward in exhaustion and crashed asleep atop a mailbox.

Yet this running chapter does highlight a problem with the author’s objective to find masochists everywhere they looked. Before the Tennessee race, the organizer initially revoked the author’s press pass because he objected to the pastime being characterized as masochism. As he wrote, “like many sport[s], there is discomfort involved, but it is a cost of competition, not an objective.”

The author objects to that distinction, but I think the organizer is right. For most runners and ballet dancers, pain is a byproduct of their ultimate goal—to run fast or dance beautifully. Meanwhile, hot-pepper gobblers and BDSM types seek pain for its own sake, either to get high or to enhance sexual desire. At times, Leigh Cowart’s definition of masochism seemed so expansive that I wondered whether pregnant women giving birth would qualify.

That said, this book makes a far better case for the importance of pain in dance or athletics than I expected. Imagine you could win an Olympic marathon without enduring any pain. You’d still have to train, but you could sidestep all the misery—the soreness, the burning lungs, the bloody blisters, the toenails falling off. Would you accept this deal? Many of us probably would; suffering stinks. But the author makes a strong argument that the medal would mean far less to you than to someone who suffered for it. Suffering creates meaning, and the joy of victory is sweeter for having suffered. So while the author didn’t convince me that all people who endure pain willingly are closet masochists, they pulled me much closer to their views and clarified my thinking in good ways.

There’s more than a bit of an exhibitionist streak in “Hurts So Good,” and in the wrong hands that could have made for tedious reading. (Is there anything more banal than someone constantly trying to shock you?) But the author largely sidesteps that danger and has produced a thoughtful, funny, and at times lyrical look at pain and its deeper human meaning. It’s still not clear where our messy craving for pain comes from, but as the author notes, “It’s beautiful and terrifying, and my god, don’t we love to look?”

###### Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy’s New Killing Fields

By Charles Bowden (2010)

**4.** Like Sebastian Junger and Richard Grant, Charles Bowden goes to dangerous places and talks to dangerous people—at a cost: “I have covered kidnappings, murders,” he writes. “There is little within me that has not been battered or wrenched or poisoned.” And at a gain: He has become a visionary poet—of murder, torture, rape. His achievement is in capturing the fleeting essence of evil. One former sicario—“a murder artist”—tells him: “You don’t know me. No one can forgive me for what I have done,” a confession all the more chilling for its tone of regret, its suggestion of a divided, unknowable self. The forces Bowden sees at play between the U.S. and Mexico are economic, elemental. They begin at the abstract level of free trade and end in the predatory, duplicitous human heart with its ravenous cravings for money, sex, drugs, blood. In lawless Juárez, Bowden discovers that where anarchy reigns, killing is as addictive as the narcotics pouring north and the money pouring south. Placing himself on the boundary between two nations, he subjects himself to titanic pressures and makes a literary diamond.

In 2018, a woman named Karin nearly died of a broken heart. There were no underlying diseases, no congested arteries, no signs, no symptoms—yet her heart suddenly ballooned in size and threatened to burst. If at that moment she hadn’t happened to be lying on an operating table for a routine retinal procedure, she would certainly have died. Karin was later diagnosed with broken-heart syndrome, which can be caused by severe stress, sudden shock, bereavement, financial losses, even a surprise party. And it can kill you.

**The Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories of Mystery Illness**

By Suzanne O’Sullivan

Death by broken heart has the ring of folklore. If nothing seems to be wrong, if no disease appears on the scans or turns up in the blood work, the medical experts tell us, then we shouldn’t be sick. Yet broken-heart syndrome and other such conditions are real and their effects debilitating. In “The Sleeping Beauties,” Suzanne O’Sullivan, a practicing neurologist, sets out to answer some difficult questions about what it means to be afflicted by such “mystery illnesses.” Her book is at once poignant, surprising and sometimes horrifying.

Dr. O’Sullivan begins with the titular “sleeping beauties,” young refugee children who have been falling asleep and cannot be woken. “Between 2015 and 2016,” she tells us, “169 children in disparate towns in Sweden had gone to bed and not got up again.” Doctors called it resignation syndrome. It starts as a kind of fatigue; the children speak little, then not at all. When they fall into an endless sleep, their frightened parents might take them to the hospital, but their brain scans inevitably come back normal. They are not in comas. On paper, they appear to have normal waking and sleeping cycles. But some of them have been asleep for years. Some may never wake at all.

“How is it possible,” Dr. O’Sullivan recalls wondering upon hearing the news, “for someone to fall into a coma when their brain seems perfectly healthy?” The medical profession—indeed, the general public—tends to dismiss disorders that fall outside the understood disease categories, maligning the sufferers as weak, or worse: attention-seeking pretenders. In the absence of apparent disease, patients are often told that their symptoms are in—or of—the mind, a diagnosis frequently distilled to mean “mental fragility, or even madness.” In the case of the refugee children, some observers believed that they were faking, or that they were liars, or that the parents were drugging them. None of these aspersions were true. A child may feign sleep, but not for years. Some needed feeding tubes so as to avoid starving to death.

Dr. O’Sullivan, who previously wrote “Is It All in Your Head?” (2015) and “Brainstorm” (2018), describes these and similar cases as “functional neurological disorders.” Once referred to as hysteria and today more commonly called psychosomatic, such conditions raise questions for which medicine still has no answer. Whatever you call them, Dr. O’Sullivan writes, they are “a result of physiological mechanisms that go awry to produce genuine physical symptoms and disability.”

Unraveling the mystery behind such strange occurrences requires more than neurological expertise—it needs careful handling, a deep and empathic understanding of how society and culture, experience and expectation, work in tandem with our neural pathways and bodily responses to produce physiological disorders. Dr. O’Sullivan uncovers these complex mechanisms while painting a picture of psychosomatic suffering that removes its associated stigma, and she asks us to think about illness in new ways.

In Kazakhstan, she meets Lyubov, an elderly woman who was once Patient Zero for a sleeping sickness that afflicted Krasnogorsk. A uranium mining town, Krasnogorsk had been a valuable asset to the Soviet government and, as a result, was well supplied. In the 1970s, its residents were all privileged and young: “They started families at the same time and watched their children grow up in relative opulence,” Dr. O’Sullivan explains. “They had everything they wanted.”

Lyubov serves Dr. O’Sullivan a mournful tale over milky mayonnaise soup. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Krasnogorsk was abandoned and left to crumble. Many homes lost heat and running water. Most of the residents relocated. As one of the few who refused to leave, Lyubov eventually fell into a sleeping sickness. Her first bout lasted four days. Other patients followed, some 130 people in a population of 300. None of them ever had concrete signs of disease. It was not, Dr. O’Sullivan explains, an illness driven by deprivation—but by deep sorrow and grief.

Lyubov was not pretending, and neither were the Swedish refugee children. Lyubov’s sadness and suffering, her anxiety and fear, combined to change how her brain—and body—functioned. Similarly, in each of the Swedish cases, the children and their parents faced deportation to dangerous homelands. As helpless witnesses, the children began to withdraw.

We know that stress can cause a surge in hormones. Yet stress is often treated as something we’re expected to overcome by force of will alone. This is a fiction. We’ve become a society, Dr. O’Sullivan explains, that privileges biology without understanding the interconnected relationships between the body, the brain and the society that surrounds us. Functional neurological and psychosomatic disorders are subject to fierce debate, and sufferers already raw from repeated denial of their experience are often the collateral damage. Dr. O’Sullivan wades into this conflict with extraordinary tact. What we underestimate, she tells us, is the power of the brain to disorder the body. “It is time we stopped resurrecting the centuries-old tropes of witch trials and Freudian hysteria,” she writes, and instead recognize the myopic focus on biology. Context can also make us sick.

Dr. O’Sullivan’s most radical suggestion is that cases of so-called mystery illness should not be considered medical at all. They are not imaginary, but medicine may not be the best means of treating them. In all of the cases she covers, from broken-heart syndrome to sleeping sickness to inexplicable seizures and people being possessed by “devils,” the best means of recovery come from the patient’s community. “When societies lose a shared spirituality and a sense of community and family,” she writes, they also lose their support systems. Treating symptoms with pharmaceuticals, instead of addressing the root cause, would “ultimately rob the community of their voice.”

“The Sleeping Beauties” offers a brilliant, nuanced and thoughtful look at the lived experience of illness while asking important questions about the relationship between body and mind. Dr. O’Sullivan’s rich prose weaves a tapestry as hauntingly beautiful as it is scientifically valid.

At the heart of this tour de force is the question, deceptively simple but so difficult to answer: What do we mean by illness? Should medicine—biologically minded, diagnosis-privileging Western medicine—alone be allowed to decide?

