

# The Bookstore at the End of America by Charlie Jane Anders



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A bookshop on a hill. Two front doors, two walkways lined with blank slates and grass, two identical signs welcoming customers to the First and Last Page, and a great blue building in the middle, shaped like an old-fashioned barn with a slanted tiled roof and generous rain gutters. Nobody knew how many books were inside that building, not even Molly, the owner. But if you couldn't find it there, they probably hadn't written it down yet.

The two walkways led to two identical front doors, with straw welcome mats, blue plank floors, and the scent of lilacs and old bindings—but then you'd see a completely different store, depending which side you entered. With two cash registers, for two separate kinds of money.

If you entered from the California side, you'd see a wall hanging: women of all ages, shapes, and origins holding hands and dancing. You'd notice the display of the latest books from a variety of small presses that clung to life in Colorado Springs and Santa Fe, from literature and poetry to cultural studies. The shelves closest to the door on the California side included a decent amount of women's and queer studies, but also a strong selection of classic literature, going back to Virginia Woolf and Zora Neale Hurston. Plus some brand-new paperbacks.

If you came in through the American front door, the basic layout would be pretty similar, except for the big painting of the nearby Rocky Mountains, though you might notice more books on religion, and some history books with a somewhat more conservative approach. The literary books skewed a bit more toward Faulkner, Thoreau, and Hemingway, not to mention Ayn Rand, and you might find more books of essays about self-reliance and strong families, along with another selection of low-cost paperbacks: thrillers and war novels, including brand-new releases from the big printing plant in Gatlinburg. Romance novels, too.

Go through either front door and keep walking, and you'd find yourself in a maze of shelves, with a plethora of nooks and a bevy of side rooms. Here a cavern of science fiction and fantasy, there a deep alcove of theater books— and a huge annex of history and sociology, including a whole wall devoted to explaining the origins of the Great Sundering. Of course, some people did make it all the way from one front door to the other, past the overfed snake shape of the hallways and the giant central reading room, with a plain red carpet and two beat-down couches in it. But the design of the store encouraged you to stay inside your own reality.

The exact border between America and California, which elsewhere featured watchtowers and roadblocks, YOU ARE NOW LEAVING/YOU ARE NOW ENTERING signs, and terrible overpriced souvenir stands, was denoted in the First and Last Page by a tall bookcase of self-help titles about coping with divorce.

People came hundreds of miles in either direction, via hydroelectric cars, solarcycles, mecha-horses, and tour buses, to get some book they couldn't live without. You could get electronic books via the Share, of course, but they might be plagued with crowdsourced editing, user-targeted content, random annotations, and sometimes just plain garbage. You might be reading the Federalist Papers on your Gidget and come across a paragraph about rights versus duties that wasn't there before—or for that matter, a few pages relating to hair cream, because you'd been searching on hair cream yesterday. Not to mention, the same book might read completely differently in California than in America. You could only rely on ink and paper (or, for newer books, Peip0r) for consistency, not to mention the whole sensory experience of smelling and touching volumes, turning their pages, bowing their spines.

Everybody needs books, Molly figured. No matter where they live, how they love, what they believe, whom they want to kill. We all want books. The moment you start thinking of books as some exclusive club, or the loving of books as a high distinction, then you're a bad bookseller.

Books are the best way to discover what people thought before you were born. And an author is just someone who tried their utmost to make sense of their own mess, and maybe their failure contains a few seeds to help you with yours.

Sometimes people asked Molly why she didn't just simplify it down to one entrance. Force the people from America to talk to the Californians, and vice versa—maybe expose one side or the other to some books that might challenge their worldview just a little. Molly always replied that she had a business to run, and if she managed to keep everyone reading, then that was enough. At the very least, Molly's arrangement kept this the most peaceful outpost on the border, without people gathering on one side to scream at the people on the other.

Some of those screaming people were old enough to have grown up in the United States of America, but they acted as though these two lands had always been enemies.

Whichever entrance of the bookstore you went through, the first thing you'd notice was probably Phoebe. Rake thin, coltish, rambunctious, right on the edge of becoming, she ran light enough on her bare feet to avoid ever rattling a single bookcase or dislodging a single volume. You heard Phoebe's laughter before her footsteps. Molly's daughter wore denim overalls and cheap linen blouses most days, or sometimes a floor-length skirt or lacy-hemmed dress, plus plastic bangles and necklaces. She hadn't gotten her ears pierced yet.

