

The New York Times

Book Review

JANUARY 17, 2021

LEGALIZE (ALL OF) IT Carl L. Hart's "Drug Use for Grown-Ups"

COLD WARRIORS Rich Cohen on being a Connecticut hockey dad

PLUS James Comey, Leonora Carrington and the latest thrillers



Here Is The Fire Now

By Danez Smith

FOR ME, FOR YOU, FOR US, Black historical fiction can salt real wounds both fresh and inherited. I'll never forget my mother's hour of tears after she saw the film adaptation of "The Hate U Give." Or the row of us waiting stone still in the movie theater, trying to steady our weeping, like a pew at a well-cast funeral, after seeing "Fruitvale Station." Or my stepfather's stern shoulders broken down by "Selma"; or the real nightmares of water and

THE PROPHETS

By Robert Jones Jr.

388 pp. G.P. Putnam's Sons. \$27.

scars after "Beloved"; or the movies, books, shows avoided because "I can't really handle another slavery thing right now."

Meeting yourself in media is no guarantee that the mirror will be kind or wanted. Instead, it's often a jagged glass you catch yourself in before it catches you. And even when you know it's coming, the blood's still warm and sharp. What of me, of us, was I to witness in "The Prophets," the debut novel of Robert Jones Jr., set on an antebellum plantation in Mississippi?

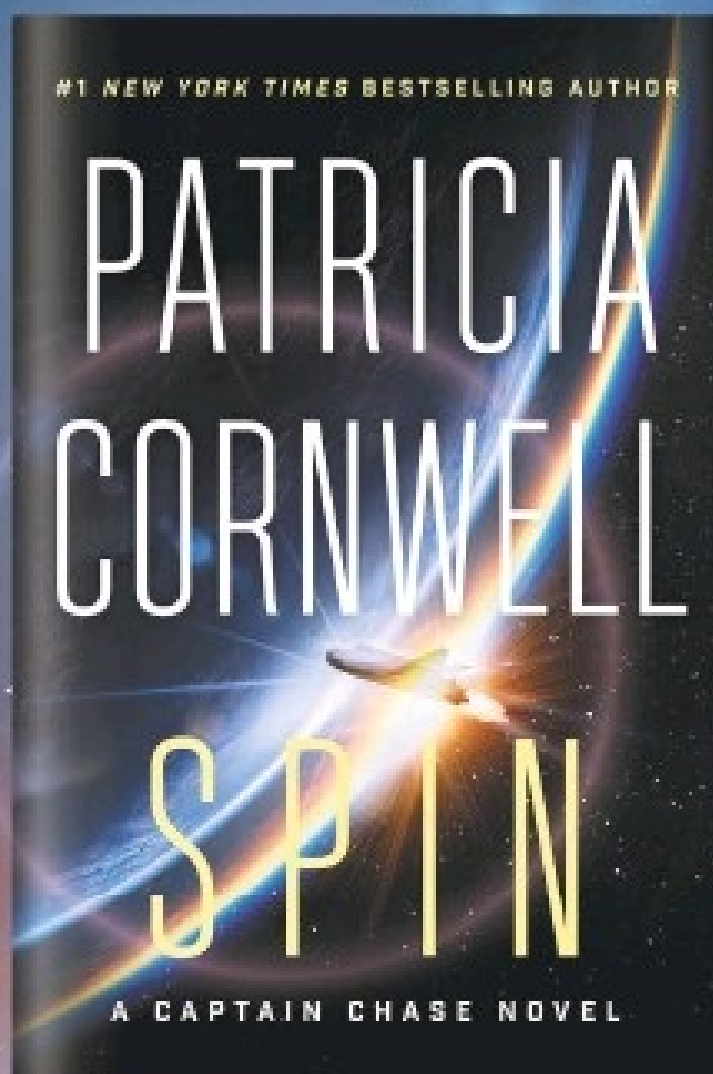
I double-checked my wounds before I entered Jones's novel, wanting to be aware of where I was numb and where raw. I wanted to be good to myself and hopefully fair to a book I arrived at with baggage and implications.

SIMONE MARTIN-NEWBERRY

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

FROM THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Captain Calli Chase will follow the
crime wherever it leads – including space.



"Move over, Dr. Kay Scarpetta ... a new series with a confident new heroine."
—*The Telegraph*

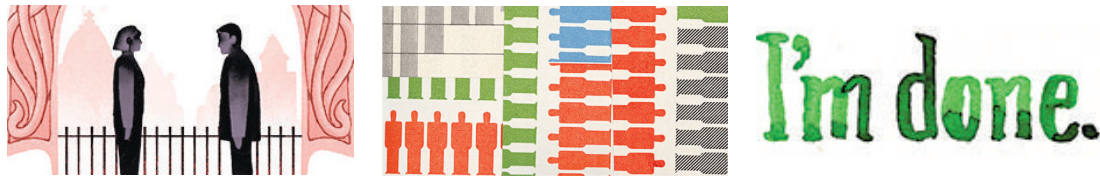
NOW AVAILABLE [AMAZON.COM/SPIN](https://www.amazon.com/spin)



@1pcornwell



amazon publishing



Fiction

- 1 THE PROPHETS**
By Robert Jones Jr.
Reviewed by Danez Smith
- 7 Thrillers**
Reviewed by Sarah Lyall
- 12 THE REVOLUTION ACCORDING TO RAYMUNDO MATA**
By Gina Apostol
Reviewed by Randy Boyagoda
- 12 THE HEARING TRUMPET**
By Leonora Carrington
Reviewed by Blake Butler
- 15 THE PUSH**
By Ashley Audrain
Reviewed by Claire Martin
- 17 HADES, ARGENTINA**
By Daniel Loedel
Reviewed by Benjamin Nugent
- 17 THE LIAR'S DICTIONARY**
By Eley Williams
Reviewed by Patricia T. O'Conner

Nonfiction

- 8 DRUG USE FOR GROWN-UPS**
Chasing Liberty in the Land of Fear
By Carl L. Hart
Reviewed by Casey Schwartz
- 9 SAVING JUSTICE**
Truth, Transparency, and Trust
By James Comey
Reviewed by Joe Klein
- 10 I CAME AS A SHADOW**
An Autobiography
By John Thompson with Jesse Washington
Reviewed by Jason Zengerle
- 11 PEE WEES**
Confessions of a Hockey Parent
By Rich Cohen
Reviewed by Mark Rotella
- 14 AFTERSHOCKS**
By Nadia Owusu
Reviewed by Fahima Haque

- 14 NINE DAYS**
The Race to Save Martin Luther King Jr.'s Life and Win the 1960 Election
By Stephen Kendrick and Paul Kendrick
Reviewed by Raymond Arsenault
- 15 ALL LARA'S WARS**
By Wojciech Jagielski
Reviewed by Steven Lee Myers
- 22 The Shortlist**
The Pandemic Economy
Reviewed by Zachary Karabell

Children's Books

- 18 GONE TO THE WOODS**
Surviving a Lost Childhood
By Gary Paulsen
Reviewed by Jarrett Krosoczka
- 18 WHAT'S THE MATTER, MARLO?**
By Andrew Arnold
- BEAR ISLAND**
By Matthew Cordell
Reviewed by Sydney Smith

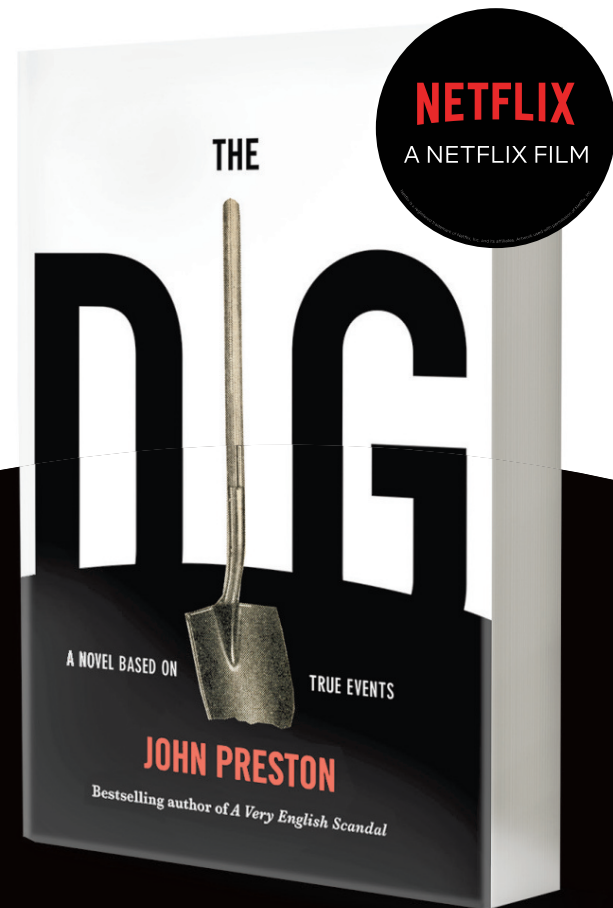
Features

- 6 By the Book**
Susan Minot
- 13 Essay**
Listen for the Music
By S. Kirk Walsh
- 23 Sketchbook**
By Leanne Shapton and Teddy Blanks

Etc.

- 4** New & Noteworthy
- 5** Letters
- 19** Best-Seller Lists
- 19** Editors' Choice
- 20** Inside the List
- 20** Paperback Row

THE INSPIRATION FOR
THE NETFLIX ORIGINAL FILM
STARRING CAREY MULLIGAN,
RALPH FIENNES, AND LILY JAMES



“A true-life chronicle that delves into the secrets of the heart.”

—WALL STREET JOURNAL

“Shimmers with longing and regret...beautifully made and quite wonderful.”

—NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

Also available
as an e-book from
Other Press



OTHER PRESS



OTHERPRESS.COM

A Special Edition On Sale Now

Uncover Your Path to Success

The New York Times

Leadership

The Principles That Matter,
Teams That Win and Your
Path to Success

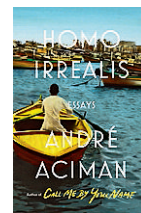
PLUS
The New
Visionaries

With stories on building the ideal skill set, profiles in leadership and stirring examples of those who broke the mold, this special edition will help you be a motivator, build results and succeed.

The New York Times Leadership special edition is now available from your favorite retailer, magazine.store, or Amazon.com

©2020 Meredith Corporation. All rights reserved.

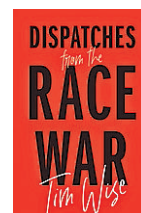
New & Noteworthy



HOMO IRREALIS: ESSAYS, by André Aciman. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$27.) In this collection, the author of “Call Me by Your Name” and other novels contemplates the life of the imagination, and the ability to hold competing realities simultaneously in mind.



FAUST, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsvath and Frederick Turner, with illustrations by Fowzia Karimi. (Deep Vellum, paper, \$15.95.) A new translation gives readers occasion to revisit the classic and timeless story of ambition and moral compromise.



DISPATCHES FROM THE RACE WAR, by Tim Wise. (City Lights, paper, \$17.95.) Drawing on events from the killing of Trayvon Martin to the Black Lives Matter protests last summer, Wise calls to account his fellow white citizens and exhorts them to combat racist power structures.



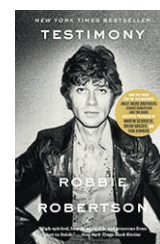
VINELAND REREAD, by Peter Coviello. (Columbia University, paper, \$20.) Coviello, an English professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, argues that Thomas Pynchon’s novel “Vineland” is an underrated masterwork of political comedy and humanism.



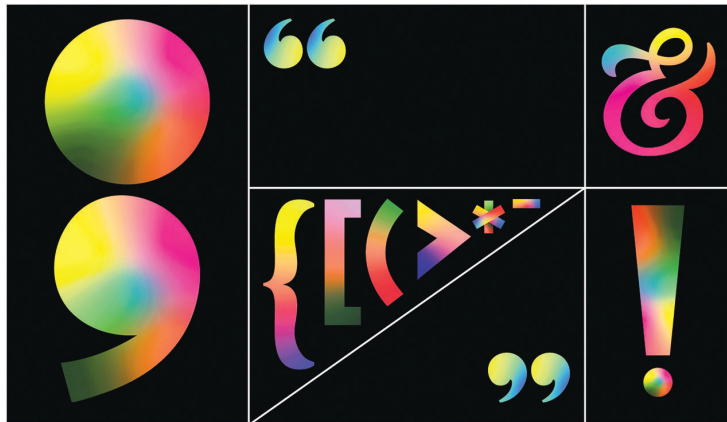
WRITING THE VIRUS, edited by Andrea Scrima and David Dario Winner. (Outpost19 Books, paper, \$18.50.) Early in the pandemic, the literary journal StatORec invited writers to describe what they were going through. This anthology gathers 31 of their responses.

WHAT WE'RE READING

More than ever, I've been using music as a buffer, when needed, against the outside world. In that vein, I finally cracked open **TESTIMONY**, Robbie Robertson's autobiography. A big fan of the Band, I was eager to learn more about the roots of the group's singular sound. As history, the book delivers. Sure, there is plenty of Dylan — and the Big Pink section is especially strong — but there is also lots of great stuff about obscure early episodes and encounters, musical and not, that helps illuminate the origins of songs that made characters like Virgil Caine and Crazy Chester indelible — and illustrate how much hard work was involved. Still, I find Robertson less likable as the book proceeds (granted, likability is not a key rock 'n' roll attribute) and sense a creeping defensiveness that is surely tied to his being just one side of the story. Levon Helm tells another in “This Wheel's on Fire.” That's next on my list.



—ED SHANAHAN, METRO REPORTER AND SENIOR STAFF EDITOR



SHIVANI PARASNIS

Exclamation Point

TO THE EDITOR:

Too bad W. S. Merwin isn't around to take the other side regarding Elisa Gabbert's effusive praise of "punctuation as a superpower and a secret weapon" in her Jan. 3 On Poetry column. Merwin stopped punctuating his poems in 1988. He said that he felt that punctuation "stapled" the language to the page. "I think punctuation is prose. We don't punctuate our speech, and we don't punctuate when we sing," Merwin said. "Poetry always has to have one foot in song and in speech."

While I do not agree that all punctuation ought to be removed from poetry — periods, commas and a rare exclamation mark are really all poets need — I do think that poetry ought not be written with a staple gun.

J. R. SOLONCHE
BLOOMING GROVE, N.Y.

What Is Conservatism?

TO THE EDITOR:

Based on Andrew Sullivan's fine review of "Conservatism," by Edmund Fawcett (Jan. 3), I'm looking forward to reading it. However, he did slide in one sentence I can't let pass without correction. In commenting on Burke's work, Sullivan states, "But what liberal democracy eroded — the authority of religion, the coherence of a community, a sense of collective belonging, home, meaning and security — could prompt far more radical responses." That would be an appalling indictment of liberal democracy, if it were true. What

liberal democracy expends great energy attempting to erode is the claimed supremacy of religion, in particular Christianity; the insularity of a community; a sense of collective intolerance; exclusion; truncated meaning and false security. All of which stand at the door, rifle in hand, against a more perfect union.

SUSAN E. MULLENDORE
TUCSON, ARIZ.

TO THE EDITOR:

In the second paragraph of his review of "Conservatism," Andrew Sullivan writes, "A defense of the status quo against disruption comes naturally to anyone truly *comfortable* in the world." A dozen pages later, in the second paragraph of her review of Rachel Holmes's new biography, "Sylvia Pankhurst," Francesca Wade repeats the following quote from Pankhurst's address to the court during her 1921 sedition trial: "It is wrong that people like you should be *comfortable* and well fed, while all around you people are starving." (Italics in both quotes mine.)

I could hardly offer a more eloquent or compelling explanation of my quarrel with conservatism than that conveyed by the juxtaposition of these two sentences.

GAYLORD BRYNOLFSON
EVANSTON, ILL.

TO THE EDITOR:

Andrew Sullivan's review of "Conservatism" serves as a reminder of the utter meaninglessness of that term in contemporary America. Sullivan alludes

to this notion when he states that "conservatism is by its nature specific and local," but stops there. It seems clear to me that Barack Obama, who, even as president, carefully tended to his relationships with his wife and children, attended church regularly and allowed his thoughtfully considered decisions and opinions to be influenced by the wisdom of others, is a far more conservative man than Donald Trump.

Perhaps the most ironic debasement of the idea of conservatism is seen through the prism of environmentalism. What could be more conservative than the desire to preserve and protect nature? Even the very terms, conservatism and conservation, share etymological roots.

