

The New York Times

# Book Review

JUNE 9, 2024

How **Reese Witherspoon's** book-club empire opens doors for other strong women.

BY ELISABETH EGAN

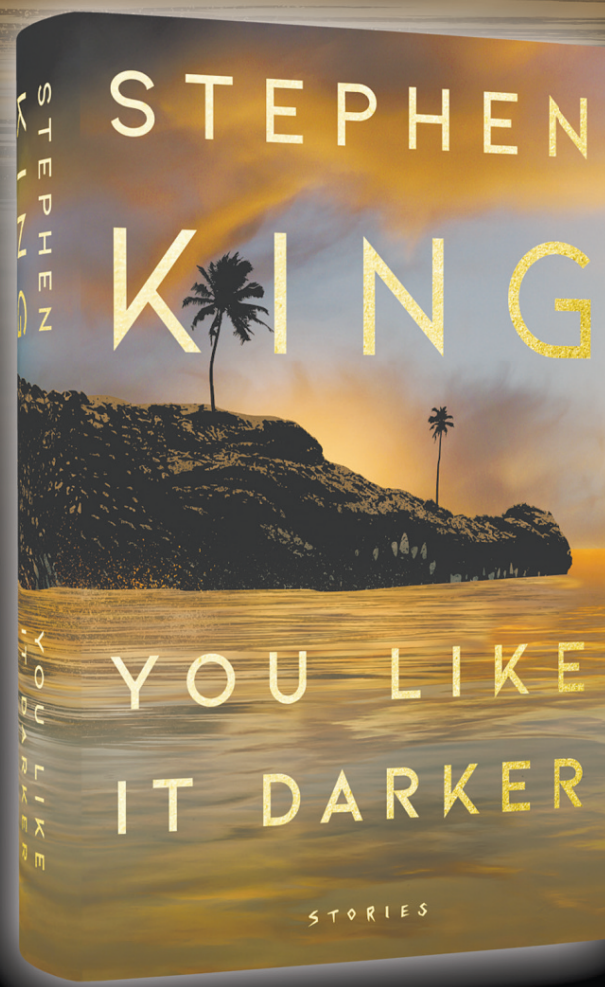


“You like it darker? Fine, so do I.”

—STEPHEN KING

“STEPHEN KING KNOWS YOU LIKE IT DARKER  
AND OBLIGES WITH SENSATIONAL NEW TALES...”

He has a long history of exceptional short fiction...and proves once more  
that his smaller-sized tales pack as powerful a wallop as the big boys.” —USA TODAY



New from the master storyteller,  
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“King is good company in the dark.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“King is writing some of the best work of his long career.”

—*The Seattle Times*

“King’s skills as a storyteller remain undimmed, and following him into the dark,  
the light or anywhere in between is never a bad bet. As if anyone could resist.”

—*Star Tribune (Minneapolis)*

“The darkness promised is as riveting and all-consuming as ever.”

—*New York magazine*

“King’s dark imagination is a dominant force in American culture.”

—*Esquire*

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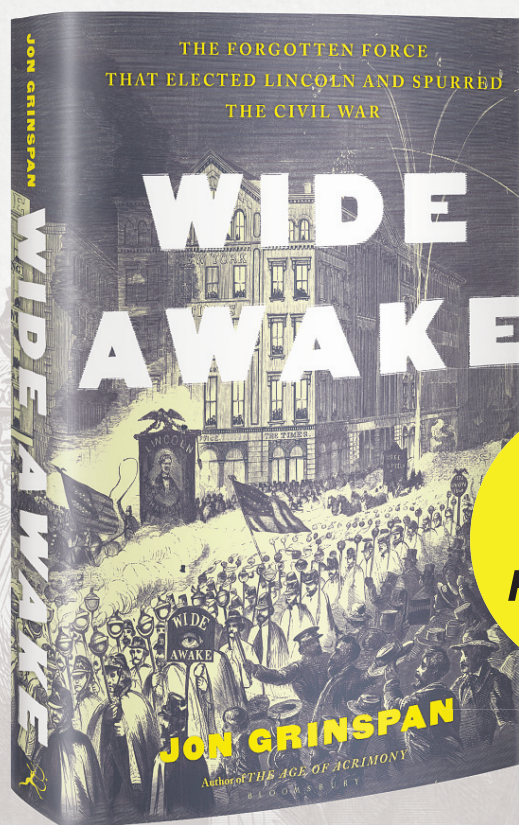
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“Brilliant.”

—ELIZABETH R. VARON, author of *Longstreet*

“At last we have a history worthy of the Wide Awakes . . . Crackling prose.”

—TED WIDMER, author of *Lincoln on the Verge*

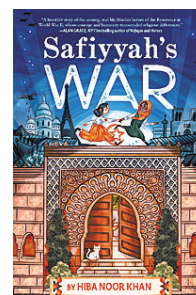
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B L O O M S B U R Y



## Newly Published / Children's



**SAFIYYAH'S WAR**, by Hiba Noor Khan. (Allida, \$19.99, ages 8 to 12.) Luminous prose and a young heroine with “a spark in her eyes” who dreams of being an explorer make this novel, inspired by the Muslims who sheltered hundreds of Jews in the Grand Mosque of Paris during the French Resistance, a riveting read for children and adults alike.



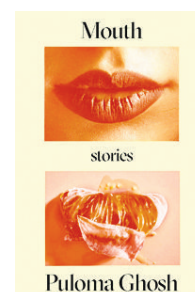
**BUILT TO LAST**, by Minh Lê. Illustrated by Dan Santat. (Knopf, \$18.99, ages 3 to 7.) When two little boys who bear a striking resemblance to the picture book's creators meet “by accident” — backing into each other while playing with blocks, causing both of their buildings to collapse — they don't fight; they unite.

**EMERGENCY QUARTERS**, by Carlos Matias. Illustrated by Gracey Zhang. (Katherine Tegen, \$19.99, ages 4 to 8.) Set in the not-too-distant past, when kids could call loved ones from pay phones, this vibrant tale that began as a Times Metropolitan Diary entry celebrates Matias's “first taste of sweet independence.”

**THE SECRET LIBRARY**, by Kekla Magoon. (Candlewick, \$18.99, ages 8 to 12.) A map left to a biracial girl by her beloved grandfather leads her to a mysterious collection of books, each a portal to a different piece of history in a time-travel fantasy that includes an adventure on the high seas with pirates.

## ...Also Out Now

**THE CIA: An Imperial History**, by Hugh Wilford. (Basic, \$35.) Wilford, who previously wrote books on the C.I.A.'s ties to private U.S. citizen groups and the Middle East, offers a sweeping history covering the agency's beginnings and its role in expanding the American empire.



**MOUTH: Stories**, by Puloma Ghosh. (Astra House, \$26.) At turns spectral and grisly, the stories in this speculative collection follow freakish teen figure skaters, an Indian American woman haunted in Kolkata and the ghosts of ex-lovers as they contend with grief and desire.

**PET, PET, SLAP**, by Andrew Battershill. (Coach House Books, paperback, \$23.95.) Pillow, the boxing protagonist of Battershill's oddball surrealist debut, is back in this worthy sequel. Falling behind on his training before his next bout, he seeks out the only person who can help: his elusive roommate, Sherlock Holmes.

**VICIOUS AND IMMORAL: Homosexuality, the American Revolution, and the Trials of Robert Newburgh**, by John Gilbert McCurdy. (Johns Hopkins University Press, \$34.95.) The 1774 trial of a British Army chaplain accused of homosexuality grounds this account of the attitudes around sex and revolt leading up to the American Revolution.



# MAISIE DOBBS TAKES HER FINAL BOW!

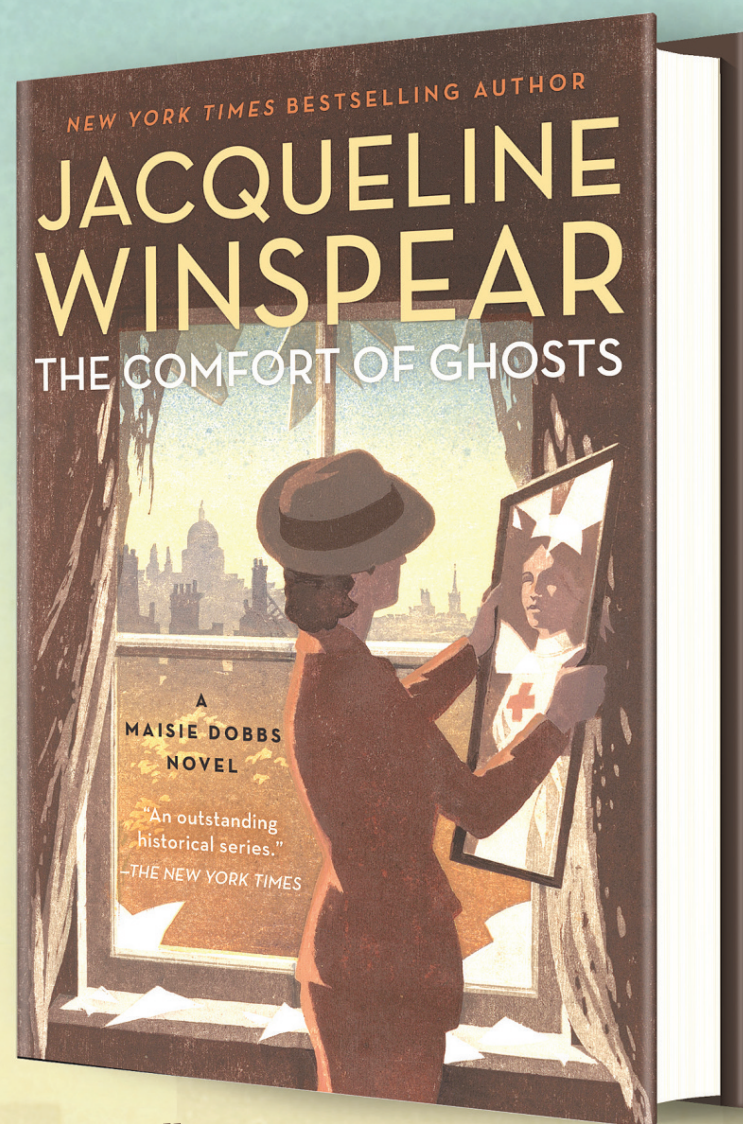
The bestselling historical series the *New York Times Book Review* calls “**Outstanding**” and Maisie Dobbs “**A Heroine To Cherish.**”

“Exceptional . . . An intriguing series that entertains and inspires.”

—THE WASHINGTON POST

“Winspear delivers a most elegant and satisfying resolution.”

—BOOKLIST, STARRED REVIEW



“A series to savor.” —TIME





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## ✂ Letters



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### Kafka Centenary

TO THE EDITOR:  
What a magnificent essay! Benjamin Balint's "Everyone Wants a Piece of Kafka" (May 26) strikes at the core of what it means to be a writer's writer. I can still remember the pull of Kafka's sensibilities when I first read "The Metamorphosis" in the ninth grade. I shouted to my grandmother, who was about to squash a cockroach: "Don't, Grandma! That's Gregor Samsa!"

Everyone claims Kafka, yet Kafka himself claimed no one. "Everything I possess is directed against me," Kafka confessed to Max Brod, "and what is directed against me is no longer my possession." Even though Brod went against Franz Kafka's wishes, he did so because he believed his possessions belonged to the world. Kafka is a rare bird — a multiculturalist — because his ideas and life experiences are bound by unseen universal laws that touch the emotions of many cultures, ethnicities and realities.

RAFAEL C. CASTILLO  
SAN ANTONIO



TO THE EDITOR:  
How appropriate — oddly so — that the May 26 Book Review begins with a memorial advertisement for the recently deceased author Paul Auster and ends with a tribute essay by Benjamin Balint

marking the 100th anniversary of Franz Kafka's death. Fifty years ago, Auster wrote a tribute essay entitled "Pages for Kafka."

DENNIS BARONE  
WEST HARTFORD, CONN.

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

### WHAT OUR READERS ARE READING

"This weekend I should put Jonathan Franzen's **THE CORRECTIONS** to rest," writes Joseph Witkowski. "Happily so, as I need to breathe."

Alice Cottingham is reading **KNIFE**, by Salman Rushdie, and **LUCY GAYHEART**, by Willa Cather: "One is sobering. The other should be better known!"

"I'm racing through Ruth Reichl's **THE PARIS NOVEL**," writes Eileen Conway. "It's very entertaining and a good read from the former editor in chief of Gourmet and former restaurant critic for The Times."

Ellen Jennings is reading **FAMILIARIS**, by David Wroblewski: "Excellent writing and great characters. Perfect summer read!"

The New York Times



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# YOUR NEXT FAVORITE READ AWAITS!

Look out for pages that are worth flipping this season.

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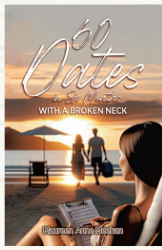


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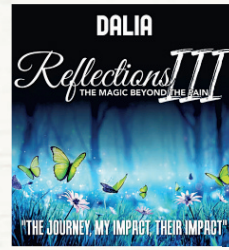
**Toy Realm**  
DAWN M. WIENS



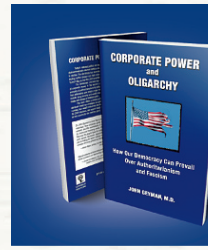
**60 Dates in Six Months  
(with a Broken Neck)**  
MAUREEN ANNE MEEHAN



**Jesus on the Journey**  
FACIA HORNE



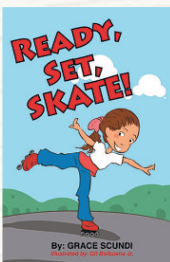
**Reflections III**  
DALIA VERNIKOVSKY



### CORPORATE POWER AND OLIGARCHY

JOHN GEYMAN, M.D.