People from both sides of the line loved Phoebe, who was a joyful shriek that you only heard from a long way away, a breath of gladness running through the flower beds.

Molly used to pester Phoebe about getting outdoors to breathe some fresh air—because that seemed like something moms were supposed to say and Molly was paranoid about being a Bad Mother, since she was basically married to a bookstore, albeit one containing a large section of parenting books. But she was secretly glad when Phoebe disobeyed her and stayed inside, endlessly reading. Molly hoped Phoebe would always stay shy, that mother and daughter would hunker inside the First and Last Page, side-eyeing the world through thin linen curtains when they weren't reading together.

Then Phoebe had turned fourteen, and suddenly she was out all the time and Molly didn't see her for hours. Around that time, Phoebe had unexpectedly grown pretty and lanky, her neck long enough to let her auburn ponytail swing as she ran around with the other kids who lived in the tangle of tree-lined streets on the America side of the line, plus a few kids who snuck across from California. Nobody seriously patrolled this part of the border, and there was one craggy rock pile, like an echo of the looming Rocky Mountains, that you could just scramble over and cross from one country to the other, if you knew the right path.

Phoebe and her gang of kids, ranging from twelve to fifteen, would go trampling the tall grass near the border on a "treasure hunt," or set up an "ambush fort" in the rocks. Phoebe occasionally caught sight of Molly and turned to wave, before running up the dusty hillside toward Zadie and Mark, who had just snuck over from California with canvas backpacks full of random games and junk. Sometimes Phoebe led an entire brigade of kids into the store, pouring cups of water or Molly's home-brewed ginger beer for everyone, and they would all pause and say "Hello, Ms. Carlton," before running outside again.

Mostly, the kids were just a raucous chorus as they chased each other with pea-guns. There were times when they stayed in the most overgrown area of trees and bracken way after sundown, until Molly was just about to message the other local parents via her Gidget, and then she'd glimpse a few specks of light emerging from the claws and twisted limbs. Molly always asked Phoebe what they did in that tiny stand of vegetation, which barely qualified as "the woods," and Phoebe always said "Nothing." They just hung out. Molly imagined those kids under the moonlight, blotted by heavy leaves, and they could be doing anything: drinking, taking drugs, playing kiss-and-tell games.

Even if Molly had wanted to keep tabs on her daughter, she couldn't leave the bookstore unattended. The bi-national design of the store required at least two people working at all times, one per register, and most of the people Molly hired only lasted a month or two and then had to run home because their families were worried about all the latest hints of another war on the horizon. Every day, another batch of propaganda bubbled up on Molly's Gidget, from both sides, claiming that one country was a crushing theocracy or the other was a godless meat grinder. Meanwhile, you heard rumblings about both countries searching for the last precious dregs of water—sometimes actual rumblings, as California sent swarms of robots deep underground. Everybody was holding their breath.

Molly was working the front counter on the California side, trying as usual not to show any reaction to the people with weird tattoos or glowing silver threads flowing into their skulls. Everyone knew how eager Californians were to hack their own bodies and brains, from programmable birth control to brain implants that connected them to the Anoth Complex. Molly smiled, made small talk, recommended books based on her uncanny memory for what everybody had been buying—in short, she treated everyone like a customer, even the folks who noticed Molly's crucifix and clicked their tongues because obviously she'd been brainwashed into her faith.

A regular customer named Sander came in, looking for a rare book from the last days of the United States, about sustainable farming and animal consciousness, by a woman named Hope Dorrance. For some reason, nobody had ever uploaded this book of essays to the Share. Molly looked in the fancy computer and saw that they had one copy, but when Molly led Sander back to the shelf where it was supposed to be, the book was missing.

Sander stared at the space where *Souls on the Land* ought to be, and their pale, round face was full of lines. They had a single tattoo of a butterfly clad in gleaming armor, and the wires rained from the shaved back of their skull. They were some kind of engineer for the Anoth Complex.

"Huh," Molly said. "So, this is where it ought to be, but I better check if maybe we sold it over on the, uh, other side and somehow didn't log the sale." Sander nodded and followed Molly until they arrived in America. There, Molly squeezed past Mitch, who was working the register, and dug through a dozen scraps of paper until she found one. "Oh. Yeah. Well, darn."

They had sold their only copy of *Souls on the Land* to one of their most faithful customers on the America side: a gray-haired woman named Teri Wallace, who went to Molly's church. Teri was in the store right now, searching for a cookbook. Mitch had just seen her go past. Unfortunately, Teri hated Californians even more than most Americans did. And Sander was the sort of Californian that Teri especially did not appreciate.

