

The New York Times

# Book Review

MARCH 14, 2021

**ON THE FORCE** Two books about the culture of policing in America

**WHY THE LONG FACE?** Lucinda Rosenfeld looks at self-loathing literary heroines

**PLUS** Charles Blow, Elizabeth Kolbert, Patricia Lockwood and audiobooks



CANNADAY CHAPMAN

## You Reap What You Sow

By Omar El-Akkad

A KIND OF MORAL claustrophobia hangs over the opening pages of Imbolo Mbue's sweeping and quietly devastating second novel, "How Beautiful We Were." In October of 1980, in the fictional African village of Kosawa, representatives of an American oil company called Pexton have come to meet with the locals, whose children are dying. Nearby, the company's oil pipelines and

drilling sites have left the fields fallow and the water poisoned. The residents of Kosawa want the company gone and the land restored to what it was before Pexton showed up, decades ago. The company's representatives say they're doing everything they can, though their audience knows it's a lie — Pexton has the support of the village head as well as the country's dictator and, with it, impunity. Nothing will be done. But just as the meeting concludes, Konga, the village madman, bursts in. He's got another idea: Until

**HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE**  
By Imbolo Mbue

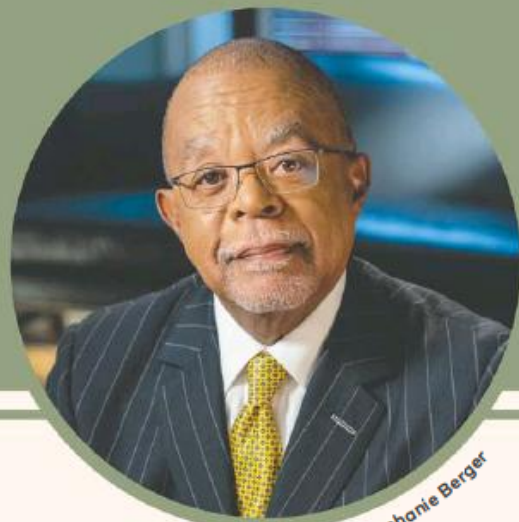
364 pp. Random House. \$28.

they get what they want, the villagers should hold Pexton's men as prisoners.

It's a propulsive beginning, though one that feels at first as though it's about to roam familiar ground — a tale of a casually sociopathic corporation and the people whose lives it steamrolls. By the end of the first chapter, I couldn't help bracing for a long march toward one of two conclusions: the corporation's inevitable victory, or

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

# THE INSTANT NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



© Stephanie Berger

**“ENGAGING . . .** In Gates’s telling, the Black church, too, shines bright even as the nation itself moves uncertainly through the gloaming, seeking justice on earth—as it is in heaven.”

—JON MEACHAM, *THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

**“SWEEPING, VIVID . . .** The eminent Harvard historian and connoisseur of American lives turns his compassionate gaze to the black church, illuminating a pantheon of good shepherds who brought a fierce social conscience to the Lord’s work.” —O, *THE OPRAH MAGAZINE*

**“A RICH STORY AND RIVETING SONG** of the profound forms of spirituality and musicality that sustained Black sanity and dignity.”

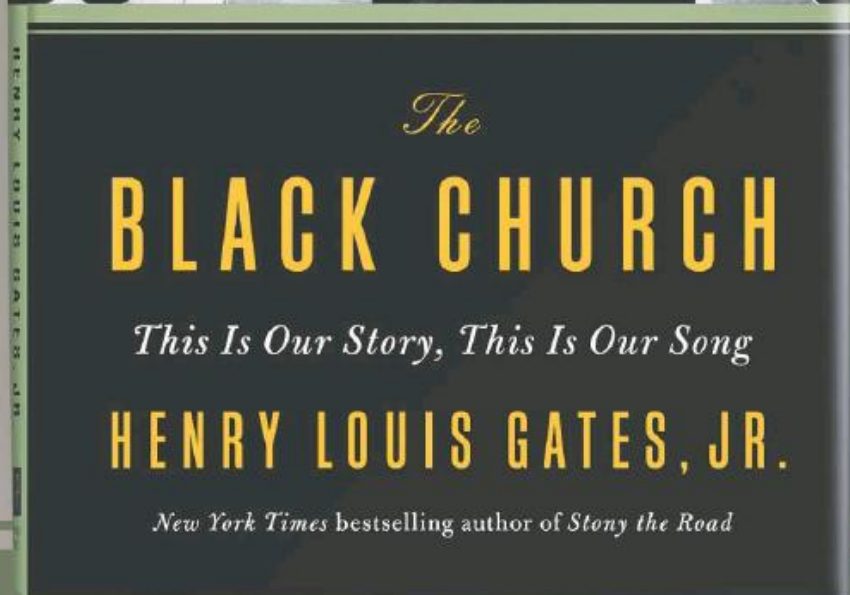
—CORNEL WEST

**“AS COMPREHENSIVE AS  
IT IS CELEBRATORY**

. . . . Blending research, interviews with scholars and insights from his own life, Gates illuminates the central role of the Black church in the movement for social justice.” —*TIME*

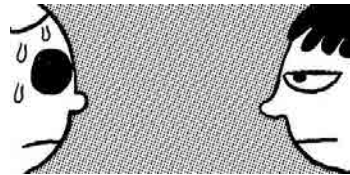
**“ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT—**  
a book that should spark a very rich conversation  
. . . A necessary and moving work.”

—EDDIE S. GLAUDE, JR.



Penguin Press

Read more at [prh.com/theblackchurch](http://prh.com/theblackchurch)



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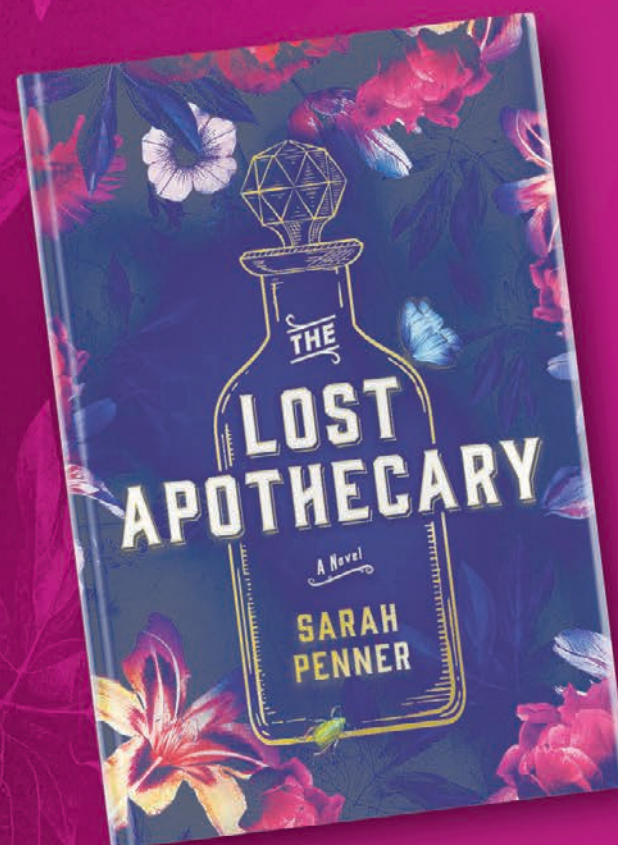
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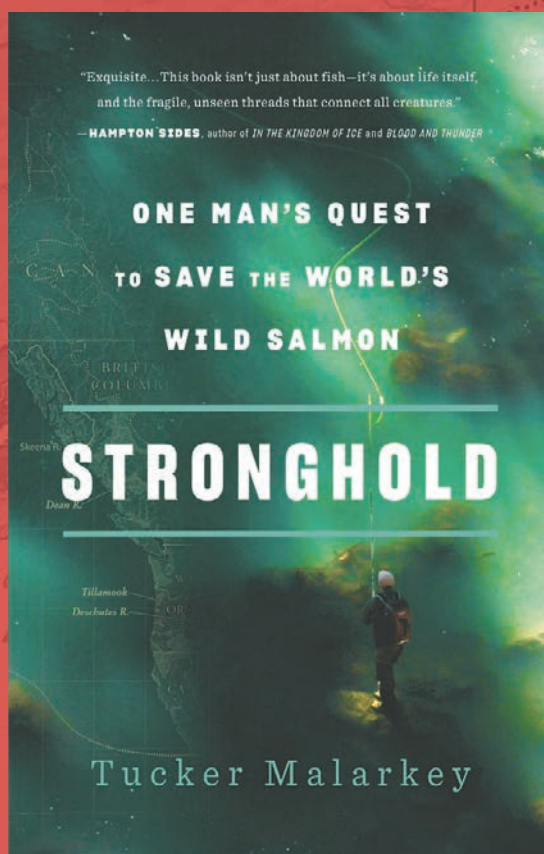
—Kate Quinn,  
author of *The Alice Network*



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—THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

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world’s most pristine waters.”  
—THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**EDITORS' PICK:** *The New York Times Book Review, Outside, The National Book Review, Forbes, and Amazon*



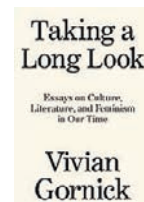
## New & Noteworthy



**I HAD A MISCARRIAGE: A MEMOIR, A MOVEMENT**, by Jessica Zucker. (Feminist Press, paper, \$18.95.) The author, a psychologist specializing in maternal mental health, struggled after her own pregnancy ended in miscarriage; this memoir seeks to destigmatize the issue.



**SHAKING THE GATES OF HELL: A SEARCH FOR FAMILY AND TRUTH IN THE WAKE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS REVOLUTION**, by John Archibald. (Knopf, \$28.) In this self-critical exposé of white privilege, a Birmingham News columnist born at the height of the civil rights movement examines his roots in a line of Methodist preachers.



**TAKING A LONG LOOK: ESSAYS ON CULTURE, LITERATURE, AND FEMINISM IN OUR TIME**, by Vivian Gornick. (Verso, \$26.95.) Spanning five decades from the 1970s on, this collection of previously published work includes incisive assessments of Lore Segal, Mary McCarthy and James Salter, among others.



**THE PORNIIFICATION OF AMERICA: HOW RAUNCH CULTURE IS RUINING OUR SOCIETY**, by Bernadette Barton. (NYU, \$24.95.) Zippy and well illustrated, this book persuasively argues that “equating hypersexualization with sex positivity is a form of Orwellian doublespeak.”



**THE NEW YORK TIMES COOKING NO-RECIPE RECIPES**, by Sam Sifton. (Ten Speed, paper, \$28.) The first cookbook from The Times’s popular Cooking app is less a recipe collection than a spur to improvisation, with lavish photos.

## WHAT WE'RE READING



Growing up watching Bollywood movies might have primed me for romantic stories about people who look and sound like me. But that’s not entirely true, especially when fairness, caste, class and even body type dictate so much of what is depicted. In the literary world, I find myself instead turning to the Y.A. magic spun by Sandhya Menon. In **THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT SWEETIE**, we have at the center Sweetie: a fat Indian girl who isn't apologetic about who she is or how she looks, despite her mother's efforts to convince her of the contrary. She goes against her family's wishes without inhibitions, eventually finding love with Ashish. Together, they must figure out how to weigh family expectations against the bliss of young love. Menon's female characters always feel at once relatable and realistic, making it super easy to root for them. With lighthearted banter and a fierce brown girl at the helm, this book remains one of my top favorites to revisit in these difficult times.

—PRIYA ARORA, SOCIAL EDITOR

“Thanks to Florio, as the Village continues to face gentrification, like many neighborhoods across America, we will never forget Bank Street. A charming stroll down Memory Lane and a tribute to a vanishing culture.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

“[A] vibrant, heartfelt memoir...Florio combines historical context with personal experiences in her kaleidoscopic account... Her decades on Bank Street gave her access to “every social, cultural, and economic layer of American life.”

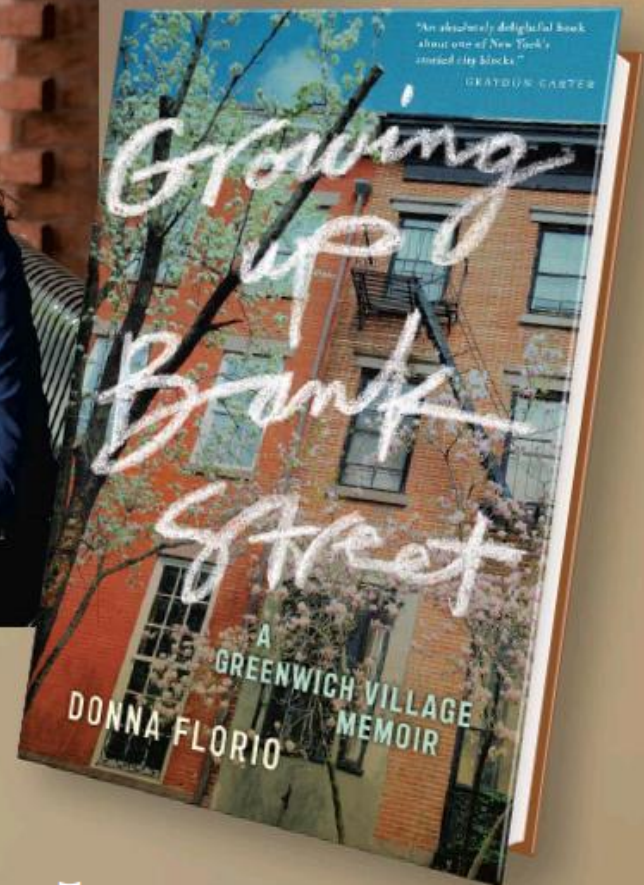
—FOREWORD REVIEWS

“Florio charms in her debut memoir about a life well-lived on Greenwich Village’s Bank Street. This sentimental memoir will uplift any reader, no matter where they may call home.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“An absolutely delightful book about one of New York’s storied city blocks.”

—GRAYDON CARTER



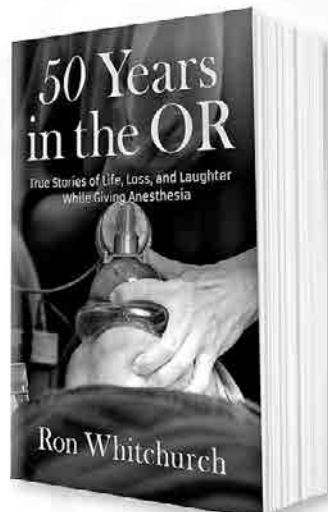
# Growing Up Bank Street

A GREENWICH VILLAGE MEMOIR

BY DONNA FLORIO

NYU PRESS

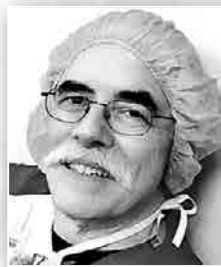
## 50 Years in the OR



By Ron Whitchurch

Ron Whitchurch wrote this wildly entertaining book to offer a firsthand look at what happens after patients are anesthetized and what challenges the staff face in keeping them healthy and safe.

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## Letters



From the cover of “Harpo Speaks!”

### The Toast of Moscow

TO THE EDITOR:  
I was pleased to see Jason Zinoman acknowledge “Harpo Speaks!,” by Harpo Marx, as the gold standard of the comedian memoir (Feb. 21). As a teenager in the early ’60s, I got my hands on the book and found it to be thoroughly entertaining.

Particularly enjoyable is the chapter about Harpo’s trip to Russia in the fall of 1933. He ended up spending eight weeks there and put on shows that earned him standing ovations. Posters that announced his appearances, written in Cyrillic, spelled his name XAPIIO MAPKC. Harpo had no idea how to pronounce it, so he called himself “Exapno Mapcase, the Toast of Moscow.”

His trip to Russia ended in intrigue. On his last day in Moscow he met with the U.S. ambassador, who asked him if he would be willing to smuggle some sensitive dispatches to America. They were taped to his leg and concealed by a sock, and after a nerve-racking ocean voyage he successfully turned them over to Secret Service agents in New York.

As a performer, Harpo never spoke a word while in character, but as a member of the Algonquin Round Table he hobnobbed with the likes of George S. Kaufman, Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker.

He was a fascinating, multitalented man who led an extraordinary life.

RICHARD GALLAGHER  
FISHKILL, N.Y.

### Making History

TO THE EDITOR:  
Discussing Robert Elder’s biography of John C. Calhoun (Feb. 28), Andrew Delbanco writes that in the wake of the Jan. 6 insurrection, a study of the “ideological father of the Confederacy may feel as welcome as an exhumed corpse.”

But when it comes to official approbation, Calhoun isn’t even interred. Go back and watch that man waving the Confederate flag around the Capitol that day, and behind him you’ll see, still occupying an honored spot on the wall, a portrait of Calhoun. Was that a smile on his face I detected as he looked on?

DAVID MARGOLICK  
NEW YORK

◆  
TO THE EDITOR:  
Delbanco concludes his otherwise astute portrait of John Calhoun, that “zealous defender of slavery,” by characterizing those who upheld last year’s vote counts in states challenged by Donald Trump and his supporters as having adopted Calhoun’s states’ rights philosophy — a juxtaposition that Delbanco

labels “one of the supreme ironies of American history.”

Not at all. Defending a state’s November 2020 popular vote for president is a far cry from what Calhoun understood as “states’ rights.” South Carolina — in which Calhoun was a leading political figure for four decades — did not even allow its citizens to vote for president until after the Civil War, long after he died.

So my Republican legislators who sought to nullify Pennsylvania’s popular vote — some even proposed that the Legislature itself choose electors — are Calhoun’s heirs, not those of us demanding that “every vote counts.” And just as the idea of Black people voting would have horrified the racist Calhoun, his heirs today objected above all to Philadelphia’s large African-American vote.

ROBERT SHAFFER  
MECHANICSBURG, PA.

### Who Says

TO THE EDITOR:  
In Ibram X. Kendi’s By the Book interview (Feb. 28), one of the questions asks: “How do you advise readers to approach books like ‘The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,’ books with conflicted or hard-to-parse racial attitudes?”

There is nothing conflicted or hard to parse about it. The novel is an unquestionable indictment of racism as well as one of the greatest studies of human nature ever published.