The book discusses oligarchy's influence on the government, how oligarchs maintain power, wealth's impact on elections, and citizens' role in strengthening democracy for national unity and common good.



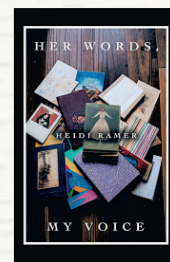
**Ready, Set, SKATE!**  
GRACE SCUNDI



**Zach's Heart**  
DEBRA BAUGUESS



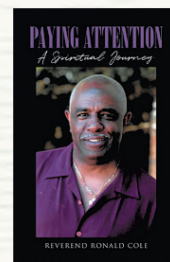
**Path of the Lion**  
K.T. BROWN



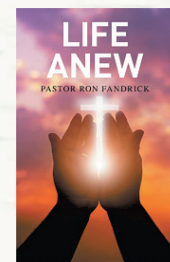
**Her Words, My Voice**  
HEIDI RAMER



**A New Pentecost for a  
Starving World!**  
BR. THOMAS VARKEY



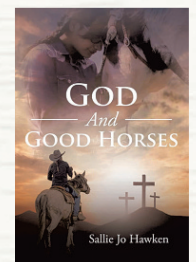
**Paying Attention: A  
Spiritual Journey**  
REV. RONALD COLE



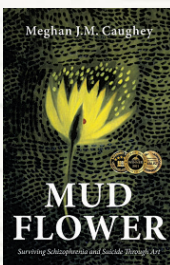
**Life Anew**  
PASTOR RON FANDRICK



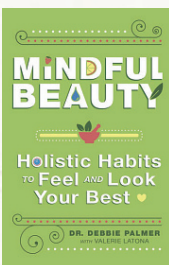
**Blessings Unexpected**  
WILLIE MAE GEARING



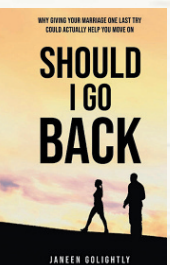
**God And Good Horses**  
SALLIE JO HAWKEN



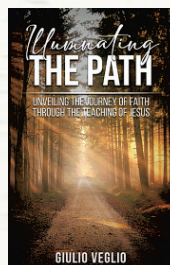
**Mud Flower**  
MEGHAN J.M. CAUGHEY



**Mindful Beauty**  
DR. DEBBIE PALMER



**Should I Go Back**  
JANEEN GOLIGHTLY



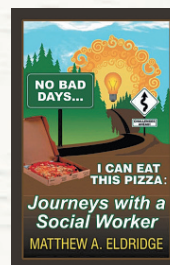
**Illuminating The Path**  
GIULIO VEGLIO



**Susie Sunshine**  
DEBORAH KLEJBACH



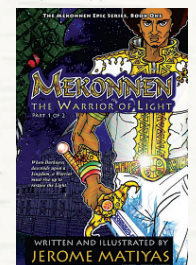
**The New Elder Abuse**  
KATHLEEN O. EDMUNDS, MD



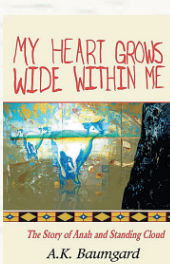
**No Bad Days... I Can  
Eat This Pizza**  
MATTHEW A. ELDRIDGE



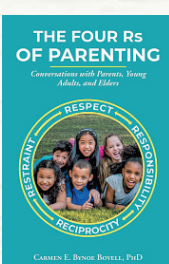
**A Fresh Start**  
NEALIE MILLER



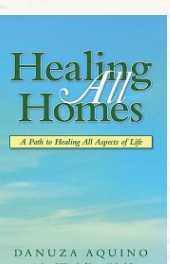
**Mekonnen: The Warrior  
of Light**  
JEROME MATIYAS



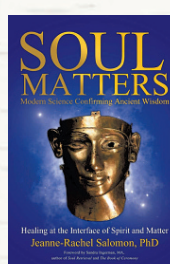
**My Heart Grows Wide  
Within Me**  
A.K. BAUMGARD



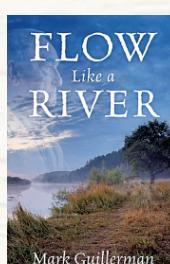
**The Four Rs of Parenting**  
CARMEN E. BYNOE BOVELL, PhD



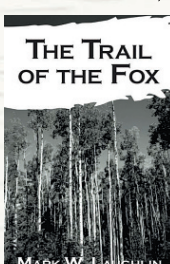
**Healing All Homes**  
DANUZA AQUINO



**Soul Matters**  
JEANNE-RACHEL SALOMON, PhD



**Flow Like a River**  
MARK GUILLERMAN



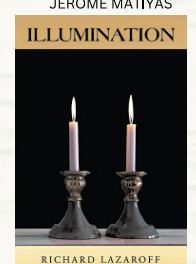
**The Trail of the Fox**  
MARK W. LAUGHLIN



**Remnants of Humanity**  
CHRISTINE VAN CAMP ZECCA



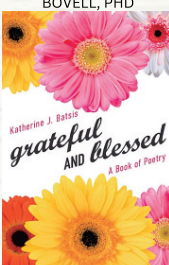
**The White Coat Effect**  
L.B. WELLS



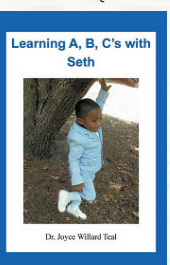
**Illumination**  
RICHARD LAZAROFF



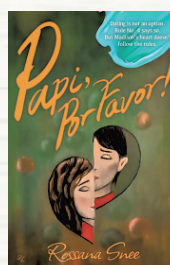
**Water for the Rose**  
WAYNE LUTHI



**grateful AND blessed:  
A Book of Poetry**  
KATHERINE J. BATIS



**Learning A, B, C's with Seth**  
DR. JOYCE WILLARD TEAL



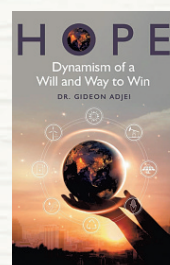
**Papi, Por Favor!**  
ROSSANA SNEE



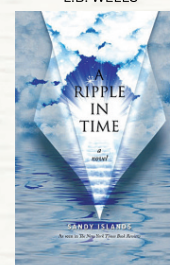
**Herbert the Bat**  
OLIVIA GREENS



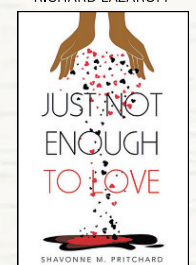
**The Plot to Cool the  
Planet**  
SAM BLEICHER



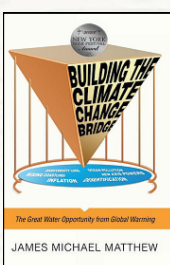
**HOPE**  
Dynamism of a  
Will and Way to Win  
DR. GIDEON ADJEI



**A Ripple in Time**  
SANDY ISLANDS



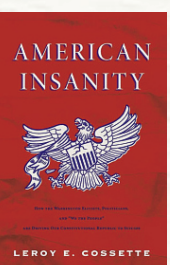
**Just Not Enough to Love**  
SHAVONNE M. PRITCHARD



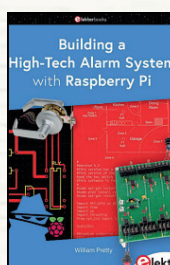
**Building the Climate  
Change Bridge**  
JAMES MICHAEL MATTHEW



**Foundations and New Frontiers  
in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**  
LEROY THOMPSON, PH.D.



**American Insanity**  
LEROY E. COSSETTE



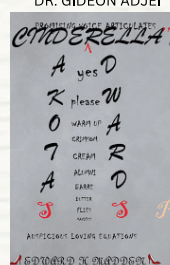
**Building a High-Tech Alarm  
System with Raspberry Pi**  
WILLIAM PRETTY



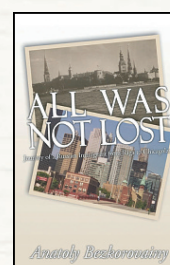
**Hoodwinked**  
ANTHONY TODD ARNOLD



**Prosper mE**  
VICTORIA RADER



**Cinderella's Pi**  
EDWARD H. MADDEN



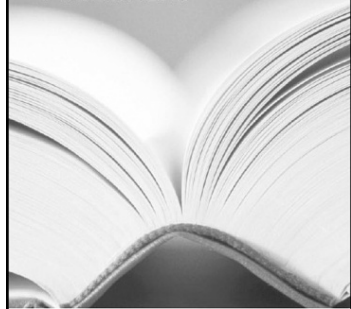
**All Was Not Lost**  
ANATOLY BEZKOROVAINY



**Cannabis for Seniors**  
BEVERLY A. POTTER, PH.D.



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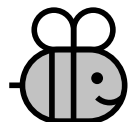
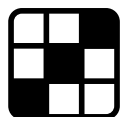
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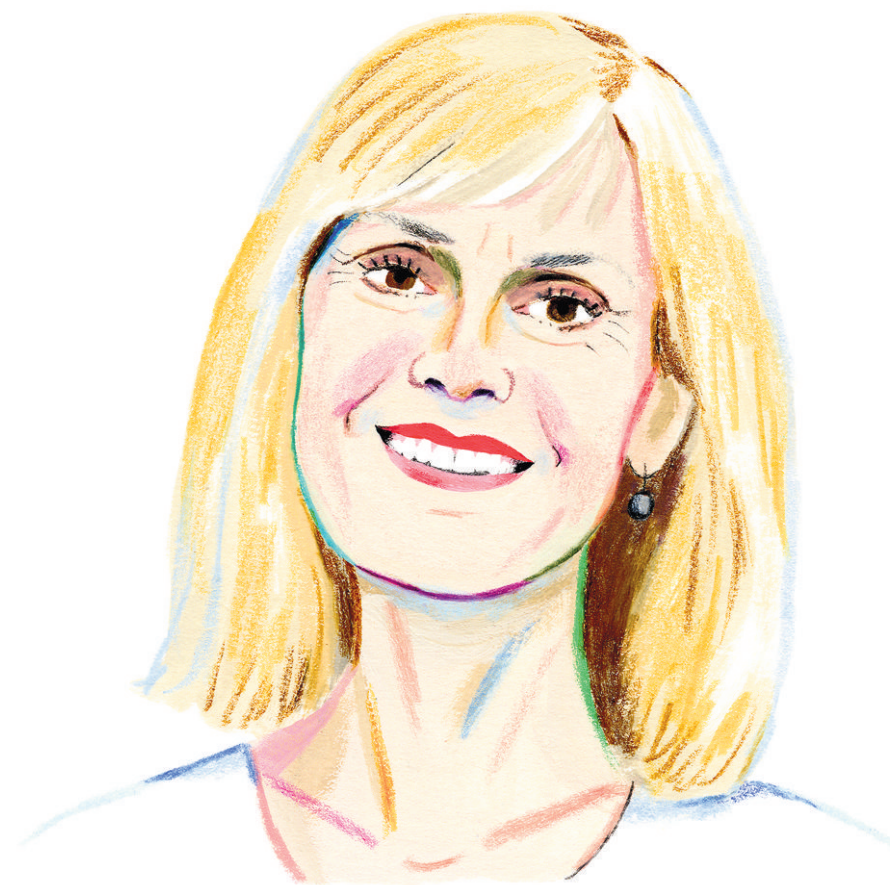
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## By the Book



# Jacqueline Winspear

'I find the word "genre" so limiting, because thus far my novels are a blend of war story, historical fiction and mystery.' The 18th and final book in her popular Maisie Dobbs series is 'The Comfort of Ghosts.'

### What books are on your night stand?

"War" by Sebastian Junger, "End Times" by Peter Turchin and "The Unwinding" by Jackie Morris. It's my nighttime fairy tale, before I turn out the light.

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

An overcast day, at home in front of a blazing fire, in one hand a big, fat book that really engages me, and in the other a mug of hot chocolate.

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

No one should be surprised by a writer's library. We all read well beyond the literary forms for which we are known. However, a friend scanning my shelves asked, "Why do you have that book on cocaine?" Dominic Streatfeild's "Cocaine: An Unauthorized Biography" is a terrific book — I read it for background research.

### What kind of reader were you as a child?

Voracious. And secretive. I had my first

library ticket at age 2, and my dad (a house painter and decorator) would often bring home books abandoned in empty homes he was working on, so we had an eclectic mix around the house.

### If you were to write in another genre besides mystery, what would it be?

I have written other fiction and nonfiction, including my memoir, "This Time Next Year We'll Be Laughing," and I write articles and essays on assignment. That's probably why I find the word "genre" so limiting, because thus far my novels are a blend of war story, historical fiction and mystery. Some of the best fiction I've read — encompassing political intrigue, environmental issues, human relationships, mental illness, immigration, history, pop culture — was authored by "mystery" writers.

### When you published a stand-alone after your 17th Maisie Dobbs novel, did you think you were done with the series?

I published "The Care and Management

of Lies," my first "stand-alone," in 2014. My second, "The White Lady," was published in 2023. It was the final novel in a three-book contract, so the publication date was set in stone. I had known for years that "The Comfort of Ghosts" would be the last in my series. I'm glad there was a gap between the 17th and 18th novels. The timing felt right.

### Who's been your most helpful resource for getting the history right?

I've interviewed some brilliant archivists, historians and psychologists. I've spent hours in the archives at the Imperial War Museum in London, and I've trekked across the WWI battlefields of the Somme and Ypres, visited the former camp at Dachau and walked into (and very quickly out of) Hitler's former HQ in Munich. Upon reflection, it's family stories that reside at the heart of my curiosity about war's impact on ordinary people — so you could say the "who" has been my family.

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

Almost everything in "Femina" by Janina Ramirez. We know women's history has been conveniently airbrushed from "his" story, but this amazing book is an entertaining, stunningly well-researched eye-opener.

