

Book Review

FEBRUARY 14, 2021

LABOR PAINS The connection between cheap goods and exploited workers

THIS LAND IS MY LAND How real estate has shaped the world

PLUS Joan Didion, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the books on Bill Gates's night stand



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Her Secret Selves

By Megan O'Grady

"I KNOW EVERY PERSON has their own truth," Tove Ditlevsen writes in "Childhood," the first volume of her beautiful and fearless memoirs. "Fortunately, things are set up so that you can keep quiet about the truths in your heart; but the cruel, gray facts are written in the school records and in the history of the world."

That the Danish author (1917-76) was famous in her own country by her 20s, writing a major body of work that includes 11 books of

THE COPENHAGEN TRILOGY
Childhood, Youth, Dependency
By Tove Ditlevsen

Translated by Tiina Nunnally and Michael Favala Goldman
370 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$30.

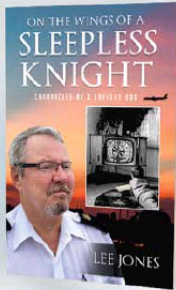
poetry, seven novels and four story collections, doesn't mean that expressing those truths came easily. The facts of her early life in a rough corner of Copenhagen's Vesterbro district were gray and often cruel enough: Hitler was rising to power, her father lost his job, Ditlevsen's education ended with middle school. Her comely, mercurial mother mocked her desire to be a poet, telling her that "everything written in books is a lie." The best she could hope for was marriage to "a stable skilled worker who comes right home with his weekly paycheck and doesn't drink."

PETRA BÖRNER

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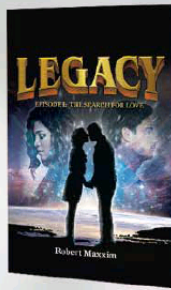
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Lee Jones, a retired airline Captain, chronicles his passionate flight career from where it all began, immortalizing his story by sharing his journey to his readers.

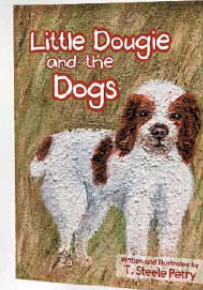
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A geologist who stumbles upon a benign underground Martian civilization. His discovery allows love, among other things, to foster on Earth and pushes him to confront his past.

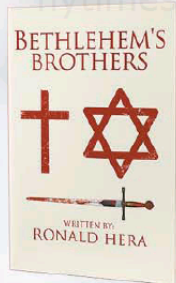
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Little Dougie And The Dogs by T. Steele Petry

This is the story of Little Dougie who loves dogs. While he is playing in the dog park, he meets and learns about the many varieties of dogs.

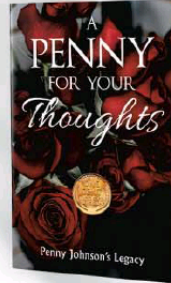
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Bethlehem's Brother's by Ronald Hera

The story of two brothers who at a young age must find strength to survive amidst death and destruction. Most of all, they each must find a savior.

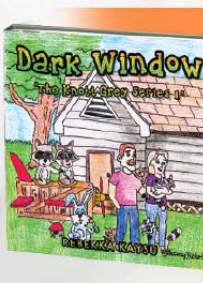
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A Penny For Your Thoughts by Jane Penny Johnson

A collection of inspiring poems of Penny Johnson's life experiences. These poems feature love, nature, religion, philosophy, and many others that will bless anyone who reads it.

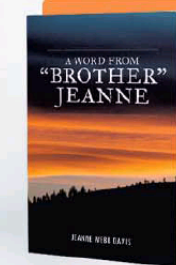
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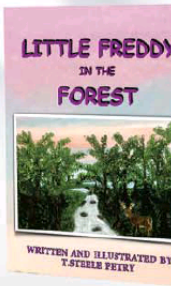
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A Word From "Brother" Jeanne by Jeanne Webb Davis

Jeanne Davis presents essays that bring simple but insightful and sometimes, humorous thoughts about God, Christianity, joy and peace amidst the doubt, skepticism, and chaos in the world.

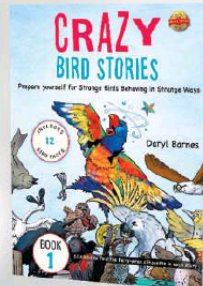
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Little Freddy In The Forest by T. Steele Petry

Little Freddy loved the forest. One morning, he decided to set out and explore so he could visit every animal he could find in the forest.

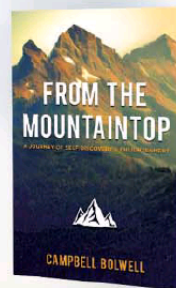
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Crazy Bird Stories by Daryl Barnes

Daryl Barnes presents twelve humorous, catchy and crazy short stories to introduce children to learn more about bird species.

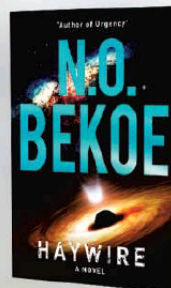
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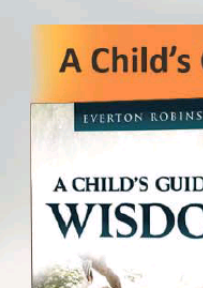
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Haywire by N.O. Bekoe

A rogue staff must be apprehended by a space agency and the powers that be before he leaks a video that will cause mayhem across the globe.

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A Child's Guide To Wisdom by Everton Robinson

by Everton Robinson

The author has designed a guide for parents in the transferal of wisdom to their children through fifty key principles intended to build character in children.

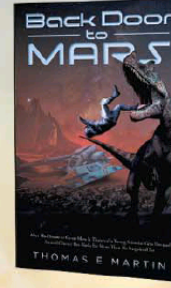
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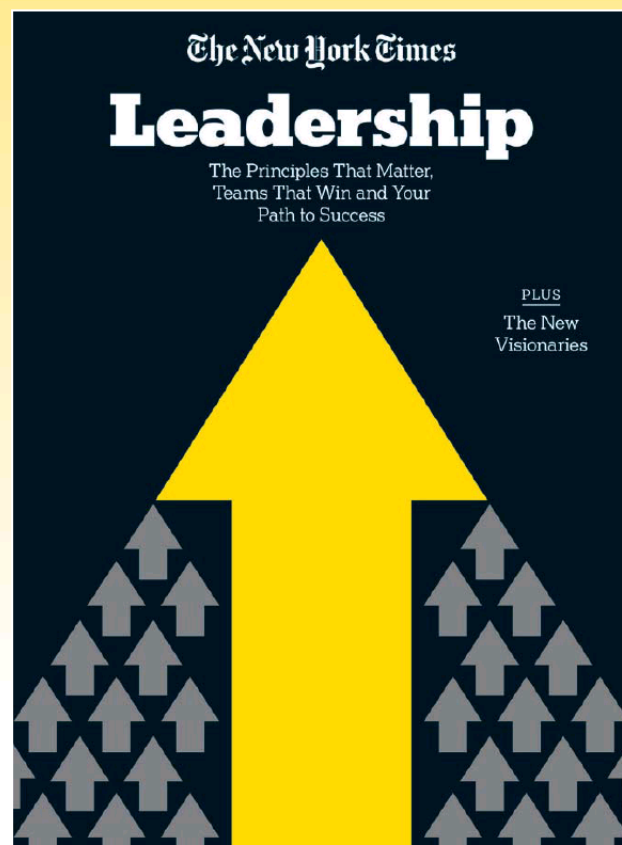
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— Christina Lauren, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Unhoneymooners*

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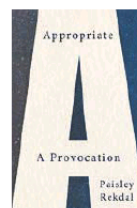
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New & Noteworthy



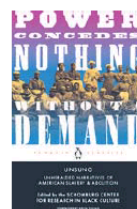
THE LOVE PROOF, by Madeleine Henry. (Atria, \$26.) Physics and romance intersect in this novel about a brilliant young scientist who drops her studies for an all-consuming relationship, then returns to the lab to prove that love really can be forever.



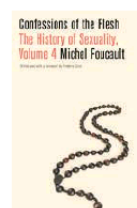
APPROPRIATE: A PROVOCATION, by Paisley Rekdal. (Norton, paper, \$15.95.) Questions of cultural appropriation often crystallize most acutely in works of literature, from William Styron to Jeanine Cummins. Rekdal, a writing teacher, parses the issue to ask who is “allowed” to write what, and in what contexts.



WANT ME: A SEX WRITER'S JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF DESIRE, by Tracy Clark-Flory. (Penguin, paper, \$16.) A journalist who covers sex and culture (currently as a senior staff writer at Jezebel) recounts her gradual understanding of the social forces and innate psychology that have shaped her own sexual identity.



UNSUNG: UNHERALDED NARRATIVES OF AMERICAN SLAVERY & ABOLITION, edited by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. (Penguin Classics, paper, \$22.) This anthology highlights the overlooked role that enslaved people played in emancipation.

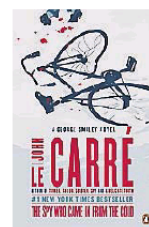


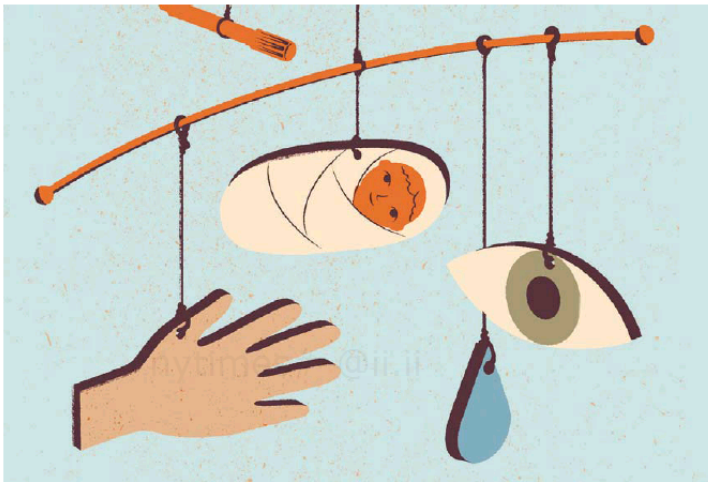
CONFESSIONS OF THE FLESH: THE HISTORY OF SEXUALITY, VOLUME 4, by Michel Foucault. Edited by Frederic Gros. Translated by Robert Hurley. (Pantheon, \$32.50.) The French philosopher explores early Christian views of desire.

WHAT WE'RE READING

I love spy novels and live in London, but somehow had never gotten around to reading anything by the British author John le Carré. His obituary in *The Times*, published in December, intrigued me. I started with his breakthrough novel, **THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD**, written more than 50 years ago but still relevant, with its tales of moral ambiguity, disinformation and betrayal. The protagonist, the lonely and exhausted British agent Alec Leamas, agrees to one last assignment before retiring. Le Carré, who penned the book while working for MI6, Britain's foreign intelligence service, peppers the novel with clues about the true nature of Leamas's mission, which takes him into Communist East Germany. But it is not until the very end that the threads come together — when Leamas makes the decision that defines him. I gasped out loud when I read the last two paragraphs.

—JENNY GROSS, GENERAL ASSIGNMENT REPORTER, EXPRESS DESK





GOLDEN COSMOS

Baby Steps

TO THE EDITOR:

In her review of Gabrielle Glaser’s “American Baby” (Jan. 24), Lisa Belkin asks what aspects of modern adoption will have profound and unexpected consequences. As an adoption counselor for the past 25 years, I believe some changes have been excellent, others detrimental.

Unfortunately, in many states it’s illegal for adoptive parents to help with housing and food, even though many birth moms are homeless and hungry. Additionally, the heinous practice of babies bounced from one foster care family to another persists despite scientific research documenting the harm it causes.

But adoptive parents go with their birth mother to the obstetrician, receive her medical records and are in the delivery room. And contact is one area contemporary adoption has gotten right. Knowing how important it is for their child, enlightened families exchange emails and social network information and often welcome visits from their birth mothers.

NANCY KORS
WALNUT CREEK, CALIF.

Close Reader

TO THE EDITOR:

In his essay centered on Harold Bloom’s “The Bright Book of Life” (Jan. 31), Robert Gottlieb suggests that Bloom included Ursula K. Le Guin’s books among his favorites because of “personal considerations,” specifically Bloom and Le Guin’s friendship

near the end of her life.

Gottlieb is of course entitled to his opinion of Bloom’s choice to include my mother’s works, but it wasn’t a matter of friendship or favoritism. Bloom wrote to Ursula for the first time in late 2017 to express his admiration going back decades for her work, and to let her know that he was planning to include her in a “kind of farewell book.” Their brief correspondence arose from this esteem for her prose and poetry.

The considerations behind Bloom’s decision to include her books may have been personal, but only in the sense that artistic and critical taste is always personal.

THEODORE DOWNES-LE GUIN
PORTLAND, ORE.

TO THE EDITOR:

As an older gentleman myself and a lifelong, inveterate reader, I always succumb to book chat essays like Gottlieb’s about the sort of books other obsessive readers prefer. I have read several of Bloom’s books and must say that my impression of his literary tastes is that he was surprisingly provincial. Not only did he spend a long and distinguished career writing about the same canon, he apparently spent his reading life ignoring not only important, even fundamental, writers, but also ignoring the literary traditions of entire continents, ethnicities, genders and generations.

Naming “great” or “essential” writers is a parlor game, and my list of excellent books is quite different from Bloom’s. But it

wouldn’t occur to me, as it apparently did to Bloom, that my preferred authors were better than any others. Especially when, if his literary essays are any indication, Bloom’s reading was mostly confined to a single tradition — “classics” in English and a handful of translations. We’re fortunate to live in a lively age for readers; we should be broadening our horizons and not (yet again!) extolling the virtues of “Clarissa.”

GEORGE OVITT
ALBUQUERQUE

TO THE EDITOR:

I cannot be the only reader who initially felt overwhelmed at the number of authors and books referenced in Gottlieb’s essay. I have read only a handful of the books Bloom included in his personal canon and could not begin to follow Gottlieb’s quibbles and asides.

At first I felt ashamed at my lack of literary chops, but then I realized that the only mentions of a nonwhite woman were two references to Toni Morrison: one about her birth year and another a joke diminishing her work in comparison with Shakespeare. Harold Bloom’s book contains many masterworks, but I prefer seeing the more robust and diverse set of authors in the pages of the Book Review each week.

MARK WEAVER
PITTSBURGH

CORRECTION

Because of an editing error, the Letters column on Jan. 31 misidentified the address of a letter writer, Stephen Schlesinger. He lives in New York, not Toledo, Ohio.

BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM

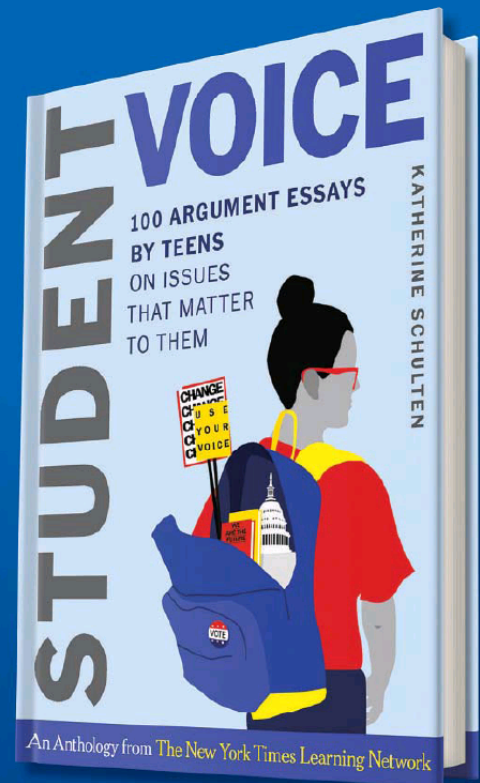
A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

This issue marks the debut of our new crime columnist, Sarah Weinman. Marilyn Stasio, who wrote the column for a phenomenal 33 years, will continue to contribute crime and true-crime reviews to our pages.