"So it looks like we sold it a while back and we just didn't update our inventory, which, uh, does happen," Molly said.

"In essence, this was false advertising." Sander drew upward, with the usual Californian sense of affront the moment anything wasn't perfectly efficient. "You told me that the book was available, when in fact you should have known it wasn't."

Molly had already decided not to tell Sander who had bought the Hope Dorrance, but Teri came back clutching a book of killer salads just as Sander was in mid-rant about the ethics of retail communication. Sander happened to mention *Souls on the Land*, and Teri's ears pricked up.

“Oh, I just bought that book,” Teri said.

Sander spun around, smiling, and said, “Oh. Pleased to meet you. I’m afraid that book you bought is one that had been promised to me. I don’t suppose we could work out some kind of arrangement? Perhaps some system of needs-based allocation, because my need for this book is extremely great.” Sander was already falling into the hyper-rational, insistent language of a Californian faced with a problem.

“Sorry,” Teri said. “I bought it. I own it now. It’s mine.”

“But,” Sander said. “There are many ways we could...I mean, you could loan it to me, and I could digitize it and return it to you in good condition.”

“I don’t want it in good condition. I want it in the condition it’s in now.”

“But—”

Molly could see this conversation was about three exchanges away from full-blown unpleasantness. Teri was going to insult Sander, either directly or by getting their pronoun wrong. Sander was going to call Teri stupid, either by implication or outright. Molly could see an easy solution: she could give Teri a bribe, a free book or blanket discount, in exchange for letting Sander borrow the Hope Dorrance so they could digitize it using special page-turning robots. But this wasn’t going to be solved with reason. Not right now, anyway, with the two of them snarling at each other.

So Molly put on her biggest smile and said, “Sander. I just remembered, I had something extra special set aside for you, back in the psychology/ philosophy annex. I’ve been meaning to give it to you, and it slipped my mind until just now. Come on, I’ll show you.” She tugged gently at Sander’s arm and hustled them back into the warren of bookshelves. Sander kept grumbling about Teri’s irrational selfishness, until they had left America.

Molly had no idea what the special book she’d been saving for Sander actually was—but she figured by the time they got through the Straits of Romance and all the switchbacks of biography, she’d think of something.

Phoebe was having a love triangle. Molly became aware of this in stages, by noticing how all the other kids were together, and by overhearing snippets of conversation (despite her best efforts not to eavesdrop).

Jonathan Brinkfort, the son of the minister at Molly’s church, had started hanging around Phoebe with a hangdog expression like he’d lost one of those kiss-and-dare games and it had left him with gambling debts. Jon was a tall, quiet boy with a handsome square face, who mediated every tiny dispute among the neighborhood kids with a slow gravitas, but Molly had never before seen him lost for words. She had been hand-selling airship adventure books to Jon since he was little.

And then there was Zadie Kagwa, whose dad was a second-generation immigrant from Uganda with a taste for very old science fiction. Zadie had a fresh tattoo on one shoulder, of a dandelion with seedlings fanning out into the wind, and one string of fiber-optic pearls coming out of her locs. Zadie's own taste in books roamed from science and math to radical politics to girls-at-horse-camp novels. Zadie whispered to Phoebe and brought tiny presents from California, like these weird candies with chili peppers in them.

Molly could just imagine the conversations she'd hear in church if her daughter got into an unnatural relationship with a girl—from *California* no less—instead of dating a nice American boy who happened to be Canon Brinkfort's son.

But Phoebe didn't seem to be inclined to choose one or the other. She accepted Jon's stammered compliments with the same shy smile she greeted Zadie's gifts with.

Molly took Phoebe on a day trip into California, where they got their passports stamped with a one-day entry permit, and they climbed into Molly's old three-wheel Dancer. They drove past wind farms and military installations, past signs for the latest Anoth cloud-brain schemes, until they stopped at a place that sold milkshakes so thick you lost the skin on the sides of your mouth just trying to unclog the straw.

Phoebe was in silent mode, hugging herself and cocooning inside her big polyfiber jacket when she wasn't slurping her milkshake. Molly tried to make conversation, talking about who had been buying what sort of books lately and what you could figure out about international relations from Sharon Wong's sudden interest in bird-watching. Phoebe just shrugged, like maybe Molly should just read the news instead. As if Molly hadn't tried making sense of the news already.