Have we strayed so far that we no longer recognize a true classic of American literature? What a field day Mark Twain would have had with that.

CORY FRANKLIN  
WILMETTE, ILL.

### CORRECTION

Because of an editing error, a review on Feb. 14 about “Let Me Tell You What I Mean,” by Joan Didion, misstated the criminal offenses that Martha Stewart was convicted of in 2004. Though she was investigated for insider trading, Stewart was found guilty of other related charges. She was not “sentenced to prison for insider trading.”

[BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM](mailto:BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM)



## Jo Ann Beard

The essayist and story writer, whose new collection is ‘Festival Days,’ rarely abandons a book she’s reading: ‘Sometimes what seems like a slog can bring you to a place you wouldn’t expect.’

### What books are on your night stand?

“Dear Miss Metropolitan,” Carolyn Ferrer’s upcoming novel; “Homeland Elegies,” by Ayad Akhtar; “The Ocean House,” by Mary-Beth Hughes; “Heavenly Questions,” by Gjertrud Schnackenberg; “At Day’s Close: Night in Times Past,” by A. Roger Ekirch; “Mothers of Sparta,” by Dawn Davies; “Memorial Drive,” by Natasha Trethewey; and “Easy Travel to Other Planets,” by Ted Mooney.

### What’s the last great book you read?

“I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes With Death,” by Maggie O’Farrell.

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

Well, I finally finished “To the Lighthouse” after years of starting and stopping. The problem was me, it turns out, not the book, so I’m glad I stuck with it.

### Describe your ideal reading experience.

End of day, bathtub, novel.

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

“Junkyard Dogs and William Shakespeare,” by Mark Lamonica. It’s a curated collection of photographs he took of the dogs guarding the junkyards he visited as a sculptor over the years, and paired with quotes from Shakespeare. You cannot read it without experiencing the nobility and exaltation of these creatures — canine and human alike — in their lonely occupations.

### What’s your favorite book to assign to and discuss with your students at Sarah Lawrence?

Because I love my students, I frequently have them read Lynda Barry and David Sedaris. And because I worry about them — about how difficult it is to focus and to write and to interpret the strange “Matrix”-like world we are living in, I’ve been having them read Jia Tolentino’s “Trick Mirror” and Jenny Odell’s “How to Do Nothing.” Both books pose their own powerful, artful arguments for living the

examined life.

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

Every page of Merlin Sheldrake’s “Entangled Life” had something moving and new for me. But my favorite thing was, and I’m paraphrasing, that some fungi may have evolved their psychotropic properties as a way of encouraging and assisting human enlightenment.

### Which genres do you especially enjoy reading? And which do you avoid?

I love the essay. My first moment of wanting to be a nonfiction writer was stumbling across an essay by Loren Eiseley called “The Bird and the Machine.” I thought it was utterly thrilling, what Eiseley did in a few pages — and it was about humans and birds and science and the rights of animals to be free of human interference. So, pretty much a perfect storm for Jo Ann.

### What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?

I have a lot of books about dog training for someone whose dogs aren’t that well trained.

### What kind of reader were you as a child? Which childhood books and authors stick with you most?

I read constantly, voraciously, as though I were actively living those lives instead of my own. It was delirious fun, those Saturdays my mother would come home from a yard sale with a box of random books for us to consume. In those boxes I eventually found all of Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Mary O’Hara, Jack London, Albert Payson Terhune. Leading to a lifelong love of dogs and horses and rowdy boys.

### Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn’t? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?

I tend to finish things, holding out hope. Sometimes what seems like a slog can bring you to a place you wouldn’t expect, like stumbling on a clearing. Mostly that doesn’t happen, but when it does, you have to imagine that it went that way for the writer too, hacking their way toward something they were glimpsing through the trees.

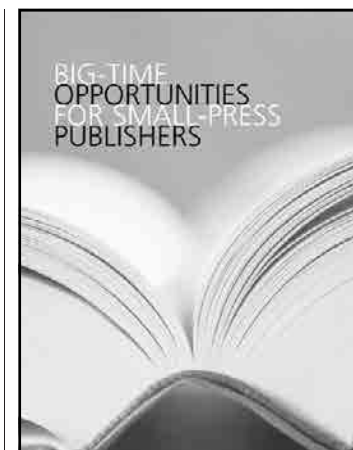
### What book are you embarrassed not to have read yet?

“Middlemarch.”

### What do you plan to read next?

“Middlemarch.” □

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

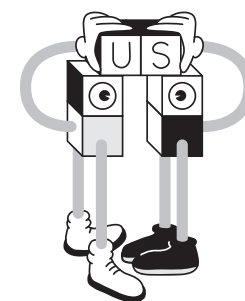


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# Tourist Attraction

A debut novel asks outsiders to empathize with the lives of locals.

By **ESMERALDA SANTIAGO**

NOT SO LONG AGO you could travel to other landscapes, peopled with men, women and children who might not look like you, who might not speak your language, who seemed to have been created just so you could build memories. When you're a tourist in someone else's home, you're there to get away from your own life, to preserve and post images of your adventures and experiences on social media, proof that you're curious about the world and that you can still have fun. To you those foreigners — preferably wearing traditional dress

### **BROTHER, SISTER, MOTHER, EXPLORER**

By **Jamie Figueroa**

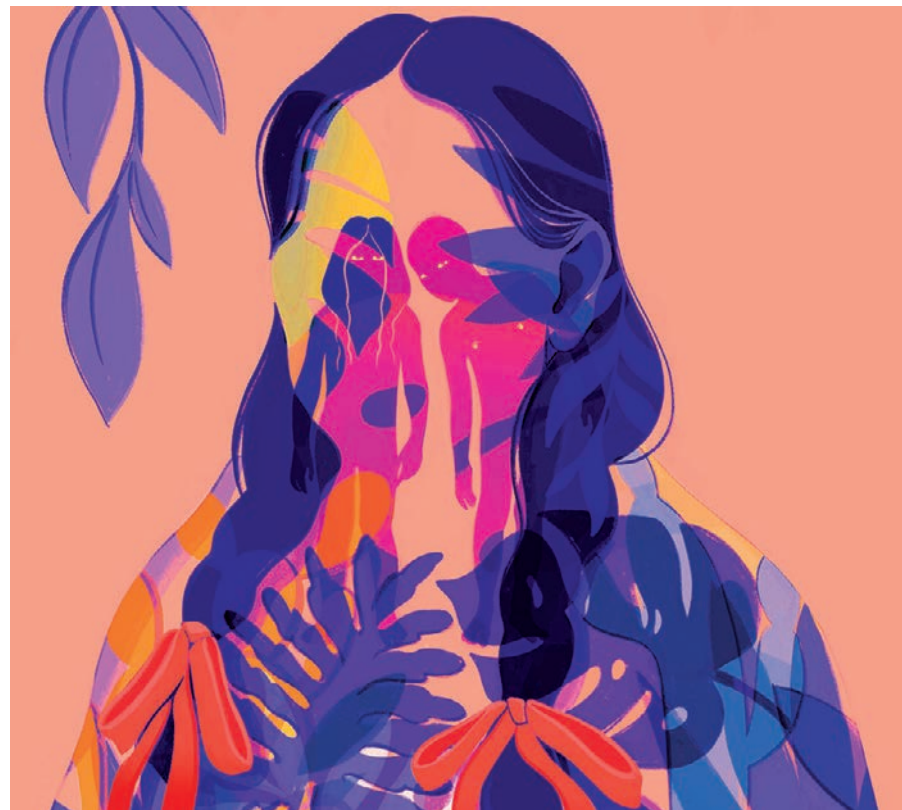
225 pp. Catapult. \$25.

or an approximation of it, their bodies adorned in patterns and textures you find charming but wouldn't wear yourself once you touch down at home — are there to fill holes in your life so deep you don't even see them anymore.

It is you, dear tourists, whom Jamie Figueroa addresses in her debut novel, "Brother, Sister, Mother, Explorer." Her otherwise third-person narration is sometimes spoken directly to you, guiding your gaze with injunctions like "Don't take your eyes off her," pointing out what you might otherwise either deliberately or subconsciously ignore: the performers forced by economic circumstance to amuse you, the shopkeepers who sell what they can't afford to own. The residents of these "exotic" places know they don't exist for you unless they're right in front of you, in a shady plaza in a mesa surrounded by mountains, waving their arms, singing, strumming, dancing, begging for your attention. But Figueroa — who describes herself as "Boricua by way of Ohio," and now lives in New Mexico — knows those picturesque people have lives as complex as yours, with fewer resources to help them cope. She sees them. And, be warned, she also sees you.

"Brother, Sister, Mother, Explorer" packs a lot of story into just over 200 pages. The titular siblings, Rafa and Rufina, are in their late 20s and mourning the recent death of their mother, Rosalinda. To support themselves they dress in colorful costumes made by "the Explorer" — the white man who invaded their home when they were children, peddling out their talents for his own profit — and pose as living statues in the plaza of Ciudad de Tres Hermanas. A basket at their feet receives the crumpled bills of visitors, who ask no questions about what has brought these brown individuals to pretend they're not human in the plaza dotted with cottonwoods. The tourists do care, though, whether they can snap a selfie.

**ESMERALDA SANTIAGO** is the author, most recently, of "Conquistadora."



MARLY GALLARDO

All their lives Rosalinda, Rafa and Rufina have been caught in the maelstrom of history, unable to affect it but scarred by events far beyond their ability to control or comprehend. While pregnant with Rafa, Rosalinda escaped "a country that wanted all of her kind dead," and made it into this one (which remains unnamed) thanks to the humanitarian work of the Grandmothers to All, a commune of elderly women who "rescue women in need. Because aren't women just an extension of the natural world?" Safely across the border, she tries to make a life for herself and her children — born 20 months apart by different fathers — and to leave behind her pain, with mixed results. Well into adulthood, her children are still trying to make sense of her erratic, often disturbing behavior. Even once she is gone, Rosalinda's ghost haunts the house, kicking doors, breaking dishes, rattling cutlery. Rafa, devastated by her loss, considers suicide. Rufina can't handle her brother's break from reality, but she can't just let him go. So she challenges him: If they can make enough money over a weekend performing at the plaza, he will leave Ciudad de Tres Hermanas and live on an island, where he has always been happiest. He agrees, reluctantly, and they return to the plaza, Rafa playing a guitar without strings, Rufina singing, poorly, about a lost baby. A white husband and wife stop to watch the performance, Rafa and Rufina's "earnest seduction," and deem the sadness and poverty "part of the charm."

During the three days we know him, Rafa is a broken man, but Rufina remem-

**White visitors to the town in this book deem the sadness and poverty 'part of the charm.'**

bers him as a multilingual, well-traveled worker in N.G.O.s. We don't know how many of his job-related experiences collide against his memories of his mother, but we can imagine, we can understand why and how he's come to the present crossroads. His mother's death is only the most recent of his sorrows.

Rufina is also more than the bedraggled performer, ogled by men, feared by women. She too has been traumatized, physically and psychologically, but she doesn't give up. Her survivor's spirit is redemptive, even though in a sense we learn she's had to give up long before we first meet her, bleating in the dusty plaza.

A ghost who loves to sit in a rocking chair on the roof, an angel who smokes cherry-flavored cigarillos, the local vendors Rafa calls the "Original Enduring Ones" watching, the Grandmothers to All protecting: These presences are like characters in a fable. Even those of us who resist magical realism might accept, maybe even celebrate it in this beautifully crafted, poetic book.

Having read "Brother, Sister, Mother, Explorer," maybe the next time you travel, you might recall that what you see is not all there is. You might see yourselves as Jamie Figueroa sees you, apart from and yet a part of our common human condition. □



## From 1619 to 3020

ON A RECENT sunny winter day, I drove 40 miles from New Orleans to a plantation on the southern banks of the Mississippi. The Whitney Plantation, first opened to the public in 2014, is the only plantation museum in Louisiana exclusively focused on the history of enslaved people. While walking its grounds I listened to an hour-long audio tour, which seemed to conjure ghosts and whispers. I recognized these as the same echoes that had been with me the week prior, in the audiobook I had been listening to: **FOUR HUNDRED SOULS: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019** (Random House Audio, 14 hours, 2 minutes), edited by Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain. This museum tour of Black stories was not only a coincidental appendix to that book, but also testament to how aural narratives, for their ability to unfurl in your mind while you are taking in the world around you, can be far more than background. They can be all-consuming.

In the book's introduction, Kendi equates the project to "a Black choir singing the spiritual into the heavens of history." It is at once a song and a continuation of a centuries-old tradition of oral histories, in the form of 80 essays and 10 poems, all commissioned to chronicle 400 years of Black life in America. There are academic essays, thoroughly reported profiles and lyrical memoirs side by side, from voices as disparate as the historian Nakia D. Parker's, the writer Kiese Laymon's and the journalist and academic Isabel Wilkerson's. The stories, running chronologically in five-year increments and read by a full cast, can at first sound disjointed in their different approaches, but they have much in common: an urgent mission to autopsy history as it's long been taught in this country, and to pull at the threads between the past

SEBASTIAN MODAK, *The Times's 52 Places Traveler in 2019*, has also written for *Condé Nast Traveler* and *The Washington Post*.

and the present as a way of showing just how intact they are.

SORT THROUGH THOSE threads and follow one far into an imagined future, and you might end up at **THE ONLY LIVING GIRL ON EARTH** (Scribd Originals, 1 hour, 12 minutes), by the National Book Award winner Charles Yu. This short story — itself a collection of free-floating but connected fragments — takes place in the year 3020 and centers on Jane, who is the sole employee of "Earth: The Gift Shop," which is all that is left on the planet, after "Earth: A Bunch of Civilizations" became uninhab-



ALLEANNA HARRIS

itable and "Earth: A Theme Park" fell into disrepair. Yes, most of the metaphors and parables packed into this story — a grab bag of sci-fi tropes highlighting humanity's hamster-wheel existence — are this heavy-handed. But, as a brief and entertaining thought experiment buoyed by some masterly turns of phrase (a telescope described, for example, as a "needle pointing out into the haystack of empty space"), the story will hold your attention, especially in audio form, thanks to a skillful narration by the voice actor Jesse Vilinsky.

IS A SHORT STORY always the opposite of the 14-hour historical epic that swirls around your mind for weeks? A snack instead of a meal? Try telling that to George Saunders, the kind of writer who talks about literature as if it is intricately linked to what makes

us human. To listen to his newest book, **A SWIM IN A POND IN THE RAIN: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life** (Random House Audio, 14 hours, 44 minutes), is the closest many of us will get to sitting in on one of his fiction writing classes. Using a selection of stories from 19th-century Russian masters — Chekhov, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Gogol — Saunders dives deep (occasionally headachingly deep) into what makes a story a story. Saunders calls the form "a frank, intimate conversation between equals" in one moment; in the next, "a continual system of escalation." This is like one of those lectures-on-tape your grandfather used to listen to, except this time the teacher's voice is joined by narrators like Glenn Close, B. D. Wong and Nick Offerman, who is unsurprisingly adept at capturing the personalities that might fill a rural Russian tavern.

A UNIVERSE IS LARGE. I know this because Saunders's book somehow exists in the same "how to" universe as **EVERYBODY HAS A PODCAST (EXCEPT YOU): A How-To Guide From the First Family of Podcasting** (Harper-Audio, 5 hours, 9 minutes), by

the brothers behind the wildly successful series "My Brother, My Brother and Me" and "The Adventure Zone." This is a course on podcasting, except very funny, very current and (as one would hope) so listenable I devoured it in a day. Griffin, Travis and Justin McElroy — with guest appearances from their partners and their father — take turns offering firsthand experience on every step of production, from choosing your co-workers ("a great friend does not inherently make a great co-host") to how long each episode should be ("I dunno, probably an hour? *Next question*"). This is a book for hardcore fans of the brothers' growing roster, but it is also a thorough resource for anyone remotely interested in the world of D.I.Y. podcasting. And that, if my Twitter feed is to be believed, includes basically everyone. □

“ Seeing ourselves as whole and healthy is an act of pure rebellion. ”

NATASHA MARIN

Curator of *Black Imagination*



## BLACK IMAGINATION

Performed by

DAVEED DIGGS & LENA WAITHE



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# What the Portal Said

Making sense of a life split between virtual and physical worlds.

By **MERVE EMRE**

“THE ONLY SOLUTION to the internet was to write bad novels with central personages who do not appear.

“The only solution was to write bad novels that mimicked the computer network in its obsessions with junk media.

“The only solution was to write bad novels that mimicked the network in its irrelevant and jagged presentation of content.”

Jarett Kobek wrote these self-ironizing words in his 2016 novel “I Hate the Internet”; now they could serve as a rubric for critics asked to review novels about the internet and to determine whether these novels are solemnly, unrepentantly bad or good in spite of themselves. “I Hate the Internet” falls into the latter category, as do Dennis Cooper’s “The Sluts” (2004), Tao Lin’s “Taipei” (2013) and Lynne Tillman’s

## NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS

By **Patricia Lockwood**

210 pp. Riverhead Books. \$25.

“Men and Apparitions” (2018). The lasting achievement of these strange, excellent novels is to represent not only the relentless with which the internet intrudes on our perceptions, our consciousness, but also the larger and more distant forces that allow it to do so. Such novels speak of trolls and mobs, of identity and authenticity, in the same breath with which they whisper about the overproduction of personal “data,” “the information of existence” (Lin), or how corporations command “the thrill of the new” to create demand for their products (Tillman). They find ways, as the critic Mark McGurl puts it, “to speak back to and against” their own conditions of existence.

The most recent contender in this genre is Patricia Lockwood’s “No One Is Talking About This.” The author of two poetry collections and a memoir, “Priestdaddy,” Lockwood is a modern word witch, her writing splendid and sordid by turns. Her prose rambles from animal gags to dirty talk to infinitely beautiful meditations on the nature of perception that deflate and turn absurd before they can turn philosophical. She has honed her craft on the internet, mainly on Twitter. That platform, as a mistrustful reviewer once complained, “rewards her particular talents for compression, provocation, mockery, snark,” inspiring poems like “Search ‘Lizard Vagina’ and You Shall Find,” or “The Father and Mother of American Tit-Pics.”