NEW from
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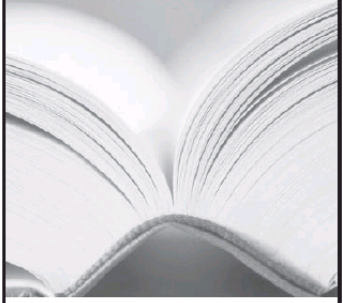


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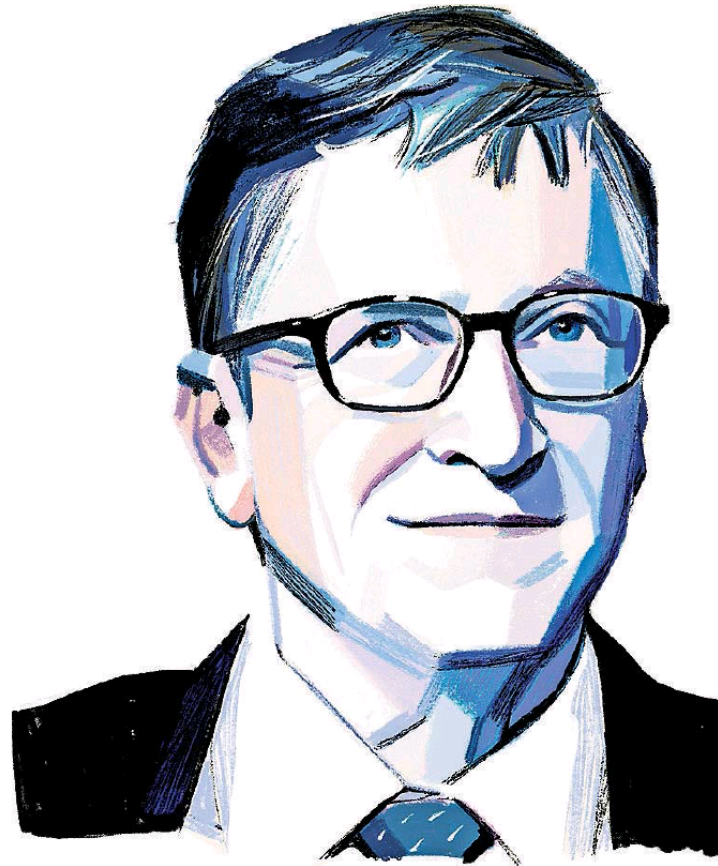
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By the Book



Bill Gates

The Microsoft founder and philanthropist, whose new book is 'How to Avoid a Climate Disaster,' is surprised more writers don't address 'how the insights we're gaining from big data could be used for good.'

What books are on your night stand?

"Infinite Jest." I'm on a mission to read everything David Foster Wallace wrote, and I'm slowly working my way through everything else before I get to that one. I've also got a copy of "The Three-Body Problem," by Liu Cixin, which I've been meaning to read for a while.

What's the last great book you read?

I really liked President Obama's new book. It was fascinating to read about times when he struggled with self-doubt and how he dealt with it. He's honest about where he might have done things differently with the benefit of hindsight. It had a level of candor and self-reflection that isn't all that common among leaders. I was surprised that he portrayed the job as less crazy than I've always imagined it to be.

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

"Business Adventures," by John Brooks, a collection of his New Yorker articles about business from the 1960s. Even though the world has changed a lot in the past 50 years, Brooks's insights still hold up today. Warren Buffett loaned me his copy years ago and told me it was his favorite business book. Now it's my favorite, too.

In "How to Avoid a Climate Disaster," you unexpectedly cite "Weather for Dummies" as one of the best books you've found on weather. What science and nature books would you recommend for somebody who wants to understand climate change?

"Weather for Dummies" is probably the best book written for a general audience about the subject. If you want to understand more about how weather and climate are interconnected, John Houghton's textbook "Global Warming: The Complete Briefing" is good. There is also a Great Courses lecture series called "Earth's Changing Climate." Give it six

hours and you will know enough to be the hit of the next party you go to, as soon as we can have those again.

What's the most interesting thing you learned from a book recently?

I read Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow" a few months ago, and I was shocked by the stories she tells about the extreme prison sentences judges are often forced to hand down. I knew that mandatory minimums were a big problem — especially for people of color — but it's heartbreaking to read about specific cases. She tells one particularly sad story about a man who got 10 years in prison without parole for what was basically a small lapse in judgment. The judge broke down in tears while issuing his sentence. Her book was written a decade ago, but sadly it's just as relevant today.

Which subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

I'm surprised more books haven't been written about how the insights we're gaining from big data could be used for good. I read "Everybody Lies," by Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, last summer, which is all about what internet data — and especially search engines — reveal about human behavior. (Did you know that people who have pancreatic cancer often Google both "back pain" and "yellowing skin" before being diagnosed?) It was super interesting, but he didn't get into what we could do with these learnings. I'd love to read a thoughtful book about how this information could make life better.

What book would you recommend for America's current political moment?

"These Truths," by Jill Lepore. If you're going to solve a problem, you need to understand the context behind how it came to be. Lepore has written the most honest accounting of our country's history that I've ever read. The book is long, but it makes it clear how a lot of what we learned in school is simplified and ignores the less savory parts of American history.

What do you plan to read next?

I can't wait to read Walter Isaacson's new book, "The Code Breaker," when it comes out in a couple weeks. It's about Jennifer Doudna, who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry last year for her work on the CRISPR gene-editing platform. □

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

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"Allah or God." This nonfiction book has some of my autobiography in it like how I was redeemed at a gas station and received the Holy Ghost. It also talks about scientific facts, the Tower of Babel, Noah, and some of the major religions on earth. It's revealed that even the King James Bible of 1611 is fallible. It consists of Islam & other religions, but their God is not the same god as the Christian God. My biblical name is Elijah of Malachi 4:5. www.mickeymullenelijah.com

"Mankind's Dilemma." The problem with the world of religion is the cunning brilliance of Lucifer. He has fooled mankind that even he was included in the King James Bible of 1611. This book presents some of my stories on how I became redeemed at a gas station, and other things for the cause of making myself righteous, as required of me by God. My biblical name is Elijah and I am here to explain the allegory found in the Bible. Know the truth at www.mickeymullenelijah.com

"The Way, The Truth, & The Life." My name is Elijah that is mentioned in the Old Testament. A prophet chosen by God to explain the allegorical gospel & parables in the Bible. Jesus couldn't speak freely because He had to get to the Cross & the Truth was not to be given to mankind at that time. It is my duty as prophet to reveal the Truth as the end time draws near. Not everything you read in the Bible came from God. Malachi 4:5. Know the truth at www.mickeymullenelijah.com

Crossword

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Killing Time

"IN AMERICA, everything is about either race or money or some combination of the two." So observes Easy Rawlins, the private detective of Walter Mosley's key literary project over the past 30 years, making his 15th appearance in **BLOOD GROVE** (Mulholland, 307 pp., \$27). Mosley's work has chronicled an America rendered invisible, but also overpowered, by whiteness. Easy may be "a Black man closer to Mississippi midnight than its yellow moon" but he's also a "father, a reader, a private detective and a veteran" who has evolved, and aged, a great deal since readers first met the 1948 version of him in "Devil in a Blue Dress."

It's 1969 now, and Rawlins is nearly 50, still struggling with professional and romantic and familial conflicts in a Los Angeles about to be beset by the berserk. He catches a strange-to-parse case: a young white man who thinks he might have killed a man during a vicious attack.

"I had to help him because I could see his pain in my mirror," Easy decides, seeing past race and money to the shared post-traumatic bond of wartime service.

There will be regrets, and deaths, and special appearances from other recurring Mosley protagonists as Easy continues his journey through the country as it was, and is, rather than the stuff of myths and dreams.

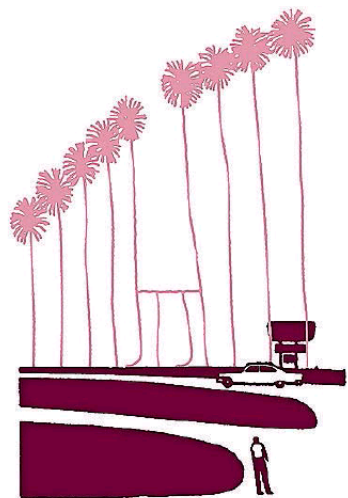
BELINDA BAUER'S thrillers are ingeniously plotted, propulsively paced and suffused with a keen intelligence and wit. So yes, I'm a fan, and **EXIT** (Atlantic Monthly Press, 325 pp., \$26) is a welcome addition to this distinctive body of work.

Felix, at 75, has known loss, still mourning the deaths of his wife and child. He channels his grief through work as an "Exiteer," sitting with the critically ill during their last moments as they prepare to end their lives.

But the latest assignment goes horrifically wrong — I gasped and

SARAH WEINMAN is the author of "The Real Lolita" and the editor of "Un-speakable Acts: True Tales of Crime, Murder, Deceit & Obsession."

thrilled at the twist, which I shan't spoil here — forcing Felix to question everything, everyone, his internal moral compass and the motives of those around him. Bauer tucks these expansive questions into the folds of the plot, which grows sufficiently break-neck, featuring secret romances, organized crime and channeling death for profit. What lingers most, though, is Felix's capacity for empathy, no matter the personal cost.



PABLO AMARGO

OUR MODERN, housebound, locked-down era has transformed an often vexing question — "Why doesn't this person I care about text me back?" — into the stuff of existential nightmares. Catie Disabato clearly worked on and completed most of **U UP?** (Melville House, 305 pp., paper, \$17.99) before the pandemic, but the novel's examination of loss, be it sudden death or friendship rupture, feels very much of this moment.

The main mystery can be boiled down to two interlinked questions: why Ezra has gone dark in Eve's text streams after the final romantic fissure with his girlfriend (and Eve's onetime close friend), Nozlee, and why Eve is able to communicate virtually — via text — with the ghost of their dead best friend Miggy, who killed himself the year before.

Both strands will be resolved not in the bustling, Before-Time Los Angeles where all four reside

but in a hideaway nestled in the desert, where the living mingle with the afterlife, and where fractured threads will knit themselves anew in unexpected ways.

Disabato is after bigger thematic game than mere paranormal mystery-romantic comedy. The texts Eve sends and receives — and the ones she doesn't — are the means for her to cope with and repress her grief at the compounding losses in her life, and the self-destructive behavior that ensues when medicating herself with alcohol and cocaine stops working. Rather than flatten emotion via text, Eve's plaintive missives heighten her brokenness, injecting an aching pathos as she searches out her deepest self within the wreckage of the selves she has abandoned.

MY NO. 1 life rule is that you should never hire a hit man, because it's certain to result in catastrophe. In **FINLAY DONOVAN IS KILLING IT** (Minotaur, 359 pp., \$26.99), her first mystery for adults, Elle Cosimano takes this rule to heart. The plot is frequently outlandish, but the main character is so endearing that it's easy to surrender to the ridiculous.

A freshly divorced, deeply indebted single mom, Finlay just wants to write romantic suspense novels and make a living at it, something that's eluded her so far. A fraught conversation with her literary agent at a crowded suburban Panera is misunderstood in gargantuan fashion, and the next thing she knows, Finlay has a \$50,000 assignment — in cash — to kill a stranger's husband. A payday that's more than 10 times her average book advance.

Things turn screwball, naturally, as if Craig Rice had rewritten "Home Sweet Homicide" with social media in mind. Finlay, poor decisions aside, has a promising future in killing for sort-of hire. Her books might garner more commercial success, too. After all, as her babysitter-turned-sidekick reasons, if landing an agent had 10,000-to-1 odds, and landing a book deal is tougher still, "Getting away with murder had to be easier than that, right?" □



The New York Times

Cooking

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Old Sorrows

A novel examines the burden of inherited trauma over several generations.

By **CLAIRE LOMBARDO**

“CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS are anthropologists of our own families,” Lauren Fox posits in an address to readers at the end of her new novel, “Send for Me.” “We’re participant-observers of cultures we live in, but that will never quite belong to us.” In many ways, “Send for Me” is indeed an anthropological excavation; its preoccupations are many and sometimes diffuse but it is haunted throughout by the endlessly fascinating question of inheritance. How much of our stories — and which parts — truly belong to us?

“Send for Me” delves into the history of a single family, spanning four generations and two continents. It is Fox’s fourth novel, written with what she acknowledges is a fair amount of autobiographical influence. (She notes that the earliest iteration of the story was a memoir she wrote for her master’s thesis; the excerpts from letters scattered through the text were written by Fox’s great-grandmother.) And,

SEND FOR ME
By Lauren Fox
272 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95.

over all, the book is a real achievement — beautifully written, deeply felt, tender and thoughtful.

The primary narrative belongs to Annelise, a young Jewish woman in 1930s Germany who is coming of age — and falling in love — just as her city is becoming unlivable owing to the rise of anti-Semitism. She eventually moves to the United States with her husband and young daughter, leaving her parents behind and creating a new life for her family in Milwaukee. Fox’s prose is rhythmic and gorgeous, and the portrait she paints of Annelise’s life — and all she comes to lose — is richly textured. Physical details animate Annelise’s story — the sharp jab of a mother’s elbow, the disturbing squish of an unclean welcome mat, a part down a scalp dividing two pigtailed — as well as keen and often painful emotional descriptions: “She can never admit it, having escaped with their lives, can never admit how much it hurts to lose so many nice things. . . . What kind of person mourns things when so many of her dear ones are ashes?”

The storytelling is patient, generous, at moments even languid. Fox takes her time staging the life that Annelise will ultimately

leave behind, chronicling minor mother-daughter conflicts, tepid female friendships, young heartbreak, the progression of courtship and marriage and, finally, pregnancy. The point of view shifts among characters, allowing us glimpses into the minds of Annelise’s mother, father and husband as well: “Later he’ll marvel

ing 28-year-old granddaughter, Clare, happens upon a trove of old letters written to Annelise in Milwaukee by her mother in Germany. The letters serve as a kind of metronome through the novel, punctuating the two story lines at intervals and tethering them — if sometimes tenuously — together: Annelise receiving them in real time, as her parents await visas to emigrate, and Clare reading them in translation some 50 years later.

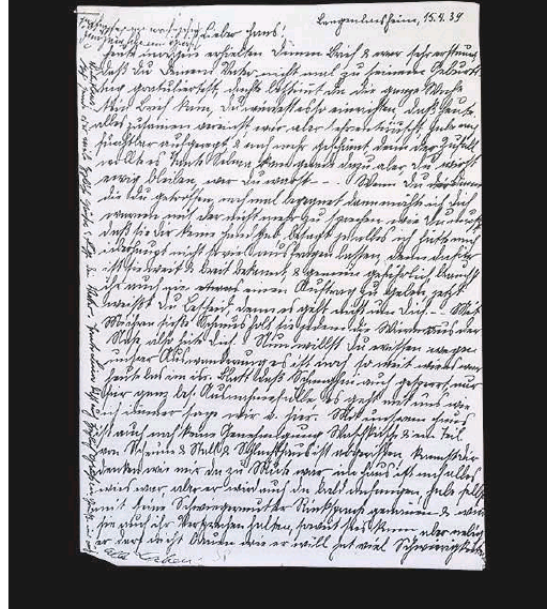
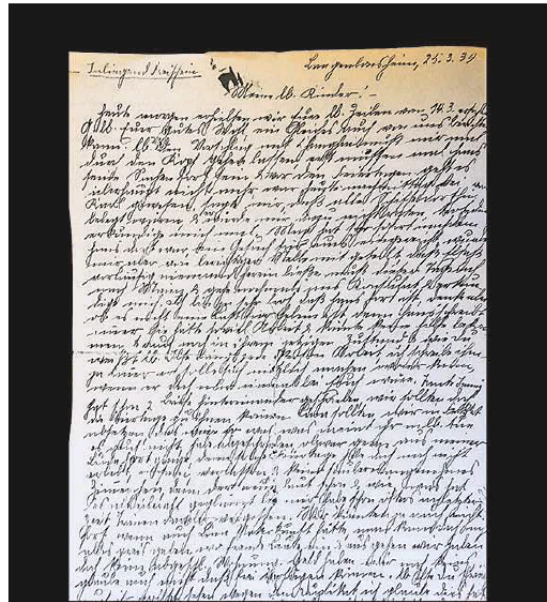
Clare isn’t introduced until a quarter of the way into the novel, and her voice is not quite a welcome interruption. Her story feels comparatively anemic, and it’s difficult to discern how much of this is intentional — of course, decisions about whom to marry and how far to pursue a career are inherently less dire than those faced by her ancestors in Germany, but this raises the question of why we spend so much time with her on the page. Her aimlessness (“a human cloud, really, just floating around”) is theoretically interesting. It invites us to consider how someone living in material comfort can find happiness while knowing all that was sacrificed by those before her to enable her to *have* that happiness — how one grapples with the burden of inherited trauma — but it doesn’t feel sufficiently explored.

In her note to readers, Fox describes Clare’s story as “about a young woman . . . trying to pry her own life apart from her history.” And while this rings true in the most ba-

‘What kind of person mourns things when so many of her dear ones are ashes?’

sic sense, I wish Clare’s narrative had been either scaled back or ramped up a bit more. There are indications that she is preoccupied by her past, but she seems more fixated on whether to commit to her current romantic interest. We’re offered the beginnings of fruitful threads — Clare’s fraught relationship with her mother, for instance, which echoes what we’ve seen of the previous generations of mothers and daughters (at one point we’re told “they clung to each other, refugees from an ancient sorrow”) — but none feel fully developed.

