

MAY - JUNE 2024  
ISSUE 11.0

# LITERATE-LY MAGAZINE

FROM REVIEWS TO LITERARY NEWS  
FROM HISTORY TO HER-STORY  
BUILT TO EDUCATE AUTHORS

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ZOLA BLUE

## AUTHOR INTERVIEWS:

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JUDY SNIDER

GIL SNIDER

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**SHORT STORY CONTEST WINNER**

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About Essence Publishing:

Essence Publishing was created by Amy Shannon, and she is the sole proprietor of Essence Publishing and its parent company Essence Enterprises. Essence Publishing is the publishing company that self-publishes Amy Shannon's books.

The purpose of Essence Publishing is to educate, entertain and provide literary services.

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**This issues contributors:**

Uncaged Magazine Book Reviews [uncagedbooks.com](http://uncagedbooks.com)

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# Amy's Bookshelf Reviews "Best Reads" Book Project

A new book from Amy's Bookshelf Reviews called *Amy's Bookshelf Reviews Best Reads Recommendations & Review Journal*.

The book will be a free download on a few sites, and anyone who contributes to the book, is not only getting a promotion about your book title, but this book will also teach the reader on how to write a review. There will be a book description and a link to where the reader can buy the book. In addition to this information, there will be a template of questions for the reader, to show them how to write a proper review.

It's a book that will recommend books, and teach or inspire a review from the reader.

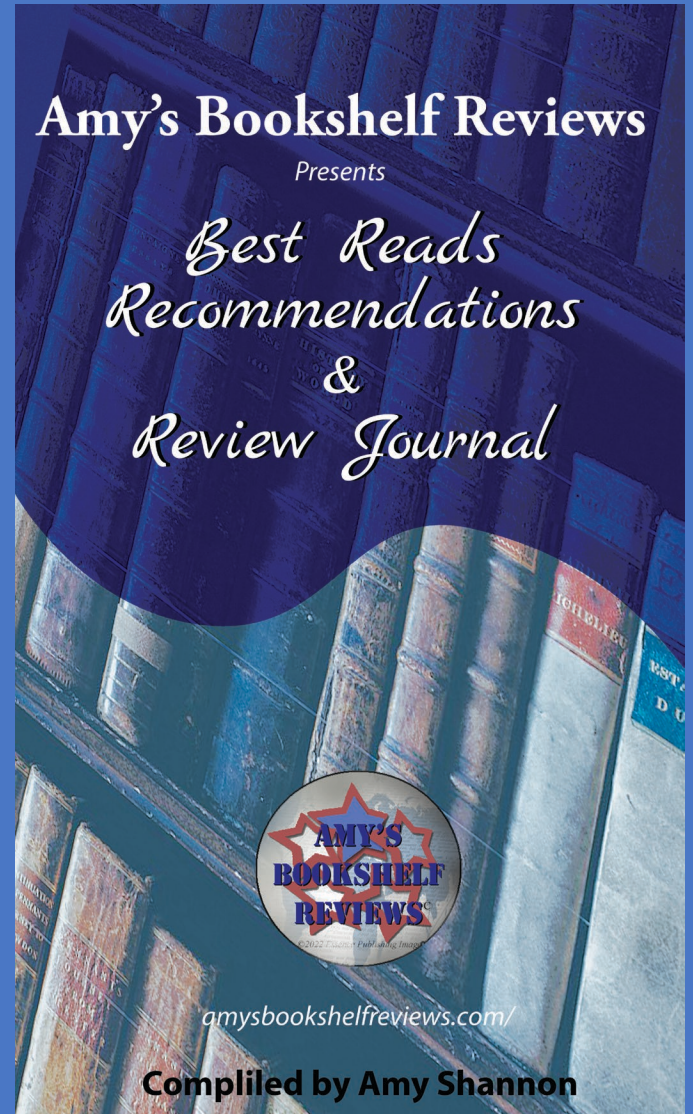
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# Amy's Bookshelf Reviews Podcast!

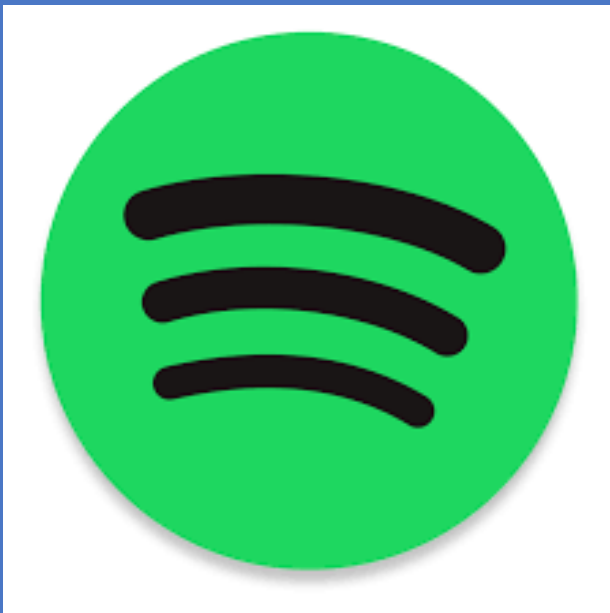
*A podcast about book reviews, author interviews, and literary news.*

Amy's Bookshelf Reviews has a new podcast.

Authors and/or just their books can be on the show.

Shows drop every Sunday at 6:00 PM EST on Spotify.

To sign up or find out more details, go to <https://amysbookshelfreviews.com/podcast>



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## Fractured Tears: A Struggle for Justice Expanded Version

Anna Coleman gave her husband one more chance for them to work on fixing what was wrong with their marriage. Ted used that chance to try to kill her. Anna didn't give up or give in, she fought to survive, and she fought for justice, as it became a personal struggle. All she wanted was for the justice system to properly punish Ted for what he did to her, and it took a lot of strength, perseverance, and support.

Read how Anna struggles to fight for justice, and deal with her personal issues from having been betrayed and abused by her husband of 13 years.

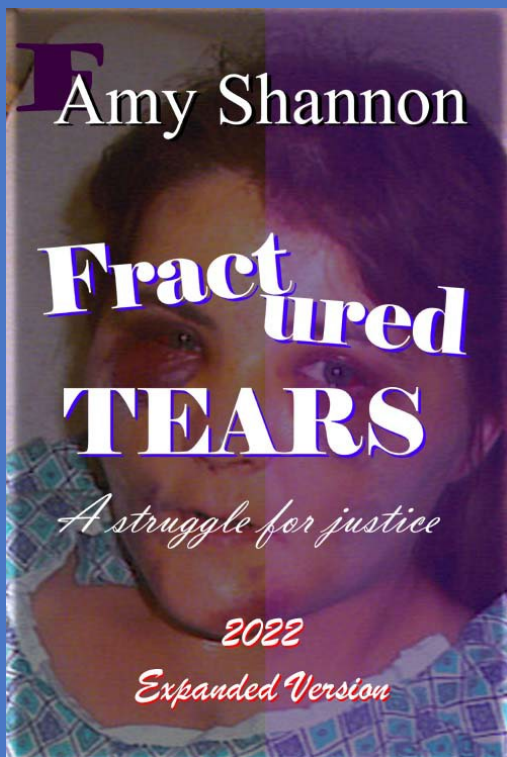
This is a fictionalized version of the real-life events of the Author.

Warning: This book contains scenes of domestic violence and may trigger PTSD or not be for some readers.

This is an expanded version and Fourth Edition.

Names have been deleted or changed for privacy reasons.

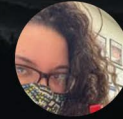
This is both a fiction book based on real-life events and a nonfiction book that tells my story.



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# WHERE WOULD YOU GO TO DIE?

Sam Marshalls is dying. After discovering he has terminal lung cancer, Sam is faced with the reality that he has to let go of everything he cares about. *By The Ocean* is a man's journey on his own terms not into the unyielding tides of death, but the powerful waves of a life full of regrets.



Jada



"Truly depressing, taking us through a man's regrets throughout life as he comes to terms with the end of his."



Khan



"Tuck yourselves in folks, this is one hell of a ride, albeit one you'll never forget."



Tyrnie



"I found myself easily getting lost in the story, entranced by the plot, almost like being unable to tear your eyes away from a car crash (the car crash being Sam's worrisome, yet captivating downward spiral)."



Laramie



"'By The Ocean' is dark, cold, and lonely, but it's the perfect addition to Becker's oeuvre and a beautiful telling of hope and loss."



John



"Ugly but beautifully written."



Isobel



"As all of Becker's work, this is three things: honest, depressing as f\*\*\*, and emotionally potent. Reading it feels simultaneously like drowning and getting a mega hit of dopamine"



E.J



"By the Ocean is a worthy endeavor that will ooze and drip its foggy New England sadness down your bookshelf for years to come."



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# **Author Spotlight**

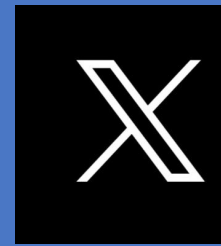
# Author Spotlight

## Zola Blue

As a reader, Zola has enjoyed numerous books throughout her life. As a writer, she aims to create engaging stories that captivate and leave readers wanting more. Now semi-retired, she can devote more time to writing and building a relationship with God.

At the same time, she works on my creative journey. Living on a lovely island in Canada with her husband, two dogs, and one cat is a beautiful and serene environment that greatly inspires her writing. Drawing from her experiences and surroundings, too, I believe, adds richness and authenticity to her stories.

Nurturing her passion for writing and exploring the realms of fiction and fantasy with dedication and creativity, she hopes to continue to craft captivating stories that resonate with readers and provide them with an enjoyable reading experience.





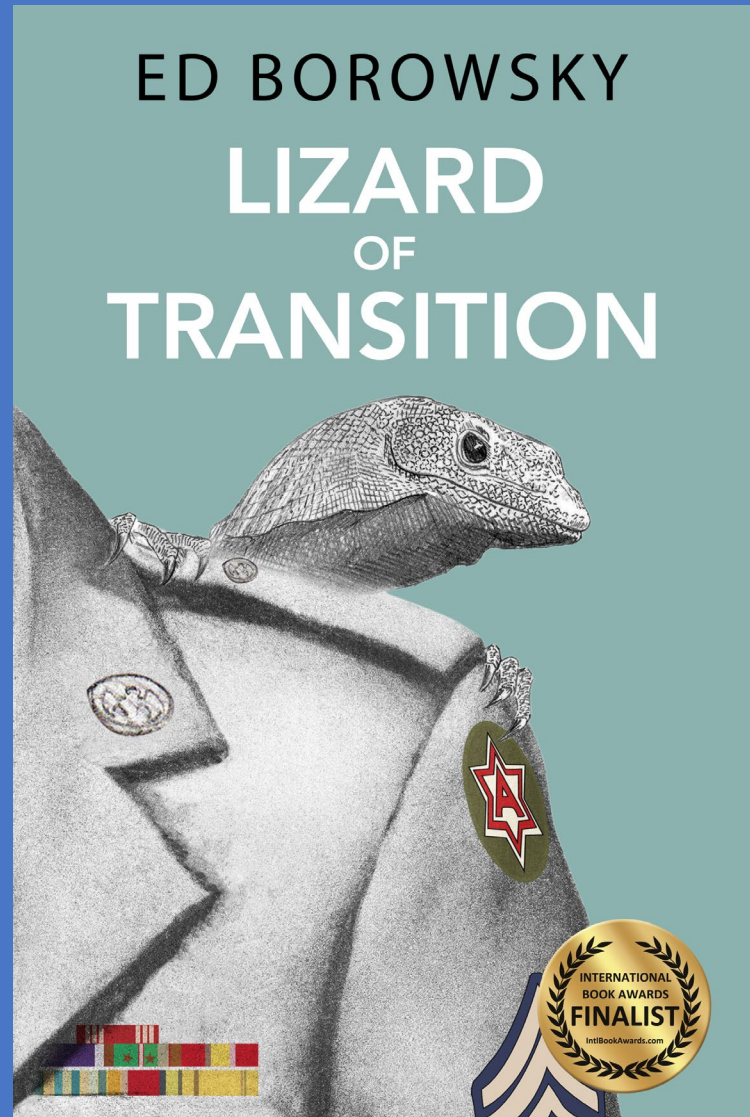
# Ed Borowsky's Lizard of Transition

On his deathbed, a World War Two veteran, Joe Rubin, confesses to his son that he murdered a Japanese prisoner in the jungles of New Guinea seventy years ago. In his last hours, Joe enters the world between life and death, known as the world of transition. He tells of his journey, with an odd lizard leading the way, as he recants the tale of the murder prior to his imminent death.

He reveals to his son, Joshua, that he possesses a Good Luck flag - Hinomaru Yosegaki, that he had taken from the Japanese soldier he murdered on the island of New Guinea during the battle of the Druinimor River. The flag has handwritten messages from the prisoner's family and friends, which reveals his identity and the village in Japan he came from.

His son, Joshua, is under tremendous pressure. He's separated from his wife, who comes to visit her father-in-law, bringing the two together to face their problems under the gut-wrenching veil of his father's passing. By attempting to reunite the flag with the son of the soldier his father killed seventy years ago, will the family find their way forward?

From the wisdom of the ages, and from the Jewish perspective on death and redemption, "Lizard of Transition" shines a light on how understanding death and dying will lead us to live rich and fuller lives.



amazon

Advertisement



# Author Interviews

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- Jesteście pewni, że ten...  
czy czegoś w tym rodzaju? -  
- Istotnie, mógłby używa...  
kojniejszym...



# Zola Blue

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* In three words, describe yourself.

Zola Blue: Creative, Kind, Rations

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* How many books have you written? How many of those are published?

Zola Blue: 6 written 6 Published

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Tell me about how you come up with your titles for your stories. Do you create the title before or after you write the book, and does it ever change from the initial title?

Zola Blue: I create the title after I have written the book. Most times, it takes the completion of the book for me come up with a title that I think describes the book.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* What is the title of your last published book? What's the title and when was it published?

Zola Blue: Whispers of Tribulation: The Past and The Destiny, Book 4 of the Mejuarian Series.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Out of all your characters in all of your books, who/what (sometimes a setting can also be an important "character") do you think is the most interesting and why?

Zola Blue: My favorite character is Syberias in the Mejuarian Series. She is the closest to my personality. She struggles with issues that others might call neurosis in her perfection of the world she can control. Throughout the series, she undergoes an identity crisis, finally learning who she is.



*Literate-Ly Magazine:* I know your story is fictional, but what inspired writing it?

Zola Blue: My story is based upon the use of magic and fantasy beings, but I believe the over all message is a spiritual one of faith. Regardless of how awful things are there is God, which I believe in.

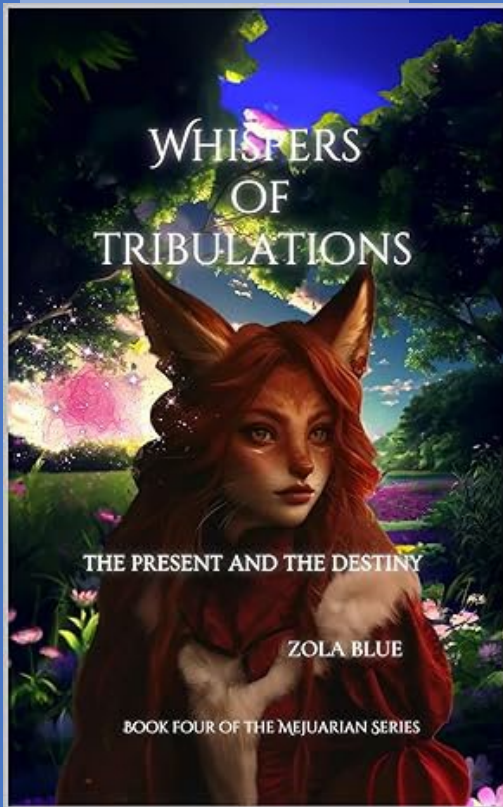
*Literate-Ly Magazine:* What sub-genres do you currently write in?

Zola Blue: Fantasy, fiction, adventure

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Without quoting your back cover blurb, tell me about the last book you published.

Zola Blue: It is book 4 the continuation of the story, which is written on both Earth and Ercutis, a faraway planet from Earth. Missing their mewling babies, Mejuarian on Ecrutis

# Zola Blue cont'd



look for the lost nests that were lost after the ship carrying them crashed. They encounter and create alliances with both those who ride dragons and little people, who might turn out to be their adversaries.

Running in conjunction with Ecrutis, on Earth, the missing mewlings, or babies, although much more intelligent and godlike, live happy lives as pets to a family struggling with their own loss and sadness. Having the mewlings in their lives, the humans' world begins to brighten until an eagle takes one of the pets.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Quote your favorite line from one of your stories. Indicate the line, and then the book title.

Zola Blue: “Maybe I am a Wolf.”

In *Whispers of Tribulations*, curious about his identity, the young blue pup talks to a large wolf. Excited and mesmerized by the large creature the little pup asked the wolf were they related.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Tell me something about yourself that is separate from writing.

Zola Blue: I have several pets because I love animals. 2 dogs, 1 cat, 2 goats, and

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Who are your top THREE favorite authors?

Zola Blue: CS Lewis, Rudyard Kipling, Dean Koontz, CS

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* What is the last book that you read? (Not counting anything you wrote)

Zola Blue: Now that I write, I don't read often because I worry about copying the story that I just read. The last book series that I read of the *Game of Thrones*, by RR Martin. {I believe the books were much better than the movie.}

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* When writing, do you have a system or something you plan, or do you just write?

Zola Blue: I just write.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Why do you write?

Zola Blue: I love to write and tell stories. I have always liked to make people feel better, and I hope my stories give them a bit of relief from their lives.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Do you read your own work a lot? If so, what does it do for you?



# Zola Blue cont'd

Zola Blue: I never read my own work. After I have completed the final copy, I give it to my hubby for his suggestions. I find that I would continue changing the book if I read it over and over again.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* I play music when I write, and depending on the setting or mood of the story depends on what I listen to. Do you listen to music when you write? If so, what genre or artist/band do you listen to?

Zola Blue: No, music tends to draw me into its beat.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* As an author, I find that the hardest thing to write (for me) is the blurb that will be on the back cover or book's description. When you write, what is the hardest line to write, the first line, the last line or the synopsis for the book?

Zola Blue: I find the hardest line for me to write is the one that is giving hardship and pain to my character. Sometimes, if it starts sad, it might take me days to start it.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* What does it mean to be a "successful" writer?

Zola Blue: Has a people that enjoy their writing.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* What do you want to accomplish, so when you look back at your life, you can say "I did that"?

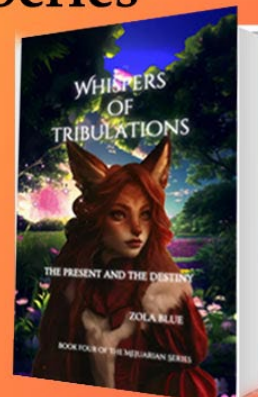
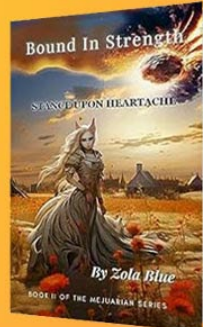
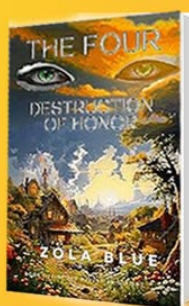
Zola Blue: My ultimate goal is to finish the Mejuarian Series. It has taken many years of putting it down and picking it back up, and finally, I am close to the end. I will probably write more books, but the Mejuarian is my heart.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Any final thoughts that you want to give to your fans or even future authors?

Zola Blue: I really thank anyone who reads my books, and I hope they are uplifting and give you a bit of peace, if only for a brief time.

If you have a story, you need to tell it. Even if you don't become a successful author, I believe it is okay because who knows who those words might help? Everyone might not agree, but sometimes, I believe that God calls us to say something, and we must say it..

## Zola Blue's The Mejuarian Series



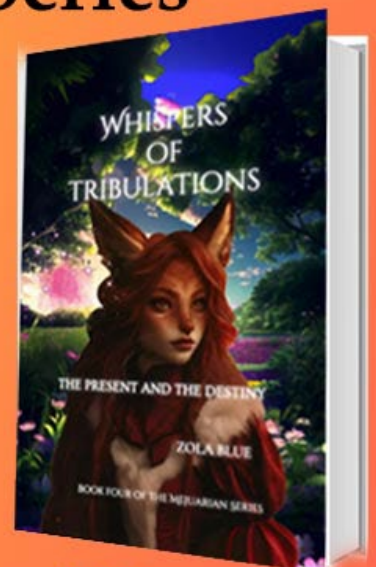
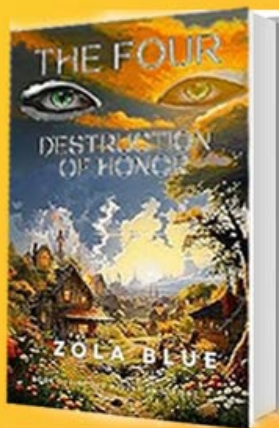
The Mejuarian are god-like creatures living on the planet Ercutis in a near-perfect world.

# Zola Blue's The Mejuarian Series

The Mejuarian are god-like creatures living on the planet Ercutis in a near-perfect world. In a galaxy where telepathic bonds and ancient dreams shape destinies, the Mejuar and their diverse allies embark on a thrilling journey that intertwines their fates across worlds.

- The Four: Destruction of Honor (The Mejuarian Book 1)
- Bound in Strength: Stance Upon Heartache (The Mejuarian Book 2)
- Courage of One: Conviction to Stand (The Mejuarian Book 3)
- Whispers of Tribulations: The Present and The Destiny (The Mejuarian Book 4)

## Zola Blue's The Mejuarian Series



The Mejuarian are god-like creatures living on the planet Ercutis in a near-perfect world.



# Gil Snider & Judy Snider

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* In three words, describe yourself.

**Judy:** funny, kind, curious

**Gil:** intellectual, funny, empathetic

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* How many books have you written? How many of those are published?

**Judy:** 2 award winning children's books (one with my sister) and three suspense (Back-to-back thriller series) and my newest suspense, Betrayed, with my husband I write quick read suspense with strong women.

**Gil:** Three suspense books have been published-Brain Warp, The Last, and Betrayed with my wife Judy.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Tell me about how you come up with your titles for your stories. Do you create the title before or after you write the book, and does it ever change from the initial title?

**Judy:** I love to come up with the title before I write the book. It is as if someone whispers the name to me. I Love You, Be Careful, the book I did with my sister came to be when we were on a call and she said to her husband as he was walking out the door, I Love You, Be Careful. That book became a Mother's Day type of book for grownups...Mom's Choice Award Book.

**Gil:** For The Last, although the protagonist is Dr. Anne Mastik, an Infectious Disease consultant with multiple sclerosis, I wanted the reader to focus on Ruth Morehouse, a teenager with a



terrible weight of history on her shoulders and how she matures as a character. As for Brain Warp, I didn't realize that the title would make people think of it as a non-fiction book about the brain. I wish I could change it.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* What is the title of your last published book? What's the title and when was it published?

Betrayed, April 1, 2024

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Out of all your characters in all of your books, who/what (sometimes a setting can also be an important "character") do you think is the most interesting and why? Judy:

**Judy:** I like Maggie in my first suspense book, Too Late To Run. I like Amy in Betrayed. I like strong, sensitive females in my books.