PETER BURWASSER
PHILADELPHIA

Lots to Celebrate

TO THE EDITOR:

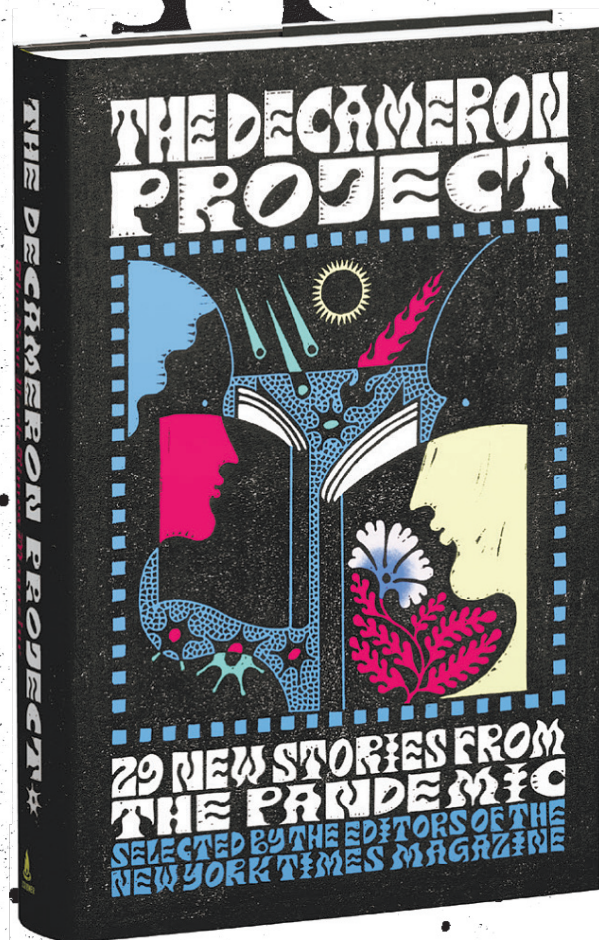
In her Dec. 27 letter to the editor, Jessica Benjamin writes, "I implore you: Stop featuring celebrities in your By the Book column." I implore you: Don't stop. Although the word "celebrity" has over time become associated with glossy entertainment, it in fact refers to a person, in any field (including writing, by the way), who is celebrated. Kurt Vonnegut once argued that writers should emerge from everywhere, not just literature programs. Yo-Yo Ma was one recent "celebrity" whose By the Book entry I found captivating. Ma, a Harvard graduate, is as expansively bookish and as intellectually curious as any literary don.

Groucho Marx once said that he found television to be educational; whenever someone turned on the TV, he'd go in another room and open a book. He dropped out of school early on, but was a lifelong bookworm. If you read "The Groucho Letters," you will encounter what an autodidact this nimble wordsmith was. What I wouldn't give to hear his responses to By the Book questions.

DAVID ENGLISH
ACTON, MASS.

BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM

NEW FROM THE EDITORS OF
THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE



When reality is surreal,
only fiction can make sense of it.

29 new stories from Margaret Atwood, Colm Tóibín, Karen Russell, Tommy Orange, Leila Slimani, David Mitchell, Rachel Kushner, Edwidge Danticat, Charles Yu, and many more

ALSO AVAILABLE AS AN EBOOK AND AN AUDIOBOOK



SCRIBNER



SimonandSchuster.com

**THE MAGNIFICENT
BRIDGES OF
NEW YORK CITY**

The Magnificent Bridges
of New York City



Dave Frieder

**New York's Bridges
As you've never
Seen them before!**

"Your dedication to your topic of bridges has produced some amazing images."

Anne Adams-Helms

"Anyone can snap a photograph of a bridge. It takes the lifelong dedication of a true artist to accomplish a goal such as this."

"This book has incredible lush photos. The Author had amazing access and photographed all the cool details and perspectives."

"Aside from the stunning photos the book also details a brief history along with bridge specs for each of the spans."

"A book for bridge lovers, engineers and New York City devotees alike. A poetic view of structures and landscape and sky."

**AVAILABLE AT
WWW.DAVEFRIEDER.COM
AND AMAZON**

 **By the Book**



Susan Minot

The author, most recently, of the collection 'Why I Don't Write: And Other Stories' finds comfort in comic writers: 'Being funny is not only hard but perhaps the most powerful thing of all.'

What books are on your night stand?

That would be sprawled on the floor. "Elvis and Gladys," by Elaine Dundy; "Three of a Kind," novellas by James M. Cain; "The Paintings of Charles Burchfield"; "The Lost Pianos of Siberia," by Sophy Roberts; "Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars," by Paul Fussell; "100 Years of the Best American Short Stories," edited by Lorrie Moore and Heidi Pitlor; "The Hat on the Bed," stories by John O'Hara; "An Alphabet for Gourmets," by M.F.K. Fisher; "Light Thickens," by Ngaio Marsh; "Marilyn: Norma Jean," by Gloria Steinem. I am not at my usual bedside because of the pandemic, but permanently there are the essays of Montaigne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, plus Laozi's "Tao Te Ching," all excellent for steady reference.

What's the last great book you read?

Have read a few. "Caste," by Isabel Wilkerson, which shines a stunning light on racial issues from a new angle; "Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory, and the

Conquest of Everest," by Wade Davis, which tracks the extremes of human behavior; "A Judgement in Stone," by Ruth Rendell, a briskly and entertainingly told story of the evils of illiteracy masquerading as a murder mystery.

Are there any classic novels that you only recently read for the first time?

"Can You Forgive Her?," by Anthony Trollope (I listened to the audio), where I was delighted to find some metafictional narrative intrusion in an otherwise conventional narrative.

Describe your ideal reading experience.

Holding in my hand a good book made out of paper. Anywhere.

Do you have any comfort reads, or guilty pleasures?

One should never be guilty about reading! It's a tyranny to make readers believe there is anything they are supposed to read or not read. As Faulkner said, Read! Read everything!

As far as comfort is concerned, I know I will always find the pleasure of laughter when I read David Sedaris. As a writer, he gets better and deeper. Other excellent comic writers always guaranteeing pleasure are Patty Marx and Sloane Crosley. Being funny is not only hard but perhaps the most powerful thing of all.

What's the last book to make you laugh?

"The African Svelte: Ingenious Misspellings That Make Surprising Sense," by Daniel Menaker. With drawings by the excellent and inspiring Roz Chast. Blunders in language are always delightful to me — unintentional poetry! I also weep as I laugh because this was written by my friend and editor who died this fall and one I hadn't read when he was alive and it is so hilarious that I wish I could tell him. And also weep as I laugh.

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

I like Henry Green's description of prose as being "an intimacy between strangers." So I am brought closer to every author I read. And yet neither of us ever knows it.

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

That in 1923 wild animals in Tibet approached humans because they were not hunted. That in 1966 Elvis Presley recorded Bob Dylan's "Tomorrow Is a Long Time" before Bob Dylan released his own version. That in 1914 the chances of a boy in Britain between the ages of 14 and 24 surviving the coming war were one in three.

Which subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

Women's experience. That is, their real experience. Then we would find out if Muriel Rukeyser was right: "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open."

What's the best book you've ever received as a gift?

So many! But the first that comes into my head: "Warriors: Life and Death Among the Somalis," by Gerald Hanley. A beautiful stark book. It helped that I loved the man who gave it to me.

What do you plan to read next?

"Blackballed: The Black Vote and U.S. Democracy," by Darryl Pinckney. His is a brilliant mind which can make simple the complicated, then show how complex the simple.

Plus more in those books on the floor by my bed. □

An expanded version of this interview is available at [nytimes.com/books](https://www.nytimes.com/books).

Knives Out

IT'S STILL DARK! But here are some thrillers to help with all the time we are spending indoors.

THE TITLE of the Australian writer Jane Harper's latest novel, **THE SURVIVORS** (Flatiron, 374 pp., \$27.99), refers to two things. The first is a sculpture memorializing a shipwreck whose ghostly remains lie off the coast of Evelyn Bay, a tiny summer community in Tasmania. The second are the traumatized, secrets-harboring residents left behind when a devastating storm killed three of the town's young people 12 years ago.

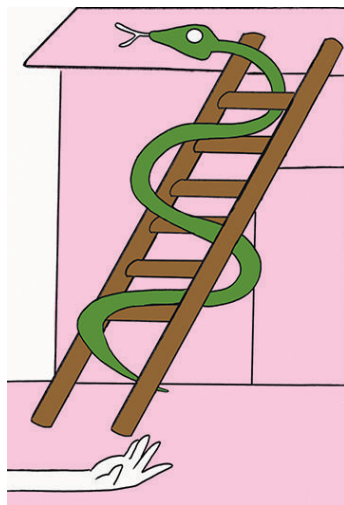
After a long exile, Kieran Elliott has returned to Evelyn Bay with his girlfriend and their baby to help his parents move out of the family house. But it is a complicated homecoming. Kieran was indirectly responsible for two of the storm deaths — one of the victims was his brother — and there are those who will never forgive him. Also, there's a new body to contend with, that of a young waitress and art student whose drowned corpse is found, fully clothed, on the beach. In this tightknit place, everyone is a suspect, and everyone is grieving, in one way or another.

It's hard to keep track of all the relationships — who loved or hung around with or betrayed or fought with whom, back when Kieran was a teenager and again now — but it's worth making the effort. Evelyn Bay, utterly dependent on the sea, is a character of its own. As always, Harper skillfully evokes the landscape as she weaves a complicated, elegant web, full of long-buried secrets ready to come to light.

"THERE ARE SO many ways to kill," observes a character in RV Raman's **A WILL TO KILL** (Polis, 282 pp., \$26), a modern-day take on the classic locked-room murder mystery, transported to a remote mansion high in the hills of southern India. "People drown in rivers, fall down stairs, have heavy objects fall on them, die of suffocation in airless rooms or dungeons, and even get scared to

death."

Here at the possibly haunted Greybrooke Manor in Nilgiris, a dozen guests have gathered at the invitation of Bhaskar Fernandez, an eccentric patriarch whose squabbling extended family is tediously dependent on his largesse. Bhaskar is convinced that someone is trying to kill him and has included on his guest list Harith Athreya, a canny private detective charged with looking into a series of suspicious incidents. To disincentivize any would-be killer, Bhaskar has drawn up two wills allowing for two different possibilities: one if



NISHAT AKHITAR

he dies of natural causes, the other in the case of his murder. (Bhaskar is a lover of mysteries and enjoys his little games.)

The roads are rendered impassable by a landslide. The lights go out. Greedy relatives and hangers-on circle like so many piranhas. And before we know it, there is indeed a murder — but instead of Bhaskar, the victim is a guest, an artist with a murky past whose body is found, improbably, slumped in his host's motorized wheelchair. Who did it? And who killed the second victim, not long after?

There seem to be several crimes going on at once, and a lot to pay attention to: an art scam, a drug ring, the falsification of identities, not to mention a spot of adultery. But Athreya is a fine detective with a curious mind, a cool eye for the chance detail, a

skill in synthesizing disparate threads and a talent for resisting the insults of the requisite police officer assigned to the case.

THE OPENING SCENE of Una Manion's **A CROOKED TREE** (HarperCollins, 320 pp., \$27.99) will strike fear into the hearts of any former children whose had-it-up-to-here parents ever threatened to kick them and their squabbling siblings out of the car. Driving at twilight one day, Faye Gallagher, a widowed mother of five, actually does it: She stops the car five miles from home and leaves her 12-year-old daughter, Ellen, by the side of the road. Darkness sets in; the hours pass. Why hasn't Ellen come home?

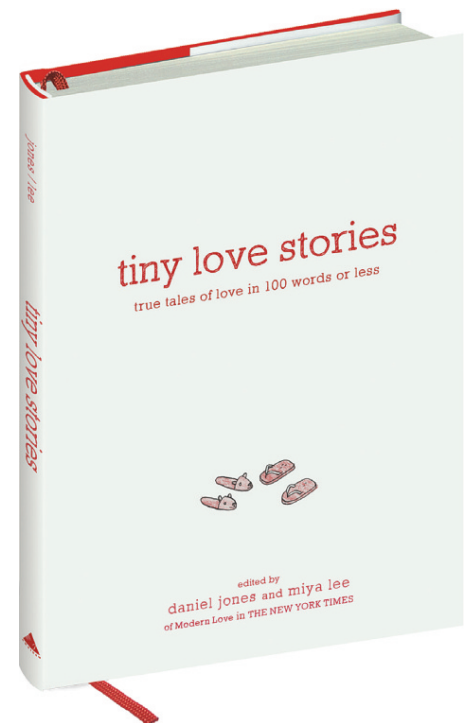
That single shocking moment reverberates through the book, bringing unexpected consequences for the family and their neighbors. The menace in this moody, meticulously plotted debut lies not in preposterous plot twists, but within the mysteries of dysfunctional families, close-knit neighborhoods harboring dark secrets and adolescents' imperfect, and sometimes disastrous, understanding of the world of adults.

The book, set during the 1980s, is narrated by 15-year-old Libby, who desperately misses her father, a charming but feckless Irish immigrant who was separated from her mother and who has recently died, leaving Libby with a precious gift, "The Field Guide to the Trees of North America."

Living by Valley Forge Mountain in Pennsylvania, Libby takes refuge in the woods and in particular the crooked tree at the heart of a secluded spot she and her best friend, Sage, call the Kingdom. There she escapes her dysfunctional life with an overtaxed mother who offers little in the way of solace or supervision.

The plot unfurls slowly. A villain arrives in the form of a mysterious man with long blond hair driving a black Camaro. There's also the unsettling presence of Wilson McVay, an older boy who listens to punk rock, takes drugs and has a reputation for violence and lawlessness. Before the story is over, everyone will have some growing up to do. □

give the gift
of love



Here are 175 true stories of love, each told in 100 words or less. Romantic and platonic, sibling and parental, requited and unrequited, lost and found: The stories are tiny, but the loves they contain are anything but. Honest, funny, tender, wise, and always surprising, these ordinary moments burn so bright that they reveal humanity, and our own selves, in their light.

From the editors of the Modern Love column in The New York Times.



Available now wherever books are sold.

THE
LIZARDS
OF
PALM
BEACH
BRUCE
McDOUGALL



“In this smooth as silk satirical novel, the filthy rich get what they so richly deserve.”

—LAWRENCE SCANLAN
author of
*A Year of Living
Generously: Dispatches
from the Front Lines
of Philanthropy*



OWL CANYON
PRESS
BOULDER COLORADO

OWLCANYONPRESS.com

Moral High Ground

A scholar of addiction argues for a new understanding of drug use.

By CASEY SCHWARTZ

IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG to get to what is perhaps the boldest and most controversial statement in Carl Hart's new book, "Drug Use for Grown-Ups: Chasing Liberty in the Land of Fear." In the prologue, he writes, "I am now entering my fifth year as a regular heroin user." In all honesty, I don't know how to feel about this admission. It's not easy to square all that I've learned about this drug with the image I also hold of

DRUG USE FOR GROWN-UPS
Chasing Liberty in the Land of Fear
By Carl L. Hart

290 pp. Penguin Press. \$28.

Hart: a tenured professor of psychology at Columbia University, an experienced neuroscientist, a father.

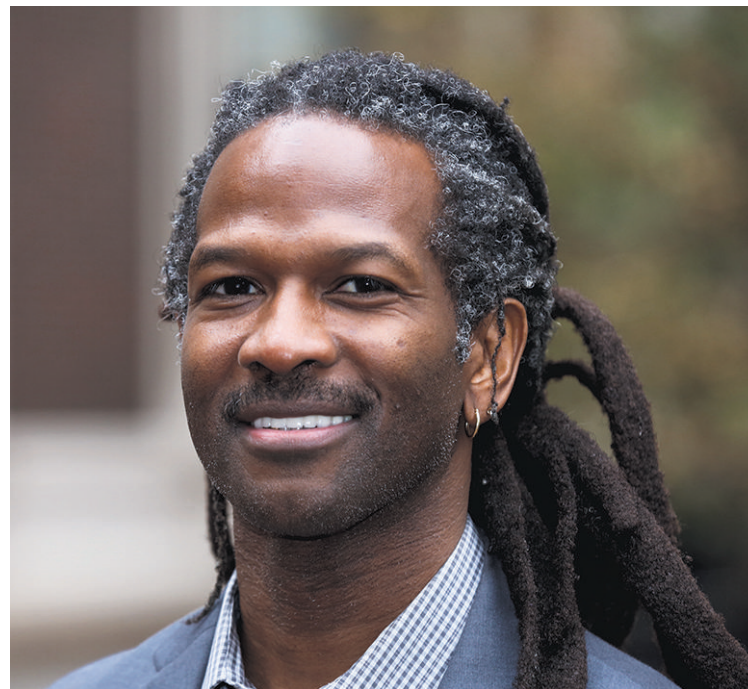
Hart knows this. He knows about the discomfort his readers might feel when they encounter his full-throated endorsement of opiates for recreational use. He offers the information in a spirit of radical transparency because he believes that if "grown-ups" like him would talk freely about the role of drugs in their lives, we wouldn't be in the mess we are in, a mess brought about by our ruinous drug policies, which have had such profound — and profoundly unequal — consequences for those who fall afoul of them.