“No One Is Talking About This” is, in part, a rebuttal to this vision of the internet as enabling a mean and cramped sort of art. The chief virtue of the novel is how it transforms all that is ugly and cheap about

**MERVE EMRE** is an associate professor of English at the University of Oxford.

online culture — the obsession with junk media; the fragmentary and jerked presentation of content; the mockery, the snark; the postures, the polemics — into an experience of sublimity. Lockwood grasps one of the most extraordinary tricks of the internet, which is its capacity to metamorphose billions of short, often brutish and haphazard utterances into something that feels immensely and solidly real; a single entity, “the internet”; a presence that overwhelms us with both wonder and despair. How big is the internet, exactly? Can we ever know all of it? This feeling of obscurity used to be the domain of nature; what Wordsworth once described as “a portal in the sky.” Lockwood gives us, more simply, “the portal.”



MARK PERNICE

What is the portal? “A brain, a language, a place, a time?” Lockwood’s unnamed narrator asks in what amounts to an extension of Lockwood’s essay “The Communal Mind,” published in *The London Review of Books* in 2019. She is a restless narrator, who thinks in beautiful, witty, tidy paragraphs. She shifts between pronouns and points of view the way one might cycle between tabs late at night, half bored, half elated. There is the all-encompassing “we,” magicking itself into existence whenever everyone online seems to agree on something. There is the “you,” a direct message to the reader, at times solicitous, at times accusatory. There is the more distracted “she,” who ignores us as she posts, clicks and scrolls to the point of hallucination, disavowing the idea that modern novels, like this one, should accommodate old-fashioned analog devices like plot or character.

“Why were we all writing like this now?” the narrator wonders. “Because a new kind of connection had to be made, and

blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote.”

The question many people have demanded that the great internet novel answer is: What does it feel like to be online? For Lockwood, the question of how it feels for one person to be online is indistinguishable from how the internet would narrate its own virtual existence — how it would speak, if it could speak, in a single voice, of the intense, exhausting accretion of matter that makes it feel alive, electric with rage and desperation, greedy for attention and praise, and, as the narrator’s husband says, “like a ventriloquist’s dummy,” “just totally, totally dead.”

“This did not feel like real life, exactly, but nowadays what did?” the narrator wonders. She emerges as a portal for the portal’s uncanny consciousness, churning individual thoughts into tweets, tweets into memes, memes back into the language of thought, until what belongs to me and what belongs to you can no longer be discerned amid this mute, incessant chatter. “What about the stream-of-a-consciousness that is not entirely your own? One that you participate in, but also acts upon you?” the narrator asks. Perhaps worried about being misunderstood or read the wrong way — a persistent fear online, where intent is impossible to fix — the narrator has an anxious habit of providing her reader with running commentary, a user’s guide to the novel.

THE CHALLENGE THE novel sets for itself is how to wrench the narrator from the portal and into a singular reality. Her release comes in the novel’s second section, which begins when the narrator learns that her

sister is carrying a child with Proteus syndrome, a condition that causes an overgrowth of skin and bone — a child who will likely die soon after she is born.

The narrator knows that the internet is no place for bereavement; here, there are only drive-by mourners, rubberneckers gawking at the pain of others. Both for the sake of plot, what little plot can be salvaged, and for the sake of self-preservation, she must withdraw. Though for one so closely identified with the portal’s consciousness, such withdrawal can only be partial. The fragments remain but are repurposed for the inchoate work of loving then losing. Humor is attempted, but falls terribly flat, dragged down by sentiment. Grief is always a slog.

Yet from this grief emerges grace, a sublimity that is not universal but achingly particular. The baby grows toward death, with “a kind of absolutism that was almost joy,” inhabiting a body and a consciousness that is wholly her own. “She only knows what it is to be herself,” the doctors keep repeating. The baby is not a metaphor, the narrator warns us, yet her wild, untrammelled, inscrutable being is everywhere counterpoised by the internet’s similarly enigmatic existence. When she dies, her doctors harvest her brain. “As long as people were looking at that mind, it was still active in the world, asking and answering, finding out about things, making small dear cries of discovery,” the narrator thinks.

Here is the novel’s secondary virtue: its insistence that the shadow forms of living and thinking — the life led online amid the buzz of the hive mind; the life that persists after death — are, for all their vaporous mystery, no less real than the life led by you or me. And so, the question the narrator first asked of the portal comes back at the end to strike a consolatory note after death: “This did not feel like real life exactly, but nowadays what did.”

Something Kobek did not anticipate in his rubric for how to solve the problem of the internet was that people might stop writing novels altogether. They might write experimental essays or memoirs; champion shagginess and shapelessness; pronounce, as Lockwood did in a recent interview, that the internet has anointed “the fragmentary and the autofictional . . . the modes of the times.” Whether or not this is true, one test of the novel in the age of the internet is if it offers enough resistance, on the level of plot or character, structure or tone, to the very media forms it wants to represent. A good novel would not speak in the voice of the internet; it would speak over it, and the clamor it made would allow its critics to hazard a stronger claim for the value of the novel to our virtual lives. For all the local beauty and humor of “No One Is Talking About This,” it does not feel like a good novel, exactly, because it does not feel like a novel at all. But nowadays what does? □

# Pilgrim Law

Seeking a fair trial in early America.

By FRANCIS J. BREMER

IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT the Pilgrims. Even during the pandemic, the 400th anniversary of the voyage of the Mayflower has been marked with public events, exhibits and academic conferences in England, the Netherlands and the United States. Numerous books have explored new angles on an old story, some of them directing attention to the Native population, the people who inhabited the land they called Dawnland. In "Terror to the



Massasoit with the Pilgrims.

**TERROR TO THE WICKED**  
**America's First Trial by Jury**  
**That Ended a War and Helped to**  
**Form a Nation**  
By Tobey Pearl

Illustrated. 288 pp. Pantheon Books.  
\$29.

Wicked," Tobey Pearl, a lawyer and educator, focuses on an important episode in the story of colonist-Native relations.

In the summer of 1638 an English indentured servant in the Plymouth Colony, Arthur Peach, ran away from his master. He was joined by three other servants. As they journeyed through the wilderness they encountered a Native whom they attacked and robbed. The Native, Penowyanquis, though mortally wounded, escaped and was able to tell his tale to Roger Williams in nearby Providence before he died. While one of the runaways escaped, Peach and two of his fellow perpetrators were put on trial in the Plymouth Colony for murder. The English jury convicted all three and they were speedily executed. The story as such is well known and speaks to the willingness of an English jury to provide justice in a case where Englishmen murdered a Native.

Pearl has not unearthed any facts that have not been previously reported in many studies of the Plymouth Colony. She adds conjecture to what the sources actually tell us, with speculation about what Peach and his associates may have been feeling, the possible motivations of major characters and the supposed thoughts of the jurors, to mention just a few examples.

One can't go beyond one or two

FRANCIS J. BREMER is the author of "One Small Candle: The Plymouth Puritans and the Beginning of English New England."

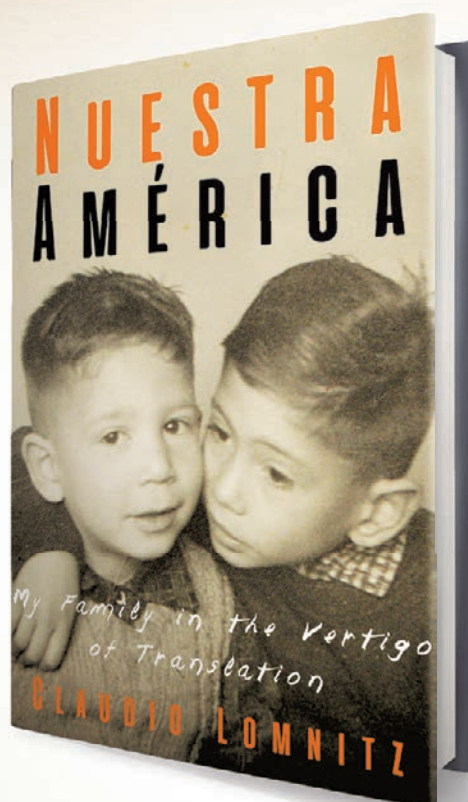
pages without encountering something that "may have," "possibly" or "likely" happened. John Winthrop, governor of Massachusetts, must have been present at the trial and the executions, though there is no evidence that he was. Many pages are devoted to imagining the details of a discussion between Roger Williams and the Wampanoag Massasoit. What sources consider possible, Pearl presents as certainty. For such supposition to be persuasive readers have to be confident in the author's deep knowledge of the times and culture, but there are too many factual inaccuracies and jumbings of chronology to provide that confidence in this case. An example is the citation of the famous 1670 English trial of William Penn and William Mede that established a jury's right to act against a judge's instructions, which Pearl seems to employ to support the independence of the jury in the 1638 Peach trial.

"Terror to the Wicked" is well written and draws upon important new insights into Native culture. But the underlying arguments that this was "America's first trial by jury" and that it "ended a war" (as the subtitle has it) are misleading. As for being the first trial by jury, Plymouth's governor William Bradford recorded that in 1630 "John Billington the Elder . . . was arraigned; and both by grand, and petty jury found guilty of willful murder by plain and notorious evidence. And was for the same accordingly executed." As for the claim that this trial "ended a war," the Pequot War was essentially over; churches in Plymouth and other New England colonies had celebrated a day of thanksgiving for their victory 10 months earlier. The Peach trial was important, but Pearl's reasoning exaggerates how important it was. It was not, as she asserts, "the trial of the century." □

"AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN WHICH WE LATIN AMERICANS ALL RECOGNIZE OURSELVES."

—MARIO VARGAS LLOSA, winner of the 2010 Nobel Prize in Literature

# NUESTRA AMÉRICA



"A FAMILY HISTORY LIKE THIS ONE IS A MEANS OF CONFRONTING AND REDEFINING THE CONCEPTS OF HOMELAND, BELONGING, AND HISTORY."

—THE NEW YORKER

"Nuestra América means 'Our America,' and that collective pronoun encompasses not just Lomnitz's family but multitudes who have wound up on South America's shores...

IT IS ABOUT HISTORY, LANGUAGE, IDEAS AND HOW THEY SHAPE, IN THE SWEEP OF TIME, OUR ECCENTRIC INDIVIDUAL LIVES."

—MICHAEL GREENBERG,  
author of *Hurry Down Sunshine*

"A MASTERPIECE OF HISTORICAL AND PERSONAL INVESTIGATION."

—KIRKUS REVIEWS (starred review)

"RIVETING... Brings to light untold narratives of the Jewish diaspora from Romania to Peru to Colombia to Israel to California to Mexico and beyond... Lomnitz's forebears, vividly portrayed, lived lives of profound political and intellectual engagement." —CLAIRE MESSUD, author of *The Burning Girl*

"I LOVED IT... Only someone with the extraordinary gifts of Claudio Lomnitz as both anthropologist and historian could produce a work as this, in which culture and history, family and individuality, all interact to create a unique kind of autobiography—written, moreover, with tenderness and talent." —MARSHALL SAHLINS, author of *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*

"VITAL, ABSORBING, ELEGIAC, and so finely honed... An extraordinary journey." —PHILIPPE SANDS, author of *The Ratline and East West Street*

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# Scenes From the Anthropocene

The human efforts to confront a changing natural world — and their unintended consequences.

By HELEN MACDONALD

A FEW YEARS AGO YouTube recommended I watch a video with the word “carpocalypse” in its title. I clicked the link — of course I did — and stared in awe at what resembled a mash-up of a video game, nature documentary and war movie. I saw a river full of fish leaping from the water like chaotic piscine fireworks and men in speedboats yelling and holding out nets to catch them as if they were wet and weighty butterflies. Fish hitting people in the face, fish landing in boats, fish flapping between people’s feet in a mess of slime and blood. This, the video informed me, was the annual Redneck Fishing Tournament in Bath,

**UNDER A WHITE SKY**  
**The Nature of the Future**

By Elizabeth Kolbert  
234 pp. Crown. \$28.



Illinois River silver carp leap into the air after being disturbed by sounds of watercraft.

Ill., the object of which was to kill as many Asian carp as possible. An invasive species that has spread throughout the Mississippi basin since its introduction as a “safe” agent of biological control in the 1960s, Asian carp jump when they feel in danger, and the sound of boat engines is sufficiently alarming to push them en masse into the air.

The video was a startling coincidence of science, culture and environmental disaster, and I thought of it often as I read Elizabeth Kolbert’s excellent new book. I did so partly because her opening chapter deals with the continuing struggle to prevent Asian carp from entering the Great Lakes system, with solutions ranging from electrified water barriers to thrillingly impractical suggestions from members of the public to stop them with flying knives. But as I read on, I was reminded of the carp for a different reason. They seemed no longer just a sign of environmental disaster or a ready metaphor for xenophobia. In my mind they became proxies for us — creatures in mass panic, leaping out of their comfort zone, desperate to avoid catastrophe.

“Under a White Sky” is a fascinating survey of novel attempts to manage natural systems of all sizes, from preserving tiny populations of desert fish to altering the entire atmosphere (the title refers to the color the sky would turn were solar engineers to implement plans to spread mineral particles in the stratosphere to reflect sunlight and cut global warming).

One of the great science journalists, Kolbert has for many years been an essential voice, a reporter from the front lines of the environmental crisis. Her new book crackles with the realities of living in an era that

HELEN MACDONALD is the author, most recently, of “Vesper Flights.”

has sounded the death knell for our commonly held belief that one can meaningfully distinguish between nature and humanity. Our world is too much changed for nature to be preserved simply by leaving it alone. “Humans,” she explains, are producing “no-analog climates, no-analog ecosystems, a whole no-analog future.” The systems that support us are now hybrid human-natural ones, and maintaining them increasingly requires us to adopt inventive strategies to correct for our previous attempts at control, efforts that have frequently led to highly unfortunate outcomes.

Kolbert has a phenomenal ability to communicate complex scientific information. She explains CRISPR gene-editing and atmospheric physics in prose that is a model of clarity and generosity; she traces environmental histories deftly. She moves us gracefully across numerous scales, from aerial views of clouds reflected in Louisiana lakes right down to an individual scientist picking aquatic beetles from a mesh screen, a fish egg with a visibly beating heart, a single gene. She has a marvelous eye for the quirky, from the plywood palm tree outside an Arctic research station to the local term for used condoms floating in water (“Chicago River whitefish,” a phrase I will never be able to forget, no matter how hard I try), and she wields figurative language in truly glorious ways: All the desert pupfish in the world, she explains, weigh less than a Filet-O-Fish sandwich. Isn’t that perfect?

All the while, we are introduced to a wonderful cast of people. She interviews scientists and engineers, coastal geologists, solar geoengineers, tattooed fishermen in gore-smeared overalls, a director of an Arctic institute with an icicle-hung beard and a Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw chief living on doomed land. One frustration I had

was the omission of Black voices in the chapter about land loss and environmental disaster in Louisiana. A significant aspect of managing natural systems has to do with the paternalism of such projects — the question of whether the people most affected by these endeavors have a say in how they are carried out.

Kolbert repeatedly turns to attempts by humans to recreate the natural world. She visits large-scale dynamic hydrological models; marine tanks in which corals are subjected to stress to assist their artificial evolution into hardier organisms capable of coping with our changing seas; the construction of a desert pool in a building that looks like an industrial warehouse. These spaces, strangely irrigated with both hope

**These spaces remind us that Earth itself is a discrete system under stress.**

and despair, remind us that Earth itself is a discrete system under stress, the site of an experiment in survival we have busily been conducting on ourselves.

Though as a writer she has a transporting ability to conjure place and atmosphere, Kolbert can at times be a strangely elusive presence in her own book. At many points, I wanted desperately to know how she felt about things. When I read her assessment of the scenery surrounding her in northern Greenland — which “could be described as bleak, or alternatively, as sublime” — I blinked, curious as to which she preferred. Pointing out this personal reticence is not a criticism of her work: “Under a White Sky” is important, necessary, urgent and phenomenally interesting. It has, however, made me muse on the ways we choose to write about the environmen-

tal emergency.

In 2014, Kolbert was asked whether she found writing about extinction depressing. She said it was, but it had to be looked in the face. “I’ve tried to transcend my own feelings,” she explained. There’s good reason to do so: In such a politically charged field, honest sentiment is too often weaponized as evidence of bias and weakness. Furthermore, the voice of reportage, like the voice of scientific papers, carries enormous cultural power. It bespeaks objectivity. It’s the voice we are told to use when we want to be taken seriously, when we don’t want our conclusions to be interpreted as simply being emotional; we’re taught such things muddy the force of truth.

Yet the people who toil to stop invasive carp or preserve desert pupfish do so for reasons that do not exist solely in the realm of science. All the conservation biologists I know have deep attachments to the creatures they study, and it is these passionate motivations that spur their efforts and assist the continued survival of the creatures in question. I’m reminded of the words of Robin Wall Kimmerer, botanist, writer and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, who maintains that science can be a path to kinship with other species, and that it should be animated by more than simply pure analysis.

Beautifully and insistently, Kolbert shows us that it is time to think radically about the ways we manage the environment; time to work with what we have, using the knowledge we have, with our eyes fully open to the realities of where we are. Rigorous analysis and science journalism, the form in which Kolbert truly excels, is needed now more than ever. But alongside it, to enrich it, there should be other stories too: tender, careful investigations into the feelings that drive and shape our efforts to save the world. □

# The Squad

New books consider the culture of policing in two American cities.

By MAURICE CHAMMAH

IN LATE 2015, I interviewed several young police officers over lunch in the middle of their patrol shift. We were near St. Louis, not far from Ferguson, where the year before an officer from a different department had shot and killed Michael Brown, sparking protests and a nationwide debate about law enforcement. I asked each officer the same question: What do you want to be doing in 10 years? I assumed one might say “detective,” another “chief.”

Most of them responded with the same word: “tactical.” They wanted to be on a SWAT team, or something like it, handling shootouts and other high-risk situations. They were earnest about wanting to serve the public, but they also seemed a little bored, stopping cars and checking them for guns and drugs. They were mostly white. All the drivers were Black. The officers acted politely,

**TANGLED UP IN BLUE**  
Policing the American City

By Rosa Brooks  
367 pp. Penguin Press. \$28.

