The New York Times

Book Review

FEBRUARY 28, 2021

RAISING LEGENDS The mothers behind M.L.K., Malcolm X and James Baldwin

GROUP TEXT Our February pick is 'The Smash-Up,' by Ali Benjamin

FICTION Joyce Carol Oates, Lauren Oyler, Roberto Bolaño and more

MATT HUYNH

Colonial Ghosts

By Junot Díaz

WHAT THE IMMIGRANT, the ghost, the spy and the war have in common is that they are all gothic subjects, both haunted and haunter, notoriously difficult to contain. It is to his eternal misery (and many a reader's delight) that the narrator of Viet Thanh Nguyen's extraordinary 2015 novel "The Sympathizer" happens to be all four.

Born to a Vietnamese mother and a French father, our narrator is a Communist mole, embedded among the South Vietnamese forces throughout war and beyond. A "spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces," he betrays his way from Saigon to Los Angeles and back — only to end up imprisoned in Vietnam, confessing all his sins during his "re-education." Equal parts Ellison's Invisible Man and Chang-rae Lee's Henry Park, Nguyen's nameless narrator is a singular literary creation, a complete original.

THE COMMITTED
By Viet Thanh Nguyen
345 pp. Grove Press. $22.99.

Fortunately for us, this tormented double agent is back for another serving of ghostcolonial discontent in Nguyen's showstopper sequel, "The Committed." How fitting: After all, isn't it the nature of the immigrant, the spy, the ghost and the war to *return*? (*Nota bene*: You need not have read "The Sympathizer" to enjoy "The

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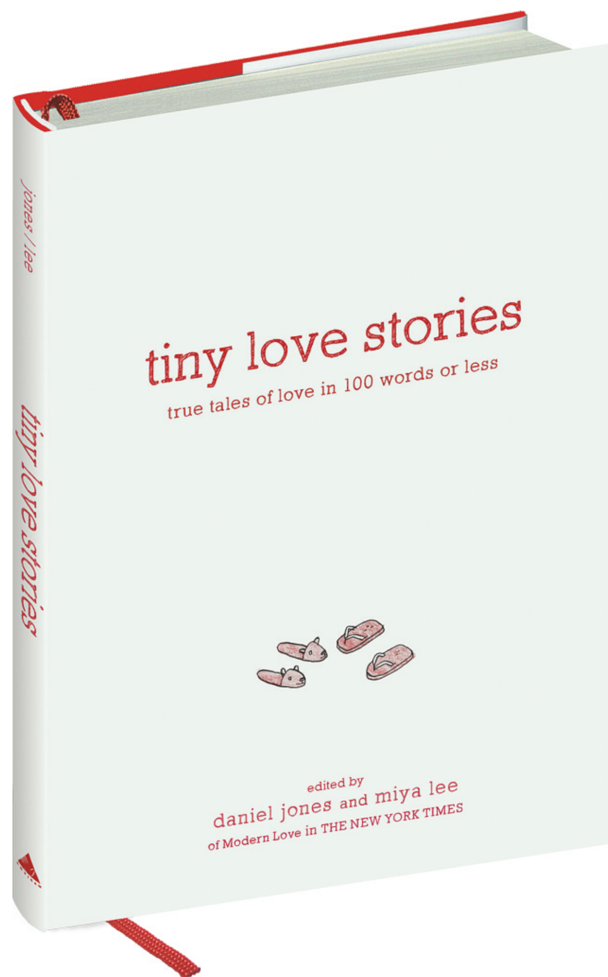
give the gift of love



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

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

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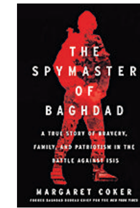
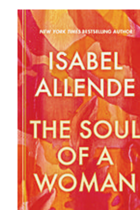
New & Noteworthy



THE SPYMASTER OF BAGHDAD: A TRUE STORY OF BRAVERY, FAMILY, AND PATRIOTISM IN THE BATTLE AGAINST ISIS, by Margaret Coker. (Dey Street, $28.99.) Coker, a former Baghdad bureau chief for The Times, details how an elite Iraqi intelligence unit worked together to combat ISIS there.

THE REMOVED, by Brandon Hobson. (Ecco, $26.99.) This mythic, sweeping novel by a 2018 finalist for the National Book Award in fiction (for “Where the Dead Sit Talking”) tells the story of a fractured Cherokee family still haunted by their son’s death in a police shooting 15 years earlier.

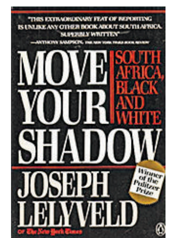


THE SOUL OF A WOMAN, by Isabel Allende. (Ballantine, $22.99.) Raised by a single mother after her father abandoned the family, Allende grew up a proud and determined feminist. In this nonfiction meditation, the novelist reflects on what it means to be a woman: spiritually, sexually, socially.

GUILTY ADMISSIONS: THE BRIBES, FAVORS, AND PHONIES BEHIND THE COLLEGE CHEATING SCANDAL, by Nicole LaPorte. (Twelve, $28.) LaPorte’s account of the Varsity Blues college admissions case sheds lurid light on the measures some families will take to protect their privilege, and the ways one unscrupulous counselor bent the system.

LITTLE SNOW LANDSCAPE, by Robert Walser. Translated by Tom Whalen. (NYRB Classics, paper, $15.95.) These brief, limpid essays and stories range widely in approach and subject, but cohere through avid curiosity and delight.

WHAT WE’RE READING



Being a reporter is great fun, but comes with a few drawbacks: We tend to be intensely competitive, while also being harsh self-critics. So it’s an odd relief to read nonfiction light-years better than my own. As I’ve worked my way through **MOVE YOUR SHADOW: SOUTH AFRICA, BLACK AND WHITE,** by Joseph Lelyveld, I’ve found myself pausing every few pages to marvel at the depth and texture of the reporting, and the clarity of the prose. It is deeply satisfying to read something so thoroughly excellent.

The book is a sweeping, unflinching account of the atrocities of apartheid-era South Africa, which Lelyveld observed over several decades during two postings there for The Times. It is told largely through small, sometimes absurd details, like the “demiapartheid” rule at one Johannesburg bar that Black patrons could eat and drink with white ones — but were forbidden to dance.

—ELIZA SHAPIRO, METRO REPORTER

Letters

An artist's rendering of Oumuamua.

Earthly Quests

TO THE EDITOR:
Dennis Overbye's review of Avi Loeb's "Extraterrestrial: The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth" (Feb. 7), which identifies the celestial apparition Oumuamua as evidence of intelligent life beyond Earth, is poignant and evocative of other quests (since the Tower of Babel) to communicate with the cosmos and its forces.

There is perhaps a more grounded interest in Loeb's journey as the son of Holocaust refugees from a farm in Israel to astrophysics at Harvard and extraterrestrial yearnings. That is a book I would eagerly read.

HILLEL GROSSMAN
BRONX

♦

TO THE EDITOR:
I thoroughly enjoyed Dennis Overbye's review of Avi Loeb's book. I share Loeb's sense of wonder in the mysterious object Oumuamua as well as his conviction that, as Overbye puts it, "the discovery of alien life would be the greatest discovery in the history of science." At the same time, it's also worth noting the grave concerns expressed by thinkers like Stephen Hawking that an encounter with aliens could prove disastrous for our civilization. They could be both hostile and extremely powerful.

Perhaps the aliens have similar reservations about us. Loeb predicts that when we finally do discover we're not alone, "we will realize that we've spent more funds developing the means to destroy all life on the planet than it would have cost to preserve it." This might be one reason that we haven't heard from anyone yet.

JOSEPH HELMREICH
NEW YORK

For the Love of Crime

TO THE EDITOR:
I'm devastated to read that Marilyn Stasio is retiring. All I've been reading during this "Year of the Pandemic" are crime novels, mysteries and thrillers, and she has been my guiding light.

Once the pandemic is over, I will continue reading these diverting and challenging "who-done-it-and-why-and-hows" in her honor.

IVY BERNEY
BALTIMORE

Two Wrongs

TO THE EDITOR:
Robert Kolker's review of "Troubled," by Kenneth R. Rosen (Jan. 24), asks: "Did the programs cause these kids' problems or simply fail to address problems that existed already?"

My parents sent me to a program for troubled teens. I had a 4.0 G.P.A. and no history of self-harm, disobedience, substance abuse or eating disorders. My parents were looking for a place that could help me conquer depression — I went willingly.

I spent months "earning the privilege" to wear my Star of David, to write letters to my friends, to visit my home. Often, I wasn't allowed to interact with anyone outside my "team" — for weeks, to punish other teammates for failure to clean well.

I graduated and got high marks in university. I'm a top performer at a biotech job. I wake up screaming from nightmares that I am trapped in that school. I've worked for years with professionals to regain trust in others and love for myself.

Trauma does not become healing through some alchemy of "two wrongs make a right." Not for me, not for anyone.

TAMARA CHERWIN
SAN DIEGO

Digital Decimal System

TO THE EDITOR:
Most people featured in By the Book haphazardly organize their books. I do the same, with over 1,000 books. I'd like to share my method of cataloging and retrieving them.

I hired a student of mine to use a cellphone camera to photograph the bookshelves (spines outward), organize the photos by room and shelf location and store the photos on my computer (iPad works as well).

Looking through them tells me where a book I want is and refreshes my memory of books that I've forgotten I have. My infirm body can't retrieve; I give a friend the location and soon the book is in my lap. When I'm finished reading it, the friend puts it back where it was found.

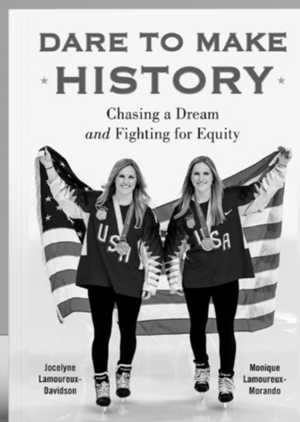
H. CHARLES ROMESBURG
LOGAN, UTAH

BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM

The Times welcomes letters from readers. Letters for publication should include the writer's name, address and telephone number. The email address is books@nytimes.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity. We regret that because of the large volume of mail received, we are unable to acknowledge unpublished letters.

IMAGE FROM ESO/M. KORNMESSER

LAMOUREUX TWINS



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By the Book

Ibram X. Kendi

The editor, with Keisha Blain, of 'Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019' says that 'how we read old and new books is no different from how we read society, past and present.'

What's the last great book you read?

I can't just name one. I want to highlight three great books I recently read on America's political economy. The first, "Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership," by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, is an expertly told history of the post-civil-rights emergence of what Taylor terms "predatory inclusion." The second, "From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century," by William A. Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen, is the best book-long case for reparations. The third, "The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States," by Walter Johnson, adroitly examines a U.S. history of imperial racial capitalism with its crosswinds centered in St. Louis.

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

I recently read "Passing," by Nella Larsen, published in 1929. I'm working my way through a stack of the classic novels from the Harlem Renaissance. Shout out to Penguin Classics! I also recently finished two books from the Harlem Renaissance that address colorism: "The Blacker the Berry," by Wallace Thurman, and "Black No More," by George S. Schuyler. These two books moved me to grab two current page-turners on the subject of colorism: "The Vanishing Half," by Brit Bennett, and "We Cast a Shadow," by Maurice Carlos Ruffin.

Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how).

At night, I like to wind down with a book in my hands. I don't remember the last time the pages of a book were not the final thing I saw before departing off for sleep. Since moving to Boston, I've been reading in bed, with a night light, straining to see the sentences. Months ago, I purchased a comfortable chaise longue chair. Pandemic-slow, it finally arrived. I read for the first time on the chair the other night. The experience was ideal. And as expected, I stayed up later than normal with the book: learning, reflecting, thinking, calming my mind. I'm hoping this ideal experience helps me read 50 books this year.

You're at the forefront of a recent wave of authors combating racism through active, sustained antiracism. How do you advise readers to approach books like "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," books with conflicted or hard-to-parse racial attitudes?

I'd advise readers of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" to ensure they are also reading books like "So You Want to Talk About Race," by Ijeoma Oluo, Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow," "White Rage," by Carol Anderson, Wesley Lowery's "They Can't Kill Us All," Edward Baptist's "The Half Has Never Been Told," Khalil Gibran Muhammad's "The Condemnation of Blackness," Matthew Desmond's "Evicted," Janet Mock's "Redefining Realness," Brittney Cooper's "Eloquent Rage," "Between the World and Me," by Ta-Nehisi Coates, Richard Rothstein's "The Color of Law," Tressie McMillan Cottom's "Thick," "Fatal Invention," by Dorothy Roberts, "Begin Again," by Eddie Glaude Jr., and Bryan Stevenson's "Just Mercy" — to name a few of the critically acclaimed nonfiction books that can nurture an antiracist critical eye. I'd advise readers to approach all books with an antiracist critical eye, even books on race. When we actively read with a critical eye, we protect ourselves from unknowingly consuming a book's hard-to-parse racist ideas. But this isn't just about books. How we read old and new books is no different from how we read society, past and present. We must read all characters — living and dead, fictional and real — with respect and not diminish them, or allow them to be diminished because of the color of their skin. At the same time, we cannot allow racism to be diminished and overlooked in literature, in policy, in power.

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

Oh, this one is easy! I'd invite James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston and W. E. B. Du Bois. I can imagine Du Bois and Hurston having a spirited debate, leaving my guests riveted, with Baldwin functioning as interlocutor as he puffed his cigarettes, and mostly sided with Hurston. Of course, they'd be debating the role of the Negro artist at my urging. At some point, I suspect Hurston would get tired of Du Bois and grab Baldwin and hit the music. □

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

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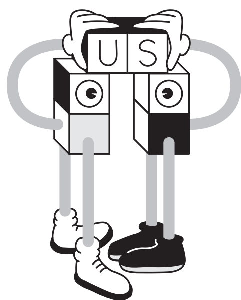

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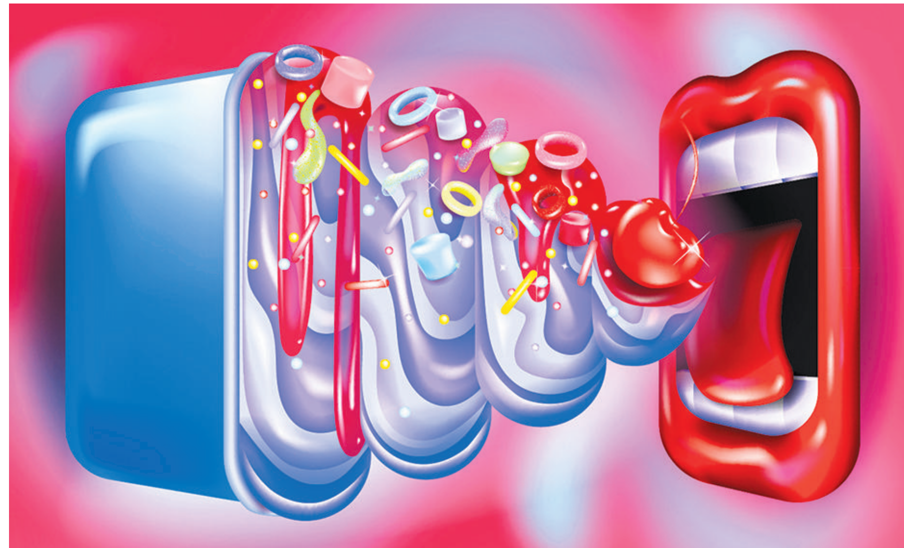
Extra Sprinkles, Please

A young woman with an eating disorder falls for an Orthodox Jewish yogurt scooper.

By LUCINDA ROSENFELD



JESS EBSWORTH

IF THERE WAS ever a novel to defy a one-sentence description, Melissa Broder's new novel would be it. An exploration of hunger centered on a young woman with an eating disorder who finds salvation in the arms of an Orthodox Jewish frozen yogurt scooper, "Milk Fed" is an even stranger animal than this description might suggest. Estranged from her family, from her body and from the spiritual world, the so-named Rachel obsessively plans and counts her highly restricted caloric intake down to the last muffin top, then forces herself to burn off 3,500 of said calories per week at the gym.

MILK FED
By Melissa Broder
289 pp. Scribner. $26.

In between these triumphs of self-denial, Rachel somnambulistically reports to work at a Hollywood talent management agency, where her fatuous, frat-brother-like boss addresses his clients as "my duuudes" and makes "constant references to his 'privilege,' also our privilege to be working there. . . . Talent management was not my dream, and this hurt him."

With its deadpan tone and self-loathing female narrator attempting to escape her self, the novel may call to mind Ottessa Moshfegh's "My Year of Rest and Relaxation." But where Moshfegh's protagonist lives to sleep, Broder's antiheroine lives to eat. Sweet, rich and fattening foods, from duck sauce to doughnuts, are Rachel's forbidden fruit.

The turning point comes when Rachel's therapist encourages her to cut off contact with her fat-shaming mother and use modeling clay to "identify, in a visual, tactile way, the discrepancy between how you perceive yourself and how you actually appear to others." The likeness Rachel sculpts is full-figured; she feels tricked and storms out, albeit absconding with the clay figure, which she comes to regard as her personal golem.

Enter Miriam, the lusciously and unself-consciously fat woman behind the counter at Yo!Gurt, where Rachel comes for her daily 16-ounce portion, no toppings. ("I didn't trust myself to taste the fudge and let go," Broder writes.) It is Miriam who begins to liberate our repressed narrator, unwittingly bringing Rachel's golem to life. Defying Rachel's initial wishes, Miriam literally overfills Rachel's cup.

Soon, when Rachel visits Yo!Gurt, sprinkles appear. ("It was gorgeous, seamless, as though the yogurt were a rainbow itself. . . . I wanted to kiss it, to make out with it, to touch it with my tongue and lips and explore what those tiny textures felt like.") But the *pièce de résistance* is a sundae-style concoction that sends Rachel, her hand tingling as she takes the cup from Miriam, into a fit of ecstasy. "The taste was orchestral. . . . The whipped cream and strawberries were their own heaven: a strawberry shortcake of pleasure."

It isn't long before our heroine abandons her diet and falls hopelessly in love with Miriam — and eating.