###### The Story of My Escape

By Giacomo Casanova, translated by Andrew K. Lawston (2014)

**5.** In 1755, Casanova was back home in Venice after energetically touring, and making love to, as he wrote, “all of Italy, the two Greeces, Turkey, Constantinople, and the most beautiful cities of both France and Germany.” By his own account, he was “full of himself . . . outspoken . . . an enemy of prejudice” and forethought. But Venice is a place of intrigue and home to the Inquisition, whose spies are everywhere. Casanova is arrested on a trumped-up charge and imprisoned in the Doge’s palace. His cell is rat-infested, lightless, airless. There’s no hearing, no trial, no word on how long he’ll have to remain—only the ominous sight of a chair in which the Inquisitors strangle prisoners to death. Casanova fashions a digging tool out of a 20-inch iron bar, but the real instrument of his escape is his wit—the powers of speech, pen and persuasion, whereby he gets less courageous souls to follow him to freedom.

“Rizzio,” a brief novel of historical treachery by the adventurous Scottish author Denise Mina, is set mostly in Edinburgh’s Holyrood Palace in early 1566. In residence at Holyrood is the 23-year-old Mary, Queen of Scots, and her husband and king consort, Lord Darnley, with whose child she is six months pregnant. Parliament is in session, about to strip the Queen’s remaining rivals of their powers and lands. Those rivals—plus the “Chaseabout Lords” already exiled or slighted by Mary—have something else in mind: They plan to seize power after killing the Queen’s private secretary, David Rizzio, on the premise that he’s a papal spy.

**Rizzio**

By Denise Mina

Pegasus Crime

“They resent her power,” thinks Rizzio of the Queen’s enemies, “her sex, her religious devotion, her pregnancy which has the potential to carry on her Catholic line. They resent the compromise she represents, that there may not be a Protestant Europe, now and for ever.” The conspiracy’s most highly placed participant is the Queen’s own spouse, the envious and perfidious Darnley.

Given its basis in recorded fact, the plot of “Rizzio” is denied many of the opportunities for suspense afforded to stories made from whole cloth. (Who lives? Who dies? Who escapes?) But Ms. Mina creates other types of suspense: Who will be the next coup participant, for instance, to find out that he’s not in charge of the deeds he’s signed on to commit?

The book focuses on the Saturday afternoon and evening of March 9, 1566, the date chosen by the insurrectionists for their attack. To this chronicle Ms. Mina brings a “Wolf Hall”-like depiction of interior thought. She describes her characters’ actions with optical clarity; centuries-old events are made immediate through the close scrutinizing of several individuals.

Here from his sickbed comes Darnley’s uncle by marriage, the feverish and bizarrely armored Lord Ruthven, his skin “a cadaverous green,” his breath smelling of “turned milk and cat piss.” One witness muses: “The conspirators have nominated a corpse to lead them.” He’s “an intolerable man,” but “he doesn’t care if they laugh. He has one foot out of this world already.”

Here too is Rizzio, the educated and charming Italian courtier who has made himself useful to the court in many ways and whose death is now vital to these conspirators’ plans. See him being dragged by the head from Mary’s presence like a “screaming trophy,” and then “stabbed in the neck, the arm, the stomach and legs.” Each present must participate, as in the murder of Caesar: “The collective nature of the act meant that everyone was tainted, that no one could be prosecuted because their fates are conjoined. If anyone were punished for the deed the entire class would fall.” Rizzio, who “has eight seconds left to live,” thinks of his assailants: “These men are grubby little cowards.”

Ruthven’s man Henry Yair, a Catholic turned Calvinist zealot, at first agrees, as he watches these “Great Men of History” at their butchery: “These men are not the elect. . . . These men are not marked for salvation.” But Yair soon returns to his reformist senses: “They are here to save the soul of Scotland. It is the right and godly thing to do.” He himself remains “a killing spree looking for an excuse.” Before the morn, his merciless suppression of his every joy will erupt in bloodletting madness.

Ms. Mina has been writing outstanding crime novels for years. She began her career at the turn of the century with a trilogy featuring a sex-abuse survivor who counsels similar victims and investigates attendant crimes. In “The Long Drop” (2017), the author constructed a fictionalized account of a real-life serial killer; like “Rizzio,” its plot was no less wrenching for being partly known in advance.

Top candidate for arch-snake in her latest novel’s nest of vipers may be the wicked and persistent Lennox, father of Darnley. “There is nothing worse than his father smiling,” Darnley thinks. “No good has ever come of it.” And Darnley knows: “Lennox wouldn’t hesitate to allow his own son’s execution if it were expedient.” Darnley is plenty vile in his own right; he expends his energy, while Rizzio is being slaughtered, hugging his wife hard in an effort to squeeze the life from their unborn child, “the usurper,” his rival for the eventual throne.

Her husband is an idiot, Mary judges. “He’s going to get them both killed.” In fact, she fears, “they’re going to kill her tonight . . . her and then Darnley. It’s the prudent thing to do. It’s what she would think to do. She needs to stop this.” Mary, then, becomes chief subject of our concern and sympathy, and she proves more than a match for her conniving mate. “She holds Darnley’s eye and mimics his wicked smile back at him. Darnley startles at her resolve . . . unhands her and steps away.”

With the help of a lady at court and the connivance of a midwife, Mary feigns illness, smuggles a note to supporters beyond the Holyrood grounds (“Bring an army”) and escapes on horseback, head high, spirit soaring. History-readers will know she cannot escape a future of exile, imprisonment and beheading. The closest thing “Rizzio” offers by way of revenge for its regal heroine, and for her Italian secretary, is the hanging of Yair, a gruesome event described in the same cinema-verité style as the rest of the story’s violence. The scene is more likely to induce PTSD than closure.

Ms. Mina, in her most recent books, has stretched her talent and pushed the genre envelope in stimulating ways. In “Rizzio” she has created a plus-sized novella with the passion of an opera, a tour de force of imaginative reconstruction. All that’s missing is a tagline from Scottish poet Robert Burns, writing some 200 years after the events at Holyrood Palace:

The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men

Gang aft agley,

An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain,

For promis’d joy!

###### Murder Machine

By Gene Mustain and Jerry Capeci (1992)

**2.** This complex story is skillfully handled by Gene Mustain and Jerry Capeci, both reporters for the New York Daily News. The title refers to the infamous Roy DeMeo crew in the Flatlands-Canarsie section of Brooklyn, N.Y. Nominally in the service of the Gambino captain Anthony “Nino” Gaggi, who profited from DeMeo’s lucrative auto-theft operation, DeMeo and his crew spent the 1970s inviting their victims to the Gemini Lounge social club and making them disappear. The killings—which may have claimed 200 lives—went beyond the need of enterprise. One unwilling witness to this horror was Gaggi’s nephew Dominick Montiglio, a Vietnam vet and Green Beret who had tried to break free of his uncle’s corrupting influence by joining the Army. Montiglio eventually testified for the government, even against Gaggi himself. As the authors write it, Montiglio’s life is the flight of a meteor pulled off course by a dark star.

###### Monster

By Sanyika Shakur, aka Monster Kody Scott (1993)

**3.** This is a family romance disguised (perhaps even from the author) as a story about a life of crime. Kody Scott is 11 years old when he joins the Crips gang in Los Angeles—the same day his mother takes him out to lunch at Bob’s Big Boy to celebrate his elementary-school graduation. Before describing in the book how he flees his mother to meet older boys who will induct him into the gang, Scott permits himself one sentence about his father: “My father and I never got along and I couldn’t understand why he mistreated me.” Six pages later, as part of his initiation, the 11-year-old shoots a perfect stranger with a pump shotgun. “I remember raising my weapon . . . for a split second it was as if we communicated on another level and I understood who he was—then I pulled the trigger and laid him down.” Kody—now aptly nicknamed Monster—devotes himself zealously to gang life. After recounting a mind-numbing whirl of senseless violence lasting 300 pages, Monster begins questioning the gangster life, adopts black nationalism, renames himself Sanyika Shakur and confronts the issue of his father, who is in fact the NFL player Richard Bass. Shakur tries to write to him: “I wasn’t able to finish the letter, just mailed it half-finished, like his fatherhood had been to me.” Shakur completes his letter by writing this book.

The idea that we should retreat from the world to cultivate our own gardens now seems thoroughly inadvisable. Even on our tiny patches of land, we are inextricably enmeshed with one another; there’s no escaping global sorrows. This is one of several thorny dilemmas novelist Niall Williams tangles with in a moving and surprisingly provocative new memoir, “In Kiltumper: A Year in an Irish Garden.” Its byways are as meandering as the garden, winding through meditations on soil, tea, varieties of rain and, this being Ireland, wandering into the mystic. Mr. Williams’s wife, Christine Breen, offers brisk, often witty, running commentary; she is a knowledgeable gardener; her illustrations lend a delicate touch. This memoir won’t teach you to garden, but it will show you a way of living in and through a garden. As Mr. Williams puts it, “Home is where you dig.”

**In Kiltumper: A Year in an Irish Garden**

By Niall Williams and Christine Breen

Bloomsbury

This couple’s narrative is more than a January-December chronicle, it is the result of decades of care, “a rich and precarious” 34 years. The authors have previously collaborated on four nonfiction books about a townland where Ms. Breen’s ancestors go back to the mid-18th century. Kiltumper, a “lumpy hillside” in County Clare, has fewer than a dozen houses. This is a place where a neighbor will share water when your well runs dry, or watch your dog—for a year. “In Kiltumper” was written just as Mr. Williams’s seductively lyrical novel “This Is Happiness” was being published in 2019. They await its reception nervously. They have reached their 60s, the fall of life. Ms. Breen has struggled for years through cancer treatments. Two children are grown and gone to New York; their parents long for their return and wonder who will carry on.