# Gil Snider & Judy Snider con'td



**Gil:** I had the most fun writing Scorpion, a malevolent enforcer for the Russian Mafia with a dark past, in Brain Warp. Sociopaths are always fun to write, but they never change. I think Dr. Anne Mastik, in The Last, had the most character development, having to deal with her disabilities and difficult past while she protects Ruth and deals with the dangers in the present.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* I know your story is fictional, but what inspired writing it?

**Judy:** The Donation Man came from a friend who had someone very upset when she said no to a donation call. The Donation man is also set in New Orleans, a city I went to school in, and still love the city...and the food. I love suspense books/film/TV, and a friend said even if I wrote

children's books I could do suspense. Initially I said "No I can't", but finally I tried. Now I have children's books submitted, and I have my publisher, World Castle Publishing, for suspense. I plan to continue to write both. I do not do gore, or violence/sexual in my suspense books. I hope they are picked up for film/tv someday. I will read it over again every once in a while, and it scares me.

**Gil:** For Brain Warp, I now realize that there was a deep subconscious need to connect with my father and his Ukrainian heritage; most of the characters were strongly impacted by the relationship they had with their fathers. The Last was inspired by an NPR story about communities in the Middle East that were isolated from the surrounding society because they spoke ancient Aramaic. My first thought was "Wow. That's 2000 years of inbreeding!" and my next thought was "What if this brought out a genetic mutation that had commercial value?" and I took it from there.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* What sub-genres do you currently write in?

**Judy:** Suspense/Children's

**Gil:** Medical suspense

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Without quoting your back cover blurb, tell me about the last book you published.



# Gil Snider & Judy Snider con'td

**Judy and Gil:** Betrayed: a woman gets a routine mammogram and a mysterious piece of metal is found in her breast. What is it, how and why did it get there?

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Quote your favorite line from one of your stories. Indicate the line, and then the book title.

**Judy:** Actually, the introduction of Betrayed...a poem, Nighttime has a way of falling upon us, like a friend needing shelter.

**Gil:** "What people believe is written can be more important than what is actually written."- The Last

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Tell me something about yourself that is separate from writing.

**Judy:** I am a member of The Cat Writer's Association, have a 17-year-old cat, Bailey, have a great group of woman friends, fun family, and I like to laugh a lot.

**Gil:** I'm a neurologist by profession, and I still enjoy working, although at a greatly reduced work load. I have recently taken up bonsai as I have more free time.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Who are your top THREE favorite authors?

**Judy:** Too many to choose....



**Gil:** None in particular. Although I write fiction, I tend towards reading non-fiction, with a broad range depending on my mood and my interests at that time.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* What is the last book that you read? (Not counting anything you wrote)

**Judy:** Love You Always, a picture book by Eileen Spinelli

**Gil:** The Jesus Dynasty, by James Tabor

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* When writing, do you have a system or something you plan, or do you just write?

# Gil Snider & Judy Snider con'td

**Judy:** Just write...computer, chocolate and our cat beside me.

**Gil:** For Brain Warp, I started with a detailed chapter summary, and finished the book's first draft in 9 months. The Last was more of an evolutionary process over time.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Why do you write?

**Judy:** Have written my whole life. In third grade wrote the "Mystery of the Green Hand"

**Gil:** What I told my sons: "When you read books, you learn about others. When you write books, you learn about yourself."

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Do you read your own work a lot? If so, what does it do for you?

**Judy:** I love to read my children's books. Goldy's Baby Socks, and I Love You, Be Careful. When kids laugh at Goldy's Baby Socks which is in English and Spanish it makes me happy. I used to work after my social work career in a school library and love to read to kids!

I am a member of Hampton Roads Writers, James River Writers, Cat Writers, associations currently.

**Gil:** Sometimes, I will go back and read passages that I enjoyed writing. I try not to do that too much, because even in spite of repeated re-editing I occasionally think "Gee, I wish I had done it a different way." Of course, now I'm a different person, and it's a different world, than when I wrote it.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Do you listen to music when you write? If so, what genre or artist/band do you listen to?

**Judy:** I listen to music when I write, and depending on the setting or mood of the story depends on what I listen to. To shamelessly promote Gil and I have songs we wrote and had produced at Pearl Snap Studios. We do not sing, or play the instruments, but had great demo singers. They are all available to listen to and on YouTube. My favorite is Invisible which I hope Kelly Clarkston does someday. I love Ed Sheeren and play his music all the time. I saw him with our son last year, and I play his music and of course Motown I love.

**Gil:** Absolutely. Almost always Classical (in the broad sense). I prefer Bach, Gabrieli, Vivaldi and Beethoven. Music with singing lyrics distracts me unless it is in a foreign language. Sometimes for a change-up I'll listen to Boogie Woogie piano, like Otis Spann, Memphis Slim or Preacher Jack.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* As an author, I find that the hardest thing to write (for me) is the blurb that will be on the back cover or book's description. When you write, what is the hardest line to write, the first line, the last line or the synopsis for the book?

**Judy:** Synopsis

**Gil:** Definitely synopsis, especially for The Last.



# Gil Snider & Judy Snider con'td

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* What does it mean to be a “successful” writer?

**Judy:** Having my books out and people enjoying them.

**Gil:** To be able to get your deepest thoughts out to the world.

*Literate-Ly Magazine:* What do you want to accomplish, so when you look back at your life, you can say “I did this”.

**Judy:** I want to be remembered that my superpower is love and hugs and that I was funny, and kind to and appreciative of my family.

**Gil:** To know that I’ve changed some people’s lives for the better.

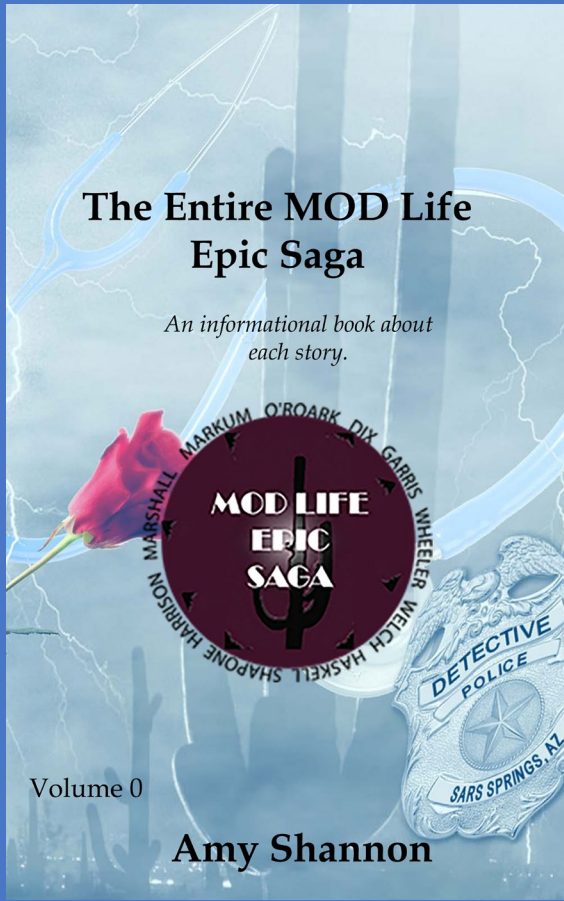
*Literate-Ly Magazine:* Any final thoughts that you want to give to your fans or even future authors?

**Judy:** Life can get hard at times, so surround yourself when you write with people who bring you joy. Write what you enjoy reading. Enjoy writing. Take your time...you don’t have to write a book in a day. Everyone has a book or more inside them. I had to use an editor and can’t draw, so I found illustrators that fit my children’s books.

**Gil:** Just what I said before: “When you read books, you learn about others. When you write books, you learn about yourself.”



# Amy Shannon's MOD Life Epic Saga



The MOD Life Epic Saga is a series of books (67 volumes in total, with 9 bonus books), that revolve around characters in a small, fictional Arizona town called Sars Springs. It follows the lives of the residents and their growing families and businesses. Evil also seems to flock there, either in a stalker form, corruption in law enforcement, murder, kidnapping, torture, and human experimentation, just to name a few. Alex Garrison starts the story when she moves to Sars Springs to build a new life, and it grows from there. The first Volume is Unwritten Life, and though the stories are standalone, the author recommends reading them from the beginning. After reading Rewritten Life (volume 2) the reader has a choice to read the prequel (volume 3) (which gives spoilers for the first two books, so read those first), or move on to volume 4.

The MOD Life Epic Saga books are digital only, being published on [Smashwords](#) and [Lulu.com](#).

The informational book about the series, and what order to read the books in can be downloaded for free [HERE](#).



*From the Authors of  
Brain Warp & Too Late to Run*

Gil Snider and Judy Snider  
presents the thriller

# BETRAYED



On a routine mammogram one year after a simple breast biopsy, a mysterious piece of metal is found embedded in writer Amy Lambert's breast. Amy becomes consumed by a desperate search to determine how and why this bizarre thing got there. At the same time, she must discover the identity of a violent, threatening stalker intruding into her life. But the closer Amy gets to the answers, the more it imperils the lives of herself, her friends, and her family. In the exciting climax, the truth is exposed and Amy's entire world is turned upside down as she fights for her life and the lives of those she loves.

<https://www.judysnider.com/>

<https://www.gilsnider.com/>



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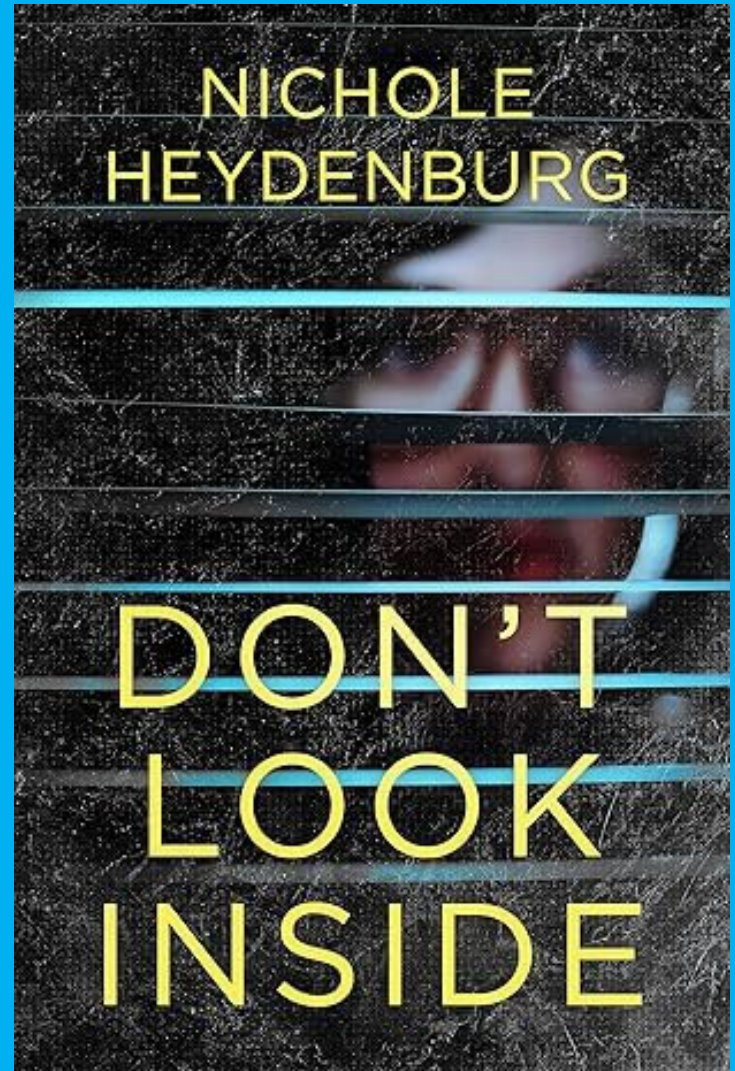
# Nichole Heydenburg's Don't Look Inside

Don't question the lies. Don't investigate. And most importantly, *Don't Look Inside*...

Elena Pierce's junior year of college unfolds with a precarious situation—a mysterious new roommate named Mara. Despite her best efforts, Mara remains distant. Elena becomes increasingly wary as a string of unsettling disappearances rocks the campus.

Amid the chaos, Elena's boyfriend exhibits strange behavior. Elena teams up with her friends Joe and Logan to unveil the truth. As they dig deeper, a shocking revelation emerges. Elena is forced to consider the unimaginable: Is someone close to her responsible for the vanishing girls?

In this gripping psychological thriller, Elena must confront the unsettling reality—the true culprits may be hiding in plain sight, ready to shatter her world forever.



Advertisement



# AN ACT OF GOD

*by*  
William Becker





# UNCAAGED

BOOK REVIEWS

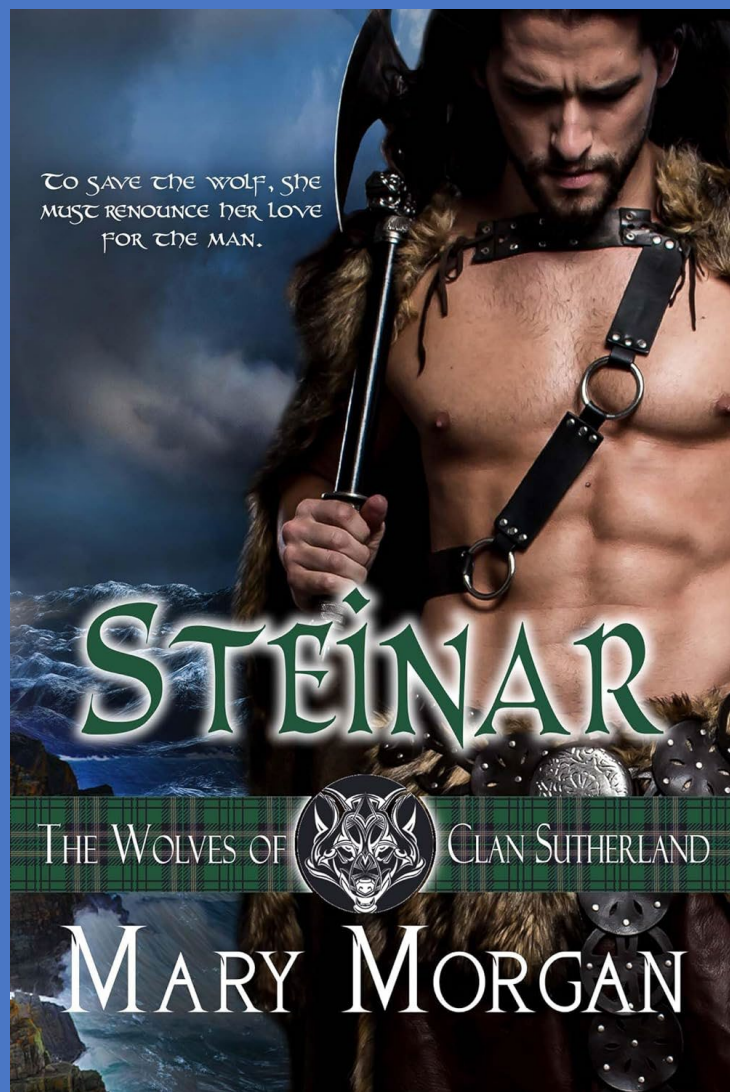


# Steinar by Mary Morgan

5 Stars

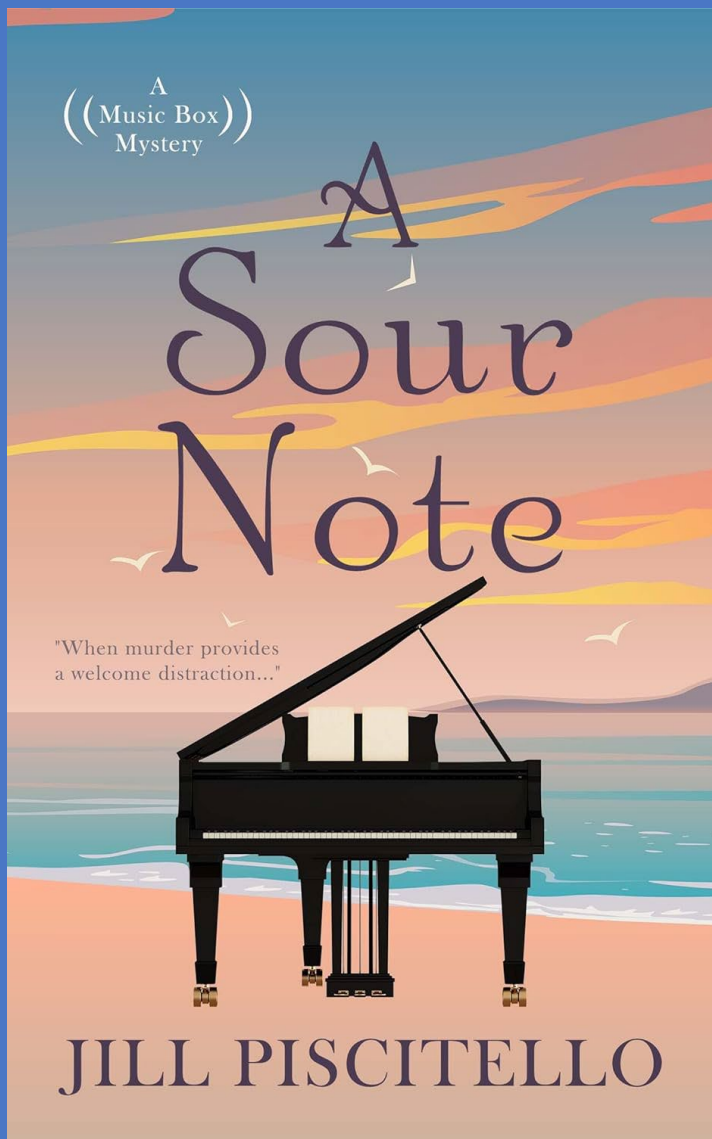
This author has a way of weaving a tale that will keep a reader glued to the pages, and the Wolves of Clan Sutherland are masterpieces. Each book will have you falling in love with the wolves all over again and all you can hope for is that the author keeps writing about them. This story is all about Steinar – the aloof sea pirate wolf, and Inga the Ruthless, who commands the Serpents. Steinar is saved by Inga and her ship, and they strike a bargain, if Steinar can get her through the deadly seas to a treasure, he will be set free. But Steinar never counted on his wolf and his heart getting involved but Inga holds many secrets of her own.

One of the most emotional times for me in this series, is when the wolves come to aid one of their brothers, and when Magmar, Rorik and Gunnar show up, I may have needed a tissue. In this series, the wolf and man share a soul, but are distinctly different. I don't think in all the fantasy I've read, that I've enjoyed a shifter book as much. This book has romance, danger, action and mystery and if you haven't read anything from this author, you are truly missing out.



**Medieval Fantasy  
Romance**





## Cozy Mystery

## A Sour Note by Jill Piscitello

### 4.5 Stars

This cozy mystery starts us out with Maive going back to her hometown after catching her high profile fiancé cheating on her. With no job, and no where to live, she goes back to live with her mom, who is a widow and owns a music store called The Music Box. She runs into an old flame, Finn, and her friends she's known her whole life. It doesn't take long before a body is found in a dumpster behind her mom's shop, and two of Maive's best friends are the prime suspects. Not wanting to see her friends taking a rap for something she knows they didn't do, and to keep from more publicity from hurting her mom's shop, Maive starts to snoop around to find out how it happened, much to the local detective's annoyance. As Maive digs, more suspects keeping popping up and more motives for the very unliked person that was murdered.

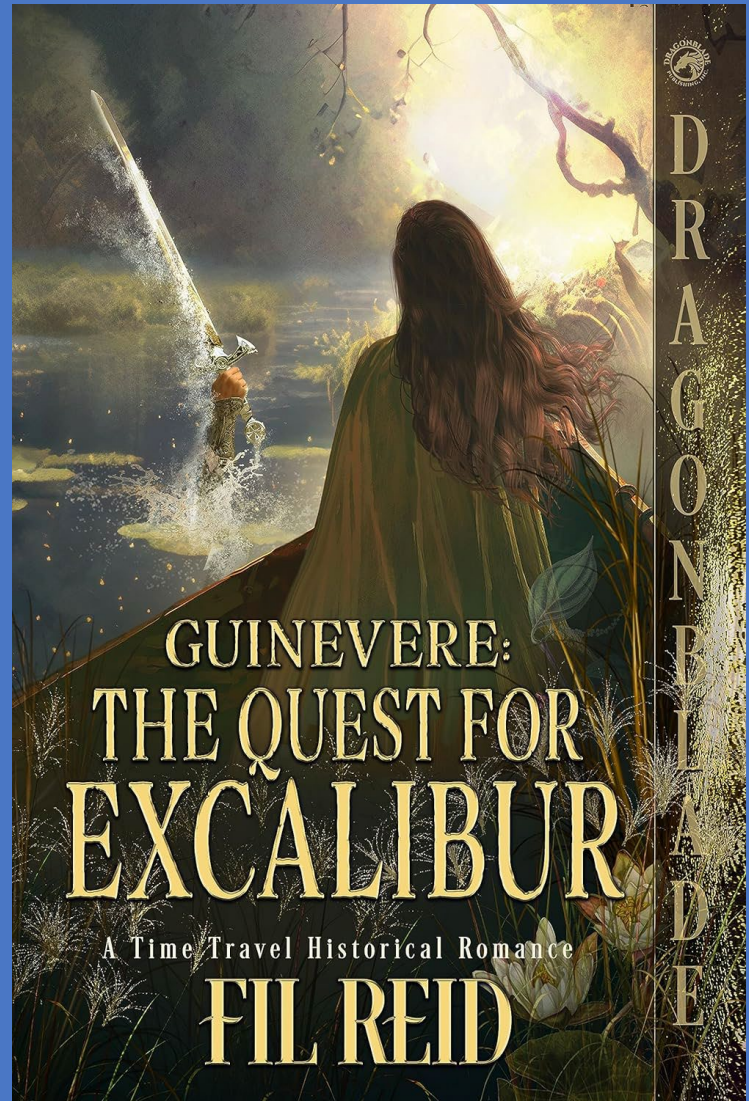
This is a fun mystery, the cast of characters are easy to like, and the mystery takes some dangerous turns, but Maive isn't backing down even when she herself becomes a target for her snooping. The pace is great, and I never really guessed in this one, there were too many ways it could go. A fun afternoon read and I hope the author continues with the characters and the town in future books.

# The Quest for Excalibur by Fil Reid

## 5 Stars

The battle of Badon is the main focus in this book. The great battle of legend is coming upon them and seeing how history is playing out, the final battle will occur after, the one in which legend says Arthur will die and Gwen is afraid. It's been 12 years that Gwen was transported into the Dark Ages and for a short moment, she's thrown from her horse from a sabotaged saddle and goes back to her own time. Scared and afraid, she runs from the hospital and back to the tor where she originally was transported. She makes it back, but Merlin, Arthur and Gwen know that Morgana was behind it all. Merlin casts a spell of protection around Gwen, to be able to keep Morgana from seeing Gwen's thoughts.

As the battle nears, Arthur has called on his brother Cadwy and Cerdic as allies to fight the Saxons, crucial to their success at Badon. The cost of the war is their son Amhar, who is feeling unloved by his father and is not resolved by the end of the book. We go into the final book in this series, with the nail-biting final battle looming. Will Gwen and Merlin be able to change history? Highly recommended series.