For Hart, it wasn't always so. Coming up in hard circumstances in Miami, Hart too bought into the widespread belief that "smoking crack is like putting a gun in your mouth and pulling the trigger," as one particularly memorable public service announcement put it. In 1986, he listened in "disbelief" as James Baldwin, his intellectual hero, argued for the legalization of drugs, believing that the recently passed Anti-Drug Abuse Act would be used disproportionately against poor and Black people.

Of course, we now know that Baldwin was right: Our drug policies have resulted in the wildly disproportionate imprisonment of Black Americans. As Hart argues, the drug war has in fact succeeded, not because it has reduced illegal drug use in the United States (it hasn't), but because it has boosted prison and policing budgets, its true, if unstated, purpose. In his last book, "High Price," Hart described his evolving views on drugs and those who use them, a gradual rejection of the overly simplistic idea that drugs are inherently evil, the destroyers of people and neighborhoods.

Here, Hart goes quite a bit farther. He has been studying the neurochemistry of different drugs for years, including crack cocaine and methamphetamine. He sum-

CASEY SCHWARTZ is the author, most recently, of "Attention: A Love Story."



Carl L. Hart

marizes his research findings in this way: "I discovered that the predominant effects produced by the drugs discussed in this book are positive. It didn't matter whether the drug in question was cannabis, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine or psilocybin." The positive effects Hart cites include greater empathy, altruism, gratitude and sense of purpose. For Hart personally, coming home and smoking heroin at the end of the day helps him to "suspend the perpetual preparation for battle that goes on in my head," he writes.

'The predominant effects produced by the drugs discussed in this book are positive.'

I met Hart once, in 2016, when I interviewed him for an article I was writing about Adderall. He told me that for a responsible adult, it could make more sense to take a small dose of Adderall than to use caffeine — because Adderall has "less calories." At the time, I was struck by his candor. Now I understand that this is his driving purpose: to demystify drugs, to advocate for the right to "the pursuit of pleasure" enshrined in the Declaration of Independence itself.

Hart's argument that we need to drastically revise our current view of illegal drugs is both powerful and timely, but the question of addiction lingers in the background. It is not one he attempts to resolve. In fact, he declares that his book is "unapologetically" not about addiction. Most

users of any drug will not become addicted, he says, putting the figure at around 70 percent. He sees the "opioid crisis" as deserving of scare quotes, likening it to trumped-up drug scares of yore. "Much of the reporting on opioids is bull****," Hart writes, and doesn't account for the fact, for example, that many deaths declared opioid overdoses are actually the result of opioids mixed with alcohol or other sedatives.

Journalists writing about drugs are one of several groups of people that Hart expresses frustration with throughout his book. Others include members of the psychedelic community for insisting that their "plant medicines" are a "superior class of drug" and for not coming to the defense of drugs with more tainted reputations, like PCP. On the list is also his son's school, colleagues in the drug research world whom he calls out by name and people who didn't engage with his ideas, like Dr. Leana Wen, who, as the health commissioner of Baltimore, was apparently unwilling to introduce drug-safety testing to bring down the number of overdoses in the city, as Hart had suggested to her. "Thankfully for the people of Baltimore," he writes, Wen left to become president of Planned Parenthood. "Less than a year later, she was fired. I wish I could say I'm surprised." In these moments, Hart's writing can turn from passionate and moral to what feels like score-settling, undercutting the tenor of his narrative. But when it comes to the legacy of this country's war on drugs, we should all share his outrage. □

Honor Code

James Comey mourns the decline of personal integrity in government.

By **JOE KLEIN**

IN HIS SECOND DEBATE against Joe Biden last October, Donald Trump inadvertently stated his philosophy of life. The issue was refugees. He said that “low I.Q.” immigrants were the only ones who abided by the law and showed up for their refugee status hearings. A week or so later, The Washington Post reported a similar statement Trump made when he admitted to stiffing his creditors on a Chicago high-rise. He said the chicanery made him “a smart guy, rather than a bad guy.”

A smart guy, according to Trump, is someone who is wise enough to cheat. Stupid people abide by the law and attend their refugee status hearings;

SAVING JUSTICE
Truth, Transparency, and Trust
By James Comey

240 pp. Flatiron Books. \$29.99.

smart ones abscond. Stupid people pay their debts; smart ones stiff their lenders and dare them to sue. Stupid people believe their elected officials; smart people know the game is rigged. The most distressing aspect of Trump’s enduring appeal, even in defeat, is how many Americans seem to agree with him.

The former F.B.I. director James Comey is appalled. In his second attempt at a memoir, “Saving Justice,” there is a story about a small-time drug dealer named Vinnie who is placed in the federal witness protection program. Vinnie begins his new life, falls in love and gets married. The trouble is, Vinnie also was married in his old life. He now has two wives, which makes him a bigamist, which is a crime. “The Department of Justice has an obligation to tell defendants and their lawyers bad stuff about the government’s witnesses,” Comey writes. This is true, even if the “bad stuff” has nothing to do with the facts of the case — Vinnie’s testimony can convict a major drug dealer — and even if the revelation might ruin Vinnie’s new happiness, since Wife No. 2 doesn’t know about Wife No. 1. “I felt sorry for Vinnie in that moment,” Comey concludes. “But the truth was more important than his pain.” We never learn the fate of Vinnie’s marriages or the case in question — he is, after all, in the witness protection program — but Comey hammers the larger point: “The Department of

JOE KLEIN is the author of seven books, including “Primary Colors,” “Woody Guthrie: A Life” and “Charlie Mike.”

Justice could not accept anything short of the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

Comey’s view of justice — both the concept and the department — is ecclesiastical. U.S. attorneys are members of a sacred order. They make an unequivocal vow to tell the truth, and they do so with a certain style: “They were almost always younger than the other lawyers and stood straighter, buttoned their jackets more quickly, answered more directly, met deadlines and admitted what they didn’t know.”

In other words, they are the precise op-

stories of his own flaws, mixed emotions and humility. His height — 6-foot-8 — makes him testy in cramped spaces. His government salary makes it hard for him and his wife to raise five children. Annoyed, he throws his daughter’s obnoxious talking doll out the window of his automobile (of course, he drives back to retrieve it). His pursuit of transparency is rigorous to the point of myopia.

But, of course, he is right: You can’t have a working democracy without an agreed-upon standard of truth. You need a “reser-

away without a sound,” Comey writes. “He could have found a way to speak to the American people in their language. . . . Department policy and tradition gave him plenty of flexibility to speak in the public interest. He chose not to, and, in the end, the only voices most Americans heard were lying to them. No truth, no transparency, and Justice paid the price in lost trust.”

He should talk. It was Comey’s epic mishandling of the Hillary Clinton email case in 2016 that, arguably, gave Donald Trump the presidency. Comey defends his Clinton actions in both memoirs. He admits only to sins of honesty. The public was clamoring for a judgment. And the F.B.I.’s conclusion, after overwhelming work on the case, was that Clinton had been sloppy but not venal. “If we couldn’t prove bad intent, there was no prosecutable case,” he writes. Comey chose to announce this dramatically, in public, but not without a bone to his fellow Republicans: Clinton had been “extremely careless,” Comey said. He stewed about the adverb, which turned his report into an op-ed. And then, on the brink of the election, he reopened the case. A computer containing more Clinton emails was found in the possession of former Congressman Anthony Weiner, whose wife, Huma Abedin, worked for Clinton. Now, if there ever was a time for transparency, this was it. Comey could have said: “Look, we found no evidence of criminality in the Clinton case, and I would be very surprised — given the nature of the thousands of emails we’ve read — if this new batch proves other-

wise. But we’ve got to look at them, and so we will.” Instead, he sent a damning letter to Congress, announcing that the investigation had been reopened. As Comey might say: No context, no transparency.

In fairness, there was probably nothing that Comey could say about the Clinton case that would have stanching the “lock her up” conspiracy-mongering. His battle, and Mueller’s, is against a powerful sludge of cynicism that has been flowing, especially in the media, for 50 years — and, for the past four years, from the White House itself. All politicians are crooked, aren’t they? All politicians lie.

If nothing else, Comey has laid out the challenge of the next four years. Joe Biden’s quiet humanity will confront a noisy nation where too many citizens have become so sour that they’ve found solace, and entertainment, in an alternative reality. It will not be easy to lure them away from their noxious fantasies, but fact-based truth is not negotiable. □



U.S. Attorney James Comey in his office, December 2002.

posite of Donald Trump, who demanded “loyalty” rather than “honesty” from Comey, and fired him as director of the F.B.I. “Saving Justice” is a slight and repetitive book, but not an insignificant one. Comey revealed the crucial moments of his confrontation with the president in his 2018 memoir, “A Higher Loyalty.” They are rehashed here, but within the context of a larger theme: the national descent from strict, fact-based truth into a feckless mirage of “truthiness,” to use Stephen Colbert’s brilliant formulation. Can an institution religiously devoted to the truth, like the Justice Department, survive in a democracy where vast numbers of people believe that the 2020 election was a fraud?

Comey is a curious figure. He is smart, admirable, hard-working — and yet slightly smarmy in his rectitude. He begins each chapter with a quote from sources ranging from Virginia Woolf to Malcolm X to the inevitable Dalai Lama. He tries to leaven his supreme pontification with

voir of trust” in our institutions if the government’s truth-work is to proceed. Conspiracy theories about the Deep State are debilitating. The Justice Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the intelligence community have to be perceived as honest to a fault — even about their own faults.

You can’t have a working democracy without an agreed-upon standard of truth.

Comey is surprisingly tough on Robert Mueller. He believes Mueller’s report on Russian interference in the 2016 election is devastating, but too complicated for mass consumption. Attorney General William P. Barr spins up a dust storm of inaccuracies while Mueller “chose to submit his unreadable — and unread — report and then go

Full-Court Pressure

John Thompson inspired a mixture of fear and respect in coaches, referees, journalists — even drug kingpins.

By **JASON ZENGERLE**

BY THE TIME he summoned Rayful Edmond to a meeting on an autumn afternoon in 1988, the Legend of John Thompson was already large. He was the Black coach of the Black college basketball team that was equal parts athletic and cultural force. On the court, Thompson taught his Georgetown Hoyas to play swarming, suffocating defense. Off the court, he hounded his players — who were among the few Black students at Georgetown — to go to class, keeping a deflated basketball in his office to re-

I CAME AS A SHADOW

An Autobiography

By John Thompson with Jesse Washington

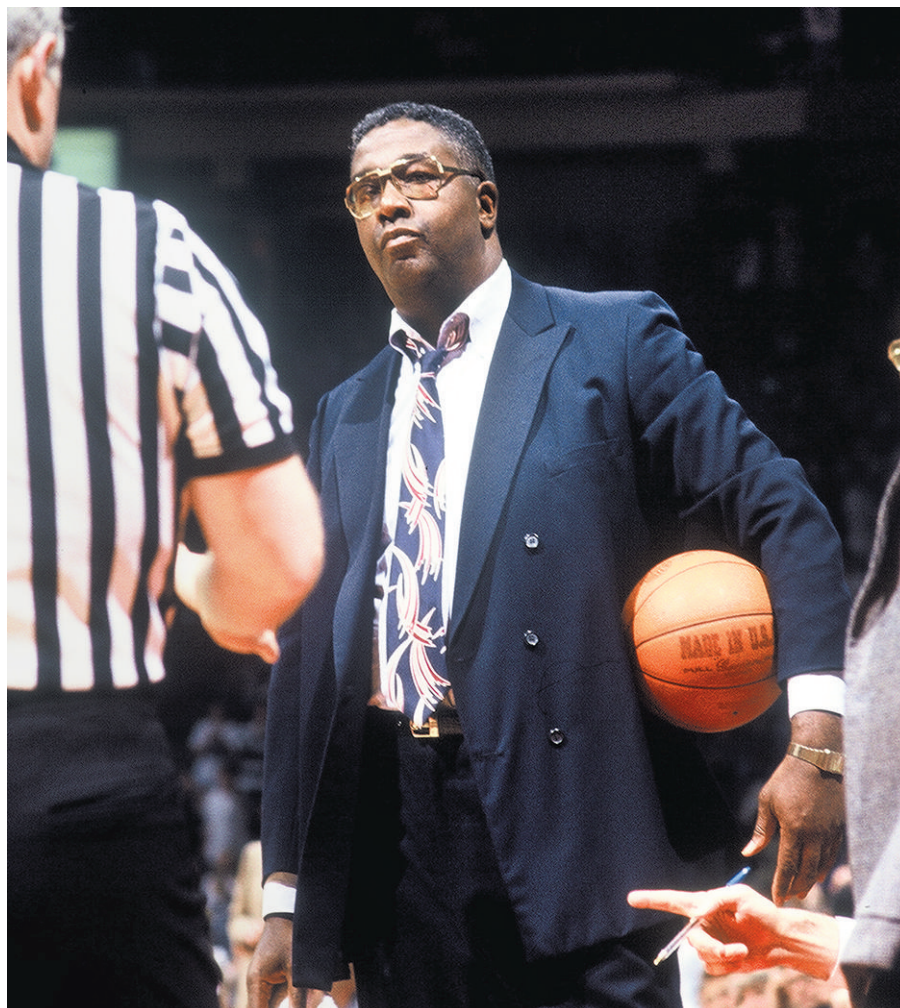
337 pp. Henry Holt & Company. \$29.99.

mind them that their athletic careers would eventually come to an end. He brooked no dissent. If an opponent threw an elbow, he didn't necessarily object to his players responding with a punch. When a reporter asked him how it felt to be the first Black college basketball coach to win a national championship, he replied that the question was insulting because it assumed other Black coaches hadn't been talented enough to win it all. Standing 6-foot-10 with a booming voice and an urban dictionary's worth of curse words, Thompson inspired a potent mixture of fear and respect in players, coaches, referees, journalists, professors — even drug kingpins.

Edmond, at the tender age of 23, was the biggest crack cocaine dealer in Washington, D.C. His gang made as much as \$2 million a week in sales and was linked to as many as 30 murders. Edmond was also a big Georgetown basketball fan. When Thompson learned that Edmond was palling around with two of his players, he told them to stay away from the drug dealer. Then Thompson put out word on the street that he wanted to talk to Edmond himself. Edmond dutifully showed up at Thompson's office, where the coach delivered the same no-contact message. Edmond promised to abide by it. Several months later, after Edmond was arrested on a 39-count federal indictment, Thompson went on ABC's "Nightline" and told Ted Koppel about the encounter. That's when the Legend of John Thompson — the basketball coach who got in the face of an infamous drug dealer and told him to keep the hell away from his program — grew even larger.

But in his posthumous autobiography, "I Came as a Shadow," Thompson, who died at the age of 78 in August, lets a little air out of that legend, or at least tries to put a different spin on it. "A myth has grown about me threatening Rayful and ordering him to

JASON ZENGERLE is a writer at large for *The Times Magazine*.



John Thompson in 1991.

stay away from my players," Thompson writes. "I've always been offended when some people assume our interaction had a physical component." What actually happened, Thompson reports, is that he reasoned with Edmond and appealed to the drug dealer's better angels. "I thought of Rayful as my neighbor's child, who was exposing my kids to some trouble. I wanted to protect my players, my university and myself. The conversation was between two Black men from Washington who both loved basketball, respected each other as human beings and had enough intelligence to work out a solution to our problem." His confrontation with Edmond, Thompson concludes, "was less than what everybody said, and also more."

In "I Came as a Shadow," Thompson — who was long wary of revealing too much about himself and yet was continually frustrated about being misunderstood — finally gets to cast his legend on his own terms, in all of its contradictions. He was someone whose job was to win basketball games, and who relished his ability to do so, but was "paranoid about being acknowledged too much as a coach." He liked to remind his players that "far more money is made sitting down than standing up" —

and would interrupt practice to deliver a two-hour lecture about the legacies of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X — but he "resented being portrayed as some kind of social worker." Thompson writes, "I didn't want to be equal to the white man, I wanted to kick his ass." In his autobiography, he demonstrates that his legend was less than what it was made out to be, and also more — much more.

Thompson grew up in segregated Washington. His mother was an educator who couldn't get a job teaching so she became a maid; his father couldn't read or write but, at the tile factory where he worked, "he trained every new boss they gave him." The only white people Thompson encountered as a child were the nuns and priests at the local Catholic school he attended. They branded Thompson, who was unable to read, "retarded." It wasn't until he went to public school in sixth grade, where he was taught by a Black teacher who helped find him a Black reading specialist, that Thompson began to succeed academically. "Black educators were able to help me," he writes, "and white ones did not."