The Williams-Breen garden sounds like a romantic affair, blowsy in the best ways, despite copious efforts at staking. Paths on their property carve through meadows and groves of trees, and there are colorful beds full of the old beloved beauties: poppies, delphiniums, lupins, helianthus, peonies, roses and more. Mr. Williams is at once helpful and shambolic, absent-minded about herbs. “I would never have thought of adding lavender to potato salad,” Ms. Breen slyly remarks when he shows her which plant he thought was rosemary.

He can’t remember the names of anything, they are X and Y in his “poverty of names.” There is one name, though, that, like a thread of silver, glints through this tapestry of treasures, and that is “Chris.” “In Kiltumper” is as much a book about the cherishing of a marriage as it is about the love of a place. If gardening is mostly about noticing, Mr. Williams writes, “I notice because Chris noticed it.”

The book opens at the New Year, “when time past and time future are present in the same moment.” Mr. Williams’s intention is to “live with purpose.” He is a readerly writer, as I think of it; one of the joys of his prose is the generous thrum of other voices—T.S. Eliot, R.W. Emerson, even, in the occasional lilt of a sentence, the King James Bible. Writing about how gardeners grow into the shape of their gardens: “Our bones are become like the branches of the tree peony.”

“In Kiltumper” is a heartfelt paean to a disappearing way of life. Dread clouds these pages. Mr. Williams reads the latest United Nations climate reports with a feeling of “self-recrimination, and then loss. A sickening feeling of loss. The world is losing.” But to the crises we have created by burning fossil fuels, Mr. Williams insists, we must add the thoughtless depredation we are inflicting on our landscapes in order to fix the problems: “How much of the world do we have to spoil in order to save it?” Two massive wind turbines will be sited on a hill less than a third of a mile from Kiltumper, joining some 300 wind-power stations across Ireland. The planners have deemed that the town is an area designated as “not of scenic value—a surprise to us, and I have to admit a little hurtful.”

While Mr. Williams is too thoughtful to veer onto the off-ramp of climate denial or despair, he sincerely laments “the frailty of everything.” In Ireland, bird and hare and bee populations are crashing. He worries that nowhere in the calculation of the cost of green energy are there lines in the budget for the irreparable damage done to precious habitat.

Before long, ancient winding roads are straightened to facilitate the one-day delivery time of the turbines. A healthy old ash tree, over 50 feet tall, is cut down. Ireland has one of the lowest percentages of forest in Europe, Mr. Williams notes, clearly but a matter of head-scratching among government officials. Bulldozers lay waste, in 30 minutes, to centuries-old stone walls, the bones of ancestral farmers’ fields. (It is impossible not to think of the perilous state of Ms. Breen’s bones, embrittled by chemotherapy.) Mr. Williams tries to rally, but his spirit is “exhausted from trying to find positives.”

Are this couple’s losses too small, their accommodations to change too personal, to be worthy of consideration? The gardeners hear and feel the ceaseless whump of the blades; their night sky is reddened by a cordon of turbine-area warning lights. Ireland’s regulations governing proximity of turbines to dwellings are lax compared to those of Germany or Denmark. But land-based wind and solar “farms” have become contentious everywhere, dividing even environmentalists with the sacrifice of farmland and forests to escalating demands for power. Mr. Williams makes no mention of Moneypoint, 23 miles away, or its attendant pollution and emissions; once Ireland’s largest coal-burning power plant, it has been displaced by wind and gas. But then again, he has not yet gotten used to the pylons of crackling power lines installed 30 years ago.

Mr. Williams worries that he has a miserable case of NIMBYism, an affliction of the elite the world over. He thinks that turbines should be offshore, in no one’s backyard. He parses out a more complicated answer—to which I will not do the disservice of a summary—over the course of the year, circling and snagging and untethering his arguments, ultimately arriving at an important question for our times: “What is the countryside for?”

We seem increasingly unable to decide communally how to proceed thoughtfully, even as we know, individually, that we must do something (if not, how soon will we be forced to do anything and everything?) to protect our children, our homes, our planet. Can’t we be more deliberative, honoring the entangled nature of our lives in the natural world? “In the rush to embrace a greener way,” Mr. Williams concludes, “it is the actual green places that count least.” Each reader will have her own arguments with Mr. Williams. But we ought not pretend there are easy answers.

So many of us, these days, are rightly fearful for the future. In Kiltumper, things turn out “not so bad.” Not yet, anyway. The garden remains a place of solace—the “oneness of all of us, gardeners, everywhere, tending to plant and soil, fills me with a real and tangible hope.” We can only hope all of our gardens continue to be places that, as Mr. Williams writes, we can fill “with an immense gratitude that is another word for love.” And that this love finds ways to envelop all who can ill afford shelter from the coming storms, much less the pleasures of a garden.

###### Contract Killer

By William Hoffman and Lake Headley (1993)

**1.** Donald “Tony the Greek” Frankos was born in Hackensack, N.J., in 1938, and raised in the Hell’s Kitchen section of New York City by an abusive uncle who beat him, terrorized his aunt and raped his sister. He escaped home at 18 by joining the Navy. Until then, he was a gentle, law-abiding youth who felt constrained to follow the moral instruction of his aunt: “You see how much sadness [your uncle] has caused us. . . . Please, don’t you be that way.” But in the Navy, Frankos learns that he’s a natural at boxing, bedding women and stealing. He goes AWOL, falls in with a childhood-friend-turned-burglar and slides into a life of crime, which leads by seemingly accidental steps to the murder of a pimp. Craving the respect of mobsters like Jimmy Coonan, Vito Genovese, Anthony “Fat Tony” Salerno and Joseph “Mad Dog” Sullivan, Frankos embarks on an epic journey of suicidally brave tough-guy violence in and out of prison. In 1989, after turning state’s evidence, Frankos attracts the notice of the journalist William Hoffman and private detective Lake Headley by suggesting that he was responsible for killing Jimmy Hoffa. Aficionados will know that Frankos’s claim is suspect, but even if the facts are bent, “Contract Killer” remains a window into something I can’t look away from: Call it “absolute rebellion,” the willingness to defy everything—the law, the state, the Mafia, the body, even the grim, measly truth—all in the service of a great story.

Sara Blakely was 26 years old and selling fax machines door to door when she “pulled off to the side of the road and thought, I’m in the wrong movie.” She searched around for a more compelling line of work, writing in her journal: “I want to invent a product I can sell to millions of people that will make them feel good.” She found it one night in 1997 as she got dressed for a party and realized that she wanted to wear body-shaping pantyhose under her pants but not with her shoes. She cut the feet off her nylons, and in an instant the idea for Spanx (a company now valued at around a billion dollars) was born.

Ms. Blakely is one of the 70 entrepreneurs whom Reid Hoffman, himself a Silicon Valley entrepreneur (PayPal, LinkedIn) and investor (Airbnb, Facebook), celebrates in “Masters of Scale,” a book inspired by his podcast of the same name. (The show’s executive producers, June Cohen and Deron Triff, contributed to the writing.) In both formats, Mr. Hoffman seeks to tease out and distill the essential attributes of people who start and grow businesses.

**Masters of Scale**

By Reid Hoffman

(Currency, 281 pages, $28)

He seizes on traits that might otherwise be missed—such as Ms. Blakely’s deliberate hunt for a transformative concept. “To find a big idea,” Mr. Hoffman asserts, “you have to be actively looking for it.” Also essential: a bias toward action. Spanx “wasn’t born just because Sara came up with an idea,” he writes. “It was born because she decided to do something about it.” Scrappiness helps as well. Rent the Runway co-founder Jenn Hyman kick-started her business by first figuring out how to get in touch with designer Diane von Furstenberg. She tried multiple permutations of email addresses until she hit on the right one and scored a meeting.

Masters of Scale: Surprising Truths From the World's Most Successful Entrepreneurs

By Reid Hoffman

Just as important to would-be entrepreneurs is the need to parse the “no’s” they will inevitably receive. When Kara Goldin, the founder of Hint Water, was told by an industry insider that her plan to sell gently flavored beverages was doomed because “Americans love sweet,” she spotted an opportunity lurking beneath the conventional wisdom. And when an idea does break through, despite the skepticism of others, additional hazards remain. Leaders scaling up their start-ups often “need to learn to unlearn,” Mr. Hoffman notes, since the approach that allowed them to achieve initial success might not be what’s needed at the next stage. “You have to be willing to throw out—or at least challenge—what you originally believed to be true.” This self-examination may result in a change in focus, or “pivot.” Many tech companies arose from the ashes of a less successful predecessor: Shopify, a mediator of online transactions, started life as a vendor of Canadian snowboards; Slack, the communication platform, was salvaged from a failed online game called Glitch.

