

The New York Times

Book Review

MARCH 7, 2021

DEFENDING 'LOLITA' How Nabokov's masterpiece survived the culture wars

LEADING MEN New biographies of Mike Nichols and Tom Stoppard

ABUSE AND CONSENT Katie Roiphe reviews two memoirs of toxic relationships



Almost Human

By Radhika Jones

ABOUT HALFWAY THROUGH “Klara and the Sun,” a woman meeting Klara for the first time blurts out the kind of quiet-part-out-loud line we rely on to get our bearings in a novel by Kazuo Ishiguro. “One never knows how to greet a guest like you,” she says. “After all, are you a guest at all? Or do I treat you like a vacuum cleaner?”

This is Ishiguro's eighth novel, and Klara, who

narrates it, is an Artificial Friend, a humanoid machine — short dark hair; kind eyes; distinguished by her powers of observation — who has come to act as companion for 14-year-old Josie. Like that childhood stalwart Corduroy, she'd been sitting in a store, hoping to be chosen by the right child. AFs aren't tutors. They're not babysitters (though they're sometimes chaperones), nor servants (though they're expected to take commands). They're nominally friends, but not equals. “You said you'd never get an AF,”

KLARA AND THE SUN
By Kazuo Ishiguro

303 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$28.

Josie's friend Rick says, accusingly — which makes Klara the mark of some rite of passage they didn't want to accede to. Her ostensible purpose is to help get Josie through the lonely and difficult years until college. They are lonely because in Josie's world, most kids don't go to school but study at home using “oblongs.” They are difficult because Josie suffers from an unspecified illness, about which her mother

THOMAS DANTHONY

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

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Fiction

- 1 KLARA AND THE SUN**
By Kazuo Ishiguro
Reviewed by Radhika Jones
- 8 LANDSLIDE**
By Susan Conley
Reviewed by Hillary Kelly
- 17 CONCRETE ROSE**
By Angie Thomas
Reviewed by Martha Tesema
- 17 BINA**
A Novel in Warnings
By Anakana Schofield
Reviewed by Evie Wylde
- 21 SUMMER BROTHER**
By Jaap Robben
Reviewed by Tacey Rychter
- 21 THE BLIZZARD PARTY**
By Jack Livings
Reviewed by John Freeman Gill
- 26 The Shortlist**
Debut Novels
Reviewed by Chelsea Leu

Nonfiction

- 7 War Stories**
Military History
Reviewed by Thomas E. Ricks
- 9 ASSUME NOTHING**
A Story of Intimate Violence
By Tanya Selvaratnam

CONSENT

A Memoir
By Vanessa Springora
Reviewed by Katie Roiphe

10 HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER

The Solutions We Have and the Breakthroughs We Need
By Bill Gates
Reviewed by Bill McKibben

11 THIS IS THE VOICE

By John Colapinto
Reviewed by Mary Roach

12 BLINDFOLD

A Memoir of Capture, Torture, and Enlightenment
By Theo Padnos
Reviewed by Declan Walsh

13 THE AFRICAN LOOKBOOK

A Visual History of 100 Years of African Women
By Catherine E. McKinley

DRESS CODES
How the Laws of Fashion Made History
By Richard Thompson Ford
Reviewed by Tariro Mzezewa

14 MIKE NICHOLS

A Life
By Mark Harris
Reviewed by James Wolcott

15 TOM STOPPARD

A Life
By Hermione Lee
Reviewed by David Ives

- 16 TICKING CLOCK**
Behind the Scenes at "60 Minutes"
By Ira Rosen
Reviewed by Jim Windolf

Children's Books

- 22 LATINITAS**
Celebrating 40 Big Dreamers
By Juliet Menéndez
Reviewed by Sandra E. Garcia

THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF AIDAN S. (AS TOLD TO HIS BROTHER)
By David Levithan
Reviewed by Adam Silvera

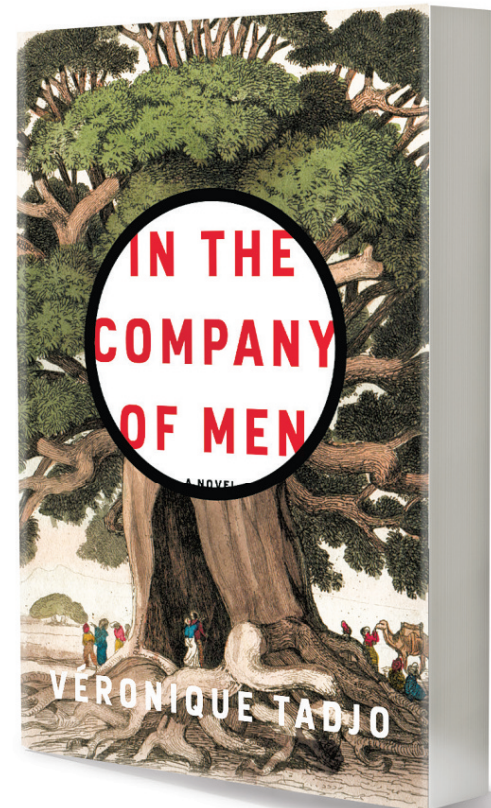
Features

- 6 By the Book**
Margaret Jull Costa
- 18 Essay**
Witness for the Defense
By Emily Mortimer
- 27 The Literati**
By Edward Sorel

Etc.

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

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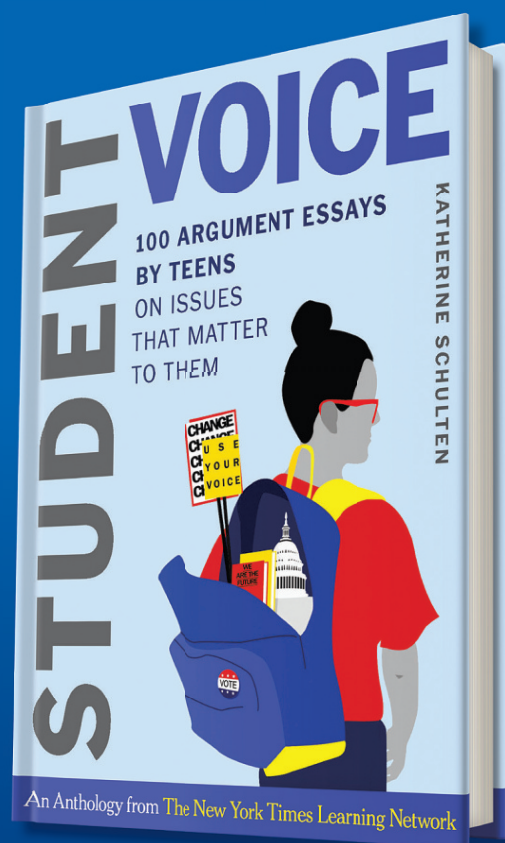
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—LE FIGARO MADAME

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New & Noteworthy / Poetry



WOUND FROM THE MOUTH OF A WOUND: POEMS, by torrin a. greathouse. (Milkweed, paper, \$16.) The poems in this debut collection methodically subvert traditional notions of beauty, to show how they leave no room for a “transgender cripple-punk” like the author.



POPULAR LONGING, by Natalie Shapero. (Copper Canyon, paper, \$17.) Shapero’s giddy, acerbic work is alert to the comedy of disconnection; in one poem, the speaker assumes that a recent restaurant boom is evidence that people “want new spots to fight, to squall / and snipe, lose their appetites.”



BEETHOVEN VARIATIONS: POEMS ON A LIFE, by Ruth Padel. (Knopf, \$27.) Padel, whose previous collections include a verse biography of Darwin, here gives Beethoven the same treatment, summoning his “holy zone / of concentration” where “three descending semitones / say there is answer in the world.”



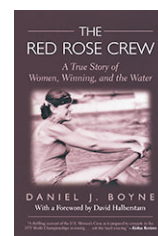
LITTLE ARMAGEDDON: POEMS, by Gregory Fraser. (TriQuarterly, paper, \$17.) In lyric lines and prose poems, Fraser distills quotidian details of marriage and parenthood into the stuff of rich observation. “I never tire,” he writes, “of searching for beauty inside spoilage.”



PINK: POEMS, by Sylvie Baumgartel. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$24.) Baumgartel’s second collection explores views of femininity, lust and violence as filtered through art and the title hue, the “color of least / Resistance.”

WHAT WE’RE READING

I had forgotten the intense purpose and fearlessness I derived from pulling on an oar, driving a long, skinny boat through the water with seven other women, until I began reading **THE RED ROSE CREW**. Few outsiders understand the high that comes from the intense pain of a crew race, but Daniel J. Boyne’s book about the women who won unexpected silver in the 1975 World Championships captures both the technique and the spirit of rowing a crew. Boyne weaves the personal struggles of several rowers with the women’s fight simply to be allowed into what was still considered a men’s sport. “The Red Rose Crew” takes readers through the mechanics of the stroke, to the thrill of the race, down to the final moment when “lungs felt like they were on fire” and quadriceps stung with “ice-pick-like pain.” Then it follows the women home to their next battles, like funding for boathouses, so that decades later, women like me would have a place to shower.



—MELISSA EDDY, BERLIN CORRESPONDENT



LYDIA ORTIZ

Beyond Vanilla

TO THE EDITOR:

The sentence from the introduction of “Kink” quoted in Jazmine Hughes’s review (Feb. 14) is the stuff of high parody. To wit, R. O. Kwon and Garth Greenwell’s anthology of stories serves to “recognize how the questions raised in intimate, kinky encounters — questions of power, agency, identity — can help us to interrogate and begin to rescript the larger cultural narratives that surround us,” each word from the playbook of academic respectability.

How “transgressive” is B.D.S.M. (an abbreviation which apparently needs no introduction to Times readers) when it comes from a major publisher, and presents itself in the anodyne jargon of academe? In other words, how pervy is kink anyway?

MOLLY HASKELL
NEW YORK

Drawing the Line

TO THE EDITOR:

In reviewing Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s “Prey” (Feb. 14), Jill Filipovic is rightly wary of condemning an entire religion. However, Hirsi Ali’s memoir, “Infidel,” convinced me that the abuses and problems she discussed there are very real in parts of Africa, and doubtless in other heavily patriarchal societies. Filipovic fills space by criticizing Hirsi Ali personally and nit-picking her feminist credentials, but omits the crucial statistics Hirsi Ali provides in “Prey.” Did Filipovic fear the statistics

might be too convincing?

According to a 2016 New Yorker article, some half a million women in the United States have been genitally mutilated or are at risk. Is this really just fine? A culture is a value system. Why should we think people will automatically give up theirs when they come here? And in fact, we currently encourage newcomers to keep their original culture: the salad bowl, not the melting pot.

Are we creating a nation of separate tribes, with conflicting ideas of law, and of women’s rights? If there are no limits to tolerance, then we are in trouble — as suggested in a quip attributed to Duc de Broglie: “Let us beware of too much understanding lest we end by too much excusing.”

OLIVIA EIELSON
EL CERRITO, CALIF.

TO THE EDITOR:

Filipovic’s review of “Prey” brought to mind Herbert Marcuse’s 1965 essay “Repressive Tolerance,” in which he examined the inherent dangers and hypocrisy of liberal notions of tolerance. Marcuse suggests that unexamined ideologies of tolerance can mask or even engender illiberal and repressive forces in society. Tolerance of multiculturalism and religious freedom cannot be an invitation to religiously or culturally endorsed intolerance.

MJM KEATING
RICHMOND, VA.

History Mystery

TO THE EDITOR:

I nodded with sympathy at Joe Ide’s By the Book answer (Feb. 21) about media representations of “Frankenstein,” which tend to leave audiences with a “dated and banal” misconception of Mary Shelley’s masterpiece. Students at Boston University, where I teach, are often surprised by the creature’s fragile and complexly human psychology; they also find rich, suggestive layers of meaning in the fact that Frankenstein is the name of the scientist.

Two other points from the interview stood out. First was Ide’s comment that, while Edgar Allan Poe is often heralded as the “originator of both horror and science fiction,” it was Mary Shelley who got there first. It’s a minor corrective, but Shelley herself was emerging from a history of Gothic literature that dates back at least half a century before her.

The second point is so suitably ironic I have to believe it’s intentional. Ide mentions that Sherlock Holmes is the first literary detective, but it was in fact Edgar Allan Poe who wrote the first detective stories, four decades before Arthur Conan Doyle. C. Auguste Dupin first appeared in Poe’s 1841 story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.”

JONATHAN NAJARIAN
BOSTON

CORRECTIONS

The By the Book feature on Feb. 21 misstated Mary Shelley’s maiden name. It was Godwin, not Wollstonecraft. (Wollstonecraft was her middle name.)

A review on Feb. 21 about “Bugsy Siegel,” by Michael Shnayerson, referred incorrectly to the Beverly Hills residence where Siegel was killed in 1947. It was the home of his longtime girlfriend, Virginia Hill; it was not Siegel’s home.

A bibliographic note with a review last Sunday about Viet Thanh Nguyen’s novel “The Committed” misstated the book’s price. It is \$27, not \$22.99.

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AMERICA'S CONTINUUM
OF RACIAL DEMOCRACY
AND INJUSTICE

FROM THE PLANTATION TO
URBAN GHETTO



THOMAS P. WALLACE

The Ossification of American Democracy: A Trilogy

Wealth, Energy, and Human Values:
The Dynamics of Decaying Civilizations from Ancient Greece to America
2009

America is Self-Destructing:
Wealth, Greed, and Ideology Trump Social Justice and the Common Good
2013

America's Continuum of Racial Democracy and Injustice:
From the Plantation to Urban Ghetto
2020

Since the Founding, America's persistent continuum of racial democracy and injustice has been the most persistent extreme debilitating societal force contributing to its current social and political polarization and cultural dysfunction, stagnation, and ossification. It has been a unique, but recognizable evolutionary dynamic mechanistic pathway experienced by every past great Western nation.

Thomas P. Wallace
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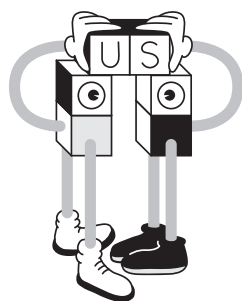


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By the Book



Margaret Jull Costa

The prolific translator, most recently of Júlio Dinis's 'An English Family,' says you should read all you can when you're young: 'Then reread it when you're 40 or older to find out whether it was any good.'

What books are on your night stand?

Well, none, since I never read in bed, but there's always a pile next to my favorite chair. At the moment, this includes "Buddenbrooks," which we're reading with a group of friends, "Le Château de Ma Mère," by Marcel Pagnol, which my husband and I are reading with our French tutor, a collection of novellas and short stories by the Portuguese writer Maria Judite de Carvalho, who I'm keen to translate more of. And Michael Gora's "Portrait of a Novel," about the writing of "Portrait of a Lady" (possibly my favorite novel), which has been on my pile for far too long and should be read soon.

What's the last great book you read?

"Mrs. Dalloway," by Virginia Woolf. Her prose is sometimes poetry. Listen to this: "Fear no more says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall." And she's such a compassionate describer of her characters with all their flaws. I hadn't read the

novel for years, and it was such a joy to revisit and rediscover it.

What book should everybody read before the age of 21?

I would say probably read everything you can lay your hands on, then reread it when you're 40 or older to find out whether it was any good and, if so, what it was really about. But if I had to choose one it would be "The Great Gatsby," just to see what it's possible to do with the English language. That famous last sentence still rings in my ears: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." Like Virginia Woolf defying that divide between prose and poetry.

What book, if any, most influenced your decision to become a translator?

I read a lot of Russian authors when I was in my teens without even realizing they were translations! It was only when studying Spanish before going to university that I was introduced to translating, and I just fell in love with the whole

alchemical process of transforming one language into another.

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

When I was translating Saramago's "Death at Intervals," I happened to meet the Dutch translator, Maartje de Kort, who was working on it too, and we had a lovely time exchanging problems and solutions, and have remained in touch ever since. Also I do a lot of co-translations at the moment, mainly with younger translators whom I've mentored, and it's a real delight to share a book with someone who knows every nook and cranny of it as well as I do. I can't think of a book that has come between me and someone else. I did disagree quite violently with a friend about Emily Dickinson's poetry — she thought it too death-obsessed, and I thought it life-affirming — but we're still friends.

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

Well, in Bernardo Atxaga's novel "Casas y tumbas," I found out a lot about appendicitis, which was useful since shortly afterward, my grandson in America had to be hospitalized with acute appendicitis, so I felt better informed.

What makes for a good translation?

It has to have a convincing voice, so that you, as a reader, have utter confidence in what you're reading. Yes, it needs to be accurate and faithful (whatever that means), but if you're translating a masterpiece of prose from Spanish or Portuguese or whatever, then your English translation should be a masterpiece too. Perhaps the biggest compliment I've ever had came from a friend who is also an expert on Javier Marías's work. He said he got as much pleasure from reading my translations of Marías's novels, as he did from the original Spanish. That's what I'm aiming for.

You're organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?

Could I have two dinner parties? In one I would invite Henry James, Eça de Queirós and Proust. They were all in Paris at about the same time and could perhaps enjoy a good gossip, although I fear that Henry James would dominate the conversation. For the second one I would invite Virginia Woolf, Clarice Lispector and Maria Judite de Carvalho. Clarice and Maria Judite are often compared to Virginia, and I just wonder if they would all get on. □

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

The Life of a Soldier

IN HIS ENCYCLOPEDIA **GLADIUS: The World of the Roman Soldier (University of Chicago, \$30)**, Guy de la Bédoyère collects pretty much every fact known about what it was like to be in the military arm of the Roman Empire — which was pretty much the only limb of government power outside Rome.

Rome's soldiers were surprisingly literate, because the Roman Army emphasized precise record-keeping. They also were a remarkably diverse group. A document from Egypt that listed the birthplaces of 36 members of two legions had them coming from today's central Turkey, Syria, Cyprus, France, Italy and Egypt itself. Some of the soldiers who died in Britain in the first century A.D. had been born in today's Bulgaria, Spain, Hungary and Italy, according to their tombstones. The common soldier tended to remain with one legion for years, even an entire career, but officers were shifted from one end of the empire to the other. For example, Marcus Censorius Cornelianus, born in Nîmes in today's southern France, was a centurion, roughly equivalent to a United States Army company commander, who was transferred from Jerusalem to command an outpost in Maryport, just outside of England's Lake District.

The Roman military had a much looser structure than we might assume, with constant changes and local adaptations. De la Bédoyère, who churns out books about Roman history and popularizes the subject on British television, describes it as “an organization that often operated on an ad hoc basis with semiautonomous units.” Roman units were excellent builders of forts, bridges and roads, but also found themselves tasked with a range of imperial errands, from policing duties to collecting taxes and exploring frontier areas.

Yet the biggest surprise may be that the Roman Army, though hardly a hotbed of individualism,

THOMAS E. RICKS is the author of seven books, most recently “*First Principles: What America's Founders Learned From the Greeks and Romans, and How That Shaped Our Country.*”

provided us with the first time in Western history that large numbers of ordinary people left records of who they were, where they came from, what they did and where they did it — usually on their tombstones.

IN **EAGLE DOWN: The Last Special Forces Fighting the Forever War (PublicAffairs, \$28)**, Jessica Donati presents a memorable but choppy portrait of Americans fighting in Afghanistan over the last six years, which is notable because there have been few good accounts of the war there. These American soldiers have much in



Roman soldiers at war.

common with their Roman forebears. Deployed to the fringes of an empire, they deal with unreliable local allies, irascible tribesmen and airy bureaucrats in a faraway capital. Donati, a correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal* (where I was a reporter for 17 years in the 20th century), does an especially good job at portraying the combat in Kunduz in October 2015.