**WE OWN THIS CITY**  
A True Story of Crime, Cops,  
and Corruption

By Justin Fenton  
335 pp. Random House. \$28.

at least in the presence of a white reporter, but the residents told me they felt harassed and under siege. Six years later, policing has drifted even further from a policy dilemma to a full-blown culture war. Between the talk of defunding and the “thin blue line” American flags, it’s not even clear that we agree what the problems of policing and crime in America actually are, much less how to solve them.

In “Tangled Up in Blue: Policing the American City,” the Georgetown law professor Rosa Brooks takes a novel approach, chronicling her experiences over the past few years as a volunteer reserve officer with the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police Department. She takes us into neighborhoods steeped in intergenerational poverty, addiction and violence. “When other social goods and services are absent or scarce,” she writes, “police become the default solution to an astonishingly wide range of problems.” The constant deluge of tragic and avoidable conflict is enough to make some of her patrol

MAURICE CHAMMAH is the author of “Let the Lord Sort Them: The Rise and Fall of the Death Penalty” and a staff writer at *The Marshall Project*.

partners callous and cruel — one even calls the residents “animals” — but Brooks also shows that the officers are coping with their own despondency. “The main occupational hazard of policing is not assault or injury, but cynicism,” she explains. “Sometimes, it seems like everyone you meet is crying or yelling.”

Brooks has an anthropologist’s ear for the language of policing, jumping from the reports full of passive-voice bureaucratized to the darkly humorous, profanity-laden shoptalk. She zips from hilarious descriptions of going to the bathroom while overloaded with clunky gear to bone-dry observations: “The ethics lesson was slightly less detailed than the guidance on the



Baltimore police officers confronting protesters after the death of Freddie Gray, in 2015.

proper wearing of uniforms.” Anecdote by anecdote, she builds to a cautious analysis of how “even normal, careful, lawful policing often ends up compounding devastating social inequalities,” even if few officers display overt racism.

Her style recalls the work of immersion journalists like George Plimpton, Ted Conover and Barbara Ehrenreich — who happens to be Brooks’s mother. Brooks makes this part of the story, nesting in a book on policing a beautifully written mini-memoir about growing up the daughter of a famous activist and writer, who disdains the police but also values a certain toughness. Brooks explores how much this shaped her own desire to be an officer, and her self-awareness gives her insight into the practical, adrenaline-hungry tendencies that may attract people to police work. “Mostly, my partners wanted to be somewhere else, doing something more interesting,” she writes. “They wanted shootings, stabbings and

high-speed car chases.”

During her training, Brooks notices how all the students seem obsessed with watching videos of officers who briefly let down their guard and end up paying with their lives. Her fellow officers are jumpy, always convinced that a woman is reaching for a gun rather than her wallet, or that a man will pounce if they don’t restrain him. She suggests that an exaggerated sense of risk too often leads to tragedy, and that the police should be encouraged to accept more risk to themselves. “They’re told they have ‘a right to go home safe.’ Too often, they forget that other people have a right to go home safe too.” It’s easy to imagine the criticism she’ll get, but her calm, consid-

crime rate and the desperation of Baltimore’s leaders to get guns and drugs off the streets, no matter the methods. Jenkins doesn’t go on the record — although he denies many of the crimes for which he was convicted — but in some ways this makes for a better story, as a huge range of people offer a pointillistic portrait of this slippery, somewhat mysterious figure. In a perversion of traditional drug investigations, Jenkins asked his victims — mostly drug dealers whom he knows nobody will really see as victims — which other dealers they would rob, as a way of finding new targets. We see a young policeman’s desire for action allowed to fester toward troubling extremes, as Jenkins gets into multiple, dangerous high-speed chases every day.

Clearly inspired by “The Wire,” Fenton populates his narrative with a network of officers, informants and street dealers, all with different motivations and interests. Some of these personalities come through more vividly than others, but the overall effect is to capture the disorienting, churning quality of a city where the good guys and bad guys aren’t easily distinguished. Fenton lays out the meticulous work of F.B.I. agents to unravel the corruption, and at many moments their success seems anything but assured: While this is all playing out, Freddie Gray famously dies in Baltimore police custody, protesters fill the streets and prosecutors fail to get convictions.

“Between those who had experienced the abuse and the relatives, friends and co-workers who heard their stories, people who had never trusted the cops in the first place became only more contemptuous of them,” Fenton writes of the task force. “Baltimore’s Black communities have been both overpoliced and underpoliced.” Favoring hard-boiled reporter’s prose, Fenton mostly emphasizes story over such analysis, but he shows how, in our zeal to combat crime, we have allowed institutions to produce it.

There will always be a role for adrenaline junkies among the ranks of emergency workers, and there will always be moral ambiguities when we send people, no matter how well trained, into difficult, chaotic situations. Both Brooks and Fenton implicitly question the value of our culture war over policing, instead offering close observations and cautionary tales. They also offer glimmers of hope, whether in Fenton’s admiring portrait of the F.B.I. agents who saved Baltimore from its rogue officers, or in Brooks’s encounters with decent people who are attracted to the profession for the right reasons. “I’m worried about getting cynical,” a young officer tells Brooks. “I don’t want to turn into the kind of cop who just shrugs when someone gets shot.” □

ered tone, grounded in experience, is itself an achievement.

Culture and training can lead well-meaning officers toward tragic outcomes. But in other cases, departments make it possible for dishonorable officers to flourish. In “We Own This City: A True Story of Crime, Cops, and Corruption,” Justin Fenton, a reporter for *The Baltimore Sun*, traces the rise and fall of his city’s Gun Trace Task Force, a group of officers who spent years robbing drug dealers, selling drugs themselves, skimming money from house seizures, planting evidence and defrauding taxpayers through overtime claims. Their reign produced the death of a civilian and numerous wrongful charges and convictions. Another officer died under mysterious circumstances one day before he was set to testify against members of the task force.

Fenton weaves the career of his anti-hero, Wayne Jenkins, the unit’s head, together with accounts of Baltimore’s high

# In Ruins

Exploring the fates of four cities lost to time to better understand what leads urban environments to decay.

By **RUSSELL SHORTO**

I DON'T KNOW about you, but I find myself, throughout this long slog of pandemic-plus-political turmoil, alternating between feelings of warmth and camaraderie for my fellow human beings — it is so heartening to see millions pulling together in an urgent situation — and periods of wanting to punch people's lights out. Navigating the pools of disinformation and ignorance makes one actually fear for the future of

## FOUR LOST CITIES

### A Secret History of the Urban Age

By **Annalee Newitz**

297 pp. W.W. Norton & Company. \$26.95.

the human race. And the crises are focusing particular attention on our cities. Idea factories as they are, they would seem to hold the keys to that future, yet at the same time they suddenly seem shockingly vulnerable.

Though Annalee Newitz began work on "Four Lost Cities" long before the Covid-19 pandemic, it's impossible to read it today without periodic *is-this-where-we're-headed?* musings. The book functions as a travel guide to places that no longer exist. As with most any guidebook, I found myself drawn to some sites more than others. The chapters on Pompeii, the volcano-buried city in the orbit of ancient Rome, famous for its exquisitely preserved ruins, its brothels and taverns and graffiti, and on Angkor, a metropolis of medieval Cambodia, didn't fire my imagination so much, perhaps because I already knew something of their histories.

They still have their charm and their surprises, these sections. I had no idea, for instance, that the Roman emperor Titus, after touring the smoking ruins of Pompeii, initiated a massive and surprisingly modern-seeming project to relocate thousands of survivors to other parts of the empire. Or that Angkor, which reached its height around A.D. 900, had an economy based on a system of debt slavery that sounds much like what middle-class Americans endure today.

But the parts of the book devoted to two other "lost" cities, places I had never known existed, filled me with wonder. Nine thousand years ago, the people of Catalhoyuk, maybe 10,000 of them, lived in cuboid clay houses packed against one another above the Konya Plain of south-central Turkey. Their dwellings were uniform, suggesting a highly regulated society: one or two rooms, painted in white or with red colors. You exited not via a front

**RUSSELL SHORTO** is the author of "Amsterdam," "The Island at the Center of the World" and, most recently, "Smalltime: A Story of My Family and the Mob."

door but by climbing a ladder to the roof. Much of life was lived up there: cooking, socializing, ambling along sidewalks that ran across the top of the city.

Let me say that again in case you missed it: This was 9,000 years ago. In terms of human society, that is just an imponderable span of time. The oldest of the books of the Hebrew Bible date to roughly 3,000 years ago; the pyramids of Egypt go back about 5,000 years. These were not prehumans or near relatives. They were like us: complex, organized, alive to meaning and living at a time beyond reckoning.

Another way of using "Four Lost Cities" is as a compendium of archaeological findings on humanity's urban origins. The author bops along with experts from Stanford, Cambridge, the University of Calgary, Middle East Technical University and other institutions, peppering them with questions we'd like to ask, and reveling in the occasionally startling answer. ("I love Nero!" a classicist studying Pompeii's theater declares at one point.)

At Catalhoyuk, Newitz hangs out with Ruth Tringham of the University of California, Berkeley, who has devoted years to humanizing the remnants of this city of the dim past by focusing on one skeleton, of a woman she has dubbed Dido. Dido replastered her walls regularly, kept her home swept clean, covered the floor in reed mats and decorated the place with art: clay figures of animals and stylized human females. In other words: much like us.

Catalhoyuk was founded by pioneers of urban living. "When the earliest construction began," Newitz writes, "many people coming to live at Catalhoyuk were only a generation or two removed from nomadism." It was brand-new, this fixed settlement thing, but it proved remarkably successful. By the time Dido was born, the city

was about 600 years old. I'm tempted to repeat a number yet again. Think of the settled, structured history Dido could look back on. As evidence of her awareness of the past, Dido, like everyone else in town, buried her ancestors in her home, beneath her bed. Some were given a special honor: Their skulls sat in niches in the walls. Dido could enjoy the comfort of her forebears' empty eye sockets following her as she went about her daily chores. In other words: not so much like us.

A thousand years ago, meanwhile, East St. Louis, Ill., was the site of an urban sanctuary that archaeologists today call Cahokia. With a population of 30,000, it was larger than Paris was at the time. Like Paris, with its Eiffel Tower and Notre-Dame, it had distinguishing physical landmarks in the form of black earthen pyramids. It sprawled across both sides of the Mississippi River, beckoning visitors from all over the present-day Southern United States.

Cahokia seems to have been a place of spiritual pilgrimage, which drew diverse groups of Native American peoples, who

## The operative lesson from the past seems to be that human culture is a plastic thing.

spoke different languages and worshiped in various ways but came to share a reverence for this city and its ceremonial customs, which included human sacrifice. Its multiethnic, year-round population apparently serviced the religious pilgrims and, in the off-season, went about their own affairs.

Cahokia died not as a result of sudden

catastrophe, like Pompeii, but seemingly because it lost its spiritual significance over time. Its people didn't perish. The pilgrims just stopped coming; the local residents merged with other tribes. There is linguistic and other evidence that the Sioux are their descendants.

The theme of how cities die runs as a dark undercurrent through the book. Newitz devotes space to debunking the popular notion that civilizations of the past "collapse" and become "lost," pointing instead to indications of gradual change.

Near the end, Newitz attempts to bring the study of the distant past to bear on today: "Globally, we're in a period of political instability and authoritarian nationalism. Unfortunately, evidence from history shows that this can be a death knell for cities." But while warning that "the combination of climate change and political instability we face in many modern cities suggests that we're heading for a period of global urban abandonment," Newitz notes too that "if we've learned anything from history, we know the death of a few cities doesn't mean the world will collapse into dystopia."

I suppose we're to take some comfort from that. The operative lesson from the past, at least from this curated offering of former metropolises, seems to be that human culture is a plastic thing. Rather than lamenting the fragility of our current urban structures, we might do better figuring out how to bend and shape society for the future.

Perhaps looking back 9,000 years can yield practical guidance on how to move forward from where we are. For me, the effect of reading "Four Lost Cities" was more meditative. This is a long, long, long ride we are on. Much is beyond our control. Humanity trundles on. □



The snow-covered peak of the Mount Vesuvius volcano, seen from the streets of the archaeological site in Pompeii.

# Growing Pains

Political revolution and mysticism charge a coming-of-age novel.

By REBECCA MAKKAI

“MAGLYA,” THE ORIGINAL Hungarian title of Gyorgy Dragoman’s novel “The Bone Fire,” means not quite a bonfire but a pyre, a place where one might be burned alive. For the book’s English translation, our word “bonfire” has been broken back down to its etymological roots: the literal fires of bones (and heretics and sinful objects), familiar to speakers of Middle English. That a word we now perceive as benign would have such macabre origins is a reminder that we don’t live terribly far removed from superstition and atavism, either historically or psychologically.

“The Bone Fire” is Dragoman’s fourth work of fiction and his second to be translated into English, after “The White King” (2005). It achieves, like its English title, a disconcerting juxtaposition of the mundane and the primeval. On one level, it’s a real-world coming-of-age story, in which a teenager navigates both post-Communist aftershocks and the more personal issues of menstruation, crushes, friendships and



SOPHY HOLLINGTON

## THE BONE FIRE

By Gyorgy Dragoman

Translated by Otilie Mulzet

471 pp. Mariner Books. Paper, \$16.99.

bathing suits — and on another, it’s a tale of magic, ghosts and ancient memory.

Thirteen-year-old Emma, whose dissident parents have died in a car accident, has spent six months at an orphanage when an old, recently widowed woman shows up to claim her, insisting she’s the grandmother Emma never knew. The woman convinces the headmistress easily enough, and perhaps hypnotizes Emma, who moves with her to a new city. That a librarian at her new school sees a family resemblance, having known Emma’s mother, is about the only evidence we get of blood ties, but readers seeking definitive resolution will soon realize it’s a moot point. Both widow and orphan have been alone and now have each other, and the folk wisdom and witchcraft the grandmother passes down (love spells, golems, how to lie) become a stronger lineage than genetics.

While no actual country or city is named here, Dragoman has indicated in interviews that “The Bone Fire,” as well as “The White King” and a third novel that will round out a loose trilogy, is set in a fictionalized version of Transylvania. Indeed, “The Bone Fire” hews closely to the history of this region of Romania, where Dragoman himself grew up before moving to Budapest in 1988. Carved off Hungary

after World War I, Transylvania is home to most of Romania’s Hungarians, who along with other ethnic minorities were stripped of liberties under decades of Communist rule. The secret police, the notorious Securitate, undertook mass surveillance, quashed public dissent and committed human rights abuses. (Most of my own family, like Dragoman’s, left Transylvania during this period, joining relatives in Budapest or the United States.)

“The Bone Fire” is set in the aftermath of a revolution similar to the one that ended Romanian Communism: In December 1989, a week of riots and violence overturned the government, led to President Nicolae Ceausescu’s Christmas Day execution, and suddenly transformed the country. At the novel’s start, Emma’s school term at the orphanage has already included the gleeful removal of pictures of the former comrade general. Supermarkets are opening for the first time, with “everything that exists under the sun, everything, but really everything, 30 different kinds of toothpaste, eight different kinds of butter, 15 different kinds of cheese.” In her grandmother’s city, Emma’s fellow students are reeling from an uprising in which some were killed, some took on gang allegiances, some followed the lead of a firebrand art teacher and some are still caught up in lingering accusations of complicity. Emma’s dead grandfather, for one, may have been a Securitate informer — or perhaps his roles in the regime and the revolution were more complicated.

The new order does not mean an easy peace. Revolution follows revolution, and vengeance keeps coming not only for those

who were complicit in the Securitate’s rein, but even for the family members left behind, like Emma’s grandmother. “The more dead people there are,” as Emma bitterly understands the calculus, “the more truth there will be.”

Everything about Emma’s life is liminal, upheaved — adolescence, regime change, a new city, a new home — and it’s in such shaky times that foundational superstitions rise more easily to the surface, making the ordinary seem extraordinary and vice versa. The result is not so much a work of traditional magical realism as a 471-page object lesson in the uncanny.

### It’s in shaky times that foundational superstitions rise more easily to the surface.

Dragoman depicts the prosaic (the destruction of an ant colony, the yield of a walnut tree, the eating of sardines) with a meticulous pacing normally reserved for the eerie or the ominous, adopting the obsessive focus of a director’s eye on, say, someone unlocking a forbidden attic door. Meanwhile, what might be genuinely magical (divination, a grandfather’s ghost, ants and foxes that act with folkloric logic) is indulged with no sharper a lens, so that it becomes disorientingly unclear what is normal, what is supernatural and what is simply the unstable ground of an adolescence flooded with trauma.

Structurally, “The Bone Fire” defies a tidy narrative arc, drifting between scenes without much overarching plot, sliding be-

tween magical thinking and magic, between the clarity of adulthood and the fog of adolescence, between political enlightenment and ancient wisdom. That this slippery narration — a risky choice — not only propels the story forward but also resonates with the book’s themes of instability and skewed perception is a testament to Dragoman’s powers. He reaches back to folklore but also speaks to this artistic moment, in which genre and its ancestral roots permute and enrich highly regarded capital-I Literature.

And “The Bone Fire” has certainly won acclaim since its original publication in 2014 — it was a finalist for major prizes in France and Italy — before landing in the capable hands of Otilie Mulzet, the translator who has notably brought us the works of Laszlo Krasznahorkai. The timing is perfect: The novel reaches an American audience at a moment when we’re feeling not only the seismic shifts of historical change, and the hard reckoning after a strongman’s fall, but also the ways magical thinking, conspiracy and rumor seep through the cracks during times of turmoil.

Whether this novel will find the same success in the United States that it has found elsewhere depends perhaps on the extent to which American readers will surrender themselves, as Emma has, to the whims of a skilled but inscrutable abductor. Like the mysterious grandmother, Dragoman seems to have our best interests at heart. This is a story, after all, in which dreams and phantasms are kinder and more sensical than the random brutality of the concrete world. To that end, his telling is not just magic, but enchantment. □

REBECCA MAKKAI is the author, most recently, of the novel “The Great Believers,” a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

# Migration in Reverse

A call for Black Northerners to move to the South.