Mr. Hoffman is perhaps best known for championing an “all-out program of growth” to reach market dominance. He even coined a term—“blitzscaling”—to describe it (and has written a book on the subject). By prioritizing speed over elegance, the strategy aims to seize opportunities before competitors get there. As his former PayPal colleague Peter Thiel explains: “You have to race really hard to scale fast—but the benefit is that you’re achieving escape velocity from the black hole that is hypercompetition.” A blitzscaling approach, with its emphasis on rapid decision making, was “key to Google’s explosive growth,” Mr. Hoffman says. The company’s decision to acquire YouTube in 2006 for $1.65 billion, he notes, was made in just 10 days. The grow-fast mind-set not only enables start-ups to outpace the competition but also shapes the culture of innovation, since “nothing kills creativity like running into bureaucratic red tape.” Former Google exec Eric Schmidt is quoted saying: “Most large corporations have too many lawyers, too many decision makers, unclear owners—and things congeal.”

At the same time, Mr. Hoffman cautions entrepreneurs not to confuse speed with haste. In the early stages of a business, he says, founders must painstakingly craft a product before they scale it. As start-up guru Sam Altman puts it: “Better to have one hundred users love you than a million users who just kind of like you.” In the earliest days of Airbnb, Mr. Hoffman writes, the co-founders would engage intensively with individual hosts—making home visits that “became Airbnb’s secret weapon in learning what people loved.” While such bespoke attention is more challenging as a start-up grows, even large companies do well to stay closely attuned to their customers. The dating app Bumble added a platonic-friends site (Bumble BFF) and a professional-networking platform (Bumble Bizz) by paying attention to how customers were using its service.

Inevitably, hypergrowth requires trade-offs. During a phase of rapid expansion at PayPal, Mr. Hoffman recounts, the company was receiving more customer-service complaints than it could handle—so “we turned off all the ringers on our desk phones and started using our cellphones for business.” He concedes that ignoring the flood of phone calls was a “bad” practice, but it gave PayPal’s engineers time to concentrate on building the product. “We had to consider the future customers as well as the current ones.” Eventually PayPal established a call center and a large customer-service department. “Problem solved,” he writes, “and I wouldn’t have solved it a moment sooner.” Similarly, Facebook ultimately changed its motto from “move fast and break things” to the more reassuring (and dull) “move fast with stable infrastructure.” But this shift occurred in 2014, long after the company had made a series of controversial decisions giving priority to rapid growth in pursuit of “domination,” as Mark Zuckerberg put it.

Mr. Hoffman recognizes the malignant effects that can come from a singular focus on blitzscaling. Uber board member Arianna Huffington, he tells us, attributed the company’s notorious indulgence of “brilliant jerks” to “worshiping at the altar of hypergrowth.” Yet he earnestly contends that, through careful attention to leadership and culture, the propulsive drive to grow can be disentangled from the toxic behavior so often associated with explosive expansion. It feels like the triumph of hope over experience.

Scott Gottlieb is uniquely qualified to write a book on America’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Physician, former Food and Drug Administration commissioner, board member for both pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and genetic sequencing firm Illumina and presidential adviser: Dr. Gottlieb saw the crisis from multiple angles. His book “Uncontrolled Spread” is everything you’d hope: a smart and insightful account of what happened and, currently, the best guide to what needs to be done to avoid a future pandemic.

If there’s one overarching theme of “Uncontrolled Spread,” it’s that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention failed utterly. It’s now well known that the CDC didn’t follow standard operating procedures in its own labs, resulting in contamination and a complete botch of its original SARS-CoV-2 test. The agency’s failure put us weeks behind and took the South Korea option of suppressing the virus off the table. But the blunder was much deeper and more systematic than a botched test. The CDC never had a plan for widespread testing, which in any scenario could only be achieved by bringing in the big, private labs.

Instead of working with the commercial labs, the CDC went out of its way to impede them from developing and deploying their own tests. The CDC wouldn’t share its virus samples with commercial labs, slowing down test development. “The agency didn’t view it as a part of its mission to assist these labs.” Dr. Gottlieb writes. As a result, “It would be weeks before commercial manufacturers could get access to the samples they needed, and they’d mostly have to go around the CDC. One large commercial lab would obtain samples from a subsidiary in South Korea.”

At times the CDC seemed more interested in its own “intellectual property” than in saving lives. In a jaw-dropping section, Dr. Gottlieb writes that “companies seeking to make the test kits described extended negotiations with the CDC that stretched for weeks as the agency made sure that the contracts protected its inventions.” When every day of delay could mean thousands of lives lost down the line, the CDC was dickering over test royalties.

**Uncontrolled Spread: Why Covid-19 Crushed Us and How We Can Defeat the Next Pandemic**

By Scott Gottlieb

In the early months of the pandemic the CDC impeded private firms from developing their own tests and demanded that all testing be run through its labs even as its own test failed miserably and its own labs had no hope of scaling up to deal with the levels of testing needed. Moreover, the author notes, because its own labs couldn’t scale, the CDC played down the necessity of widespread testing and took “deliberate steps to enforce guidelines that would make sure it didn’t receive more samples than its single lab could handle.”

Dr. Gottlieb is much kinder to his friends and former colleagues at the FDA. My view is that the FDA shares in the failure. The FDA does not have authority over laboratory-developed tests, so in ordinary times a lab can develop a test without seeking FDA approval. But the FDA, using the Covid-19 emergency as a pretext, asserted that any SARS-CoV-2 test needed its approval before it could be deployed. Thus the logic of emergency was inverted. Instead of lifting regulations and giving priority to speed, the FDA increased regulation and slowed test deployment.

Dr. Gottlieb, to his credit, cannot be accused of hindsight bias. On Jan. 28, 2020, one month before the United States recorded its first Covid death, he and a co-author warned in these pages that we must “Act Now to Prevent an American Epidemic.” Correctly predicting that testing would be a bottleneck, he urged the CDC to bring in private test suppliers as quickly as possible. One wonders how many deaths might have been averted had Dr. Gottlieb’s advice been followed.

The CDC failed. What worked? The American model worked. Namely, private incentive and ingenuity backed by a supportive federal government. Operation Warp Speed, the Trump administration’s effort to produce vaccines, was the shining jewel of the American model. The federal government promised to buy hundreds of millions of doses of vaccine from private manufacturers (so long as the vaccines worked but regardless of whether they would be needed). It also supported very large and expensive clinical trials, and it lifted burdensome rules and regulations. The advance market-commitment model is very powerful in an emergency. We should have used a similar model for masks and tests.

Dr. Gottlieb has good suggestions for preparing for the next pandemic. He makes the case for a sentinel surveillance system that would routinely sequence flu samples for viruses and that would equip every sewage plant in the United States and eventually the world with sequencing systems. We also need a national testing clearinghouse that can balance testing demand across all our labs, and we need public-private partnerships so that instead of producing bespoke tests we produce tests that run on the biggest, fastest testing systems used in the private sector. All worthy ideas, but many were already legislated in the 2006 Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act—and most were never implemented. We need to think more deeply about the institutions needed to align policies with the incentives of market participants.

Dr. Gottlieb’s idea to fix the Strategic National Stockpile is a good example. The government let the stockpile dwindle so there weren’t enough masks when we needed them, and the masks that were available were often moldy. Instead of a stockpile, Dr. Gottlieb suggests what I call a “flowpile.” The government wouldn’t store anything but would instead pay firms to increase their inventories with production going into the inventory and sales coming out. A flowpile doesn’t need periodic restocking or reauthorization, and once the system starts, firms have an incentive to lobby to keep it going. Want to produce a public good? Tie it to some pork.

Covid has killed more people than died in the battlefields of the bloodiest war in American history, the Civil War. The horror of the Civil War, however, was redeemed by breaking the chains of slavery. No such redemption is possible for the pandemic. It didn’t have to happen. “Uncontrolled Spread” explains why it did, and how to keep it from happening again.

Even for those transfixed by grand strategy, Alfred Thayer Mahan’s “The Influence of Seapower Upon History” (1890) is a slog. In more than 500 pages of often turgid prose, Mahan, who twice served as president of the U.S. Naval War College, examined how maritime strength shaped war between 1660 and 1783. “The necessity of a navy,” he wrote, “springs . . . from the existence of a peaceful shipping.” He concluded that a large merchant fleet and a strong navy with bases allowing it to operate far from home were vital to protect the U.S. economy and maintain foreign trade in times of war. “In order to do this,” he added, “the enemy must be kept not only out of our ports, but far away from our coasts.”

In “To Rule the Waves,” Bruce D. Jones attempts to adapt Mahan’s thinking to the 21st century. In prose much livelier than his predecessor’s, Mr. Jones places the oceans at the center of modern globalization. They took on such importance, he writes, amid “relative comity between the world’s most populous nations,” a time of “deepening economic integration, and a sense of shared stakes and even a shared fate in the evolution of the natural world.” But Mr. Jones warns that in the years ahead, the oceans will lie at the heart of a much more contentious relationship among the great powers.