The Kunduz fight is remembered today mostly because an Air Force gunship mistakenly attacked a politically neutral surgical hospital operated by Doctors Without Borders, the international medical aid group. Donati lists several crucial errors committed by the American military. The aircraft took off earlier than scheduled to respond to another crisis and so didn't get the usual data on what not to attack, and an attempt to email that information failed

because of communications problems on the plane. A surface-to-air missile nearly hit the plane, so the pilots flew higher, which made their navigation system less accurate. Confused about GPS coordinates, the aircrew misidentified the target and then had an overly vague exchange with an American officer on the ground about opening fire. They thought they were hitting a Taliban prison.

The horrific result was dead accurate fire poured into the hospital's emergency ward and operating room. The legs of an E.R. doctor were severed and the pharmacist was killed. After shelling the hospital, the crew strafed the people running away from it. All told, 42 staff members and patients were killed.

A United States military spokesman, Col. Brian Tribus, issued a misleading statement that claimed the airstrike had been executed in response to direct fire from insurgents against Americans. A subsequent investigation pinned the blame on the Army officer who had been on the ground, rather than the chain of command above him that committed the series of errors that led to the strike.

That callousness of the Army toward its own is one theme of the book. In one section, Donati follows home a Special Forces soldier whose legs were blasted off in southern Afghanistan. His recovery experience is familiar but nevertheless shocking. While still in a wheelchair, he is ordered to pull weeds in a field. He also was told to appear twice a day at unit formations an hour from where he lived.

Over all, Donati tells a confused but important story about limited warfare. The American government spends a lot of money and loses only a few soldiers, but it gains little. The Afghans suffer. As one of the special operators she follows summarizes the war, “The Army isn't willing to expose itself” to the risk of combat losses. “Thus they have to make do with the limitations and the probably limited outcome.” But for those caught up in the war on the ground, civilians and combatants alike, the risks and costs are huge. □

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Rocky Island Home

Susan Conley tackles the difficulties of life in a beautiful place.

By HILLARY KELLY

WOLVES, LOW-SNOUDED and hungry, haunt Thoreau's "The Maine Woods." He startles at their howls, "as if a hundred demons had broke loose," and parses the tree line for their silhouettes, though they never appear. The literature of American exploration is filled with the baying, prowling creatures — in novels like Willa Cather's "My Ántonia," James Fenimore Cooper's "The Last of the Mohicans" and especially Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series,

LANDSLIDE

By Susan Conley

288 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95.

where children learn to fear them — symbols of America's wild spirit, pushed farther and farther from society by man and machinery. Wolves are a lost bit of America.

In Susan Conley's "Landslide," Jill Archer, a documentarian who lives on a small island in Maine's Penobscot Bay, refers to her two sons as "the wolves." Seventeen-year-old Charlie and 16-year-old Sam aren't dangerous, per se, but there is a snappish, feral quality to them; they snarl and pick fights with her, whine for pasta or sandwiches, wander lonely just outside her periphery. Like Thoreau's creatures, they're remote and misunderstood, constantly out of reach.

Jill's husband, Kit, one of the few remaining fishermen in their coastal town, has been hospitalized in Nova Scotia after the engine of the swordfishing boat he was working on exploded, breaking his right femur and potentially ending his career. In the wake of his accident, uncertainty destabilizes the entire family. Sam posts a photo of himself smoking pot and begins failing tests. Charlie burrows into a fantasy life with his girlfriend and her cozy family. Jill sputters and flails, wondering how to usher two boys through the gantlet of 21st-century masculinity.

Deterioration marks every aspect of "Landslide," which is enveloping and warm, if slightly undercooked and sometimes flat-footed. The romance of Jill and Kit's courtship — "the sweet, early years," when they "used kerosene lamps and made clearings for the gardens and built the woodpile up" at their creaky island home — has had the polish rubbed off after almost two decades. Their love is baked in but negotiated: Kit is at sea for weeks, enamored of who he is when he commands a vessel and carries on his family lineage. Trauma has rubbed away at Sam's sense of self; two years earlier, he watched his closest friend fall between the boards on a

HILLARY KELLY writes about books and television for *Vulture* at *New York* magazine.



ISABEL SELIGER

crumbling bridge and drown in the water below. Now he has what his counselor calls "a willingness to self-sabotage." Their town is a picture postcard of iconic New England, except commerce has been erased by a collapsing ecosystem and industry. At one point their own dock even floats away.

This isn't Thoreau's Maine, land of ancient verdure and abundance. "Red tides" tie-dye the navy waters. A shut-down shrimp fishery has slashed hauls and income for captains and their crews. Jill notes that three rich Arizonans have used their oil money to buy up most of the fishermen's houses in a nearby cove: "Now the brothers want to impose a new noise ordinance. They've been seen at town meetings talking with straight faces about how they didn't come to Maine to get woken at 4 a.m. by lobster boats."

Little cracks have sprouted in every inch of the fortification around Jill's life, and she struggles to keep them from spreading. Her questions are the same as every other mother's: How much leeway is the right amount? What's stifling and what's protective? Motherhood is a shimmy, a step forward, a leap back. On a drive to visit Kit in the hospital, Sam mentions to her that he'll "probably have to try" drinking, for the sake of experimentation. Then again, he considers, maybe he'll be the designated driver for friends. When she points out that underage drinking is illegal, Sam shuts down. "Now I've ruined it," she thinks.

Conley's writing can be uneven, but there's a lot of heart in it — a compliment that sounds treacherous but is meant earnestly.

Mothering is a trash compactor that crams everything else into a condensed little square.

She has a gift for writing tiny, meaningful interactions. When the boys reject Jill's pancakes as sour, she puts down her spatula and goes outside to cry; they mash their faces against a window in silly-faced recompense. Sam asks if they can quietly read next to one another, "a sweet leftover from when he was young that he hasn't let go of." Charlie comes in and lies on top of them — a boy's gesture at physical communion — and they all silently surrender to love.

Jill has other concerns, too — her half-started documentary about their village, Kit's flirtation with his boat's cook — but mothering is a trash compactor that crams everything else into a condensed little square. And what is a mom to do with boys these days? That's not a question with an answer — nobody but the sanctimonious, it seems, really knows precisely how to make good men.

Cold sets in, and the Archers move off their little island for the coming long, dark season, just as Sam drifts out of reach and Jill frets more over her husband's return than she did his absence. But winter is the season of wolves: They are prepared for hardship, ready to court and frolic even in the deepest snowbanks. Conley isn't afraid to inject a little hope that these creatures will find their way back home. □

Survivor Network

Two memoirists write about their experiences with powerful, manipulative men.

By KATIE ROIPHE

EVEN IN OUR chatty, confessional culture, certain subjects are too unwieldy, too difficult, too painful to easily and effectively put into words. These are stories so long kept secret, denied, pushed into recesses, played down and bluffed through, that telling them straightforwardly is nearly impossible. Yet two recent books rather brilliantly accomplish just that.

In “Assume Nothing: A Story of Intimate Violence,” Tanya Selvaratnam, a successful film producer and activist, writes about how she fell into an abusive relationship with the former attorney general of New York, Eric Schneiderman. He was a rising

ASSUME NOTHING

A Story of Intimate Violence

By Tanya Selvaratnam

250 pp. HarperCollins Publishers. \$28.99.

CONSENT

A Memoir

By Vanessa Springora

Translated by Natasha Lehrer

191 pp. HarperVia/HarperCollins Publishers. \$27.99.

political star, high-profile Trump enemy and ally of women’s causes. She writes candidly about how she was drawn to his influence: “I heard the applause when Eric spoke, and I got swept up in it.”

In crisp, unadorned prose, Selvaratnam offers up an accumulation of small details: the slowly building feeling, amid moments of tenderness and excitement, that something is wrong. She can’t eat certain things, has to wear her hair a certain way, can’t sleep in her own apartment, can’t talk on the phone with friends. In the bedroom, he chokes and hits her, calls her his “brown slave.” He slowly chips away at her; she must occupy a smaller and smaller space, even as her life is outwardly glamorous, functional.

In the course of Selvaratnam’s careful, detailed narrative, we see how a story that looks extraordinary isn’t extraordinary. We see how millions of other less sensational, lower profile stories of abuse are contained within this one. How step by step, a strong woman is seduced by the confounding combination of male woundedness and power. (He was, along with being a brilliant prosecutor, a mess, an alcoholic, a depressive who says, “Are you going to take care of me?”)

The difficulty of going public with this account can’t be underestimated — nor can the forces working against Selvaratnam: his influence, the po-

tential for shame, the panic of letting one’s perfectly serviceable public image slip. The sheer effort involved in looking very straightforwardly at this story, allowing it to exist, is palpable on the page.

Somewhere at the core of this narrative is Selvaratnam as a tiny child holding a stuffed bunny, listening to her father, a psychiatrist, hitting her mother. From the outside their life in a big house in Los Angeles looks fine, but surfaces conceal.

Selvaratnam is at her most powerful when she tells her own story rather than rehashing familiar feminist truisms or quoting experts. One wishes at times for more of *her*: her childhood, her trips to Sri Lanka, her prickly complicated mother, her irreplaceable grandmother. The book cycles obsessively over its *raison d’être*: At least 10 times, Selvaratnam explains that she is going public with her story to save other women. The energy expended on all this justification is wasted; the reader is already on her side. But her defensiveness speaks to the arduousness of this kind of revelation, the fact that it is going against not just entrenched power structures, but some formidable internal dictate of decorum or pride.

In methodically describing how a successful artist and activist can fall into a dark relationship with a controlling man, she is performing a rare and valuable service. It is important to see how frighteningly easy it is to lose power even for extremely confident, professionally accomplished women. As Selvaratnam puts it, “Even fierce women get abused.”

The couple’s liberal credentials, their real political work, their hours spent meditating, are all secondary to the dynamic blazing through their story. Selvaratnam writes to the chasm between who we are publicly and privately, exploring how easi-



Tanya Selvaratnam



Vanessa Springora

ly the facade of our politics, our most passionately held conviction dissolves in intimate life.

Vanessa Springora’s “Consent” offers a devastating literary takedown of another powerful man. In her eloquent memoir, which has already triggered a cultural reckoning in France, the prominent French publisher describes an affair she had as a 14-year-old with a 50-year-old celebrated writer, Gabriel Matzneff. (In the book he is “G.,” but Springora has identified him in other accounts.) The story begins with a smart, bookish, overlooked child: “At the grand old age of 5, I am waiting for love.”

Springora’s prose, smoothly translated from the French by Natasha Lehrer, is spare and novelistic. She is a graceful stylist, though her story also burns with a sense of purpose, a clarifying force. Her ravishing descriptions of the restlessness and boredom of teenage life rival those of Françoise Sagan. In one scene, her father stands her up in a restaurant as she waits for hours, with waiters taking pity on her. This is just one manifestation of the paternal absence that leaves her vulnerable to a charismatic older man who writes her love letters. Soon she is cutting school, smoking in cafes, rudderless, essentially parentless. She writes, “I persisted in believing that this abnormal situation made me interesting.”

Springora simultaneously shows how Matzneff’s sexual attention feels like love to a child and how far it is from that. We see how the idea of love is dangerous, how it offers cover for violence and domination. Even years later, she struggles with how to look at the situation: “How is it possible to acknowledge having been abused, when it is impossible to deny having consented, having felt desire, for the very adult who was so eager to take advantage of you?”

Matzneff incorporated photo-

graphs and letters of the young girls he abused into his own books, which glorified these encounters as adventures. In Springora’s account one sees his effort to define and write over their interactions, his refusal of her experience. One day he even insists on writing her homework for her, an essay on a triumph, despite her protests. In the middle of an early sexual act, she writes, “something of my presence in the world dissolved.”

Her cool, precise account reveals his grand seductions as the brutal, petty, narcissistic fumbblings that they were. Springora has said, “My goal actually was to lock him up in a book, to catch him in his own trap.” And in “Consent” the object becomes subject, the described becomes the describer. At one point, Springora calls him an “ogre,” reaching deep into the mythologies of childhood because that is the language she had at 14, in spite of his efforts to get her to read Proust, and her patina of *louche* teenage sophistication.

She writes of the years after the abuse: “I felt like a doll lacking all desire who had no idea how her own body worked, who had learned only one thing: how to be an instrument for other people’s games.” This tended to complicate her subsequent relationships; as she puts it in one of the saddest lines of the book, “No one wants a broken toy.”

The French publishing world was slow to distance itself from Matzneff, who had even written a book defending sex with children, but it seems that “Consent” brought some late-breaking moral clarity. (Emphasis on “some”: Reading an article on his exile to the south of Italy, one can’t help noticing that he seems to be shunned by society in a luxury hotel room overlooking the Mediterranean. Still, one imagines him sulking over his *puttanesca* because of Springora’s success.)

Of course both of these books are, among other things, acts of revenge. What makes them so satisfying is that the writer takes over the story, turns the tables, goes from being the fearful to the feared, the controlled to the controlling. The work it takes to get there is daunting. As Selvaratnam notes, these are stories she didn’t tell even her closest friends at first. These are stories that are hard to tell even to ourselves.

Both books wrestle with the difficulty of putting these experiences into words. The mysteries of how it all happened, of how one finds oneself in this situation, remain on important levels mysteries, untellable — and yet the effort to tell them is crucial.

When I finished these two excellent books, I thought of something Virginia Woolf wrote in a letter to a friend: “Very few women yet have written truthful autobiographies. It is my favorite form of reading.” □

It's Not Easy Being Green

Bill Gates lays out his plans for solving the climate crisis.

By **BILL MCKIBBEN**

FIRST THINGS FIRST — much respect to Bill Gates for his membership in the select club of ultrabillionaires not actively attempting to flee Earth and colonize Mars. His affection for his home planet and the people on it shines through clearly in this new book, as does his proud and usually endearing geekiness. The book's illustrations include photos of him inspecting industrial facilities, like a fertilizer distribution plant in Tanzania; definitely the happiest picture is of him and his son grinning identical grins

HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER The Solutions We Have and the Breakthroughs We Need

By **Bill Gates**

Illustrated. 256 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95.

outside an Icelandic geothermal power station. “Rory and I used to visit power plants for fun,” he writes, “just to learn how they worked.”

And this new volume could not be more timely — it emerges after a year that saw the costliest slew of weather disasters in history, and that despite a cooling La Niña current in the Pacific managed to set the mark for record global temperature. As everyone can attest who watched the blazes of Australia and California, or the hurricanes with odd Greek names crashing through the gulf, we are in dire need of solutions to the greatest crisis our species has yet faced.

It is a disappointment, then, to report that this book turns out to be a little underwhelming. Gates — who must have easy access to the greatest experts the world can provide — is surprisingly behind the curve on the geeky parts, and he's worse at interpreting the deeper and more critical aspects of the global warming dilemma. Since he confesses that he completely missed the climate challenge until 2006, when he met with some scientists almost two decades after the problem emerged (previously “I had assumed there were cyclical variations or other factors that would naturally prevent a true climate disaster”), it's perhaps not surprising that he's still catching up. And yet, his miscalculations are important, because they are widely shared.

Let's do the numbers first. Gates correctly understands the basic challenge, which is to “get to zero” as soon as we can. “Humans need to stop adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere,” he writes, which is as useful a sentence as the English language admits. And he understands that the

BILL MCKIBBEN is the author, most recently, of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* and writes the *Climate Crisis* newsletter for *The New Yorker*.

key to doing this is to electrify as much human activity as possible: from powering our computers to turning the wheels of our cars and buses to producing steel. But when it comes to generating that electricity, he worries that solar panels aren't becoming more efficient fast enough: Unlike computer chips, for instance, there's no “Moore's law” that doubles their usefulness every two years.

But that's not really the target here: In fact, as the analyst Ramez Naam pointed out last spring, the price of solar power has dropped astonishingly in the last decade, far outpacing even the most optimistic

One wishes Gates had talked, for instance, with Stanford's Mark Jacobson, whose team has calculated how almost every country on earth could go to 80 percent renewable energy by 2030. If he had, he might have understood more clearly that the things that really interest him — advanced nuclear power, for instance, where he describes his considerable investments — are more about mopping up: He's absolutely right that we should be investing in research across a wide list of technologies because we may need them down the line to help scrub the last increments of fossil fuel from the system, but the key work will



Bill Gates touring the Yara fertilizer distribution facility in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 2018.

forecasts. The price drop is 50 to 100 years ahead of what the International Energy Agency was forecasting in 2010, mostly because we're getting better at building and installing solar panels. Every time we double the number of panels installed, the price drops another 30 to 40 percent, and there's plenty of runway left.

These staggering numbers are why Gates's current-day snapshots of the “Green Premiums” you need to pay for clean energy don't mean as much as he thinks they do: Especially since storage batteries are now dropping in price on a similar curve, it's clear that the imperative is to install as much solar (and wind power, which is on the same price trajectory) as fast as humanly possible, since if we don't make huge progress in the next 10 years scientists have made clear we can kiss the targets we set in Paris goodbye.

be done (or not) over the next decade, and it will be done by sun and wind.

As London's Carbon Tracker Initiative explained last year, building new sun- and wind-power facilities is already, or soon will be, cheaper even than *operating existing coal-fired power*. Most people, Gates included, have not caught on yet to just how fast this engineering miracle is happening.

So why aren't we moving much faster than we are? That's because of politics, and this is where Gates really wears blinders. “I think more like an engineer than a political scientist,” he says proudly — but that means he can write an entire book about the “climate disaster” without discussing the role that the fossil fuel industry played, and continues to play, in preventing action.

We now know from great investigative reporting that the oil companies knew ev-

erything about climate change back in the 1980s, and that they systematically built an edifice of disinformation and denial to keep us in the dark. That's why we've wasted almost three decades of scientific warning. “I don't have a solution to the politics of climate change,” Gates writes, but in fact he does: He founded, and his foundation is a shareholder in, a company that has donated money to exactly the politicians who are in the pocket of big oil. A Bloomberg analysis last fall found that Microsoft had given only a third of its contributions to “climate-friendly” politicians. Emily Atkin, in a December issue of her climate newsletter *Heated*, pointed out that Microsoft had joined 42 other corporations in a letter to President-elect Biden calling on him to enact “ambitious” climate policies — and then donated to David Perdue for his Georgia Senate runoff (other signatories to the letter also gave to Kelly Loeffler). Had they won and the G.O.P. retained control of the Senate, the chances for those ambitious climate policies would have been nil.

Gates mentions in passing at one point that he chose to divest his fortune from fossil fuel companies, but only because “I

‘Humans need to stop adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere,’ Gates rightly says.

don't want to profit if their stock prices go up because we don't develop zero-carbon alternatives.” He scoffed at the idea that activists (who otherwise go mostly unmentioned in this book) thought that “divesting alone” would “transform the world's energy system.” But of course those activists, myself included, thought no such thing. They understood that weakening the fossil fuel industry was simply one key part of the job of rapid decarbonization, just like engineering. That is, the activists were thinking multidimensionally, which Gates is so far not.

Maybe that's a weakness that comes with wealth; it's obviously easy enough to slag Gates for flying in a private jet (and his publisher must have winced a little when he chose the winter of his book launch to join a bidding war for ownership of the world's largest private jet servicing company). But I think that's missing the point: The exhaust plume from his airplane won't make or break the planet's temperature, but given his resources and political reach, the quality of his analysis just might.