Broder, who is also the author of the novel "The Pisces," several poetry collections and a book of essays, presents Rachel's hungers for sex and food as inextricably bound, if not interchangeable. On Rachel and Miriam's first date at a Chinese restaurant, where Rachel finds her mouth filled with salty brine, Broder writes, "I moaned out loud." What is less clear is whether, in waxing rhapsodically about food, Broder intends to draw us into Rachel's edible/erotic fantasies or to repel us. A typical late-night 7-Eleven trip has Rachel gorging on nachos, Swedish fish, Hostess cupcakes, four tubs of rice pudding and a box of Golden Grahams. By novel's end, this reviewer at least, perhaps revealing my own "food issues," found herself ever so slightly nauseated.

I also found the book's elaborate, food and incest-centric sexual fantasies, many built around a vaguely Oedipal image of an all-encompassing mother figure, less arousing than cringe inducing, including the one Rachel has about a 50-something female colleague at work. ("Then she let her tits dangle over my face. I suckled on each one thinking: *Feed me, Mommy! So that I may live!*")

In a lengthy later reverie, during which Rachel, seated on a stationary bike, brings herself to orgasm while imagining the jutting bike seat abutting her crotch as a male appendage, I appreciated Broder's ability to capture the fluid, gender-bending and often autoerotic nature of female sexual fantasy. But, again, I found myself wondering about Broder's intentions, whether her primary motive was to shock — and convinced, not for the first time, that in contemporary America money (how much we have, how much we make) is a topic of conversation far more taboo than the nature of our sexual kinks.

"Milk Fed" also contains scatological scenes reminiscent of an early aughts gross-out film by Judd Apatow, including one in the ladies' room at a work event, where Rachel, hidden in a stall eating a protein bar, finds herself adjacent to a woman making unpleasant noises and smells consistent with defecation.

I also could have done without the many dream sequences. As in real life — with further apologies to Freud — other people's unconscious imagery is rarely interesting or illuminating.

And yet, "Milk Fed" bravely questions the particularly female lionization of thin and loathing of fat, landing on fresh explanations. Remarking on the ultra-skinny women Rachel sees around Los Angeles, Broder writes, "They appeared to be protected — cocooned by an absence of flesh — from judgment, hurt or shame."

The novel also offers deliciously droll asides on everything from black mold to Rachel's brief foray into campus activism, during which she recalls promoting "an electro Arabic Dabke concert sponsored by Students for a Free Palestine."

The Israeli occupation makes another appearance late in the book, when, over Shabbat dinner, Miriam's Orthodox mother objects to Rachel's noting of the many Palestinians forcibly expelled from the land Israel claimed for its founding. But ultimately, "Milk Fed" is a celebration of bodily liberation, not a more communal and political version, and the ways we keep ourselves chained to others' ideas of whom and what we ought to look like and long for. □

LUCINDA ROSENFELD *is the author of five novels, including "What She Saw . . . " and "Class."*

CRIME / SARAH WEINMAN

Murder, Mayhem and Massacre

AH, SINKHOLES. So random, so terrifying, they turn neighborhoods into "oozing wounds" — especially when grievances fester angrily underneath the surface. Sarah Langan plumbs these literal and metaphorical depths as they rip apart a once-bucolic suburb in her disturbing and mordantly funny new novel, **GOOD NEIGHBORS (Atria, 296 pp., $27)**, a departure and an extension of her early horror fiction.

Set six years in the future (smartly sidestepping the need to reference anything pandemic-related), the book maps the lives, loves, dramas, prejudices and growing conflicts among the residents of Maple Street, all of whom moved to this parabola-shaped section of Sterling Park seeking betterment, conformity, upward mobility and — in the case of friends-turned-rivals Gertie Wilde and Rhea Schroeder — cover for past identities too ugly and traumatic to reckon with in their present mom selves.

No wonder the sinkhole that opens up, which swallows a child and leaves other children to clean up the psychological messes of their parents, kindles tensions into an outright war. Employing a clever narrative structure that flashes even further into the future to ratchet up the suspense, Langan maps the consequences of these battles and the viciousness that erupts between those who professed love for their friends and family with merciless precision.

BRODY ELLIS knew he wasn't doing the right thing, resorting to robbing convenience stores so that his younger sister, Molly, could continue medications to treat her disability. But, he reasons, "there was sometimes a difference between what was right and what was necessary." Too bad Brody's decisions aren't just desperate, but, as the dizzyingly plotted thriller **LOLA ON FIRE (Morrow, 392 pp. $27.99)** reveals in short order, on a level of catastrophe that traps him and Molly in a level of grudge going back decades, long before either was born.

It takes a little while for Rio Youers to rev up the story, and the connections between present-day Brody and Molly and the titular, early 1990s-era Lola are too diffuse for the first third of the book. When the strands coalesce — and that knitting is both obvious and heartfelt — the novel motors on at blinding speed, incorporating broken families, bottomless desire for revenge, and a denouement that makes the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre seem like mere trifle. What sticks with me, though, are the quiet moments, where the wounds of long-ago personal sacrifices have room to heal.

PABLO AMARGO

THE MOTHER-SON bond at the center of **QUIET IN HER BONES (Berkley, 374 pp., $27.99)**, a nervy and unsettling noir from Nalini Singh, has been in suspended animation for 10 years. That's when the willful, fiercely complicated Nina Rai disappeared from her home in a wealthy New Zealand enclave, a night when her teenage son, Aarav, heard her scream and then — nada. He's moved forward, if transforming inner turmoil into a slow-burn best seller about an unreliable psychopath counts as progress. The Porsche, the royalties and the model girlfriend say yes. The car accident, the fractured memory and the move back to his childhood home say otherwise.

Then Nina's body is found in her car in a densely wooded forest, clearly there since her vanishing, and Aarav's frozen emotional state flips to boiling hot. The subsequent investigation he conducts, interrogating his cold, abusive father, neighbors with divided loyalties, and especially his own motivations and inconsistencies, unfolds with a heady mixture of heart and dread. Aarav is a legitimately and believably unreliable narrator; the cracks in his neurological foundation are healing in asymmetrical fashion, the better to shield him from the truth about what loving his mother actually meant, and how many other lives — including his own — it cost.

THE BRIEF LIFE and mysterious murder of the Elizabethan poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe is well-trod fictional territory; Anthony Burgess's last published novel, "A Dead Man in Deptford," Louise Welsh's moody novella "Tamburlaine Must Die" and Ros Barber's novel-in-verse "The Marlowe Papers" rank among the most superior depictions. Such illustrious efforts, thankfully, did not deter Allison Epstein, whose debut, **A TIP FOR THE HANGMAN (Doubleday, 384 pp., $26.95)**, presents Marlowe as supremely capable, something of a trickster, a consummate liar, a fiendish lover — and someone capable of murder well before his own disputed demise.

Her Majesty's spymaster, Francis Walsingham, finds Kit at Cambridge and, coldly impressed with the young man's intellect (arguing both sides of the celibacy question with equal effect naturally turns heads), assigns him to infiltrate the household of Mary, Queen of Scots. Epstein, in modern prose mixed with period research, conveys Kit's horror at watching Mary and others hang, and the base thrill he feels at being part of dangerous games that supersede his official duty to country.

The suspense is palpable, as is the sense of doom, as Marlowe finds himself in thrall to a devil's bargain and his own inner demons. Epstein breathes life into a celebrated figure, which makes his demise all the more abrupt and horrific. □

SARAH WEINMAN *writes the Crime column for the Book Review.*

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Location, Location, Location

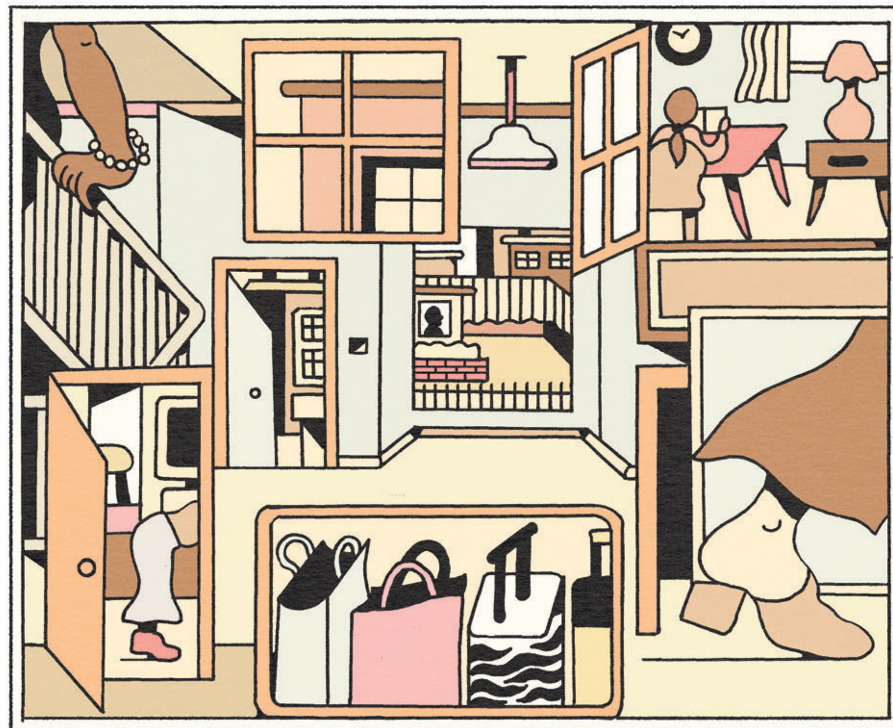
A struggling artist rents his London home to strangers. Suddenly, he has a bird's-eye view of their lives — and his own.

By SLOANE CROSLEY

WE FIND OURSELVES in the first wave of pre-pandemic fiction. Here come the narratives full of indoor scenes, maskless interactions and group coughing fits. Kate Russo's breezy debut, "Super Host," is one such novel, written long before the words "super" and "host" had everyday epidemiological associations.

But this story of middle-aged Bennett Driscoll, a washed-up artist forced to rent out his lavish London home (the shower "has two rainfall shower heads and enough room to conduct an orchestra") to a series of hapless women, situates itself even further back in time. At its best, it's reminiscent of the early-aughts romps done to great commercial effect by Nick Hornby and Plum Sykes, and even of the tidy plotting executed by the author's father, Richard Russo.

SUPER HOST
By Kate Russo
368 pp. G.P. Putnam's Sons. $27.



BO MATTEINI

"Super Host" is set in a fairy tale of London, chock-a-block with meet-cutes and grocery store cashiers who offer to lend their copy of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" to first-time customers. But Bennett's own life is not quite so dreamy. His thinly sketched ex-wife, Eliza (she loved ultimatums), could no longer "stand still" with him and has run off to America, leaving Bennett to fend for himself and his teenage daughter, a St. Martin's student who paints large-scale vaginas (not her own, much to our hero's relief).

Bennett also used to paint nudes, which sold for healthy sums, but his career has gone downhill since his fruit period. Now he's relocated himself to the garden studio, where he struggles for relevance, trying not to smother romantic and professional opportunities with desperation. One would think Russo's empathy for a straight attractive white man with a newfound obsession with rap and an affinity for existential spirals would not work, but it's one of the novel's sweeter spots: "The older he gets, the more impossible it becomes to live in the present."

The same cannot be said for her female characters. Bennett will be visited by four archetypal women, two American, two British. In addition to being native English-speakers, every woman in this novel is coincidentally affiliated with the arts or has aspirations to be so. The first is Alicia, a Sandra Dee in sensible footwear who attended the London School of Economics and is now employed by Virtual Paddle, an online auction house in New York. She talked her friends into a group trip but they have flaked, citing her unhealthy obsession with the British boyfriend who dumped her five years ago. Alicia has not had sex or smoked a cigarette since. (The world of "Super Host" is anodyne and puritanical enough to make Richard Curtis look like Irvine Welsh.)

Alicia spends her days meandering down memory lane. Upon realizing that none of her friends actually like her, she deletes them all from Facebook (the only social media platform used throughout, a tic that feels demographically askew). When a drunken stranger hits on Alicia outside a pub, she walks away but then returns in a cloud of Pollyanna doom: "All she'd meant to do was make a friend in a pub, have a laugh, maybe a snog." There's a good detail a few pages later (after a sexual assault in an alley) when she realizes she's lost her hair tie and desperately wants it back. This is the last we hear of Alicia.

Next comes Emma, an O.C.D.-afflicted alum of Rhode Island School of Design who is the most finely drawn of the bunch. Literally. While her British husband is off chasing down his drug-addicted brother, Emma traces the floorboards in the bedroom with colored pencils. In the funniest setup in the novel, she writes down what she perceives to be facts ("Fact: Bennett is watching me") and puts them in a jar while becoming obsessed with the idea that her host has entered the house and moved an avocado.

Bennett's relationship with Emma, a somewhat inexplicable war of attrition, is also the most realistic. He resentfully watches Emma and her husband "eating granola at the kitchen island, staring at their phones without saying a word to each other." Furthermore, these pages feature some of Russo's most vivid writing because Emma is, like Bennett and like Russo herself, a visual artist. The casual use of proper names (the Turner Prize, the White Cube) feels natural, as do the novel's frequent observations about the business: "There's very little art in the art world," Alicia notes. Then there's Russo's appreciation for color: "juniper green, ultramarine blue, orange glaze, pink carmine and raw umber."

'Super Host' is set in a fairy tale of London, chock-a-block with meet-cutes.

During Emma's section of the novel, Bennett meets Claire, a bartender in her early 40s. Claire has a body for objectification and a two-track mind: She's an oenophile with dreams of opening a bookstore. This might be tough, since she has apparently never left the bar before and is bowled over ("Blimey") by the marble in the upscale restaurant where she and Bennett have their first date. "They don't have a lot in common," Bennett notes, "except a deep need for companionship." Still, Claire is good for him. Not only does she get Bennett jogging and painting nudes again, she challenges him. "Don't turn this around on me," she says during a fight, which causes low-bar Bennett to conclude: "Damn, she must be smart."

Finally, there's Kirstie, who at first reminds Bennett of his ex-wife because she drives the same car. (For someone who used to paint them, Bennett's only frame of reference for women seems to be the ones in his immediate orbit.) Kirstie is a divorcée with zebra-print luggage who thinks "most women don't know the difference between a compliment and an insult anymore." She starts weeping upon arrival. She demands Bennett go house-hunting and have dinner with her, becoming infuriated with him for not "asking the correct questions," feeling jealous that Bennett surely gives his girlfriend and daughter "more attention than he's giving her right now." When she was younger, Kirstie wanted to design her own hotel but got waylaid by marrying a television actor who would later try to choke her on their balcony. Bennett nearly leaves Claire for her.

One of the things that make Emma the most digestible of the four is that Russo's portrayal of her is more logically imitative of her personality. Multiple paragraphs about an avocado align with an O.C.D. character and are less tiresome than, say, desultory Alicia, name-checking the streets of London. Another is that Emma's trauma comes off as less clumsy within a lighthearted novel, versus attempted rape and even attempted murder. Even before their stories of abuse are unfurled, these women are apt to label their own thoughts "selfish" or "sexist," flip assignations because the tone of the narrative doesn't allow for the parsing of such issues. Sometimes this passes without incident, sometimes it's a problem. Are we to think Kirstie's children are vile when they suggest she "must have done *something*" to make her husband angry? ("Why do you always egg him on?") Or, like Kirstie, are we meant to have no reaction, moving onto the next chapter with a kind of Hallmark-y determinism?

The guest's story lines are unresolved, which would have been a more successful comment on the nature of transient interactions if Russo hadn't ceded half the novel to these women's perspectives and detailed back stories. Still, to write with such care about them is no easy feat. Many authors, debut and seasoned alike, must resist the urge to make all their characters sound too identical, too clever by half, too capable of writing a novel. Here, even when the characters feel paint-by-numbers, the lasting impression is of them as separate people.

The downside of populating a story this way is that "Super Host" does not get everything it wants. It does not get to be a laugh-out-loud book or a real exploration of loneliness. But it is brimming with Russo's pure affection for her creation. Even Bennett, whose major malfunction is indecision, is as proactive as he can be without starting from scratch. He's an involved father, he's submitting a painting to the Royal Academy Summer Show, he's dutifully tending to his libido. Despite the cracks in the walls, "Super Host" is a pleasant stay, a reminder that you never know what goes on behind closed doors, even when they're your own. □

SLOANE CROSLEY *is the author, most recently, of the essay collection "Look Alive Out There."*

Social Media Creep

This debut novel examines the alluring trap of our online personas.

By KATIE KITAMURA

LAUREN OYLER'S "Fake Accounts" is an invigorating work, deadly precise in its skewering of people, places and things. It's a novel about social media and its insidious creep into our lives, the way it has reconfigured our behavior, relationships and — perhaps most critically, for the ambitions of this book — the way we think about and relate to ourselves.

Most readers will recognize the exhilarations and degradations of online activity that Oyler describes. These daily sins range from mere procrastination and online stalking to full-fledged impersonation and political derangement. Various platforms — Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tinder and its ilk — are present not as texture, but as major motors of character and plot.

FAKE ACCOUNTS
By Lauren Oyler
267 pp. Catapult. $26.

But "Fake Accounts" is also the work of a critic who has made a career of studying a much older piece of technology: the book, and in particular, the novel. Her debut is packed with references to contemporary writers, from Ben Lerner to Jenny Offill. My experience of "Fake Accounts" was not a little surreal, because a novel I wrote is the subject of one of these references (a neutral one).

Oyler's narrative opens at a precise historical moment: the interregnum between the 2016 election and the inauguration of Donald Trump. The nameless narrator discovers that her boyfriend, Felix, has a secret Instagram account, where he posts conspiracy theories and has cultivated something of a following. She resolves to break up with him, but before she does he dies in a bicycle accident in upstate New York. When his mother sends her a little money with no explanation, she decides to move to Berlin, the city where she and Felix met.

Before she decamps for Europe, she meets with a friend and shares her predicament; this friend responds with a detailed summary of a book she's reading (mine), "a new novel with a plot that resembled my situation." The narrator says "that it sounded like an interesting book but it made my pain feel less significant." To which her friend replies, "It actually wasn't less significant, because the situation in the book was fictional and mine was real."