**To Rule the Waves: How Control of the World's Oceans Shapes the Fate of the Superpowers**

By Bruce Jones

The book starts with a look at the explosive growth of maritime trade in merchandise and oil since the late 20th century. It was trade, the author emphasizes, that propelled China’s rapid rise to challenge the United States both economically and militarily. In particular, container shipping has enabled manufacturers and retailers to forge complex supply chains, through which inputs from many countries are transported across the seas to be combined into finished goods. Those chains often have links in China, anchoring it at the center of international commerce.

From the security perspective, Mr. Jones points out, supply chains that span the oceans have created a conundrum for the U.S. Keeping them secure requires military force, and if America wants to maintain its naval primacy, then it must do the job. That effectively means, as Mr. Jones puts it, that “the US Navy is securing a flow of trade in goods and energy that profits China and Russia.”

The imperative of protecting trade lanes, Mr. Jones says, is fueling maritime competition, especially between the U.S. and China. Superficially, much of this competition is not between militaries. The container terminals that China-based entities control in Belgium, Djibouti, South Korea and other places are profit-making ventures, as is state-owned China Cosco Shipping Corp., which owns nearly 1,400 commercial vessels.

Viewed through Chinese eyes, though, this maritime infrastructure also offers protection from hostile foreigners who could disrupt China’s access to raw materials, fuels and components headed to its assembly plants. “If the United States and its allies could actually succeed in stopping shipping from reaching Chinese shores, it could cripple the Chinese economy,” Mr. Jones writes. China’s strategic policy, including its effort to turn the East and South China seas into Chinese lakes, is intended to keep that from happening.

Mr. Jones, a foreign-policy scholar at the Brookings Institution, is among the burgeoning community of China hawks in Washington. “We are already deeply mired in an arms race with China,” he insists. But as he observes, the naval arms race is not merely a contest between two countries. The expanding Indian navy has gained access to bases throughout the Indian Ocean. Japan is bolstering its naval forces. Russia “has been using its navy in ways that are very helpful to China” and likely has the ability to tap or sever undersea cables. Several other countries have submarines on patrol in the western Pacific. Hostilities could make things very messy very fast, and the ensuing interruption of supply chains and communications links could cripple the economies of countries seeking to steer clear of the conflict.

Climate change is adding to these tensions. Though the phenomenon is global, the near-term effects vary by geography. Mr. Jones highlights two of particular relevance to China’s projection of power. One is a drop in fish stocks in the South China Sea, which may explain why China has moved aggressively against Philippine boats fishing in waters that both countries claim. The other is the potentially disastrous impact of changing rainfall patterns on Myanmar, threatening the country’s viability and increasing its dependence on China, which wants to import and export through Myanmar to reduce its vulnerability to the closure of sea lanes east and south.

Mr. Jones has managed to write an important book about foreign policy without delivering an impenetrable tome. He handles his reporting deftly, keeping the reader engaged as he roams from a Cold War-era submarine base beneath a Norwegian mountain, recently reactivated in anticipation of conflicts in the Arctic, to the bridge of a missile-equipped command vessel in the Pacific. And he deftly diagrams the connections between economic policy and national security. As he asserts: “Globalization has been very good for the US economy, but quite bad for the US polity.” But the stark choice he offers—“Either we pull away from globalization, at fantastic cost, or we remake it”—may be too pessimistic.

With little public attention, manufacturers have been pulling away from globalization for more than a decade now. Relative to the world’s output, foreign direct investment peaked in 2007, and exports of manufactured goods did the same a year later, due largely to businesses’ decisions about managing risks and costs. Increasingly globalization has to do with things that don’t move in container ships, such as software, research services and entertainment. These sorts of products have international supply chains, too, but bigger navies won’t do much to protect them.

**HURTS SO GOOD**  
**The Science and Culture of Pain on Purpose**  
By Leigh Cowart

Why does pain turn people on? Can consensual hurt be good for you? Will it help you know yourself? Might it destroy you in the process?

The journalist Leigh Cowart asks many related questions in “Hurts So Good,” a book about people who covet pain — and the relief that comes after it — in seemingly disparate ways, from sexual masochists to competitive hot-pepper-eaters to ultramarathoners competing in a race with no finish line. A self-described “inveterate, high-sensation-seeking masochist,” Cowart, who uses they/them pronouns, sees “masochism everywhere. I am looking for it, I am finding it, I am obsessed with it.”

Pain has been a constant in Cowart’s life, from ballet (“toenails falling off, blisters bursting open and weeping”) to a near-fatal eating disorder. “I’m so high from this violence against my body,” Cowart writes in a harrowing section about their early 20s, when they roamed Chicago in winter, bingeing and purging. Years removed from that nightmare, Cowart no longer plans “my life around my compulsion for suffering. And yet. And yet!”

Cowart still chases pain. Today it comes in the form of consensual violent sex, which they describe in explicit detail. (Those disinclined to read a short excerpt should skip to the next paragraph.) “I’m getting Saran-wrapped to another person and hung from the ceiling and beaten hard until I stink of arousal and fear,” Cowart writes. “I’m wandering back into the house and having a little snack and taking a shower and snuggling up for a cuddle and then, maybe after all that, with an ass so sore that I cannot sit right, I might think to myself: Hmmm. I wonder how I turned out this way?”

Why Cowart — or any of the people we meet on this tour of Americans seeking pain for pleasure — are the way they are is an interesting, if generally unanswerable, question. People (and their neurobiology) are complicated, which Cowart thankfully understands. And yet! “Hurts So Good” often left me frustrated, not so much by failing to answer Cowart’s questions but by regularly approaching them in predictable and unsatisfying ways. Again and again Cowart hovers around intriguing psychological and scientific ideas but then turns to an expert for what ends up being an unilluminating conversation, sometimes conducted over email. “I don’t have an easy answer for this, nor am I trying to force some Grand Unifying Theory of Masochism,” Cowart writes in a section about the line between pathology and hobby. “I’m just trying to understand my brain a little better. So, I reached out to. …”

In this case it’s the author of a scientific paper about self-harm, but the interview, like too many others, is hampered by quotations that would be better paraphrased and ideas that feel repeated. Recycling — of phrases, questions and needless expletives that turn an otherwise engaging conversational voice into what feels like someone texting a friend or sounding off on Twitter — distracts from a deeply vulnerable book with memorable moments, including a riotous description of Cowart eating the world’s hottest pepper and a fascinating exploration of the connection between self-harm, ritual, identity and the divine.

There are also questions Cowart doesn’t ask but probably should. The book argues that “a masochist can be someone who works too much, a cuticle-biter, a ballerina, a grad student, an adventurous gourmand at a spicy salsa bar, a marathoner and, yes, someone breathing shallowly through a hole in a shiny latex gimp suit.”

I’m open to Cowart’s framing, but what binds these masochists together? Cowart promises to answer that question but doesn’t connect the dots. There are two chapters on competitions that mostly ignore the connection between pain and sport. Is an ultramarathoner a masochist — or merely a very competitive person who loves to run long distances? The organizer of a race Cowart attends shares my skepticism, writing to Cowart that “like many sports there is discomfort involved, but it is a cost of competition, not the objective.”

Cowart rejects this but doesn’t seem interested in persuading the reader why the race organizer is wrong. It’s an unfortunate misstep in a first book by a promising writer who never quite answers their own question: “What do you picture when you picture a masochist?”

**THE PLATFORM DELUSION**  
**Who Wins and Who Loses in the Age of Tech Titans**  
By Jonathan Knee

Over the past two decades, the world’s hyper-ambitious entrepreneurs — is there now any other kind? — have largely pursued a pair of goals in tandem. First: Become a platform. Second: Take over the world. The former is supposed to lead to the latter, as it seemingly has for the five companies conglomerated under the intimidating acronym FAANG. Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google have taken such a bloodsucking bite (get it?) out of the world economy that in the past half decade alone they have more than tripled in value — at a rate three times faster than the growth of the entire S&P 500 — and are now worth north of $7 trillion. The appeal of building a platform is clear.

But what, exactly, is a platform? In the analog world, a platform is where you catch a train or launch a rocket or give a speech — somewhere you go to do something else. In a digital context, platforms facilitate transactions. Facebook and Google don’t sell much themselves; they make money by connecting advertisers to your eyeballs. Apple profits from selling phones, but a major part of its revenue comes from taking a cut each time you buy something from someone else in their App Store. The promise of the platform business model is its magical self-reinforcement: Once the platform is in place, money is supposed to flow through the system without much extra effort at all.

The siren song of platformdom has proved irresistible to countless start-ups, with many finding a way to shoehorn the word into their investor pitch decks — WeWork used it 170 times in its ill-fated attempt to go public — as an easy signal of ambition if not always the reality of their business. Peloton, which sells indoor exercise bikes, calls itself an “interactive fitness platform.” Casper, which sells mattresses, is a “platform built for better sleep.” Beyond Meat, which sells faux-burgers that taste like beef, pork and poultry, insists that these are actually “three core plant-based product platforms.” The world’s most established companies are not immune to the trend. On an episode of a podcast produced by the Boardroom (a “sports business content platform” co-owned by the basketball superstar Kevin Durant), the Goldman Sachs chief executive, David Solomon, said that Goldman is not a bank but a company with “three principal platform businesses.”