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

"North Woods" by Daniel Mason. The writing is rich and smooth, the storytelling woven with such dexterity and the sense of historical place so authentic and compelling, I really couldn't put it down.

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

I had published my first novel when, at a literary event, I was invited to join three esteemed authors for dinner. I could barely contain my excitement. But here's how the great literary conversation unfolded: Author 1 complained about his frozen shoulder, due to working to meet a deadline — he'd just had a cortisone shot. Author 2 had also been given cortisone for lower back pain. Author 3 shared the story of her carpal tunnel syndrome surgery. I decided to chip in with the grisly tale of the riding accident that led me to finish "Maisie Dobbs." "Cortisone shot? I've got internal hardware!"

The person I would love to sit down to dinner with is the legendary editor Max Perkins — while avoiding physical woes.

### What do you plan to read next?

"The Alternatives" by Caoilinn Hughes. □

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

ILLUSTRATION BY REBECCA CLARKE



## Three new books show us why the United States should try to strongly prevent another Civil War.

AS WE APPROACH this November's presidential election, "blood bath" is quickly becoming one of Donald Trump's favorite new terms. If he does not take the White House, there will be a "blood bath" in the auto industry. President Biden's immigration policies are causing a "blood bath" at the U.S. border with Mexico. In some corners, this imagery is understood as a threat: What will Trump supporters do if their favored candidate does not win? He has repeatedly suggested that violent unrest could follow his defeat. Would it be a reprise of the American Civil War?

If any contemporary historian can give us a clue, it might be Alan Taylor. In **AMERICAN CIVIL WARS: A Continental History, 1850-1873** (Norton, 534 pp., \$39.99), Taylor, a University of Virginia historian who has won the Pulitzer Prize twice, takes a broad look at the lead-up to and aftermath of the older conflict, including the way it transformed life in Mexico, Canada and the Caribbean.

Does this wide scope work? Yes and no. I don't think this book makes us look at the Civil War in a new way, but Taylor is persuasive in his assertion that the American conflict shaped the entire continent. "The United States emerged from the war with a stronger federal government and greater military potential," he concludes. "Intimidated by that enhanced power, Russians sold Alaska, the Spanish bolted from Santo Domingo and the French withdrew their forces from Mexico."

"American Civil Wars" also dwells on how the signs of a coming Union victory encouraged the creation of the nation of Canada from a diverse collection of British-held provinces on the northern border of the United States. (Now that the United States is a global power, any civil conflict in America would ripple around the world. Think of the 1973 Arab oil embargo, when lingering divisions over the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal made the U.S. government look weak and distracted; now imagine that on steroids.)

Taylor is a formidable historian and masterly writer. He briskly disposes of some persistent myths about the Civil War. If the fighting really was about states' rights, he asks, why did the Confederate constitution ban its states from ever abolishing slavery? On the subject of Confederate fears of race mixing, he states flatly that "after centuries of sexually exploiting enslaved women, Southern whites projected their behavior onto Blacks."

As for anyone who believes that the current turbulence on the U.S.-Mexican border is an anomaly, they will be edited by Taylor's account of how Texans attacked Mexico for



A portion of the border wall between the United States and Mexico in 2021.

### What will Trump supporters do if their favored candidate does not win?

offering freedom to runaway slaves. During the early 1850s, he notes, about 4,000 enslaved people made it across the Texas border to freedom. In response, some 111 Texas Rangers rode across the Rio Grande to "attack, loot and burn the fugitive haven at Piedras Negras."

After the Civil War, the U.S. Army general Philip Sheridan helped Mexican revolutionaries access 30,000 modern rifles, stockpiling them within easy reach along the Rio Grande in Texas. American weapons manufacturers were eager to sell off their excess inventory, which, Taylor writes, had been "refined in the recent blood bath."

THE HISTORIAN AND RETIRED U.S. Army officer Thomas Ty Smith picks up the story of trouble on the border in **THE GARZA WAR IN SOUTH TEXAS: A Military History, 1890-1893** (University of Oklahoma Press, 172 pp., \$29.95). Despite all the talk today of an "invasion" coming up from Mexico, his short study is a useful reminder that havoc often has flowed southward across the border. In the early 1890s, the Mexican government was again deeply frustrated with the failure of the American government to stop cross-border incursions by Mexican revolutionaries who enjoyed sanctuary in some parts of Texas.

"The Garza War in South Texas" makes clear that, if there were another violent fracture on this continent today, we'd be lucky to have only two sides to the conflict. Civilian leaders near the border were often at odds with

U.S. Army personnel, who in turn, notes Smith, thought many U.S. marshals were overly sympathetic to the revolutionaries. Officials in two Texas border counties brought charges against an Army officer, accusing him of conducting warrantless searches and arresting innocent people in the hunt for rebels. Meanwhile, one of the local scouts employed by the Army was arrested as an insurrectionist.

ALL CIVIL CONFLICT is complex, but few civil wars were so agonizingly byzantine as the Russian civil war that erupted as World War I ended and the Bolsheviks rose to power. In **A NASTY LITTLE WAR: The Western Intervention Into the Russian Civil War** (Basic Books, 366 pp., \$32), Anna Reid, a former Ukraine correspondent for The Economist and The Daily Telegraph, focuses on the efforts led by France, the United States and, most of all, the British to support anti-Bolshevik forces in that fight.

Despite the book's title, it was not a small campaign. Some 180,000 soldiers from 16 Allied nations were sent to try to prevent a

Red victory. The Americans were fresh-faced newcomers; the British troops, by contrast, were those unfit for duty on the Western Front, "mostly wounded, gassed or otherwise unhealthy," writes Reid.

No one was happy to be there. Not only did the largely czarist White Army suffer multiple troop rebellions, one of the White units that was led by British officers rose up and killed their Western European commanders. French sailors aboard two ships off the Crimean Peninsula mutinied, pulled down the tricolor, ran up the Red flag and then went ashore to join a pro-Bolshevik demonstration. There was even a renegade German army operating in Estonia, which declined to cooperate with the Allied commanders to whom they had just surrendered in the previous war.

All this insubordination went on despite the extreme acts of violence some used to try to keep order. One of the White generals in Crimea was Yakov Slashchyov, "a psychopathic cocaine addict who rode about with a caged crow attached to his saddle." On a single morning, he seems to have left the bodies of 200 soldiers "shot in the back of the head" on a train platform. By evening, more corpses had been strung up from the station's lampposts.

What, if anything, does all this tell us about Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine? "Outsiders," Reid notes, "often get Russia spectacularly wrong." But there is another, less apparent lesson to be learned: "Putin will fail for the same reason that the Whites did: because he underestimates the desire for freedom of the non-Russian nations." A good lesson, too, for anyone today who thinks they can impose their vision of America on others through violence and intimidation. □

THOMAS E. RICKS, the Book Review's military history columnist, is the author of nine books. Most of them are about military affairs, but the new one, which has just been published, is a mystery set on the Maine coast titled "Everyone Knows but You."



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# Homeland Elegy

From French Algeria, a family inspired by the author's migrates across continents and through time.

By JOAN SILBER

"MAMAN AND PAPA had always talked about how much they loved Algiers, how much a part of them it was . . . the most beautiful city on earth." So thinks 8-year-old François, a French diplomat's kid who's lived all over, as he, his mother, little sister and aunt flee Europe ahead of the invading German Army in 1940 to shelter with relatives in Algeria, his family's homeland but one new to him.

Readers of Claire Messud's other superbly written novels will recognize the agile precision of her prose in her newest one, "This Strange Eventful History," and some will nod at the mention of North Africa. A French household with Algerian roots is at the center of her second novel, "The Last Life" (1999), and tales of the pied-noir branch of her family are folded into her essays on Albert Camus in "Kant's Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write" (2020).

After a prologue citing her new novel's sources in her own family history, the narrative moves along from 1940 to 2010, across three generations and five points of view, channeling the intimacy of fiction. We begin with young François in 1940, dutifully trying to watch over his whiny little sister, and then get a chapter with a more well-informed set of worries from his father, Gaston, a naval attaché who's being sent to Beirut (still under French control) and is desolate in wartime without his wife. The book then leaps ahead 13 years to François's arrival at an American college. Each section is absorbing, and the leap has our attention; we want to know who François turns out to be.

Family members keep relocating across the globe — Buenos Aires, Sydney, the French Mediterranean coast, Connecticut — and their thoughts (largely unspoken) are filled with disappointments, bearable and unbearable. Denise, François's fragile sister, is elated by an intense crush and then gutted by it. Barbara, the Canadian wife François loves but never quite understands, mocks her own failure to be a Frenchwoman and hates hosting her in-laws — "three-course meals, the linen napkins, the bloody siesta, the rituals as ineluctable as Catholic Mass. The agony of it." Gaston, the family patriarch, knows by the time he's in his 50s that "the world had transformed around him, and he couldn't seem to adapt." His granddaughter, Chloe, who, we're led to think, grows up to be the writer of this saga, watches her parents with rueful love — "I felt the burden of their misery like a magnet at once drawing me home."

As the book moves over seven decades, our sympathies are dispersed — no single character owns the story and no one crisis governs the plot; our eye is on the group. It's a risky but solid structure, ambitiously

JOAN SILBER'S most recent books of fiction are "Secrets of Happiness" and "Improvement." Her novel "Mercy" will be out in 2025.



## THIS STRANGE EVENTFUL HISTORY

By Claire Messud

Norton. 428 pp. \$29.99.

packed with material. What's striking is the way Messud manages to let time's passage itself supply great feeling.

How sorry we are to see François, whom we knew as a staunch child, become a man lonely in his marriage. How dismayed we are to see Barbara, his wife, happiest as a stylish young mother in law school, lapsing into an older woman confused by dementia.

For much of the novel, no one speaks of Algeria. I kept wondering if the book had opted to cover only private sorrows. Early on, in a chapter set in Algiers in 1953, Denise is sideswiped by a car and, recalling the incident a few years later, thinks the car may have been driven by an anti-French insurgent. But this memory is quickly dropped.

Only after 300 pages is there a fierce discussion of the Algerian war for independence — the long and bloody conflict, from 1954 to 1962, in which France's atrocities against Algerians eventually lost it international support. François' daughter, Chloe, a young woman in her 20s, utters the familiar "truism" that the French should not have been in Algeria in the first place, enraging

her aunt, Denise, and her otherwise placid grandfather, Gaston.

Denise is still angry that the fleeing French and *harkis* — Algerians loyal to the French — were treated badly in France. Gaston's defense of the more than 100 years of occupation is darker. He points out that the United States and Australia, where Chloe has happily lived without shame, "are simply more *successful* examples of settler colonialism — no less unjust, no less brutal, simply with a fuller obliteration of the native cultures." He argues against "the danger of hypocrisy" as he cites the abundant company France has in historical shame.

A final chapter, flashing back to 1927, reveals a shocking fact about Gaston and his wife, dating to their time as a young couple. We've had hints of this secret but not ones we could have deciphered. Messud makes a point of tying the hidden scandal to the truth that "the country" in which the couple's rule-breaking love — I won't give away any more — was forged "does not belong to them, has never belonged to them."

I wasn't entirely persuaded by the link to political entitlement and was hungry for a longer comment on the meaning of the couple's secret. This lingering wish was a mark of how attached I had become to this family, how mysteriously resonant my time with them had been. □

ILLUSTRATION BY ROMY BLÜMEL



# Deep Dive

With 10 years of research, a Washington Post journalist examines one of the worst corruption scandals in U.S. military history.

By **NICOLAS NIARCHOS**

IN PORTS THROUGHOUT the Western Pacific, the brave officers of the United States Navy gulped down lobster thermidor, truffle royale, Osetra caviar, white asparagus custard and *kombou* seaweed jelly; they guzzled gallons of Cristal and Dom Pérignon; they puffed boxes of Cohiba cigars.

Near the end of a meal, they sometimes received what Leonard Glenn Francis, the venal military contractor who was picking up the tabs, called “oriental dessert”: an “armada” of sex workers hired to flash their breasts and perform intimate acts.

## **FAT LEONARD**

**How One Man Bribed, Bilked and Seduced the U.S. Navy**

By **Craig Whitlock**

Simon & Schuster. 460 pp. \$32.50.