These deficiencies are more noticeable because of the vibrancy of Annelise’s story, which is so emotionally resonant that one is sad to turn the page and not find her there. And this is the major accomplishment of “Send for Me”: its vivid depiction of a family’s heartbreak, its rending and rebuilding. □



From the family archive: letters from Lauren Fox’s great-grandmother to her grandmother.

at their small slice of good luck: that they fell in love before the fear sank down into their bones. . . . It was a gift. Certain events diminish you, alter your elemental structure. Later, he will not trust police officers; she won’t abide Fourth of July parades. . . . That’s who they’ll become. But when they fell in love, they were just who they were.”

Half a century later, Annelise’s flounder-

CLAIRE LOMBARDO is the author of “The Most Fun We Ever Had.”



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Hard Labor

The human toll of cheap stuff from China.

By LAUREN HILGERS

FIVE CHAPTERS INTO “Made in China,” Amelia Pang’s investigation of forced labor practices in China, her main subject — a Falun Gong practitioner named Sun Yi — is tasked with making decorative paper mushrooms for export, it is rumored, to Europe. It is early during his stay in a forced labor camp called Masanjia, and the assignment is supposed to be a cushy one. How difficult can it be to make paper mushrooms? Sun, however, soon scrapes his fingers rubbing the paper together to get the desired fake-mushroom feel. His cuts grow infected, but he keeps working, trying to fill an impossible quota of 160 mushrooms per day. Other inmates steal mushrooms from one another in desperation,

MADE IN CHINA
A Prisoner, an SOS Letter, and the Hidden Cost of America’s Cheap Goods

By Amelia Pang

278 pp. Algonquin Books. \$27.95.

growing thin on a diet of poisonous-smelling vegetable soup. “Sun regularly slept just two to four hours,” Pang writes. “Only to dream of the repetitive creasing motions of folding paper mushrooms.”

In the aftermath of 2020 — a year that saw both the expansion of a vast detention and forced labor system in the western Chinese province of Xinjiang and a homebound global population increasingly reliant on goods delivered anonymously to their doorstep — Pang’s book feels timely and urgent. Her argument starts here, in the room with the mushrooms, and goes like this: that the way we consume is unsustainable; that something as seemingly trivial as paper mushrooms and Halloween decorations are entangled in a system that hides atrocity by design and makes complicity — with authoritarian governments, with dangerous working conditions and even with religious persecution — part of modern life. Pang, a freelance journalist who grew up in a Mandarin-speaking household, is most effective when she is drawing out these juxtapositions, putting production and torture matter-of-factly side by side.

“Made in China” gets off to a rocky start; Pang does not hit her stride until a few chapters in. She opens the book with a mystery, involving the discovery, by a woman living in the suburbs of Portland, Ore., of a note that Sun Yi hid in a package

LAUREN HILGERS is a journalist and the author of “Patriot Number One: A Chinese Rebel Comes to America.”

of Halloween decorations headed to the United States. The woman opens the package, the note falls out and, it seems, the hunt is on. “If you occasionally buy this product, please kindly resend this letter to the World Human Right Organization,” the note read, in English.

Identifying Sun Yi, however, turns out not to be much of a puzzle. He had been released from Masanjia in 2010, two years before his letter was discovered, well before Pang began researching his case. In fact, he was the subject of a 2018 documentary, “Letter From Masanjia.” This opening conceit dissolves quickly and the early



Workers at a textile factory in Huaibei, China, in July 2020.

pages of Pang’s book race through Sun’s childhood and, at the same time, survey decades of Chinese history in passages that are sometimes sweeping and reductive. “The Cultural Revolution killed millions and mangled China’s economy,” she

‘We don’t feel the agony of the workers who made our products as deeply as we feel our desires.’

writes. “This is why modern mainland Chinese ideals tend to place higher value on social stability than human rights.”

Once she has dispensed with this preamble, and Sun Yi arrives in Masanjia, Pang’s narrative slows down and her argument starts to take shape. She details the living conditions and social hierarchy within the prison, the grueling work and rumors about a shadowy “ghost” unit. And, outside the prison, Pang is a dogged investigator.

She follows trucks from reform-through-labor prisons near Shanghai to the factories that dot the surrounding region. Pang talks to activists and laborers, combing through Chinese media accounts, and making a convincing case that brands from H&M to AmericanGirl have reaped the benefits of cheap *laogai*, or forced labor. Supply chains and corporate malfeasance are not only to blame, she contends; our own consumption patterns contribute to the system that had Sun working endlessly and against his will.

“Our spending habits put brands on a perpetual search for ways to shorten the

cheapest audits can quickly become expensive.”

While Pang is explaining the tangle of sourcing and consumption that tie U.S. consumers to places like Masanjia, Sun Yi’s story continues to unfold. He starts contemplating writing an SOS letter to include in the packaging of some decorative Halloween gravestones he is working on. He is hiding notes in the metal bed frame where he sleeps, courting disaster as his letter-writing campaign expands to include other inmates. Meanwhile, in the United States, Pang explains, consumers are hard-pressed to hold the means of production in our heads while making a purchase. “We feel pleasure if the price is low. We feel pain if the price is too high. When we are standing . . . in front of the gentle glow of a computer screen, we don’t feel the agony of the workers who made our products as deeply as we feel our desires.”

Sun Yi’s sister and mother struggle to secure his release. He suffers torture and illness and, by the time Pang finishes the book, has died in exile. His story ends in Indonesia in 2017, before Pang had a chance to meet him in person. Her final chapters are an argument that his imprisonment, while years in the past, is still relevant. The camps in Xinjiang, she maintains, are a means of eliminating a culture as well as turning a profit. China’s West is an important link in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, a profusion of development and investment projects around the world. The Xinjiang government has offered incentives to textile companies willing to open factories near the camps. One recent report estimated that 80,000 ethnic Uighurs have been forcibly

sent to factories in other parts of China. Pang leaves us with a question that she herself has trouble answering. How do you square China’s economic might with its human rights record? Despite a trade war between China and the Trump administration, trade with China broke records in 2020. The European Union signed a favorable new trade agreement with the country in December. Pang concludes her book with a list of actions readers can take to help ensure companies are scrutinizing their suppliers more closely. “We need to ask our favorite brands: If you are still sourcing from Xinjiang, are you willing to pull out?” she writes.

Consumers can contact corporations. They can appeal to corporate social responsibility divisions. They can use social media platforms like Twitter. But in the face of ongoing trade deals and opaque systems of manufacturing, this comes as a tall order. If governments and corporations can’t resist a good deal in the name of human rights, can we? □

Is Islam Misogynistic?

Ayaan Hirsi Ali argues that Western women are in danger of losing their hard-won rights.

By JILL FILIPOVIC

THERE ARE FEW women in the world who generate as much animosity, and as many accusations of hypocrisy, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali. She denounces Islam for its absolutism and intolerance, and then vilifies the religion of more than one billion people as a “nihilistic cult of death.” Her own history perhaps makes her antagonism understandable — she was forced into genital mutilation as a child in Somalia, fled to the Netherlands to escape an arranged marriage and, as an adult, has seen her life

PREY
Immigration, Islam, and the Erosion of Women's Rights
By Ayaan Hirsi Ali

352 pp. Harper/HarperCollins Publishers.
\$28.99.

threatened by Muslim extremists so many times and with such credibility that she travels with security. But she herself rejects that framing as sexist and presumptuous.

She calls herself an “infidel,” while many Muslims say she’s just an Islamophobe. She was put on a Qaeda hit list and called an anti-Muslim “extremist” by the Southern Poverty Law Center. She praises Western liberalism at the same time as she suggests that Islam is so incompatible with it that Western democracies need to consider suspending their core values in the service of self-preservation. She’s an asylee who calls for an end to asylum as we know it.

Her latest project only amplifies these incongruities. “Prey: Immigration, Islam, and the Erosion of Women’s Rights” argues that immigration from majority-Muslim countries imperils the hard-won rights of European women. Muslim men, who are by Hirsi Ali’s telling accustomed to gender-segregated societies in which female modesty is mandated and women are harassed out of public life, arrived in Europe in droves during the previous decade’s migration crisis, bringing old orthodoxies — and violent enforcement of them — to their new Northern homes. As a result, she says, European women face endemic sexual harassment and violence. Even worse, in an effort to not be seen as xenophobic or feed into rising right-wing nationalism, liberal Europeans are complicit in their own mounting oppression, playing down misogyny as mere multiculturalism even as Western women are criminally assaulted, told to cover their bodies and driven from the streets of their own cities. Hirsi Ali calls for a new feminist movement, one in which

JILL FILIPOVIC is a journalist and the author of “OK Boomer, Let’s Talk: How My Generation Got Left Behind” and “The H-Spot: The Feminist Pursuit of Happiness.”

true feminists are “prepared to stand up for the rights of all women” and coalesce around the issue of “women’s safety from predatory men.”

Those are certainly laudable goals for a feminist movement, which is precisely why you may be wondering: *Isn’t that what feminists have been doing this whole time?*

It is. Feminists the world over have agitated for greater freedoms for women, putting the right to be free of male violence at the center of their work and steadily rejecting the argument that patriarchal abuses are excusable in any culture. So it’s rather odd to see Hirsi Ali claim that feminists have created a near-paradise of liberalism for women in the Western world, and then accuse them of failing to adequately care about women’s rights because they also want their homelands to open doors to seekers of safe harbor, regardless of religion. But this is the one-two punch of “Prey”: Swear allegiance to Western liberalism, then push ideas and policies that would undermine it. It’s a dizzying rhetorical style, and succeeds only in knocking out straw men.

In seeking to make the case that hordes of sexually violent Muslim men are setting back women’s rights in Europe, Hirsi Ali excavates crime data, newspaper articles and social science research. She speaks with a handful of law enforcement officials, people who work on immigrant assimilation efforts and average citizens. She laudably admits that the data are extremely limited, but that doesn’t stop her from insisting that they nevertheless support her claims. She shares horrifying news stories of women and girls harassed, assaulted and raped by Muslim asylum-seekers to bolster her thesis. If readers didn’t know any better, they would come away with the impression that most sex crimes in Western Europe are committed by Muslim migrants against European female strangers. They aren’t — the men who pose the biggest threat to European women are the same category of men who pose the biggest threat to women everywhere: men whom women know.

Hirsi Ali understands that she’s generalizing, she writes; she’s not saying all Muslim men are rapists. But she is saying that young men from conservative Muslim societies arrive in Europe — and most of the new arrivals are young men — having been previously steeped in profoundly misogynistic cultures and subject to laws that offer women fewer rights than men. That impacts how they behave, she claims, something Western liberals, who worship at the altar of cultural relativism, don’t

want to recognize. “When it comes to migrants and minorities,” she writes, “pointing to cultural explanations for their behavior toward women is taboo.”

But is it? In the same book, Hirsi Ali rightly excoriates a German judge for acquitting a credibly accused rapist by making “allowances for migrant sex offenders’ lack of understanding of Western women’s sexual self-determination.” Is the problem that it’s taboo to point to cultural factors that drive sexual violence? Or is it that European authorities too often excuse sexual



Ayaan Hirsi Ali making a point, 2006.

violence at the hands of Muslim immigrants by pointing to cultural factors? In Hirsi Ali’s narrative, it’s whichever is more convenient. And any attempt to truly explore the complex factors that drive entrenched poverty, housing and educational segregation, and higher rates of crime in immigrant communities — any attempt, that is, beyond blaming religion and culture alone — is relegated to what she calls “The Playbook of Denial.”

This knee-jerk oversimplification is particularly frustrating coming, as it does, from a steely woman of great intelligence. Hirsi Ali is correct that Europeans and North Americans are grappling with the moral complexities of immigration law in a world where conflict and crisis have driven so many from their homes, that the stakes of harsh anti-immigration laws are high (just ask the families of the tens of thousands of souls who have drowned in the Mediterranean), that European welfare states are both generous and easily imperiled and that we are increasingly aware that our opportunities and our basic physical safety are often dependent on the random luck of where we were born or whom we were born to. She is right that a well-meaning commitment to tolerance can be easily exploited, and that women’s rights

are often the first to be sacrificed in the service of cultural relativism. But a reader interested in a thoughtful analysis of these questions won’t find it in this book. Even a reader like myself — a reader who delights in a little happy blasphemy, yearns for greater secularism and unapologetic atheism, and welcomes the skewering of misogynist fundamentalists of any religion (taboos and tolerance be damned) — couldn’t find much to cheer here. Like the fundamentalist religious views she and I both detest, “Prey” is too absolutist to be credible.

It could also be said to be cut through with bigotry. Hirsi Ali seems to latch onto the trope of men of color threatening virtuous white women, a particular kind of fearmongering with a long and ugly history. European colonists saw their endeavors not simply as extractive, but as civilizing; to make that work, they doubled down on the idea of African and Arab men as sexually aggressive and uncontrolled, and white women their desired victims. European settlers worried about “the Black peril” of African rapists, which was also used to justify colonialism and the pervasive racist violence that went with it. During the French occupation of Germany after World War I, German newspapers sounded the (false) alarm about a “Black plague” of mass rapes and murders by Senegalese troops in the French Army. (Hitler, true to form, blamed the Jews for bringing in the Africans.) And Hirsi Ali, who emphasizes the importance of assimilation and now lives in the United States, is surely not ignorant of this country’s own history. “Make any list of anti-Black terrorism in the United States, and you’ll also have a list of attacks justified by the specter of Black rape,” Jamelle Bouie wrote in 2015, after Dylann Roof murdered nine people in Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and reportedly told the Black congregation, “You rape our women, and you’re taking over our country, and you have to go.” Donald Trump, the most xenophobic American president in living memory, often used the threat of white girls being raped by immigrant men to justify his draconian immigration policies.

Hirsi Ali does skew this old narrative just a bit: Instead of being virtuous for their submissiveness, maternity or innocence — the usual rendering of white women in need of protection — European women in “Prey” are virtuous for their liberal feminist values, and also vulnerable because of them. But this is where Hirsi Ali gives away the game. After spending much of the book portraying herself as a defender of these very values, by the end, she’s

ready to give them up if it means keeping certain immigrants out. Her proposed solutions include ramping up policing, harsher criminal penalties and intrusions into personal privacy. Even as she says she has “thought deeply about the seeming paradox of using illiberal means to achieve liberal ends,” she ultimately decides that the ends indeed justify the means — even “privacy-obsessed Germans,” she posits, could be persuaded to accept the use of video surveillance, artificial intelligence and facial recognition technology in “troubled neighborhoods.”

Hirsi Ali suggests scrapping the current asylum program, which offers safe harbor to those facing persecution, and instead

proposes that European nations adopt immigration policies where “the main criterion for granting residence should be how far they are likely to abide by the laws and adopt the values of their host society.” In Hirsi Ali’s estimation, that means assessing whether immigrants have the skills to work for pay — a requirement that could curtail granting legal status to a great many female asylum-seekers and refugees, who tend to be less educated than their male counterparts.

Whether Hirsi Ali herself, who wore the hijab as a teenager and supported the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, would have qualified for asylum under her rules is an outstanding question. Yet this is where her

illiberalism truly shines through. “All liberal institutions are predicated on this idea,” she writes approvingly, that “the individual, whether male or female, is recognized as a decision-maker responsible for his or her behavior.” Central to this concept of liberal individualism is an antagonism to collective punishment, and the idea that individual responsibility means one person’s wrongdoing doesn’t implicate his family, his entire race or his religious group. No such concept of individual rights and responsibilities exists in the Muslim world, she says, where group identity takes precedence. It’s why, she writes, Muslims have a “victimhood complex” when sex crimes laws, which they believe are invalid

in the first place, are enforced against Muslim men: “Because the individual is inextricably linked to the group, condemnation of the individual is considered vilification of the group.”

It’s Hirsi Ali, though, who does exactly this: She finds stories of individual Muslim immigrants who commit heinous crimes, and by suggesting those stories are broadly representative, uses them to justify curtailing the opportunities afforded to the whole group. This is not, as she suggests, a feminism of standing up for the rights of women. It is a feminism of reaction — and one that would undermine the very liberal values Hirsi Ali begs feminists to protect. □

Territorial Conflicts

Land ownership and the deadly disputes it has spawned throughout history.

By AARON RETICA

WE DON’T TALK MUCH about land reform these days, but after reading Simon Winchester’s “Land: How the Hunger for Ownership Shaped the Modern World,” I am wondering whether we should. In the United States, Winchester points out, “the top 100” landowners, taken together, own “as much land as the entire state of Florida.” Nor is this exclusively the result of the dead hand of the past. As Winchester ex-

LAND

How the Hunger for Ownership Shaped the Modern World

By Simon Winchester

Illustrated. 464 pp. Harper/HarperCollins Publishers. \$29.99.

plains, “Since 2007 the amount of American land owned by these wealthy 100 has increased by 50 percent, and is showing no signs of slowing down.”