What is the point of this interweaving of reference and verisimilitude? Oyler posits books as products of their time — dated, in the way of Instagram posts and tweets, down to the year, or even month. Books are not necessarily elevated above social media, but they are also not eradicated by it. It's telling that the narrator leaves her job as a blogger to work on a novel, and that "Fake Accounts" doesn't much bother with an ersatz representation of online activity. Of the novel she is writing, which may or may not be the novel we are reading, the narrator declares: "Why would I want to make my book like Twitter? If I wanted a book that resembled Twitter, I wouldn't write a book; I would just spend even more time on Twitter."

Instead, "Fake Accounts" reserves its formal high jinks for more literary fare, including fragmentary novels by female writers, which are dismissed as a "trendy style" marked by "hollow prose." Still, the narrator is intrigued enough to try it out, and a lengthy section in fragments follows. Even as she lacerates the form, she acknowledges that "I'm not very good at this structure. I keep going on too long."

Lauren Oyler

I tended to agree, and was relieved when the novel reverted to Oyler's more natural strengths as a writer. One of the surprises of "Fake Accounts" is how much its carefully observed comedy of manners is solidly traditional in its novelistic concerns. There's a whiff of Henry James's Americans abroad to these pages, and the fictional character I found myself thinking of most often was Emma Woodhouse, whom Jane Austen famously described as "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like."

Like Emma, Oyler's narrator teeters "on the border between likable and loathsome" and possesses enormous reserves of intellectual and libidinal energy in search of an outlet. Emma is "handsome, clever and rich"; Oyler's narrator is also those things, albeit in somewhat lesser form. And perhaps most significantly, she too is fumbling, a little blindly, around the problem of her privilege, which she is aware of but not yet existentially troubled by.

In the wake of the election, she observes that for her "cohort," the incoming "administration . . . would not affect them particularly sweepingly" and that in fact, "being a white woman living in Brooklyn began to feel, very briefly, less repugnant; the white women living in Brooklyn, in the end, were ultimately just annoying, point-missing and distracting, not the biggest problem."

A "somewhat retrograde cynic, a *toxic* presence," the narrator armors herself in wit, continually hedging her position and thus her engagement with the political tumult around her. She hesitates to go to the Women's March "not because I was ideologically opposed to the idea necessarily but because it seemed there would be a lot of pink, which in a feminist context signaled to me a lack of rigor." Later, she refers to her story as a typical "searching bourgeois-white-person narrative."

But this cynicism blunts her ability to navigate the world, and her own emotions, with catastrophic results. Her friends tell her she's "overcompensating for my despair with snark; I didn't have to be so clever all the time." What was the point of making jokes, she wonders, "frustrated and teary." The narrator repeatedly gestures at the limitations of her irony, without necessarily being able to see beyond it.

That sense of entrapment — of not knowing how to relate to the world — is central to the novel. Oyler is such a funny writer that it can be easy to overlook the fact that the underlying tone of her book is extreme disquiet. Irony provides no protection from unease, but is itself a source of it. It becomes clear why the novel takes place in the days after the 2016 election. This period brought the rapid ascent of the alt-right, the proliferation of its language and symbols. Notably, that language was one of plausible deniability, hate expressed under the cover of irony.

At first glance, that particular form of toxic irony seems miles away from the lacerating humor and thrusting intellect of our narrator. But cynicism leaves her vulnerable to misapprehending the world and the people in it — including her very online, conspiracy theorist boyfriend. The reader grasps much earlier than she does not only the final layer of Felix's betrayals, but also the grim possibility that she fell in love with Felix not despite his deceptions but because of them — that there is an uncomfortable alliance between her "lazy nihilism" and his reactionary online persona.

How do we relate to irony and cynicism in this new age of the alt-right? Stylish, despairing and very funny, "Fake Accounts" doesn't necessarily provide an answer to this question. But it adroitly maps the dwindling gap between the individual and the world. However much time the narrator spends alone, in her head and online, she is formed by what is happening outside. Eventually, the realization hits: The entire time, the call has been coming from inside the house. □

KATIE KITAMURA'S *new novel, "Intimacies," is forthcoming in July.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETE VOELKER

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More Than Meets the Eye

Two young Black women describe growing up in white families, and the quest for racial identity.

By BLISS BROYARD

FOR MOST OF US, racial identity is a combination of inheritance (you are what your parents are) and influence (you're a product of where and how you were raised). But what if you are raised by people who didn't look like you, in communities where you were the only one, steeped in a culture whose power was amassed through your oppression?

In a pair of new memoirs — "Surviving the White Gaze," by the American cultural critic Rebecca Carroll, and "Raceless: In Search of Family, Identity, and the Truth About Where I Belong," by the British journalist Georgina Lawton — two women recount growing up as Black girls with white parents who loved them deeply but failed them miserably by not seeing and celebrating them for who they were.

RACELESS
In Search of Family, Identity, and the Truth About Where I Belong
By Georgina Lawton
295 pp. Harper Perennial/HarperCollins Publishers. Paper, $17.99.

SURVIVING THE WHITE GAZE
A Memoir
By Rebecca Carroll
319 pp. Simon & Schuster. $26.

Lawton is mixed race, the product of a one-night stand her white mother had with a Black man. When Lawton was born in a London hospital, it was the midwife who provided the cover story to explain how her two very white parents could have produced a clearly brown-skinned daughter. It must be "a *throwback gene* from a distant lineage, a link to a faraway, forgotten land." (Lawton's mother is originally from the west coast of Ireland, where ships from the Spanish Armada wrecked in the 16th century, "darkening the gene pool of West Clare as a result, or so it was said.")

Maintaining the fiction of her genealogy was easier for Lawton's family than acknowledging Lawton's Blackness, but it consequently turned that Blackness into something "taboo and definitely not up for discussion."

For her part, Lawton went along with the story because she loved her father. But as she notes: "Ideas from our parents about who we are form the backbone of our identities, the bedrock to personal truths that we can recite and remember like prayers from church or poems from school." And hers was rooted in a denial of how the rest of the world saw her. "Race was dogged in its desperate pursuit of me," she writes. "And as much as I tried to brush it off, as much as I tried to believe what I was told, race attached itself to me, a little more, year on year." This dissonance, a "dull roar in the background" of her childhood, grew into "a persistent buzz" at the back of her brain by the time she was a teenager.

Shortly after her father died of cancer in 2015, Lawton learned through DNA testing that she wasn't his biological child. In fact, she was 43 percent Nigerian. The revelation inspires Lawton to live in Black communities in Brooklyn, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, only to bump up against the same European beauty standards that she tried and failed to adhere to growing up in her white English village.

Georgina Lawton

Lawton's discussion of racial passing, transracial adoption, mixed-race identity and the health implications of being misidentified are freshly fascinating. She is a particularly astute observer of the psychological dislocation caused by growing up mixed race in a white family who never acknowledged her racial identity, and she writes beautifully about questions of identity and belonging, so central to each of us in finding our particular place in the world. When it comes to reconciling her newly embraced Black consciousness with the racial attitudes of her white family and friends, however, Lawton sidesteps the possibility of hurting them by saying only "we've come a long way."

REBECCA CARROLL, on the other hand, is not afraid to hurt people's feelings. She's been keeping the receipts for the last five decades, and with her gorgeous and powerful memoir, "Surviving the White Gaze," she cashes them in.

Carroll knew the story of her adoption for as long as she could remember. Her birth mother, a white woman named Tess, was her adoptive father's high school student. When Tess became pregnant with Carroll by her boyfriend, an older Black man who lived in Boston, Carroll's parents, artists committed to zero-population growth, offered to raise the baby.

Rebecca Carroll

Carroll grew up in a New Hampshire town of 1,400, where she was the only Black resident. In addition to being an art teacher, her adoptive father was a naturalist who justified a rural life because he needed to be close to nature. Carroll's need for affiliation with other Black people was at odds with a family culture that was "free of rules and religion, rich with art and laughter no matter how little money they had, each person an individual of his or her own making."

In nuanced and richly textured scenes, Carroll reminds us how identity, particularly racial identity, is forged in a thousand different moments. At age 6, she meets a Black person for the first time, a ballet teacher in a neighboring city. When her adoptive mother asks if it's nice to have a teacher who is Black, Carroll wonders why she is mentioning it, if she and the teacher could be related. Carroll's deracination has left her unable to understand the significance of the encounter. Not long after, she writes her first essay: *My name is Rebecca Anne Carroll. I am a Black child,* in a poignant attempt to explain herself to herself, since no one else was bothering to.

Growing up, Carroll absorbs conflicting messages about Blackness. A teacher in elementary school comments that she's pretty "for a Black girl," since they're "usually very ugly," the teacher adds. Carroll recalls an image in her textbook of female slaves with "caricatured lips and tar-black skin and messed-up hair" and wonders if her teacher is right. But rooming with some Black girls during a high school trip "felt like moving out of my brain and into my body." Later, in college, a Black classmate greases Carroll's scalp. "It felt so immediately ritualistic, like a necessary chore and an act of love."

It is Tess, Carroll's birth mother, whom she starts visiting at the age of 11, who proves to be the greatest threat to Carroll's evolving racial identity. Although she often appropriates a Black vernacular herself, Tess accuses Carroll of being inauthentic when she peppers her own conversation with "girl" and "fine." Tess shares some photos of Carroll's birth father, providing the physical proof of her Black identity. Then Tess suggests that he might have other children because "Black men are often out here having kids with a lot of different women," a comment that "suddenly lessened him to a faceless, stereotypical Black man in America."

Carroll writes with the urgency and persuasiveness of someone whose life is hanging in the balance, and the result is raw and affecting. Carroll suffers tremendously from Tess's manipulations, but she ends up with a loving family and a successful career writing about race and culture.

One day when her son is 4 years old, he spots a picture of Carroll when she was 4 and mistakes it for himself. "In the sound of his small, sweet voice, I heard what I'd been waiting to hear my entire life," Carrol writes, "this boy, with his tiny brown fingers grasping the handle of his little cart, eyes deep brown and bright, loose curls reaching up and around his tender, curious face — this boy saw himself in me." □

BLISS BROYARD *is the author of the memoir "One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life — a Story of Race and Family Secrets."*

PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM LEFT: LAURA FUCHS; JAMIE SIMONDS/LOFTUS MEDIA

Cut to the Chase

A novel follows a woman on a quest for justice through 19th-century Russia.

By SHAY K. AZOULAY

ACROSS THE PALE OF SETTLEMENT at the western edge of czarist Russia, Jewish men are abandoning their families. Some are seeking their fortune in America or Palestine, while others are absconding to Odessa or Kyiv. When Mende, mother of

THE SLAUGHTERMAN'S DAUGHTER
By Yaniv Iczkovits
Translated by Orr Scharf
515 pp. Schocken Books. $28.99.

two, tosses herself into the Yaselda River after her husband runs off to Minsk, her sister, Fanny, decides that enough is enough: She will track down the good-for-nothing man herself.

So begins the Israeli writer Yaniv Iczkovits's novel "The Slaughterman's Daughter," a sprawling 19th-century tale filled with violence, ancillary subplots and historical tidbits. As the child of a butcher, Fanny was mesmerized by her father's craft and learned it at his side. She swore off killing animals herself after seeing her grandfather mauled by a mistreated dog — when her father argues for man's pre-eminence over beast, she replies, "It depends which human and which beast" — but she still keeps a knife strapped to her leg. Chekhov's rule applies here: The blade comes into play on the first night of Fanny's journey, when she quickly dispatches a family of bandits who accost her.

Fanny is accompanied by Zizek, a silent ex-soldier who was abducted as a child for the czar's army, and returned to his village to find himself shunned by those who had failed to protect him. Through Fanny's determined pursuit and Zizek's military past, Iczkovits explores the richness, complexity and constant peril of Jewish life under the Russian Empire. Both characters are convincingly drawn, particularly in their occasional doubts and irrationality, and as their stories unfold we observe that although lives are often shaped by history and circumstance, character and resolve can resist and transcend the status quo.

"The Slaughterman's Daughter" is Iczkovits's third novel, the first to be translated into English. In Israel, Iczkovits, a former academic, is perhaps better known

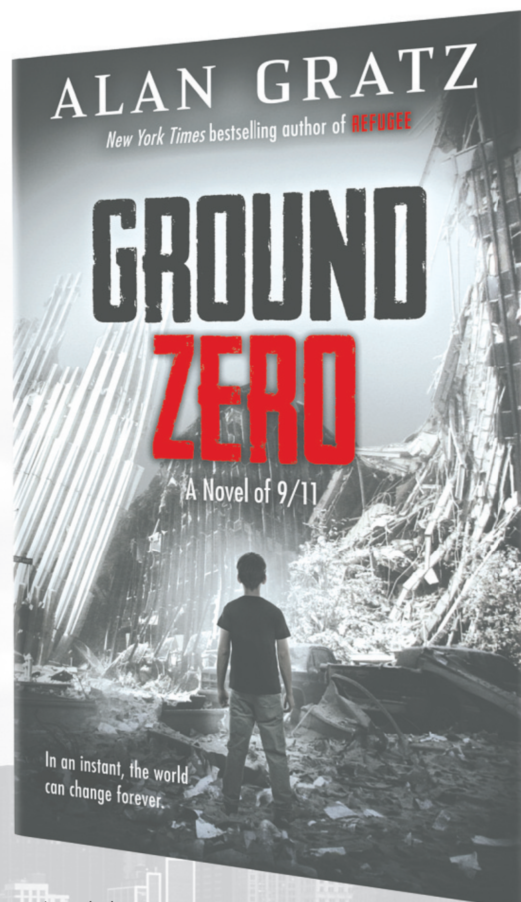
JOSIE NORTON

for his politics than his fiction: In 2002, when called up for reserve duty, he cowrote a hotly debated open letter refusing to serve in the occupied territories. We can hear his moral voice when Fanny contemplates that "every affliction that occurs in one place is made possible by its silent acceptance elsewhere." Iczkovits repeatedly implies that our relative comfort is founded on indifference and injustice. But if he also believes in our moral obligation to act, this message is severely undercut by the plot of his novel, in which Fanny's attempts to set things right are accompanied by an inordinate degree of collateral damage. Then again, Fanny is not just seeking justice, she is also exercising her freedom. The cynical reader wonders: In a world where men have spent centuries killing, raping and plundering in the name of God, country or revolution, can't a woman finally break a few eggs?

Fluently translated by Orr Scharf, "The Slaughterman's Daughter" exhibits some trappings of the picaresque novel, including a broad cast of supporting characters whose misadventures steer us away from the main narrative for a bit too long. Likewise, the plot suffers from an overreliance on coincidence; there are too many chance encounters, flukes and a statistically improbable number of uneducated orphans who become influential officers.

Nevertheless, it's a genuine pleasure to see all of the different strands of the story come together in the final act. If the Coen brothers ever ventured beyond the United States for their films, they would find ample material in this novel, which offers a familiar mix of dark humor and casual brutality — and an ultimately hopeful search for small comforts and a modicum of justice in an absurd and immoral world. □

SHAY K. AZOULAY *is a playwright and novelist based in Tel Aviv.*



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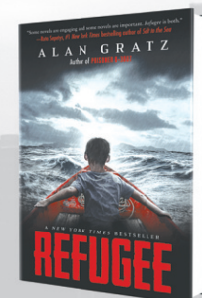

SCHOLASTIC

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Paleo-Confederate

John C. Calhoun's ideas laid the groundwork for Southern secession, and still influence politics today.

By ANDREW DELBANCO

COMING SO SOON after a neoconfederate mob rampaged through the Capitol, a respectful biography of the ideological father of the Confederacy may feel as welcome as an exhumed corpse. But the young historian Robert Elder has given us just that in "Calhoun" — an illuminating account of the life of the notorious white supremacist as well as his complex afterlife in American political culture.

John C. Calhoun was a zealous defender of slavery. His name has lately been stripped from a residential college at Yale (his alma mater) and from a lake in Minnesota named in his honor when he was secretary of war. His monument in Charleston — a glowering bronze figure in a cloak spread like eagle wings atop an obelisk — has been removed to an undisclosed location, as if in a witness protection program.

CALHOUN
American Heretic
By Robert Elder
656 pp. Basic Books. $35.

Already in his own day many people would have sent Calhoun into oblivion. But others who loathed his commitments nevertheless held his intellect in high regard. John Stuart Mill, who knew no "doctrine more damnable" than the idea that "one kind of human beings are born servants to another kind," considered him "a speculative political thinker superior to any who has appeared in American politics since the authors of the Federalist." Herman Melville, who regarded slavery as a "sin . . . foul as the crater-pool of hell," took Calhoun as a model for Captain Ahab, a dark and wild genius whose defiance ("I'd strike the sun if it insulted me") makes everyone around him seem small. Even some passionate abolitionists predicted that Calhoun's posthumous reputation would be "without that element of contempt and loathing which must mingle with the memory of his Northern imitators and tools."

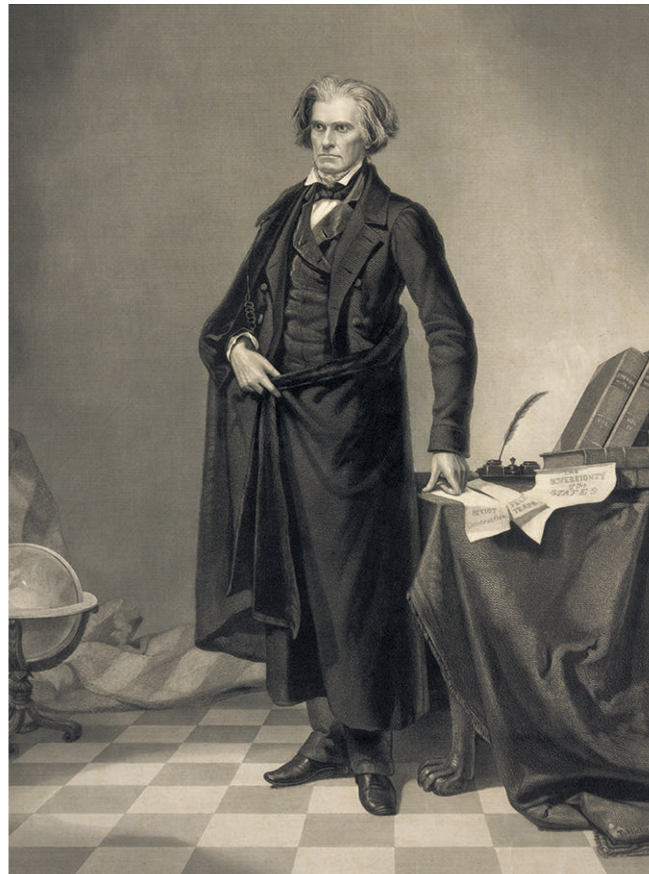
Born in the South Carolina backcountry in 1782 and educated in New England, he arrived in the House of Representatives in 1811, where the Virginian John Randolph sized him up as a combination of "cold unfeeling Yankee manner with the bitter and acrimonious irritability of the South." Outraged by British impressment of American sailors into the Royal Navy, he banged the drum for war, declaring that "the liberty of our sailors and their redemption from slavery" were at stake. Twenty years later in the Senate, he denounced a federal import tariff as a punitive tax on Southern planters and a subsidy for Northern manufacturers. When President Andrew Jackson proposed a "force bill" to compel South Carolina to comply, Calhoun replied that a nation united by force is no different from "the bond between master and slave; a union of exaction on one side, and of unqualified obedience on the other." Like many before him — including slaveholders among the founders — he saw no contradiction between using slavery as a damning metaphor and sustaining it as a defensible practice.