Power comes in many forms, from geothermal and nuclear to congressional and economic; it's wonderful that Gates has decided to work hard on climate questions, but to be truly helpful he needs to resolve to be a better geek — he needs to really get down on his hands and knees and examine how that power works in all its messiness. Politics very much included. □

Out Loud

An exploration of our vocal cords, why we have them and what humans have gained from our dexterity at making different sounds.

By MARY ROACH

AS A GENRE, body part nonfiction would seem to have run its course. We have natural histories of the heart and brain, the skin, the sensory organs. The intestines have a best seller. The penis has a cultural history, and the vagina has its own bible. But wait, you are probably not thinking, where is the 300-page book devoted to the larynx?

It has arrived, and it is exemplary. The author, the New Yorker staff writer John Colapinto, is an amateur rock vocalist with a polyp on his cords. “This Is the Voice” begins with his story, but quickly charges off in surprising and consistently fascinating directions. I did not, for example, expect: national elocutionists, Kim Kardashian’s

THIS IS THE VOICE

By John Colapinto

312 pp. Simon & Schuster. \$28.

vocal fry, the last Vatican castrato, the telling silence of lizards, Alexa or the delightful, data-based revelation that humans can reliably hear a smile.

Colapinto makes the case that our larynx — the human voice box — may well be the most important boost evolution bestowed. At its most basic, vocalization requires two pieces of equipment: lungs and vocal cords. For both these items, we have the lungfish to thank. Their lungs evolved from their swim bladder — the internal pool float that helps them hold to a certain depth. The walls of lungfish bladders in particular are so thin that oxygen can pass through them into the blood. Vocal cords evolved as a valve to keep water out of these proto-lungs. Lungfish vocalizations are on a par with the sounds of air escaping the mouth of a balloon. “I am trying to avoid the word ‘farts,’” Colapinto says nobly, “but I’m afraid those were the first vocal sounds heard on earth.”

Speech is, of course, more than vocalization. It’s not just a matter of having the equipment, the author explains, it’s a matter of where it sits. With the shift to upright locomotion, the larynx began to descend — from the back of the mouth down into the throat, where there’s room to create more varied phonemes. The larynx of Neanderthal man, like the larynx of those great orators the chimpanzees, sat higher than our own. This, Colapinto argues, kept them from producing the more gymnastic vowels and sound combinations that set language apart from utterance.

Your own vocal maturation — from mute water-breather to babbling baby to speechifying adult — is a sort of microcosm of the vocal evolution of the species.

MARY ROACH is the author, most recently, of “Grunt: The Curious Science of Humans at War.”



BRÁULIO AMADO

Infants begin life with the larynx tucked up into the back of the mouth. This makes possible nonstop suckling; unlike adults, babies can swallow and breathe at the same time. The price they pay for such highly efficient nutrient intake is that, temporarily, their speech sounds are limited. With no resonating chamber in the throat, they can manage little beyond *mama*, *dada*, *ga-ga*. As babies transition to solid food — and the risk of choking increases — the larynx begins to drop to a safer and less vocally limiting position.

Another uniquely human vocal trait: sexual dimorphism. Androgen receptors on the human male larynx cause men’s vocal cords to thicken with the hormonal gush of puberty. That’s what lowers the voice. Why might this have evolved? Because a deeper voice made its owner seem larger and scarier, and that gave early human males an edge in competition for mates. Colapinto links this to Donald Trump’s signature speaking behavior. “For a person like Trump, so consumed by the need to dominate and be the alpha male in every circumstance, it seems likely that . . . he intuitively hit on the expedient of rounding and pushing out his lips to lower his pitch slightly.” At the other end of the scale, we have Michael Jackson and other “puberphonic” individuals, pulling their lar-

ynxes higher and reducing the size of their resonating chamber in an unconscious effort to sound forever childlike.

A book about voice and speech must inevitably pay a visit to the academic citadel of linguistics. For how is it that a toddler so quickly and effortlessly puts those fancy new vowel sounds together into meaningful, grammatically correct sentences? The origin of human language has been debated so hotly that at one time the London Philological Society and others banned papers on it — a censure that lasted for 30 years — and Colapinto will likely get some

Colapinto makes the case that our larynx may be the most important boost evolution bestowed.

residual heat. He rejects Chomsky’s theory of a “language organ” in the brain and instead takes up Darwin’s emphasis on prosody — the notion that the melody and rhythms of speech are what move us toward language.

Fetuses can’t make out a mother’s words from inside a womb (and we know this because scientists, God love them, have stuck tiny waterproof microphones in there), but they can hear prosody: inflec-

tions, accents, the rises and dips and pauses of a sentence. Colapinto shares research that suggests we exit the womb with this scaffolding of language well in place. “French 2-day-olds wailed on a rising pitch contour, mirroring the melodic patterns of spoken French; German newborns cry on a downward arc typical of that language’s prosody.”

Along with prosody, language acquisition depends on the simplified sentences and exaggerated emphases of caregivers’ vocalizations and reinforcements. When the baby scores a hit, the caregiver responds with enthusiasm and repetition, etching in the brain the fundamentals of speech and grammar. The window for effortless language acquisition is open briefly, and once shut, near impossible to pry open. In rare cases of abused children deprived of all vocal contact, later efforts to teach them to speak have failed.

For the rest of us, the closing window provides an excuse for failed efforts to master new languages and explains why it’s so difficult to change an accent. Elite English boarding schools long taught “standard English” elocution — or R.P., for “received pronunciation.” R.P. was the accent of the upper class and, by mandate, of all BBC announcers. In an effort to erase the stigma of non-R.P. speech, England’s original national elocutionist, Thomas Sheridan, urged all citizens to adopt the accent. Most either couldn’t or wouldn’t, with the result that rather than hiding class distinctions, it cemented them into a hierarchy of snobbery. Only with help from the Beatles, Monty Python and a string of Labour Party victories did R.P. become — briefly — something to mock rather than aspire to.

In the equally illuminating and entertaining second half of the book, Colapinto wades into the hotter waters of gender, sexuality, race and politics. He covers the unique and shifting vocal patterns of women, gay men, Black people, transmen and transwomen (whose lack of androgen receptors complicates their vocal transition). It would be easy to misstep here, but Colapinto’s observations are, by my read, informed and respectful.

Winston Churchill makes an inevitable appearance. So does Hitler. Less inevitably, we meet James Ogilvie, an elocution teacher who rode the crest of a national craze for lyceum-style lectures in the early 1800s. Ogilvie would take to the stage in a toga, orating for three hours in a formal Ciceronian style later adopted by senators and heads of state.

Have modern attention spans contracted to the point where we prefer to listen in sound bites? Colapinto doesn’t think so. He points to the popularity of podcasts and audiobooks and argues that we are hard-wired to be drawn to and moved by the human voice. It may not be over the top to suggest, as he does, that the soul, in some sense, resides in the larynx. □

In Extremis

Held hostage in Syria for nearly two years, a journalist recounts his ordeal.

By DECLAN WALSH

IN THE FALL OF 2012, Theo Padnos was down and out in Antakya. An American freelance reporter in his early 40s, he was bunking at a grotty guesthouse in this town in southern Turkey on the border with Syria. Magazine editors were ignoring his emails. His funds had shrunk to a few hundred dollars. He felt lonely.

One evening, Padnos met a pair of young Syrians who, calling themselves citizen journalists, offered to spirit him into their country to report on the war unfolding there. Despite some troubling omens — another reporter, Austin Tice, had vanished weeks earlier — Padnos leapt at the offer. Less than 24 hours later he was sprinting across the border, into Syria, and headlong into a personal catastrophe.

What happens next is the subject of “Blindfold,” Padnos’s searching account of the almost two years he spent in the clutches of Jabhat al-Nusra, the main

BLINDFOLD

A Memoir of Capture, Torture, and Enlightenment

By Theo Padnos

Illustrated. 375 pp. Scribner. \$27.

Qaeda affiliate in Syria. The Syrian guides turn out to be jihadi kidnappers. They abduct Padnos, who is promptly sucked into a subterranean archipelago of pain — a series of filthy jails where he is whipped and electrocuted as bombs rain down outside. He is plagued by lice and the screams of fellow prisoners. Hunger is a constant companion.

Like many hostage memoirs, “Blindfold” lays bare the human condition at its extremes. There is depravity and resilience, rage and revelation, and, ultimately, a triumph of the human spirit. Padnos, however, takes the journey a step further, using his fluent Arabic to engage with his captors, probing their motives and prejudices, not to mention the psychology of a wartime community that appears to be in thrall to a fundamentalist ideology.

At first, though, he turns the lens on himself.

Padnos, who then went by Peter Theo Curtis, introduces himself as a plucky yet penniless reporter. He learned Arabic in Yemen, where he wrote a little-read book about Islamic schools (and subsequently changed his name to avoid being associated with it while continuing to report from the Muslim world). He spent three years in the Syrian capital, Damascus, where local men pressed him to marry their daughter.

DECLAN WALSH is the chief Africa correspondent for *The Times*, based in Nairobi, and the author of “*The Nine Lives of Pakistan*.” He was previously posted to Egypt, covering the Middle East, and to Pakistan.

ters. His career was going nowhere. But he disdained the correspondents from the big news outlets, with their satellite phones and poolside rooms who “mistook the lies they encountered for truth.” “I hated them,” he writes. “Phonies.”

He considered himself more authentic, in the mold of George Orwell in “Down and Out in Paris and London.” He imagines that, once in Syria, he will be able to mine the most mundane interactions for rich details to write a revealing portrait of the country or, at the least, earn a \$200 story fee.

Unfortunately for Padnos, once he is kidnapped those qualities suggest to his captors that he is, in fact, a C.I.A. agent. When he tries to impress a local Syrian judge with his intricate knowledge of jihad, the judge rubs his chin. “You’re not a journalist, are you?” he says. Padnos frets that his captors will discover the title of his book on Yemen, “Undercover Muslim,” which suddenly seems an especially poor choice.

Over the first 80 pages Padnos outlines his missteps in forensic detail, mocking his vanities and ruing the many warning signals he missed. After much of this, the effect becomes grating. He’s the “dumb American” — we get it. But once he has plunged into the abyss, those same factors — his language skills and familiarity with Islam, but also his reflexive curiosity — make Padnos a thoughtful witness of a nightmarish world, and distinguish his memoir as an acutely observed account that is deeply moving in places.

Where possible, he befriends his captors, many of whom had themselves been brutalized under Syria’s dictatorial leader, Bashar al-Assad. He decodes their jihadi lingo and religious references, their flimsy moral framework of sin and punishment and their hatred for America. He sympathizes with the way his fellow captives venerate the Quran.

BUT HE ALSO shoots straight when faced with the absurdities of their theater of brutality. When a line of men in suicide vests gather at his cell door, he likens them to runway models wearing “this season’s most audacious item,” with attitude to match. “They were fashion-forward terrorists who know how to pout, to invite stares and to exhibit their indifference at being stared at.”

The book’s title comes from a grime-stained scrap of fabric that Padnos was forced to wear during interrogations, and that ultimately became a comfort. The storytelling is similarly tight, almost blinkered. There’s no step-back section to present the context of Syria’s war, and not much about Padnos’s anguished mother back home in Vermont. We stay with him, in the cells, where the forces he imagines control his fate loom distantly like gods and demons: heartless bureaucrats in Washington and Damascus; Qaeda commanders lounging before their TVs; President Obama in the Oval Office.

The arrival of another American captive — Matthew Schrier, a photojournalist from Long Island — provides an interlude, but not a heartwarming one. The two men bicker, and eventually come to blows. At one point, Padnos confesses to Schrier that he would kill him if it meant gaining his freedom. When an opportunity to escape presents itself, Schrier flees at dawn into the streets of Aleppo. But Padnos, stuck in a window frame, is unable to wiggle free.

Exactly what occurred in those moments is the subject of a bitter feud between the two Americans, and Schrier has given his version in his book, “The Dawn Prayer.” The fact of the matter, though, is that Padnos fell back into the cell, where he received a severe beating from their enraged captors.

Padnos reserves his greatest scorn for Washington. He suspects that guns donated by the C.I.A. to Syrian rebels, as part of a \$1 billion covert aid package, ended up in the hands of his captors. As his mother begged the State Department for help, he says, the American ambassador to Syria was posing for photos with U.S.-vetted rebel leaders. In captivity he fantasized that President Obama would ride to his rescue, only to find out later that, upon learning of such cases, the president “did not do much.”

He is particularly angry about the lack of help for Kayla Mueller, an American hostage subjected to organized rape by ISIS, who died in disputed circumstances in 2015.

Padnos has told his story before, notably in a 2014 article for *The New York Times Magazine*, and in “*Theo Who Lived*,” a 2016 documentary directed by David Schisgall. The narrative in this account of nearly 400 pages meanders at times, and contains a few strange omissions. He does not mention, for instance, his failed escape attempt in August 2014, or the humiliating video message he was forced to record soon after. He is vague about the ransom of millions of dollars and the Qatari diplomats who secured his eventual release.

And there are times when Padnos, despite his acute insights into others, is frustratingly elusive about his own emotional state. Upon his release he declines to speak with his mother, worried about “a general system failure in my emotional circuitry,” but reveals little more. Still, he does reach a resolution of sorts, in the form of an allegorical novel he wrote in captivity, and finally smashes the spell held by his jailers on his imagination.

“I had bumped into a colony of brutes,” he says bluntly. “They were to be feared no more — and no less — than other brutes.”

The fate of less fortunate hostages, though, haunts the story. Padnos acknowledges that his release, in August 2014, was precipitated by the furor over the appalling execution of another reporter, James Foley, days earlier. And Austin Tice, the freelancer who vanished weeks before Padnos in 2012, is still missing today. □



Soldiers and kids at a checkpoint in Homs, Syria, in 2014.

Freedom of Expression

Two books examine how clothing and fashion reflect cultural and social change.

By **TARIRO MZEZEWA**

WHEN IT COMES to fashion history, many contributors and stories have been overlooked. Two new books — Catherine E. McKinley’s “The African Lookbook” and Richard Thompson Ford’s “Dress Codes” — provide a long-overdue course correction: McKinley on fashion on the continent over several decades, and Thompson on the rules, both written and unwritten, that govern what people put on their bodies and so much more.

For more than 150 years, the images of what is fashionable that have been presented to the world — in magazines,

THE AFRICAN LOOKBOOK

A Visual History of 100 Years of African Women

By **Catherine E. McKinley**

Illustrated. 207 pp. Bloomsbury. \$30.

DRESS CODES

How the Laws of Fashion Made History

By **Richard Thompson Ford**

Illustrated. 443 pp. Simon & Schuster. \$30.

books, on screens large and small, on runways — have overwhelmingly been of white women. Even when the clothes and accessories on display have been created by and for African and Black women. And in recent years, those Black women who have gained visibility in the industry have often still been misunderstood or misrepresented (take, for instance, Vogue’s February cover of Vice President Kamala Harris and the controversy it sparked).

For some 30 years, McKinley, a curator, author and educator, has been collecting images of women from across Africa that capture the vastness of the continent’s fashion. Her collection largely focuses on the countries of the Sahel, like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, and on countries with Atlantic coastlines, from Morocco to Angola.

The collages, sketches and photographs from these regions depict women — some young, others old; some alone, others with friends and family; some taken at home, others at studios or in public — as complex beings with agency. Even the nude portraits are respectful and thoughtful, a welcome counter to the “colonial porn” — as the Haitian-American novelist Edwidge Danticat puts it in her introduction — that was common from the 19th century onward.

McKinley expertly guides readers through a history lesson of the ways fashion in these countries is connected with colonialism, industrialization and numerous traditions and styles of dressing, reminding us throughout that “for African women



Seydou Keita’s “Untitled, #460,” 1956-57.

across the continent, many of the most powerful but less remarked upon modern legacies were born of the sewing machine and the camera.”

The images McKinley presents make clear that so much of what we see on the runways in New York, Paris, London and Milan draws inspiration from what has been created and worn by African women for decades. The images also offer a subtle indictment of Western so-called tastemakers who fail to credit and highlight African creatives in the fashion world. In Seydou Keita’s portraits taken in 1950s Mali and in undated, anonymous portraits of women in print dresses from the collection of Adjadi Adama Sylla in Senegal, for instance, keen readers and fashion lovers may see similarities to Stella McCartney’s spring 2018 runway show and Tori Burch’s 2020 embroidered dresses, both of which were criticized for appropriating African cultures.

At a time when popular culture might have us believe that the only African creativity worth praising must be linked to the royalty and wealth shown in works like “Black Panther,” “The Lion King” or the forthcoming “Coming 2 America,” McKinley delicately reminds us that African traditions, styles, creations and the people themselves — with their many layers and differences — don’t need to come from fictional kingdoms like Zamunda or Wakanda to deserve attention. The real, everyday beauty of Africa is worth canonizing beyond the continent.

Where “The African Lookbook” concentrates on fashion and style on one continent, “Dress Codes” focuses an even wider

lens on what we wear, and on what influences those choices. 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.

To help readers understand why we dress the way we do, Ford chronicles the fashion crimes of various eras, illustrating the rigidity and cruelty of social norms as enforced through sartorial laws. Joan of Arc, Ford reminds us, was tried and burned for heresy, in part because she vio-

lated religious morality by wearing men’s clothing. And in 1416, a Jewish woman named Allegra was arrested in Ferrara, Italy, for not wearing earrings. “The symbolism could not have been clearer,” Ford writes. “In an era when superfluous adornment was condemned as a sign of sin, Jews were required by law to wear conspicuous jewelry.” The distinctive attire “reinforced the idea that Jews were a physically distinct and deviant people.”

Moving closer to the present, a chapter on resistance provides an in-depth analysis of the clothes worn during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. “Respectable appearance was a mandatory part of the civil rights struggle,” he writes. But “as the racial justice struggle evolved, an activism premised on such ‘respectability’ became both practically and ideologically untenable.” The clothes worn by the Black Panthers, by the activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and more all tell us of the time and the fight for equality in their own way. Ford’s legal background makes him particularly qualified to explain fashion-related lawsuits throughout history (about miniskirts, makeup, cornrows) clearly and with ease. His insight into the treatment of rule followers and breakers alike makes “Dress Codes” essential reading whether you dress to the nines or prefer sweats, because everything we have worn — whale-boned corsets, cotillion gowns, dashikis, tutus, hoop earrings, baggy pants and lab coats — has something to tell us about sociopolitical status, sexual morality and identity.

Ford’s writing is steeped in extensive research and makes what could be a dull history lesson about fashion a deeply informative and entertaining study of why we dress the way we do, and what that tells us about class, sexuality and power. □



Joan of Arc, wearing men’s clothing, enters Orléans in 1429.

His Brilliant Career

A star-studded biography of the legendary director Mike Nichols.

By JAMES WOLCOTT

INDIVIDUAL GENIUS IS a group accomplishment, and don't let Flaubert tell you different. Mike Nichols, whose name stands alone on the marquee of Mark Harris's gleaming, teeming biography, possessed wit, cunning, icy clarity, ravenous ambition and a knack for mimicking the qualms and quavers of neurosis, but none of that would have been set free if he hadn't lucked upon the right tribe.