Thompson was a talented basketball player and received scholarships to attend a predominantly white Catholic high

school in Washington and later Providence College. In the mid-60s he played two seasons in the N.B.A. for the Boston Celtics, backing up Bill Russell. Then Thompson retired from the N.B.A. "to begin the rest of my life." He didn't expect basketball to be a part of it. He returned to Washington and worked with troubled youths (one later became a hit man) while earning a master's degree in education. A small Catholic high school, St. Anthony's, hired Thompson to coach its pitiful boys' basketball team — a side job that was akin to supervising "an after-school gym class." But then Thompson's competitive juices got flowing, he began combing the city's playgrounds and Boys Clubs where he had once played for recruits, and before long St. Anthony's became a powerhouse. In 1972, Georgetown hired him as its basketball coach.

Georgetown was, as Thompson and his fellow Black Washingtonians put it, "Across the Park" — referring to Rock Creek Park, which served as the informal dividing line between Black and white Washington. The university was notoriously inhospitable to Black people, but it hired Thompson because of his race — partly as a realization that it needed to make amends to Black Washingtonians, but also in an attempt to improve its basketball team, which in turn would raise Georgetown's profile. "He knew any successful team needed Black players," Thompson writes of Georgetown's dean of admissions. "He knew I was a Black coach who had a lot of Washington's best Black players on my teams. Are you starting to get the picture?"

The plan worked. Thompson turned Georgetown into one of college basketball's dominant teams, and the university rose to prominence right along with it. Between 1983 and 1986, when Georgetown appeared in two Final Fours and won one national championship, applications to the school increased by 45 percent. Thompson boasts, not entirely unreasonably, "Basketball gave Georgetown a national reputation." Meanwhile, the Hoyas, with their Black coach and their Black players, achieved a different sort of acclaim among African-Americans. Thompson recalls the many Black people who approached him in airports and elsewhere to thank him for what he was doing. "More than a few," he writes, "thought Georgetown was a historically Black college, based on our team. That always gave me a good feeling."

But there were a lot of hard feelings, too — typically having to do with race. Thompson was protective of his players, many of whom would not have been admitted to Georgetown but for basketball. He expected them to go to class and get good grades; if they didn't, he held them out of practices or games. But Thompson was loath to let anyone outside his team know. "It would have been harmful to expose their weaknesses," he argues. "You think we put a sign on the door saying my father

couldn't read? Our neighbors didn't even know." This led reporters, most of them white, to accuse him of being paranoid or militaristic — or worse. One branded Thompson "the Idi Amin of college basketball." His teams were invariably described in the press as thuggish and scary. "When Bobby Knight's Indiana team" — which was disproportionately white — "played great physical defense, they were 'tough,'" Thompson writes. "When Georgetown pressed full court, we were intimidating."

The game itself did not always provide a refuge. When a white referee named Reggie Copeland made what Thompson felt was a bad call that knocked Georgetown out of the N.C.A.A. tournament one year, Thompson wondered if Copeland's upbringing in the Jim Crow South had played a role: "What did Copeland think about a

Black team from up North, with a big Black coach hollering on the sideline?" On other occasions, Thompson worried that Black referees didn't give him a fair shake because they were afraid that "a lot of people thought Black refs would conspire to help a Black coach." His ferocious desire to win was about more than a mere game. "I knew that my success or failure would influence opportunities not only for other Black coaches, but for Black people in general," Thompson writes. "I had to win because Black people didn't have the right *not* to be successful."

Thompson (or, perhaps, his co-author, Jesse Washington) is a lively and entertaining writer. Describing the hush that fell over a D.C. playground when Elgin Baylor joined a pickup game Thompson was playing in as a teenager, he writes, "I think the

squirrels stopped gathering nuts." Basketball fans will relish his stories about coaching Patrick Ewing, Alonzo Mourning, Dikembe Mutombo and Allen Iverson and his explanation for why Michael Jordan was left open to hit the jump shot that helped North Carolina beat Georgetown in the 1982 national championship game. And Thompson makes news with his announcement that he's come to the conclusion that the N.C.A.A. should allow college basketball players to be paid.

The greatest value of "I Came as a Shadow," though, is that it offers us one last, long opportunity to hear Thompson's singular voice. Today, with LeBron James running a voting rights group and Mike Krzyzewski recording a Black Lives Matter video, political activism is almost expected from basketball players and

coaches. But when Thompson was raising a ruckus four decades ago, as a "dark-skinned, loud-voiced Black man who refused to be apologetic or grateful for the rights God intended him to have," he often stood alone. Just as Thompson acknowledges the people who made his own success possible — "the ones who lived in bondage, or scrubbed toilets when they couldn't teach school, or went to work instead of learning how to read" — today's socially engaged players and coaches owe him a tremendous debt.

Thompson would sometimes find himself daydreaming about how many more championships he could have won if he had focused only on basketball, but he would quickly push such thoughts out of his mind. After all, he writes, "I never had the luxury of just being a basketball coach." □

Ice, Ice Babies

Rich Cohen decodes the culture of youth hockey and considers its impact on parents.

By **MARK ROTELLA**

"IF THE COACH wants to win more than his or her team does, that's a problem and the team is doomed to fail," says the longtime coach of my 15-year-old son's hockey team. Rich Cohen might understand. In Cohen's thoughtful, lively new memoir, "Pee Wees: Confessions of a Hockey Parent," the coach-player relationship is almost as important as the parent-child dynamic.

Welcome to the world of youth hockey in Connecticut — and meet Cohen's 11-year-old son, Micah. What's amazing is how uni-

PEE WEES

Confessions of a Hockey Parent

By Rich Cohen

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

versal the experiences are for hockey families: the grueling three-day tryouts (after all, "the team a kid makes will determine his standing in the youth hockey hierarchy"); the early-morning long-haul drives to arenas throughout the Northeast for games; the armchair-coach parents, keeping track down to the second the amount of

MARK ROTELLA is the author of "Stolen Figs and Other Adventures in Calabria" and "Amore: The Story of Italian American Song." He is the director of the Coccia Institute for the Italian Experience in America at Montclair State University.

time one's kid plays; and verbal tensions between parents of opposing teams. "The mildest New Jersey heckler outdoes Connecticut's most vociferous," Cohen reports. "The nastiest are found on Long Island."

At the book's center is the development of Micah as a hockey player, and Cohen's identity as a type of parent he describes as "the crazies, the control freaks, the hyper-involved."

Tryouts for the Connecticut team begin in April, with anxious parents pressing their faces against the glass or huddling like scouts in the stands. At the end of each evening, the parents gather in front of a list to see whether their kid made a team on the first round or will need to return the following night. For the Bears, 200 kids try out, of whom only 70 will be placed on teams, ranking from AA down to B. Micah slips into the A team.

The hockey season ramps up in September, and Cohen takes readers deep into the lives of team families. We meet a Deadhead parent, a dental hygienist, a beer importer and a French physicist. Most important, we meet the coaches, who have the power to shape or destroy a player's confidence. There's a young, talented guy named Pete and two assistant parent-coaches, Ralph Rizzo and Alan Hendrix. (Cohen acknowledges that names, teams and places have been changed, "ditto dates and details.")

Initially struggling, the team tries to gel under Coach Pete, who adjusts his lines to create the best combinations. (There are

often three lines of forwards and two defensive pairs in youth hockey; the first line is usually the strongest.) Throughout, Cohen inserts himself into Micah's sport — cornering coaches, and breaking the rule prohibiting parents from talking with coaches for 24 hours after a game.

After Coach Pete moves Micah down to the third line — ostensibly to help weaker

His son responds, "Because no matter where they put me, it's still hockey."

When Coach Pete disappears for a few weeks to attend to family issues, the coaching falls to Coach Hendrix, who gives more ice time to his daughter, humiliates the other players and emphasizes winning above development. The team starts to crumble.

No matter the struggle, Cohen shines when he's exploring hockey history. He describes the annual tournament in Lake Placid, N.Y. — a rite of passage for every hockey kid in the Northeast — on the rink where, in 1980, a team of scrappy U.S. amateurs defeated legendary Soviets at the height of the Cold War. Cohen describes how Soviet hockey transformed in 1958 under Coach Anatoli Tarasov, who "built his team in the style of Russian folkways, influenced less by dump and chase than by the Bolshoi Ballet."

Eventually, Cohen asks: "Why did I care so much about the rise and fall of a Pee Wee hockey team? Why did I spend nights on the phone with my father and other fathers, talking and texting?" These are questions he never fully addresses, but one can guess the conclusion is about wanting his son — and the team — to shine. What emerges for Cohen in this warmhearted memoir is a love for his son beyond hockey, as well as the acknowledgment that "there is little to match the intoxication of seeing your child do something well." □



A youth hockey team prepares for a game.

players — Cohen approaches him, dismayed that his son has been assigned a "crap detail."

"Is Micah having fun?" Coach Pete asks, and Cohen acknowledges he is. "So what do you care? Try to remember what this is about — them, not us."

On the car ride home, Cohen asks Micah: "Doesn't it bother you? Why aren't you pissed off?"

The Struggle, Annotated

A novel of Philippine history takes a cue from 'Pale Fire.'

By **RANDY BOYAGODA**

VIRGIL SHOULD OFFER libations to the gods in thanksgiving that Gina Apostol writes about the Philippines' founding stories instead of Rome's. Her latest novel to appear in the United States, "The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata," wreaks playful and learned havoc on the life and work of the 19th-century writer José Rizal. Apostol seizes on the catalytic relationship between his fiction and the contemporaneous Filipino independence movement, whose success in ending Spanish imperial rule was qualified by five subsequent decades of U.S. involvement.

"Raymundo Mata" was first published in the Philippines in 2009 and won the country's National Book Award. Since then, Apostol has published two well-received novels — "Insurrecto" and "Gun Dealers' Daughter" — in the United States, where



Gina Apostol

THE REVOLUTION ACCORDING TO RAYMUNDO MATA

By **Gina Apostol**

350 pp. Soho Press. \$27.

she now lives. She writes historical fiction like Hilary Mantel on acid. The result is demanding, confusing, exhausting and impressive, and justified, at base, by the origin story of her native archipelagic nation, as one of the several voices of this novel explains:

"The American Revolution had farmers and dentists. The French Revolution had a mob of lawyers.

"Our prime mover was a poet.

"The Philippines may be the only country whose war of independence began with a novel (and a first novel at that) — Rizal's 'Noli Me Tangere' ('Touch-Me-Not').

"Our notion of freedom began with fiction, which may explain why it remains an illusion."

This account of Rizal's literary-political significance comes from Estrella Espejo, an editor now living in a sanitarium because of a particularly trying project. The novel takes the form of a found memoir by a fictionalized revolutionary named Raymundo Mata, whose idiosyncratic entries are analyzed and debated by Espejo and others in copious annotations, themselves prefaced by no fewer than seven introductory notes. From an American jail cell, in 1902, Mata chronicles his life story of growing up the visually impaired child of provincial theater actors and joining the Filipino independence movement. The dissidents coalesced around Rizal, a novel-writing ophthalmologist who assailed Spanish rule if never outright calling for it to end (his arrest and eventual execution would help bring it down instead).

RANDY BOYAGODA is a novelist and professor of English at the University of Toronto.

Reality Outdone

Leonora Carrington's Surrealist novel upends all expectations.

By **BLAKE BUTLER**

I'VE NEVER HAD a go-to answer for when someone asks, "What's a great Surrealist novel?" I've always found this nearly century-old subgenre of literature rather tame, less a transcendence of the known world than half-baked psychoanalytic play and veiled romance. Real life is forever lurking around the corner, so it seems, lording its narrativizing ways over what might be glimpsed of the Beyond.

Enter Leonora Carrington (1917-2011), a British-born Mexican painter and author who fantastically surpasses her Freud-struck, phallogocentric contemporaries. Her

THE HEARING TRUMPET

By **Leonora Carrington**

Illustrated. 210 pp. New York Review Books. Paper, \$15.95.

1974 novel, "The Hearing Trumpet," newly reissued, stands out as something at last truly radical, undoing not only our expectations of time and space, but of the psyche and its boundaries.

"For the last 45 years I have been trying to get away," our 92-year-old narrator, Marian Leatherby, tells us early on. She knows she's a liability to her son, Galahad, and his family, who live only for themselves. Nearly deaf, she is gifted a hearing trumpet by her friend Carmella — just in time to overhear her family discuss shipping her off to an elder-care institution "financed by a prominent American cereal company (Bouncing Breakfast Cereals Co.)" and portentously known as the Well of Light Brotherhood.

Even after the move, however, our kindly Marian remains buoyant, wide-eyed, ready for life. She continually adapts to her circumstances, as Carrington builds layers upon layers with an adeptly shifting point of view. Like captives in a body double that refuses to behave logically, we are allowed only to look over Marian's shoulder as the world changes around her. At first, she finds herself swept up into the psychodrama of a confined tribe of similarly wild-minded female residents, who are overseen by the cultish and perverted Dr. Gambit. The doctor's quasi-Christian rule of law belies a madcap conspiracy, involving mind control and poisoned fudge, that ends up dissolving pretty much everything we thought we knew about where the novel was going. It's "The Crying of Lot 49" on Ambien, or perhaps "The Magic Mountain" whittled down to a viral nightmare, or a shiv.

The book's pivot point is Marian's discovery of an uncanny portrait of a "leering abbess" who appears to watch over her

BLAKE BUTLER is the author of seven works of fiction and nonfiction, most recently, "Alice Knott."

during meals. Her obsession with the painting leads to a 37-page digression that relates the life and times of Rosalinda Alvarez della Cueva, abbess of the Convent of St. Barbara of Tartarus, to whom the Brotherhood is deeply tied. Carrington's skillful rendition of this embedded story (which itself includes a bizarre retelling of the fate of Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail) unlocks from the novel the many fractal worlds hidden within. Soon we're in landscapes populated with orgies, riddles, doppelgängers and stairways to hell, with little time to trace who we were or where we've been.



Leonora Carrington

We are reminded of the power of fiction to create a gateway to a place that wasn't visible.

Thereafter, nothing is the same. In following the mystery of the Brotherhood's origin, Marian finds her mind and memory, and the entire history of the world, wholly transformed. The questions that plague our routine daily lives are broken at last, replaced with an occasion to see newly, and therefore, to rise to heights beyond the ceilings of domesticity.

The result is a mind-flaying masterpiece, held together by Carrington's gifts of wit, imagination and suspense. We ourselves arrive at the end feeling reconfigured, as if the book — like "Mount Analogue," by Carrington's fellow Surrealist René Daumal — has only just begun where it cuts off. We are reminded, then, of the power of fiction not to reflect or to define, but to create a gateway to a place that wasn't visible to us before the text, and yet has always existed just beyond our present reality's dull edge. □

How E.L. Doctorow taught an aspiring writer to hear the sounds of fiction.

I WAS BORN with “bad ears.” When I was a child, summertime swimming often turned into episodes of throbbing eardrums, and I would end up fetal-like on my bed, my hands cupped over my ears, rocking my body in hope that the movement would somehow diminish the insistent ache. My mom would heat up eardrops and slip the warm liquid down my inflamed ear chute with a dropper, creating temporary relief from the roar of pain. Tiny plastic cylinders were inserted into my ears on several occasions with the aim of draining the fluids that led to these bouts. Sometimes this worked. Other times it didn’t.

Growing up, I also struggled with learning disabilities: Reading did not come naturally to me. Instead, words splintered apart on the page, their pronunciation out of reach. When I read to myself, I couldn’t hear my own voice. For me, the act of reading was like sitting alone in a silent room: Static strands of words created meaning, character and story, but I couldn’t hear their cadences and rhythms.

This changed in the winter of 1995. I was a graduate student in the creative writing program at New York University, and you could say I had become a more active reader: I spent huge amounts of time in libraries and bookstores. I had even started writing a novel, which seemed like a miracle, given my earlier experiences with language. That semester, I enrolled in “The Craft of Fiction” taught by E. L. Doctorow.

The first class met at 5:30 on a Monday evening. It was late January, and darkness had already seeped into the sky beyond the windows of the arts and science building on Waverly Place. As Doctorow spoke to us, he leaned against the edge of a desk at the front of the classroom. Wisps of hair swept across the elegant dome of his balding head. He wore his circular glasses and a light blue button-down shirt, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Each week, he explained, we would read some of his favorite novels and short stories, following a sort of “kitchen sink” approach in which we would examine all aspects of the author’s craft so that we could become better writers ourselves. The reading list included “The Marquise of O” and “Michael Kohlhaas,” by Heinrich von Kleist, “The Waves,” by Virginia Woolf, and stories by Edgar Allan Poe (Doctorow was named after Poe).

