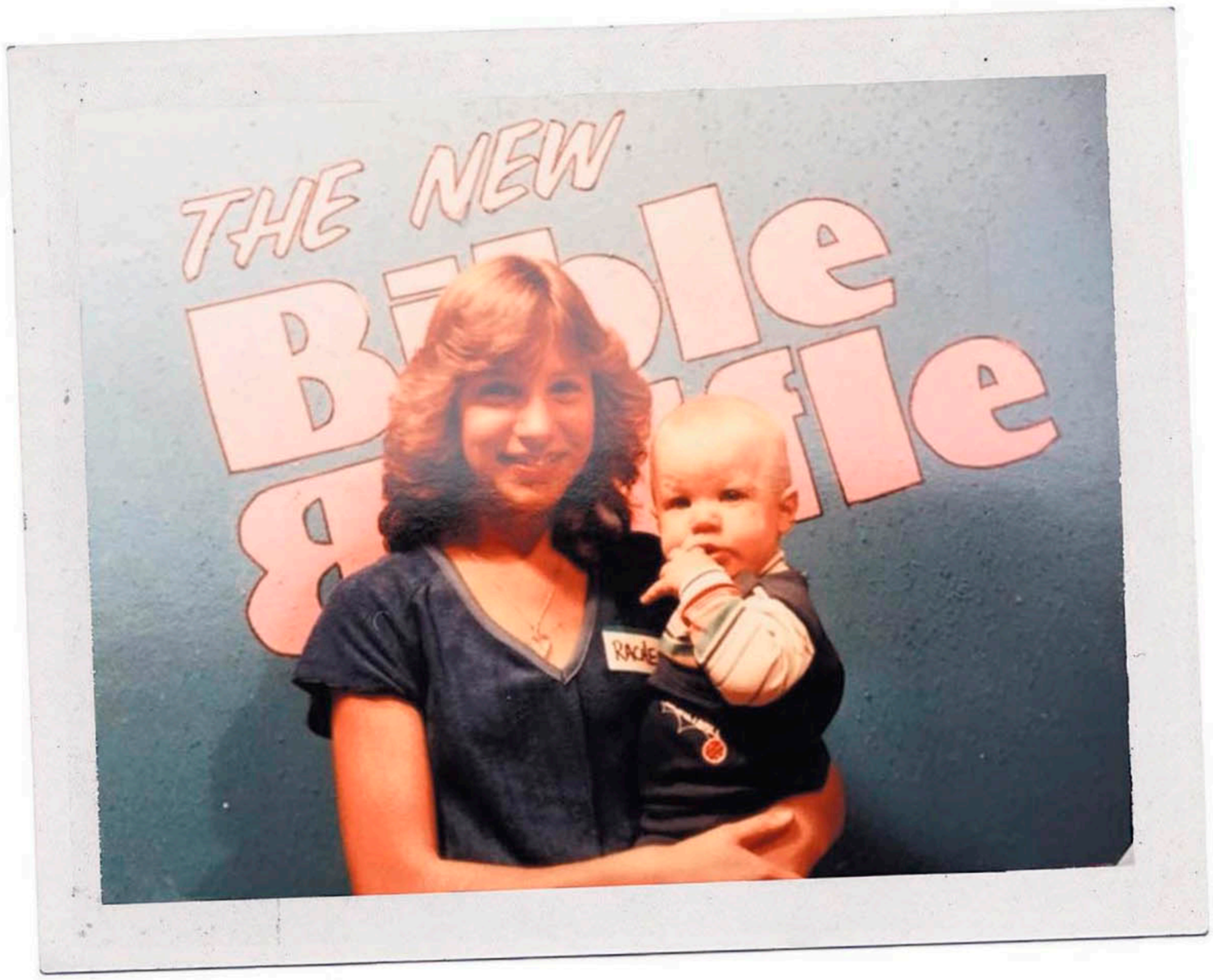
The New York Times
Book Review
JUNE 11, 2023



Prodigal Daughter

Rachel Louise Snyder lost her mother to cancer at 8 and was kicked out of her high school and her home at 16. "Women We Buried, Women We Burned" chronicles her quest to create a fulfilling life on her own terms.

BY JENNIFER SZALAI

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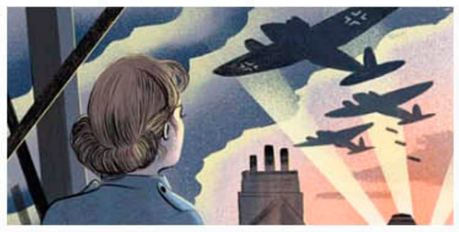

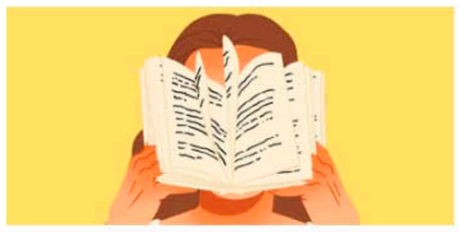

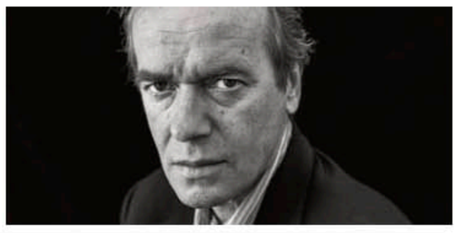

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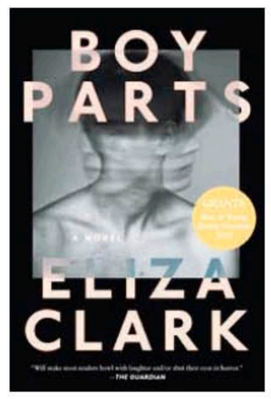
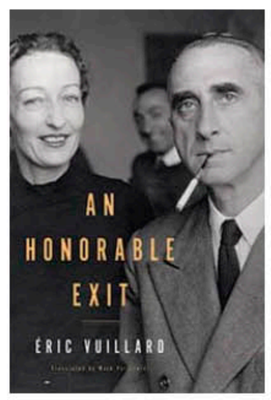
On the cover: The author Rachel Louise Snyder holding her baby brother on the set of a television game show, circa 1981. Photograph via Rachel Louise Snyder.

Newly Published



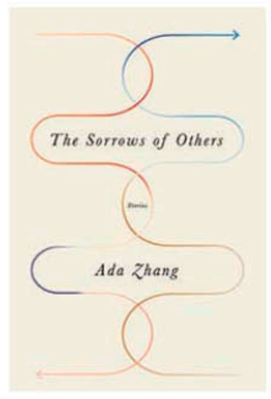
BOY PARTS, by Eliza Clark. (Harper Perennial, paperback, $18.99.) When a London gallery invites a stalled artist to display her erotic photographs of male vulnerability, the opportunity to revive her career prompts a spiral involving anxiety, drugs and plenty of violence.

COUSINS, by Aurora Venturini. Translated by Kit Maude. (Soft Skull, paperback, $17.95.) At turns morbid and darkly funny, Venturini's late masterpiece follows several women in La Plata, Argentina, in this story of misogyny, disability and art.



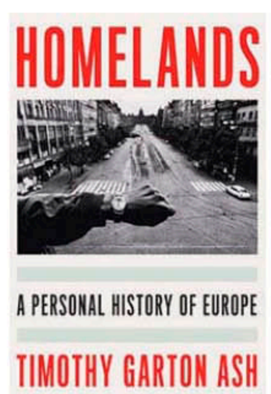
AN HONORABLE EXIT, by Éric Vuillard. Translated by Mark Polizzotti. (Other Press, $23.99.) Vuillard traces the final days of the First Indochina War in full color, sketching battles and exposing the greed and racism of financial institutions and the French elite in France's military defeat.

WHALE, by Cheon Myeong-Kwan. Translated by Chi-Young Kim. (Archipelago, paperback, $22.) This folklore-inspired novel follows three women across rural and coastal South Korea to tell a sweeping, Dickensian story of ambition, magic and folly.



THE SORROWS OF OTHERS, by Ada Zhang. (A Public Space, paperback, $18.) Through sharp and revelatory prose, Zhang's debut collection illustrates the alienation and complexities of Chinese and Chinese American life, with an eye on the legacy of the Cultural Revolution.

THE MEMORY OF ANIMALS, by Claire Fuller. (Tin House, $27.95.) During a deadly pandemic, a disgraced marine biologist enlists in an experimental vaccine trial. Isolated in a hospital, she encounters a powerful technology that allows her to relive her past.



HOMELANDS: A Personal History of Europe, by Timothy Garton Ash. (Yale University, $28.) Told through Garton Ash's personal reflections and his analyses of shifts in the political organization of the continent, this history explores the question of what it means to be European — if anything at all.

IN A FLIGHT OF STARLINGS: The Wonders of Complex Systems, by Giorgio Parisi. Translated by Simon Carnell. (Penguin Press, $24.) The Nobel Prize-winning physicist puts forth a collection of essays that range in topic from the motion of starling flocks to the importance of metaphor, which together celebrate the scientific method.

Letters

PS SPENCER

A Reiss Rendition

TO THE EDITOR:
Fittingly, PS Spencer's portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. (cover, May 28), based on a photograph by Robert W. Kelley, seems to have drawn inspiration from those by the German-born Winold Reiss (1886-1953), who arrived in the United States in 1913.

An exhibition held at the New-York Historical Society last year reminded us that Reiss was instrumental in portraying Harlem Renaissance intellectuals such as Alain Locke with keen attention to the sitters' physiognomy and subtle facial and hand gestures. Many of these portraits were first exhibited in 1925 at a branch of the New York Public Library on 135th Street, possibly the first major showing of Black portraits in the city.

Spencer kept the subject's background and torso blank — like Reiss often did — leaving the viewer to ponder the void between the sitter's hands and head.

TIMOTHY JAMES STANDRING
DENVER

Drab Vocab

TO THE EDITOR:
Regarding Ross Parker Simons's criticism of Joshua Cohen's use of four "obscure" words in his review of "Bruno Schulz," by Benjamin Balint (Letters, May 28): One writer's logophilia is another's logophobia. "Sfumato" belongs to the basic vocabulary of art history. "Ekphrasis" — the poetic description of a work in visual arts — is conventional in rhetoric and the name given to a popular genre in the 18th and 19th centuries, when it was spelled "ecphrasis." We can write "Anglophone" and "Francophone," but not "Polonophone"? Merriam-Webster Dictionary cites "claustral" as "cloisteral."

Some of the best American authors have been logophiles, as any five pages of "Moby-Dick" will demonstrate.

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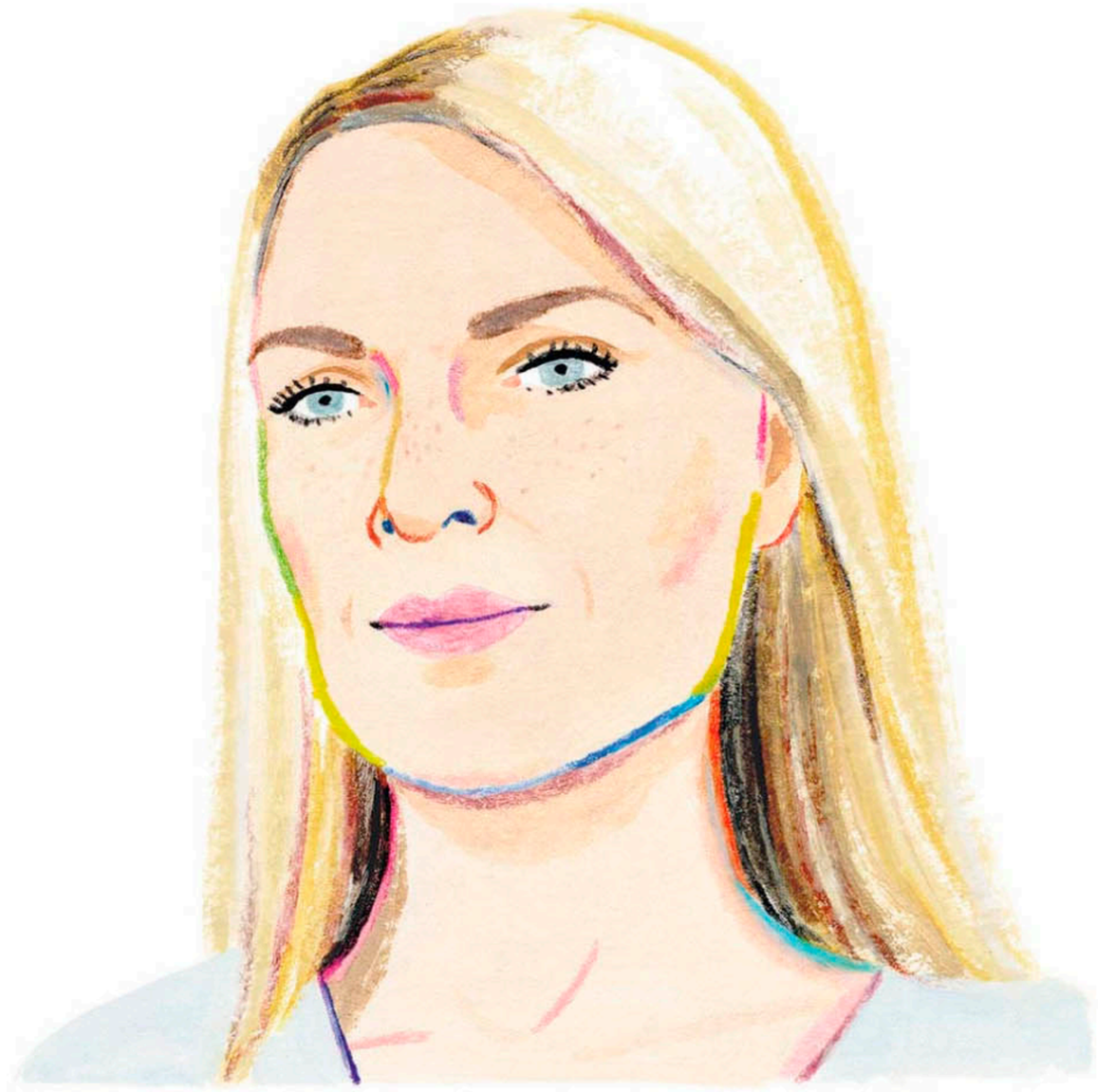
WHAT OUR READERS ARE READING

Marianne Nosuchinsky is reading **THE COVENANT OF WATER**, by Abraham Verghese: "Never have I so wanted to hug an author. This is truly literary fiction at its best."

"I'm reading **LESSONS**, by Ian McEwan, and am absolutely enthralled," writes Tim Buzzard. "For me this is a book to jump into and luxuriate in."

Christine Jensen is reading **NINE BLACK ROBES**, by Joan Biskupic: "I am reminded of Thomas Paine's words: 'A body of men [and women], holding themselves accountable to nobody, ought not to be trusted by anybody.'"

By the Book



Tess Gunty

The author, whose National Book Award-winning novel 'The Rabbit Hutch' will be out in paperback soon, says her family is surprised she reads physics books: 'They like to remind me that I am bad at science.'

What books are on your night stand?

I'll only include the ones I'm actively reading, or else this list will get rowdy: a collection of Russian fairy tales illustrated by Ivan Bilibin and curated by Gillian Avery; "Primeval and Other Times," by Olga Tokarczuk; "The Alignment Problem," by Brian Christian; "Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art," by Susan L. Aberth; "Biography of X," by Catherine Lacey; "Strangers to Ourselves," by Rachel Aviv; "Hurricane Season," by Fernanda Melchor; "The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem"; and "Poverty, by America," by Matthew Desmond.

What's the last book you read that made you cry?

"Calling a Wolf a Wolf," by Kaveh Akbar, specifically the penultimate poem: "I Won't Lie This Plague of Gratitude." Akbar alchemizes pain into beauty line after line, but it was an unexpected evocation of hope that made me cry. In this poem, the speaker is thunderstruck by a newfound "plague of gratitude." The speaker says: "Not long ago I was hard to even/hug ... I had to learn to love people one at a time/singing *hey diddle diddle will you suffer me/a little* ... now I am cheery/and Germanic like a drawer full/of strudel." Akbar's describing a small psychological sanctuary — a relief, permanent or fleeting, from everything that has haunted the speaker until now. The poem plunged me into that first miraculous flash of hope you enjoy after a long storm of bad brain chemistry. The moment you remember that it can be enjoyable to simply exist.

The last book that made you furious?

So many come to mind. I guess I'm often furious? I'm currently reading three impeccably researched works of nonfiction that are informing previously amorphous concerns. "Poverty, by America," by Matthew Desmond, investigates structurally engineered poverty. One of the many memorable facts that this book delineates is that America spends over twice as much on tax benefits for the upper class as it does on national defense. "Empire of Pain," by Patrick Radden Keefe, makes me enraged about the Sackler family, of course, but more generally about how vulnerable American health care and pharmaceutical systems are to bad actors — worse, poorly regulated capitalism incentivizes bad actors to do harm. "The Alignment Problem," by Brian Christian, makes me furious about the myopic tech boys currently pursuing immortality and godlike dominance by summoning the existential threat of A.I. into the world. They are facilitated by an absence of legal restrictions and the primeval excuse that if We don't do it first, They will.

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

My family is always shocked by how many books on neuroscience and quantum physics I've amassed. They like to remind me that I am bad at science. Probably most surprising is that I'm still under the delusion that I will someday read all 1,500 pages of "The Matter With Things," by Iain McGilchrist — a blend of neuroscience, metaphysics and epistemology about the hemispheres of the brain and the nature of consciousness. I think you start levitating as soon as you finish it.