By **TANISHA C. FORD**

LEADING UP TO the 2020 presidential election, Stacey Abrams, LaTosha Brown and other grass-roots activists successfully registered an unprecedented number of Black voters in Georgia who had been stymied in the past by voter-suppression tactics. Their work brought key victories to Democratic candidates in the state and demonstrated the political power of Southern Black women.

Georgia's recent presidential and Senate elections are relevant to the argument of the New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow in "The Devil You Know: A Black Power Manifesto." There are two Black Americas, he says. One is the world of those who remained in the postslavery South.

## THE DEVIL YOU KNOW A Black Power Manifesto

By **Charles M. Blow**

256 pp. Harper/HarperCollins Publishers.  
\$26.99.

The other is inhabited by those who fled the South for refuge in what he terms "destination cities" across the North and West during the Great Migration. But these cities are now broken, according to Blow, and the Great Migration has been a "stinging failure." Blow, a son of Louisiana who recently moved back south — to Atlanta — says Black Americans must bridge this divide.

In what he believes would be "the most audacious power play by Black America in the history of the country," Blow calls for African-Americans to reverse-migrate south, to collectively dismantle white supremacy by using their ancestral homeland as a political base. He imagines a New South where "our trauma history is not our total history." That Black people have been returning south for at least the past 40 years, he adds, demonstrates that there is fertile ground for his idea in the region, intellectually and materially.

His is a familiar argument, revitalized by the South's recent political developments. A genesis for Blow's Black power proposition could have been the Black Belt nation thesis, proposed by Black Communists in the 1920s, or the agenda of the Republic of New Afrika in the 1960s. But Blow instead builds upon the political thought of the freethinking white hippies who moved to Vermont in the early 1970s with the intent of transforming the state's conservative electoral politics. They succeeded, he says; young Black people today should follow their blueprint.

Seeing Georgia flip blue in the 2020 elec-

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tion became Blow's "proof of concept," and for him, one thing now seems clear: The path to lasting Black power is through the vote. Forming a "contiguous band" of Black voters across the South — Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina, in particular — would "upend America's political calculus and exponentially increase" Black citizens' influence in American politics. The weakness in Blow's plan is that it requires faith in a political system that has consistently failed Black Americans at nearly every turn.

For Blow, however, the reality that Black Northerners have no recourse but to leave is a painful truth that crystallized for him one night in 2015 when he learned that his son, a student at Yale, had been stopped at gunpoint by a university police officer.



Campaigning in Georgia.

Stories like this fuel the book's searing account of police violence, systemic racial disparities and social unrest in cities like New York, Minneapolis and Portland. This is where Blow is at his best.

As a historian, I wish he had spent more time exploring the nuances of the Black migration framework the book hinges upon. Blow's claim that the Great Migration "hit the South like a bomb," causing an intellectual and cultural brain drain that stunted its growth, rings hollow. It obscures the truth that the region was an incubator of radical political activism — often led by its most disenfranchised citizens — during the Great Migration and beyond. The New South to which Blow is now beckoning people to return was created largely by the Black visionaries and community builders who remained in the rural and urban South.

A strength of "The Devil You Know" is its affirmation of Black Americans as a formidable political bloc with whom the nation must reckon. The book is a helpful introduction for those seeking to make sense of fractious political debates about race and voting rights in the South, and the broken promises of American democracy. □

# Roots of Radicalization

This novel goes inside the mind of an Islamic extremist.

By **HELON HABILA**

YASMINA KHADRA IS the pen name of the French-Algerian author Mohammed Moulessehouli. In 2001 he outed himself as a former Algerian Army officer, with a stint in counterterrorism, who had been writing under his wife's name to avoid the military censors. It was a surprise worthy of his new novel, "Khalil," which was published in French (and awarded the Grand Prix of Literary Associations) in 2018. As with his earlier novels, including "The Swallows of

## KHALIL

By **Yasmina Khadra**

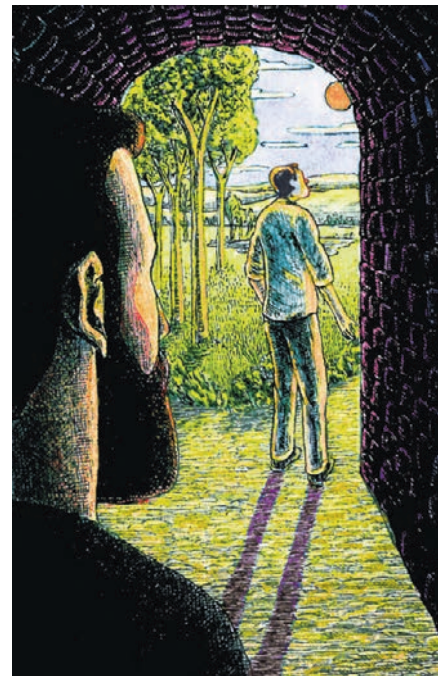
Translated by John Cullen  
226 pp. Nan A. Talese/Doubleday. \$25.95.

Kabul" and "The Attack," the focus of "Khalil" is on Islamist extremism in particular, and on the inner workings of the radical mind in general. What circumstances will push a man to forsake family and friends, to sacrifice his and others' lives, out of loyalty to an ideology, motivated by some revered, often distant leader?

On Nov. 13, 2015, Paris was rocked by a string of suicide bombings that killed hundreds, and these real-life terrorist attacks form the backdrop of "Khalil." The book opens as the eponymous protagonist, a 23-year-old Moroccan man living in Belgium, is driving from Brussels to Paris, where he plans to carry out a suicide attack on the Stade de France during a soccer match. "There were four of us suicide bombers, with one mission," he says on the first page: "to turn the celebration at the Stade de France into global mourning." The rest of the novel is just as direct and irresistible as this first line — every subsequent sentence, in this translation by John Cullen, is carefully designed to draw you in and lead you into the next one.

One of the bombers, a fellow Moroccan-Belgian named Driss, is Khalil's childhood friend; they were raised in the same apartment building in the slums of Brussels. Driss blows himself up as planned, but Khalil's suicide vest proves defective. His handlers have mistakenly given him a training vest instead of the real thing. In the ensuing manhunt for the terrorists, colored by racial profiling and an anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim hysteria reminiscent of the atmosphere after 9/11, Khalil holes up in his older sister's apartment in the Belgian city of Mons. Here he learns that his cousin was one of those hundreds of people who were killed in the very suicide bombings he helped coordinate in Paris. This is not the only case of an "engineer hoist with his own petard," as Shakespeare would put it; this becomes something of a motif in the novel. Later, Khalil

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NAJI ZAKHARIA

loses someone even closer to him from another suicide bombing in Paris, as a result of which he descends into a crisis of belief.

Khadra does a great job of guiding us through the stages of Khalil's radicalization. Xenophobia, Islamophobia, poverty, family dysfunction: All of the usual triggers are examined, but the author goes further, to show that radicalization is not inevitable. Often it is a matter of choice, a way to embrace bitterness and anger over adaptation and personal accountability. One of the most powerful moments in the story is the reunion between a disillusioned, pariahed and suicidal Khalil and the emir who radicalized him. "As I held my emir close," he thinks, "it was as though I had happiness itself in my arms." Back in the fold, Khalil remembers again why he became a radical in the first place: "The mosque gave visibility and a countenance to the untouchables that we were, Driss and I; it took us out of the gutter to display us as luxury products in the show windows of the most beautiful buildings. . . . The mosque gave us back the RESPECT we were owed." After the shame of failure Khalil is eager to prove he is still reliable and committed to the cause, and plans to follow through with another big assignment. But in this novel full of plot twists, the author saves his biggest shock for the end.

This novel is both timely and, sadly, timeless. In examining the anatomy of radicalism, Khadra shows that all forms of extremism, whether political, religious or otherwise, stem from the same source: a refusal to see things from an opposing point of view. For Khalil and many others who feel called to commit atrocities in the name of a higher cause, the outcome is only tragedy. □



# In the Mango Orchard

A book about India's rape culture ends up telling a bigger story.

By NINA BURLEIGH

IN 2012, a gang of men set upon and horrifically raped a female student on a bus in New Delhi. The crime made international news and provoked national protests that led to some changes in the laws. But Indian women with big dreams were on notice anyway. Seven years on, the Indian National Crime Records Bureau logged an average 88 rape charges a day.

Sonia Faleiro set out to examine India's rape culture, but what she ended up revealing was something even more mundane and terrifying.

In May 2014, photographs of two teenage girls hanging from a tree in a mango orchard landed in Indian headlines and on social media. The girls' deaths were quickly assumed to have had something to do with sexual assault.

Faleiro, who was born in India and lives in London, drove more than six hours from the nearest airport to the village of Katra in

## THE GOOD GIRLS An Ordinary Killing

By Sonia Faleiro

352 pp. Grove Press. \$26.

Uttar Pradesh, an agricultural region of India that abuts Nepal, to find out what happened.

The story she weaves in exquisite language is as tragic and ugly as it is engrossing.

In life, the tiny girls hanging from the tree by their colorful scarves had been so inseparable that their families and tiny community elided their names and called them as one. Because of India's rape laws, their names can't be published, so Faleiro uses the pseudonyms Padma and Lalli. "Padma Lalli," as she calls them, were cousins, "alike as two grains of rice," who spent all day in the fields before coming home to sleep in the compound of their extended family.

Their grandmother is "whispers and bones in a widow's white sari."

The girls are hard workers. Every morning, as the sun climbs in the sky, they rise to a day of chores: tending the family hearths, lighting dung cakes. They heat oil and knead dough and cook rotis, then trudge in noonday heat into the mint fields to feed family members. They come home and scrub dishes with soap made of wood ash. They go off with the goats and return to milk the buffalo. They pump water to fill buckets. They sweep the dusty courtyard over and over and over again.

Their mothers are also tireless laborers,

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caring for small children and the needs of men. "The women sweated over fires and labored over small errands," Faleiro writes. "There was a button to thread, a broken slipper to twist into a knot, nits to comb out, wicker fans to wipe clean. The men were out, smoking beedis and talking among themselves." The women pick up the slack. At night, they sleep on dirt while the men lounge in hammocks.

The MacGuffin in this mystery is the iPhone that one of the girls — an orphan living with relatives — has received as a gift. They hover over its alluring light in stolen moments between chores, using it to make plans for after dark, when they sneak off, with the excuse of having to relieve themselves (there are no toilets, so everyone squats in the fields). There in the mango orchard, the older one starts having sex with a lower-caste boy from a town across the field. These assignations are arranged by cellphone — including a cellphone that unbeknownst to either of them is surreptitiously recording everything, per the orders of the younger girl's father.

This story is at heart a tale of stymied sexuality and buried secrets. It will surprise no one that honor matters among this impoverished caste; nor will it surprise that there were watchers.

"They shouldn't be out in public with a mobile phone," one of the watchers, a government teacher and farmer, observes to one of the girls' relatives. "Who knows who they're talking to?"

"Reputation was skin," Faleiro writes of the community.

THE EVENTS OF the night the girls died are related by a cast of dubious witnesses, secretive family members and drunken and abusive police officers, all of whom Faleiro interviews and brings to life on the page. One of the lying eyewitnesses, she writes, "was coming apart like overripe fruit" before dawn broke over the hanging tree.

When the girls are found, the villagers overrun the crime scene. Female relatives

and their friends refuse to let the bodies be cut down. Someone — the girls' uncle, it turned out — removes the cellphone from Padma's bra before the police can get to it. Lalli's father later admits to destroying it. Hardly anyone wonders why their slippers are not "strewn on the ground" beneath the dangling bodies; instead they are side by side, a "precise and delicate placement" against the base of the tree, "upright as stems of wheat."

The bodies stay up for a day and a night. The crowd surges and wanes. Journalists arrive with cameras. Politicians come and go, harvesting potential votes. Finally the bodies are cut down and subjected to a post-mortem unlike any ever covered in literature: conducted by a former janitor in the ruins of a half-built government building, with a market-bought butcher knife for a scalpel, rinsed in a bucket of water hauled in from an outdoor spigot.

Back home with the girls' extended family, misogyny is so deep that Lalli's grieving mother is not invited to go to the Hindu burial ceremony — per custom, she doesn't even ask. She goes into a semi-catatonic state in the courtyard, only returning to herself a few years later, revived by a rumor the two girls have been reincarnated in a set of identical twins a few villages over.

"The Good Girls" is a puzzle with a surprise at the end. It's a riveting, terrible tale, one all too common, but Faleiro's gorgeous prose makes it bearable. She concludes, "What I had come to learn was this — that while the Delhi bus rape had shown just how deadly public places were for women, the story of Padma and Lalli revealed something more terrible still — that an Indian woman's first challenge was surviving her own home."

This feminist document looks straight at men's twisted obsession with controlling female sexuality. From Saudi Arabia to Washington, D.C., where brutal enforcement is veiled only by wealth and privilege, the story remains the same. □



People gather at the mango tree where victims were found hanging in 2014.

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# Feeding Frenzy

A sweeping history of our sources of food, tracking the shift from agriculture to agribusiness.

By **TED GENOWAYS**

MARK BITTMAN'S LATEST book arrives at a momentous time. In the opening weeks of his term, President Biden has not only rejoined the Paris climate accord, announced new emissions reduction targets, and canceled permits to build the Keystone XL pipeline and drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, but also made climate change an essential consideration in foreign policy and national security, directed federal agencies to invest in communities of color that are bearing the brunt of climate change, and promised to address the impact of this crisis on immigration and the economy.

But there is at least one area where Biden's climate critics remain skeptical: his approach to reforming the food system. Tom Vilsack, the nominee to head the De-

**ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, JUNK**  
**A History of Food, From Sustainable to Suicidal**  
By Mark Bittman

384 pp. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. \$28.

partment of Agriculture, is not just a hold-over from the era of Barack Obama but a Clinton-style, pro-corporate moderate. Vilsack has promised to tap the U.S.D.A.'s Commodity Credit Corporation to encourage sustainable and climate-conscious growing methods, but he has said little about how he plans to convince farmers and ranchers in threadbare and dying rural communities that now is the time for big change.

So Bittman's "Animal, Vegetable, Junk," a comprehensive treatise on humanity's relationship to food, matches our moment — evincing a necessary sense of urgency but also making no bones about the challenge before us. "You can't talk about agriculture without talking about the environment," he writes. "You can't talk about animal welfare without talking about the welfare of food workers, and you can't talk about food workers without talking about income inequality, racism and immigration." Every issue touches another.

Just recognizing the awe-inspiring scale of the problem has persuaded most writers to take on some narrower slice and go deep. But Bittman clearly relishes the mad ambition of his undertaking ("perhaps too ambitious," he says in a sly aside, "you'll be the judge of that"), often buoying the reader across waves of information with the sheer momentum of his narrative. If it feels a bit breathless at first, Bittman settles into his story soon enough, delivering a clear and compelling compendium of modern agriculture.

**TED GENOWAYS** is the author, most recently, of "This Blessed Earth: A Year in the Life of an American Family Farm."



A farmer at work in a potato field.

In particular, his rendering of the early mechanization of the American farm is epic and engrossing. We feel swept up in the promise and possibility of all that new technology, so much so that the turn from agriculture to agribusiness, though we know it's coming, still delivers a crushing blow. "It wasn't an entirely cynical process, and some might even call it an innocent one," Bittman writes, but "intended or not, the tragic result of the push to

standardized monoculture was that scientists and researchers became allied not with farmers but with bankers, equipment manufacturers, and sellers of seeds and chemicals."

This is a keen insight — and it points to what may be Bittman's greatest strength. He doesn't lapse into the polemic of some policy wonks who too often want to make every error seem foreseeable or the product of some unforgivable flaw. His careful delineation of the difference between the ignorant and ruthlessly statist food policies of Joseph Stalin and the American-style "laissez-faire attitude toward unchecked corporatization," for example, is extremely welcome. Likewise, he recognizes that the development of canned food and later fast food was an outgrowth of the increasing importance of women in the workplace after World War II and the large numbers of middle- and upper-class women who were, for the first time, "doing the majority of domestic labor themselves."

These nuances not only allow us to approach policy issues with more complexity, they also temper our moral certainty. By the time Bittman reaches his final section, simply titled "Change," he has earned the right to damn the evident flaws of our system. He has the wisdom not to dwell on the shortsighted ambition that brought us here but rather to offer an equally even-handed assessment of several failed attempts to undo our errors. "Humans' im-

**'You can't talk about agriculture without talking about the environment.'**

impact on the environment is often unintentional and unforeseen," Bittman writes, "but we must still recognize it and act accordingly." In the end, he arrives at a place that may be familiar to readers of Michael Pollan's "The Omnivore's Dilemma," Raj Patel's "Stuffed and Starved" or Tom Philpott's recent "Perilous Bounty" — that the only solution is to focus on sustainability.

Still, I'm freshly persuaded by Bittman's framing. The food system, he notes, isn't broken. In fact, it works almost perfectly for large seed and chemical companies, and it "also works well enough for around a third of the world's people, for whom food simply appears, to be eaten at will." But that means that change will be resisted by those with the most power and will be inconvenient for the majority of Americans too.

So it's going to require some poetry in the early stages of mobilizing the public, and then, it's going to require an equal measure of bold and sure-footed action. As Bittman clearly shows, we don't have the luxury of making well-meaning missteps or settling for half-measures. The time for big change is now. □



Food in bottles, cans, boxes and bags.

## What's with all the female literary characters who can't stand themselves?

FOR GENERATIONS, Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary have loomed as the nonpareils of self-loathing literary heroines. For Anna, guilt over having abandoned her husband and child, paired with a jealous nature, compels her to destroy the love she shares with Count Vronsky — and head for the train tracks. For Emma, dumped by a conscience-free bachelor with whom she has an extramarital affair — and unable to repay the debts she accrues on account of her shopping addiction — a spoonful of arsenic ultimately beckons.

Lately, however, Tolstoy and Flaubert have had stiff competition on the self-harm front, thanks to women novelists intent on exploring their female characters' propensity to act out their unhappiness on their bodies.