From earliest childhood Nichols felt the sting of stigma, the shame of exclusion. Medicine had dealt him a raw hand. At the age of 4 in his native Germany, which his Jewish family would flee during the Nazi terror, he received an injection of whooping cough vaccine that left him completely bald and unable to regrow hair, a pale salamander. When Michael and his younger

MIKE NICHOLS

A Life

By Mark Harris

Illustrated. 688 pp. Penguin Press. \$35.

brother, Robert, sailed to America in 1939 to meet up with their father, who had relocated to New York, he knew only two sentences of English, one of which was "Please do not kiss me," intended to ward off the fussing attention that "the sight of a bald little uncared for refugee holding a 3-year-old's hand was likely to engender among adults." Nichols would soon learn that those his own age were less solicitous, the little monsters. At school he was mocked ("Hey, baldy!"), bullied and belittled, a self-described zero. Later he would be fitted with a wig and false eyebrows, but the constant, fidgety adjustment and tell-tale stink of acetone fed a prickly sense of self-consciousness and outcast condition. Unable to feel snug in his own skin, Nichols would find expression and fulfillment by converting his wary discomfort into the psychodrama of improv and sketch comedy, breaking out of his specimen jar and never looking back.

From the film historian who gave us "Pictures at a Revolution" and "Five Came Back," undertaken with the blessing of Nichols's widow, Diane Sawyer, and his three children, and fortified with a wealth of interviews that make the acknowledgments a red carpet roll call (Candice Bergen, Robert Redford, Meryl Streep . . .), "Mike Nichols: A Life" is a midcentury fairy tale of right place-right time-right crowd sis boom bah.

Stymied back home (where he sulked off from enrolling at N.Y.U. after learning "that incoming freshmen were required to memorize the school song"), Nichols headed to the University of Chicago, where

he hoped to make a fresh start and shed his hangdog past. He that seeketh, findeth. The place was aswarm with kindred spirits and budding daredevils. His first day on campus he met a precocious 16-year-old bookworm named Susan Sontag, with whom he became friends for life. He fell into a conversation with one of the cafeteria's busboys, Paul Sills, the son of the acting teacher Viola Spolin and the future founder of Story Theater; among his fellow students in Sills's acting workshops were Ed Asner and Zohra Lampert, with whom he improvised a scene from Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain" done entirely in gibberish. The most crackling, fateful encounter in that popcorn machine of future legend was with an enigma named Elaine May, an autodidactic rebel who arrived on campus like a dust devil. With her tousled hair and forbidding aloofness, May was a figure of bewitchment, *la belle dame sans merci* of the sardonic comeback.

Their introduction was not a traditional Hollywood meet-cute. She watched Nichols perform in a student production with "a sneer on her face," having been briefed by Sills that here was the only person at the University of Chicago as mean and hostile as she was. It's hard to resist such a powerful negative attraction and once they glided into their first improv together a beautiful union of misanthropes was forged. Where so many hip comics of the era riffed on topical references with staccato delivery (pre-eminently Mort Sahl with his rolled-up newspaper), Nichols and May delivered needlepoint duets of insinuation, jittery apprehension and flustered frustration that had the intimacy of overheard conversation, the tension of thought bubbles about to pop. An improbable sensation in nightclubs and on radio, TV and the Broadway stage, Nichols and May became the royal byword for literate satire until personal friction and temperamental differences drove them apart. They had gone as far as they could rubbing antennae together and they were too high-strung and self-propelled to mellow into a sweetheart act trotting out the same old crowd favorites.

After the professional breakup with May, Nichols was in a quandary. Sure, he was clever, all the papers said so, but that's not enough to stay in the big leagues. "Oh, Mikey," said Leonard Bernstein after a long, consoling walk along Park Avenue. "You're so good! . . . I don't know at what." The "what" turned out to be as an actor-whisperer, the unflappable coxer and cajoler of sacred monsters and skittish basket cases, the redeemer of troubled scripts. From his lightning success as the ace mechanic of Neil Simon's Broadway comedies

"Barefoot in the Park," "The Odd Couple" and "Plaza Suite" to more daring forays such as "Streamers," "Hurly Burly" and "Death and the Maiden," from his magicianship with the big-screen adaptation of Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," where he deployed his "silky soft" stratagems on Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor to ungirdle them out of their comfort zones, and the generation-defining "The Graduate," which made an unlikely star out of adenoidal Dustin Hoffman, Nichols established himself as a craftsman and customizer delivering a high chrome polish.



Mike Nichols in 1966.

He wasn't a miracle worker, able to levitate the undead or alchemize a lump. A lumbering megasaurus like "Catch-22" seemed designed to hobble and humble a director whose best work was done in close quarters and in italics, not bold caps; what should have been a sporty farce, "The Fortune," starring Jack Nicholson, Warren Beatty and the newcomer Stockard Channing, turned into an exhausting taffy pull; the yuppie redemption parable "Regarding Henry" was worked over by the critics as if it owed them back pay.

BUT JUST WHEN Nichols appeared to have been delegated to the out pile, he would rock back with a hand grenade of sexual provocation such as "Carnal Knowledge," a harrowing social message thriller like "Silkwood," a burst of confetti like "The Birdcage" or, as an actor, unskin a tour de force portrait of slithery self-exoneration in "The Designated Mourner." As his failures and duds fall by the wayside (though it's often the biggest flopperos that pro-

vide the book with the most memorable vignettes, e.g., the ongoing meltdown of Garry Shandling on "What Planet Are You From?"), the list of successes onstage and onscreen stretch from here to the horizon, capped by his HBO adaptation of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America." (Harris, be it noted, is Kushner's husband.) Ironically, Nichols's dexterity and cool engineering have worked against him in posterity as a ranking auteur, denying him the canonical status and mystique of other New Hollywood directors (Altman, De Palma, Scorsese, Coppola, Spielberg). The absence of gnawing compulsions, recurring themes, maestro flourishes and other distinguishing marks makes him difficult to place.

Placement, however, is for cultural historians, critics and committed kibitzers. For devourers of larger-than-life biography with a gala cast, "Mike Nichols" offers enough show business lore, celebrity tattle, hilarious wisecracks (when the playwright Ariel Nichols solemnly informed Nichols that the author who influenced him most was Shakespeare, Nichols sighed, "Oh, Ariel, he's awful") and cameo appearances to stock a candy store to the rafters. Everybody who was anybody is here steaming up the glass. Comprehensive without being a chronological slog, a Wikipedia marathon, it's the rare large-scale biography without boring bits because Nichols's whirligig life was nearly devoid of boring bits and dead patches: busy, busy, busy up to the end (Harris notes that when Nichols died he "left behind an appointment book for the coming week that was completely full").

Without indulging in judgment, "Mike Nichols: A Life" shows how Nichols's project choices and social jockeying became winged together, presenting a portrait of the artist as a sybaritic grandee. It was the photographer Richard Avedon who tutored and groomed Nichols in the subtleties of hobnobbing with the Beautiful People, furnishing a tastefully deluxe lifestyle and reaching for the right fork, lest one be exposed as a rube. The student would eventually overtake the master until even Avedon found Nichols's palatial style and host-with-the-most manner a bit much. Most notably, Nichols developed an expensive passion for owning and breeding Arabian horses — 40 in all, at one point — and set himself up as a country squire in Connecticut, playing host to illustrious houseguests such as Lillian Hellman; this required recurrent infusions of capital. I once asked a prominent film critic why Nichols had taken on a certain misbegotten project and she replied, "The horses needed hay." But if the horses made him happy, who's to begrudge? Movies aren't everything. □

JAMES WOLCOTT is a contributor to *Air Mail* and the *London Review of Books*.

The Real Thing

Tom Stoppard had his first astonishing hit at 29, and has continued to astonish for more than 50 years.

By DAVID IVES

IN HIS EARLY 20s, Tom Stoppard — rather like young Aladdin and his lamp — told his mother, “I’d like to be famous!”

The lad in this case played genie to himself and made his own wish come true by pouring out, over more than five decades, a glistening stream of gloriously articulate, brilliantly intricate plays. A fulfilling home and social life seems to have accompanied the wished-for fame. An early unhappy marriage gave way to two much jollier ones, there’ve been terrific children,

TOM STOPPARD

A Life

By Hermione Lee

Illustrated. 872 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$37.50.

grouse shooting and rare-book collecting, friendship with Mick Jagger and cricket with Harold Pinter; the whole unimaginable public and private sundae topped off in 1997 by a knighthood. Over the course of his extraordinary life — he’s now 83 — Sir Tom has even magically managed to collaborate twice with Shakespeare, on “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead” and “Shakespeare in Love.”

Mike Nichols said Stoppard was “the only writer I know who is completely happy.” Simon Gray said, “It is actually one of Tom’s achievements that one envies him nothing, except possibly his looks, his talents, his money and his luck.” Stoppard himself has called himself “lucky.”

Luck doesn’t seem sufficient to describe the sheer Merchant-Ivory unlikeliness of Stoppard’s early life: Born Tomas Strausler on Kafka’s birthday in 1937 to Czechoslovak Jews, he was taken to Singapore at 18 months to flee the Nazis, then to India at 4 to flee the Japanese. In Darjeeling he attended a school in view of the Himalayas. He acquired a reactionary English stepfather and a new name, moved to England at 8, skipped university and got his education, like his lifelong hero Hemingway, through bottom-up journalism. After scraping along as a reporter in Bristol and falling in love with the theater there, he had his first astonishing hit at 29 with “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern” and has continued to astonish audiences right through last year’s “Leopoldstadt,” whose sold-out London run the pandemic interrupted.

The kind of astonishment Stoppard’s provided us has changed over time. As if scrambling to hold our attention, early plays like “Jumpers” and “Travesties” combined high and low jinks, with cas-

DAVID IVES is the author of many plays, including “All in the Timing,” “Venus in Fur” and “New Jerusalem: The Interrogation of Baruch de Spinoza.”

ades of quick, bright banter and jaw-dropper Newtonian jokes generating bel canto monologues on theater (“We’re actors, we’re the opposite of people!”), theology (“Is God?”) and the unpleasantness of being dead in a box (“That’s the bit I don’t like, frankly”). Those theatrical whirligigs gave way to less frantic works like “Arcadia,” “The Coast of Utopia” and “The Hard Problem,” in which characters unhurriedly talk, supported by Stoppard’s acquired confidence that his public will listen.

And why shouldn’t it listen? His fans can exit the theater after one of his plays with a heady feeling of freedom, stoic and ready for life, ignited by his aphoristic wit and two hours’ traffic with the Big Questions. His classically balanced sentences allay our contemporary panic. Whether the death of liberal arts education, our Ping-Pong-ball-size attention spans and the financial realities of the theater will continue to afford his challenging plays a place onstage, only the future can tell us and — as always — it’s not here yet.

About Shakespeare we famously possess a small, precious handful of facts. In her encyclopedic new biography Hermione Lee seems to provide several million about Tom Stoppard. She greets us, rather forebodingly, with a genealogical tree, as if the extended Stoppard family were a medieval royal house. The book’s chapter heads tease us with delicious epigraphs, but to find the sources of those quotes you have to flip to the back and ransack the microscopic endnotes. These are quibbles. The lack of an editor’s blue pencil is not. In the course of 750 pages of text we get not only detailed play sources, production histories and migraine-inducing plot summaries (one of them eight pages long), but seemingly everything Stoppard ever wore and every room in every house he ever bought and every “posh” friend he ever made. “Tom Stoppard” is every bit as informed and intelligent as any Stoppard play. If only it were as pointed or as agile. Stoppard himself, dodging puckishly, seems to get lost amid the facts.

One can’t help recalling the flair with which Kenneth Tynan in his glittering, swift, not unkvetching New Yorker profile from 1977 caught Stoppard’s spirit like lightning in a platinum martini shaker. Lee calls Tynan’s piece inaccurate and unjust. But she, now an emeritus professor of English literature at Oxford, comes at Stoppard from the academy. Tynan, like Stoppard, started as a journalist, writing for years with dishy mischief about show folk in London, Hollywood and New York. More crucially, while serving as literary manager at the National Theater, he frequented rehearsal rooms, assisted on scripts and was involved in the first production of “Jumpers.” He knew from the inside how theater works day by day, and four-plus decades have not dimmed the illuminations of his essay. It remains a vivid close-up.



Tom Stoppard on the set of “The Real Inspector Hound” in New York, 1992.

That said, Lee is very good on Stoppard’s sometimes painful experiences with the movies and fills us in about some tantalizing writing projects — like a screenplay about Galileo — that came to nothing. She’s wonderful on the wives and girlfriends and home life. She gives a fascinating account of Stoppard’s amazed discovery, in middle middle-age, of the full extent of his Jewishness, when he learned, not only about the Jewish family roots his beloved mother had concealed, but of the relatives who’d died in the camps — a revelation that ultimately gave birth to the Viennese lives, fondly told over decades, of “Leopoldstadt.” The book also dishes up generous helpings of sparkling Stoppardisms. A typical example: “Talent without imagination: wicker baskets. Imagination without talent: modern art.”

If there’s a whiff of conservatism in that last epigram, it’s not surprising. Maybe most eye-opening in Lee’s telling is how politically conservative if not right-wing-to-reactionary Stoppard was in his central years, frankly admiring Margaret Thatcher, frankly not admiring trade unions, at one point boycotting a boycott on productions in South Africa. He has been — with well-articulated reservations — an outspoken defender of the West and its values, a position almost unheard-of among

playwrights, and even less so now that the words “Western civilization” require a trigger warning. Whatever his politics, he’s been a moral explorer in his plays and a moral activist in his life, eloquent about freedom of expression and busily working on behalf of Eastern European writers and Russian refuseniks. Those political concerns, conjoined with his Czech connection, came to life in “Rock ‘n’ Roll,” wherein Stoppard created a sort of alternative existence by imagining the tested principles of a Tomas Strausler-like figure living under Soviet rule.

With celebrated volumes behind her on the likes of Edith Wharton and Penelope Fitzgerald, Lee is an expert biographer. In her superb “Virginia Woolf,” she boldly and woolfishly rethought biographical form and managed to bring a complicated novelist alive. Clearly she admires Stoppard no end — maybe a hair too much — but the expertise with which she’s assembled his bright materials is a testament to her own high and rightly esteemed gifts. Unlike many another writer, Tom Stoppard has enjoyed a rich, inimitable, event-filled life that begs to be told and her generous, event-packed volume is the proof.

All this said, it goes without saying: If you love his work, you need to read her book. □

Den of Iniquity

A memoir about '60 Minutes' details its pathbreaking journalism, and its culture of sexism and harassment.

By JIM WINDOLF

IRA ROSEN PROBABLY would have liked nothing more than to mark the end of his long career in TV news by writing a gruffly charming reminiscence of the kind that journalists tend to publish after age 65, one of those sometimes gritty, sometimes glamorous accounts filled with anecdotes of hairy deadlines, scenes of life-threatening encounters in far-flung locations and a dash of gossip to season the narrative. But Rosen, who won 24 Emmys in 40 years for a body of work that included investigative reports on politicians, business leaders, gangsters and spies, had a problem that kept him from writing that kind of thing. The problem was that he spent most of his career at "60 Minutes" — and for decades the "60 Minutes" workplace was a pit of sexual harassment and everyday abuses.

TICKING CLOCK Behind the Scenes at "60 Minutes"

By Ira Rosen

324 pp. St. Martin's Press. \$29.99.

As he writes in "Ticking Clock: Behind the Scenes at '60 Minutes,'" Rosen found success thanks to his working relationship with the show's top correspondent, Mike Wallace, who had won the admiration of millions with an interviewing style that made powerful men sweat and stammer as they tried to worm their way out of his inquisitions. Rosen also describes enduring years of misery thanks to Wallace, whose workday behavior — sexually harassing women in the office; subjecting colleagues to tirades and tantrums — belied the righteous enforcer he played on camera for some 50 years.

"I was trapped with Wallace," Rosen writes.

He joined "60 Minutes" as a segment producer in 1980, at the age of 26, hired by Don Hewitt, the show's creator, and things were nice enough in the beginning. Equipped with a bottomless expense account long before the internet was a daily tool, Rosen describes himself as a kind of human search engine. To find out which stories had made the papers in cities far from New York, where he was usually based, he would hand over his credit card at an airport counter and buy a ticket for the next available flight. He calls this research method "airport roulette."

Teamed with Wallace, Rosen became a

JIM WINDOLF, the media editor of *The Times* since 2017, has overseen much of the paper's coverage of CBS News.

backstage maestro who often felt he didn't get proper credit for his work. He paints himself as a humble digger, a persistent journalist with a sense of what makes for a solid TV segment and the skills to get it broadcast-ready.

Wallace, who died in 2012, had other attributes — a tobacco-cured baritone and a virtuoso actor's talent for making an instant bond with audiences — and Rosen describes him as a touchy, insecure creature who reveled in attention from strangers back when muckraking reporters were widely admired.

He also writes that Wallace regularly peppered colleagues with questions about their sex lives; lashed out at them for no good rea-

son. In 2017, "60 Minutes" tried to obscure its past. Richard Zoglin, a biographer, was hired by Simon & Schuster, a publisher then owned by the CBS Corporation, to write a book on the show's history in time for its 50th anniversary. After he started asking about the treatment of women on staff, he was replaced by a new author: Jeff Fager, who had succeeded Hewitt as the show's top producer.

Rosen does not go into the book fiasco but does note that CBS fired Charlie Rose, a "60 Minutes" correspondent and a co-anchor of "CBS This Morning," after a number of women had accused him of sexual harassment. He also includes the 2018 firing of Fager, whose career ended after he

repeatedly sexually assaulted her and destroyed her career during his time in charge. The settlement, reached in the 1990s, gives her annual payments for the rest of her life.

Rosen offers a mostly affectionate portrayal of Hewitt and does not mention the settlement. At the same time he questions his own reaction to the firing of Rose. "This is horrible," he quotes himself saying about the abrupt end to Rose's career during a conversation with the CBS anchor Norah O'Donnell.

"And she answered appropriately, 'I feel sorry for the women,'" Rosen writes. "Her response was from her gut and gave me an inkling of what it may have been like for women, even Norah, to work with him."

The investigation of the CBS workplace culture included the allegation that Rosen had "occasionally made inappropriate sexual comments to his female subordinates." Rosen declined to comment when *The Times* asked him about the allegation two years ago and denies it in the book.

In addition to his icon-busting description of Wallace, Rosen paints unflattering portraits of two other "60 Minutes" correspondents, Steve Kroft and Katie Couric. He reports that his workdays were pleasant when he produced segments for Lesley Stahl and Bill Whitaker.

Rosen's backstage descriptions of the show are livelier than his sometimes plodding accounts of how he nailed stories of corrupt politicians and amoral executives. But how reliable a guide is he to "60 Minutes"? Although he acknowledges the toxicity of its workplace, he devotes space late in the book to castigating journalists at *The Washington Post* who were reporting on sexual harassment at the

show. And a reader may wonder what lessons he drew from his years in such an environment when he writes of the correspondent Ed Bradley that he "liked his women and was a chick magnet" and says that Rose "had always been a ladies' man." Those lines are among the book's many groaners.

A bit like Mr. Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's "The Remains of the Day" — a dedicated butler who begins to suspect, too late, that he had spent his life in the service of a bad master — Rosen grapples in the final pages with the pair of TV news giants who shaped his career.

"The Me Too reckoning was needed," he writes, "as it left too many women in tatters. And even if Wallace and Hewitt were geniuses, it didn't excuse their Neanderthal behavior toward women. If I had been a 26-year-old woman working for Wallace in 1980, I doubt I would have survived the experience." □



The journalist Mike Wallace and the producer Don Hewitt, of "60 Minutes," in 1986.

son; grabbed the bottoms and breasts of women who worked in the office; pulled them onto his lap; and snapped bra straps.

