

The New York Times

Book Review

JUNE 14, 2026

DECLARATIONS of INDEPENDENCE

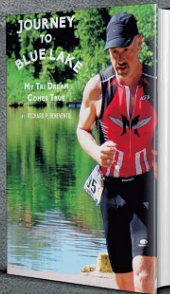
In "Freedom Round the Globe," Sarah M.S. Pearsall tracks the stirrings of liberty beyond the British colonies that became the United States.

BY JON MEACHAM | PAGE 9



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Journey to Blue Lake

Rick Benevento

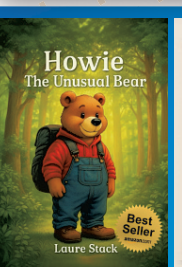
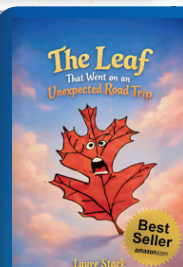
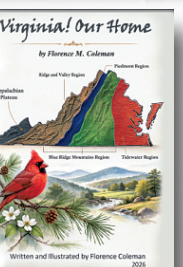
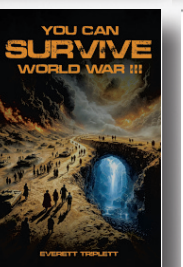
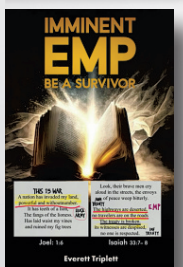
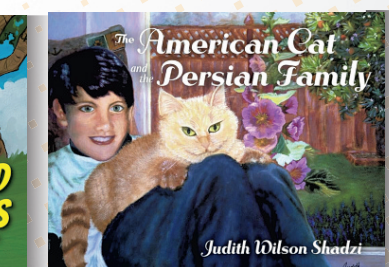
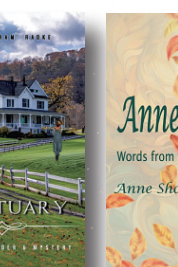
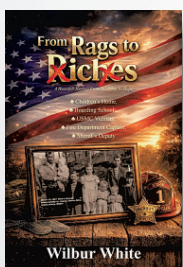
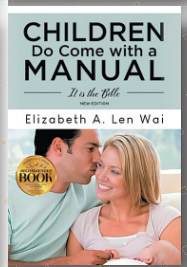
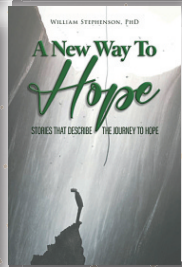
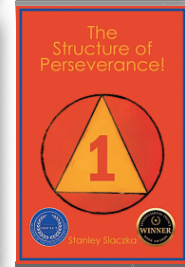
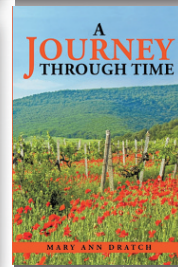
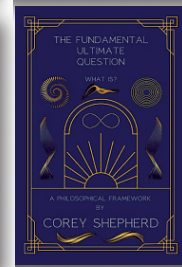
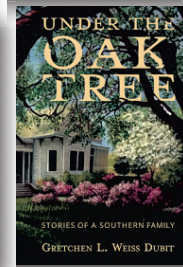
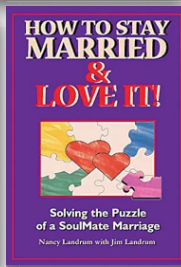
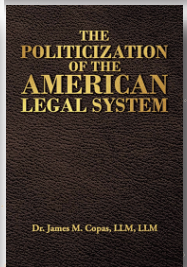
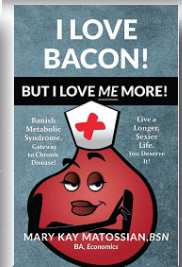
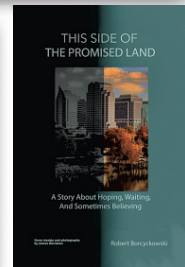
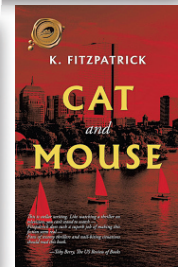
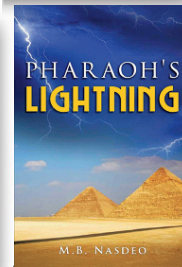
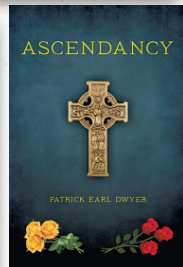
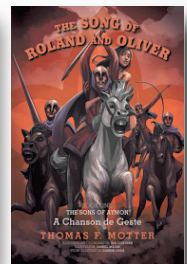
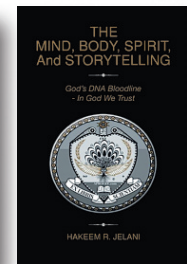
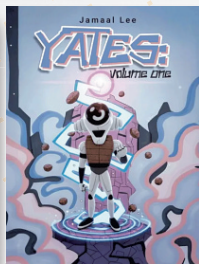
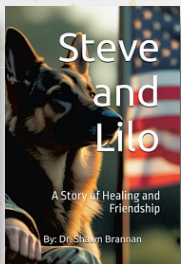
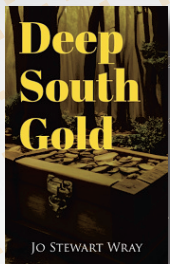
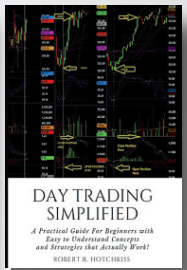
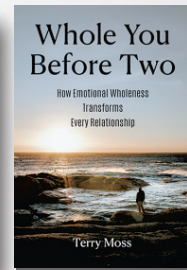
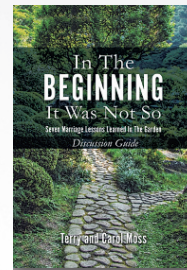
After life hit hard, first-time triathlete Richard Benevento found healing, resilience, and purpose. His honest, humorous journey offers tips, checklists, and guidance for every first race.



Lealtad

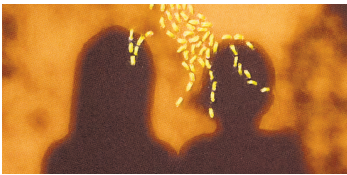
Jorge San Martin Zambrano

What if redemption is harder than revenge? In Lealtad, Yoyo faces his past, moral dilemmas, and vengeance, navigating forgiveness, self-discovery, and the scars that shape us



Books by Laure Anne Stack

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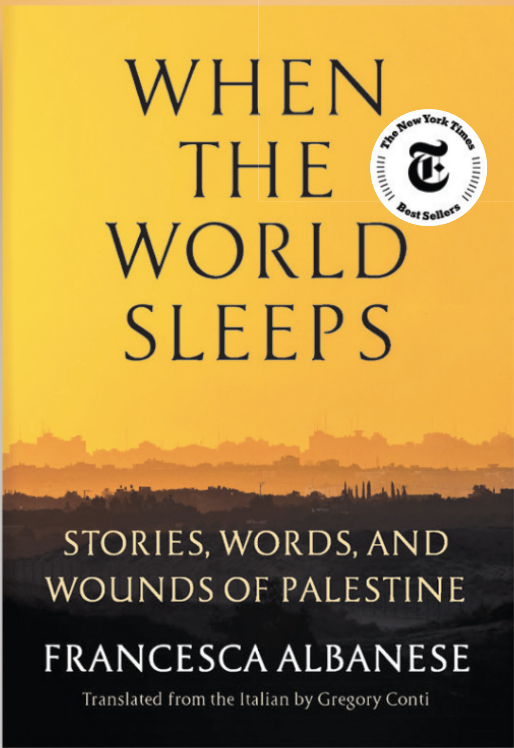
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The first woman to serve as United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territory conveys the spirit of a people through ten unforgettable stories of resilience and humanity.

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...Albanese draws the reader into her story with humility, compassion, and honesty, and then permeates it with the hard facts and analysis from her UN reporting work. This book, this testimony, even with Albanese’s proximity to such grief and suffering, brings hope.” —*Irish Times*

“INCISIVE, HEART-WRENCHING

an indispensable, at times deeply sickening, overview of the situation on the ground in Palestine.”

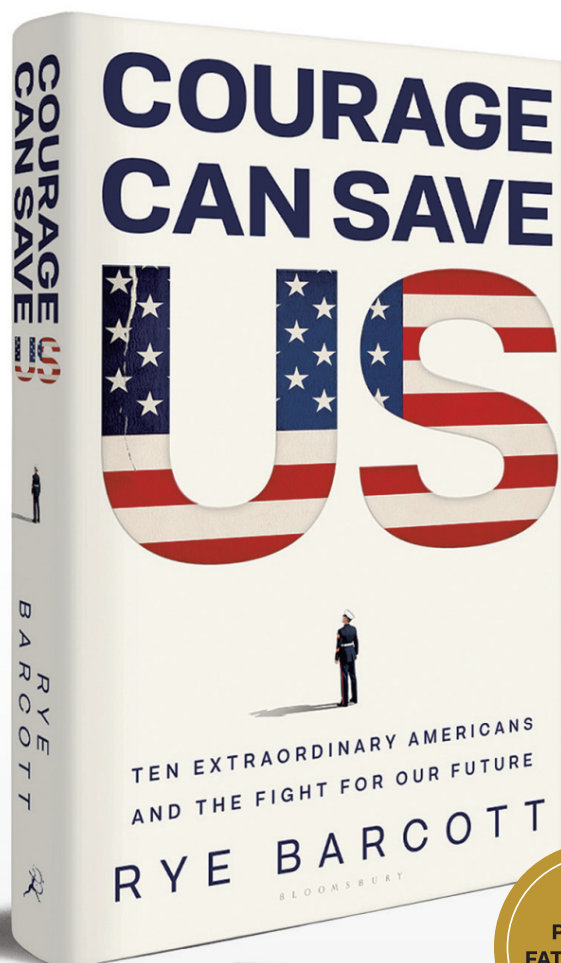
—*Publishers Weekly*

“Albanese’s chronicle **HUMANIZES THE HISTORY** that led to the October 7 attacks and the decimation that continues via a resonating chorus of global voices...The urgent necessity of Albanese’s reports is inarguable.” —*Booklist*

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—KARL MARLANTES,
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National Book Award finalist and
author of *2034* and *Sheepdogs*



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Letters



Endangered

TO THE EDITOR:

Reading Dwight Garner’s essay “Where Have All the Book Reviews Gone?” (May 24), I was disheartened by the state of literary criticism that he describes. I am a habitual reader of the weekend *New York Times* and of the *Book Review*, and I am always grateful for the hours the critics put into reading books and writing about them. I know that authors have long spoken with disdain about book critics but, like Garner, I think that criticism is of great importance to the health of the literary ecosystem.

TILDEN PITCHER
NORTHAMPTON, MASS.

Hard-Headed

TO THE EDITOR:

In her review of “Empire of Skulls,” by Paul Stob (May 31), Jennifer Wright notes that “the size and shape of skulls have no bearing on mental or behavioral attributes” and that “by 1841, there were 40 to 50 phrenological societies clamoring for replicas of the many casts [of skulls] the Fowlers had collected.”

Phrenologists believed that they could just feel the skull of a person — living or dead — and determine mental and emotional characteristics by the presence or absence of knobs, among other features. Imagine being able to determine what a nutcase your brother is without X-rays or even more expensive radiological technology. The knob feelers weren’t too different from the craniometrists who thought that intelligence could be measured by determining the cubic capacity of the skull.

MARCEL DIJKERS
BEVERLY HILLS, MICH.

TO THE EDITOR:

The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel offered the best refutation of phrenology in Paragraph 339 of his 1807 masterpiece, “The Phenomenology of Spirit”: “Smashing the skull” of the phrenologist should demonstrate to him “in a manner as palpable as his wisdom” that a person’s true essence is independent of the shape of the head.

RICHARD KASS
FOREST HILLS, QUEENS



TO THE EDITOR:

I have no idea how agreeable my lobes are to Stob’s argument, as Jennifer Wright puts it at the end of her review, but she certainly made me smile and want to find out! And as a reader in my mid-80s, that is no small accomplishment.

RUTH KRAMER ZIONY
LOS ANGELES

Spiritual Successor

TO THE EDITOR:

Max Strasser’s otherwise comprehensive review of Molly Crabapple’s “Here Where We Live Is Our Country” (May 17), on the socialist movement of anti-Zionist *mishpocha*, leaves the impression that the spirit of the Jewish Bund is now moribund. Not in America! The Workers Circle, with branches on both coasts, is a 125-year-old organization rooted in Bundist history that remains an active, progressive, self-identified Jewish organization with social as well as political activities. In fact, I just signed up for their annual New England summer retreat.

BILL MILES
SEEKONK, MASS.

BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM

By the Book



Ruth Ozeki

She read Norman Mailer too young, but ‘The Complete Book of Shoulders and Arms’ just when she needed it. Her new book, subtitled deliberately, is ‘The Typing Lady: And Other Fictions.’

What kind of reader were you as a child?

Precocious. I remember trying to read Norman Mailer’s “Ancient Evenings” in seventh grade. I was really into ancient Egypt. I don’t recall much of it now, only that it was a fat book filled with hallucinatory descriptions of sodomy, necrophilia and ritual sex magic. Not what I expected. I wanted to read about pyramids.

How have your reading tastes changed over time?

I never read another Norman Mailer book.

Describe your ideal reading experience.

I’m in my house in Desolation Sound, in the middle of a raging storm. The internet is down, my phone battery is dead, and the generator is broken. But I have a kerosene lamp, lots of fuel, shelves of good books and a full bottle of Scotch, and I know it’ll be days before the grid is back up and power restored. All of this is realistic, except for the Scotch.

You’ve talked about your affection for audiobooks. Have you ever read and listened to the same book?

I love a good audiobook, but I’m very finicky about the reader. When I find one I like, I will usually listen and read at the same time. I did this with “Piranesi,” by Susanna Clarke. It is such a beautiful book, gorgeously written, and superbly read by Chiwetel Ejiofor.

Has there been a favorite typewriter in your life?

My Hermes 3000. It was an aspirational typewriter, one I could never afford, but when “The Typing Lady” was scheduled for publication, I felt she must have one immediately, and so I bought her one.

Why is your subtitle “And Other Fictions” rather than “And Other Stories”?