In 1820, he remarked to his friend John Quincy Adams, who regarded slavery as a "merciless scourge," that the enslavement of Black people was "the best guarantee to equality among whites." Calhoun believed that by maintaining a docile class of dependent laborers, slavery solved the chronic problem of conflict between workers and employers. In the wage-labor system of the North, exploited whites — "galled," as his disciple James Henry Hammond later put it, "by their degradation" — would inevitably become a force of contention and raise the risk of revolution. (The historian Richard Hofstadter called Calhoun "the Marx of the Master Class.") But in the South, the dignity and tranquillity of white people, rich and poor, were secured by the degradation of Black people. Especially as he grew older, Calhoun rationalized these shameless arguments with pseudoscientific claims that Blacks were the natural inferiors of whites.

By the 1840s, "Free-Soilers," some of whom shared Calhoun's racism, were demanding that the Western territories must be reserved for white settlers and closed to Black slaves. Calhoun regarded this demand as an intolerable attack on the constitutional rights of Southerners. His mission became "the protection of one portion of the people against another" — by which he meant protecting the South from the North. He regarded this struggle as a fight for democracy against tyranny.

Although the antebellum South controlled huge wealth in the form of human chattel, Calhoun correctly foresaw the region's decline into an electoral and economic minority. His conception of minority had nothing to do with what the term means today — a historically demeaned or disregarded group. He meant, as Edmund Fawcett puts it in his recent book "Conservatism," which devotes several searching pages to Calhoun, "an enduring regional or social 'interest' large enough to bear weight in the nation but too small not to be out-votable." Calhoun's particular interest was, of course, that of his own slave-owning caste, but he believed that at issue was the general principle of minority rights.

Concern for this principle is what led John Stuart Mill, despite his personal revulsion at the interest Calhoun sought to protect, to respect him as a formidable thinker who challenged the utilitarian ideal of "the greatest good for the greatest number." Fearing for the lesser number, Calhoun developed his idea of the "concurrent majority," whereby "each interest or portion of the community . . . separately, through its own majority," would possess veto power in a government requiring "the consent of each interest either to put or to keep the government in action."



John C. Calhoun

Underlying Calhoun's political thought was his conviction — derived in part from the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions written by Jefferson and Madison — that the states were not subsidiary parts of a permanent union but sovereign members of a compact subject to continual revision. To resolve inevitable conflicts between state and national governments, he proposed different means at different times in his life — from his early idea that states should have the power to veto or "nullify" acts of Congress, to his desperate proposal just before his death in 1850 of a dual national executive, each with veto power over the other. If conflict proved irresolvable, the ultimate recourse was secession.

Calhoun always denied he was a disunionist and did not live long enough to witness the guns of South Carolina firing on United States forces in Charleston Harbor. But he became permanently associated with that act of what President Lincoln called domestic "insurrection." His "real monument," Walt Whitman wrote after the Civil War, was not his gravestone, but "the desolated, ruined South; nearly the whole generation of young men between 17 and 30 destroyed or maim'd."

That was not the end of Calhoun's legacy. With the repeal of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow, a series of new monuments — culminating in the grandiose Charleston statue — went up as symbols of what white Southerners called "redemption" and Black Southerners experienced as renewed degradation. By the mid-20th century, Calhoun, whose racist premises were often brushed off or silently endorsed, became a hero to conservatives aghast at the expansion of federal power following the New Deal. The right-wing theorist Russell Kirk credited him with having revealed "the forbidding problem of the rights of individuals and groups menaced by the will of overbearing majorities."

In his lucid book about this complex and contradictory figure, Robert Elder wisely refrains from assigning Calhoun to a stationary spot along the political spectrum. He points out that echoes of Calhoun's ideas have not come exclusively from the right. In the 1990s, for example, when the liberal legal scholar Lani Guinier put forward the idea of "a minority veto on critical minority issues," she was proposing a version of Calhoun's "concurrent majority." This time, however, the outrage came not from the left but from conservatives who attacked her for favoring group identity over majority rule.

Elder finished writing this valuable book too soon to add that with Donald Trump's brazen effort to overturn election results where Black voters — so long disenfranchised by heirs of Calhoun — helped determine the outcome, the cause of states' rights suddenly became the cause of the left. Almost two centuries ago Calhoun wrote that "the states must have the power really intended by the Constitution, in order, not to destroy, but to save the Constitution and the Union." In one of the supreme ironies of American history, all those who cared about the fate of the nation in the waning weeks of 2020 could have counted themselves among his followers, if only in this respect. □

ANDREW DELBANCO'S *most recent book is "The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul From the Revolution to the Civil War."*

IMAGE FROM LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION WASHINGTON, D.C.

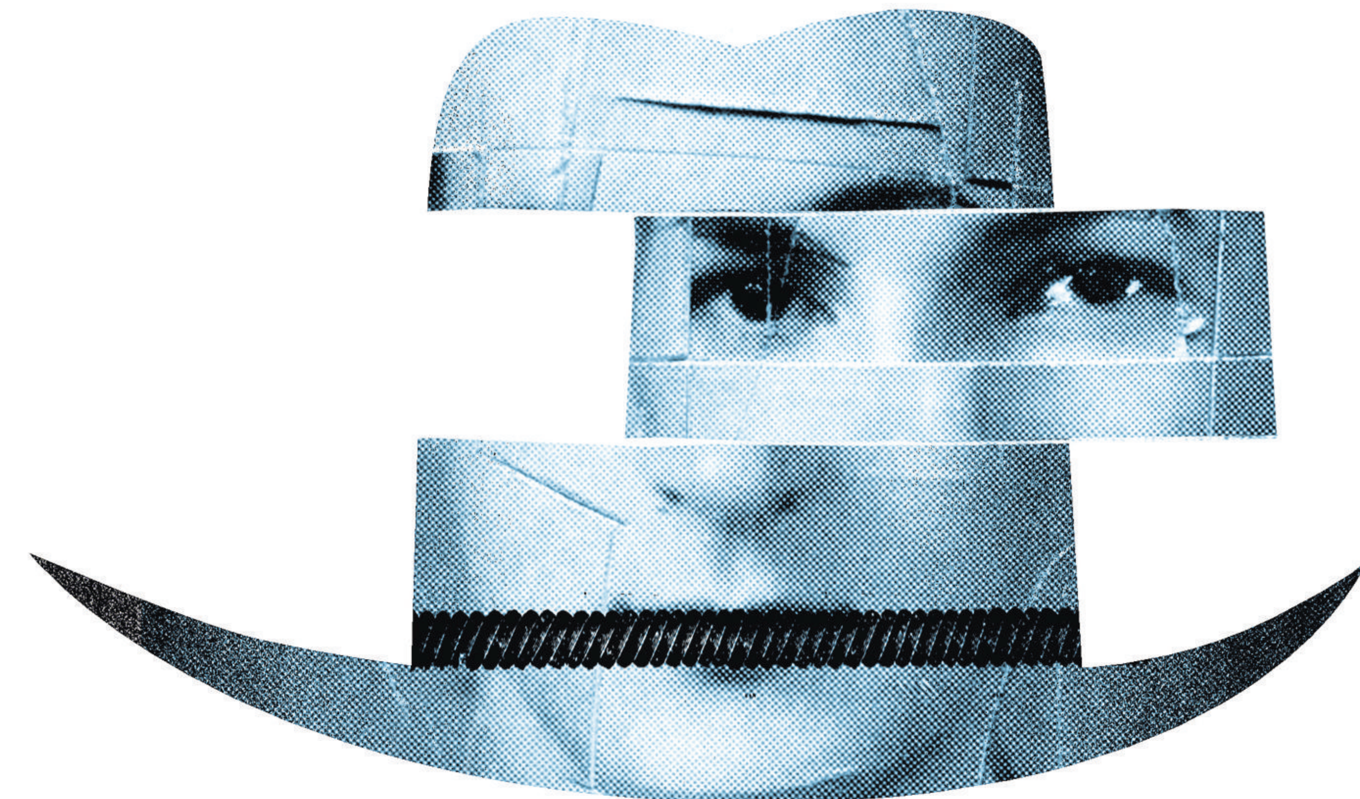
Three From the Vault

Roberto Bolaño's latest posthumous release recenters his mythic world.

By GARTH RISK HALLBERG

EMILY DICKINSON asked her sister, Vinnie, to burn her papers after she died. For Kafka, it was his friend Max Brod. Philip Larkin assigned the job to a professional, the distinguished editor and poet Anthony Thwaite. But no formal code of ethics covers the work of literary executors, whose general inclination — when in doubt, publish — often leaves us the richer. True, it may not enlarge our sense of Larkin's poems to read him banging on about his "nonacting bowels" (see: "Letters Home: 1937-1977"), but do we really want to live in a world where Dickinson's fascicles or Kafka's "Castle" get consigned to the flames?

COWBOY GRAVES
Three Novellas
By Roberto Bolaño
Translated by Natasha Wimmer
208 pp. Penguin Press. $24.



DAVID PLUNKERT

The case of the Chilean genius Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003) seems even more clear-cut. By his 40s, with his liver starting to fail, he was already mining his own archives to support his wife and children, beginning the work that continues long after his death. And why shouldn't it? "The Savage Detectives" may have made Bolaño's name, but his posthumous publications — from the galactic "2666" to the winsome "Spirit of Science Fiction" — have cemented his legend. He left behind a vault to rival Prince's Paisley Park.

Still, given the intricate recursions among the books he published in his lifetime — his love of mirrors and fractals and labyrinths, his gestures toward some Borgesian *roman-fleuve* — the bootleg feel of more recent editions has started to pose an aesthetic problem. It's all well and good to speak of Bolaño's "poetics of inconclusiveness" (to quote a peremptory note in "The Secret of Evil"), but how to discern those poetics when the work itself is so obviously unfinished?

Which brings us to "Cowboy Graves," a newly published collection of "three novellas." They date back in places to the dawn of the 1990s, to typescripts and floppy disks now as outmoded as tablets of chiseled stone. Nonetheless, these drafts "are in no way abandoned or forgotten," an afterword to Natasha Wimmer's sterling translation insists. "We must speak of puzzle pieces rather than fragments." Must we? I'm not so sure.

The gem here is the title piece, an account of the lost youth of Bolaño's fictional double, Arturo Belano. Readers may recall Arturo from "The Savage Detectives," where he stars as a firebrand young poet in mid-70s Mexico, and from any number of short stories (including "The Grub," repurposed here) that find him sifting the ashes of adulthood for the embers of "visceral realism." In effect, the novels are a prelude, the stories an aftermath, each gesturing urgently at the scale of the biographical explosion that must lie in between. It would seem almost a violation of the "poetics of inconclusiveness" to fill in that missing space. But this is precisely where the novella succeeds.

Right away, we discover the complexities of Arturo's sentimental education — the rough-edged ex-cowboy of a father, penning letters home from Mexico; the plucky mother stuck with the kids in provincial Chile, elsewhere called "the ass end of the earth." The opening chapter, "The Airport," tracks the fraught migration meant to mend this sundered family. "Santiago . . . seemed to me a metropolis of dreams and nightmares," Arturo reflects. "Wait till you see Mexico City," his mother replies.

And the climactic chapter, "The Coup," gives pride of place, at last, to the event that sends Arturo charging back to Santiago: the C.I.A.-assisted overthrow of the government by the right-wing general Augusto Pinochet. Bolaño, who made the same journey home to join the resistance in 1973, strikes a note of authority: "I wasn't a Communist or a Socialist, but it didn't seem like the kind of day to be choosy about your comrades." And if Arturo's own *vaquero* resolve is shadowed by quixotic futility, so much the better. The effect of "Cowboy Graves" is less the piecing together of a puzzle than the recentering of a whole, mythic world.

Not so with "Fatherland," a sequence of early passes at the same material. Again, our protagonist is named Belano, but here he is "Rigoberto," a kind of ur-Arturo. Here, too, we see the coup, but far from galloping toward it, Rigoberto remains passive, and gets dragged away. Our fascination comes mostly from spotting, amid the narrative shrapnel, flashes of future works and roads not taken. The skywriting Messerschmitt from "Distant Star," the escape scene from "The Savage Detectives," a shelf's worth of "Nazi Literature in the Americas" — all are present, but as what Elena Ferrante has called *frantumaglia*, the primordial jumble from which the artist slowly extracts and elaborates the work.

Spotting, amid the narrative shrapnel, flashes of future works and roads not taken.

Between these two bookends — cool triumph, hot mess — sits an unrelated piece called "French Comedy of Horrors." It's the most recent thing in the book, and, as the title suggests, the funniest — less a novella than a shaggy anecdote. Walking home from the beach after a solar eclipse, a young poet hears a pay phone ringing on a deserted street. When he answers, an unplaceable voice begins initiating him into the folkways of a secret society called the Clandestine Surrealist Group. "Or the Surrealist Group in Clandestinity," the voice allows. The swirl of deadpan everydayness and "Twin Peaks"-y foreboding would sit easily alongside Bolaño's earlier stories. But as with the title novella, the ironies here are deepened by our foreknowledge of the world that actually awaits the poet: laissez-faire where he wants to be *engagé*, iron-fisted where he would be free.

"Where will we be 15 years from now?" Bolaño writes. "We'll be working in pharmacies, as clerks, or we'll have left for the provinces to lead miserable lives. We'll have children and aches and pains. No one will write. And this . . . country will be just the same as it is now."

Even more than the "oasis of horror in a desert of boredom" (the Baudelairean epigraph to "2666"), this is what anchors the Bolañoverse: the loss of youth inscribing a larger loss of historical possibility, in an elegy for a future that never came to be. But at least inside the fiction, the possibility of change, of poetry, isn't lost for good — just gone underground, like Bolaño himself. One needn't exalt every fragment as a puzzle piece, or every story as a novella, to be staggered by his feats of resurrection. □

GARTH RISK HALLBERG *is the author of "City on Fire" and "A Field Guide to the North American Family."*

Behind Every Great Man

A tribute to three women who raised civil rights icons.

By KRISTAL BRENT ZOOK

OF COURSE we should know more about the mothers of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin. They are the inception, the root and the core. As Malcolm himself put it: "The mother is the first teacher of the child. The message she gives that child, that child gives to the world."

It's such an obvious statement that it is hard to understand how Louise Little, Alberta King and Berdis Baldwin are not household names. Portraits of the three mothers are "mostly limited or completely inaccurate," Anna Malaika Tubbs, a Gates scholar and Ph.D. candidate in sociology at Cambridge University, writes in "The Three Mothers." They've been thoroughly "ignored even though it should have been easy throughout history to see them, to at least wonder about them." Tubbs aims to correct that erasure by piecing together what she can from the "margins and footnotes" of books, speeches, funeral programs and letters.

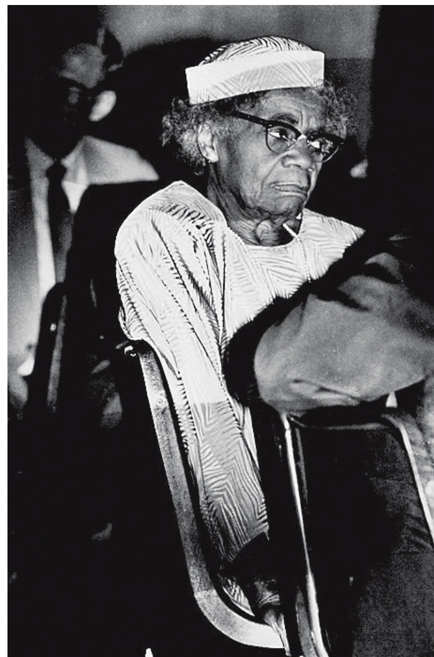
THE THREE MOTHERS
How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation
By Anna Malaika Tubbs
277 pp. Flatiron Books. $28.99.

She writes that it is possible to identify "beautiful intersections" in the lives of these women, who were born within six years of one another. All three "learned to read and write above an average level," and all three formed "passions for the arts of writing, poetry and music." Alberta, Louise and Berdis instilled this love in their children, which was "a form of resistance" in itself, encouraging "Black children to dream in this way."

"The storyteller influences the story," Tubbs writes. Her goal is to reframe the ordering of facts and, in doing so, to assign them new values.

What must it have meant to Malcolm that his mother came from the rebellious island nation of Grenada, where Caribs fought and bravely died for their freedom? What did it mean that she spoke several languages, and that she taught her children to recite the alphabet in French? Malcolm recalled how Louise Little kept a dictionary on the kitchen table alongside daily newspaper clippings that she made her children study, correcting misinformation given them by their white teachers.

What did it mean to him to have a mother who traveled alone by steamship in 1917 to Montreal, where she became an "influential member" of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and "one of Marcus Garvey's closest confidants," writing and reporting for The Negro World? Tubbs lingers over this history, reveling in the beauty and rediscovery of how such a mother might have shaped her son's deepest beliefs.