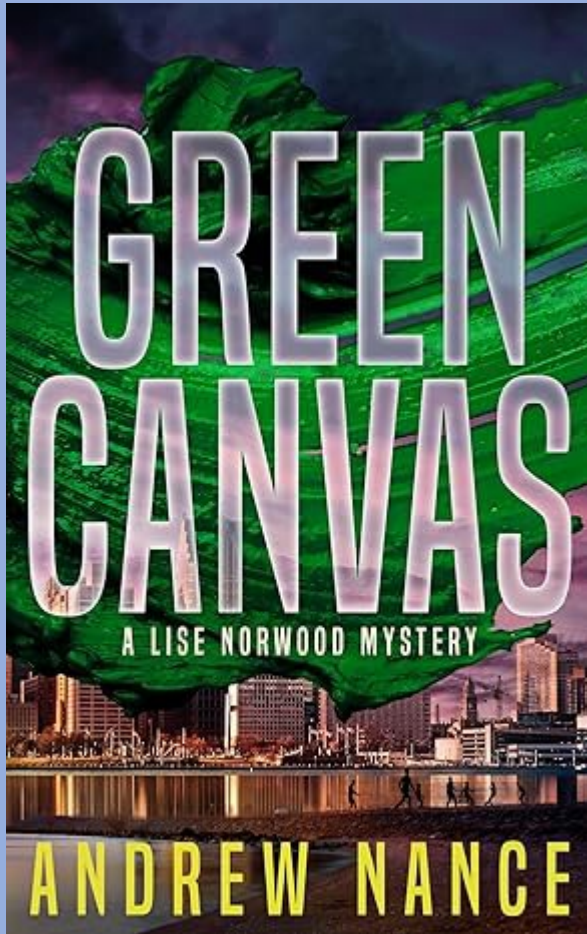
Time Travel Romance



**AMY'S  
BOOKSHELF  
REVIEWS®**

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## Andrew Nance- Green Canvas

5 Stars

Andrew Nance writes a PI mystery tale with Green Canvas

In Green Canvas, the reader is introduced to private investigator, Lise. She is still reeling from her attack with a vicious serial killer, but it seems that has put the name of her PI business out there, more prevalent because of the case. I haven't read anything by this author before, and what a hidden gem. I enjoyed it so much, that I have now followed the author and look for more books to read. Green Canvas is part of A Lise Norwood Mystery series, and this is volume two. I haven't read Red Canvas yet, the first book in the series, but I plan on reading it. Lise finds herself in the middle of the murder of a homeless boy. She has to not only discover who he really is, but who is doing unspeakable things, all in the range from kidnapping to murder. Andrew Nance has a great imagination. Lise is determined and tenacious and determined to get the job done no matter what. Andrew Nance not only tells the story but shows it with words as well. Green Canvas is a definite attention grabber, so much i couldn't put it down. Both thrilling and intriguing, all the way to the end. I have fast become a big fan of Andrew Nance. Magnetically charged with strong characters. Lise is an unforgettable character.

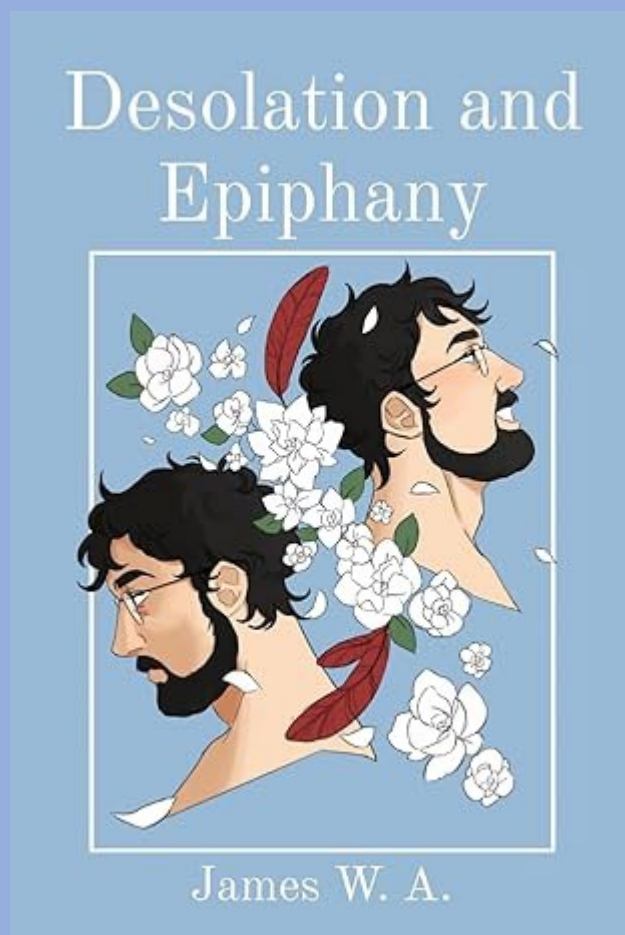
*F/Mystery*

# James W. A.- Desolation and Epiphany

4 Stars

Dark and Light, and impenetrable desire

This collection of poetry in *Desolation and Epiphany* by James W. A. is a remarkable work of words. The words almost stream across the pages with emotions of darkness, and a desire for something better. I enjoyed reading this collection, and entering the mind of this prolific poet. Such a wonderful read. Every word is worth the read, and every entry is worth, taking a step back and thinking about it. The poet describes himself as feeling broken, as it is the only way he can describe how he feels. Sometimes we don't know how we feel, but we try to put words to it. And he says I hate myself for being broken, which speaks to the perception of the poet of himself. He also says that the opposite of love isn't hate, it's survival. I enjoyed reading this collection, and also rereading some of the entries. What a remarkable way to express yourself. I look forward to reading more by this poet.



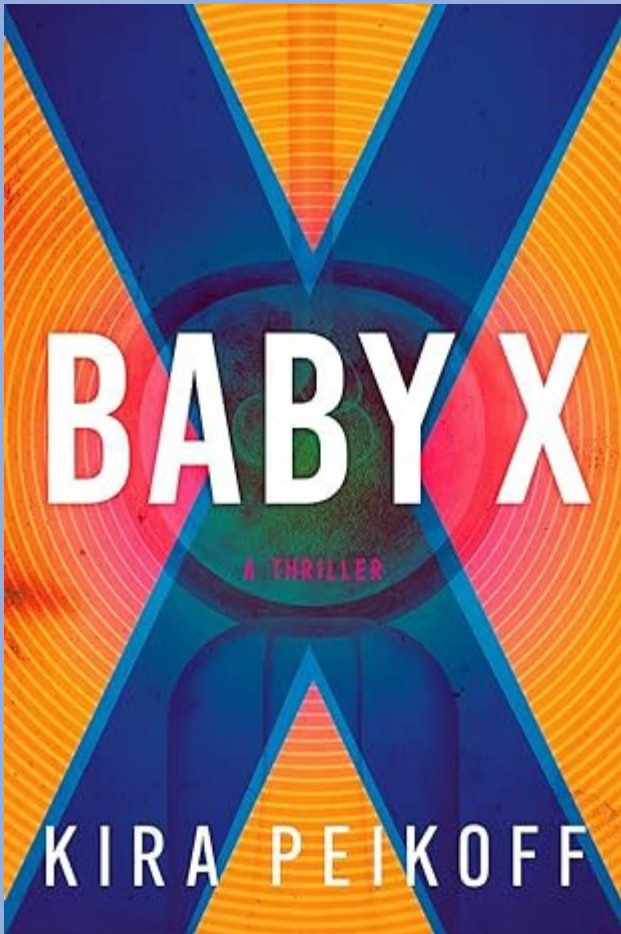
*F/Poetry*

# Kira Peikoff- **BABY X: A THRILLER**

4 Stars

Kira Peikoff writes a thrilling tale with **BABY X: A THRILLER**

In **BABY X: A THRILLER**, the reader is introduced to the future of DNA and basically cloning, where sperm and an egg from anyone, can create a new biological child, that was never conceived by their so-called parents. It's one of those stories that make so much sense, because you just know that someday, this could possibly happen. It does happen, but maybe in a different technological way, but it's out there. I haven't read anything by this author before, and what a hidden gem. I enjoyed it so much, that I have now followed the author and look for more books to read. This is a great premise for this story, as certain nefarious groups are stealing DNA, and then ransoming off the cells that were stolen. What? Yeah, that happened. Kira Peikoff has a great imagination. Between Ember, who is security for celebrity Trace Thorn, trying to protect Thorn's cells and get to the bottom of what the group called The Vault, is doing, and Thorn, who is just tired of the entire situation, the story has a lot of levels, and intensity, that makes the story come together. Both thrilling and intriguing, all the way to the end. It's a great story to follow and try to figure out what will happen next.



*F/Thriller/Sci-fi*



*F/Paranormal  
Suspense*

## **E. Denise Billups- Echoes of Ballard House**

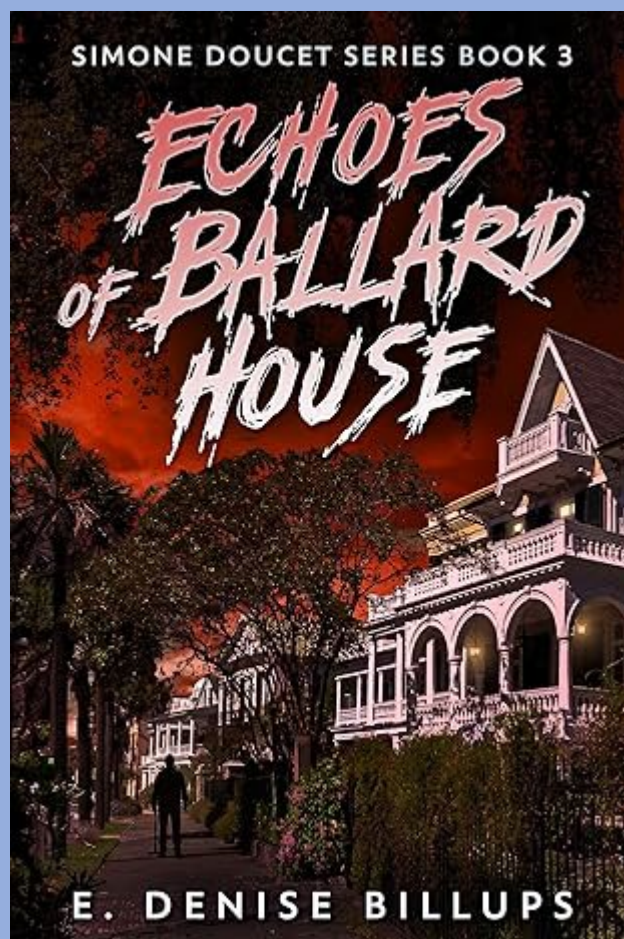
5 Stars

E. Denise Billups writes another suspenseful paranormal tale with Echoes of Ballard House

In Echoes of Ballard House the reader is introduced to another magnificent gem in the Simone Doucet series. I recommend reading the first two that come before this one. Even though they are standalone, the reader will get a feel for the setting, the characters, and the magnetic writing style of the author. Echoes of Ballard House is part of the Simone Doucet Series, and this is volume three. I am a big fan of E. Denise Billups and read whatever this author writes. This author has a grand imagination, and talent for showing the story. Simone, who lives in New York, finds herself in New Orleans, to house sit. Who wouldn't want to vacation in a grand Victorian home in the Garden District. But of course, there is something sinister lingering, and she is pulled into a new investigation. Simone is no stranger to spirits and evil beyond the grave, but still, it can be unsettling when things start happening, and murders are linked to a mansion. The Ballard House has the echoes of hate and

greed, and its ghostly secrets are one Simone is trying to discover before something else happens. Simone is determined and tenacious, and determined to get the job done no matter what. This story is absolutely chilling, with death around every corner. Echoes of Ballard House is both thrilling and intriguing, all the way to the end.

If you love a good versus evil, spirit haunting murderer suspense, this book should be next on your list. As always, E. Denise Billups shows a great story and we are lucky she shares her grand imagination with readers. I think this one is my favorite of the series so far, and hope there will be more to come.

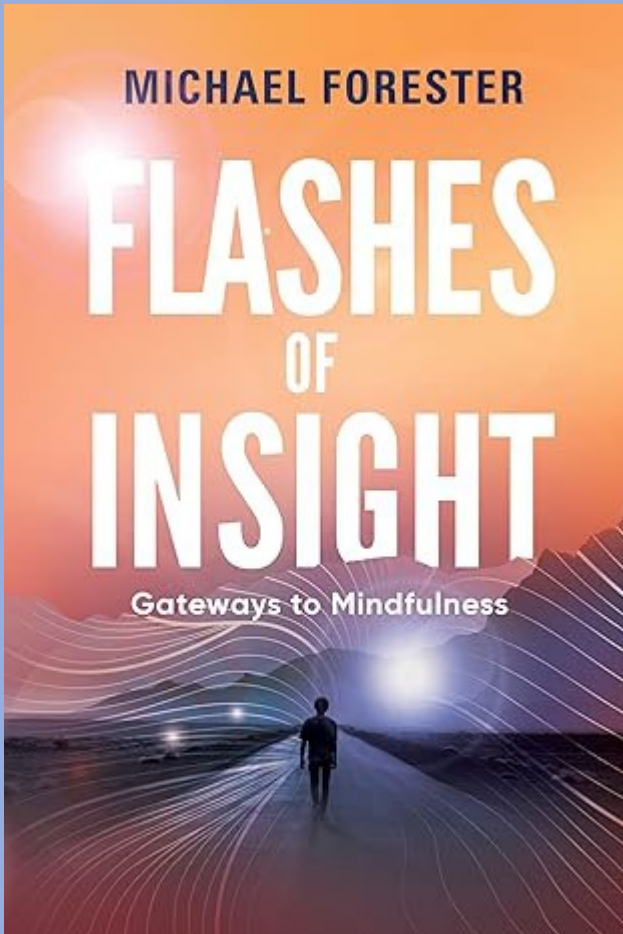


# Michael Forester- Flashes of Insight: Five Minute Gateways to Mindfulness

5 Stars

Michael Forester writes a remarkable and poetic view into mindfulness

Flashes of Insight: Five Minute Gateways to Mindfulness is a very intriguing book. I have read several books by Michael Forester, many of them poetic. This book is not just about how to have mindfulness and self-discovery, but about the life and insight of the author. This book captures the reader's attention in chapter one. This is one of those books that grabs you from the start and pulls you in. This is a book that deserves to be read, and to be shared with others. If you're on a path of self-discovery or journey into living each day to its fullest. There were some chapters that caught my eye more than others, one was clutching the butterfly, and the second was War Zone. Michael Forester writes with emotion, experiences, and passion. I related to War Zone, as an author and a person. I understand the angst and worry about sharing work with others, something you put so much passion in. It is a life worth living, when you know your purpose and have a grand insight into your own life, and how other lives affect you, and how your life affects them. This read is more than just words on a page.



*F/Holistic/Mind-  
Body-Spirit*

# William Becker- By The Ocean

5 Stars

William Becker writes a dramatic horror-fying tale with By The Ocean

In By The Ocean, the reader is introduced to Sam, a man you has terminal cancer, lung cancer. I haven't read anything from this author in a while, but I was so glad to be able to read more of his work. By the Ocean has a mix of genres, and Sam has many different sides to him. It's about more than just a man dying, but his journey through his life, past and present, as well as future. He is suffering from the regrets in his life, which seem to be overwhelming him, while also wanting to die on his own terms. William Becker not only tells the story but shows it with words as well. By The Ocean is one you'll want to read again, and again. A very unpredictable story, my favorite kind! Some of the pages, you end up reading slower than others, so not to miss anything. It's filled with emotions, both love and hate, as well as pain, not just pain from the disease, but heartache. The author's technique of raw, magnetic characters and great plotlines is a gift. The characters are so real, it's like being with them within the story. Very impressive story telling.



*F/Horror/Thriller*



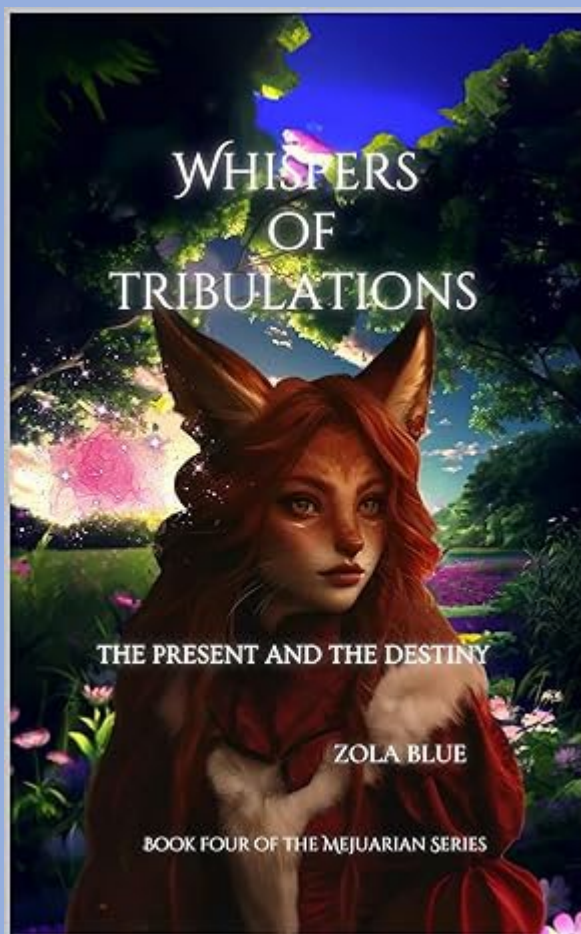
# Zola Blue- Whispers of Tribulations The Present and The Destiny

5 Stars

Zola Blue writes a fantastical science fiction tale with Whispers of Tribulations The Present and The Destiny

In Whispers of Tribulations The Present and The Destiny, the reader is introduced to the Mejuarians. Whispers of Tribulations The Present and The Destiny is part of The Mejuarian Series, and this is volume four. I am a big fan of Zola Blue and read whatever this author writes. This author has a grand imagination, and talent for showing the story. She magnificently built the world of Mejur, which is located on the planet Ecrutis. There is also the planet Earth, and there is a connection between the Mejur, and humans. It's another grandly written story, featuring the Mejuarians. There is always something interesting happening, and in this story, King Teloby must protect and lead his people away from their own village, because of the meteor that could destroy the village and maybe the planet.

The connections between various beings, including humans, they are looking to survive, and then there are more dangers than just the meteor. This story is a definite attention grabber, so much I couldn't put it down. Zola Blue not only tells the story but shows it with words as well. This story is amazingly unpredictable. It is no surprise that this story is filled with action, depth, and layers of characters and plotlines. If you love a good science fiction book with the mix of fantasy, and great world building, this book should be next on your list.



*F/Fantasy/SciFi*

# Judy Snider and Gil Snider Snider- Betrayed

5 Stars

Judy Snider and Gil Snider write a tremendously thrilling tale with Betrayed

In Betrayed, the reader is introduced to Amy, and I love this story, and not just because the main character and I share a name. So, anyway, Amy Lambert is a writer, who had a breast biopsy about a year ago, and nothing seemed to come of it, until a piece of metal is found in her breast, where the biopsy was taken. I am a huge, huge fan of both Judy Snider and Gil Snider, respectively, as individual authors, but I really love it when they write one together. They have this way of showing a story that brings their brilliant and imaginative brains together. Betrayed is just another one of those great stories that they put together. It's very thrilling, and yet, kind of disturbing as Amy is determined to find out who did this to her, and deal with the thought of being violated, and having to live with that. A stalker is threatening her life, and livelihood. This story is a definite attention grabber, so much I couldn't put it down. It's a gripping and incredible storyline, and sometimes you have to read really slow, and to pull in every word, and then, sometimes, you have to stop just to take a breath!



*F/Thriller*

# About Amy's Bookshelf Reviews

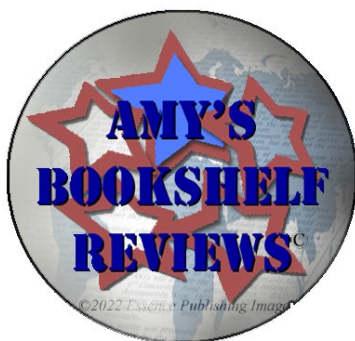
Amy's Bookshelf Reviews is a not-for-profit business, as Amy's Bookshelf Reviews does NOT charge for reviews. Amy's Bookshelf Reviews is a professional book review website, which accepts review requests from any author, and accepts most genres (with a few minor exceptions if the book promotes hatred of any kind). Please, call her Amy, and NOT Shannon (that is her surname).

The mission of Amy's Bookshelf Reviews is to help promote authors and allow them to share their stories using my reviews. #ReviewsMatter and they are very important for authors. Reviews can be the baseline for promoting and selling an author's work.

Amy's Bookshelf Reviews reviews examine the characters, story and plotlines, and the author's writing and storytelling abilities.

Amy Shannon owns and operates Amy's Bookshelf Reviews has experience with being a writer with over 30 years experience. Since 2014, while reading and writing reviews, Amy has created a new Podcast, with the Amy's Bookshelf Reviews brand. She discusses books, authors, does interviews, reviews and literary news.

Need Help with any literary process? Amy Shannon is also literary Consultant. Over the years, she has received lot of questions presented by authors, wondering what to do next, or sometimes, they have so much going on at once, they don't know what to do or who to trust. Well, Amy is that person you can trust, even if you don't know it. Amy wants to help authors, do research for authors, and see where they may need to build their brand.