The word “platform” has been deployed so many times in so many ways that it has lost almost all meaning, a fact that Jonathan Knee, who teaches at Columbia University’s business school, tries to spell out in his new book, “The Platform Delusion.” Knee isn’t rooting for the big platforms, which he describes as “succubus enterprises” that are “sucking all the value, returns and growth out of the companies that actually do things.” But he isn’t arguing for their dissolution either. He is simply offering a warning: Being a platform isn’t all it’s made out to be.

Knee’s book is filled with business school case studies that might be a bit in the weeds for general readers. (One of the successes he identifies is a company that makes software for a very specific financial accounting function.) But for aspiring entrepreneurs these stories offer a primer on the delusion Knee has identified, and show how to avoid the two primary misjudgments that cause it. The first is a belief that platforms emerged with the dawn of the internet. In fact, they’ve been around for decades. Shopping malls are platforms. Movie theaters are platforms. Credit cards are platforms. (Not to blow your mind, but money itself might be the original platform.) Moreover, Knee argues that these analog businesses were often better than the digital ones that replaced them. A suburban shopping mall operator will never achieve global scale, but the business comes with built-in competitive advantages: Stores are locked into long-term leases, and shoppers traditionally have no choice unless they drive many miles away. In e-commerce, where it is said that 90 percent of businesses fail in their first four months, these barriers don’t exist. My dog’s preferred food is available for the same price on Amazon or Chewy or many other sites I can reach with a few keystrokes. While much has been made of the mall’s decline, Knee writes that the most successful of them still have operating margins of 70 percent. Amazon manages only about 7 percent.

Not that you should feel bad for the FAANGs, who feed off one another as much as they do everything else. (Apple makes billions each year from a deal to include Google as the iPhone’s default search engine — a platform operating on top of another platform.) Clearly something is different about our digital platform behemoths; otherwise your local shopping mall magnate might be financing his own space program, too. The internet has enabled these companies to achieve unprecedented size and scale, such that the most successful competitors — of which Knee cites plenty — are those who choose to nibble off a small corner of a particular business rather than compete with the giants directly.

But the crux of Knee’s argument is that “beyond their size and success” — no small feat — there is little the big platforms have in common. This brings us to the delusion’s second symptom, which involves a blind faith in the supernatural powers the digital platforms supposedly possess: “network effects,” “big data” and other buzzwords that have kept audiences nodding at TED talks for years.

Facebook’s growth, for instance, has largely been chalked up to the power of network effects — the more people use your platform, the more beneficial it is to all of them — which Knee acknowledges is perhaps the company’s key differentiator. But Knee points out that Facebook still has to dig a moat around itself in much the same way Warren Buffett would advise any company to do. When rivals come up with a competing product, Facebook spends considerable time and money either copying it or buying it up, lest users make the easy digital switch to another social network.

Knee grants that the breadth and scope of the giant tech platforms is “awe-inspiring,” but he thinks our collective fear of them is overblown. (Aside from a few glancing nods to their impact on the news business, and the state of our informed democracy, Knee doesn’t consider their societal implications.) The platforms have weaknesses just like any business, he argues, and the succubi themselves push the myth of their own invincibility in order to dissuade any potential competition.

But what the myth has mostly done is tempt young entrepreneurs to try to match them. Knee teaches a course on investing at Columbia, where graduates have largely forsaken Wall Street to work at start-ups, often of their own creation. The personal and societal virtues of starting a business are many, in theory, but no top business school graduate is looking to start a mom-and-pop outfit that will restitch the social fabric torn apart by our digital Goliaths. They almost all want to start a small business that becomes a big business, and the venture capital world incentivizes such bets. One start-up founder I spoke to recently had met a prominent venture capitalist who declared, “I’m interested in finding a company that can own the ocean.”

Knee believes that investors, and many of his students, are fooling themselves into thinking that building a globe-spanning platform is a viable goal. Platforms are successful not because they are platforms, but because they exploit the same kinds of advantages that successful businesses have enjoyed for decades. It’s a boring realization, but one that Knee hopes will save his students not only from pursuing bad ideas, but from ruining their lives. The platform siren song, he writes, “fatally impedes the ability of many to clearly consider what they might actually enjoy.” Not everyone needs to start a company to be happy. And not every company needs to take over the world.

**THE GIRLS IN THE WILD FIG TREE**  
**How I Fought to Save Myself, My Sister, and Thousands of Girls Worldwide**  
By Nice Leng’ete with Elizabeth Butler-Witter

Surviving childhood is a highly underrated skill. I survived mine and view myself as a hero. But a real hero looks like Nice Leng’ete, the Kenyan anti-female-genital-mutilation activist whose response to her childhood was to improve the experience for others.

At the age of 3 or 4, while she was growing up in a small Maasai town near the border of Kenya and Tanzania, Leng’ete accompanied her mother to observe a 14-year-old girl get “the cut.”

“Everyone was still in the early morning light,” she writes in her elegant and inspiring memoir, “The Girls in the Wild Fig Tree.” “Then an older woman, a midwife from a nearby town, stepped forward and slashed the girl between the legs with a razor. Blood sprayed across the woman’s hands and the cowskin. She cut again and again. ‘Get it all, get it by the root,’ women chanted.” A few days after the ceremony the girl developed a fever, and a few days after that she died. “‘Someone had placed a curse on the family,’ people said.” Life went on as before.

In the Maasai community, female genital mutilation means removing the entire exterior of the clitoris. The practice is banned in Kenya, but Leng’ete’s Maasai elders spoke of the cut in terms of identity and cultural ideals of womanhood. Without it, they said, women can’t marry or have children — which means men can’t either. “Their families are shamed,” Leng’ete writes, “and the girls are outcasts.” Before she came along, every female member of her family had undergone the procedure. By the time she was 6, Leng’ete knew she didn’t want to be like them. This didn’t just make her an oddity in her community, it placed her life at risk. But, as she observes, it was the tradition that deserved to die.

Leng’ete’s memoir starts in the most dangerous place in the world for many women — at home. A psychologist recently told Observer magazine that “how someone comes out of an incident depends on what they took into it.” This might explain Leng’ete’s response to the challenges she would later face: Hers was a happy home with parents who doted on and nurtured her. They nicknamed her “Karembo,” meaning “beautiful.” Her mother woke up at dawn to ensure her children went to school with clean clothes and full bellies. Her father, a revered community leader, inspired her passion for activism. He died when Leng’ete was 7, and Leng’ete’s mother followed shortly after.

When my mother died, I was older, a teenager, and I had the time and space to grieve for her. To be permitted that process, I now know, was a luxury, and it’s one that Leng’ete, a mere child at the time she was orphaned, didn’t have. Instead, a parade of characters, the likes of which many will encounter only as stereotypes in films, emerged to terrorize the child. There’s a greedy uncle, who usurps her inheritance, and her guardian’s cruel new wife, who physically and verbally abuses her. “Most of the time I said nothing,” Leng’ete writes. “I did my work. I cried silently, and only when I was alone. If no one saw me, no one hit me. I was already small. I did everything I could to shrink to nothing.”

By the time she was 8, Leng’ete’s life might have ended for all intents and purposes — instead, by dint of iron will, it starts anew. One final beating persuades her to ask to go to boarding school. She has by then become an expert at running — she even runs away from the cut, becoming the only girl in her community to avoid mutilation.

Leng’ete completes her education, goes to college and while still in her late teens is spotted by a project officer at the African Medical and Research Foundation (Amref). He sees her encouraging girls in her town to run from the cut, and from the life prescribed for them as Maasai women. He is impressed by her persuasiveness. A risk to life is also a risk to living, Homi Bhabha has said, and Leng’ete convincingly articulated the cost of submission. “They could see my life,” she writes. “They could see that I was the first girl in our village to go to college, and that, even without the cut, I was healthy and happy.”

In three years, Leng’ete, with some help, ended female genital mutilation in her town. The project officer hired her to become a youth leader and teach girls and boys about health. Now, herself an Amref project officer and global ambassador, she has helped save 17,000 girls across Kenya. The enormity of this achievement can’t be overstated: Women have been killed for doing less. And activists all over the world are struggling to end female genital mutilation. In Mali, [nine out of 10 girls](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-women-trfn-idUSKBN2BZ1EZ) have been subject to the practice. In India, a survey by Sahiyo, an activist group, found that [80 percent](https://sahiyo.files.wordpress.com/2017/02/sahiyo_report_final-updatedbymt2.pdf) of women in the small Dawoodi Bohra community have similarly suffered.

Leng’ete’s escape, and her activism, are the centerpiece of this important memoir, but she’s far too compelling to be viewed through the lens of such achievements alone. The misstep at the heart of this and other notable activist memoirs — Malala Yousafzai’s “I Am Malala” and Nadia Murad’s “The Last Girl” come to mind — is that they focus too much on events and too little on how these magnificent women fought to survive. I wonder how they developed their resilience.