Clockwise from top: Coretta Scott King, Alberta King and Christine Farris at Morehouse College; Louise Little; Emma Berdis Jones Baldwin.

Born Malcolm Little, Malcolm X was "part of a particular experience, part of a tradition, part of a family that resisted the corner into which America tried to push them," as his brother Wilfred once put it. Louise Little continued that tradition.

Christine King Ferris, Martin Luther King Jr.'s oldest sister, echoes this sentiment: "I have to chuckle as I realize there are people who actually believe M.L. just appeared," Tubbs quotes her as saying. "They think he simply happened, that he appeared fully formed, without context, ready to change the world. Take it from his big sister, that's simply not the case." In fact, he came from "a long line of activists and ministers," she said, "incredible men and women who served as leaders in their time and place."

Tubbs excavates and honors those traditions via the mothers, rightly noting that it is impossible to grasp King's relationship to the Black church without first understanding "the foundation of Alberta's unwavering faith in the Lord." Alberta was born within walking distance of Ebenezer Baptist Church and grew up watching her parents, the Rev. Adam Williams and Jennie Celeste, as they organized strategy meetings, stood up to injustice and became early members of the N.A.A.C.P.

Tubbs's portrait is an intimate narrative that aims to link not only Little, King and Baldwin, but all Black mothers, including herself (she gave birth to a son while researching and writing the book). This gives rise to an inclusive tone that can be alternately comforting and jarring: comforting when Tubbs writes of "our" shared experience as mothers; jarring when the narrative suddenly shifts to the second-person "you."

Still, the intersections she highlights are beautiful — and including more of them might have enriched the story even more. After Malcolm's assassination, for example, it was Baldwin who was hired to write the film adaptation of his autobiography; later, just before his death in 1987, Baldwin was at work on a project about Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers.

There are any number of places where the reader yearns for more anecdotes, more description and, most of all, more of the mothers' own voices. What did they say, feel and think at any given historical moment?

AND WHAT OF Berdis's gifts as a writer? The notes she wrote to Baldwin's school were admired by his teachers and principal alike. Her birthday wishes were "some of the most beautiful ever written," according to her children and grandchildren. Baldwin and his mother corresponded regularly during his years abroad. Tubbs, who engineers a phone interview with three of her descendants, never quite explains where these letters are. Perhaps the most historically neglected of the three, Berdis lived until 1999, 12 years after her son's death, yet she remained mostly silent about her own role in history.

Louise Little and Alberta King likewise survived their sons. Little lived for 26 years after Malcolm's murder without writing a book or even commenting on the assassination. King died at age 69, murdered as she sat at the organ in her beloved Ebenezer Baptist Church — yet even this shocking crime is brushed over too quickly in these pages: Tubbs offers no in-depth discussion of who shot her or why, six years after the assassination of her son.

"It is only a disservice when we hide ourselves," she writes in the final pages of the book. "When our children do not know what we have gone through and how we survived it, when we allow others to define who we are."

Try as she might, not even another mother can salvage such monumental erasures. □

KRISTAL BRENT ZOOK *is a journalism professor at Hofstra University and the author of three books, including "Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television." She is currently writing a family memoir.*

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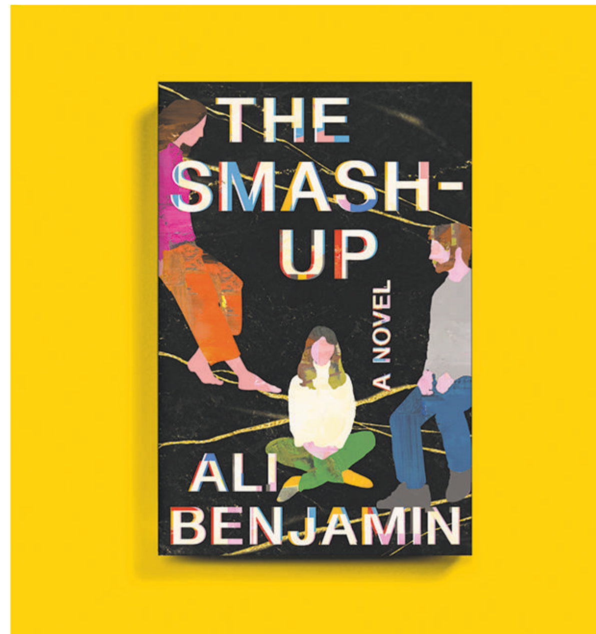
Group Text / 'The Smash-Up,' by Ali Benjamin / By Elisabeth Egan

Rage sets a couple on a collision course. Who will absorb the impact?

Welcome to Group Text, a monthly column for readers and book clubs about the novels, memoirs and story collections that make you want to talk, ask questions and dwell in another world for a little bit longer.



WHAT IT'S ABOUT

The ripple effect of #MeToo hits small-town Massachusetts — and one family in particular — leading to marital discord and a reckoning about decisions that haven't aged well.

WHY I PICKED IT

Benjamin's take on midlife marriage and friendship forged by fury is hilarious. There are no heroes here; I got whiplash trying to figure out who I was rooting for.

"*WHAT HAPPENED?*" wonders an omniscient narrator in the introduction to **THE SMASH-UP (Random House, 352 pp., $27),** a cleverly hyperlocal novel that unfolds during Justice Brett Kavanaugh's Senate confirmation hearings in September 2018. "There are no closed-off spaces, it turns out. The rupturing, the quake, could be felt in every floorboard, in every home. There wasn't a window anywhere that hadn't been rattled. Even here, even in this quiet nowhere, *what happened* had fractured even the quietest of lives."

Ali Benjamin's "quiet nowhere" is Starkfield, Mass., a fictional town in the Berkshires boasting "a nondescript village green, around which are scattered a handful of small businesses, no more than one of every variety." You may remember the place from "Ethan Frome." And the lives we see fracturing — shattering, really — belong to a modern-day Frome family: Ethan, the semiretired co-founder of a media start-up whose former partner's predatory antics have come back to haunt him; Zenobia ("Zo"), a struggling filmmaker preoccupied by her local activist group, All Them Witches; and Alex, their 11-year-old, "Wicked"-obsessed, impulse-challenged daughter who attends the unbearably woke Rainbow Seed School. The three of them live with a boarder/babysitter named Maddy and their aging dog, Hypatia, in a half-restored house crammed with soon-to-be-returned furniture the family can't afford.

There's some heavy-handedness happening here: the Whartonian names, the witchiness, the crumbling edifice as stand-in for a world gone mad. I took notice and moved on. Benjamin is like an overly chatty but skilled magician; she earns herself a few twee flourishes by telling a modern and energetic story about a marriage on the skids.

For Ethan and Zo, the 2016 election is "the break between before and after, then and now." He was a checks and balances guy — "It would be *OK*, he was certain. This was America" — but Zo would hear none of it. Bereft by the outcome, she marches, makes posters and organizes. Twice a week, she meets with her women's group ("half of them wearing pink hats, all wearing their wrath like suits of armor"). In one uncomfortable bedtime scene, Ethan proposes a new title for his wife: Minister of Rage.

The story of the couple's drift and, ultimately, their rift comes to us by way of Ethan, who is both nostalgic for their high-octane early years together in New York and burdened by his domestic responsibilities in the cozy hamlet they chose for its slower pace. Now, while Zo is rocking out in the living room with her compatriots — the vibe is "a cross between the Irish Republican Army and the Charlie Brown dance scene" — he's the one who makes sure Alex gets to bed on time. (The imposition!) Maddy, unencumbered by the baggage or history of a long relationship, is the only one who is sympathetic to Ethan's plight.

Instead of steering us into an affair, Benjamin sets up an intricate obstacle course. Ethan has to figure out how or whether to extricate his ex-business partner from a mess of his own creation. Zo needs to navigate the next phase of her career, as well as the loathsome power parents who want to oust Alex from the carefully curated, artisanal fifth grade. It's impossible not to sympathize with Zo, to want more of her, and yet she remains out of reach, unaware that her own husband may be one of the very men she is railing against. We even come to feel sort of sorry for the well-intentioned but misguided Ethan, who just wants to connect with his wife.

What's at stake is the state of the Fromes' union, but neither of them stops to consider this until they've both lost sight of their destination: the supportive, creative and thoughtful idyll they hoped to build together. Instead, the two change lanes so many times, they're not even on the same highway. Their gazes flick to the rearview and then the side view, where objects really are closer than they appear (and not just Maddy) — until, in a brutal, gut-wrenching moment, when it might already be too late, Ethan and Zo finally turn their attention to the smudged windshield that is their future together. Will they merge or exit? Do they have a choice? ◻

To join the conversation about "The Smash-Up," go to our Facebook page, @nytbooks, or our Instagram, @NYTBooks.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Were you on a particular side? If so, why? And when you arrived at the, shall we say, "hairpin turn," what were your thoughts?

+

Benjamin is known for novels for younger readers, including "The Thing About Jellyfish" and "The Next Great Paulie Fink." How did she bring her kid's-eye view to "The Smash-Up"?

SUGGESTED READING

IMPERSONATION, by Heidi Pitlor. Welcome to another run-down corner of the Berkshires. This is a similarly wry view of characters struggling with a boiled-down version of issues in the headlines — in this case, a slow slide into poverty, the challenges of finding affordable child care and the reality of being a woman who "has it all."

BEHOLD THE DREAMERS, by Imbolo Mbue. In her debut novel, Mbue tells the story of a Cameroonian couple who are building a new life in New York City when their jobs are upended by the 2008 financial crisis. We see the collapse of Lehman Brothers through the eyes of an executive's chauffeur and the unfortunate domino effect of choices made by a wealthy few.

ELISABETH EGAN *is an editor at the Book Review and the author of "A Window Opens."*

Trouble in Paradise

Tourists and locals clash on a Caribbean resort island.

By DEESHA PHILYAW

WELCOME TO PARADISE — also known as Baxter's Beach, the Caribbean resort village at the center of Cherie Jones's dazzling debut novel, "How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House." The year is 1984, and the orphaned teenager Lala is being raised by her grandmother Wilma. The trouble in Paradise seems to be that men can't control themselves, infidelity is a given, sex is currency and domestic abuse is in full bloom like lush tropical foliage.

The novel's title is derived from a cautionary tale Wilma tells a 13-year-old Lala: about a "good-for-nothing," wayward sister with "a taste for things that her mother tell her not to have" who defies this mother by visiting a forbidden tunnel where the ghosts of "bad men" dwell. In the ensuing struggle to escape the evil lurking therein, she loses her arm forever.

HOW THE ONE-ARMED SISTER SWEEPS HER HOUSE
By Cherie Jones
277 pp. Little, Brown & Company. $27.

Young Lala is unfazed: Where Wilma worries about what's practical, Lala — who sleeps in the outhouse to avoid the sexual advances of her grandfather — imagines what might be possible. Even with one arm, she figures, the sister can still have a husband, children and a house — the things Lala herself dreams of having.

Five years later Lala finds herself pregnant and in a volatile marriage to Adan, a carnival unicyclist, living precariously in a beachfront shack with no banister to cling to as she descends the 25 cement stairs from her doorstep to the sand, afraid to fall into the "nothingness" on either side. Chafing at his wife's free-mindedness just as Wilma did, Adan turns to thievery, drug dealing and physical harm: "Lala cannot now remember where that first slap came from, she cannot remember the finer details of what it was about, but Lala knows that, in the dim light of morning after that first slap, she became Wilma."

The chaos turns fatal when Lala's life collides with that of a white English tourist named Peter Whalen, who one night confronts an armed robber inside his Baxter's Beach vacation home. The incident is told through the eyes of Mira, Peter's much younger second wife, an islander "whose crowning achievement is becoming a wealthy man's wife." Jones makes a point of calling her "Mira Whalen" or "Mrs. Whalen" throughout; like Lala's, Mira's world too is upended when she finds herself without "what she has wanted for as long as she can remember — this spouse, this house, this life."

Inhabiting multiple voices on the island (Lala's, Mira's, Adan's gigolo friend Tone's), alternating perspectives and breaking up present action with back story can be tricky business. But in Jones's capable hands, tension builds without diversion. The storytelling is far from breathless, but it will leave you that way: The effect is of a horrific opera in which ugliness is inevitable, but no less gutting when it appears.

And in this opera, there are no minor characters. Each one, carefully and vividly crafted, has a crucial part to play. There's the local Sergeant Beckles, whose ego is bruised when Scotland Yard is called in to investigate the crime. There's the Queen of Sheba, a prostitute and the object of the married Beckles's obsession. "Sheba is the type of woman he would build a house for," he thinks. "He would ensure she would always be comfortable, that she would never have to walk the length of Baxter's Beach again, never have to give her body to anybody but him."

Cherie Jones

The main culprit in this book is patriarchy itself, with its view of masculinity as narrow as the tunnels beneath Baxter's village. It's a masculinity so fragile, toxic and entitled that it would rather kill and die than endure a perceived insult.

One of Jones's many gifts is the ability to show us flawed human beings with their humanity fully intact, to call us to examine the terrible beast within ourselves. What does justice look like when a victim who has never known it victimizes another? What does freedom look like when your entire world is a prison? Or, as Lala wonders, "What woman leaves a man for something she is likely to suffer at the hands of any other?"

Jones balances the novel's graphic violence with prose that is both evocative and wistful, haunting. Generational trauma is braided through with grief in the same over-under-over-under way that Lala cornrows the hair of her white customers. For these tourists, Paradise is an escape from their reality; for Lala and the locals, Paradise is the reality they long to escape. One where secrets shroud truth and darkness steals not just arms, but entire souls. □

DEESHA PHILYAW *is the author of "The Secret Lives of Church Ladies."*

Roads Not Taken

A story collection animated by 'what if' questions.

By HELEN SCHULMAN

AS IS TRUE for many of the mournful stories in Joyce Carol Oates's trenchant and moody new collection, her wonderful "Blue Guide" is a rhapsodic elegy for the vanishing possibilities of life. The protagonist is an aging American man of letters, trying to make sense of his most primal urges. He returns to a northern Italian city where, 40 years prior, he was a young Fulbright scholar who fell in love at first sight with the 16-year-old daughter of his mentor. Now, in the beginning stages of dementia, he hopes that he will see her once again, in the ruins of the town, with his faithful and frightened wife clinging to his side.

THE (OTHER) YOU
Stories
By Joyce Carol Oates
288 pp. Ecco. $26.99.

In a narcotized haze, he excitedly encounters his smiling mentor at the top of a flight of stairs at the local library, hand outstretched as if in greeting — only to realize he is now dead and embalmed like Lenin. It's a humiliating, deflating moment that's soon followed by another: a confounding vision of the daughter. But there is also strange comfort in that the wife, too, falls prey to his delusions, the couple linked in heartbreak and beauty's evanescence.

It is this embrace of mordant surrealism, along with wrinkle-in-time chronologies, that distinguishes these stories, which are largely animated by a series of "what if" questions. The titular but slight opening piece, "The (Other) You," explores the difference a score on a standardized test can make, with the power to grant a young woman a college scholarship that could take her away to artistic freedom — or deny her literary dreams, anchoring her with a local husband, business and children. "The Unexpected" is a kind of companion piece, in which a woman who has eschewed motherhood and embraced a prodigious career as a writer, much like Oates herself, is verbally attacked by her old female classmates back home, who are both jealous and pitying of her choices.

Becoming a parent appears to be the surest path to self-destruction, at least in the stories "Nightgrief" and "The Final Interview." The latter is one of the puzzling but intriguingly interlinked stories that take place at a hippie suburban restaurant, the Purple Onion; in another, "Waiting for Kizer," two men with the same name sit for what each thinks is a lunch date with the Godot-like Kizer, who never shows. After they spar over the missing man's affections, we come to realize that they have lived two different versions of the same life. The restaurant itself is a kind of magical portal, where deadly encounters may or may not take place and points of view change dizzyingly, forming a chiaroscuro of the anxieties of contemporary life.

FRANCO ZACHARZEWSKI

This collection's inevitable lesser stories, like "The Crack" and "Assassin," rely a bit too heavily on ominous atmospherics — you can almost hear the "Jaws" theme — but the best are genuinely startling. The memorable "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" takes place in the affluent and fictitious Hazelton-on-Hudson, where the citizens are all getting sick and dying from mysterious ailments and natural disasters. (Oates is famously prolific, but this one was actually written before the pandemic, its gaze both steely and prescient.) Despite plague and destruction, one resident, Andrew, accuses his anxious wife, Luce, of catastrophizing about global warming; it seems husbandly condescension will survive even the end of the world. But in a moment of marital unity, Luce, wearing a face mask out of fear of the microbes in the earth, is joined by Andrew in their garden, wearing a face mask of his own — a gesture of love and reconciliation. "Can masks *kiss*?" she asks herself. "It is not expected but of course." In this book, that counts as a happy ending.

Mordant surrealism, along with wrinkle-in-time chronologies, distinguishes these stories.

These are dark stories about dark days, suffused, like most of Oates's work, with themes of violence, loss and longing. She offers possibility here, too, but only as if to say that while the myriad choices we can make may produce wildly different journeys, none of us, ultimately, is spared. □

HELEN SCHULMAN *is the author, most recently, of "Come With Me." Her novel "Lucky Dogs" is forthcoming.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY BROOKS LATOUCHE PHOTOGRAPHY

Essay / Love Letters About Everything but Love / By Jennifer Wilson

Forbidden to express his ardor, a besotted writer found ways to say what he felt.

