

InReview

# THE DELIGHTFUL CREATURES VANISHING BEFORE OUR MONSTROUS EYES

By Matthew Minicucci

At the end of her treatise on “The Hedgehog,” number 14 of the eponymous vanishing creatures of this remarkable book, Katherine Rundell muses, in matter-of-fact sort of way, that “these are hard times, and the world is already aflame. The least we can do is refrain from setting alight some of the world’s sharpest and gentlest creatures.”

This is a fairly consistent refrain in the text as Rundell lavishes us with histories, legends, and small miracles over the course of these 22 chapters dedicated to endangered species. Consistent because, at the end of each of these fascinating accounts, the reader is always left with the true issue, the moral question underlying the medieval bestiary, which is the problem of humans.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in the introduction to his 1996 edited collection “Monster Theory: Reading Culture,” writes “it is time to ask the question that always arises when the monster is discussed seriously: Do monsters really exist?” He quickly answers his own question with “Surely they must, for if they did not, how could we?”

Though many of the creatures that Katherine Rundell writes about in “Vanishing Treasures” have been thought of, fairly or unfairly, as monsters (like the bat, spider, wolf, bear or shark), none is as monstrous as the subject of her introduction and her conclusion to the book: humans.

Each chapter homes in on our own abdication of responsibility to these creatures and to the world around them. Because the world around them is also the world around us — a seemingly obvious consideration that we nevertheless seem to forget on a daily basis.

Like all bestiaries, this is a moral tale. There is curation, intention and purpose to the beautiful descriptions and impossible realms. And part of that purpose is, perhaps, to remember these delicious facts when the creatures are inevitably gone. But the greater sum might be to prove that monsters do exist, that we too are a part of the bestiary — ever-present and extraordinarily dangerous creatures.

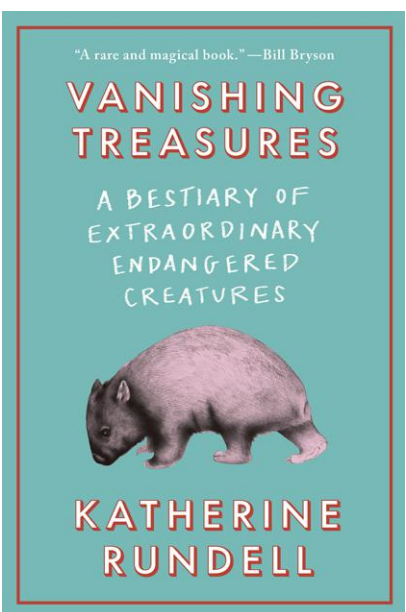
It would be remiss of me to spoil too many of the more impossible-yet-somehow-true facts that Rundell inundates the reader with in this collection, though I can’t help but think of the golden mole which is iridescent for no apparent reason.

Its iridescence is of no obvious connection to any of the other creatures on earth (like the Morpho Butterfly) who developed it as a means for survival. Except that the golden mole, perhaps, has developed fur which is densely-flattened and low-friction to make burrowing easier. Its colorful array is, as Rundell writes “an acci-



Author Katherine Rundell

Nina Subin



**VANISHING TREASURES:  
A BESTIARY OF EXTRAORDINARY  
ENDANGERED CREATURES**

By Katherine Rundell  
Doubleday (\$26)

unknowingly glowing, but it is gorgeous. Each fact captured in these declarative sentences sits like some blown-glass Chihuly sequitur pushing us ever-further into the field of what is possible on this planet.

And, truly, I wish I could just remind you, as Rundell does, that “if we were to make a vast web out of spiders’ silk as thick as a ballpoint pen, it would halt a Boeing 747 mid-air” and have that strange picture be the end of it.

But, as the genre of bestiary always must, there is a moral to this story. And its moral is the monstrous things we’re doing to the world around these vanishing treasures. Because, as this former classicist turned poet couldn’t help but observe, there are, in fact, 24 chapters in total for this collection. It is an epic poem, as it turns out, replete with shining islands, towering mountains, small glittering gods and us — the monsters.

*Matthew Minicucci is a poet and essayist. He is an assistant professor at the University of Alabama.*

## Best-sellers

### HARDCOVER FICTION

- 1. The Grey Wolf- Debut**, Louise Penny, Minotaur Books, \$30
- 2. Intermezzo**, Sally Rooney, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$29
- 3. James**, Percival Everett, Doubleday, \$28

- 4. The God of the Woods**, Liz Moore, Riverhead Books, \$30
- 5. Tell Me Everything**, Elizabeth Strout, Random House, \$30
- 6. Playground**, Richard Powers, W. W. Norton & Company, \$29.99

### HARDCOVER NONFICTION

- 1. The Message**, Ta-Nehisi Coates, One World, \$30
- 2. Be Ready When the Luck Happens: A Memoir**, Ina Garten, Crown, \$34
- 3. Patriot: A Memoir**, Alexei Navalny, Knopf, \$35

# The murky worlds between New York and Cali

By Carlo Wolff

Sergio de la Pava’s “Every Arc Bends Its Radian” is mind-bending fiction about big concepts: identity, reality, the organic, the artificial, what passes in a flash, what rings eternal. It reads like a whodunnit even though it’s a novel of ideas.

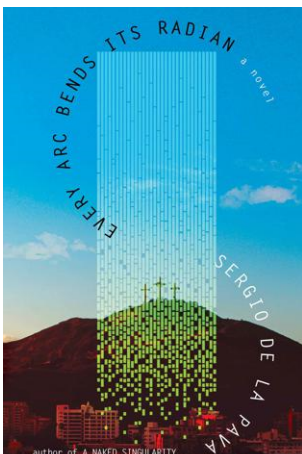
Its narrator and main protagonist is Rivilerto del Rio, aka “Riv,” a New Yorker hired by a woman named Carlotta Ochoa to find her daughter Angelica Alfa-Ochoa, gone missing God-knows-where but likely in Colombia, the steamy setting of this curious and daring work. There are many worlds in this book, most of them murky despite moments the sun shines through. All is fraught, just a little off.

Here, in a passage that packages history, intrigue and menace at once, Riv reconnects with one of two cousins who will help him find Angelica:

“Mauro and I are in a park with a lake. The park, Parque de la Barbilla, is named after a damned alligatoroid creature that resides in the lake and is depicted in a man-made stone representation that arrogantly rises out of the water. The two genocidal maniac brothers who are irrelevant now but ran Cali in the eighties and early nineties (the Orejuela brothers), used to live feet from the park in two houses that comprised multiple city blocks. And they are almost certainly responsible for the creature’s aberrational presence there the way another mass murderer of the buried past [Escobar] gets credit for the Medellín hippos.”

Sergio de la Pava is a skillful writer, parceling out just enough of the story per chapter to hold the reader’s interest. There are good reasons to be patient, chief among them the author’s evocation of Cali, a large city in western Colombia known for its salsa culture, its lush, natural beauty, and its key role in the cocaine trade in the heyday of Pablo Escobar and Gilberto and Miguel Orejuela. The banks of the Cauca River are lined with the mansions of drug cartel lords even as Cristo Rey, a giant statue of Christ, overlooks the city from high on a mountain.

De la Pava speaks of Cali’s “dreamlike qualities” and effectively communicates the big city’s atmosphere, a singular blend of the sulfurous and the serene. At the same time, he conjures a different, even more menacing reading of Cali in Exeter Mondragon, a fearsome force who, Riv knows, can lead him to Angelica, paving the way to her reunion with her mother.



**EVERY ARC BENDS  
ITS RADIAN**

By Sergio de la Pava  
Simon & Schuster (\$27.99)

With the help of his cousins, Riv eventually locates Angelica, but not before he has to navigate a very difficult path into the heart of Mondragon’s operation.

There are rabbit holes galore in this novel, ones the reader has no choice but to follow. There also are distractions (or are they goads?), like the title snippets at the top of the chapters in the first part of the book. While these suggest the topic of the chapter, their enigmatic nature often makes them more quicksand than explanation.

Other questionable facets of this fevered work include some of the dialogue, Spanish referents that lack explanations (this is that rare novel that cries out for footnotes) and variable punctuation, replete with Spanish practice, that seems arbitrary. Then again, it also showcases de la Pava’s bilingual mind.

All these “questionables” must be part of de la Pava’s plan: to write a novel that draws the reader in and stimulates discussion of concepts that never date — they only update.

The very nature of reality comes into question at the end of the book, when Riv and Angelica meet inside a submersible on its way to the center of the earth. The way there has been tortuous. Their tense talk touches on Artificial Intelligence and Super Hominin Cognition, de la Pava’s name for the next phase of intelligence.

“Radian” is not a misprint. Have I mentioned the rabbit holes?

*Carlo Wolff is a writer from Cleveland. His most recent book is “Invisible Soul,” a look at Cleveland’s soul music scene from the ‘50s to the ‘80s.*

# Getting to know Taylor Swift all too well

By Edward Banchs

Rob Sheffield’s place as one of rock’s best critics and one of pop culture’s most keen-eyed observers has long been solidified. His musings have graced the pages of Rolling Stone magazine for nearly 30 years now, between books about the life of David Bowie and the music of Duran Duran, as well as a highly praised reflection on The Beatles’ career.

With so much gravitas praising venerated artists, it may come as a surprise that his latest book, “Heartbreak is the National Anthem: How Taylor Swift Reinvented Pop Music,” centers around megastar Taylor Swift, the omnipresent musician that is equally loved and loathed, who Sheffield feels is the star of our lifetime.

Yes, Sheffield is a Swiftie. The rest of us: “normal people.”

Throughout the pages of “Heartbreak is the National Anthem,” Sheffield digs through the origins of her prolific career, albums and songs, detailing what he feels makes them so effective. Told

**HEARTBREAK IS THE NATIONAL  
ANTHEM: HOW TAYLOR SWIFT  
REINVENTED POP MUSIC**

By Rob Sheffield  
Dey Street Books (\$27.99)

chronologically through her releases, with a smattering of biographical details sprinkled throughout, this book focuses primarily on her musical output and its resulting cultural impact. No behind-the-curtain reveals here.

Sheffield dishes like an expert who has earned more than enough Swift friendship bracelets in recent years, while sharing anecdotes which will more than likely make him the envy of many others. How many other fans has Swift directly asked to help pick out her set list?

Sheffield’s insights are both professional and personal. He and Swift are friends. Yet, this does not stand in the way of his candor. He writes: “You can’t fully appreciate her without appreciating the wide range of visceral reactions she

brings out in people.”

“Sometimes it feels like I’m hearing her read my diary aloud, making me feel garish and exposed,” he writes. This affirmation distills why he finds her music so appealing: her sincerity. But that sincerity is also the primary reason she is disliked. She is a songwriter in possession of a very powerful medium that can immortalize those who she feels have done her wrong.

But many other artists also pull no lyrical punches, so why the scorn for Swift? Is it because she is successful? Because she is not the ingénue society wants her to be? Or, is it because she is not afraid of defending herself? And how does she continue to dominate like she does?

Perhaps because Taylor Swift cares deeply about storytelling, in both her music and life — and she often attempts to retain control over the narrative surrounding her. Consider how punk rock of her it was to re-record and re-release her early albums after the publishing rights to her original catalog were bought by a hedge fund.

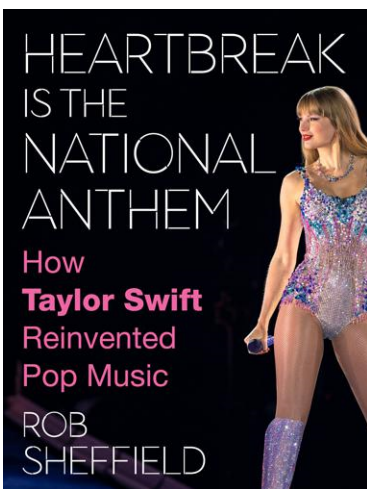
I genuinely enjoyed this book.

Like anything else Sheffield writes, his insights are sharp and reflective. His words are both elevating and humbling, as he’s a writer who knows how to frame the perfect verbal snapshot.

“Heartbreak is the National Anthem” surprised me, however, as Sheffield generally writes retrospectives of lauded performers at the end of their careers. Here, he writes about a mid-career Swift like he would write about any other idol, because he simply feels she deserves this now.

It all comes back to the songwriting. In writing about her hit “All Too Well,” Sheffield notes that “In the Swiftian universe, any lost scarf is a ticking time bomb that can take years to explode into a song. No scrap of the past is safe from showing up again — no snow globe, no snowmobile, no snow or beach. She’s a detective who never files the cold cases away.”

He seems as fascinated by her process as he does by her output. To Sheffield, Taylor Swift is both princess and provocateur. Or as he put it: “Taylor is a true daughter of Madonna — she needs to connect



on that pop pleasure level, whatever moods she’s expressing, so these songs are designed to work even if you’re in a summer mood. But today, they belong deep in the snow.”

Don’t worry, Rob Sheffield brought his snow shovel. When it comes to Taylor Swift, he’s unafraid to dig.

*Edward Banchs is a freelance writer, author and independent scholar based in Pittsburgh. His latest book is “Scream for Me, Africa! Heavy Metal Identities in Post-Colonial Africa.”*

## InReview

# Bad justice

By Glenn C. Altschuler

In March 2016, Donald Trump, then a candidate for the Republican nomination for President, met with Leonard Leo, leader of the Federalist Society and an extraordinarily well-funded network of nonprofits committed to placing hard-right conservatives on the judiciary and other positions in the federal government.

Trump agreed that, if elected, he would outsource all judicial appointments to Leo, who in turn promised to ease concerns about him among Catholics and evangelical Protestants, wealthy donors and conservative lawyers.

The deal vastly increased the power of Leo, who was already a kingmaker, adding three Supreme Court justices (Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, Amy Coney Barrett) to the two he had already put forward (Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito), and hundreds more federal appellate court judges, the vast majority of whom were members of the Federalist Society.

In “Stench: The Making of the Thomas Court and the Unmaking of America,” David Brock, who founded Media Matters for America, examines the long shadow cast by Leo’s Federalist Society and the threat his Supreme Court justices pose to American democracy.

A right-winger turned Democrat, and author of, among other books, “Blinded By The Right,” “The Republican Noise Machine” and “The Fox Effect,” Brock has spent decades atoning for his role in discrediting Anita Hill’s sexual harassment allegations against Clarence Thomas via his now-disavowed book “The Real Anita Hill.”

“Stench” covers a lot of ground. Brock explains how Leo forged a politically potent coalition of Federalist Society members, anti-abortion Roman Catholics, and mega donors. He tells the little-known story of how Brett Kavanaugh, the deputy to Special Counsel Kenneth Starr, “made his political bones” by leaking salacious information to the press during Starr’s investigation of President Bill Clinton.

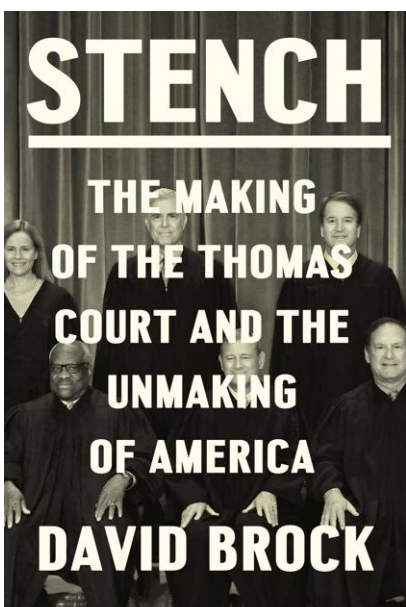
Brock describes the “stolen” election of George W. Bush; how the Citizens United decision unleashed “dark money”; the role of Leo’s network in blocking President Bush’s nomination of Harriet Miers and President Obama’s nomination of Merrick Garland to the Supreme Court; the overturning of Roe v. Wade; and flaws in the judicial philosophy of “originalism.”

After documenting Ginni Thomas’s participation in attempts to overturn the 2020 election, Brock advocates impeaching Clarence Thomas for refusing to recuse himself because of his



Author David Brock

Nicholson Porter



## STENCH: THE MAKING OF THE THOMAS COURT AND THE UNMAKING OF AMERICA

By David Brock  
Alfred A. Knopf (\$30)

Brock also makes a dubious claim that several justices committed perjury in their testimony about the importance of precedent and Roe v. Wade. His assertion that the current Supreme Court should be viewed as The Thomas Court is also unconvincing.

Far more compelling is the case Brock makes for major changes in the practices and makeup of the Supreme Court. A code of ethics that isn’t self-enforcing should be a no-brainer. Lifetime appointments, Brock points out, are “an unsustainable anachronism,” with 65% of Americans supporting term limits.

No man or woman, Brock writes, should have that power for such a long time. This reform, however, requires an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Another approach, well within the powers granted to Congress, which has added and removed seats seven times in its history, Brock suggests, involves adding three justices to bring the total to twelve, with key decisions rendered by a seven-person majority.

Passing judicial reform legislation is, of course, a longshot. But maybe, just maybe, the “stench” attached to the Court will get reform across the finish line.

*Glenn C. Altschuler is The Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Emeritus Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.*

wife’s partisan political activity and for failing to disclose gifts from billionaire Harlan Crow.

Brock, alas, was and remains wedded to ad hominem attacks. Brock indicates he is “not a big believer in thinking we can peer into the human psyche with complete clarity.” But he often impugns the character and motives of his right-wing subjects. Clarence Thomas, Brock writes, was “a Black [Robert] Bork without his brains.”

According to Brock, Thomas doesn’t possess any honor, or even “wonder what it would be like to possess honor.” Also “hate remained central to his being.” Samuel Alito lacks “both self-awareness and manners.” Senator Mitch McConnell is “a hand-out-collecting entrenched operator” who is “ever attuned to the enticing smell of greenbacks on offer.”

# Tales of the wrongfully imprisoned

By Carlo Wolff

John Grisham, best-known for such best-selling legal fiction as “The Firm” and “The Pelican Brief,” teams up with Centurion Ministries founder John McCloskey on “Framed,” a searing reminder of the mistakes, both deliberate and inadvertent, that lead to wrongful imprisonment in our country’s deeply flawed penal system.

Grisham and McCloskey wrote five chapters each. Both keep their language lean and their narrative straightforward — the stories of the unjustly convicted are enough.

Grisham sits on the board of Centurion, an organization devoted to freeing the wrongly imprisoned. He dedicates this infuriating, necessary book to founders of the Innocence Project, which uses DNA evidence to free those jailed through phony forensic methods marshaled to support an authoritarian, cruel brand of justice. McCloskey, a first-person narrator as a figure in several of these accounts, dedicates this work to several Centurion colleagues.

“In 1976, the U.S. Supreme Court lifted a four-year ban on executions,” Grisham writes in a chapter about Calder Todd Willingham, an Oklahoma native “executed for a crime that never occurred.”

“Since then, 1,572 men and 15 women have been put to death by gas, lethal injection, electric chair, and one by hanging and another by firing squad. Texas proudly leads the pack with 586 killings, Oklahoma is second with 123, barely edging out Virginia with 113.”

The northernmost case, a Grisham story, takes place in Chester, the oldest town in Pennsylvania. But, most of these cautionary tales unfold in Texas,

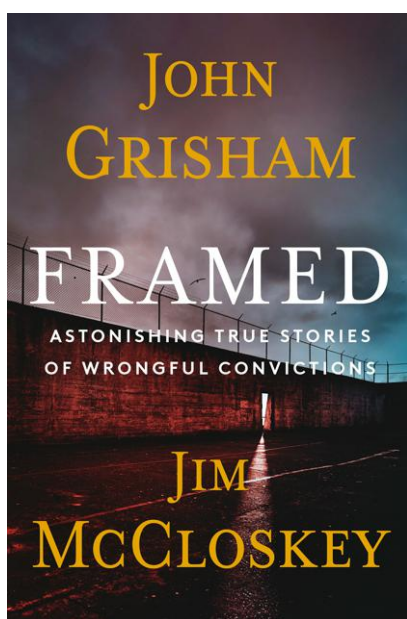
where justice seems more cudgel than corrective. Grisham and McCloskey suggest that malfeasance along the spectrum of criminal (in)justice seems particularly common in the South.

“The Norfolk Four,” the chapter that opens the book, painstakingly recounts the byzantine process that finally resulted in the exoneration of four men wrongfully convicted for a 1997 rape and murder, who finally went free after 20 years in prison.

What’s particularly scandalous is that authorities built a fictitious case against four innocent men — after the actual murderer confessed, and DNA backed his confession. Omar Ballard insisted he acted alone, and he had prior convictions for violent attacks on women.

His personal history and demeanor corroborated his confession. As Grisham’s wrote: “He went from one foster home to another and naturally gravitated to the streets from where he came. He was an angry kid who blamed his mother for his problems. His temper was explosive and often aimed at women.”

Another story resonates because it involves Dracos Burke, the cousin of James Lee Burke, the great mystery writer known for his Dave Robicheaux books. Attorney Dracos Burke was the prosecutor in the murder case of a grocery store owner in New Iberia, a small town in southern Louisiana. Given the case’s outcome, McCloskey does not paint Dracos Burke in a kindly light.



## FRAMED

By John Grisham and Jim McCloskey  
Doubleday (\$30)

One of the most lurid stories — and the book’s longest chapter — unfolds in Tyler, a town in the heart of the Texas Bible Belt. On June 10, 1977, when Eastern University secretary Paula Rudolph returned to her apartment, she encountered a man she assumed was a dean from her work, Jim Mayfield, who had been having an affair with Linda Jo Edwards, her roommate. Rudolph soon went to bed.

The following morning, Rudolph discovered Edwards brutally murdered and mutilated. Although DNA evidence clearly points to Mayfield as the killer, Kerry Max Cook, a neighbor of the two women, continues to wait for the Criminal Court of Appeals, the highest court in Texas, to vacate his conviction.

These stories are sad and shameful. Their blend of public service and call to action — and their draw as true-life pulp fiction — will inform, infuriate and, one can only hope, inspire.

*Carlo Wolff is a writer from Cleveland.*

# When you wish upon a star...

By Matthew Minicucci

In his 1945 lecture “Existentialism is Humanism,” Jean-Paul Sartre writes that a key to existentialist philosophy is that “existence precedes essence” — people, not gods or kings or any sort of magic, are responsible for their own behavior. Novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard (along with translator Martin Aitken) tests Sartre’s claim in “The Third Realm,” which continues the Morgenstjernen series and provides readers with a series of complicated characters, within seemingly isolated and intimate chapters, who make tough, existence-defining choices.

About a third of the way into the novel we’re introduced to Jarle, a neurologist who is summoned to investigate an improbable “re-awakening” of a brain-dead man. In the course of the chapter, Knausgaard gives us access to the book Jarle is writing about the nature of consciousness.

In a frantic session, Jarle writes, in reference to mathematician Alan Turing, “the explanans must be of a higher order than the explanandum — which is to say that a brain cannot explain the brain, consciousness cannot explain consciousness. For that we need a more general principle in order to explain the particular phenomenon. Something of a higher order.”

For Knausgaard’s previous novels in this series, and this one, those explanations of a higher order are always related to the sudden appearance of a new star in the sky. It’s important to note that the actions of the characters in this text often take on guises and decisions that feel terrifying. But they also make very human, very everyday choices about who they love and what is it they want out of their lives.

These are, strangely enough, quintessential existential questions, and ones very much directly related to responsibility. There are characters cheating on spouses or deciding to attend black metal raves with a man they’ve just met. But there are also characters hearing voices or investigating a young student seemingly possessed after the appearance of this new star. For Knausgaard, these disparate events have a conjoined nature; one which cannot be extricated.

A number of background characters from other novels in the series are primary actors in this one. Thus, when readers in-the-know are presented with the difficult mental instability of Tove right at the beginning of the novel, long-time fans of the series will be familiar with her husband Arne, a primary actor in its prequels.

This choice in perspective is both limiting and illuminating, depending on the



## THE THIRD REALM

By Karl Ove Knausgaard,  
translated by Martin Aitken  
Penguin Press (\$32)

reader, as you might have no previous expectations of Tove (from Arne’s perspective), or you might have all the expectations in the world, and might be hungry to know why she’s been making the choices she’s been making. This theme of choice and who bears the responsibilities of those choices, including the reader, is paramount to both the novel and its perspectives.

Over the course of its 493 pages, “The Third Realm” never steers too far away from the sudden appearance of this new star. But, with that said, it never completely alters the gravitational pull of the lives of these characters either.

Instead, it’s something in-between those two extremes. There are explanations, musings, arguments, and near-impossible acts of god (or something else entirely). But no matter how close or far these characters are from the new light of their shared sky, they continue to make very real, and very human, determinations.

How much of our decision-making is our own responsibility? In that responsibility, how much of it is merely the small signals of our brain-tissue? How could, Knausgaard writes, “such an abrupt and microscopic electrical impulse occurring in such total darkness represent a face? A voice? A landscape of fells and fjords?”

It is a question as impossible to answer as whether or not the new star has fundamentally changed anything “real” about these characters’ lives, beyond the faint light that seems to drape like a pall through these chapters. But your answer to it, as a reader, is an answer to Sartre’s assertion. In the end, this is a novel of both existence and essence, but the ordering of those two things is entirely up to you.

*Matthew Minicucci is a poet and essayist. He is an assistant professor at the University of Alabama.*

## Best-sellers

### HARDCOVER FICTION

- 1. Somewhere Beyond the Sea**, TJ Klune, Tor Books, \$28.99
- 2. We Solve Murders-Debut**, Richard Osman, Pamela Dorman Books, \$30
- 3. Tell Me Everything**, Elizabeth Strout, Random House, \$30
- 4. The Life Impossible**, Matt Haig, Viking, \$30
- 5. James**, Percival Everett, Doubleday, \$28
- 6. Creation Lake**, Rachel Kushner, Scribner, \$29.99
- 7. The God of the Woods**, Liz Moore, Riverhead Books, \$30
- 8. The Women**, Kristin Hannah, St. Martin’s Press, \$30
- 9. Here One Moment**, iane Moriarty, Crown, \$30
- 10. The Wedding People**, Alison Espach, Henry Holt and Co., \$28.99

### HARDCOVER NONFICTION

- 1. Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI**, Yuval Noah Harari, Random House, \$35
- 2. On Freedom-Debut**, Timothy Snyder, Crown, \$32
- 3. Something Lost, Something Gained: Reflections on Life, Love, and Liberty-Debut**, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Simon & Schuster, \$29.99
- 4. The Demon of Unrest: A Saga of Hubris, Heartbreak, and Heroism at the Dawn of the Civil War**, Erik Larson, Crown, \$35
- 5. Lovely One: A Memoir**, Ketanji Brown Jackson, Random House, \$35
- 6. The Third Gilmore Girl: A Memoir-Debut**, Kelly Bishop, Gallery Books, \$28.99

InReview

# The moral, and tiresome, argument against eating turkey

By Joshua D. Graber

Some legends say Harry Truman was the first president to pardon the poultry industry’s annual offering of turkeys. Some say it was John F. Kennedy. But it didn’t become a formal rite until 1989.

While animal rights groups protested nearby, George H.W. Bush declared that he was pardoning the turkey and sending it to a children’s farm close to Washington. “He’s granted a Presidential pardon as of right now,” Bush declared. And every president since has followed this absurd tradition.

Moral philosopher Peter Singer quips in “Consider the Turkey,” his newest offering, that “[t]he US Constitution authorizes the president to grant a pardon for a federal crime, but no one has ever suggested a crime for which the turkeys are supposedly being pardoned.”

“Consider the Turkey” borrows its naming convention from David Foster Wallace’s “Consider the Lobster,” a 2004 essay that empathizes with the lobster and asks pointed questions about the cruelties humans inflict on another sentient species for our own pleasure. But don’t expect much of Wallace’s charm or self-deprecating humor here.

Singer’s self-righteousness is sharp and humorless, as he details the processes by which the millions of turkeys consumed during our holiday feasts live painful, cramped lives, terrorized by poorly paid workers, who are in turn terrorized by their managers. The paragraph quoted above goes on: “Does it make families in the United States feel better, as they chew on the corpse of one of the 46 million turkeys killed annually for Thanksgiving dinners, to know that somewhere, two of them are still alive?”

Singer is right, of course, in identifying the raising of turkeys as a moral catastrophe. The way we permit animals to be raised for our consumption is an obvious problem, regardless of the scale of our need. Factory farms should be much more tightly regulated or banned outright.

But, rightly or wrongly, the massive demand for animal products isn’t going anywhere. People like eating meat, and many people argue that they need it, so we need solutions at scale if we want to solve this complex problem.

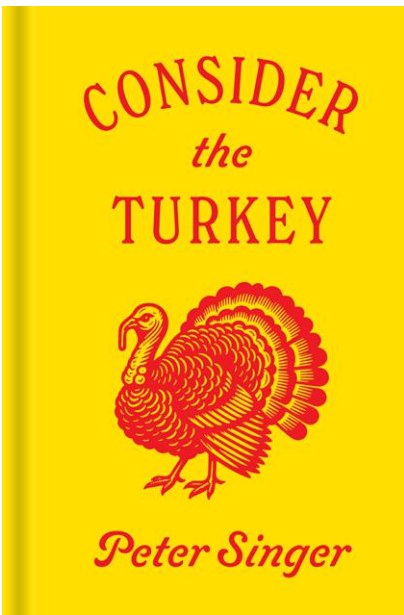
It’s easier to recommend individual penance. For moral Thanksgiving choices, Singer suggests either a high-brow veganism, or, if one must, an omnivore meal featuring a turkey purchased from a small farm where animals live fuller, happier lives. Singer makes a bit of a morally condescending assumption here: Provided an affordable option, who wouldn’t prefer to purchase a butchered turkey knowing that it had enjoyed its brief life?

For a conscientious reader who can’t afford Singer’s morality, or whose body



Author and philosopher Peter Singer

Tony Phillips



**CONSIDER THE TURKEY**  
By Peter Singer  
Princeton University Press (\$9.95)

Petulant rhetoric does not change opinions, nor does it inspire. Just ask the Democrats who harangued their own voters relentlessly for three weeks prior to election day and have since been wondering incredulously why those voters stayed home — or, worse, turned away from them.

“Consider the Turkey” also arrives at a poor moment to act upon an argument for advancing American farming ethics. In January, MAGA apparatchiks across the government will get to work disrupting institutions of democracy, the public safety net, and longstanding — if often hypocritical — commitments to human rights, not to mention animal rights. The meat industry will benefit, while progress on animal welfare will be set back years.

If those of us who care about animal rights arrive at the next presidential inauguration in 2029 having preserved both democracy and the status quo of those rights, we should consider it a victory. Then, animal rights activists can and must make a more inviting, friendly, and solutions-focused argument for improving animal welfare than Singer offers here.

Joshua D. Graber is a writer and software engineer from Pittsburgh.

# A myriad little apocalypses

By Matthew Minicucci

Early on in Paolo Giordano’s new novel “Tasmania,” the main character (also named Paolo) witnesses the mental breakdown suffered by one of his students in a science journalism course.

He finds himself haunted by something the student has said during a late night hang out at a local Trieste brewpub called Mirò. Through all the drinking and discussions of climate change, one thing stands out to this brilliant but haunted student: “Could it be, Professor, that something you study could get the upper hand?”

During my readthrough of Giordano’s novel, translated by Antony Shugaar, I couldn’t shake this question. This might be because learning to read Giordano is learning a fair amount about the current state of climate science and the tenuousness of the Earth’s biosphere. As I was learning, was this subject gaining the upper hand?

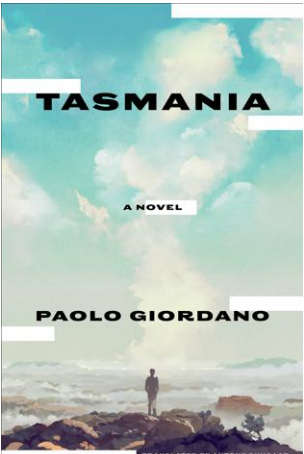
This is not just a question uttered by a student in crisis, but something grappled with by a panoply of characters in “Tasmania” — from Karol, an ordained Catholic priest risking his faith while on a tryst with a young woman, to a well-respected physicist named Novelli whose strange obsession with photographing clouds belies his misogynistic anger at a changing scientific landscape.

Paolo himself navigates a complicated period in his marriage that he at one point describes as “a system of well-established habits, a network of social relations, a bureaucratic apparatus.” Each character is, in their own way, wrestling the angel of whatever their obsession might be, attempting to prevent it from gaining the upper hand.

Novelli, discussing with Paolo where one might shelter from the coming storm to end all storms, says “In Tasmania. It’s far enough south to escape any excessive temperatures. It has considerable freshwater reserves, it has a democratic government, and there are no predators of humans. It’s not too small, but it’s still an island, so it’s easier to defend. And believe me, people are going to have to defend themselves.”

The word *apocalypse* appears a fair number of times in this book, from Paolo’s own obsession with a book he’s writing on atomic attacks, to a brief discussion between characters on geography.

It’s interesting to note that though we generally think of apocalypse as synonymous with “destruction,” its actual etymology is more about



**TASMANIA**  
By Paola Giordano,  
translated by Antony Shugaar  
Other Press (\$19.99)

something hidden — *apo* meaning “away from” and *kalyptein* meaning “to conceal.” An *apocalypse* is a thing kept from you, hidden away, whose meaning won’t be clear until after its arrival. But for Giordano, this couldn’t be further from the truth. Every character in this book is keenly aware of what’s happening. The question is not of if or what, but of when.

And this question of time is something Giordano considers in fascinating ways in the fundamental construction of the book. There are no quotation marks, for example, during dialogue between characters, giving the reader the sense that everyone is happening within or around the consciousness of our main character. Very little attention is paid to a standard sequence of events or cause/effect ordering.

Often Paolo will intimate that a thing has taken place, perhaps even a great while ago, and continue on for a number of pages about the effects of that event. But it’s only later that he’ll circle back and describe the event itself, as if the character is trying to make room for a thing they aren’t yet ready to discuss.

In the end, the facts of climate disaster are untenable for these characters. It rips at the very fabric of their lives, as it does at all our lives in ways we can’t quite verbalize yet. I was left, in my reading, with the feeling that what I had studied had, in fact, gained the upper hand. This is a book that is magnificent, in many ways, to behold — but I also offer my apologies to you, reader, that Paolo Giordano ever had to write it at all.

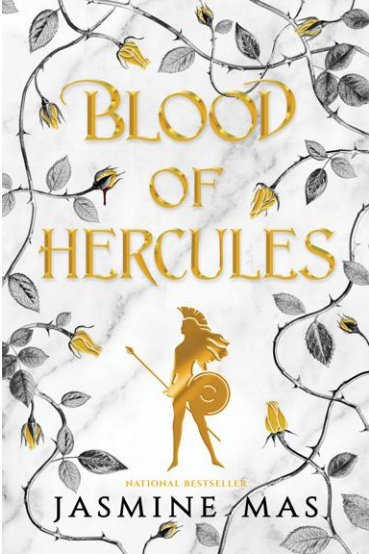
Matthew Minicucci is a poet and essayist, as well as an assistant professor at the University of Alabama.

## Best-sellers

<b>HARDCOVER FICTION</b> <b>1. James,</b> Percival Everett, Doubleday, \$28 <b>2. Intermezzo,</b> Sally Rooney, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$29	<b>3. The Grey Wolf,</b> Louise Penny, Minotaur Books, \$30 <b>4. The God of the Woods,</b> Liz Moore, Riverhead Books, \$30	<b>HARDCOVER NONFICTION</b> <b>1. The Message,</b> Ta-Nehisi Coates, One World, \$30 <b>2. Revenge of the Tipping Point: Overstories, Super-spreaders, and the Rise of</b>	<b>Social Engineering,</b> Malcolm Gladwell, Little, Brown and Company, \$32 <b>3. Be Ready When the Luck Happens: A Memoir,</b> Ina Garten, Crown, \$34
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By Hudson Warm

# A Gen-z, Greek-hero romantasy



Author Jasmine Mas

Submitted Image

**BLOOD OF HERCULES**  
By Jasmine Mas  
Canary Street Press (\$19.99)

roes like Odysseus found strength in intellectualism and wit as much as their physical prowess.

Alexis becomes more and more dispirited as she approaches the Spartan ball and graduation, and the novel employs a disjointed writing style reflecting her interior descent. Her material world also turns discomfiting, as she receives cryptic, threatening messages and gifts of human remains. But while the external risks heighten, Alexis’s explicit indifference about her existence feels anticlimactic.

When Mas reveals one of Alexis’s biggest twists 90% of the way through the novel, the landing lacks luster — the book’s title having spoiled any surprise. But, that almost feels immaterial. The ending — a romantic yet chilling cliffhanger-adjacent beat — remains propulsive because Alexis is a multi-dimensional character, a credit to Mas.

Beyond the world’s tactile differences from Ancient Greece, Mas also

covers the Spartan spirit that reigns her body. The subsequent sequence of events transpires quickly: she must survive an initiation massacre and withstand the months-long “crucible” at the Spartan War Academy with help from her mentors, Achilles and Patro.

Life for Alexis at the academy seems to be an endless loop of suffering: she is the only girl in her co-

diverges from classical language into the present time with all its slang, reminding us that teenagers, even Spartan ones with extraordinary abilities, still sound like teens.

The novel will undoubtedly be controversial to those who spurn all caps and TikTok-speak. Before a climactic ceremony, Helen advises Alexis to “stay mentally calm. That’s def the key.” Earlier, Alexis narrates that “the feminine urge to lead a fictional revolt plagued me.”

Mas undoubtedly forgoes realism in favor of aesthetic appeal. In one scene, a love interest takes off a toga to don a tailored black suit. The entirety of the Spartan War Academy is described as barren, cold and depressing, yet the library alone is somehow grand and “palatial.” The world Alexis inhabits is also at times unclear: she makes monotheistic references to God and even alludes to Biblical stories, while living with god-like Spartans.

Still, “Blood of Hercules” sweeps the reader away with its pithy, witty writing style. And while Mas’s novel is an anapologetic romantasy, tropey and with somewhat sparse and inconsistent worldbuilding, the reader is nonetheless in for a compelling — and fun — ride.

Hudson Warm is a student journalist and critic at Yale University as well as the Scholastic and National Indie Excellence Award-winning author of two novels. She formerly interned at the Post-Gazette.

InReview

# HOW OUR FOOD GOT COOL

By Carolyn Kellogg

The next time you reach in the refrigerator for a cold beer, realize that beer was one of the very first reasons that refrigeration as we know it exists. That’s just one of the many things you’ll learn in the new book “Frostbite” by Nicola Twilley.

The book is a lively history of humans and food and fridges, told by Twilley, a science journalist who contributes to the New Yorker and is co-host of the award-winning podcast Gastropod. She jumps right in, pulling on a special heavy coat when working in a freezer warehouse, while also informing us of the surprising history of keeping those workers warm — that’s where hoodies come from.

Apart from her chilling adventures, the book is a comprehensive chronological history. While “our ancestors learned to control fire before modern humans even evolved,” Twilley writes, “our ability to command cold at will dates back little more than 150 years.”

She takes us from the earliest experiments in freezing food — Sir Francis Bacon caught a fatal chill in 1626 trying to freeze a chicken — up through the contemporary systems we now have in America and around the world.

And she also looks forward, traveling to China to see how refrigeration has been adopted in rapidly industrializing city centers. Most intriguing, she goes to Rwanda, where the essential cold chains of the developed world have not yet been built. But, the planners and scientists there ask, should they be?

A cold chain is the chilled path that food follows from being picked off an apple tree or pulled out of the sea to get to your kitchen. It’s not just for frozen pizzas: “nearly three-quarters of everything on the average American plate is processed, packed, shipped, stored, and/or sold under refrigeration.”

Your salad lettuce’s bag has been specially designed to breathe in these conditions; fruit was picked before it was ripe so it could travel while chilled. “Fresh squeezed” orange juice? I hate to tell you....

Now, we think of food being kept cold as being hygienic and safe, but it wasn’t always that way. Food cooled by ice had a deservedly mixed reputa-

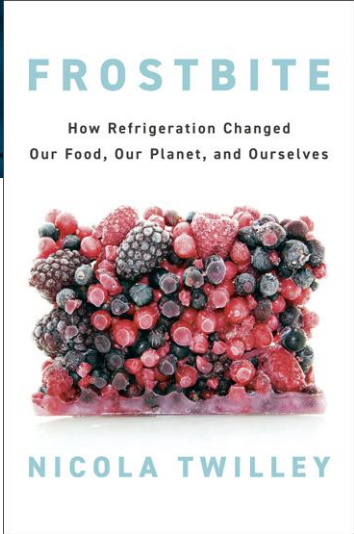


Jenny GG

Author Nicola Twilley

**FROSTBITE: HOW REFRIGERATION CHANGED OUR FOOD, OUR PLANET AND OURSELVES**

By Nicola Twilley  
Penguin (\$30)



tion. Willey tells the story of a Philadelphia doctor who, after cleaning up the city’s milk supply, was hired by the early version of the FDA in the early years of the 20th century.

Dr. M.E. Pennington got her gig only because her boss initially concealed the fact that she was a woman. She established scientific benchmarks for eggs and chickens, and even designed an improved refrigerated railcar along the way.

The history of chilling our food is twinned with the study of how and why it rots, and those explanations are much more complicated than you might expect. What happens to different fruits and vegetables can vary quite a lot, affected by temperature and chemistry. Twilley goes into both apples (whose chemistry is super interesting) and bananas (whose ability to travel created the first international refrigerated trade).

An essential part of this story is, of course, meat. The early American food industry, spurred on by a mistaken study that claimed all the nutrition people need was found in meat, wound up with massive beef lots like the Chicago stockyards. The desire to get that beef to New York to sell brought about the first refrigerated train cars and their many improvements. (Vegetarians like me may want to skim through chapter 3, “The Way

of All Flesh,” filled as it is with explanations of animal slaughter and storage.) It’s an essential but gruesome part of the story.

More pleasant, to me, is beer. In the middle of the 19th century, early experiments in refrigeration were driven by German immigrants in the U.S. who wanted to make lager beer, but found the climate too warm. They needed to chill down the process. Like many other parts of this story, a number of tinkers and scientists were working on the same problem at the same time. Often, a brilliant solution took a while to catch on. A patent here, an unfortunate explosion there — it was a zig-zagging path to progress.

First railcars and ice, then refrigerated trucks and warehouses, and today, we have an enormous drive-in cave filled with Cheez Whiz in Missouri. Twilley suggests that our massive food refrigeration systems may not be so smart on a warming planet (she doesn’t discuss other cold storage, like data centers). For now, they’re all we’ve got — until a crazy cool dreamer comes up with a better way.

*Carolyn Kellogg has an MFA from the University of Pittsburgh and is the former books editor of the Los Angeles Times.*



Submitted photograph

Author K.C. Constantine was the pseudonym of recently deceased Western Pa. writer Carl Constantine Kosak.

## K.C. Constantine’s final novel

By Robert Croan

When K.C. Constantine — a reclusive Western Pennsylvania author whose real name was Carl Constantine Kosak — died in 2023 at the age of 88, he left a series of 17 published police procedurals, the last of which was published in 2002. At the end of his life, Mr. Constantine completed one more novel, “Another Man’s Pain,” which came out posthumously in April of this year.

Constantine’s best-known detective was Mario Balzic, police commissioner of the fictional town of Rocksburg, about 50 miles south of Pittsburgh. The author killed off Balzic in an earlier story, and Detective Ruggiero “Rugs” Carlucci — at first Balzic’s replacement as “acting chief” but now second in command to the new police chief Fred Nowiki — is the series’ final protagonist. Fifty-seven years old, he’s struggling with the prospects of old age and, perhaps, enforced retirement after 40 years as an officer.

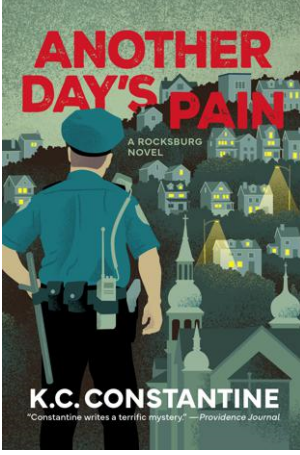
There’s no whodunnit and not much mystery in “Another Day’s Pain.” Frankly, there’s not much of a story at all, but it’s very readable and the characters are never less-than-engaging. The surprises have more to do with the revelation of horrific events from the individuals’ histories than clues or actions that would resolve the crimes depicted.

There’s a lot of Psychology 101, especially when it comes to Catholic guilt and forgiveness — forgiving others and forgiving oneself. The police force’s clinical psychologist finds Rugs’ problems sufficiently challenging to send him to a psychiatrist who can delve deeper and prescribe medications.

There’s even more of the author’s homespun philosophy about aging, about things coming to an end: not just the end of life, but the end of careers, of romances, of hope — though the author allows perhaps a small glimmer of hope to seep into his dark ending. Still, though Carlucci has come to believe that “bad news is my middle name,” this story is as funny as it’s sad, as poignant as pessimistic, as contemplative as violent.

Mothers take a large part in the narrative. Rugs’s mother is certifiably mentally ill, violently so, as she has been since the detective’s childhood. The mother of Franny Perfetti, Rugs’s girlfriend, suffers from dementia, and is terrified of being sent to an institution.

At the book’s very beginning, a prologue from 2003, Rugs has called the police to arrest his mother because she hit a fellow policeman in



**ANOTHER DAY'S PAIN**

By K.C. Constantine  
Mysterious Press (\$28.95)

the head with an eight-inch frying pan, causing the victim permanent damage. As the story winds its course, Rugs has his mother institutionalized and suffers from guilt because he does not want her to be released.

Franny’s guilt takes the form of being a permanent caretaker at the expense of her job, her love life and just about everything else. Still another mother is hysterical when her out-of-control teenage son is confined for performing criminal acts. The real villains of this tale, ultimately, are not traditional criminals, but bad parents, corrupt politicians and the Catholic Church. “I also know what the sisters did to you for 12 years,” the therapist admits at one point.

Adding to Rugs’s stress level, it’s August, when all the married officers take vacations to bring their children to Disney World, leaving him and the only other childless officer to manage on their own. There’s also a vindictive city councilman, and a middle-aged divorcee who dances naked on her porch when she stops taking her medications — which is most of the time.

It’s all quite funny at the start, grabbing the reader with intentionally bad jokes, “younzerisms” and salty language. The revelations take a dark turn later on, however, as we learn that the abusers have been abused (no great surprise), as well as the specifics of how they’d been injured and that the cycle is not likely to stop here.

Curiously, and meaningfully, the late Constantine gives the last word not to Rugs but to Franny: “Forgive me.... Please try. Even if you don’t or can’t, just try.”

*Robert Croan is a former classical music writer and senior editor for the Post-Gazette. He is currently a freelance writer and lecturer in Fort Lauderdale.*

# NO COUNTRY FOR DEAD BIRDS

By Matthew Minicucci

In his 1980 essay “Ideas of Nature,” Raymond Williams posits that there is no such thing as by-products. That, in fact, all results of labor are products, both useful and poisonous. Thus, as Williams says late in the piece, “we have mixed our labour with the earth, our forces with its forces too deeply to be able to draw back and separate either out.”

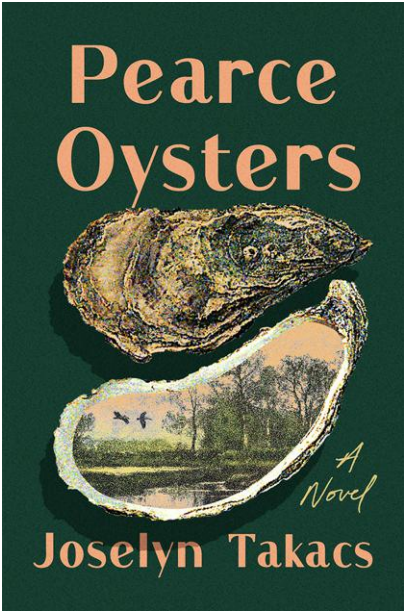
Joselyn Takacs’ debut novel, “Pearce Oysters,” offers a brief glimpse into the Pearce family, generational owners and operators of the eponymous business in the invented town of Golden Vale, La., during the (very real) BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster of 2010. It fully brings Williams’ argument about nature and the nature of humanity’s effects on it to its forefront.

It’s a novel that mixes the ecology of a family, with all its invasive flora and fauna, and matches it with the ecology of a place, an environment and an economy. It is, most importantly, a work of art that reminds us we cannot extricate these things from each other.

Takacs’ novel is, primarily, an ecological one. And I mean this even in its most basic sense. Etymologically, the eco in ecology comes from the Ancient Greek oikos, meaning “home.” Any study of ecology is, at its core, a study of a dwelling, a place where people, places and things habitate.

Much of the novel takes place in the Pearce family home, though it also drags us through the oyster reefs in Caminada Bay (on a boat formally named “Fortuna,” though all of its “fortunes” are now slipping away), the noisy tourist traps of the French Quarter in New Orleans and the quiet oyster hatcheries of Grand Isle.

Takacs uses an omniscient 3rd person narration for the work, which I found quite jarring in the first 50 pages or so. My initial expectation was that our perspective would be pinned to Jordan Pearce, co-owner of Pearce Oysters along with his prodigal brother Benny who is living in New Orleans as a sort of anti-capitalist radical-in-training pianist as the book opens.



But very quickly the author moves us among Jordan, Benny, their mother May and pretty much every character you’ll meet in the novel. Funny that, in retrospect, I think my desire to be limited in perspective was not only the result of my interest in who was most “in the right” in their opinions about oyster farming and the BP oil spill, but my desire to see ecology as an examination of individual actors in a place or conflict. That is: to truly understand how Jordan, for example, was affected by all of this, without the thoughts and desires of the people around him.

This is, I realize now, not an effective way to consider the entirety of an ecosystem, and Takacs’ use of the omniscient narrator reminds us of this shortcoming in ourselves and all of the actors involved in the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

The novel is a slow build of understanding the cilia-like movement of characters orbiting Pearce Oysters, each vibrating their own currents in the slow realization of what’s happened in these waters. This is a family drama where these small movements build towards reunion, wreckage and eventually a kind of rectification. But

**PEARCE OYSTERS**

By Joselyn Takacs  
Zibby Books (\$27.99)

it’s also a novel that never strays too far from the environmental destruction around these people.

There’s a particularly prescient moment about 150 pages in, where Jordan, Benny and the last of the hired help they can find, Alejandro, all come upon a pelican in the water, “writhing grotesquely,” dying because, as Jordan says “it probably ate some oiled fish. Pelicans dive with their mouths open. The water’s killing it.”

Benny remarks that he will probably never be able to get the sight of the dying bird, this clear harbinger for what lay ahead for the family and for all of Louisiana, out of his head. As a final reminder of the prophecy, Jordan calls the Coast Guard to report the dead bird only to be answered with “Dead birds? I’ve got a number for live birds, but not dead birds.”

And this is very much the spirit of this impressive debut novel: that in the economics of the Louisiana ecosystem, we have a number for live birds, but we’ve never even considered what to do about the dead ones. Make no mistake, this is a book about the dead: the birds, the generations of oysters, the ever-thinning crowd of poor laborers left to “clean” the oil with Cloroxit (itself thinning them with disease), and the multi-generational family-owned businesses trying to weather the storm.

But there’s also new life in the book. New chances after loss. New opportunities once thought of as only by-products of a system now ready to replace, as Benny Pearce observes late in the novel, “this sandcastle you’ve been guarding all your life.” We’re left with change in the environment and the families that are part of it. Of course we are. Just the same as any other ecosystem.

*Matthew Minicucci is a poet and essayist. He is an assistant professor at the University of Alabama.*

## Best-sellers

- HARDCOVER FICTION**

  - 1. The Women**, Kristin Hannah, St. Martin’s Press, \$30
  - 2. James**, Percival Everett, Doubleday, \$28
  - 3. Funny Story**, Emily Henry, Berkley, \$29
  - 4. Swan Song- Debut**, Elin Hilderbrand, Little, Brown and Company, \$30
  - 5. All Fours**, Miranda July, Riverhead Books, \$29

- HARDCOVER NONFICTION**

  - 1. The Demon of Unrest: A Saga of Hubris, Heartbreak, and Heroism at the Dawn of the Civil War**, Erik Larson, Crown, \$35
  - 2. The Wager: A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny and Murder**, David Grann, Doubleday, \$30
  - 3. The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness**, Jonathan Haidt, Penguin Press, \$30

## InReview

# The real Macbeth

By Matthew Minicucci

About halfway through “Upon the Corner of the Moon” the character of Macbeth — who should be considered a slightly different figure (and perhaps closer to the historical Macbeth) than the character in his eponymously-named, Shakespeare-authored play — encounters a monk in his travels, and in their conversation a question is asked: “Tell me, can one man serve as another’s conscience? Can someone be the conscience for a king?”

This, in many ways, feels more like the question that Shakespeare’s play asks its audiences, whereas Nieman’s novel seems more interested in what the cultural and social apparatus and pressures of the 11th century might have had to do with how that conscience developed and, further, how such a question could come to be asked at all.

Nieman’s novel takes on the difficult task of giving us, as readers, access to a historical context for the Macbeth we know from the oft-performed tragedy, while also engaging us in a clear consideration of the political vicissitudes of a Scotland facing an inevitable religious confrontation between the old ways the new.

The story wanders back and forth between the perspectives of Macbeth and Gruach, who will eventually become Lady Macbeth. It also happens in an entirely linear fashion, with the perspectives and speech patterns of both characters growing and changing as they do. This brings, for a reader, a fascinating blend of emotionally-charged and dramatic moments in a narrative heading toward a final scene that, ostensibly, every reader will anticipate (if they, indeed, remember their high school English classes).

This intense and honestly affecting scene-building Nieman does is the real power underscoring the book. We see a young Macbeth become half-brother to an older and somewhat smug Duncan. And, in the entirety of their relationship throughout the book, which involves each one helping, saving, and learning to love the other, we can’t help but be reminded of the violence and betrayal that will eventually conclude their story.

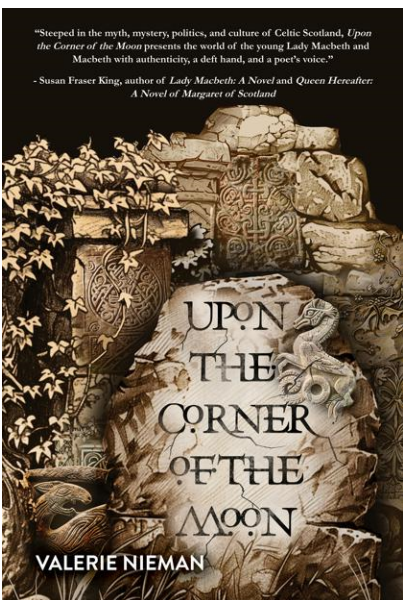
Gruach, too, has so much to do in her own attempts to survive a world in which she’s been sold off to the most expedient bidder. Nieman doesn’t shy away from the complications of Gruach’s sexuality and the repression of this patriarchal world caught between the two almost-tidal forces of ancient, native Scottish practices and the encroaching Christian context.

A warning to readers that the brutal treatment Gruach receives at the hands of her eventual-husband Gillecomgan is not for the faint of heart and brings this historical fiction directly into the sights of our contemporary fascination with the likes of “Game of Thrones,” and the sexual violence that viewers found there.



Author Valerie Nieman

A.L. Sirois



Beyond even the survival of these abominations, we see Gruach imprisoned in a larger cage — men’s expectations and distrust of women. In one scene, Duncan, listening to a conversation with the Latin tutor Oswald, advises Macbeth “No doubt it was women’s counsels that persuaded Aethelred to abandon his armies...beware such advice, my gentle brother, whether from a woman or a monk, or find yourself similarly disgraced.”

Such is the world that Gruach must

## UPON THE CORNER OF THE MOON

By Valerie Nieman  
Regal House Publishing (\$21.95)

continually battle throughout the novel, including her own salvation at the hands of Macbeth, and her business-like marriage to him.

In Act III of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, our tragic character admits to his wife “so full of scorpions is my mind.” For a playgoer, either early-modern or contemporary, those scorpions feel contained within the play itself: We understand what rends at Macbeth and the guilt at those choices.

Nieman’s novel does something very difficult to pull off — it shows us where those scorpions began, and how they were once the loss of a father or the abuse of husband, and how they burrowed deep within these characters and waited, patiently, for the moment they would come alive again and haunt them.

Nieman’s “Upon the Corner of the Moon” is a haunting and bloody tale of Scottish history. It’s also a finger tracing along a set of scars, ones we already know are too deep to ever really heal.

*Matthew Minicucci is a poet and essayist. He is an assistant professor at the University of Alabama.*

# A hidden past emerges

By Jeffrey Condran

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting,” writes Milan Kundera in “The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.”

Almost fifty years later, these ideas feel prescient of our contemporary political moment, when many seem to have forgotten any conception of shared values. And so it is with feelings of pleasure and relief to see MacArthur Fellow Karen Russell, take up this theme in her novel, “The Antidote.”

Set in Dust Bowl Nebraska, in the farming community of Uz, the novel begins with a “prairie witch” who calls herself The Antidote — as in, for what ails you. In Ms. Russell’s magical universe, prairie witches have the ability to act as “Vaults,” human repositories for memories that people simply cannot endure. These women operate like banks, taking deposits and, if the customer wants, providing withdrawals.

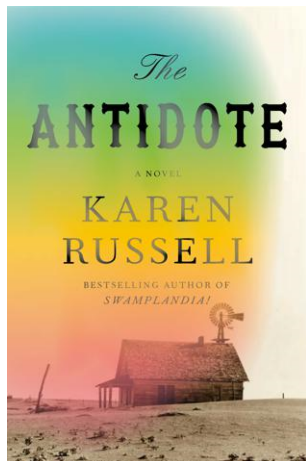
Making a deposit comes with a seemingly true miracle, the calm and emotional “spaciousness” people experience after having told their memory and forgotten it. “I feel like a sunbeam, so light — what a marvelous gift!” says one customer. It is easy to see the immediate appeal, but what are the consequences of all this forgetting?

Ms. Russell makes virtuoso use of multiple narrative voices to help the reader see what’s at stake. Two of the most compelling are Harp Oletsky and his niece, Asphodel. Both are descendants of Polish immigrants who settled in the Nebraska Territory under acts of Congress that promised land for residency.

Like everyone else in Uz, their lives are dominated by the Depression and by Dust Bowl conditions. Harp, a Job-like figure, struggles to understand what has happened to the land, a set of environmental conditions that Ms. Russell deftly uses as a cautionary tale for our own treatment of nature.

What has been forgotten is that this land, so abused by modern farming practices that the precious topsoil has blown away, was not actually uninhabited. For nearly a thousand years Native American tribes, especially the Pawnee, farmed the area and hunted its wild buffalo. They did not try to grow fields of wheat on a colossal scale, but instead crops like corn and beans and squash; their fields were not fenced in by barbed wire, but with stands of sunflowers.

Fortunately, Cleo Allfrey, a government photographer hired to record Dust Bowl hardships, appears on the



## THE ANTIDOTE

By Karen Russell  
Knopf (\$30)

scene. Armed with a magical Graflex camera discovered at a local pawnshop, the photos Cleo takes are never the photos that appear in the developing pan. Instead, the images show the land as it was when the Pawnee were there, a place where children laugh and play, crops grow in abundance, and the sun shines bright and clear with no dust to obscure it.

When the protagonists have their eyes opened to both the past and the potential future of the land, they must act upon what they know. Not wanting to believe “The past was not so sacrosanct” and that “You could simply make more up,” each decides it would be yet another crime to have been gifted with so much sudden memory, but do nothing.

Unfortunately, it is here that the novel falters. When at a town meeting the protagonists attempt to convince their neighbors to not only change their farming practices, but also consider providing the Pawnee with reparations, all of Ms. Russell’s carefully woven metaphors turn into direct political discourse.

Nevertheless, one disappointing scene does not unmake the fabric of the novel. Spending time with these characters as they strive to confront and make peace with their pasts is a truly compelling experience.

“The Antidote” is an important book, reminding us of the power of memory and the dangers of forgetting. Perhaps even more significantly, Karen Russell’s joyful imagination lights up the page, making this one this year’s must-reads.

*Jeffrey Condran is the author of the story collection “Claire, Wading into the Danube By Night” and is the cofounder and publisher of the independent literary press Braddock Avenue Books.*

## Best-sellers

### HARDCOVER FICTION

1. **James**, Percival Everett, Doubleday, \$28
2. **The God of the Woods**, Liz Moore, Riverhead Books, \$30
3. **Three Days in June**, Anne Tyler,

Knopf, \$27

4. **The Wedding People**, Alison Espach, Henry Holt and Co., \$28.99

### HARDCOVER NONFICTION

1. **The Let Them Theory: A Life-Changing Tool That Millions of People**

# Freedom of the press is under attack in ‘Murder the Truth’

By Glenn C. Altschuler

At a campaign rally in Fort Worth, Texas, in February 2016, Donald Trump declared that if he became president he would “open up our libel laws, so when [the media] write purposely negative and horrible and false articles, we can sue them and win lots of money.”

Trump’s target was New York Times Co. v. Sullivan (1964), a landmark Supreme Court decision requiring that plaintiffs in defamation cases who are “public figures” must prove not only that statements made about them were false but were also made with “actual malice.”

This decision, David Enrich, a journalist at The New York Times and author of “Dark Towers: Deutsche Bank, Donald Trump, and an Epic Trail of Destruction,” points out, has made it possible for national media outlets, local newspapers and bloggers to investigate the behavior of wealthy, powerful and corrupt corporations, religious institutions,

## MURDER THE TRUTH: THREATS, INTIMIDATION, AND A SECRET CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT THE POWERFUL

By David Enrich  
Mariner (\$32.99)

universities and their leaders, without fear of incurring massive expenses for libel insurance, litigation, and defamation awards.

In “Murder the Truth,” Enrich provides an urgently relevant account of the little known and ongoing attempt of conservative politicians, lawyers, millionaires and billionaires, supported by Supreme Court Justices Clarence Thomas and Neil Gorsuch, to erode the ability of the media to hold them accountable.

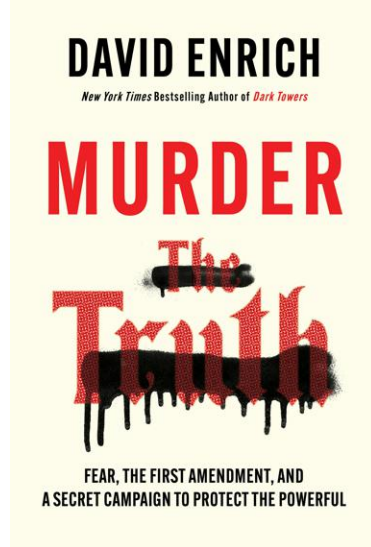
They crafted cases designed to “kneecap” Sullivan and weaponize free speech by shifting the burden of proof to defendants (who must then demonstrate that they had their facts right), narrowing the definition

of who qualifies as a “public figure” and applying “actual malice” only to allegations involving government officials.

Enrich is an indefatigable investigative reporter as well as a gifted storyteller. British courts, he reveals, attracted “libel tourists,” including Russian oligarchs, Saudi tycoons, Holocaust deniers, and Hollywood celebrities, seeking friendly venues to file suits against American media outlets.

A covert operative for Russian oligarchs sued Scott Stedman in England for defaming him in a series of exposes, even though Forensic News, the small online publication he founded and ran “had virtually no connection to the UK or Europe.” Subjected to hateful messages on social media and drowning in debt, Stedman threw in the towel, took down his (well-documented) articles, and got a job as a researcher in a non-profit.

In the United States, Enrich emphasizes, defamation suits, and even threats to sue, pose a clear and present danger to an already endangered



species — small-town newspapers.

Even though a judge dismissed a lawsuit filed by a police officer, declaring the allegations against him in an article in The Carroll Times Herald in western Iowa, “accurate and true and the underlying facts undisputed,” the family that owned the paper incurred huge legal bills and lost revenue from subscribers and advertisers. To cover their debts, they sold it to a large media company, which shifted the focus to soft news.

To bolster the Sullivan decision, Enrich indicates, several states

passed legislation enabling defendants who address matters of public concern to get lawsuits dismissed by showing that their claims had a reasonable factual basis and increased the circumstances in which plaintiffs were required to cover the legal expenses of their opponents.

Using the Dominion Voting Systems’ lawsuit against Fox News as an example, Enrich also asserts that defamation cases can “stanch the flow of disinformation” — and that the barriers imposed by Sullivan are not nearly as insurmountable as its critics maintain.

In 2023, Enrich concludes, Thomas and Gorsuch did not have the support of any of their colleagues to overturn New York Times v. Sullivan. However, the current crop of defamation lawsuits may not reach the Supreme Court for years.

“Perhaps they will fail,” Enrich acknowledges. But they “may also partially succeed,” with consequences “likely to be stark.” All the more so with Justice Thomas increasingly influential on a conservative Supreme Court that has not hesitated to overturn precedents.

“The media is still tormenting him,” Enrich writes, but now he and his allies “just might be able to do something about it.”

*Glenn C. Altschuler is The Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Emeritus Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.*

InReview

# Shari Lapena thinks everyone is lying

## Her newest novel mixes small town gossip with a touch of evil

By Cindy Alexander

When a child disappears, investigators immediately look at the parents or the child’s guardian. That makes sense, since they are usually the closest to the child. But what if no one can be trusted?

That is the premise of the new thriller by six-time New York Times Bestseller Shari Lapena, “Everyone Here is Lying.”

Ms. Lapena’s book takes place in the fictional town of Stanhope, where the book’s title holds true.

In the first chapter we meet Dr. William Wooler, a respected physician who has many secrets of his own, including an affair. He also has a complicated relationship with his ‘difficult’ nine-year-old daughter, Avery.

Avery knows how to push William’s buttons, to the point where in the past he has lost his patience and raised a hand to her. As the book begins, he has just lost the mistress he loves, Nora Blanchard, who out of guilt has decided to end the relationship.

William goes home hurt and upset, hoping to find an empty house, but Avery is there after getting in trouble again at school. Already upset and angry, he hits Avery with a hard slap, knocking her to the ground. By the time her older brother gets home, Avery is missing.

Ms. Lapena’s story takes you on a whirlwind of guessing who is lying and who is telling the truth, with interconnected neighbors who are struggling themselves — and may hold a grudge against the Wooler family.

“The idea of Avery just came to me one day,” said Ms. Lapena in an interview with the Post-Gazette. “I thought: what if a father struck his daughter really hard and she disappeared? I wanted to have a difficult child, because that’s a bit different.”

Avery gets in trouble at school and at home. Her behavior is impacting her family, especially her parents, whose relationship is strained due to their different views on how to handle her.

“I wanted to explore the dysfunction in that family and how the raising of a particularly challenging child affected each parent differently and damaged their marriage,” said Ms. Lapena.

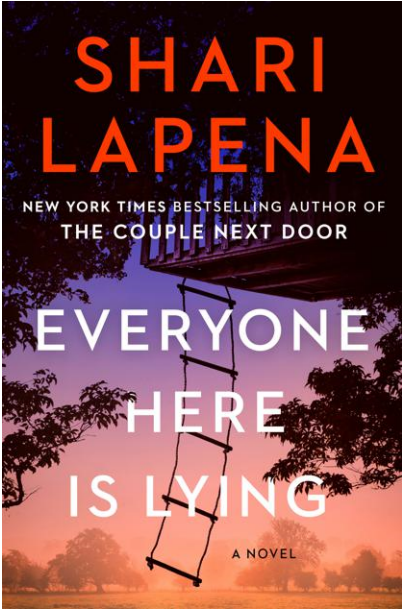
Ms. Lapena started writing when she was a child, the same age as Avery is in her book. She further dabbled in her twenties, but thought that trying to make it as a writer wasn’t practical. She decided to go to law school and then teacher’s college. She came back to writing when she stayed at home with her first child. That was 24 years ago.

“My first novel was a literary comedy. It did well critically, but didn’t sell



Author Shari Lapena

Tristan Ostler



**EVERYONE HERE IS LYING**

By Shari Lapena  
Pamela Dorman Books/Viking (\$29)

outside of Canada,” said Ms. Lapena. After another literary comedy, she switched gears and wrote a thriller, the global bestseller “The Couple Next Door.”

“I’ve been writing psychological thrillers ever since. It seems to be where I belong,” said Ms. Lapena.

“Everyone Here is Lying” not only explores the dysfunction of the Wooler family. We get to meet many neighbors while detectives Gully and Bledsoe of the local police department start

### Appearance

Shari Lapena will be reading with Annette Dashofy on July 31 at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh at 7 p.m., presented by Riverstone Books. More information can be found at riverstonebookstore.com.

asking questions, trying to get some answers on who may have taken Avery. Their answers bring more questions and reveal there may be one or more psychopaths living in their upscale neighborhood.

“I love to go inside psychopaths’s heads. I think there are more of them around than most people realize,” said Ms. Lapena.

The short chapters of “Everyone Here is Lying” make the book move quickly, with multiple points of views. Just when you think you may have the answers to what happened to Avery, Ms. Lapena takes you into another direction with ease, keeping readers on edge. And even when what happened to Avery is revealed, the twists continue.

“Everyone Here is Lying” is a perfect summer read. The story keeps you interested until the very last sentence and makes the reader long for a sequel.

*Cindy Alexander is a freelance journalist for both the Post-Gazette and Shady Ave Magazine. She is also the co-host of I Wish You Lived Next Door, a podcast dedicated to previewing upcoming book releases.*

# Pennsylvtucky darkness

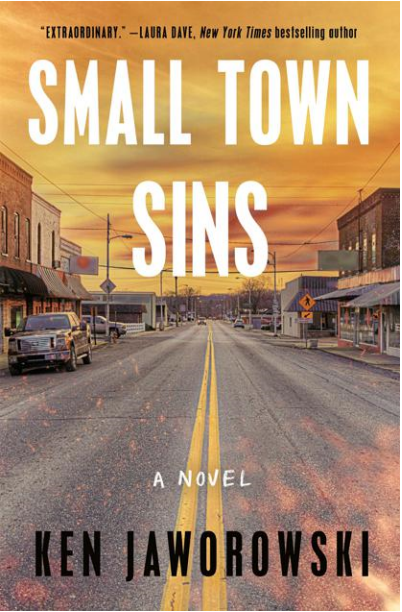
By Robert Croan

In “Small Town Sins,” his first work of fiction, Ken Jaworowski has painted an unrelentingly grim portrait of small-town America. The author, a New York Times editor, grew up in Philadelphia, but he knows the rural towns that once flourished from steel and coal, but now lie deserted except for a few thousand residents who were never able to move on. Some would call them all losers.

This novel’s three protagonists, from the fictional central Pennsylvania town of Locksburg, alternate in interweaving first-person accounts of their cheerless lives, bad decisions and the consequences for themselves and others.

Nathan, a 42-year-old steelworker, stole his mother’s wedding ring to pay for an abortion for his supposedly pregnant girlfriend, LeeLee — precipitating his mother’s death. Now married to a nurse named Paula, his marriage is torn apart by financial problems and the couple’s inability to have children. Busing himself as a volunteer fireman to distract from his disappointments, Nathan steals a bag of cash from a burning building. Paula wants to return the money. LeeLee, who inexplicably comes back into Nathan’s life at this point, has other ideas.

Callie, a 28-year-old nurse who works with Paula, is a kindhearted person with a low self-image, due to a cleft palate that has always been mocked by the men around her. When she treats a 16-year-old girl suffering from terminal cancer — whose fundamentalist parents want only to pray the illness away — she casts aside professional detachment and decides to help achieve the girl’s lifelong wish to see the ocean.



Andy, a thirty-something recovering heroin addict, was the father of a girl with Down Syndrome whose early death has just caused the suicide of his wife. He goes off the wagon and steals a briefcase which turns out to contain a trove of child porn, one victim being a child with Down and friend of his daughter. This spurs Andy to take upon himself a mission to hunt down the predator. When he discovers the predator’s identity, the crime takes on an even more sinister dimension.

Looming over all this is the town itself: “It’s the kind of place that generous people would call quaint, dismissive ones would call the boondocks, and smart-ass ones would call Pennsylvtucky.” It’s also the kind of town (and the kind of plot) where everything that can go wrong, does go wrong. One character describes

**SMALL TOWN SINS**

By Ken Jaworowski  
Henry Holt and Co. (\$27.99)

Locksburg as a place “where, most outsiders believed, nothing much happens, and we don’t think any kind of deep thoughts.”

Not so. The three inhabitants whom we follow have deep thoughts and often good intentions — even if “good intentions” has to include some vigilante vengeance. And their “deep thinking” is not necessarily a prelude to intelligent decisions. In each case their actions will lead to the death of at least one person, and that won’t be the end of their troubles — the respective denouements may be just the beginning of their personal tragedies.

“Killing someone,” one character muses, “is simple in movies and television. ... To actually carry out a murder takes either blind courage or complete ignorance ... of what it will cost the both of you.”

The world of Locksburg is one that few Pennsylvanians will want to embrace. Mr. Jaworowski is such a good writer that he brings it to life with excruciating authenticity and believability, along with plot twists that startle in every chapter. Still — this can be a very unpleasant book to read.

Whether, after the tale is told, there is resolution, retribution, vindication and hope, or whether the victories will be Pyrrhic, is left for each reader to decide.

*Robert Croan is a former classical music writer and senior editor for the Post-Gazette. He is currently a freelance writer and lecturer in Fort Lauderdale, FL.*

# Seeing women on the verge of greatness

By Matthew Minicucci

Early in Genevieve Gornichec’s new novel “The Weaver and the Witch Queen,” Gunnhild considers a massive question in her own life and the world she’s been brought up in: “I wonder what it’s like to be a woman respected on her own, for her own skills, and not who she’s related to.”

Gunnhild follows this culture-shattering thought with a question to the seeress, Heid, who will become her mentor and the person who sets her on the path towards understanding her own power. “Will you teach me to be a seeress?” Why, Heid responds, would you wish to be? “I wish to be feared and respected,” Gunnhild says. “I wish to be seen.”

It’s this desire to see and be seen which struck me so much as I was reading “The Weaver and the Witch Queen.” This is a book about women navigating a world that is not interested in their being seen, but rather informing them as to where and when — and how — they should look.

The novel focuses on the quests and relationships of three women who are trying to retain their own right to live their lives as they choose, and the tribulations they each face, both alone and together. Signy and Oddny, the other two women we circle around throughout the novel, are caught up in the confines of their culture, but do not choose the seeress path that Gunnhild takes. Oddny, more interested in the possibilities of independence, asks, “Who says a woman has to be defined by her men? By her male kin, and then by her husband and sons? Who says?”

In truth, the book is filled with characters who have some say, whether an abusive mother, raiders looking for treasure and captives, or the complicated power structure of King Eirik and a warring ruling family.

Because the novel brings us to so many places and allows us to interact with a world of almost impossible powers, we might be justified in allowing ourselves to spin off into the fantasy of a tenth-century Norway which has healers and magic and the daughters of Freyja, the first witch, with connections and influence over both nature and life and death. But I think, in reading “The Weaver and the Witch Queen,” it’s worth considering what we consider strange and fantastical, and what we consider gritty and realistic. Why is it that women wielding power(s) and taking



**THE WEAVER AND THE WITCH QUEEN**

By Genevieve Gornichec  
Ace Books (\$27)

control of the world around them strikes us as so otherworldly — while being taken away from their families, marrying for safety and position or being used as political bargaining chips feels almost akin to the everyday?

I can say, without giving too much away, that by the end of the book each of these three women find power in their own way. Still, the power they encounter comes with concessions. But, at the same time, I was excited to see the women’s journeys converge.

Ms. Gornichec deftly pulls taut the spinning threads of each of these women for so long that we’re certain they will never come back together. Even in moments of fighting, each in her own way, to survive the difficulties that have beset them, I worried I would not get a chance to see the adult versions of Gunnhild, Oddny and Signy find some measure of comfort in their lifelong support of each other. My worries were misplaced, and their reunion is incredibly satisfying.

“I wish to be seen,” a young Gunnhild tells Heid as she carves out some life for herself outside the patriarchy — which has no place for the power of young, or mature, women.

Of all the magic Ms. Gornichec carves and spins in this book, this might be the most impressive and impactful: We get to see these women rise to meet every challenge they encounter. As an audience, we stop merely looking at these women, and finally start actually seeing them — and the power they wield.

*Matthew Minicucci is a poet and essayist. He is an assistant professor at the University of Alabama.*

### Best-sellers

- HARDCOVER FICTION**
- 1. Fourth Wing**, Rebecca Yarros, Entangled: Red Tower Books, \$29.99
  - 2. Demon Copperhead**, Barbara Kingsolver, Harper, \$32.50
  - 3. Crook Manifesto-Debut**, Colson Whitehead, Doubleday, \$29
  - 4. The Covenant of Water**, Abraham Verghese, Grove Press, \$32
  - 5. Lessons in Chemistry**, Bonnie Garmus, Doubleday, \$29
  - 6. Happy Place**, Emily Henry, Berkley, \$27
  - 7. Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow**, Gabrielle Charbonnet, Knopf, \$28
  - 8. Yellowface**, R. F. Kuang, Morrow, \$30
  - 9. The Collector-Debut**, Daniel Silva, Harper, \$32
  - 10. Hello Beautiful**, Ann Napolitano, The Dial Press, \$28
  - 11. Remarkably Bright Creatures**, Shelby Van Pelt, Ecco, \$29.99
  - 12. Silver Nitrate-Debut**, Silvia Moreno-Garcia, Del Rey, \$28
  - 13. The Five-Star Weekend**, Elin Hilderbrand, Little, Brown, \$30

- HARDCOVER NONFICTION**
- 1. The Wager: A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny and Murder**, David Grann, Doubleday, \$30
  - 2. The Creative Act: A Way of Being**, Rick Rubin, Penguin Press, \$32
  - 3. The Art Thief: A True Story of Love, Crime, and a Dangerous Obsession**, Michael Finkel, Knopf, \$28
  - 4. Poverty, by America**, Matthew Desmond, Crown, \$28
  - 5. Pageboy: A Memoir**, Eliot Page, Flatiron Books, \$29.99
  - 6. Outlive: The Science and Art of Longevity**, Peter Attia, M.D., Bill Gifford, Harmony, \$32
  - 7. Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones**, James Clear, Avery, \$27
  - 8. I'm Glad My Mom Died**, Janelle McCurdy, Simon & Schuster, \$27.99
  - 9. The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse**, Charlie Mackesy, HarperOne, \$22.99
  - 10. What an Owl Knows: The New Science of the World's Most Enigmatic Birds**, Jennifer Ackerman, Penguin Press, \$30

InReview

# Nights at the Eden Park Roller Rink

By Fred Shaw

Lori Jakiela’s latest essay collection, “All Skate: True Stories from Middle Life,” evokes a line from poet Linda Pastan’s “Something About the Trees”: “There is an age when you are most yourself.” And though Jakiela, the Trafford writer and Pitt-Greensburg professor, found her writing voice many moons ago, perhaps it’s Pastan’s next line, “I know more than I did once,” that sums up the energy and drive of Jakiela’s latest, which is fittingly subtitled, “a dive into reflections wrought by a half-century of living.”

The essays in “All Skate” cover the expected midlife trajectory — loss of parents, empty-nest syndrome, the nature of work, body issues — sometimes in the same piece. But fans of Jakiela know that it’ll land with her unique blend of insight and honesty tinged with humor.

When she summons a line of Kurt Vonnegut’s, “be kind babies,” what’s most important is what she writes after, “I always thought he meant be kind to others, but maybe kindness starts with the self.” In a time where civility and understanding can be in short supply, maybe Jakiela is on to something.

In “Le Petite Butt,” she uses a department store dressing room to not only muse on American obsessions with body shape but manages to widen the scope into something more existential. “Today, I especially do not feel lucky in 20th-century America, in a T.J. Maxx dressing room, under bug-zapping fluorescent lights, in a mirror that reflects what I’ve come to think of as my own mortality.”

It takes talent to braid so much into these pages as she leaps from her French-friend Constance to Walt Whitman to gambling to her mother’s bikini to Plato and Sylvester Graham to travel in Paris. It’s also smart and observational in the way one of her many literary heroes, Ernest Hemingway, might’ve captured: “the fleeting loveliness of what it means to be alive, maybe.”

In “Pick Yourself Up Off the Ground,” readers are transported back to the pandemic and the boredom that



Author Lori Jakiela

finds the speaker “on a tennis court, trying not to pass out,” as she has, in her mother’s words, “the common sense of a doorknob.”

A roller skating adventure with her daughter has gone awry and she’s down with a broken wrist. But what’s more engaging is the idea of wanting to claw back some of those moments of carefree youth, even if it’s fraught with the peril of gravity. But as any daredevil worth their salt knows, the title is apt, and soon enough, we’re at the Eden Park Roller Rink in McKeesport, where, with the encouragement of teenage daughter Phelan, Jakiela is back at it. “My knees wobble but soon I’m flying, dodging downed kids, a human pinball zigging this way and that. When we take a break, Phelan says, ‘I saw

**ALL SKATE: TRUE STORIES FROM MIDDLE LIFE**

By Lori Jakiela  
Roadside Press (\$18)

you! You looked young, like another version of yourself.”

“Enlightenment in Blue” moves toward another sweet spot for Jakiela: the working life. Beginning with the Zoom classes many taught during those dark days of 2020, she considers the technology and loss of personal connection left her “poisoned.”

She quickly pivots to her years of being a flight attendant, where “turbulence was always something. Everything unexpected, everything uncontrolled. Flight



Phelan Newman

seems magical, out-of-body ordinary until it’s not.” That she ends up being thrown five rows after multiple lightning strikes is scary.

When she considers the pains that still lingers from those years, she thinks of them as “a postcard, the way I think of scars as postcards, my body stamped with time and place and memory — I was here and here and here. Physicality as presence. Physicality as meaning. Proof of life, maybe.”

But there is little that is a “maybe” in “All Skate,” as Jakiela’s writing calls to mind the words of another of her writerly heroes, Harry Crews, who once said, “Let’s get down to where the blood is, the bone is.”

*Fred Shaw is a visiting lecturer in creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh.*

# K-pop and the self

By Hudson Warm

Sulli, a former member of the K-pop girl group f(x), rose to stardom as an actress and a singer under leading K-pop agency SM Entertainment. She performed, and promoted, for years as her group’s fame increased with each number-one single.

But in 2015, a burnt-out Sulli left the group and began to hone an independent identity — one that tackled subjects taboo in Korean culture. She posted content braless, kissing her older boyfriend or discussing topics like menstruation.

As a result, a vicious wave of cyberbullying drowned her, and Sulli committed suicide at 25 years old.

Giaae Kwon recounts this and many more stories about Korean pop music (or K-pop) in “I’ll Love You Forever: Notes from a K-Pop Fan.” Her essay collection offers a deft portrait of this global cultural phenomenon, its parasocial fan culture, and the human issues at its center. But beyond K-pop, Kwon also paints an intimate self-portrait, complete with precise angularity and honest shadowing, albeit held together with sometimes tenuous seams.

Kwon writes with candor and writes unflinchingly — she admits that she dropped out of school twice, lied to her parents more than that, and struggles with both her body image and mental health. She’s vulnerable about having never been in a relationship and often feels lonely.

One of Kwon’s central motifs is her relationship to her body. Throughout her life, she has dealt with constant shame about not being perfect, exacerbated by one trip to Korea that made her feel ostracized from her own culture. The collection concludes with a heart-warming full circle moment when she returns to Korea in 2023 and finally feels at home.

One chapter explains how each K-pop group has a member referred to as “the visual,” the person valued for their appearance (the Posh Spice, if you will). Here, with writing that toggles between diaristic and more distantly analytical registers, Kwon explores her own relationship to feminism, which she eschewed into her 20s but embraced as she confronted her internal misogyny that biased her against certain female figures and groups.

Other K-pop stars act as prisms through which she explores particular issues in her life. In her examination of Tablo, a Stanford graduate and member of hip-hop group Epik High, Kwon dissects her own schooling and her fraught relationship with higher education. And in a chapter she begins effectively with, “This is an essay I do not want to write,” Kwon examines K-pop and Korean beauty standards as well as her experience undergoing surgery for her monolids in high school — and now rethinking it.

Kwon is an unabapologetic



Gloria Kwon

Author Giaae Kwon



**I'LL LOVE YOU FOREVER: NOTES FROM A K-POP FAN**

By Giaae Kwon  
Henry Holt and Co. (\$28.99)

bbasooni (K-pop stans), and her knowledge about and passion for the Korean music industry is evident. She writes on K-pop’s historical context: how American military bases dotted the Korean peninsula’s lower half in the postwar period, introducing nightclubs that exposed Koreans to Western-style music.

Kwon offers an education in the genre — a topic I admittedly knew little about previously — but also in the cultural underpinnings that underscore it: patriarchal structures, sentiments around sex, beauty standards and a cultural emphasis on academic advancement, for example.

Kwon’s writing style was not consistently fluid, and transitions sometimes felt woven half-heartedly. Kwon would return from a tangent often with, “But to go back to...” or repeat certain facts and phrases verbatim chapters apart. The book felt occasionally as if it wanted to escape the bounds of K-pop — a sign that Kwon certainly has more to say.

These hardly subtracted, however, from my appreciation for Kwon’s debut essay collection. The book is a considerable feat and emerges as a singular blend of personal essay and cultural criticism that is also a meaningful read. What does it mean, she asks, to live a life as a media consumer and as a creative?

*Hudson Warm is a student journalist and critic at Yale University as well as the Scholastic and National Indie Excellence Award-winning author of two novels. She formerly interned at the Post-Gazette.*

# An attempt at growing sunflowers

By Matthew Minicucci

Knee-deep in an essay titled “The Ghost of Christmas Always,” A. Kendra Greene casually mentions the maxim “all models are wrong,” generally attributed to statistician George Box who used it in a 1976 paper and goes on to finish the line “but some are useful.”

This was a “truism” that I found myself returning to in Greene’s new book, “No Less Strange or Wonderful,” a collection of essays which, among many other things, asks us to consider the nature of perspective in our daily lives.

Greene does this very early on in her essay “The Witching Hour,” which seems less like your traditional idea of what an essay might be and instead closer to its Old French etymological roots, *essai*, which means something like: “a trial or attempt.”

I would push it back even further to its Proto-Indo-European root *ag* (which eventually finds its way into Latin as *exigent*): “to drive, to draw out, to move.” It is impossible not to be moved by Greene’s essays, all caught up in a miraculous kind of exigency, and this first brief series of paragraphs forces us to consider whether a tree might be able to ride a bike.

No word of a lie. I promise



Space Giraffe Studios/Gavin Greene  
Author A. Kendra Greene

**NO LESS STRANGE OR WONDERFUL**

By A. Kendra Greene  
Tin House (\$28.95)

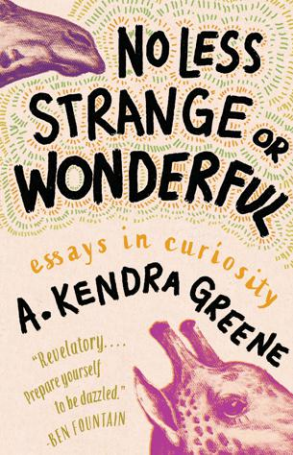
you this is (one of) the first questions you’ll have to ask yourself in reading this collection. And it’s this question of perspective (whose perspective, based on certain givens) that floats its way across the book like tangled seaweed.

Greene might have something to say about this metaphor, as she writes in her essay “The Sorcerer Has Gone to Italy,” “metaphors themselves can die, be dead, whether you were taught that happens when they become conventional ... or whether you prefer the reading that a metaphor dies only when it falls out of use.”

I love the duality of these possibilities. It is either the continued use or the complete loss of something that brings it to ruin. In this way, Greene’s book reminds me of explaining irregular verbs to students in a history of the English language class.

Generally, the complication lies in either a word used too much or too little. Either way, it finds itself mired in a sort of strangeness. Like the verb “to be,” odd in its variable morphology depending on the first, second, or third person, but only because we’re speaking contemporary English. If we were uttering its ancestor, this would all seem perfectly normal. It just never changed because we used the word too often to bother.

Greene has created a book in “No Less Strange or Wonderful” that is, ostensibly, a sort of museum of curiosities. Though, that’s only at first glance. Upon further inspection, the language isn’t caged or encased like a fossil, it’s conscious and considerate of each passing moment. This is a collection of truly great first lines like “Joanna was the perfect height to be a princess but she was employed as a chipmunk,” which doesn’t make very much sense unless you consider the perspective you have on all of these words, something beyond their syllabic weight, and then it feels like



a perfectly straightforward thing to say.

In “The Ghost of Christmas Always,” Greene cites writer Nathan Heller’s observation that “there are two kinds of ideas: sunflowers and bougainvillea,” that the sunflower is a thing which is clear and hearty, but there is also the bougainvillea, which “resists being any one thing.”

Risking language that might either be overused or never used again at all, “No Less Strange or Wonderful” is a book that dresses itself as bougainvillea, feeling its way through the world, but is actually a sunflower, robust and towering.

*Matthew Minicucci is a poet and essayist. He is an assistant professor at the University of Alabama.*

## Best-sellers

- HARDCOVER FICTION**

  - 1. Say You'll Remember Me- Debut,** Abby Jimenez, Forever, \$28
  - 2. James,** Percival Everett, Doubleday, \$28
  - 3. The Wedding People,** Alison Espach, Henry Holt and Co., \$28.99
  - 4. The God of the Woods,** Liz Moore, Riverhead Books, \$30
  - 5. The Sirens- Debut,** Emilia Hart, St. Martin’s Press, \$29
  - 6. Dream Count,** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Knopf, \$32
  - 7. Broken Country,** Clare Leslie Hall, Simon & Schuster, \$28.99
  - 8. Wild Dark Shore,** Charlotte McConaghy, Flatiron Books, \$28.99
  - 9. Heartwood-Debut,** Amity Gaige, Simon & Schuster, \$28.99

- HARDCOVER NONFICTION**

  - 1. The Let Them Theory: A Life-Changing Tool That Millions of People Can't Stop Talking About,** Mel Robbins, Sawyer Robbins, Hay House LLC, \$29.99
  - 2. Everything Is Tuberculosis (Signed Edition): The History and Persistence of Our Deadliest Infection,** John Green, Crash Course Books, \$28
  - 3. Abundance,** Ezra Klein, Derek Thompson, Avid Reader Press/Simon & Schuster, \$30
  - 4. Careless People: A Cautionary Tale of Power, Greed, and Lost Idealism,** Sarah Wynn-Williams, Flatiron Books, \$32.99
  - 5. The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World,** Robin Wall Kimmerer, John Burgoyne (illus.), Scribner, \$20

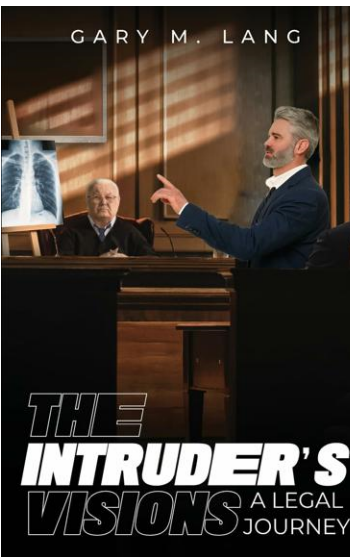
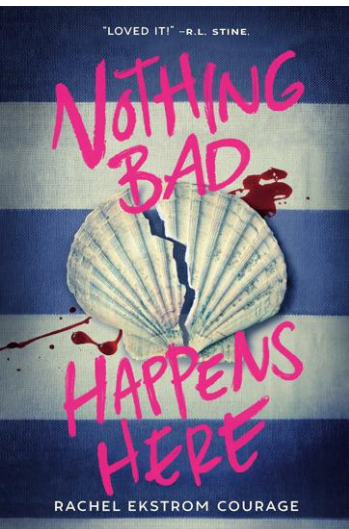
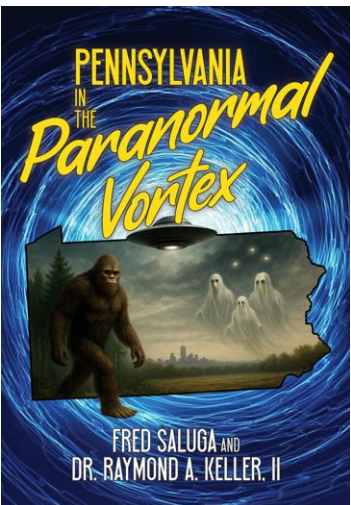
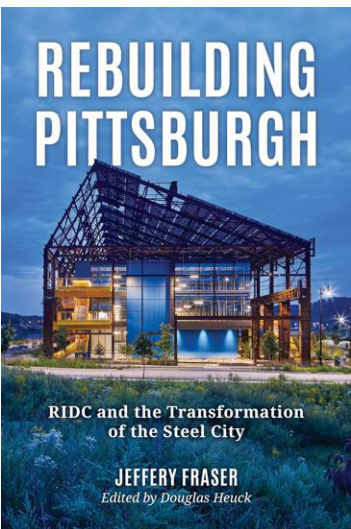
InReview

# Local author roundup!: Summer edition

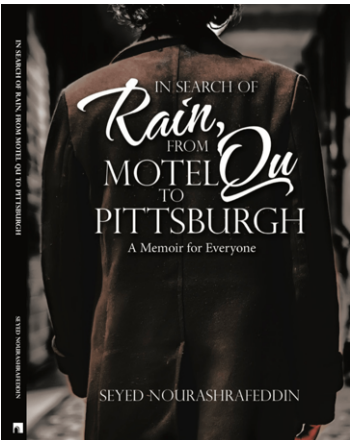
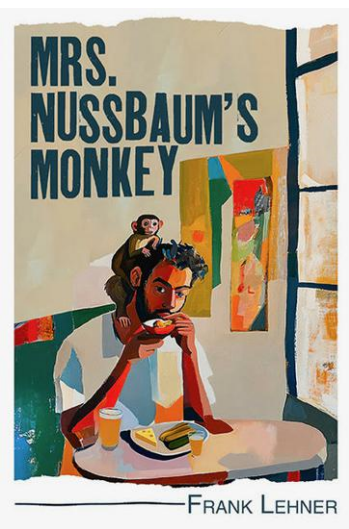
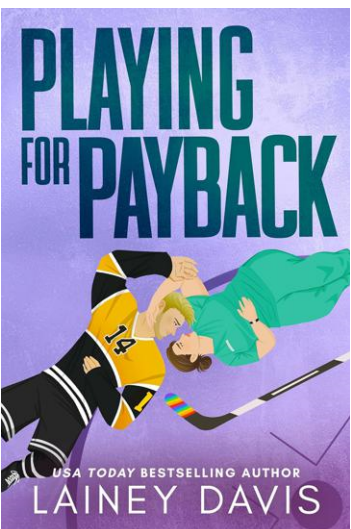
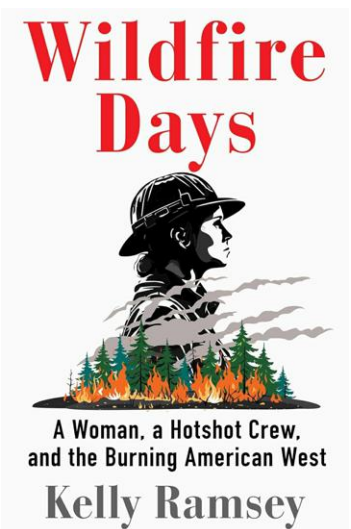
By InReview

This summer, InReview wants to acknowledge a few of the many titles by local authors we did not have a chance to cover. Here are eight books by Pittsburgh-area or Pittsburgh-related writers we wish we could have said more about — but the author-and-publisher-provided descriptions are enough to tempt any reader.

**“Wildfire Days: A Woman, a Hotshot Crew, and the Burning American West”**  
by Kelly Ramsey  
(Scribner, \$29.99)  
“As Kelly Ramsey trains relentlessly to overcome her elite crew’s skepticism [about her age and gender] and gain their respect, megafires erupt across the West, posing an increasing danger both on the job and back home. In vivid prose that evokes the majesty of Northern California’s forests, Ramsey takes us on the ground to see how major wildfires are fought and to lay bare the psychological toll, the bone-deep weariness, and the unbreakable camaraderie that emerge in the face of nature’s fury.”



**“Pennsylvania in the Paranormal Vortex”**  
by Fred Saluga and Dr. Raymond A. Keller  
(Headline Books, \$19.99)  
“...a pioneering work which underscores alternate universe theories to help explain the multiplicity and connectivity of high strangeness phenomena such as Bigfoot and cryptic sightings, UFO and alien encounters and the materialization of spectral apparitions impinging from time-to-time in the history of Pennsylvania.”



**“Nothing Bad Happens Here”**  
by Rachel Ekstrom Courage  
(Delacorte Press, \$12.99)  
“Nothing bad happens in Nantucket, a charming island with cobblestone streets and million-dollar cottages. But when Lucia stumbles upon the body of a teenage girl on a beach, the discovery reopens old wounds from her past.”

community and regional revitalization, and high quality job creation that could be a model for other regions that were once powerhouses of America’s industrial economy.”

mother who died tragically. The lives of the homeless man, the lawyer, and the teenaged orphan intertwine in complex and sometimes mysterious ways.”

**“In Search of Rain, From Motel Qu to Pittsburgh”**  
by Seyed Nourashrafeddin  
(Archway Publishing, \$30.99)  
“Imagine that you are a child who was born in a large family, and during your childhood, a revolution took place in your country and everything undergoes change and transformation, and at the same time, the country is involved in the longest war of the century, and the worry and stress caused by the war has influenced everything so much that the next generation will call the children who spent their childhood in this era as the “burnt generation.” What future did you imagine for yourself? What happened to you after forty years?”

**“Mrs. Nussbaum’s Monkey: Poems”**  
by Frank Lehner  
(Bottom Dog Press, \$17)  
“Frank Lehner’s new book, ‘Mrs. Nussbaum’s Monkey,’ is a Pittsburgh pastoral. It is a love poem and a field guide to the unknown landscape that exists beneath and beyond the truisms about blue collar, industrial cities in America. ‘Mrs. Nussbaum’s Monkey’ is a tribute to the unknownness of place, of the many surprising places this industrial city represents. This book is an eloquent revision. A revelation.” – Lynn Emanuel, author of “Transcript of the Disappearance, Exact and Diminishing: Poems.”

**“Rebuilding Pittsburgh: RIDC and the Transformation of the Steel City”**  
by Jeffrey Fraser  
(Globe Pequot, \$24.95)  
“From revitalizing abandoned steel mills and industrial sites into thriving business and technology parks to transforming underutilized land into locations built for job-creating companies, the organization has created a unique blend of economic development advocacy, com-

**“The Intruder’s Visions: A Legal Journey”**  
by Gary M. Lang  
(Gary Lang, \$11.50)  
“On a winter’s night, a homeless man seeking to get out of the cold enters an office building in Pittsburgh and camps out in the basement. He discovers a box containing the office memorabilia of an attorney, who is sitting at his desk four floors up, about to be retained on a medical malpractice case representing the estate of a young

**“Playing for Payback: A Revenge Romance”**  
by Lainey Davis  
(Lainey Davis, \$14.99)  
“Somehow, the line between fake and real grows blurry, and the game becomes dangerously personal. With Lena’s job on the line and the whole world watching [a professional hockey player’s] every move, we’re not just playing for payback. We’re fighting a connection neither of us saw coming—one that might be worth risking everything.”

## A convergence of dreams, reality — and pain

By Matthew Minicucci

In his collected journals from 1976 to 1991, “The Mausoleum of Lovers,” French writer and photographer Hervé Guibert receives news that his pain “cannot be explained.”

In a brief and introspective response that so organizes the journals, Guibert explains: “on this assertion ... the reasoned body cuts the current of its machinery of suffering. But it also has difficulty living with the pain, and reason is forgotten, and the body starts to bore again, tooth and nail, into itself.”

Maggie Nelson’s new book, “Patthemata or, The Story of My Mouth” takes much of its form and aim from Guibert’s consideration here of the moment reason is lost and how the body can bore into itself. Nelson warns us in a disclaimer that this is a book that “conjoins dreams and reality,” and that movement and insertion of dreams and reality, both connecting in a hyper and hypo way to the pain, “should be understood in that spirit.”

Ostensibly a straightforward consideration of a difficult period of intense jaw pain during the pandemic, Nelson cuts entire worlds from the fever dream of both intense



COVID isolation and the meandering passion (i.e., suffering) of jaw pain.

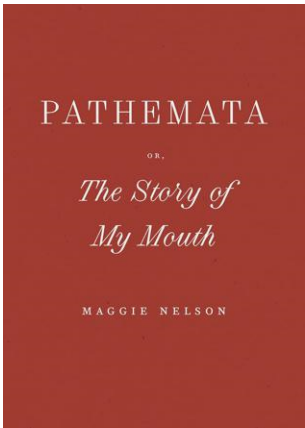
About halfway through its short 68-page length, Nelson writes: “Sometimes I wonder what I would have thought about all these years, if I hadn’t spent so much time thinking about the pain. Then

I remember I’ve thought about a lot of other things as well. Also, I’m not sure the goal of life is to think about as many things as possible.”

It is, perhaps, the consideration of pain as a grammatical present perfect that is most upsetting to both Nelson and her reader. That is: an ac-

tion not necessarily completed, begun in the past, and continuing into an uncertain future. It’s the continuance, rather than any intensity, that seems most difficult to bear.

Quoting a brief gobblet from Thoreau’s 1851 journals, Nelson tells us “the question is not what you look at but how you look & whether you see.” In a book that feels as much poetry as it



does prose, at least to this poet, this is an important reminder to the reader.

The attempt of “Patthemata” — if indeed the Montaigne-approved Old French root of the word essay, *essai*, “to attempt” is the right word at all — is not to judge or codify the value of what is examined but, indeed, to try to truly “look” at pain and see it for what it is. Which is not to say there aren’t characters introduced to us along with heartbreaking and strange scenes along the way.

In fact, for longtime Nelson readers, there’s a kind of denouement to a number of complications and connections discussed in her 2009 masterpiece “Bluets.” The real gut punch, though, of finding out what happens to these people we’ve become enamored of is, of course,

that they are not characters at all. They are real people who have suffered or are still suffering.

The irony is not lost on this reader that in a book that is as much dream as it is reality one might find a true reaffirmation of those things in our lives that are “real.”

Towards the conclusion of the book, Nelson tells a writer-friend about an unrealized and possible book idea. His reaction is not positive, and the shame pushes her to think about “the mortifying abundance of telling.” She goes on to write, “It’s just like Freud’s theory of dreams — it’s not the dream that matters, it’s the telling of the dream — the words you choose, the risks you take in externalizing your mind.”

“Patthemata or, The Story of My Mouth” is an extremely risky book in that it has little interest in the meaning of the dream’s content. Instead, it’s the telling that matters. It argues that isolation, this brief rock we cling to amid the din of all things, can be excised — dispossessed, even — just by opening our mouths and being willing to risk the moment when all these things of the self finally come tumbling out.

Matthew Minicucci, a poet and essayist, is an assistant professor of English at the University of Alabama.

### Best-sellers

#### HARDCOVER FICTION

1. **Atmosphere**, Taylor Jenkins Reid, Ballantine Books
2. **Bury Our Bones in the Midnight Soil**, V. E. Schwab, Tor Books, \$29.99
3. **The Emperor of Gladness**, Ocean Vuong, Penguin Press, \$30
4. **My Friends**, Fredrik Backman, Atria Books, \$29.99
5. **Great Big Beautiful Life**, Emily Henry, Berkley
6. **James**, Percival Everett, Doubleday, \$28
7. **The River Is Waiting**, Wally Lamb, S&S/Marysue Rucci Books, \$29.99
8. **Never Flinch**, Stephen King, Scribner, \$32
9. **The Wedding People**, Alison Espach, Henry Holt and Co., \$28.99
10. **The God of the Woods**, Liz Moore, Riverhead Books, \$30
11. **The Knight and the Moth**, Rachel Gillig, Orbit, \$30
12. **With a Vengeance**, Riley Sager, Dutton, \$30

#### HARDCOVER NONFICTION

1. **The Let Them Theory: A Life-Changing Tool That Millions of People Can’t Stop Talking About**, Mel Robbins, Sawyer Robbins, Hay House LLC, \$29.99
2. **Everything Is Tuberculosis: The History and Persistence of Our Deadliest Infection**, John Green, Crash Course Books, \$28
3. **Abundance**, Ezra Klein, Derek Thompson, Avid Reader Press/Simon & Schuster, \$30
4. **The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World**, Robin Wall Kimmerer, John Burgoyne (illus.), Scribner, \$20
5. **The Book of Alchemy: A Creative Practice for an Inspired Life**, Suleika Jaouad, Random House, \$30
6. **One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This**, Omar El Akkad, Knopf, \$28
7. **We Can Do Hard Things: Answers to Life’s 20 Questions**, Glennon Doyle, Abby Wambach, Amanda Doyle, The Dial Press, \$34
8. **Mark Twain**, Ron Chernow, Penguin Press, \$45
9. **Is a River Alive?** Robert Macfarlane, W. W. Norton & Company, \$31.99,
10. **Murderland: Crime and Bloodlust in the Time of Serial Killers—Debut**, Caroline Fraser, Penguin Press, \$32
11. **The Möbius Book—Debut**, Catherine Lacey, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$27
12. **The Fate of the Day: The War for America, Fort Ticonderoga to Charleston, 1777–1780**, Rick Atkinson, Crown, \$42
13. **Big Dumb Eyes: Stories from a Simpler Mind**, Nate Bargatze, Grand Central Publishing, \$30

## InReview

# Surviving a shipwreck — and each other

By Meredith Cummings

Fighting with your spouse? Perhaps they recently left a wet towel on the floor, or forgot to pick up the dry cleaning. Right, but have they ever sucked the juice out of a turtle eyeball?

The searing emotional pain of Sophie Elmhirst's "Marriage at Sea: A True Story of Love, Obsession and Shipwreck" puts small marital spats into perspective — and for good reason.

In June 1972 Maurice and Maralyn Bailey set off from the coast of England, dreaming of the freedom sailing would entail. Almost a year into their voyage, in the vast Pacific, a whale upends and violently sinks the boat.

"They thought of their boat as their child. To hear her wood tear and splinter was like hearing the pained scream of an infant," Elmhirst writes in her nonfiction debut.

Elmhirst, an award-winning journalist, came across the story in the early days of the pandemic. Her just-the-facts ma'am style gives way to more complex, nuanced sentences. Ultimately, the book's ebb and flow mimics the movement of the ocean on which the protagonists are trapped.

At sea on a raft for 118 days, this is a slow-burn love story in many ways. Elmhirst likens the book to a thought experiment, and any relationship taken to its ultimate extreme.

"Maurice and Maralyn had to square up to a truth we often avoid in our lives, which is the reality of our own mortality and that of those we love," she said in a Q&A with the publisher.

Even though it's clear what the book is about, the devil is in the details: watch as the couple learns how to catch sharks or use turtle carcasses for food, as Maralyn cheers on Maurice as he inches closer to death on the raft. There's no doubt that Maralyn is the hero of the story. Her refusal to give up and give in drives the narrative.

To pass the time, the two played games with a piece of string. They talked about anything and everything, literally under the sun. Maralyn kept morale high by planning what their next boat would look like. They also made up games, making dominoes with paper from the logbook of the ship, or playing cards that were so thin that they could see each other's hand.

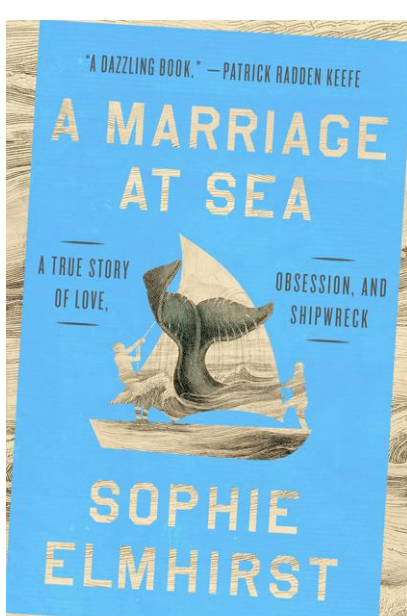
That was before the prolonged exposure to the constant sun and salt and infection set in. Before all of the animals they had to kill just to survive. Then, when their raft became so half deflated they could no longer stretch out or get comfortable, every hour or every day became excruciating in some ways, but also happy in the quiet and calm of the sea.

Maralyn kept fastidious notes on ev-



Sophie Davidson

Author Sophie Elmhirst



everything from meals to state of mind (Maurice's depression is evident). "The writing was the proof. The lists, the menus, and the clothes were reminders that such things still existed," Elmhirst writes. "Solid things, on solid ground, that she could make with her own hands. She was still alive. Look, it said so on the page."

## MARRIAGE AT SEA: A TRUE STORY OF LOVE, OBSESSION AND SHIPWRECK

By Sophie Elmhirst  
Riverhead (428)

Multiple ships passed them, just far away enough not to recognize that the object floating in the water was a raft, with living, breathing people. Sometimes the raft felt close to giving way, the most ominous fear.

Maurice and Maralyn discussed the possibility of having to eat the other if one died first. And a reader might think that the ultimate conclusion of this book is rescue or death (no spoilers here), yet with vigorous reportage, Elmhirst keeps the story going decades after the whale sinks the ship.

The suspense during "Marriage at Sea" is painful yet riveting. It's a horror movie. The end can't come fast enough, yet there is also no looking away. Although at its heart this book is about survival and love, it's also a transcendent rumination on what marriages are, and should be.

*Meredith Cummings is a freelance journalist and teaching assistant professor of journalism at Lehigh University.*

# A poet confronts her youth

By Gary Ciocco

Shaheen Dil's third poetry collection, "Letters to My Younger Self," is a memoir-in-verse that is concise, direct, and propulsive as it marshals insight and sensitivity — and photos — covering the first two-and-a-half decades of Dil's life in sixty pages.

Dil was born in Bangladesh and now lives in Pittsburgh. Having worked in academia and banking, she devotes her retired labor to poetry. Her reflexive search for self is defined in the first letter/poem, sent from Pittsburgh in 2024.

Dil begins by asking Choiti — her childhood nickname — "Where do you end and I begin?" and concludes by flipping the question, "Where might I end and you begin again?," to great effect.

Dil speculates to Choiti that "...your love of ritual started" with a first language lesson that combined Bengali elements with the Muslim "Bismillah" ceremony. (The poet explains this, and other key aspects of Bengali language and culture, in a very useful appendix.) But as much as ceremony, ritual and culture dominate, in "Letter 2," a memory from age three reminds her that "you were always dancing / to... / music unheard by others."

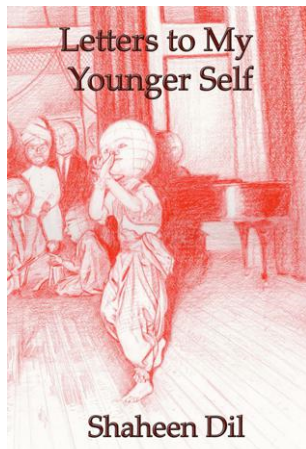
Dil recalls visiting the prison where Abbu, her father, spent years for promoting the Bengali National Language Movement. Her father, already absent much, then disappeared after a divorce.

Dil chronicles this time through moments with her younger sister, Saku. On the veranda they "played tiddly-winks / with cowrie shells," and also witnessed Ammu — her mother — and Abbu "shouting, flinging pots. // Embedded in that instant the next fifty years — / their rift, / your future lives."

There is an allegorical nature to the discord Choiti saw and experienced; she names a servant boy who stole from them, then writes that "Shoaib wasn't really his name...// But this story could be true of all Shoaibs."

In "Letter 11," she juxtaposes "the joy" of riding an elephant in 1959 with concern about the "cruelties" behind her mother's purchase of a jewelry box "inlaid with ivory." The next year she was brought to Ann Arbor, Michigan, and threw herself headlong into homework, American food — "how you loved those Twinkies"— and exploring with friends.

Choiti and Saku travel to Lahore in 1962 to visit their mother's new family, but arrive "six months after Mom," in order to give "skeptical in-laws time to know her, / unclouded by divorce, / two daughters living evidence of



Shaheen Dil

## LETTERS TO MY YOUNGER SELF

By Shaheen Dil  
Gyroscope Press (\$20)

that shame." The tensions continue. After returning to America, she recounts how it may have been "the color of our skin" which led to her and Saku being the only high school forensics team members to have a room to themselves at their first away tournament.

College at Vassar brought vast freedom to explore "boys, wine, movies," but also being told by a faculty advisor that not much mattered, "since we would all marry and have children." To boys based in from Yale and Princeton "you were an exotic distraction. // ...a brown girl in a white world, / but you didn't know it."

In graduate school in DC, Dil dates, reads "The Feminine Mystique," and eats calamari for the first time. She attends Mass with a Catholic friend and "longed to belong to that pageantry! If only Islam had glamor."

The book winds down with Dil meeting her soon-to-be husband Clark at Princeton — she "argued with a guy across the / table, / so supremely annoying the discussion never ended — / even half a century later."

Her stepfather, a mentor to her, disowned her for agreeing to marry a Jewish man, but her mother attended the wedding anyway, on a day with "the sun relentless."

"Restless" and "relentless" describe the Shaheen Dil who gets brought back to life in "Letters to My Younger Self." The vagaries of time and place, of different cultures, religions, and the subjugation of women, keep Choiti firmly mythical despite her clear connection to the present-day Shaheen. No longer must the poet worry that "I am waking in a world you can't yet reach."

*Gary Ciocco is a traveling philosophy professor and poet who lives south of Pittsburgh.*

# THE ILLUSION OF A GOOD EDIT

By Matthew Minicucci

Late in Carl Shuker's new novel, "The Royal Free," main character James Ballard shoots pool with his friend John. He furtively asks for advice (or perhaps more) from the gruff fellow on how to handle a "situation" which plagues him most of the novel. John's cryptic response is: "If you set a thing in motion like this, you'll be left to walk in the path it leaves behind. The thing itself is gone. Gone like you'd never even known it was there."

Though Shuker focuses this story around the trials and tribulations of Ballard — a young member of the editorial staff of a famous British medical journal, The Royal London — the third-person limited perspective changes in moments of desperation to other characters from his office. They are all battered by the happenings in this somewhat-contemporary, and yet also somewhat-apocalyptic, London setting.

Over the course of the book, readers are treated to some of the most intense and panic-inducing threats to Shuker's characters, all clothed in incredibly mundane and everyday situations: running through the park, writing an online editorial, taking the bus when one's bike has been "nicked." That the moments in question are so frightful is a credit to Shuker's ability to remind us that the quotidian is merely a step away from absolute disaster.

One of Shuker's techniques for achieving this goal is to constantly bring into question the small details of language in the book. There are whole chapters of conversations between editors and examinations of lexical lists of medical terminology, often grotesque, that Ballard and his colleagues are constantly



## THE ROYAL FREE

By Carl Shuker  
Counterpoint (\$16.95)

Author  
Carl  
Shuker



Shane Reid

corner of a dark room.

Ballard tries to describe these incredible events to a co-worker in the final scene of the book, and it seems almost comical coming out of his mouth — like the ravings of someone losing what grasp he has left on his sanity.

Early on in the novel, there is a small note about the consistent problem technical editors almost always share: a perceived expertise because of the editing process. Shuker writes "they fall for the illusion that they are more than what they are. They fall for the illusion of their powerful, authoritative editing — editing that may indeed save the piece and its author from utter incorrectness, incoherence, the bin...for the illusion of ownership; of importance."

This "illusion" finds its way into every part of every character's path throughout "The Royal Free." How much of what happens to us do we have control over? When are we authors, and when are we editors? How much of our lives is just text deleted from the piece entirely?

*Matthew Minicucci, a poet and essayist, is an assistant professor of English at the University of Alabama.*

## Best-sellers

### HARDCOVER FICTION

- 1. Atmosphere**, Taylor Jenkins Reid, Ballantine Books, \$30
- 2. Bury Our Bones in the Midnight Soil**, V. E. Schwab, Tor Books, \$29.99
- 3. My Friends**, Fredrik Backman, Atria Books, \$29.99
- 4. The Emperor of Gladness**, Ocean Vuong, Penguin Press, \$30
- 5. Great Big Beautiful Life**, Emily Henry, Berkley, \$29
- 6. James**, Percival Everett, Doubleday, \$28
- 7. The River Is Waiting**, Wally Lamb, S&S/Marysue Rucci Books, \$29.99
- 8. Don't Let Him In— Debut**, Lisa Jewell, Atria Books, \$29.99
- 9. The Wedding People**, Alison Espach, Henry Holt and Co., \$28.99
- 10. The Knight and the Moth**, Rachel Gillig, Orbit, \$30
- 11. The God of the Woods**, Liz Moore, Riverhead Books, \$30
- 12. Never Flinch**, Stephen King, Scribner, \$32
- 13. So Far Gone**, Jess Walter, Harper, \$30

### HARDCOVER NONFICTION

- 1. The Let Them Theory: A Life-Changing Tool That Millions of People Can't Stop Talking About**, Mel Robbins, Sawyer Robbins, Hay House LLC, \$29.99
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