Leng’ete offers a hint when she recalls the Maasai fables her grandmother sang to her when she was a child. Like real life, those stories were full of menacing characters who would destroy you given the slightest opportunity — the jealous woman, the greedy man. In the end, though, if you were clever and persistent, you survived and were rewarded.

**OF FEAR AND STRANGERS**  
**A History of Xenophobia**  
By George Makari

Over the summer and fall of 1900, as the Universal Exposition was underway in Paris, French newspapers published a series of reports on a fearsome threat suddenly emerging from China: “la xénophobie,” they dubbed it. At the same time that their capital feted the dawn of globalization and the earth’s inexorable flattening, readers in France were informed that conflict with “les xénophobes” was a dangerous part of the new reality.

The trouble had begun the previous winter when a group of pauperized villagers from Shandong Province, with an aptitude for martial arts and believing themselves impervious to gunfire, chanted “destroy the foreigners” as they mounted a hopeless insurrection against the European missionaries and colonizers taking over their country. The Boxer Rebellion, George Makari argues in “Of Fear and Strangers: A History of Xenophobia,” his riveting, painstaking and at times maddeningly overextended meditation on a subject that has vexed human society at least since the dawn of consciousness, marked a new and ironic turn in a previously obscure term’s trajectory. “Xenophobia no longer applied to some rare medical illness or a broad rivalry between Western nations,” he observes. “It now served as an explanation of the fearsome trouble Western globalists might encounter in the East, where an irrational, violent hatred of all outsiders might take hold.”

The lack of self-awareness and defensive projection exhibited by the European powers throughout the period of colonial expansion is considerable. As are Makari’s efforts to trace the evolution of his elusive and ambiguous descriptor. This was not the first instance of the ancient Greek terms for “stranger” and “fear” being connected, but the Francophone framing of the Boxer Rebellion was the moment the concept went mainstream and xenophobia became “a clarifying word” to name a phenomenon increasingly relevant in numerous colonial contexts.

Makari, a psychiatrist and historian, weaves together a fascinating if powerfully disturbing series of examples of stranger hatred (and exploitation) alongside the internal dissent such encounters have always prompted. Long before the British, French, Russians, Germans, Americans and Japanese divided up the Qing empire, the Spanish crown had brutalized the Native inhabitants of Hispaniola, excusing the aggression with strikingly similar justifications. The humanizing spirit animating this book and anticipating whatever hard-won progress we can claim looking backward from the 21st century was birthed in this genocidal calamity.

Makari’s admiration of Bartolomé de Las Casas, a man Borges memorably disparaged as “that odd variant on the species philanthropist,” is infectious. As a boy in the late 1400s, Las Casas was presented with a Black slave when his father returned to Seville from an expedition with Columbus. On turning 18, he also set out for Santo Domingo, where he became a land- and slave owner who initially didn’t think twice about the larger system he was a part of. Though we may all be trapped in the norms and biases of our times, some of us are capable of radical independence. “At some later date, perhaps after witnessing a massacre of Taino Indians in Cuba,” Makari writes, “Las Casas became uneasy.” He freed his vassals, returned to Europe and took his Dominican orders.

Incredibly, during the height of the Inquisition, he managed to publish without punishment accounts denouncing the crimes committed under the auspices of the crown and in the name of Christianity. Perhaps this was because it was practically impossible to convey the magnitude of the orgiastic violence. “Who will believe this?” Makari quotes him lamenting on the page before an illustration taken from Las Casas’ “A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies,” which depicts Spanish soldiers lopping off the hands and noses of countless Native Americans. “I myself an eyewitness writing this, I can hardly believe it.”

His conscience provides an anti-xenophobic template that Makari finds replicated through the ages in both familiar and unexpected places. Voltaire, himself a powerful antisemite and proto-Islamophobe, “turned to Las Casas to help his readers grasp the nature of intolerance.” It is of course easier to spot xenophobia in others than to find it in the mirror, and during the Enlightenment rival European powers flattered themselves with criticism of the Spanish. Leo Tolstoy and Mark Twain were also courageous, early voices against their respective societies’ imperial transgressions.

Then, through the figure of Charles Marlow, the narrator of “Heart of Darkness,” the Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad shattered the facade of colonial innocence. “Conrad masterfully described Marlow’s transformation,” Makari writes, in a scene that anticipates the shift in our understanding of xenophobia — from something barbarous hosts inflict on civilized visitors to our own prejudices and fears projected onto strangers: “What we alluded to as an attack,” Marlow reflects, “was really an attempt at repulse. The action was very far from being aggressive — it was not even defensive, in the usual sense: It was undertaken under the stress of desperation and in its essence was purely protective.” But it was Roger Casement, an Irish acquaintance of Conrad’s in Africa, who carried on the witness-bearing work of Las Casas when, as the British consul in Congo, he began to evaluate claims of abuse that staggered belief, what was described by Edmund Morel in “King Leopold’s Rule in Africa” as “a carnival of massacre.”

As the 20th century wore on and immigrants began to filter back to the cities that had conquered them, xenophobia gradually assumed a three-pronged meaning. Makari distinguishes among “racial xenophobia,” which occurs “when a Western emigrant is met by a reflexive hostility” of a non-European population reacting poorly to being dominated; “xenophobic imperialism,” which occurs “when biased Western imperialists invade lands that they see filled with primitive Oriental and Eastern hosts”; and finally “anti-immigrant xenophobia,” which occurs “when residents in Western nations attack ‘foreign’ minorities as well as immigrants, often refugees or denizens from that country’s colonies.”

Throughout his analysis, Makari brings an impressive range of reading to bear, wearing his learning lightly and interspersing fascinating capsule biographies of transformational figures like Raphael Lemkin, Carl Schmitt and Theodor Adorno with literary commentary on Aldous Huxley, Richard Wright and James Baldwin. The book shifts again when he segues into an introductory psychology course tackling behaviorism, stereotyping and projection. All the material is enthralling. Yet the sheer number of points of access into a subject so all-encompassing eventually becomes a hindrance. By the last third of the book, as the narrative becomes a kind of “[At the Existentialist Café](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/books/review/at-the-existentialist-cafe-by-sarah-bakewell.html?searchResultPosition=1)”-style lightning tour of the postwar intellectual history of the Left Bank, the word “xenophobia” becomes almost meaningless.

“The fear and hatred of strangers,” Makari writes through the lens of Foucault, “not only manifested itself in pogroms and race riots but also lurked in seemingly reasonable places, inside the heart of society, perhaps inside all hearts.” Any quality that can reside in all of us necessarily ceases to be a pathology and simply becomes one more aspect of human nature.

What could be the solution to such an entrenched problem? “Radical egalitarianism poses the greatest threat to xenophobia,” is what he finally ventures. A cynical reader can’t help feeling that we are scarcely closer to understanding how to implement such a policy in the aftermath of Trump and Brexit and Europe’s 2015 migrant crisis than we were at the beginning of Makari’s worthy endeavor. Yet this is less a criticism of the author than of the scale of his genealogical ambition — and of our own stubbornly consistent interpersonal failings. The fact that he cannot land the plane does not render the views we’ve been granted during the course of the flight any less impressive.

**TRAVELS WITH GEORGE**  
**In Search of Washington and His Legacy**  
By Nathaniel Philbrick

Early in his first term as president, George Washington visited every state in the Union. The United States was relatively new, having won its independence half a dozen years earlier; the presidency and the Constitution were brand-new. Think of Washington’s trips as test-drives.

[Nathaniel Philbrick](https://www.nathanielphilbrick.com/)is a prizewinning maritime historian who has recently turned his attention to the founding period. “Travels With George” is an account of his retracing Washington’s footsteps — and carriage tracks — accompanied by his wife, Melissa, and their Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever, Dora. The book is a hybrid: part history, part travelogue.

Philbrick’s survey of Washington’s journeys draws on his own knowledge of the period, and on his eye for detail. He begins with Washington’s eight-day trip in April 1789 from Mount Vernon to New York City, then the nation’s capital, to be inaugurated. Washington’s election had been unanimous, and his journey through Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania and New Jersey was a rolling ovation. The crowds that greeted him when he arrived in New York, one congressman wrote, were “thick as ears of corn before the harvest.” In the fall of 1789 he spent a month traveling in Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. (Rhode Island, still hesitating to ratify the Constitution, was pointedly excluded; he picked up that state in August 1790 after it had seen the light.) In April 1790 he toured Long Island, possibly to thank the members of [the Culper Ring](https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/culper-spy-ring), the spies who had kept watch on British-occupied New York during the Revolution; protective of his assets, like all good spymasters, he never admitted that this was what he was doing. His journey through Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia in the spring and early summer of 1791 was a bear, taking three months to cover more than 1,800 miles.