"The verbal harassment I experienced from Mike Wallace and other TV big shots was, in a word, criminal," Rosen writes. He says he stuck it out for so long "in part out of fear, but mostly out of ambition."

It is depressing to think that a "60 Minutes"-worthy story — on the ingrained culture of harassment at a cultural institution — took place at the nation's most prestigious and most popular TV newsmagazine. The writer Sally Quinn ventured into this territory in "We're Going to Make You a Star," a 1975 memoir about her stint at CBS News. She wrote that Hewitt tried to sabotage her after she said no to his advances. (The reviews were vicious.)

In a 1991 article for *Rolling Stone*, the journalist Mark Hertsgaard reported that Hewitt and Wallace routinely harassed women in

A '60 Minutes'-worthy story took place at the nation's most prestigious TV newsmagazine.

sent a threatening text message to a CBS reporter who was preparing a "CBS Evening News" segment that dealt with allegations of sexual harassment against Fager himself. (The problem went to the very top: The CBS Corporation also fired the company's chief executive, Leslie Moonves, after a dozen women accused him of sexual harassment and sexual assault.)

In an article about a 2018 investigation of the CBS workplace culture commissioned by the CBS board, *The New York Times* reported that the company paid more than \$5 million to a former CBS News employee who said that Hewitt, who died in 2009, had

Growing Pains

This young adult novel explores the early days of a pivotal character from ‘The Hate U Give.’

By **MARTHA TESEMA**

THE INHERITANCE WE CARRY from those who came before us is a knot of roots that can be complicated to unravel. It can take a lifetime of work to distinguish the threads that shape the people we grow to be.

Angie Thomas’s latest young adult novel, “Concrete Rose,” takes on this challenge — sorting through a person’s becoming — with the author’s characteristic mastery.

CONCRETE ROSE

By **Angie Thomas**

362 pp. Balzer + Bray. \$19.99.

In her best-selling debut, “The Hate U Give,” all eyes were on Starr Carter, a 16-year-old girl who finds her voice after witnessing a police officer kill her best friend. But Starr didn’t develop into that young leader on her own; she was molded by

MARTHA TESEMA is a writer and content strategist at *Shine*, covering the intersection of race and mental health. Previously, she was a culture writer at *Mashable*.

those around her. One of those formative figures was her father, Maverick Carter. Now, Maverick is front and center in “Concrete Rose.”

We meet Maverick on a pivotal day, years before the events of “The Hate U Give,” in the vibrant world of Garden Heights. At 17 years old, he’s just discovered he’s the father of a 3-month-old son. The sudden weight of his newfound responsibility forces him to make a choice: continue running with the King Lords, the gang he’s come into by way of his now-imprisoned father; or face the cost of leaving the gang and try to build a life for himself and his family outside of selling drugs.

Prequels grant the reader a unique security: We already know where the characters end up. That’s a welcome relief with “Concrete Rose,” which shows the high stakes of Maverick’s early life. Unlike Starr’s journey, Maverick’s fight is a subtle one. Maverick is struggling with navigating his daily life, all the while wrestling with the performative trap of masculinity and questioning how his actions will affect the legacy he hopes to build.

Yet Thomas gives Maverick the space to bloom amid these struggles thanks largely



Angie Thomas

to the unconditional love that surrounds him. That familiar hum of collective care is woven throughout “Concrete Rose” and showcases the full humanity of Black folks — and Black boys in particular. For Maverick, care comes by way of his mother’s steady and constant support, as well as his father’s meditative guidance from afar. And while those bonds are a joy to witness, the most riveting relationship that Maverick has is with his neighbor, the formidable Mr. Wyatt, who offers Maverick a job so he can leave the King Lords. In one moving

passage that serves as the crux for Maverick’s journey, Mr. Wyatt says: “Son, one of the biggest lies ever told is that Black men don’t feel emotions. Guess it’s easier to not see us as human when you think we’re heartless. Fact of the matter is, we feel things. Hurt, pain, sadness, all of it. We got a right to show them feelings as much as anybody else.”

The results of Mr. Wyatt’s mentorship are later reflected in the Maverick we come to know as an adult, as well as the Starr we see in “The Hate U Give,” who has inherited these values from her father.

In “Concrete Rose,” Thomas casts a loving eye on the lives and realities of Black people, which is a powerful continuation of one of her most moving endeavors as a writer: her challenge to readers to affirm the goodness of all types of characters and to greet them with compassion at every turn, no matter where those turns may lead. Maverick’s journey isn’t easy. It’s riddled with trauma and grief. But moments of joy permeate “Concrete Rose” and the love within the story nudges us, and Maverick, to consider how we can find the humanity within each other, for the sake of our pasts, our presents and our futures. □

Nevertheless, She Persisted

A 74-year-old woman has some important things to say, if you are willing to listen.

By **EVIE WYLD**

SOME CHARACTERS SEEM eager to please a reader. They come bounding up to you, big-eyed, as if to say, “Read me, know me, love me.” Bina, the 74-year-old protagonist and namesake of Anakana Schofield’s third novel, goes to great lengths to tell us that she will not be one of these: “I am not inter-

BINA

A Novel in Warnings

By **Anakana Schofield**

313 pp. New York Review Books. Paper, \$17.95.



Anakana Schofield

ested in appealing to you. I am not you.” She is, she tells us, here to warn us, not to reassure.

Readers who might be expecting the geriatric whimsy of “The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared,” or the slick gerontological procedurals of “Elizabeth Is Missing” or “The Thursday Murder Club,” will be in for a rude awakening. This is a novel of tangles

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and absences, aggressively resistant to sentimentality. To follow its wrenched syntax is to experience the frustrating dogleg lanes of consciousness, the distortions and failures of memory and self-narration. Though Bina assures us “there’s nothing I like more than to be useful,” this is not to be an encounter with an elderly character whose life is designed to help us extract lessons from it — that inverted child protagonist here to defamiliarize the everyday stuff and remind us all what really matters.

Bina, having “had enough,” has taken to her bed, and the novel comes to us in peripatetic bursts. Often the conceit is that we are reading what she has written on scraps of available paper, bills and receipts, which dictate the length of the paragraphs, studied with aperçus like “Troublemakers do not need a warrant to ruin your life” and “Weather can surprise you!”

There are blanks and redactions, things Bina can’t or won’t tell us about. She forgets, she repeats, she is distracted. But it becomes clear that the main thrust of what she’s trying to get down relates to Eddie, her “sorta son,” who started off a stranger after crashing his motorbike in her ditch and then hung around for a decade, angry and drunk, until he finally departed. Eddie was a parasite, moving into her house, outstaying his welcome, abusing her and impersonating her on social media so that she is inundated with death threats. This young man who, for no reason she can discover, thumps her over the head, spills scalding tea on her, wrecks her home and won’t move out, hovers as a constant threat over Bina. His return, and his testimony against her, will, she is convinced, send her to prison for the rest of her life.

Bina is especially worried he’ll come back and cause trouble for her and her

work with “the Group,” a secretive band of people practicing euthanasia on the old and dying who call her from time to time and advise her against using the word “murder” when discussing their activities. There are footnotes that point us to the author’s debut novel, “Malarky,” where Bina first appeared in a walk-on part in the background, hitting an airplane with a hammer.

Whether you view the work you are asked to do here as a reader as a pleasure or a chore comes down to the sort of reader you are. I started off feeling as if I were going through a second round of lockdown, before the novel clicked and I found myself in tune with Bina, reading around and back and through her, coming to know her through that process and valuing her all the more because of it.

“Bina” is a bitterly funny novel but one that carries moral weight. Ultimately much of its energy comes from the simple subversive act: making a woman’s life matter, making her voice be heard. As Bina puts it: “So if you are listening to a woman / Hoping she’ll shut up / Try imagining the 2,000 years / Where she did all the listening. / Sit down / Shut up / And if the woman is talking, listen.” □

How on earth has 'Lolita' escaped censure? The daughter of a free-speech advocate has some ideas.

MY FATHER, John Mortimer, brought me up to believe that you can be a good person and kill someone and a perfectly awful person who never gets so much as a parking ticket your whole life. It's an education I'm proud of. He was an author and a criminal defense barrister — in his words, “the only playwright ever to have defended a murderer in the central criminal court at the Old Bailey” — and his prowess in both professions rode on his ability to see past easy morality and to respect the fact that the truth is never one-sided and therefore art should not be, either.

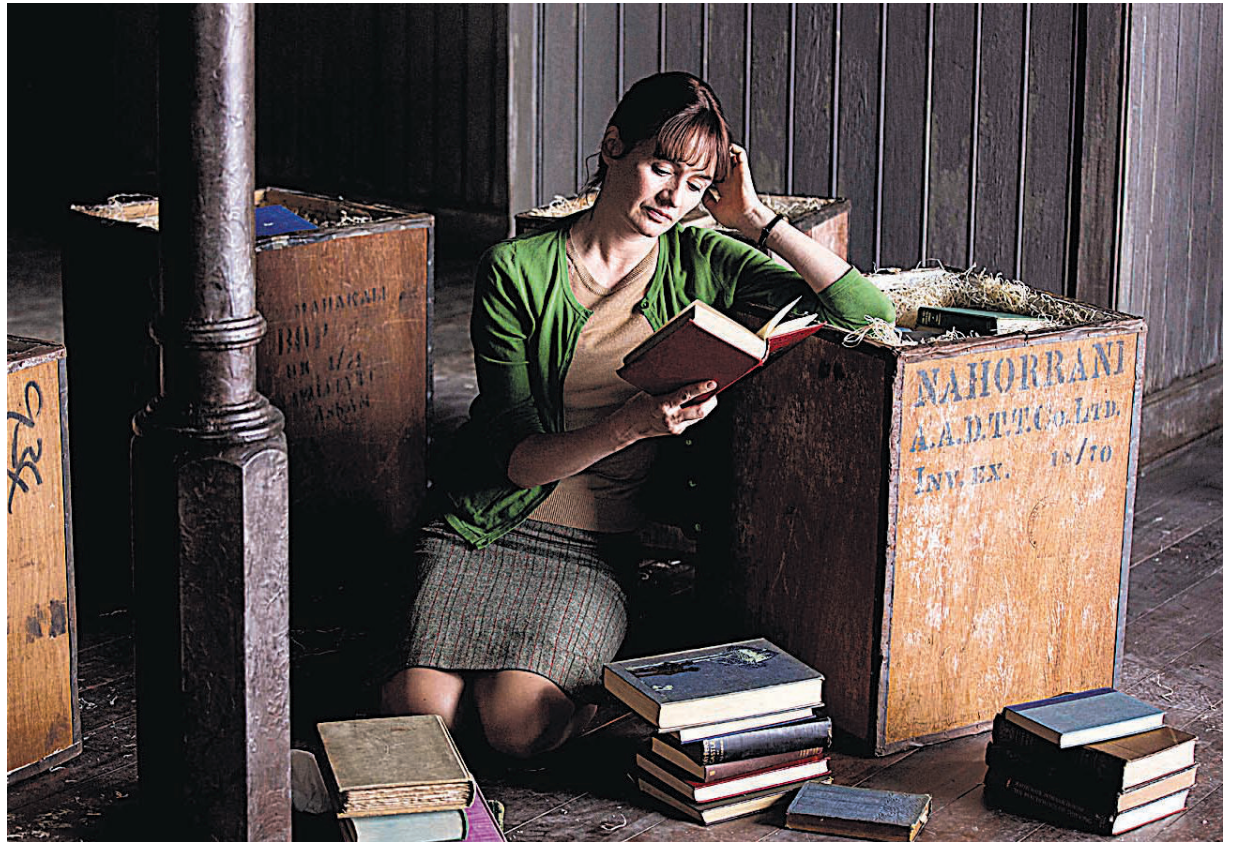
My father defended a lot of murderers — his favorite clients, because he said they had generally got rid of the one person on earth who was really bugging them, and a kind of peace had descended over them — but his other specialty was obscenity. He was of the “I may disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it” school of thinking. He became well known in the field for championing such works as the Sex Pistols' album “Never Mind the Bollocks” (charged with public indecency), *Oz* magazine's schoolkid edition (featuring a centerfold of the beloved cartoon character Rupert the Bear with an enormous erection) and Hubert Selby Jr.'s transgressive novel “Last Exit to Brooklyn.” All were prosecuted in England, and all but the Sex Pistols under the Obscene Publications Act of 1959.

My dad, who died in 2009, is with me every day somehow or another — in the funny things my kids come out with, in my conversations with my mother, in wondering what he would have had to say about this or that. But there was a period a few years ago when I found myself thinking about him a good deal more than usual. I was publicizing a film called “The Bookshop.” The film was directed by the Catalan filmmaker Isabel Coixet, who had adapted it from Penelope Fitzgerald's novel. It takes place in the year 1959 and tells the story of Florence Green, a lonely widow (played by me) who decides to open a bookshop in a little coastal town in the west of England.

The film was released in 2017 during the first wave of the #MeToo movement, which was a fitting moment for the story — being about a quietly heroic single woman in her middle age who comes up against the powers that be (mostly men) in her bid both to run a small business and to arrive at some sort of self-realization. But an interesting subplot in both the novel and the movie came up a good deal in the conversations I was having with journalists. The year 1959 was when “Lolita” was published in England, and Florence Green is faced with the dilemma of whether or not to sell the novel in her shop. In every interview I was asked by journalists what I thought about “Lolita” as a work of fiction and whether I thought it publishable today. I thought about my father and about a time when fiction was still considered dangerous enough to prosecute. I thought about the fact that “Lolita” had escaped the absurd gaze of the obscenity law. I wondered if indeed the novel might have an even more difficult time getting published now than it did in the 1950s, and I wished my dad were still alive to talk to about it all.

I'd read “Lolita” in college, and I was too lazy to both-

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Emily Mortimer as Florence Green in “The Bookshop.” The role led Mortimer to reread “Lolita.”

er to read it again when preparing for my part in “The Bookshop.” I was already a huge fan of Nabokov's — I had bought copies of his memoir, “Speak, Memory,” in bulk to hand out to my friends at college, and I had worn thin his “Lectures on Russian Literature,” which are as withering as they are brilliant. (I'll never forget my shocked delight at his excoriation of Dostoyevsky as “a mediocre writer with wastelands of literary platitudes.”)

But I'd been talking so knowledgeably about “Lolita” to the press that I was overcome with a kind of sheepish compulsion to read it again, after the fact. I bought a copy and I read it, and I realized as I did that I had absolutely and for certain never read it before. I can't have done. Any expertise I'd claimed to have on the subject of “Lolita” was invented. All I knew must have come only from SparkNotes, plot summaries and crib sheets, and maybe from watching the movie. Because if I had ever read “Lolita,” I would have certainly remembered the experience. I wouldn't have been so shocked and scandalized, my breath wouldn't have been so taken away, my brain and heart and soul wouldn't have been so twisted and fried and made to feel so sad, so upset, so elated and so blown apart all at once.

It opens so thrillingly, and you jump straight into its strange and beautiful depths with full abandon and excitement: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.” You're hooked and it's stunning and you still think at this stage that you've maybe read it before, and in any case, whatever, you're completely in.

But then, just a few pages later, and Humbert is — what the hell? — cursed to live in “a civilization which allows a man of 25 to court a girl of 16 but not a girl of 12.” I had remembered much about “Lolita,” even if I had only pretended to read it — but 12?! I had certainly forgotten that vital digit, and it came as a shock. Here was Humbert extolling “certain East Indian provinces” where men of 80 “copulate with girls of 8, and nobody minds.” And here he was on his habit of seeking out very young girls wherever he could find them, in orphanages and reform schools and public places: “Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden. Let them play around me forever. Never grow up.” And here he was fantasizing about a future in which he marries Lolita, and has her child and rapes her, too: “I might eventually have her produce a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the Second, who would be 8 or 9 around 1960 when I would still be *dans la force de l'âge*” — and then, what's this, now he's imagining a third generation of abuse with his *granddaughter*?!

As I read all this and thought about all the things I'd been pontificating about to the press, I started to wonder how on earth “Lolita” had managed to get published *then* without ever having to endure the indignity of prosecution. Why had “Lady Chatterley's Lover” been prosecuted in 1960, but not “Lolita” the year before? That's not to say its journey was plain sailing. It had been initially rejected by all the big publishing houses in the United States, so Nabokov resorted to the pornographic French publisher Olympia Press, only to have it banned in France and also in Argentina, New Zealand, South

Africa and Australia. In England, all copies were seized by customs from 1955 until 1959, when it was finally published to huge consternation and controversy. But, to my knowledge, no criminal case was ever brought against “Lolita,” which is surprising given that it appeared in the world at a time when literature was far from safe from the clutches of the obscenity laws, and given that it’s still the most shocking, sensational thing you’ve ever read.

So many questions ran through my head as I read on. I wanted to call people up and ask them if they’d ever actually read “Lolita”? I wanted to tell them to immediately do so. Just to be able to talk about it. To hear what they thought. For lack of obliging friends, I turned to Google. It wasn’t just me concerning myself with the question of whether “Lolita” would find a publisher today. Dan Franklin, who published Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie at Jonathan Cape, has speculated on the subject too: “I wouldn’t publish ‘Lolita.’ What’s different today is #MeToo and social media — you can organize outrage at the drop of a hat. If ‘Lolita’ was offered to me today, I’d never be able to get it past the acquisition team — a committee of 30-year-olds, who’d say, ‘If you publish this book we will all resign.’” Laura Waddell, a millennial and a publisher, retorted in *The Guardian*: “The true publication history of ‘Lolita’ is so much more interesting than boring, bad-faith millennial bashing. To claim that it would never be published now is a red herring.” I thought about this and I realized that in actual fact, given its almost absurdly shocking content, “Lolita” has been relatively gently treated in recent years, too.

You can’t help wondering why the same court of public opinion that has all but canceled artists like Balthus and Picasso has spared “Lolita.” At a time when even a painting of a female nude is talked about as a potentially offensive political statement, how has the novel managed to avoid a searing reassessment? In fact, women have always and continue to be some of its noisiest defenders. From Dorothy Parker (“‘Lolita’ is a fine book, a distinguished book — all right then — a great book”) to Lena Dunham (who says it’s her “favorite book”), “Lolita” has spellbound women as much as men. This is a feat, given it’s the ultimate example of the unreconstructed “male gaze” — a middle-aged man’s obsessive account of an underage girl whom he does nothing but sexualize, objectify and rape from the first page to the last.

My father wrote about the “Last Exit to Brooklyn” trial: “I remember standing in front of three very intelligent Lords of Appeal. I was trying to describe the writer’s position. I told them it was impossible to be a writer and be told there are some areas of life which you are not allowed to write about. To the judges this came as an entirely new idea, even though it is a total cliché to anyone who works in literature. The general view of the court seemed to be that if Shakespeare wrote *Lady Macbeth* that meant Shakespeare was in favor of murdering the houseguests. They found it impossible to separate the author from the subject with which he was dealing.”

In some ways I think it is much easier to separate the writer from his subject in the case of Nabokov and “Lolita” than it is to separate Picasso, say, from his paintings or Woody Allen from his films or Balthus from his little girls. Nabokov was a happily married man who admired

and adored his wife, Véra, and lived an exemplary life as an academic and author. By all accounts his only extramarital dalliances were with buxom middle-aged women. If Nabokov had ever had dark, venal thoughts like those of Humbert Humbert’s, they remained thoughts, or words on a page.