Winchester clearly sees this as a problem, but his book is not a polemic, as much as one might sometimes wish it were. Like a lot of journalists-turned-historians, Winchester is a quick study, and there is an astounding amount of information in “Land,” much of it revealing, although it can also feel somewhat random. As he roams his seemingly boundless terrain, Winchester provides us with set piece after set piece. And yet, despite the epic continents-and-centuries scale he tries to take on, his approach at its best is often miniaturist, as it has been with perhaps greater success in

some of his previous books, most notably “The Professor and the Madman,” which tells the singular story of a murderer who was crucial to the development of the Oxford English Dictionary.

Winchester opens his new book with his own purchase of 123 acres of forested land in Dutchess County, N.Y., but goes on to tell us about Stalin’s murderous collectivization in Ukraine, the depredations of the midcentury British government officials who blithely drew maps of the Indian subcontinent that proved to be deadly, Maori campaigners who sought to reclaim the land that had been taken from them by settlers in New Zealand, the forced displacement of Scottish crofters by the preindustrial enclosure movement and much, much more.

Winchester likes to move around as a kind of raconteur. He will often illustrate a larger phenomenon — the fate of interned Japanese-Americans, for example — with one particular story, in this case the tale of a strawberry farmer named Akira Aramaki. Aramaki returns from internment to find that the neighbor he’d entrusted with his farm has no intention of giving it back. Aramaki does eventually reclaim his land, only to change his mind and become a real estate agent. Interesting enough, but as far as the book goes, Aramaki is really there so Winchester can tell us about the larger historical currents that swept around Aramaki and made his life what it was. After a while, this can get annoying, because most if not all of the people in the book end up becoming symbols, and we can never really grasp how they all interconnect. Personalizing history can sometimes make it more remote, not less.

You can’t help learning a lot from a well-researched book like this, though some of



Working in the Outer Hebrides, 1955.

the material may be familiar from other accounts. To give one example, Winchester’s description of Stalin’s slaughter in Ukraine can be affecting, but if you really want to know what happened there, you would be better off reading Anne Applebaum or Robert Conquest.

And despite Winchester’s evident sympathy toward dispossessed Native Americans, which serves as a kind of leitmotif throughout “Land,” there are too many sentences that could have come out of a high school textbook, like this one: “They were, in short, a sophisticated and civilized people — and though many Americans today believe there to be precious few Natives remaining in the country, there are in fact some 500 tribes remaining and officially recognized today.” Winchester can also, in his zeal for arguing that Native Americans have a nobler conception of the land than the men who deprived them of it, sound inadvertently condescending: “In the United States too, representations of

the true value of land — of its spiritual value, well beyond its mere monetary worth — can be found occasionally in public declarations of Native Americans.”

Without a real thesis or overarching theme driving it, “Land” does not quite come together. It can often be hard to discern why the reader is being told a particular story. Sometimes, though, it is when Winchester is at his least colorful and most reportorial that the connections he is trying to make between the past and the present come through vividly. Late in the book, for example, Winchester notes that “the disparity between the amount of land owned today by Blacks and by whites — the average Black household holding assets of no more than 8 percent of those owned by the median white household, land being a central component of those assets — is an enduring legacy that contributes to the country’s racial disharmony.” Here the nasty contemporary effects of historical dispossession are at their clearest.

When he was writing “Land,” Winchester could not have known that a fresh plague would circumnavigate the globe, but the course of the disease in the United States has proved him right. Dispossession is itself a risk factor for dying of Covid-19. The same Native American, African-American and Hispanic-American communities that have never had their fair share of the land are suffering cruelly disproportionate infection and death rates from Covid-19. There are many reasons for this, but if we want to reform the society that made this devastating difference in death rates an inevitability, we would be smart to use the tool of land reform that Winchester helps us see is still a necessity. □

Sexual Carousel

For the novelist Sybille Bedford, romance came before literature.

By **BROOKE ALLEN**

SYBILLE BEDFORD IS NOT a household name, but among her coterie of admirers in Europe and America she is held in high esteem. Her reputation rests upon a relatively slim literary output over the course of a long life (1911-2006): notably, four works of fiction (three earlier novels were deemed inferior and remain unpublished), a memoir, books about travel and international legal processes, a biography of her friend Aldous Huxley that is still the definitive one, and sundry journalism. Her first published novel, "A Legacy" (1956), rescued from possible oblivion by Evelyn Waugh's encomium in *The Spectator*, has become something of a cult classic. She had limitations as a writer, the most significant being that she really had only one

SYBILLE BEDFORD

A Life

By **Selina Hastings**

Illustrated. 412 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$32.50.

story to tell: that of her own life. But what a life it was! And now here we have it, elegantly related by Selina Hastings, the author of finely wrought, literate biographies of Somerset Maugham, Nancy Mitford and Waugh himself.

Sybille Bedford's father, Maximilian von Schoenebeck, was a melancholy, idle German aristocrat and her mother, Lisa Bernhardt, a gifted but narcissistic daughter of a rich Hamburg businessman. Billi, as Sybille was nicknamed, passed her first few years in a schloss near the Black Forest. As World War I progressed and the middle-aged Maximilian left to rejoin the army, she was sent to stay with the wealthy Jewish family of his first wife in Berlin, a ménage the novelist portrayed unforgettably: The family members, "sunk in upholstery and their own corpulence . . . lived contentedly in a luxurious cocoon, an existence that was wholly centered on their own domestic comfort. . . . [They] never went to the theater, looked at pictures or listened to music; they cared nothing for books. . . . They took no exercise and practiced no sport. . . . They did not go to shops. Things were sent to them on approval, and people came to them for fittings."

Needless to say, this lifestyle did not survive the disastrous end of the war and the empire, and the whole extended family soon became what Bedford called "the new poor." Her parents, always uncomfortable together, split up and Lisa remarried a kind Italian man almost 15 years her junior, Nori. With the rise of Fascism in Italy, Nori,

BROOKE ALLEN writes frequently for *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Hudson Review* and other publications. She teaches the history of thought in the *Bennington Prison Education Initiative*.

Lisa and Billi in 1926 moved on to the South of France. Late one evening, having missed their train connection to Biarritz, the trio decided to spend the night in Sanary-sur-Mer, the little fishing village where they'd fetched up. They stayed on for much of the next 15 years.

Sanary-sur-Mer turned out to be one of the best places they could have found, with a brilliant and unconventional group of residents that included Aldous and Maria Huxley and, in the wake of the 1933 Reichstag fire, a stream of distinguished German refugees: Thomas and Heinrich Mann,



Sybille Bedford, at right, in Normandy with Allanah Harper, a lover turned friend and provider.

Lion Feuchtwanger, Ludwig Marcuse and Bertolt Brecht, among others. But throughout this period Lisa, always unstable, was descending into morphine addiction and alcoholism. It fell to Nori and Sybille to manage and care for her, a team effort her daughter later compared to that of two brothers "serving — in different ranks — in the same regiment." It was to prove a fruitless task.

With the passing of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 and a French parliamentary act restricting the movement of refugees,

Sybille — part Jewish on her mother's side — ran the risk of being deported. What was to be done? "We must get one of our bugger friends to marry Sybille," announced Maria Huxley. In the end one Walter Bedford, attendant at a gentlemen's club in London, was induced to marry her for the sum of 100 pounds, giving her a British name and passport. By this time she had determined to become an Englishwoman in substance as well as name: "The fact that I had any connections with this terrible country" — Germany — "became a cause of guilt, and for some time I tried

tile typewriter and sicken before the abnormal effort. What is this blight I have suffered from all my life that makes trying to write . . . such tearing, crushing, defeating agony?" It was far preferable to go to parties and dinners, and to cook spectacular meals for her friends. "Remember," one friend prodded her when she had shirked work for too long, "you are a writer, not other people's cook."

But Bedford's busy social and romantic life nearly always took priority. Hastings calls her existence a "sexual carousel" and has clearly had quite a job keeping track of the constantly shifting partnerships. Here is a typical sentence: "Returning to Normandy, Sybille was prepared for the tensions surrounding Allanah's affair with Eda; what she had not expected was Esther's sudden infatuation with Joan." Much of this material is not especially interesting. What is interesting is that Bedford so often had the upper hand in her own relationships. Her partners seemed to take it for granted that they should bear the brunt of the dirty work (housekeeping, gardening, bill paying, etc.), and they often supported her financially too.

Lots of people supported her financially. Indeed, she stands revealed in this biography as a world-class freeloader, with generous friends like Martha Gellhorn subsidizing her travels and writing periods and

'I wish I'd written more books and spent less time being in love.' Her fans can only agree.

offering her deluxe accommodation in beautiful spots like Provence, Rome, the Alps. She was, in short, a user — though her compensatory qualities were such that ex-lovers, even those who had been most thoroughly used, happily stayed in her orbit years after their liaisons had ended.

It is to be hoped that "Sybille Bedford," a largely sympathetic and very readable biography, will bring new readers to Bedford's oeuvre. Her two best books are "A Legacy" and the beguiling travel book on Mexico, "The Sudden View" (1953), later republished as "A Visit to Don Otavio." Her other novels, "A Favourite of the Gods," "A Compass Error" and "Jigsaw," are all, like her first, based on the events of her own life. She was an eccentric writer and not a perfect one; many readers are annoyed by her refusal (or inability?) to draw a line between biography and fiction. And her over-riding obsession with gastronomy and wine can get tedious and, as Jan Morris commented, "may drive readers of less urbane gourmandise all the more readily to the deep-freeze Ocean Pie." But her works are dense, exotic, rich with historical hindsight. In a life that spanned most of the 20th century, she lived that century in all its high drama and delivers it to the 21st in idiosyncratic, textured prose. □

Puppet Master

Revisiting the tale of Pinocchio from Geppetto's perspective.

By **BRUCE HANDY**

PINOCCHIO ENDURES; why, I'm not sure. Carlo Collodi's original 19th-century fairy tale is often funny, but with its rambunctious wooden hero who can't become "real" until he learns to behave, and who is further shamed by a phallic, lie-detecting nose, the story mixes morality and physiognomy in noxious, silly ways. Somehow, though, this mash-up of Mary Shelley and Cotton Mather has resonated for generations: Most everyone knows of Walt Dis-

THE SWALLOWED MAN

By **Edward Carey**

Illustrated. 180 pp. Riverhead Books. \$26.

ney's very freely adapted 1940 film, but there have also been movie, TV and stage Pinocchios from the Czech Republic, Russia, Canada, France and Japan — and so many Italian Pinocchios that Roberto Benigni has managed to star in two. Sequels on page and screen have taken the puppet to America, Africa, outer space and the year 3000, while yet more are reported in the works from Guillermo Del Toro and Robert Zemeckis. Francis Ford Coppola fought for years to make his own version. Miraculously, Jerry Lewis never got the bug.

Amid this glut, the novelist and playwright Edward Carey has had the inspired idea to cut the mario-nette loose and focus instead on Geppetto, the lonely old woodcutter who carves Pinocchio from an enchanted block of pine, giving him form and life — which is about as close as men get to immaculate conception, even in fantasy. Carey's odd duck of a book is less a proper novel than a riff on the entwined themes of fatherhood and creative spark. Faithful to Collodi in outline if not in spirit, "The Swallowed Man" takes place inside the giant fish (not a whale, as in Disney) that swallows Geppetto after he sets off to sea in search of his runaway wooden offspring.

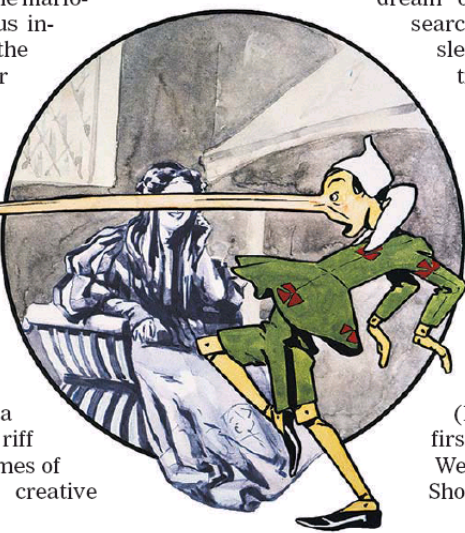
The text purports to be Geppetto's captivity journal, kept on the pages of a cap-

BRUCE HANDY is the author, most recently, of "Wild Things."

tain's log from the ship, also swallowed whole, in which Geppetto makes his dank home. He recounts the story of Pinocchio's creation and truancy; he records his own fish-confined madness and despair; he continues to make art, painting portraits of lost loves and fashioning filial surrogates — lifeless, alas — out of old hard tack and shards of crockery. The book originated in an exhibition Carey staged in 2018 at the Parco di Pinocchio in the Tuscan town of Collodi, and includes reproductions of Geppetto's drawings, paintings and sculptures. But they're mostly filigree. What keeps this book afloat, as it were, is the voice Carey gives to Geppetto. The author — whose previous books include "Little," a historical novel about Madame Tussaud, and a Dickensian-style trilogy for middle grade readers — is a master of the dusty yet droll tone. Recalling Pinocchio's first lie, Geppetto writes: "That nose — the nose of the thing, already prominent — it grew longer! O disobedient wood! O unfamiliar life! . . . I watched that nose stretch and increase until I thought it might touch the wall. It grew so much it started to imbalance the creature, to tip him over, nose-first. What an abhorrence. What a vile root. Such an unwelcome growing. It quite panicked me." If that prose doesn't delight you, this is not your book.

With distance, Geppetto comes to appreciate Pinocchio's peculiarities; his meditations on paternal love and the ache of separation can be moving ("My son, I dream of you all nights. I search for you in my dark sleeping"). At other times, the slender novel set entirely inside a big stomach feels like a stunt — entertaining, clever, but a stunt nonetheless. Halfway through, however, I absently flipped back to the dedication: "In loving memory of my father (1938-2010) and my first son (2006)." Well, that gutted me. Should it matter to a reader why an author writes something, what he's trying to work out on the page, or thinks he is? Academics can worry that

bone; Carey's dedication haunted me as I finished "The Swallowed Man," and enriched it. I've not suffered the kind of grief he implies, but I understand a father's infinite, obsessive love for a child — and the ways in which that love leaves you vulnerable. Like most parents, I know what it feels like to be consumed. □



Pinocchio and the Blue-Haired Fairy, illustrated by Attilio Mussino for the 1911 edition of Carlo Collodi's "The Adventures of Pinocchio."

Life Under Occupation

A novel depicts the deep wound of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



KATTY HUERTAS

By **AYELET TSABARI**

IN "CITY OF A THOUSAND GATES," Rebecca Sacks's ambitious first novel, the lives of a sprawling cast of characters intersect in the West Bank, where "ideology is unfolding in violent, consequential ways." There are Jewish settlers like Ori, a striking, blue-eyed soldier stationed at a checkpoint, as well as Palestinians: Mai is a student at Bethlehem University to whom Ori is a "beautiful monster," and the footballer Shibi has moved his

CITY OF A THOUSAND GATES

By **Rebecca Sacks**

384 pp. Harper/HarperCollins Publishers. \$27.99.

family from a ghetto in East Jerusalem to the Jewish part of town, because "the Jews have better water pressure."

The book opens with a set of heart-stopping scenes. Hamid, a classmate of Mai's, sneaks into Tel Aviv with an outdated permit. Outside the bus station he nearly bumps into Vera, a 20-something German reporter who is almost run over by a car belonging to Ido, an Israeli animator. Ori is stationed at a checkpoint where Hamid's comparative literature professor, Samar, is waiting to cross into Jerusalem to get a travel visa to attend a conference in Chicago. The malfunctioning body scanner that erroneously beeps as she walks through is a pointed illustration of the infuriating "senselessness" of Palestinian life under Israeli occupation. These various threads are all set against the recent murder of a 14-year-old Jewish girl, by a terrorist who climbed into her bedroom window in an Israeli settlement, followed by the vengeful beating of a 14-year-old Palestinian boy at a Jerusalem mall. Sacks describes these acts of violence in graphic — perhaps too graphic — detail.

The novel digs into the enduring wound of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and of

AYELET TSABARI is the author, most recently, of "The Art of Leaving."

fers an unflinching, unforgiving look into the harsh realities of the occupation and its impact on people's lives. Sacks works to dispel what Mai refers to as the "fantasy of a symmetrical conflict," but the author's description of the deep-seated hatred on both sides reads devastatingly true.