Washington, according to a French diplomat at the time, had “the advantage of uniting great dignity with great simplicity of manner.” This gift enabled him to embody both the monarchical and populist yin and yang of the presidency. In Boston, homeowners rented their windows so that admirers could get a glimpse of him; in Charleston he was greeted by the intendant (mayor) carrying a six-foot-tall gold crowned staff. In Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, by contrast, he stopped to help raise a rafter of a one-room schoolhouse, led the workmen in three cheers and left a dollar to treat them. He made a point of staying in inns and paying his own way, so as not to be beholden to anyone, but this independent-mindedness caused difficulties of its own. Twice in New England, hostelries turned him away; once in North Carolina his entourage, after a dawn start, enjoyed a big breakfast at a roadside house only to discover that they had barged into a private dwelling.

Washington had more in mind than scoping out accommodations. As commander in chief during the Revolutionary War, he had already been seen by more of his countrymen than any other living American. By showing himself as president, he wanted to put a face on the new Constitution. Philbrick explains: “Washington was a celebrity and he used that star power to win as much support as possible for a federal government that many in Virginia were predisposed to distrust.” Many elsewhere too. At the same time, Washington was blinkered by his own prestige: People told the hero what he wanted to hear, and so discord that would flower in the first two-party system, pitting his secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson, against his Treasury secretary, Alexander Hamilton, escaped him.

Philbrick’s present-day experiences and thoughts are skippable, except when he wrestles with problems, some of Washington’s vintage, that continue to afflict us. Of greatest concern to us now are slavery and its child, racism. Philbrick introduces us to several enslaved people whom Washington owned: [William Lee](https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/william-billy-lee/), the servant who was at his side throughout the Revolution; [Ona Judge](https://www.nps.gov/articles/independence-oneyjudge.htm), who belonged to the estate of Martha’s first husband until she freed herself by fleeing to New Hampshire, from which Washington strove, in vain, to retrieve her. We might have heard more about the 123 others he owned whom he freed in his will. The descendants of one of them, [Nancy Carter Quander](https://www.npr.org/2020/08/07/899734175/for-the-first-time-in-almost-a-century-a-family-reunion-interrupted-by-a-pandemi), hold an annual family reunion. Philbrick could have attended.

The problem of greatest concern to Washington during his presidency was national union. America’s regions barely knew one another; there had been a rebellion of overtaxed farmers in 1786-87 and there would be another in 1794 during his second term. Philbrick quotes Washington’s Farewell Address, delivered in the twilight of his administration. “The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism.” It was a hope, more than a statement of fact.

How is the hope faring these days? Philbrick finished “Travels With George” in September 2020. The riots associated with the George Floyd protests had ceased, the Capitol riot was still to come. He ends with an appropriately stern injunction, referencing both Washington and his secretary of state: “The sinews of this country have been stretched to what feels like the breaking point. If those sinews should ultimately fail and the floodgates of rage and disorder swing open, it won’t be Washington’s and Jefferson’s fault. With the combined gift of the Declaration of Independence and the Union, they provided the means for future generations to transcend the injustices and inadequacies of their own time. The fault will lie with ourselves.”

**HUMANE**  
**How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War**  
By Samuel Moyn

The American way of war is a paradox. Even after our retreat from Afghanistan, it is likely to remain vast, if not endless, with drone and missile strikes ranging across the longitudes, while U.S. naval and air formations dominate large swaths of the globe. Yet it is also more humane, with lawyers now indispensable to military operations and especially to targeting.

[Samuel Moyn](https://history.yale.edu/people/samuel-moyn), a law and history professor at Yale, writes that “absolutely and relatively, fewer captives are mistreated and fewer civilians die — by far — than in the past.” Whereas millions were killed in Vietnam from direct U.S. military strikes or collateral damage, “only” some 200,000 died in Iraq, and mainly from civil war and disorder rather than specifically because of American military action. Moyn doesn’t celebrate such statistics. To the contrary, in “Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War,” he takes the reader on an excruciating journey, in incisive, meticulous and elegant prose, about the modern history of making war more legal, and in effect sanitizing it so that it can continue forever.

Leo Tolstoy worried, Moyn writes, that “humanitarianism could entrench war” by rendering it more palatable. In a similar vein, the Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz warned that “the fact that slaughter is a horrifying spectacle must make us take war more seriously.” The demand of pacifists and other idealists, Moyn observes, has always been “peace among states, not humanity within their wars.” Indeed, the white flag of surrender was considered by them morally superior to the flag of the Red Cross in the wards of the wounded. Yet the pacifism that arose out of the mass carnage of World War I was an accomplice to the appeasement of Hitler. It is this tension between what is just and what is prudent, between a pure humanitarianism and the very real pressures on statesmen, that helps drive Moyn’s narrative as he chronicles a host of 19th- and 20th-century conflicts, from [the Ethiopian war against the Italians](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/First_Italo%E2%80%93Ethiopian_War) to the [Anglo-Boer War](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/census/events/britain5.htm) in South Africa.

Moyn particularly concentrates on the horrendous American military spectacle of Vietnam, and the efforts of people like the former Nuremberg prosecutor [Telford Taylor](https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/24/nyregion/telford-taylor-who-prosecuted-top-nazis-nuremberg-war-trials-dead-90.html) to label elements of that enterprise as criminal and racially motivated. As with Iraq, it seems that when a war is wrongly conceived, everything about it goes wrong, all emanating from the hubris of its conception. Though Moyn does not identify them as such, Afghanistan and Iraq were midsize wars, neither small policing actions like Grenada and Panama nor all-out cataclysms like the two world wars. They allowed, so to speak, for an army at war and a nation at the mall. And because they were incredibly bloody but did not fully engage the home front, they were wars that the United States did badly at, since military actions did not directly affect the voters.

Moyn seems to yearn for unblemished wars, like the Civil War or World War II, whose motives were at least defensible. Of course, those wars required the abominations of slavery and Nazi totalitarianism to make them so. Thus, such wars are rare. Following World War II, the United States found itself overseeing the globe in an imperial-like situation, and misbegotten wars have been common to empires from Rome forward.

As for Vietnam, the American military did learn from its shocking experience there. “What one might call the self-humanization of the military under law was probably the most important factor in paving the road toward humane war after Vietnam,” Moyn observes. And so lawyers became ever-present when strategy and target lists were discussed. The result over time was that both the military and the public became more comfortable with the American way of war, paradoxically helping to remove impediments to its prosecution, much to the dismay of humanitarians and particularly pacifists. Moyn doesn’t quite say it, but he establishes a link between the post-Vietnam urge to make war more acceptable and the overwhelming superiority of American power following the end of the Cold War. The illusion of sanitized war in combination with American predominance led to constant military involvement that would culminate in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

Along the way came the call for what Moyn labels “interventionist justice.” The Holocaust had become the after-the-fact justification for World War II, with appeasement of Hitler as the great totemic crime, so that the emphasis of many post-Cold War humanitarians was less on peace than on intervention to stop human rights abuses. This was a critical factor in the American-led interventions in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999, both of which (along with the interventions in Panama in 1989 and the Persian Gulf in 1991) proved spectacularly successful. It was a heady brew — and a dangerous one. I confess, my support for the Iraq war, which I came to regret, was affected partly by the sloppy assumption of yet another clean military victory. Additionally, as Moyn notes, Washington in general had become in its own way militarized, with a “blob” composed of “Beltway experts” who incessantly lobbied for action, and with an elite volunteer military conveniently at the ready.

As Iraq crumbled, the scandal of mistreating prisoners at Abu Ghraib only quickened the lawyering that henceforth sought to monitor and constrict the conduct of the war. Iraq, Moyn explains, constituted the apotheosis of making war more humane so the killing could continue indefinitely. Following the debacle of the George W. Bush presidency, Barack Obama would withdraw American troops from Iraq, yet he expanded the war on terror to “an awesome extent, while making it sustainable for a domestic audience” by transforming warfare in a “humane direction.” Thus was born the “drone empire,” which involved no footprint, was only partly human as well as partly robotic, and involved a legalistic institutional process before each killing. In the words of the Atlantic editor Jeffrey Goldberg, Obama became “the most successful terrorist-hunter in the history of the presidency,” with “a set of tools an accomplished assassin would envy.”

Moyn puts the whole issue in a tough, pragmatic perspective. “The United States faced threats, and it was not as though Obama could turn a blind eye to terrorism. He was a politician whose career depended on protecting the American people first.” Obama’s philosophical lodestar was the Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who sanctioned the necessity of conflict because of the depth of sin in a fallen world

The future for humane war, Moyn says, is at once bleak and promising. We face violent conflict that is algorithmic and robotic, with human beings and human choice moving toward the sidelines. Cyberattacks are bloodless, yet can destroy people’s livelihoods and in a sense their lives. And of course there will be drones that hit the wrong targets and special forces that kill the wrong people. Then there is the possibility of major interstate war between great powers fought with precision-guided weapons. Simply because one can’t imagine such a circumstance doesn’t mean it won’t happen. After all, a quagmire in Iraq seemed unimaginable to many considering the string of military successes in the 1990s. The yearning to avoid war and yet make it more humane will therefore continue, rendering Moyn’s book timeless.