The 20-something protagonists of Sally Rooney's two novels ask their lovers to hit them in bed. Frances, of "Conversations With Friends" (2017), a college student and aspiring poet, also scratches, pinches and gouges her skin. "I felt that I was a damaged person who deserved nothing," she muses, describing her body as "garbage." Marianne, in "Normal People" (2019), sabotages the love she shares with a sensitive classmate in favor of, first, a rich guy who mistreats her and, later, a creepy artist who takes nude pictures of her in degrading positions and does "gruesome" things to her during sex. This is all apparently because Marianne regards herself as "a bad person, corrupted, wrong," and "all her efforts to be right, to have the right opinions, to say the right things . . . only disguise what is buried inside her, the evil part of herself." Similarly, Edie, the self-described "office slut" in Raven Leilani's debut, "Luster" (2020), encourages her married lover to shove and punch her, and sticks a samurai sword into her hand.

Meanwhile, in Ottessa Moshfegh's "My Year of Rest and Relaxation" (2018), the unnamed young narrator abuses her body with sleeping pills and tranquilizers in an attempt to spend the bulk of her waking hours — asleep. "Besides sleeping, what do you want out of life?" her best friend asks her during a rare moment of sentience. "I chose to ignore her sarcasm," the narrator reports. "I wanted to be an artist, but I had no talent; I told her." Soon enough, she falls unconscious again.

And in Melissa Broder's "Milk Fed" (2021), Rachel, an underling at a Los Angeles talent management agency, goes from starving herself to gorging on junk food. This transformation is set in motion when Rachel falls in love with a plus-size frozen yogurt server — and begins to release her fear of "spinning out into infinity, a nothing, a blob, so big I could be seen only in fragments, so unwieldy I could never be held, just an overwhelming void, just devastated, just dead."

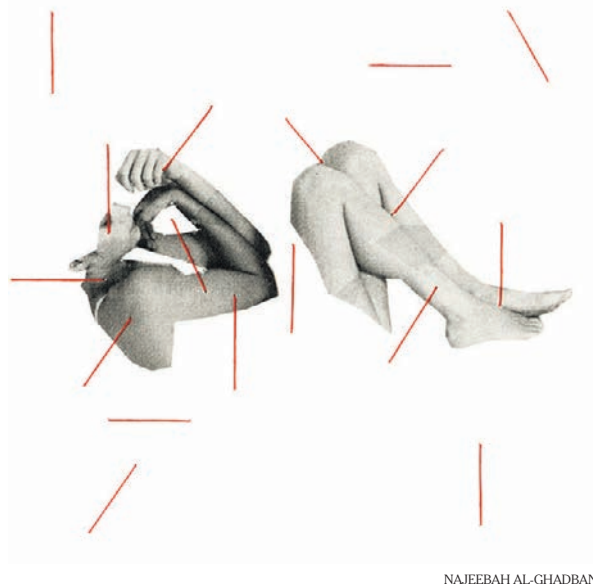
Finally, in the Swedish novel "Willful Disregard" (2016), by Lena Andersson, Ester, a brainy 30-ish writer who is not so much self-loathing as self-defeating, leaves her live-in boyfriend to pursue an arrogant older artist. Never mind that the artist makes it clear that his amorous interests lie elsewhere. Ester's unanswered texts to him are likely to send a chill of pained recognition through any reader who has sacrificed self-respect in pursuit of some mirage of love or desirability.

But where Anna and Emma can be seen as prisoners of the oppressive gender roles of their respective eras

and milieus, it's far less clear why this latest batch of self-loathers, blessed with social and sexual freedom that would have been unimaginable to their forebears, are so racked with self-disgust and hellbent on hurting themselves.

Of course, the human condition is a trying business, regardless of one's sociological data points. Yet it's hard not to notice that these protagonists are all young, intelligent, attractive and, with the exception of Edie, white and well off. Readers might be forgiven for wondering *what the matter is*.

The motives that Rooney ascribes to her alter egos range from the ravages of "late capitalism" (Frances) to familial physical abuse and being a dork in high school (Marianne). Because none of these ideas are fully developed, none are entirely convincing. Broder posits Rachel's parents as the cause of her eating disorder and cratered self-esteem. When she starves herself to the



NAJEEBAH AL-GHADBAN

point of no longer menstruating, her mother insists, "Anorexics are much skinnier than you," adding: "They look like concentration camp victims. They have to be hospitalized. You aren't anorexic."

In "My Year of Rest and Relaxation," Moshfegh resists providing any explanation for her narrator's desire to slumber away her life. Readers learn details of her comfortable if unfulfilling existence. But they're delivered in such a deadpan way that the novel reads less as a character study than as an absurdist parable about the impossibility of human connection in the modern world.

I wonder whether, in some larger sense, these books reflect discomfort with current liberal-left shibboleths regarding "the patriarchy." Both the hugely successful "Normal People" and "My Year of Rest and Relaxation" came out at the height of the #MeToo movement. Yet the flood of news stories depicting powerful men abusing their positions to prey on naïve and unsuspecting young women in their employ are a far cry from the sexual worldview of these novels. In both, the young female protagonists insist on their agency — even if it's the agency to seek out their own debasement.

What's more, the male characters don't always comply. Neither the married lover in "Conversations With Friends," nor Marianne's sensitive boyfriend in "Normal People," is willing to strike the heroine, despite her requests. And when Marianne's creepy artist lover admits he has feelings for her, she departs in apparent disgust.

So, too, Moshfegh's emotionally detached narrator seems unfazed by the experience of being "used" for sex. About her ex-boyfriend, she says, "One time he said he was afraid of [expletive] me 'too passionately' because he didn't want to break my heart. So he [expletive] me efficiently, selfishly, and when he was done, he'd get dressed and check his pager, comb his hair, kiss my forehead and leave."

It's as if the protagonists of these novels, faced with the choice between being their own worst enemies or men's victims, have all chosen the former. And it's not hard to imagine that the books' legions of female readers might prefer it that way. For one thing, the stance renders those same men almost beside the point. "It turned out that a person could miss someone she had never met, except in her imagination," Andersson writes of her hyper-aware heroine's pre-emptively obsessive longing for a guy who neither knows her nor (later) wants her.

The attitude also makes for an interesting contrast with that struck by Judith Rossner's best-selling 1975 novel, "Looking for Mr. Goodbar," another book featuring female self-destruction. Loosely based on an actual murder case, the novel features a Bronx-reared schoolteacher named Theresa who is burdened with a limp, a complication of childhood polio. Like her contemporary fictional counterparts, Theresa regards herself as damaged and therefore unworthy not only of love but of life: "How could they not believe it would have been better for her to have died the first time she was ill instead of turning into whom she had?"

Theresa's self-esteem issues become entangled with the sexual revolution, which provides justification for her fear of being tied down. Her attempts at self-protective noncommitment go increasingly awry, however, beginning with a humiliating affair with her married college professor. Later, Theresa ends up rejecting the kindly lawyer who wants to marry her in favor of anonymous sexual escapades with unvetted strangers she picks up in dive bars. As we learn in the novel's first few pages, one of those strangers is a bona fide psychopath who bludgeons her to death.

But even without the foreshadowing of her violent demise, Theresa seems vulnerable and helpless in male company in a way that today's fictional self-loathers do not — maybe because the latter all seem like experts on their own dysfunction and therefore in control even when out of control. Rossner depicts Theresa as "dizzy," "frightened," "upset" and "endangered," yet unable to make sense of her own tears. What's changed in 45 years? The mainstreaming of "therapy" — a subject played for laughs in both "Milk Fed" and "My Year of Rest and Relaxation" in the form of wacky and unprofessional shrinks whom the narrators outwit — may be the decisive factor.

In the final pages of "Looking for Mr. Goodbar," Theresa contemplates seeking professional help. In a plot point almost unimaginable today, her life is cut short before she ever makes it onto the couch. □

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# You Reap What You Sow

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

its wildly unlikely but inspiring defeat.

I was wrong. What carries Mbue's decades-spanning fable of power and corruption is something much less clear-cut, and what starts as a David-and-Goliath story slowly transforms into a nuanced exploration of self-interest, of what it means to want in the age of capitalism and colonialism — these machines of malicious, insatiable wanting.

Not long after the villagers of Kosawa kidnap Pexton's representatives, a group of national soldiers show up asking questions about their whereabouts. It's one of the narrative's first — and least violent — confrontations between the state and the village, and an introduction to the myriad ways in which Kosawa's residents must scheme in order to avoid the wrath of a government that would think nothing of wiping them out altogether. In the months and years that follow, the villagers try everything they can think of to get the oil company off their land. They meet with an American journalist, hoping that an article might change public (i.e., Western) sentiment in their favor; they travel to the capital to plead with the national government; they consider taking up arms.

In Kosawa, Mbue has created a place and a people alive with emotional range. There is no consensus among the villagers about what to do — whether to free their Pexton hostages after one falls severely ill; whether to lie to the soldiers; whether to take the oilmen's money; whether to buy guns. The central moral and philosophical conflict of this novel boils down to one between those willing to trust Pexton to do what's right, those who want to solicit the support of well-meaning American activists and those who see no difference between the two. "Someday, when you're old, you'll see that the ones who came to kill us and the ones who'll run to save us are the same," Konga says. "No matter their pretenses, they all arrive here believing they have the power to take from us or give to us whatever will satisfy their endless wants."

The story unfolds in the alternating points of view of individual villagers — the most fully realized of whom is Thula, a young girl who eventually becomes a guide for Kosawa's resistance movement — and a chorus of children. At their best, the choral chapters have an impact similar to the collective voice of the seaborne brides in Julie Otsuka's "The Buddha in the Attic," a sense of hardship dispensed en masse yet suffered individually. But over

**OMAR EL-AKKAD** is the author of "American War." His next novel, "What Strange Paradise," will be published in July.

the course of 360 pages, the constant returns to this collective voice become a bit cumbersome. Describing individuals within their group, the children use the awkward phrase "our age-mate" so often that eventually I couldn't not notice it. At times, the individual and collective narrators seem to step on each other's toes, covering the same events and recollections in a manner more repetitive than it is illuminating.

But these are minor quibbles, and easily overlooked given the novel's incisive appeal to the reader's empathy. Mbue is masterly at shading in the spaces where greed and guilt intermingle: the loneliness that follows a spouse's early death, and on its heels the secret desire to be touched again; the wavering between whether to fight the Americans or take their money. Like Car-



Imbolo Mbue

olina de Robertis's "Cantoras" or Huzama Habayeb's "Velvet," "How Beautiful We Were" charts the ways repression, be it at the hands of a government or a corporation or a society, can turn the most basic human needs into radical and radicalizing acts. In one of the novel's more understated and moving sections, Thula's grandmother, now nearing the end of her life, admits her one regret about her marriage is having adopted her husband's predilection for sorrow; she wishes she'd laughed more. "Why did this world become amusing," she asks, "only when I realized I was about to leave it?"

Indifferent to these appeals to humanity, to the human consequences of its actions in and around Kosawa, the oil conglomerate, Pexton, becomes another of Mbue's sharply drawn characters. The way that indifference clashes so jarringly against Pexton's public-relations offensive — its many hollow declarations of support for the village and the loved ones of the dead — will ring instantly familiar to anyone who's ever witnessed these machinations

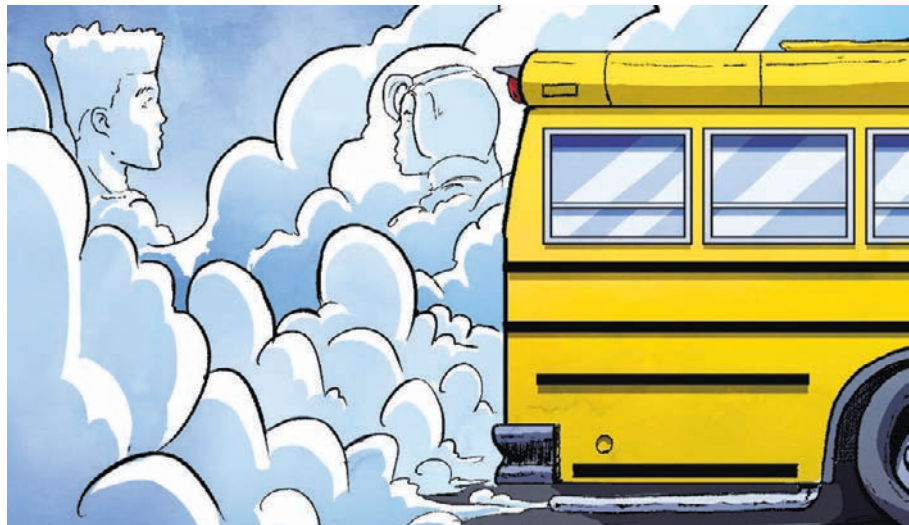
in the real world, be it by the shores of West Africa or in the sinking oil country of southern Louisiana. So authentically does Mbue render the plain hypocrisy of corporate double-speak that it sometimes becomes difficult to tell whether even Pexton's own employees believe any of the things they're saying. At one point in the novel, after an American activist group decides to sue the oil company in order to force it to clean up Kosawa's land and water, a Pexton executive comes to visit the village with an offer. The company, he says, has decided to give the villagers a share of the profits it makes off their land, though he can't quite say what the exact percentage will be. "You have to remember, Pexton has a lot of people who want its money," he says. "The government in America wants some of it. The government here wants their share. All the people who work for Pexton, they need their monthly salaries. But your share is also very important, because together we inhabit this valley, and we must do so peacefully." The executive then says his employer would be happy to offer the villagers advice on what to do with their newfound wealth, such as use it to move somewhere else.

In her widely acclaimed 2016 debut, "Behold the Dreamers," Mbue tethered the story of Cameroonian immigrants to a specific time and place (the 2008 recession in New York City). "How Beautiful We Were" has few such anchors. America in general, and New York specifically, appear both up close and from a great distance (the children of Kosawa learn from their teacher that America is a place where people live in brick houses and mash their potatoes before eating them with things called "ferks"). But for the most part the novel takes place in an invented setting, and although it begins in 1980, time becomes increasingly malleable as the narrative goes on.

There are a lot of structural elements to keep track of, and to her credit, Mbue does more than just duct-tape them together. It is profoundly affecting to watch the surviving children who were present for the first meeting with Pexton grow older over the decades, until they become parents and then grandparents, relating stories about what the village used to be. The elegiac register that runs through the entire narrative finds its best fit here in this wider arc, charting the negative spaces of these lives, all the things the children could have been and done were they not engaged in a life-long battle to keep a foreigner from splitting open their land for profit. In this way the novel can be seen as a meditation on a question one villager asks toward the end, a question that might just contain its own answer: "Why do humans fight when we all want the same things?" □

# Private Transit

In North Carolina, fates change because of a busing initiative.



THERRIOUS DAVIS

By LAUREN FRANCIS-SHARMA

IT IS 1992 WHEN Naima Coster's sophomore novel, "What's Mine and Yours," opens in the Piedmont Triad of North Carolina. Two men, smoking cigarettes outside an empty cafe, share the stories of their families. Though their chat seems little more than "15 minutes of smoking and standing together," it is through this brief but candid exchange that we come to share two fathers' dreams for four children who will be brought together by the impending misfortunes of these very men.

After a harrowing and gut-wrenching opening chapter, we discover Gee, a contemplative and grieving Black boy living with two steely women who have chosen to

## WHAT'S MINE AND YOURS

By Naima Coster

352 pp. Grand Central Publishing. \$28.

love him despite not loving each other. Gee masturbates compulsively — and the compulsion only worsens when he finds himself in the midst of a school busing dispute where he will be emotionally terrorized, not only by new classmates and their parents, but by his own mother, who pushes in all the wrong ways.

On the other side of town, Gee's classmate Noelle, a biracial Latina who passes for white, has been forced into a home with her mother's new lover. The relationships between her mother and the two men she recklessly and unequally loves shape the dysfunction that develops between Noelle and her sisters. If Noelle isn't careful, it could infect all her relationships.

Oscar Wilde once wrote, "Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive

LAUREN FRANCIS-SHARMA is the author of "Til the Well Runs Dry" and "Book of the Little Axe."

them." At its heart, "What's Mine and Yours" is a coming-of-age story — one that, in its foreground, examines the unraveling of marriages, complexities of siblinghood and reckonings with parents. Beneath it all lie tragedy and myriad loves that are tender and rich and fraught.

At times, with its shifting points of view, this multigenerational saga can become somewhat unwieldy. There are few surprises. And yet, in this predictability — where the narration depicts the unavoidable messiness of adolescence — Coster portrays her characters' worlds with startling vitality. As the children fall in lust and love, grapple with angst and battle the tides of New South politics, Coster's writing shines. Its witty and cutting dialogue is reminiscent of an early Gloria Naylor, and the dynamics of sisterhood are not unlike the works of Julia Alvarez. Sentences slice through the story's inefficiencies to offer us lushness like: "She was all muscle and fat, gray haired, her face painted in a different palette of bright colors every morning. She brought in with her the scent of perfume and hair oil, a pair of shears sticking out of her purse."

It is 2018 when the four children come together again in North Carolina. Though Gee and Noelle now inhabit the same upper-middle-class world, the gulf created by childhoods marked by both loss and the wear of a daunting double-consciousness seems too wide for any of them to risk crossing, even for love. It is in this space between them where Coster, who writes with unflinching romance, wills us to examine all the ways we come to unlove our beloveds, our families and ourselves. One might be tempted, in the face of such examination, to believe in the power of redemption and the possibility of an enduring home.

In the closing half of Coster's story, one of the children returns home to a waiting mother who refuses to "loosen her hold," and one can't help wondering if Wilde had it wrong — if perhaps children can both begin and end with loving their parents. □

# Insignificant Others

Short stories about casual relationships and life's tensions.

By BRANDON TAYLOR

MICHAEL LOWENTHAL'S NEW story collection, "Sex With Strangers," is nimble in its particulars. The stories take place in gay clubs, on cruises, along beautiful beaches and in humble small-town kitchens. His characters are men and women, gay and straight, at home and abroad, beautiful and less beautiful than they once were. There's an ease to his storytelling, too. Nothing feels strained, and the stories slow down and speed up until their climaxes arrive with a weirdly deadening ambivalence.