Then Phoebe started telling Molly about some fantasy novel. Seven princesses have powers of growth and decay, but some of the princesses can only use their growth powers if the other princesses are using their decay powers. Whoever grows a hedge tall enough to keep out the army of gnome-trolls will become the heir to the Blue Throne, but the princesses don't even realize at first that their powers are all different, like they grow different kinds of things. There are a bunch of princes and court ladies who are all in love with different princesses, but nobody can be with the person they want to be with.

This novel sounded more and more complicated, and Molly didn't remember ever seeing it in her store, until she realized: Phoebe wasn't describing a book she had read. This was a book that Phoebe was writing, somewhere, on one of the old computers that Molly had left in some storage space. Molly hadn't even known Phoebe was a writer.

"How does it end?" Molly said.

"I don't know." Phoebe poked at the last soup of her milkshake. "I guess they have to use their powers together to build the hedge they're supposed to build, instead of competing. The hard part is gonna be all the princesses ending up with the right person. And, uh, making sure nobody feels left out, or like they couldn't find their place in this kingdom."

Molly nodded, and then tried to think of how to respond to what she was pretty sure her daughter was actually talking about. "Well, you know that nobody has to ever hurry to find out who they're supposed to love, or where they're going to fit in. Those things sometimes take time, and it's okay not to know the answers right away. You know?"

"Yeah, I guess." Phoebe pushed her empty glass away and looked out the window. Molly waited for her to say something else, but eventually realized the conversation had ended. Teenagers.

Molly had opened the First and Last Page when Phoebe was still a baby, back when the border had felt more porous. Both governments were trying to create a Special Trade Zone, and you could get a special transnational business license. Everyone had seemed overjoyed to have a bookstore within driving distance, and Molly had lost count of how many people thanked her just for being here. A lot of her used books had come from estate sales, but there had been a surprising flood of donations, too.

Molly had wanted Phoebe to be within easy reach of California if America ever started seriously following through on its threats to enforce all of its broadly written laws against immorality. But more than that, Phoebe deserved to be surrounded by all the stories, and every type of person, and all of the ways of looking at life. Plus, it had seemed like a shrewd business move to be in two countries at once, a way to double the store's potential market.

For a while, the border had also played host to a bar, a burger joint, and a clothing store, and Molly had barely noticed when those places had closed, one by one. The First and Last Page was different, she'd figured, because nobody ever gets drunk on books and starts a brawl.

Matthew limped into the American entrance during a lull in business, and Molly took in his torn pants leg and dirty hands, plus the dried-out salt trails along his brown face. She had seen plenty others in similar condition, and didn't even blink. She didn't even need to see the brand on Matthew's neck, which looked like a pair of broken wings and declared him to be a bonded peon and the responsibility of the Greater Appalachian Penal Authority and the Glad Corporation. She just nodded and helped him inside the store before anyone else noticed or started asking too many questions.

"I'm looking for a self-help book," Matthew said, which was what a lot of them said. Someone, somewhere, had told them this was a code phrase that would let Molly know what they needed. In fact, there was no code phrase, nor was one needed.

The border between America and California was ungarded in thousands of other places besides Molly's store, including that big rocky hill that Zadie and the other California kids climbed over when they came to play with the American kids. There was just too much empty space to waste time patrolling, much less putting up fences or sensors. You couldn't eat lunch in California without twenty computers checking your identity, anyway. Matthew and the others chose to cross through Molly's store because books meant civilization, or maybe the store's name seemed to promise a kind of safe passage: the first page leading gracefully to the last.

Molly did what she always did with these refugees. She helped Matthew find the quickest route from romance to philosophy to history, and then on to California. She gave him some clean clothes out of a donation box, which she always told people was going to a shelter somewhere, and what information she had about resources and contacts. She let him clean up as much as he could, in the restroom.

Matthew was still limping as he made his way through the store in his brand-new corduroys and baggy argyle sweater. Molly offered to have a look at his leg, but he shook his head. "Old injury." She dug in the first aid kit and gave him a bottle of painkillers. Matthew kept looking around in all directions, as if there could be hidden cameras (there weren't), and he took a jerky step back when Molly told him to hold on a moment, when he was already in California.

"What? Is something wrong? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong. Just thinking." Molly always gave refugees a free book, something to keep them company on whatever journey they had ahead. She didn't want to just choose at random, so she gazed at Matthew for a moment in the dim amber light from the wall sconces in the history section. "What sort of books do you like? Besides self-help, I mean."

"I don't have any money, I'm sorry," Matthew said, but Molly waved it off.

"You don't need any. I just wanted to give you something to take with you."