With her outsider's perspective and troubling family past, Vera provides some of the more interesting observations on the conflict. For instance, noting that Israelis use the term "Arab" instead of "Palestinian," she says: "Of all the wars waged here, the ones in language were the hardest to detect." But her motives are suspect. When she somehow manages to be the only journalist to livestream a secret operation, "she needs everyone to know that she is here. That she is at the center. She needs them to know that this is her story." Vera wishes to narrate "this place," believing her own voice is "a kind of soundtrack that brings poignancy, maybe even beauty, to the most divisive conflict in the whole world."

Sacks, an American who lived in Israel for a couple of years, demonstrates a knowledge of the region, but her characters' actions aren't always persuasive, and her portrayals of Mizrahi Jews in particular lack depth and authenticity. But perhaps Sacks acknowledges her own limited authority in Vera's: Samar, one of the strongest characters in the novel, is skeptical of the way the German journalist presents herself "as a translator of these cries into language," and refuses to "peddle out her insights" lest she grant Vera's work "the meaning . . . that this white woman so craved."

The tension of the opening scene fails to culminate in a satisfying climax, and the book is peppered with well-built cliffhangers that remain unresolved. We never find out who's pounding on Samar's door in the night, or what happens to a child who disappears at a supermarket.

Though these narrative uncertainties evoke the unsettling pervasiveness of menace underpinning everyday life in the region, the effect is often frustrating. But in a novel that resists offering a false sense of hope in the face of conflict, the open ends seem only fitting. □

Why She Writes

Twelve newly collected essays are a reminder of Joan Didion's prescience.

By DURGA CHEW-BOSE

THERE IS NO MISTAKING, at the mention of plastic hydrangeas, that one is reading Joan Didion. Much like the words "MIRACLES STILL HAPPEN" written in pink icing on a Gamblers Anonymous anniversary cake, or the paper napkins at the Hearst Castle, fake flowers are one of many visual, allegorical asterisks that comprise the risible terms of this veteran writer's American *mise-en-scène*.

In five decades' worth of essays, reportage and criticism, Didion has documented the charade implicit in how things are, in a

LET ME TELL YOU WHAT I MEAN

By Joan Didion

149 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$23.

first-person, observational style that is not sacrosanct but common-sensical. Seeing as a way of extrapolating hypocrisy, disingenuousness and doubt, she'll notice the hydrangeas are plastic and mention it once, in passing, sorting the scene. Her gaze, like a sentry on the page, permanently trained on what is being disguised.

The 12 previously published essays collected (mostly) for the first time in "Let Me Tell You What I Mean" were written between the late 1960s and the year 2000. They are gathered coolly, unevenly, with an easygoing generalness, like a Didion digest. Or, since nearly every piece in the collection contains some mention of flowers, like a Didion bouquet. After all, she is her own kind of arranger — of words, of story — whose intuition for narrative arc is matched by her intuition for syntax.

Revisiting her work now provides a familiar joy, as well as a reminder of her prescience. Didion has a facility with bad omens, particularly when it comes to Ronald Reagan's tenure as the governor of California. Telling Didion that "having a pretty place to work is important to a man," Nancy Reagan fills an apothecary jar with hard candies for his desk, carpets the floors of the State Capitol "in a pleasing shade of green," Didion writes. (What green carpet, Didion's deadpan delivery invites us to ask, has ever been "pleasing"?) Didion's understated tone registers the nuances obscured by the quotidian: the stiff neutrality between mother and son ("The Skipper's arrival is, I have been told, the pivotal point of Nancy Reagan's day"), Nancy's preference for little choreographies.

The essays in "Let Me Tell You What I Mean" are at once funny and touching, roving and no-nonsense. They are about humiliation and about notions of rightness. About mythmaking, fiction writing, her "failed" intellectualism and the syntactic

DURGA CHEW-BOSE is the author of *Too Much and Not in the Mood*.

insides of Hemingway's craft. She first published the essay on Martha Stewart — on her core values and her inventory of scalloped tulle — in *The New Yorker* in 2000, four years before Stewart was sentenced to prison for insider trading.

To Didion's longtime readers, the title may feel peculiar; her essays so rarely waste room on the page by pausing to instruct, or explain so crudely. As she puts it in her 1976 essay "Why I Write": "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. . . . What is going on in these pictures in my mind?" Her "I's" are less authoritative than exploratory, arranged for rhythm and for that vaguely keyed-up sensation she calls "the shimmer." Hers is the "I" of an onlooker, migratory, ruled by the specific. She writes from the selva edge, prose that does not unravel: "My attention was always on the periphery, on what I could see and taste and touch." Her memory of studying "Paradise Lost" on the commute between Sacramento and Berkeley, where she was an undergraduate, is rerouted by another, more sensory recollection: "I can no longer tell you whether Milton put the sun or the Earth at the center of his universe . . . a topic about which I wrote 10,000 words that summer, but I can still recall the exact rancidity of the butter in the City of San Francisco's dining car." The literary subject might have been "the central question of at least one century," but for Didion, it's the sour taste that takes form years later. The sour train butter is more epic.

The book's six opening pieces are taken from the "Points West" column she shared with her husband, John Gregory Dunne, in *The Saturday Evening Post* in the '60s. All six were written in 1968, the same year she published her first nonfiction collection, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem"; the same year the photographer Julian Wasser captured the black-and-white portrait of Didion smoking in front of her Corvette Stingray in Hollywood. In a 2014 interview with *Vogue* — where Didion worked for several years in the '50s and '60s — she noted that the Stingray was Daytona yellow. "A yellow so bright," she said, "you could never mistake it for anything other than Daytona yellow." The yellow is as certain to her as is her early work to us. You could never mistake it for anything other than Didion.

In "A Trip to Xanadu," Didion recounts a

visit to the fabled San Simeon castle: "the phantasmagoric barony that William Randolph Hearst made for himself on the sun-burned hills above the San Luis Obispo County coast." She'd looked up at it from the highway countless times as child. When she finally saw it up close, as an adult, with her niece from Connecticut, she writes, "it was what I expected, and it was not." From the outset Didion's nonfiction



Joan Didion in 2007.

has shown no obligation to the whopping epiphanic. Realizations occur, but she relates them without splendor, as if she's extracting a tincture. Hearst's mansion is "a sand castle, an implausibility," she writes. "A pleasure dome decreed by a man who

Her gaze is like a sentry on the page, permanently trained on what is being disguised.

insisted, out of the one dark fear we all know about, that all the surfaces be gay and brilliant and playful." For Didion, reality arrives with its own controlled disenchantments; her method of itemizing, in this case, the castle's great pools and carillon bells, the zebras and the bougainvillea, is a matter of liaising with the past.

As Hilton Als notes in his elegant and panoramic foreword, Didion is fifth-generation Californian; the language she speaks is, like every writer's, regional. For her this means having a taste for the extreme and whatever strangeness escorts sunshine; the view from a highway and the perspective gained from passing — not through, but alongside. In that same piece about San Simeon, Didion, whose writing is always on some level a deliberation on writing itself, ends on a theory that so many writers wrestle with: "Make a place available to the eyes, and in certain ways it is no longer available to the imagination."

DIDION TURNED 86 in December. Many of these dispatches, organized chronologically, were written when she was in her 30s and 40s. A half-century after her last "Points West" column, Didion's questions remain acute as ever. Reading newly arranged Didion, which is actually old Didion, feels like reaching that dip in a swimming pool where the shallow end suddenly becomes the deep end. The bottom drops out, and you are forced to kick a little, to tread. This is why we return to her work again and again.

But Didion cares less for timelessness than for the evanescence of language, mistrusting pink icing or anything else that might launder truth. Undergirding the entire collection is a regard for ephemerality. Of glory, and of the era when fashion photographers called their spaces "the studio." Of fairy tales and failed attempts at quietude, of a child's memory soup of imagination. Contrary to what

this book's title might suggest, Didion deals not in the definite. Reading her letter of rejection from Stanford, Didion recalls "trying to interpret the words in some less final way." Perhaps it's the same impulse that's behind the ellipses at the end of so many of her essays; her writing rarely winds up, but wanes with unnerving preoccupation. The Didion exit — on full display in this collection — reveals the writer's discreet contempt for those who cheer on the encore. She rarely troubles herself with the loudest person in the room, listening rather for stories on a Greyhound bus or a flight to Honolulu, or in temporary setups with folding chairs and people clinging to their last hope. Didion's pen is like a periscope onto the creative mind — and, as this collection demonstrates, it always has been. These essays offer a direct line to what's in the offing. □

Is it possible to portray the drama and heat of real-life activism in the panels of a comic book?

“WRITING THIS BOOK broke my heart,” David F. Walker admits in the afterword to his ambitious and informative graphic history **THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY** (Ten Speed, 183 pp., \$19.99), crisply illustrated by Marcus Kwame Anderson. Founded in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was the most famous exponent of the Black Power movement. Its Ten Point Program (reproduced in full in these pages) was a forceful manifesto demanding “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace” for the Black community. In the immediate wake of the horrific killings of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, Walker notes that “every single concern” the Panthers addressed — from police brutality to reparations — “is still relevant.”

Newton and Seale were both born in the South, moving with their families to California as children in the mid-40s. They met in 1962 at Merritt College in Oakland, and began strategizing about revolutionary action to address racial injustice — reading Mao and Marx, refining the philosophies of previous civil rights activists. In Walker and Anderson’s account, Newton and Seale are galvanized to start the Black Panther Party by a welter of events, including the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X and the police shooting of a Black teenager in San Francisco the following year. Newton insists on developing a unique structure for the organization, though they are its two sole members. In one of the book’s few moments of levity, they arbitrarily decide that Seale will be the chairman and Newton will be minister of defense.

The Black Panthers disbanded in 1982. But they have lived on in the popular imagination because of their militant stance toward injustice — as in the iconic image of a seated Newton clutching a rifle and spear, which decorates the cover. Walker strives for a comprehensive view, dedicating his book to the party’s “rank and file” involved in community work. The result is a sprawling overview of the group’s brisk rise and protracted fall, punctuated by gripping confrontations with the powers that be.

Fifteen biographical sketches appear throughout, allowing Walker to memorialize some less remembered personalities, such as Emory Douglas (whose



From “The Black Panther Party.”

artwork in the “Black Panther” newsletter helped define the party) and Lil’ Bobby Hutton, who at 16 was the first to join Newton and Seale’s group. (They had to ask his parents for permission; he was promptly named treasurer.)

Walker dramatizes key scenes, such as an early dust-up between an Oakland police officer and a car packed with four gun-toting Panthers. When the officer asks for Newton’s phone number, he tersely answers, “Five,” referring to the Fifth Amendment. When firearms are discovered in the car, the tension ratchets up. A stickler for gun laws, Newton cites his constitutional right to bear arms, explaining that his piece is unloaded “because it is illegal to carry a loaded rifle in a car”; stepping out of the vehicle, he loads it. “Not a single shot was fired, and no one was injured,” Walker writes. “But war had been declared.”

When the text boxes start piling up, though, the tone can dry out: “Having made a name for themselves in Oakland, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was asked by Eldridge Cleaver and the RAM-affiliated Black Panther Party of Northern California to help provide security for Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X.” Fortunately, as an artist Anderson is just as good at rendering static shots as he is at depicting action, and his gift for warm, uncluttered portraiture lionizes familiar figures. In an early sequence, he depicts 31 slain civil rights

activists, their names largely lost to us. Most of them are smiling, yet all are shaded, heartbreakingly, in a ghostly blue. Though each panel is just 1.5 inches by 2.25 inches, the depth of emotion could fill an entire page.

A mixture of bravery and dread hangs over much of the book. For all the party’s talk of guns, they are only shown being discharged toward the end. Fred Hampton, who had joined the Chicago branch of the Panthers at the end of 1968, found himself the national spokesman the following year, fixing him on the F.B.I.’s radar. Walker and Anderson depict his murder by plainclothes policemen without showing any gore. Their machine guns fire 31 times across 19 orderly, crimson-tinged panels, the sound of each shot (“BLAM”) obscuring the terrified dialogue of the eight other Panthers in the house at the time. It’s a turning point in the group’s history, chillingly rendered.

THE ONLY SCENE of political resistance in Jim Terry’s memoir, **COME HOME, INDI** (Street Noise, 234 pp., \$16.99), appears at the end, as the cartoonist travels with his sister and a friend to join the Standing Rock protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline. The son of a Native (Ho-Chunk) mother and an Irish-American jazz musician father, who divorced when he was young, Terry grew up in the Midwest, bouncing between two worlds. His devotion to Standing Rock is sincere, but he doesn’t have the instant moment of connection that he was hoping for. He worries that it isn’t his place — that he’ll somehow be seen as an impostor.

“Come Home, Indio” is a dense, at times frenzied book, the panels teeming

with text. The words themselves seem to vibrate with anguish, regularly fluctuating in size and boldness. An artist who normally works on more fantastical titles (“The Crow”), he plunges into his own life story with a gothic zeal and an arsenal of styles. Sometimes the panels fall away, and a single image, such as a silhouette of his musician father playing bass, will fill the page, evocative of Craig Thompson’s losing-my-religion coming-of-age memoir, “Blankets.”

As a boy, Terry vows to avoid the addiction to alcohol that has plagued the lives of both his parents. But one summer night at the Dells, the Native community where his mother lives, he succumbs — partly because drinking would help him belong. His habit subsides, but returns in college and gets dangerous when he moves to Chicago; one page shows bottles rising from the bottom edge to the same height as the surrounding skyscrapers. Though describing alcoholism risks monotony, Terry reveals how his problem is not just familial but cultural. In his early drinking days he feels shame seeing “haunted men . . . with warrior spirits gone twisted with impotent rage and soured by booze.” Later, curled up in the throes of withdrawal, he hallucinates Sitting Bull scolding him: “I fought my ass off so you could be just one more drunk Indian? Come on.”

His fractured identity resolves beautifully by the end. Over 20-odd pages, Terry recounts his spiritual journey at Standing Rock, rendered sometimes just as white words over black space — a tour de force of comics that burns off the remnants of his self-loathing to locate a core of strength. □

I'D TAKEN MANY BOOKS FROM DON'S LIBRARY AND THEY TRAVELLED WITH ME FROM PLACE TO PLACE. I'D EYEBALLED DEE BROWN'S "BURY MY HEART AT WOUNDED KNEE" FOR YEARS AND DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO GIVE IT A GO. IT UTTERLY DESTROYED ME.



From “Come Home, Indio.”

Her Secret Selves

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

But as the author-to-be went about her housework, “long, mysterious words began to crawl across my soul like a protective membrane. . . . When these light waves of words streamed through me, I knew that my mother couldn’t do anything else to me because she had stopped being important to me. My mother knew it, too, and her eyes would fill with cold hostility.” Ditlevsen’s memoirs, now published in a single volume titled “The Copenhagen Trilogy,” originally appeared in Danish as separate books: “Childhood” and “Youth” in 1967; the astonishing third, “Dependency,” in 1971. Read together, they form a particular kind of masterpiece, one that helps fill a particular kind of void. The trilogy arrives like something found deep in an ancestor’s bureau drawer, a secret stashed away amid the socks and sachets and photos of dead lovers. The surprise isn’t just its ink-damp immediacy and vitality — the chapters have the quality of just-written diary entries, fluidly translated by Tiina Nunnally and Michael Favala Goldman — but that it exists at all. It’s a bit like discovering that Lila and Lenú, the fictional heroines of Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan quartet, were real. Ditlevsen’s Istedgade Street is every bit as pungent (and perilous) as Ferrante’s *stradone*.

Why, exactly, it has taken so long for Ditlevsen to come to the wider attention of Anglophone readers is a question that summons a certain *déjà vu*. We ask it whenever singular voices are “discovered,” such as the Brazilian modernist Clarice Lispector, or the brilliant Hungarian novelist Magda Szabo, or the prolific American short story author Lucia Berlin. The very framing of the question — “discovered” by whom? — points to the degree of whim and bias at play when the literary establishment considers which writers to translate, whom to grant cultural authority and a place in the collective consciousness.

One thinks also of Edna O’Brien, or Jean Rhys, women who craved a different scale of existence than what the history of the world had countenanced, never mind the stakes for gifted, sensitive girls with no money. Like O’Brien and Rhys, Ditlevsen wanted love, children, art, a home — “to be the painting and the painter,” as the portraitist Alice Neel put it — and paid a price in radical isolation, though she was rarely alone, her doomed vivacity a siren song for certain men. She died by her own hand at 58, and fell out of favor as a “popular” writer, that descriptor employed to dispatch successful women from critical history. But a younger generation of writers, including Dorthe Nors, who has described

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Ditlevsen as “the Billie Holiday of poetry” for the accessibility of her complexity, has found in her the kind of literary foremother she might have longed for herself — a woman who traveled to the edges of all the rocky outcroppings and reported back with a rueful honesty and a bracing lack of vanity.