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

When I graduated college, my good friend Alex gave me a beautiful, professionally bound copy of the novella I wrote for my thesis. He even got a mutual friend to blurb it. The novella itself is a catastrophe — a cluttered story about four characters from different centuries saddled with shared omniscient narration who meet in a Purgatory that resembles postindustrial Indiana. Eventually, it collapses into metafictional chaos. Flawed as the project is, I had transferred my 21-year-old spirit into its pages, and Alex knew that if I could hold a leatherbound copy of this effort in my hands, if I could see my name engraved in gold on the spine, some psychological chasm between the life I had and the life I wanted would begin to close. For years, as I submitted my fiction and accumulated rejections, losing faith that I would ever publish, I would catch a glimpse of this book on my shelf, and its presence would nourish me. It remains one of the most cherished gifts I've ever received. □

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

ILLUSTRATION BY REBECCA CLARKE

CRIME & MYSTERY / BY SARAH WEINMAN

Bloodlines

AMERICANS ARE fascinated by serial killers, and American culture usually depicts them in ways that play to this fascination. But doing so negates the truth: These murderers, while evil, are often fairly banal people who get caught because of their own errors, or stay uncaptured because of others' mistakes. So I approached the Norwegian author Victoria Kielland's novel **MY MEN (Astra House, 194 pp., $25)** with trepidation — especially given her aim to humanize the turn-of-the-20th-century serial killer Belle Gunness, who murdered and buried untold numbers on her Midwestern homestead before it was set aflame and she vanished.

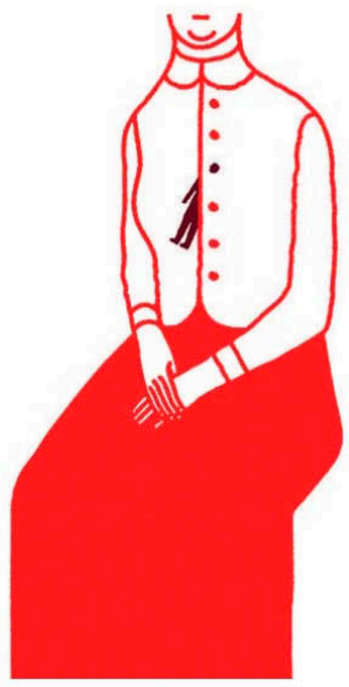
To my surprise, Kielland succeeds. "My Men," superbly translated by Damion Searls, is a portrait of a woman trying, and failing, to escape her punishing trajectory. Bit by bit, day by day, we see, and come to understand, what has made Belle Gunness a killer.

We meet her first as Brynhild Storset, a 17-year-old maid in Norway, miscarrying her baby after the father brutally kicks her in the stomach; then as Bella, a young, traumatized immigrant, realizing that "it was the same in America as in Norway — it didn't matter, the world didn't care about her"; and finally, stripped of hope, as obsessive, calculating, murderous Belle: "There was no one who reached out his arms for her and took care of her. And the longest movement of all was neither love nor desire, it was the butterfly wings in the garden, it was death, the eye always trying to make eye contact, the longest eternal flicker."

JAMES WOLFF'S prior espionage novels, "Beside the Syrian Sea" (2018) and "How to Betray Your Country" (2021) — the first two novels in his Discipline Files trilogy — were very good but not top-tier. However, **THE MAN IN THE CORDUROY SUIT (Bitter Lemon Press, 294 pp., paperback, $15.95),** the last book in the trilogy, establishes him as a memorable voice in the genre.

SARAH WEINMAN *is the Book Review's Crime & Mystery columnist.*

This status elevation owes much to Wolff's latest creation, the MI5 officer Leonard Flood, whose manner is brusque and rude (a superior once noted his "impressive ability to kneel on the bruise"). An outsize personality is required for the investigation he's tasked with, which involves spying on other spies suspected of working for the Russians, particularly a recently retired operative who may or may not have been



PABLO AMARGO

poisoned. It comes down to a single question, one with no easy answer: Who is worth the loyalty that people — and governments — extend?

"Some spies are all about warmth, others are a blast of cold Arctic air." The same description applies equally to Wolff's prose, all sharp edges and abrupt surprises, keeping the reader in a state of edgy discomfort.

THE TITLE of Katie Siegel's rollicking debut, **CHARLOTTE ILLES IS NOT A DETECTIVE (Kensington, 372 pp., paperback, $16.95),** is both truth and misnomer. Sure, Charlotte isn't a detective now. She's 25, living at home, stuck in suburban New Jersey on a merry-go-round of failed job applications and tepid dates. But back when she was a child, Charlotte was a mystery-solving legend, taking cases through her trusty blue landline.

Then one day Charlotte's phone rings again (her mom kept it working, just in case). Turns out it's her brother: Can she figure out who is stalking his girlfriend and leaving her creepy notes? Initially, Charlotte balks, but her resistance slowly melts away as her old sleuthing skills return — until, that is, someone goes missing and the case takes a turn. Unlike the mysteries of her childhood, this one involves an actual dead person.

Siegel, who created Charlotte Illes as a TikTok character, has a lot of story to work with, though she can't quite sustain it; the pacing bogs down in the middle. Even so, Charlotte is a delight. When a date says she used to think of Charlotte as a "mini Sherlock Holmes," Charlotte deadpans, "Yep, just a 10-year-old solving mysteries and doing cocaine."

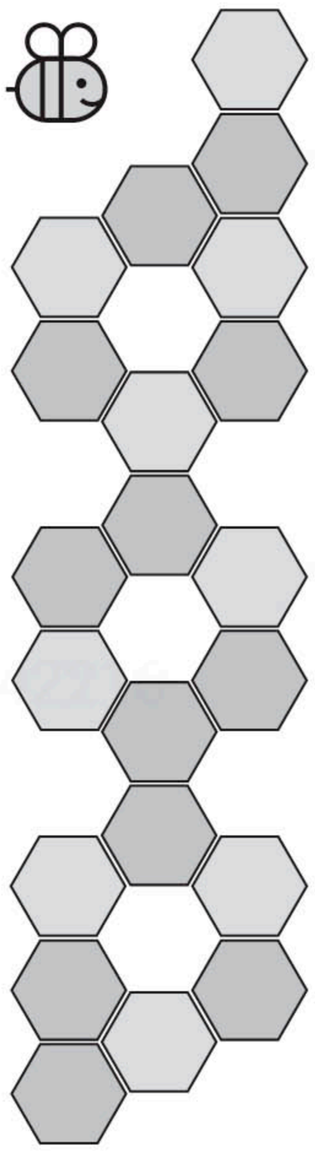
FINALLY, FAIR WARNING for those embarking on Michael McGarrity's new novel, **THE LONG AGO (Norton, 364 pp., $28.95)**: There are crimes aplenty; disappearances voluntary and involuntary; and all manner of violence, individual and state-sanctioned. But this, McGarrity's first stand-alone after a western trilogy and the earlier Kevin Kerney series, is more family saga than crime novel — one I adored without reservation, and inhaled in a single sitting.

The Lansdale siblings, Ray and Barbara, survived instability, absent parents and other childhood losses by retreating into a shared utopian fantasy they called "the Long Ago."

Escaping reality isn't as easy when you become an adult, though. In the early 1960s, Ray, once shiftless and wayward, finds purpose in the Army as the Vietnam War looms large, while Barbara flees their Livingston, Mont., hometown, and no one seems to know where she is. Ray, home on leave, wants to find her.

"People who decide to voluntarily disappear — if that's what really happened with her — usually want to keep it that way," the sheriff warns him.

But Ray takes the words of another cop to heart: "We all lose people, Ray. Sometimes you can't do a damn thing about it, sometimes you can." □



Where Everybody Knew Your Name

An author pays tribute to an unlikely institution and the community it sustained.

By TIM SULTAN

"A FRIEND TO ME has no race, no class and belongs to no minority," said Frank Sinatra. "My friendships are formed out of affection, mutual respect and a feeling of having something in common. These are eternal values that cannot be classified." These words ran through my head as I read "Last Call at Coogan's," Jon Michaud's book about the life and times of a venerated Washington Heights pub that shuttered in 2020. It might have been the motto of Coogan's — a spot that may have resembled an Irish tavern of the sort found from Mumbai to Manhattan, but was a unique place, ecumenical in outlook and bigheartED in practice.

LAST CALL AT COOGAN'S
The Life and Death of a Neighborhood Bar
By Jon Michaud
Illustrated. 306 pp. St. Martin's Press. $29.

Coogan's opened in 1985, in northern Manhattan's heavily Dominican enclave of Washington Heights, at the onset of one epidemic — crack — and closed during another. In its brief life, Coogan's became a landmark as vital to the health of a diverse neighborhood as the nearby hospital, here cast by Michaud as something of a property-hungry villain whose brazen rent demands would have put the bar out of business far sooner had it not been for its championing by the writer and actor Lin-Manuel Miranda, a regular, and the late New York Times reporter Jim Dwyer.

Cool in the summer, warm in the winter, Coogan's was a reliably comforting sanctuary: that clean, well-lit place of collective imagination where one is as likely to take one's mistress as one's mother-in-law. Operated by benevolent, civic-minded people, Coogan's was supportive of the arts, hosted runners from around the world for the bar's celebrated annual 5K race, maintained neutrality during police-civilian conflicts while providing a meeting ground for both sides, and had ace karaoke singers to boot. Simply by being there, Coogan's changed people's minds about other cultures.

Favorite bars are a matter of personal taste, and I confess that from Michaud's depiction, however loving, I would not have naturally been drawn to Coogan's. (This is to my discredit, not his — I have long held the view that bars are best when operated by retired fighters or artists, my own introduction having been the late Slugger Ann, the eponymous brawlers' dive in the East Village, when I was 12). Coogan's, by contrast, was named after a local rock formation and opened by lifelong restaurateurs and an investment group of hospital administrators. There were televisions often turned to sports — a misstep (in my opinion) that few establishments overcome. Enough politicians held court at Coogan's that it was known as Uptown City Hall.

By Michaud's account, the patrons of Coogan's were mostly respectable and even-keeled. No one ever seemed to misbehave. My biases might have prevented me from being "Cooganized," as one regular put it — that is, converted from skeptic to devotee. After all, one must put in the time for a person or a place to reveal its splendors. And for Coogan's to matter to so many people from so many backgrounds, it seems to have deserved real commitment.

Michaud, a novelist, has the perspective of both the insider and the outsider, having married into a Dominican family, and into the neighborhood. His interest is personal and it shows. Descriptions of history and boundary lines, community affairs and social unrest are given as much time as the highly granular accounts of the day-to-day demands of restaurant ownership, rent negotiations and employee relations. We learn perhaps more than we need to know about the succession of the bar's owners, as well as the succession of leaders of the Dominican Republic.

There are many names in this book. Hundreds — and most don't reappear. While this serves to show the breadth of the author's research, it does less for the book's depth. A note on sourcing makes it clear that a good deal of the material was gathered through interviews, often by phone during the pandemic. This may have been beyond the author's control, but feels limiting. We may learn that so-and-so met his spouse at Coogan's, or such and such political disagreement was brokered over corned beef, but we never learn what makes one person tick, and another a ticking time bomb — the principal social reasons to spend time in a bar.

Michaud only introduces his presence at Coogan's in an afterword, revealing that he first visited in 1998 and, although he later moved to New Jersey, Coogan's served as his refuge whenever he returned. From these few pages of more personal writing, one has the sense of an earnest, inquisitive and genial customer, if not someone who kept his internal stenographer on call at all hours of the night.

Not every chronicler of a bar need be a night owl, barfly or firebug, and once the reader sets aside the expectation that this will be another addition to that well-trodden genre, one has in hand an ambitious overview of the forces that batter the individual as they do the collective: gentrification, homogeneity, displacement.

Nostalgia is a wasted emotion, while memory defines us, a shrink once told me between beers. No doubt for a long time to come, there will be those who, walking by Coogan's unlit, rain-streaked storefront, will feel something deeper than a pang. □

The writer and actor Lin-Manuel Miranda gets a drink in 2014 with his mother, Luz Towns-Miranda, left; his father, Luis Miranda; and his wife, Vanessa Nadal, at Coogan's restaurant.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE SANDERS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

TIM SULTAN *is the author of "Sunny's Nights: Lost and Found at a Bar on the Edge of the World."*

Prodigal Daughter

Rachel Louise Snyder's memoir chronicles her unstable childhood and quest to create a fulfilling life on her own terms.

By JENNIFER SZALAI

Snyder's mother, Gail Margery Lee, in the late 1950s, left, and Snyder in the mid-1980s.

WOMEN WE BURIED, WOMEN WE BURNED
A Memoir
By Rachel Louise Snyder
Illustrated. 256 pp. Bloomsbury Publishing. $29.

BEFORE RACHEL LOUISE SNYDER settled on the subject of her previous book, "No Visible Bruises: What We Don't Know About Domestic Violence Can Kill Us" (2019), she says she believed "all the common assumptions" about domestic violence: that such harm was private, separable from the harm done to strangers; that shelters usually offered an adequate solution for victims; and that if the brutality became unbearable, a victim could just leave.

After all, Snyder had left. As she recalls in her new memoir, "Women We Buried, Women We Burned," she was 16 when her father and stepmother lined up four suitcases by the front door and informed Snyder, her older brother and her two older stepsiblings that they were no longer welcome in their suburban Chicago home. For half a dozen years in the 1980s, Snyder and her siblings had been expected to submit to a strict evangelical upbringing on pain of physical punishment. Discipline involved long conversations and lectures on proper behavior, as her father read passages from the Bible. Then the children would assume their positions, leaning over and waiting for the hard smack of the paddle, as if they were objects on "an assembly line."

Getting kicked out brought Snyder a reprieve while also introducing new troubles. She remembers "careening between terror and elation." She had already been expelled from the high school she had barely attended, obtaining a G.P.A. of 0.467. What followed were years when she slept on couches and in her car while working multiple jobs, a couple of them at the same time. Her memoir recounts a premature coming-of-age, when necessity forced her to gain independence while knowing nothing about actual freedom.

She would eventually get her G.E.D., go to college and then to graduate school; a generous uncle helped her spend a semester at sea, where she could see that the world was much bigger than the confines of an evangelical childhood. For a stretch of six years she was a journalist based in Cambodia. She fell in love and had a daughter while living abroad, finding support in an intentional family of friends she has known now for 30 years.

This is in many ways an inspirational book, but I wouldn't call it a comforting one. Snyder would never succumb to the pretty idea that suffering makes a person stronger. What she does describe — vividly and powerfully — is how, instead of responding to relentless hardship by building a protective carapace against the world, she was determined to open herself up to possibility. As a journalist, she wrote about atrocities and disasters, refugees and child brides: "Slowly, I was learning of the bottomless capacity for both human cruelty and human survival." She wanted to understand what people do in order to get by.

Her memoir is bookended by death — and also by life, since Snyder observes the world with both an unsparing eye and a generous spirit. Losing her mother is the event she remembers as setting a long catastrophe in motion. Her mother was beautiful, sophisticated, loving and Jewish; she died of breast cancer when Rachel was 8, after which all the bad things — her father's remarriage; his rigid evangelicalism; the routine and ritualized violence — began.

Almost four decades later, Snyder's stepmother, Barbara, was dying of colorectal cancer. "I'm sorry it's happening to both of you again," she said to Snyder and her father. Snyder was moved and struck by this. "What kind of grace was it to have someone apologize for her possible death?"

By that time, Snyder had reconciled with her father and Barbara, deciding not to foreclose the possibility of her daughter having a relationship with them. Although the reconciliation was real, it wasn't the same as exoneration. "I want to say that my parents did the best they could under the circumstances and with the resources they had," Snyder writes. "But I don't think this is true. I don't think they did their best."

Still, she understands that her love for her daughter entails relinquishing some control. "Didn't love ultimately mean you let go, let a person decide for herself, even if you disagreed?" Snyder writes this in a passage about how fearful and controlling her father was. But over time she has learned to see him whole — evidence that is humanizing, even if it isn't exculpatory. Her father "was authoritarian *and* loving, inflexible *and* hilarious," she writes. "Far from being paradoxical, I eventually understood that we all embody these extremes."

Getting kicked out brought Snyder a reprieve while also introducing new troubles. She remembers 'careening between terror and elation.'

Instead of getting trapped in the familiar impasse of either/or, Snyder thinks in terms of ands. This expansiveness is of a piece with her writing on domestic violence, which points out how the tendency to reach for simplistic binaries — punishment versus rehabilitation; mental health treatment versus gun laws — ends up endangering victims. Addressing a problem that is so tangled and entrenched requires more than the easy presumption that a single solution (that happens to dovetail with one's political preferences) is obviously the right one, to the exclusion of others. As Snyder put it in a 2022 essay, "We need to have not merely one answer but many."

Her memoir can be read as the story of how she came to a parallel realization in her own life. As Snyder tended to her dying stepmother, she learned that Barbara's first husband had abused her. "My father, in comparison, was saintly," Snyder writes. She witnesses up close her father's endless patience with Barbara's needs, how "exhaustive" he is "in his care." But he is also somebody who subscribes to asinine (and dangerous) ideas about medicine, insisting that Barbara be "treated" by an "alternative oncologist" (a former pediatrician with multiple malpractice suits on his record) and sneaking vitamin C and sugar water into her IV line.

