The New York Times
Book Review
FEBRUARY 7, 2021

MARK WANG

At Home in the World

By Alexander Chee

I CAN'T SAY exactly where much of Chang-rae Lee's newest novel, "My Year Abroad," is set, because the narrator, Tiller Bardmon, can't tell us either. Ad hoc consort and au pair to a 30-something woman we know only as Val, Tiller lives with her and her young son, Victor Jr., in a smallish American suburb he calls "Stagno." Val and VeeJ, as the boy is nicknamed, are in a witness protection program because of her disappeared husband's "dealings with a gang of New Jersey-based Tashkentians that involved Mongolian mineral rights, faux sturgeon eggs and very real shoulder-mounted rocket launchers." Tiller met her in a Hong Kong airport as he was escaping what was perhaps the biggest mistake of his life, and we soon learn that Val was doing much the same.

None of this is a spoiler. The setup, by Page 3, contains enough plot for several other novels in a variety of genres, vivid sketches of the worlds created when capital crosses borders and the people lost when the deals holding those worlds together fall apart. Like Lee's five previous novels, this one is explicitly transnational — perhaps the only way to describe the lives of his characters, and really America, for that matter. Lee has engaged in this kind of global revision of our idea of the American suburb for some time,

MY YEAR ABROAD
By Chang-rae Lee
480 pp. Riverhead Books. $28.

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Book Review

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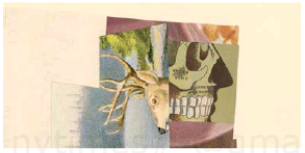

Fiction

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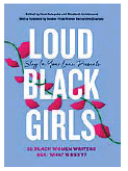
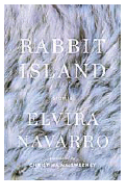
New & Noteworthy

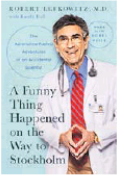


LOUD BLACK GIRLS: 20 BLACK WOMEN WRITERS ASK: WHAT'S NEXT?, edited by Yomi Adegoke and Elizabeth Uviebinené. (Fourth Estate, $26.99.) Black British women from a range of disciplines (writers, artists, actors, etc.) discuss finding and preserving their voices.

RESETTING THE TABLE: STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT THE FOOD WE GROW AND EAT, by Robert Paarlberg. (Knopf, $27.95.) Paarlberg, a Harvard political scientist specializing in agriculture and food policy, argues that commercial farms have an important role to play in fostering healthier eating habits.



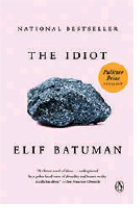
RABBIT ISLAND: STORIES, by Elvira Navarro. Translated by Christina MacSweeney. (Two Lines, $19.95.) In this impressionistic, dreamlike collection, Navarro, a Spanish writer, deploys surrealism to comic, haunting effect: a floating grandmother, a pawlike appendage growing from an ear.



A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO STOCKHOLM: THE ADRENALINE-FUELED ADVENTURES OF AN ACCIDENTAL SCIENTIST, by Robert J. Lefkowitz with Randy Hall. (Pegasus, $27.95.) Lefkowitz's lively memoir traces his path from public health and cardiology to biochemistry and a 2012 Nobel Prize.

LIVE; LIVE; LIVE, by Jonathan Buckley. (New York Review Books, paper, $16.95.) This spare novel, Buckley's 11th, features a man who can hear the dead and the much younger woman who lives with him, who exerts a magnetic pull on their next-door neighbor.

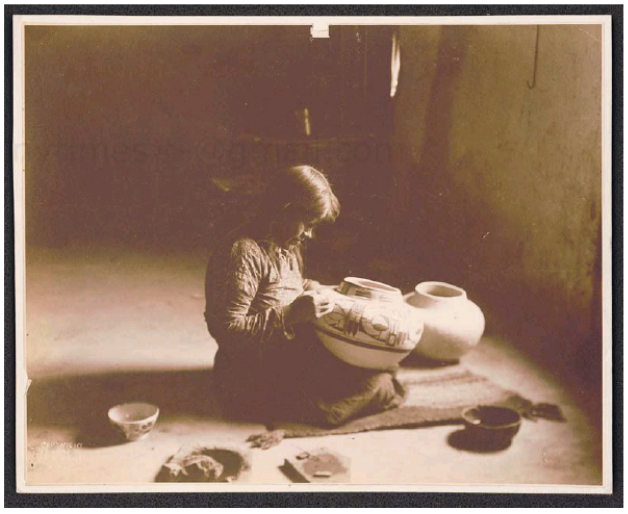
WHAT WE'RE READING



Like just about everyone else in the world right now, I miss my friends. I miss college, too, or maybe just the parts of adult life that feel like a mix between a seminar and a knees-up. So I reread Elif Batuman's **THE IDIOT**, a wry bildungsroman about a girl I wish I'd known. Batuman's main character, Selin, spends her first year at Harvard with an arched eyebrow, a scattered courseload and a sort-of romance conducted over dial-up email. At nearly every paragraph break, Batuman had me giggling at her perceptive descriptions of the tics and absurdities of daily life. For a digestif, I read "The Possessed," too, Batuman's first book, based on her Ph.D. in comparative literature at Stanford, before she became a staff writer at The New Yorker. She is clearly the most skeptical friend, the smartest, the most observant. But she is also humble. I'll follow her pen wherever it next goes.

—AMELIA NIERENBERG, NEWSLETTER WRITER

Letters



The Hopi-Tewa potter Nampeyo painting designs on pottery, circa 1900.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EDWARD S. CURTIS/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Acknowledgments

TO THE EDITOR:
Although I appreciate Deborah Needleman's review of Glenn Adamson's "Craft: An American History" and its call to recognize the contributions of "Indigenous people, African-Americans, women and the working class," an addendum should be made to the caption of the photograph that accompanies it.

The photographer is acknowledged by name, but the artist featured in the photo is not. She is none other than Nampeyo, an innovative and influential potter who was famous in her lifetime and remains one of the most well-known Native American artists to this day. Her work can be found in museums around the world including the Smithsonian and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and one of her dazzling pots was recently on view in the latter, under the same roof as Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings.

Proper respect and recognition is due for an artist who has had such a lasting impact on American art and design. After all, would a photograph of Georgia O'Keeffe at work be captioned simply as "an American artist painting a canvas"?

CAROLINE JEAN FERNALD
BERKELEY, CALIF.

Anatomy of Addiction

TO THE EDITOR:
In her review of Carl L. Hart's book "Drug Use for Grown-Ups" (Jan. 17), Casey Schwartz is right to note that many readers might feel "discomfort" when hearing about the author's "full-throated endorsement" of opiates for recreational use. That includes his own regular use of heroin, which Hart suggests he can easily control and also has benefits. The estimated more than two million Americans who are in need of treatment are not so lucky. For them, addiction has serious repercussions — the loss of friends and family and careers, and the unrelenting need to feed their habit by any means possible — that make life not only miserable but also very risky.

With drug fatalities in the United States at record levels last year and more than 450,000 deaths over the past two decades (a majority of them opioid-related), it is inconceivable how Hart can dismiss the "opioid crisis" in scare quotes, suggesting that it does not exist.

This crisis is real and a public health menace, especially for those who cannot access drug treatment, the most effective way to address the disease of addiction. I agree with Hart that the "war on drugs" has failed, but his war on the reality of addiction is far more dangerous.

MITCHELL S. ROSENTHAL
NEW YORK

Mitchell S. Rosenthal, M.D., is the founder of Phoenix House and president of the Rosenthal Center for Addiction Studies.

♦

TO THE EDITOR:
As an avid reader of the Book Review, I have rarely been more angered than I was by Schwartz's review of "Drug Use for Grown-Ups."

While I agree with Carl Hart's view that drugs need to be legalized, and that some drugs can actually be useful, I disagreed with practically everything else he is cited as writing, especially his callous dismissal of the oft-ruined lives of the 30 percent of opioid users who become addicted.

My beautiful, creative and bipolar daughter recently died after 40 years of opioid addiction that took away what could have been a successful life. Proof that genes often rule, she had four addicted grandparents, and my maternal grandmother also had an addicted bipolar daughter and a schizophrenic son, as did I.

And while my daughter died of other causes, if I or anyone unaddicted had taken the dose of methadone she took each day as part of medication-assisted treatment, it wouldn't take — as my neuropharmacologist older daughter reminded me — alcohol or another drug in the mix to kill them. And as my husband, a recovering alcoholic, said as we discussed this review, "By the time you know you're addicted, it's too late."

ROSEMARY DANIELL
SAVANNAH, GA.

Reality Check

TO THE EDITOR:
Reading his By the Book interview (Jan. 24), I thought Brad Taylor would turn out to be yet another male writer who doesn't know that women write books, but I was wrong.

He ultimately cites two women authors: Willa Cather, source of "the most boring writing ever," and Delia Owens, whose book he can't finish. He attributes the latter failure to something in himself; perhaps it's his conviction that reading is fundamentally about "escape."

GAIL GRIFFIN
KALAMAZOO, MICH.

BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM

By the Book

Elizabeth Kolbert

The environmental writer, whose new book is 'Under a White Sky,' was drawn as an adolescent to works of 'overwrought romanticism': 'In general my tastes have become a lot cooler.'

What books are on your night stand?

On my (metaphorical) night stand are Patrik Svensson's "The Book of Eels," Yaa Gyasi's "Transcendent Kingdom," and the galleys of Jim Shepard's new novel, "Phase Six."

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

Whenever I go somewhere new, I try to bring along a book that somehow bears on the place I'm visiting. I read Barry Lopez's "Arctic Dreams" while camping out on the Greenland ice sheet. That to me was pretty close to the ideal reading experience, but a tough one to replicate.

What's your favorite book no one else has heard of?

"Weird and Tragic Shores," by Chauncey Loomis, is a wonderful riff on the classic Arctic explorer narrative. It's about Charles Francis Hall, an American newspaper publisher who insisted on going looking for survivors of the last Franklin expedition long after it had become clear there weren't any. Toward the end, almost by accident, the book becomes a murder mystery. I'm sure most Arctic-philes have heard of it, but it deserves a much wider audience.

What writers are especially good on the natural world?

There are so many — too many for me even to start to list. That said, there are certain works I keep coming back to: "Walden," "Desert Solitaire," Rachel Carson's "The Sea Around Us," Annie Dillard's "Teaching a Stone to Talk," John McPhee's "Encounters With the Archdruid" and "Annals of the Former World." Anyone writing today faces the problem that what counts as the "natural world" has become pretty vexed. Some of the after-"The End of Nature" nature writers I think have had the greatest impact are: Bill McKibben, Terry Tempest Williams, David Quammen, Rebecca Solnit and E. O. Wilson.

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

I was recently reading about chimps' grooming habits in Carl Safina's "Becoming Wild." The social interactions between high- and low-status chimps are every bit as complicated as those you'd expect to see at a college mixer.

Which subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

This isn't a subject, exactly, but I wish there were more popular science books written by scientists. I really enjoyed — and learned a tremendous amount from — "Stuff Matters," by Mark Miodownik, who's a materials scientist. The same goes for: "Gathering Moss," by Robin Wall Kimmerer, a plant ecologist; "The Evolution of Beauty," by Richard Prum (ornithologist); "Your Inner Fish," by Neil Shubin (paleontologist); "The Forest Unseen," by David George Haskell (biologist); and "Lab Girl," by Hope Jahren (geobiologist). All these books opened up the world to me in a new way.

How do you organize your books?

I don't. Often this is a problem.

Who is your favorite fictional hero or heroine? Your favorite antihero or villain?

For the heroine, it's probably Oedipa Maas; I admire her intrepid cluelessness. For the villain, I think it's Fred, the dachshund in E. B. White's essay "Death of a Pig." Fred has a ghoulish curiosity that's hard to resist.

How have your reading tastes changed over time?

In my protracted adolescence, I was drawn to works of overwrought romanticism, like "Wuthering Heights" and "The Sorrows of Young Werther." I still love both of these books, but in general my tastes have become a lot cooler.

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

Roberto Bolaño, Italo Calvino and Isak Dinesen.

What books are you embarrassed not to have read yet?

In David Lodge's academic novel "Changing Places," the members of the English department play a game called "Humiliation." Participants are supposed to name a book they haven't read, but that they imagine most other members of the department have. One player names "Hamlet." He wins the game but loses his job. □

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

ILLUSTRATION BY JILLIAN TAMAKI

LISTEN UP / AUDIOBOOKS / BY JENNIFER REESE

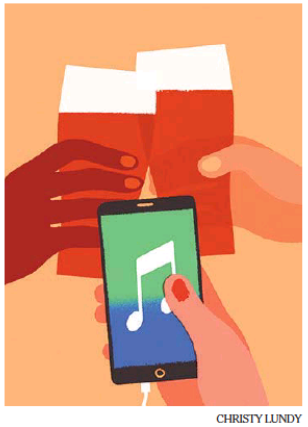
In Their Own Words

To read or to listen to a book? It can be a tough choice, but when it comes to memoirs of entertainers — especially those who narrate their own work — the answer is easy: Listen. These are authors who bring not just insight, but professional chops and innate charisma to the job. You needn't be an ardent fan of the celebrity memoirists below to appreciate hearing their personal stories in their famous voices.

NO ONE COULD recount the saga of a brooding, introverted Irish actor like Gabriel Byrne with more soul than the brooding, introverted Irish actor Gabriel Byrne. In **WALKING WITH GHOSTS (Recorded Books, 6 hours, 57 minutes),** Byrne revisits his childhood in hard-scrabble, hard-drinking mid-20th-century Dublin, introducing us to formative characters like Mrs. Gordon, an elderly friend of his family's, whose locket held her late husband's whiskers and who used to regale Byrne with tales of banshees, fairies and famine. He discusses his sister's mental illness, his early vocation as a priest ("I can't help but imagine how different my life could have been") and his struggles with alcoholism ("I started young"). There are Hollywood-era snapshots of his life tucked into the book as well: whiskeys with Richard Burton ("Give it all you got," he advises Byrne, "but never forget it's just a bloody movie, that's all it is. We're not curing cancer"), a harrowing account of the depression that struck after it became clear "The Usual Suspects" was going to be a hit, and Byrne a star.

Listening to this book in the car was like taking a road trip with a friend sharing his slightly mournful stories in a soft brogue from the passenger seat.

IT'S BEEN DECADES since "Family Ties" made him a household name in the 1980s, but at almost 60 — and having lived with Parkinson's disease for half his life — Michael J. Fox still has that Alex Keaton buoyancy. Fox's fourth book, **NO TIME LIKE THE FUTURE (Macmillan Audio, 5 hours, 59 minutes),** delves into his acting career and philanthropy, his improbable passion for golf, and his worsening health. In 2018 ("my annus horribilis," he says), Fox underwent surgery for a spinal tumor unrelated to Parkinson's, an ordeal that tested his characteristic optimism and left him struggling to walk. "Back in the days of carefree ambling, I would have considered the topic of walking to be rather pedestrian," Fox jokes. Sometimes the quips seem forced, but Fox's



CHRISTY LUNDY

positivity — rooted in the love of his family — is hard-won and inspiring. Although Parkinson's has affected his speech, after the first few minutes I stopped noticing as his storytelling, suffused with warmth and emotion, drew me in. And only in the audiobook can you hear him choke up while recounting a tender moment with his wife of more than 30 years, the actress Tracy Pollan.

THE ROCKER Lenny Kravitz never chokes up in **LET LOVE RULE (Macmillan Audio, 6 hours, 40 minutes),** but he does periodically break into song, making for startlingly lovely interludes in this bighearted autobiography. The son of a white Jewish father and a Black mother, Kravitz grew up spending weekdays with his working-class maternal grandparents in Brooklyn and weekends at nightclubs with his parents in Manhattan. "I'd have to call it a golden childhood," he says, ever able to find beauty even in bitter experiences. After his mother, Roxie Roker, was cast in "The Jeffersons," the family moved to Los Angeles, where his parents' marriage foundered and Kravitz left home at 16, bunking down in a rented Ford Pinto. His musical career blossomed after he fell in love with the actress Lisa Bonet — seeing her for the first time on a TV Guide cover, he announced, "I'm gonna marry that girl" — and the songs came pouring out. The memoir, coauthored with David Ritz, ends with the release of his first album in 1989 and the welcome words: "To be continued."