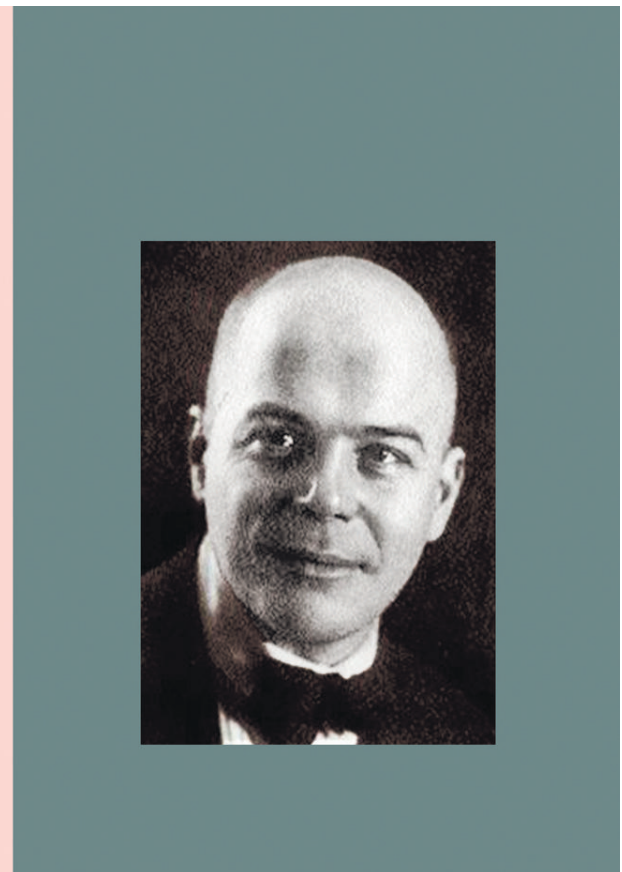
IN 1922, Berlin was the literary capital of the Russian émigré community. Driven away by political instability following the revolution, some of the greatest Russian writers and thinkers of the era — including Vladimir Nabokov, Marc Chagall, Marina Tsvetayeva and Boris Pasternak — descended on the German capital, setting up publishing houses, cultural associations and émigré journals. One of those journals, *Beseda* (Colloquy), was still trying to get off the ground when a public tantrum by a literary critic named Viktor Shklovsky threatened to derail the entire project. At a lecture sponsored by the journal, Shklovsky had become unhinged and harangued the speaker, a young poet *Beseda* was excited to have just persuaded to come on board. The editors were, understandably, furious. Shklovsky, tail between his legs, sent a note afterward to beg forgiveness. "I'm certainly in the wrong," he conceded, but there was an explanation: "In short, I'm in love and desperately unhappy."

Along with his apology, Shklovsky included the manuscript of a new book he was working on, an epistolary novel called "Zoo, or Letters Not About Love" that chronicled his unrequited romance with Elsa Triolet, a Russian living in Berlin. "Zoo," which takes its title from the Berlin zoo (near which many Russian émigrés lived), was initially meant to be a portrait of Russian writers living in the city. "I needed to write a book about people, something along the lines of 'A Hundred Portraits of Russian Writers.' But I was in love," Shklovsky wrote years later. "Perhaps I chose love," he postulated, "the way a weakened organism chooses diseases."

Here, Shklovsky refers to his struggles to adjust to life outside of Russia; in fact, the last letter of the original edition of "Zoo" is addressed not to Elsa (renamed Alya in the book) but to the Russian government, asking to be allowed back in. He experienced exile as a kind of unrequited love, and thus "Zoo" is really a story of mirrored longings — for a lover, for a country or some combination of the two. "I was bound to be broken while abroad," he wrote, "and I found myself a love that would do the job."

In later decades, Elsa Triolet would move to France, marry the Surrealist Louis Aragon and become the first woman to win the Goncourt Prize (for a book of novellas about the French Resistance, in which she also participated). But in 1922, she just wanted Shklovsky to lay off. She found his letters, which arrived daily, overwhelming, effusive, tediously literal — in sum, what we expect from love letters. "I love you very much," he wrote in an early one. "You are the city I live in; you are the name of the month and the day." Elsa, flummoxed, told him he could continue to write her only under one condition: that he not write her about love. "My dear, my own," she implored him. "Don't write to me about love. Don't. I'm very tired."

"Zoo" is the literary experiment that resulted. The letters between Triolet and Shklovsky, reprinted in "Zoo" with some minor fictionalizations, avoid addressing love directly. Instead, they delve into topics as far-ranging as Tahiti, wet nurses, "Don Quixote," internal combustion engines and the Russian avant-garde. These "letters not about love," perhaps precisely because they are not about love, achieve an unmistakable intimacy and in doing so, upend our assumptions about what it means to convey affection through language. Through its digressive register, "Zoo" makes the case that our ultimate desire in love is to share not our romantic feelings, but rather our sense of the world, our impressions of life — from the mundane to the poetic — with another person.



Elsa Triolet and Viktor Shklovsky

Elsa's prohibition proved to be a creative boon, both for her (the editors loved Triolet's letters best and encouraged her to publish a novel) and for Shklovsky. "You gave me two assignments. 1.) Not to call you 2.) Not to see you," he wrote her. "So now I'm a busy man."

Shklovsky, one of the most brilliant literary theorists of his era, used Elsa's ban as an occasion to think through and expound upon some of his ideas about art. His famous theory of "estrangement" — the act of representing ordinary events in strange, unexpected ways to jolt the reader into recognition — finds fresh expression here: Art "must be changed, 'estranged,'" he insists to her. He also voiced his frustrations with censorship in their home country, telling Elsa/Alya about a Russian publisher in Berlin whose books were continually blocked from entering Russia: "Writing about love is forbidden, so I'll write about Zinovy Grzhebin, the publisher. That ought to be sufficiently remote." However, Shklovsky cannot help comparing his romantic fate to Grzhebin's literary one — each is a "rejected suitor."

Occasionally, though, Shklovsky falls short and breaks the rules, sometimes merely in spirit — telling Alya, "You have turned my life the way a worm screw turns a rack." Other times, he utters the forbidden word itself. When a flood hits Berlin, he writes a letter containing a dialogue between the water he imagines rushing into Alya's bedroom and the slippers at the foot of her bed:

"Slippers: O, water, you have flowed into the wrong mill. That's not nice. In matters of love, might does not make right.

"Water: Not even a mighty love?

"Slippers: No, not even a mighty love."

Elsa/Alya chastises him for his clear violations of their code, telling him, "You certainly don't know how to write a love letter." She tells him to "quit writing about how, how, how much you love me, because at the third 'how much,' I start thinking about something else."

Indeed, the most palpable that love feels to us in the novel is when the correspondents are not discussing it explicitly, but when they are sharing the minutiae of their lives — when Shklovsky writes, "I have to run over to the Mierike bakery for a cake," or when Alya recounts childhood stories about her beloved but absent-minded wet nurse who "managed to poison me by gorging herself on the pits from the cherry preserves that were being made at our summer cottage." Alya catches herself here, wondering "what made me inflict Stesha on you?" as if she is recognizing that sharing this intimate detail, this buried memory about cherry pits and breastfeeding, is an admission of feeling.

That love could best be relayed indirectly became an aesthetic principle for Shklovsky. In a later work, "Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar" (1970), he reflected on his time writing "Zoo," admitting that it "was also called 'Letters Not About Love' because it *was* a book about love." □

JENNIFER WILSON *is a contributing writer for The Nation. She has a Ph.D. in Russian literature from Princeton University.*

PHOTOGRAPH ON LEFT: ALAMY

Colonial Ghosts

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Committed," but why deny yourself the delirious, hair-raising pleasure?)

"The Committed" begins in 1981, two years after we last saw our narrator preparing to flee Vietnam by boat. Flee Vietnam he has, via an Indonesian refugee camp. Now traveling under the nom de guerre Vo Danh, our narrator is once again in the wind, driven by his only commandment: "We will live!" His many travails have clearly not dulled his mordant wit — "Ah contradiction! The perpetual body odor of humanity!" — or his inner turmoil. Vo Danh is still a man at odds with himself, a 17th parallel in the flesh, a man with the Janus-like talent of seeing both sides of any situation, which he acknowledges is both a talent and his curse.

Unwelcome in Vietnam or the United States, where he murdered two men to protect his cover, Vo Danh needs a home — or at least a home base. Where is a Eurasian former Communist spy to go? To his French fatherland, naturally. And so, faster than a French para can cry "Dien Bien Phu," Vo Danh lands at Charles de Gaulle. Along for the ride is his blood brother and fellow re-education camp graduate Bon, an all-around badass who has made it his life mission to kill *all the Communists in the world* — starting with the Vietnamese variety. Bon has no idea that Vo Danh himself was once a dedicated Communist agent, who betrayed nearly everyone they knew. Were Bon ever to discover the truth, he would kill our narrator without hesitation.

"It's a matter of principle," Bon explains with a smile, when goaded with a hypothetical.

Vo Danh claims he's done playing the spy. But that's the trouble with the spy, the immigrant, the ghost, the war: Once you're in, it's so hard to get out.

After all they've survived, the friends desperately need a new start, but the scars they carry make any hope of regeneration a serious, if not impossible, challenge. Vo Danh is burdened by all his failures and betrayals, but especially by a multiplicity of ghosts — his mother, his father, the Communist agent he allowed to be raped and tortured, and, most immediately, the men he killed in the States, who give him lip at the most inopportune moments. Bon has his own burdens; he still mourns the wife and child who died during the fall of Saigon.

Over both men hangs the American War and the country that they lost, and that lost them. And France itself is packed to the rafters with colonial ghosts of all kinds. The city of lights, for a couple of colonial trauma-cases like them, turns out to be (if you'll pardon my pun) a city of wights.

Like the good revenants they are, Vo Danh and Bon immediately fall in with an underworld acquaintance from their refugee camp days, a crime boss named, well, the Boss, who runs drugs, a protection racket, a brothel named Heaven and the worst Asian restaurant in Paris, staffed by a murderous crew called the Seven Dwarves. Bon becomes an enforcer while Vo Danh mostly scrubs the restaurant's awful toilet. Our narrator, however, is nothing if not resourceful. His aunt (who is not really his aunt) and her white French confreres have lost their resident hash dealer and with the blessing of the Boss, Vo Danh steps in. Not the first revolutionary to become a drug capitalist — and not the last. To avoid the gaze of the "Repressive State Apparatus" he disguises himself as a stereotypical Japanese tourist, with requisite camera and protruding teeth.

Soldier and spy, neither Bon nor Vo Danh is particularly well suited for the anonymous life of the immigrant civilian. The reader almost senses their relief when a new war breaks out. Another group of immigrants — a band of French-born Algerians — resents the drug competition, and there are stabbings, shootings, kidnappings, C.I.A. gadgets, interrogations and torture. If that's not return-of-the-repressed enough, the old war resurfaces as well. The faceless man who tortured both Bon and Vo Danh at the re-education camp is now working at the Vietnamese Embassy. Bon sets his sights on killing him, and Vo Danh sets his on trying to stop his friend — for he knows something that Bon doesn't.

As you can see, "The Committed" indulges in espionage high jinks aplenty, but in truth the author is not as interested in them as a cursory plot summary might indicate. Nguyen is no le Carré and doesn't wish to be. The novel draws its true enchantment — and its immense power — from the propulsive, wide-ranging intelligence of our narrator as he Virgils us through his latest descent into hell. That he happens to be as funny as he is smart is the best plus of all.

Halfway through the novel, Bon says to Vo Danh: "It's guys like you who have to talk. If you don't talk, you'd die." Vo Danh does talk, a lot, a critical patter that's as exhilarating as any of the novel's generic twists. For a ghost-chained man like him, it's his way of living in a broken world, of assembling new stories from the napalmed rubble of the old, of battling all the forces that would erase and distort him. As both victim and beneficiary of coloniality's contradictory radiations, Vo Danh is exquisitely attuned to the complex ways that former colonizers forget their crimes (and former colonized, their complicities), and how whiteness and its allies will accuse people of color of absolutely everything — no evidence necessary. In his forever war against the forces of colonialism and white supremacy, Vo Danh is still a revolutionary, even though he perceives the bitter truth that revolutions always fail their followers, and his is no exception.

Viet Thanh Nguyen

Vo Danh is a man at odds with himself, a 17th parallel in the flesh.

By the end of "The Committed," its cover as a spy novel is blown and its true genre is revealed: It's a ghost story, if it's any kind at all. The novel's tension derives not from whether Vo Danh will survive the drug war or his past offenses, but whether this spectral man will, in the fullest meaning of the word, *live*.

Vo Danh might long for an end to his wars, but he can't stop prosecuting his ghost battles, in the past or the present, can't see the world through any other lens. A condom recalls Vietnam's colonial rubber plantations. A disrobed prostitute evokes the face of the Communist agent he helped destroy. His dead mother finds him no matter where he is or what he's thinking. He is that ghost who clings to his hauntedness as you or I might cling to life. His allegiance to his spectrality is perhaps his truest commitment. Even his false name — Vo Danh, literally No Name — is what's carved on the headstones for unidentified bodies. He embodies the maxim that while colonialism's atrocities are never past, its victims are never present either. Vo Danh isn't alone in his plight: Everywhere he looks in France he encounters others like him, whom coloniality has both ghosted and made ghosts of. The condition of the native may be a nervous condition, as Fanon observed, but it is also a collective one.

"If you don't talk, you'd die." Bon got it half-right. If Vo Danh didn't talk so much, I suspect he would have to find a way to declare a truce with himself, and who knows where that might lead? To feeling, to mourning, perhaps even, dare I say it, to life?

Two related questions that echo through our narrative and our narrator:

"Could a dead man commit suicide?"

"How do you forgive the unforgivable?"

The first is easy: Of course a dead man can commit suicide; he only has to choose life. At the end of the novel, the ghost who is given pride of place in the narrator's heart, his mother, is reborn, slightly, beautifully. A premonition that even someone as spectral as the narrator might have a chance at resurrection too.

The second question is trickier and each of us must decide, in a culture like ours where forgiveness is nowhere to be seen, if that's even something we believe in anymore. Nguyen does not answer this all-important question for us — he's too smart a writer to truck in platitudes — but if this incandescent novel teaches us anything, it is that forgiveness is a joy of the living, not the burden of the dead.

In my enthusiasm, I've forgotten my critic's duty to point out deficiencies. There are some. The jokes can sometimes overstay their welcome. The narrator, acutely sensitive to racial discourses of every kind, uses the word "spook" without reflecting on its racist resonances, a missed opportunity.

Any other shortcomings?

Yes, a very big one:

The novel ends. □

JUNOT DÍAZ *is the author, most recently, of "Islandborn" and "This Is How You Lose Her."*

PHOTOGRAPH BY BEBE JACOBS

Love Bug

Staring down sexually transmitted diseases.

By EMILY NAGOSKI

INA PARK'S RÉSUMÉ is impressive: She's a physician, part of the faculty of the University of California, San Francisco, and a medical consultant on sexually transmitted diseases at the C.D.C. But these are not the credentials that gave me hope that she would write a great book about sexually transmitted infections and the stigma surrounding them. After all, a typical North American medical education includes about 10 hours of sex education, which is less than I received in my first weekend of undergraduate training as a sex educator 25 years ago. What gave me hope that the book would exceed expectations was Park's college work as a peer sex educator herself, when she dressed up as a giant condom and performed a live demo with a prophylactic and a banana.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS
Adventures in the Science, History, and Surprising Secrets of STDs
By Ina Park
353 pp. Flatiron. $27.99.

IAN MACKAY

Girl, same!

"Strange Bedfellows" is, of course, timely, not least because more people are thinking about infectious disease and contact tracing now than at perhaps any time in history. This is the year to consider more clearly and compassionately humans' coexistence with transmissible critters.

It's timely, too, because Park is explicit about the role of race in America's and the medical establishment's knowledge and treatment of these infections — the Tuskegee study, to name just the most notorious example, was a syphilis study. Health disparities and maltreatment by medical professionals have deep roots that are affecting, understandably, the willingness of African-Americans to consider the Covid-19 vaccine.

And it's timely because the autocracies of the 21st century are reliably and virulently misogynist and homophobic, with the president of Poland last year declaring that the term "L.G.B.T." should not refer to people because it represents (in his view) an "ideology" more dangerous than communism. Want to make a Nazi mad? Read a book about how gay people, people of color and women of all kinds deserve evidence-based sexual health care.

But "Strange Bedfellows" is so much more than a fresh take on the biggest issues of 2021. It's joyful and funny — concerned, for example, with the habitat loss of crabs in the face of pubic hair deforestation. Park ends most chapters with groanworthy puns and quirkily practical guidance for parents and comedians alike. Chlamydia is funnier than herpes. Crabs, as Park proves in the pubic lice chapter, are hilarious.

And humor is essential to her goal. Compassion, science and a loving playfulness are the ultimate recipe for defusing stigma. As Park shows in the chapter on PrEP (H.I.V. pre-exposure prophylaxis, for those not in the know), stigma can reduce people's willingness to take preventive medications or use preventive strategies; in this way, stigma literally increases risk of infection.

WHERE DOES STIGMA come from? Park gestures toward the usual suspects, like religious institutions and pop culture and the silence of families. She also recognizes less often acknowledged stigma-mongers, like direct-to-consumer marketing by pharmaceutical companies, journalism that describes sexually transmitted diseases in language that reinforces the stigma, and even the prevalence of an infection.

Great writing about sex meets readers where they are, and it invites them through the door of evidence-based sex education, into a world where shame simply can't exist. In the spirit of Angela Garbes's "Like a Mother," Park uses science, compassion, humor, diverse stories and examples of her own shame-free living (would *you* be a live model for students learning about gynecological exams?) to take the stigma out of these infections.

In her introduction, Park asks: "Will shedding light on these hidden yet influential genital creatures help us defeat S.T.I.-related stigma? I don't know, but we must start somewhere." Let's start here, with the self-described "Lorax of pubic hair. I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues."

Girl, same. □

EMILY NAGOSKI *is the author of "Come as You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life."*

Jersey Shore Justice

A dead white girl, a Black suspect and a town's ugly racial history.

By PATRICIA MILLER

IN 1910, Asbury Park, N.J., was in its glory days as a seaside escape. The town was a candy-colored Victorian fantasy of wholesome amusements — an elaborate whirling carousel, the Crystal Maze fun house, baby parades. But, as Alex Tresniowski skillfully recalls in "The Rope: A True Story of Murder, Heroism, and the Dawn of the NAACP," it was a fantasyland built for whites.

Granted, the segregation practiced on the Jersey Shore didn't have the hard brutality of the Jim Crow South, but nevertheless a softer color line prevailed that was just as real. The Black workers who waited on the whites who thronged the hotels were housed in a rough stretch of land across the railroad tracks that ferried well-heeled tourists from New York City. When, in 1885, complaints arose that local and vacationing Blacks had the temerity to stroll the boardwalk and enjoy the beaches, The New York Times reported that they were "intruding themselves in places where common sense should tell them not to go." James Bradley, the founder of Asbury Park, solved the problem by designating a Black beach — next to the sewer pipe that spewed human waste into the ocean.