For details on how to request a review, go to <https://amysbookshelfreviews.com/requests-and-rules>

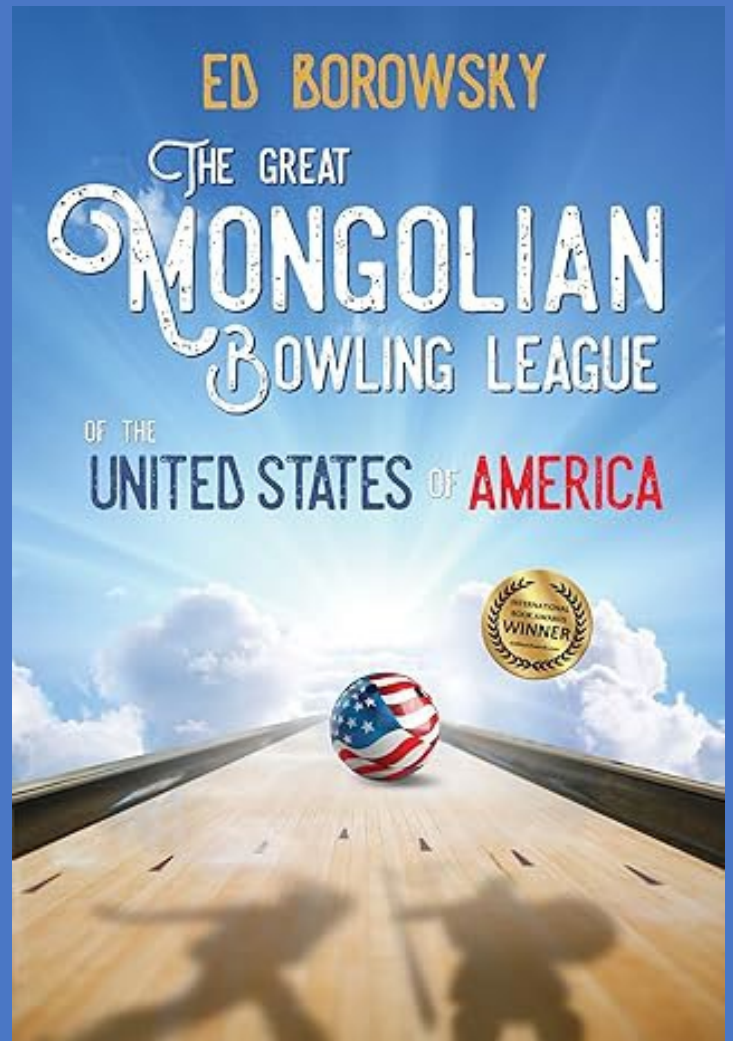
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# Ed Borowsky's The Great Mongolian Bowling League of the United States of America

Harold Kushner and his roommate of thirty years, Murray Schwartz, are average senior citizens facing down their mortality in a trailer park in Land O' Lakes, Florida. Two self-professed "best Jewish bowlers ever" wind up contestants in the first-ever Great Mongolian Bowling League Tournament in the U.S.A. The rivalry becomes a high-stakes roll-off as Harold approaches "perfection" (defined in the bowling world as three 300-score games in a row) despite a fix set by the alley's mobster-owners. As the reporters and camera crews swarm to cover his amazing feat, Harold finds himself in a life review spanning back to his Bar Mitzvah and a past incarnation as a Mongolian warrior in the era of Genghis Khan, as he ponders profound questions we all ask as we near the end of our lives: Did my life have meaning? Did I fulfill my potential? Was I a good person?

Can Harold roll perfection to help his new Mongolian friends and live to tell the tale? The uncanny action unfolds in this beautiful comedy illuminating that although we come from worlds far apart, we share a common humanity. The outcome will impact millions... and strike you right in the heart.



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# Literary Articles

# Reaction– Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller

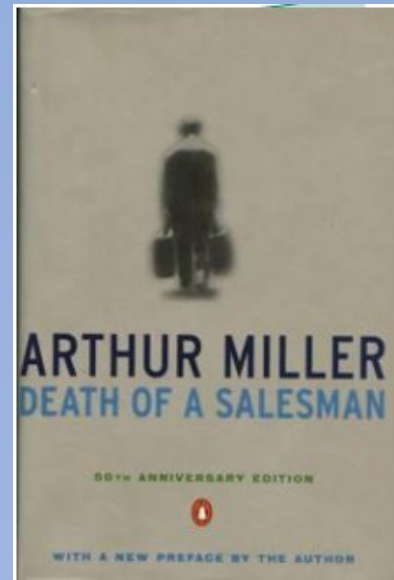
Reaction written by Amy Shannon

Note: If you haven't read this book, this article has spoilers. I do recommend the read if you never read it before.

The play “Death of a Salesman” was written by Arthur Miller. Miller created characters that had depth and were not like each other. He bases them on some of his real life experiences. Once the play had been performed in 1949, it became popular, so much that Miller received the Pulitzer Prize that year.

Arthur Miller wrote “Death of a Salesman” as a dramatic play. The story revolves around salesman, Willy Loman and his family, Linda, Biff, and Happy. The use of the surname “Loman” is symbolic as it refers to “low-man.” The protagonist is Willy, who is exhausted from traveling constantly. He is not just exhausted physically but also mentally. Loman has high hopes for himself and high expectations for his sons, especially his eldest, Biff.

Loman dreams of his version of the “American dream.” To reach the American dream, one must be “well-liked” and “personally attractive.” Willy has a deep fear of abandonment, which stems from his father and even his brother Ben, leaving him behind.



Willy has a fixation of superficial things, which he thinks will help him and his family achieve the “American dream.” Willy slowly declines psychologically as he not only talks to himself, but also he drifts off easily.

Willy’s antagonist is his son, Biff. Willy has high expectations and unreasonable goals set for his son, Biff. He wants his children to be perfect and is constant conflict with Biff because he cannot ever meet his father’s expectations. Biff feels lost in his own right, as he sees himself traveling down the same path as his father. He is not even sure what he wants because he feels so lost. Willy feels that Biff has betrayed him because of him not living up to the ambitions of his father. Biff, on the other hand, feels his father betrayed his mother since because Willy had an affair.



# Reaction– Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller

## (Cont'd)

The conflict grows between father and son. Loman imagines that he is a success. Even his flashbacks are incorrect perceptions. He idolizes his sons and always refers to them as “Adonis.” Loman thinks that in order for a person to succeed and be successful, he needs to be “well-liked.”

“WILLY: That’s just what I mean. Bernard can get the best marks in school, y’understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y’understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That’s why I thank Almighty God you’re both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. »Willy Loman is here!« That’s all they have to know, and I go right through,” (Miller, 1949).

Willy goes to his boss to see if he can get a salesman job in New York so that he does not have to travel. Meanwhile, Biff tries to do well on a business venture. Both men leave their meetings defeated, as Willy is fired.

Willy’s youngest son is Happy. He goes through life just skating by with no drive. Biff, who tries so hard for accomplishments,

keeps failing. He is unable to make himself and his father happy.

Miller writes about Willy and shows how the conflict between him and Biff started by using strategies, such as flashbacks. The flashbacks tell the story of a young Willy Loman. They also show how Willy in fact betrayed his family (with THE WOMAN).

Biff tries to tell his father about his failures, but Willy is decompensating fast, by his own failures. He feels he has to see Biff as a success, and he will do what it takes to make Biff successful. Willy kills himself in a car accident, thinking that his life insurance will allow Biff to collect the money and become a successful businessman. Little does Willy know, it is Happy who ends up following in his father’s footsteps, as Biff does not change his mind about not wanting to be that businessman.

Miller uses symbolism in his naming of the characters. Happy is just like his name suggests, he is a laid back character who tries to keep peace. He tries to convince his brother to lie to his father about his failure of his business proposition with a former boss. Happy is also a womanizer. Biff is a major blow to his father’s expectations. (The meaning of “biff” is “a blow: punch”

# Reaction– Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller

## (Cont'd)

(Dictionary.com, 2013). Linda supports her husband and is clearing the character that keeps the family together. She is the homemaker that takes care of her husband. She can sometimes feed into his insanity as he declines. She blames her son for her husband's decline. "LINDA (to Biff): When you write you're coming, he's all smiles, and talks about the future, and — he's just wonderful. And then the closer you seem to come, the more shaky he gets, and then, by the time you get here, he's arguing, and he seems angry at you. I think it's just that maybe he can't bring himself to — to open up to you. Why are you so hateful to each other? Why is that?" (Miller, 1949). Linda may support her husband, but she is aware of how he is suffering.

When Linda loses her husband, she is angry with him for leaving her the way that he did, ending his own life. She does not understand the reasons, as they are unreasonable to everyone but Willy. "LINDA: Forgive me, dear. I can't cry. I don't know what it is, I can't cry. I don't understand it. Why did you ever do that? Help me Willy, I can't cry. It seems to me that you're just on another trip. I keep expecting you. Willy, dear, I can't cry. Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it,

Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. (A sob rises in her throat) We're free and clear. (Sobbing more fully, released.) We're free. (Biff comes slowly toward her.) We're free... We're free..."

Miller focuses on Willy's childlike nature, and even immaturity to gain focus on his decreasing mental health. Many things written are how Willy perceives things. He believes his son, Biff, has forgiven him and will become the man he wants him to be. Willy takes his own life, thinking that everything will turn out better for his son, once he is gone.

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# Gary Orleck's Travels With Maurice: An Outrageous European Adventure in 1968

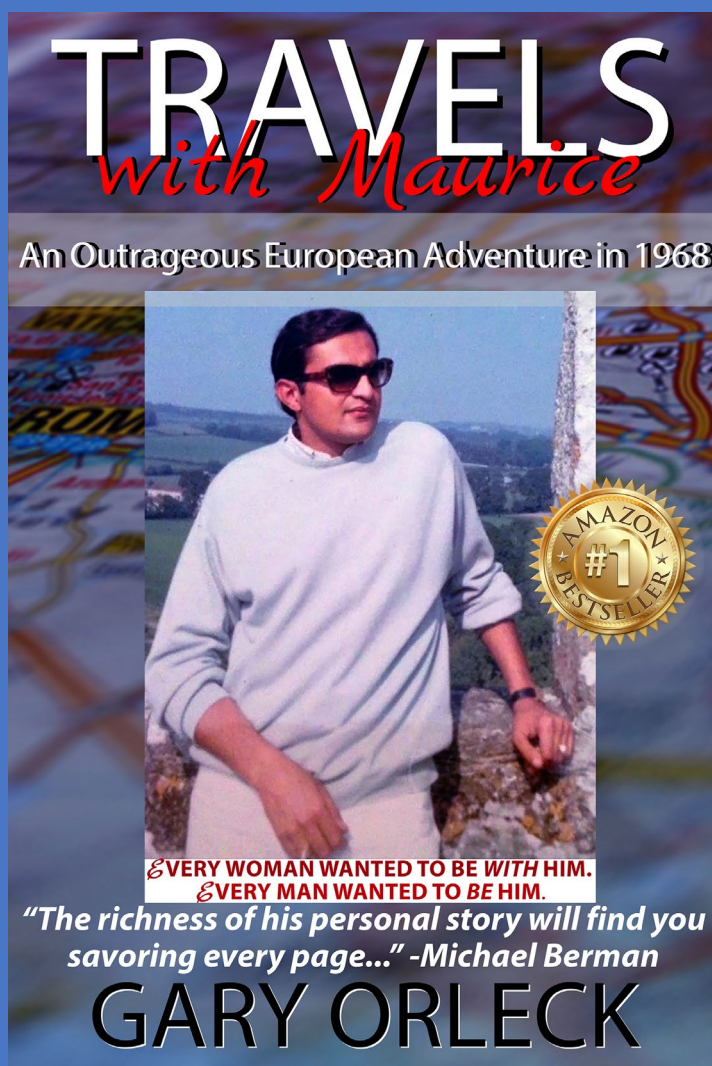
EVERY WOMEN WANTED TO BE WITH HIM. EVERY MEN WANTED TO BE HIM!

An unbelievable story, yet it's true because nobody could make this story up- NOBODY.

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# Character Writing

## 102



## Historical Writing

Whether the character is a fictional or nonfictional character, a character can be historical (and by historical, I mean any character that lives or resides in a time/era that is in the past). Some historical characters may be time travelers that come to the future (and land in our present time). Or, they travel in the past or future (even future for this time period). When a character is a historical character and lives in a historical era, there needs to be some relation to that particular era. The clothes, dialogue, frame of mind, environment, laws, businesses, and even people need to fit within the historical time.

When an audience watches a movie that is historically inaccurate (such as *Armistad*, *JFK*, or *Shakespeare in Love*), they know it, they complain about it, or give it a bad review. It is the same with books (and some of those books turn in to movies). If it's inaccurate, the reader knows that the writer didn't do the research to create the book. Just because a writer thinks they know how a person would act or react in a specific time period, doesn't mean that a person actually would.

The writer's local library is a good start. Not everything can be *Googled*, and sometimes the best research comes from books or old newspaper articles. Libraries may still have newspaper articles on

microfilm, while others may digitize them. Also, if the writer is writing about the past, but within their local area, local libraries usually carry historical books about the town. If doing research, and I'm repeating this, use *more than one source*.

It goes back to dress, too. The characters must dress time-period appropriate. If it takes place in the 1800s, then women would be wearing dresses, and never pants (unless the woman is rebelling or was raised like a "boy," which reminds me of the musical *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*.) They also would ride a horse side-saddle. Those who were not "white men" would be treated as second-class citizens, or even slaves or servants. Remember there are no cell phones, or computers. There may be no phone at all, so characters would only be able to communicate in limited ways, such as face-to-face or handwritten letters.

The mindset of the era and location can tell a lot about the story and the time period. It may not always be necessary to say the exact time or place, but the reader can almost guess accurately, if it's written properly. Also, a past time frame in New York City would be different than the same time frame taking place in California or Arizona. The environment needs to match or be accurate. Just because the story is fiction, doesn't mean that it shouldn't be correct. Inaccuracy can cause distraction within a story, and readers who find inaccuracies probably won't read another one of the writer's work again.



# Bob Freeman's H2LiftShip series

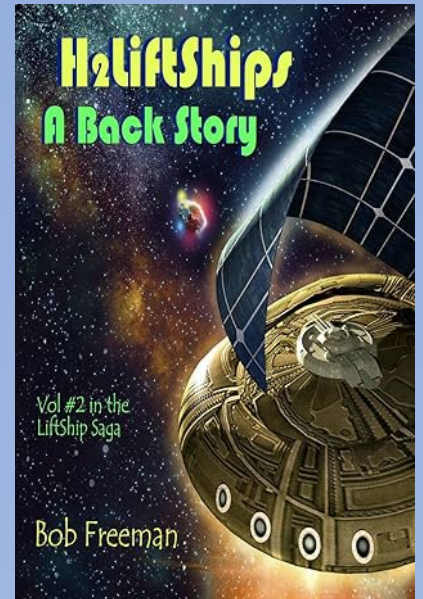
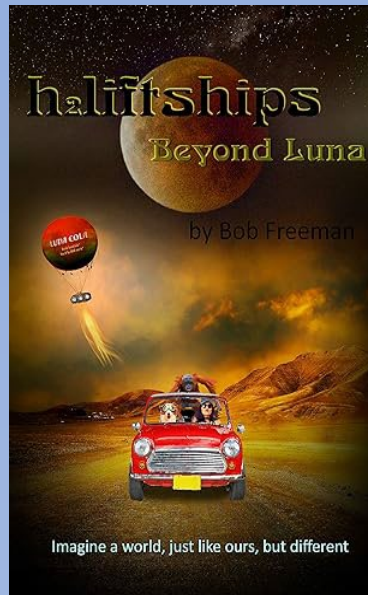
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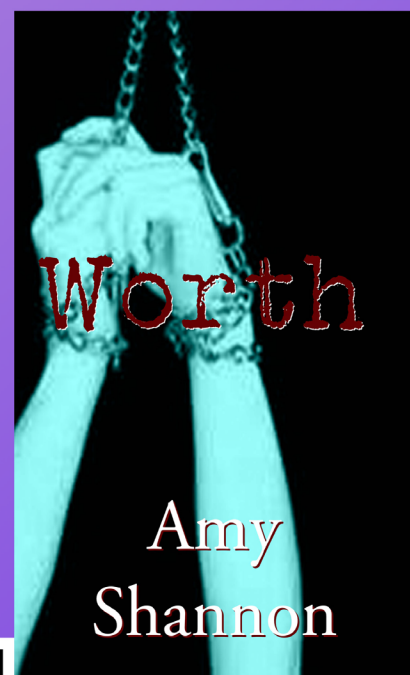
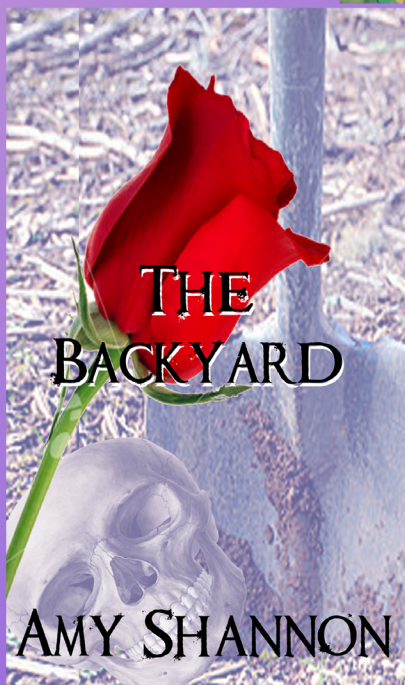
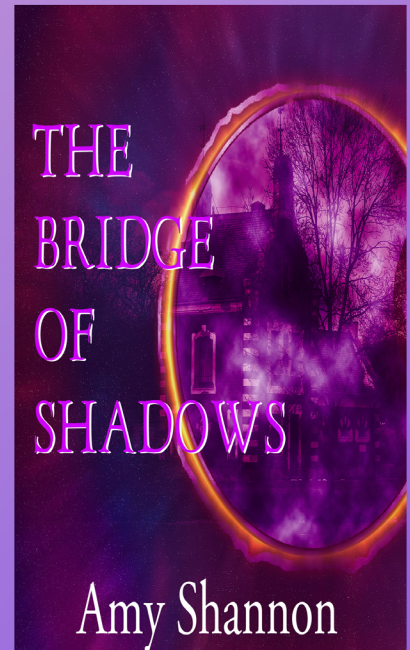


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*Amy Shannon's*

# Short Story Collection





# Poetry



# James W. A.- Desolation and Epiphany

4 Stars

Dark and Light, and impenetrable desire

This collection of poetry in *Desolation and Epiphany* by James W. A. is a remarkable work of words. The words almost stream across the pages with emotions of darkness, and a desire for something better. I enjoyed reading this collection, and entering the mind of this prolific poet. Such a wonderful read. Every word is worth the read, and every entry is worth, taking a step back and thinking about it. The poet describes himself as feeling broken, as it is the only way he can describe how he feels. Sometimes we don't know how we feel, but we try to put words to it. And he says I hate myself for being broken, which speaks to the perception of the poet of himself. He also says that the opposite of love isn't hate, it's survival. I enjoyed reading this collection, and also rereading some of the entries. What a remarkable way to express yourself.

## Desolation and Epiphany



James W. A.



A misty autumn forest scene. A large tree trunk with green moss is on the right. A path covered in fallen orange leaves leads towards a bright light in the distance. The text "Short Stories" is centered in the middle.

# Short Stories

# Something's Wrong With Max by William Becker

## (Part II)

### The Bath

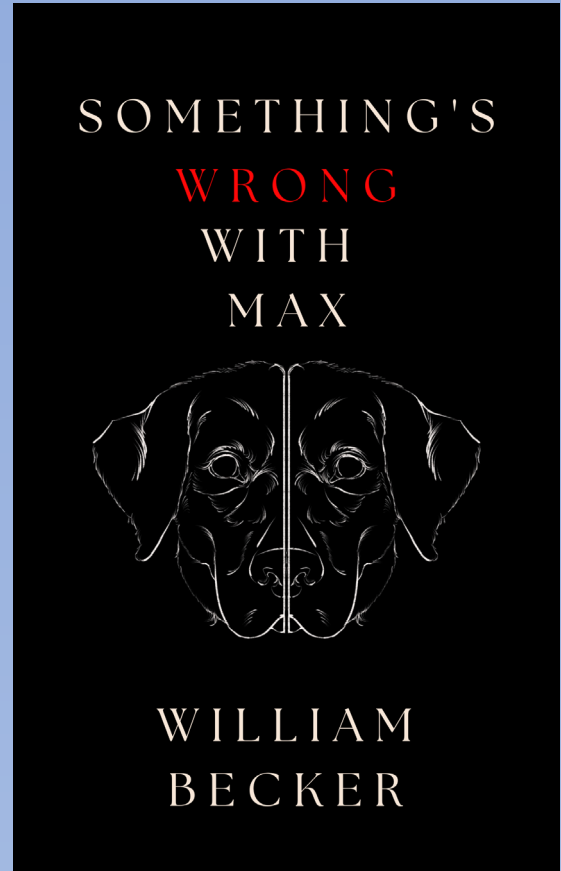
My dad wrapped Max back up in towels, so he didn't leak any pus on the hardwood floor and Max just snorted uncomfortably.

"Help me," my dad said with a grunt as he put his arms beneath Max's front half, while I quickly moved alongside his back half and put my arms just in front of his hind legs.

Max was heavy; while not a huge dog by any standards, he was awkward and dense, like a waterlogged piece of wood. I could feel the dampness on the towels as it dribbled out from inside of the dog, a couple of drops landing on the hardwood floor with gentle splatters. We had only picked him up a handful of times in his life, primarily to load him into my dad's truck, but now it was like he was just dead weight.

"What do you think happened?" I finally asked my dad as we moved through his bedroom and into his bath with the big walk-in shower. By then, little streams of the fluid were oozing down my arms. I could smell it now that we were inside; it was a sweet and hot odor, like milk left out in the sun.

"Must've cut his belly open outside and no one noticed." "Why's it all sticky?"



"Bacteria," my dad said plainly, elbowing the light-switch and then the shower-fan switch.

"Huh," I answered, Max's weight crushing the circulation in my arms. He didn't so much as jerk away as we struggled to carry his body onto the tile of the shower, pulling the dirty

and now stinking towels away from him as we put his paws against the ground. I prepared to release my grip.

Max grunted again.

"Hold him up," my dad said, turning the water on, pointing the removable shower head to the corner so the cold water that came pouring out didn't splash on Max. Max's tail wagged against my arm excitedly. A sign of life.



# Something's Wrong With Max by William Becker

## (Part II)

I moved alongside my dad and Max, holding onto Max's belly and trying my best to ignore the sticky feeling against my skin.

"It's okay, buddy," I whispered, softly tugging on his fur to keep him from resting his belly on the ground. Max grunted in protest. There was another splattering noise beneath the sound of the water.

I looked down at my leather boots; a milky light fluid was pouring out from Max's slit in a thin stream.

It splattered onto the tile and my shoes. I was tempted to say something, but then dad was spraying Max down with the shower head. As if in response, the fluid came out in thicker spurts, like someone had turned the faucet inside of him to max-power. It was chunky, drooping out in globs that went *gluck gluck* as they escaped from him. I had to hold back my urge to throw up.

"Dad?" I asked.

"I know," he said coldly back, turning up underneath Max where the fluid was exiting from. I looked down to the floor; small drops of grey things that looked like strings were mixed into his escaped fluids, which I at first thought was just discoloration, but they moved independently from the water and pus and swam away from the drain like they were themselves living. The pus itself barely even went down the drain, seeming to instead pool around our feet. It was almost too thick.

"What the hell Max?"

My dad took his washcloth underneath Max's belly, wiping the area around his opening. I didn't know what he was thinking: Max needed stitches, just spraying him down with water wasn't going to help.

Somehow, after a minute or so of this, he stopped leaking pus. My dad, as tight-lipped as ever, kept his hand on the removable-shower head, spraying at the sea of cream that had spilled out from our pet without a word.

I was holding my breath, trying not to breathe in the fumes as he turned the water off, leaving puddles of water behind and more of those wriggling strings on the tile. They were worms.

"Parasites," my dad said, too nonchalantly for my comfort, "Max is sick. We need to take him to the vet first thing in the morning."

### The Worms

It was hard to go to bed that night. Max had been there my entire life and thus far and as far as I could tell, he hadn't so much as gotten sick, much less spewed worms out of his belly. When I finally slept, it was a dreamless night. I recall being woken up by the feeling of something slimy curling against my skin.

I shuddered out of bed; it was still dark outside. I threw the blanket down to the floor, still feeling the sliminess from my sleep and was greeted by the sound of Max howling into the night through the thin walls of the house.