Phoebe came up just then and saw at a glance what was going on. "Hey, Mom. Hi, I'm Phoebe."

"This is Matthew," Molly said. "I wanted to give him a book to take with him."

"They didn't exactly let us have books," Matthew said. "There was a small library, but library use was a privilege, and you needed more than 'good behavior.' For that kind of privilege, you would need to " He glanced at Phoebe, because whatever he'd been about to say wasn't suitable for a child's ears. "They did let us read the Bible, and I practically memorized some parts of it."



Molly and Phoebe looked at each other while Matthew fidgeted, and then Phoebe said, “Father Brown mysteries.”

“Are you sure?” Molly said.

Phoebe nodded. She ran, fast as a deer, and came back with a tiny paperback of G.K. Chesterton that would fit in the pockets of the donated corduroys. “I used to love this book,” she told Matthew. “It’s about God, and religion, but it’s really just a great bunch of detective stories, where the key always turns out to be making sense of people.”

Matthew kept thanking Molly and Phoebe in a kind of guttural undertone, like a compulsive cough, until they waved it off. When they got to the California storefront, they kept Matthew out of sight until they were sure the coast was clear, then they hustled him out and showed him the clearest path, which followed the main road but stayed under cover. He waved once as he sprinted across the blunt strip of gravel parking lot, but other than that, he didn’t look back.

The president of California wished the president of America a good spring solstice instead of “Happy Easter,” and the president of America called a news conference to discuss this unforgivable insult. America’s secretary of morality, Wallace Dawson, called California’s gay attorney general an offensive term. California moved some troops up to the border and performed some “routine exercises,” so close that Molly could hear the cackle of guns shooting blanks all night. (She hoped they were blanks.) America sent some fighter craft and UAVs along the border, sundering the air. California’s swarms of water-divining robots had managed to tap the huge deposits located deep inside the rocky mantle, but both America and California claimed that this water was located under their respective territories.

Molly’s Gidget kept flaring up with “news” that was laced with propaganda, as if the people in charge on both sides were trying to get everyone fired up. The American media kept running stories about a pregnant woman in New Sacramento who lost her baby because her family planning implant had a buggy firmware update, plus graphic stories about urban gang violence, drugs, prostitution, and so on. California’s media outlets, meanwhile, worked overtime to remind people about the teenage rape victims in America who were locked up and straitjacketed to make sure they gave birth, and the peaceful protesters who were gassed and beaten by police.

Almost every day lately, Americans came in looking for a couple books that Molly didn’t have. Molly had decided to go ahead and stock *Why We Stand*, a book-length manifesto about individualism and Christian values that stopped just short of accusing Californians of bestiality and cannibalism. But *Why We Stand* was unavailable, because they’d gone back for another print run. Meanwhile, though, Molly outright refused to sell *Our People*, a book

that included offensive caricatures of the Black and Brown people who mostly clustered in the dense cities out West, like New Sacramento, plus “scientific” theories about their relative intelligence.

People kept coming in and asking for *Our People*, and at this point Molly was pretty sure they knew she didn’t have it and were just trying to make a point.

“It’s just, some folks feel as though you think you’re better than the rest of us,” said Norma Verlaine, whose blonde, loudmouthed daughter Samantha was part of Phoebe’s friend group. “The way you try to play both sides against the middle, perching here in your fancy chair, deciding what’s fit to read and what’s not fit to read. You’re literally sitting in judgment over us.”

“I’m not judging anyone,” Molly said. “Norma, I live here too. I go to Holy Fire every Sunday, same as you. I’m not judging.”

“You say that. But then you refuse to sell *Our People*.”

“Yes, because that book is racist.”

Norma turned to Reggie Watts, who had two kids in Phoebe’s little gang: Tobias and Suz.

“Did you hear that, Reggie? She just called me a racist.”

“I didn’t call you anything. I was talking about a book.”

“Can’t separate books from people,” said Reggie, who worked at the big power plant thirty miles east. He furrowed his huge brow and stooped a little as he spoke. “And you can’t separate people from the places they come from.”

“Time may come, you have to choose a country once and for all,” Norma said. Then she and Reggie walked out while the glow of righteousness still clung.

Molly felt something go all the way through her. Like the cartoon “bookworm” chewing through a book, from when Molly was a child. There was a worm drilling a neat round hole in Molly, rendering some portion of her illegible.