THE ROPE
A True Story of Murder, Heroism, and the Dawn of the NAACP
By Alex Tresniowski
322 pp. 37 Ink. $28.

Given this uneasy coexistence, it's not surprising that when Marie Smith, a 10-year-old white schoolgirl, was found sexually assaulted and murdered in a lonely patch of woods, suspicion turned to an itinerant Black man named Tom Williams, a former prizefighter who did odd jobs around town. The local police chief pronounced the murder "a Negro's crime." As Tresniowski reminds us, blaming a Black man when a white woman was assaulted wasn't limited to the South, which by the early 20th century was in the midst of an orgy of extrajudicial racial killings. Some 25 years earlier, in Eatontown, seven miles north of Asbury Park, a Black stable hand named Samuel Johnson had been beaten, shot and hanged by a mob on suspicion that he had raped a young white woman.

It's here that the first of two ropes that figure into Tresniowski's narrative comes into play. When Williams is arrested and jailed, a lynch mob forms. The police manage to beat them back and transfer Williams to a more secure jail. But the threat of his lynching hangs over the story like a morning mist on the Atlantic.

Tresniowski intertwines this story line with that of the crusading journalist Ida B. Wells, a towering figure who did more than anyone to bring attention to the horror of lynching and who was involved in the founding of the N.A.A.C.P. Wells had passed through her own crucible involving racism when her friend Thomas Moss and two other Black men were lynched in Memphis after a dispute over a game of marbles snowballed into what Tresniowski calls a "tragic chain reaction." Wells had come to see lynching as "an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized."

But it's a different rope that forms the heart of Tresniowski's story. Unconvinced that the police have nabbed the real killer, a local businessman hires a private detective named Raymond Schindler to investigate the case. Schindler sets up a series of increasingly elaborate deceptions to "rope" the man he believes is the killer, a German immigrant named Frank Heidemann, into confessing.

What plays out makes for riveting reading, although the book inexplicably lacks endnotes or a bibliography, making it difficult to assess the accuracy of Tresniowski's account. And in the end, the two strands of his narrative don't quite come together. The Smith case was only tangential to the founding of the N.A.A.C.P., and you can't help feeling that he uses Wells's story to try elevating an otherwise solid true-crime tale into something akin to a social justice crusade, which seems a stretch. □

PATRICIA MILLER *is the author of "Bringing Down the Colonel: A Sex Scandal of the Gilded Age, and the 'Powerless' Woman Who Took On Washington."*

White crowds on the beach in Asbury Park, N.J., in 1908.

PHOTOGRAPH FROM GRANGER COLLECTION

What in the World

Fossils, flowers, galaxies and a rare 'lefty' snail.

By NICOLA DAVIES

AS PARENTS HOME-SCHOOLING during the Covid epidemic have discovered, explaining science to kids is hard. It can expose the deficiencies in our own understanding — what exactly is a gene anyway? — or leave us unable to communicate what we do know, in language accessible to young children. (How do you define DNA for someone who doesn't know what a molecule is?) These are problems that authors, illustrators and editors of children's science books wrestle with all the time. The solutions they have found have never been more varied or creative, offering many routes into the world of science for all sorts of young readers, and their grown-ups.

FOSSILS FROM LOST WORLDS
Written by Damien Laverdunt
Illustrated by Hélène Rajcak
Translated by Daniel Hahn
72 pp. Gecko. $29.99.
(Ages 7 to 10)

SCIENCE AND ME
Written by Ali Winter
Illustrated by Mickaël El Fathi
40 pp. Lantana. $17.99.
(Ages 7 to 11)

WHAT'S INSIDE A FLOWER?
And Other Questions About Science & Nature
Written and illustrated by Rachel Ignotofsky
48 pp. Random House. $17.99.
(Ages 4 to 7)

THE SNAIL WITH THE RIGHT HEART
A True Story
Written by Maria Popova
Illustrated by Ping Zhu
44 pp. Enchanted Lion. $18.95.
(Ages 7 to 12)

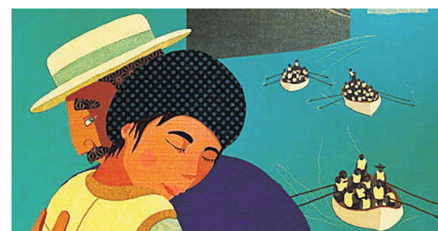
THE BOY WHOSE HEAD WAS FILLED WITH STARS
A Life of Edwin Hubble
Written by Isabelle Marinov
Illustrated by Deborah Marcero
52 pp. Enchanted Lion. $17.95.
(Ages 6 to 10)

Many children's nonfiction books take the form of what I call "the list," with each spread covering one topic within the greater whole. It's not difficult to make books like this look exciting: some bright artwork, a bit of fashionable design and an author prepared to squirt words like grouting around a set of tiles. What is harder is to use the list structure to add to the information communicated, and to make a meaningful marriage of pictures and words.

"Fossils From Lost Worlds," by Damien Laverdunt and Hélène Rajcak — who also collaborated on the picture books "Small and Tall Tales of Extinct Animals" and "Unseen Worlds: Microscopic Creatures Hiding All Around Us" — shows how well this format can work. Each spread features a different prehistoric creature, chosen for what it reveals about the history of life on earth and the science of paleontology. The illustrations use an elegant color palette but don't sacrifice adventure, humor or information for design. There are familiar favorites here, such as T. rex and Protoceratops, beloved of young dino-freaks, and lesser-known species, too: Anomalocaris, a bug-eyed invertebrate from more than 500 million years ago, and Megacerops, an S.U.V.-size mammal from more than 30 million years ago. The careful curation of this parade of creatures takes readers on a comprehensive journey through the fossil record. I enjoyed the paleontologists, depicted in droll graphic-novel-style comics interspersed throughout, almost as much as I enjoyed the paleontology.

From "Fossils From Lost Worlds."

In "Science and Me," by Ali Winter and Mickaël El Fathi, another fine example of the list format, the scientists come before their science. We learn about 13 Nobel laureates in physics, chemistry and medicine, starting with my girlhood hero, Marie Curie, and ending with Donna Strickland, who won the physics prize in 2018 for her breakthroughs in laser technology. There isn't much room for an explanation of scientific discoveries on one double-page spread, but Winter and El Fathi give a satisfying flavor of the work that guided scientific and moral compasses, while highlighting aspects of the scientists' personal histories. An important moment from each life, such as Guglielmo Marconi's meeting with Titanic survivors whose rescue his wireless radio helped to enable, is captured in a collaged image. The inclusive promise of the title is, to some extent, delivered on by the space-suited "every child" figure who appears throughout, and by the invitation issued at the end of the book to think about what science means to *you.*



From "Science and Me."

The challenge of igniting children's curiosity is akin to lighting a fire. You can't put something as large as a log on a spark; you have to start with something smaller. "What's Inside a Flower?" — written and illustrated by Rachel Ignotofsky ("Women in Science") — is the best kind of tinder for little sparks. It is a highly accessible gateway to botany that doesn't shy away from real scientific words but doesn't overload readers with too much information. The book answers the simple, child-centered question of the title in a succession of exquisite images with sparse, well-targeted text and captions. Readers will learn not only the internal structure of a flower, but also how flowers create relationships with pollinators and play a vital role in ecosystems and food production.

From "What's Inside a Flower?"

Of all the devices for communicating information, my favorite is the narrative: humanity's psychological carry-on bag, in use since we huddled around our first fires. It can hold both factual information and ideas, real and imagined aspects of human experience. "The Snail With the Right Heart," written by Maria Popova (yes, the Brain Pickings blogger!) and illustrated by Ping Zhu, tells the extraordinary true story of Jeremy, the lefty snail. Snails with left-spiraling shells are a one-in-a-million rarity, and the search for a mate for Jeremy became a British media sensation. Popova's lyrical retelling and Ping Zhu's simple, charming artwork add so much to an already marvelous story, introducing readers to the genetic significance of Jeremy's rare mutation and to the concept of deep time (and how life exists within it).

From "The Snail With the Right Heart."

The cyclical nature of many scientific phenomena provides writers with ready-made narrative structures, but a human life story can be tricky to handle in a picture book: What to include, what to leave out when you have so few words and pages? In "The Boy Whose Head Was Filled With Stars," Isabelle Marinov gets it just right. Edwin Hubble is a colossal figure in astronomy. His research proved that the Milky Way is just one among an infinite number of galaxies. He's difficult to summarize. Beginning with the words "Edwin was a curious boy," Marinov succeeds in distilling Hubble's life to the essence of youthful curiosity, bringing readers back time and again to the three key questions to which he sought answers: "How many stars are in the sky? How did the universe begin? Where did it come from?" (themselves typeset in a glimmering silver foil). Deborah Marcero's tender illustrations remind readers on every page that the experience of looking at a dark, starry sky shaped Edwin's life.

Of course there are many things missing from this small biography. No book can tell you everything, nor should it try to. The job of nonfiction is to build the fire of curiosity and acclimate readers to the idea that while knowledge is finite, questions and the ability to ask them are not. In Edwin Hubble's words, "We do not know why we are born into the world, but we can try to find out what sort of world it is." □

From "The Boy Whose Head Was Filled With Stars."

NICOLA DAVIES *is a zoologist and prolific children's author. Her most recent picture books are "Grow: Secrets of Our DNA" and "Last: The Story of a White Rhino."*

Best Sellers

The New York Times

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COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 7-13

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	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.	2
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.	1
3	5	**FIREFLY LANE,** by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's Griffin) A friendship between two women in the Pacific Northwest endures for more than three decades.	4
4		**RECKLESS ROAD,** by Christine Feehan. (Berkley) The fifth book in the Torpedo Ink series. One of the motorcycle club's members needs a second chance after thinking an intimate encounter was just a dream.	1
5	2	**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."	7
6	10	**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.	11
7		**RAFAEL,** by Laurell K. Hamilton. (Berkley) The 28th book in the Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter series. The king of wererats fights to defend his crown.	1
8	9	**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.	2
9	8	**THE VISCOUNT WHO LOVED ME,** by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The second book in the Bridgerton series. Kate Sheffield gets in the way of Anthony Bridgerton's intent to marry.	7
10	6	**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.	37

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
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10	9	**THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE,** by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	25

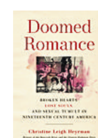
The New York Times best sellers are compiled and archived by the best-sellers-lists desk of the New York Times news department, and are separate from the editorial, culture, advertising and business sides of The New York Times Company. Rankings reflect unit sales reported on a confidential basis by vendors 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

BETWEEN TWO KINGDOMS: A Memoir of a Life Interrupted, by Suleika Jaouad. (Random House, $28.) This memoir from a young survivor of acute myeloid leukemia provides an unlikely roadmap to the new not-normal of the pandemic era. Through her treatment and subsequent cross-country road-trip, Jaouad demonstrates the courage it takes to live with unanswered questions.

WE RUN THE TIDES, by Vendela Vida. (Ecco, $26.99.) In her sixth novel, about the rift that develops between eighth-grade best friends at a San Francisco girls school in 1984, Vida captures the unstable sensation of early adolescent reality, in which outlandish lies can seem weirdly plausible and basic facts totally alien.

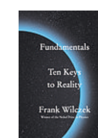
THE BLACK CHURCH: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song, by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Penguin Press, $30.) Relying heavily on the voices of myriad scholars and clergy members, Gates explains in this engaging companion volume to his new PBS series that the Black church was the soil in which Black culture and political action flowered.



DOOMED ROMANCE: Broken Hearts, Lost Souls, and Sexual Tumult in Nineteenth-Century America, by Christine Leigh Heyrman. (Knopf, $28.95.) This account of a love triangle that roiled the country's burgeoning evangelical movement in the late 1820s is scholarship at its most entertaining and insightful, as Heyrman, mining smoldering letters by aspiring missionaries, chronicles the ambition, hypocrisy and sexism at the heart of a crusade.

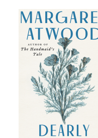
THIS IS HOW THEY TELL ME THE WORLD ENDS: The Cyberweapons Arms Race, by Nicole Perlroth. (Bloomsbury, $30.) Perlroth writes in the propulsive prose of a spy thriller to offer an intricately detailed, deeply reported — and frightening — account of the gray market for digital weapons and the worldwide cyberweapons arms race.

ZORRIE, by Laird Hunt. (Bloomsbury, $26.) This novel about a modest life in the rural Midwest serves as a luminous history of 20th-century America. Hunt renders the titular character's resilience in hard times — and her fragile, often fleeting bonds with others — with ardent precision, detail by lean detail.



FUNDAMENTALS: Ten Keys to Reality, by Frank Wilczek. (Penguin Press, $26.) Wilczek, a Nobel-winning physicist, writes with breathtaking economy and clarity about the forces that shape our physical world. His pleasure in his subject is palpable, whether writing about dark matter or the possibility that we might "terraform" a new planet.

BUGSY SIEGEL: The Dark Side of the American Dream, by Michael Shnayerson. (Yale University, $26.) Making good use of memoirs and F.B.I. files, Shnayerson tells a rise-and-fall story of a glamorous murderer who was once known as the "supreme gangster . . . the top man."



DEARLY: New Poems, by Margaret Atwood. (Ecco, $27.99.) Atwood, celebrated for her fiction, is also a prolific poet; the work in her 16th collection is concerned with ecology and with time — most interestingly, with how the present moment, "our too-brief history," will look in the future.

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

Inside the List

ELISABETH EGAN

Woman's Best Friends As a longtime correspondent for CBS, Martha Teichner has covered some of the world's biggest news events, including the Persian Gulf war, the election of Nelson Mandela and the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School. In her first book, "When Harry Met Minnie," she tells a story that happened closer to home.

'I wrote the book to keep living the story. I was retelling it to myself.'

On July 23, 2016, Teichner and her bull terrier, Minnie, were at the farmer's market in Manhattan's Union Square when she ran into a friend who told her about another bull terrier, Harry, who was in need of a new home; his owner was dying of cancer and desperate to secure a stable future for her pup. Teichner agreed to meet the pair, setting into motion the unexpected friendship and canine romance she chronicles in her memoir, which recently appeared on the hardcover nonfiction list.

"It's a little story in a big city," Teichner said in a phone interview while cuddling with Girly, her latest in a long line of occasionally problematic, deeply beloved bull terriers. "So often people think of New York as an anonymous place. But being willing to look around and see the possibility of reaching across the divide between yourself and other people is a wonderful thing. It can happen anywhere, not just this city."

In their early meetings, Teichner recalled, Minnie completely ignored Harry and he was only interested in the treats in Teichner's pocket. But by the third or fourth time Harry came to visit, the pair had warmed up to each other. Teichner said, "To see the dogs start to play, to see them lying on the floor side by side, with their paws intertwined, the physical comfort between them — that's when I realized this was a love story. They adored each other. They spoke telepathic dog language."

Although the connection led to the pain of losing a friend — and later, a dog — Teichner has never regretted saying yes that day at the greenmarket. "It's not always something people do. You get mired in your routine, your obligations, your rut if you will," she explained. "But the minute I opened up that door, I knew something special and important and intense was about to happen. Happy endings come in all shapes, sizes and varieties. I consider what happened to me a happy experience even though there was death involved."

Teichner wrote "When Harry Met Minnie" while drinking ginger tea and consulting her old diaries for detail. She said, "I wrote the book to keep living the story. I was retelling it to myself." □

PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 7-13

Fiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	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.	2
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.	1
3	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.	11
4	5	**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.	2
5	3	**THE VANISHING HALF,** by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge as one returns and the other takes on a different racial identity but their fates intertwine.	37
6	7	**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.	16
7	4	**THE RUSSIAN,** by James Patterson and James O. Born. (Little, Brown) The 13th book in the Michael Bennett series.	3
8	9	**WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING,** by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.	128
9		**THE PARIS LIBRARY,** by Janet Skeslien Charles. (Atria) A teenager in Montana discovers that her elderly neighbor worked decades earlier at the American Library in Paris and was part of the Resistance.	1
10	11	**ANXIOUS PEOPLE,** by Fredrik Backman. (Atria) A failed bank robber holds a group of strangers hostage at an apartment open house.	22

Nonfiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
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.	1
2	3	**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.	3
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8	7	**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.	28
9	8	**UNTAMED,** by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	49
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.	1

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

Paperback Row / BY LAUREN CHRISTENSEN

REAL LIFE, by Brandon Taylor. (Riverhead, 336 pp., $16.) Taylor's Booker Prize-shortlisted debut follows a Southern Black gay grad student "who is mining hope for some better or different life in the haunted halls of a white academic space," Jeremy O. Harris wrote in his review. Emotionally, he said, "Taylor subjugates us with the deft hand of a dom."

SCRATCHED: A Memoir of Perfectionism, by Elizabeth Tallent. (Harper Perennial, 240 pp., $16.99.) Our reviewer, Daphne Merkin, called this memoir by the veteran short story writer "an artful ducking of the full reveal that we have come to expect from such accounts," treating "the mysteries, gaps and obstacles in Tallent's own story with the same psychological precision and elliptical motivation she applies to her fictional characters."

A GAME OF BIRDS AND WOLVES: The Ingenious Young Women Whose Secret Board Game Helped Win World War II, by Simon Parkin. (Back Bay, 320 pp., $18.99.) The New Yorker writer's history of the Royal Navy's secret Western Approaches Tactical Unit, formed in 1942, "brings to life one of the most elusive aspects of war, showing how a military can develop an understanding of what the enemy is doing," Thomas E. Ricks wrote in his column, and then thwart it.

THE HOT HAND: The Mystery and Science of Streaks, by Ben Cohen. (HarperCollins, 304 pp., $17.99.) "The hot hand is the Bigfoot of basketball," our reviewer, John Swansburg, wrote. "A myth that won't die." Cohen's subject is our society's "unshakable belief in the sanctity of the streak," pulling in evidence from Shakespeare to N.B.A. Jam.

DON'T TURN AROUND, by Jessica Barry. (Harper, 320 pp., $16.99.) In her crime column, Marilyn Stasio wrote that Barry — who publishes under a pseudonym — is one of relatively few female authors who've made the foray into the subgenre of books about "heroes on the road." The protagonist, Cait Monaghan, is fleeing internet trolls who threaten violence after she published an incendiary personal essay.