This is a collection about relationships, with ourselves and with others. The opening story, "Over Boy," takes us into the familiar bump-and-grind of a gay club as a man, partying on his 29th birthday, grapples with the angst of growing older. In the long and mildly enervating "You Are Here," a newly ordained priest, Father Tim, spends his first weeks on the job stationed on a cruise ship and finds himself at odds with his role in the clergy when he en-

## SEX WITH STRANGERS

Stories

By Michael Lowenthal

149 pp. University of Wisconsin Press. Paper, \$17.95.

counters an old flame while also trying to counsel a married woman through a queer awakening. There's the off-kilter kitchen drama "Uncle Kent," in which a woman worries her young daughter might be drawing the lascivious attention of the titular Kent, a family friend and father figure. Then we have a handful of lukewarm set-piece stories, including the tepid "Thieves," which takes place at a resort as a middle-aged gay man in an open marriage thinks reproachful thoughts about his own body.

The stories are studded with memorable flashes of brilliant writing and stunning details. A scene of a character's night out, for instance, offers this meditation on the nature of club culture: "The generations of club kids succeeded themselves as rapidly as lab mice." There are also moments of genuine human connection, such as when Father Tim wrestles with his responsibility to a new charge: "Can he condemn her thrill in a change he, too, has felt? She's just described — better than he's ever managed to — the centripetal force of opening himself to God, when suddenly he started living at life's hub."

Lowenthal is a sensitive chronicler of the tensions that animate a life. But there's also a mean streak running through the book. Sagging bodies and limp hair and

BRANDON TAYLOR is the author of "Real Life" and the upcoming story collection "Filthy Animals."

bad skin populate the stories. Sometimes it's to useful effect, as in "Over Boy," when the narrator reflects: "For him, who had been a young beauty, beauty was youth, and as he drifted farther from his own ideal, he felt doomed." But just as often, Lowenthal's narrators linger on the burned skin and the "sauerkraut hair" and tacky makeup of the secondary and tertiary characters, as though a lack of remarkable beauty were a moral failing. I found myself thinking while reading these stories, "OK, he's not hot, but he still has to get up in the morning." And the women fare worse than the men, with descriptions like "the skin below her eyes looks like dough that's risen and been punched down."

In the early 2000s, there was something particularly fatalistic about the onset of one's 30s for gay men. It seemed to pervade much of queer popular culture, that to turn 30 marked the sharp drop in one's val-



Michael Lowenthal

ue on the meat market. Youth and beauty had a kind of moral force. This theme dominates the stories in "Sex With Strangers," sometimes successfully, as in "Over Boy," which seems keenly aware of the limitations of such a vision of the world. But more often than not, Lowenthal's gaze seems to delight scornfully in his characters' physical flaws.

Then there's the back-story issue. These stories are absolutely *bloated* with flashbacks. Some of the stories are little more than underdeveloped vignettes swimming in oceans of backfill. Lowenthal spends pages establishing the starting conditions of his stories. It almost feels like an epiphany until you realize that what the reader has just learned has been known by the characters all along. It has the hollow thrill of close-up magic, and it's frustrating because Lowenthal is clearly such a skilled and sensitive storyteller. One wishes he had used his considerable gifts to develop his conflicts rather than spend his time clearing his throat and setting them up. □

# Ancient Souls

A spoiled girl and an enslaved boy share an immutable connection.

By **NATALIE HAYNES**

THE AMBER IN Laura Amy Schlitz's confident, playful historical novel is Melisto, a girl born in fifth-century B.C. Athens to a rich father who adores her and a mother who does not. The clay is Rhaskos, a Thracian boy whose mother is enslaved and who therefore is enslaved himself. Once, when he was a small child, she sneaked him into a storeroom and opened a jar of

## AMBER & CLAY

By **Laura Amy Schlitz**

Illustrated by **Julia Iredale**

544 pp. Candlewick. \$22.99.

(Ages 10 to 14)

honey for him to taste. "My time with my mother was like that," he notes, "golden and secret / and over too soon."

Although they live in very different worlds and haven't met, Melisto and

**NATALIE HAYNES** is the author of "Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths," as well as three Greek-themed novels.

Rhaskos are soon connected in a way they don't realize: Unbeknownst to Rhaskos, his mother has been sold to Melisto's family and become her nurse.

Both children are powerless about their futures — Melisto because she is young and female, Rhaskos because he is enslaved. Melisto is chosen to leave home and serve the goddess Artemis; Rhaskos is sold without warning to a potter in Athens when his master, Menon, grows weary of him. They each experience terrifying physical violence: Melisto has clumps of her hair torn out and is pushed down a flight of stairs by her mother; Rhaskos has his nose broken twice by Menon.

Schlitz ("The Hired Girl") is a Newbery Medal winner, and hops from one style to another with tremendous skill. The story is told partly in verse and partly in prose; the voice alternates between first person and third person, with the gods — Hermes in particular — stepping in as occasional choruses to the action.

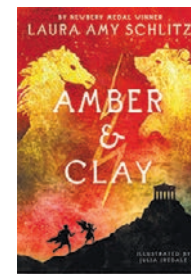
The text is complemented by Julia Iredale's delightful illustrations of imaginary archaeological finds: an ostrakon (or pottery shard), a strigil (or scraper used to

clean the body after exercise), some painted vases. They're accompanied by museum exhibit cards, to give the reader information about what they depict.

Schlitz ably conveys children's wordless emotions, like the feeling of not really wanting to do something destructive but not being able to stop yourself. When Melisto smashes her new terracotta doll because she is angry with her mother, her rage is palpable: "She was bad even to herself. She crooked her elbow over her face and sobbed." Later, she finds herself the friend and protector of an irritating younger girl, who wants to share a riddle with their other friends. Melisto refuses: "Elpis was a nuisance; Melisto had accepted that, but she wasn't about to share her."

The Acropolis acts as compass and inspiration to Rhaskos and Melisto, as they lead their separate lives, amid the noise and stench of Athens. Rhaskos even manages to befriend Socrates. Schlitz reveals what her keenest Platonist readers might already have guessed: Rhaskos is the slave with whom Socrates discusses geometry in Plato's "Meno" dialogue.

When Melisto leaves the city to join the Artemis cult, the pace of the novel slows.



Then lightning strikes as she dances with a bear she's freed from sacrifice and her nurse sets in motion a chain of events that will tie together Melisto's and Rhaskos's story lines at last.

Curious typographical decisions mean that some Greek words are printed in the Greek alphabet, some names are transliterated (Akhilleus for Achilles) and others are given in their usual English form (Apollo). Oddly, one is shifted into Anglicized modern Greek: The town of Laurium becomes Lavrion.

But this shouldn't deter Schlitz's readers from time-traveling to ancient Athens and joining her adventure. □

# Hanging With the Mythbusters

Being mortal at Mount Olympus Junior High is easier if you get to sit at the cool kids' table.

By **GEORGE O'CONNOR**

FAMILIES CAN BE a tricky business. Just ask Karen, the protagonist of "Oh My Gods!," the new graphic novel by Stephanie Cooke, Insha Fitzpatrick and Juliana Moon. On the surface, Karen is pretty much a typical 13-year-old girl: She plays

## OH MY GODS!

Written by **Stephanie Cooke**  
and **Insha Fitzpatrick**

Illustrated by **Juliana Moon**

208 pp. Etch/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

\$24.99.

(Ages 8 to 12)

video games, texts constantly and is close to her mother. Speaking of which, Karen's mom has just been asked to curate a gallery show, and to contribute a piece of artwork. The only downside is that, well,

**GEORGE O'CONNOR'S** many graphic novels include the Olympians series, a retelling of classic Greek myths in comics form.

this dream job isn't local. She's going to have to relocate for a while, which means Karen will need to stay with her father.

"You want me to go live with Zed?!" Karen screams, clearly not thrilled. Karen's dad, it turns out, hasn't been a steady presence in her life. He visits only on holidays, and even then only weird ones no one has heard of, like Panathena. But Karen is a sweet kid, so she soon finds herself on a trans-Atlantic flight from New Jersey to Mount Olympus, in Greece.

If you think you know where this is heading, you're not wrong. Karen, however, stays blissfully, *improbably* unaware. The clues are subtle at first — did that flight attendant have ram's horns? — but credulity is thoroughly strained when Zed meets his daughter at the airport in a chariot pulled by winged horses. "Whatever you paid for these horse costumes is *too much!*" Karen tells a visibly confused Zed.

The weirdness continues at her new school, Mount Olympus Junior High. A student named Hermes takes Karen on a tour. "We're like one big happy family!" he says, moving so quickly he seems to be in multiple places at once. The Muses are teachers,



Hera runs the main office and a barely disguised Zed is the principal. In a clever cafeteria scene we meet the school's various cliques: the jocks (the Titans), the mean girls (the Fates), even Jeff ("Wait, who's Jeff?" "He's, like, super into pancakes"). It's here that Karen finds her own crew, the Mythbusters: compassionate Dita, studious Tina, cute guy Pol and his twin, the nonsense archer Artemis.

If "Oh My Gods!" has a fault, it's that its lead character ventures a bit too far into Amelia Bedelia obtuseness. It's not until nearly halfway through the book that Kar-

en realizes Zed is none other than Zeus, king of the gods, and she herself by extension is a demigoddess. The Mythbusters, by the way, turn out to be actual Olympian gods — immortality lasts a loooong time, so to alleviate boredom the gods choose to be reborn periodically as kids.

The rest of the plot hinges on which mythological creature is turning students to stone. In this era of Percy Jackson, most readers will be able to see the major twists from a mile away, but there are still lots of smaller details to parse out.

And there is a lot to recommend in "Oh My Gods!" The dialogue and characterizations are spot on and snappy. Kudos also to Juliana Moon's cartooning. Her artwork is immensely engaging — filled with expressive, appealing faces and a wide variety of body shapes and sizes.

While the mystery may be slight, readers will be happy to know the Mount Olympus Junior High world building hasn't been for naught. On the last page, a lost student discovers a maze guarded by a bullheaded man in the school's basement. I think we all know where that's going, but when the journey is this fun, why knock it? □

# 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 FEBRUARY 21-27

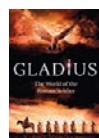
THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	2	<b>THE FOUR WINDS</b> , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's) As dust storms roll during the Great Depression, Elsa must choose between saving the family and farm or heading West.	4	1	1	<b>HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER</b> , by Bill Gates. (Knopf) A prescription for what business, governments and individuals can do to work toward zero emissions.	2
2	3	<b>FIREFLY LANE</b> , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's Griffin) A friendship between two women in the Pacific Northwest endures for more than three decades.	6	2	10	<b>THINK AGAIN</b> , by Adam Grant. (Viking) An examination of the cognitive skills of rethinking and unlearning that could be used to adapt to a rapidly changing world.	4
3		<b>THE KAISER'S WEB</b> , by Steve Berry. (Minotaur) The 16th book in the Cotton Malone series. A newly discovered dossier from World War II might change the course of Germany's upcoming elections.	1	3	8	<b>GREENLIGHTS</b> , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	19
4	1	<b>A COURT OF SILVER FLAMES</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) The fifth book in A Court of Thorns and Roses series.	2	4	5	<b>CASTE</b> , 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.	30
5	5	<b>THE DUKE AND I</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series "Bridgerton."	9	5	4	<b>WALK IN MY COMBAT BOOTS</b> , by James Patterson and Matt Eversmann with Chris Mooney. (Little, Brown) A collection of interviews with troops who fought overseas.	3
6	7	<b>THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY</b> , 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.	13	6	2	<b>JUST AS I AM</b> , by Cicely Tyson with Michelle Burford. (HarperCollins) The late iconic actress describes how she worked to change perceptions of Black women through her career choices.	5
7		<b>KINGDOM OF SHADOW AND LIGHT</b> , by Karen Marie Moning. (Delacorte) The 11th book in the Fever series.	1	7	3	<b>THE SUM OF US</b> , by Heather McGhee. (One World) The chair of the board of the racial justice organization Color of Change analyzes the impact of racism on the economy.	2
8	11	<b>THE VISCOUNT WHO LOVED ME</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The second book in the Bridgerton series.	9	8	6	<b>A PROMISED LAND</b> , 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.	15
9	8	<b>THE VANISHING HALF</b> , by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge but their fates intertwine.	39	9	9	<b>UNTAMED</b> , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	51
10	9	<b>THE SANATORIUM</b> , by Sarah Pearse. (Pamela Dorman) Elin Warner must find her estranged brother's fiancée, who goes missing as a storm approaches a hotel that was once a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps.	4	10		<b>NOMADLAND</b> , by Jessica Bruder. (Norton) A look at an expanding low-cost labor pool, which largely consists of transient older adults, and what this might portend.	1

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](https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers).

## Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



**KLARA AND THE SUN**, by Kazuo Ishiguro. (Knopf, \$28.) Klara, the solar-powered humanoid who narrates the Nobelist Ishiguro's powerful eighth novel, is an "Artificial Friend," purchased as a companion to a sickly teenage girl. Through the robot's eyes, and haunting mechanical voice, we encounter a near future in which technology, ominously, has begun to render humans themselves obsolete.



**GLADIUS: The World of the Roman Soldier**, by Guy de la Bédoyère. (University of Chicago, \$30.) This comprehensive account about what it was like to be in the Roman military offers many surprises about the lives of ordinary soldiers 2,000 years ago, among them the fact of widespread literacy and record-keeping in the troops.



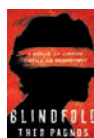
**LANDSLIDE**, by Susan Conley. (Knopf, \$26.95.) In this enveloping novel, a mother of teenage boys tries to find her footing in coastal Maine after her husband is injured in a fishing accident. Little cracks have sprouted in every inch of the fortification around this family's life, and Conley shows their battle to keep vulnerability at bay.



**CONSENT: A Memoir**, by Vanessa Springora. (HarperVia/HarperCollins, \$27.99.) When Springora was 14, she was seduced by a 50-year-old who was a celebrated writer. Now a prominent French publisher, she has triggered a cultural reckoning with this devastating memoir of the two years they spent together.



**THIS IS THE VOICE**, by John Colapinto. (Simon & Schuster, \$28.) Colapinto makes the case that our larynx — the human voice box — may be the most important boost evolution bestowed. His exploration charges off in consistently fascinating directions, including the delightful, data-based revelation that humans can reliably hear a smile.



**BLINDFOLD: A Memoir of Capture, Torture, and Enlightenment**, by Theo Padnos. (Scribner, \$27.) Padnos, a freelance American reporter who dreamed of covering the war in Syria, ended up getting kidnapped and held hostage there instead. His account of his nearly two-year ordeal is sensitive, insightful and often wry, not least about his own naïve and misguided impulses.



**DRESS CODES: How the Laws of Fashion Made History**, by Richard Thompson Ford. (Simon & Schuster, \$30.) Taking readers around the world from the 1200s to today, Ford embarks on an ambitious and comprehensive exploration of how fashion has been used by people both with and without money and power.



**MIKE NICHOLS: A Life**, by Mark Harris. (Penguin Press, \$35.) This gleaming, teeming biography of the legendary director — undertaken with the blessing of Nichols's widow, Diane Sawyer, and fortified with interviews that turn the acknowledgments into a red carpet roll call — is nothing less than a mid-century fairy tale.



**CONCRETE ROSE**, by Angie Thomas. (Balzer + Bray, \$19.99.) This Y.A. novel, a prequel to the popular "The Hate U Give," follows its 17-year-old hero as he learns he's going to become a father, considers leaving his gang and envisions his family legacy.

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

## Inside the List

ELISABETH EGAN

**Dive In** Like most authors, Heather McGhee had strong opinions about what her book's cover should look like. This former president of Demos, a progressive think tank, was well aware that "The Sum of Us," her exploration of the economics of racism, had the potential to be packaged in a dry, boring way that would appeal to a narrow audience.



**'I talked to hundreds of people and they all shared their America.'**

So she created two Pinterest boards: one consisting of covers she liked, and the other of covers she did not like — jackets with primary colors and lots of text, loudly telegraphing, "This is going to make you smarter." In a phone interview conducted shortly after she learned that her book had debuted at No. 3 on the hardcover nonfiction list, McGhee explained, "I wanted my cover to be an invitation. I wanted people to have an emotional response; for it to look more like a book of literary fiction than a book about the economy."

Stories of individual Americans are what propelled McGhee to write "The Sum of Us," so she was pleased to see humanity on her cover, which was created by the Random House senior designer Rachel Ake. In a painting by David McConochie, we see a white boy taking a flying leap into a swimming pool while, just below him, a Black girl grips a bright red ladder with one hand. The image seems to pose a question that speaks to McGhee's subtitle: "What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together."

McGhee was pleased with the result — and has been "agog" at the response to the book, which is the result of a three-year series of trips from her home in New York City to Maine, Mississippi and California, among other states.

"I talked to hundreds of people and they all shared their America with me," she said. "Each one thinks of their lives as a series of choices they made, but you can find all the doors that were open or closed because of decisions we've made as a country. The closer you get to the inside of any individual's story, the more the collective is revealed — the more the policy is apparent."