Molly was just going through some sales slips, because ever since that dustup with Sander and Teri she was paranoid about American sales not getting recorded in the computer, when the earthquake began. A few books fell on the floor as the ground shuddered, but most of the books were packed too tight to dislodge right away. The grinding, screeching sound from the vibrations underground made Molly’s ears throb. When she could get her balance back, she looked at her Gidget, and at first she saw no information. Then there was a news alert: California had laid claim to the water deposits deep underground, and was proceeding to extract them as quickly as possible. America was calling this an act of war.

Phoebe was out with her friends as usual. Molly sent a message on her Gidget, and then went outside to yell Phoebe's name into the wind. The crushing sound underground kept going, but either Molly had gotten used to it or it was moving away from here.

"Phoebe?"

Molly walked the two-lane roads, glancing every couple minutes at her Gidget to see if Phoebe had replied yet. She told herself that she wouldn't freak out if she could find her daughter before the sun went down, and then the sun did go down and she had to invent a new deadline for panic.

Something huge and powerful opened its mouth and roared nearby, and Molly swayed on her feet. The hot breath of a large carnivore blew against her face while her ears filled with sound. She realized after a moment that three Stalker-class aircraft had flown very low overhead, in stealth mode, so you could hear and feel—but not see—them.

"Phoebe?" Molly called out, as she reached the end of the long main street with the one grocery store and the diner. "Phoebe, are you out here?" The street led to a big field of corn on one side and to the diversion road leading to the freeway on the other. The corn rustled from the aftershakes of the flyover. Out on the road, Molly heard wheels tearing at loose dirt and tiny rocks and saw the slash of headlights in motion.

"Mom!" Phoebe came running down the hill from the tiny forest area, followed by Jon Brinkfort, Zadie Kagwa, and a few other kids. "Thank god you're okay."

Molly started to say that Phoebe should get everyone inside the bookstore, because the reading room was the closest thing to a bomb shelter for miles.

But a new round of flashes and earsplitting noises erupted, and then Molly looked past the edge of town and saw a phalanx of shadows, three times as tall as the tallest building, moving forward.

Molly had never seen a mecha before, but she recognized these metal giants, with the bulky actuators on their legs and rocket launchers on their arms. They looked like a crude caricature of bodybuilders, pumped up inside their titanium alloy casings. The two viewports on their heads, along with the slash of red paint, gave them the appearance of scowling down at all the people underfoot. Covered with armaments all over their absurdly huge bodies, they were heading into town on their way to the border.

"Everybody into the bookstore!" Phoebe yelled. Zadie Kagwa was messaging her father on some fancy tablet, and other kids were trying to contact their parents too, but then everyone hustled inside the First and Last Page.

People came looking for their kids, or for a place to shelter from the fighting. Some people had been browsing in the store when the hostilities broke out, or had been driving nearby. Molly let everyone in, until the American mechas were actually engaging a squadron of California centurions, which were almost exactly identical to the other metal giants except that their onboard systems were connected to the Anoth Complex. Both sides fired their rocket launchers, releasing bright orange trails that turned everything the same shade of amber. Molly watched as an American mecha lunged forward with its huge metal fist and connected with the side of a centurion, sending shards of metal spraying out like the dandelion seeds on Zadie's tattoo.

Then Molly got inside and sealed up the reading room with a satisfying *clunk*. "I paid my contractor extra," she told all the people who crouched inside. "These walls are like a bank vault. This is the safest place for you all to be." There was a toilet just outside the solid metal door and down the hall, with a somewhat higher risk of getting blown up while you peed.

Alongside Molly and Phoebe, there were a dozen people stuck in the reading room. There were Zadie and her father, Jay; Norma Verlaine and her daughter Samantha; Reggie Watts and his two kids; Jon Brinkfort; Sander, the engineer who'd come looking for *Souls on the Land*; Teri, the woman who actually owned *Souls on the Land*; Marcy, a twelve-year-old kid from California; and Marcy's mother, Petrice.

They all sat in this two-meter by three-meter room with two couches that could hold five people between them, plus bookshelves from floor to ceiling. Every time someone started to relax, there was another quake, and the sounds grew louder and more ferocious. Nobody could get a signal on any of their devices or implants, either because of the reinforced walls or because someone was actively jamming communications. The room jerked back and forth, and the books quivered but did not fall out of their sconces.