KRAVITZ CREDITS five Black godmothers with helping shape his character — among them the actress Cicely Tyson, who at 96 has come out with her own memoir, **JUST AS I AM (HarperAudio, 16 hours, 9 minutes).** Tyson reads the introduction to her book, pausing to chuckle at her own anecdotes, before turning the narration over to the brilliant Robin Miles. (The foreword, read by Viola Davis, was intimate and powerful, and piqued my interest in the book before I even got going.) Cowritten with Michelle Burford, Tyson's is a juicy, rags-to-riches opus with an unforgettable, tart-tongued heroine who used her craft to render fully the lives of Black women, "the most deeply misunderstood human beings in history."

The daughter of West Indian immigrants, Tyson grew up in Harlem in the 1920s and '30s, became a teenage mother and wife, stumbled into modeling and then acting, becoming an American icon for performances in "Sounder" and "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman." She was friends with Diahann Carroll and Sidney Poitier and Maya Angelou; married and divorced Miles Davis ("He was so full of the Devil, that Miles"); and took stands that were radical at the time, like embracing her natural hair on television. She describes it all with vivid recall, wit and monumental charm. If I hadn't been listening to this book, I would have called it a page-turner. □

JENNIFER REESE'S *work has appeared in the Book Review and The Washington Post.*

High Flier

What was the strange object that visited our solar system in 2017?

By DENNIS OVERBYE

An artist's rendering of Oumuamua.

ON NOV. 12, 2018, Avi Loeb, then the chairman of the astronomy department at Harvard, and a young research associate, Shmuel Bialy, published a paper in the highly prestigious Astrophysical Journal Letters arguing that humans may have discovered the first evidence of alien technology in the form of a mysterious object called Oumuamua that had streaked through the solar system the previous fall.

Reporters flocked to his door. I was not one of them, because I thought the claim was clever and bold, but far-fetched, and I still do, much as I wish it were true. Few of his scientific colleagues agree with him, as Loeb will be the first to tell you in his new book, "Extraterrestrial," which is part graceful memoir and part plea for keeping an open mind about the possibilities of what is out there in the universe — in particular, life. Otherwise, he says, we might miss something amazing, like the church officials in the 17th century who refused to look through Galileo's telescope.

EXTRATERRESTRIAL
The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth
By Avi Loeb
Illustrated. 222 pp. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. $27.

"Are we, both scientists and lay people, ready?" he asks in his introduction. "Is human civilization ready to confront what follows our accepting the plausible conclusion, arrived at through evidence-backed hypotheses, that terrestrial life isn't unique and perhaps not even particularly impressive? I fear the answer is no, and that prevailing prejudice is a cause for concern."

Oumuamua — Hawaiian for "scout" — was first noticed by a telescope on the island of Maui on Oct. 19, 2017, when it was already on its way out of the solar system, having passed closest to the sun a month before. It had come from outside the solar system, from the direction of the star Vega.

Nobody ever got a picture of the object, but from how its brightness varied as it apparently tumbled, astrophysicists were able to deduce that it was about a quarter-mile across and at least five to 10 times longer than it was wide. An artist's interpretation of reddish, cigar-shaped rock was widely reproduced. Based on some surprising herky-jerky motions as it departed our realm, astronomers concluded that Oumuamua was a weird comet. Such objects often get accelerated by jets of evaporating gases on their surface, although in this case no evaporating gases were detected.

But Loeb argues that it is no more preposterous to suppose that Oumuamua was a lightsail, a thin material that gets its propulsive boost from sunlight or starlight, either launched in our direction or anchored like a buoy in space, where we ran into it on our planet's travel around the galaxy. In which case the age-old question — are we alone in the universe? — has been answered.

Shades of Arthur C. Clarke's novel "Rendezvous With Rama," in which a rogue asteroid turns out to be a spaceship; indeed, radio astronomers trained their antennas on Oumuamua, but heard nothing.

It is fair to say that Loeb, who was raised with a philosophical bent on a farm in Israel, the son of refugees from the Holocaust and war-torn Europe, is one of the more imaginative and articulate scientists around. He writes frequently for Scientific American and fires off papers on a wide range of subjects — from cosmology to black holes to the desirability of inspecting exoplanet atmospheres for signs of industrial pollution or even nuclear war. He is chair of the Black Hole Initiative at Harvard and, more to the point, chair of the scientific advisory committee for Breakthrough Starshot, a grandly ambitious scheme to send tiny probes to Alpha Centauri, propelled to one-fifth the speed of light by lasers shining on lightsails.

The Starshot scheme, bankrolled by the Russian internet billionaire and philanthropist Yuri Milner, had been announced only a year and a half before Oumuamua was discovered. It was natural for Loeb to think that great minds across the universe might have thought alike. It sounds crazy but there is a larger point he has to make, one well worth making and reading.

Central to his argument is what he calls the "Oumuamua wager," a takeoff on Pascal's famous wager, that the upside of believing in God far outweighs the downside. Likewise, believing that Oumuamua could have been an alien spacecraft can only make us more alert and receptive to thinking outside the box. As Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind."

"If we dare to wager that Oumuamua was a piece of advanced extraterrestrial technology, we stand only to gain," Loeb writes. "Whether it prompts us to methodically search the universe for signs of life or to undertake more ambitious projects, placing an optimistic bet could have a transformative effect on our civilization." Imagine, for example, lightsails equipped with copies of human DNA placed around a star that would one day explode, sending them riding on a flash of light across the galaxy. It would take millions of years to set up, but what is a million years in the 10-billion-year life of the Milky Way?

He goes on, "When I think of this familiar technology in that way, a lightsail tumbling in sunlight resembles nothing so much as the wings of a dandelion seed sent off by the wind to fertilize virgin soil."

Modern academic science, he complains, has overvalued topics such as multiple dimensions and multiple universes, for which there is no evidence, and undervalued the search for life out there, not just in the form of extraterrestrial radio signals but in the form of chemical "biosignatures," or even technological artifacts — such as, Loeb believes, Oumuamua. We could try harder, he writes. The discovery of alien life would be the greatest discovery in the history of science.

As he writes toward the end of this half memoir, half soaring monologue: "But the moment we know that we are not alone, that we are almost certainly not the most advanced civilization ever to have existed in the cosmos, we will realize that we've spent more funds developing the means to destroy all life on the planet than it would have cost to preserve it." □

DENNIS OVERBYE *is the cosmic affairs correspondent for The Times and the author of "Lonely Hearts of the Cosmos: The Story of the Scientific Quest for the Secret of the Universe" and "Einstein in Love: A Scientific Romance."*

IMAGE FROM ESO/M. KORNMESSER

One Who Got Away

Following the trail of a Nazi mass murderer who was never caught.

By RACHEL DONADIO

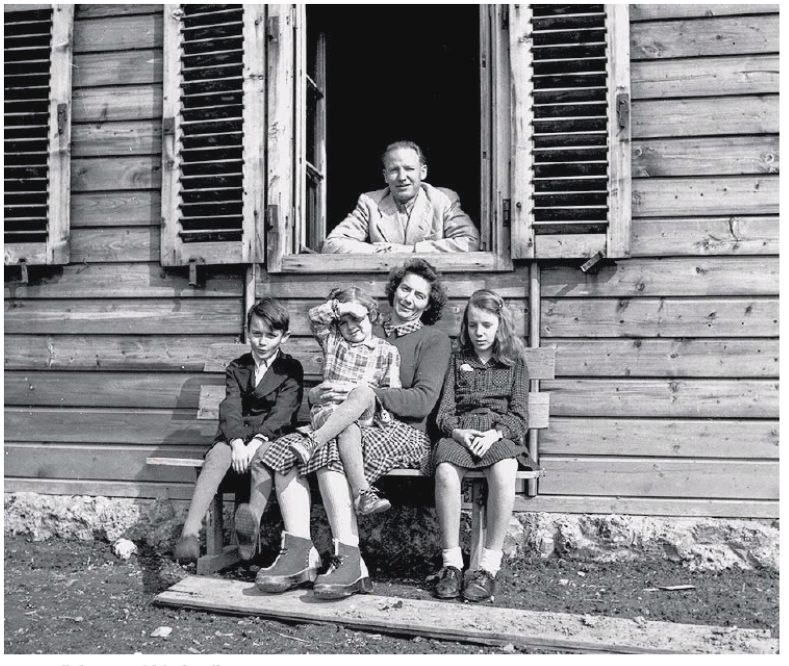
IN HIS BRILLIANT, deeply moving 2016 book "East West Street," Philippe Sands wove the story of his own Eastern European Jewish family with those of two jurists who forged the legal framework for the Nuremberg trials: Hersch Lauterpacht, who put forth the concept of "crimes against humanity," and Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term "genocide." Both men and Sands's maternal grandfather hailed from Lemberg — now Lviv, in Ukraine — and all had relatives slaughtered in the Holocaust. His latest book, "The Ratline," is a gripping sequel.

This time around, Sands, a human rights lawyer, follows the trail of a big fish who was never caught: Otto Wächter, a high-ranking Nazi official in occupied Poland who was indicted on a charge of mass murder after the war, but escaped. Wächter had been chosen by Hitler himself to govern Galicia and on his watch the Krakow ghetto was constructed and more than 130,000 people from the area, including 8,000 children, died in death camps. After the war, while much of the Nazi high command wound up at Nuremberg — tried, convicted and hanged — Wächter spent more than three years hiding in the Austrian Alps before escaping to Rome. He died there in 1949 in mysterious circumstances under the assumed name of Reinhardt, given last rites by a prominent Austrian Catholic bishop who had helped him in Rome — entirely aware of his identity, sympathetic to his cause and well connected at the Vatican.

THE RATLINE
The Exalted Life and Mysterious Death of a Nazi Fugitive
By Philippe Sands
Illustrated. 448 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. $30.

Wächter had crossed the Alps on foot in the snow and made his way to Rome, where he lived in a religious residence. He had intended to flee to South America via the so-called "Ratline," the clandestine network that helped many prominent Nazis evade justice with the aid of Catholic Church officials, some perhaps even inside the Vatican. Sometimes, Sands discovers in his research, the Ratline had the implicit or explicit support of the United States, which valued these men's intelligence about the growing Soviet threat and turned a blind eye to their murderous pasts. This is the swampy world of postwar Rome in which Wächter died, believing himself "to be hunted by Americans, Poles, Soviets and Jews," as Sands writes.

In truth, this book's title is a bit of a misnomer. "The Ratline" is less about the escape route per se than about Wächter's life and times — his education in Austria, his rise through the ranks of the Nazi Party, his courtship of and marriage to Charlotte Bleckmann, a bright, well-educated art student. "The Ratline" is a Nazi love story, but a fascinating and important one, told in vivid detail because Sands was able to make use of an extraordinary cache of documents: thousands of pages of personal papers and diaries, and years of correspondence between Otto and Charlotte. While Wächter was busy overseeing the deportation of Galicia's Jews, and then in hiding between 1945 and 1949, the two wrote to each other using lovey-dovey nicknames.



Otto Wächter and his family, 1948.

Sands was given access to this trove by one of the most intriguing central characters in "The Ratline": Horst Wächter, the fourth of Otto and Charlotte's six children, who had been safeguarding the papers in his crumbling Austrian schloss. Horst is an interesting case — forthright but also perversely myopic. He steadfastly refuses to acknowledge his father's complicity in the Holocaust, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, including the evidence in documents in his possession. The tension between Sands and Horst, the questioner and the questioned, gives "The Ratline" much of its driving force. Sands had met Horst while researching "East West Street," and the two men later became part of a documentary, "My Nazi Legacy," in which Sands brought together Horst and Niklas Frank, the son of Hans Frank, the Nazi governor general of occupied Poland, who was tried and hanged at Nuremberg.

While Niklas, a journalist, is unforgiving of and unsparing about his father — he carries a photograph of his dead body, snapped in Nuremberg after his trial, "to make sure that he is really dead," he tells Sands in "East West Street" — Horst, in sharp contrast, refuses to acknowledge his father's actions, and prefers to see his father as a good man caught up in a bad system. He was especially close to his mother and believes his father was poisoned — a hypothesis Sands spends much of "The Ratline" pursuing. And yet for all his blindness, Horst has done a great service to history. Rather than destroying the documents in his possession, he let Sands scrutinize them, a move that put him at odds with members of his family, who didn't want to call attention to their ugly past.

And ugly it was. The correspondence is a grotesque, intimate look at total commitment to Nazism, horrific evil interspersed with the banality of upper-middle-class life. In the summer of 1942, when the "Grosse Aktion," or mass deportation of Galicia's Jews, was well underway in territory Wächter governed, he and Charlotte moved into a lovely villa outside Lemberg, with a swimming pool and a tennis court. He entertained Himmler, and a close aide to Hitler praised Wächter's skills to the Führer. Returning from a summer holiday in 1942, Wächter wrote to Charlotte: "Jews are being deported in increasing numbers. It's hard to get powder for the tennis courts."

Charlotte, who died in 1985, was utterly dedicated to her husband and to the Nazi cause. On the shelf in Horst's castle, Sands found a copy of "Mein Kampf," which she had inscribed to Otto: "Through struggle and love, to the finish." When Otto was in hiding in Rome and in need of money, Charlotte sold off works of art she had looted from collections in Krakow. And after Otto's death in Rome, Charlotte managed to transport his body back to Austria, illegally.

It's a testament to Sands — his fiercely inquiring mind, his excellent researchers, the wealth of documents and his ability to make them come to life — that the book is so suspenseful. "The Ratline" was a podcast for the BBC before Sands put it into book form, and his style here is to bring us along on the quest. There are many extraordinary secondary characters and subplots. Rather than citing the work of scholars, he pops in for visits, including one with David I. Kertzer, whose excellent book "The Pope and Mussolini" offers a vivid picture of the Vatican during the 1930s.

There's an intriguing cameo by David Cornwell, the late John le Carré, who tells Sands he believes Wächter would have been "naturally attractive" to the Vatican and to the Americans, as a "talent-spotter" able to identify former Nazis who might want to work for the West. Cornwell also tells Sands he believed Wächter's death was "basically a Jewish operation, however indirectly," but offers little evidence. "It's a hunch, really," he says, "no more than that," adding, "I would have to say I admired it."

From recently declassified C.I.A. files, Sands learned about an operation conducted by the United States Army Counter Intelligence Corps, or C.I.C., which enlisted former Nazis to help recruit intelligence assets. A key figure in the operation was Karl Hass, a high-ranking SS officer and one of the last people Wächter had visited before his death. Hass had lived quietly for years after the war, before becoming a household name in Italy in 1996, when he was arrested and eventually convicted on charges of "crimes against humanity" for his role in the March 1944 killing of 335 Italian civilians at the Ardeatine Caves outside Rome. Another former SS officer involved in the massacre, Erich Priebke, had escaped via the Ratline to Argentina, where he was arrested, extradited to Italy and also convicted. One of the last war-crimes trials in Europe, it remains a flash point of historical memory in Italy.

In the end, "The Ratline" is about the Nazis who didn't escape and their descendants, like Horst. It's a reminder that Europe to this day is populated by survivors and perpetrators of World War II — a place of tangled family histories and selective denial, but also intermittent lucidity. This important book makes clear that the more difficult work of history may not be in tracking down the ones who tried to escape, but in confronting the ones who didn't. □

RACHEL DONADIO *is a Paris-based journalist, a contributing writer for The Atlantic and a former Rome bureau chief of The Times.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY HORST WÄCHTER

Death Blow

Why capital punishment in America is on its way out.

By ANAND GIRIDHARADAS

IN 1972, the Supreme Court meted out a death sentence. The condemned was the death penalty itself. The American apparatus of state killing was effectively shut down, the punishment judged too final given the flawed human beings who gave it. But this death wasn't final. A bipartisan band of bloodlust resurrected the death penalty, needling the annual count back up to a peak of 98 executions in 1999. From there, the death penalty began again to die. This time, it wasn't a high edict that doomed it, but the unsung, helter-skelter, hydra-headed, revolution-by-a-thousand-cuts process through which real change often comes.

LET THE LORD SORT THEM
The Rise and Fall of the Death Penalty
By Maurice Chammah
354 pp. Crown. $28.