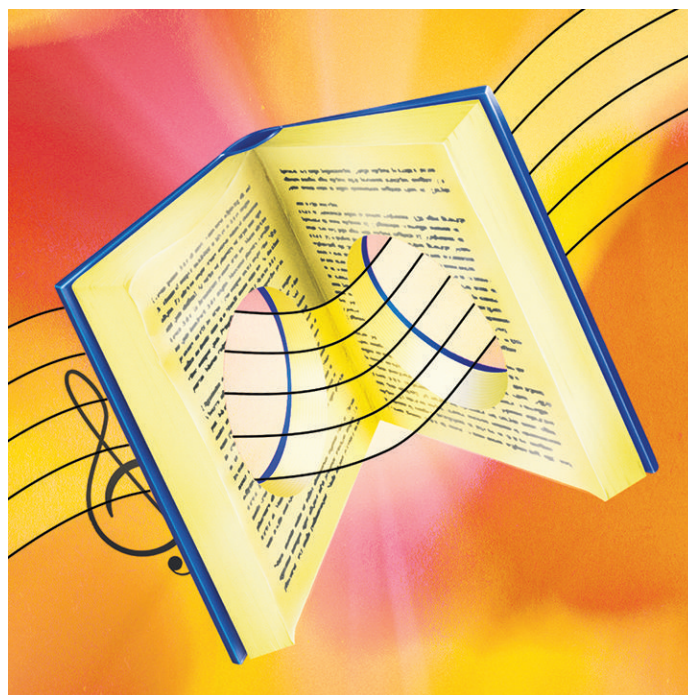
“This isn’t about reading before you go to bed or reading on the subway,” he said with a soft smile. “This is about becoming professional readers. This is about craft and narrative. It’s about asking yourself: What can you steal from these writers?”

A month into the semester, I was rollerblading in Central Park with my then boyfriend (now husband), Michael. After completing a loop of the park, Michael and I slowly glided down an exit at East 96th Street. Near the bottom of the slight incline, my feet suddenly slipped out from underneath me, and I fell backward onto my shoulder. The pain was electric. Bright and blinding. An ambulance delivered me to the nearest emergency room, at Metropolitan Hospital. I was given an injection of Demerol and vomited instantly into a

bedpan. Within an hour, an orderly arrived, asking me if I had health insurance (I did), and instructing me to go to another hospital the next day. (More police officers than doctors populated the hallways of the E.R. at Metropolitan.)

The following morning, at NYU Langone Medical Center, a doctor gently threaded my injured arm through a cloth sling and wrapped it tightly with a beige bandage against my abdomen. Except when showering and sleeping, the doctor said, I was to keep my arm like this for six weeks. If my shoulder healed well, I would move on to a program of physical therapy.

For the rest of the semester, I could no longer write or type. I told Doctorow about my accident, and he suggested I continue with the class and hand in the final paper over the summer. It had been a long time since I



JULIA DUFOSSE

had merely sat in a classroom — and listened. Truly listened. No taking notes. Despite the turn of events, it felt like a luxury to sit back and take in the weekly discussions.

Along with two other students, I was assigned to give a presentation on “The Waves.” We decided to focus on character development, style and language, and structure. Considered one of Woolf’s most experimental novels, “The Waves” consists of interior soliloquies of six childhood friends as they move along the arcs of their lives; short descriptive interludes capturing the sun’s progression punctuate the sections, illuminating the passage of time.

This is when it happened: As I read “The Waves,” I started to “hear” language as if for the first time. It was as though a window flew open, and the sounds of the author’s words rushed in. I began to notice the sonic patterns of Woolf’s sentences, how she composed a music all her own with her rhythmic language and sen-

tence structure. In the novel’s first section, Woolf writes from Bernard’s perspective: “We shall sink like swimmers just touching the ground with the tips of their toes. We shall sink through the green air of the leaves, Susan. We sink as we run. The waves close over us, the beech leaves meet above our heads.” I became attuned to the cumulative sounds of one sentence after another, and how the rhythms and repetitions produced a kind of symphony that I had never heard before.

Here is language, I thought as I read Woolf. *Here is life*.

Perhaps it was synesthesia: I couldn’t write, and this limitation may have opened up another cognitive pathway in my brain. Or maybe it was the fact that Woolf’s novel is built with a kind of acoustic architecture; the sounds of her sentences carry the narrative along. Later, I read in Elicia Clements’s “Virginia Woolf: Music, Sound, Language” (2019) that Woolf wrote in a letter to Elizabeth Trevelyan, a Dutch musician: “I always think of my books as music before I write them.” (In the same book, Clements writes that Woolf was listening to Beethoven’s late String Quartet in B flat major, Op. 130, and that this chamber work inspired much of “The Waves.”) I imagine it was a combination of these circumstances: my broken shoulder and inability to write, Woolf’s distinctive soundscapes and the critical engagement that Doctorow was pressing on us.

During the class in which we presented “The Waves,” Doctorow spoke about how Woolf’s lyricism underscored the march of time in the novel. Like Kafka in “The Metamorphosis” and Dante in the “Inferno,” he observed, Woolf animated the inevitable movement toward death through her language, the rhythmic resonance of her sentences and her sophisticated narrative structure. The innovative interplay of these elements opened up this path of meaning for the reader.

The semester continued: We read Kerouac (and I had a similar aural experience with his stream-of-consciousness, syncopated prose), the stories of Jayne Anne Phillips and more. For the final writing assignment, Doctorow asked us to choose one of the works on the syllabus and borrow — or steal — from it in a fiction of our own. (For his best-selling novel “Ragtime,” Doctorow famously borrowed the tent poles for his plot from Kleist’s “Michael Kohlhaas” and reassembled them with his own version of the story in New York City at the turn of the 20th century.) Not surprisingly, I chose “The Waves”: I copied Woolf’s sentences word for word, then replaced her language with my own — and began to understand how I could create my own musical arrangements in my imagination and on the page.

Over time, my hearing has worsened. A year after my graduation from N.Y.U., my left eardrum was perforated by another infection and required reconstructive surgery. For the past decade, I have experienced the continuous ring of tinnitus in that ear and now wear a hearing aid. Yet the sounds of reading are very much alive in my head. Occasionally, I’ll commit to memory a poem by one of my favorite poets — Marie Howe, say, or Jean Valentine — and for a spell I know the sound of her words intimately, almost like a heartbeat. All of this is thanks to Doctorow and what he taught me: Read deeply, steal what you can and always listen for the music. □

The Wanderer

A memoirist contemplates what it means to find home.

By **FAHIMA HAQUE**

WHERE ARE YOU FROM? If someone were to ask, you might cite your current ZIP code or share where you were raised. You might mention where your ancestors lived. You might explain whether you grew up rooted to one cul-de-sac, one city block, one country.

But for Nadia Owusu, the question is not so simple. The daughter of a Ghanaian fa-

AFTERSHOCKS

By **Nadia Owusu**

299 pp. Simon & Schuster. \$26.

ther who worked for a United Nations agency and an Armenian-American mother, she has lived a nomadic life — she was born in Tanzania, then, as a child, lived in Uganda, Ethiopia, Italy and England. Later, when she was 18, she moved to New York for college and stayed there for her

FAHIMA HAQUE is the audiences editor for *The Times's National desk* and works on the weekly *Race/Related* newsletter.

entire adult life. “Confused?” she asks. “Me too. I never know how to answer the question of my origin.”

Owusu’s debut memoir, “Aftershocks,” is her attempt to explain.

In “Aftershocks,” Owusu reflects on her childhood and her 20s, feeling untethered from the world. The narrative is straightforward but Owusu uses formats like a resettlement intake form and symbols like a recycled blue chair found on the streets of New York City to tell her story. The dominant motif, however, is an earthquake. Owusu opens the book with a chapter titled “First Earthquake” and chapters are grouped under sections with labels that include “Faults,” “Aftershocks” and more.

Throughout the book, Owusu writes poignantly about belonging and assimilation. But the connective tissue of the book is the near-constant guilt she experiences as she grapples with identity and her willingness to erase the most vibrant parts of

herself in an attempt to belong.

In one instance, Owusu details how she betrayed the only other Black girl at the Catholic boarding school she attended, making fun of the girl’s hair to the white students. “In reality, Agatha smelled like my family,” she confesses. In another, Owusu recalls feeling conflicted when her uncle, a cab driver, drops her off at college. “I’m going to college too,” he said. “Next year. The cab is only temporary. I was embarrassed that he felt the need to tell me that, that he needed me to know he was more than the immigrant man behind the wheel of a yellow cab.”

Owusu is unflinching in examining herself, which is commendable, but her self-reflection can veer toward the melodramatic and her repeated ruminations don’t yield further clarity. “The boy’s bird body haunts me,” she says when she sees a child beggar collapse in Ethiopia. “He hovers over me in judgment when I feel sorry for

myself, but he cannot stop me from feeling sorry for myself.”

Owusu also writes about the relationships in her life. She tells us about a man who she thought was her great love in her 20s, and of the foul men who assaulted her when she was a child, and of the many hapless men she has slept with. But Owusu’s book is most alive when she writes about her parents.

It’s clear that Owusu believes most in her father, whom she so lovingly called “Baba-Mama.” Her father died when Owusu was a teenager, and his death remains a shadow over everything she does. She was initially told he died of cancer, but when Owusu was 28, her stepmother unexpectedly told her, without proof, that he had died of AIDS. It’s an assertion that makes her question everything she thought she knew.

In the end, Owusu ultimately answers what home is. Her definition is pure and restorative to read. “I am made of the earth, flesh, ocean, blood and bone of all the places I tried to belong to and all the people I long for. I am pieces. I am whole. I am home.” □



Nadia Owusu

Unseen Revolution

How one telephone call had a lasting impact on American politics.

By **RAYMOND ARSENAULT**

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN STRUGGLE for freedom and civil rights is replete with dramatic and harrowing stories, many involving intimidation and threats of violence from white supremacist defenders of the status quo. One of the most consequential of these stories is the subject of “Nine

NINE DAYS

The Race to Save Martin Luther King Jr.’s Life and Win the 1960 Election

By **Stephen Kendrick and Paul Kendrick**

Illustrated. 368 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$28.

Days,” a compelling narrative written by the father-and-son team of Stephen and Paul Kendrick, co-authors of two previous books on race, law and politics.

The story begins in mid-October 1960 with Martin Luther King Jr.’s incarceration (his first) in a Georgia jail cell and ends three weeks later with John F. Kennedy’s

narrow victory over Richard M. Nixon in the most competitive presidential election of the 20th century. Kennedy’s razor-thin triumph depended on several factors ranging from his youthful charm to Mayor Richard J. Daley’s ability to pad the Democratic vote in Chicago. But, as the Kendricks ably demonstrate, one crucial factor in Kennedy’s electoral success was the late surge of Black voters into the Democratic column. In all likelihood, this surge represented the difference between victory and defeat in at least five swing states, including Illinois, Michigan and New Jersey, ensuring Kennedy’s comfortable margin (303 to 219) in the Electoral College.

This last-minute shift was precipitated by two impulsive phone calls: one from John Kennedy to Coretta Scott King, expressing his concern for her jailed husband’s safety; the second from the candidate’s younger brother Robert to Oscar Mitchell, the Georgia judge overseeing King’s incarceration. Arrested on two minor charges — participating in a student-led sit-in at Rich’s department store in Atlanta and driving with an Alabama license after changing his residency to Georgia — King was thought to be in grave danger after a manacled, late-night transfer from an Atlanta jail to a remote rural facility in Klan-infested DeKalb County, and soon

thereafter to the state’s notorious maximum-security prison in Reidsville.

Coretta King, panic-stricken that her husband might be murdered or even lynched, contacted Harris Wofford, a friend and longtime civil rights advocate working on Kennedy’s campaign. Along with Kennedy’s brother-in-law Sargent Shriver and the Black journalist Louis Martin, Wofford was part of a campaign initiative charged with expanding the Black vote for Kennedy by offsetting the senator’s mediocre record on civil rights — somehow without alienating the white South.

On Oct. 26, after consulting with Wofford, Shriver persuaded Kennedy to call Mrs. King. The conversation was brief, but the message was powerful: “I know this must be very hard for you. I understand you are expecting a baby, and I just wanted you to know that I was thinking about you and Dr. King. If there is anything I can do to help, please feel free to call on me.” When Bobby, Jack’s campaign manager, learned what had happened, he was furious, fearing this was a liberal stunt that would destroy his

brother’s chance of winning the South. But after cooling down and realizing that the die was cast, he called Judge Mitchell to plead for King’s release on bail.

Mitchell agreed, King was soon released and on the last Sunday before the election, the Kennedy campaign blanketed the nation’s Black churches with a flier

later known as the Blue Bomb.

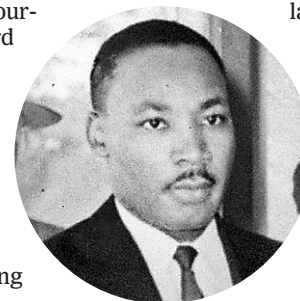
The choice was clear, the bright blue flier insisted:

“‘No Comment’ Nixon Versus a Candidate With a Heart, Senator Kennedy.”

With Black ministers leading the way, Kennedy won an estimated 68 percent of the Black vote on Election Day, 7 percent higher than Adlai Stevenson’s showing in 1956.

No brief review can do full justice to the Kendricks’ masterly and often riveting

account of King’s ordeal and the 1960 “October Surprise” that may have altered the course of modern American political history. Suffice it to say that any reader who navigates the many twists and turns and surprises in this complex tale will come away recognizing the power of historical contingency. □



Martin Luther King Jr.

Mother Courage

One woman's journey to Syria to find her radicalized son.

By STEVEN LEE MYERS

THE TWO WARS that have taken place in the rebellious Russian province of Chechnya were in many ways the horrifying denouement of the Soviet Union's collapse. Though confined to "a small corner of hell," as Anna Politkovskaya, the late Russian journalist, called the place, the wars reverberate to this day.

Those reverberations — from Europe to Syria — are at the heart of a new book from Wojciech Jagielski, another journalist who, like Politkovskaya, has traversed the world's darkest corners.

"All Lara's Wars," translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, is Jagielski's journalistic account of one woman's journey from an improbably idyllic childhood in the mountains of Georgia — "there was no finer place on Earth" — through

ALL LARA'S WARS

By Wojciech Jagielski

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

269 pp. Seven Stories Press. Paper, \$23.95.

one conflict after another. "War was like a curse that had dogged her at every step, constantly reminding her of its presence and steadily robbing her of everything she loved or valued," Jagielski writes.

The author of previous books on wars in Afghanistan and Uganda, Jagielski seems less interested in a historical inquiry of jihad than in an intimate account of the toll war exacts on one woman. At the same time, this is a book that in its way seeks to explain what unfolds each time a terrorist attack is carried out by a young Chechen immigrant, like the recent stabbing of a teacher in France.

"When I lost my husband, and then both my brothers were killed, I thought war was a man's business, and women had no part in it," Jagielski's subject tells him. "But I refused to give up my sons. I was their mother; my right to them was greater."

Lara (not her real name, we learn at the end) belongs to a small community, the Kists, who settled in Georgia's remote Pankisi Gorge centuries ago. They are cousins of the Chechens, Muslims on the northern slope of the Caucasus who have long bristled under Russian rule.

As a girl she dreamed of becoming an actress; she graduated from high school and went on to study to become a teacher. On a summer break, she met and married a Chechen, moving to Chechnya's capital,

STEVEN LEE MYERS is the Beijing bureau chief for *The Times* and previously worked as a correspondent in Moscow.

Grozny, which offered a more cosmopolitan life.

When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, Chechnya declared independence, and Russia eventually sent troops to wrest it back. With war at her doorstep, Lara fled to Georgia with her two sons. Her husband fled, too, finding asylum in an unnamed place in Europe that Jagielski simply refers to as the Alps. Lara thought she had found refuge. "Here, out of the way, the war would never reach them," Jagielski writes. But it does.

The first Chechen war ended in stalemate in 1996, but when the region then descended into lawlessness, Russia's first democratically elected president, Boris Yeltsin, in 1999 entrusted a young new prime minister to launch another military campaign. That man, Vladimir Putin, would prove to be a ruthless commander in chief.

Lara's village became a staging ground for insurgent attacks across the border. Her sons, now teenagers, were beguiled by tales of the Chechen fighters and increasingly came under the sway of Islamic extremism. New mosques sprouted in the gorge, built with foreign money supporting holy war against the Russians. Lara's two brothers, acting as guides for a notorious Chechen commander, Ruslan Gelayev, died in a Russian ambush.