It seems right, then, that Ditlevsen’s own mother figures so prominently early in these memoirs, her love for her daughter perceptible, if barely, through the twisted scrim of her own thwartedness. Young Tove can already read and write on her first day of school, and the principal rebukes her mother for teaching her too

cruel, gray facts. At first, she plays this for bruising comedy, recounting a stint as a nanny to a small boy who tells her, “You have to do everything I say or else I’ll shoot you.” When she finally earns enough money to rent that essential room of her own in which to write, it is in a flophouse run by a blowsy Nazi who blasts Hitler’s speeches on the radio but complains about the clatter of Ditlevsen’s typewriter.

By her early 20s, Ditlevsen has married her first editor, a stout, impotent man three decades her senior who prints her work in his small literary journal, a spin on the “stable skilled worker” her mother imagined as her destiny. (Ditlevsen publishes

found myself having to pause, finger in book, and take a breath — that an episode involving Evelyn Waugh, whom she charms at a literary party before being dragged off humiliatingly by her lunatic husband, has an almost leavening effect.

In the annihilated aftermath of her third divorce, the words return, and Ditlevsen publishes, in 1968, her great novel, “The Faces.” Republished in Britain this year, it captures the dissociated mental state of a children’s author, Lise, who hallucinates voices and faces, the latter — disembodied, floating, often those of children — inspiring the book’s singular prose. “Some of them, especially girls, had had to live out their mother’s childhood while their own lay hidden in a secret drawer,” Lise explains. “Their voices would break out of them like pus from a sore, and the sound would frighten them, just like when they discovered that someone had been reading their diary, even though it was locked up among the junk and old toys from the time they had worn the discarded face of a 4-year-old. That face would stare up at them from among the tops and crippled dolls with innocent, astonished glass eyes.”

As the paranoid Lise grows convinced that her husband is plotting to induce her to commit suicide, the voices ratchet up, accusing her of various offenses: of being an inattentive wife, an inconstant mother, a solipsistic writer. “You’ve never seen anything but yourself in the whole world,” she envisions her beloved daughter, Hanne, admonishing her. That madness can be more incisive than the rational is the novel’s resonant irony, one that still lands. So, of course, does the crime of female subjectivity, of believing oneself a worthy literary subject, capacious enough to contain multitudes.

A half-century later, all of it — her extraordinary clarity and imperfect femininity, her unstinting account of the struggle to reconcile art and life — still lands. The construct of memoir (and its stylish young cousin, autofiction) involves the organizing filter of retrospection, lending the impression that life is a continuous narrative reel of action and consequence, of meanings to be universalized. Ditlevsen’s refusal to present her failings as steps on the path to some mythical plane of self-awareness reminds me of how potent the form can be when stripped of that pretense. Only at the conclusion of her memoirs, where we find her as she was when she wrote them — clinging to scraps of herself, a stranger to her children, gingerly returning to the page, the hunger lingering in her veins — did I really understand what occasioned these rare and indelible texts: the desire to be rid, finally, of her shame. Ditlevsen’s voice, diffident and funny, dead-on about her own mistakes, is a welcome addition to that canon of women who showed us their secret faces so that we might wear our own. □



Tove Ditlevsen

early. “My mother moves a little bit away from me and says faintly, ‘She learned it by herself, it’s not our fault,’” Ditlevsen writes. “I look up at her and understand many things at once. She is smaller than other adult women, younger than other mothers, and there’s a world outside my street that she fears. And whenever we both fear it together, she will stab me in the back.” Her mother’s hands, she notes with distaste, smell of dish soap.

Ditlevsen’s faceted truths tend to cut in more than one way — a jab in the heart, a slash to the throat. The confirmation party her mother throws to usher her, at 14, into the working ranks is another set piece of tenderly wrapped horror. The trap of filial piety isn’t lost on Ditlevsen, but escaping a fate of low expectations and lower-paying jobs is never as simple as recognizing their

‘Long, mysterious words began to crawl across my soul like a protective membrane.’

her first book of poetry, “Girl Soul,” in 1939, her truth-telling landing her a devoted readership.) But nothing in her memoirs’ first two volumes quite prepares you for what’s to come. Her third marriage, to a sociopathic doctor who injects her regularly with Demerol — “the name sounds like birdsong” — nearly kills her. It does kill, for years, her urge to write, the protective membrane of words that has accompanied her since childhood dissolving into chemical oblivion. So unsparingly abject is her rendering of addiction — I frequently

Crude Awakening

This memoir follows a worker in the last days of the North Dakota oil boom.

By GARY SERNOVITZ

WHO IS “THE GOOD HAND,” Michael Patrick F. Smith’s memoir about working in the North Dakota oil fields, for? Those seeking points to make across our political divides will not find a condemnation of the oil busi-

THE GOOD HAND
A Memoir of Work,
Brotherhood, and Transformation
in an American Boomtown
By Michael Patrick F. Smith
458 pp. Viking. \$29.

ness; a celebration of the oil business; an explanation of how fracking works; an expose of reckless oil-field behavior; a sociological analysis of Smith’s often rough, always Republican co-workers; or “Hillbilly Elegy” nostalgia for a rollicking, dip-spitting way of life. Before his nine-month stint

GARY SERNOVITZ is the author of two novels and “The Green and the Black: The Complete Story of the Shale Revolution, the Fight Over Fracking, and the Future of Energy.”

as a “swamper,” assisting in the rigging up and down of drilling and auxiliary equipment at a well site, Smith was an actor, musician and playwright, with Brooklyn liberal politics to match.

Readers who come to “The Good Hand” previously uninterested in moving equipment — which is, well, everyone — will also find a memoir padded in front, bumpy in Smith’s self-portrayal as both a quiet watcher and an “adrenaline freak” and short of the redemptive transformation sold by the book’s subtitle. Smith’s life was more off the rails after he returned from North Dakota.

This, in other words, might be a book that pleases no one.

And yet, after Smith finally starts working in the oil field, in June 2013, the memoir tightens its grip with its depictions of action and men. Smith brings an alchemic talent to describing physical labor, which comes with numb fingers, swinging cranes, precarious footing, damp boots, hooks, chains and extreme cold. He not only writes work scenes with precision

but also treats precision itself with reverence: Understanding and doing the job precisely allowed him to triumph over his own softness, ignorance and fear. A negative-38-degree day was “one of the best days of my life,” he writes, and it also provides the best chapter in the book.

With a playwright’s talent for dialogue, storytelling in miniature and staying out of the way, Smith writes dozens of scenes of men moving, joking and endlessly talking — there are few stoics here, or women — in pickups, sublets, job sites and bars. “I’m a good listener, and I’m not quick to judge,” he writes of spending time with the veteran professionals, local residents and drifters in

the last days of the Bakken oil boom. Smith never excuses what he heard and saw: homophobia, misogyny, racism and not-too-regretful boasting of past crimes. But he doesn’t define the men by that either. He focuses throughout on actions, of his oil-field “brothers” like Huck, a charismatic giant with a fantastic knack for trouble,



Michael Patrick F. Smith

and of his real family, marked by bad luck and a bad father. By doing so, he refuses to spoon-feed us judgment; his writing keeps people alive in their histories, talents, humor and mistakes.

THERE IS A unifying principle in Smith’s depictions: the good hand, from oil-field slang for a worker. “A good hand,” Smith writes, “shows up early. He is present. He listens. A good hand carries the heaviest load every time, takes on the dirtiest, most difficult task and doesn’t complain. A good hand makes the hands around him better.”

“No one is a good hand all the time,” Smith qualifies. And that is the essence of his book. It does not recount catharsis or much transformation. It brings instead perspective, on how people, including Smith, can sometimes rise above their worst selves through unglamorous, demanding, difficult work. That perspective is a morality, and a relief in a world quick to dismiss, quick to divide and quick to believe that American work is now only about collecting data and selling knowledge. And so maybe by writing a book that pleases no one, Smith wrote a book that should be read. □

Safe Words

A new fiction anthology explores what kink, as a practice, can unleash.

By JAZMINE HUGHES

A TWEET THAT’S haunted me (and there are many) is one that reads, “Most of sex is committing to the bit.” Good sex, yes, is full of tacit and explicit agreements, the central one being sex itself — the veil that can be drawn over partners, the temporary

KINK
Stories
Edited by R.O. Kwon and Garth Greenwell
271 pp. Simon & Schuster. Paper, \$17.

worlds built together, the setting of the stage.

I thought of that tweet often while reading “Kink,” a new anthology of short, sexual fiction compiled by R. O. Kwon, the author of “The Incendiaries,” and Garth Greenwell, the author of “Cleanness.”

“Kink” is not quite erotica. Ostensibly, it’s more about the transformative nature of kink as a practice, and the different modalities — kink as anticipation, as commu-

nication, as processing, as a mind-eraser, as an anchor, as a code, as freedom — it can unleash. The collection contains a diverse selection of writing (races, ethnicities, gender identities and sexualities of all types are represented) but, strangely, its portrait of kink itself is relatively uniform (nearly all the stories take kink to mean B.D.S.M.). As Kwon and Greenwell write in the introduction, the book serves to “recognize how the questions raised in intimate, kinky encounters — questions of power, agency, identity — can help us to interrogate and begin to rescript the larger cultural narratives that surround us.”

Thus begins our erotic education.

At times reading “Kink” felt like having a mirror turned on me. In my reading, I kept thinking: “What is kink, anyway? Do I participate?” I put down the book, texted friends, revisited memories. Ultimately, this seems to be the collection’s point: to prompt a revisitation of the transgressive, a consideration, or insertion, of the self.

Alexander Chee, in a story about a successful Friendster date, writes movingly about kink as a measure of progress, the first step toward yourself. At one point in the story, the protagonist thinks of his ex-boyfriend, who had asked to be tied up: “He wanted me to be someone dirtier and

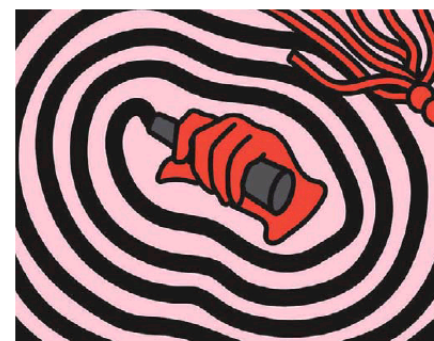
more aggressive than I was then. He wanted me to be the person I felt myself becoming now.” The now is with a new man, revisiting kink, fuller and readier than before.

Vanessa Clark’s story about sex in a “drag transsexual nightclub” is at the same time deeply romantic and deliciously filthy, prompting my favorite line in the anthology, a description that, days later, I can still feel on my tongue.

And in the last story, called “Emotional Technologies,” Chris Kraus makes the case for the inherent performance of kink, writing about the “experimental theater” within sadomasochism. “In a disembodied floating space, S/m offers little pockets of theatricality and connection. So long as they are playing, two people are totally accountable and listening to each other.”

Some stories, like handcuffs, are sturdier than others. Many are flimsy and ineffective, relying too much on an obvious exchange of power, or keeping the concept of kink on too short a leash. Other people’s dreams are rarely interesting to hear; the same holds true for listening to other people’s kinks, at least in this collection.

Still, stories by Roxane Gay and Brandon Taylor each stayed with me after reading: Gay elegantly writes about the depths



LYDIA ORTIZ

— the emotional plunge — of kink; Taylor wittily moves through its complications.

Garth Greenwell wrote the only story, for all my sexual aptitude, that made me squawk out loud. His story, a sprawling, moving, upsetting, confusing, exciting tale of submission, domination and resolution, portrays the hunger that we all must feed — through kink, through sex, through whatever intimacy works for us. “Who knows why we take pleasure in such things,” Greenwell writes, about a certain sex act, but also about sex — kink — intimacy — itself. “It’s best not to look into it too closely.” □

Show and Tell

Overcoming shyness and isolation via notes, pictures and a pine cone.

By SARAH HARRISON SMITH

WHO IS THE “Best Friend in the Whole World”? Could it be a pine cone? Seen in Sandra Salsbury’s velvet-hued watercolors, these seed pods have character. Some are spiky. Some look as if they’re doing the twist, or wearing tall, thatched hats. But friendship with a pine cone seems like . . . a one-way kind of thing.

Roland doesn’t notice. “A quiet life of drawing, and music, and drinking tea” has left this well-dressed young rabbit desperate for company. Sometimes he walks in the woods “hoping, just maybe,” to find a friend. Compared with the sequoia-like trees that tower over him, Roland is very

BEST FRIEND IN THE WHOLE WORLD

By Sandra Salsbury

40 pp. Peachtree. \$17.99.

(Ages 4 to 8)

SHY WILLOW

By Cat Min

48 pp. Levine Querido. \$15.99.

(Ages 4 to 7)

THE BOY WHO LOVED EVERYONE

By Jane Porter

Illustrated by Maisie Paradise Shearring

32 pp. Candlewick. \$16.99.

(Ages 3 to 7)

FROM ARCHIE TO ZACK

By Vincent X. Kirsch

40 pp. Abrams Books for Young Readers.

\$17.99.

(Ages 4 to 8)

small, and utterly alone. Hence the pine cone. Roland gives it a name and keeps it with him while he draws more drawings, makes more music and drinks more tea.

One day, Roland finds handwritten notes stuck to the trees near his home. Someone has lost a beloved pine cone — a pine cone that looks suspiciously like Roland’s. What to do? If Archie returns the missing pine cone, he’ll lose his only friend.

Once Roland imagines how lonely the author of the notes must feel, he acts with compassion — and in doing so, makes a new friend. Who is the “Best Friend in the Whole World”? After reading this sweet, sensitive tale, children can decide for themselves.

When we first see “Shy Willow,” the title character of Cat Min’s lushly illustrated picture book, her rabbit ears are sticking

SARAH HARRISON SMITH, a former editor at *The Times*, teaches writing at Johns Hopkins University.

straight up through the letter slot of an abandoned mailbox. She’s clearly on the alert.

Glimpses of the sketches she’s taped up inside her mailbox home hint at her state of mind. Rather than face the perils of the outdoors (snakes, cars, soccer balls and children among them), Willow would prefer to stay in and draw.

Min illustrates this portrait of the artist as a young rabbit with layered mixed-media paintings that incorporate colored pencil and watercolor. Her palette, ranging from the deepest sea-blue to bright oranges, pinks and violets, evokes a richly mysterious night; a night in which dreams could come true.

But it’s the written word that gets the action going. Although Willow’s mailbox is out of service, a letter slips through the slot. In it, a little boy named Theo begs the moon to shine into his mother’s window on her birthday.

Willow imagines how disappointed Theo and his mother will be — “waiting and staring at a dark, empty sky” — if the moon doesn’t appear. Can that compassion galvanize Willow to deliver Theo’s letter to the moon? As with Roland, Shy Willow’s brave, generous actions help her find the community she needs.

When it comes to making friends, words are powerful. Can they ever get in the way? In “The Boy Who Loved Everyone,” Dimitri spends his first morning at preschool telling every living creature he meets — right down to the classroom guinea pig — that he loves them.

Jane Porter (“This Rabbit, That Rabbit,” “King Otter”) writes most of this story in dialogue, letting readers hear the poignant disconnection between Dimitri’s kind words and the awkward silences he receives in return.

It’s no wonder Dimitri is reluctant to return to school the next day. On the walk there, his mother reassures him: When you say you love someone, they feel it, “even if they don’t say it back or show it.” She points out other ways people show their love.

When Dimitri arrives, something is different. Now the other children invite him to



From “Shy Willow.”



From “Best Friend in the Whole World.”

play, and he gets “a warm feeling.” Did his love for them spark the change, or was it the other kids’ sympathy that made them welcome him? Either way, or both, it’s a happy ending. Dimitri can enjoy school for all it offers.



From “The Boy Who Loved Everyone.”

In Maisie Paradise Shearring’s illustrations, the school is a bright, cheerful place, with students and staff of all skin tones, wearing a wild array of patterns and costumes. Lap readers will enjoy the busy background scenes, showing children tugging on rain boots, playing dress up and, yes, washing their hands.

The two friends in Vincent X. Kirsch’s “From Archie to Zack” do everything together, from riding bikes to flying rainbow kites. Though all the kids at their elementary school know this pair love each other, “Archie couldn’t say it. Zack couldn’t say it. But they wanted to.”

Archie expresses his love in letters, but squirrels them away on the school grounds

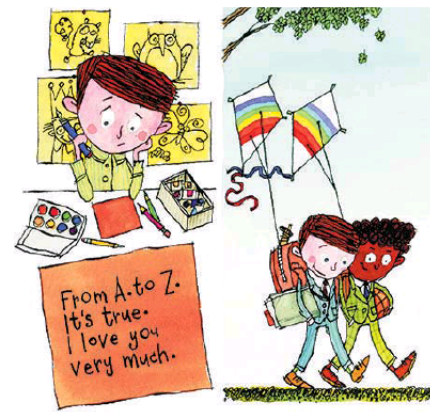
instead of sending them. When his classmates find the notes, they make sure they get to Zack.