I want to draw readers’ attention to the idea of fiction and prompt them to wonder how it might apply to the stories they’re about to read. The first entry is titled “An Author’s Note” but it becomes

apparent that it’s actually a story, told by the supposed author (me), about a woman she calls “the typing lady,” who is a minor autofictional character (also me) in my novel “The Book of Form and Emptiness.” It’s a hall of mirrors.

What books are on your night stand?

Lewis Carroll’s “Through the Looking-Glass.” Jorge Luis Borges’s “Collected Fictions.” Lydia Davis’s “Into the Weeds.”

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

“The Complete Book of Shoulders and Arms” next to “Strength Training Anatomy.”

What’s your philosophy on selling off books?

Sometimes I try to sell books, but not in N.Y.C. The used bookstore buyers are too discerning. You lug in a pile of beloved books and stand there, hopefully, while they scrutinize your titles. Maybe one or two will pass muster. It’s impossible not to feel somewhat book-shamed.

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

That the shoulder pain I suffer is caused by the long head of my biceps brachii running awkwardly through the bicipital groove in the humerus. This is not my fault. When our knuckle-dragging ancestors were quadrupedal, our arms hung down in front and the tendon ran a straight, easy path. Bipedalism forced our arms to hang at our sides, bending the tendon around a corner, pinching it, and making it perpetually vulnerable to inflammation and wear. In short, we were not designed to stand upright.

What’s the last great book you read?

I’m now reading the galleys of “Sublimation,” by Isabel J. Kim. It’s a debut novel, set in contemporary alter-worlds of Seoul and New York, about the very timely issue of immigration and border crossings. The characters, at the moment of crossing, split into two selves, one who leaves and one who stays behind. I haven’t finished, but so far it’s great!

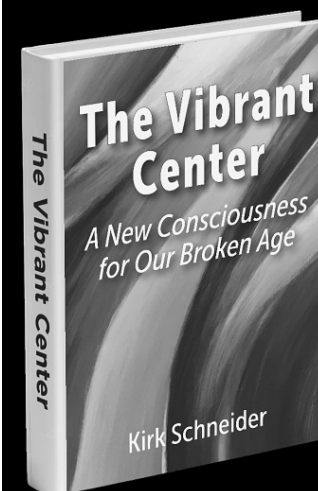
You’re organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?

In “The Typing Lady,” when the grandmother is making a fake online dating profile so she can spy on her teenage granddaughter, this very question comes up. Her answer is Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin. But who else? Oh, wait, I know. Barack Obama. □

Email interview conducted and edited by Scott Heller. An expanded version is available at nytimes.com/books.

VIBRANT CENTRISTS UNITE!

The Vibrant Center calls for a dynamic presence-based approach to combat the hate and destructiveness that’s tearing our society apart.



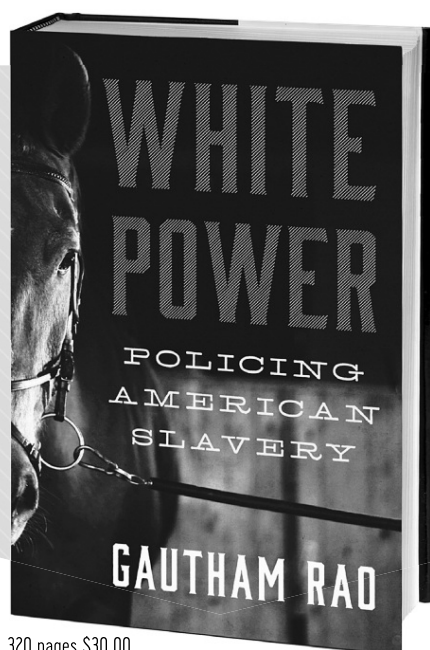
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CRIME & MYSTERY / BY SARAH WEINMAN

Just the Hits



Tiffany Hanssen, James Grady, Alessandra Ranelli and Alessandro Robecchi have terrific new novels for your lazy summer days.

I'M NOT SURE what I expected from the debut novel by Hanssen, a longtime public radio host at WNYC in New York City, but it certainly wasn't **MY NAME IS GERRY SASS** (Atlantic Crime, 218 pp., \$27), a tough and terse crime novel that bears no trace of sentimentality even as it explores the bonds of family and friendship.

Gerry, the main character, leads a bifurcated life in Mystic, Iowa. Most people know him as a local music station owner; fewer people are aware that the station, WIOA, is a money-laundering front for his mob activities, and that Gerry also happens to be a hit man. But "fewer" isn't "no one," and Gerry finally gets his comeuppance — witnessed by his closest friend, the Catholic priest Father Dan. When Gerry's daughter, Early, learns he's been killed, there's only one thing on her mind: revenge. "I am my father's daughter," she thinks.

Hanssen moves among these three perspectives to illuminate Gerry's complicated, brutal life (one scene involving a former

lover and a child is particularly harrowing) and its effects on his nearest and dearest. Gerry is a memorable character, but Father Dan and Early are the ones who will stay with me the longest.

GRADY CANNOT BE pigeonholed. He established his reputation with the 1974 spy thriller "Six Days of the Condor," but his writing since has branched out in many other directions, most recently with the sprawling coming-of-age epic "American Sky" in 2025. **SHADOWS ON SIDEWALKS** (Pegasus Crime, 251 pp., \$29.95) also seems to defy classification: Is it a James M. Cain-like noir? Is it a meditation on caring for an aging parent, or on the casual prejudice inherent in small towns?

Grady's answer is clearly "all of the above." He sets the scene in the fall of 2024, when his millennial avatar James Traven — a successful novelist with screenwriting experience — returns to Montana to help his mother recuperate after a fall. His attention is quickly diverted when he encounters an old acquaintance named Lana LaBuff, a stunningly beautiful Indigenous actress who is married to a man determined to drive her into an early grave, or so she says.

From here one expects all of the usual noir tropes, except Grady zagged where I expected him to zig. It makes for a slightly off-kilter experience, but I can't say I minded.

"What are we doing here?" James asks Lana at one point. "Finding our marks," she tells him.

STERLING LOCKWOOD, the main character in Ranelli's darkly seductive debut, **MURDER AT THE HOTEL ORIENT** (Scout Press, 404 pp., \$30), has spent much of her adult life hiding her truest self. Which is why her current job at Vienna's Hotel Orient suits her so well. It's a "love hotel" where anything can, and does, happen, and where privacy is so paramount that all cameras are

prohibited and everyone uses a pseudonym.

"The anonymous patrons were as rich, wild and glamorous as the hotel itself, and the concierge knew everything about them, except their names. And that, by morning, two of them would be dead."

The dead couple spur Sterling into action, and not the kind of action she prefers. She doesn't really want to play detective. But who else can ensure that what the Orient wants hidden won't spill into public view?

Alternately an adversary and a romantic interest for a strait-laced police officer, Sterling proves herself a worthy investigator. Ranelli, meanwhile, spins storytelling magic out of Vienna's shadowy, fantasy-laden subcultures.

A GREAT WAY to encounter a long-forgotten crime novelist is to meet him as a character in a more recent writer's work. I'd read one or two books by the Italian novelist Augusto De Angelis (1888-1944), but until I started reading **BROKEN TRUTHS** (Other Press, 282 pp., paperback, \$17.99), I had no idea that De Angelis met a violent end at the hands of a Fascist thug, or that his work had been banned by Mussolini's government.

Robecchi depicts the final days of the crime writer, as well as the present-day quest by an aging film director named Manlio Parrini who wants to adapt De Angelis's life and death. Parrini had walked away from the industry decades before, but capturing the essence of De Angelis on film proves irresistible to him — until he becomes distracted by murder a little too close to home: His neighbor, the widow Bastoni, has been found strangled.

Real life and art merge in multiple ways, though I confess to being less interested in the contemporary investigation than in De Angelis's narrative, a stark depiction of a man *in extremis* during Italy's darkest hours. □

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

Proud Mary

A new biography defends the most reviled first lady from her detractors past and present.

By AMY S. GREENBERG

NO FIRST LADY has been more demonized than Mary Todd Lincoln. Her life was marked by tragedies: her mother's 1825 death when she was a child, the loss of three of her four sons, the carnage in Ford's Theater. Yet her critics — led by President Lincoln's law partner William Herndon — savaged her reputation in the decades following Abraham's 1865 assassination.

In her admirable biography, "An Inconvenient Widow," the former Washington Post reporter Lois Romano sets out to rehabilitate "the most misunderstood and tragic first lady in American history." It's an ambitious project.

Romano's method includes elevating Mary Lincoln's accomplishments. She praises her French, her visits to military hospitals and her encouragement of her husband's political rise.

All true, but none remarkable. French instruction was a normal part of the education of elite women, and many first ladies spoke the language. By the second year of the Civil War, elite women visiting hospitals were so common that *not* doing so would have raised attention. And wives pushing their husbands to succeed is hardly a historical anomaly; James Polk joked that Sarah Childress refused to marry him until he promised to run for office.

Lincoln's one genuinely notable innovation as first lady — her 1861 tour of Union encampments — might have mattered more had it not devolved into a shopping spree.

The truth is that Mary Lincoln was, by any reasonable measure, astonishingly ill suited to preside over the White House. She had a mental illness that manifested in erratic and self-destructive behavior. Her financial excesses would have been criticized in peacetime; during a civil war they were practically obscene. She bought compulsively — clothes, jewelry, accessories — and then attempted to hide her debts by manipulating the White House budget.

In other words, there is a kernel of reality in the chaotic, narcissistic and otherwise fanciful Mrs. Lincoln of Cole Escola's hit Broadway play "Oh, Mary!" The actual first lady was rude to guests, to her husband's colleagues and to any woman she suspected might outshine her. Vain and lacking discernment, she trusted flattering opportunists who used her for access. She was indiscreet, thin-skinned and had no sense of political optics. In a less fraught period, these failings would have mattered less than they did.

But Romano's strongest argument — and it is convincing — is that Mary's de-

AMY S. GREENBERG is the George Winfree professor of history at Penn State University. The most recent of her five books is "Lady First: The World of First Lady Sarah Polk."



An 1865 lithograph depicting Mary Todd Lincoln at her husband's deathbed.

AN INCONVENIENT WIDOW The Torment, Trial, and Triumph of Mary Todd Lincoln By Lois Romano

Simon & Schuster. 463 pp. \$31.

monization after Abraham's death, and in the generations since, was wildly disproportionate to her flaws. The sheer passion with which his friends and later historians condemned her should give any reader pause.

Herndon, in particular, humiliated and apparently libeled Mary, claiming that Abraham never loved her and that she made his life miserable. Romano is at her best when she dismantles the stories that have calcified into "fact." One oft-repeated tale — Mary supposedly attacking her husband in a rage because he brought home the wrong cut of meat — turns out to rest on an interview with a neighbor who had died years before the interview supposedly took place. Her detractors, Romano notes, were generally motivated by jealousy, resentment of Mary's many grudges and slights, or sexism.

Romano also attempts to diagnose Mary's behavior sympathetically, through modern psychology. Mary's spending becomes compulsive buying disorder; her erratic widowhood is attributed to social isolation, which, "contemporary studies show, can exacerbate mood disorders, faulty decision-making and depression." Abraham's assassination triggered post-traumatic stress. She may have had bipolar disorder. Her hallucinations were likely caused by laudanum and chloral hydrate, both used for sleep.

It is hard to argue with Romano's conclusion that "few among us could survive such profound losses without the help of

psychiatric professionals or contemporary anxiety and mood medication." And, as she notes, "Mary had neither." Still, the accumulation of diagnoses sometimes distracts more than it illuminates.

Romano's portrait of Lincoln is not always convincing. She parades Lincoln's antislavery convictions but downplays her anti-immigrant and racial prejudices. Romano also places too much trust in a romanticized biography written by a family member nearly half a century after Mary Lincoln's death. Perhaps this is fair play, given the continued scholarly use of Herndon's scurrilous attacks, but it somewhat undermines the volume's claims to objectivity.

Where Romano is most compelling is in her treatment of Lincoln's widowhood, which occupies a full third of the book. It was, as she writes, a "17-year odyssey of rejection and self-isolation," saddled with debt, instability and the ultimate betrayal: her only surviving son, Robert, having her committed to a psychiatric institution in 1875 — in part, Romano argues, because he disliked the negative publicity she generated.

Romano's grief for her subject becomes so personal that she slips into the first person: "There can be just so much loss in one's life before we become incapable of tapping our reserves to push on."

In the end, the subtitle's invocation of "triumph" feels misplaced. Mary Lincoln's life was not triumphant; it was tragic. But Romano is right that the cruelty with which she has been remembered tells us more about her accusers than about Lincoln herself. Whatever her faults — and they were many — she deserved better, and Romano deserves praise for granting her, at long last, a measure of grace. □

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The New York Times

Rising Waters

Jesmyn Ward, the two-time National Book Award winner, collects essays, profiles and appreciations in a new book.

By DWIGHT GARNER

JESMYN WARD'S FIRST BOOK of non-fiction, "Men We Reaped" (2013), was primarily about the lives of five young men she knew well who died from unnatural causes: drugs, suicide, car accidents.

The book is an emphatic and bruising blend of journalism and memoir. When I reviewed it, I wrote that, though its tone can be somber, "it is also shot through with life, with a sense of rural community and what it felt like to be young and adolescent and footloose on hot Mississippi nights, all the beer cans and weed and loud music and sex and rolled-down car windows."

It's among the essential nonfiction books of this no-longer-new century. It's hard for me to believe it landed 13 years ago (it's hard for me to believe anything anymore) because a lot of its moments are still active in my mind.

Ward's new book of nonfiction is a collection of essays, profiles, introductions and speeches titled "On Witness and Respair." It's more hit-or-miss, as such assortments usually are.

The misses tend to be the pieces on writing, and on the novelists and artists she admires, simply because she leans on soft language. On reading Toni Morrison: "Her every word a caress, her every sentence an embrace." On the actress and director Regina King: "She makes films because she wants to foster beauty in the world." Ward asks us to "be more mindful of the miracle of joy."

It doesn't matter that Ward isn't exceptional at this kind of left-handed journalistic piecework; many serious novelists are not. But that material is included here, and because it is worth heeding Ward's dictum that only "full witness is love," it must be mentioned.

Ward is a two-time winner of the National Book Award, for her novels "Salvage the Bones" (2011) and "Sing, Unburied, Sing" (2017). She's received a MacArthur "genius grant." The best material in "On Witness and Respair" reminds you why she's gathered these plums.