All of this is hard to reconcile, but Snyder's memoir shows how one might — must — live amid multiple truths. During her time in Phnom Penh, she lived not far from Tuol Sleng, the horrific prison at the center of the Cambodian genocide. During the day, tourists visited the prison's museum. At night, the place turned into a parking garage. "There was the horror and the memory, there were the ghosts and the darkness," she says, "but there was also the absolute utilitarian need to go on." □

JENNIFER SZALAI *is the nonfiction book critic for The Times.*

PHOTOGRAPHS VIA RACHEL LOUISE SNYDER

Town, Gown and Down

Brandon Taylor's novel moves among Iowa City residents on the brink.

By ALEXANDRA JACOBS

Brandon Taylor

THE LATE AMERICANS
By Brandon Taylor
320 pp. Riverhead Books. $28.

READING BRANDON TAYLOR'S new novel, "The Late Americans," I thought more than once of the Bad Sex in Fiction Award that the English magazine Literary Review gave to decades of authors, many esteemed, before showing mercy in pandemic-chilled 2020. Not because the sex in Taylor's novel is described badly, but because — described well! — so much of it is *bad*.

"Like yelling at the top of your lungs into a vast open field," thinks one character who's sleeping with his closeted, trucker-cap-wearing and sometimes violent landlord, Bert, in exchange for an occasional rent discount.

Another, a ballet dancer turned finance student whose live-in pianist boyfriend is cheating on him with a married man, records himself masturbating for an OnlyFans-type site. "There was no pleasure in it," he thinks. "There was nothing in it at all, except the satisfaction afterward of having moved." (It probably doesn't enhance the eroticism that some of the proceeds will go to his parents.)

Sex between two male friends, on a "soiled and sullen mattress," ends in angry words and a broken bisque bowl.

Erections fail, or fail to manifest entirely. S.T.I. status isn't communicated in a timely manner. And in a brilliantly sardonic opening scene set at something strongly resembling the Iowa Writers' Workshop — the elite program from which Taylor got his M.F.A. — poetry scholars argue over the comparison of drying menstrual blood on a comforter, post-intercourse, to a stain on the Gorgon Medusa's robes after her decapitation.

The women in the class find the metaphor deeply powerful. A male student, Seamus, thinks it — and the general atmosphere of pretension and victimhood in the seminar — so ridiculous he vows to write a retaliatory poem called "Gorgon's Head." Forget feelings; this is literature. A higher calling.

Also set in and around the groves of academe, Taylor's first novel, "Real Life" (2020), was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, but the collection of linked short stories that followed, "Filthy Animals" (2021), was arguably stronger. Debuting with the novel, he told MJ Franklin of The New York Times, was "so that people will let me write short stories in peace." And you can feel this favored form under the novel-skin of "The Late Americans," like kittens kicking around in a catsuit.

The pick of the litter is probably the problematic Seamus, who despairs at how terms like "*witness* and *legacy of violence* and *valid*" transform class into "a tribunal for war crimes." (And what about "problematic," which makes math of art?) Maker of the bisque and breaker of the bowl, he works in a hospice kitchen to help pay for his education, and has his own unpleasant sexual encounter with Bert, whose father is dying there. But just when the reader's gotten invested in Seamus, he disappears for over 60 pages.

Taking up the narrative baton are the finance and piano students, Ivan and Goran, and two other dancers, Daw and Noah. Also Fyodor, employed at a meatpacking plant and probably ill-fatedly dating a vegetarian and logician, Timo, who is opposed to the slaughter of animals but supports the death penalty for mass shooters. Painters and others flit into the mix.

A flow chart would be handy to keep track of all the overlapping relationships, career changes and ethnicities here; some gown, some town, some teetering in between. Yet the arbitrariness of opportunity and vocation — who gets to make art? who has to dig ditches? — is clear and pointed. Fyodor brings a sculptor's sensibility to cuts of beef; Ivan goes from broke to a boundless future in New York in the bright flicker of an email.

Female characters are fewer and more peripheral, though two arrive with force: Fatima, yet another dancer, who chafes at her barista side job and suffers an unwanted pregnancy; and Bea, one of Noah's neighbors, who was abused by her father, a sturgeon farmer who would "pinch her breasts quite hard and make a sound like a goose."

She teaches swimming to poor children and, in her spare time, carves fingers out of fiberboard. Older than the various students, she seems to be visiting from another book. (Her encounter with a bloody fingerprint in a playground gave me the same kind of shiver I got from Truman Capote's classic short story "Miriam.")

AS THE TITLE SUGGESTS, "The Late Americans" is suffused with nihilism: a sense of a society nearing its end. The hospice patients are obsessed with the extinction of tortoises and other species. The ash trees of Iowa City, planted to replace elms felled by Dutch elm disease, are now succumbing in turn. The young adults struggle in a gig economy, weighed down by student loans or the guilt of trust funds, fantasizing about law school. To Goran, money falls "like dust or snow, floating down in great tufts from his parents and grandparents." To Fatima, it's "like an animal, changeful and anxious, ready to flee or bite."

Along with "the scraggly vapor of marijuana," the financial crisis of 2008 continues to hang like a toxic doom cloud over these aspirants. "The whole world was just a series of nested shell games involving dwindling sums of money," Timo thinks, "everyone a little worse off than the person next to them, until you got to the very bottom, where some people had nothing at all."

Taylor has written a bleak book with flashes of beauty, circling a hothouse of young people on the brink of transplantation into the harsh outside world. His ear for dialogue is exquisitely sensitive. Even if he calls it a novel, I hope he's working on a play. □

ALEXANDRA JACOBS *is a book critic for The Times and the author of "Still Here: The Madcap, Nervy, Singular Life of Elaine Stritch."*

PHOTOGRAPH BY HAOLUN XU

Twisted Tragedy

A journalist investigates a saga of death that occurred in Nebraska during the racial unrest after the killing of George Floyd.

By ANDY KROLL

A WRITER NEEDS DISTANCE to make sense of turbulent times, to sift right from wrong and see the larger meaning. We're only now beginning to grapple with the events of 2020, an epochal year in modern American history, up there with 1941, 1968 and 2001. Some of the first books to examine that year have set a high bar. "His Name Is George Floyd," by the journalists Robert Samuels and Toluse Olorunnipa, captured the crushing force of American racism through a meticulous biography of the man whose killing at the hands of a police officer led to nationwide racial protests. The New Yorker writer Luke Mogelson's "The Storm Is Here" embedded readers in the far-right backlash to Black Lives Matter, Covid safety measures and Donald J. Trump's election defeat, culminating in the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

THE LOST SONS OF OMAHA
Two Young Men in an American Tragedy
By Joe Sexton
376 pp. Scribner. $30.

"The Lost Sons of Omaha," by the journalist Joe Sexton, examines a different tragedy, one that briefly made national headlines and then slipped under the endless waves of breaking news. On May 30, 2020, five days after George Floyd's murder, the lives of Jake Gardner, a white bar owner and Marine veteran, and James Scurlock, a Black protester and new father, collided. As in many cities, protests had convulsed Omaha that summer. As demonstrators marched in the streets, Gardner texted a fellow ex-Marine that he planned to spend the night "sitting fire watch" — military lingo for guard duty — at his bar, the Gatsby. Gardner, who was joined by his father and a business partner, watched from inside his bar as vandals smashed its windows. Then, the three men moved outside.

What happened next would become the subject of intense dispute. Sexton describes a tense scene: Standing in front of his son's bar, the elder Gardner shoved a man who was filming protesters damaging a neighboring business. Later, online anonymous accounts would claim, without proof, that the father had uttered racial slurs. A protester responded by body-checking Gardner's father to the ground. Gardner confronted the protesters, told them to leave and flashed a gun tucked into his waistband. A young woman grabbed Gardner and they fell into the street. Gardner fired several shots. Then, Scurlock, 22 years old, rushed in. He put Gardner in a chokehold, trying, as Scurlock's defenders would later say, to disarm him. As the two men struggled, Gardner, who would later say he feared for his life, reached for his gun, pointed it behind him and fired a single shot, killing Scurlock.

Within hours, dueling versions of events took shape. Racial-justice activists, local politicians and even Gardner's distant family members pointed to Gardner's public support for President Donald J. Trump and his criticism of Black Lives Matter and called him a "Nazi sympathizer" who had murdered an innocent Black man in cold blood. Social media sites lit up with false claims and wild-eyed conspiracy theories about Gardner. Conservative media, for its part, fixated on Scurlock's criminal record and championed Gardner's cause, while online trolls celebrated Scurlock's death, labeling him a "punk kid who demanded a nomination to the Darwin Awards." The local district attorney — who was white — infuriated Omaha's Black community by declining to charge Gardner, saying he had acted in self-defense, only for a special prosecutor — who was Black — to convene a grand jury investigation that then indicted Gardner for crimes including manslaughter and assault. He faced up to 95 years in prison if found guilty. Hours before Gardner was set to turn himself in, he shot himself in the head.

Were it not for Joe Sexton, the saga of Jake Gardner and James Scurlock would most likely have ended there, a dizzying tragedy shrouded in a fog of misinformation and conflicting accounts of what happened. Sexton, a former reporter and editor at The New York Times and ProPublica (where I was later hired; he left before I arrived), was drawn to the story of Gardner and Scurlock "by the possibility that what was a terrible tragedy had somehow been twisted into a tainted morality play," he writes. "That both Gardner and Scurlock, each of whom would lose his life, had been reduced to pawns at a moment of raw hurt and suspicion in a hopelessly divided America."

Above: Marchers walk along an Omaha street during a rally to remember James Scurlock. Below: Flowers left as a memorial to Scurlock in the location where he was killed.

IT'S A STALE CLICHÉ to call this country "hopelessly divided," true as it may be. Thankfully, that's one of Sexton's few missteps in this book. Through dogged reporting and clear prose, "The Lost Sons of Omaha" elevates a made-for-social-media tragedy into a kaleidoscopic account of race, justice and urban politics, the legacy of our forever wars and the flaws of our legal system. Sexton worked hard to win the trust of people close to Gardner and Scurlock, and his depiction of the two men deepens our understanding of their lives, whether it's the physical toll Gardner suffered during his deployments in Iraq or the crushing segregation of Omaha that shaped not just James Scurlock but his entire family. Sexton directly confronts those who spread lies and hyperbole and makes them answer for their words. And he unearths damning details about the first prosecutor, who did not indict Gardner, and raises the possibility that the investigation led by the second prosecutor, who did, relied on witness intimidation and unethical conduct. (The prosecutor declined to respond to Sexton about these claims.) There are few heroes in "Lost Sons," but Sexton ensures that all parties get a chance to tell their side of the story.

There is, at times, a documentary-like quality to "Lost Sons." It works when Sexton gives a blow-by-blow account of the online misinformation that spread after Gardner shot Scurlock, and when he describes the callous treatment Scurlock faced as a teenager encountering the criminal justice system for the first time. But I grew weary from reading page after page of long block quotes drawn from police reports, eulogies or press statements. That's mostly because Sexton himself is an assured narrator, a steady hand through a challenging story.

The best stories complicate rather than simplify the world. "The Lost Sons of Omaha" is a searing reminder that reality can't be reduced to a hashtag or a sound bite; it's messy, unpredictable and resistant to easy answers. By telling their stories in the fullest way possible, Sexton does justice to James Scurlock and Jake Gardner in a way no court of law or court of public opinion ever could. □

ANDY KROLL *is a journalist for ProPublica and the author of "A Death on W Street: The Murder of Seth Rich and the Age of Conspiracy."*

PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM TOP: CHRIS MACHIAN/OMAHA WORLD-HERALD, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS; WALKER PICKERING FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Out of the Ashes

A new book traces the history of Greenwood, Okla., from its prosperous early days through the 1921 race massacre and its aftermath.

By MARCIA CHATELAIN

IF YOU HAVE TRIED to clean a fireplace or, worse, had to scatter the cremated remains of a loved one, you probably held your breath. You didn't want to inhale any of the grayish particles that surrounded you. But ash is strong stuff. It adheres to your skin, finds its way into your nasal passages and clings to your clothes as stubbornly as cheap Christmas tree tinsel. Ash — whether on a hearth or in an urn — beckons you to remember what once was and taunts you because it will never be again.

In his absorbing new book, "Built From the Fire: The Epic Story of Tulsa's Greenwood District, America's Black Wall Street," Victor Luckerson combs through layers of soot and ash, the physical and psychological residue of the Tulsa race massacre, which continues to haunt the city's Black community more than a century after it occurred.

Over the course of two days in the spring of 1921, Tulsa's Greenwood district was destroyed and hundreds of its residents were killed. Heralded as a model of Black entrepreneurial success and self-determination in the Jim Crow era, Greenwood became a target of violence when a rumor spread that Dick Rowland, a Black teenager, had sexually assaulted a white woman in an elevator. A show of force by Greenwood men to prevent Rowland from being lynched escalated into an all-out attack on Black Tulsans by white vigilantes, who in some cases had been handed arms by the police. As Luckerson recounts, "More than 1,200 houses were leveled, nearly every business was burned to the ground and an unknown number of people — estimates reach as high as 300 — were killed."

Luckerson, a journalist based in Tulsa, adeptly takes us through Greenwood's history, resisting the impulse to glorify its founders or endorse the idea that more Black-owned businesses can repair the ravages of racial capitalism. Instead, he introduces a bevy of figures who, seeking escape from the post-Reconstruction South, went to Tulsa in the early 1900s and helped establish Greenwood as the "Eden of the West."

The seemingly unfettered opportunity in the new state of Oklahoma drew unabashed capitalists, confidence men, industrious wives and loyal mothers to what had formerly been known as Indian Territory,inhabited by a confluence of Indigenous peoples native to the region and tribes forcibly dispatched there. The goal was to create "a haven for the burgeoning Black middle class . . . where land could still be claimed, wealth still built, political power still secured, even as the nation turned its back on the bloody freedoms brokered during the Civil War."

Among the early Black settlers was Alexander George Washington Sango, who "claimed to be a descendant of African royalty" and eventually ruled the Black section of Muskogee, not far from Tulsa. He leveraged his membership in the Creek Nation — his mother had arrived in the area with the Creeks in the 1830s — to acquire valuable parcels of land. Sango was so rich that he chartered "private Pullman cars," which exempted him from the indignities of a "colored only" train seat. Sango's "specialized cars featured dark walnut walls and plush upholstery, along with chandeliers that cast a warm glow on every inch of brass metalwork," Luckerson writes.

We also get to know J.B. Stradford, a hotelier and "Tulsa city father" whose business portfolio allegedly included "a dice game" that operated out of his pool hall, and who was branded a "professional gambler and booze dispenser" by a white newspaper. Stradford countered that he was a respectable philanthropist and real estate investor, yet Luckerson reveals that underground economies also helped fill Greenwood's coffers.

Most of the district was owned and operated by men, but Luckerson includes Loula Williams, a savvy businesswoman who ran a confectionary and later built one of the finest movie houses in the country, the 850-seat Dreamland Theater. Yet the bulk of Luckerson's book focuses on descendants of two of Greenwood's most prominent residents: J.H. and Carlie Goodwin, who "sought success with a patient vigor" after migrating to Greenwood from Water Valley, Miss.

In Water Valley, J.H., a former railroad brakeman, had leveraged his position with the railroad (rare for a Black man at the time) and an ability to broker connections into a series of commercial ventures in the white part of town. For people already established in business, moving to Tulsa promised fewer negotiations with white authorities and a degree of insulation from the humiliation that nearly all interracial contact entailed. J.H.'s grandson Jim Goodwin, a lawyer, still publishes The Oklahoma Eagle, the weekly that his father, Edward, purchased in 1937.

LUCKERSON IS VIGILANT about the class stratification and government neglect that enveloped this Black Wall Street: Beyond a "pocket of affluence," he writes, "Greenwood was a sea of frame buildings, shacks, tents and rickety outhouses, stitched together by a braid of dirt roads largely traversed by foot or squeaky horse-drawn wagon." His most significant contribution, however, is his account of the district in the century after the massacre. In the immediate aftermath,Black leaders tried to rebuild, but ongoing discrimination — in the form of rejected insurance claims, property theft and an ordinance banning new wooden structures — guaranteed that Greenwood would never be fully restored.

For every period he describes, Luckerson illuminates the effects of white supremacy on the neighborhood. After the 1954 Supreme Court decision ending the "separate but equal" doctrine in public education, he writes, a columnist for The Eagle, noting that segregation continued, evoked the memory of the 1921 massacre, lingering "like ashes in the mouths of Negroes." This acrid history surfaced again with the arrival in Tulsa in 1967 of the federal highway system, which placed the Crosstown Expressway through the heart of Greenwood's business district, shuttering shops and demolishing homes.

"Built From the Fire" ends in the recent past. Luckerson poignantly recreates the summer of 2020, when the murder of George Floyd animated racial justice protests, and President Donald Trump came to Tulsa for a campaign rally, igniting fear that his supporters might re-enact some of the racial violence of 1921. The nation's brief — and ultimately unsatisfying — moment of racial reflection that summer, and the centenary of the massacre the following year, led to greater awareness of Greenwood nationally; celebrities and politicians, including President Biden, visited the Greenwood Cultural Center and toured the neighborhood's streets.

Greenwood's future is uncertain. The neighborhood's supporters, including Regina Goodwin, a state representative and descendant of J.H. and Carlie, are concerned about police brutality and accountability, as well as gentrification, especially since a baseball stadium opened in the neighborhood in 2010. Goodwin, who protested the stadium's construction and has fought for criminal justice reform, now worries that a new Oklahoma law restricting classroom discussions of race, sex and gender may limit what students are taught about the state's history.

Like Luckerson and the many other people committed to making sure Greenwood's story gets told, Goodwin remains undeterred. When she announced a bid for the State Senate in 2015, she declared, "Some women get lost in the fire and some . . . are built from the fire." By the end of Luckerson's outstanding book, the idea of building something new from the ashes of what has been destroyed becomes comprehensible, even hopeful. □

Buildings damaged during the 1921 Tulsa race massacre.