Molly looked over at Jay Kagwa, sitting with his arm around his daughter, and had a sudden flash of remembering a time, several years ago, when Phoebe had campaigned for Molly to go out on a date with Jay. Phoebe and Zadie were already friends, though neither of them was interested in romance yet, and Phoebe had decided that the stout, well-built architect would be a good match for her mother. Partly based on the wry smiles the two of them always exchanged when they compared notes about being single parents of rambunctious daughters. Plus both Molly and Phoebe were American citizens, and it wouldn't hurt to have dual citizenship. But Molly never had time for romance. Now, of course, Zadie was still giving sidelong glances to Phoebe, who had never chosen between Zadie and Jon, and probably never would.

Jay had finished hugging his daughter, and also yelling at her for getting herself stuck in the middle of all this, and all the other parents, including Molly, had had a good scowl at their own kids as well. "I wish we were safe at home," Jay Kagwa told his daughter in a whisper, "instead of being trapped here with these people."

"What exactly do you mean by 'these people'?" Norma Verlaine demanded from the other end of the room.

Another tremor, more raucous noise.

"Leave it, Norma," said Reggie. "I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it."

"No, I want to know," Norma said. "What makes us 'these people' when we're just trying to live our lives and raise our kids? And meanwhile, your country decided that everything from abortion to unnatural sexual relationships to cutting open people's brains and shoving in a bunch of nanotech garbage was A-OK. So I think the real question is, Why do I have to put up with people like you?"

"I've seen firsthand what your country does to people like me," Jay Kagwa said in a quiet voice.

"As if Californians aren't stealing children from America, at a rapidly increasing rate, to turn into sex slaves or prostitutes. I have to keep one eye on my Samantha here all the time."

"*Mom*," Samantha said, and that one syllable meant everything from "Please stop embarrassing me in front of my friends" to "You can't protect me forever."

"We're not stealing children," said Sander. "That was a ridiculous, made-up story."

"You steal everything. You're stealing our water right now," said Teri. "You don't believe that anything is sacred, so it's all up for grabs as far as you're concerned."

"We're not the ones who put half a million people into labor camps," said Petrice, a quiet, green-haired older woman who mostly bought books about gardening and Italian history.

"Oh no, not at all, California just turns millions of people into cybernetic slaves of the Anoth Complex," said Reggie. "That's much more humane."

"Hey, everybody just calm down," Molly said.

"Says the woman who tries to serve two masters," Norma said, rounding on Molly and poking her finger.

The other six adults in the room kept shouting at each other until the tiny reading room seemed almost as loud as the battle outside. The room shook, the children huddled together, and the adults just raised their voices to be heard over the nearly constant percussion. Everybody knew the dispute was purely about water rights, but months of terrifying stories had trained them to think of it instead as a righteous war over sacred principles. Our children, our freedom. Everyone shrieked at one another, and Molly fell into the corner near a stack of theology, covering her ears and looking across the room at Phoebe, who was crouched with

Jon and Zadie. Phoebe's nostrils flared, and she stiffened as if she were about to run a long sprint, but all of her attention was focused on comforting her two friends. Molly felt flushed with a sharper version of her old fear that she'd been a Bad Mother.

Then Phoebe stood up and yelled, "*Everybody stop!*"

Everybody stopped yelling. Some shining miracle. They all stopped and turned to look at Phoebe, who was holding hands with both Jon and Zadie. Even with the racket outside, this room suddenly felt eerily, almost ceremonially, quiet.

"You should be ashamed," Phoebe said. "We're all scared and tired and hungry, and we're probably stuck here all night, and you're acting like babies. This is not a place for yelling. It's a bookstore. It's a place for quiet browsing and reading, and if you can't be quiet, you're going to have to leave. I don't care what you think you know about each other. You can darn well be polite, because . . . because " Phoebe turned to Zadie and Jon, and then gazed at her mom. "Because we're about to start the first meeting of our book club."

Book club? Everybody looked at each other in confusion, like they'd skipped a track.

Molly stood up and clapped her hands. "That's right. Book club meeting in ten minutes. Attendance is mandatory."

The noise from outside wasn't just louder than ever, but more bifurcated. One channel of noise came from directly underneath their feet, as if some desperate struggle for control over the water reserves was happening deep under the Earth's crust, between teams of robots or tunneling war machines, and the very notion of solid ground seemed obsolete. Over their heads, a struggle between aircraft, or metal titans, or perhaps a sky full of whirring autonomous craft, which were slinging fire back and forth until the sky turned red. Trapped inside this room, with no information other than words on brittle spines, everybody found themselves inventing horrors out of every stray noise.