Once reconnected, her husband summoned the boys to Europe, which gave her hope that they could escape the violence. But after building new lives there, the boys

became alienated and then radicalized. When the oldest, here called Shamil, joined the civil war in Syria, becoming a deputy to a Chechen commander of the Islamic State, Lara embarked on a remarkable journey to bring him home.

Jagielski, for better or worse, seems to have embraced the reporting model of Ryszard Kapuscinski, the famed Polish journalist. Kapuscinski crafted incredible tales but was dogged by accusations of confabulation. "All Lara's Wars" is billed as a true story, but parts of it, as with Kapuscinski's work, strain credibility. Jagielski, for example, renders lengthy passages of dialogue that would be difficult for anyone to recall verbatim. In an afterword, he explains that he changed the name of the woman at the center of his story — and those of "most of the other people." You have to take the author and the subjects at their word.

The story, though, is riveting. In the end, Lara says she doesn't really know what radicalized her sons. Nor do we as readers, though there are clues: the glorification of armed resistance, the anomie of modern life, the venomous corruption of faith. She feels, perhaps unfairly, guilty.

"Everything I did was designed to put them off war," she says, "but everything I did pushed them toward it." □



Wojciech Jagielski

One Bad Apple

A traumatized mother suspects her young daughter is evil.

By CLAIRE MARTIN

IS MY CHILD'S BEHAVIOR NORMAL? It's a parenting question for the ages, particularly at a time when a certain type of parent (present company included) frets over every childhood quirk, no matter how mundane. Does the preschooler with a predilection for hitting need a professional intervention, or maybe just a taekwondo

THE PUSH

By Ashley Audrain

320 pp. Pamela Dorman Books. \$26.

class? Is the kid who drops naps but not tantrums a future rageaholic? This sort of hand-wringing, at its most extreme, is at the center of Ashley Audrain's taut, chilling debut novel, "The Push."

Blythe Connor is reluctant to become a parent — understandably so. Her own mother abandoned her when she was 11, after years of cruelty. Her grandmother, also abusive, departed in a more gruesome way: by hanging herself from a tree in the front yard. Blythe is primed, perhaps even genetically programmed, for maternal struggle. "I think the baby hates me," she says just days after giving birth to her first child, a daughter named Violet. Their relationship goes downhill from there.

Blythe's postpartum experience is familiar, and Audrain renders it flawlessly. Breastfeeding isn't a spontaneous success, for one thing; a nurse "stood over us and stared at Violet and my huge brown nipple as she tried to latch again." Blythe struggles to adapt to motherhood and she sees seismic shifts in her relationship to her husband, Fox. Noticeably absent is any sense of joy or wonder. "I was so disappointed she was mine," Blythe says of Violet. She admits to ignoring her baby's cries for hours on end.

It would be easy to chalk up these difficulties to postpartum depression if it weren't for the periodic reminders of Blythe's traumatic family history, woven through the book in stand-alone chapters. Blythe's mother hit her and often disappeared for a night or two at a time. Blythe's grandmother routinely locked Blythe's mother out of the house after school and once held her head underwater in the bathtub, nearly drowning her.

Audrain nimbly stokes the mystery as to whether nature or nurture is at play in Violet's increasingly hostile disposition. When a toddler standing near Violet on a play structure falls to his death, Blythe's suspicions intensify. But Fox, ever protective of their daughter, won't hear of it. And since Blythe herself is more than a little off-kilter, it's hard to know whose side to take. She's a classic unreliable narrator who, af-

CLAIRE MARTIN is a freelance journalist and a former *Sunday Business* columnist for *The Times*.

ter her marriage to Fox collapses, lurks outside his new home and pulls a "Single White Female" move on his new partner.

The book is written almost entirely in the second person as one long missive from Blythe to Fox. It serves both as a post-mortem of their relationship and as an urgent call for him to reckon with Violet's disturbing behavior.

Audrain has a gift for capturing the seemingly small moments that speak volumes about relationships. While Blythe was in labor with Violet, Fox was "standing two feet away, drinking the water the nurse had brought for me." And a couple of years later, after Violet's cries interrupt a sexy



ELENI DEBO

shower, their relationship has moved to a phase where Fox "tossed me a towel like my teammate in a locker room."

Audrain conjures the disintegration of marriage, along with the legacy of intergenerational trauma and the pain of parental grief, so movingly that the extent to which Blythe goes off the rails doesn't seem that far-fetched — which is saying a

Audrain nimbly stokes the mystery as to whether nature or nurture is at play.

lot since it involves donning a wig in order to befriend Fox's new partner, and then lying pathologically to her. Blythe's experiences are relatable on one level and full-stop alarming on another, a hallmark of the psychological thriller genre that's executed with gripping precision here.

Occasionally the second person gets repetitive, and I found myself longing to hear Fox's voice — or anyone else's, really. But the chapters examining Blythe's family's past provide texture, and the narrative feels more balanced once Fox's partner is tricked into dishing on their life, even asking Blythe for parenting advice. Finally, someone thinks she's a good mother. □

Here Is the Fire Now

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

What I found was an often lyrical and rebellious love story embedded within a tender call-out to Black readers, reaching across time and form to shake something old, mighty in the blood.

“The Prophets” opens with a direct address, or maybe an address that speaks right past you depending on who you are:

“You do not yet know us.

You do not yet understand.”

Speaking are seven voices who, in a prologue of sorts, usher readers into the world of “The Prophets.”

“A story is coming.

Your story is coming.”

The central story that comes is anchored by Isaiah and Samuel, two enslaved boys on the Halifax plantation, also known as Empty. In each other, Isaiah and Samuel find a love that brings peace to the hearts of the many enslaved people on the plantation, until they are betrayed by a fellow enslaved man, Amos. Seeing the religious devotion of Paul, his often soiled, quick-to-cruelness master, and believing Christianity to be a pathway to better treatment for those enslaved, Amos approaches Paul, offering to bring the Word to those held captive on the plantation. Paul eventually sees the value in Amos’s proposition and allows him to begin preaching, a task that Amos excels in, mesmerizing his fellow captives with his sermons, delivered with a musicality Paul himself admits he wouldn’t have the rhythm to try.

The Word begins to spread across the plantation, and where folks once saw Isaiah and Samuel as beautiful — one “a deep cavern without lamplight to guide, the other a midnight sky, but without any stars” — this new, singular God and his ways, so unlike “the old ways” that guide and protect, rot their Black captives’ sight and turn them against the two young lovers.

To Amos, his betrayal of Isaiah and Samuel is a way to protect everybody held captive on the plantation — Isaiah and Samuel’s refusal of the forced mating that the enslavers demand as a way to breed more enslaved people puts everyone, including the lovers themselves, in danger. His love for the boys — and he does love them in his own way, having carried a young Isaiah in his arms to Empty when they were sold and brought to the plantation — is turned against them, a logic made by captivity.

Isaiah and Samuel’s relationship is the most tender and stunning achievement of “The Prophets.” Their beauty, the wonder of their spell, illuminates the darkness:

“Willingness radiated off of them in heat,” one character, Adam, thinks. “No matter where they buried him — if they

DANEZ SMITH is the author of three poetry collections, most recently “Homie,” and is a co-host of the “VS” podcast.



Robert Jones Jr. near his home in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

buried him: chances were that he would probably die at the end of a noose and swung from a tree before being lit aflame and foraged for parts — he would be aglow with the possibility he was shown, not the residual embers of an unkind torch.”

What is so adored at first, and then corroded in the eyes of the others by Amos, is Isaiah and Samuel’s choice to love, their consent, their choosing and choosing and choosing of each other, a choice outside of force or order, in a nature we (we!) have long forgotten.

One of the blessings of “The Prophets” is its long memory. Jones uses the voices from the prologue to speak across time, to character and reader alike. These short, lyric-driven chapters struck me as instructive and redemptive attempts at healing historical wounds, tracing a map back to the possibility of our native, queer, warrior Black selves. These voices are Black collective knowledge given shape, the oral tradition speaking in your face and setting you right.

Another way this blessing takes shape is through a subplot centering on Kosii and Elewa, two gay (I’m using our word, my looking to name this old thing for us) lovers who precede Isaiah and Samuel. We meet Kosii and Elewa through flashback scenes,

on their wedding day, on the eve of their village’s invasion by Dutch enslavers. From their wedding to captivity on the stinking haul of a ship en route to America, Kosii and Elewa’s love, torture and eventual rebellion act as a direct echo of Isaiah and Samuel, lovers beloved by their people, interrupted by the wickedness of whiteness.

Through these characters and their stories, “The Prophets” calls, across time, on queer warriors, woman kings, root

Jones seems to be reaching across centuries of blood and memory to awaken a warrior armed with weapon and wit.

women and boys in love to paint a long queer Black history, a history of rising against, of ever making one’s way back to freedom.

Is Jones pointing to the current moment we find ourselves living in? Black people, once again, same as always, dying and fighting the murderous avatars of white greed for another piece of freedom. After another summer in the streets fighting for our collective life — at marches often led

by Black women and Black queers whom whiteness and its God have taught us to hate so well — I arrived at this book both gracefully and loudly saying, “Remember who you have long been.” Jones seems to be reaching across centuries of blood and memory in an attempt to shake awake a warrior armed with weapon and wit that lies sleeping in his imagined, beloved, Black reader.

All of it — the seven voices, the midnight blue lovers, the warrior women, the shadows fat with ancestors — pressed upon my Black heart asking me to remember before the boats, to not turn from the horror of the fields and see what has always been most beautiful and unkillable in us — our ways, our fight, our magic, our love. “The Prophets” attempts to give its Black characters and Black audience the same gifts — our right names, our Black knowing, a freedom outside of time and circumstance.

Jones’s adoration for Toni Morrison shines through the novel, which is both a blessing and a hindrance. Haints and blue eyes in the book seem to wink at Morrison’s catalog, and like Morrison, Jones proves himself an amazing lyricist, pulling poetry out of every image and shift of light. Nothing here is flat, everything has shape and depth, we see deep into shadows and silences, transgress rich landscapes rivered and internal.

In another Morrisonian move, the story of “The Prophets” is narrated by not one central character but by a tapestry of folks, the vantage point of each chapter shifting to another person on the plantation, from the many enslaved who are watching for knowing shadows and chances to strike, to white enslavers who see empathy and even kindness in their assaults and crimes. This form is one place “The Prophets” falters. If a character is named, you can be sure there will be a chapter dedicated to him or her, and while that offers perspective, it also sacrifices some of the urgency. At times, I wanted less from the minor characters and more time with the lovers and the villains of the book, more space to dramatize both the peace and the tension in the story.

The last chapters of “The Prophets,” however, dispelled some of my frustration with the form of the narrative. The book closes with a brilliantly rendered suite of rebellion and choice that left me in tears. What earthly, writerly beefs I had with the book evaporated, forgiven. What Black, queer wounds I held close to the chest, I surrendered, I let breathe.

What a fiery kindness that ending, this book. A book I entered hesitantly, cautiously, I exited anew — something in me unloosed, running. May this book cast its spell on all of us, restore to us some memory of our most warrior and softest selves.

*“Here is the fire now:
dancing, destroying.”*

And may we spin and ignite in turn. □

Death Do Us Part?

A debut novel paying tribute to the author's lost family.

By **BENJAMIN NUGENT**

ONE OF THE signal achievements of contemporary Argentine fiction has been to take the country's dark recent history — the state terrorism of the '70s and '80s, the subsequent economic crises that brutalized the poor — and channel it into ghost stories. In Mariana Enriquez's short story "The Inn," for in-

HADES, ARGENTINA

By **Daniel Loedel**

294 pp. Riverhead Books. \$27.

stance, a tourist-town hotel that served as an army barracks during the dictatorship is haunted by spirits from the bad old days; in César Aira's novel "Ghosts," a gang of naked shades haunts a Buenos Aires construction site, visible to the workers and their families, invisible to the rich people set to move into the building once it's finished. Those tales are part of a tradition critics have called "Argentine Gothic," one founded by names like Silvina Ocampo, Julio Cortázar and Jorge Luis Borges.

BENJAMIN NUGENT is the author, most recently, of "Fraternity."

"Hades, Argentina" is the first novel by Daniel Loedel, an American book editor. In a commendable display of chutzpah, he has written an Argentine Gothic: a romance of sorts between Tomás, the narrator, and Isabel, both of whom have been "disappeared" by the dictatorship in the 1970s. For Tomás, a spy for the resistance, "disappeared" means being slipped a fake passport by a friend in the military and sent into exile. For his beloved Isabel, a Montonera resistance fighter, it means being killed. When the two reunite in 1986, after the official restoration of democracy, Tomás is emotionally dead, a ghost of a man; and Isabel is physically dead, an actual ghost. Loedel has inherited a particular brand of mordant humor from his literary forebears in the Southern Cone: When Tomás references Ronald Reagan ("U.S. president? Actor from California?"), Isabel shows "no sign of recognition." When they fall into bed, he says, "I imagine sex is . . . complicated for you now."

The character of Isabel Aroztegui is very much based on a real woman. Loedel dedicates the book to his half sister, Isabel Maiztegui, a Montonera who was murdered by the dictatorship in 1978, at the age of 22. In the acknowledgments, the author writes that this novel "could not have been



written without her sacrifice."

Loedel's sense of obligation to the real Isabel might explain why "Hades, Argentina" can feel dutiful, even workmanlike in places as it catalogs the depravities of the regime she fought. There are detailed descriptions of various torture methods, down to the number of volts used to

deliver shocks — 14,000 in one instance — but scant insight into the mentality of the torturers. A set piece about the dictatorship's practice of dropping its victims from planes "into the depths of the Río de la Plata" is wedged into the middle of the book, and written in stilted prose: "One at a time they fell." Loedel's exhaustive account of the junta's crimes might be a homage to the long chronicle of violence against women in Roberto Bolaño's novel "2666" — an oft-repeated street address in Loedel's novel is "Río Negro 2166" — as well as to the memory of his half sister and her cause. Alas, it doesn't always serve the story.

Still, it's fun and sad to follow Tomás and Isabel past the forgotten equestrian statues and dingy cafes of Buenos Aires, beneath skies with "the slippery iridescence of fish scales," both lovers stunted, one technically alive, the other joking about her otherworldly condition. When Tomás asks Isabel if she's lonely, she says, "Like Dracula." Any debut author who can come up with that exchange deserves some attention. Loedel will learn from this novel, and I suspect that he will approach his next book with a greater sense of freedom. Perhaps he will show us more of that bleak, serious comedy he writes so well. □

Word Play

A raucous homage to the power of language, both real and imagined.

By **PATRICIA T. O'CONNOR**

YOU WOULDN'T EXPECT a comic novel about a dictionary to be a thriller too, but this one is. In fact, Eley Williams's hilarious new book, "The Liar's Dictionary," is also a mystery, love story (two of them) and cliffhanging melodrama.

THE LIAR'S DICTIONARY

By **Eley Williams**

270 pp. Doubleday. \$26.95.

The twin protagonists are separated by more than a century. Mallory and Peter work at Swansby House in London, home of Swansby's New Encyclopaedic Dictionary, she in the present and he in 1899. What gradually weaves their alternating stories together is the curious power of words, both real and imagined.

PATRICIA T. O'CONNOR'S books on language include "Woe Is I" and, most recently, "Origins of the Specious," written with Stewart Kellerman. They blog about language at gramphobia.com.



As the novel opens, Mallory is the company's only remaining employee, a bored intern whose sole task is to answer the phone. It's not much of a job, since the phone rings just once a day (with a cryptic bomb threat). She passes her time reading the dictionary, a dusty behemoth that for all practical purposes is dead. Work on it was abandoned around World War I, far short of the letter Z, and it exists only in an incomplete nine-volume edition published in the 1930s. The company is kept alive by the persistence of its owner and editor in chief, David Swansby, who rents out most

of the elegant Queen Anne building for events.

Meanwhile, back in the 19th century, Peter is also numbingly bored at Swansby's, where he's one of more than 100 lexicographers toiling at what he considers "a pointless census of language." But he has a couple of secret amusements. One is a fake lisp, which he cultivates for sympathy (it got him his job). The other is a furtive talent for making up words, like "abantina (n.)," defined as "fickleness," and "agrupt (adj.)," about the "irritation caused by having a denouement ruined." They're his "secret, silly words," his "cuckoos-in-the-nest."

The cuckoos have now come home to roost. David Swansby, who wants to update and digitize the dictionary, discovers two fake entries and asks Mallory to root out any others. Before long, she's amassed piles of suspicious-looking blue index cards from the company's archives, written in a similar hand. Fascinated, she tries to imagine the author of these "small sweet observations, inconsequentialisms." Should she expose them, or let sleeping dogs lie? (Interpret "lie" however you wish.)