BUILT FROM THE FIRE
The Epic Story of Tulsa's Greenwood District, America's Black Wall Street
By Victor Luckerson
Illustrated. 656 pp. Random House. $30.

MARCIA CHATELAIN *is the author, most recently, of "Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America," which won the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for history.*

PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Doughnut Dollies

In this novel, two female volunteers find friendship and peril on the Western Front.

By NELL FREUDENBERGER

WRITING FICTION ABOUT your parents can be a minefield. (Sorry again, Mom!) On the one hand, you know all the angles; on the other, your perspective is inherently suspect. In "Good Night, Irene," Luis Alberto Urrea, who is best known for "The Devil's Highway" — his devastating account of 14 men who died attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border — tackles a radically different sort of story, about a war hero in his own family.

Urrea's mother, Phyllis McLaughlin, joined the American Red Cross in 1943, not as a nurse but as a "Clubmobiler," one of 250 women who accompanied General Patton's troops through France and Germany after D-Day, surviving the Battle of the Bulge and witnessing the liberation of Buchenwald.

GOOD NIGHT, IRENE
By Luis Alberto Urrea
407 pp. Little, Brown & Company. $29.

In 1943, when Phyllis's fictional counterpart, Irene, escapes her wealthy family's home on Staten Island — leaving behind a predatory stepfather and a violent fiancé — she imagines that war might be like wandering through the woods, one of her favorite pastimes: "Ambling. Filling notebooks with her own great thoughts. Perhaps some smoke drifting through the trees." Needless to say, Irene's illusions are soon shattered.

With Irene and her Clubmobile partner, Dorothy, Urrea creates two distinct female characters to send to war. Dorothy is an orphan from a farm in Indiana who prefers driving the Rapid City, their lumbering, 14-foot GMC military truck, to serving coffee and doughnuts from its retrofitted kitchen. Irene quickly falls in love with a dashing fighter pilot nicknamed the Handyman, but Dorothy takes more delight in the B-17s, Mustangs and Hurricanes themselves. As it turns out, neither serving refreshments nor driving the Clubmobile is the point: "The real service was that their faces, their voices, their send-off might be the final blessing from home for some of these young pilots. The enormity of this trivial-seeming job became clearer every day."

In the story of the Clubmobile Corps, the official records of which were destroyed in a fire in the 1970s, Urrea finds the historical novelist's gold: an empty space within a well-trodden time period in which to invent a story. He wears his extensive research lightly, but his immersion in the existing documentation is clear: "Irene sat on a hundred laps in the Aero Club's makeshift portrait studio. Dorothy grumbled."

NELL FREUDENBERGER'S *new novel, "The Limits," will be published next spring.*

Nicknamed "Doughnut Dollies," the women become adept at deflecting advances, but it's to Urrea's credit that he doesn't shy away from describing the shadow side of the job: They are expected to soothe the soldiers' terror and homesickness, sometimes by sitting on the laps of men who try to kiss and grope them. The Clubmobilers are caregivers, sexual objects and motivating factors — stand-ins for mothers, girlfriends and wives — while often risking their lives to the same extent as the soldiers themselves.

Urrea writes about death with a sort of familiarity, a suspension of judgment that highlights the absurdity inherent in extreme violence. As he guides the reader through one inferno after another, he's less a stone-faced Virgil than a master storyteller: "When they passed by these mausoleums, they averted their eyes, ashamed they had stacked their comrades and abandoned them to the elements. There was something ancient in this place. Something that counted these sacrifices." Whatever it is, the G.I.s know that it is "not . . . American." Or rather, they know that it's old: Urrea is interested in the way still-wild landscapes consume the dead.

In "The Devil's Highway" and "The House of Broken Angels," his riotous recent novel about the patriarch of a Mexican American family, Urrea proved that he could tell a story from the point of view of the young, the old, men, women and even the dead — a choral impulse that he follows here with mixed results. This is partly because the balance is off; Irene's perspective dominates the novel, but Urrea frequently slips into Dorothy's head, and sometimes uses an omniscient narrator to foreshadow events of which Irene and Dorothy are unaware. When he returns to Irene, it's as if his naturally fluid voice is forcing itself into a limited third-person straitjacket.

In one especially strange episode, Dorothy and Irene are observed climbing out of the basement of a destroyed house: "Aboveground, for anyone watching, the first sign of their resurrection would have been Dorothy's boot kicking at a fallen slant of roof, which creaked open like a jaw, its nails like the great crooked teeth of a barracuda." A house has collapsed on top of the two women, they've almost drowned in sewage from ruptured pipes, and rats have bitten their faces, but when they emerge into the light, their dialogue is disconcertingly lighthearted:

> "Well, hell," Irene said.
> They laughed in spite of it all.
> "Where'd everything go?" Dorothy asked.

Urrea has a weakness for melodramatic imagery: a volume of Shakespeare with a bullet lodged in its pages, a G.I. playing a burning piano in the smoldering ruins of a French village, a convoy of ambulances passing the Clubmobile, "sirens howling, with screams and groans coming from

ELEANOR TAYLOR

The Clubmobilers serve as stand-ins for mothers and girlfriends, while often risking their lives.

within the vehicles." When the reader is forced to wonder about small elisions and inconsistencies, such as what Irene and Dorothy did about the facial rat bites (they aren't mentioned again) or how they could hear groans over howling sirens, the characters themselves fade from view.

This problem becomes more acute when the terror of the war reaches its highest pitch, and the women are confronted with "a pair of signs, one pointing down to Weimar and the other uphill to someplace called Buchenwald." Anyone who has visited a concentration camp will be willing to believe, as Irene tells Dorothy, that there's "an atmosphere I can't define," even before the women know what they're about to see. But we need to be absolutely enmeshed in a character's consciousness to witness something on the order of Buchenwald through her eyes. Otherwise, the brutal catalog of the camp's contents — a room full of suitcases and shoes, ovens, lampshades, emaciated "ghosts" in striped pajamas — evokes only our own familiar horror rather than Irene's.

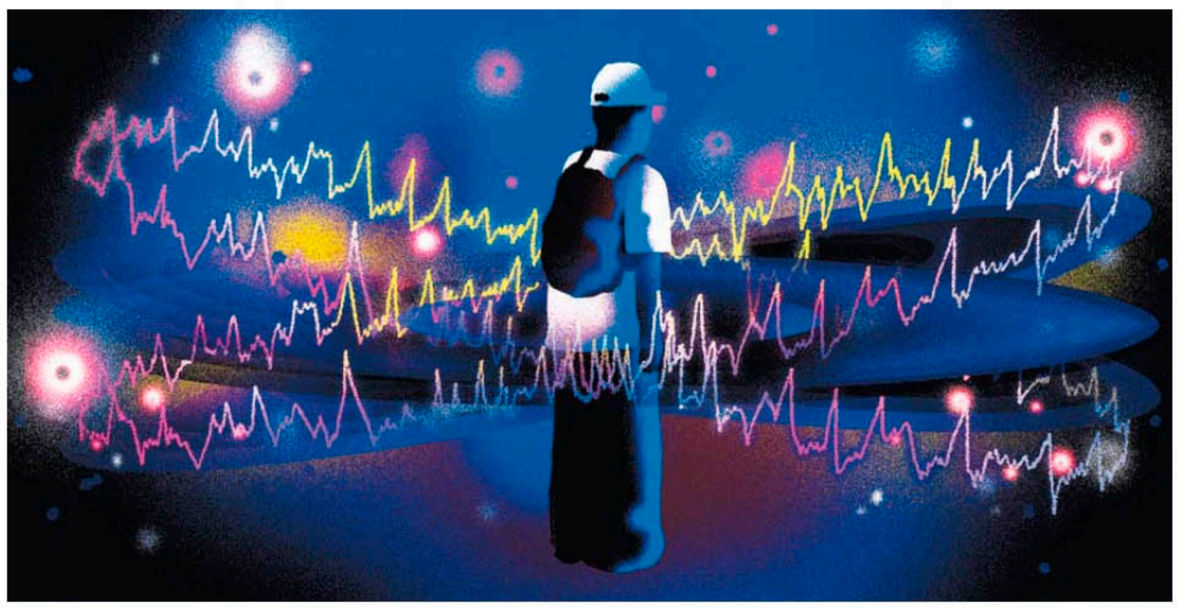
The novel is much stronger where it homes in on Irene's experience. During the Battle of the Bulge, in January 1945, Irene and Dorothy take a bottle of Champagne to gunners operating a howitzer cannon. Dorothy is allowed to fire a shell, and then Irene gets a turn. "One of the gunners punched her arm. 'Lady,' he said, 'you musta taken out 20 of 'em.'" Slowly, the reality of what it means to have pulled the lanyard dawns on Irene: "What'd I do?" she asks.

LIKE MANY VETERANS of war, Irene and Dorothy keep their memories to themselves after they return to civilian life. Their mutual silence is the engine that propels the novel's satisfying conclusion, but it's also an acknowledgment that the two women have joined an exclusive society. Even as Urrea tells the Clubmobilers' story, he recognizes that some parts of their experience remain impossible to share with those who weren't there.

On one of their breaks from coffee and doughnut service in the Rapid City, while Irene is watching a plane fly overhead and dreaming of her fighter pilot, Dorothy begs her to pay attention to the two of them: "Irene, you are my family now. . . . I need you to understand what I'm saying. This is *our* story." □

Tune In, Drop Out

This novel follows a day in the life of a troubled teenager.



DANIEL ZENDER

By HERMIONE HOBY

SHUFFLING OUT INTO a damp, black English night toward a muddy pond in the year 1995, a kid bears the weight of the world on his shoulders. That, plus a real rucksack stuffed with flint rocks. This is Shy, a drum-and-bass-obsessed boy with behavioral problems, and a protagonist in whom myth and bathos slyly collide.

After having "sprayed, snorted, smoked, sworn, stolen, cut, punched, run, jumped, crashed an Escort, smashed up a shop, trashed a house, broken a nose, stabbed his stepdad's finger," Shy now presents as a punished teenage Atlas, carrying this "heavy bag of sorry" — not a ballast to hold up the heavens, but a weight to sink him to possible death.

SHY
By Max Porter
122 pp. Graywolf Press. $25.

Shy's disordered, multidimensional consciousness careens through Max Porter's brief and brilliant fourth book, a bravura, extended-mix of a novel that skitters, pulses, fractures and coalesces again with all the exhilaration and doom of broken beats and heavy bass lines. It's best read in one deranging sitting.

The ostensible setting is an institution called Last Chance, a boarding school for troubled boys in a dilapidated old house in the countryside. With uncharacteristically printable eloquence, the usually profane Shy sees the building as being "hunched over the garden like a chunk of grumpy history." Despite the best efforts of the saintly-patient staff, it's a grim place, not least because "the boys just rip and rip at each other, endless patterns of attack and response, like flirting's grim twin."

The book's true setting, however, is the sprawling, shifting terrain of Shy's mind. Though the novel's time frame is just a few hours of one night, it's a night of "a shattered flicker-drag of these sense-jumbled memories" and one in which "the solid world dissolves then coheres like broken sleep, and he shambles into it, remembering." In other words, the night's as big as Shy's life.

Porter moves nimbly between the voices of Shy's universe as they replay in his memory. They include his long-suffering mum and stepfather; a painfully kind counselor called Jenny; his mate Benny, with whom he wants to start a label, Atomic Bass Recordings; and Amanda, a live-in staff member who "sits in her dungarees with her mug of tea and hears whatever the boys want to tell her."

Part of the novel's poignancy is that Shy himself doesn't talk much (clue's in the name). We're privy to the churn of his unvoiced thoughts, which sometimes feel like "a roll of barbed wire scrunched inside me, scraping underneath, all day every day" and other times keen into the ecstatic, especially when he's encased in his headphones, immersed in a mix. At one moment, he's blessed with the raver's revelation that "God is a bouncy bastard who wants his people together in the dance."

He's both a hapless, hurting child and a dangerous, violent young man, and his author has loved each part of him into being with the same steady attention. The awful is pretty awful: One of Shy's offenses is having attacked another boy with a broken beer bottle. Reinhabiting the moment, Shy recalls the way the weapon "opens a line straight across the top of the kid's forehead, unzips the skin" and how he "watches a sheet of blood fall down like special effects, cheap and nasty, and he thinks Wow, so easy."

This is, however, an ultimately optimistic book, even if saying so risks casting a slick of the sentimental over a work so admirably grounded. I won't unsee that sheet of blood, but nor will I unsee a comic, charismatic, deplorable, lovable, still living and not-entirely-hopeless boy doing a little dance by himself, headphones on, at 3 a.m., to an audience of two dead badgers. □

HERMIONE HOBY'S *most recent novel is "Virtue."*

Manhood

An essay collection explores society's portrayals of masculinity.

By JOHN PAUL BRAMMER

TOXIC MASCULINITY. Fragile masculinity. Like most pop-sociological truisms that gain traction on social media, these are great buzzwords but they fail to grapple with nuance. A slogan isn't a thesis, of course, but I've always found these terms to be simplistic substitutions for more interesting conversations. Yes, masculinity, which is often a patriarchal institution that metes out seemingly impossible social expectations for men and boys, has no shortage of problems. But what about its appeal? What's so captivating about it to so many people, including many who are victims of its overbearing norms?

"The Male Gazed," by the queer Colombian writer and film critic Manuel Betancourt, is a smart, refreshing essay collection on the subject, and deals directly and honestly with the paradoxes surrounding the topic of men.

THE MALE GAZED
On Hunks, Heartthrobs, and What Pop Culture Taught Me About (Desiring) Men
By Manuel Betancourt
196 pp. Catapult. $26.

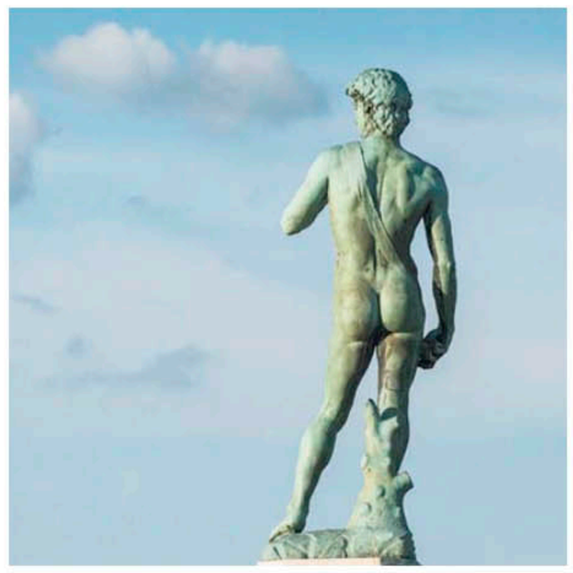
Masculinity, Betancourt says, is a concept currently at war with itself. It is simultaneously a display of force and also a delicate dance — it's a construct that has stuffy, rigid rules and also great potential for the romantic and, of course, for the homoerotic. Betancourt understands these contradictions and offers insight from the trenches as a queer person who is both a casualty of masculinity's stringent conventions and a connoisseur of masculinity's erotic delights.

Each essay in "The Male Gazed" intertwines stories from Betancourt's own life with a consideration of a facet of masculinity, contending with the idea's enduring allure and its suffocating anxieties. Take one of the collection's most compelling essays, "Wrestling Heartthrobs," which shows the author "wrestling" with his attraction to the high school jock archetype, especially Mario Lopez's singlet-clad character, A.C. Slater, in "Saved by the Bell." "The image of the wrestler, even one as charming and unassuming as that of Slater, can't help but conjure up both aggression and eroticism; the male body so revealed is both a come-on and a threat," Betancourt writes. "It is manhood distilled."

Betancourt acknowledges here that danger is part of the draw. There's something masochistic and borderline self-destructive about cultural maleness, both for those who embody it and for those who find its charms irresistible. Betancourt later dons a singlet himself, literally stepping into his high school fantasies so he can harness their carnal powers to appeal to other men and to become, if only on an aesthetic level, one of those jocks who excited him. His outfit is a celebration and a self-flagellation all in one.

It's delightful, and perhaps cathartic, to see Betancourt turn the tables on masculinity by returning its gaze. Machismo is, after all, an often homosocial project that encourages men to peacock for other men, but becomes hostile when a gay man accepts the invitation to ogle. Betancourt's analysis, even (or especially) when he turns a critical lens on himself, feels like a deft appropriation of the props and behaviors of conventional masculinity, repurposed for his own ends.

"The Male Gazed" is at its weakest when Betancourt apologizes for his own desires, as he does, for example, when describing his attraction to Guy Pearce in drag in "The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert." "I can't deny that sometimes my shallowness (or my horniness, more like) gets the best of me," he writes. What seems like a playful, self-deprecating joke has the effect of undercutting his own voice, intimating that his desires are rooted in some moral shortcoming.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSAN WRIGHT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Masculinity, Betancourt says, is a concept currently at war with itself.

It reminds me of a popular trend on social media in which gay men ascribe certain romantic and sexual appetites to their "internalized homophobia." But those memes don't say much more than "sorry not sorry!" It's odd to occasionally encounter similar simplicity and clunkiness in these essays, given that Betancourt otherwise demonstrates how capable he is of nimbly describing the complexities of gendered attraction in a patriarchal society.

All in all, though, "The Male Gazed" provides a welcome perspective on a thorny, timely subject. Readers are sure to leave with a useful lens through which they can give masculinity a second look. □

JOHN PAUL BRAMMER *is the author of "Hola Papi."*

A (Re)Writer's Life

A struggling novelist steals a manuscript in this publishing industry satire.