# Something's Wrong With Max by William Becker

## (Part II)

I slammed my door open, running as fast as my feet could carry me down the stairs and into the living room, flipping the lights on as I did. Just beyond our couch and in the middle of the living room stood Max, his snout raised to the ceiling and letting out an almost human wail. For a second, I sighed a breath of relief; he was walking again. Maybe it all had just been a bad dream and he was just howling at something that went in front of one of the windows.

“Max?” I called out, studying his fur. He cocked his head to the right. His skin and fur seemed to shimmer, vibrating with the movement of something beneath his skin.

Max let out a soft whimper, and then like roots tearing through the ground, worm-like tendrils seemed to burst from his belly, expanding the hole and shooting white pus across the wood floor. They were each about the width of my finger and dark brown in color, erratically reaching to the ground beneath Max and smacking it, like they were trying to grab onto something, anything at all. They all moved independently, groping through the air at impossible speeds, coiling against one another and hanging out from the dog’s cut open belly like they made up his internal organs.

“*DAD!*” I hollered out.

Max grunted, his voice deeper like it was in two pieces, his original grunt and the grunt of something deeper, darker lying within him. He lowered his head to the ground, cowering near the floor as the tendrils retreated back inside of him, disappearing.

My parent’s door came flying open, my dad dressed in his flannel pajamas. How had the howling not disturbed his sleep? I looked back at Max and for that brief moment, he had returned to being himself. He was trembling, seemingly scared of the monsters living inside of him.

“What’s he barking at?” my dad snarled, stopping past the couch.

Max whimpered, still cowering against the floor, thick puddles of pus beneath him, but no sign of the worms that had been reaching out of him like demons from the underworld.

“Something’s wrong with Max,” I pleaded, hoping my dad would say we should take him to the emergency vet. I didn’t have the words to describe what I had seen, like an alien ripping itself through our dog. It had always upset me a great deal when people talked about putting Max down Max and it still did, but for the first time, it made sense. No vet was going to be able to fix Max.

“Yeah, buddy, I know. We gotta take him first thing in the morning.”

# Something's Wrong With Max by William Becker

## (Part II)

“No, dad, it's- it's worse. There's something inside of him. It came falling out of his belly like a monster.”

I knew my words weren't doing the gravity of the situation justice. My dad looked at me, sleep still in his eyes.

“At least he's walking now,” my dad said, looking at me like I was just an irrational kid scared of some infection and trying as always to be the protector.

“Whaddaya say we wrap him in some gauze, get the doggy cone so he can't rip it off?” my dad added.

I said nothing. Gauze wasn't going to stop the worms from getting out.

My dad wasn't going to wait for my approval.

“Go to the laundry room. I'll get the first aid kit, you get some towels, a fresh dog bed and the cone. I think it's in the garage. He's gonna be okay, I promise.”

Max looked defeated as we laid out a spare dog bed for him, my dad used some gauze and old sheets to tie a tight wrap around his med section, and I swabbed the floors with wood cleaner and old towels that I threw in the garbage can once we had soaked up all of the pus. I noticed now that the worms that had been in the shower and leaked out of him were absent now, as if they had grown and were the things reaching out of him.

“Dad,” I begged as we snapped the cone around Max's head, “I think those parasites got a lot bigger. I saw them hanging out of him and squirming around.”

Max looked up at me, his eyes empty of all emotion now, just a hopeless flesh cell.

“I'm sure the doctor will tell us something in the morning. Just try and get some sleep, okay? I'll leave my door open and listen,” my dad said, explaining it away like it was nothing.

Part III in the next issue.



A landscape painting in a soft, painterly style. The scene is set in a rural, hazy environment. On the left, a large, leafy green tree stands in a field of tall grass. In the center, a wooden bench with a red seat is positioned on a path. To the right of the bench, a building with a thatched roof is partially visible, its details softened by the atmosphere. The sky is filled with large, white, billowing clouds, and the overall color palette is dominated by warm, golden-brown and green tones, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting. The right side of the image is partially obscured by a vertical wooden plank, which adds a sense of depth and texture to the composition.

# Short Story Contest

# Image Jury by Carol Ann Ross

Maria looked lovingly at the tiny baby lying peacefully in the frilled bassinet. The tiny fingers were perfections, as were her toes; the tiny transparent nails on each were beautiful too, as were her limbs and torso. Everything was perfect. Maria smiled as her eyes studied the tiny form, the delicate flawlessness of the body of her baby Ariel.

Then her eyes rested on the face, they closed for a moment as she inhaled a breath. Opening them, rivers of tears flowed down her cheeks. She bit her lip and shook her head, still looking at Ariel's face.

Bowing her head, Maria bit her lip again and studied the child's eyes-she sighed deeply. "Well," she spoke aloud, whimpering, "the physician had said the baby did have problems".

Dr. Phillips had gone into detail the day Ariel was born. But Maria had turned her head that day, blocking out a description of the defective child she had grown to love in the womb. Her husband, Royal, had listened. She had felt the grasp of his fingers tighten on her hand as the doctor spoke. Afterward he held her chin in his hand, "I'm so sorry, my love." He said the words softly and stayed by her side for a long time.

Reaching a finger to Ariel, Maria stopped and turned as Royal walked into the nursery. His sad eyes met hers, his arms reaching to wrap around her waist and pull her close. Together they looked longingly into the crib.

"Maybe we should have--"

"No, no. I could never--"

"Shh, it's okay. We'll make it through. We're just fortunate that we have the mirror.

Maria nodded, Oh how she loved the baby. She couldn't fathom not having her even if it



was only for a short while. "We gave her life," she gazed into her husband's eyes.

He nodded back, "yes. She gets to know what life is, even if it is only for a short while."

Maria reached her hand to stroke the baby's hair, Ariel cooed softly. Her eyes twinkled and her small mouth rounded then gently began to curl at the edges. "See, she is experiencing joy. Life is pleasing to her."

Squeezing his wife's hand, Royal's eyes teared too. He thought of the hope, the plans, the shared expectations. "About a year. I think the doctor said about a year."

"And we have the mirror," her eyes questioned to reaffirm his earlier statement.

"Yes...if we need it. You know..."

"I know. We may not need it. I hope though..." Maria's eyes welled with tears once again as she caught her trembling breath.

Kissing her softly on the forehead, Royal whispered, "I've got to get to work, sweetheart. See you this afternoon."

She nodded and kissed his cheek in return, then watched as he exited the nursery. Closing the door behind him, she felt the loneliness envelope her. Oddly enough, the loneliness was soothing. Being alone with this flawed little creature was nice. It was hers, the baby had come from *her* body.

## Image Jury cont'd



Leaning against the door Maria let her eyes slowly scan the pink room. A white Jenny Lind spindle crib sat in the center. Pink and white, pink and yellow, pink and aqua peeked from the curled lathed posts. Maria smiled recalling how she and her friend Rita had shopped at the baby stores and how she and Royal had picked out colors. It had all been so much fun. All the anticipation had set her in another world, one full of the joy and wonder of making a family-a family a little better than the one she had come from.

As Maria strolled to the lace curtained windows, she ran her fingers along the rocking chair railing. Stopping at the wall calendar, she touched the date bubbles. They changed from pink to aqua, to teal to mauve and back again. The little gray elephants blowing the bubbles winked and smiled. Maria thought how cruel they were. How could they be happy with such calamity about them?

Focusing only on the bubbles, Maria allowed her index finger to rest on the child's birthday, April 15, 2095. There had been so much hope on that day. No not hope, but promise. She slid an eye to the elephants again, wishing that they were extinct. Frowning as she recalled a news blurb, *only twelve left on the planet*. She didn't care. Squaring her jaw, Maria

regretted the thought. "That's not right, I shouldn't think that way. I shouldn't wish anything away." Closing her eyes to an overwhelming ache of love and confusion, she felt as if even hope and promise had become extinct too.

But she'd been told that this might happen- a deep depression, the baby blues. Postpartum, it was called, or something like that. She'd been told it was a quite common occurrence for women who gave birth to their own babies or for people experiencing trauma or a sudden disappointment. Pills were available for that. Even operations were available, but Maria felt odd about those types of remedies. In fact, she had feelings about a lot of things, deep down inside her, that she had never shared with anyone, not even Royal.

Her eyes slid to the elephants again. "Poor elephants, they can't help what they are." Maria half grinned and rested a finger on the elephant images. The caricatures winked and smiled, a tear from one of them made its way from its small gray eye to the tip of its trunk. The other elephants looked sadly at her and raised their trunks, Maria guessed, in a show of compassion.

Their expression eased Maria for a moment, but only a moment before she heard cries from the bassinet. The door to the room opened and Aggie entered. She smiled and nodded to Maria as she made her way to the baby. Gathering the child in her arms she left the room.

"Feeding time." Maria exhaled loudly. Wondering what all that entailed. In the month since they'd brought Ariel home, she'd never seen the baby being fed, or even diapered, for that matter.

The bassinet was programmed to detect bodily functions and needs and Aggie had been hired to take care of those things.



## Image Jury cont'd



*And now, Maria thought, Little Ariel is not perfect. She is not regulation. Life would be hard for her.*

“Maria recalled her own childhood, it certainly was not ideal. She vaguely remembered the years when she had to consider time, prepare schedules and style her own hair. She remembered those menial tasks. But that had been long ago. Now she simply programmed herself to do these things. There was no worrying about schedules or mundane chores, no worrying about anything. Wasn't that the goal? Wasn't that the way life was supposed to be? Now, everything came at will. Certainly, this was the way it should be. This was the right way. Wasn't it?”

Even finding a husband had been no problem. It had been easy and so unlike her mother's ways, when people went through many suitors before settling for one. Maria crinkled her nose in disgust, thinking of how vulgar that would have been. But Royal, well, Royal was just there one day, waiting in her office as if he belonged there. Their attraction was instantaneous. And when he kissed her on their second date, she knew he was the one. Their romance was passionate, or so Maria believed. Royal had said so too. A ceremony was performed by the Company's CEO a month after they met.

It was wonderful that the company took care of so many things. They even allowed Royal and she the freedom to choose their home. And after

Maria vaguely remembered her mother telling her how her great-grandmother had breastfed her mother. The thought repulsed Maria. *That's something dogs, cats, and elephants do.*

“I'm a good mother, I want the best for my child,” she reproved herself, “Aggie knows what to do. It's her position in life.” She thought for a moment, “But I'm important too.” Maria held her shoulders stiffly and continued speaking to the empty room. “I'm curious though, I've always been.” She frowned, pulled her lips in tight and thought of how she had hidden that trait-the frowned upon trait of curiosity. *Why is it so bad,* she thought.

“Despite everyone saying I couldn't, that I shouldn't, that it was archaic, I chose to do the commencement procedure. I wanted to know what it was like for people, for *women*.”

Maria had read a few letters her mother had hidden, the words told of feelings she couldn't quite comprehend. “They sound so...so...magical, so... I wanted my child to have it better, to...” she looked at the little elephants, they looked forlornly back.

Thinking how Royal had acted when she told him she was with child, reassured her too. He hadn't become sullen, in fact, he had been quite calm.

At first he suggested the procedure to terminate. That's what anyone did if a mistake happened. But they went for a long walk in the park and talked and before long his attitude changed and he became protective and decisively supportive.

“The doctor says everything will be fine, but no promises if the baby isn't regulation.” Royal told his wife after a visit to the physician.

# Image Jury cont'd

offering a list of cities, styles of homes and modes of transportation, they made a free and unsolicited selection. There was even a clause in the marriage agreement that at any time they would be allowed two skin tone changes and two more options to change body styles. They were set. As the company said-*you are set for life.*

Who could say she and Royal did not have free will? Who could say she was not in control of her life? Who could say they were not free to be who they wanted?

As a bonus, Maria and Royal were offered intimacy patterns. The list was placed before them and after much discussion they chose to program their sexual act for every second Tuesday of each month.

Royal was allowed to masturbate on Saturdays and Maria was allowed Sunday evenings. This schedule allowed them to watch the wall screen at their leisure or to incorporate other people into their lives, of course, all coming from the list. And it was a comprehensive list chock full of all kinds of activities and thought programs, just anything anyone could want.

Before Maria's mother had passed, she told her daughter how sad it was to see a generation who had no idea of what life was all about. "There's more to life than what they say, I want you to have more."

Hearing a muffled giggle from the adjoining room, and curious, Marie walked closer to listen for perhaps more sounds of laughter from her daughter. "I do now, Momma," Maria whispered. "I have more." She added, whispering, "The Company can not give me what Ariel does. No amount of self correction lesions, or SCL, will ever give me that."

Wondering why some things were necessary and how other things had become normal, Maria plowed through present day norms and followed her curiosity. It was like walking a tightrope.

She kept revelations secret, subtly searching Royal's thoughts, waiting to see if he too had questions.

Since Ariel's arrival, he seemed more pliable and open to ideas. Still, Maria was careful. She was still aware that the Company had provided so much for her family. And she knew that what they provided was good and the correct manner in which to progress. "Mostly," she shrugged. "I know they want what is best for everyone. And they did say that if I followed their guidelines, Ariel would not have been born so disfigured.

"If," the doctor had said, "if you had followed instructions and not put your body through the commencement procedure, you would see a child with a different face, not this disappointment." Maria inhaled deeply, he was right. It ached her to know her daughter would have to go through life so disfigured.

"But everything else is as it should be," she purred proudly to herself, "her body is so perfect." Maria heard the echo of her mother's voice, *Can't cry over spilled milk. Don't throw the baby out with the bath water.* Nodding, she smiled thinking of Ariel, "I have her now, I will do my best..." and then she thought of the time, only a year. Dr. Phillips had warned. 'You'll be lucky to get that.'

Maria knew she must obey Dr. Phillips, after all, he was a doctor, he knew better. Thank goodness he had found a loophole that had allowed her the commencement procedure; it had been discarded decades ago after it was found and proven by all scientists that it could cause grave injury to the human body and maybe even cancer.

Since she and Royal wanted a child so badly, they'd been able to persuade the doctor to allow the birth. Of course all was kept secret. Despite the

## Image Jury cont'd



chances of abnormalities, the procedure went off beautifully. They were safe, just as if the surrogate had been used.

How embarrassing it was to know her mother had been a surrogate. How demoralizing it was to know where she had come from. How fortunate Maria was to have found a way out of that lifestyle. She wondered for a moment, *will I have to hide Ariel too? Oh, she quickly answered herself, in a year...I only have a year...she only has a year.*

“But I get to love my baby for a year. Ariel will know love for a year, joy for a year, wonder for a year.”

Calming herself as the door to the nursery opened Maria grinned gaily to Aggie and asked, “do you have children of your own?”

“No ma’am. My family was among the one’s chosen to not have children.”

“Sorry.”

“No big problem, it’s easier this way. I don’t get so attached.”

“Attached?” Maria asked.

“No ma’am. I see how you worry over this one. I see you crying all the time. And I don’t know what for. She seems like such a beautiful little child. May I ask ma’am, why do you cry so much?”

Maria lowered her eyes.

“Would you like to hold her, ma’am?”

“I’m to hold her only between the hours of seven and nine twice a day.”

“Oh, come on now. This lovely little girl would love to be held by you.” Aggie held the baby toward its mother.

A smile beamed across Maria’s face as she held her arms to gather the baby. She felt its tiny fingers tug at her blouse, its warmth against her body; she heard the light breaths and saw the sparkle of Ariel’s eyes. Oh, how she did love her. But--

“I shouldn’t get too close, Aggie. The doctor said only a year.”

“Oh, but a year of love. A year of light, a year of smiles and sweet caresses. Who wouldn’t want a year of that. Give it to her ma’am. Give her that even if that is all she gets. And in return--ah, giving love. It is so much better when you get it back.” Aggie sought Maria’s eyes, she held them.

“But they said--”

“Hot air, what they said. There is nothing better than pure love. That’s all you can give her. Right?”

“But it’s only a year. And look at her face Aggie, its---”

“There’s not a thing wrong with her face. Two eyes, two eyebrows, a sweet little nose and rosebud lips. This child is beautiful.”

“But we asked for amber eyes. We didn’t want the cleft in her chin. The nose is too long. Nothing in her facial features is what we were told would be part of her.”

“Is there anything else wrong with her, inside?” Aggie touched the infant’s chest and abdomen. “Are her organs inside okay?”

The doctor says she has something called an appendix, and another thing..her jaw formation, she may have crooked teeth, one nostril is slightly smaller than the other. She has a mole, that nasty mark on her temple. No, he says that in one year we are to bring her to the hospital.”

“Then what?”



# Image Jury cont'd

“If she does not pass away before then, he will take the necessary steps.”

Aggie thought for a moment, her brow furrowed as she raised a finger to her chin. “That’s dumb. She looks so healthy.” Aggie giggled, “she eats like a horse. There’s nothing wrong with her. So what if--”

“Aggie, she’s not really what we wanted.”

“Then why the hell did you...?” Her mouth drawing tightly, Aggie added, “what you wanted? Ha.” She dare not add what she thought, *what about what the baby wants?* It had long been the law that babies had no desires except to eat, sleep and poop.

Torn, Maria still clung to the baby. “I have to think about how she would be accepted, you know. With such facial defects. You...”

Her jaw clenching, Aggie’s eyes rolled to the ceiling, here it came, the degradation, the reminder that she was not one of the perfect. But how was she to help that. How was she to have control of what her parents had chosen or not chosen?

“Aggie, I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, but you see, your teeth, and your hairline. Your chin is too long. I’m sure you have a hard time finding clothing-or do you make your own? It’s, well, your size is not right. I mean, I don’t think you are stupid or anything, but Aggie, if your parents had been kind they would have made changes to you before you were born. Isn’t it difficult for you? Don’t you wish sometimes...?”

“She has the mirror.” Aggie spoke

“Yes, we have a mirror. It will allow her to see what we really wanted in a child. The mirror will reflect a perfect image, amber eyes, a perfect nose, no skin blemishes, and a perfect oval face. The medications prescribed by Dr. Philips will help reconstruct her and if they don’t...they help her pass. Quietly, calmly, without pain, she will pass.”

“And at a year you will give her up? You will let this lovely child go away if she does not change?”

Maria held the baby close to her, she leaned to kiss her brow before placing the baby in the bassinet.

“In a year I will have readied myself. I will be prepared for what needs to be. I will not be selfish and set my daughter out into a world that will look down on her and treat her as less than human.”

Descending the stairs into the basement, Aggie shook her head, thinking of how fortunate her employers were to have her working for them. Oh, it could be a pain, but that was the way it was. Things had changed so much from when she was a child. She sighed at the thought.

Nowadays there were things that couldn’t be said, even thought. Certain words had been deleted from dictionaries. There were certain expressions that were no longer tolerated and others that were enforced, if not by the PoliPols, then by neighbors, the Company, and even family. Aggie was careful with what she said and did. It was a thin tight rope to walk, but she was careful. So far, so good, things had gone well since she had been working for Royal and Maria #82.

Aggie nodded her head, “Yes, they are lucky to have me. I might be up in years, but I’m good at my job. I don’t steal, like some of them do and I’ve learned to smile when they tell me to do things, so they think I’m happy to do it. Doing that keeps them under the impression that I like them.” She tittered to herself, *an unhappy boss is your loss.* “That’s what Momma always said.” Aggie smiled recalling the woman who had raised her.

Gerie was her name, Aggie pictured her face-somewhat long, her nose broad. The warmth of the memory oozed through the petite, soft woman. “Momma had the prettiest eyes, always

## Image Jury cont'd

smiling,” Aggie spoke aloud as she entered her room and made her way to the recliner.

Propping her feet aloft the stand, she relaxed and thought about sneaking off to Rampartally, to browse the shelves. She could certainly pick up a few items there rather cheaply.

Sighing at the thought, she decided against the trip to the shopping mart, besides if her employers found out she'd been there they could begin treating her differently. She'd seen that happen.

It was well nigh a social sin to be caught in Frenelite. Aggie chuckled at the thought and relaxed to bask in the warmth a few childhood memories of her mother and of the explanations for all of her childhood questions.

*Long time ago everybody had babies--least women did. It was kind of a guessing game as to what they'd turn out like, you know, color of their eyes, shape of their face, their hair. Babies, little people were all so different.*

“Why?” Aggie had asked her mother so long ago..

*Gerie had shrugged, I don't know why. But it changed around fifty years ago so that some people could do--she hummed for a moment, her forefinger pressed against her chin. Ah, designer babies, that's what it was. So parents could have exactly what they wanted. And so women wouldn't have to put strain and stress on their bodies. So their image would be the way it should be.*

Aggie remembered the cool strong hands of her mother touching her face as she spoke to her daughter. How fortunate she was to receive the love, the patience and guidance. Aggie hoped she could impart those things to the babies she took care of.

Kicking off her shoes, she leaned farther back in the recliner and closed her eyes.

*I am so sorry you will never have a child, I am so sorry my station in life will not afford you that. Gerie explained when her daughter asked. Oh, you can marry, but there will be no children for you. You have been fixed. Only Frenelites are allowed that. Once again Aggie recalled the cool calming hands of her mother, stroking her hair, lifting her chin to catch her gaze. But it is all for the best--as it has been explained. The burden of childbirth and all things that go with it have been lifted from those in our station. Others are better equipped, have finer qualities, can offer more than we--I--people like--well, sweetheart. Without enduring the commencement procedure of your own child, you will not have to endure such sorrow, such angst--oh, the worry, the questioning, the fear that a parent endures.*

*But Momma, I love you, you love me.*

*And now women can have the exact eye color they want for the baby, the shape face, the full lips, the thick hair, she ran her hand along her ample frame. They can have the perfect body. Gerie laughed, imagine, no more dieting. Now I could go for that. And the most important thing. Gerie stood tall above her daughter. The most important thing. They can be smart...so smart.*

*Momma, what is smart? What does it mean when someone is smart? Do they know everything?*

*Aggie noticed the change of expression and the way her mother turned to hide it. “Yes my dear--they know everything.”*

Eleven months had passed and with each day Maria had fallen more and more in love with her baby daughter, Ariel. Royal had too. Maria admired her husband's stoicism and the strength he showed. Despite his love he knew what was best and he would be there for her when the time came.

# Image Jury cont'd

“I didn’t expect her to live this long,” he mentioned one day as they sat in the nursery watching their daughter gazing into the mirror.

Maria nodded. She had not expected it either. And after the third doctor visit, she believed her daughter would be gone in only a few weeks, or so Dr. Phillips had explained.

It was after that third visit, after the line of sojuice she had been administered twice daily.

“It’s the unnecessary appendix,” the doctor explained, “the formation of the organs. They should be different.” He looked sadly into Maria’s eyes, touched her lightly on the arm and expressed heartfelt sympathy about the inevitable death of her daughter.

But the torrential rain, the desire to keep her daughter dry, the over packed tote and being in a hurry, alas, the package of drugs slipped from the over packed tote. Then flood waters washed it into the curbside drain unnoticed.

A day passed. Maria had forgotten about the sojuice that first day. The second day she was too ashamed to mention the loss of the pills to Royal. The third day, Ariel cooed louder and laughed louder than Maria had ever heard before.

“Miss Maria, I think the baby is doing just fine,” Aggie commented. She ate very well and no crying when I changed her diaper. You know, I never really thought she seemed sick at all.”

“The appointment was a scheduled well check and...the doctor had explained and given me medicine.” Maria thought for a moment then shook her head.

“Well, she looks just fine to me. It doesn’t look like she needed any medicine.”

“Doctor Phillips said that in a couple of weeks I would notice things. He said with the medicine her passing wouldn’t be painful.”