Her writing about blue-collar Black life in the South, and about her family, comes alive because it is shrewd and vexed; Ward's feathers are ruffled and she is more present on the page. She keeps everyone in the frame, and deals out facts and impressions so deftly that she makes you recall Saul Bellow's comment that a fact is a wire through which one sends a current.

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.



Jesmyn Ward

ON WITNESS AND RESPAIR Essays

By Jesmyn Ward

Scribner. 226 pp. \$29.

The indispensable piece is "We Do Not Swim in Our Cemeteries: A Legacy of Not Evacuating," which appeared in the *Oxford American* in 2008. It's about her family's experience riding out Hurricane Katrina in coastal Mississippi. A lot of her extended family was packed into her mother's double-wide trailer before they were forced to flee it.

"We never evacuated, so we didn't evacuate this time," Ward writes. "For one thing, we couldn't afford to leave. My mother made seven dollars per hour as a teaching assistant, my middle sister made 10 dollars per hour as a dental assistant, and my youngest, pregnant sister made

two dollars and 50 cents per hour as a waitress. My father made eight dollars per hour as a gas station attendant. I was unemployed for the summer."

After the water began to rise, the family made their way to her grandmother's brick house. Ward charts the water ascending to the carpet, and then to the waist, the cars drifting and spinning outside. After they were forced out of this house as well, a white family denied them shelter.

Ward captures the heat and grime afterward, the bugs and the lack of shade and the rashes and the necessity of siphoning gas. Downed power lines "lay like slinky Mardi Gras beads all along the streets." The entire region smelled like grilled meat because families raced to cook what they had before it went bad.

The essay downshifts into outrage. Where are FEMA and the Red Cross? Why are the police treating survivors like a band of thieves? Ward reminds you why

Katrina's aftermath was a dismal chapter in the moral history of America.

An essay titled "No Mercy in Motion" — which appeared in *Guernica* in 2013 — captures Ward's existential loneliness as an undergraduate and master's student at Stanford, where she graduated from in 2000. She made a stab at working in publishing in New York but felt like a

Her writing about blue-collar Black life in the South comes alive; it is shrewd and vexed.

Southern oddity. She longed for Mississippi. The essay also relates the events of her brother's death at the hands of a drunken driver, a white man who received a minimal sentence.

There's an essay, written for *The New Yorker*, about taking a genetic test and being shaken to find that her ancestry is 40 percent European. There's one about her father — a former Black Panther who liked motorcycles and kung fu and Public Enemy — getting into Prince's music and being confronted with what she calls "alternative Black masculinity." Another is about her fears of bringing a Black boy, her second child, into a dangerous world for Black boys.

One gets a sense of all the white people who have twinkled patronizingly at Ward — and worse. An indelible moment occurs at the Washington offices of the Mississippi senator Trent Lott, whom Ward met while in high school. "My schoolmates were white," she writes. "I was not."

Trent Lott took a whip as long as a car off his office table, where it lay coiled and shiny brown, and said to a male schoolmate, who grinned at Lott enthusiastically: *Let's show 'em how us good old boys do it.* And then he swung that whip through the air and cracked it above our heads, again and again. I remember the experience in my bones.

The title essay details Ward's husband's death, at 33, during the Covid lockdown, from organ failure that was initially thought to be the flu. It's an emotional steamroller. Some have said, glibly, that nothing bad can happen to a writer, that it's all material. But for Ward, the bad things have kept coming. You see from her buoyant writing about friends, family, food and other topics that she would still be one of our best Southern writers without so much agony. Her resilience is plain; so is the sense that she'd be happy to have trouble no more. □

Declarations of Independence

A historian tracks the stirrings of liberty beyond the British colonies that became the United States.



A depiction of the East India Company's European regiment at the Siege of Cuddalore on July 1, 1783.

By JON MEACHAM

THOUGH HE WAS dour sometimes to the point of bitterness, give John Adams this: He could be funny. “The History of our Revolution will be one continued Lye from one End to the other,” Adams wrote in 1790. “The Essence of the whole will be that Dr Franklins electrical Rod, Smote the Earth and out Sprung General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his Rod — and thence forward these two conducted all the Policy Negotiations Legislation and War.”

He wasn’t far wrong, at least in terms of the popular imagination. The red, white and blue Revolution of powdered wigs, fifes, drums and Paul Revere — perhaps with a Betsy Ross cameo — is a durable tale streamlined, simplified and grounded in the celebratory ethos of David Ramsay’s 1789 “The History of the American Revolution” and the 19th-century triumphalism of George Bancroft’s 10-volume “History of the United States, From the Discovery of the American Continent.”

This jubilant version of the Revolution lives in contrast to more recent, more complex and more challenging interpretations of the era. From Charles A. Beard’s 20th-century argument for a larger appreciation of the economic motives of the founders to the 21st-century emphasis on the Atlantic world and slavery, the Revolution has rightly come to be seen as a vastly more various and capacious story than the

JON MEACHAM is a professor of political science at Vanderbilt University and the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of “American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House.”

one children were taught when I was young. (I was born in 1969, in time to be an elementary school flag-bearer in Bicentennial parades.)

As the Johns Hopkins historian Sarah M.S. Pearsall tells us in her engaging new book, “Freedom Round the Globe,” our understanding of the Revolution — which, she writes, is “a story bigger than the 13 colonies” — should not dismiss the founders of record but add to their com-

FREEDOM ROUND THE GLOBE

A World History of the American Revolution

By Sarah M.S. Pearsall

Doubleday. 419 pp. \$35.

pany. In a way, she takes the words of the Duke of Newcastle as her marching orders: “Ministers in this country, where every part of the World affects us, in some way or another, should consider the *whole Globe*.”

And so she does. With Pearsall’s expert guidance, we meet revolutionaries and liberty lovers — men and women, enslaved and Indigenous, old and young — in far-flung places: the American interior, India, China, Scotland, the Caribbean and the forests of what would become Germany. The unifying theme: resistance against British authority and influence.

In battles against competing European colonial interests and Indigenous populations around the world in the 1750s and ’60s, the British largely prevailed, investing them with enormous imperial power. But, as Pearsall writes, the crown “now had a much larger and more fragile set of

holdings to defend.” She quotes a 1761 commentator who noted, presciently, that it would not be “for the advantage of England to be so overloaded with foreign Possessions.”

By the 1770s, London was beset on all sides, and the sundry challenges to its global empire required troops and resources that might otherwise have been deployed to put down rebellion in British North America. The Spanish and French siege of British-held Gibraltar, for instance, lasted from 1779 to 1783, tying down British forces. (It was, Pearsall notes, “the largest military action of the American Revolutionary War, involving at least 40,000 soldiers and sailors.”)

Americans revere the French as their first great ally, but Paris looked east as well as west to stand against the British. In the late 18th century, French soldiers aided Haidar Ali, the leader of Mysore in southern India, in his battle against the exploitations of the British East India Company.

This element of the story — the connection to what was unfolding in India — rarely makes an appearance in the popular accounts of the American Revolution, though news of it traveled across the planet. The resistance in South Asia was a drain on the British, not only materially but also in terms of popular opinion back in British North America, where colonists were horrified by reports that the East India Company had exacerbated a famine that killed 300,000 people in Bengal, beating and abusing anyone who could not pay taxes to the colonial authority, even as they starved.

The East India Company, a Boston newspaper wrote in 1773, was sending ships with tea “for the purpose of *enslaving*

and poisoning all the Americans.” After subjugating India, the Pennsylvania leader John Dickinson warned, the British would now “cast their Eyes on America, as a new Theatre, whereon to exercise their Talents of Rapine, Oppression and Cruelty.” The immediate past, in other words, might well be prologue.

The attacks on liberty from imperial authority also provoked conversations about other kinds of freedom. If Americans sought a “land of liberty where the spirit of freedom glows,” the Rev. Levi Hart of Connecticut asked in 1775, how could they endorse the “*horrible slave-trade?*” That same year, in Scotland, the Pantheon Society admitted women to its meetings for the first time. The subject of debate that day: What is the best way to ensure happiness? The women were not allowed to speak, but they could vote for the argument they liked best. The old order yieldeth — slowly, yes, but also surely.

One suspects Pearsall is an excellent lecturer, for she often states a point, emphasizes it and then states it again, as if she were applying the Powell Doctrine of overwhelming force to students of varying degrees of focus. This, however, is a quibble: Her arguments and her observations repay attention in any year, but especially in this one.

“The American Revolution was not a common event,” John Adams observed in 1818. “Its effects and consequences have already been awful over a great part of the globe. And when and where are they to cease?” They haven’t — not least in the nation-state that Adams did so much to construct, and whose history Pearsall’s book does so much to illuminate. □

Examination

Patricia Cornwell's memoir traces how she survived a Southern Gothic upbringing to emerge as a famous thriller writer.

By ALEXANDRA JACOBS

PATRICIA CORNWELL IS meticulous about researching the plots of her best-selling forensic thrillers — leaving a quarter under one corpse's buttocks for a month, for example, to test whether it oxidized on the skin in a telltale pattern — but mystical in her outlook.

In her plainly written but effective new memoir, “True Crime,” Cornwell recounts how, long before her super-sonic career took off, she had a

TRUE CRIME

A Memoir

By Patricia Cornwell

Grand Central. 464 pp. \$32.50.

dream where Agatha Christie appeared in a big black hat, looked her in the eye and proclaimed grandly: “You will take my place.”

Once success does swoop in, “True Crime” gets bogged down by famous names. Flirty friendships with George H.W. Bush and Orrin Hatch; script discussions with Demi Moore and Susan Sarandon; candidates to play Cornwell's famous heroine, the forensic pathologist Kay Scarpetta (Nicole Kidman eventually got the role).

There were unwelcome advances from Larry King, and the previously untold, underwhelming anecdote of Bill Clinton theorizing why O.J. Simpson did it.

But a mesmerizing Southern Gothic horror hovers over the author's formative years, with “perfume pie” made from Cool Whip and Jell-O powder; a neighbor's child requesting she put heated steel screws up his rectum; a Grandma Gussie, a.k.a. G.G., who made hats with ostrich feathers; and a beloved teacher giving lessons in poisonous botany.

The Scarpetta books (almost 30 of them) originated from Cornwell's own gruesome experiences working at the medical examiner's office in Richmond, Va., and have extended to groundwork with NASA. (“Blood doesn't drip” in outer space, F.Y.I. “It floats and spatters everywhere as fans blow constantly.”) A survivor of multiple serious accidents, she boldly flies helicopters and drives Ferraris but is nonetheless constantly scanning the world for danger.

“An escalator can cut you to ribbons if you're not paying attention,” she writes. “The scaffolding you foolishly walked under could collapse. The backhoe gouging the earth on the roadside is way too close

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



Patricia Cornwell with paraphernalia gathered for her research on Jack the Ripper.

to cars going past. The person loitering suspiciously might be a serial killer.”

Noted.

Little Patricia was known as Patsy after her mother, a former flight attendant and part-time model who resembled Vivien Leigh and was inexplicably nicknamed Pat, though she was actually Marilyn Frances.

These tragic actress associations were apt: After Pat's husband, Sam Daniels, an appellate lawyer, left her for his secretary, she had psychotic depressive episodes that included, on one occasion, feeding the possessions of their three children, whom she called “schnickelfritzies,” into a living-room fire.

Sam was obviously not the picture of mental health either. Yes, he took the schnickelfritzies for fast-food feasts and magical sounding boat trips under the Big Dipper. But he also enjoyed popping up in

the window with a nylon stocking over his head when Pat was washing the dishes, and whispering “you're not fit to live” as she slept.

Pat found solace as a born-again Baptist, and after the breakup relocated with Patsy and two sons to the small town of Montreat, N.C., because her favored televangelist, Billy Graham, lived there. His wife, Ruth, helped route her to a psychiatric hospital, where she got electroconvulsive therapy, and the Daniels brood into foster care with a missionary couple, which was its own kind of shock treatment: intercom spying system, Maltese puppy tied to a pole and left alone in a basement, etc.

The strict mealtime rules there probably contributed to Patsy's eventual eating disorder and own institutionalization, under the questionable care of a sinister “Dr. Bill” who had also treated her mother. The sense of control that came with working at

the morgue, vile odors and crunch of hardened arteries being sectioned notwithstanding, was probably the cure.

The “Cornwell” came from Patricia's late ex-husband, Charles, who had been one of her English professors at Davidson College, where she was admitted as a tennis player so good she played on men's teams, despite a subpar academic record.

Their marriage foundered after she was drugged and raped by a law-enforcement official, a source when she was on the police beat at The Charlotte Observer. (Bisexual, Cornwell has been partnered with Staci Gruber, the neuroscientist nicknamed Harvard's Pot Doc on CNN, for over 20 years.)

The author's first published book, “A Time for Remembering” (later repackaged as “Ruth: A Portrait”), was a poorly received hagiography of Ruth Graham, a fairy godmother descending from her mountaintop manse in a silver automobile, playing Pachelbel's Canon for young Patsy and supporting her early writing efforts.

This ragtag protégée wrote four novels and was rejected by multiple imprints, all currently rending their garments, before Scribner bought “Postmortem” for \$6,000, publishing it in 1990.

Though best known for Scarpetta, and a few other fictional series, she is also devoted to the mysteries of history.

She questions the conclusion that her maternal grandfather's plunge off the 17th floor of the Conway Building in Chicago — resulting in fatal “evisceration of the liver and intestines” — was a suicide.

Meanwhile, somewhere back on the paternal side is Harriet Beecher Stowe, the abolitionist author of “Uncle Tom's Cabin.”

Cornwell feels a certain kinship for Stowe's investigation of John Wilkes Booth's death and defends her against Charles Dickens's charge of sentimentality. “The ugly truth is that many authors don't like each other even if they won't admit it,” she writes.

One sore thumb on Cornwell's enormous body of work is the 2002 book “Portrait of a Killer,” which concludes that Jack the Ripper was the painter John Sickert. In The New York Times, Caleb Carr, a fellow abuse survivor turned literary criminologist and animal advocate, called it “sloppy,” “insulting” and an “exercise in calumny.”

Cornwell does not address his criticisms in the memoir. “To this day I rarely read anything written about me,” she writes, “most of all book reviews.” □

The Plot

In David Sedaris's wry new collection, being alive is as weird, atrocious, contradictory, unfair and funny as ever.

By **RODDY DOYLE**

SOME YEARS AGO, I found out that I needed hearing aids. It was a wretched piece of news. Wear a new pair of glasses, and people will tell you, "Oh, they look great! They really suit you!" With new hearing aids, the same people will say, "You'd hardly notice them."