By AMAL EL-MOHTAR

AN UNRELIABLE NARRATOR is an invitation to a shell game. Watch closely, the book says, and if you're very attentive, you'll find the ugly truth hidden beneath layers of pleasant obfuscation and textual sleight of hand. But the unreliable narrator of R.F. Kuang's "Yellowface" takes a different approach: Instead of hiding the facts, she puts her sordid truth under a glass dome and shines a spotlight over it.

June Hayward is a white woman in her late 20s, attempting to revive a writing career that stalled at the starting line after her debut novel flopped. Meanwhile, her friend Athena Liu — beautiful, charismatic, Asian American — "has everything: a multibook deal straight out of college at a major publishing house, an M.F.A. from the one writing workshop everyone's heard of, a résumé of prestigious artist residencies, and a history of awards nominations."

YELLOWFACE
By R. F. Kuang
323 pp. William Morrow. $30.

Kuang's novel opens with these two writers toasting to Athena's exciting new TV deal while June wonders why they're friends. She fantasizes about being Athena, feeling "a bizarre urge to stick my fingers in her berry-red-painted mouth and rip her face apart, to neatly peel her skin off her body like an orange and zip it up over myself." She gets precisely that chance. As they celebrate at Athena's apartment, Athena dies in a freak accident — and in the confusing aftermath, June steals an unpublished manuscript off her desk.

The manuscript in question is a war epic, "about the unsung contributions and experience of the Chinese Labour Corps, the 140,000 Chinese workers who were recruited by the British Army and sent to the Allied Front during World War I." Deciding to pass the novel off as her own, June rewrites sections as if she's tailoring a dress to fit her: She makes Athena's white characters more sympathetic, introduces a romance between a white woman and a Chinese laborer, and generally smooths over anything that might confuse or alienate a white audience.

Because Athena never showed anyone her working drafts, there's nothing to stop June from stealing "The Last Front" — at first. But the more success the novel earns, the more scrutiny it attracts, and June finds herself, ironically, fighting a war on two fronts: She has to both navigate a hostile social media landscape criticizing her for cultural appropriation and also scramble to prevent evidence of her very literal theft from coming to light.

"Yellowface" is Kuang's fifth novel and first foray outside of fantasy. It's a breezy and propulsive read, a satirical literary thriller that's enjoyable and uncomfortable in equal measure; occasionally, it skirts the edges of a ghost story. It's also the most granular critique of commercial publishing I've encountered in fiction, and seeing the cruel, indifferent vagaries of one's industry so ably skewered is viciously satisfying.

MARELLA MOON ALBANESE

Written in first-person present tense, June's voice has the zippy, immersive cadence that's been associated with young adult novels since at least "The Hunger Games." It's a shrewd choice that makes June sound younger than she is — sometimes immature; sometimes demanding pity; sometimes outright deranged. The result is both addictive and slightly sickening, like reading transcripts of someone else's catty group chat, or watching "Succession."

Athena's manuscript brings June all the wild success she's craved. At her publicists' behest she rebrands herself from "June Hayward" to "Juniper Song" — her full first name and her middle name — ostensibly to separate herself from her ill-fated debut, but as June notes, "No one says explicitly that 'Song' might be mistaken for a Chinese name." She commissions author photos in which she appears "nicely tanned," making her appear "sort of racially ambiguous," and she argues, "It's not fraud, what we're doing. We're just suggesting the right credentials, so that readers take me and my story seriously, so that nobody refuses to pick up my work because of some outdated preconceptions about who can write what."

If this reads as a quite on-the-nose critique of contemporary conversations about race and appropriation, that's because it is. This is not a subtle book. It is in fact so obvious that it makes one wonder why Kuang uses the device of an unreliable narrator at all. I kept expecting the whole novel to snap into something more elaborate, more complex — to have to match wits with June, to catch her in a lie within a lie, to experience some sort of revelation from an accumulation of evidence. Instead, June's methodology is consistently to tell the reader her trespasses and offer flimsy justifications for them.

The book is most exciting and effective when there's a grain to read against. June presents herself as an able scholar, but when she makes classical or philosophical references they're clumsy or erroneous readings (mistaking maenads for naiads when discussing Orpheus, for instance); she presents herself as a good writer, but the few excerpts we see of her prose, separate from Athena's, are laden with cliché. Her relationship with Athena and Athena's work is the site of greatest ambiguity, where she most baldly revises previous statements or glosses over contradictions in service of her own experience: Initially June claims Athena's life was perfect, but later reveals, while weathering a social media storm, that Athena received death threats and vitriol for dating a white man. These moments suggest the kinds of layers and intrigue the book could have maintained if it weren't so committed to showing its hand.

This obviousness isn't necessarily a flaw — but it is puzzling. An unreliable narrator destabilizes a text, drawing our attention to the ways in which our reading protocols accord them a certain degree of untroubled authority. This isn't limited to prose fiction, either: The last three years have seen a spate of Art Monster discourses rooted in the ambiguities and subjectivities of authorship and the question of to whom a story can be rightfully said to belong. Disagreements about the substance of "Tár"; the frenzy around Robert Kolker's magazine article "Who Is the Bad Art Friend?"; the question of whose story is really told in Kristen Roupenian's short story "Cat Person" — these conflicts probe the porous boundaries between art and life and fuel waves of fascination and disgust on social media. "Yellowface" is a kind of Art Monster story, but one that can't allow room for ambiguity or revelation without rushing in to fill that space.

It's the most granular critique of commercial publishing I've encountered in fiction.

When "Yellowface" is a satire, I want it to be sharper; when it's horror, I want it to be more frightening; when it's a ghost story, I want it to be more haunting; when it suggests a vampiric, parasitic relationship, I want it to be more inviting, more ambiguous, more strange. Instead, all its genre fluidity is in service of the same blunt frankness. Perhaps the ultimate irony of the book is what it has in common with its protagonist: Like June herself, "Yellowface" seems desperate to not be misunderstood. □

AMAL EL-MOHTAR *is a Hugo Award-winning writer and co-author, with Max Gladstone, of "This Is How You Lose the Time War."*

Roving Eye / 'Babi Yar,' by Anatoly Kuznetsov / By Jennifer Wilson

This documentary novel relives the Nazis' execution of tens of thousands of Jews in 1941.

ON SEPT. 29 AND 30, 1941, in a ravine just outside Kyiv called Babyn Yar ("Babi Yar" in Russian), Nazis executed nearly 34,000 Jews over the course of 36 hours. It was the deadliest mass execution in what came to be known as the "Holocaust by Bullets." We were never supposed to know it happened. In 1943, as the Nazis fled Kyiv, they ordered the bodies in Babyn Yar to be dug up and burned, to erase all memory of what they'd done.

The Nazis planned to kill the workers they tasked with destroying the bodies. "But they didn't succeed," one declared proudly. The Ukrainian filmmaker Sergei Loznitsa included newsreel footage in his documentary "Babi Yar. Context" (2021) of one of the men giving an interview. He and 12 others (out of 300) escaped "and can now testify," he tells the camera, "to the whole world and our motherland to the acts of barbarity committed by those fascist dogs in our beloved Kyiv."

And yet, not everyone believed the story. In October 1943, the Soviets invited a delegation of American journalists to Babyn Yar, gave them a tour of the ravine and told them of the atrocities that had occurred there. Their reports were bafflingly contradictory. Though hair and bones were mixed in with the dirt under their feet, some of the journalists considered these fragments just that: pieces of some bigger, unclear whole. Others dissented. In a frustrated letter to his parents, Bill Downs (Newsweek, CBS) concluded: "It seems that the Presbyterian mind of the average American cannot accept the fact that any group of people can coolly sit down and decide to torture thousands of people. . . . This refusal to believe these facts," he noted, "is probably the greatest weapon the Nazis have."

On that September day in 1941, a 12-year-old boy named Anatoly Kuznetsov was in his Kyiv courtyard with his grandfather. They lived a stone's throw from the ravine and could hear a sound: "ta-ta-ta, ta-ta." "They're *shooting* 'em," his grandfather realized. All morning the city had been abuzz with rumor: "Where are they taking them? What are they doing with them?" The city's Jewish population had been told to report at 8 o'clock, to bring valuables and warm clothing. Many assumed — hoped — this meant deportation. However, others could feel the truth even if they had not seen it yet. Earlier that morning, Kuznetsov recalled, a young girl threw herself from a window. After the war, a witness said he had seen a woman that morning standing in front of her home crying out in Yiddish. He told the war crimes tribunal: "Her entire body expressed such a terror, such extreme despair, that it is hard to imagine such a degree of human suffering. One cannot explain it with words. It cannot be told."

I cannot say for sure that Kuznetsov believed otherwise. What true artist thinks he can capture something entirely, perfectly? And what reader, not having been there, can say yes — he got it right. All I can say is that over the days I spent reading the notebook young Kuznetsov began keeping about the Nazi occupation of Kyiv, I screamed when a neighbor knocked on my car window. I screamed when my partner came up behind me and asked a question. It was as if I had developed a fear of sound after reading Kuznetsov's interview with an actress from the Kyiv puppet theater, Dina Mironovna Pronicheva. She had survived by jumping in the ravine before the bullets hit. She landed in a sea of bodies, "was immediately spattered with warm blood," and all around her were the noises of the half-alive, "strange submerged sounds, groaning, choking and sobbing."

Anatoly Kuznetsov during an interview with the BBC, 1969.

Kuznetsov turned his notebook into what he labeled "a document in the form of a novel." Originally published in Russian in 1966, **BABI YAR (Picador/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 468 pp., paperback, $20)**, translated by David Floyd, is now being reissued with an introduction by the journalist Masha Gessen. The book does not read like an account of an event by someone who thinks the worst is over; Kuznetsov writes with a certainty about the future, a sureness that his words will resonate again. Historical comparison is often sneered at. If you want to be mocked on social media, draw parallels between a contemporary event and World War II. Kuznetsov would have no patience for such sneering. He saw the interchangeability of contexts as the basis for political consciousness and the primary quality of enduring literature. "**Fate plays with us as it wishes — we are just little microbes crawling about the globe**," Kuznetsov warns. "You could have been me; you could have been born in Kyiv, in Kurenyovka, and I could now have been you, reading this page."

Some of the words I've quoted are in bold. Kuznetsov employs typeface to tell a story beyond the text itself. Everything in boldface is what Soviet censors excised from his novel, which was first released in installments in the literary journal Yunost (Youth). Descriptions of beleaguered soldiers of the Red Army, dust and sweat caked in their faces, begging civilians for clothes to disguise themselves, are in bold. As are scenes depicting the punishing poverty of those who worked on collective farms, and mentions of girls with crushes on the handsome German soldiers. There's one almost humorous moment when the censors' paws are all over a passage about . . . censorship. After the Nazis have warned all local households to get rid of Soviet publications, Kuznetsov's mother tells him: "You have your life ahead of you, Tolya, so just remember **that this is the first sign of trouble — if books are banned, that means things are going wrong.** It means that you are surrounded by force, fear and ignorance, **that power is in the hands of barbarians."**

There are also brackets indicating text Kuznetsov added after he defected from the Soviet Union in 1969. This is material he never bothered to submit for approval, including his speculation that part of why Kyiv's Jewish population obediently followed the German ordinance had to do with the Soviet press. "Right up to the outbreak of war," he puts in brackets, "Soviet newspapers had been doing nothing but praising and glorifying Hitler as the Soviet Union's best friend, and had said nothing about the position of the Jews in Germany and Poland." The roots of disbelief are a major theme for Kuznetsov, one that most directly lends the novel its contemporary relevance.

In the introduction, Masha Gessen observes that Kuznetsov "created a layered text that told several stories: the story of the Babyn Yar massacre," as well as that of "Soviet efforts to suppress this history." In the Soviet Union and today in Russia, World War II has largely been recast as a story of victory, of wins not losses, of Red Army heroes without nationality. Attempts to specify any of the victims as Jewish were met with charges of "bourgeois nationalism." In 1944, the Soviet Jewish writers Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg, who both covered the war as reporters embedded with the Red Army, attempted to publish a book documenting the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. That volume, "The Black Book of Soviet Jewry," was banned and members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, which helped compile it, were accused of "rootless cosmopolitanism" and executed under Stalin.

In 2016, on the 75th anniversary of the mass execution at Babyn Yar, Petro Poroshenko, then the president of Ukraine, announced plans to establish the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center. Though privately funded, the center was seen as part of the Ukrainian government's efforts to build closer ties to Europe and reject Russia's legacy of Holocaust suppression. The project has been besieged by creative differences, many stemming from the involvement of the immersive filmmaker Ilya Khrzhanovsky. In 2021, he took Gessen on a tour of one of the exhibits in progress, which Gessen later described as a column of mirrors riddled with bullet holes matching "the caliber of the bullets used by the executioners" and a soundscape devised of "frequencies that involved the numerical expression of the letters that made up the names of the dead."

While Khrzhanovsky's ideas have understandably induced some eye-rolling, his interest in collapsing time, in fusing past and present, feels in sync with Kuznetsov's microbe theory: "You could have been me," and "I could now have been you." Kuznetsov's "Babi Yar" was required reading for the memorial center team, whose efforts have since been redirected. On March 1, 2022, Russia launched a missile at Kyiv, striking a TV tower and a nearby building intended for use as part of the Holocaust memorial. On his Telegram channel, President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is Jewish, wrote, "We all died again at Babyn Yar." Now, instead of collecting materials related to 1941, the center is working with Zelensky's government to document the atrocities being committed by Vladimir Putin. As Kuznetsov knew even as a small boy, remembering is something we do in the present tense. □

JENNIFER WILSON *is a contributing essayist at the Book Review.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY BBC, VIA ALAMY

Value Judgment

A modern morality tale from the late A.B. Yehoshua.

By SHAY K. AZOULAY

IN A 2016 INTERVIEW, the late Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua named the 19th-century Italian novel "Cuore" ("Heart"), by Edmondo De Amicis, as one of the books from childhood that had stuck with him throughout his life. Presented as the diary of an upper-class schoolboy in Turin and embedded with the moralistic tales he is assigned by his teacher, the novel's patriotism and sentimentality made it an immediate sensation in Italy, while its themes of solidarity and self-sacrifice made it a staple of textbooks in many socialist countries throughout the first half of the 20th century. In the young state of Israel, the book's numerous Hebrew translations were popular bar mitzvah gifts in the 1950s.

Yehoshua described "Cuore" as "a book filled with feeling and moral values" that was among his early inspirations to write.

THE ONLY DAUGHTER
By A.B. Yehoshua
Translated by Stuart Schoffman
191 pp. HarperVia/HarperCollins Publishers. $26.99.

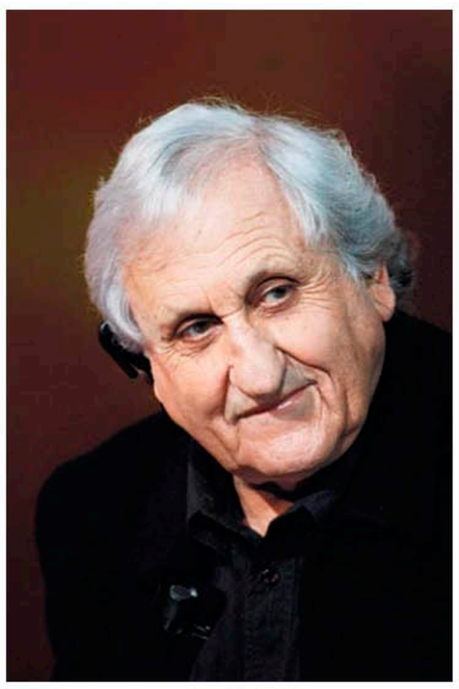
In the novel "The Only Daughter," his second-to-last book, he offers De Amicis an affectionate yet cleareyed homage.

Rachele Luzzato, the titular only daughter, is a graceful and clever schoolgirl living in northern Italy. The novella follows her over the span of a few weeks as she is shuttled across the region, from a ski vacation in the Dolomites to a costume party at her grandmother's Venice home, and on to several other minor adventures. Throughout these travels she conducts edifying conversations with her elders, who are all charmed by her opinionated confidence. The story's schoolbook quality is enhanced by the fact that everyone around this carefree rich girl is invariably kind and generous, and espouses the same values of secular humanism, from her orthodox rabbi to her maternal grandmother, "a devout atheist who is nonetheless careful not to sabotage the Jewish faith of her only granddaughter."

At the start of the novella, Rachele is cast as "the Mother of God" in her school's Christmas play, but her father won't allow her to participate because of their Jewish heritage. He is the only member of Rachele's doting family who assigns the matter any importance. Later, when we learn that he has an illness, an "appendage enlarging the brain to help Papa understand the changing situation," as Rachele imagines it, and will have to undergo surgery to remove it, the link between religious isolationism and cancerous growth is heavily implied. Though initially set up as a major conflict, the Christmas play is quickly forgotten once Rachele is whisked off on her ski vacation, and the father's illness is likewise resolved without much drama.

The rapid introduction and dismissal of narrative threads and images persists throughout this episodic novella, raising questions of what might have been. In a more ambitious novel, the experiences of Rachele's Jewish grandfather, who survived World War II by masquerading as a priest, and the birth of her father, assisted by a resentful Nazi doctor, could have been given space to accumulate nuance and meaning. In the present volume, however, the author gives more space to a retelling and discussion of two didactic stories from "Cuore."

Yehoshua died last June, preceded by his accomplished translator Stuart Schoffman by only a few months. In more than a dozen celebrated works of fiction, Yehoshua maintained a consistent universal humanism, often underpinned by secular Jewish values, while exposing and condemning the dangers of both fanaticism and insularity.