“I have a friend who gave her daughter the sojuice to ease her pain. The child did go peacefully-a month later.”

The women looked at one another. They said nothing. Aggie left the room.

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“Dear, Dr. Phillips was in touch with me this afternoon and asked about Ariel. He said you came for your third visit a couple of weeks ago and he hasn’t heard from you since.”

Maria looked up from her reading. “Oh, the baby is doing just fine. No need to go back to the doctor.” Her eyes studied Royal’s as her soft lips parted to speak, “I think she’s trying to talk and she said *mama* today and she’s getting into so many things, crawling everywhere and I changed a diaper--”

“You what?” Royal’s frown turned upward as he drew closer to Maria. “Are you okay?”

“I have never felt better.”

“The doctor mentioned that he believes it will be good when you go back to work at the Company. He held a letter in his hand, “A letter from the Company reaffirms that.”

“No!”

“What?”

“I mean, no, Ariel is fine. She’s not going to pass away Royal. She’s so healthy and happy. She laughs all the time and plays. I love playing with her.”

“You play with her? Dr. Phillips says he wants you to bring her in for an examination. He mentioned that she was on medication. Have you been giving her the medication, Maria?”

“I lost the package, Royal. And Ariel does not need medication. She is fine.”

As she followed her husband into the nursery, Maria pressed against the pulsing bell image near the door. In seconds she heard Aggie’s footsteps on the stairs.



# Image Jury cont'd

“Has she been looking in the mirror?” asked Royal.

Aggie pressed by the couple, entering the room to gather the baby from the crib. “The mirror, sorry to say, but it was broken. My fault,” she laughed. “Like my mother always said, it’s seven years of bad luck to break a mirror.”

“Shrugging, Royal mumbled, “never heard of that one.”

“I’ve been letting her look in mine,” Aggie bit her top lip and waited to be admonished.

“What kind!” Royal barked. “Is it--”

“Oh no sir, this is a simple mirror. Nothing special about my mirror. I mean I’m still plain and fluffy.” She patted her stomach. “My mother almost named me biscuit.” Aggie stifled a laugh as she noticed the man’s perplexed look.

Reaching for Ariel, Royal pulled the child to his face, examining the cleft chin, the mole--*what larger nostril?* He questioned as he studied her face closely. Her eyes were a soft brown, only a little darker than her hair. Her tiny lips made a perfect bow before drawing into a broad grin. Tiny fingers grabbed at his nose. “Da da.” she squeezed gently then ran the palm of her hands alongside his face. “Da da.”

“He says--”

“He who?”

“Dr. Phillips says the Image Jury wants to examine her. He asked about the mirror. He wants to resume the medication. He says any improvement is temporary and a symptom of the disease.”

The softness of her fingers touched his lips, her fingers felt along the soft tissue of his mouth. Ariel giggled loudly, “da da.” the wet fingers slid from Royal’s mouth into her own and the baby giggled once again. She pressed her head against her father’s then leaned against his chest.

“Sir,” Aggie began. “You may not approve, but some of my friends frequent Rampartally. There are good jobs, maybe not as fine. And homes, maybe not as fancy. But sir...the children.”

Royal settled his daughter on his hip, pulled his wife to his side. “Thank you, Aggie. I guess we need to pack.”

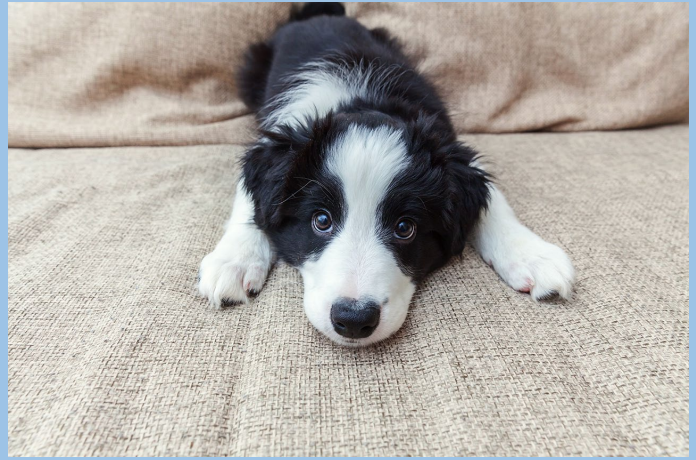
# Tupper by Carol Ann Ross

The sound of the drums beating, brass horns blowing, floats covered in pink and white flowers, the lilt of laughter along with the gentle push of the crowd, felt so familiar and welcoming. Marla had been coming to the Azalea Festival in Wilmington her entire life. She loved it. But today, well...she wasn't sure. This was a strange one, at least for her. For one, where was the sunshine?

Stretching her neck and studying the darkening sky overhead, she thought, *Oh yuck, looks like rain,, it is going to rain.* Sighing heavily, the twenty something girl rolled her eyes and turned her attention toward Jerry, standing only a few yards away. He too was studying the darkening skies. She watched him shrug, then turn his focus to the progression of high school bands, beauty queens and clowns parading down Front Street.

She noted his unkempt hair, the old baggy jeans and wrinkled shirt he wore. And though some may have said he was being stylish, Marla was certain that Jerry's odd smell had nothing to do with style. Obviously he had no interest in how clean he was or how he presented himself to the world...or to even her. It didn't seem he had cared about such things for quite a while, at least for the last few times she had seen him.

Now, he didn't look nearly as attractive as he had the first time she'd met him, or had she simply been awed by his resemblance to Justin Timberlake that first time, and not noticed anything else?



His manner had changed too, and he seemed somewhat annoyed with her recently, showing up late for dates and begging money for one thing or another. Today, that morning, when she'd picked him up, he'd even refused to meet her eyes. Bell and Pete, who were along for the ride, had seemed somewhat aloof too.

If it hadn't been for the fact that she had promised to take them to the festival weeks ago, she wouldn't have even bothered with them. Now, she regretted the promise. Groaning softly to herself, she grappled for a few moments with the ambiguous feelings she now had for the three.

*If Jerry doesn't like me anymore, that's okay,* she thought. *The feeling is certainly mutual. It's just a matter of making the break.* She sighed again, *But I did tell him, and his little friends too,* she curled her lip, *that I would drive everyone to the festival today. Oh how I hate it when I make promises I don't really mean.* "I said it, so I have to do it," she chided herself aloud.

Turning her attention toward the floats and little clown cars, Marla mustered a smile, then winced as she felt a drop of rain, then another, on her skin.

# Tupper Cont'd

“Darn it, the weatherman said there was only going to be a twenty percent chance of rain today,” She mumbled.

She searched the crowd of people, looking for Bell and found the blonde girl only a few feet behind her. Catching her attention, she shrugged and called, “Guess it’s going to *twenty percent* any minute now.”

Bell sneered and grunted, then held a bare arm out from her side to test for drops of rain. “I thought I felt something, but was hoping it was just a bird.” She tittered briefly, “but nope, it’s raining alright.” She pushed back against a stranger moving through the crowd and reached to grab her boyfriend’s hand.

Pete slid an indifferent glance to Marla as he pulled Bell into the alcove of a nearby store. They turned to face one another and kissed quickly, before joining in with the growing groans of discontent rising from the people lining the sidewalks and streets as the skies broke open. Immediately the crowd was moving in all directions. Some opened umbrellas, others pressed against store fronts, hoping to wait out the shower. Still others pushed their way through the throng of parade goers toward their vehicles.

Abruptly, Marla and Jerry found themselves shoved into the small alcove with Pete and Bell. Pete leaned into Bell and pulled his light jacket over his head, half shielding his girlfriend from the progression of raindrops that had burst from the sky.

“I told you that it was going to rain today. But you wouldn’t listen,” Pete looked directly at

Marla, then wrapped an arm around Bell. She leaned in even closer to him, as he flashed yet another disapproving look towards Marla.

Not bothering to hide his annoyance, he growled, “So, where’d you park your car?”

“Yeah, where’s your car?” Jerry echoed.

“I parked on Anne Street, about half way down on the right.” Marla responded timidly.

Pete nodded and grasping Bell’s hand even tighter, pulled her along as they jogged toward Anne Street.

Jerry’s eyes hastily swept over Marla’s face as he proceeded to follow the other two, leaving her to trot along behind. She sighed and licked the rain from her lips. “How do they think they’re going to get in, I have the key,” she grinned and felt for the keys in her jeans pocket, watching as the distance between her and the others grew.

Was she saddened because Jerry wasn’t holding her hand and was leaving her behind to hurry to safety alone? “No,” she answered herself. She knew *they* were over. She’d known it for a while now. His actions today just cemented the fact and she found herself feeling not hurt, but indifferent. On the other hand, she did feel somewhat abandoned, since she was, after all, the one who had driven the group to the parade. She’d even dropped them off early and close to the festivities, then parked the car and walked back through the crowds.

“Fool,” she muttered, “some friends I’ve got.” She moved slowly toward Anne Street, the rain pelting her short dark hair, leaving it to drip into her eyes. She brushed the limp strands to the side



# Tupper Cont'd

of her face, “Why do I do this-try to be friends with people I really have nothing in common with? I just don’t fit in, not with them, anyway.” she thought as she slowed her pace. “What the heck, it doesn’t matter if I keep up with them or not.”

As she walked slowly toward the car, Marla listened to the crowd, the voices, as they passed her by. Very few of the people were angry; she heard a few complaints, but not many. Most were laughing about getting caught in the rain or expressing sympathy for the people on floats or in marching bands. It made her smile, not everybody was a grouch.

Anne Street was a little more than a block away, she could see her parked car; she noticed the fogged windows. “Didn’t I lock my car? She asked aloud as she approached the driver’s side door. Marla looked curiously at the occupants as she opened it. All three were in the back seat. Jerry and she were obviously were done now.

All three glared at her, meeting her gaze with looks of derision. All but Pete quickly turned away; his defiant sneer dared her to comment.

There was one thing Marla knew that Pete loved, and that was confrontation. She was not about to take the bait. She met his eyes, grinned, then looked to Bell. Whiny Bell hated confrontation.

“I used the spare key you gave me.” The blond girl shrugged.

“Marla shot her a heated stare, “If I remember correctly, I asked you to put that key



back in the desk drawer after you borrowed my car last week.”

“Oops, must have forgotten,” Bell tittered.

“Hey, if she hadn't had the key we would have been standing out here in the rain getting soaked waiting on your slow butt.” snarled Pete.

*I could throw your butt out of my car and make you all walk home,* Marla thought, but right now she did not feel like getting into it with Pete or with any of them. She just wanted to go home.

“Why?” she closed her eyes and whispered, reminding herself she had dug this hole and she was the only one who could get herself out of it. Marla held her hand out, “keys...now.” Her eyes blazed into Bell’s timid ones.

True to form Bell began sniffing. Tears welled in her eyes, “I didn’t mean...” She dug deep into her purse and handed the keys to Marla. “It’s just that I haven’t...”

“See what you did now,” Pete spat.

*Same old crap, every time she gets caught with her hand in the cookie jar, she starts crying, whining, and it’s always because of something else or somebody else, it’s never her fault. She’s always the victim.*

Shaking her head, Marla slid the extra key into her purse and guided hers into the ignition, then checked her mirrors and fastened her seatbelt. The

# Tupper Cont'd

rain was still coming down, but not nearly as steadily as before. She turned on the windshield wipers and slowly pulled away from the curb.

The trio in the back giggled and grunted. Marla felt Pete's knee in the back of her seat, but she wasn't about to mention it. For certain he was aware of what he was doing and when she looked into the rearview mirror, she saw the wicked sneer plastered on his face. She was familiar with that sneer and she despised it.

Marla heard the click of Bell's purse as she opened it and noticed as the girl moved her hands around inside, opening it wider and nudging Pete to look in. *What games are they playing now*, she thought as her eyes moved to the street, then back to the trio in the backseat. She noticed how Bell and Pete nodded to one another, how they grinned and glanced her way. Marla sighed lightly, figuring they were up to something no good, but she sluffed it off, preferring to concentrate on the ride home.

At the stop sign she glanced once again into the backseat, then to the family of four, mother, father, son and daughter, holding hands and laughing as the rain soaked them. They seemed delighted with the wetness as they splashed in the roadside puddles.

After they crossed the street, Marla pulled forward and drove another block to another stop sign. Another family crossed in front and she moved forward again to the next block and next stop sign.

"Why don't you go over to Market Street so we don't have all the stop signs and jerky

driving. I swear, where did you learn how to drive? Walmart?"

Marla ignored Pete and drove another block. Here there were no people, there was hardly any traffic either. She looked to the right and then to the left, thinking that maybe she would try to get to Market, despite the probability that it was bumper to bumper traffic. But then she saw *him*.

He stood on the edge of the curb, his brown eyes looking directly into hers. "Poor doggy," she heard herself say aloud. Rolling down the window, she looked more closely at the dog. He seemed so scared and lonely.

"Hey! Don't you dare let that darn dog in this car." Pete ordered.

If he hadn't said it with such vehemence, if he hadn't been so cruel and disdainful ever since she'd known him, maybe she wouldn't have done it. But the instant the last syllable left his wretched lips, Marla opened the door and patted her thigh, "Come on boy, come on."

Without delay the little dog hopped on her lap. She could feel his wet paws through her jeans.

"Dang stinking dog," Jerry scoffed.

*Now he speaks up. Sniveling little minion. What in the world did I ever see in him?*

She reached her hand to ruffle the little dog's thick fur and felt the thin strip of a leather collar around his neck. Thinking that perhaps she should pull over and check the collar for a name or address, Marla glanced into the rearview mirror. Bell had her hand cupped to Pete's ear and was whispering something. Jerry was leaning in as closely as he could, hoping to catch a word.

# Tupper Cont'd

*On second thought, I don't think I'll pull over right now. In a bit, besides, I kind of like the company of this little dog.* She looked down again and twined her fingers in the damp hair. Reaching up, the dog licked Marla's cheek.

A low groan drifted from the back seat, "That makes me sick. You don't know where that dog has been. And you don't know what else he's been licking." Pete complained.

Taking a quick look in the rearview mirror, Marla caught Pete's eyes. He glared at her before leaning into Bell.

"The dog is going to ruin everything." the blond girl whispered too loudly.

"Huh?" Marla looked in the mirror again, "ruin what? What are you talking about?"

"Nothing!" Pete growled., "you must be hearing things." He shot an explosive look of contempt to Marla as she pressed on the gas and moved forward.

Suddenly the backseat was quiet.

The hint of a grin settled on her lips as she drove along the streets, turning finally at fourteenth street and then onto Market. Still the backseaters hadn't said a word.

"Think I'll pull over at this gas station and check out this puppy's collar. Maybe there is an address."

As she pulled into the Exxon station, she glimpsed the rearview mirror again only to catch the scornful expressions of the three passengers. Pete grumbled something to Jerry as Bell sat busy with her hands in her purse, scrounging again for something or other.

"Here it is," Marla exclaimed as the car idled. "Tupper. His name is Tupper."

"Tupperware?" Pete guffawed. "That's a stupid name."

"I didn't say Tupperware. I said Tupper. Just plain Tupper."

"It's still stupid," added Jerry.

*Now, what would Jerry say if I told him he was stupid? Would Pete stand up for Jerry or would he agree with me?* Pondering the question for a few moments , Marla surmised that if she did say anything about Jerry's lack of intelligence, it would start a row. *It's not worth it.*

Rubbing her thumb across the dirt-encrusted name tag again, she made out an address: 406 Lightning Rod Lane. She spoke it aloud. "406 Lightning Rod Lane."

"Where's that?" Bell asked timidly.

"Hey! I just want to get home,"Pete snarled. "We've spent all day in the rain and riding around with a smelly dog. The whole day's been wasted ."

"Yeah," Jerry hissed, "Just dump the mutt out here."

A glance in the mirror at her so-called boyfriend, and Marla suddenly felt embarrassed. *Yuck, what did I see in him, and why oh why did I let him kiss me?* She noticed a glob of spit in the corner of his lips, *If I had a rock to crawl under, I'd do it.*





# Tupper Cont'd

“Hey, do you even know how to get to Lightning Rod Lane? I’ve never heard of it. Probably way out in the boonies.” Pete barked.

Marla ignored the question and tapped in the address on her phone. By now Tupper was lying peacefully in the front passenger seat, his head resting on his paws. Occasionally Marla would reach a hand to stroke his thick fur. *He kind of looks like a Lhasa Apso, she thought. He’s black and white and has that little beard they are known for...or maybe some kind of terrier.* Tupper opened his eyes and wagged his tail as Marla petted him. *He sure is a long way from home. He must be lost or maybe his owner just doesn’t want him.*

Another glance in the mirror reassured Marla of what she had been thinking all day; she no longer liked or trusted the three *friends* in the backseat. She trusted this strange dog much more. *They seemed like strangers now, like she had never really known them at all and she questioned herself once again as to why she had ever befriended them.*

Marla’s thoughts drifted back to the day she’d met Bell. It was at the bank. She’d gone in to make the weekly deposit for Eastern Boat Works, her business-her’s now. With her father’s passing, she was now the sole owner.

And oh how she missed her father. They’d been close, spending most of her waking hours either at his shop or on the water, fishing, diving and skiing. She loved it all. Her father’s unexpected death had been a shock. Marla rubbed her chin, as she thought warmly of her father. He had died too young.

Maybe his passing had made her lonely, who knew? But she had met Bell at the bank. She seemed nice, she was quiet, friendly and her eyes begged for friendship and Marla had a heart that couldn’t say no. They started taking lunch breaks together and a couple of times went out on Marla’s boat.

Sometimes Pete popped up at the lunches and even once he joined them on the boat. He seemed a nice enough guy, although not very talkative and a bit standoffish. Often he appeared to be brooding. But Bell excused his behavior by saying that it was just Pete’s way and that it took a while for him to warm up to people.

Marla reached to pet Tupper once again. The look in his eyes this time was different, maybe forlorn, *Yes, she thought, that’s it, but why is this little doggie unhappy? Maybe he doesn’t want to go home. Maybe he would rather go home with me. I’d love to have a little dog like him around.*

“Two miles, then turn left on Cumberland Road,” a soft voice spoke from the GPS.

Marla thought about the possibility of keeping Tupper and glanced at the dog again. *You want to come home with me?* Marla dare not say the words aloud. But as if the dog had heard her, his ears perked up and he wagged his tail.

Shaking her head, Marla whispered. “That would be stealing.” Instantly the dog’s ears drooped, he blinked his eyes and rested his head on his paws again.

Marla tittered softly as her thoughts returned to when she first met Bell, Pete and Jerry.

*Yeah, Pete was always a little strange, but he was Bell’s boyfriend and none of my business and then she talked me into meeting Jerry. UGH!*

# Tupper Cont'd

*Geez, what an idiot I was. She held back a laugh, realizing that not only was she an idiot for dating Jerry, but he really was an idiot-dumb as a doorknob, she thought. Can't keep a job...and he doesn't have a single thought of his own that isn't put there by Pete. Marla sighed as she contemplated the young man's physique. But he does look good when you clean him up. Yep, he could be another Justin Timberlake.*

Twice he'd asked to borrow money from her. She obliged him the first time; she never did get that back. So when she declined him the second time, he started acting distant.

Marla took another quick look in the rearview mirror. All three heads were bowed, as they held their phones, texting. She studied their expressions. Jerry looked pensive, serious, his mouth pursed.

Pete's lips were curled upward at the corners and Bell's mouth hung open as she moved her thumbs quickly across the keyboard of her phone.

*It's about me, she shrugged. They're texting nasty things about me.*

"Turn right at Border Street." The words from the GPS startled her for a moment.

Turning onto Border, Marla thought of the things her father used to say, 'you don't have to be friends with everyone, just be nice. Take care of yourself before you try saving the world.' *Wish I could remember that, Marla sighed. I need to give friendships time, because now these friends all feel so wrong. I should have listened*

*to Daddy, he always told me to go with my gut. She shook her head softly, now my gut says no to Bell, a very ashamed no to Jerry and a most emphatic no to that mean Pete. He has always been intimidating.*

Tupper stood in the seat and wagged his tail, his tongue hanging from his mouth, dripped a few drops of saliva.

"That's nasty," Pete spat.

It was hot in the car and very humid outside. Marla reached to turn on the air conditioner. Ordinarily she would have rolled the windows down, but with the rain, the A/C would have to do. She reached to pat the little dog, "it will cool off in a few minutes sweetie."

The little dog released a tiny yap and pranced in his seat. Placing his paws once again on Marla's thighs, he reached to lick her cheek.

"What is it boy?"

"Stupid dog is nuts. You're going to catch something from that mutt." Pete spoke the words commandingly, as if he was an authority on dogs. But of course, Pete had always acted as if he knew it all.

*His parents didn't have to waste any money on college for him, he already knows everything, Marla chuckled to herself.*

"What are you laughing about?" Jerry barked.

She's not going to be laughing—" Bell snickered.

Pete jabbed Bell in the side with his elbow. His tight jaws clenching, he whispered something to her.

# Tupper Cont'd

Marla stretched to hear the words, but had no luck. "What's going on?"

There was no answer.

Instantly a sense of discomfort swept through Marla. She wondered just what the three in the back were up to. Focusing on the road ahead, she could feel her heart pounding rapidly in her chest.

Tupper whined, then growled.

"Turn right at the next intersection," the GPS sounded. Marla pulled into the left lane and waited for a car to pass.

"Turn right at Lightning Rod Lane and proceed one half mile."

Obedying the GPS, Marla pulled onto a narrow dirt road and drove as an ominous silence filled the car.

"You are now at four 0 six Lightning Rod Lane." The words soothed Marla as she pulled in front of a nearly obscured structure surrounded by old oaks with low hanging branches dripping moss. The rain had stopped and a hazy mist filled the air. Marla searched through the trees to find a tiny blue cottage that sat nearly hidden among the thick rambling greenery intertwined with wisteria. Its pungent aroma draped the scene as the whirring of dragonflies clouded the yard and surrounding area.

Nervously reaching for the car's door handle, the frightened girl opened it. She and Tupper bounded out.

Expecting the dog to run to the front door, Marla was puzzled when Tupper reached his front paws to her thighs and barked loudly.

Was it the tingling chill of early spring, the breeze, the rain? Goose bumps raised, it seemed, on her entire body. Her breath came quickly and for a moment she felt dizzy.

But there was no reason to be afraid, was there? Not out here-out of the car where she had felt the menacing presence of her three companions. She studied her surroundings. They were foreign and she wasn't even sure if they were welcoming.

Turning to watch the others slowly exit the car, Marla turned to the little blue cottage for solace and gradually walked toward the door. Her steps came nervously as she walked on the uneven cobblestones, then balancing herself she stepped more carefully toward the entrance. She could hear mutterings from the three behind her, but she wasn't about to stop and ask them what they were saying. Marla only knew that the strange cottage seemed much more friendly than they did.

She hoped, she wondered, was someone home? Would they offer her protection? Just what was happening? Nothing felt right. Nothing felt safe, except for the little dog, Tupper, and the hope that perhaps behind the wooden door, was safety. Marla tapped lightly on it, it swung open a bit. Tupper pushed it open even farther with his nose and stood looking up at her as if to invite her in.

"You're not going in that house, are you?" called Bell.