Zack, in the meantime, has been working on his own note to Archie.

Kirsch’s long list of accomplishments includes another fabulous book about friendship, “Freddie and Gingersnap,” and illustrations for *The New York Times*. Though his pen line is reminiscent of Ronald Searle’s satiric drawing for the midcentury *Molesworth* series, Kirsch’s candy-bright colors and generous sensibility are far from old school.

Other picture books depict the deep love of one child for another, but things can get complicated. In Thomas Scotto and Olivier Tallec’s poetic 2018 “Jerome by Heart,” Raphael’s parents scowl at his feelings for Jerome. Kirsch’s Archie and Zack bask in the smiles of everyone they encounter. What an enlightened, encouraging view of friendship.

You’d want that, wouldn’t you, even if you had to start with a pine cone? □



From “From Archie to Zack.”

Best Sellers

The New York Times

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

COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF JANUARY 24-30

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		THE RUSSIAN , by James Patterson and James O. Born. (Little, Brown) The 13th book in the Michael Bennett series. An assassin killing a number of women might disrupt the detective's wedding plans.	1	1		JUST AS I AM , by Cicely Tyson with Michelle Burford. (HarperCollins) The late iconic actress describes how she worked to change perceptions of Black women through her career choices.	1
2	1	THE DUKE AND I , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series "Bridgerton."	5	2	1	A PROMISED LAND , by Barack Obama. (Crown) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barack Obama offers personal reflections on his formative years and pivotal moments through his first term.	11
3	12	THE VISCOUNT WHO LOVED ME , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The second book in the Bridgerton series.	5	3	2	CASTE , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	26
4	3	THE VANISHING HALF , by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge as one returns and the other takes on a different racial identity but their fates intertwine.	35	4	3	GREENLIGHTS , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	15
5	4	THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY , by Matt Haig. (Viking) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.	9	5	4	UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	47
6	5	THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE , by V.E. Schwab. (Tor/Forge) A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie LaRue has across centuries.	12	6		EXTRATERRESTRIAL , by Avi Loeb. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) The Harvard science professor shares his theory that a piece of advanced technology created by a distant alien civilization recently visited our solar system.	1
7		AN OFFER FROM A GENTLEMAN , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The third book in the Bridgerton series.	1	7		LET ME TELL YOU WHAT I MEAN , by Joan Didion. (Knopf) A collection of 12 pieces written between 1968 and 2000.	1
8	6	THE PUSH , by Ashley Audrain. (Pamela Dorman) A devastating event forces a mother who questions her child's behavior and her own sanity to confront the truth.	2	8		THE DEVIL YOU KNOW , by Charles M. Blow. (Harper) The New York Times Op-Ed columnist gives a call to action for Black people to achieve equality on their own terms.	1
9		ROMANCING MISTER BRIDGERTON , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The fourth book in the Bridgerton series.	4	9	7	THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	23
10	10	FIREFLY LANE , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's Griffin) A friendship between two women in the Pacific Northwest endures for more than three decades.	2	10	6	BECOMING , by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady describes how she balanced work, family and her husband's political ascent.	96

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

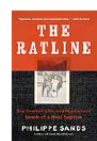
Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



MY YEAR ABROAD, by Chang-rae Lee. (Riverhead, \$28.) Part study of suburbia, part globe-trotting adventure, Lee's latest novel follows a young man from a transformative trip in Asia to a low-key life in a New Jersey town. Reflective, precise writing and a steady churn of pleasures and perils make for a winning combination.



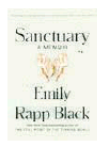
EXTRATERRESTRIAL: The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth, by Avi Loeb. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$27.) You may not buy Loeb's argument that the cigar-shaped object that streaked through our solar system in 2017 was alien technology. But his search for intelligent life, couched in a moving account of his path to the top of Harvard's astronomy department, is fascinating and persuasive.



THE RATLINE: The Exalted Life and Mysterious Death of a Nazi Fugitive, by Philippe Sands. (Knopf, \$30.) Using a trove of archival and personal documents, Sands tells the gripping story of a Nazi mass murderer responsible for the deaths of thousands who managed to elude his pursuers until his death in Rome in 1949.



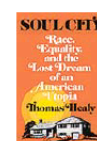
LET THE LORD SORT THEM: The Rise and Fall of the Death Penalty, by Maurice Chammah. (Crown, \$28.) The number of inmates on death row has been declining for years, and Chammah's thoroughly reported, essential history, which includes interviews with inmates, wardens, activists, prosecutors and politicians, delivers a surprising account of how and why the death penalty is dying.



SANCTUARY: A Memoir, by Emily Rapp Black. (Random House, \$27.) In her third memoir, Emily Rapp Black writes of tentatively, painfully regaining her footing after losing her son to Tay-Sachs disease. With brutal honesty, she ushers readers into the mourner's sanctuary, where life and death, love and loss, rage and happiness, pleasure and pain can tolerably intermingle.



WE CAME, WE SAW, WE LEFT: A Family Gap Year, by Charles Wheelan. (Norton, \$27.95.) Two parents and three teenagers set out on a nine-month trip around the world. This travel memoir is the father's story of how it went — including buses, airplanes, skin rashes, misunderstandings and domestic sniping.



SOUL CITY: Race, Equality, and the Lost Dream of an American Utopia, by Thomas Healy. (Metropolitan, \$29.99.) In the 1970s, Floyd McKissick, a civil rights activist, set out to create a Black-run city in rural North Carolina. Healy's account is a parable of America's tragic racial past and its insidious legacy.



MISTRUST: Why Losing Faith in Institutions Provides the Tools to Transform Them, by Ethan Zuckerman. (Norton, \$26.95.) Zuckerman, the former director of the M.I.T. Center for Civic Media, sees the dark side of a society in which all trust is lost, but he lauds activists who work around institutions and those trying to fix them or create new ones.



SMALLTIME: A Story of My Family and the Mob, by Russell Shorto. (Norton, \$26.95.) A master of historical nonfiction applies his methods to his grandfather, a mobster in Johnstown, Pa., illuminating the Mafia's network in small-town America and, affectingly, the dysfunction in his family's past.

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

Byte Club Before Hafsa Faizal became a best-selling author — her second novel, “We Free the Stars,” was No. 6 on last week’s young adult hardcover list — she designed websites for other writers.



‘I stayed up a few nights trying to work through the code.’

In a phone interview, she estimated that she had created sites for hundreds of authors, including Angie Thomas, V. E. Schwab, Elizabeth Acevedo and Becky Albertalli. “I started coding when I was 13,” Faizal said. “My dad bought me a new laptop, a very expensive one — it was pink and had my name on it — and he was like, if you want to keep it, I want you to learn this book.” He handed her a manual for Microsoft’s now-discontinued software, FrontPage. The Florida native, whose parents are from Sri Lanka, quickly started experimenting with a blogging platform: “I posted a questionnaire, trivia and recipes every week,” she said. “I don’t even remember what it was called, but my parents and my dad’s friends and my mom’s sister used to visit.”

When she was 17, Faizal started Icey-Books, where she blogged about young adult titles. “A few years later, an author came to me and asked me to design her site. She was on WordPress, so I stayed up a few nights trying to work through the code,” Faizal recalled. “I was basically just ruining all the code until I figured out what worked.”

In 2019, after struggling with rejection, Faizal published “We Hunt the Flame,” the first installment of her Sands of Arawiya duology. Like “We Free the Stars,” it was inspired by back-to-back viewings of “The Lord of the Rings” and “The Hunger Games.” Both books are set “in a world inspired by ancient Arabia” and influenced by Faizal’s designer’s eye: “I’m always describing clothing, food, language, everything as deeply as I can because that’s what I love. That’s how I think.”

Many authors feel they’ve arrived in the literary community when they open a box containing their first book. For Faizal, that experience came when she started building her own website to promote “We Hunt the Flame,” which was also a best seller. She adds, “Another unforgettable, mind-blowing moment is when you’re sitting in front of a signing table and there’s a line of people who have read your book, who have swag they’ve designed that they want to give you, or they want you to write a quote in your own handwriting so they can make a tattoo out of it. I still can’t believe there’s a world I’ve created where people found parts of themselves.” □

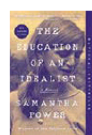
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SALES PERIOD OF JANUARY 24-30

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		THE RUSSIAN , by James Patterson and James O. Born. (Little, Brown) The 13th book in the Michael Bennett series. An assassin killing a number of women might disrupt the detective’s wedding plans.	1	1		JUST AS I AM , by Cicely Tyson with Michelle Burford. (HarperCollins) The late iconic actress describes how she worked to change perceptions of Black women through her career choices.	1
2	1	THE VANISHING HALF , by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge as one returns and the other takes on a different racial identity but their fates intertwine.	35	2	1	A PROMISED LAND , by Barack Obama. (Crown) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barack Obama offers personal reflections on his formative years and pivotal moments through his first term.	11
3	5	THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY , by Matt Haig. (Viking) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.	9	3	2	GREENLIGHTS , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	15
4	2	THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE , by V. E. Schwab. (Tor/Forge) A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie LaRue has across centuries.	14	4	3	CASTE , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	26
5	3	WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING , by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.	126	5	4	UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	47
6	4	THE PUSH , by Ashley Audrain. (Pamela Dorman) A devastating event forces a mother who questions her child’s behavior and her own sanity to confront the truth.	3	6		LET ME TELL YOU WHAT I MEAN , by Joan Didion. (Knopf) A collection of 12 pieces written between 1968 and 2000 that includes observations on the underground press and the act of writing.	1
7	8	THE RETURN , by Nicholas Sparks. (Grand Central) A doctor serving in the Navy in Afghanistan goes back to North Carolina where two women change his life.	18	7		EXTRATERRESTRIAL , by Avi Loeb. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) The Harvard science professor shares his theory that a piece of advanced technology created by a distant alien civilization recently visited our solar system.	1
8	6	NEIGHBORS , by Danielle Steel. (Delacorte) A Hollywood recluse’s perspective changes when she invites her neighbors into her mansion after an earthquake.	4	8	5	BECOMING , by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady describes how she balanced work, family and her husband’s political ascent.	103
9	9	READY PLAYER TWO , by Ernest Cline. (Ballantine) In a sequel to “Ready Player One,” Wade Watts discovers a technological advancement and goes on a new quest.	10	9		THE DEVIL YOU KNOW , by Charles M. Blow. (Harper) The New York Times Op-Ed columnist gives a call to action for Black people to achieve equality on their own terms.	1
10	12	ANXIOUS PEOPLE , by Fredrik Backman. (Atria) A failed bank robber holds a group of strangers hostage at an apartment open house.	20	10	6	A SWIM IN A POND IN THE RAIN , by George Saunders. (Random House) A collection of essays examining the functions and importance of works of fiction.	3

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

Paperback Row / BY LAUREN CHRISTENSEN



THE EDUCATION OF AN IDEALIST: A Memoir, by Samantha Power. (Dey Street, 592 pp., \$18.99.) In these pages, Thomas L. Friedman called the former U.N. ambassador’s third book a “combination of autobiography, diplomatic history, moral argument and manual” on balancing human rights work with parenting. Also balanced gracefully, he said, are the author’s “superidealistic” side and that of the “sober policymaker.”



BOYS & SEX: Young Men on Hookups, Love, Porn, Consent and Navigating the New Masculinity, by Peggy Orenstein. (Harper, 304 pp., \$17.99.) In her interviews with young men for the follow-up to “Girls and Sex” (2016), Orenstein “takes the same eagle-eyed approach to jock culture, rape culture, L.G.B.T.Q. kids and porn,” our reviewer, Lauren Smith Brody, said. “Oh my God, the porn.”



AMERICAN POISON: How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Promise, by Eduardo Porter. (Vintage, 272 pp., \$16.) “A tough read,” our reviewer, Michael Ignatieff, said, because of its implications for American liberalism, its indictment of “our faith in our own empathy.” Its difficulty makes it all the more important: “It is a learned, well-written but relentless survey of social science studies on racial polarization, animosity and social fragmentation of American life.”



WE RIDE UPON STICKS, by Quan Barry. (Vintage, 384 pp., \$16.95.) In the 1980s in northeastern Massachusetts, a group of virgin girls form a field hockey team inspired by the legacy of the 1692 witch trials. In her review, Marcy Dermansky called the poet’s second novel a “singular story of female sexuality, friendship, racial identity, witchcraft and transformation.”



A CHILDREN’S BIBLE, by Lydia Millet. (Norton, 240 pp., \$15.95.) A National Book Award finalist and one of the Book Review’s 10 Best Books of 2020, Millet’s latest novel witnesses impending doom — on a summer getaway in the wilderness — from an adolescent’s perspective. In this modern parable “as in the Bible,” our reviewer, Jonathan Dee, wrote, “every disaster story is also an origin story.”



WRITERS & LOVERS, by Lily King. (Grove, 352 pp., \$17.) It’s 1997 and a 31-year-old would-be novelist is waiting tables in Harvard Square and mourning the recent death of her mother. In his Times review, John Williams pointed out the resonances of this plot in King’s own autobiography — her mother died soon after the publication of her previous novel, “Euphoria.” “The emotional force,” Williams wrote, “is considerable.”

THIS MONTH	Audio Fiction	MONTHS ON LIST	THIS MONTH	Audio Nonfiction	MONTHS ON LIST
1	THE DUKE AND I , by Julia Quinn. (Recorded Books) Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series "Bridgerton." Read by Rosalyn Landor. 12 hours, 9 minutes unabridged.	2	1	A PROMISED LAND , by Barack Obama. (Random House Audio) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barack Obama offers personal reflections on his formative years and pivotal moments through his first term. Read by the author. 29 hours, 10 minutes unabridged.	3
2	STAR WARS: LIGHT OF THE JEDI , by Charles Soule. (Random House Audio) In this installment of the High Republic series, a disaster in hyperspace may cause far greater damage. Read by Marc Thompson. 13 hours, 35 minutes unabridged.	1	2	GREENLIGHTS , by Matthew McConaughey. (Random House Audio) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years. Read by the author. 6 hours, 42 minutes unabridged.	4
3	THE VISCOUNT WHO LOVED ME , by Julia Quinn. (Recorded Books) The second book in the Bridgerton series. Read by Rosalyn Landor. 12 hours, 23 minutes unabridged.	1	3	CASTE , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Penguin Audio) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today. Read by Robin Miles. 14 hours, 26 minutes unabridged.	6
4	READY PLAYER TWO , by Ernest Cline. (Random House Audio) In a sequel to "Ready Player One," Wade Watts discovers a technological advancement and goes on a new quest. Read by Wil Wheaton. 13 hours, 46 minutes unabridged.	3	4	UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Random House Audio) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice. Read by the author. 8 hours, 22 minutes unabridged.	11
5	THE GUEST LIST , by Lucy Foley. (HarperAudio) A wedding between a TV star and a magazine publisher on an island off the coast of Ireland turns deadly. Read by Jot Davies, Chloe Massey, Olivia Dowd, et al. 9 hours, 54 minutes unabridged.	8	5	JUST AS I AM , by Cicely Tyson with Michelle Burford. (HarperAudio) The late iconic actress describes how she worked to change perceptions of Black women through her career choices. Read by Cicely Tyson, Viola Davis and Robin Miles. 16 hours, 9 minutes unabridged.	1
6	THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY , by Matt Haig. (Penguin Audio) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived. Read by Carey Mulligan. 8 hours, 50 minutes unabridged.	2	6	BECOMING , by Michelle Obama. (Random House Audio) The former first lady describes how she balanced work, family and her husband's political ascent. Read by the author. 19 hours, 3 minutes unabridged.	27
7	THE VANISHING HALF , by Brit Bennett. (Penguin Audio) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge but their fates intertwine. Read by Shayna Small. 11 hours, 34 minutes unabridged.	7	7	EXTREME OWNERSHIP , by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin. (Macmillan Audio) Applying the principles of Navy SEALs leadership training to any organization. Read by the authors. 8 hours, 15 minutes unabridged.	31
8	AN OFFER FROM A GENTLEMAN , by Julia Quinn. (Recorded Books) The third book in the Bridgerton series. Read by Rosalyn Landor. 12 hours, 22 minutes unabridged.	1	8	TALKING TO STRANGERS , by Malcolm Gladwell. (Hachette Audio) Famous examples of miscommunication serve as the backdrop to explain potential conflicts. Read by the author. 8 hours, 42 minutes unabridged.	16
9	THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE , by V. E. Schwab. (Macmillan Audio) A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie LaRue has across centuries. Read by Julia Whelan. 17 hours, 10 minutes unabridged.	4	9	THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Gildan Media) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery. Read by Sean Pratt. 16 hours, 17 minutes unabridged.	4
10	ANXIOUS PEOPLE , by Fredrik Backman. (Simon & Schuster Audio) A failed bank robber holds a group of strangers hostage at an apartment open house. Read by Marin Ireland. 9 hours, 53 minutes unabridged.	5	10	BORN A CRIME , by Trevor Noah. (Audible Studios) A memoir about growing up in South Africa by the host of "The Daily Show." Read by the author. 8 hours, 50 minutes unabridged.	34
11	THE STAND , by Stephen King. (Random House Audio) A struggle of good and evil takes place in a world transformed by a plague. Read by Grover Gardner. 47 hours, 47 minutes unabridged.	4	11	BREATH , by James Nestor. (Penguin Audio) A re-examination of a basic biological function. Read by the author. 7 hours, 18 minutes unabridged.	5
12	ROMANCING MISTER BRIDGERTON , by Julia Quinn. (Recorded Books) The fourth book in the Bridgerton series. Read by Rosalyn Landor. 13 hours, 17 minutes unabridged.	1	12	MYTHOS , by Stephen Fry. (Chronicle) Whimsical retelling of Greek myths. Read by the author. 15 hours, 26 minutes unabridged.	5
13	WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING , by Delia Owens. (Penguin Audio) A young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect. Read by Cassandra Campbell. 12 hours, 12 minutes unabridged.	29	13	SAPIENS , by Yuval Noah Harari. (Harper Audio) How Homo sapiens became Earth's dominant species. Read by Derek Perkins. 15 hours, 17 minutes unabridged.	28
14	THE SCORPION'S TAIL , by Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child. (Hachette Audio) The second book in the Nora Kelly series. An F.B.I. agent and an archaeologist identify a mummified corpse and its gruesome cause of death. Read by Cynthia Farrell. 11 hours, 58 minutes unabridged.	1	14	EDUCATED , by Tara Westover. (Random House Audio) The daughter of survivalists, who is kept out of school, educates herself enough to leave home for university. Read by Julia Whelan. 12 hours, 10 minutes unabridged.	29
15	THE PUSH , by Ashley Audrain. (Penguin Audio) A devastating event forces a mother who questions her child's behavior and her own sanity to confront the truth. Read by Marin Ireland. 8 hours, 38 minutes unabridged.	1	15	YOU'LL NEVER BELIEVE WHAT HAPPENED TO LACEY , by Amber Ruffin and Lacey Lamar. (Hachette Audio) A pair of sisters who live in different parts of the country share their perspectives on the absurdities and everyday experiences of racism. Read by the authors. 5 hours, 21 minutes unabridged.	1