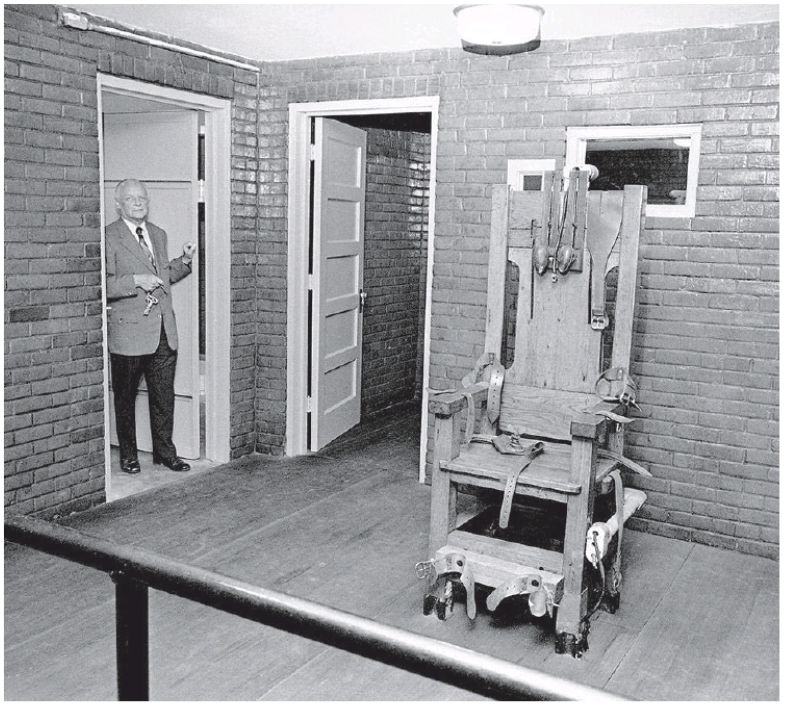
The journalist Maurice Chammah's sober, densely reported first book, "Let the Lord Sort Them," promises a history of "the rise and fall of the death penalty." But as it tells that focused tale, it becomes — almost unwittingly — a case study that speaks more broadly to our current moment, about building monumental change brick by brick.

How? Not through big ideas in Washington, D.C., but through tedious grass-roots whittling. Not through purity tests but through unlikely coalitions of the righteous, the tainted and the grappling. Not by raising an issue's visibility but by keeping its profile down.

In a season of American life when so many want to get big things done and few seem to get anywhere, this story of the slow slaying of the death penalty — one that flies against many of my own intuitions — serves as a vaccine against the virus of fatalism.

Like much that seems immovable, the death penalty is ancient. But it appears on the way out now, and, as Chammah, a staff writer for The Marshall Project, shows, it was on the wane once before, in the years leading up to the Supreme Court's 1972 blow: "The news of American military atrocities in Vietnam — along with the discovery of German death camps a generation before — gave new power to the argument that governments should be restrained in their power over life and death."

When the Supreme Court finally ruled in 1972, in Furman v. Georgia, it didn't declare execution unconstitutional in principle. Rather, a divided court found capital punishment to be ruled by caprice, irregularity and discrimination, and thus, as Justice Potter Stewart put it, a "cruel and unusual" violation of the Eighth Amendment.



The death chamber at the Texas State Penitentiary in Huntsville, 1972.

And what you have to understand about America, and about the state Chammah focuses on, Texas — which is to America what America is to the world — is that many interpreted this historic ruling not as an invitation to step back and reimagine the justice system but as an invitation to retool the death penalty to get those heartbeats stopping again.

The ensuing rise and fall of "the death," as some inmates are known to call it, is a national phenomenon, but Chammah homes in on Texas, because of what can be called its exceptionalism, as captured by the historian T. R. Fehrenbach: "its almost theatrical codes and courtesies, its incipient feudalism, its touchy independence and determined self-reliance, its — exaggerated as it seemed to more crowded cultures — individual self-importance and its tribal territoriality."

For state legislators in Texas, the Furman ruling was a spur to get back to work. How could the death penalty be more carefully engineered and administered to get the bad guys dying again?

Texas eventually narrowed the type and number of crimes eligible for death and settled on a new way of handing down that penalty: instructing juries to ask themselves certain questions about the defendant and the crime, including whether they perceived a "probability" of future dangerousness and, later on, whether anything in the defendant's past mitigated his or her deed, from mental ability to an abusive childhood.

If Chammah can be a dry writer, he is at his most enjoyable in unpacking the philosophical puzzles raised by the death penalty. He understands that the questions given to juries and judges in such cases are among the most profound that human beings can answer: "Can a person be 'evil'? What does 'justice' mean?" he writes, before nicely phrase-checking Joan Didion: "If you look closely you'll see the stories they are telling us about ourselves."

Like much that seems immovable, the death penalty is ancient.

"In the battle over future dangerousness," Chammah writes later on, "each side confronts a logical conundrum. The prosecution needs to portray a defendant who has used his free will to get to a place where he committed a terrible crime but who is now beyond change for the better and will continue to hurt people. The defense, on the other hand, needs to portray a defendant who has been molded by the circumstances of his life to do something terrible but now has the ability to use his free will in order to choose not to do so again. Both sides need to downplay and amplify free will, only at different moments in their narratives."

So the death has its Easter, rises back to life in this new, more structured form. And, as soon as the executions start rolling again, now mostly by lethal injection instead of the electric chair, a group of lawyers, activists and others resume the struggle to bring the number back down.

Yet the approach many of them take is not to chase a silver-bullet court ruling (though obviously that would be nice) so much as to pursue a multifarious, bottom-up process of inexorable erosion. Organizations like the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the Texas Resource Center chip away at the death penalty. Every chunk of marble that falls to the ground, every particle of marble dust, is a step.

They chip away at executions of those with mental impairments. They chip away at executions of people who committed their crimes as minors. They chip away at executions tainted by somnolent lawyering. They chip away at the fairness of the jury questions that perhaps more properly belong to a freshman dorm bull session the night before the Sartre quiz than to the justice system.

The chipping worked, in Texas and beyond. Chammah reports: "In 1994, Texas juries sent 43 people to death row. After 2014, that number never rose beyond 10, and in 2015 it dropped to two. In 2019, death rows around the country reached their smallest total population since 1992." The death lives on, but it is not well (despite the recent spate of executions by the Trump administration).

Chammah intersperses this history with the stories of people who shaped and resisted these changes. We meet Craig Washington, a crusading Texas lawmaker who works to help his colleagues see that "the true history of the death penalty in his country, and his state, lay not in Revolutionary-era hangings, nor in a gauzy vision of the frontier, but in the horrors of Southern lynching" — and who ends up becoming a frustrated member of Congress, accused of corruption. We meet Elsa Alcala, orphaned as a girl, who rises through the ranks of the Texas justice system, first as a Republican prosecutor who ambivalently seeks and gets the death penalty, then as a judge who presides over a system she increasingly regards as unjust. We meet Danalynn Recer, a scrappy investigator turned lawyer who practices what she calls "bakesale justice," chiseling away at an edifice of injustice with little but her own energy and righteousness, and succeeds.

ALONG THE WAY, we learn frightening and funny and astonishing things about the justice system, and the death in particular. A warden presiding over an execution is using a cane, apparently because he was in a car accident that killed a person and he was facing drunken-driving charges — a paltry misdemeanor compared with the felony murder punishment he's supervising. We learn that lawyers call death row inmates who kill themselves or stop appealing their execu-

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS, *publisher of The.Ink, is the author, most recently, of "Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World."*

PHOTOGRAPH FROM ASSOCIATED PRESS

tions "volunteers." That the amount of sodium pentothal used in Texas' lethal injections was — at least for a while — far more than needed because an official didn't want to fill out paperwork explaining the wastage of part of a vial. That many inmates are afraid of false rumors of butt plugs on the gurney. That in small, sparsely peopled counties in Texas, officials sometimes have to raise taxes to pay for a death penalty trial. That Dallas prosecutors were told to avoid jurors with "physical afflictions" because of their tendency to sympathize with the accused. That one Texas district attorney rewarded a prosecutor who had landed a death sentence with a novelty pen resembling a syringe. That the Ellis Unit, which used to house death row in Texas, greeted visitors with a perplexing acronymic sign: "Everyone lives longer if safety is first."

Throughout the book, such details stand out — and compensate for the fact that Chammah's writing can be workmanlike and staid. At times, there are almost too many lines of fact to keep track of — too many minor characters whose names we must recall, too many sad death cases to keep straight. Sometimes you long for a through-line.

Then it hit me. The book's form and its limitations underscore its barely explicit but unmistakable thesis: that change doesn't happen because of singular heroes; that it isn't elegant or linear; that it comes through the planting of many seeds, only a small number of which will sprout; that you never know precisely where you are in the process. In a way, the book is a tribute to legwork.

It also illustrates how change is sometimes made possible not by raising the stakes and notoriety of an issue but rather by pulling the poppy down so it doesn't get mowed. Pick your issue: Medicare for all, immigration, a wealth tax. These days, once the national gaze falls on an issue, that issue is already polarized. The camps are sorted and no one will budge an inch.

While the death penalty has never disappeared from national or local discussion, "Let the Lord Sort Them" portrays opponents who realized that a spotlight doesn't always help.

And it shows how setting the death penalty on a path to extinction was achieved by a strange, haphazard coming together — of true believers like Recer; of prophetic if unheeded leaders like Washington; of system insiders like Alcala, who grappled with moral questions and changed their minds; of Republican officials like George Ryan, the former governor of Illinois, who supported capital punishment but was open to evidence that it was not foolproof; and of conservative columnists and Tea Party activists who found right-wing arguments about governmental costs and overreach to achieve a traditionally liberal result.

Chammah is here to remind us that in our lifetimes a sea change has happened. It's not over yet. But it's a triumph all the same. And if you're one of those people who despair that nothing changes, and dream that something can, this is a story of how it does. □

Safe Space

After her son died, Emily Rapp Black pulled herself back from the brink.

By JUDITH WARNER

ON JAN. 10, 2011, Emily Rapp Black, a writer and creative writing instructor living in Santa Fe, took her infant son, Ronan, to the eye doctor. At 9 months old, the baby wasn't hitting his developmental milestones and his pediatrician wanted to rule out vision problems. In Albuquerque, the ophthalmologist found "cherry red spots" on the backs of the baby's retinas, and immediately diagnosed him with Tay-Sachs disease, a very rare, but inevitably fatal, genetic disorder. And the world tilted on its axis.

SANCTUARY
A Memoir
By Emily Rapp Black
240 pp. Random House. $27.

In her well-received 2013 book, "The Still Point of the Turning World," written while Ronan was still alive, Black (who at the time used the name Emily Rapp) found beauty in stolen moments. She was able to derive lessons to learn and wisdom to share from the "terrible freedom" of parenting a child without a future and turned to writing as a way to "find underlying patterns of meaning in a situation that, from the outside, looked inviolate and incontrovertibly meaningless" — an endeavor that would ultimately give her a way to connect with and help others.

Her current memoir comes from a much darker place. It begins in the summer of 2012. Ronan is dying, and Black is actively considering a jump from the Rio Grande Gorge bridge. Her marriage has imploded — exploded, really — after the corrosive effects of too many days and nights of anger, guilt, resentment, exhaustion and, above all, a never-ending, all-consuming grief. Black's coping mechanism has been desperate self-numbing — compulsive extramarital sex, extreme exercise, any sort of "tangible, identifiable, physical pain." Her husband has fled into rage. Their self-immolation and ultimate split amount to "a rupture that a crater of any size in any ground and beneath any sky failed to accurately depict," and in the aftermath, she has been left feeling mentally "fractured," she writes. "My mind was shifting and molting as my life broke slowly apart, like some strange and painful rebirth, but with no imaginable future — for what mother can imagine a future without her child?"

Black resists the pull of the river 565 feet below. And that choice — equal parts survival instinct and desire to live — marks a turning point in her trajectory. Ronan's life can go only in one tragic direction — he died on Feb. 15, 2013, just before his third birthday — but Black's refusal to die means that she can open up a little bit of space in which she can find "a way to live in the world," as she puts it. And that space, in which life and death, love and loss, rage and happiness, pleasure and pain can tolerably intermingle, is the mourner's sanctuary.

The opening is small at first, little more than the permission to live. But then, having split from her husband and fallen in love, Black moves on the day of Ronan's death into the 100-year-old renovated church that her new boyfriend, Kent (named in the book, while the ex-husband is not), has been renovating since the late 1990s.

Emily Rapp Black

There, she — I won't say "recovers," because the bankruptcy of notions like "recovery" or "courage" or "resurrection" or "resilience" or the "phoenix rising from the site of destruction" in the context of losing a child is a point that Black repeatedly underscores during the "journey" (also heinous) that she charts in this book. She relearns how to live in a world that keeps on turning. She relearns how to be in a universe where (temporarily) she is no longer a mother. She transitions — jerkily, messily — from the torturous present tense of watching a child slowly die to living in a future of possibility. A new pregnancy. A new marriage. A new daughter. Eventually, a new city.

Through it all, Black tries to puzzle out a quandary: How to live faithfully in the present without betraying the past? (Or, how to take joy in the arrival of her daughter, Charlie, without — as some accuse her — "replacing Ronan"?)

"Sanctuary" is, over all, a brutal book to read. Black's power as a writer means she can take us with her to places that normally our minds would refuse to go. But the narrative also takes us to places we perhaps don't belong: for example, deep down in the weeds of her meaner-than-ever ex-marriage.

At the very worst point, Black recounts her ex-husband's horrible behavior at a level of detail that's extremely damaging for him, and then, as she brings us affirming commentary from friend after loving friend, seems to be seeking our validation as well. We come away feeling like guests at a nightmare dinner party, left to pick up broken glass after one of the hosts has made a scene.

We also, as readers, would have been better off not having to trail Black through her long meditations on topics like time, memory, dark matter, Holocaust youth diaries and "the elegant imbalance of butterflies," digressions that would have made — that do make, taken individually — marvelous single sentences. But that also, spooled out in their exhausting entirety, shined and polished to perfection, but not at all under control, recall the "numbing solace" of the three-hour-a-day exercise sessions that Black's friends warned her were "nutballs."

At the very start of "Sanctuary," Black describes helping people "order the chaos of their lives through storytelling." That goal lies at the heart of her — of any writer's — life's work. With just a little more editing, this otherwise often beautiful jewel of a book would have gotten there. □

JUDITH WARNER'S *most recent book is "And Then They Stopped Talking to Me: Making Sense of Middle School."*

PHOTOGRAPH BY CAT DAVIS PHOTO

Essay / Darwin and the Second Sex / By Michael Sims

The father of evolutionary theory took a dim view of women's potential, with one notable exception.

"IF I LIVE till I am 80 years old," Charles Darwin wrote to a friend in November 1837, "I shall not cease to marvel at finding myself an author."

Recently he had received proofs of his first book and he could not stop admiring its crisp type and smooth paper. "Voyages of the Adventure and Beagle" read the spine, and below that VOL. III, and below that DARWIN. The third of three planned volumes by different authors, it was first to be completed. He disliked the minutiae of proofing pages. "If I attend to sense," he complained, "I forget the spelling and vice versa."

Darwin was 28. Bronzed by five years aboard the Beagle, he had returned to England to find himself already known in scientific circles for his dispatches home detailing his findings. A career in science had usurped his plan to work as a country parson who dabbled in natural history.

Since March he had lived in a flat on Great Marlborough Street near the British Museum, close by his brother, Erasmus. London's filthy streets were a bedlam of costermongers, urchins, coffee wagons and tall-hatted bobbies. Lifted above the fray by his family's money, Darwin sat at his desk amid papers and books, gazing at an ugly building across the street and thinking about reproduction, competition and the struggle for life. It would be 22 years before he published "On the Origin of Species."

The following spring, he walked to his brother's nearby flat for a party. At 33, Erasmus resembled Charles: high forehead, easy smile, side whiskers. Darwin considered Erasmus a host of "very brilliant" dinner parties. He admired his sly wit, his knowledge of art and literature. Less robust and energetic than Charles, Erasmus pursued no career beyond surrounding himself with accomplished people. These included the historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle and the mathematician and engineer Charles Babbage, who only the year before had unveiled his mechanical computer the Analytical Engine, a successor to his earlier Difference Engine.

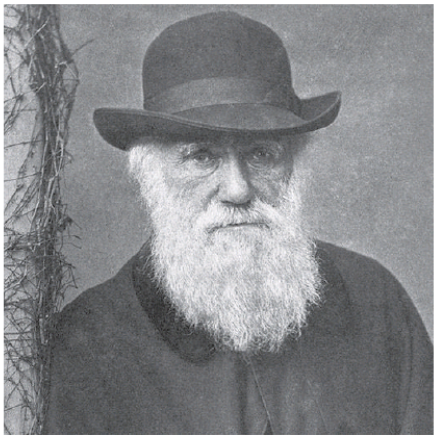
Charles was pleased that Erasmus's servant Sally had prepared an appetizing spread that included a salmon. He noted that dessert alone cost Erasmus eight shillings and sixpence.

This party afforded the young writer an opportunity to talk shop with Harriet Martineau, a prolific journalist and pioneer sociologist who supported herself by her writing. Queen Victoria was a fan and Martineau would attend her coronation that June. She enjoyed a level of influence and fame that Darwin could not imagine.

Moreover, Martineau had built her impressive bibliography without the advantages that provided stepladders and safety nets for men of Darwin's class. He had never known want. His father made it clear that Charles, like Erasmus, need not concern himself about money. At a young age Martineau, in contrast, had been forced by the collapse of her father's textile business to help support her family through needlework and writing.

Darwin had met her a year and a half earlier, during his first visit to London upon returning to England. Erasmus was a close friend of Martineau's — if not more — and was "with her noon, morning and night," Darwin wrote to his sister Susan. His friend and mentor the geologist Charles Lyell had recently called on Martineau and found a beautiful rose on a table, about which she remarked casually, "Erasmus Darwin gave me that."

Lyell found her surrounded by editors and writers for the liberal quarterly Edinburgh Review. She presided over these salons despite deafness that required visitors to all but shout into her ear trumpet. Rebutting the notion that femininity was a handicap, she insisted, in "Society in America," that only deafness posed a serious obstacle. "I carry a trumpet of remarkable fidelity," she added, "an instrument, moreover, which seems to exert some winning power, by which I gain more in tête-à-têtes than is given to people who hear general conversation." At times Martineau smoked cigars. She was a colorful figure welcome at gatherings of artists, intellectuals and politicians.



Charles Darwin, photographed circa 1854.

Martineau had an unkind reputation for plainness and lack of feminine polish. "I was astonished to find," Darwin wrote to his sister Caroline after their first meeting, "how little ugly she is." They talked "on a most wonderful number of subjects." Like other men who knew her, Darwin considered Martineau "overwhelmed with her own projects, her own thoughts and own abilities." Rather than nodding at men's ideas, she was known for responding with her own.

In 1833, the conservative Fraser's Magazine had acknowledged the status of Martineau, then 31, by devoting considerable space to arguing with her conclusions and mocking her appearance. Her second published work, "On Female Education," a defense of her own passion for learning and a critique of the expectation that her education would end when she reached adulthood, came out when she was 20. Her most famous book, "Illustrations of Political Economy," dramatized human stories featuring the economic theories of Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus and James Mill. Didactic, at times simplistic, it was lucid and accessible and considered a step forward for progressive, human-centered economics.

Her most recent success was "Society in America," based on two years of travel during which she was feted by artists and legislators. She visited President Andrew Jackson and lodged with the former president James Madison. Both owned slaves, but Martineau did not shrink from portraying the horrors of slavery. She had been writing about it, as both a moral sin and an economically inefficient system, since early in her career. She would have found common ground on this topic with Darwin, a passionate abolitionist who had witnessed slavery's abuses from Africa to Brazil. His theories about natural selection were motivated in part by a desire to undermine racist notions promulgated by scientists.

They compared writing methods. Several of Martineau's books grew out of her detailed travel journals, which was how Darwin had constructed his own book about his voyage around the world. Martineau was said to require little revision for the many pages that flowed from her pen. Darwin thought her invincible and seems to have expressed this idea.

Not at all, she replied; a few consecutive hours of hard work tended to exhaust her. Darwin felt the same. He recorded that he felt gratified to learn that Martineau was "not a complete Amazonian."

Decades later, despite many respectful and admiring interactions with Martineau and other female writers and thinkers, as well as with his intelligent and well-read sisters, wife, cousins and colleagues' wives, Darwin comprehensively dismissed women's intellectual potential. "The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes," he stated in "The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex" (1871), "is shewn by man's attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman — whether requiring deep thought, reason or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands."

In 1881 the American educator and social reformer Caroline Augusta Kennard wrote to ask Darwin if she correctly understood him on the inferiority of women. Missing the irony, he responded by saying, "I certainly think that women though generally superior to men [in] moral qualities are inferior intellectually."

He conceded that there was "some reason to believe that aboriginally (& to the present day in the case of Savages)" men and women demonstrated comparable intelligence, thus implying the possibility of regaining such equality in the modern world. "But to do this, as I believe," he added, "women must become as regular 'bread-winners' as are men; & we may suspect that the early education of our children, not to mention the happiness of our homes, would in this case greatly suffer."

Martineau, in contrast, described Darwin as "well employed, earnest-minded, accomplished and genial." She found him "simple, childlike, painstaking, effective." Later she was quick to support his "Origin of Species." Unlike the young writer who admired her at a party, she did not try to set herself above half the human race.

Back in 1838, however, before he joined the evolutionary game and fathered 10 children borne by his wife and tended by nursemaids whose work gave him the opportunity to now be considered the most doting father of the Victorian era; before he wrote about women as if having forgotten the countless ways he had learned from them throughout his life, Darwin summed up his admiring view of Harriet Martineau, writing to his sister Susan, "She is a wonderful woman." □

MICHAEL SIMS, *whose most recent nonfiction book is "Arthur and Sherlock," is writing a book about Darwin's relationship with his first child.*

PHOTOGRAPH FROM CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

Are We There Yet?

Around the world with three teenagers, and living to tell the tale.

By AMITY GAIGE

I GO THROUGH PHASES: Sometimes I feel as if I'm doing OK as a parent, other times I feel like a henchwoman in one long, slow sociocultural crime. When my 15-year-old son screams for help from his counterterrorism team while shooting his way around the world in Rainbow Six Siege, I consider turning myself in to the authorities.

In the fall of 2016, faced with related, albeit more charitable feelings about raising his teenagers, Charles Wheelan chose another tack, and the result is his new travel memoir, "We Came, We Saw, We Left."

"Team Wheelan" comprises Wheelan's wife, Leah, and their three teenage children: Katrina (18), Sophie (16) and CJ (13). Inspired by a backpacking trip he took with Leah in the late '80s, Wheelan rekindles a longtime wish to reprise this journey with kids in tow. He notes that "experiences, rather than things, are what make us happy in the long run," because they become an "ingrained part of our identity." Wheelan argues for the feasibility of such an adventure, which clearly requires a measure of entitlement, though not necessarily wealth. (What it really requires is a woman like Leah, a trained computer scientist turned educator who loves maps, spreadsheets and planning.)

WE CAME, WE SAW, WE LEFT
A Family Gap Year
By Charles Wheelan
Illustrated. 288 pp. W.W. Norton & Company. $27.95.

Together, they plan a nine-month trip around the world, a time span that tellingly mimics the length of a human pregnancy. The Wheelans start in Colombia, eating their way through street food in Cartagena, then proceed to the Peruvian Amazon for a hilarious misadventure at an "adventure lodge." From there, everywhere: New Zealand, India, Vietnam, Zanzibar. How do they get around? Buses, buses and more buses (and some planes). They all get carsick; most of them throw up. The stars of this show are undoubtedly the kids: precocious Katrina, on her way to Williams College, contrarian Sophie, who hands her parents a manifesto in the Quito airport declaring a speech and hunger strike, and quirky CJ, a "raging extrovert" who talks so much at school he is apparently placed facing a wall and talks to *it*.

Aside from the requisite cultural misunderstandings, skin rashes and homicidal drivers, Wheelan wisely focuses his book on the way the family navigates meltdowns, hurt feelings and all the high-stakes transactions of life on the go. I loved this family. Wheelan is a lucid and likable storyteller, and his antic family dialogues are spot-on, but he is not — and does not pretend to be — a poet of place. Readers will not find the closely observed details of landscape and culture of a Freya Stark or V. S. Naipaul, nor the self-implication at the core of much modern travel writing.

Wheelan has a habit of reaching for comparisons to movies. He compares the Bolivian salt flats to the set of a "Star Wars" film. A mossy forest path in New Zealand reminds him of "Avatar." He tends to liken that which is unknown or new to something within his own frame of reference. In Patagonia, "the jagged snowy peaks rising above the aquamarine lake looked as if someone had dropped the mountains of Colorado into one of the lakes of New Hampshire and then added a glacier."

The Wheelan family on the Bolivian salt flats.

Although Wheelan's journey spans myriad subjects and places, he narrows his aim to persuading us to take a "family gap year." But we'd love to! We'd love to — but we can't right now. Many of us can't under normal circumstances. Seems to me, a travel narrative necessarily functions as a stand-in for the trip you really aren't going to take.

Wheelan focuses on meltdowns, hurt feelings and the high-stakes transactions of life on the go.

"We Came, We Saw, We Left" tells an upbeat story. What I liked best about the book was watching two people parent their teenagers well. The Wheelans leaven respectful negotiating with some appropriate sarcasm. They let their kids flounder, lick self-inflicted wounds, get a little bit lost and — every once in a while — suckle on the hotel internet. And in the end, the kids prove themselves to be more resilient and sensitive than Wheelan knew them to be. To whatever measure each of us was able to cross borders and travel before, surely we miss doing so. No arguing here — we want to go and see. □

AMITY GAIGE *is the author of four novels, most recently "Sea Wife."*

PHOTOGRAPH VIA CHARLES WHEELAN

Bromance

A middle-aged dad struggles to connect in a lonely world.

By A.J. JACOBS

IN ONE SENSE, the journalist Billy Baker has undertaken a self-defeating task: to cure his loneliness by writing a book. He could've made a documentary — seems more social — but instead he's chosen one of the loneliest professions, involving endless days of solitary confinement in a room with your keyboard and self-doubt, to try to reconnect with friends.

Still, Baker manages to pull it off, mostly. When not typing at his desk alone, he speaks to psychologists, goes on male-bonding trips and tries to embrace his vulnerable side. The result is "We Need to Hang Out," an entertaining mix of social science, memoir and humor, as if a Daniel Goleman book were filtered through the lens of Will Ferrell.

GASTÓN MENDIETA

WE NEED TO HANG OUT
A Memoir of Making Friends
By Billy Baker
224 pp. Avid Reader Press. $27.

Baker, a middle-aged dad and Boston Globe writer, starts with the thesis that we've been in the midst of a loneliness crisis — even before Covid. "In the 21st century," he writes, "loneliness has become an epidemic." He cites a 2019 survey that found 61 percent of Americans are officially lonely, according to the "gold standard" U.C.L.A. Loneliness Scale.

As the sociologist Robert Putnam put it 20 years ago, we are increasingly "bowling alone." This is not a trivial problem. "Loneliness kills," Baker writes. It's a public health threat linked to shorter life spans, heart disease, obesity and Alzheimer's.

So how, as a society, did we lose so many friends? Social scientists point to several culprits: Fewer of us join civic or community organizations like the Kiwanis or the Elks. We are less likely than previous generations to attend churches, synagogues or mosques. We are prone to overworking, overscheduling and overparenting.

Social media was supposed to connect us, but has turned out to be a poor substitute for in-person contact. Then came Covid. Now even bowling alone is risky.

In the pre-Covid era, Baker embarks on several adventures to try to revive his withering friendships. He goes on a treasure hunt in Montana with his college buddies. He starts a sort of grown-up frat house, where he and his pals can hang out, drink beer and watch hockey. He tries to resurrect his high school's Senior Skip Day and persuade his friends to skip work to meet in the park.

Baker is a self-described "guy's guy," and his style is appropriately casual, as if he were chatting with us at a tailgate party while holding a Solo cup filled with Miller Lite. For instance, the psychiatrist and scholar Richard Schwartz is described as "a good dude." Or, of his road trip, he writes: "The car stank like fast food and farts. It was all so stupid. . . . I miss stupid. I need stupid."

Baker spends most of the book talking about male friendship, which he says is fundamentally different from its female counterpart: Where women gossip conspiratorially about others not present, men prefer "ball busting" in person. "Women talk face-to-face. Men talk shoulder to shoulder," he writes. "Barstools and box seats are designed for it." Men compete; women like to cooperate. Men, Baker argues, are more competitive and have more boundaries. "Planes, elevators and urinals are off-limits for chatting with other men," Baker writes. "Just pretend they're invisible. (See: guys, unwritten rules.)"

It's all very Mars versus Venus.

Maybe the research backs up these stereotypical differences — I'm not an expert on the literature. But I would have liked to read more about inter-gender friendships. At one point, Baker says that some of his closest friendships are with women, but he doesn't write much about it.

I would have also liked a deeper dive into the loneliness crisis' effect on female friendships — which, in fairness, does get at least one chapter (Baker goes on a cruise for the mostly female fans of the '90s boy band New Kids on the Block).

And finally, I'd love to read more about the complex effects of technology on our interpersonal communication. Yes, our laptops have isolated us in some ways. But they've also spawned passionate communities, for better and worse. Often worse — I'm sure many QAnon folks have formed friendships over their shared fantasy that Bill Gates plans to microchip us all.

Over all, though, Baker is an energetic writer and this is an important topic. Plus, the book inspired me to initiate a Zoom lunch with a college friend. Not quite bowling, but a welcome break from sitting alone writing my book. Also I don't like bowling. □

A.J. JACOBS *is a contributor to NPR and the author, most recently, of "Thanks a Thousand: A Gratitude Journey."*

Dreamland

The story of a civil rights activist's struggle to create a Black American town on a former slave plantation.

By CHRIS LEBRON

STOP ME IF you've heard this one: A Black man walks into a federal government office and says, "Give me a lot of money and I'll build you a Black city." And the government, to everyone's surprise, says, "OK, here's $14 million!"

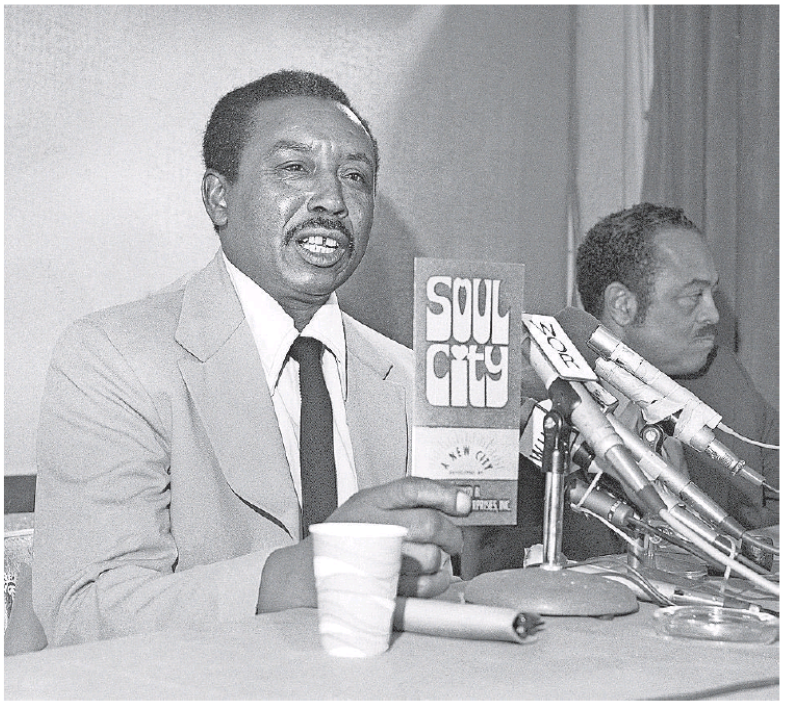
No? Most people haven't. The story of Floyd McKissick's dream, struggle and, ultimately, failure to build an American city on behalf of Black citizens is one of the greatest least-told stories in American history. In "Soul City," Thomas Healy chronicles this tragically quixotic enterprise by McKissick, a civil rights activist turned capitalist, who attempted, beginning in 1969, to build "Soul City," a Black-run city on a former slave plantation in rural North Carolina, close to Southern Klan country.

SOUL CITY
Race, Equality and the Lost Dream of an American Utopia
By Thomas Healy
Illustrated. 434 pp. Metropolitan Books. $29.99.

McKissick was almost certain to fail the moment he purchased that 5,000-acre plantation in Warren County. So, with the ending obvious from the outset, the challenge for Healy is to recount the tale in such a way that our comprehension not only of McKissick's attempt but of his inevitable defeat is deepened — to make the story of a Black American who dared to dream the biggest American dream while failing to realize it of value for our continued struggle with racial injustice today.

Floyd McKissick was a civil-rights-era legend. Raised in the South, he was intimately familiar with white supremacy. Healy reports that when McKissick was just 4 years old, he innocently resisted moving to the back of a trolley car, prompting the conductor to snarl at his aunt to come forward to get her "Black son of a bitch and take him back there with you." From then on, Healy writes, McKissick was continually reminded that he was "a Black boy in a white land." This incident, along with later racist encounters, including in 1951, when he integrated the University of North Carolina Law School, fueled his career as an activist. McKissick helped organize sit-ins in the wake of the 1960 Greensboro sit-in at Woolworth's, an early example of nonviolent direct action, and went on to become a leader in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which played a key role in the Freedom Rides through the South.

McKissick's back story is important to understanding his dream for Soul City. This was a man who had spoken at rallies alongside Martin Luther King Jr., was a contemporary of Medgar Evers and Malcolm X, and emerged a survivor among these slain dreamers. Even as the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts were passed, it was clear Blacks needed more. Calls for equality before the law had generated some change, but Black Americans owned a fraction of whites' wealth and were boxed into ghettos in every major American city, while whites fled to cleaner, healthier, better-resourced suburbs. Meanwhile Black lives remained deeply endangered in America. In the late 1960s, CORE, with McKissick in a leadership position, did not denounce Black militancy, even as organizations like the N.A.A.C.P. did. Yet McKissick's preferred solution was as pragmatic as it was revolutionary: Blacks needed a city they could call their own, one that would allow them to control local social services and economic institutions.



Floyd McKissick at a press conference in New York City in 1972.

In the mid-1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the Model Cities program to spur urban development, ease crowding and reduce poverty in major cities. Healy, a professor at Seton Hall Law School and the author of a book about Oliver Wendell Holmes and the First Amendment, does an excellent job recounting the details of McKissick's project, and we learn of the arduous process he and his team endured across four presidential administrations to access the $14 million in loan guarantees promised by the Department of Housing and Urban Development but never delivered in full.

We learn how McKissick pinned his hope on the Nixon administration and made an implicit deal with the president, switching his party affiliation to Republican and stumping in North Carolina to secure the Black vote for Nixon in his 1972 re-election bid in return for support from the country's highest political office. The move helped. In 1973, Soul City received enough money to break ground and build some roads, houses and an industrial center — Soul Tech I — with the aim of attracting manufacturing jobs.

In the end, none of McKissick's efforts bore fruit. As Nixon's fortunes crashed with Watergate, so too did McKissick's. The Ford, Carter and Reagan administrations were decidedly uninterested in his project, and at its peak, Soul City never had more than a few hundred residents.

Healy's greatest strength is his eye for the procedural details — the who, what, when and where of the Soul City story. Yet his book is a lost opportunity. "My goal in telling the story of Soul City is not to assign blame," he writes. "It is to understand the forces that led to its downfall and the lessons it offers for the pursuit of racial equality today." As someone who has spent a career writing about racial equality, I can promise you that it is impossible to further that cause without assigning blame, and Healy's reticence on this point ultimately makes Soul City a soulless book.

One part of the problem is Healy's reluctance to contextualize the case of Soul City. He acknowledges racism generally but presents the slow and inevitable collapse of the project as though it were separate from the wider phenomenon of institutionalized inequality. Nixon was a booster of Soul City, yet it was his administration, through the grant-giving powers of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, that provided the seed money for the criminal justice juggernaut that we are now working to dismantle. Under Nixon, the agency's budget more than tripled, to $850 million.

That Soul City's fate is directly bound up with this development is evident in the fact that, though the town's residential neighborhoods were never completed and today only about 200 people reside in them, Soul Tech I is now a manufacturing plant for janitorial supplies that relies on the labor of prisoners at a nearby correctional facility.

BUT THERE ARE OTHER implications of Healy's procedural approach. We are too rarely given access to the internal lives of the main characters during their most trying moments. For example, the word "soul" in Soul City was a major obstacle to McKissick's efforts to attract investment from major companies like General Motors. Such corporations perceived the word as "too Black," even separatist, and thus likely to scare off potential white residents (Soul City was meant to be Black-run but residentially integrated).

McKissick refused to change the name until it was too late. His connection to the word was likely multifaceted, but its significance in the book is unwittingly commandeered by this racist complaint. It is not until the epilogue, when McKissick, figuring out life after heartbreak, takes up preaching, that we learn he had always dreamed of being in the pulpit and long held strong religious sentiments. That this fundamental trait is withheld from us until the end means that we are deprived of full knowledge of McKissick and the context for his seemingly stubborn refusal to abandon the name "Soul City."

Smaller problems abound as well. Though Healy early invokes the fact that Soul City was located near Klan country, he only ever vaguely signals that the city faced local racial resistance. And though he energetically describes a minor player in the Watergate scandal as a "dirty trickster," somehow the segregationist Senator Jesse Helms, who promised McKissick that he'd "kill Soul City," is never called what he was: a racist.

There is much to be learned in "Soul City" about the facts of the case. But if we want to know what the project meant at the time and what it should mean for us today, Healy's book provides more of a reason to move on from rather than linger on its pages. □

CHRIS LEBRON *is an associate professor of philosophy at Johns Hopkins and the author of "The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea."*

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTHONY CAMERANO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Brick by Brick

How do we regain trust in institutions and build their legitimacy back up?

By MATTHEW YGLESIAS

ARIEL DAVIS

IN HIS NEW BOOK, "Mistrust," Ethan Zuckerman takes us on a kaleidoscopic tour of everyone from Gandhi to Bitcoin enthusiasts, Brexit voters to Black Lives Matter activists — people and groups whom he calls "insurrectionists" because they are trying to overthrow or work around what has been a worldwide decline in social trust. Fighting this erosion from another direction are the "institutionalists," those who seek to bolster trust and prevent any further crumbling.

Zuckerman, the former director of the M.I.T. Center for Civic Media, writes with the tone of a sobered-up insurrectionist who's come to see in Donald Trump, QAnon and antimask activists the dark side of a society in which all trust is lost and anything goes. Rather than liberation, Zuckerman correctly explains, this systematic distrust has proved to be a blessing for authoritarians around the world who have only further undermined traditional arbiters of truth (say, journalists) in order to open the way to their own propaganda. He offers the particularly absurdist example that in Vladimir Putin's Russia, so all-encompassing is the leader's control that many Russians see the mere fact that a dissident leader like Alexey Navalny *hasn't* been murdered (yet) as evidence that he doesn't represent a real opposition force.

MISTRUST
Why Losing Faith in Institutions Provides the Tools to Transform Them
By Ethan Zuckerman
275 pp. W.W. Norton & Company. $26.95.

It's clear Zuckerman hasn't abandoned his insurrectionist sympathies for those trying to work outside a system they see as irreparably broken. He writes sympathetically about plainly loopy ideas like seasteading (the libertarian fantasy of building floating communities outside the reach of established states) and using the same blockchain technology that powers cryptocurrency to establish new virtual nation-states.

But he seems to find most promising those activists with more conventionally progressive politics who embrace new tactics. He offers the fascinating story of the Association for the Empowerment of Workers and Peasants in India, along with the more familiar tales of Bryan Stevenson and the success of digital activists in reshaping coverage of law enforcement.

One of his big examples is the Black Lives Matter movement. Citing research from his former lab at M.I.T., he notes that after Michael Brown's death and the protests in Ferguson, police killings of people of color "were 11 times more likely to receive media coverage than deaths that preceded Brown's." Media stories also became "far more likely to cover a story not as an isolated incident but as part of a pattern of police violence against people of color."

Zuckerman's heroes have what he calls strong "internal efficacy" (they believe they can do things) but low "external efficacy" (they think political leaders don't care about them). So they operate outside the system, pressuring retailers to change their approach to selling firearms, decentralizing institutions or shifting media coverage.

"#MeToo is a different kind of movement," he writes. "Sexual assault and harassment have been illegal for years, so its main demands are for changes not in law but in norms."

This feels like an unsatisfactory effort to rebrand failure as success. The social media phenomenon revealed that conduct short of assault but still deeply troubling to its victims is fairly widespread in American life. And nothing fundamentally changed — no alteration to legal liability rules for employers, managers or bystanders, for example — to redress that situation. I hope that norms have changed, but there's no clear evidence that they really have. Much-deserved Pulitzer Prizes were won, but crack investigative journalists exposing predators one by one is a not a viable fix.

This is where Zuckerman himself lands when considering the coronavirus pandemic and where he illustrates best the limits of the insurrectionists: Actual functioning institutions became indispensable, and couldn't simply be worked around with internal efficacy and digital savvy.

Recounting a conversation with the activist Eli Pariser, Zuckerman proclaims himself a "resurrectionist" who believes that "we need institutions that deserve our passionate support and defense, and if the institutions we rely on now do not clear that bar, we need to demand new ones that take their place." That seems correct and sensible, though it perhaps raises the question of what the point was in introducing the dichotomy in the first place.

Zuckerman concludes his book by saying that "we are likely to find that institutions fail when we no longer recognize ourselves as a single nation, when we no longer feel responsibility for or obligation to our fellow citizens."

Out of context, one could imagine that flowing from the pen of Stephen Miller as part of a denunciation of globalist preoccupation with asylum seekers and the perfidious work of the 1619 Project in tearing down our common culture. In the course of a book that praises the protests that halted Trump's "zero tolerance" immigration initiative and casually tosses off an endorsement of Ta-Nehisi Coates's case for reparations, I'm quite sure that's not what he means. But in many respects the divide between a call for unity that can be read as nationalistic and one that can be understood as cosmopolitan is the real split in the world today.

Another way of thinking about institutional trust is precisely in terms of that divide.

Major institutions have long been led primarily by the members of an educated elite. But it's only over the past generation or so that college graduates with cosmopolitan attitudes have become a large enough share of the population that educated people's sensibilities could be a force in mass politics. Consequently, today institutional leaders face meaningful pressure — often from some of the young, college-educated activists whom Zuckerman valorizes like David Hogg, fighting for gun control, and Alicia Garza of Black Lives Matter — to use their power to reflect and act on those views. But when they yield, they face fierce backlash from a populist right rooted in the cultural sensibilities of older, whiter, generally less-educated people.

Meanwhile, there are those who feel caught between these worldviews: the working-class people of color who largely eschew left-wing radical chic and feel the pull of things like patriotism and traditional gender norms without wanting to hop on a right-wing bandwagon inflected with racism and indifference to the material needs of the lower class. These are precisely the people with the least direct access to media attention or the political process. They are the ones, more than the insurrectionists of left or right, that institutional leaders need to find a way to better serve if they want to preserve their power and restore their legitimacy. □

MATTHEW YGLESIAS *is the author of "One Billion Americans: The Case for Thinking Bigger."*

At Home in the World

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

but in case you're imagining some stately, somber affair, let me assure you that "My Year Abroad" is a wild-ride picaresque, wisecracking, funny, ambitious, full of sex and danger.

The novel is much like Tiller himself, a strangely meek yet cocky young man who tells his story with the pace of someone setting you up for a scam. It is a bold reworking of the bedroom-community novel established by John Cheever and John Updike, perhaps even a satire of it, the title a wink at both Tiller's skipping school, John Hughes-style, and the international nature of the book, with its panoply of complex characters who make a mockery of other writers' attempts to diversify their fictions.

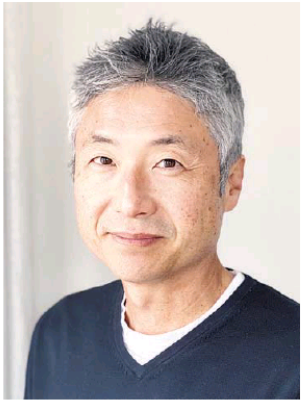
Tiller is Lee's modern American Everyman: 20 years old, one-eighth Asian, and referred to, depending on where he is in the world, as *hapa, haole* and *farang* — mixed, nonnative, white. His mother left him and his white father when he was young, and to say that he is ambivalent about his identity would be to miss the point. Tiller's identity is at times a thread, a leash and a tripwire, and that flickering sense of himself, so dependent on the vision of whoever is looking at him, was only too familiar to me, a biracial Korean-American. I felt as if I were spending time with the person my nephew's son will be one day.

Lee alternates between the stories of Tiller's low-key life with Val and his life-changing travels with Pong, his boss and mentor. The latter account serves as a back story that in many other novels would be the protagonist's entire rite of passage. We move from the New Jersey suburb Tiller grew up in, where he meets Pong, to drunken surfing and foot massage in Hawaii, to shot-fueled karaoke, scuba-diving and circuit-breaking sex in Shenzhen and Macau — all as Pong tries to bring an Indonesian health elixir called *jamu* to a wellness-obsessed market, with Tiller as his protégé and Gen Z pitchman.

Pong is a puckish Chinese-American chemist and superfood entrepreneur whom Tiller met while caddying. He is one of the most fascinating characters in the novel, the son of two artists who fell out of favor during the Cultural Revolution. His own art is in flavors, but his true talent is that he can tell people exactly what they need to hear in order to get their cooperation, something Tiller admires but doesn't realize is dangerous to him until it is too late.

By the time Tiller meets Val, he is desperate to trade in his globe-trotting adventures for a quiet life in a sleepy American subdivision. VeeJ, at 8, is the child-prodigy chef you brag about to the neighborhood listserv, which his mother indeed does — risking their witness protection status. The shapeless threat of being discovered draws out the real trouble with Val and her dual role as Tiller's lover and as an effective replacement for his mother. Val is a determined spoiler, pathologically intent on ruining her happiness — she is both Tiller's dream come true and the greatest threat to it.

When we learn Val is a quarter Chinese, like Tiller's mom, and VeeJ is an eighth, like Tiller, their stories rhyme. We hear another echo when Pong shares his biography; he has clearly found some reflection of himself in Tiller, leaving him the heir to his story, if not his fortune.



Chang-rae Lee

TILLER IS a self-aware, self-swindling hustler, but the real hustle, he reflects, as he begins his world tour with Pong, is far bigger than any of his own: It's "being raised and educated in a well-to-do progressive enclave and demographic that championed egalitarian ideals like inclusion and justice but of course were built and sustained on exclusion and exploitation, real-world stuff that the vast majority of us privileged and chauvinistic dudes didn't much think about, me included."

A wild-ride picaresque: wisecracking, funny, ambitious, full of sex and danger.

What connects the suburban reverie and the wild ride around the world? In a conventionally structured novel, Tiller's story of his past with Pong would somehow illuminate his present time with Val. But Lee's real subject here is a global economy made from desires and appetites that don't transcend race and national borders as much as they exploit them, appetites that can be fulfilled because of, and not in spite of, stunning inequities.

The camaraderie and glamour of Tiller's travels quickly give way to the bleaker truths behind Pong's health-drink plans. Pong introduces him to the people behind the supply of jewel-toned beverages flowing from the Pearl River Delta to the Northeast Corridor, the people who work in New Jersey basements, "off the books, at two-thirds the cost and in half the time," so that Pong's children can upgrade their "tweenie romper room to something more like a first-class airline lounge." Eventually, Tiller himself is made one of these unseen workers, shattering his sense of being above them, apart from them, forever.

This is no Cheeveresque brand of existential angst. Tiller lives in Stagno knowing what it costs him and everyone else around him, unable to leave unobserved even the small details of walking around strange mansion labs and restaurants and suburban homes, under the hypnotic sway of these baroque surfaces and what they hide. He's excellent in the role of the newcomer to whom all must be explained — a way to educate the reader on a range of topics from Taoist alchemy to the making of curry to the complicated social dynamics of contemporary multiracial suburbs.

As a picaresque goes, it is an intimate one, the plot created out of Tiller's compulsion to "latch on" — a truth about Tiller that Pong reveals to him, and that Val exploits. It is also then a book about how people try to recreate their oldest family patterns again and again, sometimes even succeeding. Within the novel's curious design, what might have counted as a climax, and therefore the narrator's awakening, comes just before the story begins, liberating the novel from it and making room for another, quieter resolution. Tiller reaches the end much as he began: willing to live constantly in the shadow of older, more powerful beloveds — but now he sees this compulsion as the secret to his happiness, even though it may destroy him.

On the penultimate page, he and Val attend to their day's housework, and he offers us something like a prayer to keep his life just as it is.

"I want to keep us planting and not worry about a harvest," Tiller tells us. "The bounty is here already. It's in our joint earth tilling, our basketball dribbling, in our melodic low-down humming and in our vigorous eating and drinking, and it finds sudden contour in random, lovely things, like the meringue Victor Jr. can froth to a Himalayan peak, or the warmed dent Val leaves in her pillow, the buttery smell of her hair threaded deep in the flannel. . . . This is the world I want to shape myself to; this is the world I want to shape me."

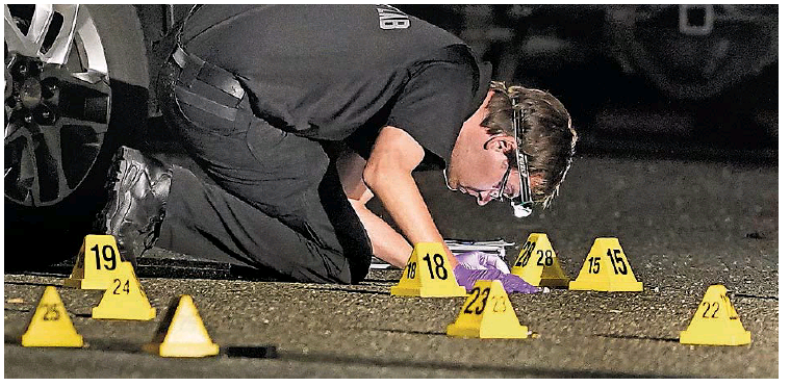
When Val asks him if he's all right, he's shaken; she doesn't ever ask him that. The novel undergoes some final transformation, revealing itself to be a manifesto to happiness — the one found when you stop running from who you are. □

ALEXANDER CHEE *is the author, most recently, of the essay collection "How to Write an Autobiographical Novel."*

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE BRANCA LEE

In Cold Blood

An ethnography of a Midwestern crime lab.



A Washington State Patrol Crime Lab worker looks at evidence markers.

By KATHY REICHS

LOCARD'S PRINCIPLE STATES that any contact between two objects results in an exchange. In crime scene parlance, that means stuff left behind. Good news for cops and prosecutors, bad news for criminals. Evidence bagged at a scene or tweezed from a body in a morgue can result in conviction of the guilty or exoneration of the innocent. Clues such as blood, powder and residue are the primary sources of forensic science and what make it such a powerful tool.

BLOOD, POWDER, AND RESIDUE
How Crime Labs Translate Evidence Into Proof
By Beth A. Bechky
227 pp. Princeton University Press. $29.95.

The title is catchy, the cover provocative, but for readers seeking the standard sortie into the inner workings of a forensic lab, Beth A. Bechky's book offers something quite different — a live, human angle. The author is a sociologist interested in how relationships function in different work environments. And "Blood, Powder, and Residue" grew out of her observations at a Midwestern crime laboratory.

The book is what Bechky calls an "organizational ethnography" covering the four units she observed: forensic biology, responsible for collecting biological fluids and performing DNA profiles on those samples; chemistry, in charge of identifying drugs; toxicology, in which traces of narcotics in the body are picked up; and comparative evidence, where fingerprints, firearms and tool marks are processed.

For those working in these units, three overlapping social settings determine much of their world: the lab, the criminal justice system and the broader public. Each has its own expectations, attitudes and protocols that shape how these criminalists maneuver through their jobs.

Bechky examines what she calls the "culture of anticipation," a mind-set she claims is prevalent in every crime lab. It can be seen in the way criminalists must balance their handling of evidence and their interpretations of data with the needs of lawyers and the courts, all the while striving to maintain the integrity of their science.

The specter of court testimony often shapes the thinking of "captive" forensic scientists, she writes. Bechky points out, correctly, that crime lab workers, in addition to mastering their field, must also develop finesse in translating their findings into forms understandable to the broader public (i.e., jurors) and to those in the criminal justice system.

In 2009, the National Academy of Sciences released a report outlining problems with forensic science and making suggestions for correcting them. The report, critical of many disciplines and scathing with regard to several, exploded like a bombshell in the forensic community. Bechky examines the responses from various fields and from professional organizations.

The one exception to the academy's criticism was DNA analysis, which, in Bechky's words, has become the gold standard and the envy of practitioners in all other forensic disciplines. She suggests, again correctly, that analysts in every specialty have felt pressure to develop protocols and best practices in line with those of DNA profiling.

Bechky's portrait of the daily conflict faced by crime lab workers should prove enlightening to outsiders. Pulling criminalists one way is their allegiance to neutrality and objectivity concerning their science. Pulling them the other way is their constant need to foresee the demands of the criminal justice system.

The writing is crisp and jargon-free, and the text includes many interesting anecdotes. Though repetitive at times, this account of a fascinating work world manages to be both scholarly and engaging. □

KATHY REICHS *is a forensic anthropologist, author of the Temperance Brennan novels and producer of the TV series "Bones."*

Mobster Tale

A master of historical narrative turns his gaze on his family's past.

By HELENE STAPINSKI

IN THE HIERARCHY of literary respect, fiction is king, followed by historical narrative and, dead last, the lowly memoir. To those who have never practiced it, or to those who practice it badly, memoir writing is simply a regurgitation of life events. But a well-crafted memoir involves archival research, hours of taped interviews and a narrative structure that leaves more on the cutting-room floor than on the page.

Reporting on your own life or on the lives of people who share your DNA can be much more challenging than reporting on strangers. For starters, some friends and family will hate you for it. But the main difference is the emotional investment — and emotional payoff — which can push the memoir to the top of the literary heap.

In his new book, "Smalltime," after much throat clearing and hedging about not being a memoirist, Russell Shorto — a master of historical narrative — digs up the facts on his family. Until now, Shorto has written books mostly about people he's never met, trying to get inside the heads of Peter Stuyvesant in "The Island at the Center of the World"; Baruch Spinoza in "Amsterdam"; and George Washington in his last book, "Revolution Song." But the most fascinating characters in those books — for Shorto and for the reader — are always the ones that history has forgotten.

SMALLTIME
A Story of My Family and the Mob
By Russell Shorto
Illustrated. 259 pp. W.W. Norton & Company. $26.95.

An Italian-American whose family name was changed long ago from Sciotto, Shorto comes from a small-time criminal clan in Johnstown, Pa., people you have never heard of before. History has not forgotten them. It never knew them to begin with.

Shorto's search for his long dead grandfather and namesake, Russell "Russ" Shorto, involves F.B.I. documents, newspaper archives, police records and, most difficult of all, deeply intimate communication with his own father, Tony. Russ, a boss of bookies and tough guys, was a taciturn power broker in southwestern Pennsylvania in the 1940s and '50s whom no one, not even his son, seems to have known very well.

Italian mobsters, Shorto argues, were no worse than the immoral robber barons of the late 19th century. Through the illegal lottery, men like Russ provided hope for steel mill and factory workers of hitting it big and escaping their drab lives.

Shorto awkwardly dances around his grandfather's story, giving us some fascinating history on the numbers racket, the Johnstown flood, Prohibition, his Sicilian roots and the songs of Frank Sinatra.

Eventually, Shorto goes to the mattresses.

In nursing homes, hospitals and a Holiday Inn, he meets "the boys," the wiseguys who knew his Grandpa, like Frankie, Mike and a sociopath named Rip, as well as the girls who were there back in the day. The narrative tension comes from whether Shorto will uncover the mystery of Grandpa before these firsthand witnesses — Tony included — die of natural causes. These guys are in their 80s. It's a race against time, like all historical excavation.

Mary and Russ Shorto in Atlantic City.

To tease us, he throws some blood our way, a murder that may or may not have something to do with his family. The move is as dishonest as his grandfather's fixed card games. Through a slick sleight of hand, one his grandfather would appreciate, Shorto shifts his mark about halfway through his story. The true drama is found not in the murder or scams or detailed explanations of the Pennsylvania mob. That's all just context.

The goosebump revelations are not in the tall stack of criminal records that he and Tony uncover together but in the relationships Russ forged and in the sad lives — mostly of women and children — that he manipulated and ruined.

In the end, this is not a mob story. It's a story of family dynamics. Of love and loss and betrayal. Of Shorto's hometown. Of his own relationship with his father and his father's relationship with *his* father. In other words, it's a family memoir. Whether Shorto likes it or not.

His reluctance — perhaps a mere literary device — is a roadblock. But once Shorto's on the highway, steering us along with his usual humor and eye for quirky detail, settling an hour from his hometown for easy access, we are with him. All the way, as Sinatra would say. □

HELENE STAPINSKI *is the author of two family memoirs, "Five-Finger Discount: A Crooked Family History" and "Murder in Matera: A True Story of Passion, Family and Forgiveness in Southern Italy." She's currently at work on a new book, which is about someone else's family.*

PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM LEFT: TED S. WARREN/ASSOCIATED PRESS; VIA RUSSELL SHORTO

U Is for Unfinished

Two picture books recognize and celebrate African-American challenges and achievements.

By JABARI ASIM

The week I wrote this review, Kamala Harris became the first woman, first African-American and first Asian-American to take the oath of office as vice president of the United States. At the same event, Amanda Gorman, the nation's first National Youth Poet Laureate, dazzled the world with her inaugural poem. Roughly two weeks before that, Bianca Smith joined the Red Sox organization, becoming the first Black woman hired to coach professional baseball. There will be more firsts before the sun sets on this day, and already Black authors and illustrators across the country are dreaming up ways to get these new accomplishments down on the page.

HAVE I EVER TOLD YOU BLACK LIVES MATTER
Written by Shani Mahiri King
Illustrated by Bobby C. Martin Jr.
80 pp. Tilbury House. $17.95.
(Ages 9 to 12)

THE ABCS OF BLACK HISTORY
Written by Rio Cortez
Illustrated by Lauren Semmer
64 pp. Workman. $14.95.
(Ages 5 and up)

But which breakthroughs should they include? No matter their choices, other equally worthy facts and personalities will have to be left out, and well-informed readers will call out sins of omission. Why include Augusta Savage but not Edmonia Lewis? Angela Davis but not Assata Shakur? Huey P. Newton but not Fred Hampton? These are never unreasonable questions, but a book can have only so many pages. Besides, the Black experience is so vast and multifaceted it can't ever be contained within covers.

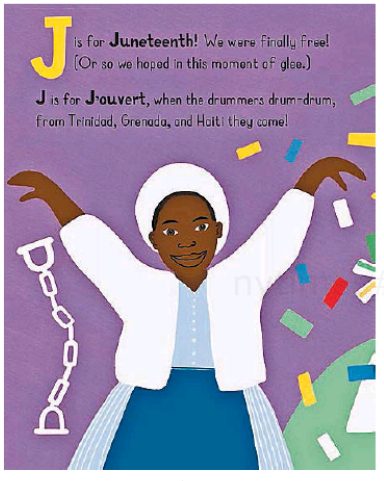
Shani Mahiri King (an associate director of the Center on Race and Race Relations at the University of Florida, where he is also a law professor) addresses this dilemma directly in "Have I Ever Told You Black Lives Matter," choosing to focus on the "collective" power in "the breadth and richness" of 116 individuals. They embody an impressive range, from the early American revolutionary Crispus Attucks to up-to-the-minute figures such as Jay-Z and Chadwick Boseman.

"Have I Ever Told You" adopts a conversational approach. The author's tone resembles that of a patient elder addressing an attentive youthful audience. The typography may be challenging for grandparents and hopelessly analog folks (like this reader) who look forward to sharing this work with loved ones. I suspect it won't present such difficulties for digital natives and readers of more recent vintage. In contrast, the luminous color schemes will be accessible to everyone. The pages are wonderfully alive with electric hues.

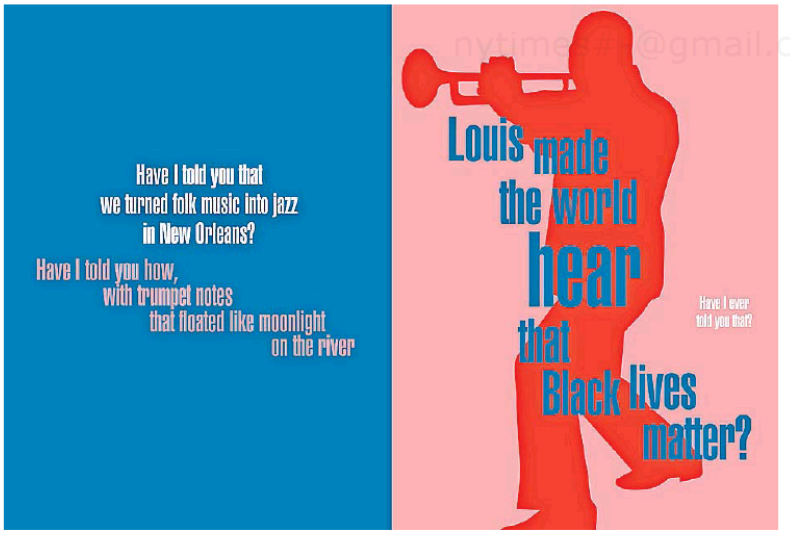
King excels when he avoids platitudes in favor of quotations that reveal some crucial aspect of a notable individual's personality. I couldn't stop smiling, for example, when I came across this nugget from Bessie Smith: "I don't want no drummer. I set the tempo."

Such taglines are where the illustrator, Bobby C. Martin Jr., really shines. It's easy to visualize his imaginative blends of text (and sometimes images) emblazoned on posters and T-shirts. No doubt many of us have room in our lives for his dramatic rendering of this reminder from the great artist Faith Ringgold: "You can't sit around and wait for somebody to say who you are." I wasn't aware of Martin's work before now. (His design credits include the June 24, 2020, New York Times Magazine cover "What Is Owed" and the April 2018 special edition of The Atlantic honoring Martin Luther King Jr.) I'm grateful for the introduction and hope to see more.

The book's narrative rhythms portray time as a river of swirling currents as opposed to points on a straight line. King's long view of history connects the past strongly to the present, and vice versa. A mention of Colin Kaepernick expands to include Tommie Smith and John Carlos, Black athletes who bravely protested at the 1968 Olympics. A mention of Ida B. Wells sends us cascading through generations of journalists who have followed in her stead, including Charlayne Hunter-Gault and Yamiche Alcindor. In the world King has created, Jean Toomer occupies the same space as Jacqueline Woodson, and it's but a small leap from Josephine Baker to Gregory Hines. At strategic intervals the narrator wisely reasserts — plainly — that Black lives matter.



From "The ABCs of Black History."



From "Have I Ever Told You Black Lives Matter."

The Black experience is so vast and multifaceted it can't ever be contained within covers.

In "The ABCs of Black History," Rio Cortez (a Pushcart Prize-nominated poet) picks up a similar refrain. "Black lives matter," she proclaims on the "M" page, emphasizing the word "matter." "Every breath, every dream — / Every thought, each idea, each impossible scheme." In rhyming couplets, she leads readers on a journey through Black life that acknowledges pain and struggle while building confidence with examples of triumph. It's a tricky maneuver when writing for children, but Cortez pulls it off. There's no condescending to her readers; she assumes they'll be able to follow when she tells them, for instance, that "D is for diaspora." Not surprisingly, her celebration of Blackness is worldwide, as in this nod to Caribbean carnival: "J is for J'ouvert, when the drummers drum-drum, / from Trinidad, Grenada and Haiti they come!"

Lauren Semmer's illustrations are warm and friendly, rendering Black characters in a range of dynamic shades. In perhaps her best panorama, "G is for Go!" echoes Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series," with the epic African-American journey from South to North spreading across two pages along a serpentine railroad track, on top of which stream passenger cars crammed with Black dreamers and strivers. Another strong sequence is simple, subtle and moving: Behind Cortez's words "L is for love. L is always for love," Semmer has placed portraits of the actor-activists Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, the Stonewall activist Marsha P. Johnson, and Mildred and Richard Loving, among others.

Like "Have I Ever Told You," "The ABCs of Black History" takes an imaginative view of time. Protest placards from earlier eras with messages such as "I Am a Man" and "Separate Is Not Equal" are placed alongside contemporary slogans such as "Hands Up Don't Shoot" and "We Can't Breathe." On one particularly cool layout, Gwendolyn Brooks recites her poetry just inches from DJ Kool Herc, spinning jams on his wheels of steel. With such creativity at our disposal, Cortez and Semmer seem to suggest, full equality for African-Americans is not only possible but inevitable.

I am heartened by the daily scroll of parents and educators (not all of them Black!) proudly showing off on Instagram and Pinterest the libraries they've compiled for the young Black readers in their lives. Such posts should be required viewing for any employees of publishing companies who still dare to question whether sufficient readers exist for books with African-American themes. Publish volumes like these and they will surely come. □

JABARI ASIM'S *books for children include "Preaching to the Chickens: The Story of Young John Lewis" and "A Child's Introduction to African-American History."*

Best Sellers

The New York Times

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

COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF JANUARY 17-23

Fiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**THE DUKE AND I,** by Julia Quinn. (Avon) Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series "Bridgerton."	4
2		**BEFORE SHE DISAPPEARED,** by Lisa Gardner. (Dutton) A recovering alcoholic puts herself in danger when she searches for a Haitian teenager in a Boston neighborhood.	1
3	3	**THE VANISHING HALF,** by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge as one returns and the other takes on a different racial identity but their fates intertwine.	34
4	4	**THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY,** by Matt Haig. (Viking) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.	8
5	11	**THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE,** by V.E. Schwab. (Tor/Forge) A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie LaRue has across centuries.	11
6		**THE PUSH,** by Ashley Audrain. (Pamela Dorman) A devastating event forces a mother who questions her child's behavior and her own sanity to confront the truth.	1
7	9	**NEIGHBORS,** by Danielle Steel. (Delacorte) A Hollywood recluse's perspective changes when she invites her neighbors into her mansion after an earthquake.	3
8	13	**WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING,** by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.	118
9	12	**ANXIOUS PEOPLE,** by Fredrik Backman. (Atria) A failed bank robber holds a group of strangers hostage at an apartment open house.	20
10		**FIREFLY LANE,** by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's Griffin) A friendship between two women in the Pacific Northwest endures for more than three decades.	1

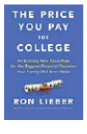
Nonfiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**A PROMISED LAND,** by Barack Obama. (Crown) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barack Obama offers personal reflections on his formative years and pivotal moments through his first term.	10
2	2	**CASTE,** by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	25
3	3	**GREENLIGHTS,** by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	14
4	5	**UNTAMED,** by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	46
5	4	**ON TYRANNY,** by Timothy Snyder. (Tim Duggan) Twenty lessons from the 20th century about the course of tyranny.	26
6	10	**BECOMING,** by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady describes her journey from the South Side of Chicago to the White House, and how she balanced work, family and her husband's political ascent.	95
7	8	**THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE,** by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	22
8		**BORN A CRIME,** by Trevor Noah. (Spiegel & Grau) A memoir about growing up biracial in apartheid South Africa by the host of "The Daily Show."	73
9		**THE TRUTHS WE HOLD,** by Kamala Harris. (Penguin) A memoir by the daughter of immigrants who is currently serving as the 49th vice president.	7
10	6	**A SWIM IN A POND IN THE RAIN,** by George Saunders. (Random House) A collection of essays examining the functions and importance of works of fiction.	2

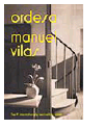
The New York Times best sellers are compiled and archived by the best-sellers-lists desk of the New York Times news department, and are separate from the editorial, culture, advertising and business sides of The New York Times Company. Rankings reflect unit sales reported on a confidential basis by vendors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

Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review

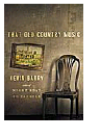
TRIO, by William Boyd. (Knopf, $27.95.) An alcoholic novelist, a closeted film producer and a movie star with a terrorist ex-husband converge in this madcap novel set in 1960s England. It's a satisfying and entertainingly retro production, chock-full of subplots and buoyed by dotty humor.



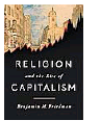
THE PRICE YOU PAY FOR COLLEGE: An Entirely New Road Map for the Biggest Financial Decision Your Family Will Ever Make, by Ron Lieber. (Harper/HarperCollins, $27.99.) A comprehensive guide to the trying process of paying for higher education, Lieber's book explains in detail how to save money, apply for aid and bargain with colleges, all while carefully acknowledging the sometimes conflicting perspectives of the parties involved.



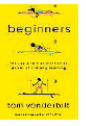
ORDESA, by Manuel Vilas. Translated by Andrea Rosenberg. (Riverhead, $28.) This meditation on midlife yearning and solitude is many other things: autofiction, something between a novel and poetry, a collage of memories and ancestry, a treatise on a changing country. The Spanish writer Vilas plumbs emotional depths, but with a light touch.



THAT OLD COUNTRY MUSIC: Stories, by Kevin Barry. (Doubleday, $23.95.) Hope and heartache anchor the stories in this collection, where relationships take unexpected turns and characters befuddle one another and themselves. Barry's writing sparkles, as ever, moving speedily between pathos and humor to great effect.

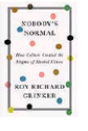


RELIGION AND THE RISE OF CAPITALISM, by Benjamin M. Friedman. (Knopf, $37.50.) In this prodigiously researched and enlightening book, Friedman argues that if we are to understand the American capitalist system and modern economics, we have to look for their roots in early Protestant theology.

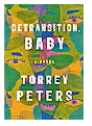


BEGINNERS: The Joy and Transformative Power of Lifelong Learning, by Tom Vanderbilt. (Knopf, $26.95.) Jealous of all the new skills his child is learning, Vanderbilt decides to see what he is capable of picking up as an adult. Trying to gain some proficiency in chess, singing, surfing, juggling and drawing teaches him a lot about the process of acquiring new knowledge when your brain is not so flexible anymore.

NO HEAVEN FOR GOOD BOYS, by Keisha Bush. (Random House, $27.) This poignant debut novel explores the harsh trials of a pair of young boys in Senegal, known as talibé, whose teachers dispatch them to beg for money and food. Their heartbreaking story is punctuated by moments of hope.



NOBODY'S NORMAL: How Culture Created the Stigma of Mental Illness, by Roy Richard Grinker. (Norton, $30.) Grinker shows how a society's needs and prejudices shape its approach to mental conditions, from the regrettable asylums and lobotomies of past centuries to the recent corporate trend of recruiting employees with autism.



DETRANSITION, BABY, by Torrey Peters. (One World, $27.) Following three central characters — a trans woman who wants a baby; her ex, a man who's recently detransitioned; and the cisgender woman he's impregnated — this debut novel suggests there are many different ways to be a parent, or a person.

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

Inside the List
ELISABETH EGAN

Presidential Library Angie Thomas has had a few peak experiences in her career, and one occurred right before a phone interview to discuss what it's like to have two books at the top of the best-seller list at once. (Her new novel, "Concrete Rose," is No. 1 on the young adult hardcover list and her debut, "The Hate U Give," is No. 4.)

'My editor texts to tell me that Dr. Jill Biden shouted me out!'

"This is the least glamorous story of all time," Thomas warned. "I was sitting here doing research on pooper-scoopers because I'm getting a dog in the next couple of months. Suddenly, my editor texts to tell me that Dr. Jill Biden shouted me out at the American Library Association midwinter conference! She said she just bought 'The Hate U Give.'"

Thomas consulted social media, where she'd been tagged by teachers and librarians and was able to see a video clip of the moment. She said, "What shocked me was, this novel about a 16-year-old girl dealing with police brutality found its way into the hands of the first lady of the United States. Had you told little Angie that 20-something years ago, she wouldn't have believed she wrote something that made it that far — that this little Black girl in Mississippi whose family sometimes didn't know if they would have food would have a book in the White House."

Thomas's new novel, "Concrete Rose," is a prequel focusing on Maverick Carter, father of Starr, the main character in "The Hate U Give." In this incarnation, Maverick is 17, working two jobs while his own father is in prison, when he discovers that his girlfriend is pregnant. Thomas said her decision to tell his back story was inspired by interest from readers: "So many kids would tell me Maverick is the best dad they've seen; they wish their dad was like him. We know he was once in a gang and did drugs — and for some people, that doesn't line up with the father and the man we see. I started to think about the character on a deeper level. Having conversations with Russell Hornsby, who played Maverick in the movie, really sparked the flame."

Getting inside the head of a teenage boy wasn't as challenging as Thomas expected it to be, but she struggled with whether to show her protagonist in tears. She said, "I thought I should write scenes where he's fighting it because he's told that men don't cry. But I had conversations with Black men who encouraged me: Show him being vulnerable. Give him those moments on the page so when a young Black boy picks this book up, he's given that permission." □

PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF JANUARY 17-23

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**THE VANISHING HALF,** by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge as one returns and the other takes on a different racial identity but their fates intertwine.	34
2	7	**THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE,** by V.E. Schwab. (Tor/Forge) A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie LaRue has across centuries.	13
3	6	**WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING,** by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.	125
4		**THE PUSH,** by Ashley Audrain. (Pamela Dorman) A devastating event forces a mother who questions her child's behavior and her own sanity to confront the truth.	2
5	5	**THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY,** by Matt Haig. (Viking) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.	8
6	3	**NEIGHBORS,** by Danielle Steel. (Delacorte) A Hollywood recluse's perspective changes when she invites her neighbors into her mansion after an earthquake.	3
7		**BEFORE SHE DISAPPEARED,** by Lisa Gardner. (Dutton) A recovering alcoholic puts herself in danger when she searches for a Haitian teenager in a Boston neighborhood.	1
8	9	**THE RETURN,** by Nicholas Sparks. (Grand Central) A doctor serving in the Navy in Afghanistan goes back to North Carolina where two women change his life.	17
9	11	**READY PLAYER TWO,** by Ernest Cline. (Ballantine) In a sequel to "Ready Player One," Wade Watts discovers a technological advancement and goes on a new quest.	9
10	4	**STAR WARS: LIGHT OF THE JEDI,** by Charles Soule. (Del Rey) In this installment of the High Republic series, a disaster in hyperspace may cause far greater damage.	3

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**A PROMISED LAND,** by Barack Obama. (Crown) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barack Obama offers personal reflections on his formative years and pivotal moments through his first term.	10
2	2	**GREENLIGHTS,** by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	14
3	3	**CASTE,** by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	25
4	4	**UNTAMED,** by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	46
5	6	**BECOMING,** by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady describes her journey from the South Side of Chicago to the White House, and how she balanced work, family and her husband's political ascent.	102
6	5	**A SWIM IN A POND IN THE RAIN,** by George Saunders. (Random House) A collection of essays examining the functions and importance of works of fiction.	2
7	8	**HOW TO BE AN ANTIRACIST,** by Ibram X. Kendi. (One World) A primer for creating a more just and equitable society through identifying and opposing racism.	39
8	10	**BREATH,** by James Nestor. (Riverhead) A re-examination of a basic biological function and a look at the science behind ancient breathing practices.	13
9	15	**EDUCATED,** by Tara Westover. (Random House) The daughter of survivalists, who is kept out of school, educates herself enough to leave home for university.	135
10	12	**UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN,** by Emmanuel Acho. (Flatiron) A look at some questions and concepts needed to address systemic racism.	7

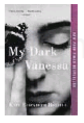
An asterisk (*) indicates that a book's sales are barely distinguishable from those of the book above. A dagger (†) indicates that some bookstores report receiving bulk orders.

Paperback Row / BY JENNIFER KRAUSS

AT THE CENTER OF ALL BEAUTY: Solitude and the Creative Life, by Fenton Johnson. (Norton, 272 pp., $15.95.) An author of novels, essays and memoirs who grew up next door to Trappist monks, Johnson argues that solitude, the opposite of loneliness, is essential not only to creativity (as evidenced by the outputs of 11 historic arts figures), but also to living fully, and usefully, in the world.

RUN ME TO EARTH, by Paul Yoon. (Simon & Schuster, 288 pp., $17.) "Beauty and violence coexist" in a universe "by turns cruel and wondrous," our reviewer, Tash Aw, wrote of this "richly layered" novel that follows three Laotian children whom we meet in a field hospital during American bombing raids. What they don't yet realize is "how the pain of their wartime years will spread its tentacles . . . across continents and over decades."

STRONGHOLD: One Man's Quest to Save the World's Wild Salmon, by Tucker Malarkey. (Random House, 368 pp., $18.) The "Melvillian showdown" that ensues when a Russian oligarch dares an American conservationist to catch a giant Siberian salmon on a fly rod in Kamchatka is the climax of what our reviewer, Nate Blakeslee, called an "ambitious," "finely drawn" profile.



MY DARK VANESSA, by Kate Elizabeth Russell. (Morrow, 400 pp., $17.99.) Taking its title from Nabokov's "Pale Fire," this "clever, unsettling" debut novel, in the words of our reviewer, Katie Roiphe, is at once "a creepy account" of the abuse of a 15-year-old boarding school student by her 42-year-old English teacher and "an overwrought teenage girl's love story" told by "a classic unreliable narrator."

BLOWOUT: Corrupted Democracy, Rogue State Russia, and the Richest, Most Destructive Industry on Earth, by Rachel Maddow. (Crown, 448 pp., $20.) The "through-line" of this "rollickingly well-written" book on the geopolitical consequences of the oil and gas boom of the last 20 years, according to our reviewer, Fareed Zakaria, is "Russia's development into a full-blown petrostate" and Putin's use of his resulting consolidation of power to "protect himself and disrupt the West."

THE LAST TRIAL, by Scott Turow. (Grand Central, 464 pp., $16.99.) The final book in Turow's Kindle County series brings the career of the defense attorney Alejandro (Sandy) Stern, who held center stage in "The Burden of Proof," to an end. The Times critic Janet Maslin deemed Sandy's last case satisfyingly "true to form."

CHILDREN'S BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF JANUARY 17-23

Middle Grade Hardcover

THIS WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	**THE ICKABOG,** by J.K. Rowling. (Scholastic) A fearsome monster threatens the kingdom of Cornucopia. (Ages 8 to 18)	11
2	**LITTLE LEADERS,** by Vashti Harrison. (Little, Brown) The biographies of 40 African-American women who made a difference. (Ages 8 to 12)	52
3	**ROWLEY JEFFERSON'S AWESOME FRIENDLY ADVENTURE,** by Jeff Kinney. (Amulet) Roland embarks on a quest to save his mom from the White Warlock. (Ages 8 to 12)	25
4	**THIS IS YOUR TIME,** by Ruby Bridges. (Delacorte) Ruby Bridges integrates New Orleans's all-white public school system in 1960. (Ages 10 to 18)	4
5	**THE ONE AND ONLY BOB,** by Katherine Applegate. Illustrated by Patricia Castelao. (HarperCollins) Bob sets out on a dangerous journey in search of his long-lost sister. (Ages 8 to 12)	38
6	**LITTLE LEGENDS: EXCEPTIONAL MEN IN BLACK HISTORY,** by Vashti Harrison with Kwesi Johnson. (Little, Brown) Biographies of trailblazing Black men. (Ages 8 to 12)	18
7	**WONDER,** by R.J. Palacio. (Knopf) A boy with a facial deformity starts school. (Ages 8 to 12)	281
8	**REFUGEE,** by Alan Gratz. (Scholastic) Three children look for safe haven. (Ages 9 to 12)	120
9	**THE COMPLETE COOKBOOK FOR YOUNG CHEFS,** by America's Test Kitchen Kids. (Sourcebooks Jabberwocky) Kid-tested recipes. (Ages 8 and up)	93
10	**BECOMING MUHAMMAD ALI,** by James Patterson and Kwame Alexander. (jimmy patterson-HMH) A biographical novel of the prolific boxing champion. (Ages 8 to 12)	15

Young Adult Hardcover

THIS WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	**CONCRETE ROSE,** by Angie Thomas. (Balzer + Bray) Maverick Carter decides to leave the life of crime due to fatherhood. (Ages 14 and up)	2
2	**LORE,** by Alexandra Bracken. (Disney-Hyperion) To get revenge for her family's murder, Lore must re-enter a hunt know as the Agon. (Ages 14 to 18)	3
3	**STAMPED,** by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi. (Little, Brown) An exploration of racism and antiracism in America. (Ages 13 to 17)	44
4	**THE HATE U GIVE,** by Angie Thomas. (Balzer + Bray) A 16-year-old girl sees a police officer kill her friend. (Ages 14 and up)	204
5	**ONE OF US IS LYING,** by Karen M. McManus. (Delacorte) For five students, a detour into detention ends in murder. (Ages 14 and up)	156
6	**WE FREE THE STARS,** by Hafsah Faizal. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) Zafira, Nasir and Kifah continue their quest of bringing magic to all of Arawiya. (Ages 14 to 18)	1
7	**THE COUSINS,** by Karen M. McManus. (Delacorte) Three cousins learn about their family's dark past. (Ages 14 to 17)	8
8	**CHAIN OF GOLD,** by Cassandra Clare. (Margaret K. McElderry) Cordelia battles demons in a quarantined London. (Ages 14 to 17)	31
9	**AVATAR, THE LAST AIRBENDER: THE SHADOW OF KYOSHI,** by F.C. Yee. (Amulet) Kyoshi must stop a mysterious threat. (Ages 13 to 17)	8
10	**AVATAR, THE LAST AIRBENDER: THE RISE OF KYOSHI,** by F.C. Yee with Michael Dante DiMartino. (Amulet) Kyoshi flees with her friend Rangi. (Ages 13 to 17)	13

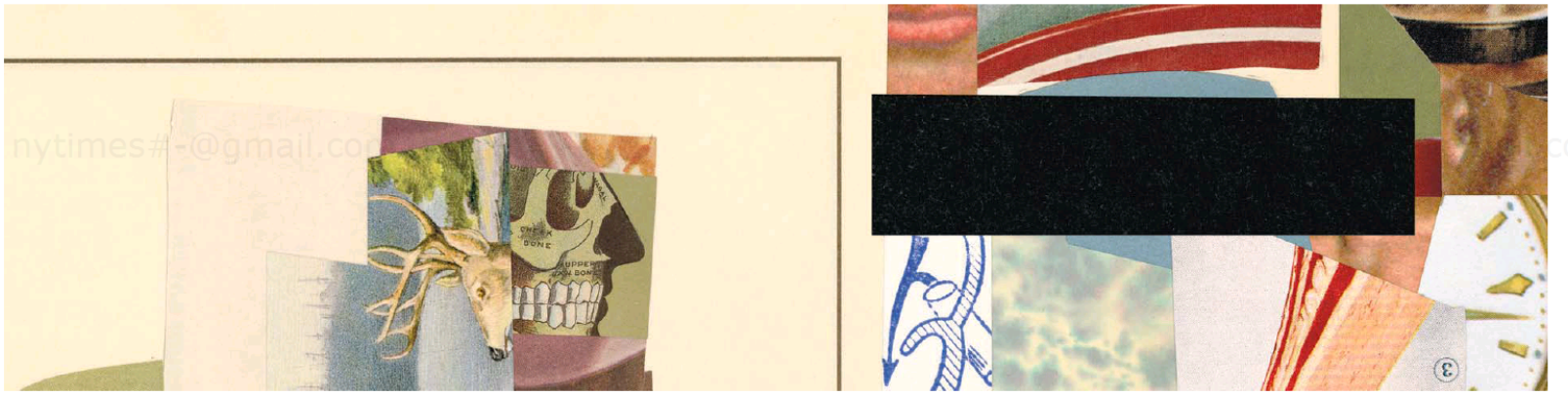
Picture Books

THIS WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	**AMBITIOUS GIRL,** by Meena Harris. Illustrated by Marissa Valdez. (Little, Brown) A celebration of female ambition. (Ages 4 to 8)	1
2	**LITTLE BLUE TRUCK'S VALENTINE,** by Alice Schertle. Illustrated by Jill McElmurry. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) Little Blue Truck delivers Valentine's Day cards. (Ages 4 and up)	4
3	**SUPERHEROES ARE EVERYWHERE,** by Kamala Harris. Illustrated by Mechal Renee Roe. (Philomel) A girl discovers heroes in her daily life. (Ages 3 to 7)	6
4	**KAMALA AND MAYA'S BIG IDEA,** by Meena Harris. Illustrated by Ana Ramírez González. (Balzer + Bray) Kamala and Maya build a playground! (Ages 4 to 8)	4
5	**CHAMP AND MAJOR: FIRST DOGS,** by Joy McCullough. Illustrated by Sheyda Abvabi Best. (Dial) Champ shows Major the White House ropes. (Ages 2 to 5)	1
6	**LOVE FROM THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR,** by Eric Carle. (Grosset & Dunlap) A ravenous insect returns with its appetite intact. (Ages 3 to 5)	32
7	**LOVE FROM THE CRAYONS,** by Drew Daywalt and Oliver Jeffers. (Penguin Workshop) The Crayons show the colors of love. (Ages 5 to 8)	8
8	**HAIR LOVE,** by Matthew A. Cherry. Illustrated by Vashti Harrison. (Kokila) A father and daughter work together on a hairstyle. (Ages 4 to 8)	28
9	**KAMALA HARRIS: ROOTED IN JUSTICE,** by Nikki Grimes. Illustrated by Laura Freeman. (Atheneum) A biography of the vice president. (Ages 4 to 8)	2
10	**JOEY,** by Jill Biden with Kathleen Krull. Illustrated by Amy June Bates. (Simon & Schuster/Paula Wiseman) A biography of the 46th president. (Ages 4 to 8)	1

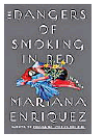
Series

THIS WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	**DOG MAN,** by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic) A dog's head is combined with a policeman's body to create this hybrid supercop hound. (Ages 7 to 9)	178
2	**DIARY OF A WIMPY KID,** written and illustrated by Jeff Kinney. (Amulet) The travails and challenges of adolescence. (Ages 9 to 12)	619
3	**HARRY POTTER,** by J.K. Rowling. (Scholastic) A wizard hones his conjuring skills in the service of fighting evil. (Ages 10 and up)	618
4	**WINGS OF FIRE,** by Tui T. Sutherland. (Scholastic) The seven dragon tribes have been at war for generations, and only the five dragonets of destiny can unite them. (Ages 9 to 12)	98
5	**WHO WAS/IS . . . ?,** by Jim Gigliotti and others; various illustrators. (Penguin Workshop) Biographies unlock legendary lives. (Ages 8 to 11)	106
6	**THE TWILIGHT SAGA,** by Stephenie Meyer. (Little, Brown) Vampires and werewolves and their intrigues in high school. (Ages 12 and up)	251
7	**BABY-SITTERS CLUB GRAPHIX,** by Ann M. Martin. Illustrated by Raina Telgemeier and Gale Galligan. (Scholastic) Kristy, Mary Anne, Claudia, Stacey and Dawn are The Baby-sitters Club. (Ages 8 to 12)	59
8	**PERCY JACKSON & THE OLYMPIANS,** by Rick Riordan. (Disney-Hyperion) A boy battles mythological monsters. (Ages 9 to 12)	560
9	**THE GRACELING REALM,** by Kristin Cashore. (Houghton Mifflin-Dial) Some inhabitants have a "Grace," a superhuman skill. (Ages 14 and up)	2
10	**COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES,** by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) Feyre navigates divided worlds that are edging toward war. (Ages 14 and up)	22

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



THE DANGERS OF SMOKING IN BED
Stories
By Mariana Enriquez
Translated by Megan McDowell
187 pp. Hogarth. $27.



There's something thrilling about other people's suffering — at least within this collection's 12 stories of death, sex and the occult. Horrors are relayed in a stylish deadpan. "It's not exactly practical to try and strangle a dead person," one woman narrates upon seeing the reanimated corpse of her great-aunt, who died in infancy. "But a girl can't be desperate and reasonable at the same time."

Enriquez's plots deteriorate with satisfying celerity: In "The Cart," a curse strips an entire neighborhood of its livelihood within approximately three pages. "The goodwill went all to hell," she writes. "Coca ate her cat, and then she killed herself." Bad odors emanate throughout, rich and visceral and disgusting, one "like rancid meat forgotten in the fridge and turned wine-purple." Twice, people defecate without warning on the sidewalk.

A journalist in Buenos Aires, Enriquez sets most of the stories in and around her home city, and populates them with South American mysticism. One story features San La Muerte, a saint who takes the shape of a grinning skeleton; another a statue of an Afro-Brazilian spirit.

Largely it's insatiable women, raggedy slum dwellers and dead children — those who are ordinarily powerless — who wield unholy power in this collection, and they seem uninterested in being reasonable. And Enriquez is particularly adept at capturing the single-minded intensity of teenage girls. Obsessed with sex and with a hunky older boy named Diego, the adolescent friend group in "Our Lady of the Quarry" speaks in first-person plural and stews in a jealousy that eventually turns murderous. But it's the young female fans of a dead pop star, in "Meat," who perform the book's most appalling act.

If some of these stories end vaguely, the best ones close on the verge of some transgressive climax, as when a woman who masturbates while listening to irregular heartbeats on her MP3 player confesses to her lover that she wants to see "his heart stripped of ribs, of cages, have it in my hand beating until it stopped." To Enriquez, there's pleasure in the perverse.

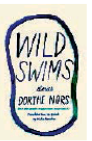
MILK BLOOD HEAT
Stories
By Dantiel W. Moniz
202 pp. Grove. $25.

Life's inflection points, mundane but universal, mark the Black and brown Floridians who populate these stories: the 11-year-old who begins to accept her absent mother for who she is, the 13-year-old who realizes that her overbearing mother might see her more clearly than she thought, women on the verge of adultery or immobilized over whether to have children or plunged into grief after a miscarriage.

But in Moniz's collection, the ordinary experience of being female is laced with a kind of enchantment. That 11-year-old girl collects animal bones and watches "a forest of women undulating under a full harvest moon" at the festival her grandmother throws in the backyard. Two best friends drink milk mixed with blood, ceremoniously, to mark each other as blood sisters. ("Pink is the color for girls," one of them notes.) Entire stories seem bathed in a warm radiance: the "low golden light" of a restaurant in which the bartender finds unexpected grace on a cold night, the way a 17-year-old becomes "incandescent" with newfound power and knowledge. One can glow with both love and rage.

Many of these stories draw their force from a well-honed righteousness that turns, at times, into a double-edged sword. In the particularly delicious "The Hearts of Our Enemies," a mother who can't seem to get anything right takes down her daughter's predator with extreme finesse. "Exotics" — a story that takes the notion of eating one's young to its logical limit — is sharp on privilege and complicity. But some stories become one-note in their effort to make a point. In "Tongues," Zey's foes are nothing less than patriarchy and the church. "The Loss of Heaven" — the only story told from a male point of view — is a cutting portrait of Fred, who wears "expensive-looking things" as armor, thinks women owe him attention, and can't bear to be alone: "He was wanted here; she wanted him, and Fred regained his swagger." It's women and girls who really hold sway in this book, their cares and secrets and self-delusions.

WILD SWIMS
Stories
By Dorthe Nors
Translated by Misha Hoekstra
124 pp. Graywolf. Paper, $15.



None of the characters in these 14 compact, bracing stories are fully satisfied with where they find themselves, whether it's an abandoned fairground or a Copenhagen swimming pool or a ferry crossing the North Sea. Nors's protagonists take refuge in their memories or in their wishful, imagined dramas; they fixate on relationship-ending snippets of conversation. "Nobody knows that he told her that — that her love couldn't be genuine," Lina thinks of a recent breakup in "By Sydvest Station." She's going door to door collecting funds "for the Cancer Society," but her pretenses are false: She isn't affiliated with any such organization; she simply has the disease herself.

This kind of acute situational irony — the distance between thought and reality — animates all of Nors's stories, particularly those in which nothing actually happens. The entirety of "In a Deer Stand" is devoted to a man stranded in the wilderness with an injured ankle. He's just had a fight, but he refuses to reckon with the seriousness of his own circumstance: He's only imagining his wife fretting about him in their home. "There are black birds overhead, rooks he thinks," Nors writes, "and she's pacing around in the yard, restless." Nors's book is full of these midsentence swerves, succinct diptychs of external and internal.

Other characters are ruled by their compulsions. The spurned woman pacing the fairground with fire on the brain is armed with a can of gasoline. The old man in "Hygge," filled with contempt for his also-aging companion, still ends up having sex with her in a particularly twisted sendup of Danish coziness.

The collection's epigraph has the comforting ring of advice, tinged with a depressed sense of humor: "You can always withdraw a little bit further." The line is drawn from the story "Manitoba," whose speaker is a reclusive former teacher who "no longer has any wish to regulate his abnormalities" and wants only to flee to an even remoter cabin than his own. It's less advice, it seems, than a statement of fact, or a reminder: These stories are a dark reflection of all of us, blinkered by our hang-ups and our insistent desires.

CHELSEA LEU *is the book reviews editor at The Rumpus.*

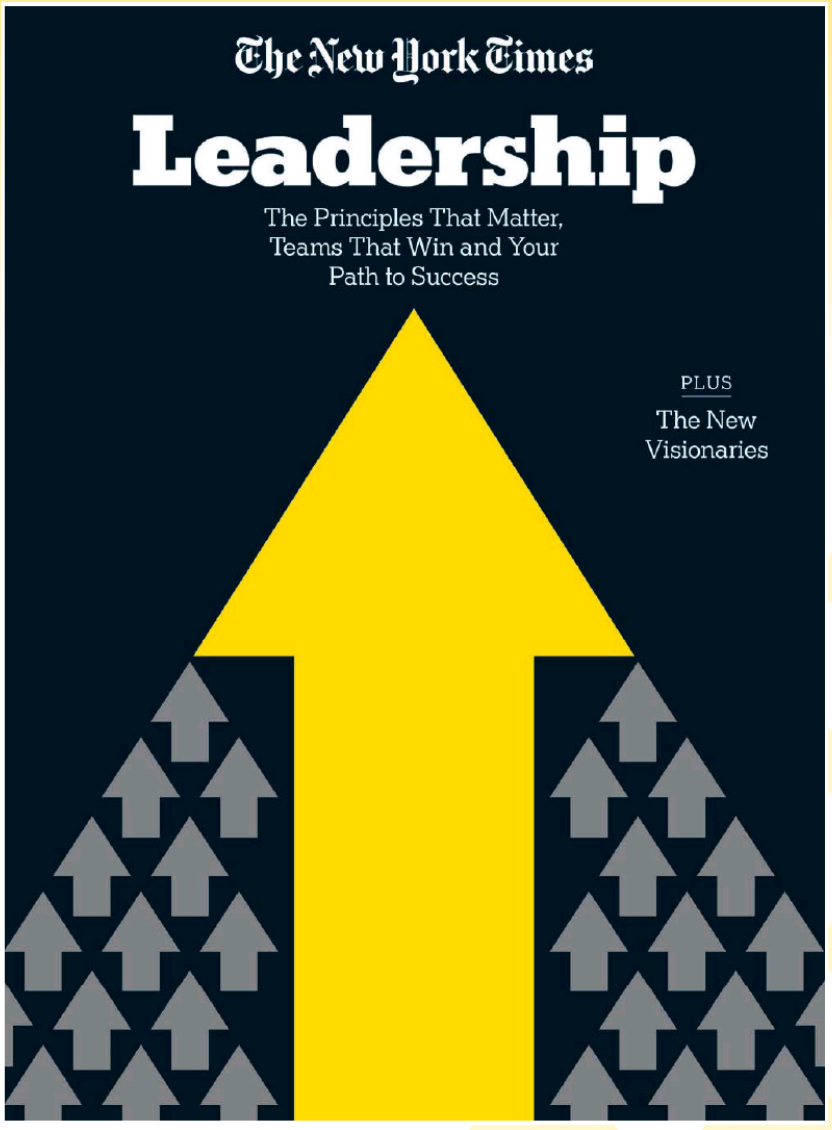
ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GALL

Sketchbook / Between the Pages / By Liana Finck

A book is a whole universe, but what does it actually contain?

LIANA FINCK *is the author, most recently, of "Excuse Me: Cartoons, Complaints, and Notes to Self."*

Uncover Your Path to Success



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