Marla pushed the door open wide and walked across the threshold. It was dark and faded inside. A taxidermied snake, perched on an end table, seemed to hiss at her. A dusty red fox stared at her blankly from a side wall and she could have sworn she heard a neigh from the horse's head near the fireplace.



# Tupper Cont'd

Turning, she saw Pete, Jerry and Bell, they had stopped at the door, their backs turned to her, heads lowered as they spoke in undertones. Pete's eyes rose quickly to meet hers.

What was it? Now they were all looking at her threateningly. She called to the house, hoping for a response, as she looked around at the furnishings and dead animals staring from the walls. Slowly she walked farther into the cottage, "Hello? Hello, is anyone home? I found your dog. Tupper, your little black and white dog. Did you lose him?"

There was no response and she looked back at the people with whom she'd driven, who were all still standing just outside the entrance. Pete spewed a line of spit toward a bush.

"There's no one here," he sneered, his face twisted into a broad grin as he glared. "You're all alone out here. That mutt took you on a trip to nowhere."

"We've got to do it today," Marla could have sworn she heard Pete add, as he leaned towards Bell and Jerry.

Jerry leaned to peer at her and attempted to spit a stream of spit toward the vinery, but the dribble fell against his chin. He raised a bare arm to wipe it away.

Bell, her mouth, once again hanging open, was searching through her oversized purse. Marla saw her head jerk to listen to Pete.

"Huh? But she..." someone said

"Shut your freaking mouth, she'll hear you." Jerry muttered.

Had they forgotten that she was right there, not thirty feet from her? She scoffed for only a moment, *dum, dum, dum*. But her fear quickly returned when she noticed how they had all gathered to huddle, commencing a long whispered conversation of only muffled *she's* and *hers* among other words she could not hear.

"So there you are!" a grainy sounding voice pierced the silence. A tall older woman, maybe in her sixties, came from behind a partition. She snapped her fingers at the dog.

"Where did you go this time?" She eyed the dog scornfully, then winked. "What have you been up to now? What have you brought home to me?" The old woman eyed Marla, a smile growing across her lips as she studied the frightened young woman.

Feeling her chest rise and fall, Marla gulped a breath before speaking. "He was downtown, at the parade. It was raining. I uh, let him in my car."

The woman pulled her shoulders back, her thin chin squared as she ran long yellowed nails near the sides of her face to catch several stray strands of hair, then settle them back into the bun at the nape of her neck.

She sucked in air, released a heavy sigh and lifted her head higher. If Marla hadn't known it was impossible, she would have believed that as the old woman took the breaths, she grew taller.

Smoothing the skirt of her long gray dress, the old woman slid a glance from the dog to Marla and back again. "He always did like pretty young things."

Moving closer, the older woman picked at a spot on her dress, one of many.

# Tupper Cont'd

*Some sort of stain*, thought Marla. She eyed the thick cloth of the dress, it had many stains. *She must be hot in that heavy material.*

"I know it's hot. This dress is hot and it is muggy and humid outside." She bent to reach her bony fingers to Tupper's muzzle. Gingerly he smelled them, then looked up into the woman's eyes.

"See what you missed? Next time don't go wandering off." The woman rose again to what seemed even a taller height.

Perplexed, Marla stuttered, "I'm uh-just bringing..."

"Not to worry, my dear. I have been fixing a late lunch in the kitchen and Tupper loves tongue." She raised her head and winked, "Tongue sandwich. Would you like one?"

Unconsciously wrinkling her nose, Marla shook her head, "No, thank you, Ma'am."

"And I see you have friends with you," The old woman leaned to the side and studied the people standing outside her doorway. "Are these your friends?"

The Intensity of the woman's green eyes took Marla's breath away and she felt herself gasping for air.

"Oh, I see, these are *not* your friends, are they my dear?" She lowered her eyes and whispered garbled words. Then lifted them to meet Marla with a broad grin.

"Well, we came to the parade together," Marla answered nervously.

Holding the skirt of her dress to the side, the woman swept by Marla. A sharp pop and crack echoed in the thick spring air as she passed by to lean against the door frame and stretch an arm to the other side. Reaching into a pocket, she tossed a treat to Tupper. He jumped and snapped it quickly as it came toward him.

"Good dog," the old woman winked before setting her gaze on the three in her yard.

"I see you..." The words seemed blown through a tunnel. "My name is Decebal Caine." The wind raised as she spoke; tendrils of her hair blew from her tight bun. Her long bony fingers pulled strips of cloth from her hair where it had become matted. She threw them to the ground.

"Do you not hear me? I am Decebal Caine!"

Pete looked toward Decebal, he squinted his eyes, then raised his hands above him as if the sun was glaring. Pulling his lips inward, he cast a repentant gaze toward Marla.

Jerry stepped forward, close to where Decebal stood. "Tuh, puh," he began. "Tuh puh!" His mouth gaped, his hands flew to cover it.

Bell inched along the cobbled steps toward the door as well. "Huh?" Losing her balance she stumbled, scraping her knee. The contents of her purse spilled out onto the ground. Quickly she reached a hand to retrieve a long bladed knife and scoot it back inside the faux leather bag.

A puzzled expression covered her face as she attempted to speak, "Tuh, tuh, tuh." She reached her fingers inside her mouth. "Awww, yik," her eyes widened aghast with horror. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she turned to look at Marla, the dog and the old woman.

# Tupper Cont'd

“Cat got your tongue?” Decebal Caine asked snidely. Her eyes glaring, the long nails of her hands drawing slowly about her chin and lips.

Pete screamed what appeared to be the word, *no*. He repeated it again, pointing at the little black and white dog. “Duh dahg ach ek!” He looked angrily from the old woman to Marla and then to Tupper.

Decebal grinned to Marla, “Can’t understand a word the boy says.” Catching the wisps of hair that had strayed so violently from her hair earlier, she tucked them back into place. “I still have those sandwiches in the kitchen, Tupper loves tongue.”

The little dog stood on the cobble stone steps, his tail wagging as Decebal Caine tossed another treat his way. He barked happily, looked to Marla as if to ask her to join him, then led the way back into the house and its safety.



# Amy's Personal Reads

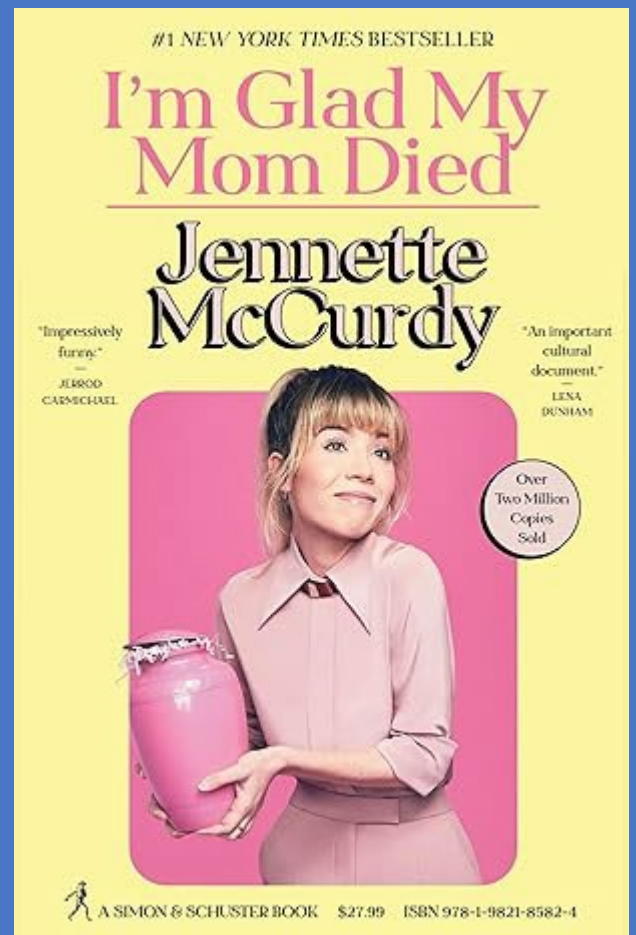


# Amy's Personal Read:

## Jennette McCurdy- I'm Glad My Mom Died

Jennette McCurdy was six years old when she had her first acting audition. Her mother's dream was for her only daughter to become a star, and Jennette would do anything to make her mother happy. So she went along with what Mom called "calorie restriction," eating little and weighing herself five times a day. She endured extensive at-home makeovers while Mom chided, "Your eyelashes are invisible, okay? You think Dakota Fanning doesn't tint hers?" She was even showered by Mom until age sixteen while sharing her diaries, email, and all her income.

In *I'm Glad My Mom Died*, Jennette recounts all this in unflinching detail—just as she chronicles what happens when the dream finally comes true. Cast in a new Nickelodeon series called *iCarly*, she is thrust into fame. Though Mom is ecstatic, emailing fan club moderators and getting on a first-name basis with the paparazzi ("Hi Gale!"), Jennette is riddled with anxiety, shame, and self-loathing, which manifest into eating disorders, addiction, and a series of unhealthy relationships. These issues only get worse when, soon after taking the lead in the *iCarly* spinoff *Sam & Cat* alongside Ariana Grande, her mother dies of cancer. Finally, after discovering therapy and quitting acting, Jennette embarks on recovery and decides for the first time in her life what she really wants.



# Jennette McCurdy- I'm Glad My Mom Died cont'd

Genre: Nonfiction/Biography/Memoir

5 Stars

Jennette McCurdy writes an intriguing memoir about her childhood into adulthood

I'm Glad My Mom Died is one of those books that as you're reading it, you don't know whether to laugh or cry, or just feel heartbroken. I am familiar with Jennette McCurdy as the actor that my boys watched growing up, and even still do on their favorite shows, as grown ups. I admit that she was my favorite character on iCarly, because she was bold, brass, and strong. I heard over the years that there were claims about many of the child actors, or even the rumors about the firing of, and I'm using Jennette's phrase The Creator. I had started reading this when it first came out, and then set it down, almost forgetting about the book, until I started watching a new series that dives into many young actors treatment and how there were unsettling and abusive adults, including The Creator. At that moment, I realized I forgot to finish the book, and quickly searched through my tall pile of books that I had yet to read or finish reading. I read so much, that sometimes the books I buy for myself take more time to read. So, I settled in, and over the course of a few days, I was able to finish the book. She writes her feelings about growing up, specific experiences, and how much she loved and wanted to please her mother. As a child, and even as an adult, she couldn't see the truth behind her mother's actions, and that it led to alcoholism, and a multitude of eating disorders, starting at the pressing of her mother at the age of eleven. She goes through her life, her dislike of acting and her anxieties of auditions. It's an amazing story, and I was very impressed with her writing, her ups and downs, and can understand her actions, as both a child and adult. I hope she writes more, whether it is about her life, or maybe a screenplay about anything. She is a talented writer, and I was honored to read this book.





# **Recommended Children's Books**

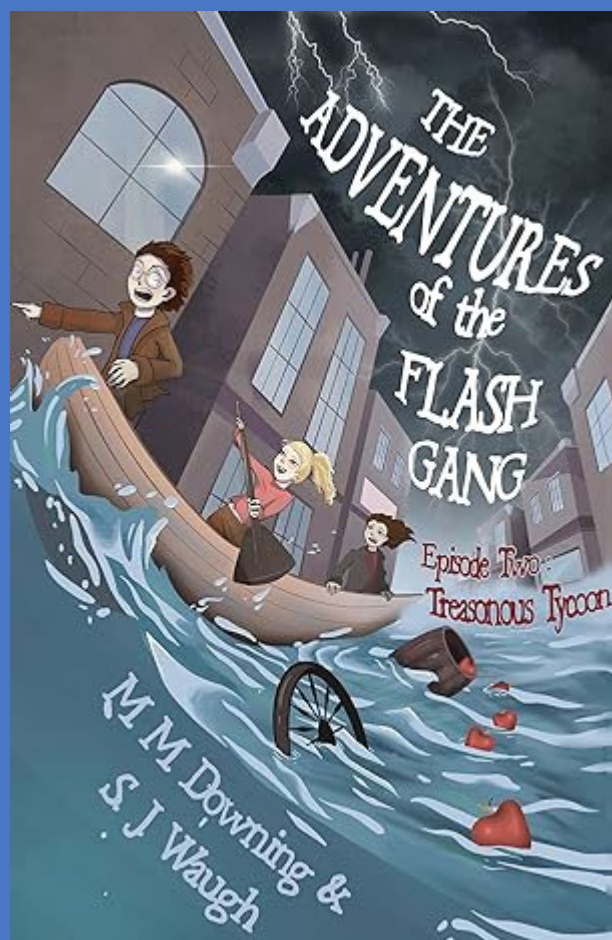
# S.J. Waugh and M. M. Downing- The Adventures of the Flash Gang, Episode Two: Treacherous Tycoon

Where is the Flash Gang? Pittsburgh's most notorious thieves haven't struck for a year, not since a devastating fire resulted in the supposed death of two streeters. Pearl and Lewis— along with their pals, Duck and Mac— are alive and well, just in hiding. But now, their hideout is crumbling under the relentless rain. It's been a winter of bitter winds and slim pickings, and their friendship is starting to fray. To make matters worse, streeters are disappearing. Are they skipping town or is something more nefarious afoot? When one of their own vanishes, the gang goes all out to unravel the mystery, which once again points to enemy #1: the steel tycoon who had Lewis's father killed. But Pittsburgh is flooding and the tycoon's plans are in motion. If they want to save their friends, they're running out of time.

4 Stars

S.J. Waugh and M. M. Downing write an adventurous YA tale with *The Adventures of the Flash Gang, Episode Two: Treacherous Tycoon*

In *The Adventures of the Flash Gang, Episode Two: Treacherous Tycoon*, the reader is introduced to the Flash Gang. I haven't read Episode 1 yet, but I plan on it, after reading this book. I haven't read anything by this author before, and what a hidden gem. I enjoyed it so much, that I have now followed the author and look for more books to read. First, just because it is a YA book, does not mean that adults won't enjoy it. I really liked the characters and the adventures of this group of friends. The reader meets Pearl, Lewis, Duck and Mac, who are now in hiding. Living on the streets of Philadelphia is not an easy task, especially in the winter, where food and shelter are hard to find. The group learns that one of them is missing, and they think they believe who the culprit is. The Tycoon is someone they have encountered before, and believe he is responsible, even if indirectly. A Grand suspenseful story. A very unpredictable story, my favorite kind! Both thrilling and intriguing, all the way to the end. I like that the story had different layers and the characters were their own, with their flaws, perfections, and the in-between that fits their personality and tenacity to survive.

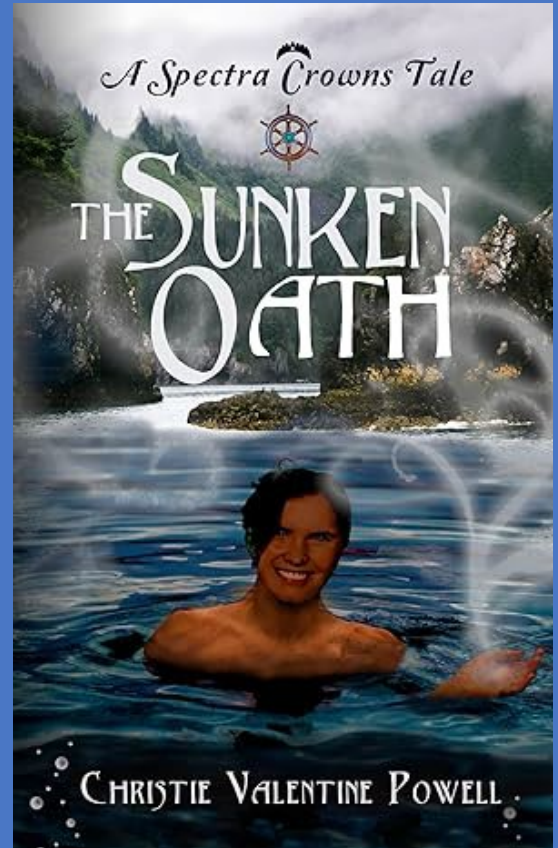


# Christie Valentine Powell- The Sunken Oath

A prince with a stolen voice.

A pirate without a ship.

Dylan never wanted to be king, but he'll have to accept his title to get his voice back. The rest of the royal family hate humans, who don't have water abilities like the Mer, but he's fascinated, especially by an ocean-eyed pirate girl. The rift between humans and Mers grows almost as fast as the one between Dylan and his mother, the ruling queen. How much would he sacrifice to control his own voice?



5 Stars

I absolutely love The Spectra Crown Tales

Christie Valentine Powell writes a fantastical tale with *The Sunken Oath*. This story is part of the Spectra Crown Tales series, and this is volume four. The reader is introduced to Dylan, and if you read this story on Kindle Vella, you may be familiar with him. In this series, each story is about one of the Spectra Royals, and in this case, Dylan, the one who never wanted to be king. I am a big fan of Christie Valentine Powell and read whatever this author writes. This author has a grand imagination, and talent for showing the story. It's a very strong and interesting story, and it follows the great artistry as the other stories. I love the fairytale format, and how the bias within the stories are the Mers who hate humans, those who are indifferent, and those who think they can live in harmony or close to it as possible. Dylan needs to rule in order to get his voice back, and with his mother, the queen involved, he does what he needs to do to get what needs to be done. It's a big sacrifice for Dylan, but he has to decide which path to take. It's a fairytale for young adults, but anyone who loves a good fantasy will like these stories. You don't have to be young, just young at heart to dive in and enjoy! This story is a definite attention grabber, so much I couldn't put it down. Some of the pages, you end up reading slower than others, so not to miss anything. The reader just embarks on a superb journey.





**AMY'S BOOKSHELF REVIEWS**

**AMY'S  
PICKS OF THE  
MONTH**

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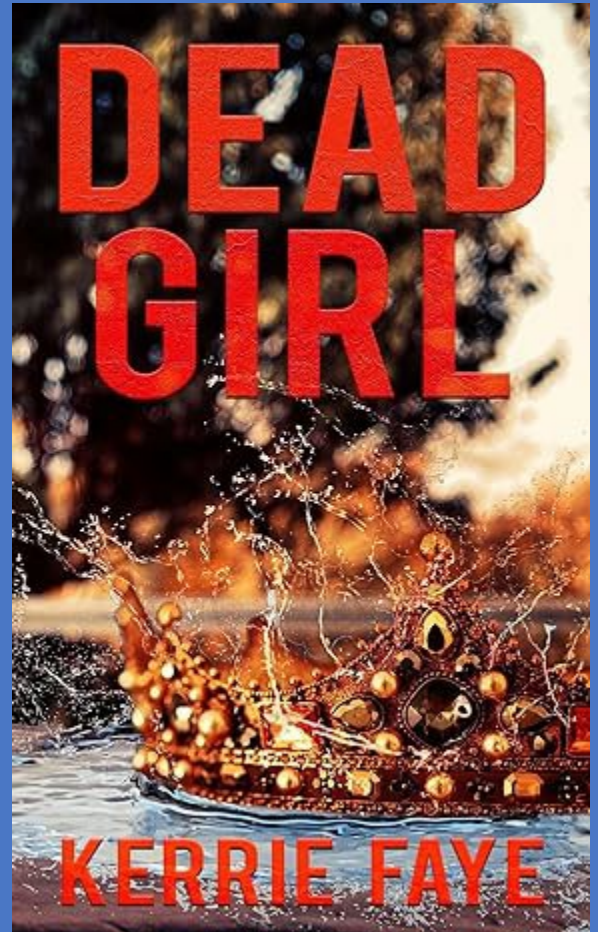
# Kerrie Faye- Dead Girl

Genre: F/YA/Paranormal/Thriller

## About Dead Girl

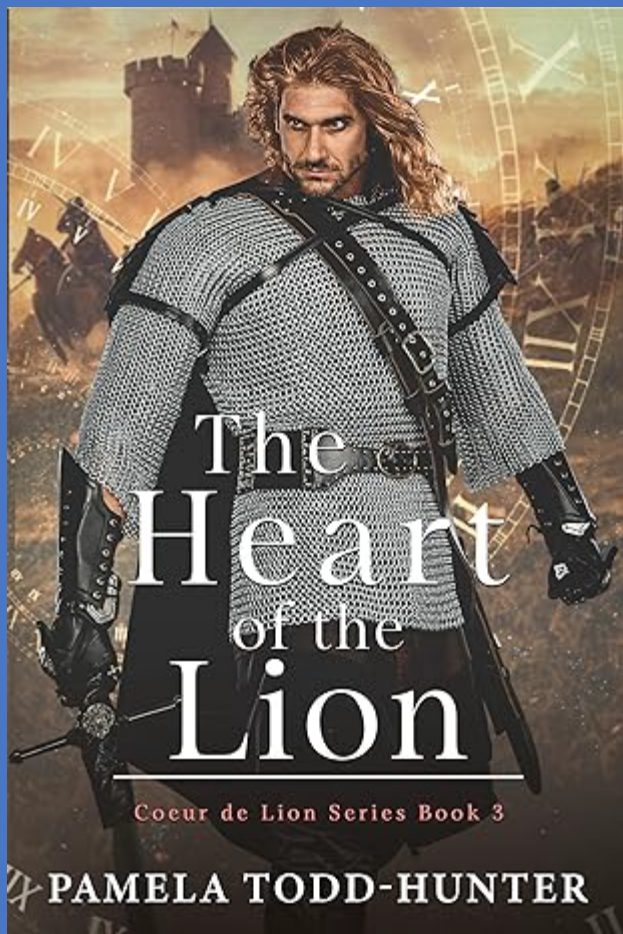
Dying has its perks...mostly. Bullied teen, Ember O'Neill goes from the weird girl to the tyrant of her school when she is resurrected from a deadly prank. Now secretly supernatural, she dethrones the school drama queen and snags the hot new guy, but her reign is at risk when the Order, a heretical sect, sends an assassin to eliminate her. Ember must expose her powers, potentially losing all she has gained, in order to save herself and her friends as her killer closes in.

Find more about Kerrie Faye at <https://www.kerriefayebooks.com>



# Pamela Todd-Hunter- The Heart Of The Lion

Genre: F/Medieval Historical Romance



## The Heart Of The Lion

Two lives entwined are now in danger of being torn apart.

When historian Alixandra Evans traveled back in time to twelfth-century France, she never expected to fall in love with Richard the Lionheart, the legendary king of England. Becoming his confidante and lover, she witnessed his rise to power. Now Richard must marry a Spanish princess to ensure the protection of his realm. Alix can't bear the thought of becoming 'the other woman'. To protect her heart she decides to return to the twenty-first century.