A.B. Yehoshua in 2012.

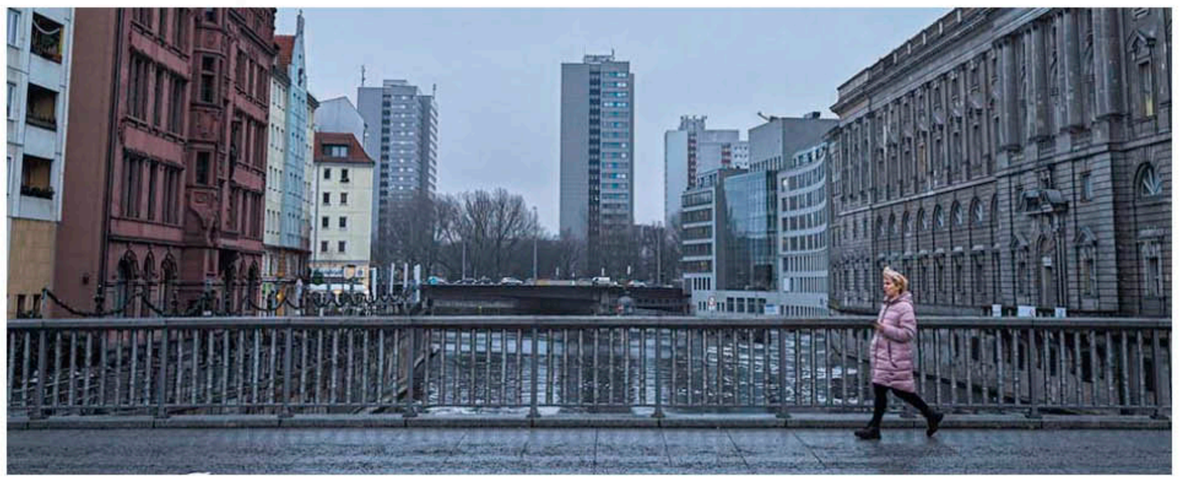
Urging a return to civility, compassion and other basic human virtues.

In "The Only Daughter" he urges a return to civility, compassion and the many other basic human virtues we learned in grade school, from our books, our families and our teachers — virtues we might have forgotten over time. It is an old-fashioned book, free of cynicism, encroaching technology and intricate plotting, but imbued with a heartfelt and optimistic view of humanity — in other words, a book filled with feeling and moral values. □

SHAY K. AZOULAY *is an Israeli playwright and novelist.*

Windows

A young woman copes with the danger of life in a new city.



By JENNY WU

"HUNGER WAS GOOD DISCIPLINE," wrote Ernest Hemingway, who subsisted largely on alcohol when he lived in Paris. There, he visited the Musée du Luxembourg and communed with paintings by Cézanne that became "clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry." Given the right combination of solitude and neglect, hunger can just as easily morph into self-deprivation. This proves true in "Berlin," Bea Setton's cinematic and confessional debut novel.

"Berlin" is narrated by 26-year-old Daphne Ferber, who has just moved to the German capital from London. Jobless but undeterred, she falsifies some elements of her résumé to sublease an apartment in Kreuzberg, "a poor part of the old West, a Szeneviertel (cool neighborhood) near Kottbusser Tor" whose residents wear "Adidases and bad-boy sweaters." It is 2017, and Daphne spends her days attending a German-language class on her doting parents' dime, a young woman isolated in her own mind.

BERLIN
By Bea Setton
244 pp. Penguin Books. Paperback, $17.

Early on, we learn that Daphne lives by day on raw carrots, oats and cottage cheese. By night, she pilfers baking chocolate from her hosts' kitchens and gobbles cake crumbs at parties. Daphne's relationship with food worsens when, one night, a window in her apartment shatters inexplicably, leaving her confused and terrified.

Janus-faced and ambivalent to tropes, Daphne's narration is riddled with omissions and reversals that intensify the mystery of the broken window. Daphne admits she often lies, or, rather, embellishes her life "for the social good" — she says what others want to hear. This strategy benefits her until it depletes her. In plot, too, "Berlin" is a Woolfian mirror: Red herrings and cliffhangers stoke interest by conforming to expectations, until the novel undercuts them with digressions and anticlimaxes, reveling in its own formal impunity.

It is also a window, onto the city's antiwork culture, eclectic individualism and architectural sediments. We experience the "proton-blue" sky above Tempelhofer Feld, pockets of air that "smelled of brioche, apricot jam and coffee" and midnight feasts on Turkish convenience-store snacks that reduce Daphne to "trembling intestine and fluttering heart."

The sensuality of Setton's prose and the electric atmosphere of suspense that envelops Daphne's Berlin undermine the novel's important critique, however. Daphne's eating disorder ornaments the 20-something's "joyfully misspent" time abroad the way Hemingway's hunger enhanced his visits to the art museum. But unlike Hemingway, Daphne must contend with the dangers of being a young woman living alone in a new city. (In addition to the broken window, she has a stalker.) As Daphne maintains a facade of cool cynicism — "the true Berliner attitude" — while fixating on food and safety in secret, Setton risks casting these issues as costs of freedom for women living and traveling alone, rather than illuminating the ways in which they limit the scope of said freedom.

"Berlin" shines when we leave Daphne's head long enough to observe the humorous and tender behaviors of those around her. When her boyfriend breaks up with her beneath the dome and minarets of the Sehitlik Mosque, she "passed him the tissues, and he unfolded one of them, dabbed his face, and then used it to clean black marks off the underside of his skateboard." When her mother discovers "honey-crusted teaspoons" in Daphne's sock drawer, "she knew better than to confront me with them. They just disappeared punctually. She did that for me, my mother, discreetly evacuating my greatest shames, which were also her own."

As a quiet misfit in a foreign place, Daphne hungers for human connection even as she physically deteriorates. A look inside her mind reveals the force of danger thinly veiled behind the romantic glow of youth. □

JENNY WU *is a writer and independent curator. Her work has appeared in Art in America, Bomb, The Times Magazine and other publications.*

PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM LEFT: LUCA BRUNO/ASSOCIATED PRESS; LENA MUCHA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Counting on Conversation

The task of writing a counting book is daunting, for counting is active, whereas listening to a story is passive.

By AMY ALZNAUER

A COUNTING BOOK is tricky to write, for it must inspire readers to do two things at once: to count and to read. The latter task is, of course, what all books must do — create enough intrigue to charm us into turning the page and then turning the next one, and so on until the end. But this going forth page by page, one by one, suggests that counting and reading have something deep in common. After all, we *count* with numbers and we *recount* tales. We *tell* stories and, long ago, shepherds *told* their sheep, an archaic word for counting members of a group to make sure each one is there. Still, the task of writing a counting book is daunting, for counting is active, whereas listening to a story, especially when we are little and someone else is turning the pages, is passive.

Five new counting books solve this puzzle in different ways, but they all share one essential strategy: to start a conversation.

HOW TO COUNT TO ONE
And Don't Even THINK About Bigger Numbers!
By Caspar Salmon
Illustrated by Matt Hunt
32 pp. Nosy Crow. $17.99.
(Ages 3 to 6)

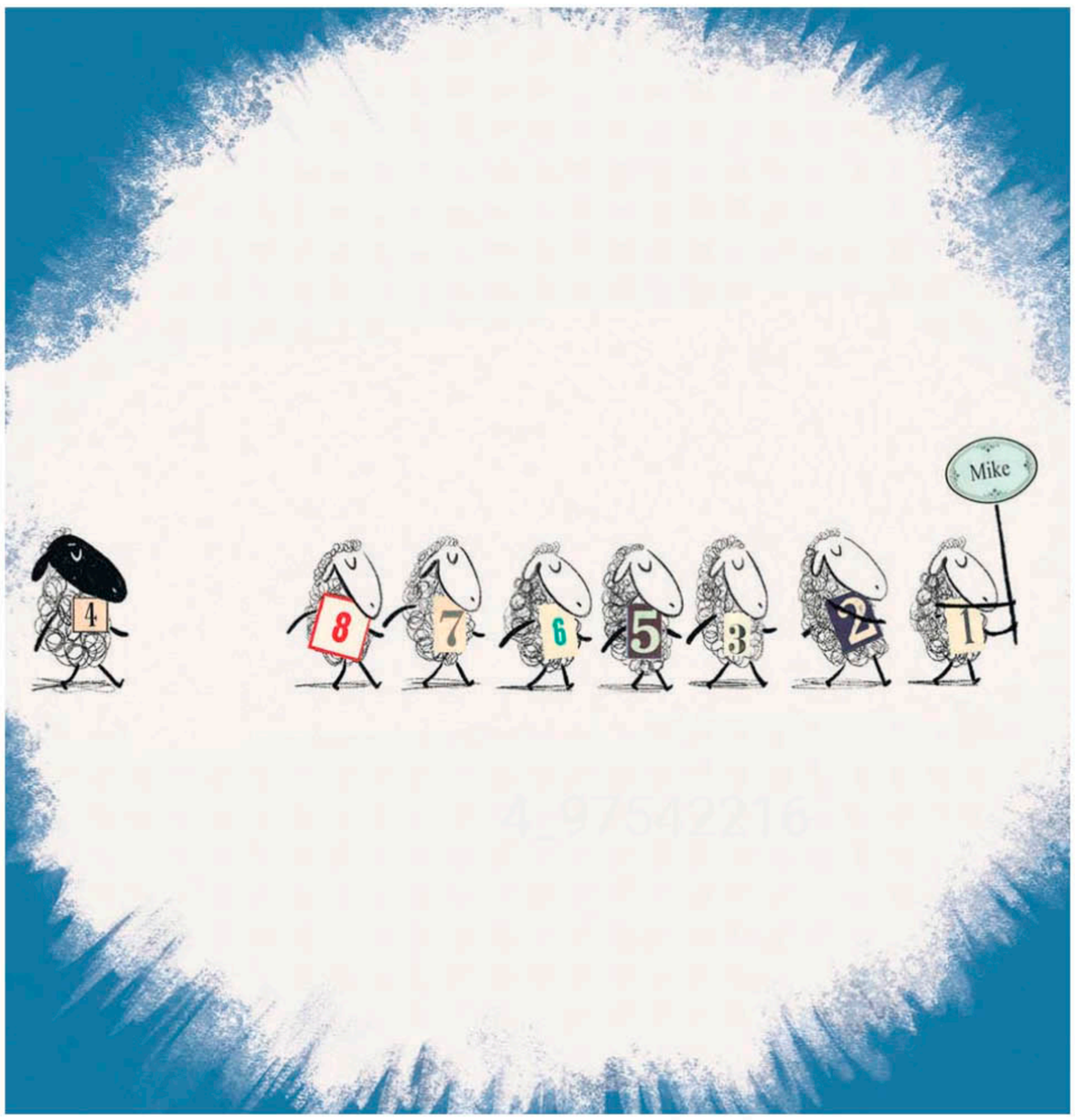
THE FLOCK
By Margarita del Mazo
Illustrated by Guridi
40 pp. NubeOcho. $17.99.
(Ages 3 to 7)

10 CATS
By Emily Gravett
32 pp. Boxer Books. $16.99.
(Ages 3 to 5)

TOO MANY RABBITS
By Davide Calì
Illustrated by Emanuele Benetti
Translated by Angus Yuen-Killick
28 pp. Red Comet. $17.99.
(Ages 4 to 7)

100 MIGHTY DRAGONS ALL NAMED BROCCOLI
By David LaRochelle
Illustrated by Lian Cho
40 pp. Dial. $19.99.
(Ages 3 to 7)

AMY ALZNAUER *is the author of three picture books, including "The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity: A Tale of the Genius Ramanujan." She teaches calculus and number theory at Northwestern University.*



From "The Flock."

Conversation was the original context and form of stories, but even more important, conversation has the power to grab a reader and make two appeals at once: Listen to me. Talk to me.

In "How to Count to One: And Don't Even THINK About Bigger Numbers!," written by Caspar Salmon and illustrated by Matt Hunt, the conversation is sparked by an irresistible dare. It starts out in the standard way. See one apple, count one apple. But as the number of fancifully drawn objects and animals begins to mount, things get dicey. Two enormous whales and three bowls of soup practically beg to be counted, yet we are admonished to notice just one sausage, perched atop a whale's spout, and one tiny fly in the soup. "Ignore all the other worms, please," the author-narrator cries on a subsequent spread, "and count that ONE worm!" — the only one (out of 10!) that is "in disguise." Just as we once screamed at a pigeon not to drive the bus, we now, with similar glee, take on Salmon as he commands us not to count past one. Counting (and reading) become acts of both hilarity and rebellion, prompting the reader not only to turn the page and talk back, but to count with more gusto and cunning.

Salmon also manages to get to the heart of counting, for it really is all about counting to one. To go higher, just adopt a beginner's mindset and count one more, then one more again. But this suggests a pitfall of counting, that it can make numbers all seem the same. In some sense, they are indeed the same, each number just one more than the previous one. Yet each integer has its own fascinating properties.

"THE FLOCK," by Margarita del Mazo, beautifully dramatizes this quandary: that numbers are at once alike and wildly different. The numbers One through Nine enter as sheep who usually jump single-file over a hurdle while a sleepy boy named Mike counts. One night, Four refuses to jump. It is a numeric and a narrative crisis, which the illustrator Guridi animates with humor and urgency. Mike lies in a blue-black room, his eyes huge as clocks, and way up on top of his round head (which doubles as a world) sit a lone hurdle and a not-jumping, recalcitrant Four. All fates are linked, and a frantic conversation ensues.

"You'll be branded a wayward sheep!" the other sheep plead. It's only when Mike enters the conversation himself that the crisis is resolved. But instead of getting back in line, Four jumps right out of that lined-up, sheep-filled world and into Mike's arms. Four becomes a number unlike all others to him. It is left to readers to discuss what properties might make each number (starting with Four) so distinct.

The ultimate training guide for counting-book writers and readers is Christopher Danielson's "How Many? A Different Kind of Counting Book," first published in 2018. On each spread, Danielson pairs a sumptuous yet deceptively simple photograph of objects with the question, "How many?" At first it seems easy. For example, count one dozen eggs. Done. Until the next spread reveals a partly empty carton, four sunny-side-ups in a pan (one with a double yolk) and several cracked shells. Again, "How many?" Answers abound. Conversation is inevitable, ranging perhaps over parts and wholes, addition and subtraction, and the central, profound question: What counts as one? Danielson demonstrates that counting is not merely enumeration but a way to open up a world of interest.

Emily Gravett's "10 Cats" presents one mama cat and nine kittens, so bright and various as they frolic in spilled cans of red, yellow and blue paint that the standard hunt-and-count will be an immediate joy. But Gravett's deeper idea, that 10 breaks down in many ways, will lead alert readers into a discussion of how addition can separate numbers into parts (six cats with yellow dots, four without, or nine with green dots, one without).

"Too Many Rabbits," written by Davide Calì and translated by Angus Yuen-Killick, is also a hunt-and-count romp, this time with Emanuele Benetti's cantaloupe-colored rabbits, playfully scattered in a Gorey-esque world. But Cali's overarching plan — that you can rid yourself of a whopping 210 rabbits by first losing one, then an additional two, on up to 20 — is a grand subtraction (or addition!) problem, which might inspire a general discussion of summing consecutive integers.

Riding that addition and subtraction seesaw even more vigorously is David LaRochelle's "100 Mighty Dragons All Named Broccoli," which will keep readers laughing and tallying as Lian Cho's adorable cartoon dragons leave and reappear.