Above all, McGhee wanted to deliver a message of hope to readers. It's a realistic, roll-up-our-sleeves note of optimism, and the feeling is there, front and center, beginning with the cover. "I tried to include stories of people who are living in the America we want for everyone," McGhee said. "Even when the book tells a very hard truth about racism, I want people to see the world we might have." □

## PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 21-27

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	2	<b>THE FOUR WINDS</b> , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's) As dust storms roll during the Great Depression, Elsa must choose between saving the family and farm or heading West.	4	1	1	<b>HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER</b> , by Bill Gates. (Knopf) A prescription for what business, governments and individuals can do to work toward zero emissions.	2
2	1	<b>A COURT OF SILVER FLAMES</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) The fifth book in A Court of Thorns and Roses series.	2	2	2	<b>JUST AS I AM</b> , by Cicely Tyson with Michelle Burford. (HarperCollins) The late iconic actress describes how she worked to change perceptions of Black women through her career choices.	5
3	3	<b>THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY</b> , 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.	13	3	11	<b>THINK AGAIN</b> , by Adam Grant. (Viking) An examination of the cognitive skills of rethinking and unlearning that could be used to adapt to a rapidly changing world.	4
4	5	<b>THE SANATORIUM</b> , by Sarah Pearse. (Pamela Dorman) Elin Warner must find her estranged brother's fiancée, who goes missing as a storm approaches a hotel that was once a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps.	4	4	7	<b>GREENLIGHTS</b> , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	19
5	4	<b>THE VANISHING HALF</b> , 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.	39	5	4	<b>WALK IN MY COMBAT BOOTS</b> , by James Patterson and Matt Eversmann with Chris Mooney. (Little, Brown) A collection of interviews with troops who fought overseas.	3
6	6	<b>THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE</b> , by V. E. Schwab. (Tor/Forge) A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie LaRue has across centuries.	18	6	6	<b>CASTE</b> , 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.	30
7	7	<b>WHERE THE CROWD SINGS</b> , by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.	130	7	5	<b>A PROMISED LAND</b> , 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.	15
8		<b>THE KAISER'S WEB</b> , by Steve Berry. (Minotaur) The 16th book in the Cotton Malone series. A newly discovered dossier from World War II might change the course of Germany's upcoming elections.	1	8	3	<b>THE SUM OF US</b> , by Heather McGhee. (One World) The chair of the board of the racial justice organization Color of Change analyzes the impact of racism on the economy.	2
9	9	<b>FAITHLESS IN DEATH</b> , by J. D. Robb. (St. Martin's) The 52nd book of the In Death series.	3	9	9	<b>UNTAMED</b> , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	51
10	8	<b>THE RUSSIAN</b> , by James Patterson and James O. Born. (Little, Brown) The 13th book in the Michael Bennett series.	5	10	10	<b>FOUR HUNDRED SOULS</b> , edited by Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain. (One World) A compendium featuring 90 writers covering 400 years of African-American history.	4

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



**THE YELLOW BIRD SINGS**, by Jennifer Rosner. (Flatiron, 304 pp., \$16.99.) A 5-year-old music prodigy who must be quiet while hiding with her mother in a hayloft in World War II Poland, after the rest of their family has been murdered, takes comfort in the trill of a bird she grasps in her hands. Rosner's novel, which our reviewer, Mary Beth Keane, called "exquisite" and "heartrending," was a 2020 National Jewish Book Award finalist.



**THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE**, by Abi Daré. (Dutton, 400 pp., \$17.) This coming-of-age story, narrated in pidgin by a "sassy, strong-willed" Nigerian girl who wants to be a teacher, opens with her father marrying her off to a polygamous, abusive taxi driver. Our reviewer, Tsitsi Dangaremba, found Daré's "brave, fresh voice," which articulates "a resounding anger" toward Africa's patriarchy, "unforgettable."



**THE DEPOSITIONS: New and Selected Essays on Being and Ceasing to Be**, by Thomas Lynch. (Norton, 352 pp., \$17.95.) Some of the "finest, wryest and most stylish" essays by the poet and funeral director appear here, where they "light up the dark details" of what our reviewer, Scott Simon, referred to as "the one demographic to which we will all belong."



**DIRT: Adventures in Lyon as a Chef in Training, Father, and Sleuth Looking for the Secret of French Cooking**, by Bill Buford. (Vintage, 432 pp., \$17.) Our reviewer, Lisa Abend, declared the New Yorker writer's second food memoir "a delightful, highly idiosyncratic exploration" of how a dish is arrived at by discovering, as Buford puts it, "everything about it: the behavior of its ingredients, its history and a quality that some chefs think of as its soul."



**28 SUMMERS**, by Elin Hilderbrand. (Back Bay, 448 pp., \$17.99.) Back on Nantucket, "where Hilderbrand fans feel like locals even if they've never had the pleasure of visiting," a dying schoolteacher asks her son to notify a man with whom, it turns out, she's had a secret rendezvous every Labor Day weekend for almost three decades. Our reviewer, Elisabeth Egan, crowned this "sweeping love story" the novelist's "best ever."



**THE NIGHT WATCHMAN**, by Louise Erdrich. (Harper Perennial, 464 pp., \$18.) "High drama, low comedy, ghost stories, mystical visions, family and tribal lore . . . mix with political fervor," according to our reviewer, Luis Alberto Urrea, in this "magisterial epic" inspired by the letters Erdrich's grandfather sent to politicians in Washington in the 1950s to save his Native American tribe from termination.



## AUDIO MONTHLY BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF JANUARY 31-FEBRUARY 27

THIS MONTH	Audio Fiction	MONTHS ON LIST	THIS MONTH	Audio Nonfiction	MONTHS ON LIST
1	<b>THE FOUR WINDS</b> , by Kristin Hannah. (Macmillan Audio) As dust storms roll during the Great Depression, Elsa must choose between saving the family and farm or heading West. Read by Julia Whelan. 15 hours, 2 minutes unabridged.	1	1	<b>GREENLIGHTS</b> , 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.	5
2	<b>FIREFLY LANE</b> , by Kristin Hannah. (Brilliance Audio) A friendship between two women in the Pacific Northwest endures for more than three decades. Read by Susan Ericksen. 17 hours, 54 minutes unabridged.	1	2	<b>A PROMISED LAND</b> , 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.	4
3	<b>FAITHLESS IN DEATH</b> , by J. D. Robb. (Macmillan Audio) The 52nd book of the In Death series. Eve Dallas investigates the murder of a young sculptor in the West Village. Read by Susan Ericksen. 13 hours, 42 minutes unabridged.	1	3	<b>THINK AGAIN</b> , by Adam Grant. (Penguin Audio) An examination of the cognitive skills of rethinking and unlearning that could be used to adapt to a rapidly changing world. Read by the author. 6 hours, 40 minutes unabridged.	1
4	<b>THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY</b> , 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.	3	4	<b>CASTE</b> , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Penguin Audio) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today. Read by Robin Miles. 14 hours, 26 minutes unabridged.	7
5	<b>A COURT OF SILVER FLAMES</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Recorded Books) The fifth book in A Court of Thorns and Roses series. Nesta Archeron is forced into close quarters with a warrior. Read by Stina Nielsen. 26 hours, 5 minutes unabridged.	1	5	<b>HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER</b> , by Bill Gates. (Random House Audio) A prescription for what business, governments and individuals can do to work toward zero emissions. Read by Wil Wheaton and the author. 7 hours, 11 minutes unabridged.	1
6	<b>READY PLAYER TWO</b> , 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.	4	6	<b>JUST AS I AM</b> , by Cicely Tyson with Michelle Burford. (HarperAudio) The late iconic actress describes how she worked to change perceptions of Black women through her career choices. Read by Cicely Tyson, Viola Davis and Robin Miles. 16 hours, 9 minutes unabridged.	2
7	<b>THE VISCOUNT WHO LOVED ME</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Recorded Books) The second book in the Bridgerton series. Read by Rosalyn Landor. 12 hours, 23 minutes unabridged.	2	7	<b>FOUR HUNDRED SOULS</b> , edited by Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain. (Random House Audio) A compendium featuring 90 writers covering 400 years of African-American history. Read by a full cast. 14 hours, 2 minutes unabridged.	1
8	<b>THE SANATORIUM</b> , by Sarah Pearse. (Penguin Audio) Elin Warner must find her estranged brother's fiancée, who goes missing as a storm approaches a hotel that was once a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps. Read by Elizabeth Knowelden. 11 hours, 58 minutes unabridged.	1	8	<b>UNTAMED</b> , 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.	12
9	<b>THE VANISHING HALF</b> , 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.	8	9	<b>BECOMING</b> , by Michelle Obama. (Random House Audio) The former first lady describes how she balanced work, family and her husband's political ascent. Read by the author. 19 hours, 3 minutes unabridged.	28
10	<b>THE DUKE AND I</b> , 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.	3	10	<b>THE SUM OF US</b> , by Heather McGhee. (Random House Audio) The chair of the board of the racial justice organization Color of Change analyzes the impact of racism on the economy. Read by the author. 11 hours, 8 minutes unabridged.	1
11	<b>ROMANCING MISTER BRIDGERTON</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Recorded Books) The fourth book in the Bridgerton series. Read by Rosalyn Landor. 13 hours, 17 minutes unabridged.	2	11	<b>EXTREME OWNERSHIP</b> , 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.	32
12	<b>AN OFFER FROM A GENTLEMAN</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Recorded Books) The third book in the Bridgerton series. Read by Rosalyn Landor. 12 hours, 22 minutes unabridged.	2	12	<b>TALKING TO STRANGERS</b> , 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.	17
13	<b>THE GUEST LIST</b> , 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.	9	13	<b>BORN A CRIME</b> , by Trevor Noah. (Audible Studios) A memoir about growing up in South Africa by the host of "The Daily Show." Read by the author. 8 hours, 50 minutes unabridged.	35
14	<b>RELENTLESS</b> , by Mark Greaney. (Audible Studios) The 10th book in the Gray Man series. Assassins go after Court Gentry as he attempts to bring back an American agent who went missing. Read by Jay Snyder. 15 hours, 39 minutes unabridged.	1	14	<b>UNMASKED</b> , by Andy Ngo. (Hachette Audio) A former writer for the online magazine Quillette gives his perspective on the activist movement antifa. Read by Cecil Harold. 9 hours unabridged.	1
15	<b>THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE</b> , 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.	5	15	<b>SAPIENS</b> , by Yuval Noah Harari. (Harper Audio) How Homo sapiens became Earth's dominant species. Read by Derek Perkins. 15 hours, 17 minutes unabridged.	29

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](http://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers).



The New York Times

## Cooking

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**TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE**  
**A Murder, a Private Investigator, and Her Search for Justice**  
 By Ellen McGarrahah  
 368 pp. Random House. \$28.



“I was totally in favor of the death penalty until I witnessed Jesse Tafero’s execution,” writes McGarrahah, who watched Tafero die in 1990 as a young staff writer for The Miami Herald. In her article, she noted how the electric chair malfunctioned, with flames and smoke visible above Tafero’s head covering; soon after that, she quit journalism, worked in construction, then became a private investigator. She found herself drawn back to Tafero’s execution and the crime that led him there: a double murder at a highway rest area in February 1976. Had she witnessed the execution of an innocent man?

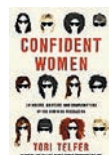
“Old murder cases are like coffins,” McGarrahah writes. “You have to be careful, opening them up.” This one is particularly puzzling. A state trooper and a visiting Canadian constable were shot at close range while checking on a Camaro full of sleeping people: Tafero, his girlfriend Sunny Jacobs and her two children, and their friend Walter Rhodes. There’s a good reason to believe each of the three is the murderer. Two truckers saw gunfire explode from the back seat, where Jacobs was. Tafero was apprehended with the murder weapon strapped to his hip. And Rhodes, who had gunshot residue on his hands, confessed — before he recanted, confessed again, recanted again, and so on.

Jacobs wound up being freed, writing a memoir and participating in a play about her life titled “The Exonerated” (although she was not technically exonerated). She maintained her innocence, presenting herself as “a hippie peace-and-love vegetarian,” but as McGarrahah finds in her investigation, all of them were doing enormous amounts of cocaine and dealing even more. They were associated with the so-called Dixie Mafia; their circle included murderers, extortionists and one colorful jewel thief.

McGarrahah’s obsession with rooting out the truth in the case leads her to Florida, Ireland and Australia, where she tracks down any detail that might potentially help her know what happened. It’s not a triumphant story.

After all, she writes, “your gut instinct isn’t always right. Sooner or later, I have come to find out, everyone gets fooled.”

**CONFIDENT WOMEN**  
**Swindlers, Grifters, and Shapeshifters of the Feminine Persuasion**  
 By Tori Telfer  
 352 pp. Harper Perennial. \$26.99

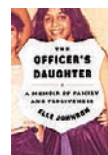


“There’s no point in denying it; the women in this book are extremely charming,” writes Telfer, an author and podcaster whose beat is women in crime. In her latest effort, Telfer profiles those whose misdeeds are more of the grifting than the murdering variety. “Her victims almost never end up dead,” she writes. “Almost never!” (One of Telfer’s con artists most familiar to New York readers will be Sante Kimes, who started out as a poor kid with an “obsessive and pathological” relationship to money and ended up a murderer.)

Collected here are 13 tales, each around the length of a juicy podcast, about women whose relationship to truth and justice was, at best, a bit wobbly. Some are already well known — the slew of young women pretending to be Anastasia, the lost czarina, or the Fox sisters, whose hoaxes launched spiritualism into stratospheric popularity. Other stories feel newer, like that of Margaret Lydia Burton, a midcentury scammer whose antics sparked uproar in the polite world of cocker spaniel breeders. Their relationship to crime ranges from murderers like Kime, to victims like Bonny Lee Bakly, to more spectacular con artists like the 18th-century Frenchwoman Jeanne de Saint-Rémy, a rabid social climber who leveraged a corrupt cardinal’s desire into a scandal involving Marie Antoinette and the “most beautiful diamond necklace in the world.”

The farther away from our own time and place, of course, the easier it is to find charm and romance in these tales. Still, Telfer narrates them with great verve, grace and even humor. Whether or not we buy her assertion in the book’s introduction that we want to be like the confidence women she profiles (“doesn’t it sound sort of delicious?”), it can be hard to resist the allure of their stories.

**THE OFFICER’S DAUGHTER**  
**A Memoir of Family and Forgiveness**  
 By Elle Johnson  
 224 pp. Harper. \$27.99.



Johnson was 16 when her cousin Karen, the same age, was shot and killed during a botched robbery at the Burger King where she worked in the Bronx. Both girls’ fathers were Black men in law enforcement, Karen’s a homicide detective and Elle’s a parole officer. As the family gathered in their grief, Johnson overheard her father and the other men plotting revenge on those who had killed Karen. In the end, three teenage boys were convicted of their parts in the crime; 33 years later, Johnson finds herself pondering whether to write the court on the occasion of the last remaining defendant’s parole hearing.

“The Officer’s Daughter” is a slim, immensely moving book. Johnson, who writes for television (“cop shows and crime procedurals,” she tells us), skips back and forth from her teenage years to the present, telling her story in plain-spoken language and examining her own reactions to Karen’s murder from both perspectives. “If a good girl like Karen could be killed,” she recalls, “then anything could happen. There seemed to be no point in listening to your parents, or doing as you were told.” As an adult, she finds herself thinking about the decades the men have spent in prison: “I wondered what kind of men they had become behind bars. What kind of men could they become, except for prisoners?”

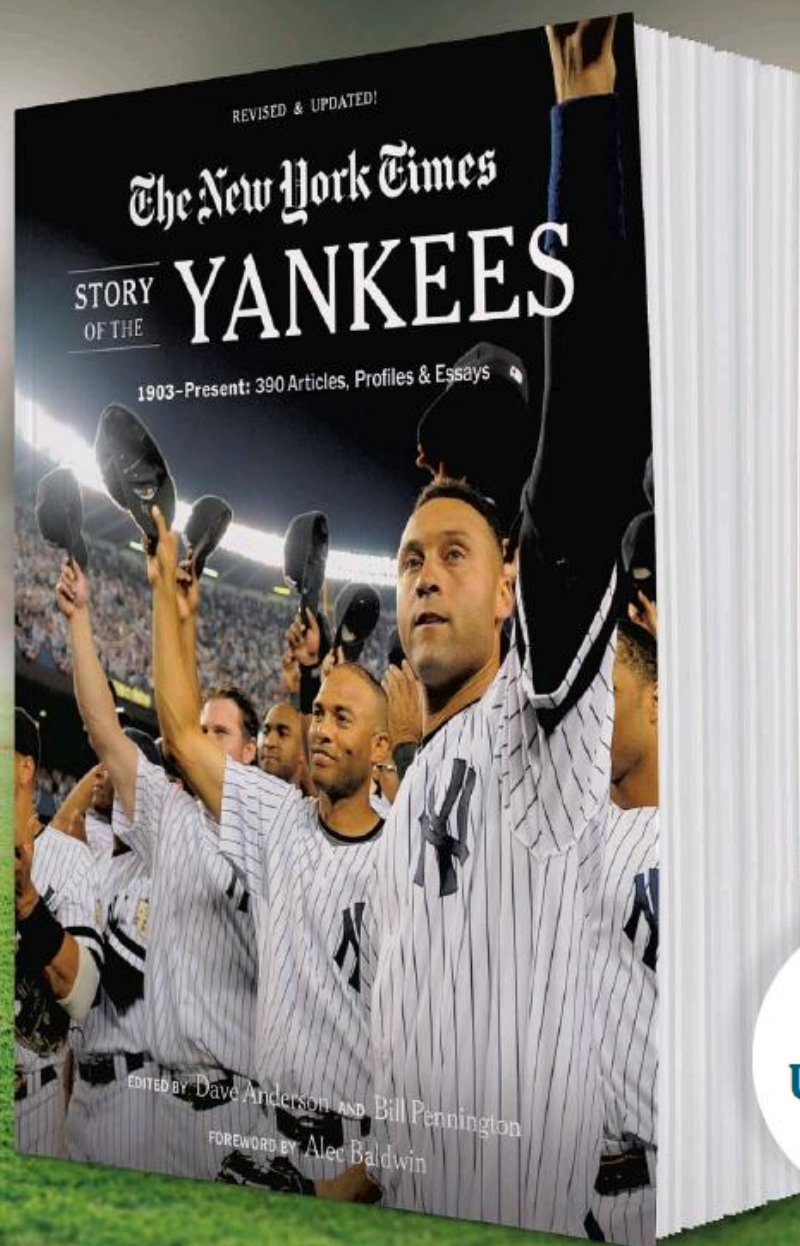
As Johnson contemplates asking the parole board to keep her cousin’s killer locked up, she finds herself remembering different events; on her mind most of all is her father. “He was controlling yet protective,” she writes, “and sometimes someone to be protected from.” Johnson ponders pain caused by the killer, her father, even herself, especially after losing the religious faith that once provided a framework. When you live in a family forever experiencing “the background buzz of lifelong mourning,” the only way to peace is to find a path to forgiveness.

Awkward encounters with Sally Rooney's intense, lovelorn characters.



“Yankee history is rich and deep, with players so iconic their first or last name, or their nickname, is identification enough.”

– ALEC BALDWIN, from the introduction



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