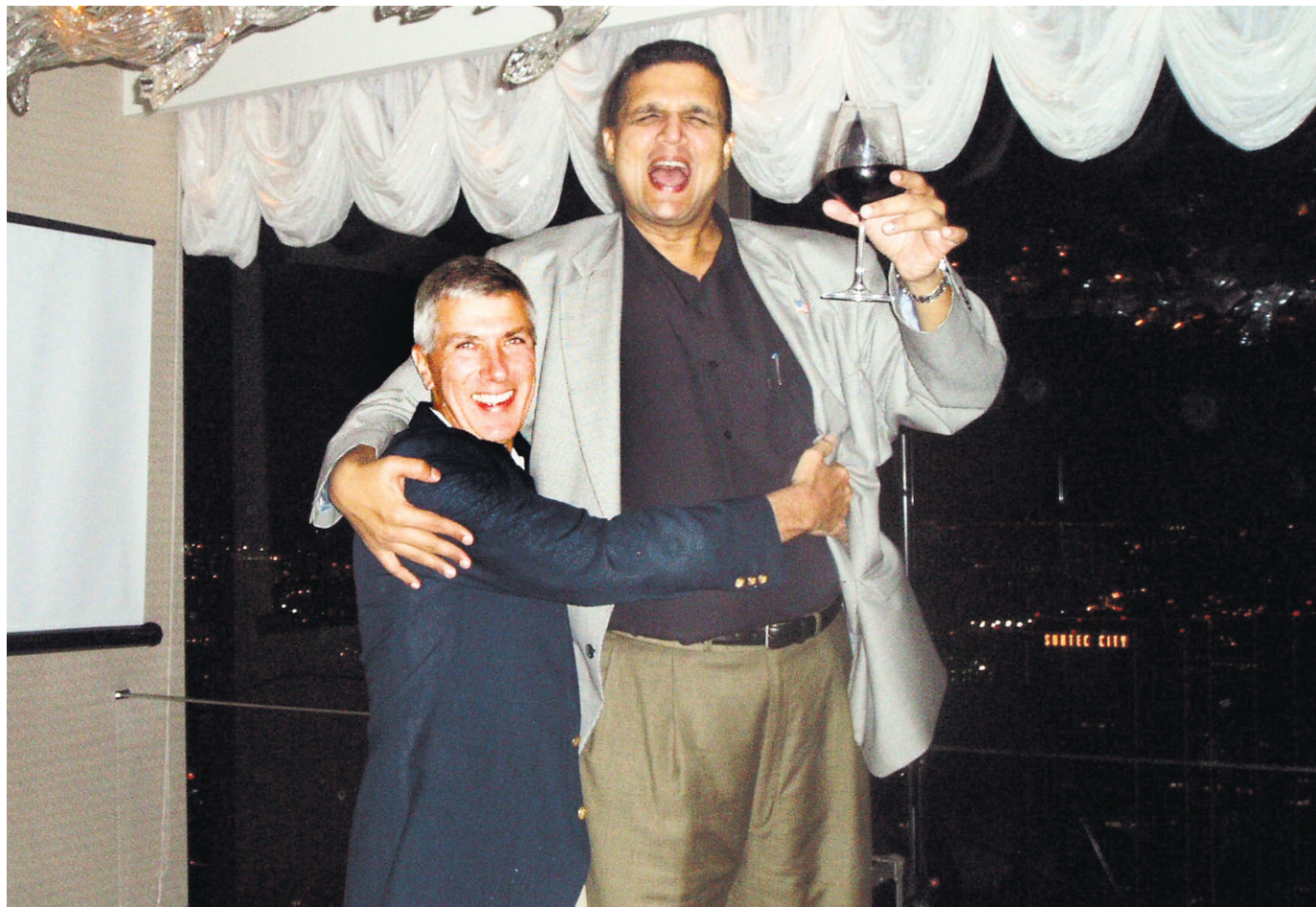
An attendee described one of Francis’ dinners as a “Roman orgy.” At one of Francis’ most sordid parties, in Manila in 2007, a replica of Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s corn-cob pipe was used as a sex toy. At least one of Francis’ dinners cost more than \$3,000 a head. In return, Navy officials looked the other way as his companies charged far above the regional rate to service American vessels.

In “Fat Leonard,” a masterly investigation into one of the Navy’s worst scandals in modern times, the Washington Post journalist Craig Whitlock brings to bear 10 years of research to show how Francis came to be known as Leonard the Legend, Mr. Make-It-Happen, Fat Bastard, and, most of all, as Fat Leonard.

Francis rose from fairly comfortable origins on the Malaysian island of Penang and followed his father into the family business in the 1980s as a “husbanding contractor,” providing services like food and water delivery, bilge pumping, tugboat hiring and a whole manner of other prosaic but important logistical tasks that fleets need to operate.

His plan, Whitlock writes, was to become the Malaysian Aristotle Onassis. He learned early that the captains of merchant ships, “after weeks at sea, gladly accepted his offers to get drunk and meet women” in return for “all sorts of favors.” When the U.S. Navy came into the equation, in the early 1990s, Francis went into overdrive. “The Navy’s byzantine accounting policies made it easy for Francis to jack up his prices with minimal resistance,” Whitlock notes. (While no one knows exactly how much Francis stole, he has ad-

**NICOLAS NIARCHOS** is a freelance journalist whose writing on military matters has appeared in *The Nation* and *The New Yorker*. He is at work on a book about the supply chain for battery metals.



Rear Adm. Samuel Locklear III, left, pretending to lift Leonard Francis off the floor at a dinner party in 2003. Locklear has denied having any involvement in Francis’ misdeeds and was cleared of wrongdoing by the Navy.

mitted to making at least \$35 million off the U.S. taxpayer.)

The word “farce” comes from the French word for “stuffing” and originally referred to the stuffing of comedies into serious religious plays. Whitlock’s book is a farce of the highest order, as richly stuffed as the liver of a foie gras goose. His reporting is astonishingly detailed, thanks to the “several terabytes” of leaked government data he was able to obtain. Reading “Fat Leonard,” you almost feel sick at the amount of consumption that Francis visited upon the U.S. sailors who became his lap dogs in exchange for champagne, sex and cash.

By 2013, he was on a first-name basis with captains and admirals and even had the power to redirect U.S. Navy ships to ports where he could make the most money off them. As Francis became wealthier, his weight ballooned to almost 500 pounds. Whitlock tracks this detail with perhaps too much glee, but he also usefully makes clear that the magnate’s girth was yet another tool in his box: Francis repeatedly used tales of his gastric bypass surgery to show his vulnerable side and build a rapport with officers.

Whitlock is particularly good at revealing the way that Francis profited from the “entitlement” of Navy officers who seemed

to think that they had a God-given right to accept freebies in return for wasting U.S. government funds and leaking classified information, including ship schedules. In 2011, a captain’s wife returned a Versace handbag she was gifted by Francis not because of ethics concerns but because the gold lettering was cracked. Before a dinner in 2007, an officer wrote that rather than having one type of champagne, he’d “like to compare”: “Dom Pérignon, Cristal and Bollinger’s.” At another party, that same officer poured champagne off the top of a skyscraper in Singapore, just to show that he could.

Unsurprisingly, Francis led a squalid existence. As Whitlock notes, he “treated women as expendable objects,” rotating between multiple mistresses and sequestering one of his partners away from her children.

In 2015, two years after Francis was finally arrested, he pleaded guilty to bribery and conspiracy charges and faced up to 25 years in prison. He eventually managed to barter and charm his judges and prosecutors into letting him live in a luxury mansion in San Diego while he awaited sentencing. He even hired his own guards, Pablo Escobar-style. Francis made a mistake, however: He escaped to Venezuela,

**Francis’ plan, Whitlock writes, was to become the Malaysian Aristotle Onassis.**

where he was captured and used as collateral in a 2023 prisoner exchange with the United States.

In many ways, Francis is the antihero of Whitlock’s book, with the Navy and its officers filling the role of villains. Francis collected *kompromat* on his clients, photos of officers carousing and signed dinner menus, but he doesn’t seem to have needed to use much of it while he was in business, so willing were his marks to receive gifts.

After Francis’ arrest, the Navy stymied scrutiny and tried to protect culprits, despite the serious national security implications of the leaks that Francis was able to extract. As one of Whitlock’s sources tells him, “Leonard Francis would have made a wonderful intelligence officer.”

In the end, scores of Navy top brass were let off lightly while lower ranks were thrown under the bus. Francis is set to be sentenced soon, but, as Whitlock makes clear, the culture of entitlement he exploited has gotten off scot-free. □



# Close to Home

A teenage rebel and her troubled father try to reconnect in this novel.



By DWIGHT GARNER

GARTH RISK HALLBERG'S ambitious but uneven and exhausting new novel, "The Second Coming," takes its title from an unreleased live album by Prince. One of the book's central characters, a 13-year-old girl named Jolie Aspern, is on a Manhattan subway platform listening to a bootleg version when her phone slips from her hand and clatters onto the tracks below.

She climbs down after it. A train heaves into view. Oh no! Jolie is rescued, but she is hurt and shaken up. Was she suicidal or just foolish? The next day she is the subject of a New York Post headline: "APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION."

This early scene is one of many needle drops in Hallberg's multigenerational and music-drenched novel, which is set primarily in 2011 but frequently flashes forward a decade, and backward even further. By the end, the novel has become a mixtape of sorts, with sections named after songs.

"The Second Coming" never becomes a great rock or music novel. Hallberg doesn't make you feel what his characters are getting out of these songs. But this is certainly a novel that, to annex a thought from Annie Proulx in "The Shipping News," makes you realize that one of the bummers of existence is that "there is no background music."

DWIGHT GARNER has been a book critic for *The Times* since 2008, and before that was an editor at the *Book Review* for a decade.

This is Hallberg's second novel, if you don't count "A Field Guide to the North American Family," a 2007 novella. His first, "City on Fire," a sprawling New York City story set in part during the blackout of July 13, 1977, made an impact when it was published in 2015. It made best-seller lists. Frank Rich gave it a yea-saying review on the cover of *The Times Book Review*, though he also had a lot of caveats.

Speaking of *The New York Post*, it ran a "City on Fire" review, too. Its headline was: "Overhyped novel 'City on Fire' is a steaming pile of literary dung." My opinion of the novel is closer to Rich's, but *The Post*'s dissent registers with me. Hallberg is an intelligent writer, but he's a wild and frequently sloppy one. His narratives don't click into gear; his curveball only sometimes makes it over the plate.

Jolie, the girl who jumped on the subway tracks, is one of the most precocious eighth graders in recent literary history. She wears black and quotes Philip Larkin on how your parents mess you up. She name-checks Itzhak Perlman. She goes alone to a zendo to work on re-centering. Before long she will dye her hair pink, give herself a mental patient's haircut, get a lot of piercings and stop talking altogether. She'll drop acid.

She's already a pint-size rock 'n' roll survivor. As *The Onion* once joked about Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love's daughter, she seems to have been born ready to enter prehab.

She is her father's daughter. Ethan Aspern is a washed-up actor who has been arrested on drug charges, gone through

## THE SECOND COMING

By Garth Risk Hallberg

Knopf. 608 pp. \$32.

12-step programs and burned every bridge he's crossed. He walks around uttering things like "I'm only going to let you down." He is not lying. He is scruffy, outstandingly handsome and has a heart of gold that's visible from a satellite. When Ethan learns about Jolie's accident, he comes back into her life after many years away and hopes to make amends, if he is not arrested first for abducting her.

Ethan has a tangled back story, with complicated parents of his own. His mother is a serious artist. And the novel summarizes his father's story this way: "Naval Academy, Yale Divinity, a summer sailing for William F. Buckley of all people. And then right back to Annapolis for a chaplain gig." Little of this material is picked up in the novel. This information is an indication of Hallberg's flickering interest in big, interlocking American themes. Scenes play across Sept. 11 and Occupy Wall Street, and take us into Covid.

Hallberg is often at his best when he's not reaching for big effects, when he gives himself room to breathe. Here's Ethan defending his hometown, Ocean City, N.J.:

Like, did the Hamptons have stand-mounted binoculars that offered up only darkness unless you paid a quarter? Or the game with the giant mallets and the flying rubber frogs? Did the Hamptons have that? How about not one but two

amusement parks called the Jolly Roger, each with a Tilt-a-Whirl so ultra-sketch you had to sign a waiver?

This novel's scope and ambition are reminiscent of Jonathan Franzen's novels. But Hallberg's writing is more in the mold of Richard Ford. Like Ford, he's enamored of New Jersey settings and lets crucial scenes play out over holidays, for supplemental resonance. He's given to epigrammatic summing-up statements every other page or so. Ford's are better; they're crisper bites of the apple.

We follow Jolie and Ethan around. The narrative baton is passed among unreliable narrators. A lot of the sentences and dialogue are of the sort that might sound good in a Steve Earle song ("But what if I were to try calling on your better angels?") but not so much in cold print, especially when they pile up.

Ethan is a familiar figure. He's a beautiful loser, an amiable screw-up of the genus Jim Harrison once classified as the "nifty guy at loose ends." We know this creature from Thomas McGuane's novels, and from Barry Hannah's, and from Harrison's, among other writers. Hallberg's amiable screw-up, unlike those in his predecessors' fiction, is never much fun to be around.

Ethan is almost entirely sexless as well, which gives the novel a deracinated feeling. Like Ryan Gosling in "Barbie," he seems to have only a smooth plastic panel down there.

Katie Roiphe has written about how a now not-so-young generation of male writers have jettisoned their carnal appetites for empathetic cuddling. The critic Elaine Blair, too, has thought through the new skittishness about sex in fiction written by men, the "fearful suspicion that if a man gets what he wants, sexually speaking, he is probably exploiting someone."

Younger women hurl themselves in front of Ethan, who is still in his early 30s for much of the novel. When he does sleep with one, even after getting to know her, the vibe is one of disgust and sharp regret. It's as if he has run over a small animal with a lawn mower.

He blames his weakness on his surroundings: "Apparently he'd been in California long enough to weaken a little on the numinous, the vibrational, and he couldn't help but think that the sex was somehow related to his feeling of having upset the power balance between them." Jolie's first stab at sexual contact is porn-like, horrible, pitilessly bleak.

This novel, like Ethan's life, lurches sideways. There are many, many characters — siblings, parents, parole officers, lovers, spouses, drug dealers, old friends. There is little sense of momentum; the pages never turn themselves. It is so intensely written that it gave me a headache, as if I had been grinding my teeth. I was glad when it was over. □



# Lessons Not Learned

The Challenger tragedy that riveted a nation was a preventable lesson in hubris and human error.

By RACHEL SLADE

MY ENTRY INTO THE WORLD was eclipsed, several days before I was born, by the story of two Americans who had temporarily left theirs to walk on the moon. Seventeen years later, I stood in a classroom of fellow space age kids around a bulky cathode-ray tube TV wheeled in on an A/V cart to watch the launch of the space shuttle Challenger.

Looking soft and white, the spacecraft (officially called an orbiter) rode on the back of a 10-story-tall tank full of liquid hy-

## CHALLENGER

**A True Story of Heroism and Disaster on the Edge of Space**

By Adam Higginbotham

Avid Reader. 547 pp. \$35.

drogen and oxygen. On either side of the tank were two solid rocket boosters — basically giant metal tubes packed with a rubbery explosive that, once lit, burned until the fuel ran out, thrusting the orbiter out of gravity's grip.

By January 1986, two dozen shuttle missions had taken place with minimal public interest — which was a problem for NASA. Lack of interest meant diminishing funds from an indifferent Congress, and you can't send humans safely into space without money.