All these counting books offer the hope of moving past the illusion of sameness — of seeing complexity where we had thought things were simple — or finding unity within multiplicity. Numbers become moments in a story or, like the pages of a book, doors we can open to a fascinating, infinite world. □

Best Sellers

The New York Times

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

COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF MAY 21-27

Fiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1		**IDENTITY,** by Nora Roberts. (St. Martin's) After her roommate is killed by a con artist, a former Army brat builds a new life at her mother's home in Vermont.	1
2	2	**HAPPY PLACE,** by Emily Henry. (Berkley) A former couple pretend to be together for the sake of their friends during their annual getaway in Maine.	5
3	3	**IT ENDS WITH US,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A battered wife raised in a violent home attempts to halt the cycle of abuse.	102
4	13	**THE COVENANT OF WATER,** by Abraham Verghese. (Grove) Three generations of a family living on South India's Malabar Coast suffer the loss of a family member by drowning.	4
5	4	**IT STARTS WITH US,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) In the sequel to "It Ends With Us," Lily deals with her jealous ex-husband as she reconnects with her first boyfriend.	32
6	6	**FOURTH WING,** by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) Violet Sorrengail is urged by the commanding general, who also is her mother, to become a candidate for the elite dragon riders.	4
7	5	**LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY,** by Bonnie Garmus. (Doubleday) A scientist and single mother living in California in the 1960s becomes a star on a TV cooking show.	29
8		**TOM CLANCY: FLASH POINT,** by Don Bentley. (Putnam) When aircraft from rival nations have a midair collision and the Campus is attacked, Jack Ryan Jr. tries to avert a war.	1
9	12	**MEET ME AT THE LAKE,** by Carley Fortune. (Berkley) A decade after a one-day adventure, Will appears again in Fern's life at her mother's lakeside resort.	4
10	7	**DEMON COPPERHEAD,** by Barbara Kingsolver. (Harper) Winner of a 2023 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. A reimagining of Charles Dickens's "David Copperfield" set in the mountains of southern Appalachia.	17

Nonfiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	2	**KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON,** by David Grann. (Doubleday) The story of a murder spree in 1920s Oklahoma that targeted Osage Indians, whose lands contained oil.	78
2	1	**THE WAGER,** by David Grann. (Doubleday) The survivors of a shipwrecked British vessel on a secret mission during an imperial war with Spain have different accounts of events.	6
3	5	**OUTLIVE,** by Peter Attia with Bill Gifford. (Harmony) A look at recent scientific research on aging and longevity.	9
4	3	**THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE,** by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	144
5		**THE BOOK OF CHARLIE,** by David Von Drehle. (Simon & Schuster) The Washington Post columnist shares stories and wisdom he learned from a neighbor who was more than a century old.	1
6	9	**I'M GLAD MY MOM DIED,** by Jennette McCurdy. (Simon & Schuster) The actress and filmmaker describes her eating disorders and difficult relationship with her mother.	42
7	4	**SPARE,** by Prince Harry. (Random House) The Duke of Sussex details his struggles with the royal family, loss of his mother, service in the British Army and marriage to Meghan Markle.	20
8	11	**CRYING IN H MART,** by Michelle Zauner. (Vintage) The daughter of a Korean mother and Jewish American father, and leader of the indie rock project Japanese Breakfast, describes creating her own identity after losing her mother to cancer.	62
9	6	**THE DADDY DIARIES,** by Andy Cohen. (Holt) The host and executive producer of "Watch What Happens Live" juggles fatherhood and his career.	3
10		**ON OUR BEST BEHAVIOR,** by Elise Loehnen. (Dial) An examination of the seven deadly sins and their influence over the lives of women today.	1

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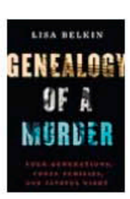
The New York Times best sellers are compiled and archived by the best-sellers-lists desk of the New York Times news department, and are separate from the editorial, culture, advertising and business sides of The New York Times Company. Rankings reflect unit sales reported on a confidential basis by vendors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

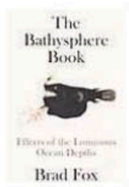
Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review

THE HALF MOON, by Mary Beth Keane. (Scribner, $28.) On its surface, this absorbing novel by the author of "Ask Again, Yes" is about a faltering marriage and a failing bar in a small, not-necessarily-thriving town. The triumph comes in the small, unexpected moments that have a way of standing in for something full of meaning.

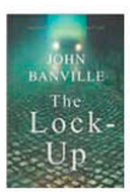
WALKING PRACTICE, by Dolki Min. Translated by Victoria Caudle. (HarperVia, $26.99.) On the surface, this smart debut novel is a fun story about an alien who finds men on dating apps and eats them to stay alive. But underneath lies a potent critique of gender norms and an exploration of what it feels like to not fit in your body or your surroundings.



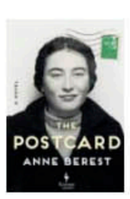
GENEALOGY OF A MURDER: Four Generations, Three Families, One Fateful Night, by Lisa Belkin. (Norton, $26.95.) In this time-collapsing and generation-spanning examination of a crime, Belkin turns the stories of three men — a doctor, a police officer and a murder victim — into an intimate study of fate, chance and the meaningful intersections of disparate lives.



THE BATHYSPHERE BOOK: Effects of the Luminous Ocean Depths, by Brad Fox. (Astra House, $29.) This hypnotic account chronicles the Depression-era ocean explorations of William Beebe, who, along with the engineer Otis Barton, spent four years off Bermuda's Nonsuch Island, watching light and color vanish as they dropped ever deeper.

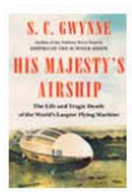


THE LOCK-UP, by John Banville. (Hanover Square, $30.) Banville's detectives Quirke and St. John Strafford join forces in his latest crime novel, which begins with the suspicious death of a young scholar in 1950s Dublin. The case is soon complicated by a conspiracy involving a wealthy German family, as well as the investigators' own private lives.



THE POSTCARD, by Anne Berest. Translated by Tina Kover. (Europa, $28.) This powerful, meticulously imagined autobiographical novel traces the history of the author's Jewish family and, inextricably, the devastating history of the Holocaust in France, prompted by the arrival of a mysterious postcard bearing the names of four relatives who were killed in the camps.

ONCE UPON A PRIME: The Wondrous Connections Between Mathematics and Literature, by Sarah Hart. (Flatiron, $29.99.) In this wide-ranging and thoroughly winning book, Hart, a mathematician, makes a persuasive case for the role of numbers in literature and shows how the two are bound in a symbiotic dance.



HIS MAJESTY'S AIRSHIP: The Life and Tragic Death of the World's Largest Flying Machine, by S.C. Gwynne. (Scribner, $32.) This tale of hubris, quixotic dreams and improbable figures is a fast-paced, real-life dirigible ride. The disastrous end may be foreordained, but the journey is the destination.

WILD THINGS, by Laura Kay. (Vintage, paperback, $17.) Kay's latest novel is a delightful rom-com about a girl who finds herself living with her not-as-unrequited-as-she-believes crush. What follows is a charming story that has all the lingering touches and almost-confessions your heart craves.

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

Inside the List

ELISABETH EGAN

Consider the books that lived in the classrooms of your youth. Didn't it seem like those stories materialized as if by magic, complete with illustrations, a title and a sturdy hardcover? There wasn't a lot of discussion about how a book arrived in the world, or the arduous creative process behind every collection of words on a page — not just the ones lucky enough to snag an ISBN.

'I'd like to know if you think there's enough foxes in this book.'

Dave Eggers is working to disrupt this dynamic (although he wouldn't use the word "disrupt" in such a context). In 2017, the author of "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," "The Circle" and "Zeitoun" — among many others — was working on a middle grade book, "The Lifters," when he started talking with his editor Taylor Norman and fellow author Mac Barnett about how to involve kids in the creation of books written for them.

"We had the idea to try to collapse the space between young readers and publishers and authors and give them a peek behind the curtain and let them see manuscripts in progress," Eggers said in a phone interview. "We started cooking up this idea of showing students or classes written manuscripts and saying, 'What do you think?' To show them the process as it went along."

And so the Young Editors Project was born. It works like this: The program matches an author with a classroom of students who are roughly the target audience for a particular work. The writer might pose specific questions — for instance, Eggers said, "I'd like to know if you think there's enough foxes in this book" — and the kids provide feedback.

"Most writers that participate get all these very sweet, exclamation-filled notes from classes and students all over the world," Eggers said. "Every so often they might say something that is very astute and might provoke a rethinking of a page or a sentence."

Or, as Lemony Snicket put it in his endorsement on the project's website, "At long last, writers can get free advice from strangers without approaching them in the street."

The YEP proposes several ways for authors to thank budding reviewers for their input, including acknowledgment in the final product (another word Eggers wouldn't use in relation to literature).

In his new book, "The Eyes and the Impossible," which debuted at No. 2 on the middle grade hardcover list, Eggers thanks a early readers hailing from the United States, England, Australia and Canada. Presumably, this crew learned a lesson: Pros need help too. Eggers said, "We're always telling students that every author goes through 10 or 12 drafts." □

PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF MAY 21-27

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		**IDENTITY,** by Nora Roberts. (St. Martin's) After her roommate is killed by a con artist, a former Army brat builds a new life at her mother's home in Vermont.	1
2	2	**HAPPY PLACE,** by Emily Henry. (Berkley) A former couple pretend to be together for the sake of their friends during their annual getaway in Maine.	5
3	12	**THE COVENANT OF WATER,** by Abraham Verghese. (Grove) Three generations of a family living on South India's Malabar Coast suffer the loss of a family member by drowning.	4
4	4	**LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY,** by Bonnie Garmus. (Doubleday) A scientist and single mother living in California in the 1960s becomes a star on a TV cooking show.	55
5	3	**FOURTH WING,** by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) Violet Sorrengail is urged by the commanding general, who also is her mother, to become a candidate for the elite dragon riders.	4
6	6	**DEMON COPPERHEAD,** by Barbara Kingsolver. (Harper) Winner of a 2023 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. A reimagining of Charles Dickens's "David Copperfield" set in the mountains of southern Appalachia.	30
7	7	**THE 23RD MIDNIGHT,** by James Patterson and Maxine Paetro. (Little, Brown) The 23rd book in the Women's Murder Club series. Lindsay Boxer tracks a copycat killer.	4
8	9	**SIMPLY LIES,** by David Baldacci. (Grand Central) A former detective becomes the prime suspect in a murder case involving a man with mob ties who was in witness protection.	6
9		**TOM CLANCY: FLASH POINT,** by Don Bentley. (Putnam) When aircraft from rival nations have a midair collision and the Campus is attacked, Jack Ryan Jr. tries to avert a war.	1
10	5	**YELLOWFACE,** by R. F. Kuang. (Morrow) June Hayward, a struggling writer, must conceal the fact that she stole Athena Liu's just-finished masterpiece after Liu's sudden death.	2

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**THE WAGER,** by David Grann. (Doubleday) The survivors of a shipwrecked British vessel on a secret mission during an imperial war with Spain have different accounts of events.	6
2	2	**OUTLIVE,** by Peter Attia with Bill Gifford. (Harmony) A look at recent scientific research on aging and longevity.	9
3		**THE BOOK OF CHARLIE,** by David Von Drehle. (Simon & Schuster) The Washington Post columnist shares stories and wisdom he learned from a neighbor who was more than a century old.	1
4	5	**I'M GLAD MY MOM DIED,** by Jennette McCurdy. (Simon & Schuster) The actress and filmmaker describes her eating disorders and difficult relationship with her mother.	42
5	3	**SPARE,** by Prince Harry. (Random House) The Duke of Sussex details his struggles with the royal family, loss of his mother, service in the British Army and marriage to Meghan Markle.	20
6		**ON OUR BEST BEHAVIOR,** by Elise Loehnen. (Dial) An examination of the seven deadly sins and their influence over the lives of women today.	1
7	6	**THE LIGHT WE CARRY,** by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady shares personal stories and the tools she uses to deal with difficult situations.	28
8	4	**THE DADDY DIARIES,** by Andy Cohen. (Holt) The host and executive producer of "Watch What Happens Live" juggles fatherhood and his career.	3
9		**RAW DOG,** by Jamie Loftus. (Forge) The comedian and Emmy-nominated TV writer explains the cultural and culinary significance of hot dogs.	1
10	8	**LOOK FOR ME THERE,** by Luke Russert. (Harper Horizon) The Emmy Award–winning journalist details how he grieved for his late father and sought to make his own way.	4

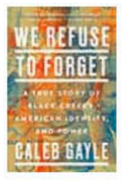
An asterisk (*) indicates that a book's sales are barely distinguishable from those of the book above. A dagger (†) indicates that some bookstores report receiving bulk orders.

Paperback Row / BY SHREYA CHATTOPADHYAY

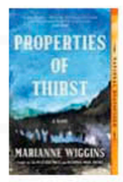
THE TWILIGHT WORLD, by Werner Herzog. Translated by Michael Hofmann. (Penguin, 144 pp., $17.) The renowned director extends his interest in unconventional lives from film to fiction in this reconstruction of the almost 30 years the Japanese lieutenant Hiroo Onoda spent in Filipino jungles, refusing to believe World War II was over. According to our reviewer, Liesl Schillinger, the novel is "a potent, vaporous fever dream."

README.TXT: A Memoir, by Chelsea Manning. (Picador, 272 pp., $19.) The military intelligence analyst turned whistle-blower and activist details her repressed childhood in Oklahoma, the impact that online freedom had on her political trajectory, her experience transitioning genders while in prison and more. "Information is power," she writes, "and it is power that should be held by everyone."

BIG GIRL, by Mecca Jamilah Sullivan. (Liveright, 288 pp., $16.95.) Malaya, a Black girl growing up in 1990s Harlem, contends with a host of forces — pressure to lose weight from her mother, her father's trauma from childhood hunger, budding romantic feelings for her best friend, neighborhood gentrification — as she seeks to define herself in this lyrical coming-of-age debut novel.



WE REFUSE TO FORGET: A True Story of Black Creeks, American Identity, and Power, by Caleb Gayle. (Riverhead, 272 pp., $18.) A Jamaican American journalist outlines the history of Black members of the Creek Nation. From the 1860s Black Creek chief Cow Tom to his descendants who today are fighting for recognition, Gayle's account emphasizes the contingency and violence of American racial categories.



PROPERTIES OF THIRST, by Marianne Wiggins. (Simon & Schuster, 544 pp., $19.99.) This expansive story of love in the World War II West, by a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, follows the rancher Rocky Rhodes as he tries to protect his remaining family and land from the inequities of wartime California. The novel probes memory, desire and the quest for recognition with an element of surprise.

A LYNCHING AT PORT JERVIS: Race and Reckoning in the Gilded Age, by Philip Dray. (Picador, 272 pp., $18.) Contrary to narratives of lynching as a Southern phenomenon, this account follows a white mob's 1892 murder of 28-year-old Robert Lewis, a Black man accused of sexually assaulting a white woman in an industrial town 65 miles from Manhattan. Though anti-lynching activists took up Lewis's cause, the law did not.

PAPERBACK

SALES PERIOD OF MAY 21-27

Paperback Trade Fiction

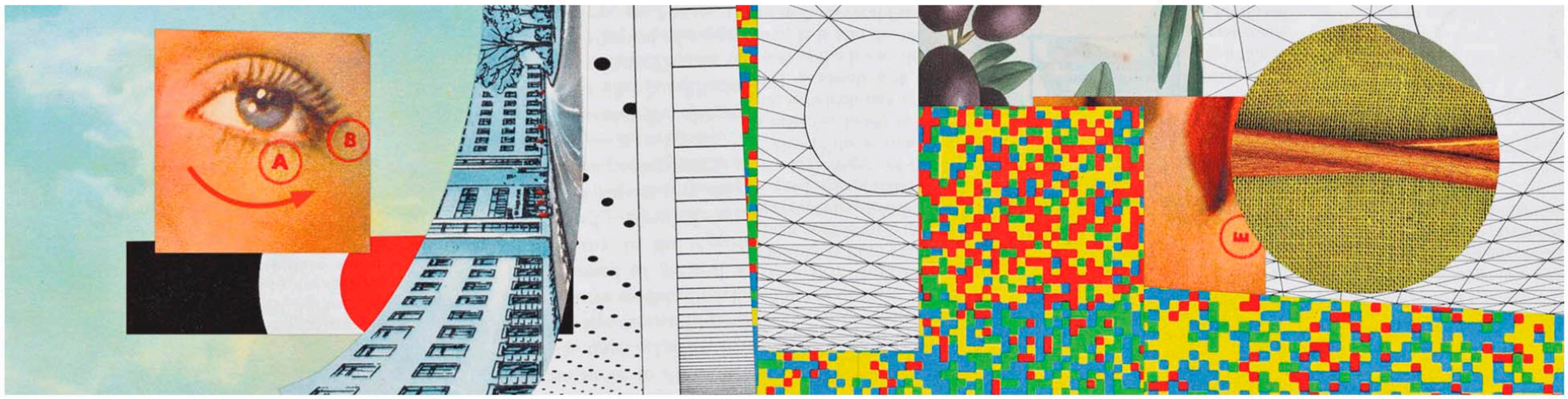
THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**IT ENDS WITH US,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A battered wife raised in a violent home attempts to halt the cycle of abuse.	108
2	2	**IT STARTS WITH US,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) The sequel to "It Ends With Us."	32
3	3	**MEET ME AT THE LAKE,** by Carley Fortune. (Berkley) A decade after a one-day adventure, Will appears again in Fern's life at her mother's lakeside resort.	4
4	4	**VERITY,** by Colleen Hoover. (Grand Central) Lowen Ashleigh is hired by the husband of an injured writer to complete her popular series.	94
5	5	**THE SEVEN HUSBANDS OF EVELYN HUGO,** by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Washington Square/ Atria) A movie icon recounts stories of her loves and career.	116
6	7	**THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY,** by Matt Haig. (Penguin) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities.	3
7	6	**THE LAST THING HE TOLD ME,** by Laura Dave. (Marysue Rucci) Hannah Hall discovers truths about her missing husband and bonds with his daughter from a previous relationship.	10
8	11	**ICEBREAKER,** by Hannah Grace. (Atria) Anastasia might need the help of the captain of a college hockey team to get on the Olympic figure skating team.	15
9	8	**UGLY LOVE,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A casual sexual relationship between Tate and Miles becomes more complicated than they expected.	96
10	10	**THE HOUSEMAID,** by Freida McFadden. (Grand Central) Troubles surface when a woman looking to make a fresh start takes a job in the home of the Winchesters.	5
11	9	**NEVER NEVER,** by Colleen Hoover and Tarryn Fisher. (Canary Street) Questions arise when a pair of lovers try to uncover why they suddenly became strangers.	13
12	12	**HEART BONES,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) After an unexpected death prevents her from going to Penn State, Beyah Grim has a summer fling with the rich guy next door.	17
13	14	**THE SILENT PATIENT,** by Alex Michaelides. (Celadon) Theo Faber looks into the mystery of a famous painter who stops speaking after shooting her husband.	93
14		**TRUST,** by Hernan Diaz. (Riverhead) Winner of a 2023 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Competing narratives about a wealthy New York couple have new revelations over the course of a century.	1
15	13	**THINGS WE NEVER GOT OVER,** by Lucy Score. (Bloom) A runaway bride becomes the guardian of her evil twin's daughter and gets some help from a bad-boy barber.	33

Paperback Nonfiction

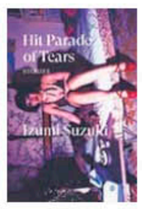
THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	2	**KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON,** by David Grann. (Vintage) The story of a murder spree in 1920s Oklahoma that targeted Osage Indians, whose lands contained oil.	117
2	1	**THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE,** by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind.	240
3	4	**CRYING IN H MART,** by Michelle Zauner. (Vintage) The leader of the indie rock project Japanese Breakfast describes creating her own identity after losing her mother to cancer.	9
4	6	**THE ESCAPE ARTIST,** by Jonathan Freedland. (Harper) Rudolf Vrba, who became one of the first Jews to escape from Auschwitz, warned others about the death camp.	5
5	5	**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.	163
6	7	**ALL ABOUT LOVE,** by bell hooks. (Morrow) The late feminist icon explores the causes of a polarized society and the meaning of love.	77
7	3	**QUIETLY HOSTILE,** by Samantha Irby. (Vintage) A new collection of essays detailing personal and professional experiences by the author of "Wow, No Thank You."	2
8	12	**THE GLASS CASTLE,** by Jeannette Walls. (Scribner) The author recalls how she and her siblings were constantly moved from one bleak place to another. (†)	470
9	11	**THINKING, FAST AND SLOW,** by Daniel Kahneman. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) When we can and cannot trust our intuitions.	364
10	9	**EMPIRE OF THE SUMMER MOON,** by S. C. Gwynne. (Scribner) The story of Quanah Parker, the last chief of the Comanches.	66
11	13	**TALKING TO STRANGERS,** by Malcolm Gladwell. (Back Bay) Famous examples of miscommunication.	87
12	14	**EDUCATED,** by Tara Westover. (Random House) The daughter of survivalists, who is kept out of school, educates herself enough to leave home for university.	51
13		**MY LOVE STORY,** by Tina Turner with Deborah Davis and Dominik Wichmann. (Atria) The late Grammy Award-winner describes her road to fame and reflects on difficult personal experiences.	1
14		**THE BOMBER MAFIA,** by Malcolm Gladwell. (Back Bay) A look at the key players and outcomes of precision bombing during World War II.	32
15	15	**GRIT,** by Angela Duckworth. (Scribner) The MacArthur Fellow argues that passion and perseverance are more important than innate talent in creating success.	149

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.**

The Shortlist / Story Collections / By Jen Vafidis



HIT PARADE OF TEARS
By Izumi Suzuki
276 pp. Verso. Paperback, $19.95.