As I walked home, wearing the hearing aids for the first time (I kept having to push my glasses back up my nose because the hearing aids were shoving them off my head, and the local sparrows suddenly started to sound like pterodactyls), I wondered to myself, "Does David Sedaris wear hearing aids?"

I doubt if I'm the only person who, as I come up against the miseries of growing old — the liver spots, the colonoscopy, the 50-year-old woman offering me her seat on the bus — hopes that Sedaris has suffered the same indignity, and has written about it. It is not that I would wish these things on

THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

By **David Sedaris**

Little, Brown. 262 pp. \$30.

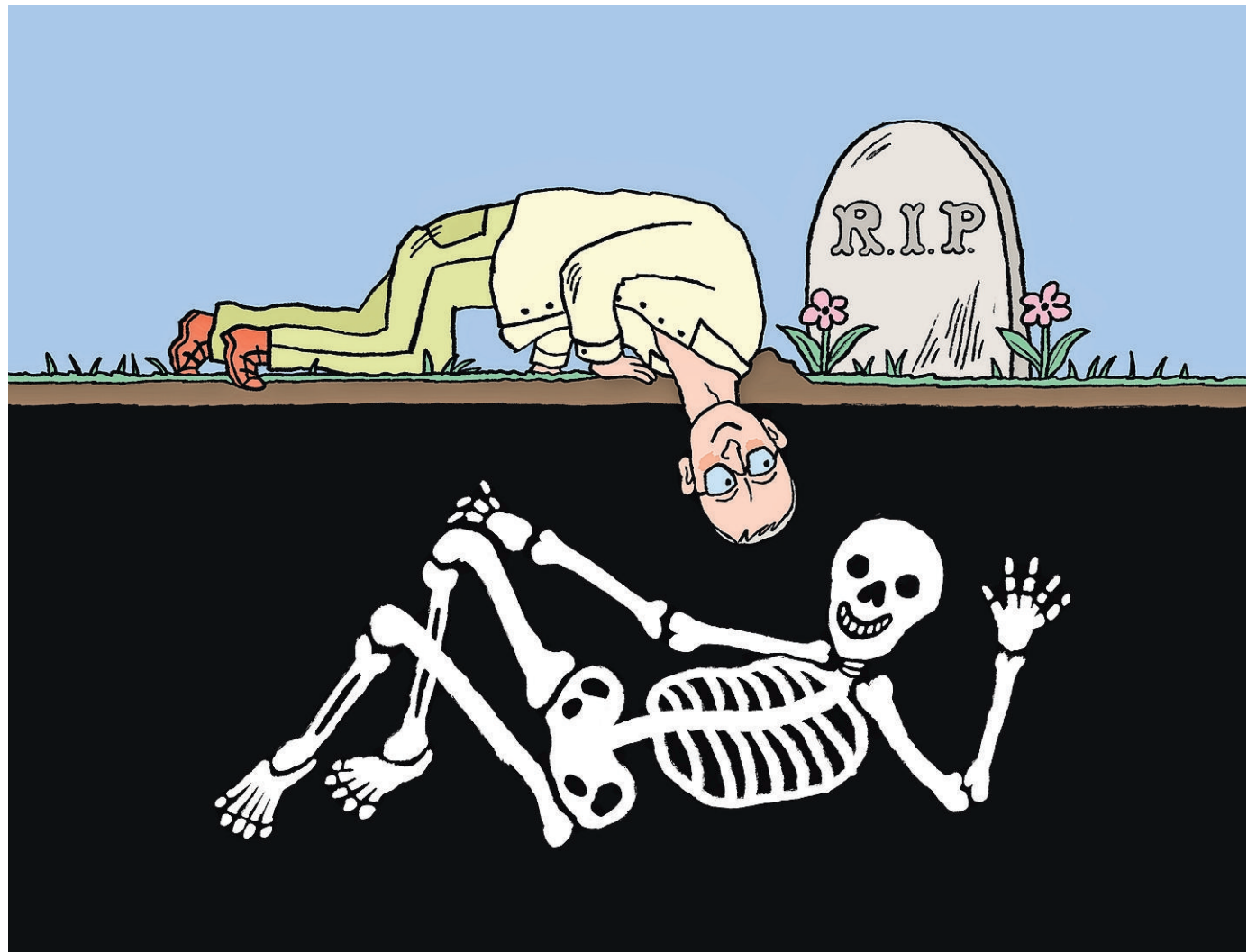
him, especially. It's that he writes about the stuff of mortality bluntly and honestly, with a brilliance that makes the steady crawl toward death seem almost welcome. I realized some books back (his, not mine) that I don't read Sedaris for the laughs, although he makes me laugh: I read him for his honesty.

In the first essay in his new collection, "The Land and Its People," Sedaris's husband, Hugh, is about to undergo a hip replacement. "I know all about kidney stones and gum surgery," Sedaris writes. "I know about broken ribs and urinary tract infection. When it came to hip pain, though, he had me." Anyone who has sat with a group of older people as they go through what a friend of mine calls "the organ recital" (the litany of their bodily ailments) will be familiar with the competitiveness inherent in those words.

The essay, titled "Care and Feeding," has the ingredients that we've come to expect of Sedaris: the "is he allowed to write that?" humor; the family members and friends who provide him with so much material, whether they want to or not; the sometimes startling personal details; the effort that must go into making his sentences such a pleasure to read.

But it is the final sentence that makes the essay special: "As he became his old self again, the pleasantness of our life together just sort of swelled, crowding out everything but half a bottle of OxyContin and a really tall toilet seat now gathering cobwebs beside an aluminum walker in

RODDY DOYLE'S most recent novel is "The Women Behind the Door."



our building's dank, uninviting basement."

There's love in the words "life together" — but the future lurks beneath them, in the basement. The walker hasn't been thrown out; it will be needed again. It is ominous, but the reader — this reader, anyway — looks forward to seeing it being hauled back up, in some future essay.

What I admire most about Sedaris is that he examines aging with the same vigor, curiosity and grim glee that he showed in his earlier books, when he wrote about his younger self. He's as alive and angry now as he was then; every year seems to be formative.

His father has been a huge figure in his work through the years, in part, I suppose, because he lived longer than Sedaris's mother and also because the man was vile. In the essay "My Finances, in Brief," which starts as an account of his choice of underwear, Sedaris recalls the rejection and humiliations his father inflicted on him, then writes, with the furious joy of a teenager: "But then I thought, *He's dead. And I don't have to go through that anymore — not on Father's Day or at Christmas. I don't have to call or write to him again. I'm free!*"

It is shocking, and wonderful, and it is immediately followed with, "And with that I bought myself a spanking new white pair of underpants."

THERE ARE 28 ESSAYS in the book and, inevitably, some have more going for them, and more in them, than others. There's an account of his audience with the pope — the previous one, not the current lad — which probably had to be written but is slight, because the audience itself was very slight.

I was going to suggest that "Say It Like You Mean It," an account of his relationship with the language app Duolingo, was a bit of a filler, until I read it a second and third time, and had to accept that if a piece of writing, and one sentence in particular, can make me laugh at 6 in the morning, it's worth keeping and going back to. The particular sentence: "My friend Mike is learning Yiddish with Duolingo and was taught to say, 'My uncle is a broken man.'"

Is "The Land and Its People" as good as the earlier books — is it as funny as, say, "Let's Explore Diabetes With Owls"? This is like asking if Episode 3 of Season 2 of "The Sopranos" is as good as Episode 4 of

'I'm in the hard part of getting old,' he writes in 'Welcome In' — 'the part where everything irritates you.'

Season 6. We're very lucky to have both. The author is older, the world seems weirder; he hates it and loves it. And this is another reason I love reading Sedaris: He knits the present to the past so that they become the same thing; for him being alive has always been strange and atrocious, contradictory, unfair and hilarious.

"I'm in the hard part of getting old," he writes in "Welcome In" — "the part where everything irritates you." Long may it last.

I waited until I was home, safe from the sparrows, before I searched online, "Does David Sedaris wear hearing aids?" And something called A.I. Overview responded immediately. "Based on available information, there is no evidence that author David Sedaris wears hearing aids."

"That's great," I thought. "I'm ahead of him." □

Machine Learning

A journalist travels to the classrooms, hospitals and research labs where people are using artificial intelligence that might benefit society.



A student using the A.I. tutor Khanmigo for help with a math problem in Palo Alto, Calif., in 2023.

By MAX CHAFKIN

EVEN FOR SKEPTICS, it's getting harder and harder to argue that the obsession with artificial intelligence is pure hype. A.I. advances are fueling a historic stock market boom that may bust some time soon, but the responses that come from the latest versions of ChatGPT and Claude still often feel like magic. Pretty much everyone in the business world thinks what we've seen so far is just a taste of what's to come — that artificial intelligence advances will inevitably lead to far better products and far lower labor costs.

That promise lies in the future, but the reality is that A.I. is here and already changing society. In “AI for Good” Josh Tyrangiel charts the present-day impact of

MAX CHAFKIN is a senior reporter for Bloomberg Businessweek and the author of “The Contrarian: Peter Thiel and the Rise of the Silicon Valley Oligarchs.”

this technological revolution with a series of case studies in which ambitious researchers, educators and entrepreneurs, mostly from outside Silicon Valley, familiarize themselves with the hot technology of the moment and try, movingly at times, to do something positive with it.

AI FOR GOOD
How Real People Are Using Artificial Intelligence to Fix Things That Matter
By Josh Tyrangiel

Simon & Schuster. 257 pp. \$29.

“AI for Good” grew out of a regular column Tyrangiel wrote for The Washington Post in 2023 and 2024, and it is useful at a moment when workers are being asked (and sometimes forced) to adopt and master Claude, ChatGPT and similar tools. The result is the kind of book designed to be enthusiastically recommended by chief innovation officers and management consultants. For better or worse, your boss will love it.

Tyrangiel wisely sidesteps the technical debates within the industry about what A.I. is. (ChatGPT is, of course, A.I., but so is the technology that transcribes your voice mail messages and lets you deposit a check through the bank app on your phone.) Tyrangiel also smartly avoids the bong-hit intellectualism that sometimes seeps into discussions of the technology's risks. (Google “paperclip problem” if you want to go down that rabbit hole. Or, sure, ask a chatbot.)

It's also refreshing to read an A.I. book that doesn't concern itself with one of a handful of morally dubious masters of the universe, and instead lingers, for instance, on an Indiana school superintendent named Peggy Buffington, who sounds far more clear-eyed about the challenges A.I. companies face than Sam Altman or Jeff Bezos.

“Some kids were just bullying the heck out of it,” she tells Tyrangiel, describing her school district's experiments with a tutoring chatbot known as Khanmigo. “Cussing at it. I mean, you can figure out where that went.”

The first quarter of the book covers the development of Khanmigo, created by OpenAI and the nonprofit Khan Academy. The reception is mixed. At one point, after quoting a parade of adults who are awed, in one way or another, by the potential of A.I., Tyrangiel meets actual eighth graders who are, he reports, “wildly unimpressed.” One calls the chatbot “not helpful” for complex questions and “not close to the same as an actual teacher.”

This seems troubling, though the number of school districts using Khanmigo is growing quickly anyway. “The marketplace has rendered its own verdict,” Tyrangiel writes.

Next we're off to the Cleveland Clinic, where the hospital's C.E.O., Tomislav Mihaljevic, hopes that A.I. will help save lives. A new machine learning system designed to help doctors flag patients at highest risk for sepsis coincides with a lower rate of sepsis deaths, likely catching some cases that doctors would have missed.

These results are promising, if a little muddy. Despite improvements, the software continues to produce a number of false positives and it's not clear if the A.I. deserves much credit for the drop in fatalities. As Tyrangiel notes, it's possible Cleveland Clinic employees were simply on higher alert and caught more cases than usual because they knew their work was being matched against the A.I. Still, Mihaljevic frames this, in Tyrangiel's words, as a “proof of concept” that suggests “A.I. does not need to be perfect to be useful.”

The book's strongest section involves the efforts of an M.I.T. researcher named Kristy Johnson, who uses A.I. to make sense of the vocalizations of her developmentally disabled son. Johnson developed her tool by crowdsourcing audio recordings of nonverbal children along with their parents' judgments about what those

Tyrangiel wisely sidesteps the technical debates within the industry about what A.I. is.

sounds mean. It's a thrilling account, as an expression of both technical audacity and parental affection.

“AI for Good” is structured like a travelogue and the author's prose is breezy, concise and well observed. But travelers don't always come home with a nuanced understanding of what they've seen, especially if they don't stray far from the double-decker tour bus.

The book's opening scene is a particular disappointment in this regard. Tyrangiel recounts his “A.I. awakening,” a “late night epiphany” he experiences while watching a YouTube video of a conference put on by Palantir, the U.S. tech analytics firm and defense contractor.

In the video, a Trump administration official describes the triumphant hiring of some Palantir employees who build him a data dashboard so he can track the materials needed to deliver hundreds of millions of Covid vaccines around the country as part of Operation Warp Speed.

“Sir, we're going to give you all the data you need so that you can assess, determine risk and make decisions rapidly,” the employees are quoted saying. “Great, you're hired,” responds the official.

The speech itself is nothing special. Tyrangiel, though, reports feeling transported and says he watched the video compulsively: “At home in the dark, I clicked restart, levitated by the force of something distantly familiar.” That force, he writes, “was optimism.”

The choice of Palantir as an example of “AI for Good” sits strangely with the medical workers and teachers who populate the rest of Tyrangiel's account. The company, co-founded by the far-right venture capitalist Peter Thiel, has attracted complaints from civil liberties activists for years and currently provides software to support the Trump administration's violent immigration raids.

Is Palantir “good”? That is certainly debatable, although it's a debate Tyrangiel brushes off as a “kind of trivial” political matter. He seems to view these considerations as pointless or boring. The A.I. is here, no matter who is developing it, and our only option is to make the best of it.

Late in the book, Tyrangiel says he hopes that “AI for Good” will inspire others to use technology to solve social problems. It's a mission statement that will serve him well on the speaking circuit. But at a time when companies are laying off tens of thousands in the name of automation, and when trillions of dollars in paper wealth depends on convincing more people that chatbots are worth their time and money, it's ultimately an argument so predictable that A.I. could have come up with it. □

Fortune Hunters

An Oxford philosopher explores how generative A.I. relies on prediction, enriching Big Tech while making the rest of us less safe.

By JENNIFER SZALAI

IMAGINE YOU ARE a turkey on a farm — a nice, free-range organic farm, so that instead of being cooped up all the time you get plenty of chances to roam. Your kindly caretakers feed you and provide a safe place to roost. As the days go by, you grow increasingly confident that each day will be like the one before: roaming, feeding, roosting. Then, November arrives. You

PROPHECY

Prediction, Power, and the Fight for the Future, From Ancient Oracles to AI

By Carissa Véliz

Doubleday. 354 pp. \$35.

never get any hint that your idyllic life is about to take a nasty turn; the cumulative effect of your previous experience will have taught you to feel safest the night before your death.

Carissa Véliz gives the example of this poor turkey in her witty and surprising new book, “Prophecy: Prediction, Power, and the Fight for the Future, From Ancient Oracles to AI.” (The philosopher Bertrand Russell offered a similar example, using a chicken.) Véliz is a philosopher at Oxford and the author of a book about privacy and the perils of surveillance. In “Prophecy,” she shows how Big Tech has accrued enormous amounts of wealth and power by promising insight into the future. These modern oracles claim to make us safer, but, she argues, they are doing precisely the opposite: “Putting ourselves in the hands of prophets perversely makes us more unsafe and less free.”

Admittedly, we have always been drawn to those who promise to alleviate our anxiety about the future by telling us they know what will happen. In her early chapters, Véliz provides a lively tour through history, from the soothsayers of ancient Greece and Rome through the birth of the insurance industry and the quantification of risk. Today, automated algorithms use our data to predict whether we’ll pay back a loan or commit a crime. Machine learning in A.I. uses statistical models to fill in unknown parts of a problem. Feed a chatbot a million children’s books, Véliz writes, and it will guess that the prompt “Once upon” should be followed by “a time.”

Divining the future from animal entrails or sheep knucklebones is quaint compared with the scale of big data, which has given prediction the power to colonize more and more of our lives. Chatbots can (when they’re not hallucinating) look as if they’re acquiring knowledge to get closer to the truth, when in fact they’re up to something else: “What the machine is actually doing is predicting what would be a plausible re-

JENNIFER SZALAI is the nonfiction critic at *The Times*.



sponse from a machine, based on the texts and feedback it’s received.” Instead of homing in on what’s true, generative A.I. identifies past correlations. Large language models “are built to be fortune tellers, not truth tellers,” Véliz writes. And they are ignorant fortune tellers at that: “They don’t know what they don’t know.”

Plenty of wannabe prophets have warned about the dangers of A.I., including the prospect of “existential risks,” like a machine that turns everything into paper clips or marauding armies of killer robots. Véliz’s argument is different. She maintains that the preoccupation with A.I.-generated existential risk deflects attention

from more realistic and immediate problems.

A.I. can become the enabling technology for authoritarian methods, like extreme surveillance, and creating a police state carries its own violent and lethal risk (one that’s much more likely than a galaxy of paper clips). A system that requires hard force to tamp down the chaos it provokes is also more brittle. Attempts to control the world can generate “monstrous forms of uncontrollability.”

Yet there is another, seemingly opposite, danger posed by A.I., one that is already apparent. This isn’t the remote peril of some wild card scenario, but a growing

monoculture of sameness. As Véliz explains, A.I.’s reliance on statistical analyses means that its predictions tend to select for the middle of a normal curve. Language gets stripped of its weirdness and idiosyncrasy, while recommendation algorithms favor blandly pleasant coffee shops that all look vaguely the same. Véliz compares cultural monoculture to crop monoculture, which is more vulnerable to pests: Less variety makes the system seem less volatile while making it more fragile.

Consequently, this is also a book about inequality. Predictions don’t necessarily make risk disappear; often, risk just gets “pushed around.” Ordinary people end up paying more for “dynamic pricing” or haggling with their health insurance over claim denials, while tech billionaires try to foist energy-hungry data centers on communities and build luxury bunkers to weather the coming climate catastrophe. Still, while these billionaires might want to believe that they have optimized the system for themselves, Véliz argues that they are delusional to think they can escape the apocalypse. “No man is an island,” she writes. “The ultrarich would be safer by doing a better job of building a more just world.”

So much for that, at least for now. And now is where Véliz thinks we should be turning our attention. “What we need,” she says, “is less prediction and a firmer commitment to the present.” Against the lure of prediction, which promises to relieve our anxiety by relieving us of uncertainty, she proposes curiosity and philosophy. Indeterminacy can be scary, which is why we crave prophecy in the first place, but she adds that indeterminacy is also where we can exercise our freedom by “defying the odds.”

Her rousing call sounds appealing. But it’s perhaps a sign of our degraded times that for lots of people “defying the odds” now means gambling in prediction markets and crypto. Véliz doesn’t really get into these developments (though she does have a section on the disgraced crypto entrepreneur Sam Bankman-Fried). She wants us to think more deeply about how to live, rather than indulging in the newest fads for making a killing.

After all, looming over our attempts to calculate probabilities is our definite, 100-percent-certain mortality (no matter how much our tech overlords are loath to admit it). Like the turkey’s, our time on this Earth is limited. Unlike the turkey’s, our frame of reference is bigger than what happened to us yesterday. Humans, for all of our terrible faults, have access to other ways of understanding the world. We can gain some additional insight through economics and psychology (which might shed some light on the motivations of the turkey’s caretakers), not to mention philosophy. A book like “Prophecy” — roving, intelligent, irreducibly idiosyncratic — can expand our sense of possibility, starting now. □

Lies to Live By

This novel follows a commitment-averse narrator who is plagued by visions of violence.

By JUSTIN TAYLOR

“ALL I WANTED was control,” says the unnamed narrator of Aea Varfis-van Warmelo’s “Attention-Seeking Behavior,” a young woman living in contemporary London. She is an aspiring writer on leave from a graduate program in poetry, working two jobs where servility is the order of the day: one for a P.R. firm run by a posh woman she despises, the other as a gofer for an American journalist whose work she admires.

She maintains a prolific dating life free of commitment or deep connection. Besides the sex, she says, “my favorite thing about the dating was the sense of solitude it gave me. . . . I liked to think about how I was the only person who knew everything there was to know about me.”

One thing her casual encounters do not know about her is that she’s an unrepentant pathological liar. She’s also plagued by visions of violence: corpses in canals, rooftop jumpers, a murder on the street. Her last serious relationship ended in a trauma she is either unwilling or unable to describe. Avoiding commitment isn’t just

JUSTIN TAYLOR’S most recent novel, “Reboot,” is now available in paperback.

about free-spiritedness; it saves her the trouble of keeping her stories straight. When an unassuming charmer she calls Normal Ben tempts her into something like going steady, his earnest interest in getting to know her registers as a psychic threat.

Such threats multiply in the second half of the novel, when the journalist tasks the narrator with digitizing a trove of police depositions from a sexual assault case. The narrator shares the details with us, albeit with the crucial caveat that, for the sake of anonymity, she has changed not only names but *all the facts of the case*. “The specifics are the only things I will ever lie to you about,” she says. The assurance raises more concerns than it mitigates.

But we are not lawyers or reporters. We are readers of a novel, and the corruption of verifiable reality in pursuit of higher-order truth is more or less what novel writing is. But does the narrator of *this* novel know she’s narrating a novel? Certainly, she makes regular address to the “you” of a presumptive readership. But are “you” a secret-sharer within the world of the story (a therapist, say, or diaristic conceit) or are “you” the actual reader of the novel in the actual world?

Could the fake details of the assault case



ATTENTION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR

By Aea Varfis-van Warmelo

Graywolf. 185 pp. Paperback, \$17.

be the true story of the narrator’s own trauma, smuggled in under the false flag of fiction? Does that subterfuge extend to the book entire? The issue figures less on a reader’s willingness to suspend disbelief (mine is ample) than on whether there’s *any* stable narrative ground where belief can be established, and what it is we’re being asked to believe.

Throughout the novel are discursive interludes that explore the history of lying. A less generous critic might call these infodumps, but I’m inclined to take them in the

Throughout the novel are discursive interludes that explore the history of lying.

spirit in which the narrator offers them, as displaced autobiography. She is not seeking a diagnosis or cure for her behavior, but rather an intellectual framework in which to inscribe it. So we learn about Darwin’s “Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals,” the theory of a universal facial language, the development of the polygraph, differences between British and American police interrogation policy, and more. We even get a meditation on the “lyric I” in poetry.

“Attention-Seeking Behavior” is, in some ways, in the cerebral tradition of novels such as Teju Cole’s “Open City” and Ben Lerner’s “Leaving the Atocha Station.” But where those novels simmer, this one boils over with bitter humor, bad sex, class rage, wild rhetorical swerves and metafictional psych-outs, all of which demonstrate Varfis-van Warmelo’s exquisite control over the chaotic proceedings, and make good on the ambivalent promise of her title. This is a powerful, provocative debut novel by a writer who commands, and deserves, your full attention. □

Modern Fable

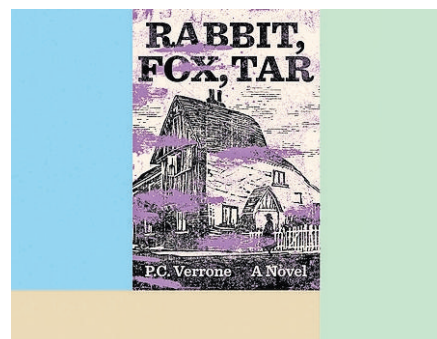
A white neighborhood’s local election is complicated when a mysterious, dark-skinned woman suddenly appears in town.

By MATEO ASKARIPOUR

THERE’S A CERTAIN type of novel I always enjoy: one that feels like you’re in someone’s living room, hearing a story from a wise person with firsthand experience, and all you have to do is sit, listen and enjoy. From its inviting first sentence — “The streets of Original Hill were alive with talk of the old man’s niece” — it’s clear that P.C. Verrone’s debut fits this description.

The story mostly takes place in Original Hill, an Edenic neighborhood in an unnamed Midwestern city. Its almost exclusively white residents believed it to be “the last holdout of a kind of life that every sensible person hoped would return.” One day, Baby, a dark-skinned woman, seemingly appears out of thin air, confounding and later enamoring the people of Original Hill — especially Lucius “Lucky” Foote, a complex, conflicted sellout of a Black councilman running for re-election against Baby’s alleged uncle, Eugene Fox, the city’s white former

MATEO ASKARIPOUR’S new novel, “Pure Ox,” will be published in January.



RABBIT, FOX, TAR

By P.C. Verrone

Catapult. 290 pp. \$28.

councilman who fashions himself a progressive savior of all that is good and moral.

The characters will be familiar to anyone acquainted with Joel Chandler Harris’s “Uncle Remus” stories. Lucky Foote draws a “trickster” parallel to Brer Rabbit, Eugene Fox a modern-day Brer Fox, and Baby an enchanting remix of “Tar Baby.” Some of the plot may be predictable as well

— Fox will use Baby as a means of derailing Lucky in an attempt to win the election — but is no less satisfying to watch play out. Verrone has an alchemical ability to take parts of the old and the new and transform them into something entirely his own, making the book’s existence a revolution unto itself.

This is because nearly 150 years ago, Harris, a white man, soaked up the West African-descended folklore of Brer Rabbit from enslaved men and women, and published these stories to critical acclaim and fame, even receiving a personal thank-you from President Theodore Roosevelt. We continue to see this mind-boggling pattern today, one of white writers, however well-meaning, telling Black stories, being awarded at the highest levels, and cracking an already overwhelmingly white best-seller list. Verrone’s novel is a necessary, even overdue, reclamation.

Given its subject matter, along with its oral and written ancestry, it wouldn’t be wrong to view “Rabbit, Fox, Tar” as a fable. Its vital messages — such as how a community is only as strong as its stories — are present for all who have the vision to see

them. However, its power doesn’t lie in its didacticism, but rather its screaming relevancy to the present state of American affairs.

The neighborhood of Original Hill exists because of the destruction of Sankofa, an idyllic settlement “that grew from a few families of free Black folks into a thriving Black town,” only to later be split “in two like Solomon’s baby” when white people decided that it needed to be leveled for the I-94 highway. The residents of Original Hill, while priding themselves on neighborliness and tradition, only care about history insofar as it serves their own narratives, forcing those, like Auntie Riri — the griot-like last living member of Sankofa — to ask the questions of *whose* tradition, *whose* history?

In Auntie Riri’s memory of a time before the “shallow and bleached world” of Original Hill, we witness the critical importance of there being someone who remembers. Because in the seed of even just one person, history remains alive, fated to spread. “You change things by knowing them,” Verrone writes toward the novel’s end. “You name them anew.” □

A Blanket the Size of the Sky

Ali Smith's new novel dispenses with subtleties and takes on an age of war and the ghosts left behind.

By MEGAN O'GRADY

"I'M JUST NOT SURE that books that are novels and fiction and so on should be so close to real life . . . or so politically blatant," says Petra, one of the three women at the center of Ali Smith's new novel, "Glyph." "But what if the point," her Gen Z niece replies, "is that things like what happens in that story *are* blatantly happening in reality to real people?"

There's no question where Smith falls in this debate. Her Seasonal Quartet of interconnected novels atomized a post-Brexit-era England shadowed by a refugee crisis

GLYPH

By Ali Smith

Pantheon. 268 pp. \$28.

and the Covid-19 lockdown; her last novel, the homophonically titled "Gliff," was set in a future surveillance state not so different from current ones. The Guardian has called Smith an "intellectual first responder," a description that's hard to beat. Brexit seems like ages ago now, but the social fissuring Smith captures in her pages is indelible.

"Glyph" raises the ethical stakes even more. Set in a cultural moment defined by an unsteady relationship to reality — that is, right about now — it depicts people accustomed to scrolling by human atrocities on social media. Passive-voice headlines prop up the illusion that no one is responsible for them. Gazans waiting for humanitarian aid are shot for sport; asylum seekers are firebombed; journalists turn up in body bags. The present doesn't feel entirely *present*, partly because of technology, but also maybe because we prefer it that way.

The past doesn't seem entirely past, either. As children, Petra and her younger sister, Patricia (whom Petra calls "Patch"), were close, united by the death of their mother and the need to protect themselves from their abusive father. Inspired by a ghoulish story an elderly stranger told them at a family party — a soldier's body found flattened by a tank at the end of World War II and left to rot — the girls make up stories about the anonymous corpse to distract and entertain each other. The dead man at the center of the story takes on dimension as the girls name him Glyph and pretend, in a very earnest way, to communicate with his ghost.

To her daughter, Billie (or Bill, as she is nicknamed), Patricia describes Petra's particular talent for this kind of storytelling-as-resurrection. "I can't say more than that she could take something crushed and

MEGAN O'GRADY is a professor at the University of Colorado Boulder. Her book, "How It Feels to Be Alive: Encounters With Art and Our Selves," was published in April.



ruined and she'd make up something about it and it would give it back to itself. Still ruined. But also weirdly sort of *unruined*." In one amusing thread, neighbors begin showing up at the house, hoping the girls will convey messages from their deceased pets and loved ones.

As their names suggest, Petra is the rock while Patch is an empath. Estranged as adults, both are haunted by images, like the flattened soldier, that glow amid the chaotic rubble of shared family lore. Some have been passed on from previous generations (a horse blinded by mustard gas during World War I), while others come from their own experiences (a pair of Teletubbies, gifts from a well-intentioned uncle, abandoned in a dirt pile). "Helpless looking things," Patricia thinks. "Little talking toys. Anyone can press a button on them to hear them say the rubbish they've been programmed to say."

Much of the novel is dialogical, arranged in exchanges between two people: the young Petra and Patch's spellbound whispers; Patricia and Bill's tender, roving chat in the car after the latter's arrest at a protest; the chilling, largely one-sided conversation between Bill and the "Appropriate Adult" charged with minding her at the po-

Much of the novel is dialogical, arranged in exchanges between two people.

lice station. "I am actually just a person super interested in the way we all use language," says Bill, in one of her futile attempts to provoke the silent civil servant to override her programming and show any humanity at all.

Smith's tonal acuity places us in the room with her characters, and this shot/reverse shot intimacy and immediacy are the novel's power. We breathe in the childhood fears, the maternal affection and unease along with them. Language, the author reminds us, might connect us to one another and convey mutual understanding, but it can just as easily be used to obfuscate. When Patricia inquires, at the police station, why her daughter has been arrested, she is told that Bill was "apprehended for waving her scarf in an aggressive manner" (We can guess what kind of scarf she was waving. In Britain, protesters have been arrested for wearing or holding kaffiyehs.)

In another scene, Bill, channeling Smith (and Orwell), thinks to herself about "this

huge mechanism" that is "acting on everybody. You just say something that's the truth is a lie. Or that something that's a lie is the truth. Then the matter of something being true or not stops being about truth or lies and becomes about choosing a side and it drops itself like a blanket over everything, a blanket the size of the sky." When Bill confronts her mother and aunt with their solipsism, we grasp what it's like to be coming of age at a time when abuses of power are met with silence from the appropriate adults in the room, slipping by on our screens with little moral residue.

"Glyph" isn't subtle, and it lacks the artistic coherence of Smith's best work. But there's no faulting its sincerity. It's a didactic novel that argues for didacticism in our approach to a violently asymmetric world, that exposes our ironic distance (literary or otherwise) from current events for what it is: gutless and craven. To read "Glyph" is to wonder what, 20 years from now, will be retained of the stories we told ourselves to make sense of this time — that is, the capacity of art and literature to contain it. On whose terms will those they succeed? And who will turn up to haunt us in the night, knocking over the lamps and pawing blindly at the floorboards? □

The White Party

A Princeton professor looks back at the country's past celebrations and anniversaries with skepticism and pain.

By **RICHARD KREITNER**

FOR THOSE OF US in the national memory-keeping business, anniversaries hold near-totemic power. Satisfyingly round units of time, ideally bearing fancy, Latin-derived names, serve as the overburdened pegs on which to hang think pieces and museum exhibits, revisionist documentaries and maudlin public ceremonies. The arbitrary nature of such occasions is precisely what gives them their charge, inviting us to set aside complacency and submit to a comprehensive check-in.

AMERICA, U.S.A.

How Race Shadows the Nation's Anniversaries

By **Eddie S. Glaude Jr.**

Crown. 270 pp. \$31.

In his new book, "America, U.S.A.," Eddie S. Glaude Jr. presents an intriguing variation on the genre, seeing the country's 250th birthday as an anniversary of anniversaries: 50 years since the malaise-ridden, schlock-heavy Bicentennial. A century since the subdued Prohibition-era Sesquicentennial. A century and a half since telegraphed reports of George Armstrong Custer's defeat by the Lakota and Cheyenne at Little Bighorn rudely interrupted the Gilded Age Republic's 100th birthday party.

If an anniversary offers a snapshot of a moment, the core of Glaude's book is an old-timey photo album, a collection of notable episodes from earlier national reckonings, long-ago glances in the mirror. An estimable scholar of Black history, politics and religion at Princeton — best known for "Begin Again," his 2020 meditation on James Baldwin's relevance for our times — Glaude focuses, as his subtitle puts it, on "how race shadows the nation's anniversaries."

Such celebrations, he contends, have never really been the moments for honest self-reflection they are often advertised to be. Instead, the nation usually shatters the mirror, refusing to accept what it prefers not to see. "American anniversaries are often moments to turn a blind eye to the evils

RICHARD KREITNER is the host of the U.S. history podcast "Think Back" and the author of "Fear No Pharaoh: American Jews, the Civil War, and the Fight to End Slavery."



The Ku Klux Klan parading in 1926.

of the past and the present," Glaude writes, "to suppress the fact of America's divided soul."

It's a clever concept, and, needless to say, perfectly timed. Last year, Glaude notes, the Trump administration executed a hostile takeover of the government's studiously bipartisan 250th anniversary planning. It is now preparing a program that is certain to conceal more than it reveals about the country ostensibly being celebrated.

Glaude, in no mood for celebration, argues that such omissions and evasions also defined commemorations in the past. In 1875, Frederick Douglass predicted "one grand Centennial hosannah of peace

Douglass from the grandstand, until a white politician vouched for him.

The 150th anniversary came soon after a resurgent Ku Klux Klan successfully pushed for a restrictive immigration law aimed at keeping America a "Nordic" nation. At the lavishly funded, lightly attended celebrations in Philadelphia, Black veterans of World War I were excluded from marching in the opening parade. A writer with *The Associated Negro Press* wondered "what was in the breast of those black men who fought to make America safe for Democracy and on Monday stood on the sidelines, forgotten, as the Nordic strode by in all his vain pride."

By 1976, when the nation marked its Bicentennial, the violence of the '60s had destroyed any semblance of consensus. Vietnam and Watergate had eroded trust in the government. The commission initially tasked with organizing the anniversary was disbanded amid reports of corruption. Corporations filled the vacuum, Glaude explains, with "star-spangled whoopee cushions; patriotic toilet seats; Liberty hamburgers; red, white and blue beer cans." The author, around 8 years old at the time, dimly remembers donning a pair of tricolor trousers.

A half-century later, Glaude is refreshingly honest about the depths of his despair. "I do not love America, and never have, especially now," he writes in one of the more startling opening sentences I've read in some time. He dismisses this year's Semiquincentennial as reaching back "to a storybook America that requires either the banishment of Black people from view or the reduction

of our role in the country's history, so as to affirm America's ongoing quest to be a more perfect union."

Undoubtedly true. But Trump doesn't own the country, at least not yet, nor the 250th anniversary of one of the most radically liberatory and confusingly contradictory events in world history — an inspiration, as Glaude shows, even to critical observers of the American experiment, like Douglass. Far from the revanchist MAGA-palooza in Washington, I suspect this summer's unasked-for invitation to national soul-searching may surprise us yet.

Despite his despair, Glaude concludes that "the past still offers resources for us to freedom-dream." So, too, does this book. □

If an anniversary offers a snapshot of a moment, the core of Glaude's book is an old-timey photo album.

and good will to all the white race of this country." He was right: The nation reached 100 years old at a crucial moment in the post-Civil War fight over racial equality, with white Northerners ready to give up on Southern Reconstruction. The occasion would help the once-warring sections to reunite around a shared commitment to white supremacy. On May 10, 1876, at the opening of the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the police tried to bar

All Aboard

A man rides a magical train that helps him revisit key moments of his life.

By ELISABETH EGAN

MATT HAIG'S NOVELS should come with a warning label: If you're young, think you're invincible and/or are allergic to nostalgia, steer clear.

But for readers of a certain age and inclination — game for a good cry, tolerant of wistfulness — Haig's books are tried and true. Consider "The Midnight Library," Haig's seventh novel for adults, which spent two years on the best-seller list and sold over 10 million copies. It has more

THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN

By Matt Haig

Viking, 296 pp. \$30.

than 200,000 reviews on Amazon, including ones so revealing that, while skimming, I had a sense of having stumbled into a stranger's diary.

Haig's latest, "The Midnight Train," hews closely to the formula that made "The Midnight Library" a phenomenon. It, too, follows an ordinary person into a strange purgatory where he has a chance to take stock of his life before it's officially over.

Here we meet Wilbur Budd, an 81-year-old mega successful bookseller — think Len Riggio, creator of the modern Barnes & Noble — who finds himself (you guessed it) on a train, making stops in different chapters of his past. There he is, meeting his future wife, Maggie, while clutching a copy of "The Old Man and the Sea." There he is, careening down a busy street with his brother, the police in hot pursuit as he heads toward a tragedy that will reshape his life. And there he is in a grand house in London, disconnected from everything he once held dear.

How did Wilbur end up in this lonely place? Patience, my friend. All will become clear.

If this sounds like broad strokes, that's because it is. "The Midnight Train" is a parable posing as a novel, complete with lines like "It feels brave just to live sometimes" and "What would you do right now if you had no fear?" There are echoes of "It's a Wonderful Life," "The Polar Express," "Regarding Henry," the text inside Magic 8 Balls and even "Footprints in the Sand," the inspirational poem so beloved by decorators of church basements. ("When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you." Oy.)

Despite occasional schmaltz, Haig makes a worthy contribution to the genre that could be shelved under "alternate-life curious." (See "Groundhog Day" and "Sliding Doors," among others, as a Times review of "The Midnight Library" noted.) You need to be in the mood for this one.

ELISABETH EGAN is a writer and editor at the Book Review.



You'll want to leave your skepticism and cynicism on the platform. If you hated "The Alchemist," by Paulo Coelho, you're on the wrong train.

Our conductor is Agnes Bagdale, the original proprietor of the first bookstore Wilbur owned in Sheffield, England. She, like Haig's librarian, is wise and kind but firm.

"There are rules," Agnes says. "You get on and off the train as required. You never try and speak to yourself. And you must never be there when you fall asleep."

Later she tells Wilbur, "You linger where you are meant to linger." But he can't linger too long, no matter how much he'd like to, or he'll risk entry to eternity ("an existence outside time or pressure or concern").

Here's the thing about Wilbur: He has many regrets. He spurned his mother; disappointed his best friend; neglected his wife to the point where they became strangers. He worked too hard. So it's tempting, as he

steams through station after station, to move one piece of the puzzle so the rest of the picture will take shape differently.

But of course, life doesn't work that way, and neither does the Midnight Train. And Wilbur really, really wants to reunite with Maggie, now his ex. I won't spoil the ending, but I will say — with apologies to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Miley Cyrus and everyone else who has riffed on this concept — the journey is the most important part.

What saves "The Midnight Train" from becoming a hokey morality tale is Haig's playfulness. He knows exactly what he's up to and appears to have fun doing it. He doesn't just nod to "It's a Wonderful Life," he names a bit character Jimmy Gower, in homage to Mr. Gower, the film's grieving pharmacist who nearly poisons a customer before George Bailey intervenes. Toward the end of the book, we even see a familiar face from "The Midnight Library," one who arrives at exactly the right

How did Wilbur end up in this lonely place? Patience, my friend.

moment and with the perfect message.

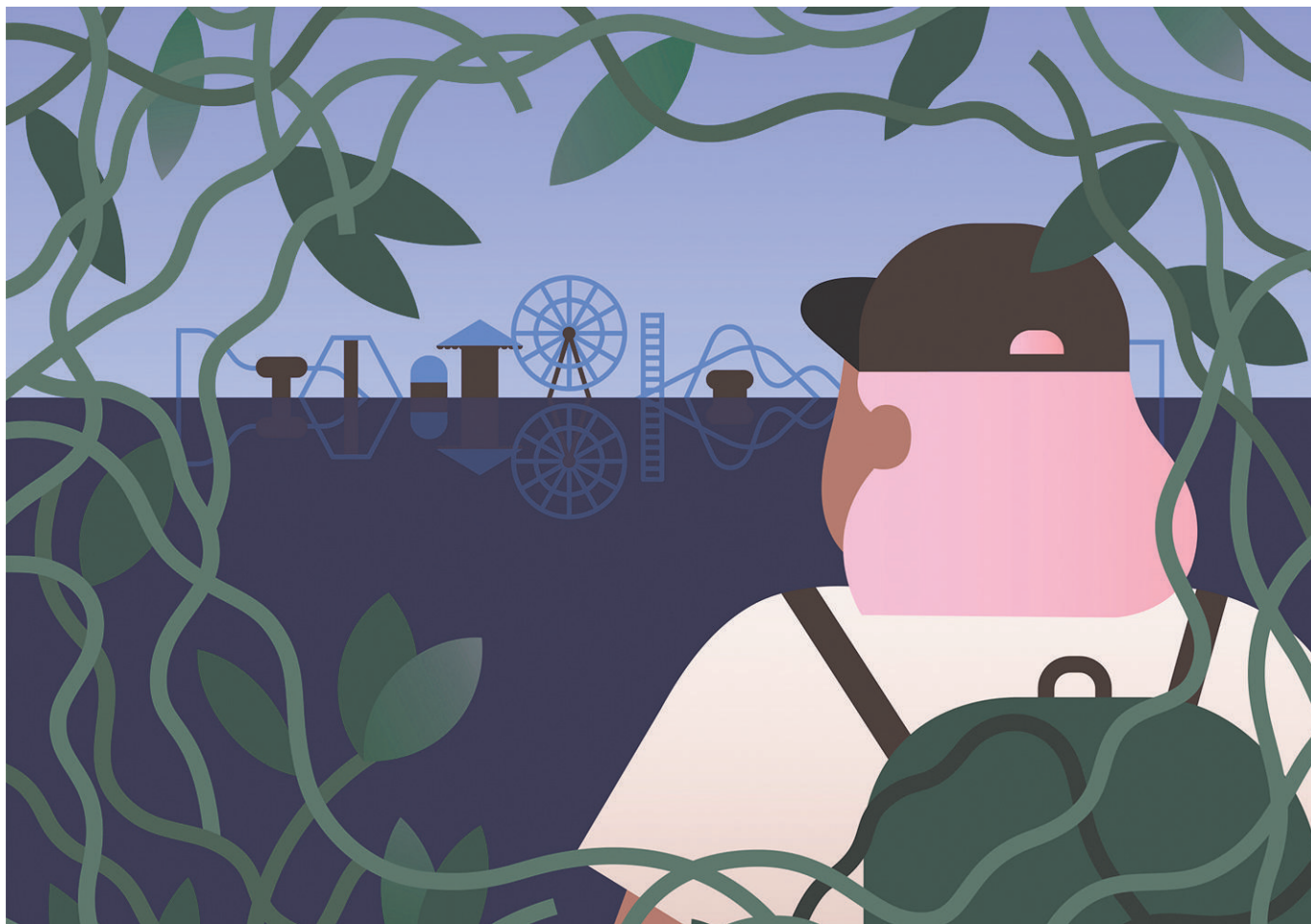
Is this a literary masterpiece to be shelved alongside the great thinkers Haig occasionally mentions? (Of course Kierkegaard shows up with his quote about living forward and understanding backward.) No, it is not. And that's just fine.

Just as Wilbur wants to get to Maggie — the newlywed version of her, before the wealth and disappointment — many of us just want to get whisked away by a good yarn. This one does the trick. Some will accuse Haig of cashing in on a proven concept. To quote Mel Robbins: Let them. If you enjoy the "Midnight" experience, climb aboard. If not, books are like trains: There's another one every hour. □

Children's Books

The Shadowy Corners of Summer Fun

A cozy mystery set at an abandoned amusement park and a satirical horror novel set at a malevolent sleepaway camp.



By JENNIFER HUBERT SWAN

SUMMER IS UPON US, and the annual question of what to do with bored kids during the long, hot days is rearing its sunburned head. Two crowd-pleasing options when I was a tween that still prove popular are amusement parks (Cedar Point in Ohio was my mecca) and summer camp (or in my case its cheaper cousin, coed vacation Bible school). Who doesn't love screaming down the precipice of a roller coaster or sharing s'mores around a campfire crackling with Capture the Flag tension?

But what happens when the expected good times turn sinister? Two new middle grade novels, about an abandoned amusement park and a malevolent sleepaway camp, bewitchingly explore the shadowy corners of the sunny season.

In "Rialto," by the Edgar Award winner Kate Milford, Dahlia and Ivy Vicar are on a

JENNIFER HUBERT SWAN is a school librarian and adjunct professor of children's literature. Her Substack is *Reading Rants Redux*.

car trip with their parents from Brooklyn, N.Y., to Rialto, Mo. (population 600), where Mom's best friend, Sally, is spending the summer with her family. The town is also home to a theme park of the same name that Mom, a chronicler of roadside attractions, hopes to tour. Before it abruptly closed in 1988, it was known for its Skyway gondola, fantastical carousel and charming shops. Now it stands abandoned in a deeply wooded forest.

The three-day drive has been trying for the siblings, mostly because 14-year-old Ivy has been up in the business of 12-year-old Dahlia, recently diagnosed with anxiety and depression. The two have always been close, but lately Ivy's protective concern makes Dahlia desperate to escape her sister's claustrophobic orbit.

Once they arrive in Rialto, the Vicars are greeted by Sally, her husband and her stepson, Remy. Sally's Aunt Jess, a longtime local who "crossed over," has left Remy a list of bequests she would like him to share with her Rialto friends and neighbors. He invites Ivy and Dahlia to come along. The three are puzzled and intrigued by the

RIALTO

By Kate Milford

Clarion. 480 pp. \$19.99.
(Ages 10 and up)

**FATAL GLITCH
Camp Zero**

By Erin Entrada Kelly and Eliot Schrefer

Illustrated by Jeannette Arroyo
Stonefruit Studio. 144 pp. \$14.99.
(Ages 8 to 12)

quirky keepsakes on the list and the enigmatic handwritten messages to their recipients that seem to be an apology on the part of Aunt Jess for a transgression she committed years ago that coincided with the closing of the park.

What really happened to her? What did she do that was so wrong? And could the clue-gathering process help mend Dahlia and Ivy's splintered sisterhood? As the mystery grows, so does the sense that the scrim between the real world and one in which carousel animals come to life and

wishing tokens exist is thin indeed, and that what Remy, Ivy and Dahlia are investigating is magical in nature.

This is a stuffed suitcase of a book, overflowing with lush descriptions of everything from elaborately engineered music boxes to twee terrariums, and featuring a complicated magic system involving secret portals, folkloric generational feuds and a pair of blue, kid-sized lace wings. But it's also emblematic of Milford's signature cozy style and settings, which recall classics such as "The Last Unicorn," "The Chronicles of Narnia" and "Winnie-the-Pooh," all of which she nods to here. Lovers of immersive mythopoeisis will be sucked right in.

FOR READERS looking for a leaner, meaner experience, "Fatal Glitch: Camp Zero," the first book in a satirical series by the two-time Newbery medalist Erin Entrada Kelly and the two-time National Book Award finalist Eliot Schrefer, with illustrations by Jeannette Arroyo, should fit the bill nicely. Or should I say nastily? Because the main character, 11-year-old Sofia Mendoza, is a hostile, manipulative online gamer who only cares about collecting more credits in her favorite game, Sandbox. Which is how she found herself dumped at the remote, bare-bones Camp Forestjaw, which her father hopes will "give you some perspective to reflect on what you did to your sister." (Gulp!)

Sofia is greeted by the camp director, Monarch, who looks as though "she's been crafted out of triangles and edges" and disconcertedly carries a robotic vulture with knives for talons on her shoulder. Monarch informs Sofia and the six other campers, also 11-year-old addicted Sandboxers, that they will vie in a series of physical, device-free games and then rank one another on who deserves to move on and win the grand prize of one million Sandbox credits. Sofia is determined to systematically destroy the competition until she's the last one gaming.

But is the prize what she thinks it is? And where have all the losers been spirited off to? Did I mention the weird alien presence at the beginning and end of the novel that's sharing Sofia's story while also siphoning off the life force of . . . whom? Sofia? One of the other kids? YOU? Savvy readers will recognize aspects of online games like Minecraft and Roblox (and perhaps some unsavory facets of their own gaming greed) while enjoying action that's fast, furious and gleefully Machiavellian.

Whether your child's warm-weather destination is Six Flags, soccer camp or their own backyard, their delight is sure to be doubled by tucking one of these captivating summer reads into their knapsack. □

ILLUSTRATION BY JING WEI

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)

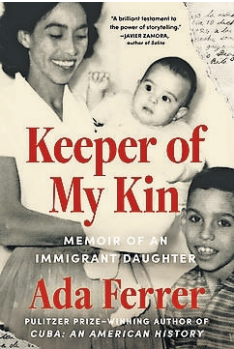
COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF MAY 24-30

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		THE DIVORCE , by Freida McFadden. (Poisoned Pen) After her husband ends their marriage and she turns her attention to his new girlfriend, Naomi suspects she might be in danger.	1	1		THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE , by David Sedaris. (Little, Brown) Essays on the passage of time, complicated relationships and some unexpected delights life has to offer.	1
2	3	THE DEAL , by Elle Kennedy. (Bloom) Hannah Wells makes a deal with the captain of the college hockey team in exchange for tutoring him that may complicate their relationship.	3	2	2	STRANGERS , by Belle Burden. (Dial) Burden retraces her marriage of 20 years in search of clues to help shape her understanding about its demise and to find a way forward.	20
3		THE FINAL TARGET , by Nora Roberts. (St. Martin's) A fan fixates on the introverted author Arden Bowie, who tries to set up a new life for herself in a small town in Oregon.	1	3		THE HERO NEXT DOOR , by Martha Raddatz. (Avid Reader) The Emmy Award-winning ABC News anchor profiles members of our military who served in the wake of 9/11.	1
4	4	THEO OF GOLDEN , by Allen Levi. (Atria) A man travels to a small Southern town, where he purchases pencil drawings of local residents and exchanges them for stories.	26	4		ALL WE SAY , by Ben Rhodes. (Random House) The former speechwriter for President Obama explicates what it means to be American through this collection of 15 speeches.	1
5	5	YESTERYEAR , by Caro Claire Burke. (Knopf) Natalie Heller Mills, a privileged tradwife social media influencer, wakes up to find she is living in the comparatively difficult reality of 1855.	8	5	1	LIAR'S KINGDOM , by Andrew Weissmann. (Little, Brown) The author of "Where Law Ends" argues that a flaw in America's legal system allows for deceit in our politics.	2
6	7	THE MISTAKE , by Elle Kennedy. (Bloom) The second book in the Off-Campus series. A college hockey player attempts to redeem himself to a rising sophomore.	3	6		CRISIS OF THE COMMON GOOD , by Chris Murphy. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) The Democratic senator from Connecticut re-examines one of our country's organizing principles. (†)	1
7	6	PROJECT HAIL MARY , by Andy Weir. (Ballantine) Ryland Grace awakes from a long sleep alone and far from home, and the fate of humanity rests on his shoulders; the basis of the movie.	51	7	9	THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	297
8	8	THE SCORE , by Elle Kennedy. (Bloom) The third book in the Off-Campus series. A brokenhearted senior resists the charms of a hockey star.	3	8	12	TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADER , by Neil deGrasse Tyson. (Simon Six) The astrophysicist depicts what potential encounters with aliens from outer space might be like.	3
9		PHOEBE BERMAN'S GONNA LOSE IT , by Brooke Averick. (Crown) As her 30th birthday approaches, Phoebe Berman goes from no dating life to juggling several prospects.	1	9	8	LONDON FALLING , by Patrick Radden Keefe. (Doubleday) The author of "Say Nothing" details the efforts by the parents of a 19-year-old Londoner to uncover the truth about his mysterious death and secret life.	8
10		THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN , by Matt Haig. (Viking) The second book in the Midnight World series. Wilbur wants to go back in time to see how he might have lived differently.	1	10	7	FAMESICK , by Lena Dunham. (Random House) The author of "Not That Kind of Girl" evaluates the effects that pursuing her creative endeavors had on her.	7

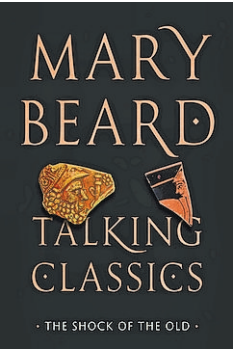
The New York Times best sellers are compiled and archived by the best-sellers desk of the New York Times news department, and are separate from the opinion, culture, advertising and business sides of The New York Times Company. Rankings reflect unit sales reported on a confidential basis by vendors offering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

Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



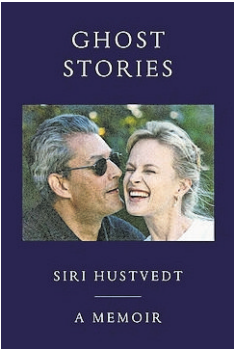
KEEPER OF MY KIN: Memoir of an Immigrant Daughter, by Ada Ferrer. (Scribner. 369 pp. \$30.)

The Cuban Revolution severed Ferrer's family, sending her as an infant to New York with her mother and leaving her 9-year-old half brother behind. The aftershocks of separation reverberate through this memoir as Ferrer, a Pulitzer-winning historian, sifts through letters and archives to tell the entwined stories of family and country.



TALKING CLASSICS: The Shock of the Old, by Mary Beard. (University of Chicago Press. 198 pp. \$22.50.)

Few scholars make antiquity come alive as vividly as Beard, the popular British classicist. Her latest book is a kaleidoscopic survey of some of the ancient people and objects that have delighted and intrigued her over her life and career — starting with a formative encounter at age 5 with a 4,000-year-old bread roll at the British Museum.



GHOST STORIES: A Memoir, by Siri Hustvedt. (Simon & Schuster. 302 pp. \$30.)

Hustvedt's memoir of life with the writer Paul Auster, assembled from letters, journal entries, emails and bits of personal journalism, is held together by her grief in the wake of his death in 2024 from complications of lung cancer. Hustvedt's stitching skills are nimble. This book is cohesive, melancholy, distinctive and — despite the occasional lungeur or "lyrical" moment — genuinely moving.

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

1500
miles hoofed
cross-country

40
hours trekking
with poles

18
pairs of socks
pushed to their limits



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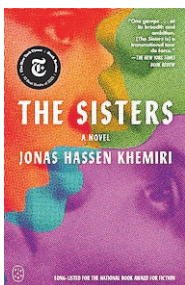
PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF MAY 24-30

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3		THE FINAL TARGET , by Nora Roberts. (St. Martin's) A fan fixates on the introverted author Arden Bowie, who tries to set up a new life for herself in a small town in Oregon.	1	3		THE HERO NEXT DOOR , by Martha Raddatz. (Avid Reader) The Emmy Award-winning ABC News anchor profiles members of our military who served in the wake of 9/11.	1
4		THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN , by Matt Haig. (Viking) The second book in the Midnight World series. Wilbur wants to go back in time to see how he might have lived differently.	1	4		CRISIS OF THE COMMON GOOD , by Chris Murphy. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) The Democratic senator from Connecticut re-examines one of our country's organizing principles. (†)	1
5	1	THE BALLAD OF FALLING DRAGONS , by Sarah A. Parker. (Avon) The second book in the Moonfall series. As a calamitous moonfall approaches, Raeve must make life-or-death decisions.	2	5		ALL WE SAY , by Ben Rhodes. (Random House) The former speechwriter for President Obama explicates what it means to be American through this collection of 15 speeches.	1
6	6	THE CORRESPONDENT , by Virginia Evans. (Crown) Letters from someone she used to know push Sybil Van Antwerp toward revisiting her past and finding a way to forgive.	31	6	10	TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADER , by Neil deGrasse Tyson. (Simon Six) The astrophysicist depicts what potential encounters with aliens from outer space might be like.	3
7	7	THE CALAMITY CLUB , by Kathryn Stockett. (Spiegel & Grau) As things get tougher during the Depression, several women look for ways to improve their circumstances.	4	7		THE INVISIBLE COUP , by Peter Schweizer. (Harper) The author of "Blood Money" puts forward his argument that mass migration is a political weapon.	7
8	5	OUR PERFECT STORM , by Carley Fortune. (Berkley) After her fiancé leaves her, Frankie goes on her planned honeymoon trip with her best friend from childhood, George.	4	8	1	LIAR'S KINGDOM , by Andrew Weissmann. (Little, Brown) The author of "Where Law Ends" argues that a flaw in America's legal system allows for deceit in our politics.	2
9		THE MARTIAN , by Andy Weir. (Ballantine) Abandoned by his crew, an astronaut embarks on a dogged quest to stay alive.	5	9		1929 , by Andrew Ross Sorkin. (Viking) The New York Times journalist and CNBC host looks at the fight between Washington and Wall Street that fueled a historic crash of the stock market.	26
10	4	A PARADE OF HORRIBLES , by Matt Dinniman. (Ace) The eighth book in the "Dungeon Crawler Carl" series. A sense of normalcy might be a set-up that spells danger for Carl and Donut.	3	10	9	LONDON FALLING , by Patrick Radden Keefe. (Doubleday) The author of "Say Nothing" details the efforts by the parents of a 19-year-old Londoner to uncover the truth about his mysterious death and secret life.	8

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.