But I think there are other reasons “Lolita” has endured, despite being more shocking than many pornographic novels of its time and despite the reappraisal that many other transgressive works of art have gone through in our time. First, it’s very funny. My dad always said you could get away with anything in court as long as you made people laugh: “In obscenity cases the first thing I did was to make the jury laugh. The great object of the judge and the prosecutor was to stop the jury from laughing.” Humbert Humbert is hilariously self-aware and funny. Even in extremis, even at the height of the drama when he is out for blood and on the road to ruin



Sue Lyon and James Mason in Stanley Kubrick’s “Lolita,” 1962.

(when a lesser author would have forced his hero into earnestness), our hero is still cracking jokes and making us laugh.

The novel is also written in brilliant prose. Nabokov himself claimed that this book was a record of his “love affair with the English language,” and the feeling is of language being used as it has never been used before and might never be again. You read about awful things in vertiginous, sensational sentences that take your breath away. As Humbert confesses, “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style.”

Murderers were my father’s favorite clients, not just because they were the most obliging and compliant. He also considered murder to be the most human of crimes, the one crime any one of us could commit. We might not rob a bank, we might not sell drugs or fiddle our taxes, but he thought that all of us when pushed could just about find it in ourselves to kill. I think he said these things in part to shock. As a writer and a renegade, he was interested in paradoxes, but he also really believed

in finding the good in people, and in the simple notion that “there but for the grace of God go I.” What my father did both as a criminal defense barrister and as a writer was to try to persuade a jury or a reader to find it in themselves to empathize with the character he was presenting — no matter the circumstances.

It’s impossible to retreat to any kind of moral high ground when you read “Lolita” — partly because Nabokov threads a strange emotional honesty and purity through his portrait of obsession. Because as well as all the other things the book is, “Lolita” is one of the most beautiful love stories you’ll ever read. You finally understand this in its last, thrilling, devastating, tragic section. From Humbert’s final rejection by Lolita (thank God), his breaking down in his car as he drives away for the last time, “the windshield wipers in full action but unable to cope with my tears,” to his desperate incantations: “I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable, and brutal, and turpid, and everything, *mais je t’amais, je t’amais!*” to the moment he is apprehended by the police and remembers hearing the sounds of children playing when Lolita first disappeared: “I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope . . . I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord.” Humbert’s pain is palpable and so deeply relatable. The agony of lost, impossible love, the feeling of having defiled something innocent because you loved — it’s all too familiar. The most thrilling, beautiful and disturbing aspect of the novel is that as well as finding Humbert’s heart on the page, we also find, like it or not, a bit of our own.

“Lolita” makes us see with the eyes of a man who is a pedophile, a rapist and a murderer, and that’s I think the essential reason it’s escaped the harsher accusations of both the courts and the moral police in the 60 years since it’s been published. While it doesn’t apologize for Humbert’s vile transgressions, neither does it romanticize them — although Humbert himself is ridiculously romantic at times. The author forces his reader to confront, on every page, the monstrous nature of his protagonist. There is no escaping his awfulness, but we get inside his head and his heart. We end up not only empathizing with but also loving a murderer and the rapist of a young girl. And it feels really good. It feels like a deep relief. It feels exhilarating and paradoxically cleansing. Nabokov called “Lolita” the “purest” of all his books.

My father could never have got Humbert off in a court of law, but he would have argued fiercely for his humanity, just as he argued for the humanity of all of the most dangerous and immoral people he defended. Unlike many lesser works of fiction, some of which my father found himself advocating for, “Lolita” has been protected by “the refuge of art,” where it should be forever safe to explore the thoughts and feelings of people capable of the most monstrous things. “Lolita” remains unassailable because it disarms you and transcends judgment. The experience of reading it, if you do actually read it, is to relinquish concern with right and wrong and just to feel things as another person feels them. One of our most precious attributes, and perhaps the greatest measure of our humanity, is our ability to do this. Florence Green in her little bookshop understood it, my dad knew it, Nabokov did, and really anyone who is a reader knows it, too. □

Almost Human

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

projects unspecified guilt.

“Klara and the Sun” takes place in the uncomfortably near future, and banal language is redeployed with sinister portent. Elite workers have been “substituted,” their labor now performed by A.I. Clothing and houses are described as “high-rank.” Privileged children are “lifted,” a process meant to optimize them for success. Readers of Ishiguro’s 2005 novel “Never Let Me Go” will viscerally recall the sense of foreboding all this awakens. If I am being cagey about it, it’s to preserve that effect. But for the inhabitants of the novel, the older generation of whom remember the way things were, these conditions have been normalized, to use the banal language of our own era. Here is Josie’s father, a former engineer: “Honestly? I think the substitutions were the best thing that happened to me. . . . I really believe they helped me to distinguish what’s important from what isn’t. And where I live now, there are many fine people who feel exactly the same way.” Through Klara, we pick up bits of overheard conversation: a mention of “fascistic leanings” here; a reference to Josie’s mysteriously departed sister there; the woman outside the playhouse who protests Klara’s presence: “First they take the jobs. Now they take the seats at the theater?”

For four decades now, Ishiguro has written eloquently about the balancing act of remembering without succumbing irrevocably to the past. Memory and the accounting of memory, its burdens and its reconciliation, have been his subjects. With “Klara and the Sun,” I began to see how he has mastered the adjacent theme of obsolescence. What is it like to inhabit a world whose mores and ideas have passed you by? What happens to the people who must be cast aside in order for others to move forward? The climax of “The Remains of the Day” (1989), Ishiguro’s perfect, Booker Prize-winning novel, pivots on a butler’s realization that his whole life has been wasted in service of a Nazi sympathizer. (“I gave my best to Lord Darlington. I gave him the very best I had to give and now — well — I find I do not have a great deal more left to give.”) A subplot in Ishiguro’s first novel, “A Pale View of Hills” (1982), involves an older teacher in postwar Nagasaki whose former student renounces his way of thinking. “I don’t doubt you were sincere and hard working,” the former student tells him. “I’ve never questioned that for one moment. But it just so happens that your energies were spent in a misguided direction, an evil direction.” In “Never Let Me Go,” clones “complete” after fulfilling their biological purpose. In “Klara and the

Sun,” obsolescence reaches its mass conclusion: Whole classes of workers have been replaced by machines, which themselves are subject to replacement. It nearly happens to Klara. In the story’s first section, a new, improved model of AF arrives and bumps her to the back of the store.

“Klara and the Sun” lands in a pandemic world, in which vaccines hold the promise of salvation but the reality of thousands of

culcation that sounds terrible on paper until one realizes how common it already is.

Considering the place of “Klara and the Sun” in Ishiguro’s collected works — which cohere astoundingly well, even “The Unconsoled” (1995), powered as it is by the dreamlike absorption and reconciliation of unfamiliar circumstances — I found myself thinking of Thomas Hardy, the way Hardy’s novels, at the end of the 19th cen-

world at critical points in the story, communing with the sun to try to help Josie with matters bigger than either one can comprehend. Klara’s perception, too, is at once mechanical and deeply subjective. Fields of vision appear in squares and panels, so that you can imagine (through her eyes) pictures processed and bitmapped, resolving themselves the way a high-definition image resolves on a screen, but with a shifting focus that seems tied to her interpretation of the events and environment around her. Seeing the world from Klara’s point of view is to be reminded constantly of what it looks like when mediated through technology. That might have felt foreign a century ago, but not anymore.

Klara is likable enough — as she was manufactured to be — but it’s hard to empathize with her on the page, which is maybe the point. The stilted affect that so often characterizes Ishiguro’s prose and dialogue — an incantatory flatness that belies its revelatory ability — serves its literal function. Klara’s machine-ness never recedes. Unlike most of Ishiguro’s first-person narrators, however, she seems incapable of deluding herself. Her technological essence presents some childlike limitations of expression, but are they more pronounced than the limits

What’s it like to inhabit a world whose mores and ideas have passed you by?

born of the human desire to repress, or wallow, or come across better than we are? “I believe I have many feelings,” Klara says. “The more I observe, the more feelings become available to me.” This statement had the peculiar effect, on me anyway, not of persuading me of her humanness but of causing me to consider whether humans acquire nameable feelings all that differently from her description. Which is maybe also the point.

In an interview with *The Paris Review* in 2008, Ishiguro said he thought of “Never Let Me Go” as his cheerful novel. Never mind that it centers on a trio of clones bred specifically to have their organs harvested. “I wanted to show three people who were essentially decent,” he said. Klara carries that quietly heroic mantle. Look at the characters Ishiguro gives voice to: not the human, but the clone; not the lord, but the servant. “Klara and the Sun” complements his brilliant vision, though it doesn’t reach the artistic heights of his past achievements. No moment here touches my heart the way Stevens does, reflecting on his losses in “The Remains of the Day.” Still, when Klara says, “I have my memories to go through and place in the right order,” it strikes the quintessential Ishiguro chord. So what if a machine says it? There’s no narrative instinct more essential, or more human. □



Kazuo Ishiguro, photographed in Britain in 2015.

deaths a day persists, and a substantial portion of the American population deludes itself into thinking it isn’t happening. Our own children have been learning on oblongs and in isolation. The crisis of this novel revolves around whether Josie, with Klara’s help, will recover from her illness — and whether, if Josie doesn’t recover, her mother, with Klara’s help, will survive the loss. It turns out that to “lift” her daughter, to ensure Josie will thrive amid her world’s “savage meritocracies” (I’m quoting from Ishiguro’s 2017 Nobel lecture, an enlightening document as to his state of mind), her mother has knowingly risked Josie’s health, her happiness, her very life — a cal-

ture, captured the growing schism between the natural world and the industrialized one, the unclean break that technology makes with the past. Tess Durbeyfield earns her living as a dairymaid before agricultural mechanization, but she channels early strains of what Hardy presciently calls “the ache of modernism.” She represents a mode of being human in nature before machinery got in the way.

Klara is a man-made marvel. She lacks the fluidity of human mobility such that to negotiate a gravel driveway is a project of careful intention. But like the great outdoors, she runs on solar power, and she ventures deliberately into the natural

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Family Time

A 13-year-old finds himself the caregiver for his disabled brother.

By TACEY RYCHTER

EXCUSE THE GENERIC TITLE, “Summer Brother.” The book really sounds cooler with its original Dutch name, “Zomer-vacht,” which translates to “summer coat,” as in, what an animal has after it sheds its winter fur. It’s more fitting because, like a molting creature, the Dutch author Jaap Robben’s second novel shows us the shedding of innocence.

“Summer Brother,” translated by David Doherty, shakes out over a hot summer, during that potent lull when characters so splendidly boil, burst and bloom. The plot starts quickly: Brian, a lonely and neglected 13-year-old, and his father, Maurice, a low-level swindler, make a rare visit to see Lucien, Brian’s 16-year-old brother, who is severely mentally and physically disabled and lives full time at a nursing

SUMMER BROTHER

By Jaap Robben

Translated by David Doherty

283 pp. World Editions. Paper, \$16.99.

home. Because of renovations at the care facility, Maurice is asked to take Lucien home for the summer, an offer he can’t reject fast enough — until he learns of the stipend the nursing home will pay.

Suddenly, Brian finds himself Lucien’s default caregiver. Disaster is inevitable. Lucien is nonverbal, occasionally violent and still in diapers. On top of that, money is running out, debts are closing in and Maurice’s lies can’t hold the levee much longer.

Brian tries earnestly to reel in his father’s slack but is quickly overwhelmed by the monumental task. As the slope gets slipperier, Brian learns to navigate how responsibility really works — that no matter the excuses or justifications one can spin, people can still get hurt.

“Summer Brother” grapples with the consequences of carelessness and the abuse of power and trust, even if the violation is unintentional. Its most uncomfortable manifestation is a relationship Brian develops with one of the nursing home’s residents, 19-year-old Selma, with whom he tries to have sex. Her disability is undefined by Robben (as is Lucien’s), but she is childlike and her consent is dubious.

Robben, who is also the author of “You Have Me to Love” and several children’s books, contracts the world of “Summer Brother” almost to a stage set, blurring peripheral details. There’s barely any cultural, political or technological context to the story. The book’s setting is fuzzy, although it feels loosely like France. The only mention of a location name is “Saint Arnaque,” which appears to be tongue-in-cheek and translates to “holy scam.”

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Ultimately place is unimportant. Brian lives in the land of Maurice, and navigating that volatile terrain while fumbling with his own moral compass is the heart of the book. He’s governed by his father’s controlling gaze, the sound of his pickup coming up the drive and the tense anticipation of his father’s fist thumping his shoulder, hard. From the dingy caravan park, Brian can see little lights dotting the wooded hill on the horizon at night, “but during the day you’d never know people live there.” It’s an apt description, too, of Robben’s treatment of the world outside of Brian’s immediate field of vision: far away and ungraspable.

This stylistic myopia works, although more character exposition could have been helpful. Does Brian have friends at school, or in town? What comics does he read? Where does Maurice go during the day? Robben offers crumbs, but doesn’t let us indulge too much.



JACKSON JOYCE

Such small gripes are easily forgotten, as Robben is wonderful at drawing characters with just a few deliberate strokes. One standout description comes in a passing reference to Maurice’s mother: “In my memory, smoke came out of her mouth even when she didn’t have a cigarette between her lips. There was always something smoldering inside her.”

Most fascinating to Robben, however, are the prickly relationships between men, which oscillate between moments of tenderness and brutality before reaching a painful climax. Robben depicts men who regularly cycle between carelessness, cruelty and compassion, which makes Brian’s ultimate rank-breaking toward benevolence all the more uplifting.

Like a photographer shooting a portrait, Robben captures his subjects in “Summer Brother” in a focused close-up. It’s intimate, even claustrophobic at times, just as life must be for an isolated boy like Brian, looking with wonder to the lights on the hill. □

Party City

A drug-fueled New York bacchanal changes lives.

By JOHN FREEMAN GILL

THE TONY UPTOWN doorman building of Manhattan is a fertile environment for a spiritually restless literary character to make his home. Holden Caulfield grew up in one. So did the children of the Great American Author patriarch in David Gilbert’s engaging 2013 novel “& Sons.”

THE BLIZZARD PARTY

By Jack Livings

402 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$28.

An architectural and cultural subset of such apartment houses is the gargantuan, prewar Upper West Side palace, at once a city-state of casual opulence and a provincial village stuffed with eccentrics. In Tom Barbash’s 2018 novel “The Dakota Winters,” set in the Dakota Apartments on Central Park West in the year leading up to John Lennon’s 1980 murder at the building’s entrance, the young narrator struggled to shape an independent identity in the shadow of his larger-than-life father, a troubled television talk show host.

Five blocks north, Hazel Saltwater, the middle-aged narrator of Jack Livings’s kaleidoscopic debut novel, “The Blizzard Party,” occupies similar literary territory, looking back at the same early-Koch-era New York City, a place of violence, revelry and happenstance. Ensnared in her childhood apartment in the monumental Apelles co-op, a full-block palazzo unmistakably modeled on the Apthorp at 78th Street and Broadway, Hazel methodically recounts a catastrophic concatenation of events during a city-smothering blizzard in 1978.

Amid a drug-fueled bacchanalian blowout that night, untold pieces of furniture and one naked body were tossed off the terrace of an Apelles penthouse apartment. Hazel, 6 years old at the time and sleeping in a guest room at the party, found herself at the center of the disaster, the events of which her father, the author Erwin Saltwater, wove into a best-selling novel that transformed him overnight into a literary titan.

Collateral damage of that artistic alchemy was Hazel’s identity, as she suffered two violations at that party. The first occurred when the senile lawyer Albert Caldwell, as his final act on earth, crawled into bed with her, took her hand and “carved himself a snug little slot” in her head, cramming it with his memories until she “had become a file cabinet for Albert’s history.”

Also crowding Hazel out of her own consciousness was her father’s fictionalized version of her. In the name of veracity (and Livings’s novel questions in a thousand ways whether such a thing exists), Hazel’s father did not change anyone’s name in his

JOHN FREEMAN GILL is the *Streetscapes* columnist for *The Times* and the author of “The Gargoyle Hunters.”

book. Thus, she recalls, “I became a photo negative, a child-shaped hole into which anyone who’d read the book tried to fit the Hazel they’d met in those pages.”

Now Hazel — who is further traumatized by the dematerialization of her husband at the World Trade Center on 9/11 — has set out to write her own version of “The Blizzard Party,” an excavation of her past and those of her father and neighbors. In



Midtown Manhattan, winter, 1978.

Hazel’s view, Erwin got the whole thing wrong: “He’d translated my story without even consulting the original.”

It is hard not to hear, in all this telling and retelling, echoes of the family of Joseph Heller, who wrote much of the bombshell novel “Catch-22” in Apartment 2K South of the Apthorp, and who, like Erwin, both concealed and revealed himself by transmuted disturbing World War II experiences in his fiction. After Heller wrote about a man’s disaffection with his dreary children and wife in the 1974 novel “Something Happened,” Erica Heller, his daughter, parried the blow in a 1975 essay in Harper’s called “It Sure Did.” She then followed up with a 2011 memoir about growing up with her father in the Apthorp.

But “The Blizzard Party” is no roman à clef. It is a raucously inventive tale of loss and erasure told with an authorial assurance uncommon in a first novel. While Hazel begins with a carnival of interconnected characters rattling around in the Apelles, her story ultimately flies out in all directions, spanning generations and continents as it explores the challenge of understanding one’s place in what might be called real life, while schlepping around others’ painful pasts as well as one’s own. “We absorb our parents’ grief whether that grief is spoken or not,” Hazel reflects.

Along the way, there are some trippy excursions involving auditory time travel and the earth’s crust, where not all readers will care to follow. But Livings, whose story collection “The Dog” won the PEN / Robert W. Bingham prize, is a nimble wordsmith. And if his novel can be discursive and the language overwrought — metaphors begetting metaphors like the successively smaller cats popping out of the Cat in the Hat’s striped headgear — the overall effect is thought-provoking, and this rollickingly bleak rendering of 1970s New York is well worth a visit. □

Latina Girls Dreaming

Meet 40 Latina trailblazers, from the 17th century to the present, as children at play.

By **SANDRA E. GARCIA**

AS A SECOND-GENERATION Dominican child growing up in Harlem, I was steeped in my culture at home. From mangu to merengue, my family made sure I never forgot my roots. But once I ventured out, everything was American, including my heroines. I learned about Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Marian Anderson, Madam

LATINITAS

Celebrating 40 Big Dreamers

By **Juliet Menéndez**

120 pp. Henry Holt. \$18.99.

(Ages 8 to 12)

C.J. Walker and many other Black women who were trailblazers. Few were Black Latinas. I often wondered about the Rosa Parks of the Dominican Republic, the Marian Anderson of Brazil.

SANDRA E. GARCIA is a Styles reporter for The Times and a co-author of "Finish the Fight! The Brave and Revolutionary Women Who Fought for the Right to Vote."

"Latinitas," by Juliet Menéndez, attempts to fill those gaps by finding, celebrating and educating readers about women such as the Bolivian Juana Azurduy de Padilla, who became the voice of oppressed silver miners in a war for independence from Spanish rule, and the Dominican Solange Pierre, who sued her government to gain basic human rights for Dominican-Haitians.

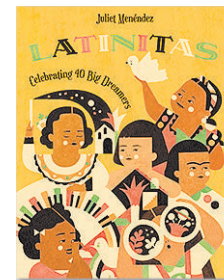
In easily digestible vignettes, Menéndez — a Guatemalan-American illustrator who worked as a bilingual art teacher in East Harlem — brings to life 40 Latinas from all over Latin America and the United States, from the 1650s to the present.