So NASA cooked up a public relations gambit to build excitement for its next mission. In the days and months leading up to Challenger's 10th launch, the nation was fed a constant news diet about Christa McAuliffe, the first non-astronaut (and teacher) to ride into space.

Hence, the TV on the cart in the school library.

Most schoolchildren in the United States, like me, were officially skipping lessons to watch that launch. As Adam Higginbotham recounts in "Challenger: A True Story of Heroism and Disaster on the Edge of Space," a mere 73 seconds after lift-off, the 526,000 gallons of liquid hydrogen and oxygen exploded, instantly blowing apart the orbiter. The reinforced cockpit carrying the seven crew members traced a two-minute arc over the Atlantic Ocean before smashing apart upon hitting the surface of the water.

Then came the near-constant post-accident replay of that indelible explosion in the clear blue Florida sky — a Reagan-era snuff film.

We took comfort in the thought that the astronauts died instantly. We were wrong. Recorded audio captured from a painstakingly reconstructed magnetic tape of the

RACHEL SLADE is the author of "Making It in America: The Almost Impossible Quest to Manufacture in the U.S.A. (and How It Got That Way)."



The crew of the Challenger shuttle on Jan. 9, 1986. From left to right: Sharon Christa McAuliffe, Gregory Jarvis, Judith A. Resnik, Francis R. Scobee, Ronald E. McNair, Mike J. Smith and Ellison S. Onizuka.

shuttle's black box revealed that at least one astronaut, Mike Smith, had survived the entire journey, counting down the seconds to certain death.

Higginbotham is an intrepid journalist and skillful storyteller who takes care to humanize the dozens of major and minor players involved in NASA's many successful, and occasionally catastrophic, space missions.

But this is not a book that revels in triumph and courage. Its focus is on the relentless string of snafus and mind-boggling hubris that plagued these missions from the start. In spite of startling incompetence, NASA achieved unimaginable technical feats — but the cost was great. The failures, however occasional, ended in death and ruined lives.

Higginbotham's book opens with the tragedy of Apollo 1, which burned up on the launchpad during a rehearsal in 1967, asphyxiating all three astronauts as they desperately tried to unbolt the pod door to escape the flames. The culprits were already well known to NASA: The cabin was a pure pressurized oxygen environment laced with thick bundles of poorly installed electrical wires and combustible material, including 5,000 square inches of flammable Velcro that the crew had installed to secure things; the faulty hatch door was nearly impossible to open and close. Engineers had warned NASA of these issues; their concerns were consid-

ered and dismissed. But the doomed astronauts were all too aware of the risks.

The causes of the Challenger tragedy, 19 years afterward, were eerily similar. The mission depended on solid-fuel rockets to propel the shuttle into space — an economically driven, dangerous decision. The rocket was built in Utah in segments for easier transport, then fitted together on-site at Cape Canaveral with rubber gaskets designed to seal the joints.

Each time the used rockets returned to earth following a mission, a forensic team would analyze the performance of the giant rubber gaskets because, if those connections failed, burning fuel would quickly escape, turning a controlled burn in a chamber into a fireball that could ignite the liquid oxygen/hydrogen bomb to which the orbiter was attached. And on many occasions, engineers working for Morton Thiokol were alarmed by what they saw: evidence that the 12-foot-diameter rubber rings weren't working as designed. It was a bad joint, bound to fail, especially in colder temperatures.

One Thiokol engineer, Roger Boisjoly, spent years obsessing over a fix for the problem, but his recommendations went unheeded. The verdict came down from on high: It was too expensive, and too time-consuming, to repair the joint. Boisjoly knew it was only a matter of time before the faulty joint caught up with the shuttle program. As the renowned physicist Rich-

ard Feynman wrote after the Challenger investigation: "When playing Russian roulette, the fact that the first shot got off safely is little comfort for the next."

FOR CYNICAL AMERICANS, disaster buffs and engineers, "Challenger" will be a quick, devastating read. In Higginbotham's deft hands, the human element — sometimes heroic, sometimes cloaked in doublespeak and bluster — shines through the many technical aspects of this story, a constant reminder that every decision was made by people weighing risks versus expediency, their minds distorted by power, money, politics and yes-men. It's a universal story that transcends time, from Napoleon's decision to attack Russia to the recent Boeing 737 Max debacle.

At the end of the book, the thing that disturbed me most was that I didn't remember the story of the Columbia. Some 17 years after the Challenger disaster, the wing of the Columbia orbiter was hit by a piece of foam insulation during launch, a recurring problem for the shuttle program that had yet to be addressed. During the two weeks that Columbia orbited Earth with seven astronauts aboard, engineers debated whether the vessel had been compromised by the impact. Predictably, the official determination was that it would be fine. Upon re-entry on Feb. 1, 2003, the craft broke apart, killing everyone aboard.

How quickly we forget. □



# Hidden Nantucket

A new novel examines island life from a fresh angle.

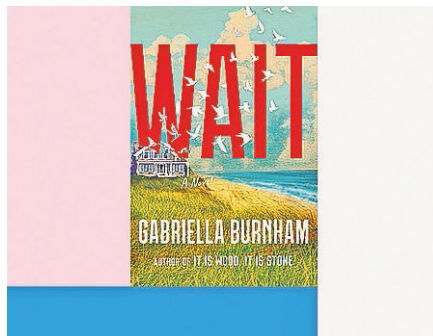
By IMBOLO MBUE

NANTUCKET, THAT BEAUTIFUL ISLAND off the coast of Massachusetts, is rarely associated with poverty. Gorgeous estates, wealthy men in pink shorts, slender women wearing sun hats, happy children in pastels, pretty boutiques, cobblestone streets, photogenic beaches, clambakes — these are the most common images of Nantucket.

Gabriella Burnham knows this world because she grew up in it. She knows, too, that moneyed Nantucket is but one story of the island. The other, less-told one, the Nantucket of undocumented immigrants and broken families, housing insecurity and hopelessness, is the focus of her commendable sophomore novel, “Wait.”

The story follows Elise, who learns, days after her college graduation, that her mother has been deported to Brazil. Gilda had overstayed her visa and, as she explains to her older daughter, was thrown out of the country “like I was nothing more than a little flea.” Elise has no other family

IMBOLO MBUE is the author of “Behold the Dreamers” and “How Beautiful We Were.”



**WAIT**

By Gabriella Burnham

One World. 272 pp. \$27.

besides her sister, Sophie, a recent high school graduate. Together, they must find a way to support themselves on Nantucket, no small feat in a place where affordable housing is scarce and the cost of living high. The sisters are offered a lifeline by Elise’s college friend, an heiress named Sheba who has her own problems (such as getting rejected from a yacht club).

Burnham leaves little doubt about how much she understands the people who

populate her novel — the things that matter to them, the ways in which Nantucket has shaped them, the reasons they leave or won’t leave the island. Her compassion for them is evident — and, yes, that includes the affluent ones who come across as arrogant and snobbish toward those who wait on them all summer long. Consider the fund-raising dinner hosted by one of Sheba’s mothers, who hires Elise to serve her environmentalist guests and their benefactors. As humiliating as this experience turns out to be, Elise is grateful; after all, she earned some money for her efforts. But Sheba, who’s livid about how her mother treated her friend during the dinner, says, “She uses you like a PowerPoint presentation on poverty during her fake fund-raising dinner, and you’re grateful because she paid you for it?”

What else can Elise feel? And what else can her sister feel? Like their mother, they’re at the mercy of forces bigger than themselves; all they can do is sweep up the crumbs that fall off the tables of others, even if those crumbs are pushed in their direction with the soles of dirty shoes.

Even though Nantucket disappoints the sisters, it’s still their home. Their mother, now living in a country she hasn’t called

**Burnham leaves little doubt about how much she understands the people who populate her novel.**

home for decades, has a far more complex relationship with the notion of belonging. Her days in Nantucket were short on bliss and long on hardship, yet Gilda yearns to return. Her children are there and Brazil is, in many ways, a foreign country now.

As Burnham writes of Gilda, “She felt that the years she’d spent on earth had accumulated the sorrow of a hundred lifetimes and she worried that if she thought about it too much, her future would be erased by the suffering of the past.” But returning to the United States after being deported is no easy feat, nor is finding an affordable Nantucket residence if you’re paid by the hour.

Still, Burnham doesn’t allow us to pity her characters for their misfortunes. These are resilient women who are determined to rescue themselves. There is no easy way out for any of them, but this tender novel allows us to rejoice when tiny windows of opportunities begin to open. □

# Sex, Drugs and Shakespeare

The rise of Henry V is transformed into a contemporary story about a brash gay man grappling with abuse and guilt.

By HUGH RYAN

IN ALLEN BRATTON’S debut novel, “Henry Henry,” Shakespeare’s Henriad (the tetralogy of plays that, combined, trace the rise of Henry V) is given a modern queer makeover. In Bratton’s version, which is set in 2014, Prince Hal is now just “Hal Lancaster,” our young gay protagonist who is possessed of “nothing but a subsidiary title, an unignorable sense of his own pre-eminence and a daily terror of this pre-eminence going unnoticed by everyone in the world except his father.” Hal’s father, Henry, is the Duke of Lancaster only because the main line of inheritance ended when Henry’s cousin Richard, the intended heir, died of AIDS. Hal and his siblings have been both maintained and stunted (fiscally, socially and spiritually) by this (fiscal, social and spiritual) inheritance, and as the novel begins, their father’s decision to remarry threatens to upend their static existence.

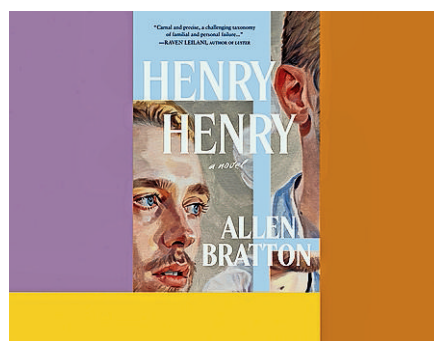
With this reimagining, Bratton has cre-

HUGH RYAN is a curator and writer, and the author of “The Women’s House of Detention” and “When Brooklyn Was Queer.”

ated a marvelously detailed world of supernumerary aristocrats, as rich, toxic and wild as the best entries in the “Real Housewives” franchise. Even one of his more seemingly moral characters nonchalantly mentions how she disliked a girl in school, and so “at Cannes I pushed her off the deck of a yacht.”

At first, Hal seems like a petulant yet typical member of this world, except that he is sodden with Catholic guilt over his bad behavior, and his very existence. He is aware of his faults — he’s a self-hating pop-injay with a prodigious coke habit — yet he’s unable to act differently. This seeming paradox is explained a few chapters in, when it is graphically revealed that Hal is a survivor of ongoing sexual abuse that started in childhood. He bears the pain of both his betrayed child self, wondering why God let this happen to him, and his ashamed adult self, who wonders why he hasn’t spoken out about it.

In Hal, Bratton offers a psychologically acute portrait of the kind of trauma-born narcissists who yo-yo between judging everyone else as beneath them and hating themselves for those very judgments. But a portrait is not a novel, which depends as much on plot and action as it does charac-



**HENRY HENRY**

By Allen Bratton

The Unnamed Press. 350 pp. \$29.

ter and world-building. Bratton has accurately drawn a protagonist stuck still by his pain, and the result is a story that for long stretches also feels stuck itself. Hal reacts to others’ actions, feels guilty, lashes out and gets trashed — a cycle that repeats and repeats. The book tells us that “Hal liked to have fun, he liked not to suffer,” and that when he got punished for misbehaving, “on him, the consequences were charming,” but we are so deep in his mind

that his guilt and unhappiness dim any such lighter moments.

Hal is hurting, and he admits that his only shield against his pain is his fiendishness, but he also realizes “how poor a defense his own bitchy irony was.” When he finally does experience a moment of catharsis, it’s borrowed from his cousin’s death from AIDS, and told in an anomalous monologue from an otherwise offstage character, smooshed into a late chapter.

One of Shakespeare’s great skills was creating unreliable characters who profess to be in control of their madness or depravity while simultaneously seeming to be lost in its grips. That ambiguity allowed every member of the audience (or future adapter of his stories) to make their own call on these knotty figures. Bratton positions his protagonist to be one of these Shakespearean enigmas, but by giving Hal a direct and backward-looking explanation for his actions — Hal’s bad because Hal’s traumatized — “Henry Henry” obviates the delicious questions about his behavior. Sure, Hal’s self-aware about his conduct, but he doesn’t seem to have agency over it, and thus lacks that Shakespearean moral complexity. And without that, “Henry Henry” feels well written but inert. □



# Performance Art

Two Korean American women find pleasure in a bond that knits creative expression and sadomasochism.

By ALEXANDRA JACOBS

“EVERYTHING WAS BEAUTIFUL at the ballet,” goes the famous song from “A Chorus Line,” but of course backstage there are blisters, anorexia and worse, like the feathers popping out of Natalie Portman’s back in “Black Swan.”

Hypnotic and sometimes perplexing, R.O. Kwon’s second novel, “Exhibit,” literalizes the twinning of pain and art with a ballerina character who is an actual sadomasochist.

Kwon’s protagonist, Jin, is a photographer who becomes interested in portraiture after drifting away from God. “People, not relics, I thought, at which point the images began rioting to life.” At a party

## EXHIBIT

By R.O. Kwon

Riverhead. 224 pp. \$28.

thrown by a guy named Irving in the rarefied quarter of Marin County, Calif., she encounters the ballerina, Lidija: a principal, known for her floating jump, who bypassed the slog of the corps. She’s tattooed and unfazed by an injured leg.

“It was a lifelong allure, the gloss of a bold, strong girl,” Jin thinks.