Molly and Phoebe huddled in the corner, trying to figure out a book that everyone in the room would be familiar enough with, but that they could have a real conversation about. Molly had actually hosted a few book clubs at the store over the years, and at least a few of the people now sheltering in the reading room had attended, but she couldn't remember what any of those clubs had read. Molly kept pushing for this one literary coming-of-age book that had made a splash around the time of the Sundering, or maybe some good old Jane Austen, but Phoebe vetoed both of those ideas.

"We need to distract them"—Phoebe jerked her thumb at the mass of people in the reading room behind them—"not bore them to death."

In the end, the first and maybe only book selection of the Great International Book Club had to be *Million in One*, a fantasy adventure about a teenage boy named Norman who rescues a million souls that an evil wizard has trapped in a globe, and accidentally absorbs them into his own body. So Norman has a million souls in one body and they give him magical powers, but he can also feel all of their unfinished business, their longing to be free. And Norman has to fight the wizard, who wants all those souls back, plus Norman's. This book was supposed to be for teenagers, but Molly knew for a fact that every single adult had read it as well, on both sides of the border.

"Well, of course, the premise suffers from huge inconsistencies," Sander complained. "It's established early on that souls can be stored and transferred, and yet Norman can't simply unload his extra souls into the nearest vessel."

"They explained that in book two," Zadie only rolled her eyes a little. "The souls are locked inside Norman. Plus the wizard would get them if he put them anywhere else."

"What I don't get is why his so-called teacher, Maxine, doesn't just tell him the whole story about the Pendragon Exchange right away," Reggie said.

"Um, excuse me. No spoilers," Jon muttered. "Not everybody has read book five already."

"Can we talk about the themes of the book instead of just nitpicking?" Teri crossed her arms. "Like, the whole notion that Norman can contain all these multitudes but still just be Norman is fascinating to me."

"It's a kind of Cartesian dualism on speed," Jay Kagwa offered.

"Well, sort of. I mean, if you read Descartes, he says—"

"The real point is that the wizard wants to control all those souls, but—"

"Can we just talk about the singing ax? What even was that?"

They argued peacefully until around three in the morning, when everyone finally wore themselves out. The sky and the ground still rumbled occasionally, but either everyone had gotten used to it or the most violent shatterings were over. Molly looked around at the dozen or so people slowly falling asleep, leaning on each other, all around the room, and felt a desperate protectiveness. Not just for the people, because of course she didn't want any harm to come to any of them, or even for this building that she'd given the better part of her adult life to sustaining, but for something more abstract and confusing. What were the chances that the First and Last Page could continue to exist much longer, especially with one foot in either country? How would they even know if tonight was just another skirmish or the beginning of a proper war, something that could carry on for months and reduce both countries to fine ash?

Phoebe left Jon and Zadie behind and came over to sit with her mother, with her mouth still twisted upward in satisfaction. Phoebe was clutching a book in one hand, and Molly didn't recognize the gold-embossed cover at first, but then she saw the spine. This was a small hardcover of fairy tales, illustrated with watercolors, that Molly had given to her daughter for her twelfth birthday and had never seen again. She'd assumed Phoebe had glanced at it for an hour and tossed it somewhere. Phoebe leaned against her mother, half reading and half gazing at the pictures, the blue streaks of sky and dark swipes of castles and mountains, until she fell asleep on Molly's shoulder. Phoebe looked younger in her sleep, and Molly looked down at her until she, too, dozed off and the entire bookstore was at rest. Every once in a while, the roaring and convulsions of the battle woke Molly, but then at last they subsided and all Molly heard was the slow, sustained breathing of people inside a cocoon of books.

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Charlie Jane Anders is hard at work on a new adult novel, tentatively called *The Prodigal Mother*. Most recently, she wrote the young adult Unstoppable trilogy: *Victories Greater Than Death*, *Dreams Bigger Than Heartbreak*, and *Promises Stronger Than Darkness*. She's also the author of the short story collection *Even Greater Mistakes*, and *Never Say You Can't Survive* (August 2021), a book about how to use creative writing to get through hard times. Her other books include *The City in the Middle of the Night* and *All the Birds in the Sky*. She's won the Hugo, Nebula, Sturgeon, Lambda Literary, Crawford and Locus Awards. She co-created Escapade, a transgender superhero, for Marvel Comics and wrote her into the long-running New Mutants comic. And she's currently the science fiction and fantasy book reviewer for the *Washington Post*. Her TED Talk, "Go Ahead, Dream About the Future" got 700,000 views in its first week. With Annalee Newitz, she co-hosts the podcast *Our Opinions Are Correct*.