You might think you've read stories like Suzuki's. They have a punchy, au courant voice and teem with bad feelings about living with others, not to mention living at all. Publishing tends to chase hard-edged youth for the key to our confounding present, but Suzuki (1949-86) sounded like now back then. Her youthfulness is a 20th-century product.

In the late 1960s and early '70s, she modeled nude and acted in Japanese sexploitation cinema; during and after a doomed marriage to a saxophonist, she made a name in science-fiction magazines, pursuing her ideas to their sublime, almost idiotic limit (a compliment), until her death by suicide at 36.

"Terminal Boredom," the dour but hard-to-shake collection that Verso Books published two years ago, was the American introduction to the Suzuki cult. The latest excavation, "Hit Parade of Tears," is funnier, more electric and more hit-and-miss. I like it so much better.

What does Suzuki push to absurdity? Gender, relationships, family and the meaning of pop culture. The best piece of covert arts criticism I've read in a minute is in this collection, a psychedelic trip in and out of the head of an ersatz garage-rock groupie named Reico (also spelled Reyco and Reiko, depending on how she feels) whose life never seems to belong to her as much as the music does.

Is that original? Not totally. But does "Almost Famous" have a scene when the sky opens to reveal giant chopsticks hovering over salmon roe as big as skyscrapers? Suzuki's narratives might contain B-movie silliness. They also have the hypnotic power of a bender. Just look at the time — you've suddenly finished them all.

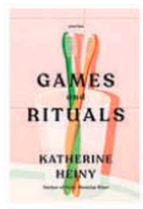
URANIANS
By Theodore McCombs
210 pp. Astra House. $25.

A minor description from Theodore McCombs's inquisitive fantasia "Uranians," his debut collection, illuminated the whole book for me. The main character in "Laguna Heights," frustrated by memory gaps caused by his top-shelf neurotechnology, is called the "sort of man pleased to remember that old movies are still in the world." *He's* not pleased; he's the *kind of* person who would be. This detached phrasing, however tossed-off, tore me out of the moment, and confronted me with an iffy behavioral theory: Identity predetermines emotions and actions, and emotions and actions reinforce identity, in one smooth loop.

Almost all of McCombs's protagonists suffer from this fallacy, whether they're in early-20th-century Boston or on a corporate spaceship. Not all the characters are queer but queerness is central to their thinking. An imaginary box labeled "What I Am" plagues them; they are also equally oppressed by another box, labeled "What I Am Not." This creates a potent stasis, a conditional way of life that no one is fully happy with.

That stagnancy also means the plots never bloom. (There is something more to be said — with a larger word count — about how multiverse stories, like the first in this collection, can be "waiting room" dramas, where all the action is in someone's head and thus nothing actually happens.) McCombs's prose is elegant, but can veer into description for description's sake. He has an aesthete's addiction to getting lost in what's rich. But the best parts of "Uranians" are the most focused, when he gives his characters the gift of discovering that their point of view is not the point at all.

GAMES AND RITUALS
By Katherine Heiny
218 pp. Knopf. $28.

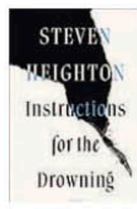


In her previous novels, "Early Morning Riser" and "Standard Deviation," and her first collection, "Single, Carefree, Mellow," Katherine Heiny's touch was always astonishingly light, even when a serious darkness might take over. As the title of her latest collection suggests, "Games and Rituals" deals in more of the same. Her stories are paeans to the almighty joke, both what it accomplishes and what it precludes, often at the expense of anything substantial.

Up to the moment it would be unforgivable, her characters crack wise from the same arsenal, their charm depending heavily on your sense of humor. (I'll admit, it's not mine.) There's a reliance on almost vaudevillian repetition ("He looks like a retired history teacher and is, in fact, a retired history teacher"), gently used internet speak ("because, well, marriage") and winking one-liners about universal misfortune ("That's love for you"). Her characters often possess a guilelessness that at its best evokes Lorrie Moore's tough cookies, and at its worst a harried friend ignoring the truth.

Having a laugh is one of life's great pleasures, but sometimes you crave more. Heiny's stories hint at something truly ripe for comic fiction: Her characters have a nagging fear of getting old. Not of dying, oddly, but the part right before it — losing the validation of others, missing the point, having nothing left but doctors' appointments and the company of your self-absorbed children. It's a substantial terror. But when the moment of reckoning comes in these stories, it only fizzes, like an open can of seltzer. You have to ask: Is that all there is?

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE DROWNING
By Steven Heighton
217 pp. Biblioasis. Paperback, $22.95.



In an obituary for Steven Heighton, his former publisher Martha Sharpe is quoted saying she was "blown away" by the first story in "Instructions for the Drowning," citing the author's ability to choose "the things included and the things not included." "He was really, really good at that," she said, and boy, was she right.

To read work like Heighton's knowing that we won't get more of it — he died last year of cancer, at the age of 60 — inspires fury in all directions. Who's thinking of the things not included when you have what Heighton does include? Every story in this collection has "it," whatever Heighton decided "it" would be: pacing that thrills; fragile love and blind hate; descriptions you can smell and taste and hear.

I'm not saying the collection is a smoothly flowing concert album, with only the best solos of Heighton's career captured on high-end equipment. For every classically humanist story, say, about the moment everything became clear between a man and his wife (and his son, and his father), there is a thorny B-side that will appear in your thoughts unexpectedly, as you zone out on Zoom.

At the risk of classic rock cliché, the deep cuts might be better. There's the plastic surgeon who goes too far in tribute to beauty. The gravedigger surrounded by olives you shouldn't eat from the tree. And the writer of an unsigned note left in your mailbox, with one telling word out of place. They all live now, thanks to Heighton's talent, and they haven't faded yet.

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ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GALL

An Appraisal / Martin Amis / By A.O. Scott

Our critic assesses the achievement of Britain's most famous literary son.

ON MAY 6, at the age of 74, Charles III was crowned king of England. A few weeks later, at 73, Martin Amis died at his home in Florida. One event seemed almost comically belated, the other tragically premature. Charles took over the family business well past normal retirement age, while Amis was denied the illustrious dotage that great writers deserve.

It's hard to accept either one of them as old. The point of princes is that they're young; Amis, much like the former Prince of Wales, had enjoyed (or endured) a decades-long career as a dauphin. These near-contemporaries, who once argued at a dinner party about the persecution of Salman Rushdie, shared a curious generational destiny. They were forever sons, defined and sometimes overshadowed by famous parents, dynastic heirs trying to figure out how to be self-made men.

Amis, whose father, Kingsley (1922-95), was a very famous novelist, once described himself as "the only hereditary novelist in the Anglophone literary corpus." We all know about Charles's family. He and Martin were the leading nepo babies of the British baby boom.

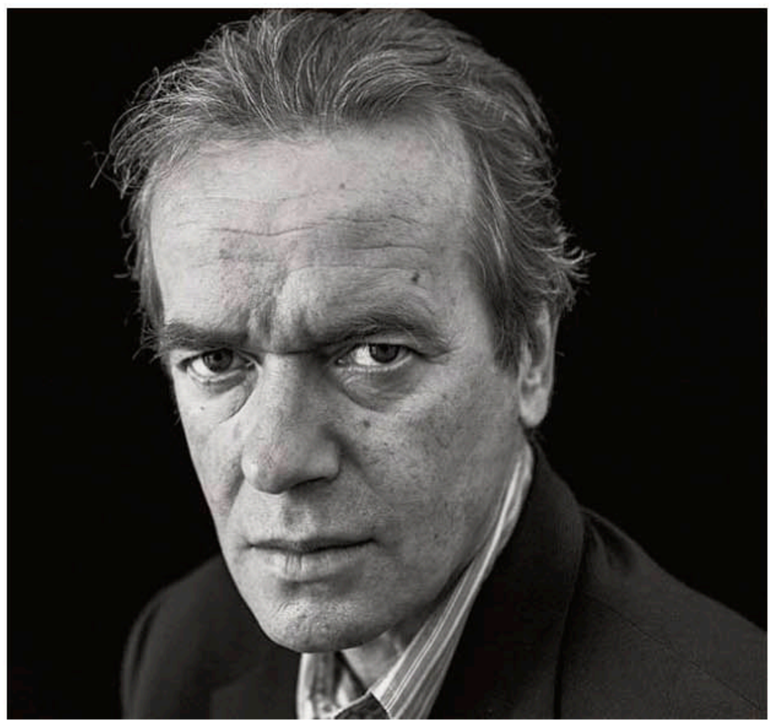
There are writers who disdain the idea that generations matter. Amis was not one of them. From first to last — from "The Rachel Papers" to "Inside Story" — his novels bristle with characters who not only live (and sometime drown) in the flow of history, but who relentlessly historicize their own experience. Their libidos unfurl like banners in the sexual revolution and soldier on in its aftermath. Their political views and social attitudes follow the left-right zigzagging and centrist muddle of the Reagan/Thatcher and Clinton/Blair eras. Their economic prospects wane and wax with the cycles of global hypercapitalism.

The closer these characters come to Amis himself — most recently in the retrospection of "The Pregnant Widow" and "Inside Story" — the more overt this generational mapping becomes. But it's also evident in his "State of England" fictions, including the 1996 story of that name and the 2012 novel "Lionel Asbo," which recycles the phrase as a subtitle. There, the working-class protagonists situate their own frustrations and satisfactions, their aging and their coming-of-age, within an ambient dialectical narrative of progress and decline. In the shorter "State of England," an upwardly mobile, almost-divorced bouncer named Mal reflects that

> class and race and gender were supposedly gone (and other things were supposedly going, like age and beauty and even education): all the really automatic ways people had of telling who was better or worse — they were gone. Right-thinkers everywhere were claiming that they were clean of prejudice, that in them the inherited formulations had at last been purged. This they had decided. But for those on the pointed end of the operation — the ignorant, say, or the ugly — it wasn't just a decision. Some of them had no new clothes. Some were still dressed in the uniform of their deficiencies. Some were still wearing the same old shit.

Even when Amis's fictional attention veered toward other histories, notably and controversially the Holocaust and Stalin's terror, a reader couldn't help hearing the voice and sensibility of a worldly and well-placed citizen of post-imperial literary London.

By all accounts — certainly by Amis's accounts — to be young in that twilight was, if not quite heaven, then an awful lot of fun. The 1970s, when Amis, still in his 20s, served as back-of-the-book editor of The New Statesman and published his early, funny novels, were a swirl of deadlines,



Martin Amis in 2007.

love affairs, literary quarrels and long, boozy lunches with brilliant friends. Such friends! Amis's cohort of male British writers included Ian McEwan, James Fenton, Salman Rushdie and Christopher Hitchens, all of whom (especially Hitch) pop up frequently in his pages.

In his criticism, though, Amis's gaze was more frequently cast backward over his shoulder, toward his father's peers — Philip Larkin, Iris Murdoch, John Bayley, Robert Conquest — and across the Atlantic. There (which is to say here, in the United States) is where he found the surrogate dads, dashing uncles and swaggering older brothers who spurred and challenged his aspirations: John Updike, Philip Roth, Joseph Heller and above all his "twin peaks," Vladimir Nabokov and Saul Bellow.

Even as he ascended to trans-Atlantic fame and best-selling fortune, Amis was happy to embrace his junior status, to cast himself as an admiring, critical, sometimes rebellious acolyte. This isn't to suggest that he was modest or diffident. On the contrary: He reveled in precocity, cheekiness, iconoclasm and snark. He tapped at the clay feet of his idols with the chisel of his irreverent wit, even as he clambered onto their shoulders to see farther, and more clearly, than they ever could.

If I accept the mightiness of Bellow and Nabokov, it's partly because Amis persuaded me, both by the precepts of his criticism and the example of his fiction, which grapples with and overcomes their influence. What I mean is that I liked him better, and trusted him more.

The best way I can find to pay tribute, to conduct an honest appraisal — no small challenge with a writer who was singularly gifted at self-appraisal — is to lay my own generational cards on the table. I'm a member of what Amis called "the Crap Generation": "I mean the one that came after the baby boomers — those born around 1970 (the Generation Xers)." He once proposed a "polemical work" about how crappy we were, which is especially hurtful, though not necessarily surprising. We were his biggest fans.

To come of reading age in the last three decades of the 20th century — from the oil embargo through the fall of the Berlin Wall, all the way to 9/11 — was to live, it now seems clear, in the Amis Era. He cut, for guys around my age (and not only guys, as Zadie Smith might agree), a figure not unlike the ones that Bellow and the other Americans represented for him. A giant, yes, but also a familiar, provoking, somehow approachable writer. Someone you could envy as well as admire, resent as well as respect.

It was easy enough to point out the lapses, blind spots and missteps: the alternately sentimental and slobbery view of women; the taste for cruel, downward-punching humor; the occasional slippage of liberal common sense into reactionary bluster. But it was also easy to imagine arguing about all that over drinks and cigarettes, thanks to Amis's inexhaustible intellectual brio and his undentable good humor.

That quality, even more than his satirical flair or the buoyant elegance of his prose, marks his greatest feat of self-invention. The first time I wrote about Amis in these pages, I too cleverly called him "the best American writer England has ever produced." What I was responding to was not just his evident Americanophilia, or the scale and audacity of his ambition, but also his optimism, his open-mindedness, his energy.

Whether these are still — or ever were — defining characteristics of American culture is an argument for another day. The point is that they were decidedly not attitudes associated with English writers up until then, especially not those of Kingsley Amis's generation.

Those guys made art out of their grudges, resentments and prejudices, none better than Larkin, Kingsley's difficult pal from their undergraduate days at Oxford. Larkin, who detested children and had none of his own, was a spectral presence in Martin's boyhood and the subject of some of his most searching and productive mature criticism.

Larkin, who Amis called "the novelist's poet," is his crucial precursor. "Inside Story," Amis's avowedly autobiographical last novel, broaches the idea that he may have been Martin's actual father as well. That's the claim made by Phoebe Phelps, Martin's lover in the late 1970s, who tells Martin, many years later, that she heard it from Kingsley himself, who was trying to get her to go to bed with him.

All it takes to debunk this revelation is a glance at a few book jacket photos. Martin's resemblance to Kingsley is impossible to miss. And at least superficially, the apple landed very close to the tree. Martin grew up into a comic novelist and a prolific periodical scribbler, just like dad. He was gregarious and well traveled, which Larkin was decidedly not.

But the fantasy of Larkin's secret paternity in some ways improves on the actual literary succession. What Martin Amis inherited from Larkin, genetically or otherwise, was a streak of kindness, a tenderness that Kingsley in his writing almost entirely lacked.

Larkin, a gloomy bachelor with a wretched romantic life, a proud provincial decidedly not clean of prejudice, was a great love poet. His meanest appraisals of the human condition admit a glimmer of affection, which sometimes deepens into a glow. You find that in Amis too, sometimes where you least expect it: amid the apocalyptic tremors of "London Fields," the fratricidal savagery of "The Information," the decadence and thuggery of "Lionel Asbo." And in everything he wrote about the writers he revered.

In his poem "Posterity," Larkin imagines how he might look to a future biographer, a fictional academic named Jake Balokowsky. "One of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys," is how he sees Jake seeing him. It's possible to think of Amis along similar lines, as a man of his time, even if it was a very different time. Much as it's impossible to picture Larkin young, it's hard to think of Amis as anything but. And now, all of a sudden, he's no longer young. He's permanent. □

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