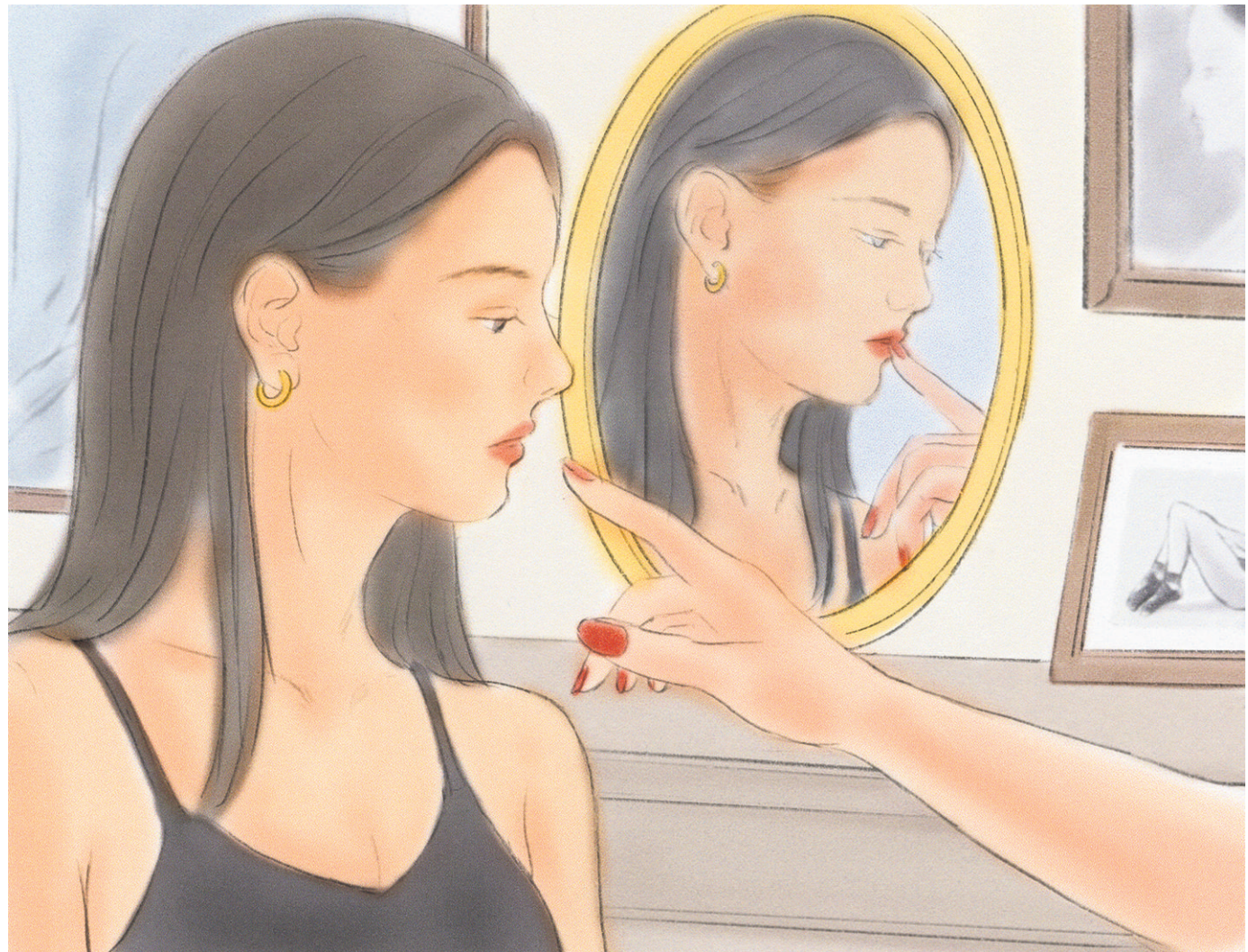
Inconveniently, she has come to the party with her husband, Philip, a film producer, whom she met at a college called Edwards that readers of Kwon’s widely heralded and more plot-packed first novel, “The Incendiaries,” will recognize. Indeed one of Jin’s photography projects — in a sort of “Black Swan”-like authorial doubling — is to reimagine an alternate ending for that book’s protagonist, Phoebe, who rather than rejecting religion was sucked into a cult. Jin swaps out pictures of Phoebe for historical images before showing her piece publicly so as not to offend one of their mutual acquaintances.

Part of Lidija’s appeal is that she argues for aesthetic integrity over tact or propriety. Their sex, described discreetly, is a kind of performance art. The two women rendezvous in Irving’s turret, both menstruating. The ballerina smears blood on her own hip as Jin, an old burn wounded and then soothed, snaps away. “You’re like a wild thing at a kill,” Lidija tells her. “Stained in triumph.”

’Tis the season for outré novels of marital malcontent among the creative class. But all three in this triangle have had to compromise in order to get along in mainstream America.

Lidija, who like Jin is Korean, changed her name from Iseul (Kwon supplies the Korean lettering for this and other words)

ALEXANDRA JACOBS is a Times book critic and occasional features writer. She joined The Times in 2010.



at age 5 to sound more Slavic. Philip, though he would “pass as being white,” as Lidija points out, was born Felipe in Argentina. And Jin has suppressed longing to be hurt sexually, knowing it conforms to a stereotype of Asian women as “pliant, subject. Ill-used and glad of it.”

Philip, moreover, is not a fan of kink, the theme of a short-fiction anthology Kwon co-edited in 2021. As another song goes — he’s vanilla, baby. And speaking of babies, though the couple agreed from the outset of their relationship not to have children, he’s changed his mind. “It’s the scent,” he says with bafflement, sniffing a friend’s infant’s head.

The trio argues about gradations of racism, and the boundaries of art. (“If I’m hollering, it isn’t ballet,” Lidija insists. “It might be art. But it’s just not ballet.”) We’re asked to envision a lot of avant-garde creations; tons of triptychs and tableaux. Philip describes a movie of a dancer yelpingly en pointe on the lid of a piano with knives strapped to her feet, as the original Little Mermaid felt.

Jin once imagined that she was born “as a partial fish,” Lidija compares her own

flaking sunburned skin to fish scales, and they discuss fish folk tales. I’m not sure entirely what to make of this, except that fish are beautiful, fragile creatures with significance in religion.

Complicating matters further is the ghost of a kisaeng, a Korean courtesan, who supposedly died alongside a firstborn son far back in Jin’s lineage, when she was not allowed to marry. According to family lore, this spirit has the power to destroy relationships. Between chapters she tells Jin what really happened to her, in little spritzes of sarcasm and profanity. “Oh, it’s like a dragon’s tail, oh, how will I fit it in?” she mocks the rich old men who took her to bed.

“EXHIBIT” IS QUITE SHORT: barely over 200 pages, and sometimes I did wish the kisaeng, full of vim though she is, would haunt another novel so I could get back to what was going on with Jin and Lidija and Philip and Irv.

An English-speaking reader doesn’t need a Korean dictionary beside the book, though she might occasionally need an English one. A polemic accusing Jin of

blasphemy is not thrown in the trash but “shied.” After being hit with a riding crop and forced to eat olives and currants off a floor — “Exhibit” is a feast of various food and drink — Jin feels her flesh “floresced.” Kwon stretches and pauses the language to its outer limits, as if in a series of tendus and arabesques.

Chunks of her prose could also be torn out and put in a poetry book, no problem. On fame: “I knew it to be pyrite dross, a tinsel jinx.” Nude swimmers are “blue nereids, plume-tailed.” As much as commas, Kwon favors semicolons, which Kurt Vonnegut infamously called “transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing”; if so, her novel is not just an exploration of BDSM in contemporary relationships, but a transvestite hermaphrodite convention, to which one is both privileged and perhaps slightly puzzled to receive an all-access pass.

“Exhibit” is a highly sensory experience, awash in petals and colors, smells and flavors, that adds to the literature on a proclivity much discussed and often misunderstood. It lingers like a mysterious, multihued bruise. □



# Boys to Men

In two new verse novels, the thunderstorm of adolescence splits open a once peaceful sky.

By JUAN VIDAL

ADOLESCENCE CAN BE a tangled web, fraught with body changes and new desires — the world outside moving fast and slow at the same time.

I think of the Carol Ann Duffy poem “In Mrs Tilscher’s Class,” which recounts a child’s gradual loss of innocence. It starts off happily enough. Then the speaker learns about sexual reproduction (“a rough

## ULTRAVIOLET

By Aida Salazar

Scholastic. 304 pp. \$18.99.  
(Ages 10 and up)

## MID-AIR

By Alicia D. Williams

Illustrated by Danica Novgorodoff  
Atheneum. 320 pp. \$17.99.  
(Ages 10 and up)

boy told you how you were born”) and instantly becomes appalled by this adult business that exists outside the walls of the classroom.

The closing image is a thunderstorm splitting open a once peaceful sky. There’s no turning back now.

Two new verse novels add to the conversation about growing up, offering nuanced takes on love, friendship and grief.

“Who invented love, anyway?/Had to be a girl, right?” With this, we meet 13-year-old Elio Solis, the wide-eyed and hormone-crazed protagonist of Aida Salazar’s savagely funny and deeply human “Ultraviolet.” When Elio’s crush, Camelia, glances at him from the “artsy-fartsy lunch table” as he walks into the cafeteria, he freezes in his tracks, “completely helado.”

Camelia’s “too-good-to-be-true/sparkle-on-the-teeth” smile cuts through Elio’s mushy heart like a knife.

The book earns its title. Each poem bursts with energy, expanding the rich territory of fiction about middle school boys grappling with newfound romantic feelings. “Grown, eighth-grade stuff,” as Elio puts it.

As his relationship with Camelia develops, Elio’s world becomes smaller and more illuminated. “Beyond the spectrum” colors blow up his vision. Between their public displays of affection — “spit swapping” while drinking a chocolate shake through the same straw — Elio plays Camelia’s favorite songs on the piano. She

JUAN VIDAL is the author of the memoir “*Rap Dad*” — about father-son dynamics and Latino masculinity through the lens of hip-hop culture — and the forthcoming young adult verse novel “*A Second Chance on Earth*.”



From “Mid-Air.”

sends him manga drawings. Noting their cosmic connection, their science teacher, Mr. Trejo, posits that Elio and Camelia may be “soul companions,” two energies that have crossed paths before.

But at home, where Elio lives with his mom, dad and two ornery younger sisters, Elio is of two minds: He attends lucha libre matches and backyard cockfights with Pops, who tells him to “man up,” and has heart-to-hearts with Moms about the meanings of feminism and toxic masculinity. (Salazar weaves sharp, witty social commentary into the narrative without being didactic.)

One mind prevails when Elio and Pops — together with Elio’s friends and their dads — join a community group called Brothers Rising. They engage in rituals and spiritual cleansings, calling on ancient spirits to guide and strengthen them on their journey to, and through, manhood. “We are now men, Elio. Real men,” his friend Paco says after the ceremony. Endearing bits like that keep the pages turning.

In time, heartbreak strikes. What began as a new and exciting “coupling up” — kaleidoscopic and brimming with possibility — is shattered by a betrayal. Salazar, whose son helped inspire the novel, depicts

Elio’s emotional trajectory with grace and empathy.

“Ultraviolet” beautifully captures the essence of what it means to be a boy trying to make himself into a good man.

In “Mid-Air,” the Newbery honoree Alicia D. Williams delivers tenderhearted verse that leaps off the page. Isaiah, Darius and Drew, all Black eighth graders, are best buds and adrenaline junkies. They skateboard, ride bikes and back-flip off trees. They dominate in schoolyard four square, “bending air, earth, & water.” Everything revolves around their shared pursuit of breaking Guinness World Records. In each challenge, they encourage one another to be chill, to “be like water.”

At the center of the novel is Isaiah — sensitive, thoughtful and the most cautious of the three. His real passion is music: rock, metal and hard-core punk; AC/DC, Led Zeppelin, Bad Brains and Fishbone. Other kids call him “White Boy” and “Metal Head.” Isaiah takes their comments in stride, knowing that with true friends close by he doesn’t need to hide who he is.

Everything changes when an attempt to beat the record for longest wheelie ends in a fatal accident. The two surviving boys sink into grief, united by a heaviness

they’ve never before experienced. At the funeral, they struggle to keep it together.

“This all feels —/Weird, I say, finishing his sentence. *Like it’s a —/Bad dream.* He finishes mine.”

After the tragedy, uncertainty looms at every turn. Graduation comes and goes, and summer isn’t shaping up to be as epic as it could have been. When the boys have a falling-out, Isaiah makes it his mission to try to repair what was broken by their friend’s death.

Williams does a wonderful job of letting the story be driven by emotional beats — Isaiah’s anger, for example, and his penchant for using humor to cope. And she tackles issues of racism, self-acceptance and identity with heart and compassion. Danica Novgorodoff’s ink and watercolor illustrations add another layer of depth and relatability.

As I neared the end, having come to love these characters and their youthful visions of greatness, I remembered a line from early in the book that vividly encapsulates the journey we’re all on: “To the bloody nose & the slippery path.” A fitting and deliciously lyrical reminder that we can choose resilience in the face of trials, hope in the wake of despair. □





# Best Sellers

The New York Times

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

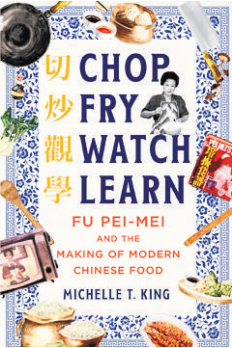
## COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF MAY 19-25

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		<b>YOU LIKE IT DARKER</b> , by Stephen King. (Scribner) A dozen short stories that explore darkness in literal and metaphorical forms.	1	1		<b>WHAT THIS COMEDIAN SAID WILL SHOCK YOU</b> , by Bill Maher. (Simon & Schuster) The host of “Real Time With Bill Maher” gives his take on a variety of subjects.	1
2		<b>MIND GAMES</b> , by Nora Roberts. (St. Martin’s) Thea shares the gift to see into the minds and souls of others with the man who killed her parents when she was 12 and now seeks vengeance.	1	2	2	<b>THE DEMON OF UNREST</b> , by Erik Larson. (Crown) A portrayal of the months between the election of Abraham Lincoln and the beginning of the Civil War.	4
3	2	<b>THE WOMEN</b> , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin’s) In 1965, a nursing student follows her brother to serve during the Vietnam War and returns to a divided America.	16	3	3	<b>THE ANXIOUS GENERATION</b> , by Jonathan Haidt. (Penguin Press) A look at the mental health impacts that a phone-based life has on children.	9
4	3	<b>FUNNY STORY</b> , by Emily Henry. (Berkley) After their exes run off together, Daphne and Miles form a friendship and concoct a plan involving misleading photos.	5	4	1	<b>THE SITUATION ROOM</b> , by George Stephanopoulos with Lisa Dickey. (Grand Central) A depiction of the location where and conditions under which a dozen presidential administrations handled crises.	2
5	9	<b>IT ENDS WITH US</b> , by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A battered wife raised in a violent home attempts to halt the cycle of abuse.	125	5		<b>ONCE UPON A TIME</b> , by Elizabeth Beller. (Gallery) Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy’s rise to fame and untimely death in a plane crash with her sister, Lauren, and husband, John F. Kennedy Jr.	1
6	8	<b>JUST FOR THE SUMMER</b> , by Abby Jimenez. (Forever) Justin and Emma, whose exes find soulmates after breaking up with them, have a fling on a private island.	8	6		<b>IN MY TIME OF DYING</b> , by Sebastian Junger. (Simon & Schuster) After suffering a ruptured aneurysm, Junger addresses some imponderables related to mortality.	1
7	5	<b>A COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) After killing a wolf in the woods, Feyre is taken from her home and placed inside the world of the Fae.	7	7	5	<b>THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE</b> , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	195
8		<b>ROMANCING MISTER BRIDGERTON</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The fourth book in the Bridgerton series. Penelope Featherington and Colin Bridgerton discover each other’s secrets. The inspiration for the third season of the streaming series “Bridgerton.”	8	8		<b>WHAT A FOOL BELIEVES</b> , by Michael McDonald with Paul Reiser. (Dey Street) The Grammy Award-winning songwriter and musician shares moments from his time in the bands the Doobie Brothers and Steely Dan.	1
9		<b>ONE PERFECT COUPLE</b> , by Ruth Ware. (Gallery/Scout) On a storm-swept island, there is a killer amid five couples who were cast on a reality TV series and are now unable to contact their crew.	1	9	6	<b>AN UNFINISHED LOVE STORY</b> , by Doris Kearns Goodwin. (Simon & Schuster) A trove of items collected by the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian’s late husband inspired an appraisal of central figures and pivotal moments of the 1960s.	6
10		<b>TOM CLANCY: ACT OF DEFIANCE</b> , by Brian Andrews and Jeffrey Wilson. (Putnam) The 24th book in the Jack Ryan series. President Ryan takes on a new Russian vessel.	1	10	9	<b>BITS AND PIECES</b> , by Whoopi Goldberg. (Blackstone) The EGOT winner shares personal stories about her mother and older brother and the struggles they faced.	3

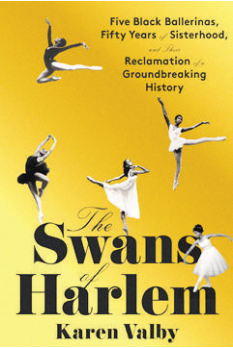
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## Editors’ Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



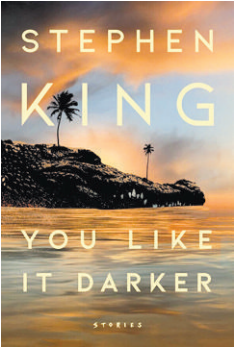
**CHOP FRY WATCH LEARN: Fu Pei-mei and the Making of Modern Chinese Food**, by Michelle T. King. (Norton. 304 pp. \$29.99.)

In 1971, this newspaper called Fu Pei-mei “the Julia Child of Chinese cooking.” But, as King’s biography notes, it was really the other way around: The legendary Fu, who taught generations to cook dishes from all over China, preceded Child on TV by several years. King interviews women who learned from Fu’s cookbooks and show, making the case that she was a cultural force.



**THE SWANS OF HARLEM: Five Black Ballerinas, Fifty Years of Sisterhood, and Their Reclamation of a Groundbreaking History**, by Karen Valby. (Pantheon. 304 pp. \$29.)

For those who believe that the narrative of Black prima ballerinas begins and ends with Misty Copeland, Valby’s rich, prismatic portrait of the five dancers who formed the core of the Dance Theater of Harlem’s inaugural 1969 class offers a joyful and spirited corrective.



**YOU LIKE IT DARKER: Stories**, by Stephen King. (Scribner. 502 pp. \$30.)

The master of horror returns with a new collection full of eerie tales. The book features a range of stories, from a crime novella to a yarn about a family that encounters two murders on a road, all delivered with King’s fine-tuned eye for terror.



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PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

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4		<b>HEAVENBREAKER</b> , by Sara Wolf. (Red Tower) A giant machine left over from the war has something unstoppable in it.	1	4	1	<b>THE SITUATION ROOM</b> , by George Stephanopoulos with Lisa Dickey. (Grand Central) A depiction of the location where and conditions under which a dozen presidential administrations handled crises.	2
5	2	<b>FUNNY STORY</b> , by Emily Henry. (Berkley) After their exes run off together, Daphne and Miles form a friendship and concoct a plan involving misleading photos.	5	5		<b>IN MY TIME OF DYING</b> , by Sebastian Junger. (Simon & Schuster) After suffering a ruptured aneurysm, Junger addresses some imponderables related to mortality.	1
6		<b>ONE PERFECT COUPLE</b> , by Ruth Ware. (Gallery/Scout) On a storm-swept island, there is a killer amid five couples who were cast on a reality TV series and are now unable to contact their crew.	1	6		<b>ONCE UPON A TIME</b> , by Elizabeth Beller. (Gallery) Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy's rise to fame and untimely death in a plane crash with her sister, Lauren, and husband, John F. Kennedy Jr.	1
7	4	<b>FOURTH WING</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) Violet Sorrengail is urged by the commanding general, who also is her mother, to become a candidate for the dragon riders.	55	7		<b>WHAT A FOOL BELIEVES</b> , by Michael McDonald with Paul Reiser. (Dey Street) The Grammy Award-winning songwriter and musician shares moments from his time in the bands the Doobie Brothers and Steely Dan.	1
8	7	<b>IRON FLAME</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) The second book in the Empyrean series. Violet Sorrengail's next round of training might require her to betray the man she loves.	29	8	6	<b>AN UNFINISHED LOVE STORY</b> , by Doris Kearns Goodwin. (Simon & Schuster) A trove of items collected by the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian's late husband inspired an appraisal of central figures and pivotal moments of the 1960s.	6
9	3	<b>THINK TWICE</b> , by Harlan Coben. (Grand Central) The 12th book in the Myron Bolitar series. Myron's client, whom he eulogized three years ago, might still be alive and is the main suspect in a double homicide.	2	9	10	<b>BITS AND PIECES</b> , by Whoopi Goldberg. (Blackstone) The EGOT winner shares personal stories about her mother and older brother and the struggles they faced.	3
10	8	<b>THE 24TH HOUR</b> , by James Patterson and Maxine Paetro. (Little, Brown) The 24th book in the Women's Murder Club series.	3	10	4	<b>YOU NEVER KNOW</b> , by Tom Selleck with Ellis Henican. (Dey Street) The actor charts his journey to success in Hollywood.	3

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

Paperback Row / BY SHREYA CHATTOPADHYAY



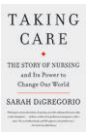
**OPEN THROAT**, by Henry Hoke. (Picador, 176 pp., \$17.) Over the course of a few weeks, an unnamed mountain lion — a resident of the hills around Los Angeles's Hollywood sign — eavesdrops on hikers' conversations, mourns its former loves and flees from a fire. Hoke's novel, which the lion narrates, is an “act of ravishing and outlandish imagination,” our reviewer wrote.



**FIRE WEATHER: On the Front Lines of a Burning World**, by John Vaillant. (Vintage, 432 pp., \$20.) Our reviewer wrote that fire proves an “unforgettable protagonist” in this dive into the May 2016 burning of Fort McMurray, a Canadian town that was home to 40 percent of American oil imports. Vaillant's telling of the disaster, which devastated the surrounding area and forced 88,000 people to flee, made this one of The Times's 10 Best Books of 2023.



**THE UNSETTLED**, by Ayana Mathis. (Vintage, 336 pp., \$18.) In 1980s Bonaparte, Ala., Dutchess Carson is one of five residents holding down what was once a thriving all-Black town. Meanwhile, her daughter and grandson make a life for themselves in tumultuous Philadelphia. Shifting through their perspectives and those of others, Mathis's novel mirrors “the reality that every historical event inspires multiple, conflicting points of view,” our reviewer wrote.



**TAKING CARE: The Story of Nursing and Its Power to Change Our World**, by Sarah DiGregorio. (Harper Perennial, \$21.99.) From nursing's history as one of the world's oldest professions to the importance of nurses to the Covid-19 pandemic response and to harm reduction, DiGregorio “reminds us that perhaps more than ever before, nursing is politics,” our reviewer wrote.



**MY MURDER**, by Katie Williams. (Riverhead, 304 pp., \$18.) Louise is the final victim of a serial killer, cloned back to life by a shadowy government agency. As she returns to her family and re-evaluates the last few weeks of her alienated life, the “self-possessed wisecracking” of her narration, according to our reviewer, reveals itself as the humorous “defense mechanism of a lonely and disconnected soul.”



**A FEVER IN THE HEARTLAND: The Ku Klux Klan's Plot to Take Over America, and the Woman Who Stopped Them**, by Timothy Egan. (Penguin, 448 pp., \$18.) Reading “at times like a screenplay for a crime procedural, at others like a horror film,” our reviewer wrote, Egan's history recounts the rapid expansion of the K.K.K. across the Midwest in the 1920s and the gruesome murder of a woman that eventually undermined its then leader.



Paperback Trade Fiction				Paperback Nonfiction			
THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	6	<b>IT ENDS WITH US</b> , by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A battered wife raised in a violent home attempts to halt the cycle of abuse.	155	1	1	<b>THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE</b> , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	292
2	2	<b>JUST FOR THE SUMMER</b> , by Abby Jimenez. (Forever) Justin and Emma, whose exes find soulmates after breaking up with them, have a fling on a private island on Lake Minnetonka.	8	2	2	<b>THE BACKYARD BIRD CHRONICLES</b> , by Amy Tan. (Knopf) Essays and drawings by the author of "The Joy Luck Club" and "The Bonesetter's Daughter," which depict a search for peace through birding.	5
3	1	<b>A COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) After killing a wolf in the woods, Feyre is taken from her home and placed inside the world of the Fae.	7	3	4	<b>THE LIGHT WE CARRY</b> , by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady shares personal stories and the tools she uses to deal with difficult situations.	6
4	3	<b>THIS SUMMER WILL BE DIFFERENT</b> , by Carley Fortune. (Berkley) Lucy returns to Prince Edward Island, where she finds it difficult to stay away from her best friend's younger brother.	3	4	7	<b>BRAIDING SWEETGRASS</b> , 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.	215
5	4	<b>THE HOUSEMAID</b> , 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.	57	5	6	<b>THINKING, FAST AND SLOW</b> , by Daniel Kahneman. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) When we can and cannot trust our intuitions in making business and personal decisions.	406
6	10	<b>HAPPY PLACE</b> , by Emily Henry. (Berkley) A former couple pretend to be together for the sake of their friends during their annual getaway in Maine.	12	6	9	<b>EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT LOVE</b> , by Dolly Alderton. (Harper Perennial) The British journalist shares stories and observations; the basis of the TV series.	49
7	9	<b>TWISTED LOVE</b> , by Ana Huang. (Bloom) Secrets emerge when Ava explores things with her brother's best friend.	50	7	3	<b>KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON</b> , by David Grann. (Vintage) The story of a murder spree in 1920s Oklahoma that targeted Osage Indians, whose lands contained oil.	169
8	7	<b>A COURT OF MIST AND FURY</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) The second book in the Court of Thorns and Roses series.	7	8	8	<b>THINK AGAIN</b> , by Adam Grant. (Penguin) An examination of the cognitive skills of rethinking and unlearning.	22
9	8	<b>KING OF SLOTH</b> , by Ana Huang. (Bloom) The fourth book in the Kings of Sin series.	4	9	5	<b>THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR ON PALESTINE</b> , by Rashid Khalidi. (Metropolitan) An account of the history of settler colonialism and resistance.	34
10		<b>ROMANCING MISTER BRIDGERTON</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The fourth book in the Bridgerton series. Penelope Featherington and Colin Bridgerton discover each other's secrets. The inspiration for the third season of the streaming series "Bridgerton."	1	10	14	<b>THE SPLENDID AND THE VILE</b> , by Erik Larson. (Crown) An examination of the leadership of the prime minister Winston Churchill.	22
11		<b>IT STARTS WITH US</b> , 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.	69	11	13	<b>THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY</b> , by Erik Larson. (Vintage) A story of how an architect and a serial killer were linked by the Chicago World's Fair of 1893.	377
12	11	<b>A COURT OF WINGS AND RUIN</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) The third book in the Court of Thorns and Roses series.	7	12	10	<b>TALKING TO STRANGERS</b> , by Malcolm Gladwell. (Back Bay) Famous examples of miscommunication.	114
13	13	<b>MURDER YOUR EMPLOYER</b> , by Rupert Holmes. (Avid Reader) At the McMasters Conservatory for the Applied Arts, students learn how to "delete" someone.	4	13	12	<b>CRYING IN H MART</b> , by Michelle Zauner. (Vintage) The leader of the indie rock project Japanese Breakfast describes creating her own identity after losing her mother to cancer.	53
14		<b>VERITY</b> , by Colleen Hoover. (Grand Central) Lowen Ashleigh is hired by the husband of an injured writer to complete her popular series and uncovers a horrifying truth.	134	14	15	<b>ALL ABOUT LOVE</b> , by bell hooks. (Morrow) The late feminist icon explores the causes of a polarized society and the meaning of love.	129
15		<b>ICEBREAKER</b> , 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.	66	15	11	<b>POVERTY, BY AMERICA</b> , by Matthew Desmond. (Crown) The ways in which affluent Americans keep poor people poor.	9

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

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# Bad Trip

Capt. James Cook's final voyage to the Pacific islands gets a closer examination.

By DOUG BOCK CLARK

IN JANUARY 1779, when the British explorer James Cook sailed into a volcanic bay known by Hawaiians as “the Pathway of the Gods,” he beheld thousands of people seemingly waiting for him on shore. Once he came on land, people prostrated themselves and chanted “Lono,” the name of a Hawaiian deity. Cook was bewildered.

It was as though the European mariner “had stepped into an ancient script for a cosmic pageant he knew nothing about,” Hampton Sides writes in “The Wide Wide Sea,” his propulsive and vivid history of Cook's third and final voyage across the globe.

As Sides describes the encounter, Cook happened to arrive during a festival honoring Lono, sailing around the island in the

## THE WIDE WIDE SEA

**Imperial Ambition, First Contact and the Fateful Final Voyage of Captain James Cook**

By Hampton Sides

Doubleday. 408 pp. \$35.

same clockwise fashion favored by the god, possibly causing him to be mistaken as the divinity.

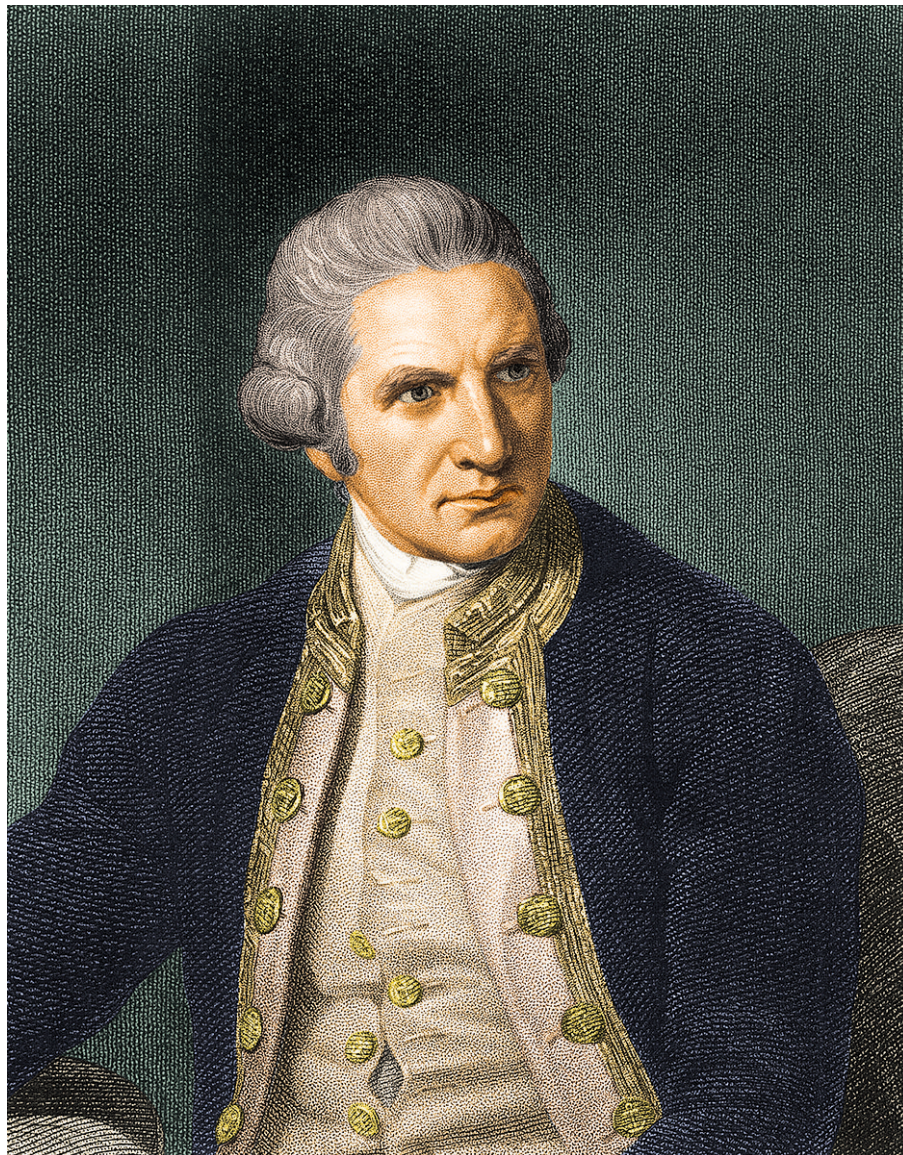
Sides, the author of several books on war and exploration, makes a symbolic pageant of his own of Cook's last voyage, finding in it “a morally complicated tale that has left a lot for modern sensibilities to unravel and critique,” including the “historical seeds” of debates about “Eurocentrism,” “toxic masculinity” and “cultural appropriation.”

Cook's two earlier global expeditions focused on scientific goals — first to observe the transit of Venus from the Pacific Ocean and then to make sure there was no extra continent in the middle of it. His final voyage, however, was inextricably bound up in colonialism: During the explorer's second expedition, a young Polynesian man named Mai had persuaded the captain of one of Cook's ships to bring him to London in the hope of acquiring guns to kill his Pacific islander enemies.

A few years later, George III commissioned Cook to return Mai to Polynesia on the way to searching for an Arctic passage to connect the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Mai brought along a menagerie of plants and livestock given to him by the king, who hoped that Mai would convert his native islands into simulacra of the English countryside.

“The Wide Wide Sea” is not so much a story of “first contact” as one of Cook reckoning with the fallout of what he and others

DOUG BOCK CLARK is the author of “*The Last Whalers: Three Years in the Far Pacific With a Courageous Tribe and a Vanishing Way of Life*.”



The English explorer James Cook, circa 1765.

had wrought in expanding the map of Europe's power. Retracing parts of his previous voyages while chauffeuring Mai, Cook is forced to confront the fact that his influence on groups he helped “discover” has not been universally positive. Sexually transmitted diseases introduced by his sailors on earlier expeditions have spread. Some Indigenous groups that once welcomed him have become hard bargainers, seeming primarily interested in the Europeans for their iron and trinkets.

Sides writes that Cook “saw himself as an explorer-scientist,” who “tried to follow an ethic of impartial observation born of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution” and whose “descriptions of Indigenous peoples were tolerant and often quite sympathetic” by “the standards of his time.”

In Hawaii, he had been circling the island in a vain attempt to keep his crew from disembarking, finding lovers and spreading more gonorrhea. And despite

## The book presents Cook's moral collapse as an enigma.

the fact that he was ferrying Mai and his guns back to the Pacific, Cook also thought it generally better to avoid “political squabbles” among the civilizations he encountered.

But Cook's actions on this final journey raised questions about his adherence to impartial observation. He responded to the theft of a single goat by sending his mariners on a multiday rampage to burn whole villages to force its return. His men worried that their captain's “judgment — and his legendary equanimity — had begun to falter,” Sides writes. As the voyage progressed, Cook became startlingly free with the disciplinary whip on his crew.

“The Wide Wide Sea” presents Cook's moral collapse as an enigma. Sides cites other historians' arguments that lingering

physical ailments — one suggests he picked up a parasite from some bad fish — might have darkened Cook's mood. But his journals and ship logs, which dedicate hundreds of thousands of words to oceanic data, offer little to resolve the mystery. “In all those pages we rarely get a glimpse of Cook's emotional world,” Sides notes, describing the explorer as “a technician, a cyborg, a navigational machine.”

The gaps in Cook's interior journey stand out because of the incredible job Sides does in bringing to life Cook's physical journey. New Zealand, Tahiti, Kamchatka, Hawaii and London come alive with you-are-there descriptions of gales, crushing ice packs and gun smoke, the set pieces of exploration and endurance that made these tales so hypnotizing when they first appeared. The earliest major account of Cook's first Pacific expedition was one of the most popular publications of the 18th century.

But Sides isn't just interested in retelling an adventure tale. He also wants to present it from a 21st-century point of view. “The Wide Wide Sea” fits neatly into a growing genre that includes David Grann's “The Wager” and Candice Millard's “River of the Gods,” in which famous expeditions, once told as swashbuckling stories of adventure, are recast within the tragic history of colonialism. Sides weaves in oral histories to show how Hawaiians and other Indigenous groups perceived Cook, and strives to bring to life ancient Polynesian cultures just as much as imperial England.

And yet, such modern retellings also force us to ask how different they really are from their predecessors, especially if much of their appeal lies in exactly the same derring-do that enthralled prior audiences. Parts of “The Wide Wide Sea” inevitably echo the storytelling of previous yarns, even if Sides self-consciously critiques them. Just as Cook, in retracing his earlier voyages, became enmeshed in the dubious consequences of his previous expeditions, so, too, does this newest retracing of his story become tangled in the historical ironies it seeks to transcend.

In the end, Mai got his guns home and shot his enemies, and the Hawaiians eventually realized that Cook was not a god. After straining their resources to outfit his ships, Cook tried to kidnap the king of Hawaii to force the return of a stolen boat. A confrontation ensued and the explorer was clubbed and stabbed to death, perhaps with a dagger made of a swordfish bill.

The British massacred many Hawaiians with firearms, put heads on poles and burned homes. Once accounts of these exploits reached England, they were multiplied by printing presses and spread across their world-spanning empire. The Hawaiians committed their losses to memory. And though the newest version of Cook's story includes theirs, it's still Cook's story that we are retelling with each new age. □

IMAGE FROM STOCK MONTAGE/GETTY IMAGES

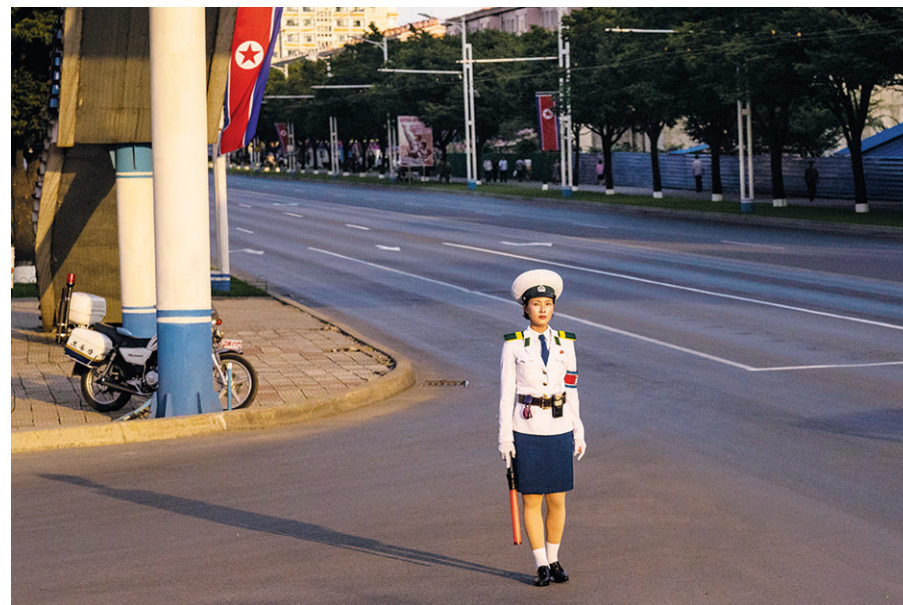


**Up Close** / **‘North Korea: The People’s Paradise,’ by Tariq Zaidi** / By Miguel Salazar

A new photo book captures everyday images of a hidden society at work and at play.



*The Kumgangsan Hotel at Mount Kumgang.*



*A traffic warden in the streets of Pyongyang.*



*A kindergarten student in the city of Sinuiju.*

A WOMAN POKES her head out from a hidden room at the Kumgangsan Hotel — a place known for hosting reunions between families from North and South Korea — disrupting the sweeping autumnal landscape painted on the wall.

The image, reproduced by Tariq Zaidi in **NORTH KOREA: The People's Paradise** (Kehrer Verlag, 176 pp., \$50), offers a metaphor for a country shrouded in secrecy. North Korea's daily existence has been largely shielded from Western eyes; those who are granted entry are subject to extreme surveillance.

Zaidi, a self-taught photographer whose previous collection documented gangs in El Salvador, was allowed rare access here under rigid conditions that included inflexible itineraries, final photo approval and the constant presence of state chaperones. Still, his images manage to capture small, revelatory glimpses of daily life: a female traffic warden fiercely surveying the streets of Pyongyang; a young girl perched at a weathered piano; several men casually sharing a riverside picnic.

Throughout, Zaidi documents the omnipresence of the North Korean state. Order, discipline and *juche* — the ideology of self-reliance — are emphasized in vibrant murals. The figures of the country's supreme leaders, past and present, loom over classrooms, train cars and public squares, where the pavement is marked with foot placements to ensure perfect formation during processions.

Yet even within this imposed synchronicity and order, Zaidi's lens offers evidence of deviation: a military man hiding a cigarette behind his back at the beach, a stiff knee disrupting the symmetry of a collective performance. These are tokens of imperfection, humanity made palpable. Here, too, each person is a small nation unto themselves. □



*Men enjoying a picnic lunch on the banks of Ulim Waterfalls.*



*Citizens walking past motivational posters on their commutes.*



*Men demonstrating martial arts exercises at an annual celebration.*



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