Find more about Pamela Todd-Hunter at [www.pamelatodhunter.com](http://www.pamelatodhunter.com)



# Massimo Fantini- Concerning Fanaticism

## The Human Race: A debate on the human condition

Genre: F/Literary/family

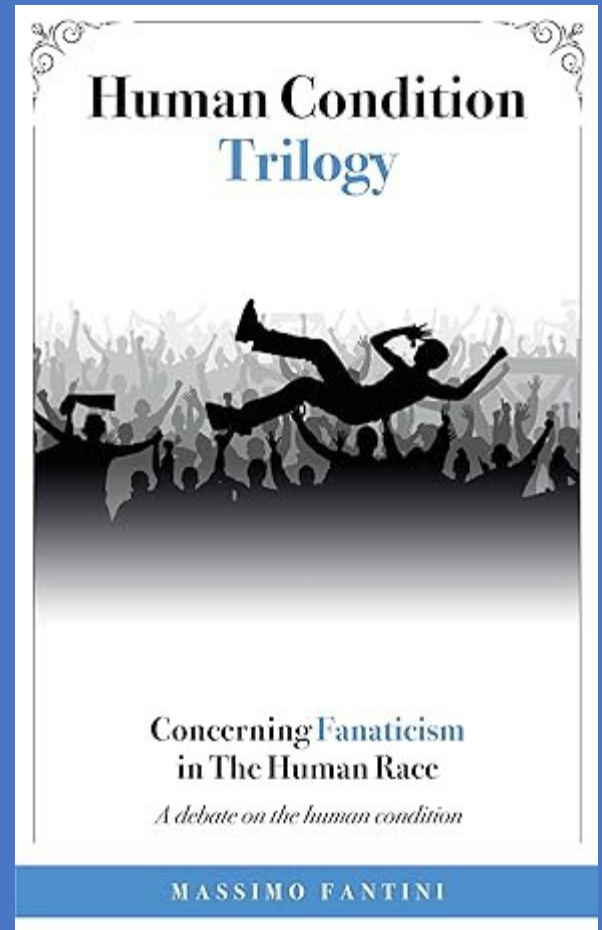
About Concerning Fanaticism The Human Race: A debate on the human condition

Elijah is a promising young lawyer, in love with his work and confident in the potential of the human race.

His law firm's senior partner gives him his first important assignment. Elijah will have to follow the case of Leonard, an elderly engineer who lives in Montepastore, a small village in the Bolognese Apennines (Italy).

Leonard's question concerns the supplementary contribution that engineers enrolled in the professional register are required to pay to Inarcassa, the Engineers' Pension Fund. At first, the case seems simple. It was the subject of a previous ruling by the Court of Cassation. But Leonard is not satisfied with an institutional response. He wants to know why. He wants to know what hides behind the Supreme Court's ruling.

Find more about Massimo Fantini at <https://www.amazon.com/stores/Massimo-Fantini/author/B0C74QJQZD>



# Sherri L. Dodd- Murder Under Redwood Moon

Genre: F/Paranormal/Mystery/Thriller

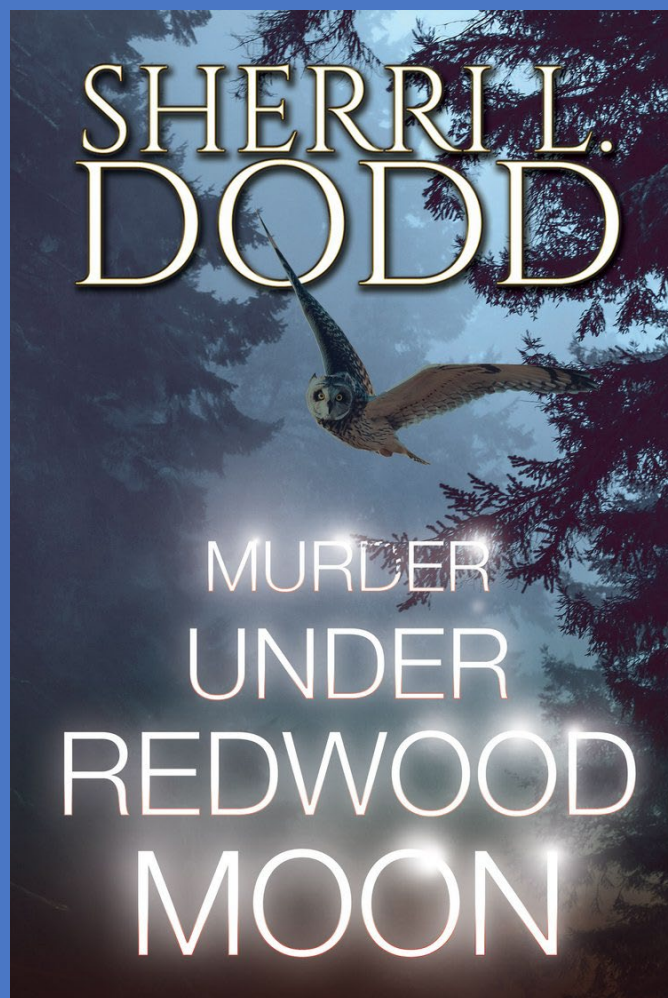
About Murder Under Redwood Moon

At the age of eight, Arista Kelly was frantically swept up by her parents and whisked off to an isolated town in the California redwoods. Two days later, her parents were gone.

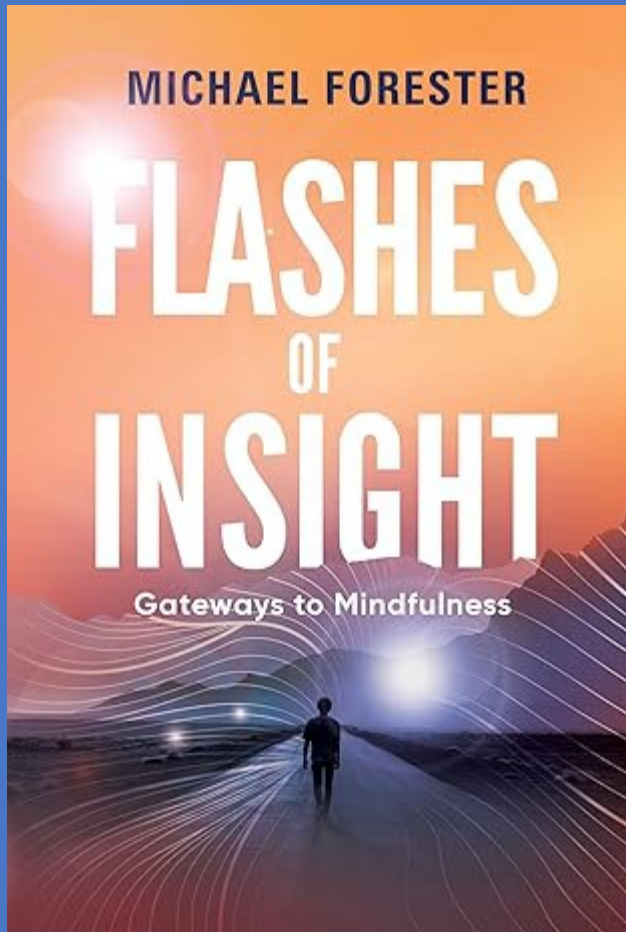
Now at the age of twenty-three, she has settled quite nicely into an eclectic lifestyle, much like her great aunt, and guardian since childhood, Bethie. She enjoys the use of herbs and crystals to help her commune with the energy and nature around her and finds pleasure in the company of her beloved pet, Royal. Usually quite satisfied with her mundane life high in the Santa Cruz Mountains, life becomes unsettling when a new recurring vision of an ominous tattoo as well as increased activity from the ghostly presence within her own cottage invade her once-harmonious existence.

But life in this mountain sanctuary takes an even darker turn when the body of Arista's former classmate is found in the nearby river. As other young women fall prey to a suspected serial killer, Arista realizes that the terror is coming to her.

Find more about Sherri L. Dodd at [www.sherridodd.com](http://www.sherridodd.com)



# Michael Forester- Flashes of Insight: Five Minute Gateways to Mindfulness



Genre: F/Holistic/Mind-Body-Spirit

About Flashes of Insight: Five Minute Gateways to Mindfulness

Here are fifty-two gateways to mindfulness that will each take you about five minutes to read. They will provoke thought and awareness, drawing back the curtain of illusion, inviting you to transition deeper. Read them while you are waiting for a train, standing in a supermarket queue, when you are early for an appointment; use them to open a time of meditation. Read them as they were written: as flashes of insight.

Find more about Michael Forester at <https://www.michaelforester.co.uk/>



# Massimo Fantini- Concerning Intellectual Suicide in The Human Race: A debate on the human condition

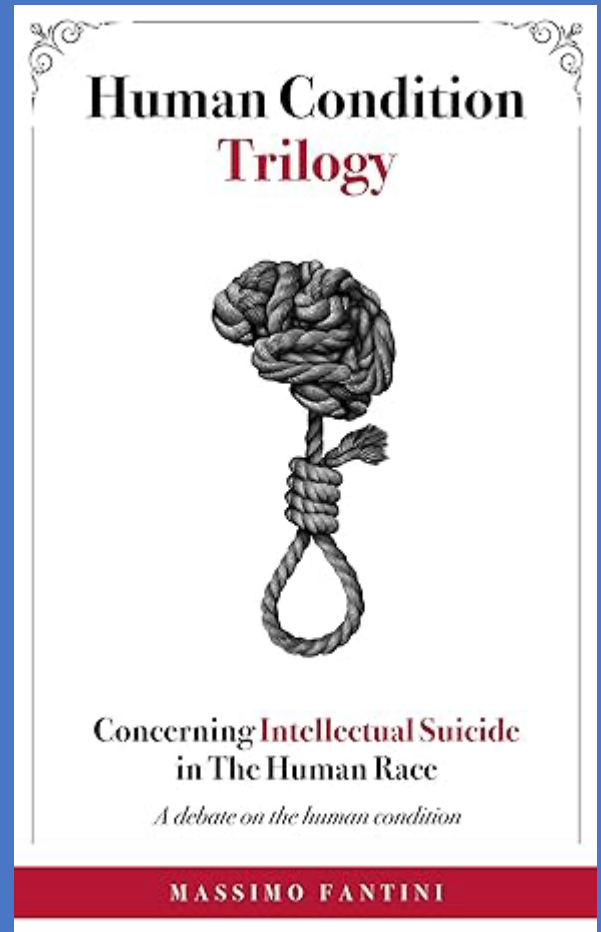
Genre: F/Literary/family

about Concerning Intellectual Suicide in The Human Race: A debate on the human condition

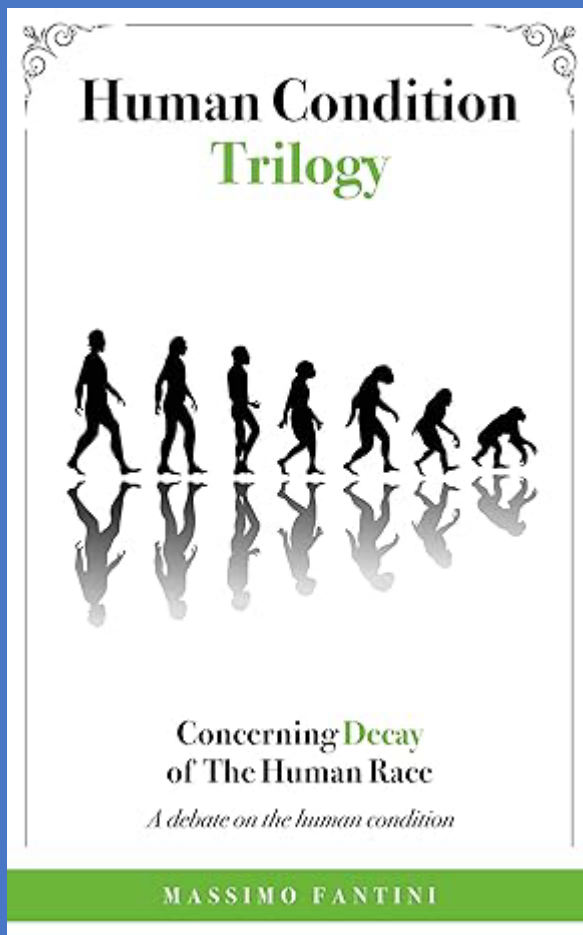
Intellectual suicide corresponds to the more or less conscious decision to switch off the brain and renounce rational thought in favor of attitudes dictated by superstitions, by established habits, by prejudices, by common places. The effects of irrational choices – made with the brain switched off – can be devastating for oneself and for the others. Examples range from conformism, to religious superstitions, to ideological fundamentalism, just to name a few possibilities.

Tommaso, the protagonist of this debate, is the victim of his parents' intellectual suicide, perpetrated through procreation. Procreation – the unilateral act by which a couple throws innocent individuals into the stillicidium of life, without weighing the consequences that the hell of existence will have on them – is the most heinous form of intellectual suicide in the human race, not least because of the scale of its consequences.

Find more about Massimo Fantini at <https://www.amazon.com/stores/Massimo-Fantini/author/B0C74QJQZD>



# Massimo Fantini- Concerning Decay of The Human Race: A debate on the human condition



Genre: F/Literary/family

About Concerning Decay of The Human Race: A debate on the human condition

The small village of the Island of the Iguanas experiences the succession of different communities – sometimes forced to live together, sometimes taking over from a former generation. Each community possesses a culture and an assortment of certainties which it does not intend to give up, judging a priori the customs of those who preceded it as uncivilized or unreasonable.

Over the years, the community consolidates and grows, together with their prejudices, social injustices, and religious superstitions. The structural transformations of the village have repercussions on the ecosystem of the island which – starting as a protected nature reserve – becomes a hunting place, a tourist destination, and a favorable terrain for smugglers to exploit.

Find more about Massimo Fantini at <https://www.amazon.com/stores/Massimo-Fantini/author/B0C74QJQZD>

# Jennette McCurdy- I'm Glad My Mom Died

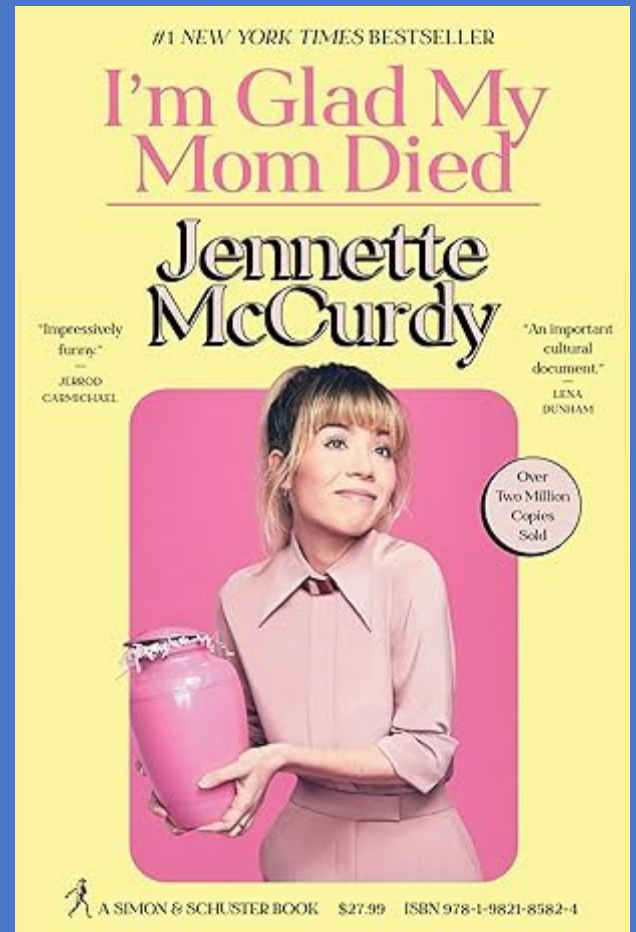
Genre: Nonfiction/Biography/Memoir /

About I'm Glad My Mom Died

Jennette McCurdy was six years old when she had her first acting audition. Her mother's dream was for her only daughter to become a star, and Jennette would do anything to make her mother happy. So she went along with what Mom called "calorie restriction," eating little and weighing herself five times a day. She endured extensive at-home makeovers while Mom chided, "Your eyelashes are invisible, okay? You think Dakota Fanning doesn't tint hers?" She was even showered by Mom until age sixteen while sharing her diaries, email, and all her income.

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Find more about Jennette McCurdy at <https://www.jennettemccurdy.com/>

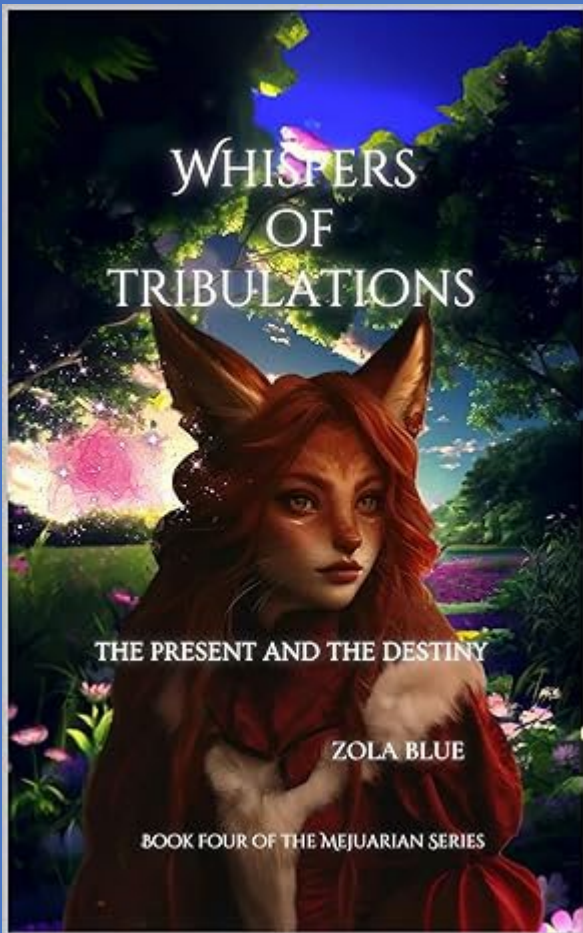




# Zola Blue- Whispers of Tribulations The Present and The Destiny

Genre: F/Fantasy/SciFi

About Whispers of Tribulations The Present and The Destiny



In a galaxy where telepathic bonds and ancient dreams shape destinies, the Mejuar and their diverse allies embark on a thrilling journey that intertwines their fates across worlds.

When a meteor threatens the peaceful village of Mejuar on the distant planet Ecrutis, King Teloby and his loyal followers seek refuge in the mystical Dragonor village. But their escape is fraught with danger as their sacred cargo, including the King's nest, is lost in a crash en route.

Determined to recover their lost treasures, King Teloby leads a daring expedition into the treacherous cave of Magnus, a legendary dragon rumored to hoard precious artifacts. As they delve deeper, they unravel ancient secrets that link their past to unforeseen dangers in the present.

Meanwhile, on Earth, two mischievous Mejuarian pups, Bracket and Pinky, find themselves in the care of a curious human named Ren. With their telepathic abilities and playful antics, they bring joy and wonder to their new family. But when Bracket's unique powers attract unwanted attention, they must navigate a world where humans and Mejuar collide in unexpected ways.

Find more about Zola Blue at <http://zolablueauthor.com>

# Louis Falcinelli- Welcome to the Madhouse

Genre: F/Drama/Family/Mental Health

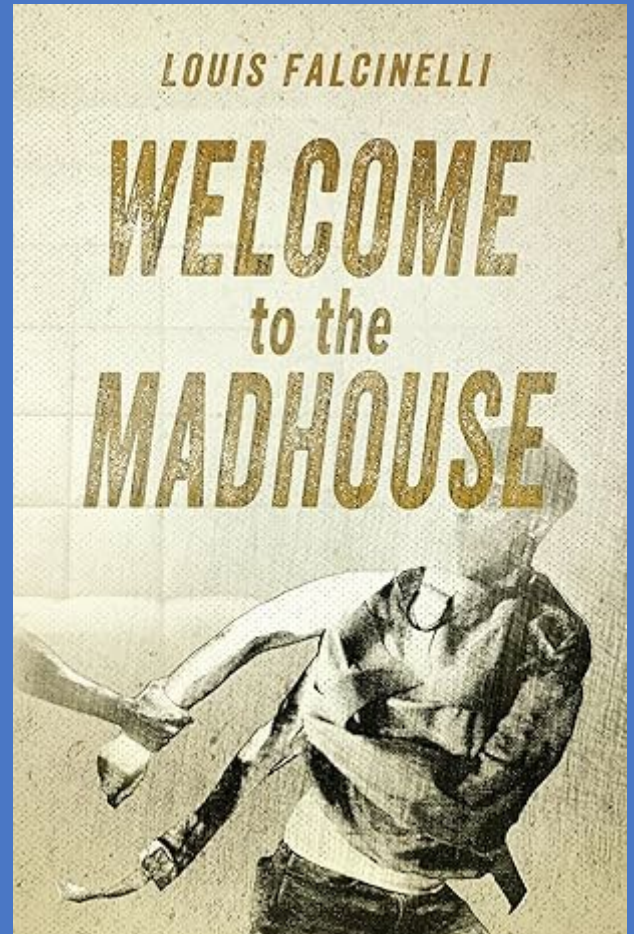
## About Welcome to the Madhouse

Darren has just begun to endure a breakdown of monumental proportions. His socialite mother, already consumed with preparing her daughter's lavish wedding, seeks to shield herself from possible humiliation brought on by her social circle as a result of her son's condition. In desperation, she turns to the family's lifelong advisor, Dr. Gag, a deranged figure who dreams up an experimental psychiatric facility where patients previously institutionalized are given the opportunity to treat others through a mixture of conventional and unconventional methods.

Darren is involuntarily admitted, finding it to be the worst place, run by the one he most detests, Dr. Gag.

We follow Darren on his journey of unparalleled pain and pleasure as he forges relationships of the deepest, darkest kind while ultimately battling his biggest demon yet—himself.

Find more about Louis Falcinelli at <http://www.bottlerot.com/>

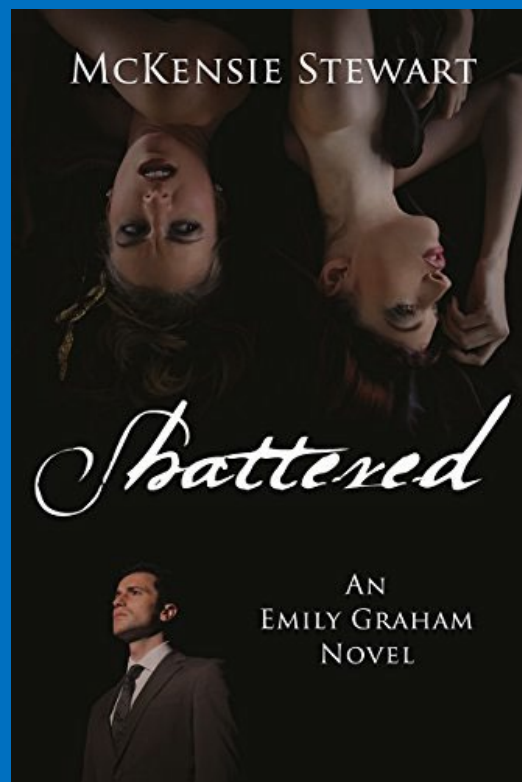


# Shattered: An Emily Graham Novel

By McKensie Stewart




Emily finds herself metaphorically waking up to face a life she no longer recognizes. She loves her husband Brendon Graham, the Senator for the State of Pennsylvania along with their twins Madison and Connor but that isn't enough any longer. The ripple effect of her college professor, Dave Banks, taking a piece of her innocence destroys her marriage every day. Even though Emily only shared part of the secret with Brendon; he is on a destructive spiral choosing escorts, booze and heroine to cope with the pain he feels from their loss. Kyndall, the matriarch of the family, and Emily's mother-in-law will do everything in her power to ensure that her dream of Brendon becoming the President of the United States will come to fruition no matter who she has to kill to make it happen. Emily's true love, