



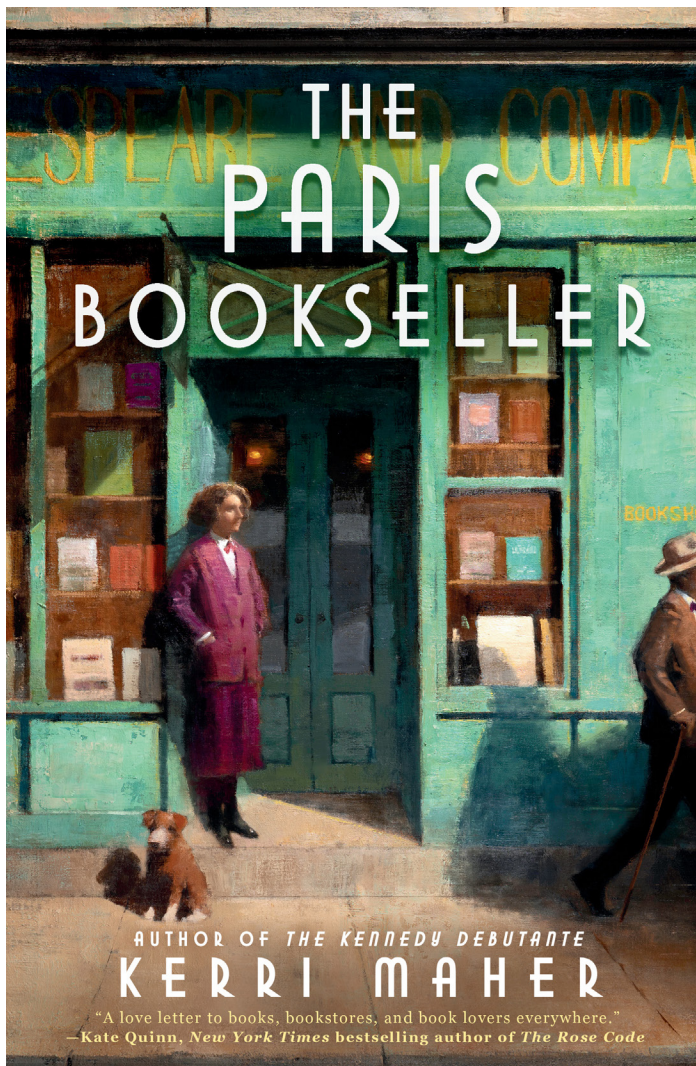
HISTORICAL NOVELS REVIEW

ISSUE 99

FEBRUARY 2022

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THE HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY was formed in 1997 to help promote historical fiction. We are an open society — if you want to get involved, get in touch.

MEMBERSHIP in the Historical Novel Society entitles members to all the year's publications: four issues of *Historical Novels Review*, as well as exclusive membership benefits through the Society website. Back issues of Society magazines are also available. For current rates, please see: <https://historicalnovelsociety.org/members/join/>

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HISTORICAL FICTION MARKET NEWS

IN MEMORIAM: BRYAN DUMAS

The *HNR* editorial team was deeply saddened by the passing of US reviews editor Bryan Dumas on October 23, 2021. Bryan was a talented writer and editor who loved historical novels and was dedicated to his work for the HNS; he had served as an editor since 2015 and a reviewer for some time before that. He had wide-ranging interests and was game for reviewing all types of books—literary fiction, inspirational romance, alternate history, you name it—and was especially skilled at evaluating these diverse works in a concise, engaging way. He was a pleasure to work with (a sentiment echoed by his many publisher contacts) and an integral member of our team, and his enthusiasm, commitment, and good humor are greatly missed.

NEW UK CHILDREN'S EDITOR, ANN LAZIM

Welcome to Ann Lazim, who recently joined as the UK children's editor for the *HNR*. She will be organizing reviews of children's and young adult historical novels from British publishers. Ann recently retired as Literature and Library Development Manager at the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education in London. Her contact details are on the masthead at left.

NEW BOOKS BY HNS MEMBERS

Congrats to the following author members on their new releases! If you've written a historical novel or nonfiction work published (or to be published) in 2022, please send the following details to me at sljohnson2@eiu.edu or @readingthepast by April 7: author, title, publisher, release date, and a blurb of one sentence or less. Details will appear in May's magazine. Submissions may be edited for space.

In **Beth Kanell's** *This Ardent Flame* (Five Star/Cengage, Jun. 23, 2021), Alice Sanborn, 17 years old in 1852, bonds with a deaf teacher in her Vermont village and finds her way into the Abolition movement, despite the risks the two girls face.

Linda Harris Sittig's *B-52 DOWN!* (Freedom Forge Press, Aug. 4, 2021) is historical nonfiction about an event in January 1964: a B-52 bomber loaded with two nuclear bombs and a five-man crew slammed into a massive blizzard and the crew had to eject from 30,000 feet; while 1000 volunteers searched for five days for survivors, the wives of the five airmen waited and prayed that their husbands were still alive.

With only hours left until his transport to a death camp, discovering the body of a murdered Gestapo officer gives a Jewish labor camp prisoner a last chance to survive, in *The Uniform* by **G. Gruen** (Writers Bureau, Aug. 14, 2021).

In **James R. Benn's** *Road of Bones* (Soho Press, Sep. 7, 2021), the 16th Billy Boyle WWII mystery novel, Captain Billy Boyle is sent to the USSR to investigate a double murder of American and Russian intelligence agents and is paired with a KGB investigator who has his

own secret agenda.

As retold in *Marriage, Murder, and Betrayal in Nineteenth-Century California*, historical nonfiction by **Jo M. Haraf** (Fonthill Media, Sep. 27, 2021), after James Black's death from addiction, his beloved daughter ate the signature off his will rather than see her father's cattle empire go to her stepmother.

Set in 1930, *Darjeeling Inheritance* by **Liz Harris** (Heywood Press, Oct. 1, 2021) is a tale of love and malice on three tea plantations that lie in the shadow of the Himalayas.

The Music Maker's Daughter, The Hours Before Dawn, and Love Comes at a Cost by **Gayle Wyatt** (Independently published, Oct. 8, 2021) are the first three books in the Westcott Girls series, which is set in the UK in the turbulent 1930s-40s.

In *Shard: A Novel of Captivity, Betrayal, and Endurance* by **James R. Benn** (Ranger Publications, Oct. 11, 2021), Ethan Shard, part of the US Army of Occupation in Japan, 1950, is knee-deep in the black market, getting rich stealing from the army and selling to Japanese gangs; sent to stem the North Korean invasion, he is captured, and it will take all his wiles to help survive the brutality of the climate, his captors, and his own nature.

In **Elizabeth Forest's** historical fantasy novel, *The Wharf Rat Guild* (Arbori Books, Oct. 23, 2021), orphaned children living by the Thames in 1660 are at risk of being kidnapped not only for indentured servitude in the Colonies, but also to be sold into slavery to the nobility, who covet their unusual gifts.

In *Bedtrick* by **Jinny Webber** (Cuidono Press, Nov. 16, 2021), the unconventional marriage of the Shakespearean actor Alexander Cooke, born female but passing for male, to another woman unfolds against the political and theatrical tensions of the late days of Queen Elizabeth I.

After learning his family's darkest secret, a secret hidden from him since his birth, sixteen-year-old Will McDougall joins a militia unit in Civil War Oregon in *Safe Thus Far: Searching for Truth in Civil War Oregon* by **Theresa Hupp** (Rickover Publishing, Nov. 15, 2021).

Set on the 16th century Anglo-Scottish Border, Book 3 in the Thunder on the Moor series, *Shake Loose the Border* by **Andrea Matthews** (Inez M. Foster, Nov. 22, 2021), follows the story of Will Foster, who, in an effort to protect his new bride from her Scottish kin, sends Maggie to her childhood home in Lancaster, unaware that home is four hundred and fifty years in the future.

As related in **Yvon Delville's** *The Fourth Sword* (Independently published, Nov. 27, 2021), Elise Chocard, a young nurse from 1974, wakes up in 18th-century Belgium, where she wishes to pursue her vocation but risks her life when facing extremists bent on repressing independent-minded women like her.

In *Dare Not Tell* by **Elaine Schroller** (independently published, Nov. 30, 2021) Joe Parker, an Australian WWI veteran who thinks he has tamed all his demons and his American wife, Sophie, a wartime nurse who thinks she knows all his secrets, must confront their shared past in a story of love, loss, and redemption from WWI France to Australia and France on the threshold of WWII.

In *Lies of Omission* by **Kathleen Ernst** (Level Best/Historia, Nov. 30, 2021), when Pomeranian immigrant Hanneke Bauer reaches Wisconsin in 1855, she believes her dearest dreams are coming true:

after reuniting with her husband Fridolin at his farm near Watertown, she will help create a true home, but instead she receives the shocking news that he is dead.

Susan Higginbotham's *John Brown's Women* (Onslow Press, Dec. 2021) is the story of three women connected with the American abolitionist: his wife, Mary, who never expected to be the wife of a martyr; his daughter-in-law Wealthy, whose dream of making Kansas into a free state turns into madness, mayhem, and murder; and his daughter Annie, who guards her father's secrets while risking her heart.

In *Everything Will Be All Right* by **Constance Emmett** (Next Chapter, Jan. 4), splintered by emigration, World War Two and secrets kept from one another, the Prestons are a Northern Irish family grappling with the past, dislocation, and a frightening and uncertain future.

In *Knights of the Air, Book 1: Rage!* by **Iain Stewart** (Atmosphere Press, Jan. 10), some say the skies in WWI are the last days of chivalric warfare, where airborne warriors duel in single combat like mediaeval knights, but to survive Lance Fitch finds he must make his enemy vermin, his friends expendable, and his chivalry more threadbare than a beggar's cloak.

From bestselling author **Michelle Muriel** comes *Westland* (Little Cabin Books LLC, Jan. 11), the sequel to the #1 bestseller *Essie's Roses*, set during the Reconstruction Era post-Civil War: a moving, gripping historical novel about family secrets, forgiveness, and the meaning of home.

In Florence, Italy, in 1560, amid the beauty of the gardens at Pitti Palace, evil schemes attempt to spoil the lives of the Medici household in *Labor of Love* (Book One in Gardens of Time; Celebrate Lit Publishing, Feb. 15) by **Marguerite Martin Gray**.

Can King Wiglaf keep the dragons at bay or is Mercia doomed to disappear beneath the wings of the Wessex wyvern? Read *Son of Mercia* by **MJ Porter** (Boldwood Books, Feb. 16) to find out.

Two families whose lives intersect, two refugees who travel far-flung paths: from Vienna in the 1930s to England in the 1940s—and back—*The Third Man* by **Randolph Splitter** (Golden Antelope Press, Mar. 7) is a literary-historical novel about dispossession, exile, the gift of refuge, and the morally complex search for justice and humanity.

In *Drakemaster* by **E. C. Ambrose** (Guardbridge Books, Apr.) the year is 1257, the place, Mongol-occupied Kaifeng, China: a captured bellmaker, the warrior who enslaved him, an astronomer, a monk, and a spy race to uncover a clockwork doomsday device that draws down the power of the stars.

The true-life story of Marion Davies' 34-year relationship with William Randolph Hearst including a whirlwind courtship, a movie career spanning two decades and 44 films, a secret child, and harrowing family excesses, not to mention a secret love affair with Charlie Chaplin, is the subject of *The Blue Butterfly* by **Leslie Johansen Nack** (She Writes Press, May 3).

The Physicists' Daughter by **Mary Anna Evans** (Sourcebooks, Jun. 7) is the story of WWII factory worker Justine Byrne, the daughter of two physics professors, who is stunned by the death of a coworker in an apparent industrial accident, forcing her to draw from her unconventional upbringing to identify a spy hiding in plain sight.

NEW PUBLISHING DEALS

Sources include authors and publishers, *Publishers Weekly*, Publishers Marketplace, *The Bookseller*, and more. Email me at sljohnson2@eu.edu or tweet @readingthepast to have your publishing deal included.

Rachel Beanland's reimagining of one of early America's deadliest tragedies, the Richmond Theater Fire of 1811, told from the points of view of four characters—men and women, Black and white, free and enslaved—as they struggle to come to terms with the tragic event, sold to Carina Guiterman at Simon & Schuster by Chad Luibl at Janklow & Nesbit.

Melanie Fried at Graydon House acquired **Barbara Mujica's** *Miss Del Rio*, about early Hollywood actor Dolores Del Rio, who was also a pioneer of Mexican cinema during its Golden Age, via Leticia Gomez at Savvy Literary Services.

The Sign of the Weeping Virgin, the first novel in **Alana White's** Guid'Antonio Vespucci mystery series set in Renaissance Florence as part of a trilogy set against the plot to assassinate the Medici family and their supporters in Florence Cathedral in 1478, has been acquired by Atmosphere Press for publication in spring 2022 (in paperback for the first time), followed by the publication of the new, second title, *The Hearts of All on Fire*, also in paperback, in August 2022.

A Princess Called Sunny by **Clare McHugh** (author of *A Most English Princess*), about Princess Alix of Hesse, the young woman who married the heir to the Russian imperial throne and became Empress Alexandra, sold to William Morrow's Lucia Macro via Laura Dail at Laura Dail Literary Agency.

Tessa Woodward at William Morrow acquired *After Anne* by **Logan Steiner**, retelling the tragic life story of Lucy Maud Montgomery, author of the beloved, bestselling *Anne of Green Gables* novels, via Abby Saul at The Lark Group.

The East Indian by **Brinda Charr**y, about the young man believed to be the first person from the Indian subcontinent to arrive in North America, following his travels from India to Shakespearean London to Jamestown, where he worked on tobacco plantations, sold to Kathy Belden at Scribner via Eric Simonoff at William Morris Endeavor. Scribe will publish the novel in the UK and Australia.

Historian (and former *HNR* reviewer) **Laura Shepperson's** novel *The Heroines: Phaedra*, a feminist retelling of young Cretan princess Phaedra, set amid the male-dominated political world of classical Athens, described as "revealing the truth of the woman behind the myth" and aimed at readers of *Circe* and *The Song of Achilles*, sold to Tara Gavin at Alcove Press for fall 2022 publication, by Nelle Andrew at Rachel Mills Literary (NA). UK and Commonwealth rights were sold to Rosanna Forte, commissioning editor at Sphere.

Time's Undoing by **Cheryl A. Head** (author of the Charlie Mack Motown Mystery series), based on her family history and exploring inherited trauma and the pain of white supremacy in the alternating stories of a Black family encountering racial violence in 1929 Alabama and a young Black reporter 90 years later investigating her great-grandfather's unsolved murder, sold to Lindsey Rose at Dutton via Lori Galvin at Aevitas Creative Management.

The Rose of Jericho, the second novel by **Nathan Harris**, author of the critically acclaimed *The Sweetness of Water*, following two siblings in the post-Civil War era of 1868 as their former owner flees to Mexico with plans to re-establish his Confederate lifestyle by forming a new

colony with other rebellious Southerners, sold to Ben George at Little, Brown via Emily Forland of Brandt & Hochman.

A Bakery in Paris by **Aimie Runyan**, a French family saga spanning 120 years, beginning during the Paris Commune and continuing through the recent past, sold to Tessa Woodward at William Morrow via Melissa Jeglinski at The Knight Agency.

Writing as **Betty Walker**, Jane Holland sold two new sagas in her Cornish Girls series (see the latest reviewed in this issue), about three young women working for the war effort on the British home front, to Lucy Frederick, editor at Avon UK, via Alison Bonomi at LBA Literary Agency.

Epic Annette: A Heroine's Tale, novel in verse by **Anne Weber** (trans. Tess Lewis), a bestseller in Germany that retells the true story of Anne (Annette) Beaumanoir, who rescued Jewish children with the French resistance during WWII, fought in Algeria against the French army, and became a noted neuropsychologist, who still resides in France, sold to Susie Nicklin, commissioning editor for The Indigo Press, via Matthes & Seitz Berlin.

Following three women's intersecting lives during the lead-up to Nantucket's Great Fire of 1846, *A Tiny Spark* by **Julie Gerstenblatt** sold to Kathy Sagan at Mira by Allison Hunter at Trellis Literary Management.

American Codebreaker by **K. D. Alden** (author of the *HNR* Editors' Choice title *A Mother's Promise*), based on the life of Elizebeth Smith Friedman, a woman called "America's first female cryptanalyst" who cracked Nazi spies' codes during WWII, sold to Leah Hultenschmidt at Grand Central via Evan Marshall at Evan Marshall Agency.

CORRECTION

In the review of Melissa Amateis' *The Stranger from Berlin* (*HNR* 98), the author's inspiration came from her research into anti-German sentiment during WWI, not WWII. The online review has been corrected to fix this error and clarify the timeline.

OTHER NEW & FORTHCOMING TITLES

For forthcoming novels through late 2022, please see our guides, compiled by Fiona Sheppard (adult titles) and by Fiona Sheppard and Susan Firghil Park (children's and YA):

<https://historicalnovelsociety.org/guides/forthcoming-historical-novels/>



COMPILED BY SARAH JOHNSON

Sarah Johnson is Book Review Editor of *HNR*, a librarian, readers' advisor, and author of reference books. She reviews for *Booklist* and *CHOICE* and blogs about historical novels at readingthepast.com. Her latest book is *Historical Fiction II: A Guide to the Genre*.



NEW VOICES

Research, family histories, and imagination are blended into insightful historical fiction by debut novelists Melissa Fu, Tammye Huf, Elena Gorokhova, and Samantha Greene Woodruff.



Family history was the initial source of inspiration for Elena Gorokhova's *A Train to Moscow* (Lake Union, 2022), which is set during and after WWII. This period, Gorokhova explains, "is still known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War, the war where one in every seven Russians was killed by the enemy. Because of such immense loss of life, the war was (and still is) the glue that has held the country together. There is no family in my Motherland that didn't lose someone in the maw of battle, and mine was no exception."

Gorokhova's mother's younger brother, she says, "went to defend the country and never came back. He was an artist whose story I learned from old letters and family conversations, the story that is fused into the book. Like the protagonist's uncle, he graduated from the Leningrad Art Academy and, when the war broke out, was drafted to the front. Unlike her uncle, he was mortally wounded and died in his home in Ivanovo in 1942."

As she was plotting the novel, which is told through the eyes of Sasha, a young rebellious woman, "all those *what if* questions sprang to mind, laying the groundwork for his story. What if he hadn't been killed and had made it all the way to Berlin? What if, unlike his staunch communist father, he had questioned the infallibility of my righteous country and the façade of lies erected by its leaders?"

"My older sister, an actress, was born in 1942, so the novel's post-war shortages—both of food and men—are burned into her memory. It was also the time of grief and fear, of Stalin's purges and Gulag labor camps. Everyone knew of someone executed or sent to the northern fringes of the country to serve time as a political prisoner. In my family, it was my grandmother's brother, sentenced to eight years in a labor camp for telling a joke. He never returned."

It was the story of Gorokhova's uncle which, she says, "sifted through the filter of memory, became the foundation for this book. So did my sister's acting career, which highlights the novel's conflict between the truth of art and the official curtain of lies. The cast of characters became a microcosm of our Soviet Motherland. Based on my family history, *A Train to Moscow* became a novel of family secrets, artistic struggle, ambition, loss, and strangled love."

Samantha Greene Woodruff's novel *The Lobotomist's Wife* (Lake Union, 2022), like Gorokhova's, is also at its heart "a novel about the struggle—particularly for women—to be true to themselves in the face of society's oppressive norms, and the lengths people will go to fit in," she says. "This is my first novel, and initially I was writing a more personal contemporary fiction about a woman who is unsatisfied with her idyllic suburban life. Concurrently (but unrelated) I was reading the non-fiction book *Get Well Soon: History's Worst Plagues and the Heroes Who Fought Them* by Jennifer Wright."

It was when she got "to the chapter about lobotomy and Walter Freeman II (1895–1972), the doctor who popularized the procedure in the United States," she says, "I became utterly enthralled, and knew that this was what I wanted to write about. I began my research for *The Lobotomist's Wife*."

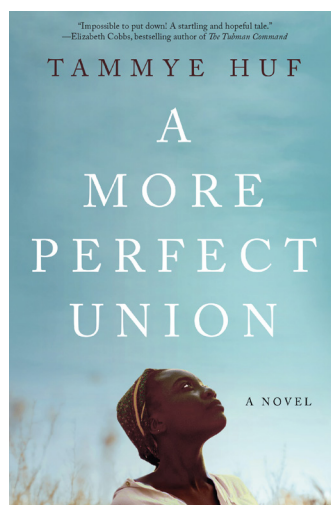
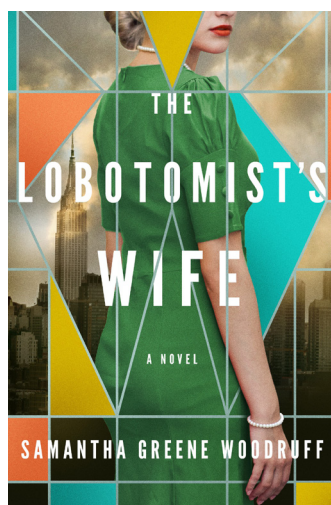
"I had a vague notion of what lobotomy was, but I had no idea that the heyday of this gruesome treatment was in the middle of the 20th century. Or that, by the early 1950s, Freeman was travelling the country like a salesman, lobotomizing dozens of people daily with his outpatient 'ice pick' technique. At home, he was prescribing lobotomy for everything from migraines to depression, and more than half of his private patients were women—Rosemary Kennedy being one of the most famous."

As a result, Woodruff says, "I began to re-imagine my contemporary story through the lens of lobotomy. I started by creating the character of an unfulfilled 1950s housewife yearning for more, in the brief period when lobotomy was considered a miracle cure. Initially Margaret (the housewife) was my protagonist, but when a friend asked me about Freeman's wife I started to think more broadly. What kind of woman could be married to a mad doctor who was more like a serial killer? Freeman's actual wife, Marjorie, was an economics professor and an alcoholic. Their distant relationship was marred by his infidelity and the tragic loss of one of their four children. That didn't suit my story."

"I invented Ruth Emeraldine, and she became my protagonist. Ruth is a foil for both Robert (my fictional lobotomist) and Margaret—a character who gives humanity to how and why lobotomy rose to prominence and an example of how a woman can buck convention and stand on her own in a male-dominated world."

Tammye Huf, author of *A More Perfect Union* (Forever/US, 2022; Myriad Editions/UK, 2020), describes how she found the inspiration for her novel. "When I first heard the story of my great-great grandparents, I was amazed. My great-great grandmother had been enslaved, and my great-great grandfather had come from Ireland. When they met and fell in love, he bought her freedom to marry her."

"Their incredible story took hold of my imagination and wouldn't let go. I loved the heart-swelling, romantic idea of two people so in love that they would defy society and the law to follow their hearts, but the more I thought about them, the more I wondered, how on earth



did they do it?"

Huf was particularly moved by their interracial love story because of her own situation. "Being an African-American woman married to a white European man, I felt an affinity to them. I could only imagine the risks and dangers they must have faced. The disapproval that my husband and I encountered as an interracial couple would pale by comparison. I was fascinated by the courage and strength of character that they must have had to pursue their relationship and the deep love they must have felt for each other to persevere despite the odds."

Huf felt that their story needed to be told. "Despite our country's inglorious history of racial terror and intolerance, woven throughout our past are other, more hopeful stories too. To me, my great-great grandparents' example is an encouraging reminder that love has the power to break down barriers and build bridges to overcome the racial divide that we still grapple with today."

"*A More Perfect Union* is the result of imagining what it might have been like for them. Placing my characters in the reality of the day, I explore the seemingly impossible love of two people who refuse to let the circumstances of their world keep them apart."

One of the great powers of historical fiction for Huf, she relates, "is the way it can help us look at the past in a new light, shifting the viewfinder to see what was always there but out of focus. I think this 19th-century interracial love story offers new perspective and encourages us in the here and now, making *A More Perfect Union* a story for our times."

When Melissa Fu, author of *Peach Blossom Spring* (Little, Brown/US; Wildfire/UK, 2022), was a child, her father was, she says, "always trying to grow fruit trees. Somehow, they seemed a perpetual disappointment—tent caterpillars ate the leaves, summer hailstones damaged the crop, birds stole the fruit, or the harvest was small and sour. A few years ago, when I became more serious about writing, I drafted a short story about my dad and his trees. I shared it with some writer friends and their consensus was that the story was fine, but there was more to tell."

"If there's more, where does the story begin? I thought, and soon found myself going back in time, to my father's childhood in 1930s China."

As children, Fu and her brothers, she continues, "learned that our father was 'born in China, moved to Taiwan and is now an American citizen.' If we asked for details, he would say that he couldn't

remember or that 'Chinese history is sad.' He wouldn't say anything else. Except once. One day in, 1998, for some reason, he decided to tell us more. That afternoon I wrote down everything he said. Every date, every city, every scrap of memory he recalled from his youth. Since then, I have lived in six different houses and two different countries. Throughout all the moves and miles, I have always known exactly where those notes were. I knew they would be important someday; I just didn't know when."

Fu asked herself, *Where does the story begin?* and her answer was: *with those pages*. "As I tried to connect my notes to the story of his trees, I started to imagine a boy and his mother, who survived both the Sino-Japanese and Chinese Civil Wars through a combination of good luck, heartbreaking choices, and great loss. I wondered if a childhood sown in displacement could grow into a life of abundance."

In early 2019, Fu's father passed away. "Although I'm sure he would have told a different story than the one I have written, his life inspired my novel, and I hope *Peach Blossom Spring* celebrates the happiness he eventually found."

Debut novelists Fu, Huf, Gorokhova, and Woodruff have all illustrated the art of utilizing family history, inspiration from stories they heard, and how to combine these with historical research to create their wide-ranging historical novels. These are novels that, as Huf points out, introduce their readers into ways of looking at the past in a "new light."



WRITTEN BY MYFANWY COOK

Myfanwy Cook is an Associate University Fellow and 'a creative enabler'. She is a prize-winning short story writer who facilitates creative writing workshops. Contact myfanwyc@btinternet.com if you have been captivated by the writing of a debut novelist you'd like to see featured.



Drink & the Devil: *Treasure Island*



*Fifteen men on the dead man's chest
Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum
Drink and the devil had done for the rest
Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum*

So goes the chorus of Robert Louis Stevenson's sea chanty in his pirate adventure novel, *Treasure Island*, published in 1883 (in novel form; it was first serialized 1881-1882). When I read the book as a child, my mental picture was somewhat literal: 15 men dog-piled on a dead guy, one they'd presumably just killed in a drunken melee since, well, *pirates*. Then I thought a bit about context and figured maybe it was 15 men clustered around a treasure chest, a chest belonging to someone now dead. The drink part I vaguely understood, and I wondered how the devil had done for the rest, but regardless, "I'm done for" was now added to my lexicon, to parental consternation when I used it to lament dish duty. Yet both childish suppositions were incorrect. Stevenson got the idea for *Treasure Island* (and the lyrics he created for the chanty) from a list of Virgin Island names he read in a book. Dead Man's Chest is the name of the coffin-shaped island.

Treasure Island has everything necessary for an adventure story to capture a child's (or adult's, for that matter) imagination: a historical setting, tall ships, pirates, marooned hermits, buried treasure. I devoured it. And then I saw Disney's 1950 film version and experienced my first crush: Robert "Bobby" Driscoll, in the role of the plucky protagonist, Jim Hawkins. The plot, briefly: Hawkins's father (his mother, in the film) owns an inn, the Admiral Benbow. A drunken seaman, Billy Bones (Finlay Currie), is lodging at the inn, and he warns Jim of his overwhelming fear of the "seafaring man with one leg" – to always be on the lookout for this dangerous personage. Bones is visited by Blind Pew, a former shipmate who delivers to him, scrawled on a piece of paper, the Black Spot, an ominous summons to give up the location of a buried treasure. Bones, it turns out, was first mate to the infamous pirate Captain Flint, and now his former shipmates seek the location of Flint's buried treasure. The Black Spot so terrifies Bones that he keels right over, dead from an apopleptic fit. In the film, he entrusts young Hawkins with Flint's treasure map

(in the book, Hawkins's mother discovers it while looking for back rent in Bones' sea chest). Hawkins shows this map to the local squire, Trelawney (Walter Fitzgerald), and Dr. Livesey (Denis O'Dea). They decide to mount an expedition to find and retrieve the dead pirate captain's treasure. Trelawney commissions a fine ship, the *Hispaniola*, under a fine captain, Smollett (Basil Sydney). Smollett expresses his unhappiness with a couple of aspects of the venture: a) the squire has hired a cook, Long John Silver, and allowed that cook to recruit the majority of the crew and b) the entire crew (and half of Bristol) seems to know the purpose of the voyage, which was meant to be a secret. Hawkins is initially mistrustful of Silver – he exhibits horror when Silver comes out from behind a counter and Jim realizes the man only has one leg. But Silver's roguish charm and quick wit soon allay the boy's fears. Hawkins sets sail on the *Hispaniola* as cabin boy in search of the buried treasure; mutiny, murder, and adventure await.

This movie has the distinction of being Walt Disney's first entirely live-action film, which was a significant leap for the studio. This decision was driven by a few factors. Disney had money in post-war England, proceeds from Disney films shown in the country that he could not move to the United States because of currency regulations. He decided to spend the funds on making a movie in England, but Disney lacked the resources for this to be an animated film; artists and animators like the team Disney had assembled in California were not available in England. Thus, he focused on live action, with most of the cast made up of British actors. The only Hollywood import for the primary characters was Driscoll, and several of his scenes that didn't require close-ups had to be shot using a double due to problems with England's child labor laws – Driscoll was forced to leave the country before filming wrapped because of them.¹

Driscoll was one of the first actors Disney put under contract, part of a sweetheart team with another child actor, Luana Patten. He had already proved himself in a couple of Disney films that were part animation, part live action (eg, the now memory-holed *Song of the South*), and he would go on to be the voice of the boy who never grew up in 1953's animated *Peter Pan*. His performances were a primary factor in the creation of an Academy Award for juveniles. It's not unusual for successful child actors to experience difficulties as they age, but a word of unsolicited advice: if sadness isn't your thing, never look into the path your childhood film crush took in life. Driscoll's pathetic story hits like a ton of bricks. When he appeared in *Treasure Island*, however, the future was bright. His performance in the film as a precocious and brave twelve-year-old was generally praised by critics, though a few did ding him for his American accent. While my focus as a pre-adolescent was on Driscoll and his adventures, viewings of the film as an adult brought home the idiosyncratic virtuosity of Robert Newton's performance as Long John Silver. It's downright iconic.

Newton was a British character actor, and when viewing his performance now, from a certain perspective, it borders on caricature. The reason for this is that it's essentially the archetype – though pirates had been a staple since the advent of moving pictures and Long John Silver had appeared on film before (eg, Wallace Beery's portrayal in the 1934 *Treasure Island*), Newton essentially created the now familiar film pirate, from the speech patterns to the peg leg and cantankerous shoulder parrot (these last, admittedly, granted him by Stevenson's character description). Though he had a wide range of well-received roles on stage and screen, Newton, like stars such as Errol Flynn, was eventually best known for his popularity with

young, male audiences through roles in adventure films. His lifestyle was piratical in many respects – he was a hard-drinking and hard-living man. (And perhaps unsurprisingly, bankrupt and dead at 50.) He had some seafaring experience, having served in the Royal Navy during World War II. Newton was originally from Dorset in the West Country, and this is the accent and rhotic dialect he exaggerates for the Bristol-based Silver; it's what gives "pirate speech" its hard, rolling rrrs. Newton's Silver is hammy and fun – with a one-eyed squint and near perpetual sheen of sweat, possibly from lurching around on his peg leg, but just as likely due to the fact that Newton was three sheets to the wind during most of filming. The last film he worked on, *Around the World in 80 Days*, thought it wise to write into his contract that he had to remain sober on set; he managed it, but the astounding bender he went on after filming didn't end until his death the next year. Silver carries on a snappy dialogue with his parrot, named Captain Flint, who's continually shrieking "Pieces of eight!" It's easy to see how Silver charms Jim Hawkins ("Smart as paint you are, Master 'Arkins!") while the audience, privy from the beginning to events and conversations Jim never sees, has a more complete picture of the duplicitous rogue (who turns out to have been Flint's quartermaster) before a turn hidden in an apple barrel clues Jim in. The other pirates – George Merry, Israel Hands, et al. – are blunt instruments, but Silver is intelligent and cunning, able to play the long game. It's obvious he'd sell his own mother for a doubloon, but one of the engaging aspects of his portrayal in *Treasure Island* is his soft spot for the young cabin boy. The timbre of their relationship is even more sympathetic when viewed in light of the novel; Jim's father has just died not long before he sets out on the *Hispaniola's* voyage, and Silver is a replacement father figure, of sorts.

Shot in vivid Technicolor, with some obviously fake but also lovely matte backgrounds (stormy scenes outside the Admiral Benbow Inn are a good example), *Treasure Island* ticked the right boxes for its 1950s audience. "Violent, exciting, colourful, stimulating, and brilliantly acted" was a general consensus; Bobby Driscoll is "sensitive" and Newton gave the "performance of his life."² The *New York Times* stated that "Mr. Stevenson's classic never really sprung to full cinematic life until Mr. Disney waved his magic wand."³

These are contemporary views. How well does the film age? Some modern reviews of this film complain about a variety of things, most often in comparison to what viewers now expect from multi-million dollar, effects-heavy Hollywood blockbusters: the location shots aren't as convincing as those created with CGI, action scenes aren't "exciting enough" when compared with special effects extravaganzas like those in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Any time characters "waste" talking is "boring," taking away from screen time that could be spent on repetitious fight scenes and explosions. One adjective used for some of the portrayals was "cartoonish,"⁴ with accompanying notes on the superiority of the *Pirates* franchise to the 1950 film. While it's a valid description (Geoffrey Wilkinson's gleefully deranged Ben Gunn and Walter Fitzgerald's blustering moron Squire Trelawney provide ample evidence), this is amusing as a comparison criticism. Subtlety certainly isn't Johnny Depp's forte as a pirate captain, and the *Pirates* films and those of similar ilk are essentially live-action cartoons in their whimsicality and complete disregard for the laws of physics. An anonymous IMDB poster on Newton's later reprisals of the Silver role (see below) summed it up: "In my single digits I rarely paid attention to the perceived budgetary constraints on a film or TV series...Will today's kids, brought up on crap like the *Pirates of the Caribbean* 'franchise' with it's [sic] naive premise and foppish 'captain,' not to mention the typical overuse of CGI, go for this? I doubt it, as it requires them to listen and think – besides, it has a plot!"⁵ Perhaps we can hope better for the capabilities of our modern children, but... it may be wise not to lay bets either way.

Newton's portrayal of Silver garnered him more pirate roles (eg, Blackbeard), and he reprised the character of Silver in *Return to Treasure Island* (1954) and "The Adventures of Long John Silver" (a TV series which ran from 1956-1957). Imitation is said to be the sincerest form of flattery, and while there are few who would even recognize his name, the enduring impact of Newton's portrayal is evident in all the outgrowths and parodies it spawned, including your officemates' cringeworthy attempts on annual Talk Like a Pirate Day to imitate the speech patterns he popularized (it's September 19, if you'd like to observe). Tim Curry channels Newton in his version of Silver in *Muppet Treasure Island*, facing off against a Kermit Captain Smollett who has never looked better green (even if his slippery amphibian hands do make cutlass work more difficult).

It's not a spoiler to note that Jim survives his adventure, though he is far from unmarked by it. In the book, even when safely back in England, he confesses: "The worst dreams that ever I have are when I hear the surf booming about its coasts, or start upright in bed, with the sharp voice of Captain Flint still ringing in my ears: 'Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!'" I was also left with something enduring from repeated childhood viewings of *Treasure Island* – memories of fantastically fun pirate playtimes with my younger brother (though he did prefer *Davy Crockett*), and a fascination with adventure stories and their film outgrowths, especially those featuring tall ships and stars to steer them by.

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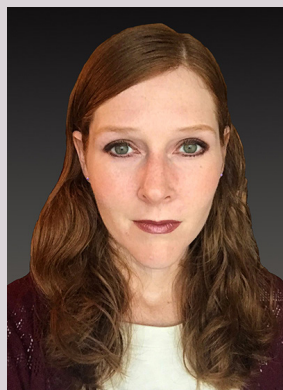
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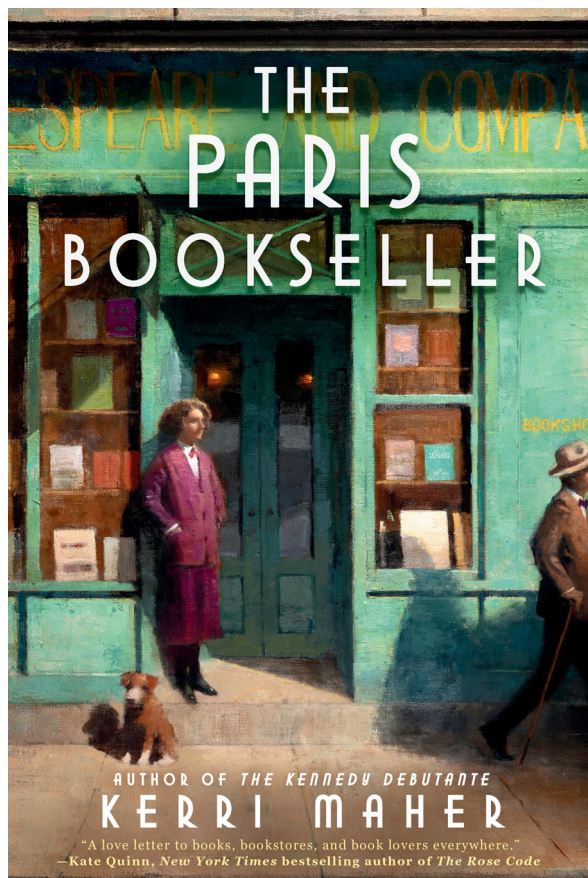
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WRITING REAL PEOPLE

Kerri Maher Discusses the Challenges and Rewards



In 1919 a young American woman named Sylvia Beach was searching for a way to meld her love of literature with her love of Paris and create a livelihood. When she befriended the proprietors of a famous French bookstore, her destiny became apparent. Beach turned to one of those proprietors, Adrienne Monnier, for support, advice and, eventually, for love as she embarked on the monumental task of establishing an English-language bookstore on the Left Bank.

The bookstore became a haven for some of the most influential English-language writers. By providing a central place for the expats to congregate and share ideas, Beach's store shaped the future of literature, but the bookseller did much more. When James Joyce's groundbreaking novel *Ulysses* was banned in the United States, Beach decided she would publish the book herself. Her courageous battle against censorship would call on all of her personal and financial resources and take her to the brink of ruin.

This captivating story is the inspiration behind *The Paris Bookseller* (Berkley, 2022) by acclaimed historical novelist Kerri Maher. Maher once said that no one told her how to research and write a historical novel. Instead, she let herself be led by "instinct and interest." Those twin prongs guided her in the writing of *The Kennedy Debutante* about Kathleen "Kick" Kennedy, *The Girl in White Gloves* about Grace Kelly,

and now *The Paris Bookseller*, an engrossing book about Sylvia Beach and the literary lights who mingled in the aisles of Shakespeare and Company.

Maher holds an MFA from Columbia University and founded an award-winning literary journal of short-form YA writing. She has also written a memoir of her writing life entitled *This Is Not a Writing Manual*. Previously a professor of writing, she now writes full time and lives with her daughter in Massachusetts.

In hindsight, Sylvia Beach was the perfect subject for Maher, who once worked at the Community Bookstore, an independent in Brooklyn "that was a hotbed of literary talent just like Sylvia's shop" as well as in the rare books conservation department of her university library. Although Maher was introduced to Beach when she first read her autobiography at the age of twenty, Maher didn't think of the bookseller as a subject for a novel until she had the other two novels under her belt.

"I wrote about Kick Kennedy and Grace Kelly first. Both of these American women found themselves in Europe and did interesting work there," she said. The idea of American women living and working in Europe appealed to Maher, and writing about Kennedy and Kelly gave Maher the confidence to tackle the founder of Shakespeare and Company.

In telling Beach's story, Maher also had to write about James and Nora Joyce, Ernest Hemingway and his various wives and lovers, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and others. With libraries full of books about these writers and their work, the amount of research material would seem to be overwhelming. Fortunately, Maher had two decades of prior reading to rely upon. Much of the material was already inside her head. "Certainly I had to refresh my memory," she said. "But this era was in the air for me at the right time. This time in literary history and cultural history is really special."

Maher admits that it was intimidating to write about Beach's milieu. "I had read Hemingway and Joyce and all these other writers, and as an aspiring writer I revered them. To write about them and put words in their mouths was daunting, to say the least," she said.

She was grateful for the experience of writing about the Kennedys because she'd already faced the question of whether or not she had the right to conjure the words, thoughts, and feelings of such a well-known clan. However, writing about Joyce and Hemingway raised the angst exponentially. "Because I'm a writer and they are writers, I wanted to do right by them," she said.

While Maher found inspiration in the work of those writers and in Beach's autobiography, she was also inspired by the original text that inspired Joyce's *Ulysses*, Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*.

"I hope readers will see some of the allusions I made," she added. "How could the idea of home not be important when writing about the expats of the 1920s?" In Shakespeare and Company, Beach created a home away from home for the writers of the so-called Lost Generation.

I HAVE TO ASK *what the characters might have realistically been thinking or doing in this moment. So it tethers you to the historical record in a way that having the freedom to make things up does not.*

One of the challenges, but also one of the rewards, of writing about real people is that the major events are already in place. Those events are immutable, for the most part. “There’s only so much fudging you can do. The historical record is the historical record. The people involved had real thoughts and feelings about these events,” Maher said. “I had to figure out how to maneuver my fictional version of the characters from one real event to another and that’s where the imagination and pleasure happens.”

According to Maher, when writing about a real subject, you can’t just let your imagination run wild. “I have to ask what the characters might have realistically been thinking or doing in this moment. So it tethers you to the historical record in a way that having the freedom to make things up does not.”

While the historical record can act as a tether, it also provides a sense of security because certain elements of structure are already known when writing about real people. “Fictional characters have no scaffolding,” she added.

In addition to the known historical events, real life often holds surprises. Maher was astonished to discover how insulated some of the expatriate writers were. “Many of the American writers formed a colony in Paris but didn’t really integrate themselves into French life. Sylvia was unique in that she became French. Hemingway also did this to some extent. They spoke the language and went to French sporting events. This was part of the reason they were lifelong friends.”

Maher believes that writing about the truth can teach us much about writing fiction. “The things that really happen to real people are both more terrible and more wonderful than we can often imagine.”

To be a young queer woman in Paris in the 1920s and create her own business, find a deep and lasting love, publish James Joyce’s groundbreaking novel, and establish friendships with some of the greatest writers of the 20th century was no ordinary feat. Mahler commented: “Sylvia defied society’s expectations and did the things she believed in, and she did it with great energy and excitement,” adding that “she really lived a full and rich life, a life anybody today would be proud to live.”

Now that Maher has written about these real-life women and the remarkable choices they made and the remarkable things that happened to them, she says she feels much more equipped to write a novel where the stakes are invented.

Another challenge in writing about real people is deciding on the frame of the book. Maher noted that when you’re writing about a real person, you have to find that part of the person’s life that most interests you. “In this case,” she said, “the story I felt was most compelling was the opening of the store and the publishing of *Ulysses*. It had the most satisfying arc.”

In choosing to publish *Ulysses*, Beach did not have the approval of all of her patrons. As Maher writes in the book, “The first thing that happened was that Gertrude [Stein] disavowed her. Incredibly, she and Alice traveled all the way from their cozy apartment in the March slush, just to do it in person.”

Maher says that in spite of some minor feuds, the writers who made their pilgrimages to Beach’s bookstore fed each other’s creativity. A community of writers is something that has also been useful in her own writing. She even dedicates her novel to “*mes amis*,” her friends. “Writers talk about how important finding your virtual water cooler is. Ironically, the pandemic forced a lot of us to find that water cooler,” she said. “I’m fortunate to have an agent who represents a lot of other historical fiction writers. We all get together weekly and chat. It’s like an online water cooler.”

For Maher and most writers, it’s reassuring to know that they aren’t alone. Maher adds that it’s important to be able to exchange work with other writers. “By reading other writers’ drafts and commenting on them you’re always learning all the time. If you’re only reading published work, that makes it more mysterious,” she said. She added that the writers who flocked to Beach’s bookstore were also showing each other their work. “The chapters of *Ulysses* that were serialized were drafts,” she said. “Those writers were constantly giving and getting feedback through their community.”

Timing in any book release, of course, is crucial. Although Maher wondered why it took so long for her to select Beach for a subject, the release of this book couldn’t be more timely. *Ulysses* was published in serialized form one hundred years ago, and a documentary is currently underway featuring the six brave women behind the publication of *Ulysses*, all of whom are characters in *The Paris Bookseller*. Maher will be featured in the documentary¹ and also is appearing at events at the Jefferson Market Courthouse where *Ulysses* was put on trial in 1921 and which is now a library.

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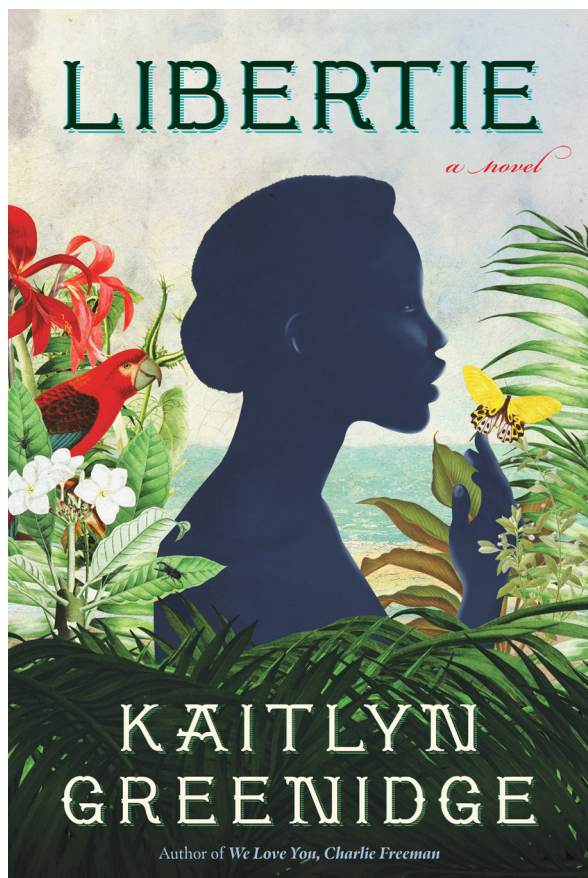
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FREEDOMS

Kaitlyn Greenidge Talks to Tiphonie Yanique about her novel, *Libertie*



Kaitlyn Greenidge's second novel, *Libertie* (Algonquin, 2021), is set during the 1860s, during the slave era in the United States. The main characters are Black. But it is not a novel about freedom from slavery—at least that is not its chief focus. The author is clear that “there is value in exposing the history of slavery in America, and still much to be uncovered about the time, but the question is: why are other aspects of Black people in history less interesting to us? Why do we focus on the specific narrative time of slavery (1840s–1860s)?” Greenidge says that a focus on slavery, in particular the 1840s–1860s, is “because it keeps us in a past that we can claim was done with the Emancipation Proclamation: Hope is on the way, and it will all be over.”

Greenidge became interested in the material that would turn into this novel while working at the Weeksville Heritage Center, in central Brooklyn. She did an oral history project with a descendant of Dr. Susan Smith McKinney-Steward, the first Black female doctor in New York State. It is her daughter, Anna McKinney Holly, who Greenidge uses as the model for Libertie Sampson. The more Greenidge learned about these women doctors, the more she became interested in their family narrative.

Greenidge says, “When we read white history, we welcome learning

about intimate aspects of culture (petticoats, phrasing, etiquette), but with Black historical novels we want to learn about specific figures, specifically about slavery.” In *Libertie*, Greenidge defies this by refusing to present major historical figures. Instead, she uses a fictionalized retelling of the story she had heard about, while using contextual details, like posters from the period, the songs that were sung, and what room and board would have felt and looked like for a Black college girl of the time.

Much of the historical detail in the novel is also focused on what medical treatment looked like in the 1860s, in part mental health treatment. Greenidge again affirms that there has been good reason for readers to want to learn about historical figures in Black historical fiction. “Black Literature in the US is about claiming history, about making a testimony to one’s humanity, to the truth of the horrors of slavery. And if one can say, this really happened, then it validates our humanity.” As a novel, *Libertie* succeeds in doing this through the subtle but pervasive way in which history is used in the book, which allows the characters to become fully realized on the page—not just figures of history, but people not so different from us.

For a woman, becoming a doctor in the 1860s was indeed a way to gain many freedoms—it brought financial freedom, intellectual freedom. It also led to a freedom of movement and power not often afforded women, certainly not Black women, of the time. But there was also a trap to it: it meant having allegiance to science over other types of faith. It meant being tied to one’s profession, and perhaps forsaking love.

In this novel, Greenidge challenges both liberal and conservative ideas of freedom. The book asks whether religion can be freeing, and can motherhood be freeing? Toni Morrison, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, said that: “There was something so valuable about what happened when one became a mother. For me it was the most liberating thing that ever happened to me.” When asked how motherhood might be freeing in *Libertie*, Greenidge says, “Morrison was instrumental in the whole novel. For me, what it means is that for Black women, so much of society denies us our autonomy, motherhood is a place to exercise our will, and the way we want the world to look, one human at a time. And that true power means having choice.”

Libertie’s first faith is in her mother. When the object of her belief, her mother’s scientific wisdom, is ultimately shown to be less than perfect, the daughter must learn how to rebuild her own place in the world. Running from her mother’s failure, Libertie marries a doctor whose allegiance to nationalism also keeps him from freedom. Dr. Chase’s faith in nationalism is framed in the Haitian religion, Voodoo. “Freedom,” Greenidge says, “is not always coveted and is certainly always more complicated than we might imagine. When people feel anxious about the excesses of freedom, religion can sometimes be a tether.”

In researching Black religious traditions, Greenidge found it hard to find books about Haitian Voodoo that were not racist or voyeuristic. It took a while for her to understand that Voodoo was a way to order the world. She came to understand it as a faith based on community ties. She noted that the book that helped her the most was *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers*, edited by Claudine Michel

FOR A WOMAN, *becoming a doctor in the 1860s was indeed a way to gain many freedoms — it brought financial freedom, intellectual freedom.*

and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (2006).

For many Black Americans of this time period, Haiti was part of the freedom project that Christian and well-to-do Blacks were establishing. But choosing marriage and moving to the island also proved to be limiting. Choice was freedom. But when the real-life doctor's daughter, Anna, decided she wanted to leave her husband and Haiti, this was seen as "breaking up the Black family." The intact Black family was a central part of the Black Liberation project, but keeping the family intact was the work of women. Greenidge wondered what it might mean to seek one's freedom by undermining concepts of Black Excellence or exceptionalism. In *Libertie* she asks, "What happens if you give into the lie that you have to be excellent to be free?" *Libertie* is someone who simply wants to survive and thrive, not to be the first or the only one of anything.

The novel also examines the role of nature. "Water is a perennial theme in Black literature and for me," Greenidge says. When researching for a historical novel, "there are many day-to-day details that I may not be able to find easily. So, I went looking for timeless reference points... like those in nature, both of that time period, and also addressing this one." Water is a focal point in the novel, and there is a series of lush and moving scenes with *Libertie* learning to swim.

Freedom has conditionality in this novel. It looks very different for different characters. "The universality of freedom is the lie," says Greenidge. In *Libertie* we see how freedom for someone newly emancipated from slavery is very different from the freedom that comes from losing a beloved. That physical freedom of learning to swim is different from the emotional freedom of giving birth. Reading this historical novel, now, helps us see also how in our time, freedom may differ for people who have different social status, different relationships to their bodies. Here in America, we have citizens who claim that freedom is not having to wear a mask, being able to breathe the air freely, not cover their faces. We have other citizens who say that, during a health pandemic, freedom is being able to move freely around knowing that you are relatively safe from contagion, and that everyone wearing masks allows for everyone's freedom of movement. Every society has to balance different freedoms.

A character in the novel, Ben Daisy, serves as a metaphor for this complex counterintuitive reality of many freedoms. During the slave era, many enslaved Blacks understood, in part because of their faith systems, that suicide might be a way of resistance. White society quickly saw this as a mental health issue. Then again, even the Black desire to escape from slavery was considered by many whites to be a sign of mental illness—drapetomania, it was called.

Mental illness, after all, might a healthy response to a socially ill society. How could a mentally healthy person survive slavery? *Libertie* argues that in one cultural system healing oneself might mean drowning oneself, while in another system healing oneself might mean learning to swim. Care is a theme that resonates throughout the novel: Ben's mental state is seen as an illness by his community, and so they try to heal him. Greenidge says that "Ben Daisy is way to explore these issues, particular the trauma of living one's entire life through a traumatic event... slavery, and the post-traumatic stress

disorder that follows. I can't say that he is wrong to react as he does in the book."

She adds that "you need to be tethered to something to make use of freedom". When asked about her own tether, Greenidge says that "My faith is that the world at large will continue to offer up guidance that I can use to order and create my life." Greenidge tethers herself to her own artistic practice, to her own abilities as an artist and thinker.

Libertie is a deftly written novel that encourages us to ask profound questions. Greenidge knows that often readers come to fiction for moral clarity, but she states that such clarity does not exist in literature, but rather "it kills a novel when you attempt to impose stark black and white terms." *Libertie* does not intend to offer up lessons learned about race and gender, useful anthropological notes about Haiti, or even the historical "facts" that we may believe are the remit of the historical novel. "Fiction isn't very practical," she says. "And that is the point."



**WRITTEN BY
TIPHANIE
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Tiphanie Yanique is the author of *Monster in the Middle* (Riverhead Books, 2021), and *Land of Love and Drowning* (Riverhead Books, 2014), a novel set in the Virgin Islands during the transfer from Danish to US rule.



PEOPLE & PLACES

BY LUCIENNE BOYCE

Writing with the Senses, Mood, and Atmosphere

At a recent conference on 'Imagining History: Wales in Fiction and Fact', Dr Marian Gwyn remarked, "Historical fiction teaches us how people and places connect".¹ For readers of historical fiction, a sense of place is an important element establishing not only the physical milieu of a novel, but also the historical one. This is often achieved, as the familiar mantra has it, by evoking the "sights, sounds and smells" of a setting, that is, through the senses of the people in it. A sense of place is created by the characters connected with it.

However, setting may have another function besides conveying a sense of time and place. It can also create mood or atmosphere. This is most obvious in tales of the supernatural. Here, descriptions of manor houses, graveyards and cellars may be used to convey feelings such as horror or dread. But is this merely a literary conceit, or do places really have atmospheres?

Nicola Cornick's timeslip novels are all rooted in a sense of place. Indeed, place is often the initial inspiration. This is true of her latest book, *The Last Daughter* (HarperCollins UK, 2021; in the US *The Last Daughter of York*, Graydon House) which links the stories of Francis Lovell during the Wars of the Roses, and present-day Serena Warren, haunted by the disappearance of her sister many years ago. It was the setting – Minster Lovell – says Nicola "that initially drew me in". In a similar way, her first dual-time novel, *House of Shadows* (MIRA, 2015), was inspired by Ashdown House, a seventeenth-century hunting lodge in Oxfordshire, where Nicola works as a guide and historian. Even where a person is the starting point of the story, as Amy Robsart was for *The Forgotten Sister* (HQ, 2020), place (here, Cumnor Place in Oxfordshire) is still centre stage.

For Nicola historic houses and sites are "characters in themselves with their own moods and behaviours". These affect the story, particularly its tone, themes, and atmosphere. Nicola experiences Minster Lovell as a location with a "melancholy, slightly malign atmosphere". This, along with the unknown fate of its one-time owner, Francis Lovell, to which the legend of a skeleton found in an underground chamber has been linked, provided the central theme of *The Last Daughter*, which explores disappearance. It is not a place where Nicola feels comfortable, and this discomfort is reflected in the character, Serena's, sense of threat, loss and displacement when she is there.

These powerful reactions to place have long been recognised, particularly by artists, writers, philosophers, and architects. Romans had their *Genius Loci*, the "Spirit of the Place". These responses may have their roots in evolutionary or biological development. Humans, it is theorised, had to make rapid assessments of their environment, deciding whether danger or safety awaited them in the dark, out in the open, in caves and forests. These judgements became instinctive, and we still make them, but so quickly that we are unaware of the process. Hence, we experience them as sudden and striking.

The way we respond to places by experiencing what we call "atmosphere" is clearly something that is determined by more than the information we take in through our senses. Danger and safety, melancholy and malignity are not things we touch, smell, hear, see

or taste. These responses are also determined by elements such as our memories, imagination, prior knowledge, emotions, and culture.

These reactions are not always predictable. "Sometimes," says Nicola, "the atmosphere will grab me immediately in some way." On the other hand, "I don't connect with some places at all". She is drawn to ruins, to the "sense of lost grandeur that appeals to me and the idea that the history of a place is written into its remaining fabric, waiting to be rediscovered".

Nicola's fascination with psychometry is illuminating in this context. Psychometry is the ability to discover something about the history of an object and the people connected with it, by touching it. Many of Nicola's stories, *The Last Daughter* amongst them, include characters who have this supernatural ability. Nicola explains that she was "fascinated by the idea of someone who could touch the stones of an old building and 'see' episodes from its history as a result".

She acknowledges the influence of the 'Stone Tape Theory', the idea that memories can be stored in the fabric of a building or object and accessed later. A way of accounting for the experience of hauntings, it gained ground in the 1960s and 1970s. It was explored by, amongst others, archaeologist Thomas Charles Lethbridge (1901-1971), and found its way into popular culture in such productions as the 1972 BBC TV film, *The Stone Tape*. As Nicola puts it, "It's something I think you can get very close to when you visit a place and get wrapped up in the atmosphere. Your imagination provides all sorts of images of what might have happened there in the past and you feel as though you are within touching distance of the past". She also acknowledges that it is a "very useful plot device in a dual-time story!"

Even if you are not convinced by either the psychic or scientific theories mentioned here, they can at least be credited as attempts to explain that powerful response we call a "sense of place". For the writer who is concerned with the experiences of people who inhabited a place in the past, a sense of place provides tremendous inspiration, feeding into the creative mix of research, imagination, and empathy that go into a historical novel. Historical fiction may indeed teach us "how people and places connect", but our connection with places also enables us to write historical fiction.

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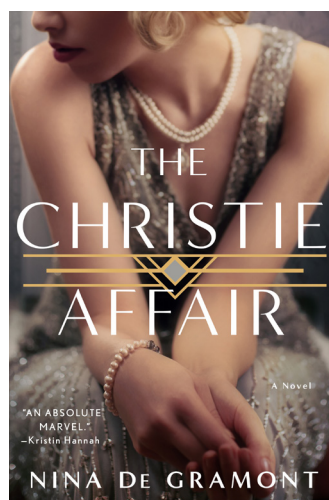
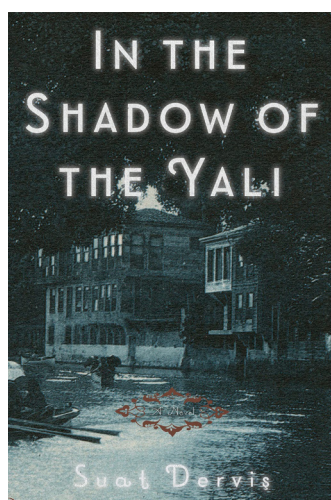
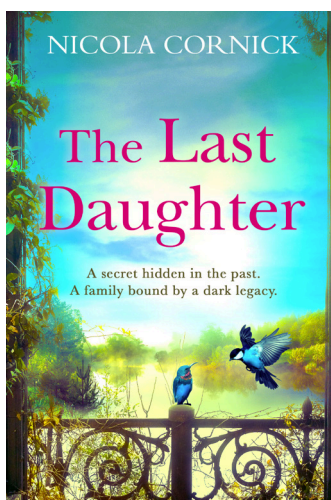
Lucienne Boyce writes historical fiction (*To The Fair Land*, the *Dan Foster Mysteries*), non-fiction (*The Bristol Suffragettes*), and biography (currently working on a biography of suffrage campaigner Millicent Price), and is also a blogger and speaker. www.lucienneboyce.com

A FEMINIST IN TURKEY

BY LUCINDA BYATT

Maureen Freely talks about Suat Derviş

Suat is a man's name, so when Maureen Freely was first approached to translate *In the Shadow of the Yali*, she didn't realise it was by a



woman, let alone a republican feminist and activist. Suat Derviş (1905-72) was a member of the left-wing intelligentsia, living in Constantinople (before it became Istanbul). She wrote from a young age, and this novel was first serialised in a Turkish newspaper in 1944. It was only after she moved to Paris that the French translation (*Les ombres du yalı*, 1958) achieved broader recognition.

Freely is an award-winning journalist, chair of English PEN, academic, author and translator of five of Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk's books. She grew up in Istanbul from the age of eight, after her parents moved there in the 1960s. Her close understanding of Turkish culture and politics has influenced all her subsequent work, including her latest novel, *Sailing Through Byzantium* (2013). Freely admits that, as a young girl, it quite likely that she enjoyed the same stylish patisseries as Derviş did. Freely's translation of Derviş' novel, published by Other Press (2021), is based on the Turkish novel rather than its later French incarnation, and her introduction points to striking differences in the plot structure of the French and Turkish versions.

Originally entitled *Çılgın gibi* (Like Crazy) in Turkish, *In the Shadow of the Yalı* has strong autobiographical echoes: like Derviş, the protagonist Celile has a grandmother who was a Circassian slave, an odalisque at the imperial court in Constantinople before being married to a pasha; Celile lives with her grandmother in the decaying splendour of the family *yalı*, an aristocratic mansion, standing on the waterfront of the Bosphorus. Freely points out our misconceived western understanding of the term 'odalisque': "Most of these girls never got near the sultan, and the sultan would rarely be in the room alone with any of them."

Derviş' own writing took two forms: reportage on her experience of Turkey's political turbulence, with her earliest writing dating from her twenties, but also writing for a female readership. "Writing for women," as Freely underlines, "her assumption was that men are not going to bother to read it, so that gave her a lot of freedom". Freely adds that "I was keen to keep the atmosphere of the original. Derviş' was not going to be too graphic, but I love the game that she's playing, which has to do with that steamy writing." Derviş reflects the experience of a certain type of woman in Istanbul society in the 1920s and 30s, as modern Turkey under Atatürk swept away the old to make room for the new. But at the same time, many views remained unchanged, as the narrator comments, "a beautiful woman was always under watch, no matter how private or solitary her life."

Constantinople was, until 1930, the capital of the Ottoman Empire,

and increasingly influenced by European powers: the elite attended lycées or high schools; the cultural influences were European, and so was the world of international commerce, the background for the two male protagonists, Ahmet and Muhsin. Ahmet is the product of the cadre school, Galatasaray Lycée, with aspirations and ambitions above his middle-class background. Moreover, the inter-war years offered opportunities for smuggling and profit.

Celile's marriage to Ahmet continues for ten years – "a life of calm monotony ... observing the world from afar" – until a chance meeting with a tycoon, Muhsin, leads her to risk everything for love. The triangular relationship darkens into a stand-off between money, power and social standing, with vindictive and devastating effects. Even after the "modern" woman had emerged (Turkish women voted in national elections in 1934), Turkish society remained fundamentally patriarchal and Celile moves from one gilded cage to another, until the love affair that freed and at the same time exposed her. For all that the new republican wished to move away from the "rotting, crumbling *yalı*" and the "dying traditions" of the Ottoman aristocracy, as Derviş writes, Celile "was brought up to believe that women never meddled with such matters. They left that to the men." Her characterisation of Celile anticipates that most famous line in Simone de Beauvoir's book, written five years later: "One is not born, but made, a woman, and not the subject of desire, but its object" (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, Paris 1949).

When I ask Freely about *The Shadow of the Yalı*, she says: "For me, Derviş was doing something very interesting with desire. Her reportage sits equivocally with her three marriages and her love of pastries, in the coffee shops of Pera, where everyone congregated. The reason I love this book is that it pulls together Derviş' understanding of the two worlds she came from: the old Ottoman Empire and the new society that she analysed, from a critical distance, as a Communist."

"Derviş knew these worlds," Freely continues, "and from inside this melodrama, she's explaining what happens to women in them", especially a woman like Celile who doesn't "know the first thing about real life, and never would". At one point, Derviş describes Celile as "the child of that forty-room wooden *yalı*, cut off from the real world and floating in its own legend."

Women writers like Derviş are of special interest to Freely when they "have something to say about how weird the outside world looks". Moreover, the fact that Derviş' novel is now available in English will help, in some small way, to bridge the "blank space", as Freely describes it, that many Anglophone readers have "for what was happening at the edge of Europe. It is something that we



should know.” She says this with feeling because she is currently writing a historical novel set in Constantinople in the aftermath of World War I; readers have, she says “sometimes reacted with disbelief. ‘Did this really happen?’ they ask.” Suat Derviş grew up with the memories of these events, but I look forward to reading Freely’s version soon.

Lucinda Byatt is Features Editor for *HNR* and translates from Italian. Find her on Twitter and at her blog “A World of Words” <https://textline.wordpress.com/>

FALLIBILITY & HEARTBREAK

BY ELIZABETH LENCKOS

Elisabeth Lenckos Discusses Nina de Gramont’s *The Christie Affair*

The Christie Affair by Nina de Gramont (St. Martin’s/Mantle, 2022) revolves around what is perhaps the most notorious escapade in Agatha Christie’s life. On 4 December 1926, Christie famously vanished from Styles, the country home in Berkshire where she resided with her husband, Archie. But although her disappearance kept the British public breathless—the involvement of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Wallace, and Dorothy Sayers adding piquancy to the chase—Christie refused to comment on the event when she was discovered at a spa hotel in Harrogate, Yorkshire eleven days later. She also failed to mention the incident in her autobiography, intimating that she preferred to forget the period in her life when, after a disagreement with Archie—he intended to leave her for his mistress—she took off on a journey to England’s North. Nor could (would?) she say with any certainty why she had checked into the hotel using the name of her husband’s lover, Nancy Neele.

A writer of mysteries whose disappearance made as brilliant of a story as those she wrote, Agatha Christie accomplished a daring feat. Fed by her silence on the subject, speculation has since run rife as to whether she intended to cause a scandal or whether she truly suffered a breakdown accompanied by a loss of memory. Fascinatingly, *The Christie Affair* suggests that these two possibilities might not be mutually exclusive. Instead, the novel offers up a dual vision of Agatha Christie, the one “deeply, enormously, crazy-makingly heartbroken,” the other “the architect of her own disappearance.” As De Gramont explains:

“Agatha Christie was the architect of her own disappearance. Historically, that hasn’t been the case for the majority of women who go missing. For centuries women have disappeared because of violence, or because of a society determined to contain them and conceal sexual impropriety... As evidenced in her novels, Agatha had great sympathy for human foibles, even those that drive people to do terrible things.”

De Gramont possesses an intuitive insight into the complexity of Christie’s talent and the fact that she was both a master of detective fiction and an astute portraitist of human fallibility, her twin talents honed during her marriage to Archie and the suffering caused by his lack of loyalty. “I’m interested in the kind of heartbreak that makes you want to escape your own skin,” De Gramont adds, “to disappear.”

Therefore, *The Christie Affair* offers readers something far more captivating than a mere re-imagining of the author’s flight to Harrogate, providing instead a character study of two very different women—Agatha Christie and Nancy Neele (Nan O’Dea in the book)—in their opposing positions as celebrated writer and obscure lover, privileged wife and ostracized mistress. Into this clash of roles and personalities, De Gramont weaves a genius twist, an absorbing murder mystery with a lot of moving parts and a fabulous cast of protagonists. The great achievement of *The Christie Affair* consists in elevating Nan O’Dea above the stereotypical conniving gold digger readers might expect her to be, allowing her instead to come across as to a deeply thinking and feeling—if also misguided—woman, who has a very surprising, and far more compelling reason for destroying the Christies’ marriage than might be assumed. Intriguingly, it is motherhood, rather than romance, which holds the key to unlocking the mystery. As Nina de Gramont puts it eloquently:

“The word ‘mistress’ or ‘other woman’ conjures instant and understandable animosity. Especially when the wife is as beloved a figure as Agatha Christie. I knew it would be a challenge to get readers to attach to Nan. I tried to give her voice an awareness of, and regret for, the hurt she was causing. Nan is telling her story—and Agatha’s—as a means to absolve herself. To do that she has to explain what she has gone through, what she hopes to achieve, and all the great disadvantages she’s been working against from the start. Agatha Christie’s position in the world lets her be any kind of mother she wants to be. Whereas Nan, with no power or resources, has no choices at all. That’s the greatest divide between them and hopefully what helps the reader empathize with Nan and understand her desperation to right the wrongs that have been done to her.”

In addition to Nan O’Dea, *The Christie Affair* features a romantic sister-plot that centres on the author using her visit to Yorkshire to come to terms with Archie’s dereliction and to fall in love herself. The male detective, Chilton, who is out looking for Christie and sustains her, turns out to be a brilliant literary creation, someone one could see returning in future novels. When asked to comment on him, De Gramont had this to say:

“She [Christie] certainly deserved a happy and romantic interlude, after all her husband had put her through! I have a theory that Agatha Christie created Hercule Poirot as an antidote to Archie, who couldn’t be bothered with other people’s emotions. Archie wasn’t analytical or sympathetic. He just wanted everyone to be happy so they wouldn’t bother him with their troubles. So, she created a man who with one glance detects a person’s greatest secret and deepest sorrow. Poirot sees the beauty in everyone and forgives them their faults even as he gets to the root of them. I wanted to create a real person like that for her—someone sweet and caring—to help her get to the other side of her grief over Archie. She claimed not to be interested in romance, but I felt like there are enough clues in her novels for me to create her perfect rebound man. Or maybe Chilton is everyone’s perfect rebound man? I certainly hope so.”

Whether it is Chilton, Nan O’Dea, or Agatha Christie, De Gramont brings these personalities to sparkling life. Her novel is a fine work of fiction that has much to recommend it to lovers of detective stories with a social and gender twist, and to those who believe in second chances. Wearing its feminism lightly on its sleeve, *The Christie Affair* is a wonderful study of the terrible antagonisms, as well as the intimate ties, that exist between wives and mistresses, and how each group might turn the tables upon the other. Prepare to be surprised.

Dr. Elisabeth Lenckos serves on the Social Media Team for the Historical Novel Society. She is at work on a novel about a German Jewish family in twentieth-century Berlin.

IT'S REGRETTABLE that so many adults think books should be safe and anodyne. Literature is not safe because history is not safe, nor is reality.

SHOWING US OUR OWN HUMANITY

BY JEAN HUETS

Juhea Kim's *Beasts of a Little Land*

In *Beasts of a Little Land* (Ecco, 2021), Juhea Kim portrays the struggle to adapt to—or be crushed by—the forces of history. A young girl is sold to the courtesan's arts, even as modernizing Seoul extinguishes such diversions; a tiger is endangered more by habitat loss than by the lone hunter stalking it. Early 20th-century Korea, the largest of the book's cast of memorable characters, strives for independence from its colonial ruler, Japan, even as the superpowers of China, the USSR, and the United States loom over the "little land."

Born in Korea, Kim moved to the U.S. when she was nine. She learned as a schoolchild Korea's 5,000-year history, rooted in its mythical founder, Dangun. In America, though, the most familiar period of Korean history is painfully brief: the Korean War fought from 1950 to 1953. Ironically, given the horrendous casualties among soldiers on all sides and Korean civilians, American media dubbed it "the forgotten war." The war's enduring and certainly not forgotten outcome is the armistice agreement that divided the peninsula into North and South. Kim calls the severance "a genuine collective sorrow because families—actual human relationships—were torn apart arbitrarily, never to be reunited again."

Beasts of a Little Land takes place in the decades leading up to the war, when colonial Korea's independence struggle entangled with the communist movement and the agendas of three superpowers. Against that backdrop, Kim met a primary challenge faced by writers of historical fiction: to keep world-changing events in clear sight without diminishing individual characters' fears, yearnings, passions, and needs. Kim's success in affirming her characters is reflected in her love of the ancient epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. "Homer was narrating, in the eighth century BCE, events that took place centuries earlier, in the Greek Bronze Age, circa twelfth century BCE. I constantly marvel at the way he portrays human emotions, motivations, and pathos with such extraordinarily fresh language. Nothing about these epics feels dated, even though their characters 'lived' more than three thousand years ago."

Another challenge of historical fiction lies in representing people authentically, even as they defy contemporary values. The hostile view of *Beasts'* Koreans toward Japanese colonialists seems to clash with Kim's aim to "reflect and uphold our shared humanity." Kim addresses the predicament with determination. "You can't write a book that does everything for everyone. There were some Japanese who spoke out against colonialism and were imprisoned; some Japanese and Koreans fell in love and got married. But that was not the frame I chose to capture this place and time. You have to work within your limitations with conviction."

Kim applied to those limitations the writerly and very human tools of

empathy and imagination. "The close third-person narrative gives a window into the Japanese characters' inner thoughts and emotions, and their justifications for the way they act in the world. In fact, Ito [Japanese] and SungSoo [Korean], both despicable in distinct ways, were two of my favorite characters to write. I give my antagonists significant pieces of my own soul, which makes them relatable human beings."

Besides Korean history, Kim is drawn to the Silk Road era and to medieval France, having studied Late Antiquities and medieval art history at Princeton University. She credits art history courses for her primary training in writing. "In that discipline, the focus isn't to come up with some brilliant expression no one has ever thought of, but to describe in the clearest way possible, so you can lead the reader through what you're seeing. Very often, I first see my scenes visually, so this became my most useful tool. I also channel other forms of art into my writing. Before I wrote a single word of *Beasts*, I knew I wanted to do something like Bruckner's Symphony No. 8, but in a literary form."

Beasts opens with a vivid scene: "The sky was white and the earth was black, like at the beginning of time before the first sunrise. Clouds left their realm and descended so low that they seemed to touch the ground. Giant pines loomed in and out of the ether. Nothing stirred or made a sound. Hardly distinguishable in this obscure world, a speck of a man was walking alone."

Here, Kim creates a place, near as mythic as the roots of Korean history, in which a man is diminished to a speck, and yet occupies us as the only actor in the scene. Rich details are layered as carefully as a painter might place brushstrokes on a scroll or a composer the notes of a symphony.

The tiger that haunts the story seems to embody much more than an elusive big cat. It also alludes to one of Kim's personal causes. "My mission is to use my writing talent to save nature and reduce animal suffering." To that end, a portion of the novel's proceeds will benefit The Phoenix Fund, a Vladivostok-based nonprofit working to conserve Siberian tigers and Amur leopards. "Thinking about what I can do to marry my art and activism is what truly keeps me going."

For all its beauty, *Beasts of a Little Land* does not censor brutality. "I felt no inclination to shy away from violence, much of which is directly inspired by true accounts. Recently there's been, in my view, too much emphasis on trigger warnings. It's regrettable that so many adults think books should be safe and anodyne. Literature is not safe because history is not safe, nor is reality."

Juhea Kim does not write "to bolster the comfortable shell that we continuously build around us to glide through our daily lives," she says. "Great books break that shell, wound and devastate us, because that's the only way toward empathy. Historical fiction at its best doesn't just dredge up old scars of the past; it also provides a way to overcome those scars, by showing us our own humanity."

Jean Huets' novel, *The Bones You Have Cast Down*, is set in Renaissance Italy and inspired by the history of the Popess tarot card. Her writing is in *The New York Times*, *Ploughshares*, *The Rumpus*, *Kenyon Review*, *Civil War Monitor*, and others, and she reviews books for the HNS. Visit www.jeanhuets.com



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ANCIENT HISTORY

THE MOON GOD'S WIFE

Shauna Roberts, *Nicobar Press*, 2021, \$14.95, pb, 295pp, 9781948077002

Esh-tar-da-ri, daughter, sister, and aunt of kings in the sprawling Mesopotamian empire of Akkad, wants nothing more from her earliest childhood than to be a priestess of her family's patron goddess, Inanna. Brought up in the palace as a royal princess, inquisitive, and eager to learn, Esh is indulged by her father, Sargon the Great, mostly ignored by her brothers, and disliked by her mother. It is over her mother's objections that Esh's father (who seems to be the enlightened one here) grants her an education, so she and her loyal lifelong friend, Ninsha, are tutored the same as her brothers. She puts all her energies into preparing for the priesthood and believes she is visited by Inanna in dreamlike visions. But King Sargon is forced to use his daughter for a political alliance, and Esh, grudgingly accepting her duty, journeys upriver to marry the king of Mari, and is made a priestess of the sun god Shamash. As a queen, she is instructed to further her father's plans to expand and govern his empire, and to keep Mari allied with Akkad.

Spanning Esh's lifetime, Roberts' novel takes the reader into the chaotic atmosphere of ancient Mesopotamia, with bloody palace coups, constant rebellions, widespread brutality and slaughter, slavery, elaborate religious rites, and magnificent architecture. In a well-researched, engaging narrative, Roberts has made Esh—based on a real woman who would eventually become the Enheduanna, the human wife of the moon god and is credited with writing some forty-two hymns that have lasted centuries—a believable and courageous figure. She has the determination to survive oppression and danger, but finally also realizes that one can fulfill one's destiny in unexpected ways.

Michael I. Shoop

DISAPPEARANCE OF A SCRIBE

Dana Stabenow, *Head of Zeus*, 2022, \$29.95/£18.95, hb, 336pp, 9781800249776

47 BCE. Caesar has returned to Rome,

and Cleopatra VII must bring back order to Alexandria. Tetisheri, her Eye of Isis, records her cases on a scroll in the Great Library. A certain Grafeas, a scribe who had been conducting a profitable business recording legal cases, has gone missing. Librarian Sosigenes reports a spate of organised book thefts targeting the most ancient documents.

Fishermen discover a body anchored at the bottom of the sea, feet embedded in cement—'Rhakotis sandals'. Aristander of the Shurta (Police) says it is the second such case he's seen. Tetisheri consults the architect Vitruvius to learn about pozzolan, the pit ash that makes cement seawater-proof. The Roman legate Gaius Aurelius Cotta is also enquiring about pozzolan. The Eye conducts a merry chase around Alexandria to solve the case. Ever one to put on a good show, Cleopatra stages the big reveal for maximum effect and shows a clemency for which the historical Cleo was not known.

I loved the usage of authentic words: a case is called *máthema*, widths are measured in *plethra*, people swear 'by Sobek's balls', weeks are measured in 'ten-day's. Metaphors are period-specific: her love Apollodorus's green eyes are a 'color straight out of the olivine mines of Punt'; a man has 'the four-square solidity of the Roman veteran and nothing less than the authority of a *tesserarius*'.

The writing style is fluent and colourful. It pulls you into a world where 47 BCE is the present day. Attention is paid to what people eat, drink, and wear. The characters are fascinating, the descriptions gorgeous, the plot swift-paced and the dialogue convincing. Hooked by chapter one, I couldn't put it down. This is Book 2 in the Eye of Isis series.

Susie Helme

CLASSICAL

ELEKTRA

Jennifer Saint, *Wildfire*, 2022, £11.99, hb, 352pp, 9781472273918 / *Flatiron*, 2022, \$27.99, hb, 304pp, 9781250773616

This modern retelling of the Homeric myth follows the lives and fates of three women: Elektra, Clytemnestra, and Cassandra. There is not much variance from Homer and Sophocles in terms of plot, apart from a more modern feel. For example, Apollo curses Cassandra because she refuses to sleep with him. Saint misses some top scenes: Clytemnestra with Achilles when she believes he is to wed her daughter, Iphigenia going meekly to the altar.

Watching the entire scenario from these three viewpoints—from the wrath of Achilles to Odysseus' final trick to the torching of the topless tower—is something new. What set the *Iliad* apart from other epic poems of its era was that it told both sides of the story. So does

Saint as we shift from Mycenae to Troy and back again.

With all the father-murdering and daughter-sacrificing that went on in the House of Atreus, you would think the women would be pretty hard-nosed. They would have taken as read such vicissitudes as men squabbling over female war captives like so much booty and throwing princes' babies off high roofs before they can grow up to seek revenge. Even so, we can still relate to the women's attitudes.

It is beautifully written as we follow the women's internal journeys. Cassandra's description of the inner turmoil that comes along with her gift is very moving; she tends Apollo in the temple but is terrified of his visions. We feel Clytemnestra's thirst for revenge and Elektra's longing, and the effect on the families as the war drags on and on for so many years.

It is an old story but a great one, and Saint underlines the masculine folly of war. She is also the author of *Ariadne* (2021).

Susie Helme

1ST CENTURY

DEATH AND A CROCODILE

Lisa E. Betz, *Crosslink*, 2021, \$16.95, pb, 320pp, 9781633573161

Set in Rome in 74 AD, when Christianity was a new and somewhat suspect religion in that city, this is the story of young Livia defying convention to solve her father's murder. Aided by her slave Roxana, and despite opposition from her brother and all the other menfolk in her family, Livia persists in chasing down suspects, all too often in the sleazier part of the city. Yet in the back of her mind is her worry that she might be forced by family pressure to marry the unattractive lawyer Avitas. She prefers the handsome young Marcellus, a longtime friend of the family.

Livia's interventions are considered meddling, yet slowly they produce results, helping to clear her brother's reputation for dishonesty and to disentangle her father's complex business dealings. Repeatedly Livia is forbidden to explore Rome's seamier areas in search of clues to help her discover her father's killer. Time after time she must circumvent these limitations placed on her freedom. Unfortunately, her sleuthing appears to cast a shadow on the reputation of the handsome Marcellus, while the disagreeable Avitas adds to the number of those trying to curtail her freedom.

The author has used her skill to make ancient Rome seem a welcoming and familiar place to the reader. We can appreciate the elegant homes of the wealthy as well feeling apprehension as Livia approaches the sleazy hangouts in the more dangerous suburbs. She has peopled the city with well-developed characters typical of the time but also familiar to us today. She has also considerably opened the book with a humorously detailed cast of characters and concluded with details of

Roman terminology. This is an easy-to-read book, suitable for the whole family.

Valerie Adolph

KILLER OF ROME

Alex Gough, Canelo, 2021, £9.99, pb, 336pp, 9781800325241

In this long-awaited third book in the Carbo Chronicles, the Roman adventure unfolds as we find the great hero a broken man. He owns an inn and property, including a devoted slave, and yet is drinking and gambling his way into oblivion. When returning legionary, Cicurinus, having been rescued from years of torture at the hands of a German priestess, seeks out his hero, Carbo, he is rejected and leaves discouraged. Instead of being saved from the effects of his ordeal, Cicurinus descends into a state where he craves revenge. To clean up Rome he murders the sinful in an impoverished area of the city, but no one in authority cares. When he targets a rich man's son, things change: the murderer is hunted, but Carbo has been framed for the crime.

The author's passion for ancient Rome is apparent on every page. The amount of detail woven through the plot makes it easy to visualise life in this harsh city. Poverty, slavery, and corruption are accepted and rife, whilst the rich rule by enforcing their politics and strict punishments. The action is swift, the cruelty part of everyday life, and yet the love of good women and his close friends help Carbo to solve this crime and catch the true murderer. Injustice is made plain as the thrills keep coming and the plot twists surprise and delight. Certainly recommended for lovers of strong historical adventures.

Valerie Loh

CRY FOR JERUSALEM – BOOK 2, 66-67 CE: Against All Odds

Ward Sanford, Stadia Books, 2020, \$16.95, pb, 436pp, 9781950645022

66 CE. Jewish rebels have just defeated the Roman army, but Yosef knows Rome will be back for bloody retribution. Charged with uniting Jewish forces, Yosef travels to Galilee. But sentiments against Jerusalem and its leaders divide the nation. In Jerusalem, Yosef's sister Miriam continues to secretly train despite the recent death of her Sicarii mentor. She is the only woman Sicarii, an organized assassination unit of cloak and daggers, known to the zealot group. Her purpose is to strike back against the Romans, but when her first love returns to Jerusalem, could Miriam put her warrior ways behind to become a wife? Would it wash away her pain? Meanwhile, in the midst of rebuilding Rome after the Great Fire, Nero hungers for Jerusalem's temple riches and seeks just the right general to defeat the growing rebellion.

The title may make one believe this is a Christian novel (strongly integrating themes of Christianity). However, this book examines both sides of the conflict, their trials, and their

sins. Traditions and customs for both societies are meticulously researched and vividly penned.

There are a few editorial errors, mainly with different fonts. At times, character thoughts on what to write are included in the font delineating a letter itself, which occasionally distract.

Plot-wise, Sanford again proves his vast knowledge of period and place as events from book one escalate in book two. Tensions run high as Yosef faces not only the Roman threat but threats from his own people. The characters continue developing in impactful and emotional ways. Minute details of daily life make the reading experience immersive. Full of political intrigue and action, the novel sweeps across detailed and vast settings and weaves together a complex plot that will keep readers hooked till the end.

J. Lynn Else

4TH CENTURY

GODS OF ROME

Gordon Doherty and Simon Turney, Head of Zeus/Aries, 2021, £18.99, hb, 451pp, 9781800242067

This third and final book in the Rise of the Emperors series continues directly from the previous volume, *Masters of Rome*, beginning in January of 312 AD. It covers the final acts of the great civil conflict in the later Roman Western Empire between the pagan emperor Maxentius and Constantine the Great. Smoothly switching between the two main characters' perspectives, the story details Constantine's invasion of Italy and climatic confrontation at the battle of Malvern Bridge. By its nature, this makes it a much more compact book, the events occurring over a single year, and the focus is very much on military operations rather than the political manoeuvrings of the previous novels. A lot of the details of these proceedings are not fully understood, so the authors provide their own interpretations of some the more unusual events. It all hangs together logically, and it is so beautifully done that even though I personally do not agree with all of their explanations, I just wanted to keep on turning the pages. This is a really a first-class historical novel. Highly recommended.

Martin Bourne

EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW

Bryan Litfin, Revell, 2021, \$26.99, hb, 496pp, 9780800738181

In 316 AD, much of western civilization is at a crossroads. The Roman Empire, which rules most of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, is on the verge of adopting Christianity under Emperor Constantine. Yet even within Christianity there are competing sects and heretical views, and there is still a substantial movement to retain the old gods. Bishop Sylvester of Rome seeks to unify the Christians under the sponsorship of Constantine and maintain Rome as the Christian epicenter.

He enlists a young novice nun, Flavia, who is of noble heritage, to travel to petition the emperor to support Rome's position. Flavia, in turn, has the welcome assistance of Rex, a Germanic warrior also of noble heritage, who is also a highly trained Roman military special operations soldier with many skills. They travel, along with clerical companions, in a world torn by war and enmeshed in espionage and intrigue, seeking to make Sylvester's vision of a unified Roman church a reality.

This is the second book in a trilogy and, like the first, is an illuminating and intelligent masterpiece. The author has the educational background and gifted literary ability to vividly and seamlessly describe the diverse peoples, places, and competing beliefs of the time in an engaging manner—the mark of a historical fiction master. Maps and glossaries aid the reader. There seem to be fascinating tidbits to discover every few pages: some bishops and clergy could be married, olive oil was used for shaving cream, nuns' celibacy vows were meant to be temporary, and the seat of the church could easily have been in Alexandria, Egypt.

Mixing romance, espionage, ancient land and maritime warfare, and religious history, this is a rather long book which surprisingly reads lightning-fast. I reviewed the first and can't wait for the next in the series. Strongly recommended.

Thomas J. Howley

7TH CENTURY

THE SHADOW OF THE EMPIRE

Qiu Xiaolong, Severn House, 2022, \$28.99/£20.99, hb, 192pp, 9780727850812

Judge Dee Renjie is not a judge, but the people have bestowed this title upon him, an official with many functions. During the 7th century, Empress Wu sits as ruler. She is sending Judge Dee away from the capital city of Chang'an to a new post in the provinces. He is getting caught up in the political unrest, and the Empress is displeased with him over his Confucian stance on the future transition of power.

While staying at a roadside hostel, a mysterious note is delivered via a gemstone-studded knife embedded in the pillar beside him. Then follows a messenger knocking on the door with a request from Minister Wu for Judge Dee to look into a high-profile murder. The accused is a beloved and gifted poetess, Xuanji, and this sensational murder of her maid and burial in a shallow grave is incongruous with the refined, diminutive poetess. Unsure of the Minister's motive, he makes a gesture at a few inquiries before he continues on his travels, but his curiosity grows as strange events and questions with no answers arise.

This book is the first in the Judge Dee series and based on a true crime that took place during the Tang Dynasty. Yang, Judge Dee's devoted assistant, is dogged in his tasks of

seeking answers. The wise, analytical Judge Dee outwardly maintains his quiet composure around the frightened, nervous Yang, making each man a complement to the other. Both Judge Dee and Yang are an endearing duo for this delightful series.

Janice Ottersberg

11TH CENTURY

CHALLENGES OF A KING

K. M. Ashman, *Canelo*, 2021, £9.99, pb, 352pp, 9781800323643

A lot has been written about that tense period in history in the run-up to the Norman invasion, when King Edward the Confessor delayed appointing a successor, and the powerful Godwineson family controlled large chunks of England. The facts of this period are well-known, and Ashman does a competent job of relating them. Where this book particularly pleases is in some of the side stories—that of the goldsmith-monk Spearhafoc of the Benedictine Abbey at Bury St Edmunds, for instance; a real and consummate artist whose work was well-documented in contemporary annals. I hadn't realised, though, that he had effectively funded the Godwineson comeback by stealing precious metals and jewels earmarked for a new set of crown jewels! Another well-drawn tale is that of Owen of Hereford, a Godwineson thegn; an imaginary character, I think, but his character arc, from full loyalty to a breaking-point where Sweyn's appalling behaviour pushes him beyond the brink, is well drawn.

And then there's the grasping and venal Robert of Jumièges, Bishop of London and confidant of the King, who finally made him Archbishop of Canterbury. Ashman portrays his small-mindedness over the elevation of Spearhafoc to Bishop well enough that you get a clear glimpse into how the self-serving actions of this man contributed to the Norman invasion in no small way. And having him smuggle the two Godwineson boy hostages out of the country is excellently done.

Ashman provides a good read, with a solid grasp of the facts. The book is listed under a heading of "The Road to Hastings"; I hope that it's the first of a series!

Nicky Moxey

NORMAN LORD, SAXON LADY

Lynna Banning, *Prairie Rose Publications*, 2021, \$14.99, pb, 288pp, 9798525847040

In late summer 1067, Saxon earl's daughter Edra meets the forbidding Norman knight Alain de Chalus, who has been granted her father's estate of Belven. Alain needs Edra's cooperation to learn about his new estate, and working together leads to cautious trust and admiration. Then Alain's wife moves in, and Edra faces the prospect of marrying a stranger and leaving her home—and Alain.

Edra's Saxon world doesn't feel precisely

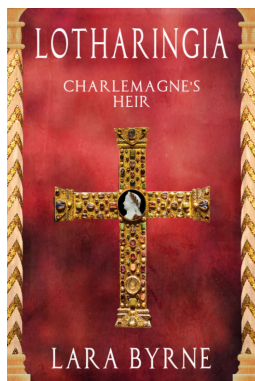
imagined; the halls are laid out like Norman keeps already, one character waffles between a baron and a duke, and the observance of Beltane has a very Celtic feel. Belven's villagers face starvation when their wheat fields burn, apparently unable to fish, trap game or fowl, or trade goods at local markets. However, the snippets of Old French and Old English add enjoyable flavor to the language, and the characters are appealing. Spirited Edra defies male command, even when she is abducted by a neighboring knight, and sensitive Alain respects his marriage vows though he burns for Edra. With smooth prose, brisk pacing, and believable obstacles, this enjoyable romance achieves a happy ending that feels well-earned.

Misty Urban

LOTHARINGIA

Lara Byrne, *Independently published*, 2021, \$12.99/C\$14.99, pb, 366pp, 9781838095826

AD 1062. During the High Middle Ages, Countess Matilde of Tuscany is one of the most powerful women in all of Christendom.



A descendant of the legendary Charlemagne, she is an heiress who stands to inherit vast lands. She lives in a world where strictures are placed upon women, including those who wield great power. While she is powerful, she must rule with

a man by her side. Enter Gottfried, Duke of Lower Lotharingia. He is a beastly brute of a man, and Matilde cannot bear the idea of marrying the monster. After they marry, the marriage quickly turns abusive, and Gottfried breaks the non-consummation clause of their contract. She seeks asylum at the court of King Heinrich of Germany, where love eventually develops between the two.

This book can be likened to a masterfully woven tapestry, since it tells such a captivating story. The characters, of which there are many, are like the different colored threads that come together to create a compelling work. The result? Lara Byrne's book is engrossing. While it does start off a bit slow, once I reached a certain point I had to know what would happen next. In Matilde we have an unconventional and strong heroine who faces such horrible circumstances but rises above them. With Heinrich, we have a young king who has just come into his own power and confidence. It is apparent that Byrne must have done an extensive amount of research. She writes beautifully and brings the politically unstable world of 11th-century Europe to life.

Elizabeth K. Corbett

BLOOD FEUD

S. J. A. Turney, *Canelo*, 2021, £9.99, pb, 400pp, 9781800321281

All aboard for an epic Viking adventure, in the capable hands of Simon Turney. In 11th-century Gotland, a boy witnesses his father murdered by Christian zealots. Orphaned Halfdan grows up nursing the memory of his valiant father, convinced he is now in Valhöll. Vengeance must be had, and Halfdan pursues the murderer, Jarl Yngvar. But Yngvar must not die a warrior's death, lest he also go to Valhöll. Guided by a mysterious prophetess, Halfdan's quest leads him to the edge of the world. Along the way, there are all the adventures of a Viking saga. There's comradeship forged in battle, a plucky shield maiden, magical powers, a valuable sword won. There are wagers and arguments, the solidarity of the shield wall, exotic foreign lands, and different gods.

There were a few turns of phrase that struck me as anachronistic: how would men 'sign on' to a ship in a world of oral contracts? But I'm being picky: the important thing is the fights—one in almost every chapter. For those interested in unravelling real history from myth, Turney provides an excellent historical note. Recommended for those who want to enjoy all the glory of adventure, with none of the pain.

Helen Johnson

12TH CENTURY

ROTHERWOOD

Chris Thorndycroft, *Independently published*, 2021, \$15.00, pb, 355pp, 9798529888650

England and the Holy Land are the settings of this 12th-century imagining of Wilfred of Ivanhoe's life over the four years before the opening pages of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Young Wilfred, a new knight, joins King Richard the Lionheart's crusade to reclaim Jerusalem. His Saxon father is not pleased, refuses to honor the love between his son and his devoted Rowena with a betrothal, and disinherits him.

In the Holy Land, warrior loyalties are divided by warring European kingdoms as well as Saladin's forces. Disease, treason, and massacres plague the Crusaders. Wilfred suffers all, as well as post-traumatic stress, nightmares, and doubts.

Back in England, the country is being devastated by corruption and crippling taxes thanks to Richard's brother John. Rowena finds ways to ease the suffering of the poor. She is aided in her efforts by a nobleman-turned-outlaw and his band. In one of the novel's many delights, she's responsible for him becoming known as Robin Hood.

Through their long separation, the narrative glides from Rowena's to Wilfred's settings and conflicts. Despite a few anachronisms and modern phrasing, *Rotherwood* carries on in the historical novel adventure traditions of Thomas B. Costain, James Fenimore Cooper, and Sir Walter Scott himself. A page-turning treat! Highly recommended.

Eileen Charbonneau

13TH CENTURY

OLAV AUDUNSSØN: Providence

Sigrid Undset (trans. Tiina Nunnally), Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2021, \$17.95, pb, 269pp, 9781517911607

Olav Audunsson: Providence is Tiina Nunnally's new translation of Book Two of Sigrid Undset's lauded Audunsson series. Originally published in Norwegian in 1925 and first translated into English in 1929 as *The Master of Hestviken*, the series chronicles the life of Olav Audunsson: husband, father, and heir to land and wealth in 13th-century Norway.

In Book One, *Vows*, Olav's father, a widower facing imminent death, had secured for seven-year-old Olav both a foster father and a fiancée: Olav's new foster-sister, Ingunn. As the children matured, their friendship blossomed into romance; but when they consummated their marriage prematurely, Olav's integrity and the legitimacy of the betrothal were challenged.

In *Providence*, Olav, now master of his ancestral home, commits a desperate act meant to defend Ingunn's honor and enters a downward spiral into guilt and self-recrimination. Once congenial, he becomes reclusive, alienating friends as he descends, in his own estimation, beyond salvation. A powerful study in the cause and effect of acts both innocent and heinous, *Providence* plunges the reader into Olav's darkest nights.

In the translator's note, Nunnally states, "Literary translations depend on the individual translator's linguistic skills and artistry, but they are also subject to attitudes at the time of their creation..." She hopes hers will "bring the reader closer to Sigrid Undset's beautiful and lyrical voice."

While Arthur Chater's 1929 translation features medieval-sounding language in a smooth, if dated, narratorial voice, Nunnally's delivers precise wording and unadorned syntax. This more contemporary language may initially appear less evocative of the period, but it allows the narrative itself to draw the reader into a casually brutal world in which the tentacles—and the judgment—of the Church pervade every aspect of life.

Replete with family feuds, betrayal, clandestine love, and the consequences of a man's infidelity to his own honor, the Audunsson saga is recommended reading.

Rebecca Kightlinger

14TH CENTURY

THE GOOD DEATH

S. D. Sykes, Pegasus Crime, 2021, \$25.95, hb, 364pp, 9781643137797 / Hodder, 2022, £8.99, pb, 304pp, 9781473680234

Lord of Somershill Manor, Oswald de Lacy is explaining the origin of a letter to his dying mother. The letter dates back to 1349, when Oswald was a monk in Kintham Abbey. As third son in the de Lacy line, Oswald was

never expected to be head of the Somershill estate. Only after the sudden death of his father and two older brothers did Oswald return to the family home and become lord of the manor. The story behind the letter returns Oswald to the abbey and the nearby village of Stonebrook where young women are disappearing. With the help of his tutor, Brother Peter, Oswald is determined to find the perpetrator.

The Good Death is the fifth in the highly regarded Somershill Manor Mystery series. This well-crafted medieval mystery tantalizes readers, leading them to suspect first one, then another, and another of its multidimensional and nuanced characters. It also delves into themes of privilege, retribution and justice, faith and loss of faith, deceit, truth, and forgiveness.

Written at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, *The Good Death*, and its predecessors in the series, are eerily relevant. The books are set during the Black Plague, which killed nearly half of the people in western Europe between 1348 and 1350 and recurred between 1360 and 1363. This novel brings the fears, suspicions, and misinformed attitudes of the past into the stark reality of the present.

K. M. Sandrick

THE DEADLIEST SIN

Jeri Westerson, Severn House, 2021, \$28.99/£20.99, hb, 224pp, 9780727889713

This is the fifteenth and last Crispin Guest Medieval Noir mystery. Crispin, a Tracker (private eye) in 1399 London, forfeited his knighthood and estates when he supported the wrong side in a power contest between the Duke of Lancaster and the King. The story opens as that old conflict is re-igniting. Richard II is on the throne, but Henry Bolingbroke has returned from exile to threaten his reign.

With politics always in the background, Crispin and his assistant Jack Tucker investigate three deaths at St. Frideswide's Priory. Crispin's son Christopher, born of a liaison with his long-time love Philippa, assists. Philippa is supportive, but events have carried her out of Crispin's reach.

The complex monastic murder mystery is eventually solved, but Bolingbroke is looming over Richard II, and Crispin's fate is deeply intertwined with theirs. There is a lot going on in this stand-alone story: the murder mysteries, the political complexities, and Crispin's personal relationships. I think fans who have followed the Tracker longer than I have will like the satisfying personal resolution. I found myself wishing there was going to be a next book. Since there isn't, I purchased the first two volumes and happily started reading. Colorful, engaging characters, a richly textured dip into medieval life, and nail-biting suspense: it's no surprise that this series has been nominated for thirteen national awards over the years.

Elizabeth Knowles

15TH CENTURY

THE GOOD WIFE OF BATH: A (Mostly) True Story

Karen Brooks, William Morrow, 2022, \$16.99/£9.99, pb, 560pp, 9780063142831

Brooks offers another adventure-crammed frolic through the London of an earlier era in this prequel to her bestselling *The Brewer's Tale/The Lady Brewer of London*. Alyson aka Eleanor, a successful bawd and minor figure in the earlier book, becomes the central character in this sprawling, picaresque tale, with her life modeled closely after the autobiographical Prologue to Chaucer's famous *Wife of Bath's Tale*.

Orphaned Eleanor Cornfed of Bath (the first and briefest of many surnames) is married at the age of twelve to an elderly farmer in the year 1464. She's appalled at the lack of control she has over her life, but the union surprises her by providing opportunities to learn the trade of weaving, to gain a loving family, and eventually, to experience marital joy. Readers might be squeamish about a child forced into a sexual relationship (even though such unions were common in the medieval world), but Brooks handles the relationship with such sensitivity and empathy that one soon finds Eleanor's affection for her elderly husband quite understandable.

But this is only the first tenth of an entertaining narrative that follows Eleanor (who later takes the name Alyson for dramatic reasons) through five marriages, countless liaisons, numerous reinventions, and several journeys as a pilgrim across the Known World of the 15th century. Her most important relationship, however, is her friendship and correspondence with the poet Geoffrey Chaucer—until he betrays her by transforming her into his most notorious fictional creation.

Brooks not only offers fascinating details about life, work, and relationships in medieval England, but creates a "chosen family" for Eleanor/Alyson whose warmth and loyalty create ample opportunities for truly heartwarming (and sometimes heart-rending) moments along the way. At the end of the 560 pages of this ambitious tale, the reader will be eager to hear more about this loud, loving, unforgettable character.

Kristen McDermott

THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN

Catherine Clover, Duckworth, 2021, £8.99, pb, 362pp, 9780715654156

This second instalment of the memoirs of Lady Isabella d'Albret Courteault starts in 1453, in South Wales after Isabella has just said farewell to her betrothed, Lord Richard Goodwyn. He has left to return a priceless relic to the Vatican. She then travels back into England only to find that the Wars of the Roses have left her in grave jeopardy: she must hide out in an Oxford college, disguised as a male student.

Having enjoyed the previous book (*The Templar's Garden*), I find Isabella a

very likeable and vital character. She has convincing religious visions, including the heretical suggestion that God could be female. Attempting to rejoin the troubled Lord Richard, she makes a travelogue-like journey, taking in Calais, Lucerne, Florence and Rome, before finishing back in South Wales, amongst the Tudors. She encounters real-life objects and characters: the Wilton Diptych, the father of Leonardo da Vinci and the parents of King Henry VII.

The book is consistently readable: as well as Gothic architecture, we have Gothic plotting—a disguised leper, a jail dungeon, the Roman catacombs, and more. The editing could have been better; a sea captain's name changes from 'Aird' to 'Smith'; there are some inappropriate phrases: 'ambled' (for walking into a dying man's presence), 'open to the public', 'this weekend'. The dialogue is frequently over-explanatory. I found some of Isabella's comments seemed distractingly more like hindsight than prophecy. For example, when describing Calais in the 1450s, she says it is *still* under English occupation (when this occupation was to continue for another century). Reading this book, I was reminded of Dennis Wheatley's vintage Roger Brook series, unevenly written but always gripping. Clover also has the knack of crafting a propulsive plot, full of movement and incident. Recommended

Ben Bergonzi

ISLAND OF GOLD

Amy Maroney, Artelan Press, 2021, \$14.99, pb, 378pp, 9781955973014

Cédric, the landless youngest son of a viscount in Languedoc, France, has a knack for falconry. In 1435, after his father dies, his skill wins him a position with the Count of Chambonac, in the Auvergne.

In the meantime, in the bustling, southern market city of Toulouse, Sophie, the spoiled but sometimes kind 16-year-old daughter of a wealthy merchant, is past due for marriage. She wants a young man she can love, her father thinks a well-off man would be best, and her mother likes the idea of a nobleman. Her father gives Sophie what she wants.

After Sophie and Cédric marry, his employer, the count, makes him an offer Cédric cannot refuse: to become master falconer for the count's cousin, the new grand master of the Knights Hospitaller at their headquarters on the Greek island of Rhodes. After six years the count will grant Cédric a piece of land. A title is attached to the property so Cédric will become a viscount, just like his oldest brother. Rhodes, however, proves to be not only exotic and rich, but also dangerous—especially when Cédric

and Sophie begin to mistrust each other and keep secrets instead of working together.

This is a nimbly told story with impeccable pacing. I glanced at the first page—just to see how it started—and then barely emerged before it was all too quickly over. Author Amy Maroney's research felt just right. The novel opened detailed, colorful new worlds.

Kristen Hannum

16TH CENTURY

THE NIGHTMARE KINGDOM

Rob Bauer, Rob Bauer Books, 2021, \$13.99, pb, 340pp, 9781948478229

In the early 1530s, a group of determined Anabaptists took control of the city of Münster. At the time, religious conflict was widespread: not two decades had passed since Luther had nailed his theses to the door of Württemberg Cathedral, and the Holy Roman Empire adopted a harsh approach to anyone who embraced the new teachings. The Anabaptists were extreme radicals, scoffing at Luther for not being brave enough to truly follow Scripture. They advocated a new kingdom for the Elect, one in which all goods and properties were held in common and no one went without.

What happened in Münster goes to show that such utopian beliefs are hard to hold on to. As Bauer vividly depicts, soon enough the so-called Elect impose a religious tyranny on the inhabitants. Like all sect leaders, John of Leiden, aka "the prophet," considers himself above any laws but his own and uses terror and violence to control the people of Münster. One could think the inhabitants would flee, but unfortunately for them, the city is besieged by the Catholic bishop who once controlled it.

This is a harrowing tale, one of death, fear and loss capably told by Bauer. Through the eyes of his protagonists, Sofie and Hilde, Heinrich and Brigitte, he offers insight into the unfolding events, from when the Anabaptists first take power to when they are finally defeated. It is not a pretty tale, but then the story of religious zealots never is. Bauer delivers a well-written narrative, even if at times his deep dives into the religious background—while necessary—has a negative impact on pace. All in all, *The Nightmare Kingdom* is a gripping and educating read. Warmly recommended.

Anna Belfrage

THE QUEEN'S LADY

Joanna Hickson, HarperCollins, 2022, £14.99, hb, 464pp, 9780008305628

This novel follows on from *The Lady of the Ravens*, although it reads well as a stand-alone novel. It opens in 1502 and portrays the end of the reign of King Henry VII and the beginnings of that of King Henry VIII, as seen through the eyes of Joan Guildford. She recounts major royal events, starting with the marriage of Prince Arthur to Catherine of Aragon, and his tragic death. After another death, the King is grief-stricken and becomes over-suspicious

and miserly. The dowager Princess Catherine is sidelined and the King despairs of Prince Henry, his heir, for his frivolity.

The King accuses Joan's husband, Sir Richard Guilford, of embezzling royal funds for his own use; Richard is imprisoned. Lady Joan is still loved by the princes and princesses who still call her 'Mother Guildford', but she also suffers. What follows is the death and funeral of the King and her growing friendship with the lonely, poor and neglected Catherine of Aragon. Joan is shown playing a major part in Catherine's early, happy marriage to Henry VIII. Her life also takes a turn for the better. This is a sumptuous historical novel reminiscent of the great Jean Plaidy with her ability to bring the well-trodden paths of history to vibrant life. Some modern readers may find it a slow read, but to me, this is traditional historical fiction at its very best.

Sally Zigmond

QUEEN OF BLOOD

Sarah Kennedy, Penmore, 2021, \$19.50, pb, 382pp, 9781950586752

Novelist, poet, and Professor of English at Mary Baldwin University, award-winning scholar Kennedy sets her *The Cross* and *The Crown* series in Tudor England. This installment, the fourth, begins in October 1553. Sixteen-year-old King Edward VI has died and Mary Tudor—eldest daughter of Henry VIII and his first wife, Catherine of Aragon—has been crowned queen. But uncertainty reigns and rumors fly. Will the Catholic queen reverse England's Protestant Reformation? Will she wed Prince Philip of Spain, as is whispered? And, will lands gained by some nobles from dissolved convents and monasteries be returned to the Church? Many worry, will England erupt into rebellion? Meanwhile, protagonist Catherine Havens Davies—a former nun, now married—has her own challenging uncertainties to navigate. Catherine's son, Robbie Overton, a "hot-headed boy" with "Protestant fervor," has suddenly returned home to England from Wittenberg. Who are the mysterious men with whom he roams? Soon all in Catherine's household, including her husband, are swept up in England's momentous events.

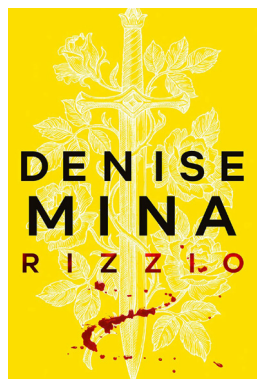
Kennedy introduces her readers to various historical characters. Along with "Bloody Mary" are the unfortunate John and Jane Dudley, the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland, and their son Guildford, husband to the "Nine Days" queen, Jane Grey. There is the rebellious Thomas Wyatt, the Younger, and the slippery Bishop Stephen Gardiner, now Lord Chancellor, and his unmannered henchmen. We learn something of all of them in an account that adeptly captures the unsettled nature of the unstable 1550s. "No one seems to know what is happening or who is on which side," Kennedy writes. But her plot, while believable, is decidedly more imaginative than historical. In *Queen of Blood*, Catherine and her inner circle are centre stage. And while the action unfolds in short, snappy chapters, Kennedy's noteworthy prose is also

delightfully descriptive of fictional Catherine's inner life.

Mark Spencer

h RIZZIO

Denise Mina, Polygon, 2021, £10.00, hb, 128pp, 9781846975677 / Pegasus, 2021, \$20.95, hb, 128pp, 9781643138459



March 9th 1566, Edinburgh. Conspirators want to murder Mary Queen of Scots' suspected lover during a tennis match, but her estranged husband, Darnley, says no. Six-months pregnant Mary won't be there. Darnley wants her to witness

the violence, in the hope that she will miscarry and die, so he can rule by himself. So starts Denise Mina's unputdownable novella about the murder of David Rizzio, Mary's personal secretary.

It's a famous incident in history. Rizzio is stabbed 56 times after he is dragged from the room in Holyrood Palace where he and Mary are dining. This is despite him grabbing hold of Mary's skirts and her attempting to shield him as he begs for mercy. Mary's husband is backed by Protestant lords, sympathetic to England, who are due to lose their powers in a few days when Catholic Mary holds a Parliament. But when there is a coup who can be trusted?

Mina explores this bloody incident with forensic and gripping detail. We get an insight into the debated parentage of Mary's child (the future King James VI & I), the conspirators and their fates. It's written in a taut detective-story style, with flashes of modern wit. Mina is an award-winning crime novelist. The murder appears to be the catalyst that leads to Mary's later turbulent life, and the road to execution at Fotheringhay on the orders of another Queen—

Elizabeth I. The book is part of a series reimagining stories from Scottish history by Scottish writers. Highly recommended.

Kate Pettigrew

ABIGAIL OF VENICE

Leigh Russell, Bloodhound, 2021, £9.49, pb, 334pp, 9781914614484

1562: in a Lithuanian ghetto, Abigail's impoverished parents marry her off at puberty to Reuven, a violent, drunken man many years her senior. When the Jewish community is driven into the river by the soldiers of Ivan the Terrible to drown or be shot, Abigail and her uncle survive, making their way eventually to the Ghetto Nuovo of Venice.

Abigail makes a life for herself as a

seamstress in this city within a city, and falls in love with Daniel, a widower with two children, but their marriage is prevented by the unexpected return of Abigail's husband. When Reuven gets into a drunken brawl and is found in possession of a knife, forbidden to Venetian Jews, he is sentenced to the galleys, a fate from which he is unlikely to return but which will leave Abigail in limbo, never knowing whether she is widowed or not.

Abigail finds an unlikely ally in the enlightened courtesan and poetess Veronica Franco, who is able to warn her community of impending danger from the Inquisition.

There are some character and plot stumbles: leaving aside coincidence, we never learn how Reuven was one of the three thousand souls who survived the pogrom, nor where he went to before Venice. Daniel was for some years a widower before loving Abigail, but it is not clear why he resisted remarriage for so long, as we learn that he esteemed his dead wife, but did not love her. Abigail is a stoical heroine, forced by culture and circumstance to accept what fate throws at her. Russell's book is thoroughly researched, throwing a light on an aspect of Venetian history that many who know the city well may not be familiar with.

Katherine Mezzacappa

17TH CENTURY

OUT FRONT THE FOLLOWING SEA

Leah Angstman, Regal House, 2022, \$19.95, pb, 334pp, 9781646031948

This is the story of Ruth Miner and her journey of survival in 17th-century New England. Accused of witchcraft after her parents' deaths, she stows away on the ship of her friend Owen, who feels responsible for all her misfortune. However, they both soon find themselves fighting for their lives as the war between England and France in 1689, known as King William's War, begins. Ruth's strength and independence make her a target in this patriarchal society, and Owen, who has French ancestry, is treated as a suspect by the English. After Owen and Ruth find love, a harsh and domineering man tries to destroy them both.

What a wonderful and authentic work of historical fiction! The dialogue is completely true to the period, and there is a helpful list of non-English phrases at the end of the book. The descriptions of the people and their prejudices are completely realistic. The reader is shown how the absolute oppression of women includes death to any woman who seeks to be different, and how the accusation of witchcraft is a convenient excuse. The superstitions of the time are fascinating and well-researched. The wildness of the New World and the cruelty of those in power against anyone who disagrees with them are splashed in blood across the pages of this realistic and no-holds-barred novel. *Out Front the Following Sea* is an odyssey in an untamed country that will one day be America. Those interested in

American history will want to explore this oft-forgotten period in her past.

Bonnie DeMoss

REBEL'S KNOT

Cryssa Bazos, W.M. Jackson Publishing, 2021, \$14.99, pb, 366pp, 9781999106744

Kingdoms wage war on a small island, and it is the common folk who bear the brunt of the fighting. Aine Callaghan is a dairymaid on the Mulriane homestead in County Limerick, Ireland. The young woman is unassuming and unencumbered, save for the mystery of her early years spent in Cork, when she lived a life she would rather forget. Her idyllic new livelihood is torn apart when English forces raid the estate in revenge for the young lordship's participation in rebel Irish activities, waging brutal violence on anyone they find, and driving Aine into hiding.

It is while foraging in the wild hedge that Aine meets Niall O'Coneill, kin to the Mulrianes and soldier in the employ of Edmund O'Dwyer, a respected Irish commander. Aine and Niall reluctantly set off together for the relative safety of the Irish military encampment, where they face the harsh realities of living off the land as well as the dangers inherent to living among trained warriors, some of whom seem to be on the side of the British.

Aine and Niall both present intriguing points-of-view: she a woman living on her own in the 17th century, and he a soldier with noble aspirations confronting increasingly political conflicts with his fellow men. Their relationship evolves naturally over time, although Aine faces a series of near-assaults and grave danger in order to stay by Niall's side. While violence and bloodshed occur with some frequency, Bazos keenly avoids salaciousness in telling this story of people caught up in imperial conquest.

This is the third in Cryssa Bazos' *Quest for Three Kingdoms* series. While some character arcs continue across the books, *Rebel's Knot* easily stands on its own with an ending that will leave readers satisfied with true closure.

Erin Page

MAGIC IN THE WEAVE

Alys Clare, Severn House, 2021, \$28.99/£20.99, hb, 242pp, 9780727890108

It's October 1604 when Dr. Gabriel Taverner and his sister Celia attend a new play in Plymouth, England. The Company is a skilled group of actors driven from London's plague-closed theaters, and their portrayal of *Othello* throbs with sexuality. Afterward, they share a drink with the Company's flamboyant actor-manager, and Celia impulsively offers to embroider a silken handkerchief fit for *Othello*'s gift to Desdemona: reputed by Shakespeare's characters to be witch-made, with magic in the weave. The young woman rides home with her brother, rosy-cheeked with excitement. Fearing she may run off with the troupe, Gabriel stays close to Celia. Then, an overheard argument hints at a more

sinister reason for the Company to flee London than plague. Secrets are carried within the Company; the sort which might lead to murder to keep them hid.

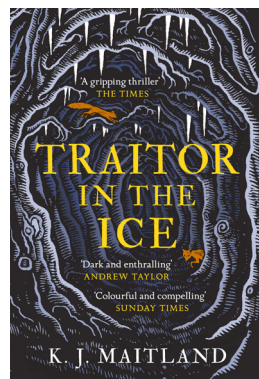
Alys Clare's latest in her Dr. Gabriel Taverner series is an intricate puzzle worthy of Shakespeare himself. Ms. Clare does a terrific job placing readers in a time when science and sorcery are practically one, presents us with increasingly bizarre clues for her methodical Dr. Taverner to untangle, then reweaves them at the end. I particularly enjoyed the theatrical setting, with players changing personalities as easily as their costumes.

A man is found dead, but his corpse disappears before turning up miles away. A player collapses with the plague—or is it poison? What is in the mysterious coded book he carries, and who are the Scholars of the Numinous the dying man mentions? Are members of the Company behind the escalating body count, and why? Read *Magic in the Weave*, find out for yourself, and enjoy!

Jo Ann Butler

H TRAITOR IN THE ICE

K. J. Maitland, *Headline Review*, 2022, £16.99, hb, 419pp, 9781472275455



This is a country house murder mystery, and a very good one. The investigator, Daniel Pursglove, is a flawed genius with an interesting past, there is a host of colourful suspects, each with a guilty secret, sub-plots

abound, and there are three murders and a dramatic denouement. But this is more than a detective story set in the past. It is an historical novel in the fullest sense, very much rooted in its time and place.

The time is 1607, in the ferocious winter that marked the onset of the Little Ice Age. England is still in shock after the narrow escape from a massive terrorist outrage, the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Religious fanatics are at large, ready to kill and die for their faith. The security services see conspiracies everywhere.

The place is Battle Abbey in Sussex, home to the Catholic (and hence potentially treasonous) Montague family and close enough to the coast to be convenient for refugees, assassins, and spies. Maitland is scrupulous and painstaking with her research, and the icy weather and fevered political climate are expertly conveyed. This is the second of her Pursglove stories. I look forward to the next.

Edward James

HUSKANAW

Brian Swann, *MadHat Press*, 2021, \$22.95, pb, 338pp, 9781952335266

Young John Crowe, chafing under the thumb of his brother in rural early 17th-century England, runs off to London with a “Gypsy” couple before ending up on a ship bound for Virginia in Brian Swann’s *Huskanaw*. Crowe haphazardly falls in with other ne’er-do-well men as an indentured servant and diffidently schemes for advancement as he adapts to the new continent and the Algonquin people interacting with Jamestown. He learns about Algonquin customs and language and is adopted by the people. “Huskanaw” is the name for that adoption ritual.

The majority of the novel feels unfocused; it plods along with great amounts of detail for the first four-fifths. Crowe seems like an entirely passive protagonist who receives the plot’s few actions, often in bewilderment, and initiates very little. These incidents mostly occur randomly, without any connection to the rest of the narrative. Crowe’s laziness and absentmindedness underline the fact that he lacks a strong goal—even his dislike of his supposedly abusive brother is unfocused and non-urgent. Things happen to him, he tries confusedly to make sense of them, and they stop happening.

The best aspect of this colonial transatlantic novel is how thoroughly and evenly it treats the locations on both sides of the ocean. Both are made vividly real and given their due. I only wish the protagonist and plot had received that focus. Historical fiction of early English Virginia is rare, but better examples than this novel exist, and I recommend readers seek those out.

Irene Colthurst

THE KING’S CAPTAIN

Mark Turnbull, *Sharpe Books*, 2021, £4.99, pb, 124pp, 9798491137671

This is a very slim novella (barely 40,000 words), the second (after *The King’s Spy*, reviewed in *HNR* 96) in the “rebellion” series of books about Maxwell Walker, a widowed ex-blacksmith serving as a captain in the King’s cavalry during the English Civil War.

1645 is not a happy time for the good captain. The murder of his wife still plays heavily on his mind, and the Royalist cause he has thrown in with is crumbling fast. Desperate times call for desperate measures, so the bulk of the King’s remaining horsemen are despatched on a wild ride north to join the Marquess of Montrose, who has been winning big battles in Scotland and only lacks cavalry to completely secure the country for the King. However, the Parliamentarians seem to be aware of their every move and are able to counter the Royalist force at every turn. Walker begins to suspect there is a traitor in the camp supplying the “rebels” with information, and that the French government is also dabbling in the situation.

The historical detail in this is impressive and enlightening, all the more so because it

concentrates on less well-known events at the dying end of the war. Unfortunately, the accompanying story is thin in the extreme, and although there are some significant scenes, the plotline is too threadbare to make much sense.

Martin Bourne

TOO MUCH OF WATER

L. C. Tyler, *Constable*, 2021, £21.99, hb, 338pp, 9781472135070

You might well think ‘too much of water’ while reading this novel, especially at this time of year. The title, of course, is a quotation from *Hamlet* about poor drowned Ophelia, but beware of jumping on it as a clue of some sort.

Set out like a 17th-century tome with several pages of dramatis personae, quaintly relevant names abound in this light-hearted gothic world, such as Wraith, the people-hating vicar; Catch, who caught a fatal fever; and, among many others, Grey himself, the reluctant detective sent to track down the murderer of one of the contenders in the forthcoming Parliamentary election, the foul-mouthed Admiral Digges. There are enough suspects as to whodunnit, in fact nearly everyone could, and a good thing too. It seems Digges had it coming, and not only for trying to buy his way into Parliament, as you’ll discover.

Despite this motley cast, the setting is as much a character as the grey denizens who, though assumed to be living, haunt this dying town as its mud cliffs slowly drag it into the German Ocean. As one of the rotten boroughs of the 17th century, expected to send two members to Parliament despite having a tiny population, Eastwold is a small grey world of suspicion, half-truths, political corruption, and ugly rivalries. Those who know the east coast will be aware that from here as far as Flamborough Head, stories abound about the drowned villages with their church bells ringing under the waves. As the cliffs crumble, skulls from Eastwold’s ravaged church yard are pitched from their coffins in sinister rivalry between the living and the sea. This grey place is enlivened by the acidic marital banter of Grey and his wife, Arminta.

Cassandra Clark

THE SWIFT AND THE HARRIER

Minette Walters, *Allen & Unwin*, 2021, £20.00, hb, 512pp, 9781838954529

Minette Walters spent many years as a bestselling thriller writer before turning her talents to historical fiction, and *The Swift and The Harrier* is her third historical novel set in her home county of Dorset. The story, set in the 1640s, features Jayne Swift, a female physician who, despite being from a royalist family, insists on treating people from both sides of the civil war. On a quest to treat a family in Dorchester, she first encounters William Harrier, who offers himself as a chaperone as violent feeling is stirred up and war commences.

Swift and Harrier meet again several times during the next few years. Jayne holds true

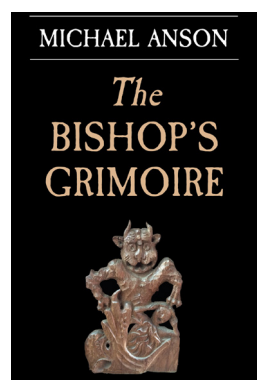
to her neutrality by tending the wounded on both sides during the battle at Lyme and at her home, and through her eyes we watch the brutality and horror of war unfold. Walters has a gift for creating characters that you root for despite their flaws, along with a talent for writing fast-paced, page-turning stories. By focusing on the impact of war on one locality, Walters creates a poignancy and tension in the story that equals her previous Dorset books. Perfect for fans of K. J. Maitland and S. G. MacLean.

Lisa Redmond

18TH CENTURY

THE BISHOP'S GRIMOIRE

Michael Anson, *Page D'Or*, 2021, £12.99, pb, 360pp, 9781913825539



1766, Lichfield. Richard Greene, a fifty-year-old apothecary, surgeon and proprietor of an extensive museum of ancient artefacts and curios, is one of a party visiting Eccleshall Castle, the former home of a bishop of

Lichfield in the 1300s, who had stood trial for witchcraft.

During their visit, a gatehouse that is being renovated collapses, killing one of the workmen but also revealing an ancient book that had been hidden there for centuries. It is, of course, no ordinary book, and it quickly transpires that it has dreadful and dangerous demonic power. Greene has to overcome not only the book's diabolic enchantment but also the attempts to steal it by a man who is evil personified.

What makes this book an absolute joy to read and a real page-turner is not so much the plot, which is exciting but not new, but the language, especially when Anson describes the horrific manifestations of evil. The real joy, however, lies in the characters, which Anson has fleshed out to such an extent that I yearn for Richard Greene and his long-suffering but indomitable wife, Theodosia, to invite me round for dinner and amuse me with their conversation and humorous banter. Greene and his wife were real people, and Anson, for a bit of light relief amongst the satanic darkness, describes beautifully and often hilariously their imagined interactions with the likes of Samuel Johnson, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Erasmus Darwin, and David Garrick.

This is, in fact, book two of a trilogy, the first being *The Burning Zone*, which I am going to read as soon as I've finished this review. This is one of the most enjoyable and unputdownable books I have read in a long time, and I look

forward impatiently to the publication of Book 3. I can't recommend this book enough.

Marilyn Pemberton

CRY OF THE INNOCENT

Julie Bates, *Level Best/Historia*, 2021, \$16.95/£11.99, pb, 258pp, 9781953789778

In 1774 Williamsburg, Virginia, Faith Clarke bears full responsibility for raising her son and running Clarke Tavern after the recent death of her husband. When Phineas Bullard, an influential but despised businessman, is hacked to death in her private meeting room, Faith falls under suspicion. Does the onerous debt her husband owed to Bullard give her a motive for murder? Bullard's pocket book and sabre are missing, along with his young Jamaican slave, the only possible witness to the crime. It soon becomes clear to Faith that Bullard had many enemies, but why did he rent her room when there are many other more affluent establishments in Williamsburg, and why is the murderer trying to ruin her reputation as an honest businesswoman? Faith is determined to clear her name and is horrified to discover Bullard was involved in the abhorrent business of capturing and selling freed slaves. Faith's feelings are conflicted because she owns two slaves herself, but she plans to ask the governor to free them and cannot countenance rogues who choose to profit from people's misery.

With a background set during the lead-up to the American Revolution, this has the makings of an engaging murder mystery, but as I read, I was plagued by more questions than answers. Events seem to hang without resolution, and some occurrences have no clear bearing on the plot. Many small details are enticing but don't lead anywhere.

The parts dealing with Faith's slaves illuminate feelings about this subject with compassion. The tension of the times is palpable, and the pressure the British placed on daily life, where even serving tea could put you on the wrong side of an ever-widening divide, is well-drawn.

Fiona Alison

HMS HAZARD

David Donachie, *McBooks*, 2021, \$29.95, hb, 304pp, 9781493060658

In the early summer of 1796, John Pearce commands the 14-gun Royal Navy sailing ship *HMS Hazard*. She is manned by inexperienced "quota men" conscripted from various places. Spain, France, England, Portugal, and Holland have been engaged in decades of war, truces, shifting alliances, and war again. Pearce has orders to surveil parts of coastal France and then Spain and learn what he can about their battle readiness and intentions. Samuel Oliphant, a clever but irritating civilian spy, must travel with Pearce.

Over a few short weeks, Pearce deals with a deadly mutinous crew faction, sneaks ashore in France, and then runs south to Spain, whose friendship with England is tenuous.

If Spain were to become an ally of France, England's power would wane. Rumors have it that a giant warship is headed to Spain from the New World with a cargo of silver to fund Spain's break from England and new aggression.

Pearce faces unresolved challenges back home too. His secret affair with a married lover has borne them a baby son. Well-connected merchants maneuver to strip Pearce of his rank and take for themselves bounties he captured from enemy vessels.

Donachie's prose and dialogue fit the language of those times. He knows the ships, their crews, and battle strategies. He puts readers on the ocean and waterways, in tight landing areas and unfriendly towns. Pearce and Oliphant's clever moves to obtain information, while avoiding capture, are riveting. This novel's plotlines and character relationships will be fully appreciated by fans of the prior fifteen John Pearce novels. Without that background, Pearce still makes for an interesting and dashing leader, and his current adventures at sea and on land are worth the read.

G. J. Berger

MUSKETS AND MINUETS

Lindsey S. Fera, *GenZ Publishing*, 2021, \$19.99, pb, 504pp, 9781952919572

Annalisa Howlett has been learning to shoot a fowling from her brother George since she was 13 years old. She enjoys discussing politics, a topic about which her sex shouldn't speak. Her focus should be the loom and minuets if she hopes to marry well. Annalisa could care less about marriage... until she meets the handsome Jack Perkins. Four years later, in 1775, she secretly joins the militia disguised as a boy while things are heating up within the colonies. In disguise, her voice is finally heard. However, Annalisa's and Jack's feelings toward one another have grown. Unfortunately, Jack is expected to marry whom his family deems fit if he intends to keep his inheritance, and that woman is Annalisa's sister. After bragging to Annalisa about the upcoming engagement, Annalisa runs off to join the minutemen marching towards Bunker Hill. In the thick of battle, Jack hunts for Annalisa in hopes of announcing his intentions to marry her before it's too late.

As if intended for a different print size, the book suffers from formatting errors. Many words run into one another, and paragraph indents aren't always spaced the same on pages. Additionally, there are two pages numbered 182, one which has two words but is otherwise blank. However, Fera's breadth of research overshadows this. The manner of speech and slang create an immersive narrative that sucks readers in (there's a glossary in the back too!). Other tidbits of knowledge include loading a fowler, social customs, and character participation in decisive moments leading to the Revolutionary War. Family drama abounds, which impacts the story in deeply emotional ways. A thrilling

story of romance, 18th-century society life, and rebellion.

J. Lynn Else

ANTOINETTE'S SISTER

Diana Giovinazzo, *Grand Central*, 2022, \$28.00/C\$35.00, hb, 384pp, 9781538720127

Charlotte, born Maria Carolina to Holy Roman Empress Maria Theresa, tells her story in this biographical novel. Her sister, Marie Antoinette, was the most famous of sixteen siblings, but Charlotte has her own fascinating life. The Empress arranged politically advantageous marriages for many of her children. Charlotte is married to King Ferdinand IV and sent to Naples. At fifteen, she has difficulty accepting her fate and finds her new husband to be childish, irresponsible, and uninterested in ruling. Instead, he spends his time hunting and playing make-believe games with the common people such as a fishmonger or an innkeeper. This endears him to his subjects, but is detrimental to Naples under the rule of his regent, Tenucci.

The Empress wisely included a clause in the marriage contract giving Charlotte the right to take a place on the governing council once she has produced an heir. The first third of the novel is lackluster through Charlotte's childhood and early years of her marriage. When she finally provides an heir, the narrative picks up and interest builds when Charlotte, who has been observing and learning, challenges Tenucci to take her rightful place in the governance of Naples, upsetting the status quo.

She matures into an intelligent, formidable leader able to match wits with deceitful, power-hungry men. As Ferdinand ages, he still has no interest in ruling, but he changes from a buffoon into a tender, loving father to his seventeen children. Each chapter ends with a letter from people in her circle, primarily Marie Antoinette. These are unconvincing as personal letters, but read as news items to provide a view of events outside of Naples. They do add interesting context as we follow what is taking place in revolutionary France through Marie Antoinette's missives. This novel is enjoyable for its family drama and political power plays.

Janice Ottersberg

WAYWARD VOYAGE

Anna M. Holmes, *The Book Guild*, 2021, £9.99, pb, 477pp, 9781913551728

The story begins with the child Anne Cormac emigrating from Ireland to Charlestown, South Carolina, in 1704 with her parents. Her father manages to prosper enough to buy land and slaves to work it. Tomboy Anne rides her beloved horse and plays at swords with a neighbor boy, Richard, whom her father pressures her to marry once she grows up. Rejecting the kind of life she would have to lead as a plantation owner's wife, Anne runs away with sailor James Bonny, and marries him

because the captain demands that they wed if she is to join the ship.

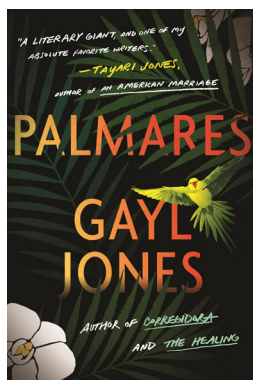
They alight in the Bahamas, where Anne discovers she has little in common with James. The death of their small daughter makes their relationship worse. James takes Anne to witness the hanging of captured pirates, and afterwards she meets Calico Jack Rackham in a tavern. Anne wants something more from life than James offers her, so she runs off to be with Jack and his pirate crew, disguised as a man. But once the crew discovers her secret, their fervent prejudice against women on board results in them threatening to throw Anne off the ship and voting to reject Jack as their captain.

Holmes fills in the many gaps in Anne's known history with logical suppositions of what might have happened. Anne and her co-pirate Mary Read are strong female characters. The tale added to my scanty knowledge of pirate ways. However, the book is too long. Did Holmes fall into the trap of many first-time authors, not wanting to leave out any of the fascinating information they dug up during their research? With that caveat, I recommend it to fans of adventure stories, and to those who like female historical characters who break the mold of their time period.

B. J. Sedlock

H PALMARES

Gayl Jones, *Beacon*, 2021, \$27.95/C\$36.95, hb, 504pp, 9780807033494 / *Virago*, 2021, £18.99, hb, 512pp, 9780349015262



Jones began her celebrated literary career as the protégée of Toni Morrison, and in the last fifty years has written a handful of challenging, intense novels and books of poetry. A scholar of the African American oral tradition and a stylist of "magical realism," she explores themes of Black and Indigenous identity, immigration, spirituality, and women's history in a style she compares to jazz improvisation. Her books are not easy to read but offer an inspiring, dizzying vision of the long history of cultural boundary crossing that is part of the African Diaspora.

In *Palmares*, she creates an unforgettable protagonist in Almeyda, whose life the novel follows from infancy to adulthood in Brazil in the late 1700s. The novel unfolds in hundreds of brief vignettes: conversations Almeyda has or overhears, stories told by the people Almeyda meets, fragments of manuscripts written by European explorers attempting to make sense of the vastness of the land and peoples of Brazil.

Almeyda begins life enslaved, a *mulatta* girl

who can see and hear spirits and voices from the past and future. The dizzying array of characters she meets represents the complex populations of Brazil at the time: European, Indigenous, and African; free and enslaved; colonizer and colonized; Christian, Muslim, and pantheist. Almeyda journeys from slavery to freedom in the legendary fugitive community of Palmares, and from silent observer to trained *curandeira*. Throughout, she is guided by a vision of her destiny to understand and document Brazil's people of color, traveling at the side of her beloved Anninho, a freedom fighter, and aided by powerful women of all races and walks of life, each of whom offers a valuable lesson about survival and resilience. The result is a quilt of many colors and textures, held together with patterns of incantatory language and vivid description.

Kristen McDermott

CHARLOTTE'S STORY

Carolyn Korsmeyer, *TouchPoint Press*, 2021, \$16.99, pb, 276pp, 9781952816581

Spin-offs from *Pride and Prejudice* generally focus on Elizabeth and Darcy and occasionally the other Bennet sisters. Instead, in *Charlotte's Story* Carolyn Korsmeyer writes from the perspective of Charlotte Lucas, Lizzy's best friend. As in Austen's novel, Charlotte marries Reverend Mr. Collins after Lizzy refuses him. She's not unaware of Mr. Collins's verbosity, pretensions, and sycophantic relationship to his patron, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, but regards marriage and a home and family of her own as preferable to remaining the elder spinster daughter. Besides, she has her own private retreat in the parsonage.

Austen creates Mr. Collins as a ridiculous figure, made worse by the entailment of the Bennet family estate to him, their nearest male relative. So too in *Charlotte's Story*, though the frequent laugh-out-loud-moments aren't all thanks to Mr. Collins's folly. Often it's Charlotte's perceptions and wit that provide the humor. She's a warm-hearted, intelligent narrator whose inner deliberations develop as she realizes the complexities of what she believed a practical marital choice.

Korsmeyer's language echoes Austen's style without seeming stilted or anachronistic as she weaves Austen's characters and plot elements into Charlotte's marriage story. With stress developing between them, Mr. Collins sends Charlotte on an extended trip to the fashionable city of Bath in the company of her sister, numerous Bennets, and Anne de Bourgh. Charlotte savors the healing waters, but amidst the social whirl of shopping, assemblies, flirtations, and supper parties, potential scandals draw her in.

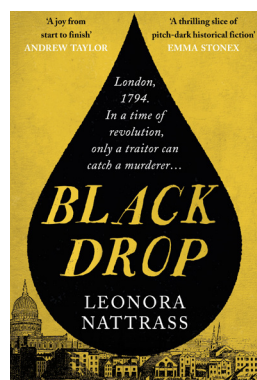
The reader sees incidents from *Pride and Prejudice* anew in a story that's very much of the 18th century as well as to a degree contemporary, including, discreetly and amusingly, the sex life of Charlotte and William Collins. Throughout, Charlotte's moral dilemmas, sensible outlook, and loving

heart illuminate this delightful novel. Highly recommended.

Jinny Webber

BLACK DROP

Leonora Natrass, *Viper*, 2021, £14.99, hb, 352pp, 9781788165938



London, 1793. Laurence Jago is a lowly government clerk, decoding messages and copying documents. He is answerable to George Aust, Permanent Under-Secretary to Lord Grenville, the Foreign Secretary, but Laurence has a

dangerous secret.

After the initial euphoria of the 1789 French Revolution, France is now seen as the enemy. Laurence's mother is French, and he is fluent in the language. So when a letter written in French he recently copied (and supposedly could not understand) is leaked to the press, he is terrified he will end up in prison. His fear increases his addiction to opium—*The Black Drop*. Then he discovers the hanged body of a friend and fellow clerk. Blame for the leak is then shifted to the dead man, but even as the body is taken to the anatomists for dissection, Laurence is certain both of his friend's innocence and that he was murdered. But after years of hiding his own secrets from his powerful employers, and at a time when even the slightest hint of treason can lead to the gallows, how can Laurence find the true culprit without incriminating himself?

When I opened the first page I was woefully ignorant of the politics of the 18th century, apart from the basic outline: the French Revolution, the American War of Independence and the "madness" of King George III. Reading this richly detailed novel soon put me straight and plunged me into an exciting, frightening and, on occasion, amusing, tale of espionage and deceit that gripped me from beginning to end. Highly recommended.

Sally Zigmond

THE HEART OF THE RUN

Craig Pennington, *Independently published*, 2021, \$10.95, pb, 443pp, 9798539281861

This is the fictionalized history of the Muirhead family (later Moorhead), in Scotland and Ireland from 1648 to 1764. The novel begins with Alexander Moorhead, who is on a ship with his mother, crossing the sea from Ireland to the Americas in 1764. During the voyage, Alexander tells stories of his ancestors to his new friend Peter, a young ship's officer. Through Alexander, we learn of John James Muirhead, who fought in the Scottish

Civil War and then later became Captain of the Guard for the Marquess of Argyll. Then we meet John and Donald Muirhead, and through them experience the horrific Massacre of Glencoe. Alexander's stories of other relatives also describe important periods of history. As Alexander tells his friends the story of his family, the story of three countries is also told, and it is often a bloody tale.

I enjoyed this meticulously researched novel. The characters are well-written, and I connected with them right away. Through the stories of this family, we are transported to important events in Scottish, English, and Irish history. We learn of the Jacobite rebellion, the Smallpox Epidemic of 1720, and the Irish famine, as well as many other events in history. We are also steeped along the way in the knowledge of whisky making, printing, horticulture, and sailing. We learn of language and literature as well. The amount of history and knowledge contained in this book is impressive.

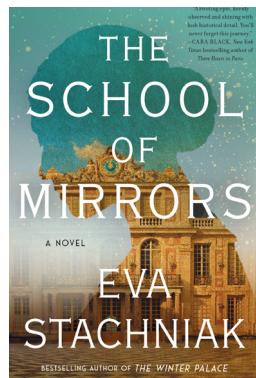
While we are learning so much, we are also experiencing a well-written novel full of suspense, heartache, romance, and intrigue. Readers will be swept away to other times and places by these stories within a story. Those interested in European history will enjoy this captivating novel.

Bonnie DeMoss

THE SCHOOL OF MIRRORS

Eva Stachniak, William Morrow, 2022, \$16.99, pb, 403pp, 9780063119604

Eva Stachniak focuses on an intense era: France from 1755 to 1793. *The School of Mirrors* is a three-generation epic, divided into five parts. As the story opens, King Louis XV is a man who fancies beautiful girls of lower-class origins, to be trained in Versailles in obedience and the gracious arts. Véronique, the narrator of the



early sections, becomes his favorite, believing her patron to be a Polish count related to the queen. Through her initially innocent eyes, we see Versailles and its occupants including, briefly, the queen and Madame de Pompadour. The rest of the book changes to third person, shifting to Marie-Louise, a young girl raised as a ward on the palace grounds who desperately wishes she knew her mother, but no one will tell her. She grows up harshly treated and poorly educated until removed to Paris by the king's valet/business manager. Marie-Louise is a lively girl interested in science and a larger realm. Her midwifery training in

Paris adds plot twists and intriguing female characters.

The School of Mirrors gives us inside views of royalty and the politics behind the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror. Elegant, somewhat decadent Versailles is contrasted with the poverty, ruthlessness, and revolutionary fervor of Paris. Marie-Louise continues to seek her mother there, but the skills she learns in her new adoptive home enable her to lead a purposeful life. She marries a lawyer who, as the revolution builds, becomes more and more committed to the cause.

Stachniak's lively style and plot twists keep the story moving, and we care deeply about her characters and their fates. The novel is textured with details surprising even to those who know French history and have visited Versailles. This is a compelling novel and very highly recommended.

Jinny Webber

THE NEW LAND

David O. Stewart, *Permuted Press*, 2021, \$28.00/C\$37.00, hb, 335pp, 9781637580806

The New Land—Book One in David O. Stewart's trilogy, *The Overstreet Saga*—follows Johann and Christiane Oberstrasse from Rhineland Germany to frontier America. Escaping life as a mercenary soldier, Johann aspires for his family to become peaceful farmers. Enticed by promotional literature promising free land, they make for General Waldo's settlement at Broad Bay, in colonial Maine. But peace and tranquility are elusive. Tragedy strikes even before they've crossed the Atlantic; their young son, Peter, is buried at sea. In Maine, innumerable trials await the ever-expanding family (based partly on the author's ancestral history). Promised land is not delivered. Food is sparse; shelter meagre; winters cold; death, always lurking. Perhaps "America's disappointments were only beginning," Johann worries. Warfare, too, is ubiquitous. Conflicts with Penobscot Indians permeate daily life. Soon, the colonists are swept up in the Great War for Empire, pitting Britain against France. Johann finds himself back on the battlefield, as a Ranger Captain at the 1758 siege of Louisbourg in Nova Scotia. Next, the American Revolutionary War looms. In Waldoborough, son Franklin enlists, dashing Johann's wish that "his sons would never be soldiers."

Eighteenth-century America provides ample material from which Stewart—a former lawyer and author of bestsellers in fiction and narrative nonfiction—constructs a good story. He demonstrates his main characters' gradual transformations. Germans become British and then American; Oberstrasses become Overstreets. We learn about grand historical trends and themes—the scramble for land; colonial life's hardships ("pestilence, famine, war, death"); an ambiguous Revolution. These topics, Stewart artfully illuminates through the imagined lives of his characters, participants often far removed from the

center of things. Book Two, *The Burning Land*, focused on the Civil War, will be released in May 2022. So, readers won't have long to wait for the 19th-century leg of Stewart's sweeping historical journey.

Mark Spencer

THE BOOKS OF JACOB

Olga Tokarczuk (trans. Jennifer Croft), Riverhead, 2022, \$35.00, hb, 992pp, 9780593087480 / Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021, £20.00, pb, 928pp, 9781910695593

In mid-18th century Poland, a messianic figure emerges in a small Jewish community. It says something about this book that this character is not introduced until a good hundred pages in, because the story is less about him than about the communities he was part of, ones he rejected and ones he created, and ones on the periphery of his world.

The discursive subtitle, too lengthy to include here, signals the antiquarian spirit of the book, filled with fragments, images, letters, personal accounts, and ranging across narrators, tenses, and empires. The central figure Jacob Frank, and the great majority of the rabbis, priests, mystics, tradesmen, noblewomen, soldiers, Turks, and Kabbalists who appear, are historical persons. The author has dug deeply into libraries and archives to assemble these threads and weave them together with a wide-ranging imagination.

Jacob's call is to reject Jewish law and its traditional elaborations, especially the Talmud, and embrace Christianity, not exactly as the end goal, but as a parallel path to a true faith. The narrative pursues his followers and hangers-on across networks of families and dynasties of teachers, through trials, curses, an anti-Talmudic disputation, a blood libel accusation made by one group of Jews against another, sexual shake-ups, and Jacob's imprisonment in a monastery. After the group converts to Catholicism, they take on Christian names, further disrupting readers' attempts to keep characters straight. Yente, an old woman who swallows charmed words of protection and cannot die, sees all but does not intervene.

Fascinating and frustrating, the book is both a dry treatise and a fever dream. Readers who enjoy sinking into a time and place will be intrigued, while readers who like to engage with storylines and get attached to characters may find it hard to get a foothold.

Martha Hoffman

19TH CENTURY

CAROLINA BUILT

Kianna Alexander, Gallery, 2022, \$27.99, hb, 336pp, 9781982163686

Carolina Built is the nearly forgotten story of entrepreneur Josephine Leary and her desire and perseverance to create a life of her own. From her young years following the emancipation of North Carolina in 1863, to later falling in love and her first land purchase, we get an honest and spirited peek into Josephine's everyday struggles to balance

the family she loves with her aspirations of becoming a real estate businesswoman. Facing challenges with hope and determination, Josephine builds her legacy one property, and brick, at a time.

Incredibly well researched and filled with historical detail, *Carolina Built* is inspiring and relatable, and oftentimes humorous. The chapters are short but character-driven, moving us deftly through Josephine's early life, to meeting her husband, Sweetie, and giving birth to their children. Both barbers by trade, Josephine and Sweetie have their share of marital disagreements—namely about how she uses her money to purchase properties and renovate buildings, a thing frowned upon for women, especially Black women—and I was a bit nervous for their relationship.

But Josephine's grace and tenacity define her as she copes with disappointments in her career and navigates the demands of a growing and changing family. Overcoming numerous setbacks and frightening moments, she also finds triumphs in her journey. The author's passion for telling Josephine's story is evident in the pages, and I enjoyed learning about such a determined woman.

Holly Faur

YONDER

Jabari Asim, Simon & Schuster, 2022, \$27.00, hb, 272pp, 9781982163167

One horror of American slavery was that its victims were valuable to their captors. Their high price and necessary labor resulted in strenuous effort on the part of their exploiters to maintain the bodily health of their captives while systematically destroying the things that create identity—community, family, memory, or even any sense of the passage of time beyond the demands of the workday.

Because of this, an unimaginably rich, clandestine culture of secret languages and story paths developed among the enslaved people of the 19th century. Asim creates from this a multi-voiced evocation of one community's struggle to survive the eugenics experiments of the man who owns the land they work on. William, Cato, Margaret, Pandora, and Little Zander, who call themselves collectively "The Stolen," and their captors, "The Thieves," offer short vignettes of life on a plantation in the 1850s, using a shared, poetic style that William calls their story voices.

Asim is presenting situations and characters similar to those in works like *The Water Dancer* and *The Underground Railroad*, but the choral narrative style particularly emphasizes the communal nature of the setting and allows an unusually intimate glimpse into the strategies enslaved people were forced to create to survive their daily struggle. This story does not allow its characters the comforts of false hope or nobility but simply shares the persistence of love, desire, and faith in the face of dehumanizing terror. As the characters individually begin to imagine a world "yonder," beyond the confines of their enslavement, they regain a sense of time and place, and the novel

enters its pulse-pounding final third with an epic escape attempt. This moving, lyrical book is a worthy addition to its genre, as Asim gives triumphant voice to his own ancestors.

Kristen McDermott

JANE AND THE YEAR WITHOUT A SUMMER

Stephanie Barron, Soho Crime, 2022, \$27.95, hb, 336pp, 9781641292474

This 14th in Barron's Jane Austen series sets the noted British author close to her own death, as the year is 1816 and the real-life writer died in 1817. Indeed, in her guise as family financial support and accidental investigator, Jane's already feeling poorly when Barron's new tale opens. Her condition motivates a fortnight's visit to the lesser-known spa town of Cheltenham, where she and her sister Cassandra propose to drink the restorative (and sulfurous) well waters and savor the pleasures of playful society. Alas, the other guests at the boardinghouse they've chosen are not well-tuned to such pleasant relief.

Most trying is the presence of a fragile beauty in an invalid's chair, composing poetry and demanding the attention of all around her. The Beauty in the Basket Chair, "Miss Williams," is a constant self-absorbed threat to everyone else's peace. When her husband Lord Portreath arrives in town in pursuit of her, Jane and all other sensible adults attempt at first to protect the frail young woman from what she declares are threats to her life from her estranged husband, who desires her submission and, even more, her fortune.

Barron deftly weaves delights of the early 19th century into the twists of plot, from poisoned delicacies to a masquerade ball, and the rights and rebellions of women of the time. She is also a clever plotter (this is one of two series she writes) and offers well-chosen dialogue and desires of the period. In the glow of Napoleon's 1815 defeat at Waterloo, Barron demonstrates a growing sense of rebellion among women, even as Jane chooses to hide her own successful career as a novelist—but also to reveal her own fierce intelligence.

Beth Kanell

NOT QUITE A MARRIAGE

Bliss Bennet, Bliss Bennet Books, 2021, \$12.95/C\$18.50, pb, 353pp, 9781737845508

After five years of self-imposed exile in West Africa, Spencer Burnett, Viscount Stiles, returns to England determined to atone for his selfish past behavior, but despite all his best efforts the wife he so thoughtlessly abandoned, refuses to be reconciled. Philadelphia wants only to provide a safe home for her beloved cousins, and after her harsh treatment at the hands of her husband and controlling father-in-law, her trust is not easily won.

The author raises many serious personal and social issues: the vulnerability and economic dependence of women in a patriarchal system, colonial exploitation, racism, slavery, guilt, bullying, and the long-lasting damage suffered

by the victims. Given her experience, Delphie's mistrust is understandable, but her obstinate refusal to accept the repeated evidence that her husband really has changed does erode sympathy. Even her cousins get annoyed. As well they might, since Delphie is trying to control their lives, ironically.

Interesting psychological as well as social insights here, but lovers of romance may grow impatient with the heroine's inflexibility.

Ray Thompson

CITY OF INCURABLE WOMEN

Maud Casey, *Bellevue Literary Press*, 2022, \$16.99, pb, 128pp, 9781942658863

Paris's Salpêtrière Hospital began as a gunpowder factory; by the 1600s, it had been repurposed into a care/work facility for beggar children and disabled women, as well as a prison for prostitutes. After the Revolution, it morphed into a hospital for female "hysterics." By the late 1800s, it was touted as the cutting edge of neuropsychiatric learning under Jean-Martin Charcot, a pioneer in the burgeoning field of neuropathology. Charcot was lauded for his humane (though this is a relative term) treatment, and his patients have seen a recent rise in interest (e.g., 2021's *The Madwomen's Ball* by Victoria Mas and Amazon's filmic adaptation). *City of Incurable Women* is a literary, impressionistic take from the perspective of the women who were inmates of the Salpêtrière. They include Avril Jane, a dancer from the Moulin Rouge, as well as various women who became short-lived "favorites" of Charcot for exhibition in his medical theatre during their "hysterical epilepsies." These women were hypnotized and exhibited not only as medical specimens, but the wealthy of Paris could even pay to mingle with them at an annual ball.

The prose is stream-of-consciousness, and the brief chapters (most of which have been previously published as short stories in other venues) are interspersed with artifacts of a sort—case notes, photographs of the denizens of the Salpêtrière, catalog cards for the photographs. Casey has pulled some information verbatim from actual artifacts (each new admission was photographed and described); others she embellishes or creates entirely based on information from contemporary sources. The resulting episodic, indistinct sketches of these women occasionally coalesce into moments of devastating clarity that illustrate suffering, past trauma, paralysis, loneliness—and how it might feel to be poked and peered at like an interesting insect under glass, rather than treated as a human being.

Bethany Latham

THE GREAT MRS. ELIAS

Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Amistad*, 2022, \$26.99, hb, 416pp, 9780063019904

This is Chase-Riboud's fifth installment in her "invisible" women of color series

which began with *Sally Hemings*. The author stumbled upon the story of Hannah Elias by sheer inadvertence, in a long-forgotten cache of microfilm in the New York Public Library. That foundational discovery has shaped this fictional biography into a *pièce de résistance* of Gilded Age storytelling.

Bessie Davis is born into the Philadelphia slums, one of 11 children and the daughter of a mixed-race marriage. After a series of losses, including her father's suicide, her rape and her incarceration, Bessie takes control of her life and moves to New York. How does a beautiful young woman of uncertain descent make her way, other than to sell her wares and remake herself into a Cuban of Spanish origin? Bessie transforms into Hannah—becoming well-versed in how to grow her riches, in investments, in real estate ownership. She will never be poor again.

By the turn of the 20th century, Hannah, who has easily passed as white for decades, is one of the wealthiest women in the city. But she is challenged to her core again when a former tenant, Cornelius Williams, assassinates Andrew Green, considered the father of NYC progress, believing he has also killed her. Hannah's life begins to unravel, and she becomes the target of a number of lawsuits that can easily result in her complete destruction.

Chase-Riboud's greatest strength is in her ability to become one with Hannah, to listen to how Hannah will think and act, and to share that person with us. Even though the novel is replete with historical figures and events, it all comes back to Hannah, a remarkable, resilient, crafty woman who controls much of that history. That regular folks flock to her defense and women envision her as their North Star is not surprising.

Ilysa Magnus

THE PHYSICIAN'S DAUGHTER

Martha Conway, *Zaffre*, 2022, £16.99, hb, 480pp, 9781838773076

Massachusetts, 1865, and Vita, daughter of a country doctor, wants to study medicine, but her father forbids it. Instead, he demands that she marry and bear sons, to replace men lost in the recent Civil War. But Vita is determined. She cuts a deal with a man who promises to help her get to college. But can she trust him?

Conway embeds detailed historical research into a story of living, breathing people, with their own personal tics, joys, and griefs. Vita lives up to her name, and whether she is hiding to read an illicit book, witnessing a medical procedure, or making love, readers share her lived experience. I enjoyed this feel of character and place. However, squeamish readers might find some medical scenes an experience too far.

I found the first part of the book somewhat repetitive, as Vita continually argues with her father. Through argument after argument, he offers a variety of reasons why she may not

study and cannot have a career outside the home. His words represent not only himself, but also the attitudes of society. Vita struggles with women's lack of freedom at the time. They were subject to fathers or husbands, and when they married, their property became legally their husband's. Part of the medical storyline involves birth control, taboo at the time and hence difficult to research.

Conway contrasts Vita's story with the struggles of damaged war veterans as they try to rebuild civilian lives. Men did not have it easy, either. As characters sought new opportunities, I enjoyed the lively descriptions of fast-growing industrial cities. The magnificently awful Reverend Simpers provides welcome comic relief.

Recommended for those interested in women's, social, and medical history, with a reading list of sources for those wanting to learn more.

Helen Johnson

SHARPE'S ASSASSIN

Bernard Cornwell, *Harper*, 2021, \$27.99, hb, 336pp, 9780062563262 / *HarperCollins*, 2021, £20.00, hb, 400pp, 9780008184018

Richard Sharpe's journey has taken him from London's gutter into the British infantry and a role in the empire's most important battles from India to Waterloo. Having risen from the ranks to become a trusted Lieutenant-Colonel to the Duke of Wellington, Sharpe led a savage charge against France's Imperial Guard in the Duke's great victory over Napoleon. Now that the emperor has been defeated, Sharpe longs to live out his days with his wife and child on their Normandy farm. But the Duke calls on Sharpe one more time.

Paris is teeming with unrelenting zealots bent on revenge and assassination and the Duke knows it takes a rogue to best a rogue. Sharpe's mission is to root out Napoleon's most ardent supporters, and to find them, he and his loyal men must scour post-Waterloo Paris's underbelly, through its foul coal smoke, sewage, and despair. Sharpe will have to bring all his cagey experience and fighting skills to bear to complete the Duke's mission—and stay alive.

Readers know Richard Sharpe well from a series of 20-plus books, yet the scenes and dialogue are fresh and alive enough to propel his story forward. Bernard Cornwell's Sharpe series, his *Saxon Tales*, and many other historical novels have earned him millions of readers. Though placed in historical settings, his protagonists are timeless men of action, canny and courageous fighters with principled natures. Cornwell's battle scenes are drawn with immediacy that give them a very distinctive sense of momentum.

Brodie Curtis

MOON AND THE MARS

Kia Corthron, *Seven Stories*, 2021, \$30.00, hb, 592pp, 9781644211038

This expansive novel follows the adventures of Theodora Brigid "Theo" Brook, a poor,

half-Black, half-Irish orphan growing up in Five Points in lower Manhattan from 1857 to 1863. Theo dubs herself “orphan lucky”—blessed with an extended family—and she bounds easily from the tenement apartments of her Black and white grandmothers to her Irish aunt’s saloon to her Black aunt’s home in Seneca Village.

Theo’s street-savvy voice matures from a breathless age seven to a wise thirteen as she witnesses major historical events, including the operation of the Underground Railroad, the Dred Scott decision, the Panic of 1857, Irish gang wars, the building of Central Park, and the implementation of the Fugitive Slave Act by unscrupulous slavecatchers. The mingling of her two families depicts both the interconnectedness of marginalized groups at the time and the tensions between them. “My Irish family would never do anything to hurt me,” she says at one point, “but to them I’m not colored.” In the Draft Riots of 1863, New York’s Black and white communities collide in a terrifying way. An epilogue propels the story to 1878, detailing what becomes of Theo and her kin in the Civil War’s aftermath.

The characters in this novel spring from the page in full color, but the plot, fashioned mostly from Theo’s daily interactions and observations as she roams the streets, often moves slowly. The author divulges a lot of historical facts through expository dialogue (especially from Auntie Eunice, a teacher who sometimes sounds like a textbook) and devices such as a Greek chorus of newsboys spouting headlines. Additional pruning and shaping could have made way for more conflict, turning this fine novel into a stunner.

Paula Martinac

CROSSED LINES

Jennifer Delamere, *Bethany House*, 2021, \$15.99, pb, 331pp, 9780764234934

Delamere borrows elements from *Cyrano de Bergerac* in this second volume of her series, *Love Along the Wires*. In 1880s London, Mitchell Harris and friend Christopher Newman work at the Central Telegraph Office. Chris saved Mitchell’s life when they were child factory workers, at the cost of Mitchell’s foot; he now wears a prosthesis but hides it by claiming his limp is from a bad knee.

Emma Sutton also works at the CTO; she and Mitchell meet on its doorstep when she retrieves his wind-blown hat. Mitchell admires her, but before he can act on this (hesitating due to his disability), inarticulate Chris asks Mitchell’s help in courting Emma with romantic, flowery notes. Mitchell feels his debt to Chris justifies the sacrifice of his own hopes, so he agrees to compose the notes. But as the courtship progresses, Mitchell becomes more and more dissatisfied with the arrangement.

The story includes interesting Victorian period detail, such as a steamboat ride and a comet-watching party, but I thought the beginning moved slowly due to lack of conflict. However, the three main characters are

likeable, and readers who persist will root for them. Recommended to Christian fiction fans.

B. J. Sedlock

EVERY WORD UNSAID

Kimberly Duffy, *Bethany House*, 2021, \$15.99, pb, 356pp, 9780764235658

Twenty-five-year-old Augusta “Gussie” Travers rebels against her “vacuous life in a Fifth Avenue mansion” and fault-finding parents. In 1897 she traipses around the U.S., writing a travel column with photos from a portable Kodak camera. Using the byline of Miss Adventuress, she strives to keep her identity secret. Proper young women don’t travel alone and write of their adventures for the whole world. Then a New York newspaper reveals who Miss Adventuress really is. Gussie’s editor offers a six-month assignment to India, allowing her to flee family and New York high society. The path seems eased by her two best childhood friends and neighbors (a brother and sister) having already made their own lives not far from Mumbai. The boy neighbor, now a lanky man named Spec, has become a revered medical doctor of the poor.

Expecting pleasant visits and exotic travels, Gussie is instead plunged into a nasty bubonic plague and a brutal culture. Widows and orphans are outcasts. The military force the sick into hovels, where they die without relatives or decent care, their homes then looted and shuttered. Every waking moment makes Gussie examine family, the true worth of her dispatches, and what she really wants. Sudden mutually strong feelings between Gussie and Spec add to the turmoil.

In often lyrical prose, many of Duffy’s scenes and several plotlines tug at the emotions. Not just a trip to the India of a century ago, this is an honest and thought-provoking (even if sometimes too repetitive) exploration of deep-seated human fears and quests for meaningful lives. Relatable secondary characters, both Indian and American, add to the rich context. The ending resolves several important issues a bit too quickly, but the overall story often enthralls and always engages the reader.

G. J. Bergerer

A PERFECT EQUATION

Elizabeth Everett, *Berkley*, 2022, \$16.00, pb, 336pp, 9780593200643

Elizabeth Everett’s *Secret Scientists of London* series focuses on a group of women who congregate at a club called Athena’s Retreat. This is no ordinary ladies’ club. The women who meet there are engineers, chemists, physicists, and mathematicians. Instead of drinking tea and sharing decorating tips, they explore theorems, design bridges, and sometimes blow up things.

Her second book in the series revolves around Letty, a disgraced shopkeeper’s daughter who happens to be brilliant at math, and Lord Greycliff, a viscount with a secret pastime. The two have a history of animosity, and when they are called upon to manage Athena’s Retreat

together, sparks fly—literally. The plot thickens when a 19th-century version of the Proud Boys causes trouble for these women who have the audacity to believe they can contribute to the betterment of the world.

The book has more substance than a standard romance, thanks to the vivid descriptions, political intrigues, and social justice themes. With all the elements of a steamy “enemy-to-lover” story, the book also shows the enormous obstacles women had to overcome just to be able to use their brains.

Trish MacEnulty

FARRINGDON’S FATE

Linda Finlay, *HQ*, 2021, £7.99, pb, 374pp, 9780008392673

1854. Life at Nettlecombe Manor in Devon would be peaceful for Edwin, Lord Farringdon and his five daughters, if it wasn’t for his second wife, Charlotte. She is determined to throw a lavish ball to celebrate her eldest stepdaughter Louisa’s engagement. As part of her preparations, she engages a French corset-maker. When Madame Pittier is taken ill, her assistant Jane Haydon is obliged to take her place, bringing her into contact with the older Farringdon sisters and the estate manager’s son, Sam Gill. While she is there, she hears strange stories about a gypsy’s curse and a ghost portending death through the scent of lavender—a scent she herself detected, despite the absence of flowers in the room...

I was pleasantly surprised by this well-written saga. There are some occasions when the dialogue seems too modern, as are the relaxed attitudes between different social classes. (Even with permission, wouldn’t working-class Victorians feel uncomfortable addressing social superiors by their first names?) If Edwin is a baron (rather than an earl or higher), then his daughters should be the Honourable Misses Farringdon, rather than Lady Louisa, Lady Victoria, etc. But I don’t suppose hardcore saga fans will care tuppence for that.

A greater flaw is that when the climactic tragedy occurs, it is largely kept off the page and the character most devastated by these events is not told the news by any of the other central characters, making them appear more heartless than they are and robbing the reader of what could have been an emotionally charged scene. But on the whole, this is a lively read, with well-delineated characters (apart from a one-dimensional villain, who is mercifully largely kept off-stage). There are clearly more episodes to come in the story of the Farringdons before everyone can have their happy endings.

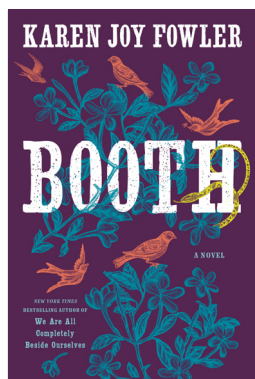
Jasmina Svenne

BOOTH

Karen Joy Fowler, *Putnam*, 2022, \$28.00, hb, 480pp, 9780593331439

This is not a novel about John Wilkes Booth.

In her author’s note at the beginning of the book, Fowler makes clear that this work on the entire Booth family was inspired by yet another



American mass shooting. Wondering how the shooters' families deal with the monstrous acts of someone they've loved, Fowler began thinking of the Booth family. There were ten children, six of whom survived to adulthood,

including John Wilkes. Throughout, she seeks to answer the question: "What is it like to love the most hated man in the country?"

Beginning in 1822 and following the Booth family through the infamous days of 1865, Fowler tells the family's story through the points of view of three of the older siblings, Rosalie, Asia, and Edwin. Rosalie, bent and crippled by an unknown condition, possibly scoliosis, who resents never being allowed to leave the nest. Asia, who dreams of grandeur and adventure, and Edwin, who struggles to break free from his famous father's shadow and become an accomplished actor in his own right. Through it all, they watch the descent of their beloved little brother, John Wilkes, into madness. Try as they might, John Wilkes refuses to listen to any facts that contradict his worldview and latches onto conspiracy theory after conspiracy theory.

Interspersed with the siblings' points of view are historical asides explaining what was happening politically in the nation at the time and how so few of the issues underlying the Civil War have been resolved. Quotes from Abraham Lincoln show his increasing despair and depression during the war and seem to predict his own assassination.

Booth is a sad, astonishing, and beautifully written look at a complicated, secretive family that failed to save one of their own from himself. Highly recommended.

Sarah Hendess

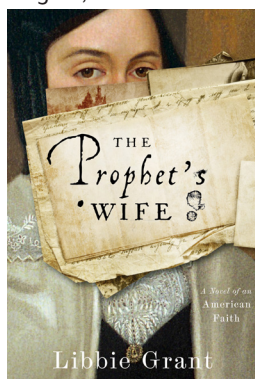
THE PROPHET'S WIFE

Libbie Grant, William Morrow, 2022, \$16.99, pb, 496pp, 9780063070622

If you know as little as I do about the Mormon religion, this book will at times read like a

fantasy novel. The history is astounding and sometimes horrifying, but Grant's gorgeous writing will keep readers enthralled throughout.

Grant sets the birth and growth of Mormonism in the context



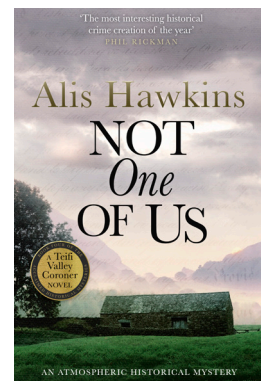
of a hyper-religious century in America. In 1825 Emma Hale, unmarried and worried she might remain that way forever, meets Joseph Smith, a charismatic young man with a belief system grounded in his mother's old European superstitions. Emma is entranced and marries him in spite of her family's objections. Once he discovers some "golden plates" buried in a mysterious earthen mound, he is off and running, creating a new religion based on his own prophecies. Receptive followers of this offbeat religion willingly migrate with Joseph and Emma to points west, but they always get into trouble with their neighbors. In fact, a "war" erupts with the Gentiles in Missouri, resulting in the deaths of numerous Mormons—tragedies easily avoided were it not for the patriarchal hubris of the Mormon leadership. Most of us associate Mormonism with polygamy, but that decree only arrives later in their marriage at a time when Joseph—who has always craved adoration—happens to be surrounded by young vulnerable women. Conveniently, God commands him to marry as many of them as he likes, much to Emma's dismay.

The Prophet's Wife is a powerful, mesmerizing novel. In the figure of Emma Hale Smith, Grant has created a fully realized woman of intelligence, integrity, complexity, strength, and a deep and abiding faith in God. Emma acts as Joseph's support but also as his conscience. While the follies depicted in the story are almost two centuries past, blind allegiance to charismatic narcissists still wreaks havoc today. I predict this will be a popular and influential book.

Trish MacEnulty

NOT ONE OF US

Alis Hawkins, Canelo, 2021, £9.99, pb, 386pp, 9781800324718



Teifi Valley, Wales, 1851. Harry Probert-Lloyd, though only 27, has been forced back from London by failing eyesight to his lands at Glanteifi. As coroner and landowner, he is supported by John Davies, his

assistant coroner and under-steward. The fourth book in Hawkins's Teifi Valley Coroner series is told in alternating voices by Harry and John, their narratives becoming progressively more tightly woven. The two investigate the unexplained death of a 19-year-old girl, the beautiful daughter of a tenant farmer. She had been pursued by a number of young men, with an Englishman amongst them arousing particular resentment in his rivals; this is a community in which workmen from Llandysul being employed in Newcastle Emlyn are

regarded as outsiders, even though they come from only eight miles distant.

Distraught by his work as a coroner and conscious that Glanteifi is at risk of bankruptcy, Harry turns his failing eyes from the pitiless actions his steward takes to make the land pay. Tragedy results, but with it comes a form of epiphany for Harry. Then a body is dragged from the river—there is no doubt this time that this was murder.

Hawkins's novel is impeccably researched; she draws on a startlingly rich vein of knowledge of courting rituals and superstitions, from birch crowns to courting sacks and 'washing the midnight shirt.' In this remote area mid-19th-century medicine keeps company with long-held beliefs and customs, but farmhouse weaving sheds are already overshadowed by the development of machinery—on display in all its might at the Great Exhibition—that will literally change the warp and weft of rural life forever. *Not One of Us* is an engrossing read, ingeniously plotted, with an utterly absorbing sense of place and time.

Katherine Mezzacappa

CHANGING FLAGS

Ray Herbeck, Jr., Five Star, 2022, \$25.95, hb, 255pp, 9781432889173

This ambitious first book in a series on the Battalion of St. Patrick brings to light a little-known chapter of American immigrant history: During the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), more than a hundred Irish and other immigrants who'd suffered among the bigoted American military forces changed sides. Despite the shame of becoming deserters, they defected to the Mexican forces, lured by both a common religion and promises of higher wages, land grants, and citizenship.

John Riley is a seasoned professional soldier who's already left one army behind. So desertion to the "greasers" seems just one more change, one that may finally give him the funds he desperately desires in order to sail back to family in Ireland. Crossing the Texas-Mexico border, with no Spanish vocabulary and no allies, he's quickly humiliated as the recruitment goodies turn out to be propaganda and fantasy. The only way to ease his pain and frustration is to welcome in more deserters and, under the urging of the Mexican officers on hand, to forge them into a genuine artillery battalion.

Herbeck, a Civil War and Old West consultant, defies the usual expectations for an adventure protagonist: There is little heroic about John Riley. An aggressive Irish drunk, brutal when he feels the need, and unable to respect women or officers, his strongest gift is his ability to lie convincingly. Manipulated by the Mexicans, he hones this art, eventually taking pride in being able to convince other half-starved deserters to become real soldiers. Coarse at times, but also passionate, the book's a page-turner, full of twists and costs. It ends with unexpected hope, and a hunger

for Riley's ongoing wagers, wandering, and growth in the books ahead.

Beth Kanell

JOHN BROWN'S WOMEN

Susan Higginbotham, Onslow Press, 2021, \$15.99, pb, 408pp, 9781737474906

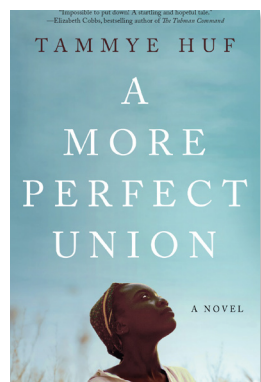
Abolitionist John Brown's remarkable life and family are vividly explored through the eyes of three women: his wife, Mary; his daughter-in-law, Wealthy; and his daughter, Annie. Mary is a fascinating character, phlegmatic and stoic, but not without strong feelings or emotion. She takes on the children of John Brown's previous marriage and loves them as much as the many children she and Brown then have together. John Brown comes and goes, his anti-slavery work always in the background of the central drama of the trials and tribulations of family life at a time of high infant mortality. When the perspective moves to Wealthy, the novel's action moves to Kansas, setting the groundwork for key historical events at Harper's Ferry, as seen through the eyes of Brown's daughter Annie. Finally, Higginbotham returns to Mary, who hopes to see her husband one more time before he pays the ultimate price for his actions and the anti-slavery cause.

More than painting a picture of John Brown's life through the eyes of the women in his life, Higginbotham's novel makes accessible the whole period and the moral conflict over slavery within white society. Each of John Brown's women are fully-fledged, believable, and interesting characters. A rich portrait of 19th-century America emerges, with all its flaws and hardships, and the story's climax is emotionally charged and gripping. Recommended.

Kate Braithwaite

Ⓜ A MORE PERFECT UNION

Tammye Huf, Forever, 2022, \$15.99, pb, 369pp, 9781538720851 / Myriad Editions, 2021, £8.99, pb, 352pp, 9781912408979



Henry O'Toole escapes the Irish potato famine of 1848 and comes to America, unprepared for the hatred against the Irish that greets him in New York. Changing his name to Henry Taylor, he eventually becomes a traveling blacksmith

in Virginia, where he meets Sarah, who is enslaved on the Jubilee plantation. When they fall in love, an uphill battle awaits them as interracial marriage is illegal and considered immoral at that time. Also on the plantation is the enslaved Maple, who is actually the half-sister of the mistress of the house. Maple has

been forcibly separated from her husband and child in order to serve her sister. Based on the story of the author's own great-great grandparents, this is a novel that will captivate, shock, and yes, enrage the reader.

What a stunning debut novel by Tammye Huf! The extreme injustice of the time is so well portrayed that it had me in tears. The beautiful love story of Henry and Sarah is made all the better knowing that this is based on a true story. The chapters are divided into multiple points of view, which makes for a compelling read. The author does not hold back in portraying the evil of one man owning another, and the depraved reality of the lashes, neck rings, slave markets, and chains is brought forth for all to see. The truth about the so-called respectable men and women of that era is sobering, but the lights of hope woven into this story are shown in Henry, Sarah, and others who are willing to take risks in order to help. *A More Perfect Union* is a love story, but also a shocking and heart-rending look at the realities of slavery. It is a must-read for those who want to know the truth about the pre-Civil War South.

Bonnie DeMoss

THE SEA OF SILENCE

Seth Hunter, McBooks, 2021, \$27.95, hb, 256pp, 9781493059195

In the tradition of Hornblower and Aubrey/Maturin comes this third in a new series of Napoleonic seafaring adventures. "Jane Austen for boys" I've heard such books called, although Austen gives us few hints at the broader world events that were the background for her desperate marriage markets.

Peace has broken out between France and Britain in 1801, leaving our half-British, half-American hero Nathan Peake home from the sea and at loose ends. Is he to live with his mother for the rest of his life? Fortunately, Baron Horatio Nelson is also grounded, although the great commander's living arrangements are much more interesting: a ménage à trois with his lover Emma, Lady Hamilton and her long-suffering husband. Nelson calls on Peake to reform a relationship with Gilbert Imlay, with whom I was not acquainted before, but this scoundrel of the early days of the American Republic should lay to rest any lingering or universal worship of the Founding Fathers.

Imlay and Peake are to sail the Caribbean and run guns for General Toussaint L'Ouverture and his slave rebellion in what is now Haiti, and thus undermine any French peace gains. Napoleon's sister Pauline puts in a noteworthy appearance.

Sly humor, more direct cinematic storytelling, and the shedding of some of the Patrick O'Brian ballast of seafaring words (which I actually love) make for a quick and entertaining read about a corner of this century we often ignore.

Ann Chamberlin

SHADOWS OF SWANFORD

ABBEY

Julie Klassen, Bethany House, 2021, \$16.99, pb, 416pp, 9780764234248

Klassen mixes Regency romance and Gothic suspense in this tale of hauntings, murder, and second chances at love in a scenic English village.

Vicar's daughter turned lady's companion Rebecca Lane accompanies her widowed employer to Swanford Abbey to answer a distress call from her younger brother John, a struggling writer. The arrogant bestselling author Ambrose Oliver stole John's last novel, and with the big man staying at Swanford Abbey to write his next, John leans on Rebecca for help persuading Oliver to back his new manuscript and rectify past wrongs.

Complicating her stay at Swanford is Sir Frederick Wilford, local baronet, lodging at the Abbey while his house undergoes renovations following his wife's sudden death. Rebecca fell in love with Sir Frederick as a child, but her current situation, her concerns over John, and rumors that his wife's death was no accident hang over their renewed associations. Only Frederick believes Rebecca when she sees the resident ghost who haunts the Abbey. But when Oliver is found dead in his room and the guests realize there is a murderer among them, Rebecca's fear that John is involved leads her to deceptions she never intended.

Blending shades of Austen's *Northanger Abbey* with the classic grand house murder mystery, Klassen's quiet writing is as soothing as a watercolor landscape and as layered with intricate details that slowly surface. As Frederick's investigation ensues, the relationship between the leads grows on a foundation of trust, shared memories, and new confidences. Skirting cliché for genuine human fallibility, the book's themes of justice and mercy carry its inspirational message while the pieces of the puzzle fall into place, and the themes of familial love, especially that between siblings, deepens the emotional dimensions. A satisfying read.

Misty Urban

MURDER, SWEET MURDER

Eleanor Kuhns, Severn House, 2022, \$28.99/£20.99, hb, 224pp, 9780727850096

Kuhns continues her delightful mystery series with this 11th book as husband-and-wife team Will and Lydia Rees once again work together to solve a murder mystery. When Lydia receives a letter from her sister sharing the news that their father has been accused of murder, the duo jump into action, despite Lydia's estrangement from her family. Rees and Lydia travel to Boston from their home in Maine where they learn that her father, Marcus Farrell, is the only suspect in the murder of a lowly worker from Jamaica, where Marcus owns a plantation. Despite Marcus's claim of innocence and rejection of their help, Rees and Lydia set out to discover the truth. Lydia's background is largely unknown to Rees, so the trip proves quite educational. As Rees

delves into the mystery of who murdered a seemingly innocent boy, he travels about the city chasing down clues. Readers are treated to a lovely (and sometimes grim) glimpse of Boston in the early 1800s, as well as historical facts about the rum trade. Another murder complicates matters and the prime suspect list becomes quite long.

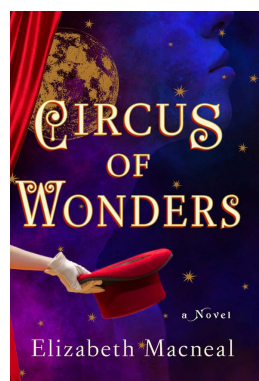
The mystery itself is interesting, with plenty of interrogations, sleuthing, and complicated family secrets coming to life. Lovers of classic mysteries will appreciate the traditional gathering of all the suspects to face the murderer, although I was slightly disappointed with the unoriginal motive in the great reveal. Reading the first ten books in this series is not necessary to enjoy this one, but it does help to understand some of the family dynamics and relationship between Lydia and Rees.

Rebecca Cochran

CIRCUS OF WONDERS

Elizabeth Macneal, Atria, 2022, \$27.99, hb, 368pp, 9781982106799 / Picador, 2021, £14.99, hb, 372pp, 9781529002539

Victorian England, 1860s. Nell's already troubled young life is further ripped apart



when her father sells her to Jasper Jupiter—the man with the circus. With birth marks covering her skin, she is groomed, costumed, and displayed as an oddity alongside Jupiter's other human collections. And the crowd loves her. With the

name Nellie Moon on the handbills, Nell flies through the air on the trapeze, moving from town to town with the caravans and her new family.

While Jasper dreams of fame, his brother, Toby, would settle for something simpler. Always at the command of Jasper, Toby has lived in the shadows. When he catches Nell's eye, a timid relationship begins to bloom, each of them struggling with self-love. But the brothers share a secret from the Crimean war, one they are both determined will never be revealed. When Nell's fame begins to overshadow Jasper's, he grows more erratic, his greed turning to desperation, as his carefully constructed scheme shatters around him.

The writing in *Circus of Wonders* is vividly lyrical, each chapter almost a vignette of each character's thoughts and emotions as the story slowly unfolds. While oftentimes grim, the pages are also touched with whimsy and poetic details. Once a timid child, Nell finds herself when she embraces what life has forced upon her, while Toby struggles with near-paralyzing war memories and his fierce loyalty to Jasper. When the final secret of the

war is revealed, it rings a bit hollow, but Nell has found the strength to accept herself as she was made, which is both brave and inspiring.

Holly Faur

DEAR MISS CUSHMAN

Paula Martinac, Bywater Books, 2021, \$16.95, pb, 260pp, 9781612942155

An award-winning author of numerous novels about lesbian lives and histories, Martinac offers an absorbing, energetic adventure starring the passionate Georgiana Cartwright, a young actress just beginning a brilliant career at a time when women had few options besides marriage. "George" is the daughter of a prominent Shakespearean actor who has recently disappeared after a drunken onstage disaster; she shamelessly exploits her family connection to secure an entry-level place in her father's company. Her height and "unfeminine" appearance win her a number of "trousers" roles, popular in mid-19th-century theater; she wins acclaim for her Mercutio and sets her sights on playing Romeo and Hamlet, like her role model, the real-life American stage star, Charlotte Cushman.

Martinac's backstage adventure is enriched by the diverse allies the openhearted George makes along her rise to fame, offering the reader a glimpse into the roots of the Broadway community's long history of progressive attitudes toward race and gender. George has her share of challenges to overcome—professional jealousies, sexually predatory employers, and worst of all, her mother's social ambitions—but meets them with pluck and good humor, making friends and falling in love with Clementine, a brilliant playwright, as she learns her craft. Even readers who aren't among the "unabashed theater geeks and nerds" to whom Martinac dedicates this well-researched novel will enjoy the depth of feeling Martinac gives her protagonist's relationships and artistic dedication. Martinac has created a warmhearted troupe in the fictional Prince Theatre Company, as entertaining offstage as on, and readers will hope that Martinac follows her charismatic heroine into new adventures on tour.

Kristen McDermott

THE SIREN OF SUSSEX

Mimi Matthews, Berkley, 2021, \$16.00 / C\$21.99, pb, 432pp, 9780593337134

1862. To secure financial security for her four younger sisters as well as herself, Evelyn Maltravers has come from Sussex to London to find a wealthy husband, but with little money and few connections, the task will not be simple. She is, however, sensible and has a plan: she is a fine equestrienne and rides a magnificent stallion. She just needs a striking riding outfit to attract attention, and this leads her to Ahmad Malik, a tailor of mixed English and Indian parentage. Ahmad is hoping to establish himself in his own business, but in the face of racial prejudice and aristocratic arrogance, that is not easy. And so they agree

to a partnership: he will design and make the clothes which she will display and recommend to other ladies.

The trouble is, they fall in love, and while Evelyn is willing to defy convention, Ahmad, after long years of bitter experience, is unwilling to expose someone he loves to insult and prejudice. The situation seems hopeless, but the author resolves their dilemma with her usual skill and ingenuity. Those interested in Victorian social attitudes, horse riding, and clothing fashions will find much to enjoy. Highly recommended.

Ray Thompson

THE DIAMOND HUNTER

Fiona McIntosh, Arrow, 2021, £7.99, pb, 432pp, 9781787466739

Spanning some 25 years at the latter end of the 19th century, this excellently competent story opens with two fevers. One takes the life of Louisa Grant in a tent by a South African river in which husband James is panning for gold, while the other infects him and prospectors worldwide with news of diamond finds at a nearby location that will eventually become Kimberley town. Son James, six-year-old daughter Clementine and Zulu digger friend Zenzele join the frenzied rush to live grubby hand to hungry mouth in searing heat and shanty squalor, digging relentlessly in search of the "big conker." Enter Reggie, Clementine's uncle, half-brother to Louisa who, having heard of her death, has voyaged from England to return the child home where, at age 30, she will inherit the family wealth. But before leaving, at the mine, Reggie has an altercation with James who falls to his death—or was he pushed? Years later "Clem" is an independent, altruistic, and visionary woman whose deeply buried memories begin to surface, nagging her to resolve the constant doubts about Reggie's sincerity—so she contrives a situation to discover if he is really the scoundrel he sometimes presents, precipitating an emotional denouement cleverly twisting what we thought we knew.

McIntosh's measured prose tells a fine tale that skillfully reveals all necessary hooks while still guarding the anticipated secret and its slant. She adroitly covers love, interracial friendships and racism, mendacity, greed, trust and doubt meanwhile exploring whether one should forgive bad deeds done with good intentions. A great read.

Simon Rickman

SUSAN: A Jane Austen Prequel

Alice McVeigh, Warleigh Hall Press, 2021, \$12.99 / £9.99, pb, 332pp, 9781916882317

Miss Susan Smithson is thrown out of Mrs. Ansruther's school after she is accused of having a dalliance with the music teacher. When this occurs, the penniless orphan has no choice but to go live with her uncle George Collins's family. Since she is a lively young beauty with dark tresses and a fair complexion,

she has no shortage of admirers. Many people who meet her remark upon her loveliness and playful vivacity. She soon attracts the attention of the redoubtable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who takes a shine to her. While in this great lady's circle, she makes the acquaintance of a young nobleman who is unsuitable for her. Afterwards, she is sent away to live with her other uncle at Hunsford rectory, in Kent.

This is a novel that any Jane Austen lover would enjoy. The author, Alice McVeigh, has done something fun and clever. She has written a prequel to Austen's *Lady Susan*, about the youth of Lady Susan Vernon, but added so much more. She sprinkles in characters from other Austen novels such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Colonel Fitzwilliam from *Pride and Prejudice* and the mysterious Frank Churchill from *Emma*. The characterization of these already well-established characters is fantastic. The personalities and dialogue are consistently on point. At first I was unsure, but as I kept reading, I was thoroughly drawn into the story. My favorite was the rendering of Susan, as it definitely reminded me of Lady Susan's tone from Austen's original work. If you adore Jane Austen's classic work and the world of Regency England, give this a try.

Elizabeth K. Corbett

THE STRANGE CASE OF THE DUTCH PAINTER

Timothy Miller, *Seventh Street*, 2022, \$17.95, pb, 264pp, 9781645060420

After reading Miller's delightful book, *The Strange Case of Eliza Doolittle*, I was excited to get a chance to review the second in his Sherlock Holmes series. His latest does not disappoint. In fact, centered as it is around the mysterious death of Vincent van Gogh, the book is even more intriguing than the first mystery.

This one begins when Watson comes across a painting, apparently by Van Gogh, among his deceased friend's effects, accompanied by a mysterious manuscript written in German. When Watson locates the author of the manuscript, an expert in authenticating paintings, the man relates an adventure he had with a man named "Vernet"—a detective who bears a striking resemblance to Sherlock Holmes. The untimely death, supposedly by suicide, of Vincent van Gogh sets the pair on a quest from Paris to Auvers-sur-Oise to Arles to Montpellier and back in pursuit of forgers and murderers, risking life and limb as they traverse the countryside. They encounter various historical characters, including Theo van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Paul Gauguin. Our narrator can spot forgeries at a glance, but he makes no secret of his distaste for the Impressionists whose work is "a shadowless world, bereft of line or volume. Lurid pigments warred for attention...leaving the viewer to guess at the paintings' subjects..." In spite of his discerning eye, he is always one step behind the detective and serves as the perfect foil.

While the book contains deft Holmesian

plotting and a plethora of historical tidbits, the real draw for me is the extraordinary voice of Miller's narrator: hilariously pompous, erudite, and evocative. The sheer riot of his descriptions captivates and invites readers to linger over the sentences rather than rush headlong through the story.

Trish MacEnulty

SILVER GRASS

John D. Nesbitt, *Five Star*, 2021, \$25.95, hb, 245pp, 9781432879464

John D. Nesbitt's newest Western offers the classic entry into an adventure: "A stranger comes to town." Young Wilsey Grant, 17, wandering toward the frontier settlement of Silver Grass in search of work, befriends someone in tougher straits than his own—a tramp who's been beaten and robbed and is trudging, hungry, through the dry land. Because Wilsey opts to give the man a hand reaching the town, he's stunned to find Walter Finn murdered soon after.

Wilsey's an orphan and pretty naive, so the factions in *Silver Grass* baffle him: The business owners scraping by, a cluster of would-be homesteaders waiting for land to open up, and a truly nasty range-hogging entrepreneur making big bucks off wealthy guests buying his upscale "camping" experience. At the same time, this brute is fencing off public land for his own use, and murdering anyone getting in his way.

When Deputy Calvin Yenser rides into town to investigate the tramp's death and seek justice, Wilsey already has another death to report—the brother of a young settler named Alice. Meanwhile, determined to figure out what's really going on around Silver Grass, the young man already has evidence to report to the deputy sheriff, and a willingness to put more than just his testimony on the line.

The range war erupting in *Silver Grass* is small, but its impacts on Wilsey and the people he begins to care about—men who'll offer kindness and justice, and young women who size up the situation and appreciate it—are huge. Help a young-adult reader to persist through the first couple of awkward chapters, and let the well-balanced story set a spark to an ongoing interest in the Western frontier and its people.

Beth Kanell

NECESSARY DECEPTIONS

Pamela Nowak, *Five Star*, 2022, \$25.95, hb, 460pp, 9781432888015

Opening in San Francisco in 1871, this novel ends in Pinal, Arizona in 1888. The first protagonist, Sadie Josephine Marcuse, daughter of a poor immigrant family, despairs of attracting an eligible husband. To improve her chances, she drops the 'e' from her surname. 'Marcus' sounds better.

A small deception, but it sets the tone for the rest of her life. If facts don't help the situation, invent a better version. As she matures, makes her living in a whorehouse but always

seeking love and respectability, Sadie relies increasingly on her ability to come up with necessary deceptions. Meeting the charming, handsome and apparently respectable Wyatt Earp increases the need for fabrication of fact.

At about the same time as Sadie worries about attracting a husband, the second protagonist, teenager Celie Blaylock, on an Iowa farm, despairs of her life with a narrowly religious father and the impossibility of making a happy marriage. She runs away but also ends up in a whorehouse. There she meets the debonair, irresistible Wyatt Earp.

Both women claim to have been married to the footloose, irresponsible Wyatt, each often having to sell her body to rescue him from his latest self-inflicted disaster. Only one survived as his wife, living to the mid-20th century.

Many of the scenes in this novel take place in whorehouses in the lawless West. The narration, whether told to us by Celie or Josephine, is folksy and natural, giving a strong sense of place and character. It is a rapidly paced book, with twists and heartbreaks maintaining interest throughout. The novel shows evidence of extensive research and a perceptive winnowing of truths, half-truths and deceptions. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, one wonders how close the author has come to the truth about Wyatt Earp.

Valerie Adolph

WHEN WE LOST OUR HEADS

Heather O'Neill, *Riverhead*, 2021, \$26.00, hb, 448pp, 9780593422908

In late 19th-century Montreal, girls and women are filled with rage in Heather O'Neill's *When We Lost Our Heads*. The story centers on two girls who first meet in 1873, and concludes some 15 years later, and during the entire period, these girls are obsessed with each other, sometimes tinged with competition and other times with love.

The girls, Marie and Sophie, are not terribly likable at twelve, when we first meet them. Marie is wealthy, spoiled, and consumed by her own importance. Sophie is extremely intelligent and entertained by the suffering and death of animals. Marie feels her power; Sophie is trying to gain power over her environment. Neither girl conforms to the ideals of Victorian womanhood.

The main theme addressed is the travails of women in that period. Rage at their lack of control over their bodies, rage at the cruelty of the factories, rage at the inequities of income and opportunity, rage at the ease with which they can be shut up in an asylum, rage at the lack of opportunities—all of this rage shows up in the breasts of the women of this book, and that anger must find outlets, whether at those responsible or those who happen to be available targets.

The book also explores various types of sexuality and gender identification. Indeed, the most sympathetic character in the book is a nonbinary person who genuinely cares

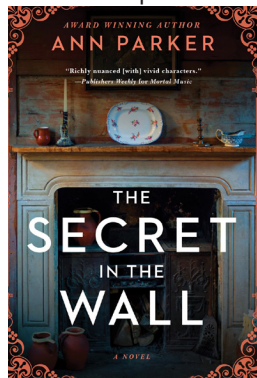
about people and the misery of impoverished women, having grown up in a brothel.

Not surprisingly with these themes, this is a dark book. However, the book is filled with quotable statements, and the plot is well-conceived, so even though it can be chilling to read sections, Heather O'Neill's mastery propels one to the end of the story.

Jodi McMaster

THE SECRET IN THE WALL

Ann Parker, *Poisoned Pen Press*, 2022, \$15.99, pb, 400pp, 9781464214943



With an impressive command of the genre of historical fiction, Ann Parker tells the tale of Inez Stannert, who purchases an old house in San Francisco in 1882, only to find a corpse, a bag of gold coins, and a glass eye hidden in the wall. Stannert, an early version of a venture capitalist, is ostensibly the owner of a music shop. Readers soon learn of her additional expertise at sleuthing. Over the course of a week, she puzzles out the identity of the corpse, the background of the gold, the mystery surrounding the house, and she ultimately catches the killer.

Assisting her is a small cast of well-drawn characters, including her adventurous teenage ward, her rule-following business partner, and an attractive private detective.

Parker is adept at plotting, characterization, dialog, and historical setting. Her plot ties into Civil War events twenty years earlier, surprising readers who may not know that conflict reached as far west as San Francisco. From the spectacular opening scene to the riveting denouement, Parker paces her plot well, alternating action with the quieter work of an investigation. She also tells a feminist story in a non-dogmatic fashion. Inez is a businesswoman who enjoys supporting other businesswomen, and she seeks male companionship but is perfectly comfortable on her own.

The Secret in the Wall is Volume 8 in Parker's successful Silver Rush Mystery series, first set in Leadville, Colorado, then in San Francisco. As expected, Volume 8 includes many ambiguous references to Inez Stannert's complex earlier life, references that are likely to intrigue readers, sending them to volumes one through seven if they have not already had that pleasure.

Marlie Wasserman

HOW TO DECEIVE A DUKE

Samara Parish, *Forever*, 2022, \$8.99, pb, 384pp, 9781538704547

This is an entertaining tale of a headstrong female chemist who brings an overly conscientious duke to his knees. Edward Stirling, Duke of Wildeforde, ended his engagement with Fiona McTavish for fear of what society gossips might do to her. Six years later, Edward finds himself standing bond for Finley McTavish, jailed for participating in a workers' protest. Fiona is in London to find distributors for her invention, friction matches, and she suspects businessmen will take her more seriously if she's dressed as a man.

Harboring Finley/Fiona under his roof causes all sorts of amusing complications for strait-laced, status-vigilant Edward, especially when his siblings are charmed by Finley. But when Fiona falls under the shadow of her treacherous father's misdeeds, Edward's high-handed intervention is completely unacceptable to stubborn Fiona, determined to make it on her own.

The perfectly paced plot rolls merrily along, full of mischief and masquerades but with palpable emotion in the tangled pasts the characters must overcome as they grow toward one another. Echoing the smart, sensual style of author Eloisa James, Parish offers a refreshing take on historical romance that shows relatable characters struggling to find one another against restrictive Regency conventions and mores. An utterly enchanting experience.

Misty Urban

WAITING ON LOVE

Tracie Peterson, *Bethany House*, 2021, \$15.99, pb, 320pp, 9780764232404

After her mother passes, Elise Wright takes over her duties as ship's cook and caretaker on the *Mary Elise*, a freighter crisscrossing the Great Lakes in the 1870s. Elise wants to stay with her father, the captain, but her sister Caroline prefers to live in high society, far from the ship. Nick Clark is a former ship's captain and the new *Mary Elise* first mate who is still reeling with guilt over a past decision. Will he get a fresh start, or will a new crew member disrupt everything?

This historical Christian romantic adventure contains some surprises while taking us on thrilling voyages across the Great Lakes. The daily routine on a freighter in that time period is explored, and it is obvious ship life has been meticulously researched. The potential for danger to occur at any moment is well portrayed. The characters are captivating, from strong-willed Elise to her noble father to the evil Booker Duran. This is a captivating historical novel with themes of redemption and forgiveness. While riding the waves on the *Mary Elise*, the reader will be rocked with danger, love, and loss. This third book in the Ladies of the Lake series easily stands alone.

Bonnie DeMoss

MOONLIGHT AND THE PEARLER'S DAUGHTER

Lizzie Pook, *Mantle*, 2022, £14.99, hb, 304pp, 9781529072846 / *Simon & Schuster*, 2022, \$27.99, hb, 288pp, 9781982180492

1886. The Brightwell family—two brothers, Willem and Charles, with their wives, and Charles's two children, Thomas and ten-year-old Eliza—arrive from England at the fictional Bannin Bay, Western Australia, to make their fortune as pearlers. Ten years later, they appear to have succeeded. However, the life they lead is hard, especially for the women, who are left alone for weeks at a time while the luggers go in search of pearls and mother-of-pearl. By now, Charles Brightwell is an acknowledged master-pearler with a fleet of luggers. When he does not return from one of these expeditions, Eliza refuses to believe that he is lost forever. Eliza finds solace and respite in the strange, savage, and all-enthraling natural world, an interest which she conspiratorially shares with her father and where she feeds her thirst for knowledge and her longing for beauty. This makes her an outsider in this brutish, corrupt society but also gives her the independence of mind that enables her to pursue her quest despite opposition and intimidation.

The story is told from Eliza's point of view in an intense, third-person present tense narrative that is at once intricate and mesmerising. Eliza's ten years in Bannin Bay, years in which she grew from childhood to womanhood, have forged her into a relentless pursuer of the truth about her father's disappearance, no matter what it costs. The language is at times lyrical, especially in the descriptions of nature, but nature here is also harsh and unforgiving. Overall, a fascinating insight into 19th-century Western Australia. A detailed historical and cultural note provides background information.

Catherine Kullmann

AN IMPOSSIBLE IMPOSTER

Deanna Raybourn, *Berkley*, 2022, \$26.00, hb, 336pp, 9780593197295

In this seventh rollicking installment in Raybourn's Veronica Speedwell series, set in 1889, Veronica and Stoker are summoned by Sir Hugo Montgomerie, head of Special Branch. His goddaughter, Euphemia Hathaway, has advised that her eldest brother, Jonathan, heir to Hathaway Hall (who was thought to have been killed in the Krakatoa eruption a few years before) has miraculously returned. Is it possible? Can the dynamic duo decide whether the man who claims that he is Jonathan is really the heir? Or is he an imposter seeking to steal the famous family jewels?

As an incentive, Montgomerie advises Stoker that the Hathaway holdings include a rare Tasmanian devil that he can add to his natural history museum collection. How can Stoker refuse if he can make such an acquisition?

But Veronica doesn't anticipate that she will

be confronting her past when she and Stoker agree to undertake the investigation. As the pair delve deeper into the mystery of Jonathan, of course they are met with all manner of inconsistencies, deceptions, bad behavior and ultimately threats to life and limb.

Both Veronica and Stoker continue to grow together and individually in Raybourn's talented hands. This story is very focused on Veronica and how she has developed into the woman we see in each installment. I will always recommend a Speedwell mystery as a fun and enjoyable read.

Ilysa Magnus

THE LADY'S MINE

Francine Rivers, Tyndale House, 2022, \$27.99/£21.99, hb, 464pp, 9781496447579

The Sierra Nevada mining town of Calvada doesn't quite know what to make of Kathryn Walsh as she steps off the stagecoach in 1875. A brief encounter with handsome saloon keeper, Matthias Beck, as he introduces an unwanted guest to the wet part of a horse trough, arouses uninvited feelings in Kathryn, as she admonishes his version of justice. Love isn't what she came for, however, and there's no going back to Boston (her stepfather made that abundantly clear), so she takes possession of the meagre belongings left to her in her deceased uncle, City (C.T.) Walsh's will: a two-room shack, a printing press, and a mine claim. Despite coming from money, she must support herself now, so she convinces her uncle's young apprentice to help relaunch City's newspaper, the *Voice*, against strenuous objections from Matthias. Kathryn's forthright honesty on the page makes her a target for violence, and her refusal of an offer of marriage from a wealthy mine owner, Matthias's business and political rival, aggravates the ill feeling.

The author has thoroughly captured the feel, taste and smell of the Old West in this dialogue-driven story, such that I felt immersed in the late 1800s. Just the right amount of sexual tension sizzles between the feisty Kathryn and the charismatic Matthias to create an intoxicating romance, as well as a mystery. When Kathryn learns that City refused to sell his mine claim and that he was murdered, she digs deeper, endangering herself and pulling Matthias's protective presence closer than ever. The novel sheds light on the enterprising men and women who built the foundations of the American West after the mines were tapped out. Highly romantic and full of the author's joie-de-vivre in the writing of it.

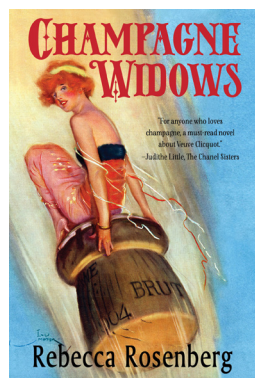
Fiona Alison

CHAMPAGNE WIDOWS

Rebecca Rosenberg, Lion Heart Publishing, 2021, \$9.99, ebook, 295pp, 9781732969926

Champagne Widows tells the story of the famous winemaker Veuve Clicquot, born Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin. Barbe-Nicole inherits her grandmother's extraordinary sense of smell, Le Nez (The Nose), and she decides to use her talent to make the best champagne

in the world. Rejecting all her suitors, Barbe-



Nicole marries her childhood sweetheart, François Clicquot, and they start a wine business together. François, suffering from mental illness after his experiences in the Napoleonic Wars, dies tragically, but Barbe-

Nicole keeps the winery going, even though Napoleon's laws forbid women from owning a business. Poor harvests and a world at war will not stop her. She and her chief salesman decide to sell the wine in Russia, in spite of Napoleon's blockade, because the Russians love champagne. When she falls in love with her salesman, Barbe-Nicole must make a difficult choice, because if she remarries, she loses the winery.

I loved the character of Barbe-Nicole, a strong, determined woman, who defies Napoleon to make her business a success. The novel contains fascinating details about winemaking and everything that goes into it: the soil, climate, barrels, glass bottles, and the various blends of grapes. All these things and more affect the smell and flavor of the wine. I felt I could smell the wine along with Barbe-Nicole, because Rosenberg's descriptions are so vivid. Barbe-Nicole's narrative is interspersed with brief chapters about the rise and fall of Napoleon, and the evil advisor known as the Red Man, a devil figure disguised as a coachman, who encourages him to conquer Europe. Rosenberg takes the reader into the world of the Napoleonic Wars, with all the devastation they caused, and some of the most moving parts of the book are the scenes where Barbe-Nicole harvests the grapes along with other women who were widowed by Napoleon's wars.

Vicki Kondelik

THE CABALLERO'S SON

Anne Schroeder, Five Star, 2021, \$25.95, hb, 272pp, 9781432879433

This novel depicts a different version of the California gold rush than many readers likely know: the devastating effects it had on Native Americans and Californios (Spanish/Mexican settlers). Murder, theft, and rapine by the whites stir up resentment, embodied in the title character, Miguelito Robles, who grows up dreaming of vengeance against the yanquis.

Miguelito falls in with bandit Tiburcio Vasquez and his gang; they live off the plunder they can get from robbing stagecoaches and stealing horses from whites. Though injustices occurred on both sides: one of the gang tortures some Chinese men, and Miguelito rejects the notion that he might have Indian blood. Miguelito rescues a girl he briefly met

and admired in the past, Elena, who's being forced to work as a prostitute. They start a family, which begins to give Miguelito a distaste for the banditos' violent ways. But can he escape from the gang and live a normal life?

The author consulted local sources, including a Native American relative of Vasquez. Some of the characters are hard to like, but the different view of California history is the book's most memorable takeaway: so many injustices that my generation didn't learn about in school.

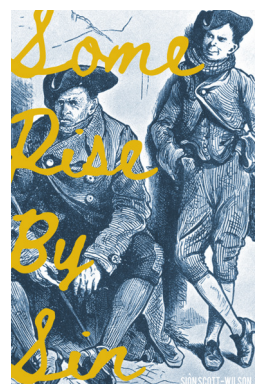
B. J. Sedlock

SOME RISE BY SIN

Siôn Scott-Wilson, Deixis Press, 2021, £11.99, pb, 372pp, 9781838498719

London, 1829: while passing themselves off as bakers, Sammy and Facey make a living as talented "Resurrection Men" and as debt-collectors, in which a "silk" (a young corpse) nets them significantly more from the anatomists than a "crepe" (an old one).

Then they get wind of an exceptional prize: the cadaver of a hermaphrodite. They are not the only ones interested in the corpse,



however, and as poor Bobby Herman's remains are stolen and stolen again, the tension escalates, for there are those who will not stop even at murder, knowing that there is one law for the rich and another for the disenfranchised.

Scott-Wilson immerses the reader in the teeming, stinking underworld of a city before Bazalgette's modern sewers. It is not only his research that is impeccable but the consistent, immersive "voice" of his prose. It would be easy to label as Dickensian characters like Rosamund (not "fair", but pockmarked), the brothers Kak John and Pure John, the albino Teeth (veteran of Marshal Blücher's Prussian army), the performers in a freak show and the considerate former prize fighter Tom Canon, but this risks reducing them to caricatures, which they are anything but.

They might make their living in sordid and sometimes dangerous ways, but each character shines on the page as a vivid, often dignified human being capable of joy and pain. I would like to say that *Some Rise by Sin* is filmic, though it would be hard for any filmmaker to as authentically recreate what Scott-Wilson achieves on the page.

Katherine Mezzacappa

THE REBEL AND THE RAKE

Emily Sullivan, Forever, 2021, \$8.99, pb, 352pp, 9781538737347

It is 1897 in Scotland. To conceal her past as

a suffragist activist, Sylvia changes her name and takes a position as a lady's companion. Then a blackmailer threatens to expose this damaging information if she does not carry out his order to steal a letter from her host at a Scottish castle. Under the cover of an irresponsible rake, Rafe Davies spies for the crown, but he is unenthusiastic about his current assignment to recover the stolen letter. When the pair meet, both are powerfully attracted to each other.

As is often the case in mystery and spy fiction, the plot is convoluted and rather unlikely. It does, nevertheless, provide an opportunity to explore a number of important issues: the vulnerability of women in a predominantly patriarchal society; the mistreatment by those in positions of authority of those struggling for equal rights; the injustices of a press more interested in sensational headlines than fairness; corruption and hypocrisy in high places. In other words, abuses of power, which are as relevant today as they were in the Victorian Age. Insightful.

Ray Thompson

LILY: A Tale of Revenge

Rose Tremain, Chatto & Windus, 2021, £18.99, hb, 284pp, 9781784744564

Born in 1850, Lily Mortimer is found as a just-delivered baby and is taken to Coram's Foundling Hospital children's home by a kindly young policeman. She is sent to live on a farm in Suffolk with a large and loving foster family until she is six and then callously returned to London. The harsh separation from her home is heart-rending, but Lily is to be trained to

make a useful career.

From the very start of the novel, Lily as a 16-year-old tells us that she has murdered someone in an act of revenge and is waiting for justice to catch up with her. She works at a wigmaker's in central London, nimble and

skilled in her finger work. The police officer who saved her as a baby returns into her life, adding an element of complication and delight, also danger as Lily is convinced that he will discover her crime and start the process of the fearful justice that she is convinced awaits her. Lily and the other children at the home want to recapture the stability and happiness of their foster homes, and this bereavement haunts Lily as she emerges into adulthood; she mourns the loss of the security and simple pleasures of those early years on the farm in Suffolk, when she was loved, and life was pleasurable. The revelation of the reason for Lily's revenge-taking murder is shocking when

it is revealed, and this reader has nothing but sympathy for Lily and her decision to kill.

Rose Tremain portrays the brutal nature of the orphans' lives, as well as the precarious nature of life in 19th-century London for poor members of society with forensic clarity, in a narrative that is beguiling and beautiful—it's simply a pleasure to read. Lily is such a sympathetic heroine that the reader is fully on her side and wants the best for this feisty, generous, and talented soul.

Douglas Kemp

CHAMBERS OF THE SEA

Alan Vazquez, Independently published, 2021, \$4.99, pb, 96pp, 9798512583876

The sea is a place of legends and superstitions, none more so than with the *Mary Celeste*. The ship floats in a place where no other vessel should be when Captain David Morehouse and his crew first spy her six miles ahead. The closer they come, the more they feel wrapped in a shroud of uneasiness, a bad omen of what lies ahead. John Wright and Oliver Deveau are sent to investigate. Neither wishes to go, but they must heed their captain's order, even though they find themselves swathed in a dense shroud of mist. Once aboard the derelict, there is no one to be found and no clues as to what occurred. Only a voice that whispers, "Leave."

The abandonment of the *Mary Celeste* is perhaps the best-known sea mystery. In the winter of 1872, the *Dei Gratia* comes upon the derelict. Vazquez takes what is known about this event and spins a haunting psychological tale. Once spooked, a domino effect occurs giving rise to tricks that the mind plays in order to make sense out of that which is unfathomable. What works against this are the formatting and grammatical errors, poorly worded sentences, misspellings, and missing letters or punctuation. Several italicized passages interrupt the story's flow. Although the tension level could be higher, this is a yarn for curious readers seeking more than just the facts. Vazquez includes an epilogue, which reveals what happens once the ships and crew make port.

Cindy Vallar

OUR KIND OF PEOPLE

Carol Wallace, Putnam, 2022, \$17.00, pb, 368pp, 9780525540021

It took a chapter or two for me to warm up to *Our Kind of People*, but by chapter three when the point of view settles down, I was hooked by this deliciously soapy narrative of the exploits of the Wilcoxes, an upper-class family living in New York during the Gilded Age. They are a family in which the women make rather unconventional choices when it comes to men. The mother, Helen, begins this trajectory when she chooses Joshua, the handsome owner of a small-town transport company, for a husband.

The decision to go outside the bounds of her own class for a mate, which she doesn't

regret, is one she hopes her own daughters won't emulate. For a minute it looks as though she'll have her way in the matter. Both girls manage to acquire and exhibit the attributes necessary to earn a spot in society and attract a "suitable" husband, but when the family fortunes falter and their father is disgraced, the girls' options suddenly become more interesting.

Wallace weaves in wonderfully authentic details to recreate the glittering social scene of the 19th century, with its strict etiquette and arcane rules, as well as the hardships of the family's financial downturn. The characters are thoroughly engaging, especially Helen and her older daughter Jemima. Equally fascinating is the depiction of the entrepreneurial fervor of the era as Joshua applies his business acumen to the development of mass transit. The book is a thoroughly enjoyable read. Recommended for devotees of *Downton Abbey*, *Bridgerton*, or the Gilded Age in general.

Trish MacEnulty

20TH CENTURY

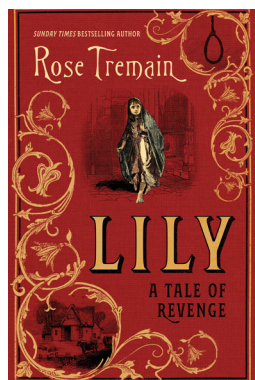
THE COMMUNE

Erica Abeel, Adelaide Books, 2021, \$22.30, pb, 329pp, 9781954351790

Leora is struggling to keep it all together. Recently divorced, as a cash-strapped single mother, she has little time or emotional energy to pursue her writing career. Looking for mental stimulation and perhaps an idea for a magazine article, she joins a group of friends for a weekend at a commune. There she meets a motley crew of women and a few men planning the 1970 Women's March for Equality. Unfortunately, the group's leader, Gilda, doesn't immediately like Leora and isn't interested in including her. Desperate to become a communitarian, Leora finds she has something the group needs, a connection to Kaz, a wealthy businessman. While trying to persuade him to help fund the march, she finds she still has feelings for him but has too much time passed for them to rekindle their relationship?

The Commune is a satirical peek behind the curtain at the women's movement, full of eccentric characters representing the group's different and sometimes competing views. The book explores internal power struggles, Gilda's homophobia and distrust of radical feminists, ageism, and conflicting opinions about the role of men in the movement. Abeel does a good job of balancing social critique with humor, showing that even those promoting social change are flawed human beings. While a little light on plot, this book is full of memorable characters, and readers will enjoy guessing who each woman is based on.

Janice Derr



NEVER TRY TO CATCH A FALLING KNIFE

Skye Alexander, Level Best/Historia, 2021, \$16.95, pb, 496pp, 9781685120207

This is the first of a new series, set in the Prohibition era, and it's a promising debut, filled with plot twists, intriguing characters, and snappy dialogue. As I read this book, I kept imagining Barbara Stanwyck as the heroine, Lizzie Crane. Lizzie is just the sort of beautiful, brassy, self-sufficient character that Stanwyck often played.

Lizzie is a singer and actress, one of a four-person entertainment troupe until one of them—a handsome saxophonist and actor—is murdered. The three remaining Troubadors worry that they might be next, and Lizzie is determined to find out just who her colleague, Henry Ives, really was and why someone would to murder him. Trapped in a mansion in Ipswich, Massachusetts with a coterie of the rich and powerful, Lizzie begins prying into the secrets of the Winslow family, who are hosting the entertainments in honor of one daughter's engagement to a count. Matters are complicated when Lizzie finds herself attracted to the dashing scion of the family, Peter Winslow, who has "tousled honey-gold hair and shapely calves" and a few secrets of his own. There's also an Upstairs/Downstairs component to the story as Lizzie gets to know and comes to rely on certain of the house servants.

Rich with juicy historical details—especially the motorcars!—and surprising turns, this book should appeal to fans of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers.

Trish MacEnulty

KARITAS UNTITLED

Kristín Marja Baldursdótti, (trans. Philip Roughton), AmazonCrossing, 2022, \$24.95/£19.99, hb, 415pp, 9781542027076

Karitas Untitled is a newly translated Icelandic novel peopled with unique, quirky, and well-defined characters. With the talent of a true artist, the author paints stunning descriptions: "The rain holds the house in its embrace, the windowpanes weep." This is a novel about Icelandic life in the early 20th century; it is about family within a closely-knit village, country life, and delightful characters; and most importantly it is about Karitas—her choices and her journey to define herself within conflicting desires and responsibilities.

Karitas is a young girl living in the Westfjords with her mother, Steinunn, and five older siblings after their father is lost at sea. The book opens in 1915 with a comical introduction of the family's maid who is prone to losing her wits. When the mother announces a move to a city where her children can be educated, the neighbors decide she is the mad one, not the maid. Steinunn's brave move shows her as a forward-thinking and deeply devoted mother doing something unheard of. When their economic situation becomes dire, Karitas, too young to attend school, is clever at bartering with shop keepers to acquire the family needs,

making deals for her family to fulfil. When the privileged Madam Eugenia offers to teach her drawing, her artistic talent comes to light.

We follow Karitas over 24 years until the start of WWII—her childhood, art training in Copenhagen, her marriage to Segmar, birth of her children, and growth and setbacks as a woman. Titles of Karitas's artwork comprise the chapter subtitles. The book's early chapters are subtitled 'Untitled' (a motif linked to the book's title), then as her art develops, Karitas begins to assign a descriptive title to her pieces. These subtitles are mirrored in Karitas as she matures and defines herself. This is a rich novel that readers who enjoy international literature will appreciate.

Janice Ottersberg

HER HIDDEN GENIUS

Marie Benedict, Sourcebooks, 2022, \$26.99, hb, 304pp, 9781728229393

In 1947, scientist Rosalind Franklin thinks she's finally found her place at a laboratory in Paris where she learns the fine details of X-ray crystallography. Unlike in her native London, Franklin isn't the only female scientist in Paris, and her career trajectory isn't hampered by sexism. But after a crushing heartbreak, she takes a new position at King's College in London, where she finds herself caught up in the race to identify the structure of DNA. When she does discover the structure, however, a male colleague, unable to reconcile having to treat a woman as an intellectual equal, betrays her, giving two scientists at rival Cambridge access to Franklin's work. The two scientists, James Watson and Francis Crick, along with the betrayer, Maurice Wilkins, will for decades enjoy the prestige of discovering DNA's double-helix structure while Franklin fights to receive recognition for her discovery.

Once again, Benedict has shed light on an important female historical figure who until recently hasn't been given due credit for her contributions. Impeccably researched, *Her Hidden Genius* takes readers along on Franklin's journey to create a space for women in science. While Benedict never shies away from illuminating the sexism aimed at Franklin, she never devolves into man-bashing either. Indeed, Franklin had many close relationships with male colleagues who supported and assisted her along the way. While the scientific descriptions sometimes get a bit dry, overall, this novel is an intriguing examination of a woman fighting to claim her rightful space.

Sarah Hendess

SHARD

James R. Benn, Ranger Publications, 2021, \$15.99, pb, 326pp, 9781737947202

Ethan Shard comes from an incredibly difficult childhood, but that seems to pale compared to his situation in the early 1950s, first as a prisoner of war of the North Koreans and later the Chinese communists. As a comfortably situated enlisted truck driver in the U.S. Army of Occupation in Japan, Ethan

knows trouble is once again on the way when the North Koreans invade their southern neighbor. In the meantime, he has befriended another soldier, Skitter, and together they have experienced some luck at low-level black marketeering with the Japanese. Both are plucked out to join a "provisional infantry company" (which is never a good sign).

Rushed to the front lines, the two are among the earliest of the Americans captured by the seemingly unstoppable North Korean communists. For years they are subjected to hideous mental and physical torture along with their fellow prisoners. Even after hostilities end, they are still pawns during peace talks. Shard must be a reluctant "section leader" of his small crew, who experience consistent losses through disease, starvation, and executions. His harsh upbringing, though haunting, seems to harden him to withstand his many challenges.

This is a dark, visceral, and gut-wrenching account of the "forgotten war." The author provides a clear warning of what horrendous atrocities a one-party ideological totalitarian state is capable of committing. Prisoners are forced to become self-described "progressives" and proclaim their hatred for America or be tortured to death. Captured clergy members, including Father James and Sister Mary Clare, are especially reviled. Still, Benn describes moments of tenderness and inspiration under the worst of conditions and provides a few surprise twists which this reviewer never saw coming. Not for the faint of heart, but still an exceedingly worthwhile novel.

Thomas J. Howley

PIGNON SCORBION & THE BARBERSHOP DETECTIVES

Rick Bleiweiss, Blackstone, 2022, \$28.99, hb, 300pp, 9781665046756

In Edwardian England, 1910, we meet Pignon Scorbion, newly-appointed chief inspector of the fictional town of Haxford. Asked by newcomer, Jonathan Bentine, to prove a wealthy, retired salesman, Mortimer Gromley, is his father, Pignon utilises the local barbershop, a frequent haunt, as his interview room. Calvin Brown, barbershop owner and long-time friend, is deputized, along with his three employees, to aid in the investigation. No sooner has the case been cleared and Gromley exonerated of an illicit one-off liaison during an out-of-town sales trip (resulting in the scheming Mr. Bentine) than a circus employee is murdered, a prize hog stolen and slaughtered, and the unfortunate animal's owner found with a tomahawk stuck in his back. Meanwhile Pignon's new deputies pull out a seemingly endless stream of chairs from the back room, like rabbits from a hat, and invite their growing warren full of interviewees to please sit.

With more than 60 characters listed, 40+ of them playing roles beyond just mentions, this novel could become unwieldy, but Bleiweiss has developed a cleverly convoluted plot full of conundrums into an easily readable page-turning diversion, in which we meet

innumerable quirky, off-beat and charmingly peculiar characters. Utilising Occam's Razor (or KISS, if you like), Pignon works through the evidence step by logical step. A true gentleman and one-of-a-kind investigator, his mannerisms and mode of speech are a delight, harkening back to Christie's Poirot sojourns, which are currently having a new lease on life.

This is a highly engaging read which will join the ranks of Richard Osman, Anthony Horowitz, and Fred Vargas for the eccentricities and singularly idiosyncratic personages portrayed here. It makes you long for the time when courtesy and respect, even towards potential criminals, was the most important order of the day. Let's hope Pignon and his distinctive black-and-white shoes will be back soon, or preferably even earlier.

Fiona Alison

A MAN OF HONOR

Barbara Taylor Bradford, *St. Martin's*, 2021, \$29.99, hb, 464pp, 9781250187451 / *HarperCollins*, 2021, £16.99, hb, 448pp, 9780008242527

At the turn of the 20th century, young Blackie O'Neill leaves his home and everything he has ever known to start his life anew in England. Orphaned by the cruel fate of poverty in harsh 19th-century Ireland, Blackie must sail from county Kerry to live with his aunt and uncle in Leeds. As the title suggests, the young boy's honesty and fortitude never falter, even with such an inauspicious beginning. He develops interests, desires, and ambition that drive him to thrive and succeed, eventually landing him work as a tradesman and builder.

Though steadfastly earnest, Blackie encounters his share of drama, notably with beautiful women who cross his path and business opportunities with Yorkshire gentry. Even as his daily life and the struggles of his friends and family span only a few years, the implications of the hardships of his impoverished youth keep the dramatic encounters grounded in realistic early 20th-century detail.

The large cast of characters is introduced methodically, allowing the reader to get to know each person individually but also slowing the first portion of the book. Readers of Bradford's earlier work will recognize the late arrival of Emma Harte, the heroine of *A Woman of Substance*. And while this novel features Bradford's talent for developing new, likable characters, Emma Harte's appearance might invite some wistful nostalgia for the heroine instead as the central figure.

Erin Page

BEAUTIFUL LITTLE FOOLS

Jillian Cantor, *HarperPerennial*, 2022, \$14.99 / *C\$21.00*, pb, 368pp, 9780063051263

Beautiful Little Fools is Jillian Cantor's spin-off of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jazz Age masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*.

Fitzgerald's novel focuses on the rich and mysterious Jay Gatsby, who throws great

parties for his wealthy neighbors in West Egg, Long Island, and Gatsby's obsession with a married woman named Daisy Buchanan. Writing from the point of view of Nick Carraway, Daisy's Princeton-educated second cousin and Gatsby's best friend, Fitzgerald weaves a brittle and delicate web of upper-class romantic intrigue that slowly unwraps Gatsby's elusive, shady, sentimental, and somewhat naive character. It's a love story wrapped in a mystery.

Beautiful Little Fools is a different take on the same story. It focuses more on Fitzgerald's women—Daisy Buchanan, her friend Jordan Baker, Myrtle Wilson, the mistress of Daisy's husband, and Myrtle's sister Catherine.

Cantor's novel is in part a police procedural. Detective Frank Charles, a newly invented character, wades in to investigate the murder of Gatsby, the event which ends Fitzgerald's book. *Beautiful Little Fools* concocts a new mystery and sets up a dramatic (and different) conclusion involving the women.

Nick Carraway comes off as terribly boring, but Fitzgerald's other characters feel true to their roots. The author fashions believable back stories and tells her story effectively and with frequent shifts of point of view. She recreates Fitzgerald's leisure class milieu, and aside from a couple of phrases that sound contemporary, the dialogue rings true. While this is not Fitzgerald's masterpiece, the book is beautifully packaged and the story clearly written. The novel has more sex than the original, if less romance, and it's an interesting sort of try. Once again, rich people get away with murder and life goes on.

Beautiful Little Fools should interest many readers looking for another helping of *The Great Gatsby*.

David Drum

THE STRAITS OF TSUSHIMA

Tim Chant, *Sapere*, 2021, \$11.99/£10.50, pb, 358pp, 9781800553316

The Russo-Japanese War on the high seas explodes like a shot in this promising first entry in a new series that follows a disgraced former British Royal Navy officer, Marcus Baxter.

It's 1904 and the Russo-Japanese War is in its second year as 26-year-old Marcus Baxter nurses a bruised ego for his recent blacklisting by the Royal Navy for less-than-obedient actions aboard ship. Approached by the navy's top intelligence agent to spy on a Russian convoy soon to pass off the coast of Scotland, Baxter sees a chance to correct his listing life and get reinstated. The plan goes horribly awry, however, as he and his young companion, Tommy Dunbar, are captured by the Russian ship Yaroslavich, and held prisoner to avoid a possible international incident with Britain. It is a long journey southward and around the Horn to reach the Straits of Tsushima, and along the way Baxter and Tommy become something like friends with the dashing first officer Juneau and his enigmatic wife, Ekaterina. Baxter puts his

seaman skills to use and helps Juneau whip the crew into shape for the coming battle with Japan, whilst wrestling with his own inner loyalties... both to his country and to his newfound friend, Juneau. Braving natural disasters at sea and the machinations of a Marxist cabal aboard ship—not to mention an unexpected attraction—Baxter's dance card is full, much to readers' delight.

The Straits of Tsushima recollects the works of Patrick O'Brian and Dewey Lambdin with its authentic nose for naval battle and its rich descriptions of exotic locales. With a sturdy plot and smooth pacing, Chant's novel introduces a likable man of action and brio who yet must wrestle with his past, promising more jolly good reading in the next installment.

Peggy Kurkowski

THE POSTMISTRESS OF PARIS

Meg Waite Clayton, *Harper*, 2021, \$27.99, hb, 416pp, 9780062946980

"That was something she'd learned early: when to draw attention to herself and when to avoid it. Evanston rules."

Paris, 1938. A decade into her exile from society in Evanston, Illinois, heiress, pilot, and expat Nanée lands her Vega Gull and sweeps into the Galerie des Beaux-Arts wearing her flight jacket and white silk scarf over a black Chanel dress—Aero-Chanel she calls the look—drawing the attention and interest of Jewish photojournalist Edouard Moss: father, recent widower, and refugee from Nazi Germany. Moss's most intimate photograph, *Salvation*, attracts and interests Nanée. As does the artist himself.

Marseilles, 1939. Hitler's growing list of enemies—writers, artists, and journalists—now includes Moss, who is living with his young daughter, Luki, in Provence. When he realizes they must flee, he engages a friend to accompany Luki on a separate train; they will meet in Paris. But en route, Moss is arrested and incarcerated.

Nanée now works for the Resistance as "postmistress," covertly delivering coded messages and forged documents to sequestered refugees attempting to flee France. When she learns that Moss has been taken, she draws on the Evanston rules: first attracting the attention of a commandant and securing Moss's release papers, and then passing unnoticed as she searches for Luki. Her plan? To reunite father and daughter and smuggle them to freedom even as all avenues of escape are closing.

Inspired by the life-story of American heiress Mary Jayne Gold, this fast-moving narrative slips seamlessly between locations, characters, and subplots. With its breathtaking turns, back-street meets, and an intensifying attraction between Nanée and Moss, Meg Waite Clayton's tale portrays a quiet woman who, fueled by courage and dedication, chooses to risk her life breaking laws rather than save it by returning home to a

stifling society life governed by Evanston rules. Recommended.

Rebecca Kightlinger

THE MAGNOLIA PALACE

Fiona Davis, Dutton, 2022, \$27.00, hb, 352pp, 9780593184011

Fiona Davis's novels offer the vicarious pleasures of getting an exclusive tour of New York City's iconic landmarks. Her latest work centers on the Henry Clay Frick House, once a Gilded Age mansion, now a public museum and art library. While envisioning the gorgeous paintings, sculptures, and other precious objects inside the building (whose Fifth Avenue garden is adorned by large magnolias) is a highlight, the colorful personalities could carry the novel on its own.

By 1919, Lillian Carter has spent six years posing for public sculptures across New York under the name "Angelica." While she's enjoyed contributing to the city's art scene, a murder scandal involving her landlord forces her to go into hiding. A twist of fate propels Lillian into the role of private secretary to Helen Clay Frick, the industrialist's mercurial 31-year-old daughter, who's torn between pursuing her own interests and seeking her critical father's approval. Lillian proves remarkably successful in her tasks, but while she dreams of a silent movie career, a secret assignment, one that's too temptingly profitable to resist, ensnares her in longstanding Frick family tensions. Decades later, in 1966, English model Veronica Weber secures a lucrative modeling assignment at the Frick Collection, but after the job turns sour, she finds herself accidentally trapped in the building overnight alongside a handsome African American museum intern. Initially watchful of one another, they team up to follow clues in a scavenger hunt created long ago.

The pages breeze by as potential romances develop (maybe not the ones you'd expect) and a mystery involving the whereabouts of the Magnolia Diamond unfolds. Deeper issues also undergird both narratives, which confront stereotypes about models and explore how a tragedy can warp family relationships years later. The two narratives dovetail in a satisfying way. Mystery and art lovers should relish this exciting escape into New York's past.

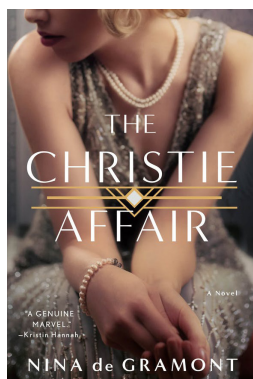
Sarah Johnson

THE CHRISTIE AFFAIR

Nina de Gramont, St. Martin's, 2022, \$27.99, hb, 320pp, 9781250274618

In 1926, renowned mystery author Agatha Christie disappeared for eleven days. When found, she claimed not to remember anything, a story she stuck to for the rest of her life. From there the mystery is filleted down to its two main players, Agatha and husband, Archie, into which is inserted a fiction arguably far more interesting than the actual events. What is known is that Archie and Agatha argued on December 3, 1926, after which he left to spend time with his mistress, Nancy Neele, and Agatha disappeared without a trace. Agatha

did not stay missing, so we have the beginning and the end; but what about the middle?



and the baby's father) ignorance of her whereabouts, even after her escape. Despite her undying love for Finbarr, Nan sets her sights on Archie Christie, winning him over with ease. Thus begins the tangled web of Nan's introspective story, gradually shedding light on her choices and motivations.

Readers are immediately drawn to the congenial Nan as she talks informally to us, sometimes questioning whether we have figured something out before she has had time to explain it, sometimes asking us to defer judgment and just listen. In 1926, the complex supporting cast plays out their roles superbly in a cleverly contrived plot. Through young Nan's ordeal, we get an unpleasant immersion in Irish history—Catholic convents, abused girls, molestation by priests, endless punishment for fabricated sins, forced adoptions, and pious nuns who turn a blind eye.

An engrossing work which lends itself well to circumstances Agatha herself chose to stay mum about, and which remains one of England's most fascinating unsolved mysteries.

Fiona Alison

THE LADY OF GALWAY MANOR

Jennifer Deibel, Revell, 2022, \$15.99, pb, 336pp, 9780800738426



father has allowed her to apprentice to a local family of jewelers who specialize in the famous Claddagh ring. Stephen Jennings, who is to be her mentor, has experienced both family and romantic tragedy associated with the English. Now Anna and Stephen are thrown

Recalling her earlier life, our fictional Nan recounts her childhood, her teenage pregnancy, her forced convent incarceration, her daughter's birth, and Finbarr's (Nan's childhood sweetheart

together at the worst possible time as the Irish independence struggle and reactive English oppression measures flare to fever pitch.

An inspirational romance, this superb novel is also an exciting historical journey into a terrible past which occurred just one hundred years ago. The author charmingly interjects occasional flurries of Irish Gaelic which are not only linguistically flawless but lend color and realism to the story. The characters, British and Irish, are memorable and attractive, especially Stephen's wise and lovable father, Seamus, and Anna's valiant younger sister, Emmaline. Both romance and Irish history fans will love this book. My highest recommendation.

Thomas J. Howley

A GOOGLY IN THE COMPOUND

Boman Desai, Independently published, 2021, \$17.99, pb, 438pp, 9798716256620

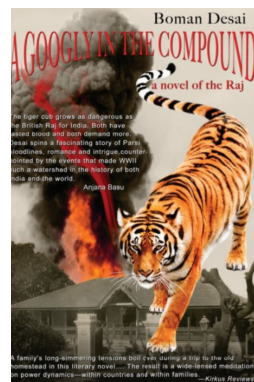
This is an unusual story of the British Raj (1910-1945) in India. Desai uses myth, metaphor, and family reminiscences to spin an intriguing story about family dynamics, romance, betrayal, and resolution while portraying British machinations and class inequities in both Indian and British societies.

The central focus is a Parsi (Zoroastrian) family, the Sanjanas, and their relationships with their pet tiger Victoria, servants, and diverse Britishers. The physical locations range from rural Navsari to cosmopolitan Bombay, 1930s London and war-torn Burma and Mesopotamia.

The Sanjanas gather every year to commemorate the death of the matriarch, Dolly's first husband Kavas, at Navsari. The opening scene, set on 25 September 1945, shows the family breakfasting in the enclosed compound.

Interspersed with the opening scene is the complex story of each protagonist, comprising Dolly's marriage into the wealthy Sanjana family, the rivalry between Sohrab and Rustom, and the chequered life of Daisy Holiday who comes to India seeking her erstwhile lover, has a brief encounter with the Sanjanas servant Alphonse, and ends up marrying Sohrab. There is also the dilemma of how to manage the adolescent Victoria who also symbolizes the British Raj, greedy and dangerous.

Tension escalates through Alphonse, threatening to reveal the outcome of his brief liaison with Daisy if she refuses to give him money, and Victoria tasting blood from a cut on Sohrab's hand. A cleverly staged denouement enables Dolly to resolve both dilemmas. 'Fate



had bowled [Daisy] a googly and she had batted it for a sixer.'

The story, richly detailed and absorbing, is a banquet; its construction—a breakfast scene divided into five acts interspersed with life stories rife with history—is a master class in narratology and temporal ordering. The prose is gorgeous, the story gripping. Highly recommended.

Indrani Ganguly

UNTIL WE MEET

Camille Di Maio, *Forever*, 2022, \$15.99, pb, 384pp, 9781538738047

A Glen Miller playlist will put readers "In the Mood" for *Until We Meet* by Camille Di Maio. This World War II epistolary novel begins in September 1943 with three best friends doing their bit at the Brooklyn Naval Yard. Filling roles of the men gone to war are Dottie, Margaret, and Gladys, who learn to knit socks while listening to tunes on the radio. Meanwhile, three airmen in the Screaming Eagles of the 101st Airborne are bunking at the Browns' farmhouse near Aldbourne, England. When William hasn't received any letters from family, Margaret's brother, John, pleads with her to write to him. At this turning point in the novel, Margaret decides to write a note and slips it into a pair of socks for William. The plot now moves through the letters of Margaret and William.

Di Maio creates great anticipation as bonds are formed through letters that take weeks to cross the ocean. Through the girls' Naval Yard experiences and encouragement from Gladys to become involved in women's causes, Di Maio captures the burgeoning interests of women in politics and business. As readers follow the three airmen from training in the U.S. to England, themes of loyalty and family expectations are aptly explored as Virginian Tom Powel, only son in a military family, reminisces about his upbringing and decision to become an airman. The movements of the Screaming Eagles are reported through letters, including details of the Battle of Normandy, with foreshadowing of lives lost and the Eiffel Tower's symbolism as a monument of human endurance. Di Maio's forthright handling of grief, facing it and moving on, is empathetic and realistic. The touching analogy of "joy and sorrow like seats on a playground teeter-totter" is also perfect for *Until We Meet*.

Dorothy Schwab

A SISTER'S WISH

Donna Douglas, *Orion*, 2021, £6.99, pb, 324pp, 9781409190929

In Second World War Hull during the Blitz, people's lives are being disrupted by the constant bombing, and they must also live with the consequences of their actions. Iris Fletcher is wracked with guilt at the death of her daughter and her best friend and is trying to salvage a life for herself while supporting her two other children. In the same family,

Ruby Maguire has her demons coming back to haunt her, while her estranged mother is attempting to get back into her and her sister Pearl's lives. These characters must assert themselves so that they can find what is truly important to them.

The novel is well written and researched, so it pulls the reader in to experience Hull during the bombing. It is interesting to read about the Women's Voluntary Service and its role on the home front. The bombing is brought to the foreground as the main characters are massively affected by it, and any hope of a normal life has come to a standstill as streets around them are obliterated. The characters are believable throughout, and the reader can empathise with them. It is a good story with twists and turns and fully pictures life in wartime England.

Clare Lehovskiy

LOVE AND SAFFRON

Kim Fay, *Putnam*, 2022, \$24.00, hb, 208pp, 9780593419335

In 1962, Imogen Fortier and Joan Bergstrom strike up an epistolary friendship over their shared love of food. At first they seem to have little else in common: Imogen is a married 59-year-old living in Washington State, and Joan is a single 27-year-old living in Los Angeles. But both are writers: Joan writes for the food pages of her local newspaper, and Imogen writes a monthly column for her local newspaper.

The letters between the two women are filled with warmth and detailed recipes. They also reveal the political and social climate of the era, mentioning everything from the Cuban Missile Crisis to Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl*. They both grieve when JFK is assassinated. Although the older Imogen is puzzled by the new band called the Beatles, thinking of them as "four British boys with odd haircuts," she thinks young people need "something that looks to the future."

Fay creates a pleasant world that at first seemed to this reader a little too conflict-free aside from difficulties finding ingredients for exotic recipes, but as the friendship between Imogen and Joan deepens, it becomes clear that they both experience private pain, making them deeply sympathetic and relatable. Their friendship becomes an anchor in both of their lives, prompting Imogen to write to Joan, "when a new experience comes into my life, it doesn't feel real anymore until I've shared it with you."

The author's note explains that this book was meant to be an antidote to the anxious climate created by our current pandemic, and it definitely succeeds. This gentle story about female friendship is sure to be a hit with foodies and fans of early 1960s America.

Clarissa Harwood

THE MITFORD VANISHING

Jessica Fellowes, *Minotaur*, 2022, \$28.99 / C\$37.99, hb, 416pp, 9781250819208 / Sphere, 2021, £16.99, hb, 416pp, 9780751580648

In 1939, Louisa Cannon, former maid to the aristocratic Mitford family, is now a married mother going into business as a sleuth with her husband, a former policeman. When Jessica Mitford, the second to youngest of the six Mitford sisters, disappears, the family naturally turns to Louisa. They want Jessica found, and they don't want the story to reach the tabloids. If they go to the police, it surely will.

Jessica, Louisa learns, has fallen in love with her cousin, Esmond Romilly, a communist. The two have, perhaps, gone to Spain to fight fascism.

Fellowes has based that part of this book, the fifth in the Mitford Murders series, on real events. Knowing that makes its slow pace—or, rather, classic pace—worth the reader's patience. The social mores of the British aristocracy of the time meant that the fourth Mitford sister, Unity, with her gushing adulation of Adolf Hitler, was a bit of an embarrassment to the family. However, they considered Jessica's openly rebellious relationship with her communist lover far worse.

The author skillfully weaves a second disappearance into this cleverly plotted mystery, and a surprise into its resolution. Louisa becomes increasingly confident as a detective, and I enjoyed watching her interact with those she needed to question, from the owner of a communist bookstore to the Mitfords themselves.

Fellowes also gives a great section of historical notes at the book's end. It was sad to learn that the Mitford sisters' father, David Freeman-Mitford, Second Baron Redesdale, never reconciled with Jessica, and 20 years later cut her out of his will. Fellowes recommends Jessica's memoir, *Hons and Rebels*, in her helpful bibliography.

Kristen Hannum

PEACH BLOSSOM SPRING

Melissa Fu, *Little, Brown*, 2022, \$28.00, hb, 400pp, 9780316286732 / Wildfire, 2022, £16.99, hb, 400pp, 9781472277534

This tale of three generations of a family starts in China in 1938 and ends in the U.S. in 2000. It traces the Chinese nationalist experience of WWII, the supporters of Chiang Kai-shek who ended up in Taiwan and what life was like there, the experience of a Taiwanese student in the U.S., and closes with the perspective of a first-generation Chinese American.

Covering that much history is an ambitious task. Although the book is engaging and well-written, there is so much to be told that the story feels shallow in some places. The transitions from one main protagonist to another sometimes feels as though the preceding protagonist's story is incomplete, and it is occasionally unclear whose point

of view in the narration is being represented. However, the long timeframe of the story helps illuminate the reasons an immigrant would be close-mouthed about the past, and the difficulty that a child raised as a middle-class American has in relating to or imagining the horrors of living through an era of so much upheaval. Fu masterfully demonstrates the inability of one traumatized generation to quite imagine the trauma of another.

Fu's imagining of the difficulties of being a woman in China during the first half of the 20th century is lucid and compelling, and her exploration of the way that one emergency solution to a problem can lead to a new and sometimes bigger problem is fascinating. Her use of tales from an antique scroll as a way to link the protagonists is lovely. All in all, *Peach Blossom Spring* includes intense lyricism and tragedy, an introduction to the historical period covered, and insightful commentary on the gap between generations.

Jodi McMaster

A HAUNTING AT HOLKHAM

Anne Glenconner, Hodder & Stoughton, 2021, £16.99, hb, 352pp, 9781529336405

This is a country house murder/mystery, but whereas lovers of the genre are usually content with the artificiality of the setting, Anne Glenconner goes for authenticity. Not only did she grow up in a country house (she is the daughter of the Earl of Leicester), she grew up in the setting for her novel, Holkham Hall in Norfolk, and has chosen to cast herself as the investigator into the death of her own grandfather—who wasn't murdered in real life, although he did meet a violent end. So this book is part fictional murder mystery and part memoir.

The book works better as a memoir. There are too few suspects to be a challenging whodunnit, and we don't really get to know them before the denouement. As a memoir, it is enthralling. Told in two time streams, 1943 and 1950, when Anne is 11 and 18, this is not the golden age of the country house but its twilight years. The best character is Miss Crane, the governess from hell.

A beautiful memoir of a very unusual childhood.

Edward James

A TRAIN TO MOSCOW

Elena Gorokhova, Lake Union, 2022, \$24.95/£19.99, hb, 316pp, 9781542033879

The Soviet world in the post-WWII era is a bleak existence for Russians. The Iron Curtain has cut them off from the rest of the world, and famine and deprivation define their existence. Sasha, a young girl born three years before the end of the war, lives with her mother and grandparents. She is told her father died a noble death in the war, but the vagueness of it all seems to her a lie, and her uncle Kolya is presumed dead since he was never returned from the war. When Sasha finds Uncle Kolya's

war journal hidden in the attic, she learns of his horrific experiences in his beautiful prose and illustrations of haunting images. This find is yet another family secret dogging Sasha. As she reads, it draws her close to an uncle she never met.

Sasha and her two close friends, Marik and Andrei, are witness to the unfair arrests and brutality of the NVKD and the mysterious disappearances of people in the village. Tragedy strikes the group of friends, and Sasha's guilt and regret is forever with her. Since a small child, she has aspired to be an actress. Living in a make-believe world gives her escape from the realities of her life. In a bold break from her claustrophobic life in a small country village, she boards a train to Moscow and defies the expectation for a conventional career to seek her dream.

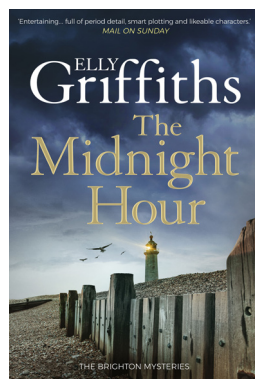
Elena Gorokhova, who grew up in the 1960s Soviet Union, has given us a heartfelt autobiographical novel. Sasha, like Elena, navigates through her family's lies and secrets, within the lies and secrets of her country, to make her own path in the world. This novel will move you to feel the pain and frustration of one who needs to live in truth and have the freedom of expression.

Janice Ottersberg

THE MIDNIGHT HOUR

Elly Griffiths, Quercus, 2021, £20.00, hb, 352pp, 9781787477582 / Mariner, 2021, \$14.99, pb, 352pp, 9780358418634

England 1965. Nonagenarian ex-impresario Bert Billington is found poisoned at his retirement home, and in classic who-done-it style, there are enough faces in the frame to open a small portrait gallery. For a start



there's the string of women the serial adulterer bedded and their possibly vengeful kids, plus his own possibly resentful children, not to mention several entertainers from back in his variety-show day, including the famous magician, Max Mephisto. Alternatively, it

might've been the wardrobe mistress who "knows all the secrets", or the personal assistant/housekeeper, or indeed his very wronged wife. All seem to have credible

grudges, thus motive. As other murders occur, it becomes clear the answers lie in his past.

The CID vie with two privately hired lady sleuths to uncover the truth, and excellent vying it is, not least because sleuth Emma is an ex-cop, married to the local Superintendent. Told mainly from the female perspective, the natural dialogue and clear thought processes enable a smooth yet snappy, at times comedic narrative to progress at pace, enhanced by clever misdirection. Clues lead from the south coast to Liverpool, Whitby, London, Somerset and back. Sustained throughout are valid references to male chauvinism (Meg, the WDC officer, being female, is forbidden from driving police cars!). Contemporary events also feature, such as the Moors Murders, the introduction of no-parking lines, and seat-belt laws. The epilogue presents a neat twist, not unexpected but not as expected. This sixth in series provides much encouragement to explore others in Griffiths' plentiful oeuvre. Murder-mystery most fine.

Simon Rickman

BENEFICENCE

Meredith Hall, Godine, 2021, \$16.95, pb, 288pp, 9781567927092

Beneficence is the emotional journey of the Senter family, who live on a farm in Maine in the 1940s and 1950s. It begins with stories of this happy troop of five as they face the challenges of life for a family with three young children. Farming is not an easy occupation, as everyone has chores, and the work is never done. Their blunders are treated empathetically, giving the reader a compassion for their foibles and a belief in the love they share. In the same mode as Kent Haruf and Marilynne Robinson, the setting is alive, almost another character. Unfortunately, a major catastrophe hits the family as their oldest child dies. The reactions of the parents, sister, and brother are very different, yet succeed in driving the family apart.

Part of the joy of reading this book is figuring out how the title will play out in the action. A beneficent act, of course, is one that has the welfare of the participants as a goal. It is kind and charitable. As the Senter family members stumble through their grief, one has the sense that the author is fully exploring the notion of what it takes to atone for one's mistakes and forgive each other for them. Hall writes in the full consciousness of the difficulties of these actions and how everyone involved is changed in the process.

Lorelei Brush

BENEATH A STARLESS SKY

Tessa Harris, HarperCollins, 2021, \$16.99, pb, 416pp, 9780008444983

What begins as a sweeping romance between a Jewish ballerina and a dashing German-Italian officer soon develops into a political thriller. In 1930 Munich, 18-year-old Lilli Sternberg dances *Giselle*, enchanting Captain Marco Zeiller with her grace and

beauty. They walk in the Englischer Garten, picnic by a lake, and share a love of opera at La Bohème. Their tender love story unfolds until his transfer to Leipzig. Sadly, a fateful telegram ends the affair. Lilli pursues a dance career in New York and Hollywood, dancing with Fred Astaire on Broadway and film until an injury ends her career. Recovering at Somerset Maugham's villa on the Côte d'Azur, she is befriended by Wallis Simpson. Naïve Lilli is unaware of the growing Nazi dominance and persecution of the Jews in her homeland until her brother Leon's letter.

When Lilli becomes an agent for the British Secret Service, the action and suspense intensify. We are aware of the Windsors' fascist sympathies. Lilli Stern, secretly a Jew, places herself in grave danger by accepting Wallis's invitation to accompany them to Hitler's mountain retreat at the Berghof in Austria. What a shock when Major Marco Zeiller meets her train in Munich. He is formal and a model officer of the Reich. Will he betray her? Has he embraced Nazism? Appealing to their pride, the Führer plans to seduce the Duke of Windsor as an ally and puppet king.

Operation Willi, a plan to kidnap the ducal couple about to vacate Europe for a governorship in the Bahamas, is true. "We may never know the full extent of collusion between the Windsors and the Third Reich, so writers of fiction can always speculate," says Harris. Weaving well-researched fact with her creative imagination, she has produced a gripping novel. Highly recommended.

Gail M. Murray

ALL OF YOU EVERY SINGLE ONE

Beatrice Hitchman, Overlook, 2022, \$26.00, hb, 320pp, 9781419756931

The tale of queer love, family, and freedom in one of the greatest cities of the early 20th century is eloquently depicted in *All of You Every Single One* by Beatrice Hitchman.



Julia Lindqvist is the unhappy wife of a neglectful Swedish playwright when she meets the stunning Eve Perret, a female tailor, in 1910.

After a passionate

affair, they place their hopes for a future in the liberal city of Vienna. Falling deeper in love, they struggle to build a life of their own, finding friendship and support from the city's Jewish quarter. Under the mothering wing of their landlord, Frau Berndt, and the solicitous eye of their charming new gay acquaintance, Rolf, Julia, and Eve create a new family. But Julia's desire for a child threatens to throw

the precarious harmony of their new life into chaos.

Across the city, Ada Bauer is the sheltered teenage daughter of a prominent businessman, desperately in love with Isabella, the wife of her cousin Emil. Struck mute by a storm of emotion and memory, Ada is sent by her worried parents to Dr. Sigmund Freud for treatment. After unlocking her choked voice and freeing her past trauma through the "talking method," Ada makes a fateful decision to protect an innocent life from her dangerous cousin. The consequences of this event will erupt personally for Rolf, Eve, and Julia decades later amidst the rise of a new political party in Vienna, the Nazis. Hitchman depicts the transformation of Vienna from a haven of liberality for homosexuals and Jews in the 1910s to the paranoid race state of the late 1930s with a chilling sense of doom.

Populated with rich and vibrant characters, *All of You Every Single One* is a stellar work that blends the best of history and fiction.

Peggy Kurkowski

THE DUCHESS

Wendy Holden, Berkley, 2021, \$17.00, pb, 432pp, 9780593200353 / Welbeck, 2021, £12.99, hb, 352pp, 9781787396241

At first, relocating to London sounds like a fresh start for Wallis. Finally, she can leave behind her old life in the United States, along with the memories of her doomed first marriage. But things aren't turning out exactly as she hoped. She cares for her second husband, Ernest, but feels no great passion for him, and theirs is a chaste relationship. She finds life dull without friends or family nearby and spends most of her time alone and daydreaming of being invited to fancy parties and glamorous nights out for drinks and dancing. Then she receives a rare invitation to a dinner party and, taking advantage of the opportunity, uses her wit and charm to endear herself to members of high society. Through her new friends, she meets the Prince of Wales, a brooding and complicated man she feels an instant attraction to.

Wallis Simpson is typically portrayed as scheming and power-hungry, but Wendy Holden provides an alternate, more sympathetic view. Here Wallis is trying to overcome a traumatizing past and is plucky in her attempt to make the best of a less than desirable situation. She provides the prince with warmth and sympathy and encourages him to use his position to effect social change. She has no desire to be queen or for the prince to abdicate the throne. Her only desire from him is love and friendship.

Whether or not this version of Simpson is historically accurate is debatable, but she is a likable character in this engrossing novel. The book offers a refreshing new take on the abdication. It is full of sumptuous descriptions of the lavish parties Wallis attends and unforgettable characters like the prince's self-

centered and fabulous former lover, Thelma Morgan.

Janice Derr

THE PIMLICO MURDER

Mike Hollow, Allison & Busby, 2021, £19.99, hb, 352pp, 9780749026844

This is the sixth in the Blitz Detective series set in London in World War Two, featuring Detective Inspector John Jago of London's East End police. This time, he is seconded to investigate a murder in the Pimlico part of west London. Taking his regular assistant Detective Constable Peter Cradock with him, Jago examines the newly discovered body of Terry Watson in an Anderson shelter in the garden of the small house where he lodged, and embarks upon the hunt for the murderer. With the killing taking place around Armistice Day, and with two white poppies found upon Watson's body, Jago reflects upon his experiences of death and injury in the Great War. Watson's rather murky background emerges as the investigation proceeds and witnesses are interviewed and suspects emerge.

The snail-pace platonic friendship with the American journalist Dorothy Appleton continues with near-imperceptible progress as Jago seems unable to commit to her or to fully accept or recognise the intense feelings he has for her. The author writes with precision and narrative ability, and the fundamental decency and lonely vulnerability of the character of DI Jago continues to appeal; he is a good man trying to tackle the bad behaviour of Londoners during a time when the whole country is under threat of German invasion and with the added peril of nightly bombing. Mike Hollow has performed his historical research with diligence and creates an authentic-looking portrait of wartime London—fully recommended as well-written excellent historical fiction.

Douglas Kemp

ANGELS OF THE PACIFIC

Elise Hooper, William Morrow, 2022, \$16.99, pb, 384pp, 9780063068902

This is a fast-paced and well researched historical account surrounding the military nurses held by the Japanese as prisoners of war in Manila, who have come to be known as the "Angels of Bataan." While fictionalized before, the story is told here by an authoritative author in a refreshingly authentic female voice and perspective.

Two women are at the heart of the story. Flor Dalisay is a Filipina former math student turned wartime accountant. Supported by her local network in occupied Manila, including her sister Iris, Flor pursues creative and often daring plans to support the women of the U. S. Army nurse corps confined in a former convent. This includes American army nurse Tess Abbott. Unlike Filipina girls like Flor, whose dreams and self-respect are being slowly crushed by Japanese occupation, the war at first presented Tess a welcome opportunity to serve in her profession and see the world beyond her rural

Depression upbringing. The overwhelming Japanese invasion and subsequent brutality of the Bataan death march joined the two women's fates. The women face both different and similar challenges. Shame and moral erosion dog Flor's efforts to overcome the economic deprivation that is slowly grinding Manila's once vibrant economy. Despite this, with an often-desperate audacity, she is driven to help the western nurses held prisoner and undermine the occupying forces any way she can.

The style is vivid and highly readable, shedding light on many previously little-known aspects of what day-to-day life must have been like for these remarkable warriors. Recommended reading for fans of the era.

Jackie Drohan

THE SPANISH DAUGHTER

Lorena Hughes, Kensington, 2021, \$15.95, pb, 304pp, 9781496736246

Lorena Hughes' second novel drops a murder mystery into a simmering tale of sibling rivalry, gender-bending impersonation, and chocolate, and the result is scrumptiously readable. As in her debut, *The Sisters of Alameda Street* (2017), *The Spanish Daughter* vibrantly recreates the author's native Ecuador. In 1920, the coastal city of Vinces is known for its European architecture and cacao production. An experienced chocolatier, María Purificación de Lafont y Toledo, called Puri, sails from Seville to claim an inheritance from her late father, cacao plantation owner Don Armand, who had abandoned her and her mother decades earlier. She discovers, to her shock, that someone wants her dead.

Aboard the ship to Ecuador, Puri's husband Cristóbal is killed in an attack meant for her, and so Puri disguises herself as Cristóbal—lowering her voice, wearing his clothes, and donning false facial hair—to determine who wanted to steal her rightful legacy. Puri surprisingly learns that her father had a second family, but while her half-siblings are resentful over Don Armand's will, they treat "Don Cristóbal" with respect and don't seem especially murderous.

This family has secrets aplenty, though, and Puri must sneak around the hacienda without letting her disguise slip, a challenge when she's not comfortable riding horses, and when the dashing plantation administrator takes her drinking and to visit prostitutes (these scenes and Puri's reactions are hilarious). The story explores gender roles with thought-provoking understanding. The plot feels initially jumpy when the viewpoint switches to Puri's half-sisters at different times in the past, but these segments serve to illustrate family dynamics while adding to the puzzle.

It almost seems impossible there could be a satisfying ending to this complex state of affairs, but there is, very much so, and the novel's atmosphere is as rich as Puri's chocolate recipes.

Sarah Johnson

THE RUNES HAVE BEEN CAST

Robert Irwin, Dedalus Books, 2021, £9.99, pb, 249pp, 9781912868537

Oxford University, England, 1960, and English Literature student Lancelyn is set an essay on the Victorian ghost story by his mysterious tutor, Edward Raven. So begins a tale in which Lancelyn lives life as a mirror of his large library, heavy on magic and ritual sacrifice. He categorises his experiences by the Dewey system, in which 'women are a subset of 395, etiquette'. When Raven introduces him to the 'Ignatius immersion', a deep imagining of himself within the world of a book, Lancelyn is set up for the clash of his two worlds. The historical setting has a strong feel of mid-20th century novels about young men finding their place in the world. The twist is that, rather than aspiring to rise, Lancelyn mourns that the pinnacle of his existence, as a prefect at Eton, is over. However, like other angst-ridden young men of the genre, Lancelyn's feelings about women include obsession, ignorance, and terror. When a real woman speaks to him, he has no idea how to react.

Farce arises when the real world collides with Lancelyn's imaginings. After an impromptu séance, Lancelyn begins to see omens wherever he goes. Irwin mocks the insular, arrogant academia of the time, making them extreme and ridiculous. I'm sure that he was satirising when one of his characters wrote that an abused woman 'had enjoyed being whipped, as all women do,' but sadly, I didn't find that line funny.

Readers will enjoy this book more if they are familiar with the many texts referenced. These range from Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), to Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954). Important plot points hinge on the works of M.R. James and George MacDonald.

Helen Johnson

ALL THE QUIET PLACES

Brian Thomas Isaac, Brindle & Glass, 2021, C\$22.00, pb, 277pp, 9781990071027

"Eddie found what he was looking for: the hollow tree he'd often crawled inside when he was little." The reader is brought full circle in Eddie's life journey. Complicated by family dysfunction along with location and society, Eddie searches for personal meaning at a time when greater possibilities for Aboriginal people were severely limited.

A raucous childhood frames Eddie Toma's formative adolescent and teenage years on the Okanagan Indian Reservation in the interior of British Columbia. Constantly dealing with the vicissitudes of life on a poverty-stricken Reserve, including the impact of the lack of electricity, Eddie's reality is further complicated by an absentee father and a demanding mother, along with unexpected tragedies.

In many ways, Eddie is like the salmon swimming upriver; that is, no matter the determination he employs to right both family and situational wrongs, he seems to make little progress. He is not protected from

life's unpleasantness and, even at a young age, experiences death, want, and family separations. He is constantly torn between his own needs and wants and those of the two conflicting societies in which he is immersed. A burning question for Eddie concerns his own cultural history and how he might interact with a wider community that appears at times to be most antagonistic.

First-time novelist Isaac has penned a powerfully emotional novel that captures the realities of life on a Reserve at mid-20th-century. The weight of personal growth weighs heavily as Eddie confronts forces far beyond his control: at what point does he cease seeking change and simply acquiesce? Realistically, the denouement offers possibilities but no clear resolution—such is life!

Jon G. Bradley

THE PILOT'S DAUGHTER

Meredith Jaeger, Dutton, 2021, \$17.00/C\$23.00, pb, 352pp, 9780593185896

In this riveting dual time-line book, Meredith Jaeger imagines the lives and loves of two women—24-year-old Ellie Morgan, a secretary for a San Francisco newspaper editor, and her aunt, Iris Thompson, a middle-aged widow working as a secretary for a law firm. When the novel opens in 1944, Ellie learns that her father, a bomber pilot, has been reported missing over the Adriatic, and that he may have had a secret life in New York City. Around this time, she learns too that Aunt Iris had a secret life of her own as a Ziegfeld Follies showgirl two decades earlier. Along with Iris, Ellie travels to New York to learn about her father's duplicitous past. Ellie's discoveries soon link to Aunt Iris's secret life and the murder mystery (based on a true story) that haunted her for years. Chapters alternate between Ellie's story, set in the '40s, in both San Francisco and New York, and Iris's story, set in New York in the early '20s.

Often readers of dual timeline books will consider one part of the story stronger than the other and will race through the less favored to the more favored. By contrast, Jaeger sustains interest in both periods and integrates them well. She also concludes the novel with a satisfying mix of the expected and the unexpected. Some readers may be distracted by the change in point of view. Jaeger uses the third person for chapters focusing on Ellie, while surprisingly using the first person for the earlier chapters that focus on Iris. Most readers are likely to see this alternation as an effective technique to sort out the different periods. Jaeger has woven together two well-crafted, memorable stories.

Marlie Wasserman

DAUGHTERS OF WAR

Dinah Jefferies, HarperCollins, 2021, \$16.99, pb, 544pp, 9780008479411 / HarperCollins UK, 2021, £8.99, pb, 544pp, 9780008427023

It is France, 1944, and three sisters are living together in a small provincial village, trying to survive the war. Their father has died, and their mother has decided to stay in London for

the duration of the occupation. This leaves Hélène, the oldest sister, to assume the role of protector for her two younger sisters. Élise, the middle sister, has always been a rebel and becomes involved with the French Resistance. Florence, the youngest sister, is the baker and cook in the family. She is quiet compared to her two older sisters and believes in the good of mankind, at least until the day Nazi soldiers invade their house and nothing will ever be the same again.

In the midst of the sisters trying to avoid further scrutiny, two fugitives come asking for asylum. One is a German deserter, just a boy, and the other is an Allied soldier trying to escape beyond enemy lines.

The situation jeopardizes the safety of all three sisters, and together they agree to be courageous and fight for what is right. But courage often takes a high cost, and the three girls will learn just how devastating that can be as family secrets long buried suddenly come to light.

This is a thoroughly engrossing read with a well-paced plot and characters who are finely drawn as to be quite distinct from one another. As in all WWII stories, there are uncomfortable parts, but these details provide a firm foundation to the atrocities of war. I appreciated the unexpected ending to the story and highly recommend the book.

Linda Harris Sittig

MURDER UNDER A FULL MOON

Abigail Keam, *Worker Bee Press*, 2021, \$12.99, pb, 264pp, 9781953478047

It's 1934, and a trip to Washington, DC, for lunch with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt should be a treat for mystery-solving mine owner Mona Moon. But besides the sudden shootouts and diplomats dying mysterious deaths at her hotel, everyone in the capital is interested in Mona's copper mines and whether she plans, wittingly or not, to help Hitler rebuild Germany's army. After the Swedish ambassador, a Nazi sympathizer, dies unexpectedly at the British ambassador's party, Mona sets out to find out what shady G-man Abraham Scott wants from her and who is menacing her maid, Violet. Fiancé Lord Farley can't help, as he's off dealing with his ducal father's decline. But sassy, steely Mona manages to bring everything under control—and solve the crime—before anyone quite knows what hit them.

The story moves swiftly, and the use of historical characters like the irrepressible Alice Roosevelt Longworth adds amusement. There are peeks into the 1930s jazz scenes as well as the Depression. Mona looks great in designer evening gowns, is quick to draw her gun, and plays her cards close to her chest, but readers who like fast action and fast talk will love this series.

Misty Urban

WHEN THE NIGHTINGALE SINGS

Suzanne Kelman, *Bookouture*, 2021, £10.99/\$12.99, pb, 410pp, 9781838887940

When the Nightingale Sings tells the fictionalised life of real-life scientist Joan Curran and Hollywood film star, Hedy Lamarr. The novel explores the senseless loss of life during war and how scientific developments meant for good can equally be employed for less righteous purposes.

Hedy, after escaping her manipulative husband, makes her way to Hollywood and fame, but her wish is to be recognised for herself and her scientific genius, which we must all thank for the wireless technology used in cell phones today. Judy Jenkins (a fictional version of Joan Curran) begins her career at Cavendish Labs in Cambridge, working on the proximity fuse, inventing chaff, and later assisting on the Manhattan Project, which causes a unbreachable rift in the women's longstanding friendship. The novel takes readers through WWII, Judy living through dangerous times, and Hedy basking in the luxurious but superficial paradise of California and yearning for more.

The story is well told, often through letters, but I didn't always feel a connection to the characters, and I would have preferred less one-off Hollywood name-dropping. There are interesting contrasts to observe: ordinariness vs. glamour, sunny California vs. damp dreary England, British shyness vs. American boldness. But Hedy (Hedwig Kiesler) was Austrian-born, so there analogies as well; both women are European and dedicated to seeing the end of Hitler's tsunami of destruction, both have brilliant scientific minds, both want to be recognised and loved for themselves. Judy achieves this with her deep and lasting relationship with husband Tom, but in contrast, Hedy, married and divorced six times, sadly never found that elusive affection which could see beyond her physical allure. The author encourages readers to research both women's remarkable lives: women ahead of their time and achieving recognition only after their deaths.

Fiona Alison

WALKING THE DIVIDE

Halima Khan, *Sang-e-Meel Publications*, 2021, PKR 600 (Pakistan rupees)/£30.00, pb, 190pp, 9789693533613

In 1947, at the time of the Partition of India, Europe was still in the grip of the aftereffects of World War Two, preoccupied with the unfolding horrors of the Nazi Holocaust and with attempts to stabilise countries that had been damaged by the hostilities. Consequently, the problems besetting India seemed very far away.

In this beautifully constructed novel, its writer, Halima Khan, begins gently, introducing us to characters and lifestyles that will soon be brutally shattered when vast numbers of people are dispossessed by the partition of their country. Their traditions,

personal status in society, lands, finances, inheritances, family achievements and ambitions are all about to be swept away.

We begin to focus on one family, particularly the younger generation, among which three teenaged brothers are approaching university education. Although considered "privileged", their upbringing had also taught them humility and responsibility.

With Lord Louis Mountbatten's announcement, the existing friction across India hardened. The family of Syed Sarder Ahmed, the eldest of the three brothers, takes the central role in the narration, and it is mainly through Syed's eyes and heart that we learn of the carnage which follows when the friction between Muslims and Hindus erupts into barbaric massacres perpetrated on fleeing hordes who found themselves where they should no longer be. By the time a sort of order was restored, many thousands had died horribly and cultures and artefacts had been destroyed.

The novel ends with a collection of family photographs of the characters we have been following and their very few surviving descendants. Turning those last pages is a harrowing experience, rather akin to reading the facts of Anne Frank's account of her experience.

Walking The Divide is excellently told. A beguiling, unsentimental glimpse of one of the darker stories in modern history.

Julia Stoneham

UNDER A SKY OF MEMORIES

Soraya M. Lane, *Lake Union*, 2022, \$14.95/£8.99, pb, 351pp, 9781542031974

In 1943, three nurses from different backgrounds meet at training in Kentucky and become part of the 807th Medical Air Evacuation Transport Squadron, charged with transporting the wounded to safety during World War II. Evelyn has been caring for her father and sisters after the death of her mother and has finally left to make her own way in the world. Dot was jilted by her fiancé on the eve of her departure and is still clinging to her engagement ring, afraid to admit the truth. Vita was born in high society and is used to the finer things, but left it all to pursue a different path. Together the three women face incredible danger when their transport plane crashes in Nazi-occupied Albania. Based on a true story, this historical thriller follows a group of nurses and medics, and their flight crew, as they attempt to survive in harsh conditions with the enemy in constant pursuit.

This is a thrilling novel full of suspense, intrigue, and romance. It is told from three points of view—Evelyn, Dot, and Vita—which is crucial in making a more compelling story. The three main characters are well-written and captivating, and the romances engaging and believable for the circumstances. The true events, expertly woven together with fictional characters, make for a fascinating read. Descriptions of the harsh conditions

and perilous journey make you feel as if you are there, and the author does not hold back on the agony, suffering, and physical toll of such a situation. This adds another layer of authenticity to this book. *Under a Sky of Memories* takes us through snowstorms, dangerous terrain, and bullet fire during a perilous attempt at survival, and throws in romance and heartache along the way. Highly recommended for fans of World War II fiction.

Bonnie DeMoss

HER SECRET WAR

Pam Lecky, Avon, 2021 £8.99/\$16.99, pb, 384pp, 9780008464844

Her Secret War is a novel set during the Second World War featuring a strong heroine and a tale of love, grief, courage and romance. However, what sets this book apart from so many others is that the heroine is Irish. Sarah Gillespie loses her home and family in one tragic night when German bombers strike Dublin's North Strand. Pulled from the rubble, she is badly injured. With no home or family, she accepts an offer to stay with her uncle in Hampshire. Soon she has a job, family and friends, and she feels she is part of the war effort against those who had taken her sister and father from her. However, an opportunity arises for Sarah to do something else, to make a contribution even greater than her work at Supermarine. Despite the risk to herself, Sarah sets about doing as she's asked, determined to make a difference.

This is a genuinely page-turning tale about the heroism of ordinary people in wartime. It is such a revelation to see the story of the Home Front told from the perspective of an Irish person. The Irish government's neutral stance meant that many Irish people headed to the UK to join up and do their bit, especially after the Dublin bombing. Sarah is a great example of a heroine torn between duty and family, and Pam Lecky is a fantastic storyteller. Perfect for readers of Kate Quinn, Nancy Revell, Deborah Burrows or Clare Harvey.

Lisa Redmond

THINK OF ME

Frances Liardet, Putnam, 2022, \$26.00, hb, 400pp, 9780593191149

In 1974, widower James Acton accepts the position of vicar of Upton and Barrow End, near Winchester, England. Alone since his wife, Yvette, died ten years earlier, father and son enjoy a camaraderie which is apparent as Tom helps James relocate his grotty collection of belongings into the dilapidated vicarage. This easygoing relationship is shattered by the discovery of Yvette's journals, hiding revelations which alter James's perception of his life and make Tom question if he really knows his father. They tell of Yvette's deep love for James and the tragedy which ushered in the 'new' James to whom she couldn't relate. Seeking someone who understood her loss brought

Yvette to Upton, unbeknownst to James, and years ahead of his new appointment.

Told in first person, the narrative alternates between James's contemporary life, his backstory as a fighter pilot and POW, and Yvette's revelatory journals. Upton houses a plethora of eccentric characters that James comes to know in his capacity as flock-tending vicar. When he finds a unique headscarf abandoned on a church pew, he wonders if it could have belonged to his wife.

The narrative, which explores how differently men and women process grief, unfolds slowly and thoughtfully, written in an easy flowing prose, flipping smoothly back and forth in time. Connections weave through the whole, propelling the story forward. Filled with symbolism about love and loss, bravery, faith, and abandonment, these tenets of everyday life are represented by leaking roofs, dilapidated buildings, Upton's townsfolk, resolute archdeacons, and a scarf which links past to present, as the relationships unwind and re-form. Taglined as a WWII story, I feel it's more than that, but its wartime background does have unexpected importance. An unusual and moving novel which has much to say about whether we truly know anyone.

Fiona Alison

HALF IN SHADOW

Gemma Liviero, Lake Union, 2022, \$14.95/£8.99, pb, 383pp, 9781542026963

The beginning of this book starts off with a bang—literally. A bomb dropped on a village in Belgium by the Germans in 1914 kills a young boy and devastates his family, especially his older sister, Josephine Descharmes. Liviero does an excellent job of describing the horrors faced by the unsuspecting Belgians as Germans invade their country, pillaging, murdering, and raping. The first section of the book is filled with excitement and drama as the Descharmes family try to escape the encroachment of German soldiers, losing family members along the way. Perhaps a little too much excitement is crammed into this opening section, however, as we don't quite get a chance to know the characters, and there are a number of them.

The next section takes us to London where middle-aged Arthur has his life and marriage upended by an unexpected loss. To cope with his grief, he leaves his wife and joins the army as a private. Here the story moves a little slower, and the writer's descriptive power and character development shine as Arthur's story is skillfully and movingly rendered.

The lives of Josephine and Arthur converge in Brussels where the situation grows dire, especially for the Belgians who resist the invaders and for soldiers like Arthur, trapped behind enemy lines. The invasion of Belgium is a little-known aspect of World War I. As the author explains in her commentary at the end of the book, thousands of Belgians died from execution, hunger, and disease, and many more lost their property and livelihood. Readers will find this a fascinating, if heartbreaking, topic

even though the story gets a bit convoluted at times.

Trish MacEnulty

DEATH AT THE OLD ASYLUM

Adrian Magson, Canelo, 2022, £8.99, pb, 352pp, 9781800327184

There is this rather eventful night, in the late summer of 1964, when the police of Amiens find themselves confronted with a multiple shooting on a country road, involving a bunch of well-armed Moroccan nationals—and a car crash and assault on the outskirts of town. If truth be told, Inspector Lucas Rocco would greatly prefer to work on the four dead men, but with an officer injured, and an alarmingly unstable former soldier in custody, he finds himself spread thin between the two investigations. Because the fact is that, if on the one hand the Moroccan authorities are being less than helpful, on the other the enigmatic (and quite possibly insane) Georges Koutcheff happens to be in the employ of a high-powered lawyer, the sort with a local manor—converted from the eponymous old asylum—top-level connections in Paris, and a not entirely far-fetched ambition to enter the Académie Française. Trouble is brewing on all fronts, but luckily, Rocco is more than your average tough cop with a military past and a wry humour.

Seventh in an ongoing series, *Death at the Old Asylum* is an engaging story with a likeable hero. There isn't much, perhaps, in the way of a sense of the time period, and the language is sometimes a little careless—but the places and atmosphere of provincial France ring pleasantly true, and the story unfolds nicely to a satisfying end.

Chiara Prezzavento

THE PARIS BOOKSELLER

Kerri Maher, Berkley, 2022, \$26.00, hb, 352pp, 9780593102183

In a novel exuberant, bittersweet, and reflective by turns, Maher explores the life of Sylvia Beach, doyenne of the American expat literary scene during the interwar years as proprietress of the English-language bookstore Shakespeare and Company. Unlike many writers whose work she championed, Beach may not be a household name, but the story gives her her due, recognizing that it takes a special talent to create a space where art can thrive.

In 1919, Sylvia arrives in the French capital, content to breathe the air of this "most rare and wonderful of places." She finds a spiritual home at the bookshop of Adrienne Monnier, a young raven-haired Parisian to whom she's attracted. Adrienne is already attached, but she and her partner welcome Sylvia to their literary life. An admirer of the unabashed honesty of Kate Chopin and James Joyce, Sylvia discovers her true métier lies in supporting the power of art to "be new, to make change, to alter minds." Establishing her own bookstore and lending

library sets her on this path, making her store a magnet for the literati.

The atmosphere feels effervescent with creativity, though after obstacles to Sylvia's dreams fall away (she and Adrienne become a couple at last), the story lacks conflict. Momentum increases once Sylvia takes up the challenge of publishing the manuscript of Joyce's *Ulysses* herself, since the work is deemed obscene in the United States. The ways she and her friends circumvent would-be censors to get the book into American readers' hands is brilliant. Joyce may be a genius, but he has definite character flaws, and the story offers a deep look at their complicated relationship and Sylvia's own emotions as she questions how much she should give of herself in indulging him. In the end, readers will emerge with sincere appreciation for the artistic spirit and courage of a remarkable woman.

Sarah Johnson

ORDERS TO KILL

Edward Marston, Allison & Busby, 2021, £19.99, hb, 352pp, 9780749026998

The Great War is on, and crime still happens in Britain. Dedicated Inspector Marmion and his equally capable Sergeant Keedy are assigned to the grisly death of a respected surgeon, stationed in an Army hospital back in Blighty. Why was a talented and respected Army doctor—

even serving once over in mud-strewn France—tortured and brutally killed? As Marmion and Keedy dig into the trivial details of the past of the victim, they unearth similarities to other crimes around the country. The detectives must find the links between the cases to find the killer. And then Marmion is hit with more personal news.

In this novel in the Home Front series, Marston is very good at setting the scenes and attitudes of the day but tends to write in terse dialogue between two characters, which can read as the script to a play. This aside, the book is highly enjoyable and engaging. The conditions of Great War Britain are skilfully presented without seeming to be a history textbook.

Alan Cassady-Bishop

TOGETHER UNDER THE STARS

Beryl Matthews, Allison & Busby, 2021, £8.99, pb, 407pp, 9780749027711

RAF Scampton, Lincolnshire, England, 1943. Four hunky Canadian airmen arrive to help replenish Bomber Command's depleted stock of flying crew. Pilot hunk Steve and knock-out WAAF Nancy are smitten before page two but try keeping it cool so's to avoid possibly tragic consequences, her aircrew brother already MIA. Nancy's bestie Jean hooks up with navigator hunk Ricky, and they all pass the time between raids drinking gallons of tea and/or alcohol everywhere they go and "roaring with laughter" at the drop of

an RAF beret. Before you know it, 30 missions have flown by, not without loss or mishap, nevertheless everyone volunteers to carry on beyond D-Day. Then Steve's Lancaster bomber is badly shot up, but he manages, just, to coax it back to Blighty. Intense hospitalisation follows, he recovers, and after more missions it's all over and he can instigate his cunning plan to get hitherto reluctant Nancy to join him back home in Canada.

Adolf aside, there is not a single even mildly unpleasant or threatening character in the entire 400 pages; everybody is incessantly nice, helpful, and kind. "Hell" is the only swear word. Hints at an intriguing Canadian backstory are disappointing; it turns out the hunks are also loaded but were too polite to say so. The extremely uncomplicated plot and dialogue create a book hard to put down only because it is so lightweight. File under Romance (Teenage).

Simon Rickman

A DEADLY ENDOWMENT

Alyssa Maxwell, Kensington, 2022, \$26.00, hb, 288pp, 9781496734907

Lady Phoebe Renshaw's grandparents are landed gentry in the English Cotswolds, and lovely people, but the terrible British economy at the end of the Great War has stripped the family of its measure of comfort. Phoebe, with support from her younger sister, tackles the first ever visitors' day, a sort of family historical open house, in their lovely home.

It should have been simple. One historical society and one village school as guests on the first effort. But instead, there's murder in the library, and while the schoolchildren are in the clear, odds are that one of the historical society members has strangled Mrs. Arvina Bell. Even her own son will have to defend an alibi. As for Phoebe and her family, this effort is clearly putting everyone in jeopardy—even risking the modest fees for the visits.

Between the scandal, the blot on the house's reputation, more criminal events, and the upsetting experience for her grandparents, Phoebe has abundant reason to investigate the crime. When her older sister takes off without warning, there isn't even time to truly check that out, because Phoebe and her lady's maid Eva Huntford are chasing clues that the police fail to pursue.

Alyssa Maxwell's Gilded Newport mysteries established her as well-grounded in the class and social frictions of 20th-century America. The Lady and Lady's Maid mystery series transports her storytelling from the New England coast to the English countryside. This author brings the same lively plotting, deft character portraits, and clever twists to this seventh in the English series. Fans of British fiction may note a few slips in the language transition, but the story is lively enough to leave them behind as Phoebe and Eva team up once again.

Beth Kanell

FROM A DARK HORIZON

Luke McCallin, Berkley, 2021, \$28.00, hb, 528pp, 9780425282922

In the final months of World War I, a grisly crime at a secluded farmhouse sends young German officer Lt. Gregor Reinhardt to investigate and clear the name of an innocent man in this explosive entry in the popular Gregor Reinhardt series.

In 1918, the Kaiser's forces are battered and numbed by the never-ending slaughter of the trenches. At an isolated farmhouse, a mysterious meeting of Germany's top brass ends in death and destruction when a bomb goes off in the room. All the evidence points to one of Lt. Reinhardt's men as the culprit, who committed suicide shortly after the explosion. Called in to confirm his guilt, Reinhardt's seemingly open-and-shut case turns into a Pandora's box of horrors as the clues increasingly lead him down a dangerous trail of conspiracy as twisted as the trench tunnels around them. With every new path of inquiry and person of interest, the body count rises around Reinhardt, casting suspicion upon himself as a possible co-conspirator. As German forces gear up for a final push to win the war, Reinhardt races against the clock to answer the many mysteries he's uncovered, no matter the consequences. Fans of the series will love the earlier portrait of a risky Reinhardt, brash and impulsive in his search for truth through trenches, towns, trains, and terrifying battle. McCallin's novel is richly textured and evokes the grim realities of trench warfare and the psychological and physical traumas unique to WWI soldiers.

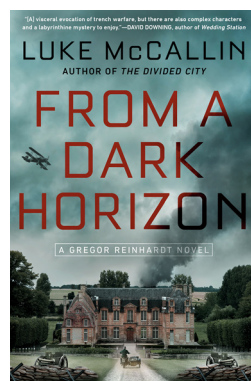
Populated with a fascinating cast of characters, *From a Dark Horizon* masterfully captures the zeitgeist of the time: mutinous soldiers, Bolshevik cabals, dastardly medical treatments, and a generation of young men whose minds were sometimes more shattered than their bodies. This one is not to be missed.

Peggy Kurkowski

SECRETS AND SHOWGIRLS

Catherine McCullagh, Blue Sky Publishing, 2021, A\$29.99, pb, 400pp, 9781922387660

Australian editor and author, Catherine McCullagh writes about World War Two Europe, equally at ease with factual accounts or fictitious ones. Her previous novel *Dancing with Deception* is about an Australian nurse in German-occupied Paris. Prior to writing, McCullagh had a twenty-year career in the army, so potentially has a unique insider



viewpoint of military culture and protocols to draw on.

Secrets and Showgirls is also set in Paris at the time of the German occupation but is concerned with the lives of a group of performers and backstage staff from cabaret nightclub, Le Prix d'Amour. A motley crew, with a mixture of mysterious backstories, they are thrown together for the duration of the war, too late to flee Paris.

As the war progresses, the daily struggle for supplies, coal to heat the theatre, and food and medicine to keep performing is set against a backdrop of simmering tensions as they try to keep on the right side of the Germans without compromising their ideals.

McCullagh takes the uncommon route of telling the story through observation of multiple third person characters, rather than focusing on one protagonist, leaving the reader never quite sure who to trust, a situation that skillfully reflects the complexity of the times.

Christine Childs

H THE MYTH OF SURRENDER

Kelly O'Connor McNees, Pegasus, 2022, \$25.95/ C\$34.95, hb, 336pp, 9781643139302

In 1960, pregnant teenagers, Doreen and Margie cross paths at Holy Family for the Wayward in rural Illinois. Though markedly different in background and temperament, they become allies in an alien world. When Margie's time comes, Doreen becomes indebted in an unexpected way, and, suffering shame and guilt for her (in) actions, silently vows to do lifelong penance for Margie.

Legitimate vs illegitimate are subtly juxtaposed here—vulnerable girls (children in some cases) with out-of-wedlock pregnancies, coerced and manipulated with complicity by church and state. It's a story of mothers and daughters, of life-changing faux-pas for which you will not be forgiven, of the shame brought upon family and community, that unforgivable lapse in judgement never visited upon the father. The novel is also an exploration of secrets and lies, how church and family colluded to make decisions, supposedly with best interests in mind, without any input from the mothers-to-be, who were expected to move on with their lives as though nothing had happened.

The novel is two parts of a whole, first the girls' pregnancies, and then the aftermath which is especially powerful as we follow their attempts to 'move on'; but it speaks to second chances, that journey from grief to healing and

forgiveness of ourselves and others. The lifelong effects of not knowing what happened to your first-born child are detailed with tenderness and care, but the read is often uncomfortable. Bravo to Ms. McNees for illuminating a mostly forgotten piece of history and for finding a precisely perfect title to convey her dedicated research. With details taken from historic interviews, the author departs occasionally from her fictional specifics to a wider universal 'we', paying tribute to the 1.5 million girls and women who were incarcerated in various institutions during the Baby Scoop Era, and who often surrendered their autonomy along with their child. An enlightening read.

Fiona Alison

SONGBIRD

Gail Meath, Independently published, 2021, \$11.99, pb, 211pp, 9798488549760

Private detective Jax Diamond has been trailing composer and playwright Sam Sanders to provide evidence for Sam's wife that he's been having an affair. When Sam fails to follow his usual routine, Jax jimmies the locks to Sam's apartment and finds him dead. Though suspicious, the death doesn't impress police as murder, and the coroner signs it off as the result of an underlying heart condition. But after learning of the death of an actress who worked with Sam at the Ambassador Theatre, Jax persists, gradually piecing together the details of a series of murders related to Songbird, the nickname for a rising star in the musical theater community, and the name of Sam's manuscript which went missing after his death.

Songbird is the first in the Jax Diamond series by author Meath. Known for historical romances, westerns, and biographies of women who challenged their places in time, Meath takes *Songbird* readers to Sardi's restaurant, Yankee Stadium, Coney Island, and jazz nightlife in the New York City of the Roaring Twenties.

Rather than a venture into the world of the noir, like other detective fiction set in that period, or a follow-the-clue whodunit, *Songbird* is an introduction to the attractive Jax, a man burdened by a troubled past; Ace, his black and tan German shepherd; and the police detectives and medical examiners he previously worked with. Here, he meets feisty and automotive-conscious Laura Graystone, the woman called Songbird and his romantic interest. Fast-paced, breezy, entertaining.

K. M. Sandrick

SPIRITS AND SMOKE

Mary Miley, Severn House, 2022, \$28.99/£20.99, hb, 224pp, 9780727850430

Readers will find it easy to like and connect with Maddie Pastore, the protagonist of this Jazz Age mystery set in Chicago. The young widow of a gangster, Maddie tries to raise her infant son while working as an investigator and shill for Carlotta Romany, a medium who connects grieving clients with their deceased

relatives. An odd character comes to one of Carlotta's seances, asking for information about his brother, Herman Quillen, who died of alcohol poisoning. Maddie questions why a teetotaler would have died in this manner. She comes to believe that Herman stole \$100,000 from the mob, and that she and her son will not be safe until she finds and returns the money. When she meets a *Chicago Tribune* journalist eager for a story about gangland, she teams up with him, posing as his stenographer and then as a reporter. Her curiosity leads her into danger as she crosses paths with gangsters, including Al Capone and Hymie Weiss. She is taken hostage during a bank robbery and later thrown into the freezing Chicago River. Along the way she mixes with two brothers, one an honest policeman and one a suspicious artist, as well as the secretary of a bank who appears to be running the enterprise.

An accomplished writer of historical crime fiction, Mary Miley creates a vivid sense of Chicago in 1924, adding the right amount of detail about geography, transportation, architecture, and corruption, as well as period slang. She paces her story well, adding expected and unexpected surprises. The plot is largely logical, with just an occasional improbability. At the end of the book, several threads remain loose, leading the way for another Maddie Pastore novel.

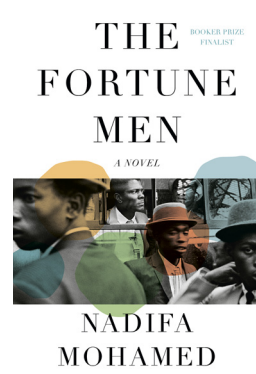
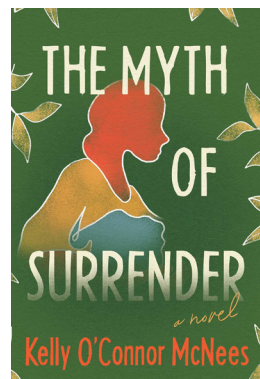
Marlie Wasserman

H THE FORTUNE MEN

Nadifa Mohamed, Knopf, 2021, \$27.00, hb, 320pp, 9780593534366 / Viking, 2021, £14.99, hb, 384pp, 9780241466940

'Defend me for what? You can't get me to worrying,' says Mahmood Mattan, when offered legal representation after his arrest in Tiger's Bay, Cardiff, home to the young Somali, his estranged Welsh wife, and their three boys. A muscled sailor from Hargeisa, Mahmood has a prodigious memory, excels at games of skill, knows five languages, and is unemployed by dint of 'Blackness'. A stoker by trade, he soon learns the heat from the fiery engines is nothing compared to people's burning hatred. His reluctance to return to sea and miss his boys' growing up morphs into tragic irony.

The Fortune Men is based on the murder of a Jewish shop owner on the night of March 6th, 1952 in the melting pot of Tiger's Bay, an area decimated by the war, and resettled by Somali, West African, Caribbean, Indian, Arab and Maltese sailors. We see life through Mahmood's eyes—his worldly travels, his gambling, petty theft, propensity for lying, his cockiness, the prejudice faced in marrying a



Welsh girl, his deep love for his wife and boys. When arrested, he naively believes he will be released immediately, and forgoes counsel. As the days slip into weeks, he rereads the Qu'ran, still confident his innocence will free him. The trial is a travesty, but how does one fight a xenophobic system where evidence is manipulated, police pressure people to rethink their recall of what they saw (or didn't), lying witnesses are applauded, and a large reward is on offer in a poverty-stricken city? Slowly coming to terms with a universal disinterest in the truth, Mahmood's gradual transformation—cynicism to realisation and acceptance of death—is heart-breaking.

Shortlisted for the Booker Prize, this remarkable literary work puts the era unflinchingly on show in intricate detail, and the author's ability to place the reader right there, privy to this shameful miscarriage of justice, is chilling. A remarkable achievement not to be missed.

Fiona Alison

THE TOBACCO WIVES

Adele Myers, William Morrow, 2022, \$27.99, hb, 352pp, 9780063082939

North Carolina native Myers mines her family history while incorporating extensive research on Big Tobacco in this chilling exposé. Set in a fictional small North Carolina town circa 1946, the story is told from the perspective of Maddie, a naïve fifteen-year-old whose widowed mother has dropped her at seamstress Aunt Ettie's doorstep, weeks before a big gala. When Ettie is hospitalized with a life-threatening case of measles, Maddie's sewing skills save the day, creating exquisite gowns for the wealthy tobacco wives. Beneath the glittering surface lurks a dangerous underbelly. This engrossing debut novel is an emotional account of tobacco executives employing deceptive marketing to shape public perception: doctors knowingly recommending cigarettes to pregnant women aware of the correlation between smoking and birth defects that cause miscarriage, crib death, malformations, premature birth, and cleft lip and palate. It's all about profit.

Facts are interspersed with colorful characters that keep us reading. There's glamorous Mitzy Winston, married to the president of Bright Leaf Tobacco; Cornelia Hale, the regal dowager who channels Maggie Smith's Dowager Countess of Grantham. Cornelia's son, Dr. Hale, perpetuates the deception with complimentary cigarettes in his waiting room and a ward of premature babies. Both women take an interest in Maddie's coming of age. There is a sweet romance between Maddie and Mitzy's godson, David Taylor. Our heroine's integrity is tested when she discovers evidence—a confidential letter from Dr. Robert Hale to Richard Winston—

outlining risks to smoking mothers. What will she do with this knowledge? Not only is the entire town's economy based on tobacco, but the doctor is threatening to withdraw treatment from her failing aunt. What I found

shocking was so many people lighting up in our not-so-distant past. The novel's message resonates today.

Gail M. Murray

THE SCENT OF A STORM

Annette Oppenlander, Independently published, 2021, \$15.99, pb, 315pp, 9783948100315

Watching the fall of the Berlin Wall on a grainy TV screen from her drab East German apartment, Annie is suddenly jolted from her lethargy by a fuzzy picture that reignites buried memories. Could that reporter amongst the revelers be her long-lost and thought-dead war-time lover? Egged on by her energetic daughter Emma, Annie embarks on a perilous human journey into that crevasse that she has kept sealed.

This novel follows the arduous adventures of Annie and Werner. Young lovers hoping to survive the tumult of East Prussia are separated in late 1944 when Werner is drafted into Hitler's newly created militia "the Volkssturm". Finding herself pregnant, Annie awaits Werner's return, but the vicissitudes of war dictate otherwise.

Oppenlander paints a complex landscape in which the raw personal emotions of each protagonist rise within the individual but, equally importantly, clash with the feelings of others. The past and present mix from varying points of view. The dialogue, at times, is realistically tense while the reader is engaged in the emotional rollercoaster that emerges.

Not for want of trying, searching for displaced people is a gargantuan task in a chaotic post-war Europe. However, life must continue, especially for Annie as a young single mother on a devastated landscape further complicated by a communist dominated social structure. Adding to the human drama is that Annie is tormented by a secret regarding her own mother: "I killed her with my selfishness".

The past is forcefully thrust into the present and intersecting personal journeys entwine. For the first time, Emma gains a realistic insight into her mother's past, Annie is able to reconcile some ghosts, and is that blurry reporter really Werner? This is a complex multi-layered narrative that fully engages the reader.

Jon G. Bradley

A THOUSAND STEPS

T. Jefferson Parker, Forge, 2022, \$27.99/ C\$37.99, hb, 368pp, 9781250793539

If you're into the hippie scene, Laguna Beach, California, is the place to be in summer 1968. However, sixteen-year-old Matt Anthony has more compelling concerns, such as trying to put food on the table, because his mother, hooked on opium-laced hashish, earns very little as a waitress. His father's a deadbeat who lives in a different state, and his older brother, Kyle, is fighting in Vietnam.

Worse yet, Matt's older sister, Jasmine, has disappeared, and he comes to believe

she's been kidnapped. But the police assume that Jazz is just another drug-addled kid on a bender, so it's up to Matt to rescue her.

How he tries makes for an exceptionally tense, plot-driven thriller, the background to which is Matt's hand-to-mouth existence, in which he delivers newspapers, fishes to get protein, and cadges leftovers from friends who work in restaurant kitchens. He has his mother's fecklessness to contend with, a cop who wants to break him, bad guys of all stripes (including those masquerading as good guys), and vicious types all too willing to prey on a young, defenseless kid down on his luck.

However, I find the characters hard to believe, especially the teenagers. The two girls Matt likes have attitudes but little in the way of inner lives. He's nearly perfect, without the anger or rebelliousness you'd expect, and nothing of his selfish, dishonest parents in him. It's as though this protagonist coming of age has already aced being young. Surprisingly, given the careful plotting, I didn't expect the hackneyed confrontations at the end, nor the jarring turn the romance takes, with little afterthought.

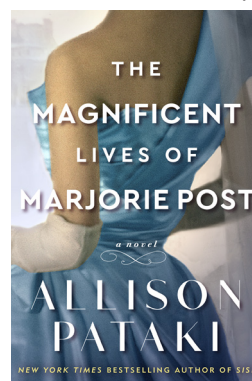
A Thousand Steps is a novel with an intensely strong physical presence and well-drawn historical atmosphere, an inventive narrative that somehow loses its sure-handedness. Take that for what you will.

Larry Zuckerman

THE MAGNIFICENT LIVES OF MARJORIE POST

Allison Pataki, Ballantine, 2022, \$28.00, hb, 400pp, 9780593355688

This is an absolutely terrific novel. If you



want to know more about the 20th century, it's all here, from the founding of the Post Cereal Company to the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson, and if you want to be inspired by a brilliant, generous, and powerful woman, then

Marjorie Post will fill the bill.

The book begins at the turn of the century when a sickly C. W. Post and his family travel to Battle Creek, Michigan, to find a cure at Dr. Kellogg's sanitarium. C. W. manages to regain his health in Battle Creek, but he also discovers a source of wealth in the idea of a tasty, grain-based breakfast. His daughter, Marjorie, learns valuable life lessons from her father, and when he dies while she is still a young woman, she uses those lessons to further enrich herself but also to enrich the lives of others. Marjorie enjoys her money, creating monumental estates such as Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach and Hillwood Home in D.C., but she also believes that with great

wealth comes great responsibility. During the Great War, she founds a hospital for soldiers in France. In the Great Depression, she becomes known as “Lady Bountiful” for the canteens she establishes to give out free food and clothing. Finally, when she dies, she leaves most of her treasures to the public for their enjoyment.

Pataki manages to make every chapter in this long and complicated life fascinating. Marjorie’s love life is as enthralling as it is heartbreaking. Her four successive husbands are unequal to the task of truly loving a woman of such wealth and power. She never admits defeat, however, and ultimately embodies the ideal of a true American hero.

Trish MacEnulty

DARK ARTS, DARK ACTS

Orlando Pearson, MX Publishing, 2021, £9.99, pb, 248pp, 9781787058910

1940. Sherlock Holmes is a secret government asset. Tasked by Foreign Office Minister “Rab” Butler to negotiate the mutual exchange of POWs, he travels with Watson across war-torn Europe to find that the German Foreign Minister Goebbels will only agree to the transfer if Holmes will investigate serial attacks on women on the S-Bahn, Berlin’s surface suburban railway.

Holmes discovers something which leads the pair to Moscow and the facilitation of treaties which keep Britain afloat in the war. When Holmes leaves Berlin, he suggests a strategy to the local police so they may solve the railway murders by themselves. These now become irrelevant to Holmes’s and Watson’s roles as alliance makers in the greater war game.

The weight of historical facts dramatised into dialogue drags an unbalanced plot. We are asked to believe that our octogenarian duo travel incessantly, both upon and beneath train seats. They speak with the same voice, perhaps from having lived together so long. Holmes’s intellectual specialness is conveyed by asking mundane questions; his experimentation is vague and mainly off-stage.

Readers who enjoy learning diplomatic history through fiction will undoubtedly learn some here; but readers who enjoy following Holmes in a hands-on investigation based on forensic analysis of evidence will be disappointed.

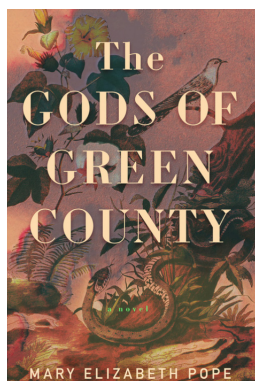
Louise Tree

THE GODS OF GREEN COUNTY

Mary Elizabeth Pope, Blair, 2021, \$25.95, hb, 240pp, 9781949467710

Set in 1926, this perfectly stunning novel unravels the intricate threads of small-town life in Green County, Arkansas. In this rural and poverty-stricken land, cotton employs most people and the law everyone else. When young Coralee’s beloved brother Buddy is shot and killed, his blood lingers on the pavement—what little of it there is in Green County—because the drought is so bad that no one has spare water

to wash it away. When Sheriff Wiley Slocum



is proven to have shot Buddy in self-defense, it isn’t the end of Coralee’s relationship to Buddy. She sees him still, every so often, walking around town, in the grocery store, in the fields out back. Eventually Coralee marries and has a child, but she still sees things that others don’t, which only fuels her faith in God and Brother Jeremiah. Brother Jeremiah has plenty of time for what little money Coralee might have after the weekly grocery shop, but never for Coralee’s concern for her visions. Eventually, Coralee’s husband is convinced that perhaps with all her nonsense about her dead brother, giving away every red cent to Brother Jeremiah, and his concern for Little Earl’s safety, maybe Coralee needs help at the state hospital in Little Rock. After all, everyone is just there to help. But in small town life, there is a web in every relationship.

This short book holds an entire mood inside its pages. Having family from the Ozarks, there is something so complete about the dialogue, the food, even the family dynamics, that feels so true and real to me. I could hear every slam of a backdoor, every creak of the porch’s floorboards. If I could recommend a single book from this year, this would be it.

Katie Stine

CHRISTMAS HOPE FOR THE STEEL GIRLS

Michelle Rawlins, HQ, 2021, £7.99, pb, 400pp, 9780008427337

As heartwarming as a log fire and a mug of mulled wine, *Christmas Hope for the Steel Girls* is a sequel following the continuing story of Nancy, Patty and Betty, factory girls during the Second World War. The backdrop to the story is the Vickers Aircraft Factory in Sheffield.

Commencing just weeks after war was declared on Germany in 1939, each chapter covers events on certain days leading up to Christmas and into the New Year. Each of the main characters has a rich story to tell about love and family. They find support and courage through their friendship and, encouraged by Betty, try to help the community around them in increasingly hard times.

The book is easy to read, has realistic characters in realistic settings, and shows the bravery and stoicism of women who not only had to keep the home fires burning during World War II but had to earn a living and keep industry and the war effort going.

Nit-picking from a historical viewpoint, this novel might have been better placed in 1940 or 1941 rather than 1939. In the Autumn of 1939 the war was new, Dunkirk was nine

months away, and food rationing had not yet been introduced (January 1940). The National Service (Armed Forces) Act, passed immediately after war was declared, made all able men between the ages of 18 and 41 liable for conscription. A bit like Covid vaccination in reverse, it was a long, drawn-out process as differing age groups had to register before certain dates. This book starts even before the first group (men aged 20 to 23) had to register (21st October 1939). However, this did not spoil this well-written, enjoyable tale of ordinary folk in extraordinary times.

Aidan K. Morrissey

SHIPYARD GIRLS UNDER THE MISTLETOE

Nancy Revell, Arrow, 2021, £7.99, pb, 448pp, 9781787464292

This, we are told, is the eleventh and penultimate outing for the Sunderland girls working in the wartime shipyards along the River Wear. Opening with a prologue set on Christmas Day in 1919, more than twenty years before the main story, a detailed and intriguing insight is given into the background of one of the novel’s compelling storylines. The main protagonists in this book are Dorothy, Gloria, and Helen, and through them we are given a glimpse of what life was really like in the industrial North East when the men were at war. However, not all wars are fought on battlefields, and in this novel, the Shipyard Girls face their own battles, with love, life and family at the core.

Nancy Revell is an investigative journalist, and this shines through her writing, which is free-flowing and full of impeccably researched details. Her description of the psychiatric hospital brings you right inside the now-demolished Cherry Knowle Mental Health facility in Ryhope. Her storytelling and characters are exceptional, and totally believable. Her villainous Havelock and Miriam are every bit as enjoyable as the eponymous heroines. At the end of the book Nancy Revell writes a letter to her readers talking about the various kinds of love which drive the plot. This is a great touch, and certainly love in its many forms is the very essence of this great story. Hopefully the end of the war will not mark the end of the Wearside ladies’ stories. Their return to post-war life must have great scope for Revell to continue.

Aidan K. Morrissey

MR. CAMPION’S WINGS

Mike Ripley, Severn House, 2021, £28.99/£20.99, hb, 256pp, 9780727850409

Mr. Albert Campion’s profound exaltation in watching his wife receive a prestigious academic honour from Cambridge University, with attendant pomp and ceremony, is shattered when detectives suddenly interrupt the proceedings. Amanda is unceremoniously detained on the charge of “breaking the Official Secrets Act”. With her humiliating public arrest, Campion’s quest is joined to not

only exonerate his wife, but also to expose the real culprit.

Set in 1965, a time of increasing fear in England of both Communism and a possible nuclear war with Russia, this is the ninth novel to feature the intrepid Campion on a jaunt for justice. As is central to Ripley's mysteries, the reader follows Campion on an often-convoluted journey as he investigates the ultra-secret project code-named "Goshawk". Amanda is accused of leaking details concerning this advanced military aircraft to Russian agents. Campion's aim is clear: find the real traitor thus clearing his wife!

As with all of Ripley's mysteries, there are numerous twists and turns that offer suspense and surprise. The suspicious deaths of others who worked on the Goshawk Project add levels of intrigue.

A strength in Ripley's narrative is his excellent use of dialogue. Further, he brings in what might be termed interesting peripheral characters. These literary side bars add a depth to the story and offer a wider societal landscape that anchors the contemporary environment. A solid yarn that captures a sense of the times.

Jon G. Bradley

FAREWELL BLUES

Maggie Robinson, *Poisoned Pen Press*, 2021, \$15.99, pb, 272pp, 9781464215193

The Dowager Marchioness of Broughton is in gaol, accused of murdering her paramour, the Duke of Rufford, in their suite at the Ritz. Lady Adelaide cannot abide seeing her own mother portrayed as the society scandal of 1925, so she enlists her dead husband's ghost Rupert and the dashing Detective Inspector Devenand Hunter (on leave from Scotland Yard after injuring himself in their previous adventure) to clear her mother's name.

On the surface, both the marchioness and the duke appear to have led lives of boring fidelity, although rank can allow appearances to deceive. The duke's family closet harbors numerous skeletons, including the elopements of his daughter with an Austrian count and his son with a Black American jazz singer (the "Farewell Blues" of the title). Adelaide is stalked by the press, especially one enterprising American newshound who claims to be on her side of the story. When another member of the duke's household dies and the singer disappears, it clears the Dowager of murder but doesn't lead anyone closer to the truth.

Robinson portrays the time period genuinely and fleshes out the numerous characters admirably. The mystery is uneven yet satisfying in its conclusion, but the icing on this cake is the epilogue that sorts out the lives of the main characters just in time to celebrate the Christmas and New Year holidays.

Tom Vallar

THE GIRL BEHIND THE WALL

Mandy Robotham, *Avon*, 2021, /\$26.99, hb, 416pp, 9780008462901 / *Avon UK*, 2021, £7.99, pb, 416pp, 9780008364533

August 13th, 1961. Karin Voigt, an aspiring fashion designer in her early twenties, falls ill on a visit to the eastern side of Berlin and is hospitalized. The next morning her twin sister, Jutta, wakes on the western side and discovers that all passage between the two parts of the city has been halted. A wall is being built and everything changes. Karin is unable to travel home and must build a new life in the east, while Jutta, missing her sister's presence in the family home and her everyday life, keeps searching for a way for them to be reunited.

The story is told in the present tense, alternating viewpoints between the sisters. Nearly two years after they are separated, Jutta stumbles across a route to the east through a series of abandoned buildings and believes the sisters' problems are solved. But, in fact, things only become more complicated. Karin has built a life in the east that she can't just walk away from, and as she and Jutta take more and more risks to see each other, the threat of capture by the Stasi becomes increasingly real.

With two likeable main characters, and a fascinating period of history propelling their story, *The Girl Behind the Wall* becomes an immersive read, particularly once Jutta starts crossing from west to east. And although everyday life is the focus, the wider world's reaction to events in Germany is neatly incorporated: for example, in the visit of JFK in June 1963. Robotham acknowledges the darker side of life in the divided city, but overall the tone is optimistic. An enjoyable read.

Kate Braithwaite

SISTERS OF NIGHT AND FOG

Erika Robuck, *Berkley*, 2022, \$17.00, pb, 480pp, 9780593102169

Sisters of Night and Fog starts and ends in 1995, but the novel mostly spans the years of WWII, covering two true-life heroines and their stories. Virginia D'Albert-Lake is an American living in France. Along with her husband, Philippe, and a number of other French citizens, she becomes involved with the Comet Line, which secures safe passage out of occupied France for British and American airmen. The other storyline is about Violette Szabo, a fiery British-French citizen who, desperate to make a difference in the war effort, becomes a spy for the Special Operations Executive (SOE). The two women and their stories converge when they are arrested and sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp.

The novel's first third jumps back and forth between the two women, providing their backgrounds and personalities, and I found this part low-key and largely unnecessary. I didn't get into the story and start caring about

the characters until the women put their lives on the line with their involvement in the Comet Line and SOE. Later, after both are arrested, Violette is interrogated, and they are shipped off to Ravensbrück, where they hold onto their humanity and sanity through courage and resistance. This part was raw and brought tears to my eyes. However, I question the author's choice of using first-person narrative, since it didn't bring the characters closer for me.

Franca Pelaccia

MURDER AT THE MANSIONS

Sara Rosett, *McGuffin Ink*, 2022, \$13.99, pb, 282pp, 9781950054404

Life is finally settling down for Olive Belgrave, stylish detective for the upper classes in 1924 London: she has a pleasant flat in the new South Regent Mansions, things are developing with the delicious Jasper, and her latest project for her client and neighbor, Lola, was a cinch. But when her friend Minerva spots signs of foul play on the second floor, Olive dives in to find the victim. Problem is, their neighbors have scattered, and no one's ever seen the mysterious Darkwaiths in suite 228. Tracking down her errant neighbors and trying to determine who's hiding what will take all of Olive's flair, smarts, and ability to fit into small spaces.

As always, Rosett's prose is as crisp, stylish, and bubbly as the Bright Young Things who populate her pages. Characters and settings are winningly sketched, the action brisk, the plot turns engaging. Rosett lets the reader come along as Olive gathers information and spots clues, and the whodunnit lives in its historical period, featuring details like motors, the cultural scene, and the Flying Scotsman railway route. Other series might grow tepid or start to sound familiar this far in, but this is the best Olive adventure yet.

Misty Urban

THE VISITORS

Caroline Scott, *Simon & Schuster*, 2021, £16.99, hb, 437pp, 9781398508170

Like many women in the 1920s, Esme Nicholls is grieving for her husband, killed in the First World War. The chance to spend a summer in Cornwall seems to be an opportunity for her to learn how to live again. She can indulge her love of gardens and the countryside and write her weekly nature columns for a local newspaper. And she becomes a part of a rather unconventional community, one of whose members, Rory, holds a particular attraction for her. However, her fragile peace is shattered by the arrival of visitors and the unexpected secrets they bring with them.

The story is interspersed with Rory's wartime diaries, an uncompromising account of the fear and the hardships of war punctuated by fleeting moments of joy and camaraderie. We also have Esme's nature notes, and the main

narrative is seen through the eyes of gardeners and artists, an ephemeral landscape of flowers and hedgerows, of sea and shadows. It is a patchwork of secrets, new beginnings, and the ghosts of the past.

When I began this book, I thought the story was going to be predictable and not particularly enjoyable. But I was wrong on both counts. Both Esme and Rory turned out to be more interesting characters than initially suggested, and there are enough twists and turns to keep the reader guessing. And I loved the lyrical descriptions of the Cornish countryside. Recommended.

Karen Warren

COUNT THE NIGHTS BY STARS

Michelle Shocklee, Tyndale House, 2022, \$15.99, pb, 432pp, 9781496459930

This dual-timeline novel takes us to Nashville, Tennessee in both 1897 and 1961. In 1961, Audrey Whitfield is home from college after the death of her mother. She is helping out her grief-stricken father at the historic Maxwell House Hotel. While cleaning out the room of an elderly guest who has had a stroke, she finds a scrapbook of mementos from the Tennessee Centennial Exposition. Hints of a long-ago romance, and possible evidence of the disappearance of young women at the exposition, start Audrey on an investigation into Nashville's past. In 1897, Priscilla Nichols is staying at the Maxwell House Hotel and exploring the Tennessee Centennial Exposition with her driver, Luca Moretti, until a disappearance changes everything.

This captivating story takes us to the exposition as it begins in 1897. The descriptions of the shining exhibits at Exposition Park make you feel as if you are there. Through the wealthy Priscilla and the working-class immigrant Gia, we see the oppression of women of the time in different ways. The haughty privilege and power seized and abused by the rich is also portrayed, and is shocking to behold. In 1961, Audrey learns more about the American civil rights movement through Jason, who wants to be a civil rights attorney. The reader learns the history of the movement and is told of lunch counter sit-ins and the Freedom Riders, fighting for equality against the evil Jim Crow laws. In 1897, when the disappearance occurs and the mystery begins, it is shocking and compelling. Audrey and Priscilla unravel elements of this secret in two timelines. At the same time, shadowy figures from the upper class try to interfere. Rich in history and mystery, *Count the Nights by Stars* is a novel that will teach and inspire.

Bonnie DeMoss

2207 SOUTH GREEN ROAD

Janice C. Spector, Two Bairs Press, 2021, \$27.99, hb, 278pp, 9781736706404

Janice C. Spector's novel *2207 South Green Road* will likely resonate with many people. I am the product of the 1950s and the child of

a large immigrant Jewish family, as I suspect the author is as well. Grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, cousins all trying to thrive in America.

Its 1961, and ten-year-old Edna is just trying to survive her family. She lives with a mother who is distant and a father who should be, for all he cares about her. Her grandparents Morris and Becky live downstairs. Morris barely speaks English; Becky is the quintessential hypochondriac. Her great-grandfather is a poker addict. Uncle Abe is in hock to the mob. Aunt Libby hates her husband Uncle Joe, and Uncle Joe hates Aunt Libby. Then there's uncles Arthur and Izzie, aunts Millie and Ceal, and all the crazy nieces and nephews, employees and neighbors. Is anybody happy? How does a suspicious, creative, and unlikely ten-year-old cope in the middle of all this dysfunction? Espionage.

At 2207 South Green Road, Edna's family argues, cheats, lies, steals, breaks bread at the holidays, talks behind each other's backs, and somehow manages to stay together. They love, live and, ultimately, die. Edna is not only the cataloguer of her strange family's woes but, in the end, the glue that pulls them together.

This novel seems to be autobiographical. It is as if author has lived with all of these people and knows every nuance, every quirk, every secret. She is spot on. Perhaps she is too spot on, because most of the characters are thoroughly unlikeable. And there are too many of them. Cutting out the relatives who don't drive the novel forward would enhance the drama. Focusing on the relatives in Edna's life who matter most to her would have made the arc and conclusion more powerful.

Peter Clenott

MURDER UNDER HER SKIN

Stephen Spotswood, Doubleday, 2021, \$23.99, hb, 368pp, 9780385547123

It's 1946 New York, and the female detective duo of Lillian Pentecost and Willowjean "Will" Parker have been investigating crimes together now for four years. The crime that sends them to Stoppard, Virginia, also takes Will back to her former family: The Hart & Holloway's Traveling Circus and Sideshow. Valentin Kalishenko, the knife-throwing performer who taught Will everything she knows to stay alive, is accused of killing Ruby Donner, the Amazing Tattooed Woman who gave Will a home in the circus when no one else wanted her. To get Valentin out of jail and uncover the real killer, Lillian and Will have to deal with small-town secrets with big-time grudges, backwater characters, and residents who don't like meddling from no-good, big-name detectives.

Murder Under Her Skin is the second book in the Pentecost and Parker Mystery series. The style recalls the hard-boiled, crime noir books and films of the 1940s but with a chick-lit attitude and flavor. There are enough twists and turns and surprising layers to keep the reader guessing. Lillian is still the brains and face of the operation while Will is the brawn and the soul. She is still trying to figure

herself out, but rough, tough, full-throttle, and bleeding-heart sums her up. Just like the first book in the series, *Murder Under Her Skin* is a fun and engaging read with a whodunit that keeps you guessing and entertained.

Franca Pelaccia

RESISTANCE

Mara Timon, Zaffre, 2021, £8.99, pb, 392pp, 9781838774660

May 1944. Two female spies are dropped into France to try and help the Resistance to disrupt German operations in preparation for the Normandy landings and to discover whether, as is suspected, the Resistance group has been compromised and the previous English wireless operator discovered and forced to hand over his codes. Elisabeth de Mornay becomes Frau Hugel. The other spy dropped is Léonie, who actually is a German and who quickly becomes the mistress of a high-ranking Nazi officer. Elisabeth is the replacement wireless operator and is also trying to find who is the traitor within the Resistance. There are very few people she can trust.

What came as a complete surprise to me was when Elisabeth comes face to face with a man from her past, and, she hopes her future, who is a German and working for Rommel though, not, she is certain, a Nazi. He has his own dangerous agenda to follow. There are some truly horrific scenes, and some that had me almost tearing the pages in my haste to see what happens next. I even laughed a couple of times.

This is the second book in a series, the first being Timon's debut novel, *City of Spies*, which introduces Elisabeth and tells of an earlier mission in Lisbon in 1943. It's not necessary to have read it, but it would be useful to do so as presumably it answers a few questions I have about how she met her husband, what happened to him and how she became a spy in the first place.

I started as a bit of a sceptic but ended up as a fan. This book will please any reader who enjoys a thriller about espionage, war or just adventure. Recommended.

Marilyn Pemberton

A GAME OF FEAR

Charles Todd, William Morrow, 2022, \$28.99, hb, 312pp, 9780062905598

This, the 24th in the Inspector Rutledge series, is set in south-eastern England in the late spring of 1921. Rutledge's superior officer and nemesis at Scotland Yard, Chief Superintendent Markham, has assigned him to what appears to be a wild goose chase: a murder committed by a man already dead and no sign of a victim's body.

Rutledge is accompanied as always by his own ghost from the First World War, Hamish, whose presence constantly threatens his mental health as he travels eastward to the small fishing village of Walmer. Here he meets Lady Felicia Benton, the sensible, reliable woman who says she witnessed the murder.

She lives in the manor house, once an Abbey, and a place of ghosts. Also a place of ghosts is the nearby airfield where many airmen, flying the rickety planes of the time, left during WWI never to return.

Rutledge, along with Hamish, must sort out reports of the ghosts of the place and decide which ones were actually flesh and blood people and why they might try to frighten Lady Benton.

Charles Todd, actually a mother-and-son team, is very comfortable with the characters, the place and the time. His principal characters are upper class English in old world locations clinging to the familiar elements of an Empire in decay. The reader is made aware of the reality of a recently ended war and the class distinction between the lady of the manor and the local fishermen. The success of the series speaks to the lasting appeal of this long-gone world.

The novel is written with a gentle familiarity, drawing the reader in to a detailed portrayal of characters with their own needs and personal history inhabiting a world that recent literature has brought into focus for the 21st century reader. Recommended.

Valerie Adolph

THE MAGICIAN

Colm Tóibín, Viking, 2021, £18.99, hb, 448pp, 9780241004616 / Scribner, 2021, \$28.00, hb, 512pp, 9781476785080

Tóibín's biographical novel of Thomas Mann begins in the Hanseatic port of Lübeck in 1891, where Thomas, overshadowed in his literary ambitions by his elder brother Heinrich, seems destined to follow his father into a mercantile future, a prospect that changes with his father's death and his mercurial mother's move to Munich. The young Mann attempts to live up to expectations in his emotional life, too. Despite the advice of his friend Paul Ehrenberg that 'marriage is not for you. Anyone who follows your eyes can see where they land', Thomas weds Katia Pringsheim and has a large family. His same-sex yearnings can only be expressed to his diary, in furtive embraces and in his writing; only when Mann was nearing the end of his life, it is suggested, did Katia realise his orientation. Literary success and lionisation in parallel with the rise of National Socialism present Mann with a dilemma; as a German writer of worldwide renown, how is he to oppose Nazism whilst at the same time protecting those whom he cares about or feels indebted to, such as his German publisher?

Early on, Hitler and his adherents seem a collection of irrelevant blowhards until suddenly they are not, making this a novel for our times. Mann's own Odyssey as an émigré, a German writer with acquired Czech nationality who finds himself caught in the toils of U.S. emigration, also has contemporary resonance. Painstakingly researched, Tóibín's magnificent novel succeeds in even the smallest cameo parts, as in his portraits of an acerbic Alma Mahler and of an astute Eleanor

Roosevelt—and of Mann's remarkable children, perhaps Erika most of all deserves a novel to herself.

Katherine Mezzacappa

FOUR THOUSAND DAYS

M.J. Trow, Severn House, 2022, \$28.99/£20.99, hb, 224pp, 9781780291345

Archaeology focuses on the past, not on the dawn of the 20th century. So, for lecturer Margaret Murray (her doctorate appears merely decorative), Egyptology usually holds more sway than the death of one of her female public lecture students at University College, London. Yet when facts emerge that persuade the police that Helen Richardson was prostitute Alice Groves by night, and the policeman who investigates the case is also one of her public lecture students, Margaret does what she does best—asks questions about dead people.

Meanwhile in the north of England, retired Inspector Edmund Reid, infamous for failing to solve the Jack the Ripper murders, stumbles upon another dead female archaeologist. Emmeline Barker was excavating a first-century Roman dig when she unearthed an olive wood box containing a secret she was willing to die for. To Margaret, female archaeologists are rare enough that losing two is intolerable, and she sets out to link seemingly disparate events.

Trow's extensive research into British turns of phrase in the late 1890s amazed this American reader and provided many chuckles, but most went well over my head. The characters and their traits—students, fellow faculty, suspects, and police—are brazenly drawn so as to elicit reactions that propel the story forward. Revealing the meaning of the title will disclose the secret, but the resolution is so satisfying that (despite appearing to begin a new series) this novel can stand alone as a testimony to an intrepid and visionary real-life feminist.

Tom Vallar

THE LAST GRAND DUCHESS

Bryn Turnbull, MIRA, 2022, \$28.99/C\$35.99, hb, 400pp, 9780778311706

When *The Last Grand Duchess* opens in March 1917, we are witness to the collapse of a world: the privileged existence of the Romanov czarist family, and, more specifically, that of their oldest daughter, Olga. Word comes that the beleaguered Nicholas II has abdicated, leaving his



family, closeted in the palace at Tsarskoe Selo, to an uncertain fate. As this narrative follows Olga and her family to their inevitable end, it alternates with another storyline beginning in February 1913, taking the reader through the events leading up to Russia's disastrous entry into the Great War and through the terrible toll exacted by the war itself. Somehow, we are allowed to hope that Olga—attending teas at her aunt's house, volunteering as a nurse, enduring efforts to match her with a suitably royal partner, and falling in love—might find some happiness along the way.

I loved this novel, chiefly because of its deft characterizations. There's Olga herself: socially awkward yet sometimes imperious, fiercely loyal to her family but increasingly becoming aware of her parents' flaws. There's her open-minded aunt, whose attempts to provide her isolated nieces with a semblance of social life leads to Olga's first romance. There are Olga's patients, whose brutal experiences at the front help to shape Olga's growing realization of the hardships faced by her father's subjects. There's the obscenely wealthy couple Felix and Irina Yusupov, somewhat abashed by Felix's failure to join his friend Dmitri at the front, boasting that they have turned their palace into a military hospital: "Of course, we removed all the valuables, but just think of the cultural education they'll receive, convalescing in a home as grand as this." And finally, there is Olga's high-strung mother, Alexandra, gobbling crystals of Veronal while utterly incompetently trying to run the country in her passive husband's absence. Even the most flawed characters have their redeeming points: there's not a cardboard villain to be found.

Superbly written and researched, this is a novel that I will be reading again.

Susan Higginbotham

THE CANVAS OF THE WORLD

Antonin Varenne (trans. Sam Taylor), MacLehose, 2021, £8.99, pb, 288pp, 9781529403862

This third novel in Varenne's trilogy takes on the Exposition Universelle of Paris in all its glory. Aileen Bowman, a determined and energetic journalist, arrives in Paris from America to use her skills as a reporter and to tap into her French origins. She is quickly seen as a game-changer first and foremost in her writing about the Exposition, but also in her dress-sense and defiance of both French and universal customs. She discovers passions and new romantic pursuits in her assault on French culture. Her emotions are tested as both old and new loyalties come to light.

This novel is a sensual one, and the words dwell on each character as they take the centre of the scene. The author is successful in creating a plot about a daring character in an era where customs were followed closely, such as matters of fashion and traditions about marriage and relationships. The balance

between America and France is also done well and researched thoroughly. The story takes you along, always with a level of mystery, and only reveals when it is necessary to the reader. It was interesting to learn about Paris in 1900 and experience it through the eyes of these characters.

Clare Lehovsky

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE PANDEMIC OF DEATH

Daniel D. Victor, MX Publishing, 2021, £8.99, pb, 154pp, 9781787058088

The Covid-19 crisis having made such an enormous impact on our cultural consciousness, it is about time we started seeing titles with this theme. This pandemic, of course, placed in its proper historical context, refers to the previous one, the Spanish Flu of 1918. The American novelist Sinclair Lewis comes to Dr. Watson for advice on his upcoming work, a novel about a doctor championing the fight against a deadly disease. The recounting of the meeting pokes gentle fun with Watson's astonishment at the American's brashness and Sinclair's amusement at the Englishman's smugness.

The Spanish Flu being too raw in the writer's memory, he has decided to write about the plague. It's a painful subject for Watson, too, plus he's familiar with Sinclair's tendency toward satire. They consult Sherlock Holmes.

As a detective story, it's not terribly exciting, involving the professional reputations of two bacteriologists and whether or not Pfeiffer's bacillus was the cause of the Spanish flu, but as a Sherlock Holmes story—using logic, eliminating the impossible—it fits the bill. Oddly, though Holmes solves the case, he declines to reveal his solution to the police. Perhaps the beans are spilled in Sinclair's book, *Arrowsmith*—I haven't read it.

The writing style matches quite deliciously Conan Doyle's Victorian feel. A good deal of the story, as the party discusses the demise of Watson's late lab partner Martin Aaron-Smith, is told in the past perfect tense, and I always find that uncomfortable, although perhaps it's in keeping with the Victorian feel. Though a very easy read, the complex language means it is not one for a younger readership.

It's a clever device, taking an actual novel and going back in time to create a story about its inspiration. This is Book 7 in the Sherlock Holmes and the American Literati series.

Susie Helme

CHRISTMAS WITH THE CORNISH GIRLS

Betty Walker, Avon, 2021, £7.99, pb, 374pp, 9780008400316

Cornwall, 1941: A convalescent home for injured officers and an orphanage are the settings for this wartime saga. Eva, Lily and Rose find love and adventure in the relative calm of the southwestern corner of England. This, the second in Betty Walker's Cornish Girls escapades, draws from *Wartime with the Cornish Girls* but is a stand-alone novel.

The story concentrates on Eva's turbulent relationship with her nursing superiors and her love for a handsome Flight Lieutenant who had saved her life in London, now injured and coincidentally in her care. Lily is encouraged to join Eva at the home and is happy to escape any involvement with her abusive great-uncle. Rose suspects the orphanage adjacent to the nursing home is being run in a cruel and heartless fashion and is determined to improve the lives of the young residents. Meanwhile she is also fighting her love for a handsome doctor who just happens to be her sister's fiancé.

This is an enjoyable story and typical of HarperCollins' Avon imprint. It is a classic 'love conquers all' uplifting and heart-warming tale which will be thoroughly enjoyed by fans of Betty Walker and similar authors.

Aidan K. Morrissey

THROUGH FORESTS AND MOUNTAINS

Margaret Walker, Penmore Press, 2021, \$19.50, pb, 392pp, 9781950586714

This World War II narrative set in Yugoslavia brings another perspective to the war. When the surrounding eastern European countries capitulate to Hitler, Yugoslavia takes a defiant stance. A group of partisans band together to launch a resistance led by the communist Tito. These partisans are comprised of the only fighters available—farmers, peasants, and women. They were dressed in whatever was available. Some had coats or boots against the winter, some did not. With little to no experience, no uniforms, and no tanks, planes or any heavy artillery, this peasant army, with and without communist leanings, sets out with one goal: to defy the odds and defeat the well-oiled German machine to save their villages.

When Hitler attacks Belgrade, Anton Marković, a Yugoslavian naval captain, is in the hospital after an accident with the propellers of his torpedo boat. Without medical clearance and left behind by his boat and crew, Anton travels to join the partisans. Mara, the daughter of the Yugoslavian ambassador stationed in London, returns to Belgrade in spite of the danger. She feels out of place in London and has split from her boyfriend, Miroslav, for his fascist beliefs. Joining the partisans allows her, as a woman, to join the combat. When Mara's concerned father doesn't hear from her, he sends Miroslav to find her. Miroslav is a journalist and man of no scruples who, for now, is siding with the Ustashas, the Croatian fascists. He adds a layer of sinister threat to the plot.

The interweaving of these characters along with many others, forms an absorbing story. The politics and history of hostilities among the various racial groups—Serbs, Muslims, Chetniks, Ustashas—play roles in the struggle. Walker takes this complicated war in Yugoslavia and weaves the backstory and politics with clarity into a plot easy to follow with persuasive, sympathetic characters.

Janice Ottersberg

THE NEXT SHIP HOME

Heather Webb, Sourcebooks Landmark, 2022, \$16.99/C\$24.99, pb, 432pp, 9781728243146

Heather Webb's latest book, *The Next Ship Home*, is a novel about Ellis Island in the early 20th century. The story of the immigrant experience in 1902 New York City is told from two perspectives. Francesca is a young Sicilian woman who flees Italy and her abusive father. Tragedy strikes at Ellis Island, but fortunately, Francesca is able to make it to New York City to start her new life. Alma, a second-generation German American, is forced by her stepfather to work at Ellis Island so that she, an unmarried woman, can contribute to the household income. Repelled at first by the crowds of immigrants, Alma quickly becomes compassionate and devoted to social justice issues. With her love of linguistics, Alma yearns to become a translator, a challenging route for a woman at this time. At Ellis Island, Francesca and Alma's paths cross, and the two young women eventually become friends, helping and learning from each other along the way. With Francesca's support, Alma tries to expose the abuses happening at Ellis Island.

Today, most visitors to New York City visit Ellis Island, and walking through the rooms of the former immigration inspection station, one learns about the immigrant experience. But missing from their tour are the countless abuses many of these immigrants suffered and the blatant prejudice they faced daily, both there and once they got to New York City and beyond. Webb exposes these injustices, telling this critical side of history that is left off the audio tour of Ellis Island. Webb's book represents what historical fiction is all about: telling the reader about a neglected but important part of history through an engaging story of memorable and strong female characters.

Julia C. Fischer

THE SISTERS SWEET

Elizabeth Weiss, Dial, 2021, \$27.00, hb, 416pp, 9781984801548

Beautifully written, immersive, and at points compelling, *The Sisters Sweet* is the story of Harriet Szász, and her twin, Josie, daughters of a struggling theatrical set designer and a former star of the Ziegfeld Follies. The girls start performing when they are only five years old, but singing twins are 'a dime a dozen,' and so their father crafts a harness and costumes to transform them into the Siamese Sweets—conjoined, but able to sing and dance—an instant vaudeville hit. Of course, this charade can't last forever, and the sisters' lives diverge dramatically when Josie runs away and becomes a Hollywood movie starlet.

Harriet, the more conservative sister, is the lead character, and the novel follows her into adulthood, always carrying with her the loss she feels at Josie's abandonment of the family. There's also a separate narrative delving into the history of Harriet's parents, the injury that ended her mother's stage career and her aunt's marriage to an evangelical preacher, Eugene,

to whom the family reluctantly turn during hard times.

The Sisters Sweet is a story about family and sisterhood, about talent, about hardship and hard choices, and Weiss is a talented writer, evoking time and place seemingly effortlessly. Only the framing of the story as Harriet's retelling of their lives to a *Vanity Fair* journalist strikes an awkward note. In her own words, Harriet is 'the dull sister left behind.' She's deflated by the telling of her own story, leaving the reader to wonder what might have been, if this had been Josie's story to tell.

Kate Braithwaite

TWILIGHT AT MOORINGTON CROSS

Abigail Wilson, Thomas Nelson, 2022, \$16.99, pb, 320pp, 9780785253273

1819 Kent, England: Amelia is a widow and a patient at Cluett's Mesmeric Hospital suffering from a disorder that causes her to fall asleep without warning. In a strange turn of events, she learns that her doctor, Mr. Cluett, has altered his will naming her his primary beneficiary and heiress to his estate. However, to inherit, she has to marry one of two specific men, neither of whom she knows. She has thirty days to decide, even though she is attracted to someone else entirely. Not long after informing her of this, Mr. Cluett passes away. Amelia is determined to investigate the sudden death of her benefactor while at the same time trying to choose from two possible husbands.

This is a wonderful combination of mystery and romance that is sure to please fans of both genres. The premise is intriguing and includes a will, a forced marriage, a murder, and a sleep disorder. The history of mesmerism, a type of hypnosis, and its use in medical treatment is explored a bit. We are reminded of the limited rights of women in the 1800s through Amelia, whose life is controlled by guardians and then by an abusive husband. The murder mystery is well thought out and contains many twists and red herrings. It will most definitely keep the reader guessing until the end. The house itself, Moorington Cross, holds many secrets and is almost a character in the story. This is a book that is heavy on suspense and mystery in Agatha Christie style but still delivers with romance as well.

Bonnie DeMoss

STILL LIFE

Sarah Winman, Putnam, 2021, \$27.00, hb, 464pp, 9780593330753 / Fourth Estate, 2022, £8.99, pb, 448pp, 9780008283391

Spanning four decades, this novel begins in 1944 as Allied troops liberate Italy. British soldier Ulysses "Temps" Temper meets middle-aged art historian Evelyn Skinner to salvage paintings with the Monuments Men. Over wine, they discuss the beauty and purpose of art. Years later, their lives will intersect.

We shift to grey, postwar East End London,

as Temps returns to the pub and his unfaithful wife, Peg, who is the least sympathetic character: selfish, probably mildly depressed and, by her own admission, a poor mother. Temps takes on rearing Alys, Peg's daughter by an American serviceman, Eddie. We encounter a motley crew for this ensemble novel, which is character- rather than plot-driven.

In a work of such length, I kept waiting for something to happen. Winman's uneven style takes perseverance. Her prose runs the gamut from sparse, blunt naturalism to philosophical poetry. Entire scenes are dialogue, and Winman eschews quotation marks, so it is not always clear who is speaking. Things pick up when Temps inherits a home in sunny Florence, thanks to a simple act of kindness. The scenes describing life and art in Florence saved the book for me. Wise Old Cressy, Temps' father's mate, lovingly nurtures both people and the Japanese cherry tree in his life. He becomes a friend/surrogate father to Temps and Peg. His blue Amazonian parrot, Claude, not only quotes Shakespeare, but his antics also provide much needed humor and comic relief.

There are complex relationships, same-sex couples, and Alys's coming of age. As the novel unfolds, this disparate collection of characters becomes a family. Though the protagonist is named for a winning greyhound, I see a reference to the Greek hero, Ulysses, who encounters obstacles before arriving home: "So, time heals. Mostly... winter moves to spring, swallows return. Beauty does what is required. Loneliness becomes a mere Sunday. But still life in all its beauty and complexity."

Gail M. Murray

THE LOBOTOMIST'S WIFE

Samantha Greene Woodruff, Lake Union, 2022, \$14.95/£8.99, pb, 315pp, 9781542036214

Ruth Emeraldine runs the New York City public hospital for the insane founded by her father and carrying the family name in the 1930s. She meets, falls in love, and marries Robert Apter, a handsome, charismatic neurologist. He passionately adopts, promotes, and performs what he considers to be an instant cure for anxiety and psychosis—surgical separation of connections within the prefrontal area of the brain or lobotomy.

Margaret Baxter in 1952 is deeply depressed after the birth of her third child. She longs for relief and believes lobotomy may be her best hope.

The Lobotomist's Wife follows Ruth as she learns of the devastating long-term effects following lobotomy, the steps she takes to confront the issue, and the resistance she encounters not only from her husband but from those she approaches to take action. Tension builds as Margaret comes closer and closer to making the decision to undergo the procedure.

This storyline is based on the work of Walter Freeman II, the proselytizing physician who popularized lobotomy in the U.S., traveling

in his so-called lobotomobile and performing 3000 lobotomies in the 1940s and '50s. Incidents in the book are based on actual events—a court-ordered lobotomy done on the spot in a boarding house, a total of 228 procedures performed on one trip, death of a patient after an unsuccessful initial lobotomy was followed by a second procedure.

Dramatic and compelling, this is also a cautionary tale. In the midst of often widespread misinformation, it is more important than ever for members of the public to make decisions not based on popular notions but on the scientific community's rigorous studies of the safety and effectiveness of clinical therapies.

K. M. Sandrick

MULTI-PERIOD

VIOLETA

Isabel Allende, Ballantine, 2022, \$28.00, hb, 336pp, 9780593496206 / Bloomsbury, 2022, £16.99, hb, 336pp, 9781526648341

One-hundred-year-old Violeta writes her story beginning with her birth in 1920 during the Spanish flu pandemic up to her 2020 death during the current pandemic. Violeta was born into a family of wealth and lives in an unnamed South American country, assumed to be Chile. She has lived through the life and world events of a century: the fight for women's rights, the world stock market crash and Great Depression, her country's political upheaval and a military coup, her family's financial demise, World War II, death of friends and family, a failed marriage, lovers, domestic abuse, and more. Her family's wealth comes from her father's sawmill, vineyards, and construction projects, but it is built on a foundation of fraud, tax evasion, and risky investments. When it all collapses, they are left penniless. Their father's actions destroy him and his reputation, leaving the family shamed in their community, and prompt them to leave with their possessions to take shelter with the kind-hearted Rivas family at their farm in the cold South.

Violeta writes her story as a letter to her grandson, Camilo, to leave him "a testimony of [her] life". Unfortunately, her telling Camilo of sexually intimate details of her relationships and describing details to him of his own life are incongruous within this narrative format. Nevertheless, getting to know the characters is a pleasure: Violeta's childhood governess Miss Taylor and her love for Teresa Rivas, a feminist and political activist; Torito, the family's servant whose "almost beastly appearance... and childlike innocence elicited cruelty from others"; Violeta's brother José Antonio, who warns his father that his shady and illegal activities will be his downfall and the only one who takes responsibility for the family; and her elderly spinster aunts, Pia and Pilar. This is a satisfying story of a woman who lived a remarkable life.

Janice Ottersberg

37: A Novel

Joy Cohen, *Guernica Editions*, 2021, \$21.95/
C\$25.00, pb, 340pp, 9781771836432

In 2007, reporter Polly Stern, tasked to write articles about the changing Vermont economy, stumbles across the VYCC, a resurrected program from Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal, the CCC. Her subsequent article, "Three Cs," recounts the story of Emma Hale, a disenfranchised foster child given a reprieve from juvie by an astute judge, an eight-week stint at Mt. Ascutney Wilderness Camp. There, amongst other outcasts and misfits, she learns teamwork, survival, and appreciation of the manual labour FDR enlisted to build infrastructure, such as the bridge under which she finds a mossy rock carved with the names of three men, along with the date, October 1937.

So, we enter Polly's 37 mindset, stories of identity—individual and universal. A sojourn to Sosúa, a community which sprang from dictator Trujillo's encouragement of displaced Jews (after his massacre of 25,000 Haitians) to whiten Dominican bloodlines. The cancellation of photographic coverage of trials; *The Hobbit*; Amelia Earhart's disappearance; the Dani of Papua, New Guinea before white men came; the Peel Commission's partitioning of Palestine; André Blum's appointment as first Jewish Prime minister of France; the Majadahonda Monument; phrenology charts showing 37 different skull regions, a quasi-science used to determine racial inferiority; Tibetan Year of the Fire Ox; the Hindenburg disaster; the Golden Gate Bridge and on and on. Cohen unites Polly's stories to ask time-honoured philosophical questions.

Throughout her quantum wanderings and discovery of her own identity, Polly wonders what it is that connects us—kismet, karma, fate, destiny, bershert—call it what you will, but those things can also disconnect us from our stories, our universal mosaic. A thought-provoking literary achievement which will leave you reflecting how our experiences mesh together and if they are something far more than chance.

Fiona Alison

THE CARTOGRAPHER'S SECRET

Tea Cooper, *Harper Muse*, 2021, \$17.99, pb, 402pp, 9780785267317

In 1880, at her house at Yellow Rock, New South Wales, talented Australian sketch artist Evie Ludgrove shares her father's obsession with the famous explorer Dr. Ludwig Leichardt, who vanished in the Australian wilderness. After creating a map that follows her father's leads and seeking *The Bulletin* magazine's thousand-pound reward, she heads out into the wilderness on a quest to find Leichardt's last known whereabouts. On her expedition, she vanishes without leaving any clues to her disappearance.

In 1911, following the loss of her brother Thorne in an automobile accident, Letitia

Rawlings escapes her wealthy mother's house in Sydney. She moves to Evie Ludgrove's former dwelling to stay with her aunt Olivia, who remains haunted by Evie's disappearance after twenty years. Captivated by Evie's story and curious about what happened to her, Lettie follows points north from Yellow Rock toward Aberdeen. With the help of the drover Nathaniel and the blacksmith Denman, she embarks on a quest to follow Evie's map and discover where she vanished. After a series of loops following the crash of her tin lizzie, the group makes startling discoveries that may lead her to Evie's last known place.

Lettie's growing attraction for Nathaniel highlights the social rift between the drover society and the landed gentry in Sydney. He becomes involved with Lettie in her search for Evie, helping her navigate her journey's challenging physical and emotional landscape. Yet, they face an unknown future since they are from different social classes.

Tea Cooper's meticulous prose and deft phrasing delight the reader. Her storytelling weaves the places on Evie's map in tandem with the search Lettie makes so that the reader becomes immersed in a distant world. The reader yearns along with Lettie (and Evie, too) for the answer to Leichardt's disappearance and wants Lettie and Nathaniel to surmount the chasm that separates them. This fascinating novel informs the reader about Australia's storied past.

Gini Grossenbacher

SMALL WORLD

Jonathan Evison, *Dutton*, 2022, \$28.00, hb, 480pp, 9780593184127

On his last train, on his last day of work, a retiring Amtrak engineer slams the brakes of his train and jumbles the lives of his passengers together. Dazed, he has the heart to realize that the humans he sent hurtling through the air were more than just names on a manifest, and he wonders "what circumstances, what decisions, had delivered them to that moment."

This wide-ranging book then darts back and forth in time, from the mid-19th century to the early 21st. With at least 15 named point-of-view characters, the story follows four 19th-century families and their distant descendants, those soon-to-be train riders. A Chinese immigrant faces down a white man who has murdered his friends and stolen their gold in the California gold rush; a pair of Irish immigrant twins struggle to survive in a world as harsh as the one they left; a man determined to escape slavery finds what may be only a temporary respite; and a young Miwok woman decides to escape her stultifying adopted Christian family and find her own life.

Meanwhile, in the contemporary sections, we find a business woman ground down by her high-powered job (of firing people, including Amtrak employees), a woman escaping domestic abuse, a young mother with high hopes for her sweet, basketball son, and that engineer himself. (Even that list of characters

doesn't capture everyone in this sweeping novel.)

Each storyline is rendered with respect and often beauty, though this reader found the broad scope to be, well, limiting. The characters' realizations sometimes feel forced, and their personal journeys either truncated or rushed. Still, the final scene is deeply touching, as one character concludes that the incessant restlessness that drove everyone "collectively forward like a runaway train, that was America."

Carrie Callaghan

A WOMAN MADE OF SNOW

Elisabeth Gifford, *Corvus*, 2021, £14.99, hb, 304pp, 9781838953218

This engaging novel begins with a plea from a person unknown and long dead. The speaker urgently begs to be named and acknowledged. The book is an account of how one 20th-century family travels back in time and away to wild places to enable them to put a name to that mysterious voice and understand why the person was absent from their family tree.

A young couple, Alasdair and Caro, have returned to live on the remote family estate in Fife, where Alasdair's mother lives in the dilapidated family castle. It is a challenging prospect for new mother Caro, who must stay isolated at home with her young baby and only an unappreciative mother-in-law for company when her husband is at work. She is eventually given a sense of purpose by being asked to research the family's historical records to fill in puzzling gaps. The chance discovery, partway through the work of human bones buried on the estate, heightens the importance of her work.

The story alternates between the generation living in the castle in the 1880s and their descendants in 1949-50, showing how issues of family relationships and class recur from generation to generation in slightly different forms, but also how social attitudes to other societies do change over time.

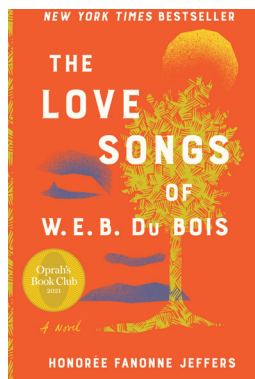
The most vivid sections of the book recreate a 19th-century whaling trip to the Arctic from Dundee, based on research in the records in Dundee museums and diaries from the time, describing in detail the day-to-day lives of the hardy fishermen undertaking those perilous expeditions and the vital part whale-hunting played in the economy of coastal Scotland in the 19th century. A worthy successor to Gifford's earlier novels.

Imogen Varney

THE LOVE SONGS OF W. E. B. DU BOIS

Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, *Harper*, 2021, \$28.99/C\$35.99, hb, 793pp, 9780062942937 / *Fourth Estate*, 2022, £20.00, hb, 816pp, 9780008516451

In 1973 a baby girl is born to Belle and Geoff Garfield. Ailey Pearl Garfield is a lover of books, a child whose lineage stretches back to Africa, the Creek Indians, and settlers who arrived with



Oglethorpe to colonize what we now know as the state of Georgia. This magical novel teases out strands of many histories: Ailey's own journey to maturity, the lives of her immediate family, and those of her ancestors on land the white man stole

from the indigenous people and then named Chickasaw.

We watch Ailey grow, and learn the stories of her sisters, her father, her mother. They spend winters in the city, where Geoff works as a doctor and Belle teaches school. Summers are spent in the South with her grandmother, Miss Rose, and beloved Uncle Root. Ailey's tale intertwines with those of her ancestors: Nila, Micco, Aggie, Nick, the twins Rabbit and Eliza, and so many other forefathers and mothers, and in the telling weaves a rich and deeply textured tapestry of story.

I devoured this amazing novel, but now yearn to go back again, slowly re-read and savor the book, as rich and sweet as the golden juice and flesh of the peaches that grow on Miss Rose's farm. The struggles, loves, and sufferings of Ailey's people open an intimate window on painful chapters in American history which some readers may not be familiar with. Other readers will rejoice, hearing a story that resonates with their own past told so masterfully. Jeffers's prose flows like a powerful river, drawing the reader into the current of Ailey's life and the lives of her ancestors. I didn't want the journey to stop. Highly recommended.

Susan McDuffie

THE LONDON HOUSE

Katherine Reay, *Harper Muse*, 2021, \$17.99, pb, 368pp, 9780785290209

This dual-timeline novel takes place in early 20th-century Paris and present-day London. Through journal entries and correspondence written for the most part in the 1930s, we follow Caroline Payne's painful, yet eventually uplifting, personal journey through a web of dark family secrets. Caroline, an American living in Boston, is stunned when Mat Hammond, a former college friend who is an academic and conducts private family research on the side, contacts her about her British great-aunt who, he asserts, betrayed her family and country to marry a Nazi officer during World War II. This is a big story, and he plans to publish it as a feature article in *The Atlantic*, with or without Caroline's approval.

All her life, Caroline has been told her great-aunt died as a child. What is true? Why the lies? In denial at first, then with growing passion, despite seemingly overwhelming obstacles, Caroline, along with Mat, hunts

the truth. The sad fact is Caroline's family accepted without question the possibility that her great-aunt was a traitor and Nazi collaborator. Angry and embarrassed, they chose simply to let her disappear. Truth is nothing if not complex. What Caroline learns, with the help of Mat, is we must try to learn from the past, no matter how difficult its secrets. Throughout, we see Caroline blossom from someone who feels the heavy weight of responsibility for her sister's death to a strong young woman ready to embrace life.

Early on Mat expresses the heart of the matter when he tells Caroline that even stories we would rather forget can provide us with a sense of hope. "Humans are resilient and endure." Reay's characters are engaging, and her descriptions of Paris and London are lovely.

Alana White

THE SCHOOLTEACHER OF SAINT-MICHEL

Sarah Steele, *Headline Review*, 2022, £8.99, pb, 401pp, 9781472270139

Set in 1942, during the Second World War in France, this is a super story, engaging and suspenseful. The novel opens in the present with a mystery presented to Hannah Stone, also a schoolteacher, about her grandmother's past. Her grandmother, Gigi, left a dying request. She wanted Hannah to take a message to the schoolteacher of Saint-Michel, Lucie Laval, whom she had known during the war.

Hannah sets off to find Lucie and, in the process, seeks to understand the role Gigi played when the Germans occupied France. Hannah also has her own problems, and her quest will give her the opportunity to understand the value of friendship and family.

The reader is soon immersed in the rural society of mid-20th century France, both through the tales of the retired schoolteacher and in Hannah's present-day recreations of old French recipes in the schoolteacher's house and garden in the Dordogne. This is a strength of the novel; the food and surroundings are beautifully evoked with luscious imagery, but it is also a story of heartbreak and romance. The two time streams require the reader to get to know lots of characters, but this is well worth the effort, with interesting and strong female characters.

A well-researched story about women's lives during the Occupation of France. It tells of the women who played their part in resisting the German occupation and is one which will leave the reader full of admiration for their courage as the mystery unfolds.

Bridget Walsh

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE CROWNED HEADS OF EUROPE

Tom Turley, *MX Publishing*, 2021, £9.99/\$14.95, pb, 314pp, 9781787057715

Holmes and Watson tackle four cases in

this pastiche. Spanning 1888 to 1913, the two investigate the death of the German Emperor Frederick, the death of the heir apparent to the Austrian Empire at Mayerling, the 1903 coup in Serbia, and an English shooting party in 1913 attended by Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife. Holmes and Watson's efforts to calm troubled European waters and maintain political equilibrium in the years leading to the Great War make for fascinating reading.

The four cases sweep the reader into the world of late Victorian Europe, the dynasties and political forces that played out over the 35 years prior to the Great War. Still, Holmes cannot change history. As Watson states in his introduction: "Had the facts... been made public... each would have resulted in a European scandal. But in every instance, Holmes's scrupulous investigation remained unresolved and the historical facts behind the cases faded with each passing year. Until... their long-delayed results combined with terrible effect, erupting in the cataclysm that brought down our vanished world."

Tom Turley has done impeccable research; his PhD in late Victorian British defense policy undoubtedly helped. His scholarship shines through, and there are a goodly number of references listed for interested readers, although family trees, or lists of important players included in the book proper, might have made that information somewhat easier to access for non-erudite readers, myself included.

This is an immersive foray into the politics that led up to the First World War, and a pleasurable chance to spend time with the Great Detective and his assistant. A fun read, definitely recommended for Baker Street fans.

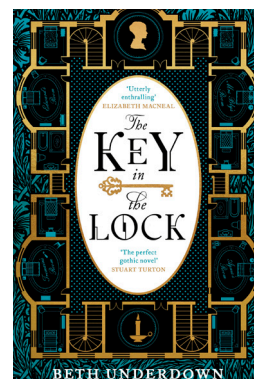
Susan McDuffie

THE KEY IN THE LOCK

Beth Underdown, *Viking*, 2022, £14.99, hb, 279pp, 9780241503300

A gothic tale, set in rural Cornwall over two timelines. In the first, the narrator Ivy is trying to come to terms with the death of her son in the last days of World War I. The second takes place in the 1880s when, as a young woman, she witnessed a catastrophic fire in which a small boy burned to death. In both, she tries to find out the truth of what happened: was each death merely a horrible accident or are there more disturbing forces at work?

Right from the start, there is an unexplained constraint between Ivy and her husband Richard. As the story begins to develop, it becomes clear that this is more than the guilt of parents who have outlived their only child,



and the past begins to entwine with the present. In facing both deaths, Ivy must also look at her own actions as a wife, lover and mother. Young Ivy is beset by a series of unnerving characters: the maid accused of starting the fire; the owner of the great house; the cook who seems to be protecting him; even the coroner investigating the fire. Yet it is only in the later narrative that she can come to terms with the fact that people were not always who she thought they were, even those she loved the most.

The Key in the Lock starts as an exquisitely understated exploration of grief and loss. Underdown's writing is precise and quietly beautiful, becoming increasingly sinister as the earlier story gathers pace and she takes the chance to pose questions about the nature of love and responsibility. This is a slow-burning tale, whose power grows in the latter half. An unsettling and atmospheric novel which stays with the reader long after it ends.

Charlotte Wightwick

A RIVER IN BORNEO

Richard Woodman, McBooks, 2021, \$27.95/£21.95, hb, 240pp, 9781493061921

Lt. Charlie Kirton finds the perfect place to mount a machine gun and command the river snaking through the rainforest of Indonesian Borneo in 1964—the wreck of a nearly 100-year-old brigantine sailing vessel whose name, *Tethys*, holds special significance for Charlie. It's the name of the sailing ship whose captain, Hal Kirton, was his great-grandmother's brother and who disappeared at sea in the 1870s.

A River in Borneo backtracks to Hal, who is unable to continue as second mate on the British steam vessel *River Tay* after severely breaking his leg in 1867. Otherwise consigned to return home as a Distressed British Seaman because of his permanent disability, Hal instead agrees to captain *Tethys* and carry trade goods from island to island for Mr. Cha, head of Singapore's House of the Green Dragon.

On his voyages, Hal rescues and falls in love with a Rungu woman after her family is killed by Bugis pirates, and he runs afoul of Spanish men-of-war hell bent on blockading the port of Jolo in the then-Sultanate of Sulu (now Philippine) archipelago.

Author Woodman spent 37 years at sea as a midshipman and captain before retiring in 1997. He has written both nonfiction and fiction. His maritime novels include the Nathaniel Drinkwater series beginning in 1770, the William Kite slave ship trilogy, the Kit Faulkner series set during the English Civil War, and merchant seaman James Dunbar's voyages just prior to WWI.

As expected from such an experienced writer, the maritime details are plentiful and authentic. Yet the narrative moves beyond sea-going life, wind and steam vessels, shipping and business, and naval power. The storyline builds on themes of duty, friendship, love, loyalty, and legacy. Resonant in time and place, *A River in Borneo* is first rate.

K. M. Sandrick

HISTORICAL FANTASY

DESPERATE REFLECTIONS

Betty Bolté, Mystic Owl Publishing, 2021, \$15.99, pb, 274pp, 9781735466934

Alabama in 1821 is still rustic and not far removed from the complete wilderness which still encompasses most of the North American continent. The Fairhope family, proprietors of their bucolic Fury Falls Inn, are trying to transform their business into an elegant establishment in anticipation of the upcoming visit of a United States Senator. But with their mother recently deceased, there are other even more pressing and weird concerns for the family. For one thing, their father is off on a mission, and there are brothers who must be summoned home. On top of that, two strange and threatening aunts, their late mother's sisters, decide to pay a visit with an intent to entice Cassie Fairhope to come away with them to form the third in a perfect trinity of immense witchcraft powers. Even though she's a ghost, Cassie's mother, Mercy, is endeavoring to prevent this accumulation of bad-intentioned witchcraft, along with some of the Fairhope brothers and friends.

This book is 3rd in a six-book series. It can best be described as a supernatural early-American romance. Indeed, it is a mega-romance which also includes brotherly and sisterly love and abiding friendship among friends, family members and co-workers. But there is a killer on the loose. It seems everyone is a witch of some type, but some don't even know it. The dialogue occasionally seems glib for the time, and there are echoes of Tolkien in a magic ring that "can cause great damage." But I very much liked the descriptions of men and women's fashions of the time and sumptuous descriptions of early 19th-century cooking. Forebodings and warnings add even more spicy suspense, but since it's part of a longer series, there is no ultimate resolution here. Recommended for fans of romance and fantasy.

Thomas J. Howley

A MARVELLOUS LIGHT

Freya Marske, Tor, 2021, £16.99, hb, 384pp, 9781529080889 / Tordotcom, 2021, \$27.99, hb, 384pp, 9781250788870

Set in Edwardian England, *A Marvellous Light* is a magical murder mystery. Young baronet Robin Blyth finds himself with a mystifying new job in the civil service. His predecessor, Reggie, has gone missing and, for an unknown reason, Robin has been inflicted with a hideous curse tattoo. Edwin Courcay arrives as Robin's 'liaison' and promptly sets about Robin's 'unbusheling', which means initiating him into the concealed presence of magic all around him. Robin discovers that it is his job to report on any ruptures in the secrecy around magic to Prime Minister Asquith.

The settings in Edwardian London and on a couple of country estates are vividly drawn.

Robin is hale and hearty, but there is more 'dark' to Edwin. Edwin is ashamed of how feeble his own magic is compared to that of his siblings. As the two men set about solving Reggie's disappearance and trying to remove the tattoo on Robin's arm, they grow attracted to one another. Robin discovers that he has the gift of foresight. The brittle magical set of Edwin's sister is finely drawn, as is the truly, scary, bad magic of Edwin's older brother. Edwin and Robin must run the gauntlet of a murderous maze and find themselves with a second murder to solve.

The characterisation in the novel is strong, with particular psychological depth in the character of erudite Edwin. The suspense keeps the reader pressing on. The romance between Robin and Edwin is well written, and in places the novel shifts gear into tender erotica. The blending of the elements—an almost comical, upper-class tale; a romance; a sinister murderous plot—rub up against each other a little uneasily at times. Written in highly readable prose, this is a thoroughly enjoyable story. *A Marvellous Light* is the first in a trilogy and leaves us wanting more soon. I am certainly keen to read the next two!

Tracey Warr

CHILDREN & YOUNG ADULT

ONCE UPON A CAMEL

Kathi Appelt, illus. Eric Rohmann, Atheneum, 2021, \$17.99/C\$22.99, hb, 336pp, 9781534406438

Appelt charms in this heartwarming middle-grade tale of a camel in the desert of West Texas in 1910. Zada the camel has lived a long life, first as one of the Pasha's finest racing camels in Turkey, then as a U.S. Army camel in Texas, and finally, as a desert nomad. One day, a terrible dust storm whirls up, and Zada rescues a pair of baby kestrels before the cottonwood tree they live in gets blown over. The babies' parents get swept away on the drafts, and Zada must carry the little ones to the Mission, where she'd promised their parents they would take shelter. As they travel through dangerous mountain lion territory, Zada tells the babies the stories of her life and adventures with her dear friend Asiye. Together, they won races that brought the Pasha fame and fortune, traveled across the ocean to America, and wandered the desert until Asiye's body gave out from age.

Taking inspiration from *One Thousand and One Nights*, Appelt has woven a beautiful story about friendship, hope, found family, and the lifesaving power of storytelling. While occasional anachronistic phrases such as "just saying" and "nothing burger" pull an adult reader out of the early 20th century, it's unlikely middle-grade readers will be bothered. Adults and children alike will be delighted to learn about the camels who briefly wandered the deserts of the American Southwest. Highly recommended.

Sarah Hendess

THE DAY THE PIRATES WENT MAD

Trevor Atkins, Silverpath Publishing, 2021,
\$11.95, pb, 224pp, 9781989459027

When Emma Sharpe's parents end up in debtors' prison, she's sent to a London orphanage. Labeled a troublemaker, she befriends a sailor whose stories fill her with dreams of adventure and faraway places. She learns that the *New Adventure* is making ready to depart, so she stows away aboard the vessel.

Hunger drives her to the galley, where the cook takes her to the captain. Seeing something of himself in eleven-year-old Emma, he offers her a choice: work for her passage and join the crew or disembark at their next port of call. Before long, Emma thrives at sea, first as a powder monkey and then an able seaman. By 1702, when circumstances permit, she sends home money to pay down her parents' debt.

New Adventure is not a typical merchant ship. Her blended crew of men, women, and children share in the profits garnered from each voyage. They also do a bit of smuggling and privateering, but never pirating. They form a cohesive unit until Emma stumbles across the sole survivor of a derelict, treasure-laden pirate ship.

Initially, the story unfolds with brief segments of the present interwoven with flashbacks of backstory. Action takes center stage later, especially once Emma happens upon the dying pirate. Geared toward tween readers, this Emma Sharpe *Adventure* is a story of modern inclusivity set in the past. This isn't historically correct, but it allows readers to better identify with the characters, each of whom has a particular strength. The piratical elements are true to history, and the author includes a glossary and website where teaching resources can be found. *The Day the Pirates Went Mad* is a good introduction to life at sea and is written in a manner that makes the Age of Sail more interesting to today's young readers.

Cindy Vallar

WE PLAYED WITH FIRE

Catherine Barter, Andersen Press, 2021, £7.99,
pb, 332pp, 9781839130069

This YA novel is based on the intriguing true story of sisters Maggie and Kate Fox who convinced many people in mid-19th-century America that they could communicate with the spirits of the dead. It begins in 1848 when the Fox family has recently relocated to the community of Hydesville, New York, drawing readers in by relating the sensationally reported incident which began the girls' careers as mediums. The narrative then goes back to 1847 when they lived in Rochester in the home of Amy and Isaac Post, activists in the anti-slavery and women's rights movements. The action moves forward again to 1848 when the girls became famous for conducting séances in New York City. Their activities are met with opprobrium from some quarters of

society and with encouragement from others. The latter is due to emotional need on the part of those who have lost loved ones but also to an interest in Spiritualism from some radical thinkers, and this insight into the political and historical context of the time gives depth to the novel.

The author says in an afterword that 'Historical accounts of the Fox sisters tend to present them as gifted mediums, or absolute frauds.' The way their story is woven in this novel presents them with much more nuance. They are under no illusion that they are using a variety of tricks to persuade people of their veracity. However, there are events and coincidences that are not easily explained away, and the older sister Maggie, in particular, has encounters that are left open to interpretation. Although this a third-person narrative, Maggie is certainly the focal character. She is fourteen at the time the story takes place, an age when the prospective readership may be inclined to identify and empathise with her and her adolescent uncertainties.

Ann Lazim

UNDER A STARLIT SKY

E.M. Castellan, Feiwel & Friends, 2021, \$21.99,
hb, 368pp, 9781250226068

Castellan concludes her *In the Shadow of the Sun* duology, set in a fantasy-alternative version of the French Court of Louis XIV. Geared toward a young adult audience, Castellan's 17th-century France relies on clichéd depictions of both court intrigues and magical powers but redeems them somewhat with a complex portrait of the famous marriage between Henrietta of England (sister of King Charles II) and the charismatic Monsieur, the openly bisexual brother of the Sun King. The union of these two attractive nobles—each more sensible and humane than their ambitious royal siblings—is depicted in Castellan's novel as a modern "open" marriage made possible by the essential decency of the spouses and their allies in the competitive French court.

Writers of fantasy have been making great strides in representation, not just with LGBTQ+ characters like Monsieur. This novel also presents a protagonist who struggles to navigate court politics while managing a chronic illness (the real Henrietta was frequently debilitated by lung and digestive problems). It's refreshing to experience the exhausting rounds of courtly social obligations from the point of view of someone who is realistic about their toll on even the healthiest of constitutions.

However well intentioned, the novel creaks under the weight of a thin plot of magical intrigue and far too many repetitive details of fabrics and furniture, as well as the delicious French cuisine that Henrietta constantly rejects. Historical fiction fans will be frustrated with the many inaccuracies and anachronisms, and fantasy fans may be impatient with the system of magic's lack of coherence and logic, which is used (to avoid

conflict with actual historical events) mainly for entertainment purposes, making the descriptions of sparkling illusions redundant in the context of the actual splendors of Versailles.

Kristen McDermott

BRIGHT RUINED THINGS

Samantha Cohoe, Wednesday Books, 2022,
\$18.99/C\$25.99, hb, 352pp, 9781250768841

Mae Wilson is an eighteen-year-old orphan on a magical island surrounded by miles of ocean. The Prosper family, headed by Lord Alphonsus Prosper, leads a glittering lifestyle there. It is funded by the magical power source "aether," which Lord Prosper discovered and used to make a fortune. The faerie-like spirits who inhabit the island toil in the aether wells and serve the Prosper family.

Mae is unhappy because she has no magical abilities and no real claim to a place on the island. She is the daughter of the deceased steward. The wealthy, glamorous Prospers tend to overlook and discount her. She is manipulated into an uncomfortable engagement with the magician Ivo, heir to his grandfather Lord Prosper. Mae prefers another grandson, Miles, despite his lack of interest in her. Some of the family can do magic and some cannot, but Ivo is designated as the one who will continue the lucrative aether business.

As the "immortal" spirits start to die, the gilded beauty of the island seems to fade. Mae learns that magic was used to harm her, and she suspects something sinister must be lurking.

This story enchants and entertains. Inspired by Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, it shares a similar dreamy island setting. I had a little trouble sorting through all the Prosper relatives, but there is a useful family tree in the book. There are a handful of passing references to 1920s life, barely giving this fantasy a historical slant.

Elizabeth Knowles

HEART OF THE IMPALER

Alexander Delacroix, Swoon Reads, 2021,
\$18.99, hb, 352pp, 9781250756169

Steeped in 15th-century blood, Delacroix has brought Transylvanian and Wallachian history vividly to life. The fact that one central character is a young Vlad Dracul III (aka Dracula) makes the novel even more enticing. Vlad Dracul II was a ruthless and unpopular voivode (although, as "Impaler," his son eventually upstaged his father's many efforts at brutality!) and the boyars (warlords) frequently staged uprisings against him. A dangerous time to be anywhere near court.

Based around historical figures of the time, the nub of the story is the friendly threesome between Vlad, his fictional cousin Andrei Musat, and Ilona Csáki, forcibly betrothed by Vlad II to Mircea, young Vlad's loathsome older brother, as part of a bargain to elevate and subjugate her boyar father. Ilona's

affections waver between Vlad's boorish and possessive advances as he romanticises the idea of her becoming his queen (after he has murdered Mircea), and Andrei's gentle, compassionate nature. When circumstances force Andrei and Ilona together, sheltering at the home of a boyar ally, they find much in common through her love of artistry and science.

The novel is equal part mystery and adventure, and the denouement leaves the door ajar for a sequel in which Andrei and Ilona may be sorely tested. Filled with murder, mayhem and treachery, the narrative moves at the speed of the galloping horses the boys ride to vie for Ilona's affections. Vlad is rather wooden and a stereotypical bully, unsurprisingly, and his sense of entitlement furthers more dislike. There's plenty of action and derring-do which will appeal to young adult readers, but for readers seeking romance this might not do the trick. The appendix of Hungarian and Romanian words is informative, and the history is positively moreish, even though Delacroix admits to certain poetic license.

Fiona Alison

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Marissa Doyle, *Book View Cafe*, 2021, \$13.99, pb, 330pp, 9781636320038

Set in the United States home front as the U.S. enters World War I in 1917, this entertaining fantasy-tinged YA follows 17-year-old Emma Verlain. She's been raised by her geologist father and a series of colorful nannies and tutors. When her father is called to serve in Washington, her own efforts to serve as a nurse or secretary are thwarted by her age and inexperience.

Emma and a more worldly cousin are sent to stay for the summer with her Gran on an island off Cape Cod. She loves island life and draws the romantic interest of several young men, but Emma only has eyes for Malcolm, part of an eccentric hotel owning family. Together they delight in the antics of the local seals, who take an intense interest in Emma.

On the island, a new Navy Air Station guards the coast from German U-boats. Soon spies and saboteurs enter the picture and resourceful Emma must unlock the secrets of her mother's past and her own identity in order to join Malcolm in saving the island she's come to love.

Enchanting Selkie tale joins well-researched history in this light-hearted adventure that teens are sure to enjoy.

Eileen Charbonneau

DARWIN'S DRAGONS

Lindsay Galvin, illus. Gordy Wright, *Chicken House*, 2020, £6.99, pb, 256pp, 9781912626465

This is an attractive, charmingly illustrated novel that succeeds in blending fact and information with fantasy.

Everyone knows the story of Charles Darwin's exploration of the Galapagos islands, their strange fauna, and the paradigm-shifting conclusions eventually drawn from them. In this book, the animals prove even stranger than those that still occupy the islands today. Ship's boy and latterly Mr. Darwin's assistant, Syms Covington, finds himself lost and shipwrecked on one of the smaller and still volcanic islands, and potential prey to an enormous dragon.

His escape, and the smuggling to England of both a young dragon and a clutch of dragon eggs which he and Mr. Darwin must struggle to protect, form the basis of this pacey and intriguing narrative. A final twist set 25 years into the future ensures a heart-warming ending,

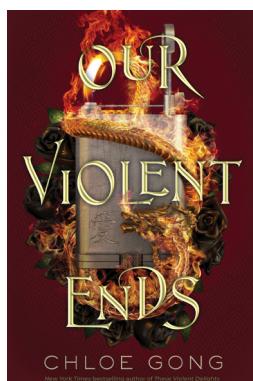
Life at sea on the *Beagle*, the boy's survival of a volcanic eruption, and the final chapters set in Victorian Britain are all vividly recreated. The writing is simple but evocative and uses a few easy archaisms to give authenticity; for example, Syms 'had been awful feared...' that the sailors might 'take violent' to his pet lizard (or dragon, as he later discovers), and is relieved when they don't. Descriptions are neat and short but effective: the air before a storm 'smelt of copper pennies' and an adult dragon is 'bigger than four stage-coaches all squashed together'. The book's humour will appeal to both children and adults—at one point Queen Victoria comes to the rescue, 'boots and gaiters beneath her long skirts', wading in a cave pool and tossing sardines to the young dragons.

I would heartily recommend this book for young readers of eight years old and upwards, and to younger children as a chapter book for bedtime reading.

Jane Burke

OUR VIOLENT ENDS

Chloe Gong, Margaret K. McElderry, 2021, \$19.99/C\$24.99, pb, 512pp, 9781534457720



As these forces work to destroy one another and the people of Shanghai, the heirs of two feuding gangs fight to save their city.

Gong builds an unspeakably violent world to house the deepest friendships, sweetest romances, and strongest family bonds. It is a tale rooted in family, kindness, and a love much bigger than two people. Gong's characters are complex and introspective. No action is without consequence in this romance because true love can only end in tragedy.

As the characters transcend gender roles, family expectations, and a city soaked in blood, each connects with something so much bigger than themselves. While Gong stays true to Shakespeare's original themes, she brings to life a host of rich characters in a vibrant world. It is a world far beyond the grasp of a white, male, English playwright. Love is not only powerful in this story. It is equal. The moments that took my breath away were not between Juliette and her star-crossed love but the LGBTQ+ characters, who face much greater obstacles than feuding families.

This band of intrepid young gangsters must forge their own paths as they desperately

fight to escape the sins of their fathers. As the streets of Shanghai run red with blood, Roma and Juliette fight for so much more than true love. Readers will clutch the final chapters of this reimagined classic with white knuckles and racing hearts. Highly recommended for ages 14 and up.

Melissa Warren

SHACKLETON'S ENDURANCE: An Antarctic Survival Story

Joanna Grochowicz, Allen & Unwin, 2021, \$13.99/A\$16.99, pb, 290pp, 9781760526092

Most explorers' fame rests on routes charted or new lands found—regardless of the human cost. Sir Ernest Shackleton, a towering figure of Antarctic exploration, failed in his goal to cross the icy continent. His fame rests on a different, astounding achievement: bringing every crew member home alive after two years of unimaginable hardship stretching from August 1914 to August 1916. A testament to his leadership, charisma, compassion, and uncanny judge of character is the absence of factions between suffering men or any serious challenge to "the boss."

Joanna Grochowicz draws on exhaustive research to build a vivid, multi-sensory chronicle of that harrowing adventure. We hear ice cracking the ship's timbers and feel the agonizing struggle to move supplies across tortuous terrain, the unending cold, and the challenges of finding food and shelter in a land of ice and rock while enduring endless months of doubt, fear, and boredom. We're with Shackleton in an unequalled feat of navigation in an open boat on stormy Antarctic seas to a tiny inhabited island where he marshals a rescue effort. Grochowicz's accounting of these trials is so vivid that the reader must constantly remember that the men did survive.

The narrative is supplemented by a list of crew members and functions, charming sketches of each man, a chronology, maps, and Frank Hurley's evocative photographs. Outdoor enthusiasts and armchair explorers, YA and adult audiences will find *Shackleton's Endurance* an engrossing read and convincing proof of "the boss's" characteristically modest observation, "What a lot a man can endure! In the right company!"

Pamela Schoenewaldt

THE RECKLESS KIND

Carly Heath, *Soho Teen*, 2021, \$18.99, hb, 336pp, 9781641292818

Three misfit Norwegian teens are the central characters in this novel set in 1904: Asta Hedstrom has a genetic condition later identified as Waardenburg Syndrome, Erlend Fournier loves putting on plays, and Gunnar Fuglestad is Asta's childhood friend who recently lost an arm in a farm accident; Erlend's parents have taken him in while he recuperates, because his mother is dead and his father is a drunk. Asta is supposed to be preparing to marry Nils but would rather act in plays. The two boys find a growing attraction between them, leading to a break between Erlend and his parents. The three move to a property outside of town after Asta is cast off by her family for refusing to marry Nils.

Gunnar's family is in danger of losing their

farm, and the three get the idea that if they can win the town's annual Christmas sleigh race, the prize would pay off the taxes. They hear that a neighbor has imported thoroughbred horses from abroad, and the rules create another problem: three members of the same family must ride in the sleigh, but both Gunnar and his farrier brother Fred, recently concussed from a horse kick, are too injured to compete. Can this found family convince the town fathers to let them race, and can they find acceptance for their non-mainstream lifestyles?

Heath is skilled at staying within historical boundaries when it comes to vocabulary—the word “gay” describing Gunnar and Erland is not mentioned, nor is Asta's asexuality called that; instead, she wonders if her lack of “carnal instincts” means she'll always be alone. I like a book that keeps me guessing what will happen next, and also one with complex characters like these. The story will provide a beacon of hope to nonconforming teens and young adults.

B. J. Sedlock

THE CORPSE QUEEN

Heather M. Herrman, Putnam, 2021, \$18.99, hb, 416pp, 9781984816702

1850s Philadelphia. After her friend's body is found in the river, fellow orphan Molly believes the man her friend was seeing, a medical student named Edgar, is to blame. Molly is sent away to stay with an estranged aunt who asks Molly to perform a secret nightly task: obtaining corpses for medical students. Molly realizes this is her best chance to find Edgar and accepts. When other women begin to go missing and later turn up mutilated, Molly suspects Edgar is more dangerous than anyone suspected.

Molly is in her friend's grave when the book opens. Stage: set. Even metaphors are thought of in macabre medical references: “the sky was a festering wound, clotted with clouds.” Molly's journey as she finds her own way is captivating. By day, she rubs elbows with the upper crust of Philadelphia society while by night she's gathering bodies.

A couple of times, a character takes off a dress by pulling it over her head. Dresses were commonly of two pieces in this era in addition to the crinoline and petticoats underneath. I also had concerns about the 12–17 years reading age. Molly's closest friend works upstairs at a place called “The Red Carousel.” While there, Molly participates in using a whip against a man. Additionally, the interludes introduce a woman who's killed a man with some non-subtle sensual references to her previous affair.

Molly's struggles to define herself in a man's world are the heart of this novel. The story is peppered with side characters that add varying degrees of depth and empathy to Molly's world. The controversy of obtaining bodies is wrestled with and compared to how

poor people and women are treated by society in life. This is a dark, atmospheric, and tense medical thriller that hooked me from page one.

J. Lynn Else

THE RED PALACE

June Hur, Feiwel & Friends, 2022, \$18.99/C\$24.99, hb, 336pp, 9781250800558

As the illegitimate daughter of an aging concubine, Hyeon does not have many options. The strict laws of Korea in 1758 separate her from the rest of society. She is bound by the invisible chains of the caste system until her mentor shows her how to break them.

June Hur's story chronicles Hyeon's quest to outsmart a system designed to crush her. At just eighteen, Hyeon is a skilled palace nurse. She spends her days attending to the ladies of the court. However, she lacks the cunning to avoid the danger within the walls of the Changdeok Palace and soon finds herself entangled in a series of gruesome murders. Hyeon risks everything as she uses her medical training and fearlessness to find a killer and save her mentor.

This novel is everything a reader wants in a murder mystery and a romance, but it is so much more. Hur has the uncanny ability to immerse readers in a faraway world and make them instantly feel at home. She seamlessly weaves rich historical details into the action and explains a brutal caste system, complicated political landscape, and fascinating medical practices through Hyeon's eyes. She provides a delicate balance of details that show both the beauty and the horror of an ancient land. I highly recommend this book for readers 13 and up.

Melissa Warren

AGGIE MORTON, MYSTERY QUEEN #3: The Dead Man in The Garden

Marthe Jocelyn, illus. Isabelle Follath, Tundra, 2021, \$16.99/C\$19.99/£14.99, hb, 368pp, 9780735270817

In this third Aggie Morton mystery, twelve-year-old Aggie (the young Agatha Christie) travels to the Wellspring Hotel and Spa with her mother, grandmother, and young Belgian friend Hector Perot. They are surprised (and excited!) to learn that a woman and former patient at the spa died mysteriously on a park bench a few days prior to their arrival. That evening, a guest, Mr. Hart, receives a telephone call telling him that his niece has suffered an emergency. She had gone with her husband to the bandstand to listen to music and dance. Mr. Hart rushes from the hotel to find her. When the niece returns, having suffered no emergency, Hector and Aggie leave the spa to find Mr. Hart. They discover him on a park bench, dead. The two young detectives assume the deaths are connected murders. With the help of their new friend,

George, a wheelchair-bound teenager, and a clever female undertaker, Aggie and Hector collect clues to solve the mysteries.

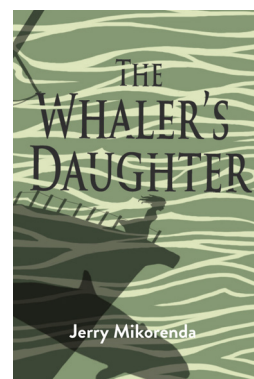
At first, I thought the criminal was obvious, but as Aggie and Hector uncover details and learn more about the myriad suspects, the trail to the murderer became tangled. This is a cleverly written mystery, and the way the young detectives discuss the clues and their suspicions is a perfect model of problem-solving techniques. Having not read the first two books in the series, I was easily able to understand the character relationships and follow the story. A fun read for mystery lovers of all ages!

Elizabeth Caulfield Felt

THE WHALER'S DAUGHTER

Jerry Mikorenda, Fitzroy Books, 2021, \$17.95/C\$23.95, pb, 270pp, 9781646030705

At the turn of the 20th century in Australia, twelve-year-old Savannah Dawson dreams of the day her father will invite her to participate in a whale hunt. Living a sheltered life on a whaling station, Savannah is feisty and independent and longs to join her father's crew. The Dawson family have built their lives around the lucrative whale oil they produce from successful hunts, but life on Reflect Bay



can come with perils, as both of Savannah's older brothers drowned in a fishing accident.

The Dawsons use orcas, also known as killer whales but part of the dolphin family, to help them locate sperm whales on a hunt.

Savannah becomes friends with Figgie, an Aboriginal boy who shares the ancient knowledge his village has about the orcas. It is not until a legendary orca rescues her after her boat capsized in shark-infested waters that Savannah begins to understand the intelligence and emotions of the orca pod.

However, the townspeople view the orcas as a menace, and one greedy fishing company plans to slaughter them. It will be up to Savannah and Figgie to try and save the magnificent animals.

I thoroughly enjoyed this story, although it took me a while to acclimate to all the Australian dialects spoken by the characters. Intended for audiences twelve and older, this book has a swift-moving plot, well-defined characters, and just a touch of fantasy to hold the reader's attention to a satisfying ending. I definitely recommend it.

Linda Harris Sittig

THE DIAMOND KEEPER

Jeannie Mobley, Viking, 2021, \$18.99/C\$24.99, hb, 352pp, 9781984837448

In 1792, nineteen-year-old Claudie Durand, an innkeeper's daughter in a small village in Brittany, expects never to marry because all the men are attracted to her beautiful younger sister Mathilde. The events of the French Revolution seem distant to Claudie and her family. When the revolutionary army destroys her village, everything changes. Mathilde's admirer is killed in the fighting, but he entrusts her with a magnificent blue diamond, stolen from the royal treasury. The two sisters journey across the war-torn countryside to bring the diamond to a mysterious man known as the Rooster of Rennes, the leader of a troop of royalist rebels. Claudie hopes that she, Mathilde, and the Rooster will reach England and use the diamond to negotiate with the Prince of Wales for military aid for the royalist cause. She unexpectedly finds love with the Rooster, but will the war destroy her chance of happiness?

The Diamond Keeper is a companion volume to Mobley's previous novel, *The Jewel Thief*, which tells the story of how the diamond, known today as the Hope Diamond, came to be cut for Louis XIV. Because the two books take place so far apart in time, they can easily be read on their own, but reading the previous book, and knowing the history of the diamond, enhances the reader's enjoyment of this one. I loved the character of Claudie, a heroine who is not beautiful and feels inferior to her sister. She has great strength and determination and overcomes many dangers during her journey to England. I also enjoyed reading a novel about the French Revolution that does not take place in Paris. Claudie's village is far from the major events, but, even there, people are not safe, and Claudie, who thought herself ordinary, becomes a heroine. Highly recommended for ages 12 and up.

Vicki Kondelik

THE PUFFIN KEEPER

Michael Morpurgo, illus. Benji Davies, Puffin, 2022, \$17.99, hb, 112pp, 9780735271807 / Puffin, 2021, £7.99, pb, 112pp, 9780241454503

Colourfully and creatively illustrated by Benji Davies, this captivating tale based on true events spans decades as it charts human remembrance and reconciliation. A young boy, along with all thirty passengers, is rescued from certain death on a stormy night as his passenger schooner, the *Pelican*, destroys itself on the rocks below the Scilly lighthouse. Fighting the angry seas, keeper Benjamin Postlethwaite makes numerous dangerous trips in a small boat to bring all safely to his lighthouse.

Questioned by the press on his heroic efforts, the keeper stoically noted: "I'm not saying nothing, excepting to say it were done because it were needed to be done."

Decades flow; the youth evolves into a man and becomes a sailor himself drawn into World War II. Surviving the many catastrophes that

battle can inflict, the hardened sailor ponders his past and begins to explore that day so long ago when he was saved by this silent and reclusive man.

A small, unframed painting of a ragged puffin, from rescuer to rescued, transforms the future. The numerous paintings that festooned the walls of the lighthouse have remained engrained in the young mind of Allen Williams. Why such a fixation for the keeper?

His attempts to research his past prove elusive. Numerous letters go unanswered with time and frustration growing. Finally, eschewing convention, he boldly arrives at the now-decommissioned lighthouse and presents himself to his rescuer. Surprisingly, all his letters had been carefully saved and a deeply personal secret is revealed.

Highly recommended, this novel provides a setting for numerous adventures for the young adult reader. Past and present merge, buried mysteries resolve, the enigmatic puffins thrive, and positive possible futures unfold.

Jon G. Bradley

DAUGHTERS OF A DEAD EMPIRE

Carolyn Tara O'Neil, Roaring Brook, 2022, \$18.99/C\$25.99, hb, 336pp, 9781250755537

As civil war between the Reds and Whites rages across Russia in 1918, Evgenia, a sixteen-year-old peasant, drives from village to village with her horse and wagon, peddling goods but finding few buyers. When she comes across an angry mob attempting to shove a bourgeois girl of about her own age into a fire, Evgenia saves her, but her sympathy for the would-be victim, Anna, only goes so far. A proud revolutionary, Evgenia refuses Anna's pleas to drive her to the nearest train station—until Anna produces a diamond. Desperate to find a way to pay for a doctor to tend her dying brother, Evgenia agrees to give Anna a ride, unaware that her bedraggled but well-spoken passenger is the Grand Duchess Anastasia, who has just escaped the massacre of her family at Ekaterinburg. But with rival armies roaming about and the hunt on for Anastasia, the girls' troubles are only beginning. Just as the heroines, who tell their story in the first person in alternating chapters, begin to like and trust each other, they find themselves in mortal danger.

Given the overwhelming evidence against Anastasia's survival, which O'Neil acknowledges in her author's note, a modern novelist who hopes to convince the reader otherwise has a formidable task, and I was never quite able to suspend my disbelief. I also marveled at Evgenia's ease in throwing the F-word around at the slightest provocation, especially since some of the very rough men the teens encounter are more inhibited in their language. Still, this novel, O'Neil's first, is fast-paced and well plotted, with two resourceful, feisty heroines. It should appeal to young adult readers and to older ones as well.

Susan Higginbotham

THE GREAT DESTROYERS

Caroline Tung Richmond, Scholastic, 2021, \$18.99/C\$25.99, hb, 400pp, 9781338266740

In this YA 1963 alternative history, nuclear weapons remain unknown. Instead, advanced robots carry out tasks that range from fighting wars to serving cocktails at dinner parties. The story centers on the annual Pax Games, where two-person teams of teenagers from 25 qualifying countries joust until only one combatant is left standing. This year, the US hosts the Games in Washington, D.C. Heads of state and dignitaries, including Russia's Khrushchev, attend. The robots run on batteries powered by a natural fuel, called esterium. Nations engage in sinister plots at the Games to align with esterium-rich countries.

Every competitor wears a mecha, a robot suit that enhances any move and helps protect against strikes. The mechas allow young men and women to fight each other until the winner pins the loser to the ground for a count of five.

Josephine "Jo" Linden, her widowed father, and younger brother live in San Francisco. Dad runs a robot repair shop, and her brother can fix just about any robot. Jo is her region's fighting champion but is unknown elsewhere. When an injury forces one U.S. team member to drop out, Jo gets to take his place. More challenges than the other contestants confront her. Someone starts a mysterious fire, poisons adversaries, and sets up Jo (and the U.S.) to take the fall.

Richmond has created a fun history of the pre-Vietnam War era. The Linden family—Jo's mother was of Chinese descent—adds heart-tugging complexity at a time of common racism against "non-Americans." The other combatants—from silky smooth and fast French to tough world champion Russians—create constant surprises. JFK, Jackie, LBJ, and Khrushchev make realistic cameo appearances. Refreshingly, no obligatory romance sidetracks this engaging and well-told story. Highly recommended.

G. J. Berger

ROBIN HOOD: The Shadows of Sherwood Forest

Tilman Roehrig (trans. Oliver Latch), Arctis Books, 2021, \$18.95/£15.99, hb, 350pp, 9781646900077

This novel opens at the 1189 death of King Henry II, followed by the crowning of his older son, Richard the Lionheart, and Richard's departure for a Crusade to reclaim Jerusalem.



Greedy younger brother, John, and his cruel acolytes now rule. They tax commoners into starvation and hang or jail any complainers. Evil sheriffs and

lords murder loyalists merely because they witnessed earlier crimes.

A giant young hunter, John Little, brings home a precious deer. His small village rejoices. But wild game belongs to the King. Soldiers ambush the villagers and slaughter everyone they find. Only John and a young girl, Marian, escape. Together they flee into deep forests and are captured by Robin Hood's outlaws. Robin quickly assesses John's many skills and quiet strength. Robin's band renames John as Little John, and he becomes Robin's constant advisor. The story unfolds mainly through John's point of view.

For years Robin Hood's bases remain hidden while his men raid the wealthy and help the poor. Local rulers use bribes and all the soldiers and horses they can muster to thwart Robin. Clever forays by both sides build to thrilling encounters between the two groups.

Magnetic leader Robin runs like a cat and is a champion archer. We watch Marian grow up and a banished priest, Friar Tuck, join the outlaws. Roehrig's secondary characters are often scene stealers. He knows the terrain, the customs and clothes, the foods and weapons. He puts readers deep into secret forests, noisy towns, and castles. This YA/adult crossover story, though translated from German, is not just a rousing addition to the legend of Robin Hood but also a well-told slice of English society and history during challenging times.

G. J. Berger

THE BOOKSHOP OF DUST AND DREAMS

Mindy Thompson, Viking, 2021, \$16.99/C\$22.99, hb, 330pp, 9780593110379

In 1944 in the fictional town of Sutton, New York, thirteen-year-old Poppy Fulbright helps her parents run their bookshop, Rhyme and Reason. But Rhyme and Reason is not a typical bookshop. It's a living being, full of magic, and attracts customers from other places and times—up to one century before and one century beyond its root time. The Fulbrights' mission is to protect the bookshop's magic and never use it for their own gain. But when Poppy's brother, Al, loses his best friend in World War II, he tries to use the magic to save his friend, rending cracks through the precariously balanced Dark and Light. With her father hospitalized with a mysterious illness, it falls to Poppy to stop her brother and save the magic.

This book is an absolute delight. Thompson has built a rich world where bookshops have feelings and characters must rely on each other to set things right and restore magic to the world. Poppy is a fully realized protagonist with talents and weaknesses, loves and fears. Most importantly, she sends a message about not giving up on someone you love because of a single mistake. Written for the middle

grades, this novel includes a brilliant plot twist that even this seasoned adult reviewer didn't predict. Highly recommended.

Sarah Hendess

STEALING HOME

J. Torres, illus. David Namisato, Kids Can Press, 2021, \$17.99/C\$18.99, hb, 112pp, 9781525303340

Young Sandy Saito loves his hometown Vancouver's all-Japanese baseball team, but when they are knocked out during the playoffs in 1941, his father calls it a bad omen. And it may well be, since shortly after comes the bombing of Pearl Harbor and a whiplash of anti-Japanese sentiment. Sandy and his family are soon confined to their home, at first fearful of going out and then prohibited. But Sandy's father, a doctor who had to be trained in Japan because Canadian schools would not admit Asian men, remains committed to his patients, even at the expense of spending time with his terrified young family. When the worst happens and the family is separated from their father and sent to a camp deep in the Canadian wilderness, Sandy fears he'll never feel safe again.

This sweet, artfully drawn graphic novel brings the shameful internment camps to life for middle grade readers. Sandy's yearning for his father is palpable, and his family's hardships are both gripping and illuminating. This is a great way to introduce young readers to a dark historical moment, one that still resonates today.

Carrie Callaghan

IZAR, THE AMESBURY ARCHER

Michael E. Wills, Independently published, 2021, \$14.99, pb, 250pp, 9781916392694

During the Stone Age, Izar must prove his worth in an unforgiving landscape after an accident limits the use of his knee. He becomes skilled in creating copper knives, and many headmen would kill for such craftsmanship. Thus begins Izar's journey from clan to clan as he struggles to find safety and a home.

While this novel is geared for young adults, Izar never comes across as youthful. Granted, his life is hanging on a balance, as those with disabilities rarely survive long. Thus, he grows up fast. The tension is thick throughout the storyline. However, younger readers may struggle to connect. The only characters of the target age group either die or are the subjects of discussions about child sacrifice. Without a relatable narrator, I worry this novel will struggle with its market appeal. Where it will attract is with its disabled main character who learns and grows and travels (with help). The novel embraces what it means to be different in an unforgiving setting. Bravo!

Everything seemed well edited until page

138 when it suddenly jumped to page 145. Five pages later, pages 139-144 appeared. Another critical eye would be welcomed to finalize the book to its most professional state.

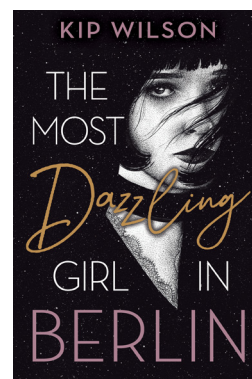
Story-wise, Izar traverses a vast landscape, by land and sea. The settings are vibrant. Wills's research shines in the meticulous details surrounding Izar's craft, which continues to develop throughout the novel and will engage readers. A captivating tale of a boy-turned-man using his skills to survive in ancient times.

J. Lynn Else

THE MOST DAZZLING GIRL IN BERLIN

Kip Wilson, Versify, 2022, \$18.99, hb, 416pp, 9780358448907

Hilde is barely eighteen and a recent escapee from an orphanage, yet she stands poised to conquer 1930s queer Berlin. At the



Café Lila, where she finds work as a waitress, she experiences head-on what it means to straddle the social, racial, and gender divide in this city, which offers a home not only to uncensored c a b a r e t s , ingenious lesbian

balladists, and gay performers, but to the burgeoning National Socialist movement, which is out to destroy this diverse, liberal scene. Whilst Hilde falls in love and charts out a singing career, Hitler's heinous supporters, not content with terrorizing every aspect of public life, are set to invade the private sanctuaries of Berlin's gay community, of which she forms part. Can Hilde, her young lover, and their friends escape the lethal Nazi threat and erect a safe place somewhere else? The reader, who is bound to be smitten with Hilde and her cast of characters, will wish and hope fervently that her story, at least, will end in peace and safety.

Girl, you are indeed dazzling, and not only in Berlin. Contemporary audiences worldwide are likely to love you, as well. This young adult novel is written in verses that read like modern songs, or in the historical context in which the story is set, like the urban ballads of Berthold Brecht, performed by Marlene Dietrich or Ute Lemper, which tell of the fall of early 20th-century German industrial society and prophecy its descent into darkness. The language is as shinningly beautiful as the leading characters, Hilde and Rosa, and an absolute pleasure to read. A brilliant addition to the canon of LGBTQ young adult literature.

Elisabeth Lenckos

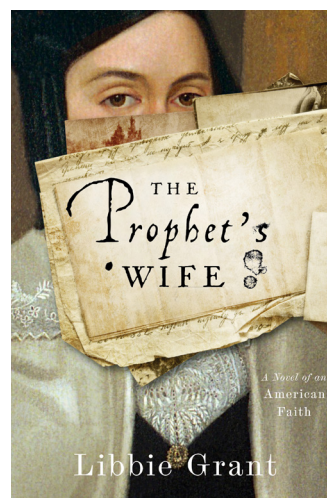
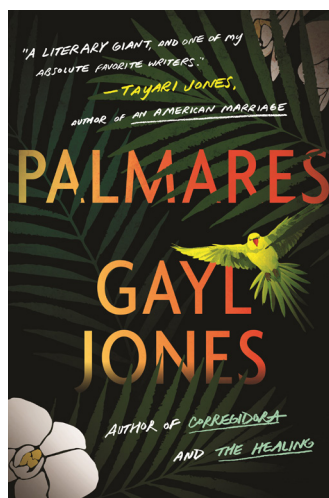
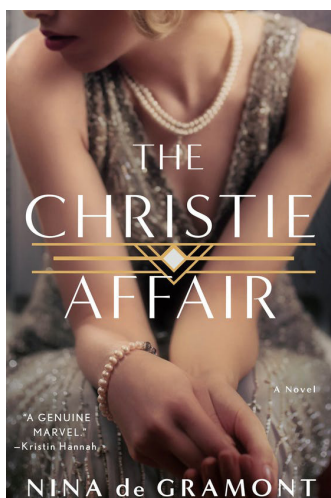
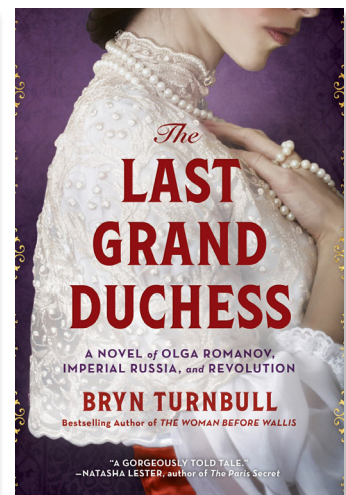
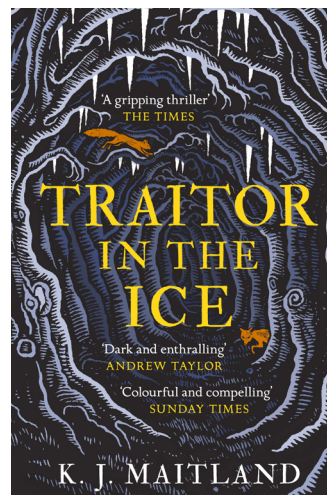
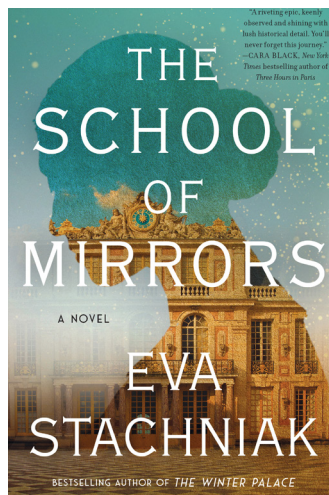
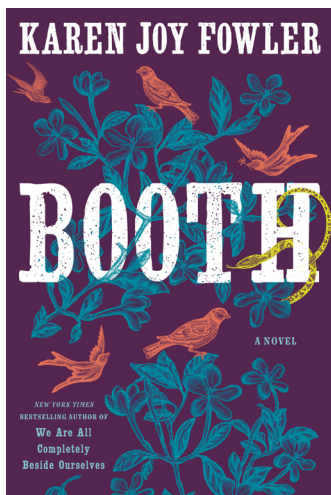
CONFERENCES

The Society organizes biennial conferences in the UK, North America, and Australasia.

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