Williams, a British writer who is also the author of the story collection "Attrib.," ingeniously links these parallel narratives. Peter wakes one morning with a pounding head after a night of drinking and wonders why there's no word for his condition. Later, Mallory reflects on the many modern words that never made it into Swansby's, like the bibulous sense of "hangover."

Their love lives are ambivalent, each in its own way. Peter, who's excruciatingly shy, is smitten by a colleague's fiancée. Mallory is gay though not quite out, while her lover, Pip, is "out-and-out out." When Mallory ruminates on all the words we don't have — like one for the kindness of people who try to free trapped insects — Pip asks, "What about a word for not being out?" (Peter, in the meantime, struggles to release a moth from his railway carriage.)

"The Liar's Dictionary" is a raucous orgy of words. Williams juggles them, plays tunes with them, tries them on and takes them off, tastes them and spits them out. All the while, she's using them to frame a thoughtful inquiry into truth and meaning. And her denouements are so satisfying that it would be agrupt to spoil them. □

About the Boy

A memoir so rife with trauma it's written in the third person.

By **JARRETT J. KROSOCZKA**

AUTHORS' CHILDHOOD experiences — no matter how joyous or upsetting — often lay the groundwork for their fiction. Gary Paulsen's name is synonymous with gritty survivalist stories, so it should come as no surprise that his memoir, "Gone to the Woods," leaves you gritting your teeth and clutching the pages. Paulsen, a recipient of

GONE TO THE WOODS
Surviving a Lost Childhood
By Gary Paulsen

368 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$17.99.
(Ages 8 to 12)

the American Library Association's prestigious Margaret A. Edwards Award for his lasting contribution to young adult literature, takes us inside his life story, where readers will quickly make connections to

JARRETT J. KROSOCZKA is the author of the graphic memoir "Hey, Kiddo," which was a National Book Award finalist.

events in his novels, in particular his Newbery Honor-winning "Hatchet."

Paulsen refers to himself throughout as "the boy." There is just one moment, early on, when a character calls him "Gary." While the boy spends most of the book escaping unfathomable traumas, "mind pictures" remain seared in his psyche. Writing a memoir is a fraught endeavor, and I can only presume that Paulsen chose this third-person device — which sometimes kept me at bay — as a form of self-care.

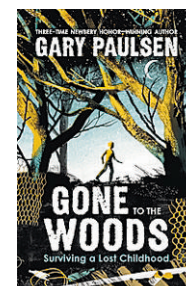
This isn't to say the book is void of beautiful language or stunning detail. I was still lost in the story, rooting for the 5-year-old boy who boards a train alone in Chicago and rides 400 miles to Minneapolis surrounded by wounded soldiers returning from World War II, where his absent father (whom he won't meet until he's 7) has been serving as a low-level officer under General Patton. In Minneapolis he transfers to another train to travel hundreds of miles more — all to escape an alcoholic, irresponsible mother. (She would dress him in a uniform and drag him with her to bars, where she set him on tabletops to draw men to her by singing songs.) The boy's

scandalized maternal grandmother is the one who insists he go live with Aunt Edy, his mother's younger sister, and her husband, Sig, in Minnesota's North Woods.

Paulsen describes their homestead as "a fairy tale kind of farm." It is here that the boy learns to work and survive off the land, and immerses himself in the wonders of childhood. Even in these sublime moments, I found my heart racing, knowing that while authors may craft fairy tales, they don't always live them, because life doesn't play out that way.

My heart broke as does Sig's when the boy's mother turns up unannounced, with a man she calls "Uncle Casey," to take him away, first by train to California and then "across the ocean to be with your father in a place called the Philippine Islands." ("The man named Casey . . . was not the boy's uncle and would never be his uncle.")

So many horrors befall this boy as he moves through his childhood and teenage years. While traveling by boat to the Philippines, he witnesses a plane crash, followed by a shark attack on the passengers thrust into the water. While in Manila, he hears heavy artillery being fired nightly



and witnesses brutal killings. In North Dakota, where his usually drunken, fighting parents land next, he repeatedly runs away, before enlisting in the Army. These events haunted me as a reader, so I can't begin to imagine how witnessing them with his own eyes has haunted the author.

Lessons from Aunt Edy and Sig help him survive, or at least buoy him until at 13 he first steps into the safe physical space of a public library, where a librarian puts a notebook and a sharpened pencil in his hands and encourages him to write down his "mind pictures." This small act has echoed throughout his life, and enriched the lives of readers across generations. □

The Hide-and-Seek of Grief

Two picture books separate the person from the emotions, and model empathy.

By **SYDNEY SMITH**

"WE ONLY HAVE 42 more Christmases until we are dead."

This is what my 4-year-old told me in mid-December before bedtime. He has been testing out these kinds of musings on

WHAT'S THE MATTER, MARLO?
By Andrew Arnold

32 pp. Roaring Brook. \$18.99.
(Ages 3 to 6)

BEAR ISLAND
By Matthew Cordell

48 pp. Feiwel & Friends. \$18.99.
(Ages 2 to 5)

mortality a lot lately. I quickly changed the subject, asking which he would prefer, "PJ Masks" or dinosaur pajamas. The truth is, I am terrified of engaging him in these

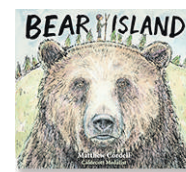
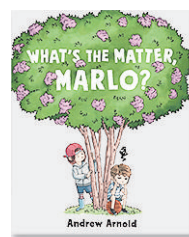
SYDNEY SMITH'S most recent picture book is "I Talk Like a River," with the poet Jordan Scott.

death talks for fear of devastating him. "Everyone you know will die someday. Many in your own lifetime and the more you love them the harder it will be to say goodbye." Where do I begin?

Picture books are the perfect medium by which to introduce one of the more difficult and complicated of life's challenges: grief.

Andrew Arnold's "What's the Matter, Marlo?" follows a child and her best friend, Marlo, spending time together laughing as they read a joke book and playing hide-and-see. One day Marlo is upset. He's sad and angry. So angry that his rage, a mass of dark scribbles, fills the page and obscures him. Just as in hide-and-see, the friend looks and looks until she finds Marlo, hiding in his grief. (His dog's death is hinted at visually.) The book concludes as they hug and cry together, "because that's what best friends do."

It's beautifully precise, and accessible in its simplicity. Not only does it speak to grief in others, insightfully separating the person from the (sometimes eruptive and unpredictable) emotions, but it also models



empathy. The role of the friend is to be present, patient and compassionate.

In Matthew Cordell's "Bear Island," we are offered a similar canvas, and the picture is painted with Cordell's signature sensitivity.

We follow a girl, Louise, on her own emotional trek after the death of the family dog. The book begins with sepia-toned illustrations, bleached and faded like a forgotten T-shirt in the back of a station wagon. In her malaise, Louise rows out to the titular island, where she encounters an ill-tem-

pered bear in whom she recognizes a familiar anger and sadness. Over time they become companions in their respective wanderings through grief.

"Some days, only Louise was better. Some days, only Bear was better." Colors are introduced to the palette as grief fades and happiness returns.

Unlike "What's the Matter, Marlo?," "Bear Island" depicts a layered and complex journey. We are shown the true tragic nature of grief as it happens to all of us. It's a slow process with ups and downs and no quick fixes. Cordell speaks eloquently and respectfully to the universal experience of loss and recovery.

Authors such as Andrew Arnold and Matthew Cordell appreciate the unique privilege of creating safe spaces for our children to explore these multifaceted emotions. Their books promote self-awareness and understanding. After they are closed, there may be hard conversations, and questions that have no answers, but we're left with a comforting message: It will be OK if we are here for one another. □

Best Sellers

The New York Times

For the complete best-seller lists, visit [nytimes.com/books/best-sellers](https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers)

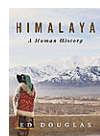
COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF DECEMBER 27-JANUARY 2

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		THE DUKE AND I , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The first book in the Bridgerton series. Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series "Bridgerton."	1	1	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.	7
2	2	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.	31	2	2	GREENLIGHTS , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	11
3		HUSH-HUSH , by Stuart Woods. (Putnam) The 56th book in the Stone Barrington series. Old friends come to Stone's aid as he takes on an expanding cabal of enemies.	1	3	4	UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	43
4	14	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.	9	4	5	CASTE , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	22
5	13	THE LAW OF INNOCENCE , by Michael Connelly. (Little, Brown) The sixth book in the Mickey Haller series. Haller defends himself when police find the body of a former client in his car's trunk.	8	5		THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	19
6	1	A TIME FOR MERCY , by John Grisham. (Doubleday) The third book in the Jake Brigrance series. A 16-year-old is accused of killing a deputy in Clanton, Miss., in 1990.	12	6	3	BECOMING , by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady describes her journey from the South Side of Chicago to the White House, and how she balanced work, family and her husband's political ascent.	92
7		THE VISCOUNT WHO LOVED ME , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The second book in the Bridgerton series. Kate Sheffield gets in the way of Anthony Bridgerton's intent to marry.	1	7	6	WORLD OF WONDERS , by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. (Milkweed) In a collection of essays, the poet celebrates various aspects of the natural world and its inhabitants.	4
8	11	ANXIOUS PEOPLE , by Fredrik Backman. (Atria) A failed bank robber holds a group of strangers hostage at an apartment open house.	17	8	13	THE SPLENDID AND THE VILE , by Erik Larson. (Crown) An examination of the leadership of the prime minister Winston Churchill.	31
9		AMERICAN DIRT , by Jeanine Cummins. (Flatiron) A bookseller flees Mexico for the United States with her son while pursued by the head of a drug cartel.	37	9	8	IS THIS ANYTHING? , by Jerry Seinfeld. (Simon & Schuster) The comedian shares material he collected in an accordion folder over the last 45 years.	11
10	5	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.	14	10		THE ANSWER IS ... , by Alex Trebek. (Simon & Schuster) A memoir by the host of the TV game show "Jeopardy!," from 1984 to 2020.	9

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



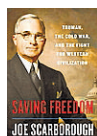
HIMALAYA: A Human History, by Ed Douglas. (Norton, \$40.) This authoritative account of the world's most storied mountains is rich with personalities, politics and lore, to which Douglas, a veteran mountaineer and expert on the region, brings an infectious love and fascination.



A GOOD TIME TO BE BORN: How Science and Public Health Gave Children a Future, by Perri Klass. (Norton, \$28.95.) In this ambitious, elegant meditation on medicine, culture and parenting, Klass explores one of our greatest human achievements: the reduction in child mortality. With a powerful rage, she underscores the racism and shameful political truths that have complicated our contemporary plague.



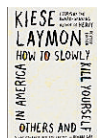
BAG MAN: The Wild Crimes, Audacious Cover-Up, and Spectacular Downfall of a Brazen Crook in the White House, by Rachel Maddow and Michael Yarvitz. (Crown, \$28.) This detailed and breezy account of Vice President Spiro Agnew's downfall, adapted from the authors' popular podcast, reminds us of how lucky the nation was to be rid of him.



SAVING FREEDOM: Truman, the Cold War, and the Fight for Western Civilization, by Joe Scarborough. (Harper/HarperCollins, \$29.99.) The popular cable news host examines President Harry Truman's legacy, showing how shrewd White House politics overcame America's divisions and its isolationist tradition.



A LIFE SOMEONE TOLD YOU ABOUT YOURSELF, by Peter Ho Davies. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$24.) In Davies's wise, bracingly honest novel, a father chronicles his son's birth through his teenage years. He juggles guilt, worry and marital strife alongside the joys, triumphs and laughter of family life — never sugarcoating, always leaning into the hard parts in a way that's refreshing, timely and necessary.



HOW TO SLOWLY KILL YOURSELF AND OTHERS IN AMERICA, by Kiese Laymon. (Scribner, paper, \$16.) A contentious publishing experience left Laymon unsatisfied with his 2013 essay collection. Now, seven years later, after buying the book back from his initial publisher and revising the collection, he returns with Take 2.



WILD MINDS: The Artists and Rivalries That Inspired the Golden Age of Animation, by Reid Mitenbuler. (Atlantic Monthly Press, \$28.) Mitenbuler's fast-moving account of the cartoonists, writers, hucksters and moguls who constructed the firmament of American animation is also filled with shady business dealings and fierce rivalries.



AN INVENTORY OF LOSSES, by Judith Schalansky. Translated by Jackie Smith. (New Directions, \$24.95.) This genre-defying catalog of things that no longer exist takes on a variety of styles, from researched histories to richly imagined narratives. A vanished island, the Caspian tiger, Sappho's lost poems: Each gives rise to a fascinating study of disappearance.



EXERCISED: Why Something We Never Evolved to Do Is Healthy and Rewarding, by Daniel E. Lieberman. (Pantheon, \$29.95.) An evolutionary biologist debunks common fitness myths and explains why we resist exercise even if we know it's good for us.

The full reviews of these and other recent books are online: [nytimes.com/books](https://www.nytimes.com/books)

Inside the List

ELISABETH EGAN

Game On When “Ready Player One” came out in 2011, Ernest Cline bought his dream car — a “Back to the Future”-inspired DeLorean — and logged 4,000 miles driving to bookstores to talk about



‘My wife and I had our anniversary in a VR room.’

his debut novel, which was made into a movie directed by Steven Spielberg. He’d park out front so fans could snap pictures of themselves alongside the iconic vehicle. “It was like a traveling ’80s museum,” Cline said in a phone interview. “It made for kind of a festive event.”

In November, his sequel, “Ready Player Two,” landed in a very different world — one where the futuristic technology Cline envisioned in “Ready Player One” has not only come to fruition but become indispensable. This time, instead of traversing the country, the former spoken word poet, lifelong gaming enthusiast and self-described “full-time geek” conducted a virtual author tour from his home in Austin, Texas. Sales of this novel do not seem to have suffered: “Ready Player Two” debuted at No. 1 on the hardcover fiction list, spent three weeks in that spot and is now at No. 4 in its sixth week as a best seller. It’s No. 1 on the audio fiction list, and “Ready Player One” is No. 15. (The actor Wil Wheaton narrates both books, as well as Cline’s alien invasion thriller, “Armada.”)

Cline has embraced virtual reality as a result of his work on the “Ready Player” books — in fact, when he realized in-person visits would be curtailed, he supplied friends and family with Oculus Quest headsets so they could hang out in 3-D. Clearly surmising that he was in conversation with a late adopter of everything, Cline explained, “My wife and I had our anniversary in a VR room. It was really cool. There’s an app called Big Screen where you can hang out in a living room with a movie screen and we showed video and photos from our wedding slideshow. We feel like we were the champions of social distancing.”

This Ohio native is married to Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz, a fellow author whose 2014 book, “Dr. Mütter’s Marvels,” crossed paths with “Ready Player One” on the best-seller list. The pair, who met on the poetry slam circuit, have real-life, framed evidence of the overlap hanging in their living room.

In his novels, Cline said, he strives to portray “the good side and the bad side” of innovation. “I think there’s always both,” he said. “Whenever we create a technology, it’s to improve our lives, but it can have unforeseen side effects that we then have to mitigate. That’s humanity’s push and pull, that love-hate relationship.” □

PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF DECEMBER 27-JANUARY 2

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	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.	31	1	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.	7
2	13	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.	11	2	2	GREENLIGHTS , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	11
3	4	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.	14	3	4	UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	43
4	2	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.	6	4	6	CASTE , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	22
5	6	WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING , by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.	122	5	3	BECOMING , by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady describes how she balanced work, family and her husband’s political ascent.	99
6	10	ANXIOUS PEOPLE , by Fredrik Backman. (Atria) A failed bank robber holds a group of strangers hostage at an apartment open house.	16	6	5	WORLD OF WONDERS , by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. (Milkweed) In a collection of essays, the poet celebrates various aspects of the natural world and its inhabitants.	4
7	1	A TIME FOR MERCY , by John Grisham. (Doubleday) The third book in the Jake Brigance series. A 16-year-old is accused of killing a deputy in Clanton, Miss., in 1990.	12	7	14	THE SPLENDID AND THE VILE , by Erik Larson. (Crown) An examination of the leadership of the prime minister Winston Churchill.	31
8		THE MYSTERY OF MRS. CHRISTIE , by Marie Benedict. (Sourcebooks Landmark) What might have happened during the 11 days in which a rising mystery author went missing in 1926.	1	8	9	BAG MAN , by Rachel Maddow and Michael Yarvitz. (Crown) The MSNBC host gives an account of the 1973 investigation of then Vice President Spiro T. Agnew and its impact on politics and the media.	4
9		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.	5	9		BREATH , by James Nestor. (Riverhead) A re-examination of a basic biological function and a look at the science behind ancient breathing practices.	10
10	5	DEADLY CROSS , by James Patterson. (Little, Brown) The 28th book in the Alex Cross series. An investigation of a double homicide sends Alex Cross to Alabama.	6	10	8	HUMANS , by Brandon Stanton. (St. Martin’s) Photos and stories of people from over 40 countries collected by the creator of “Humans of New York.”	12

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

Paperback Row / BY JENNIFER KRAUSS



AMNESTY, by Aravind Adiga. (Scribner, 272 pp., \$17.) The “driving force” of this “thriller-like” novel by the Booker Prize-winning Indian-Australian author of “The White Tiger” is an unsolved murder about which its undocumented protagonist has information. Praising its “humanity,” Juan Gabriel Vásquez, our reviewer, declared it “an urgent and significant book.”