What will pull young people in is that Menéndez depicts these women as children (Latinitas), both visually and anecdotally. Readers get to imagine the Puerto Rican astrophysicist Wanda Díaz-Merced in her pajamas, sailing through the stars with her sister in an imaginary spaceship, "holding tight to their bedposts"; the Chilean novelist Isabel Allende chasing ghosts her grandmother summoned during séances; the Brazilian artist Maria Auxiliadora da Silva drawing on a wall with coal from the kitchen stove while the food she

was supposed to be watching for her mother "burned to a crisp"; the Argentine architect Susana Torre and her cousin building homes for birds out of twigs and mud.

What will keep these readers engaged is how their soon-to-be heroines bloom into their future selves on the page. The Uruguayan poet Juana de Ibarbourou, who as a child collects caterpillars and ladybugs in jars, writes her first sonnet at 14 and by 17 has enough poems to publish a book. The Salvadoran topographical engineer Antonia Navarro defies her brothers' teachers, who tell her, "Girls aren't smart enough to do math," to become the first woman in all of Central America to graduate from university. The Cuban ballerina Alicia Alonso, who as a little girl sleeps with ballet shoes under her pillow, runs away at 15 to New York and, while battling vision problems in her early 20s, becomes an overnight sensation as a last-minute replacement in the role of Giselle.

In refreshing contrast to the prevalent whitewashing of Latina pioneers and innovators, Menéndez bathes these figures in a range of sun-tinged terra-cotta hues. Most striking to me is her illustration of the Te-



jano singer Selena Quintanilla. While Selena was portrayed in a Netflix series by an actress with lighter skin than she had, in the book she appears more like the Selena fans remember. Young girls who can't find themselves in the mainstream will appreciate the multitude of shades with which Menéndez paints Latinas.

At the end of the book there is a sort of lightning round where Menéndez briefly lists the contributions of a handful of additional Latinas, such as Sylvia Mendez, the first Latina child to desegregate an all-white U.S. school, and Ellen Ochoa, the first Latina astronaut to go into space. I hope to learn more about these women, perhaps in a sequel. □

Out of the Wardrobe

A novel with echoes of Narnia flips the script on traditional portal fiction.

By **ADAM SILVERA**

DAVID LEVITHAN NOVELS existed when I was a teenager, but I didn't begin reading them until I was an adult. There's no way I would have been comfortable as a closeted 13-year-old in the South Bronx picking up "Boy Meets Boy."

THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF AIDAN S. (AS TOLD TO HIS BROTHER)

By **David Levithan**

224 pp. Knopf Books for Young Readers.

\$16.99.

(Ages 8 to 12)

Even at 23, while reading "Two Boys Kissing," I removed the hardcover's gorgeous jacket on a crowded subway because the cover showed, well, two boys kissing, and I still wasn't ready to be cast under that rainbow-filtered spotlight.

ADAM SILVERA is the author of "They Both Die at the End" and the Infinity Cycle series, among other novels for young adults.

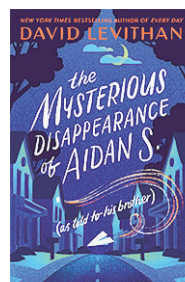
Now comes Levithan's addictive middle grade debut, which my younger self not only would have been able to safely read anywhere, but also would have devoured.

"The Mysterious Disappearance of Aidan S. (as Told to His Brother)" begins with 12-year-old Aidan going missing. Was he kidnapped? Did he run away? What's the story?

The hold-your-breath tension of the opening pages lets you breathe sooner than you might think when Aidan is found on the sixth night of his disappearance. Or perhaps it's more appropriate to say when Aidan returns.

This is the first of many uncertainties that shadow the novel, and one that doesn't make sense since Aidan's family and the police searched every inch of the attic, including the old dresser that Aidan claims brought him to another world known as Aveinieiu.

You're probably already thinking about "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe." I certainly was, as were the investigating officers on the case after Aidan tells his side of the story. But the brilliance of this novel is how Levithan flips the script on tradi-



tional portal fiction by not having the narrator be the person traveling between worlds. Instead it's someone who would have appeared as a secondary character in another book.

As Aidan describes the many wonders of Aveinieiu, his 11-year-old brother, Lucas, serves as our suspicious narrator, trying to catch him in a lie.

In the past, Aidan claimed that there were unicorns in the backyard, that there were monsters under the bed and that Santa sent gifts via Amazon. Lucas believed him then, but he won't be fooled so easily now.

So did Aidan actually travel to a realm like Narnia or is Aveinieiu an imagined world like Terabithia? Aidan certainly weaves exciting tales about green skies, a silver sun, royal blue leaves, fireflies that blink in different colors and the woman who had been there for 50 years who told him to go home before life could move on without him.

I was tempted to skip to the end for spoilers, but I exercised control. Ultimately, "The Mysterious Disappearance of Aidan S." is an anti-thriller. The mystery is secondary to the novel's heart, about accepting people for who they are. (This spirit is alive in Levithan's past works as well, which, thankfully, now sit comfortably in the more tolerant mainstream.)

Deep into the book, Lucas matter-of-factly observes Aidan's new boyfriend, which shocked me since the words "gay" and "queer" hadn't come up, and don't appear later.

The beauty of this is that it's not a plot twist. It's simply normal.

A welcome world for anyone coming out of the closet — or even a maybe-magical dresser. □

Best Sellers

The New York Times

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

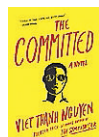
COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 14-20

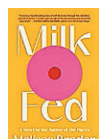
THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		A COURT OF SILVER FLAMES , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) The fifth book in A Court of Thorn and Roses series. Nesta Archeron is forced into close quarters with a warrior named Cassian.	1	1		HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER , by Bill Gates. (Knopf) A prescription for what business, governments and individuals can do to work toward zero emissions.	1
2	1	THE FOUR WINDS , 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.	3	2	2	JUST AS I AM , by Cicely Tyson with Michelle Burford. (HarperCollins) The late iconic actress describes how she worked to change perceptions of Black women through her career choices.	4
3	3	FIREFLY LANE , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's Griffin) A friendship between two women in the Pacific Northwest endures for more than three decades.	5	3		THE SUM OF US , 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.	1
4		RELENTLESS , by Mark Greaney. (Berkley) 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.	1	4	1	WALK IN MY COMBAT BOOTS , by James Patterson and Matt Eversmann with Chris Mooney. (Little, Brown) A collection of interviews with troops who fought overseas.	2
5	5	THE DUKE AND I , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series "Bridgerton."	8	5	7	CASTE , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	29
6		MISSING AND ENDANGERED , by J.A. Jance. (Morrow) The 19th book in the Joanna Brady Mysteries series.	1	6	4	A PROMISED LAND , by Barack Obama. (Crown) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barack Obama offers personal reflections on his formative years and pivotal moments through his first term.	14
7	6	THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY , by Matt Haig. (Viking) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.	12	7	11	BETWEEN TWO KINGDOMS , by Suleika Jaouad. (Random House) The writer of the New York Times column "Life, Interrupted" chronicles her fight with cancer and an impactful road trip.	2
8	10	THE VANISHING HALF , 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.	38	8	6	GREENLIGHTS , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	18
9	8	THE SANATORIUM , 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.	3	9	9	UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	50
10	2	FAITHLESS IN DEATH , by J.D. Robb. (St. Martin's) The 52nd book of the In Death series.	2	10	3	THINK AGAIN , 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.	3

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

Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



THE COMMITTED, by Viet Thanh Nguyen. (Grove, \$27.) The sequel to Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "The Sympathizer," is a deep examination of postcolonial identity disguised as a rollicking thriller, complete with murderous henchmen, drug dealers and a crime boss named the Boss. Nguyen's narrator tries to escape his past as he navigates the seamy underworld of 1980s Paris.



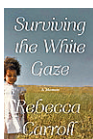
MILK FED, by Melissa Broder. (Scribner, \$26.) An entertaining erotic comedy lightly sprinkled with spiritual aperçus, Broder's second novel features a 20-something factotum at a Los Angeles talent agency who suffers from an eating disorder and finds unlikely salvation in the form of a zaftig Orthodox Jewish yogurt scooper.



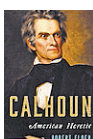
SUPER HOST, by Kate Russo. (Putnam, \$27.) A washed-up, middle-aged London artist moves into a shed in his own garden, ceding the home he shared with his ex to a parade of renters with problems of their own. Russo's clever debut evokes a time when travel wasn't so fraught and strangers could get close enough to learn something about themselves.



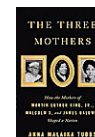
FAKE ACCOUNTS, by Lauren Oyler. (Catapult, \$26.) Social media and its cultural impact are the ostensible subjects of Oyler's debut novel. But the book is steeped in a much older literary tradition: the American abroad, fumbling and wisecracking her way in foreign spaces. Set in the days after the 2016 election, the novel considers the disquieting alliance between online irony and toxic cynicism.



SURVIVING THE WHITE GAZE: A Memoir, by Rebecca Carroll. (Simon & Schuster, \$26.) Carroll, a biracial woman who was adopted by white parents, grew up as the only Black resident in a New Hampshire town of 1,400. Her parents didn't discuss race, but in this raw and affecting memoir she plumbs what her Blackness and her family mean to her.



CALHOUN: American Heretic, by Robert Elder. (Basic, \$35.) This illuminating examination of the life and thought of the notorious white supremacist looks not only at his zealous support of slavery but also at his theoretical defense of minorities against tyrannical democratic majorities, an idea with a complex afterlife in American political culture.



THE THREE MOTHERS: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation, by Anna Malaika Tubbs. (Flatiron, \$28.99.) Who raised the pillars of the civil rights movement? Tubbs answers this long-neglected question in her thorough, accessible examination of Louise Little, Alberta King and Berdis Baldwin.



THE SMASH-UP, by Ali Benjamin. (Random House, \$27.) In this novel, set in a small Berkshires town after the 2016 election, Benjamin deftly tells the story of a marriage cleaved by fury (the wife's) and long-ago decisions (the husband's) that haven't aged well.



HOW THE ONE-ARMED SISTER SWEEPS HER HOUSE, by Cherie Jones. (Little, Brown, \$27.) This dazzling debut novel follows the disillusionment of an orphaned teenager in a Caribbean resort village in the 1980s, when men can't control themselves, infidelity is rife, sex is currency and domestic abuse is in full bloom.

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

Inside the List

ELISABETH EGAN

Dynamic Duo At the end of January, Michaela Goade (top picture) became the first Indigenous artist to win the Randolph Caldecott Medal, which is one of the most illustrious distinctions awarded for children's books — the

literary equivalent of an Oscar, with a gold seal instead of a statuette.



Goade, who is a member of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, earned the distinction for "We Are Water Protectors," a picture book about the importance of safeguarding natural resources. Her vibrant, intricately detailed watercolors illuminate lyrical text by Carole Lindstrom (bottom picture), who is tribally enrolled with the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe.



'We fight for those who cannot fight for themselves.'

In a Google Hangout, Lindstrom said it was important to her to find an Indigenous artist to illustrate her message, which was inspired by the movement at Standing Rock to protest the Dakota Access pipeline. "I wanted people to know what was going on," she recalled. "I did what I could on social media but then thought, maybe I should write a book. I had no idea the message would be embraced by young and old people alike." The book recently appeared on the children's picture book list.

"We fight for those / Who cannot fight for themselves," Lindstrom writes over several pages, "The winged ones, / The crawling ones, / The four-legged, / The two-legged, / The plants, trees, rivers, lakes, / The Earth. We are all related." This reminder ends on a spread in which watercolor silhouettes of continents are overlaid with vines and flowers and the planet is encircled by a procession of creatures: a jellyfish following a lizard, a pair of humans walking hand in hand between a bear and a fox. The effect is both meditative and joyous.

Lindstrom said she purposely wrote in spare language: "I don't like a lot of words. I like to leave a lot of room for imagination."

Her approach instantly inspired Goade when the two were introduced. They share similar goals for the book; as Goade put it, "For Native children, I hope they come away feeling seen and valued and that they know their stories and experiences are incredibly important. I hope this book helps all readers feel connected to the land and to each other, and helps us to think about how we are all in a relationship with the land and its water." □

PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 14-20

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		A COURT OF SILVER FLAMES , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) The fifth book in A Court of Thorn and Roses series. Nesta Archeron is forced into close quarters with a warrior named Cassian.	1	1		HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER , by Bill Gates. (Knopf) A prescription for what business, governments and individuals can do to work toward zero emissions.	1
2	1	THE FOUR WINDS , 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.	3	2	2	JUST AS I AM , by Cicely Tyson with Michelle Burford. (HarperCollins) The late iconic actress describes how she worked to change perceptions of Black women through her career choices.	4
3	3	THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY , by Matt Haig. (Viking) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.	12	3		THE SUM OF US , 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.	1
4	5	THE VANISHING HALF , by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge as one returns and the other takes on a different racial identity but their fates intertwine.	38	4	1	WALK IN MY COMBAT BOOTS , by James Patterson and Matt Eversmann with Chris Mooney. (Little, Brown) A collection of interviews with troops who fought overseas.	2
5	4	THE SANATORIUM , 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.	3	5	3	A PROMISED LAND , by Barack Obama. (Crown) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barack Obama offers personal reflections on his formative years and pivotal moments through his first term.	14
6	6	THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE , by V.E. Schwab. (Tor/Forge) A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie LaRue has across centuries.	17	6	8	CASTE , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	29
7	8	WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING , 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.	129	7	6	GREENLIGHTS , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	18
8	7	THE RUSSIAN , by James Patterson and James O. Born. (Little, Brown) The 13th book in the Michael Bennett series.	4	8	10	BETWEEN TWO KINGDOMS , by Suleika Jaouad. (Random House) The writer of the New York Times column "Life, Interrupted" chronicles her fight with cancer and an impactful road trip.	2
9	2	FAITHLESS IN DEATH , by J. D. Robb. (St. Martin's) The 52nd book of the In Death series. Eve Dallas investigates the murder of a young sculptor in the West Village.	2	9	9	UNTAMED , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	50
10		MISSING AND ENDANGERED , by J.A. Jance. (Morrow) The 19th book in the Joanna Brady Mysteries series.	1	10	5	FOUR HUNDRED SOULS , edited by Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain. (One World) A compendium featuring 90 writers covering 400 years of African-American history.	3

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

Paperback Row / BY JENNIFER KRAUSS



THINKING INSIDE THE BOX: Adventures With Crosswords and the Puzzling People Who Can't Live Without Them, by Adrienne Raphel. (Penguin, 304 pp., \$18.) This affectionate analysis of a cultural fixation that in 1924 The Times dismissively compared to "the temporary madness that made so many people pay enormous prices for mahjong sets" succeeds — our reviewer, Peter Sagal, argued — because "like a good crossword" it challenges us to "back away from our assumptions," "think differently" and "apply ourselves again."



TYLL, by Daniel Kehlmann. Translated by Ross Benjamin. (Vintage, 352 pp., \$16.95.) Our reviewer, Irina Dumitrescu, called this picaresque fable in which the proverbial trickster Tyll Ulenspiegel tightrope-walks above the brutality of 17th-century Europe's Thirty Years' War "profoundly enchanting."



THE MOUNTAINS SING, by Nguyen Phan Que Mai. (Algonquin, 368 pp., \$16.95.) "With a poet's antenna for beauty in the most desolate circumstances," our reviewer, Gaiutra Bahadur, wrote, Que Mai's "stirring" first novel in English bears witness to the "unspeakable events" of 20th-century Vietnamese history, communicated across generations via deathbed letters and "diaries read surreptitiously."



OUR REVOLUTION: A Mother and Daughter at Midcentury, by Honor Moore. (Norton, 432 pp., \$18.95.) The eldest of nine children, stranded in "a wilderness of hunger" for attention, Moore waited until her 70s to mine the interior life of her mother, the "gifted, complicated" Jenny McKean. The result, our reviewer, Janny Scott, noted, is a "searching," "ruminative," "sometimes lyrical" memoir of their relationship.



TROOP 6000: The Girl Scout Troop That Began in a Shelter and Inspired the World, by Nikita Stewart. (Ballantine, 288 pp., \$17.) While our reviewer, Samuel G. Freedman, cited the outside celebrity support generated by the 2017 article on which this book is based, he praised the journalistic "rigor" with which Stewart, a Times Metro reporter, "problematizes the myth" of a fairy-tale ending, "relentlessly returning to the debilitating chaos of homelessness itself."



SORRY FOR YOUR TROUBLE: Stories, by Richard Ford. (Ecco, 272 pp., \$16.99.) Ford's mostly middle-aged-male protagonists experience "jarring dislocations," imposed by divorce or death, and grapple with relinquishing "the sense of an overarching narrative in their lives." As our reviewer, Rand Richards Cooper, put it, "These are stories about the death of stories."

CHILDREN'S BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 14-20

THIS WEEK	Middle Grade Hardcover	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	Young Adult Hardcover	WEEKS ON LIST
1	THE ICKABOG , by J.K. Rowling. (Scholastic) A fearsome monster threatens the kingdom of Cornucopia. (Ages 8 to 18)	15	1	CONCRETE ROSE , by Angie Thomas. (Balzer + Bray) Maverick Carter decides to leave the life of crime due to fatherhood. (Ages 14 and up)	6
2	LITTLE LEADERS , by Vashti Harrison. (Little, Brown) The biographies of 40 African-American women who made a difference. (Ages 8 to 12)	56	2	ONE OF US IS LYING , by Karen M. McManus. (Delacorte) For five students, a detour into detention ends in murder. (Ages 14 and up)	160
3	ROWLEY JEFFERSON'S AWESOME FRIENDLY ADVENTURE , by Jeff Kinney. (Amulet) Roland embarks on a quest to save mom. (Ages 8 to 12)	29	3	STAMPED , by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi. (Little, Brown) An exploration of racism and antiracism in America. (Ages 13 to 17)	48
4	GROUND ZERO , by Alan Gratz. (Scholastic) Parallel storylines of Brandon and Reshmina take place on Sept. 11th, in 2001 and 2019. (Ages 9 to 12)	3	4	LORE , by Alexandra Bracken. (Disney-Hyperion) To get revenge for her family's murder, Lore must re-enter a hunt know as the Agon. (Ages 14 to 18)	7
5	THE ONE AND ONLY BOB , by Katherine Applegate. Illustrated by Patricia Castela. (HarperCollins) Bob sets out on a dangerous journey in search of his long-lost sister. (Ages 8 to 12)	42	5	THE HATE U GIVE , by Angie Thomas. (Balzer + Bray) A 16-year-old girl sees a police officer kill her friend. (Ages 14 and up)	208
6	LITTLE LEGENDS: EXCEPTIONAL MEN IN BLACK HISTORY , by Vashti Harrison with Kwesi Johnson. (Little, Brown) Biographies of trailblazing Black men. (Ages 8 to 12)	22	6	THE COUSINS , by Karen M. McManus. (Delacorte) Three cousins learn about their family's dark past. (Ages 14 to 17)	12
7	THE COMPLETE COOKBOOK FOR YOUNG CHEFS , by America's Test Kitchen Kids. (Sourcebooks Jabberwocky) Kid-tested recipes. (Ages 8 and up)	95	7	STAR WARS: INTO THE DARK , by Claudia Gray. (Disney Lucasfilm) After their ship breaks down, the Jedi and the ship's crew take shelter in an abandoned space station. (Ages 12 to 18)	3
8	DIARY OF AN AWESOME FRIENDLY KID , by Jeff Kinney. (Amulet) Greg's best friend Rowley Jefferson writes his own diary. (Ages 8 to 12)	91	8	THE GILDED ONES , by Namina Forna. (Delacorte) Deka becomes part of the army of alaki-near-immortals in the kingdom of Otera. (Ages 12 and up)	2
9	AMARI AND THE NIGHT BROTHERS , by B.B. Alston. (Balzer + Bray) Amari Peters competes for a spot at the Bureau of Supernatural Affairs. (Ages 8 to 12)	4	9	THE INHERITANCE GAMES , by Jennifer Lynn Barnes. (Little, Brown) Avery Grambs must solve a multilayered puzzle. (Ages 12 to 18)	9
10	WONDER , by R.J. Palacio. (Knopf) A boy with a facial deformity starts school. (Ages 8 to 12)	284	10	THESE VIOLENT DELIGHTS , by Chloe Gong. (Margaret K. McElderry) A reimagining of Romeo and Juliet set in 1920s Shanghai. (Ages 14 to 18)	5

THIS WEEK	Picture Books	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	Series	WEEKS ON LIST
1	LOVE FROM THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR , by Eric Carle. (Grosset & Dunlap) A ravenous insect returns with its appetite intact. (Ages 3 to 5)	36	1	DOG MAN , by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic) A dog's head is combined with a policeman's body to create this hybrid supercop hound. (Ages 7 to 9)	182
2	HAIR LOVE , by Matthew A. Cherry. Illustrated by Vashti Harrison. (Kokila) A father and daughter work together on a special hairstyle. (Ages 4 to 8)	32	2	DIARY OF A WIMPY KID , written and illustrated by Jeff Kinney. (Amulet) The travails and challenges of adolescence. (Ages 9 to 12)	623
3	WE ARE WATER PROTECTORS , by Carole Lindstrom. Illustrated by Michaela Goade. (Roaring Brook) Standing up for environmental justice. (Ages 3 to 6)	3	3	BABY-SITTERS CLUB GRAPHIX , by Ann M. Martin; various illustrators. (Scholastic) Kristy, Mary Anne, Claudia, Stacey and Dawn are The Baby-sitters Club. (Ages 8 to 12)	63
4	I AM ENOUGH , by Grace Byers. Illustrated by Keturah A. Bobo. (Balzer + Bray) A poetic affirmation of self-esteem. (Ages 4 to 8)	27	4	HARRY POTTER , by J.K. Rowling. (Scholastic) A wizard hones his conjuring skills in the service of fighting evil. (Ages 10 and up)	622
5	HOW TO CATCH A LEPRECHAUN , by Adam Wallace. Illustrated by Andy Elkerton. (Sourcebooks Jabberwocky) Seizing a leprechaun. (Ages 4 to 10)	19	5	WINGS OF FIRE , by Tui T. Sutherland. (Scholastic) The seven dragon tribes have been at war for generations, and only the five dragonets of destiny can unite them. (Ages 9 to 12)	102
6	THE TALE OF THE MANDARIN DUCK , by Bette Midler. Photographed by Michiko Kakutani. (Random House) In 2018, a rare duck is spotted in New York's Central Park. (Ages 3 to 7)	1	6	THE TWILIGHT SAGA , by Stephenie Meyer. (Little, Brown) Vampires and werewolves and their intrigues in high school. (Ages 12 and up)	255
7	AMBITIOUS GIRL , by Meena Harris. Illustrated by Marissa Valdez. (Little, Brown) A celebration of female ambition. (Ages 4 to 8)	5	7	WHO WAS/IS . . . ? , by Jim Gagliotti and others; various illustrators. (Penguin Workshop) Biographies unlock legendary lives. (Ages 8 to 11)	110
8	SULWE , by Lupita Nyong'o. Illustrated by Vashti Harrison. (Simon & Schuster) Sulwe discovers her inner beauty. (Ages 4 to 8)	14	8	RUSH REVERE , by Rush Limbaugh with Kathryn Adams Limbaugh. (Simon & Schuster) Time travel with exceptional Americans. (Ages 8 to 12)	27
9	PETE THE CAT: THE GREAT LEPRECHAUN CHASE , by James Dean. (HarperCollins) Pete opens a leprechaun catching business. (Ages 4 to 8)	5	9	THE BAD GUYS , by Aaron Blabey. (Scholastic) Tough animals in suits take on some real villains. (Ages 7 to 10)	113
10	GRUMPY MONKEY , by Suzanne Lang. Illustrated by Max Lang. (Random House) Jim Panzee is having a bad day. (Ages 3 to 7)	39	10	FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S , by Scott Cawthon and Kira Breed-Wrisley. (Scholastic) Stories based on the indie video game. (Ages 12 to 18)	5

Picture book rankings include hardcover sales only. Series rankings include all print and e-book sales.



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BLACK BUCK

By Mateo Askaripour

388 pp. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. \$26.



This winning novel — or is it a self-help book? — opens with a striking proposition: “MLK, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Frederick Douglass were all salesmen.”

And the purpose of this book, the titular Buck writes in his prefatory “Author’s Note,” is to “help other Black men and women on a mission to sell their visions all the way to the top.” Teetering between biting satire and complete earnestness (interspersed throughout are callouts with real sales advice), Askaripour’s novel charts the unlikely metamorphosis of Darren Vender — a 22-year-old former high school valedictorian who works at Starbucks and lives with his mother in a Brooklyn brownstone — into Buck, who appears on morning talk shows as “the best salesman in New York City” and does bumps of cocaine in the back seat of his chauffeured car.

The key to his transformation is Sumwun, a start-up with all the trappings of a ragtag company flush with investor cash (free swag, anarchic business practices), where Darren lands a job as a sales rep. What follows is high corporate fantasy: As he accepts Sumwun’s messianic ideology and the name his blatantly racist manager gives him, Buck single-handedly saves the company from total collapse and methodically destroys every relationship tethering him to his old life in the process — until he’s given a chance at redemption. What’s not fantasy, though, are the all-too-believable tone-deaf or actively malicious slights Darren/Buck faces at his lily-white office. Thankfully, his quick wit provides cathartic delight: “I should’ve known from the Middle Passage to never trust a white man who says, ‘Take a seat.’”

THE BAD MUSLIM DISCOUNT

By Syed M. Masood

357 pp. Doubleday. \$26.95.



Anvar’s family moves from Karachi to “the suburbier suburbia” in California’s Bay Area in the late 1990s; Safwa ends up in San Francisco in 2016 after immigrating illegally from Pakistan with her

troubled conservative father. Alternating between their stories, Masood’s novel presents a stereoscopic, three-dimensional view of contemporary Muslim America: the way historical conflict in the Middle East lingers in individual lives, the way gossip travels in a close-knit immigrant community.

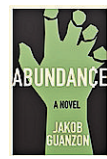
But swapping between these two perspectives also involves disorienting shifts in register. Anvar’s sections tell a fundamentally comic story of growing up a smart-alecky misfit. “I practice Islam at a fourth-grade level,” he tells the imam of his local mosque. For a while, his biggest problems are his crappy apartment and his anemic career as a lawyer and his unresolved feelings for his college girlfriend a decade on. Meanwhile, Safwa — or Azza, as she’s now called — is either being beaten by her father or receiving sexual threats from Qais, her menacing betrothed. Odder still: When our two leads finally meet, 162 pages in, they immediately fall in bed together.

Admittedly, Anvar’s story is more convincing. He’s unfailingly funny, frequently annoying and much more alive than Azza, whose grim life and secretive intensity make it difficult to see her beyond her circumstances. But her perspective is clarifying, too. Americans “didn’t know the world at all,” she thinks, observing the national obsession with the 2016 election. “They thought it was smaller than it was, and that they were bigger than they were.”

ABUNDANCE

By Jakob Guanzon

278 pp. Graywolf. Paper, \$16.



To be poor in America is to constantly be aware of how close you are to empty. Henry, the protagonist of “Abundance,” measures distances in gallons of gas, stockpiles free ketchup pack-

ets (“a reserve of sugar for later hunger pangs”), and scrimps enough money to treat his young son, Junior, to a birthday meal at McDonald’s and one night at a motel — a luxury after six months of washing up in public restrooms and sleeping in Henry’s pickup. It’s fitting that each chapter of Guanzon’s relentless novel begins with the amount of money Henry has: Unexpected expenses, over the course of one day, torpedo Henry’s careful plans toward upward mobility in an excruciating slow-motion cascade.

Throughout, we see glimpses of Henry’s past that explain his present: inherited medical debt, a five-year prison sentence for selling opioids that makes job prospects slim, the departure of Junior’s drug-addicted mother. “I’m right here,” Henry tells Junior over and over again; it’s all he has to offer. Close to the end of the book, though, this refrain morphs into a message to those who would avert their eyes from our societal ills. “Look at me, look at my son,” Henry says. “We’re right here.”

This is worthy but heavy stuff, and the novel occasionally staggers under the weight. Henry feels more like the sum of his identities — father, felon, half-Filipino — than a fully-fleshed character, consumed by his fears of turning into his own embittered immigrant dad. Instead, what “Abundance” captures is how mundane poverty is, and how psychologically punishing.

THE SCAPEGOAT

By Sara Davis

210 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$26.



The narrator of “The Scapegoat,” at first, seems like your prototypical absent-minded professor: He’s employed at a prestigious university and keeps losing track of time, brooding over

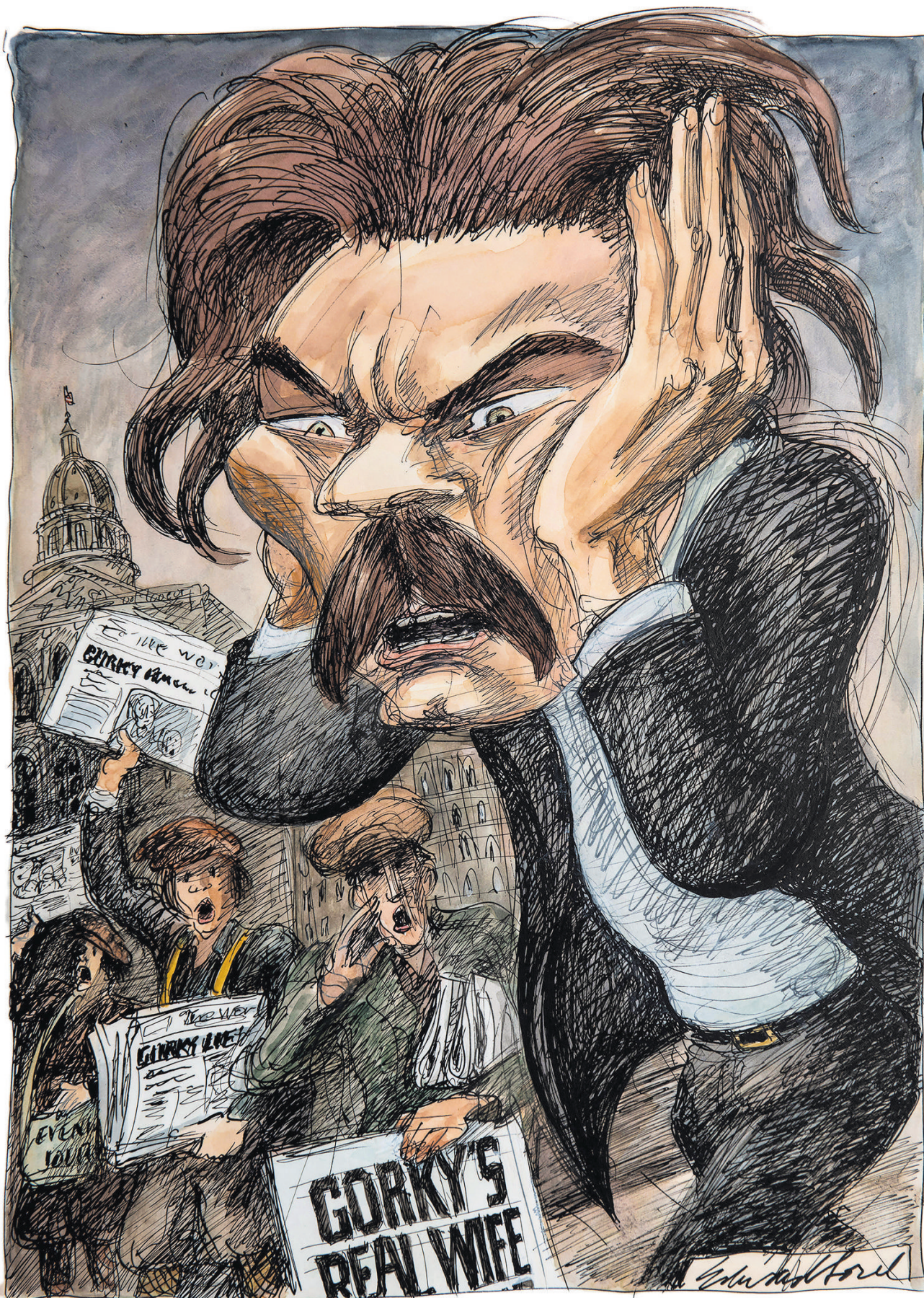
30-year-old regrets. But he isn’t a professor; instead, he’s what a colleague calls a “glorified secretary,” having been installed at his post by his distant father, a powerful university administrator who has recently died. It’s the strange circumstances around his father’s death (never described) that lead him on the investigation that structures the book.

Though one gets the sense that the “investigation” proceeds *despite* the protagonist’s meager efforts. “I had read two horoscopes, one relevant, one not. I’d gone to a hotel, a restaurant, an open house; under a pseudonym, I’d acquired an empty leather briefcase,” he sums up, in a convenient and characteristically self-referential meditation more than halfway through the book. His every move seems orchestrated by a shadowy group of fanatical academics; they blame him for his father’s involvement in a hotel that was built on the site of a former mission, where Native Americans were historically slaughtered.

As our narrator loses his grip on reality, Davis drops her readers into successive scenes so fluidly that even we forget what just happened. I raced through the book, marveling at its precise, restrained prose and grasping paranoiacally at small details that might indicate what was real and what wasn’t. What does become clear by the end, though, are the dangers of dwelling on past miseries, which so thoroughly haunt the novel.

The Literati / *The Very Brief Friendship of Maxim Gorky and Mark Twain* / By Edward Sorel

When the revolutionary writer arrived in New York City, he slammed headfirst into a scandal.



In April 1906, Czar Nicholas caved in to protests from around the world, and released Maxim Gorky from the prison into which he had thrown him. Mark Twain and other writers, hearing that the celebrated author of “The Lower Depths” had been freed, invited him to New York City, and Gorky, still harassed by the secret police, accepted. With him on the voyage was the actress Maria Andreyeva.

Docking in Hoboken, Gorky was cheered by thousands of Russian immigrants, and a day later he was the guest of honor at a white-tie dinner arranged by Twain. Gorky, who spoke no English, came with an interpreter. Through him, he implored the guests to donate money to aid his Bolshevik comrades in overthrowing the czar. His fund-raising was helped along by William Randolph Hearst, publisher of *The New York American*, which featured Gorky’s articles on its front page. The news that Theodore Roosevelt had invited Gorky to the White House also helped.

That invitation, however, was soon withdrawn, after Hearst’s archrival, Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of *The New York World*, printed a scandalous story under the headline: “Gorky Brings Actress Here as Mme. Gorky.” It revealed that the Russian had left his wife and children in Moscow, then lied to customs officials, telling them that his companion was his wife — a scoop offered by an agent for the czar, who also supplied photographs of the Gorky family.

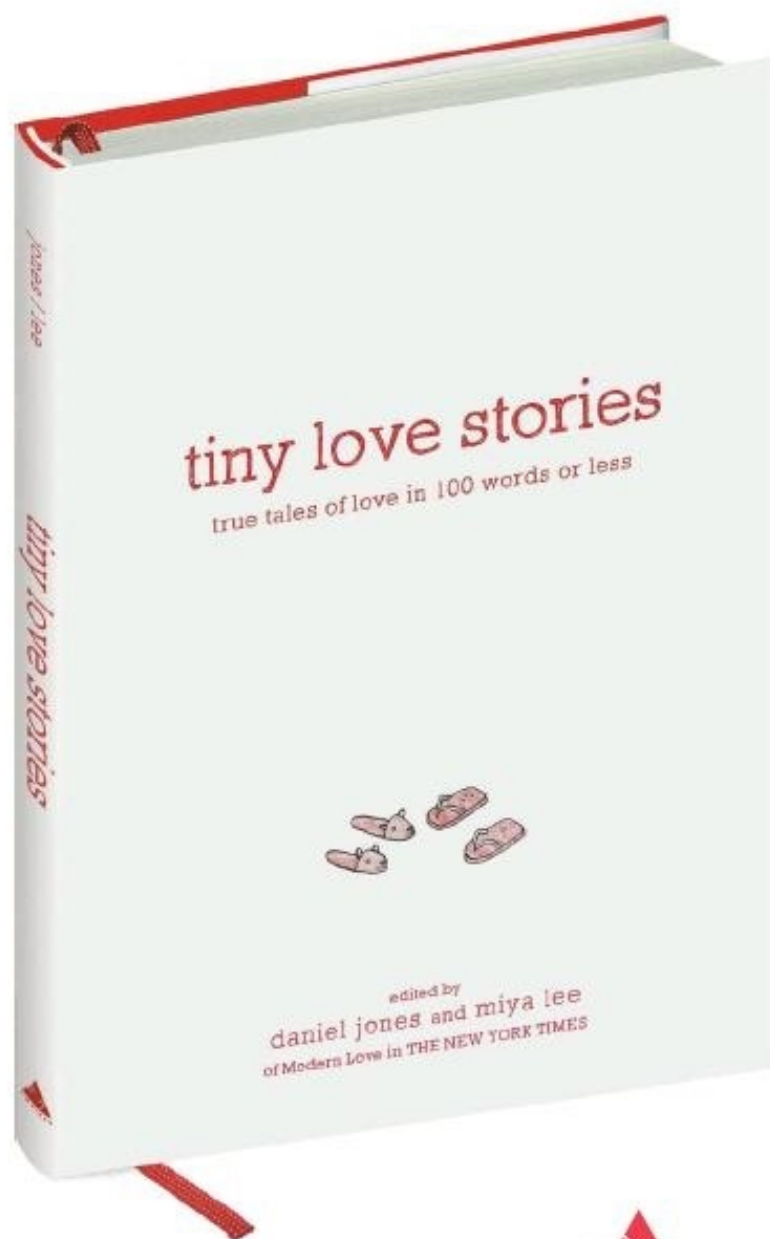
Gorky was now an outcast. Ordered to leave the Hotel Belleclaire with the explanation from the owner that “my hotel is a family hotel,” he and Maria fled to the Lafayette-Brevoort, but were told that while they could take their meals there, they could not sleep there. Twain, at home at 21 Fifth Avenue, now worried that his association with this branded libertine was going to cost him the love of his readers. He insisted to reporters that he was still a revolutionist, but he feared that “Mr. Gorky had seriously impaired his efficiency as a persuader.” Twain then resigned from the anti-czarist committee that he himself had founded.

When Gorky lambasted New York City as a “monstrous metropolis” that boiled people alive, Twain retorted: “He hits the public in the face with his hat and then holds it out for contributions.” □



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