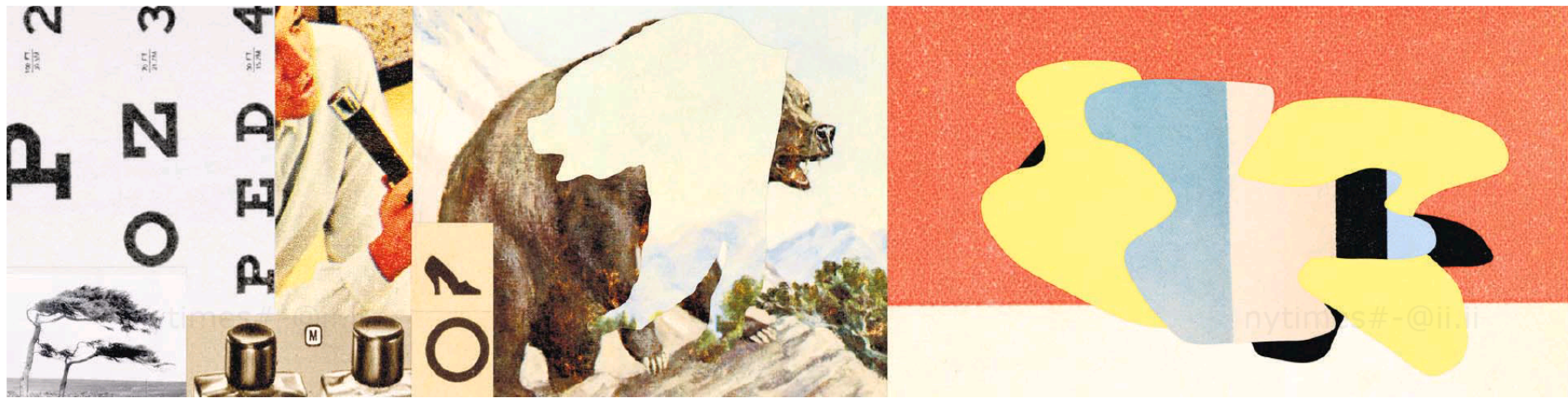
Audiobook rankings are composed of sales in the United States of digital and physical audio products from the previous month. Sales of titles are statistically weighted to represent and accurately reflect all outlets proportionally nationwide. Free-trial or low-cost trial audiobook sales are not eligible for inclusion. Publisher credits for audiobooks are listed under the audiobook publisher name. **ONLINE:** For more lists and a full explanation of our methodology, visit www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers.

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LAST ORGY OF THE DIVINE HERMIT

By Mark Leyner
277 pp. Little, Brown. \$27.



The best way to start a review of a Leyner book is to list a few of its high-concept conceits. In “Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit,” these include:

- a spoken-word karaoke bar
- warring criminal gangs that distinguish themselves by their colognes
- “If Joan Rivers had gone to the electric chair instead of Ethel Rosenberg, this is the book she would have written”

As in most of Leyner’s novels, like “Et Tu, Babe” and “Gone With the Mind,” these little joke-bombs go off on nearly every page. The reader has to stop to figure out what they mean and why (and whether) they’re funny. This can be a slog. It’s also a weirdly exciting reading experience.

“Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit” poses as an ethnographic study of the fictional Eastern European nation of Chalazia. Actually, the novel *excludes* the study, consisting only of an introduction and an epilogue. The introduction is being recited by a patient in a New Jersey optometrist’s office: She’s reading it off an eye chart through a phoropter (the device used to determine lens prescriptions). “Is it better like this . . . or like this? One . . . or two?” the optometrist asks, switching lenses. The epilogue dramatizes a tender scene between the author of the study, Mark Leyner, and his loving daughter, Gaby. They visit a Chalazian karaoke bar on a Thursday “Father/Daughter Nite,” where they read endearments off a screen, just as the other fathers and daughters in attendance do. Perhaps none are the *real* Mark and Gaby.

The serious work of this comedy is to depict a father’s love for his daughter and their shared recognition that they won’t always be together. It’s played out across a hall of mirrors, an “infinite regress of fathers and daughters.” The situation arouses pathos, which Leyner acknowledges before relentlessly hyperbolizing, satirizing and detonating the pathos. The novel’s underlying poignancy, however, remains intact.

MARSHLANDS

By André Gide
Translated by Damion Searls
116 pp. New York Review Books. Paper, \$14.95.



The narrator of “Marshlands,” a writer, is being driven mad by ennui. He’s miserably aware that human beings can’t be anything but themselves, defined by their personal characteristics and imprisoned by routine. He rails against the sameness of the daily tasks they’re forced to perform: “We do it again precisely because we *have* done it; every one of our acts from yesterday seems to want us again today, like a child to whom we have given life and who demands from then on that we keep it alive.”

Maybe he’s been in lockdown too long with his kids. In fact, “Marshlands” was written by the French novelist and journalist Gide, whose career extended from the late 19th century to his death in 1951. This was an early book, first published in 1895. Searls, a prolific translator, has annotated the revised 1932 edition and rendered it into vivid American English. His admirable efforts, however, are not quite enough to lift the novel beyond the status of a minor work.

The narrator is writing a novel also titled “Marshlands,” about a man named Tityrus, from Virgil’s “Eclogues,” who lives in an empty, grassy region. The writer wants the novel to express his own “boredom, vanity, monotony” — not usually a promising idea for a book. Yet there’s something compelling in Gide’s perception that all of us are trapped, regardless of the pandemic, in some kind of lifelong lockdown, the days essentially featureless, relieved only by trivialities like our meaningless work, our predictable cultural products and our irrelevant public affairs.

The critic Dubravka Ugresic’s exuberant preface claims for “Marshlands” a charm on the order of “Winnie-the-Pooh.” She more persuasively compares it to Ivan Goncharov’s “Oblomov,” the 1859 Russian novel about another affluent 19th-century man. He too is burdened with the mysterious privilege of human existence.

SATURATION PROJECT

By Christine Hume
179 pp. Solid Objects. \$20.



In her richly meditative lyric memoir, Hume poeticizes the life of a woman whose childhood was marked by sexual violence. What the reader may initially find challenging in her convergence of intimate personal history and classical mythology soon turns deeply absorbing.

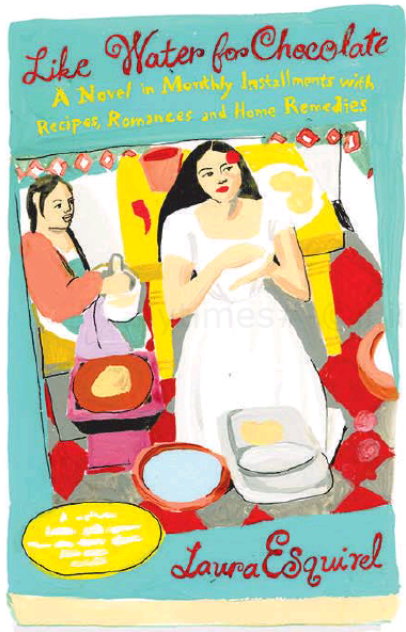
Hume invokes the Greek heroine Atalanta, the ferocious hunter raised by bears and the slayer of centaurs who try to rape her. Even offstage, Atalanta remains the embodiment of animal courage. Her cunning and resilience, especially against male predation, must be summoned by a girl trying to survive her western Pennsylvania childhood. Hume repeatedly suggests incestuous brutality: “the memory of his huge hands down your pants.” She explains, ominously, “If there’s one thing the woods do not need to tell her, it is what a body standing over her at night means.”

In her damaged adolescence, “the dark, lanky teenage girl” hums to herself as she walks swiftly through the threatening woods, hums everywhere, contemplating what the act of humming represents. It’s “the sound of my captivity,” she says. “The only intimacy I had available.” She continues to hum even while performing fellatio. For the young woman, “my sonic ornament was a customized flush of puberty, a condensed libidinal vehemence.” She eventually passes into adulthood and becomes mother to a 3-year-old girl who develops her own personal relationship with the unseen world, specifically the wind. Her daughter is terrorized by it, suffering raw pain in the open air. The wind’s mythologically sexual aspect can be aggressive, relentless and even, in some legends, germinative.

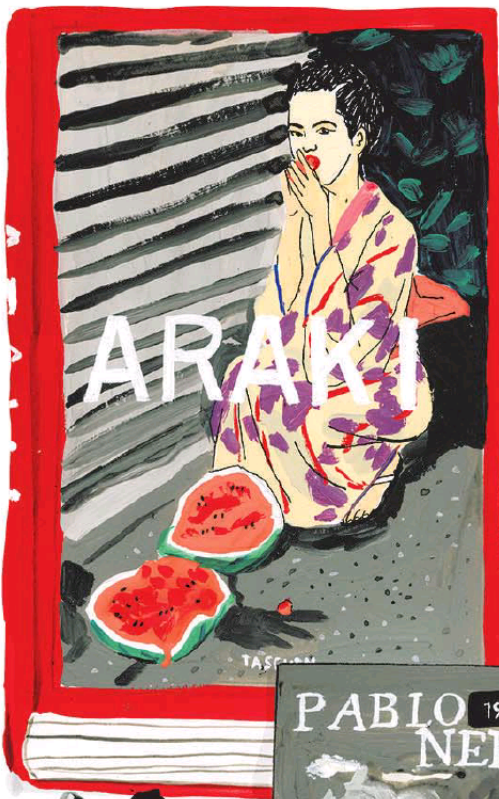
“Saturation Project” is sometimes elusive, but there’s no meaning in it that gets lost for long. When Hume’s thematic connections and redemptive insights arrive, it’s with the force of a hurricane.

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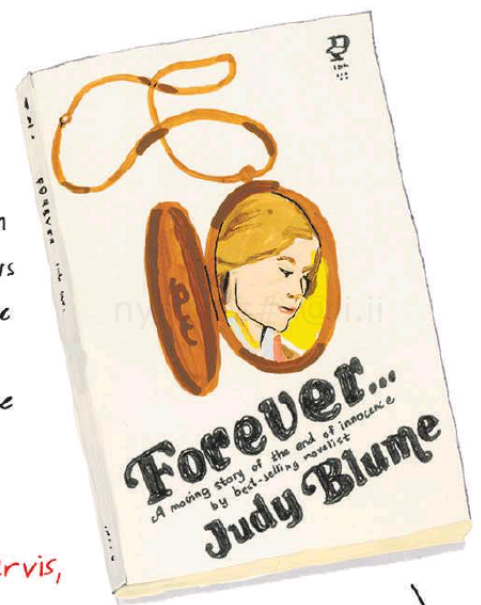
For Valentine's Day, we visit books that first inspired a certain passion in their readers, beyond the literary.



"The scene for me is the roasted quail with rose petals. Tita communicates her passion for Pedro so masterfully that no one can deny their reactions to it. Life goals. Cooking like that got me a husband!" — Michael W. Twitty, culinary historian



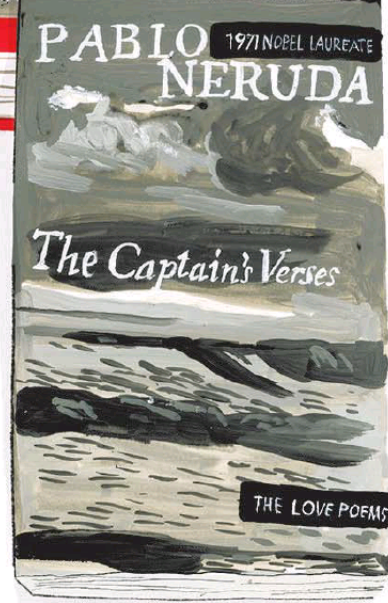
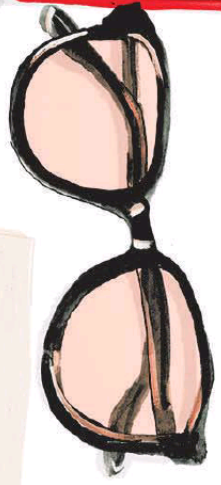
"Until seeing his work, I don't think I knew an image of a flower could turn me on. He knows how to juxtapose floral displays next to bondage and make it look one and the same."
— Shaniqwa Jarvis, artist



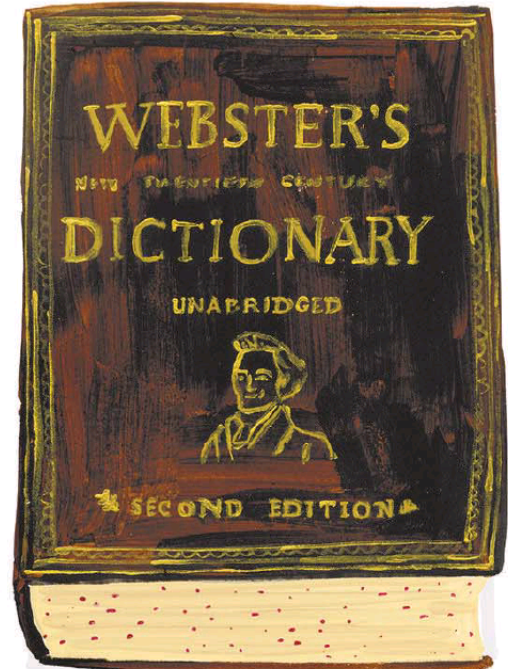
"At 9 years old, I learned everything I ever wanted to know about life but was afraid to ask (including sex) from Judy Blume. So I trusted Judy, well, forever."
— Alysia Reiner, actress and producer



"Morrison was a master of so much, including sex, and this book has some incredible moments of ecstatic abandon."
— Emma Straub, novelist



"'The Captain's Verses' by Neruda is the easy answer for me, the language is just so sensual and stupidly poetic, it's so loving for his wife while also hungers and wants. I mean: 'From your hips to your feet I want to make a long journey.' Come on."
— Anis Mojgani, Oregon Poet Laureate



"The unabridged dictionary we always had open in the living room. Certain words were very interesting."
— Roz Chast, cartoonist

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