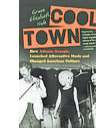
GOLDEN GATES: The Housing Crisis and a Reckoning for the American Dream, by Conor Dougherty. (Penguin, 304 pp., \$18.) Though this “masterly primer on the fight for new construction” in California’s Bay Area can feel “a little local,” our reviewer, Francesca Mari, noted, Dougherty, a Times economics reporter, convincingly argues that these “carnavalesque battles” are “a microcosm of the exasperating land-use issues threatening other thriving economies.”



GROWN UPS, by Emma Jane Unsworth. (Scout Press/Gallery, 368 pp., \$16.99.) This “truly funny” comedic novel about a female web-obsessed millennial — our reviewer, Kelly Conaboy, wrote — is “less of an escape than it is a set of ‘Clockwork Orange’ metal eye clamps, forcing you to examine,” via “hand-wringing over exclamation points and emoji choices and the exact right timing of a fav, your own profoundly unhealthy relationship with social media.”



CLEANNESS, by Garth Greenwell. (Picador, 240 pp., \$16.) Revisiting the territory of Greenwell’s 2016 novel “What Belongs to You,” these stories are a “wistful paean,” our reviewer, Colm Toibin, observed, to the place where the unnamed gay American expatriate teacher who is their first-person narrator “lived in uneasy exile, or learned to grow up, or both.”



COOL TOWN: How Athens, Georgia, Launched Alternative Music and Changed American Culture, by Grace Elizabeth Hale. (University of North Carolina Press, 384 pp., \$20.) A history and American studies professor who once played in a band and ran an underground club in Athens, Hale analyzes why this sleepy college town spawned the likes of the B-52’s and R.E.M., and became “the model for the small, deeply local bohemia that together formed ’80s indie culture.”



THE ONLY GOOD INDIANS, by Stephen Graham Jones. (Saga Press/Gallery, 336 pp., \$16.99.) Our reviewer, Danielle Trussoni, called this “panoramic view” of the struggles and triumphs of four Native American young men, haunted by the spirit of a pregnant elk they killed on a hunting expedition and by the burdens of tradition, a “gritty and gorgeous” horror novel.

AUDIO MONTHLY BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF NOVEMBER 29-JANUARY 2

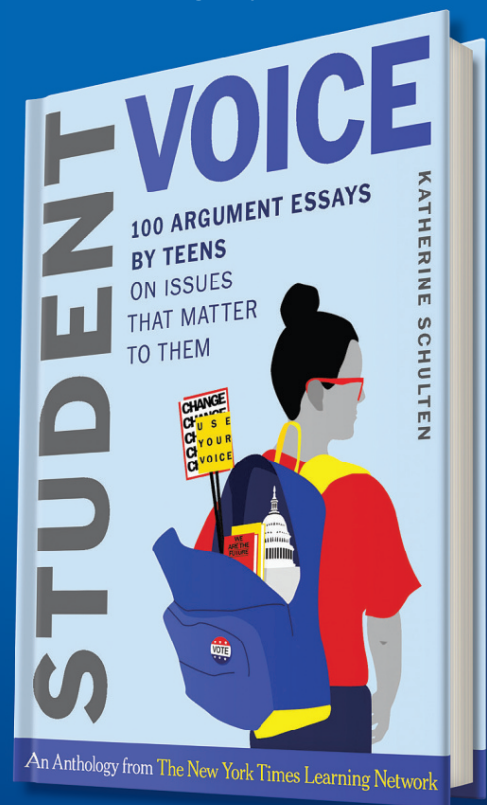
THIS MONTH	Audio Fiction	MONTHS ON LIST	THIS MONTH	Audio Nonfiction	MONTHS ON LIST
1	READY PLAYER TWO , by Ernest Cline. (Random House Audio) In a sequel to "Ready Player One," Wade Watts discovers a technological advancement and goes on a new quest. Read by Wil Wheaton. 13 hours, 46 minutes unabridged.	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.	2
2	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.	7	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.	3
3	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.	6	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.	5
4	RHYTHM OF WAR , by Brandon Sanderson. (Macmillan Audio) The fourth book in the Stormlight Archive series. Read by Kate Reading and Michael Kramer. 57 hours and 26 minutes unabridged.	2	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.	10
5	BRUSHFIRE , by Craig Alanson. (Podium Audio) The 11th book in the Expeditionary Force series. Read by R. C. Bray. 19 hours, 18 minutes unabridged.	1	5	BECOMING , by Michelle Obama. (Random House Audio) The former first lady describes her journey from the South Side of Chicago to the White House, and how she balanced work, family and her husband's political ascent. Read by the author. 19 hours, 3 minutes unabridged.	26
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.	1	6	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.	30
7	A TIME FOR MERCY , by John Grisham. (Random House Audio) The third book in the Jake Brigance series. A 16-year-old is accused of killing a deputy in Clanton, Miss., in 1990. Read by Michael Beck. 19 hours, 59 minutes unabridged.	3	7	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.	15
8	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.	3	8	HILLBILLY ELEGY , by J.D. Vance. (HarperAudio) A Yale Law School graduate looks at the struggles of America's white working class. Read by the author. 6 hours, 49 minutes unabridged.	2
9	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.	4	9	SAPIENS , by Yuval Noah Harari. (Harper Audio) How Homo sapiens became Earth's dominant species. Read by Derek Perkins. 15 hours, 17 minutes unabridged.	27
10	DAYLIGHT , by David Baldacci. (Hachette Audio) The F.B.I. agent Atlee Pine's search for her twin sister overlaps with a military investigator's hunt for someone involved in a global conspiracy. Read by Brittany Pressley and Kyf Brewer. 11 hours, 37 minutes unabridged.	2	10	BREATH , by James Nestor. (Penguin Audio) A re-examination of a basic biological function. Read by the author. 7 hours, 18 minutes unabridged.	4
11	THE AWAKENING , by Nora Roberts. (Macmillan Audio) The first book in the Dragon Heart Legacy series. Breen Kelly travels through a portal in Ireland to a land of faeries and mermaids. Read by Barrie Kreinik. 15 hours and 27 minutes unabridged.	2	11	THE BEST OF ME , by David Sedaris. (Hachette Audio) A collection of the humorist's essays including "Me Talk Pretty One Day" and "A Guy Walks Into a Bar Car." Read by the author. 13 hours, 8 minutes unabridged.	2
12	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.	1	12	BORN A CRIME , by Trevor Noah. (Audible Studios) A memoir about growing up in South Africa by the host of "The Daily Show," whose parents had an illegal (under apartheid) interracial relationship. Read by the author. 8 hours, 50 minutes unabridged.	33
13	WHERE THE CROWDADS 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.	28	13	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.	3
14	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.	3	14	MY OWN WORDS , by Ruth Bader Ginsburg with Mary Hartnett and Wendy W. Williams. (Simon & Schuster Audio) A collection of articles and speeches by the Supreme Court justice. Read by Linda Lavin. 13 hours, 16 minutes unabridged.	6
15	READY PLAYER ONE , by Ernest Cline. (Random House Audio) In 2044, the key to a vast fortune is hidden in a virtual-reality world. Read by Wil Wheaton. 15 hours, 46 minutes unabridged.	8	15	THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Brilliance) An account of the Great Migration of 1915-70, in which six million African-Americans abandoned the South. Read by Robin Miles. 22 hours, 44 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.

NEW from Katherine Schulten and THE NEW YORK TIMES Learning Network

"The essays in Student Voice loudly proclaim what young writers are capable of: insightful opinions, thoughtful argument, compelling evidence, and—most importantly—lively writing."

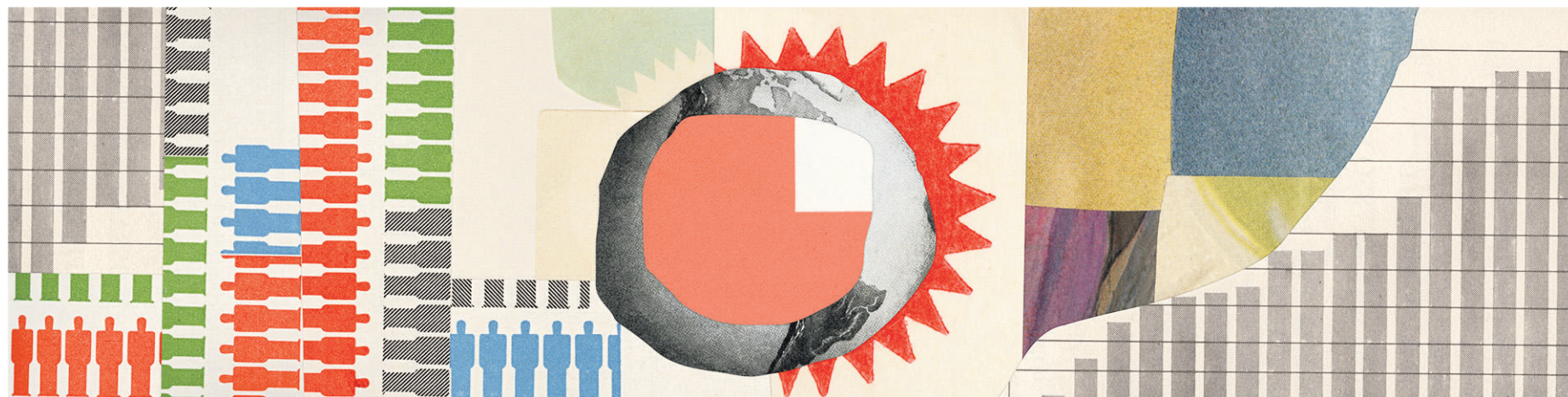
—Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, Executive Director, National Writing Project



Now collected for the first time in one volume, **Student Voice: 100 Argument Essays by Teens on Issues That Matter** spotlights the perspectives of 13-to-18-year-olds on race, lockdown drills, immigration, Covid-19, social media, and more.

Also available as a 2-book set with **Raising Student Voice**, a guide with classroom-ready activities, writing prompts, and a sample essay annotated by *Times* judges.





THE CORONA CRASH
How the Pandemic Will Change Capitalism

By Grace Blakeley
112 pp. Verso. Paper, \$14.95.



The chasm between just how well some have thrived economically during the pandemic and just how badly others have fared is among the more startling results of this *annus horribilis*. But where some see the disease as upending some industries (travel and restaurants) and boosting others (home entertainment and technology), Blakeley, an English writer, Labour Party activist and leftist theorist, sees the have and have-not divide as the latest and perhaps most egregious chapter of the sad story of capitalism.

For Blakeley, the response to Covid is twined with the great financial crisis of 2008-9: Then, states bailed out the financial industry; now, the state is bailing out all industry to maintain the system of “monopoly capitalism.” While she acknowledges that no government could just let the system collapse, she excoriates the way that officials have become handmaidens to corporations, which have pocketed the free money of central banks while millions of individuals go further into debt. That, in turn, has led not to a desirable reversal of globalization, but to even more advantages for the “Global North” and even less latitude for the “Global South.”

The only solution, she believes, is an enormous global Green New Deal. It would be hard to find a purer iteration of the socialist critique of modern capitalism in a pandemic age. Blakeley’s passion as a polemicist notwithstanding, if you don’t share her sensibility, it’s unlikely that this book will change your mind.

LIFE AFTER COVID-19
Lessons From Past Pandemics

By Bob Gordon
200 pp. Banovallum. \$22.99.



In our world of constant immediacy, it’s easy to forget that all is not new under the sun. This is the first pandemic of our lifetimes, but it is neither unique nor especially deadly compared with pandemics past.

Gordon, a Canadian author, takes us on a world tour of previous pandemics, starting with the 14th-century bubonic plague. His *danse macabre* continues with the 17th-century Great Plague of London and then through various typhus and cholera outbreaks in the 19th century through the Great Influenza of 1918-19.

At each point, the science and medicine of the day proved woefully inadequate. Doctors and those who passed for learned persistently misidentified the way the various diseases were transmitted. Another constant during pandemics was and is the predilection of the wealthy to flee urban areas, leaving the poor and vulnerable to cluster together and suffer the worst ravages.

Gordon is at his best in these thumbnail sketches. When he turns to the lessons of the present, he is on thinner ground and his observations about the digital transformation of industry and the work-from-home revolution become more familiar. Given the current pace of change, even an instabook can feel dated: Gordon wrote over the summer, when vaccines seemed years rather than months away and when it appeared that Covid might be the defining feature of all societies for years to come.

POST CORONA
From Crisis to Opportunity

By Scott Galloway
256 pp. Portfolio. \$25.



By now, it has become increasingly evident that the pandemic has accelerated multiple trends that were currents before Covid and have become tidal waves because of it. The shift to the digital world, already in play over the past decade, has become tectonic.

Few are better positioned to illuminate the vagaries of this transformation than Galloway, a tech entrepreneur, author and professor at New York University’s Stern School. In brisk prose and catchy illustrations, he vividly demonstrates how the largest technology companies turned the crisis of the pandemic into the market-share-grabbing opportunity of a lifetime.

Galloway neither celebrates nor decries this, though he has little patience for the homilies of Silicon Valley that all disruption is for the best; he recognizes that the pandemic makes it even harder to police the “bad behavior” of Big Tech. He also notes that one industry ripe for disruption that has resisted it until now — higher education — may finally have its day of economic reckoning. That may imperil some institutions but could well unleash a new era of education.

Galloway fears, rightly, that all of the spending and government intervention may serve only to embed dominant companies. His call for more competition in an age of tech consolidation is laudable, but even with antitrust measures now being taken, how that is to be achieved remains elusive.

THE NEW GREAT DEPRESSION
Winners and Losers in a Post-Pandemic World

By James Rickards
208 pp. Portfolio. \$29.



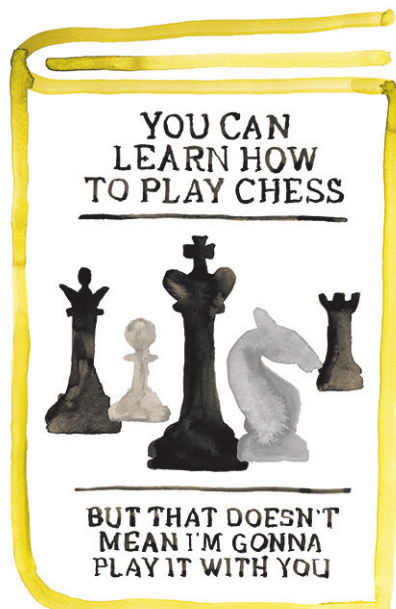
It is now common to speak of the Covid recession, but for Rickards, a longtime financial author and stock market skeptic, the assorted policy responses to the pandemic in the United States and else-

where have produced a new Great Depression, one that has hurt the working class disproportionately. That means the starry-eyed hope for a 2021 return to normal isn’t going to happen: “In depressions, things don’t get back to normal because there is no normal anymore.” The destruction of service industries caused by the lockdown and the rise of technologies like telemedicine and teleconferencing mean the damage to the old economy is likely to be permanent.

This is not a book to read if you want reassurance: Rickards forecasts a 30-year period of lower growth. The predilection of governments to take on huge debt and to spend, he says, will only make the recovery more sluggish. While civilizational collapse is not likely, it should not be ruled out as a possibility.

Given his longtime bearishness about financial markets, it’s not surprising that Rickards ends with an investment menu heavy on cash, commodities and gold and light on paper assets like stocks and bonds. We all tend to read crises through the lens of our prior beliefs; for Rickards, an economic system built on central banks and fiat money had been itching for a reckoning long before 2020. Gold was his answer before the crisis, and gold is the answer now. It would be comforting to think that the solutions were so elegant and simple.

We've come a long, exhausted way from trying to make the best of it.



The New York Times **Events**

Understand today. Together.

Join us for a virtual event, live at home. Get the story, firsthand. Hear vital voices, in their own words. Make the most of every moment, with exclusive experiences just for subscribers. Connect with your world and the people shaping it.

Explore the full schedule.
timesevents.nytimes.com