IN THE LATENESS OF THE WORLD: Poems, by Carolyn Forché. (Penguin, 96 pp., $16.) "A testament to the aftermath of human culture," as our reviewer, Sandra Simonds, called it, this collection "carries forward her project to document the struggles of people experiencing political disaster." The result: "poems that are sometimes difficult to reckon with even as they soar in moments of unexpected beauty."

PAPERBACK

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 7-13

Paperback Trade Fiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Paperback Trade Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**FIREFLY LANE,** by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's Griffin) A friendship between two women in the Pacific Northwest endures for more than three decades.	35
2	3	**THE SONG OF ACHILLES,** by Madeline Miller. (Ecco) A reimagining of Homer's "Iliad."	17
3	7	**FAIR WARNING,** by Michael Connelly. (Grand Central) The third book in the Jack McEvoy series.	2
4	4	**HOME BODY,** by Rupi Kaur. (Andrews McMeel) Poems and illustrations by the author of "Milk and Honey" and "The Sun and Her Flowers."	13
5	13	**MILK AND HONEY,** by Rupi Kaur. (Andrews McMeel) A collection of poetry about love, loss, trauma and healing.	178
6	2	**THE DUKE AND I,** by Julia Quinn. (Avon) Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings.	7
7	6	**THE NIGHTINGALE,** by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's Griffin) Two sisters in World War II France: one struggling to survive in the countryside, the other joining the Resistance.	73
8	8	**THEN SHE WAS GONE,** by Lisa Jewell. (Atria) Ten years after her daughter disappears, a woman tries to get her life in order but remains haunted by unanswered questions.	83
9	5	**THE DUTCH HOUSE,** by Ann Patchett. (Harper Perennial) A sibling relationship is impacted when the family goes from poverty to wealth and back again over the course of many decades.	6
10	14	**THE GIRL FROM THE CHANNEL ISLANDS,** by Jenny Lecoat. (Graydon House) A Jewish woman living as a translator to Germans on one of the Channel Islands in 1940 develops a tentative friendship with a sympathetic German officer.	2
11	9	**CIRCE,** by Madeline Miller. (Back Bay) Zeus banishes Helios' daughter to an island.	36
12		**28 SUMMERS,** by Elin Hilderbrand. (Back Bay) A relationship that started in 1993 between Mallory Blessing and Jake McCloud comes to light while she is on her deathbed and his wife runs for president.	1
13	10	**EIGHT PERFECT MURDERS,** by Peter Swanson. (Morrow) A bookseller finds himself under the scrutiny of the F.B.I. when recent killings resemble his list of fiction's most unsolvable murders.	2
14	12	**THE ONLY GOOD INDIANS,** by Stephen Graham Jones. (Gallery/Saga) Four Native American men find themselves being tracked by an entity out for revenge.	2
15		**THE SEVEN HUSBANDS OF EVELYN HUGO,** by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Washington Square) A movie icon recounts stories of her loves and career to a struggling magazine writer.	3

Paperback Nonfiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Paperback Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE,** by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	121
2	2	**WHITE FRAGILITY,** by Robin DiAngelo. (Beacon) Historical and cultural analyses on what causes defensive moves by white people and how this inhibits cross-racial dialogue.	128
3	3	**THE BODY,** by Bill Bryson. (Anchor) An owner's manual of the human body covering various parts, functions and what happens when things go wrong.	3
4	6	**BRAIDING SWEETGRASS,** by Robin Wall Kimmerer. (Milkweed Editions) A botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation espouses having an understanding and appreciation of plants and animals.	44
5	4	**THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS,** by Isabel Wilkerson. (Vintage) An account of the Great Migration of 1915-70, in which six million African-Americans abandoned the South.	59
6	7	**BORN A CRIME,** by Trevor Noah. (One World) A memoir by the host of "The Daily Show."	105
7	12	**JUST MERCY,** by Bryan Stevenson. (One World) A civil rights lawyer and MacArthur grant recipient's memoir of his decades of work to free innocent people condemned to death.	241
8	15	**SAPIENS,** by Yuval Noah Harari. (Harper Perennial) How Homo sapiens became Earth's dominant species.	131
9	5	**MY OWN WORDS,** by Ruth Bader Ginsburg with Mary Hartnett and Wendy W. Williams. (Simon & Schuster) A collection of articles and speeches by the Supreme Court justice.	30
10	11	**THE NEW JIM CROW,** by Michelle Alexander. (New Press) A law professor on the "war on drugs" and its role in the disproportionate incarceration of Black men.	221
11	10	**SO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT RACE,** by Ijeoma Oluo. (Seal) A look at the contemporary racial landscape of the United States.	32
12	9	**THE COLOR OF LAW,** by Richard Rothstein. (Liveright) A case for how the American government abetted racial segregation in metropolitan areas across the country.	40
13	8	**ON TYRANNY,** by Timothy Snyder. (Tim Duggan) Twenty lessons from the 20th century about the course of tyranny.	83
14	13	**THE TRUTHS WE HOLD,** by Kamala Harris. (Penguin) A memoir by the daughter of immigrants who is currently serving as the 49th vice president.	19
15		**OUTLIERS,** by Malcolm Gladwell. (Back Bay/Little, Brown) Unexpected factors that explain why some people succeed.	328

Sales are defined as completed transactions between vendors and individual end users during the period on or after the official publication date of a title. Sales of titles are statistically weighted to represent and accurately reflect all outlets proportionally nationwide. The panel of reporting retailers is comprehensive and reflects sales in tens of thousands of stores of all sizes and demographics across the United States. **ONLINE:** For a full explanation of our methodology, visit **www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers.**

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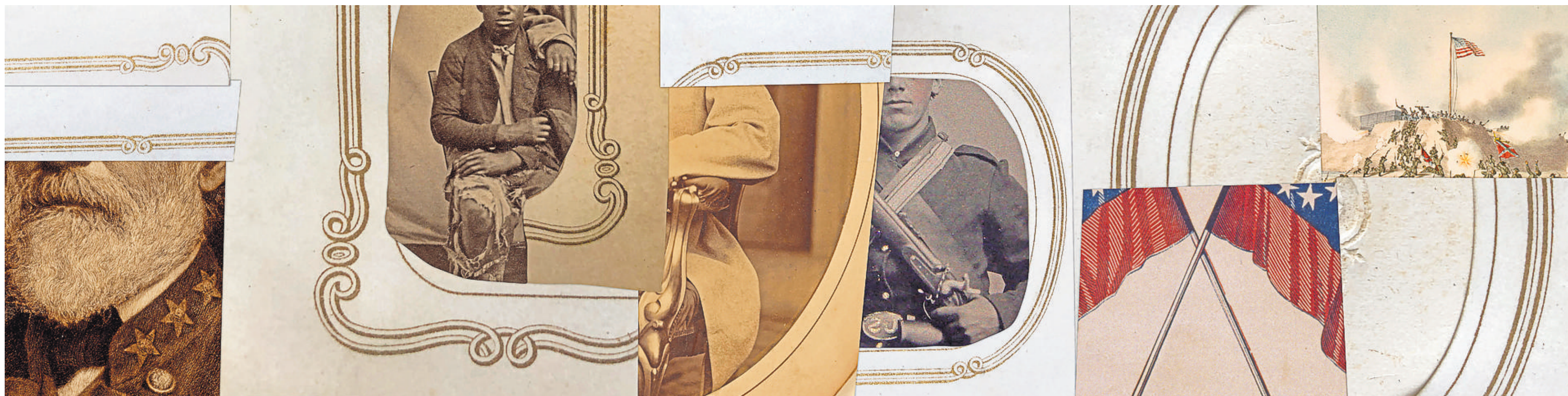
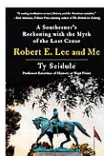
The Shortlist / Civil War-Era History / By Jane Dailey



ROBERT E. LEE AND ME
A Southerner's Reckoning With the Myth of the Lost Cause
By Ty Seidule
291 pp. St. Martin's. $27.99.



Long before the alt-right circled the statue of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville in 2017, Seidule, a retired brigadier general and professor emeritus of military history at West Point, set out to understand why his academy continued to display a portrait of Lee, a graduate of the school who resigned his Army commission to fight against his country.

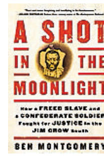
This investigation required that Seidule, a native Virginian and graduate of Washington and Lee University, examine his own reverence for Lee and the myth of the Lost Cause. The resulting book — part autobiography, part history — is a powerful and introspective look into white Americans' continuing romance with the Confederacy, and the lasting damage that has done.

The chapters follow Seidule's life, from his upbringing in Alexandria (which he later learned was a major slave-trading hub) and Monroe, Ga. (where a grisly 1946 quadruple lynching remains unsolved), to his Army career and years teaching at West Point. Along the way he explores Lost Cause ideology, which denies that slavery was the war's central motive; describes the pro-Confederate propaganda served to children in Southern schools in the 1960s and '70s; and illuminates the tortuous relationship between the U.S. Army and its greatest traitor.

The history of the Army's relationship to the Confederacy and Lee is fascinating, especially in light of current controversies over military bases named after Confederate commanders. After the Civil War, Seidule explains, West Point banished the Confederates from memory. The academy's postwar motto, "Duty, Honor, Country," was a rebuke to secession. Over the next century, however, Lee memorials began to appear. Seidule saw a pattern. Again and again, he says, progress toward integration and equal rights in the military was accompanied by Confederate memorialization.

The book's epilogue sets out the reason for Lee's treason: the protection of slavery. The evidence is clearly on Seidule's side. It is long past time to break Lee's grip on American Civil War memory. Seidule provides a blueprint for doing just that.

A SHOT IN THE MOONLIGHT
How a Freed Slave and a Confederate Soldier Fought for Justice in the Jim Crow South
By Ben Montgomery
Illustrated. 285 pp. Little, Brown/Spark. $28.



The breathless title tells it all. The shot in the moonlight was fired by George Dinning, an emancipated slave, in defense of his home and family in Simpson County, Ky., in 1897. Dinning's target was a mob that had congregated at his home and accused him of theft; his shot killed a white farmer, the scion of a wealthy local family. Dinning was spirited away by a civic-minded sheriff determined to prevent a lynching. Denied that satisfaction, the mob burned Dinning's house to the ground.

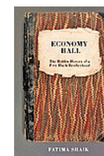
Although Kentucky remained in the United States during the Civil War, it was rived politically and plagued by guerrilla violence long past 1865. By the turn of the century, the state's white elite had grown impatient with mob violence, which marred its reputation and deterred investment. Kentucky's legislature passed an anti-lynching bill one month before Dinning stood trial for murder. Dinning could have been hanged, either by the mob or by the state. Instead, he was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to seven years in prison.

This sentence was too extreme for Gov. William Bradley, who pardoned Dinning, declaring that "the fair name of Kentucky" had been disgraced by mobs for too long. Noting that Dinning's conviction had been "procured almost entirely on the evidence of his assailants," Bradley also affirmed Dinning's defense: that he had fired into the mob only after it had fired on him, and that he acted solely to protect his family.

Dinning, aided by his lawyer, Bennett Young — a former Confederate soldier and humanitarian — went on to sue members of the mob for the destruction of his home. They won a noteworthy victory in the Kentucky courts.

Montgomery's claim that "a Black man in the South had sued his would-be lynchers and won" is overstated. It's not clear that the men who congregated at Dinning's home intended to lynch him, and the lawsuit centered on the burned house, not on personal assault. Even so, it's a good story, one that reveals the complicated history of the post-bellum South, a world that included brave freedmen, occasionally sympathetic white men and genuine commitment to law and order.

ECONOMY HALL
The Hidden History of a Free Black Brotherhood
By Fatima Shaik
Illustrated. 525 pp. The Historic New Orleans Collection. $34.95.



"Economy Hall" is so inviting that the true depth of its scholarship is revealed only in its bibliography, which lists dozens of archival and other sources. Shaik's monumental book is anchored in 24 handwritten ledgers rescued from the trash by her father years ago. Her painstaking translation of the ledgers, and re-creation of the world that produced them, transports you to the orbit of the Société d'Economie et d'Assistance Mutuelle, a benevolent association and social club begun in 1836 by 15 French-speaking freemen of African descent in New Orleans. The book is simultaneously a history of the men's iconic meeting place, Economy Hall, and of the city they called home.

Alexis de Tocqueville, commenting on Americans' propensity to form associations, called this "art of joining" the "fundamental science" of democracy. Shaik emphasizes the political activism of the New Orleans group. Whether refuting the claims of scientific racism, risking their lives for the right to vote or nurturing jazz and other forms of African-American culture, members of the Economie fought to participate in democratic life. Not all of their ventures achieved the desired outcome, as a coalition of New Orleans Black men that included a president of the Economie discovered in 1896, when the Supreme Court upheld Louisiana's separate train car law in Plessy v. Ferguson.

After 1900, the Economie "evolved from an elite to an inclusive society," Shaik writes. As segregation tightened across the South, the society was led by the son of a Black mother and a Jewish father and began to focus less on politics and more on culture, particularly jazz. Economie musicians shaped the new musical form, and Economy Hall became famous for its dance parties.

The book is organized around the life of Ludger Boguille, the group's long-serving secretary and a local leader of New Orleans's prosperous Creole community. A fierce advocate of Black suffrage, Boguille was nearly killed in 1866 when an armed mob led by police burst into a reconvened Louisiana constitutional convention. Boguille was also a teacher, who prescribed "radical kindness" for students and parents alike. The city of New Orleans is Boguille's co-star, and Shaik's rendition of her hometown is lyrical and mysterious and always captivating.

JANE DAILEY *is a professor of history at the University of Chicago and the author of "White Fright: The Sexual Panic at the Heart of America's Racist History."*

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GALL

WHEN IT'S TIME FOR SOME FUN AND GAMES

In this era of crossword puzzles, Words With Friends and The Times's own Spelling Bee, it's fascinating to look back at just how long the paper has been printing word games and literary quizzes. The very first ones did not appear in the Book Review but in The New York Times Sunday Magazine. One, from 1903, was called "Two Hundred Hidden Books" and took the form of two letters in which, yes, 200 book titles were concealed.

In 1945, in his tweedy column called "Speaking of Books," the Book Review's editor, J. Donald Adams, noted that his entire staff had just taken a difficult quiz in Harper's magazine called "Books Without Authors" in which readers were meant to name the authors of 16 books — "Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates," "The Swiss Family Robinson" and "Lorna Doone," to name just three. No one at the Book Review got more than nine right. "It is worth noting," Adams wrote, "that a fair proportion of the titles are those of children's books!" In later years, the Book Review printed a number of quizzes by the critic and editor Anatole Broyard, who clearly delighted in literary trivia. Some were fiendishly difficult; others — like this one from 1989 — a bit easier. □

Twelve Who Got Away

By Anatole Broyard

DRAWINGS BY STEVEN GUARNACCIA

While many characters in fiction are escaping, or trying to escape, from one situation or another, there are novels and stories in which the escape is more dramatic or climactic. The examples in this quiz are both physical and metaphorical escapes, drawn from best-selling books of the 19th and 20th centuries. Match each of the following escapes with its source, one of the 12 works listed alphabetically by author at far right.

1. When a mountain made of the world's hardest substance explodes, a pair of young lovers escape with a disappointing memento.

2. Aided by a handsome, heroic friend, a mentally retarded boy frees himself from a tyrannical schoolmaster.

3. A young man escapes, at least for the moment, from both conjugal and extramarital difficulties by simply running.

4. Fleeing over an unstable surface, a young woman and her child elude their cruel pursuers.

5. A restlessly romantic woman in an exotic country escapes, on horseback, from boredom to martyrdom.

6. When the semitropical culture he is visiting grows too hot for him, an anthropologist makes his getaway in an open boat.

7. Zipping, or unzipping, her way through Europe, a high-spirited young woman escapes the censure, and possibly envy, of her compatriots.

8. A rebellious ex-convict escapes his past and achieves a remarkable, even official, respectability — for a while.

9. A wife who is even more irrational than most married people escapes from a place of confinement and sets fire to the bed of the family's young governess.

10. A philosopher who escapes the Nazis in Poland and later kills a German soldier in single combat is unable to evade a different kind of ethnic confrontation in New York City.

11. A man who escapes a charging lion is not so lucky with his wife.

12. A World War II flier shot down in an air raid on Bologna, Italy, inflates his life raft and paddles his way to a more peaceful place.

a. Saul Bellow: "Mr. Sammler's Planet."
b. Charlotte Brontë: "Jane Eyre."
c. Charles Dickens: "Nicholas Nickleby."
d. F. Scott Fitzgerald: "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz."
e. Joseph Heller: "Catch-22." (1)
f. Ernest Hemingway: "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber."
g. Victor Hugo: "Les Misérables." (2)
h. Erica Jong: "Fear of Flying." (3)
i. D. H. Lawrence: "The Woman Who Rode Away."
j. Robert Stone: "A Flag for Sunrise."
k. Harriet Beecher Stowe: "Uncle Tom's Cabin."
l. John Updike: "Rabbit, Run." (4)

Answers to quiz on page 43.

Answers to Quiz

1, d
2, c
3, l
4, k
5, i
6, j
7, h
8, g
9, b
10, a
11, f
12, e

1 CATCH-22 "'Catch-22' has much passion, comic and fervent, but it gasps for want of craft and sensibility," the Book Review said in 1961. "Joseph Heller is like a brilliant painter who decides to throw all the ideas in his sketchbooks onto one canvas."

2 LES MISÉRABLES In 1862, The Times took note of a new translation of Victor Hugo's novel but did not review it, noting, "elsewhere we have paid some attention" to the original French edition, "the greatest romance of our day."

3 FEAR OF FLYING Today Erica Jong's debut — about free-wheeling sexual adventures of a poet named Isadora Wing — is regarded as a feminist classic, but in 1973, the Book Review's male critic complained about "the whining that gets in the way."

4 RABBIT, RUN "John Updike, still only 28 years old, is a man to watch," the Book Review decreed in 1960. It found this first Rabbit Angstrom novel a "tender and discerning study," but warned that some of the sexual details might "shock the prudish."

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