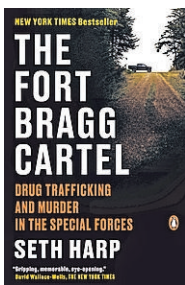
Paperback Row / BY MIGUEL SALAZAR



THE SISTERS, by Jonas Hassen Khemiri. (Picador. 656 pp. \$20.)

Khemiri's sprawling novel, one of the Book Review's 10 Best Books of 2025, follows the fortunes of the three Mikkola sisters — Ina (dependable), Evelyn (magnetic) and

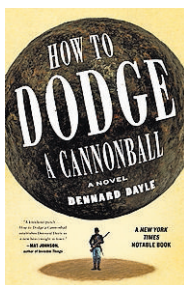
Anastasia (rebellious) — for more than three decades. Jonas, the narrator, observes them with familiarity and longing as they navigate drunken parties and play in pickup basketball games, told in ever-shrinking increments of time.



THE FORT BRAGG CARTEL: Drug Trafficking and Murder in the Special Forces, by Seth Harp. (Penguin. 368 pp. \$20.)

"They think they have no accountability, because they don't," a former intelligence specialist at Fort Bragg

says in this chilling and deeply reported account of the rampant corruption in the U.S. Army's elite units. Harp, a former Army reservist and lawyer, delves into the seedy world of narcotics, murder and blackmail by following a cast of crooked Army special operators.



HOW TO DODGE A CANNONBALL, by Dennard Dayle. (Holt. 336 pp. \$18.99.)

Dayle's Civil War satire, one of the Book Review's 100 Notable Books of 2025, follows a hapless teenage flag-bearer who takes on the identity of a

Black man as he manages to somehow stay alive. As our reviewer, Mat Johnson, wrote, "Dayle's deft portrayal of American anti-Blackness, class exploitation and cultural uncertainty feels both accurate to the novel's 19th-century setting and, soberingly, very contemporary."

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Third Term's the Charm

Washington insiders scheme to replace the president with a religious professional wrestler.



By **DAVID GATES**

“YOU SAY YOU WANT CHANGE?” Ben Fountain wrote in “Beautiful Country Burn Again,” his fierce and funny nonfiction account of the 2016 presidential race. “Here it comes. Brace for impact.” That impact has been a blunt-force trauma for 10 years, and the story’s still not over.

Fountain first made his reputation as a fiction writer — “Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk” won the 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award — and his new novel, “Rasputin Swims the Potomac,” imagines the Trump era in its twilight. Or maybe its midafternoon, since Fountain’s fictional president is running for an unconstitutional third term.

The jacket copy calls “Rasputin” “a biting satire of American politics,” but it lacks the anger and outrage that animated Fountain’s political reporting. It’s actually a magic realist fantasia, in which Americans suffer an epidemic of “weeping sickness” and begin converting to the Russian Orthodox Church.

DAVID GATES teaches in the M.F.A. program at St. Joseph’s University.

Does that sound random? Wait until you hit the part where a character has a near-death experience and is greeted on the Other Side by . . . Terry Southern? He complains that Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda did him out of money for his script work on “Easy Rider,” and then goes off to have lunch with Big Mama Thornton and the Marquis de Lafayette. It’s less like “1984” than “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream.”

RASPUTIN SWIMS THE POTOMAC

By **Ben Fountain**

Flatiron. 402 pp. \$29.99.

Fountain’s president is unmistakable: “a black hole of insatiable need . . . absorbing everything in its path, money, people, cheeseburgers, countries, the office of the presidency itself.” But the text uniformly obscures his name with a black bar. (To parody the much-redacted Epstein files? To forestall a lawsuit? Just wishful thinking?) Republican elites, weary of drama and divisiveness, scheme to replace [redacted] with a hyper-Christian professional wrestler who calls himself Rasputin — and who’s a reincarnation (“or something”) of the *real* Rasputin, the Russian mystic who cozied up

Americans contract a ‘weeping sickness’ and begin converting to the Russian Orthodox Church.

to Empress Alexandra, the consort of Nicholas II, before being assassinated in 1916.

This Rasputin has eyes with “the high-beam glare of a circus mesmerist,” uncanny healing powers and an Oswaldian backstory: an American military veteran who had an under-the-radar sojourn in Russia, who might be an operative and who now lives in Dallas. He also has a Clintonian sexual magnetism, and an Epsteinian tendency to surround himself with young women. No spoilers, but if you were a novelist, wouldn’t you get him together with the first lady?

I’m afraid I’m making “Rasputin Swims the Potomac” sound like more fun than it is. News junkies will appreciate the knowing references to such fleetingly famous figures as Sidney Powell, and savor the information that White House staffers call Stephen Miller “Eeyore.” (If that’s an invention, as it seems to be, it deserves to catch on.) But the title character is just a stitched-together creature of ill-assorted parts; even the monstrous president seems momentarily human when we glimpse “pale scalp shining through his poofed-up hair” and feel “the pathos of . . . old-man vanity and vulnerability.”

The energetic prose of Fountain’s nonfiction gets noisy in a novel. Characters “chortle,” “chirp,” “bray” and “snap,” when they need only “say,” and Tom Wolfe-like similes make the quotidian pointlessly lurid: “Inside her purse, her phone is buzzing like a baby wolverine.” One such simile, in fact, comes verbatim from Fountain’s campaign book: the Archer-Daniels-Midland complex in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, “belching smoke like the pits of Mordor.” Like the ferocious buzzing of that baby wolverine — has one person in a million actually heard one? — it’s invective pretending to be evocation.

As a feat of novelizing, “Rasputin” consistently does better with setup than follow-through. Its fictional president has a *really* fictional V.P.: Marjorie Taylor Greene, who obviously promises better comic possibilities than JD Vance, but never makes an appearance. A Black reporter, no relation to anyone on the Supreme Court, happens to be named Clarence Thomas Jr.; this engineered coincidence never pays off either. (Except when an interview subject tells him, “Perhaps you doubt me, Mr. Thomas.”)

I know I said no spoilers, but Rasputin eventually *does* swim the Potomac. In dangerously cold weather, as “a special penance, a mortification, if you will.” It’s a tense, involving scene, the best in the book, but I can’t tell you why it needs to be there. Not because that would ruin its effect, but because I have no idea. □

ILLUSTRATION BY LUCA SCHENARDI



Dear readers,

I grew up in a family of news junkies. My parents, who spent decades far from their home countries, often talked about the bizarre experience of reading flawed reports about events they had lived through. But I also knew which journalists they admired, and I am acutely sorry that my own birth prevented my mother from sitting next to one of them at a dinner party.

There's an adage that among journalism's highest aims is to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," and as cynical as I may be, I do believe there is a moral imperative to pay attention to what's going on in the world. Today, I recommend two elegant, book-length works of narrative journalism that capture the complexity of the Middle East.

Notes on a Foreign Country: An American Abroad in a Post-American World,
by Suzy Hansen

Nonfiction, 2017

Hansen, who has written for *The Times Magazine* and other outlets, exemplifies the kind of journalism I most admire. As an American who has lived in Turkey for years, she is a canny interpreter of life under an autocratic leader. But the primary "foreign country" of her title is really the United States, and Hansen uses her book as an opportunity to examine a particular strain of American exceptionalism.

"We cannot go abroad as Americans in the 21st century and not realize that the main thing that has been terrorizing us," she writes, "is our own ignorance."

Hansen grew up near the Jersey Shore and moved to Istanbul after 9/11. She had no sentimental ties to the region, and the Iraq invasion and the "war on terror" had shaped her views of Islam.

Before her departure her father sent her a late-night email: "Did you know that Turkey is 99 percent Muslim? Are you out of your mind?"

Through her years in Turkey, along with travels in Iran, Greece, Egypt and Afghanistan, she comes to understand America's profound influence over the Middle East. Her years abroad are hardly the "joyous romp of self-discovery and romance" you find in movies, she says; "mine were more of a shattering and a shame."

"Notes on a Foreign Country" was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and it can be read as an effort to remedy Hansen's own previously blinkered view of the United States' role on the global stage. Really, it's a fearless and remarkable work of self-reflection that inspires readers down their own investigative paths.

READ IF YOU LIKE: "The Innocents Abroad," by Mark Twain; any novel by Joseph O'Neill.

House of Stone: A Memoir of Home, Family, and a Lost Middle East,
by Anthony Shadid

Nonfiction, 2012

Shadid was a Pulitzer-winning Middle East correspondent, and by the time he joined *The New York Times* in 2009 he had established himself as one of the most respected, and collegial, journalists in the region. Unlike Hansen, he had a personal connection: His ancestors had left Lebanon for Oklahoma, where he was raised, and the Middle East had "fascinated, preoccupied and saddened" him for decades.

In August 2006, Israeli soldiers entered Shadid's family village, Marjayoun, a predominantly Christian town in southern Lebanon, as part of a wider military campaign. War is always personal, as he knew from covering countless conflicts — but now, aided by "enough cigarettes to keep the Carolinas out of the meth business," he was reporting on a deadly incursion with his own

family top of mind.

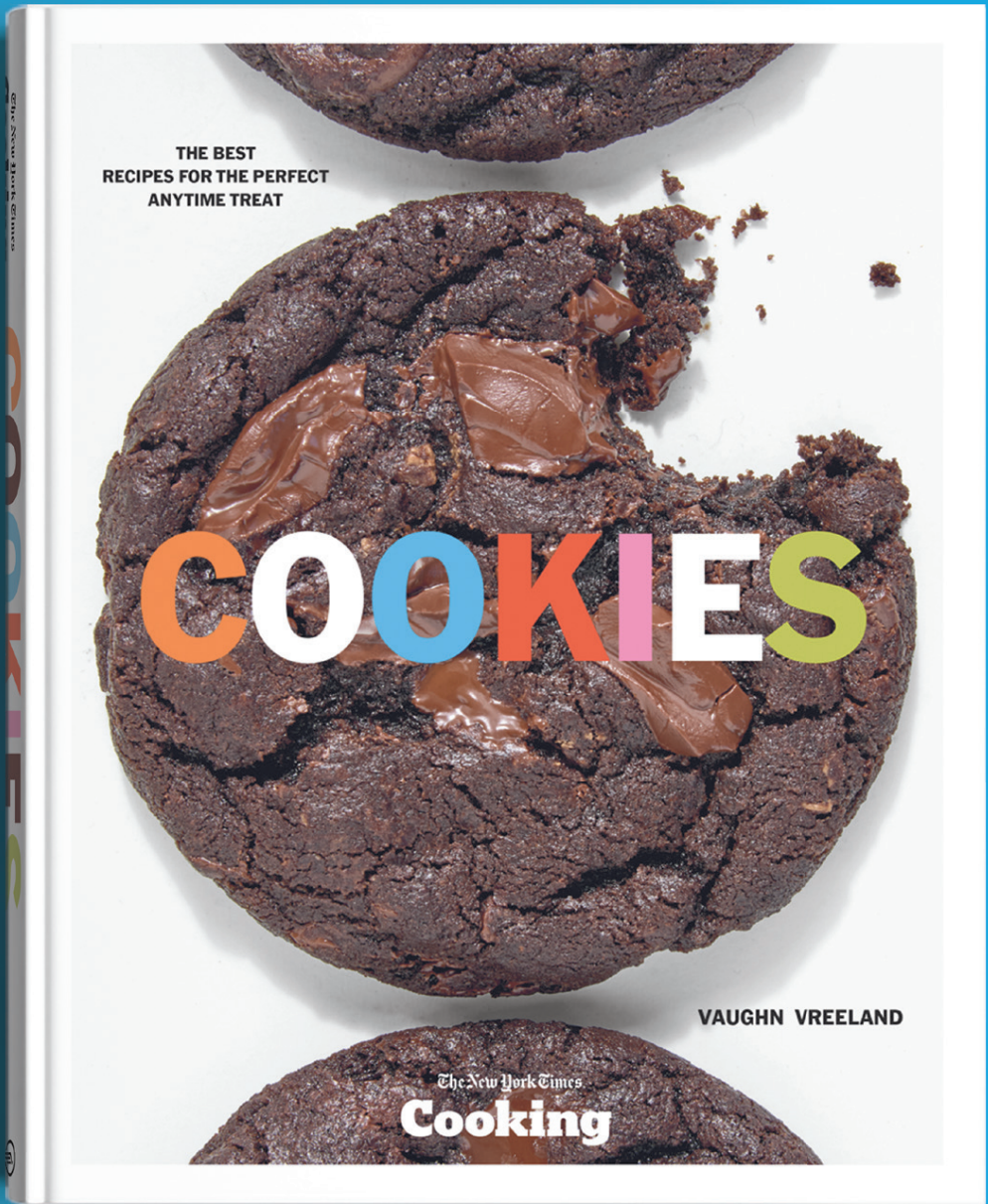
"Until the soldiers left, the Marjayounis, hidden in their houses, spoke only in whispers," he wrote. "They knew the drill: Voices attracted bullets."

It's a typical Shadid observation, pithy and devastating. He was a stylish writer even when reporting on the grisliest circumstances, and had a sophisticated understanding of the internecine politics and history of the Middle East. Eventually Shadid was inspired to restore his family's home in Marjayoun, thus subjecting himself to the baffling process of getting anything done in Lebanon. It provides an elegant framework for this book; as he writes about the house reconstruction, he delves into his family history on both sides and pulls in episodes from his life as a reporter along with a startling degree of personal candor.

Shadid died in 2012 on assignment in Syria, at age 43. "House of Stone" was published soon after. I don't know what's become of his home, but it's no exaggeration to say that I still grieve the work he might have done.

READ IF YOU LIKE: "The Return," by Hisham Matar; genealogy.

The ultimate collection of treats:
100 delicious cookies
from New York Times Cooking



Because you
deserve
a cookie

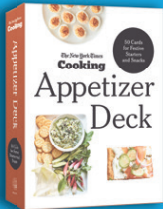
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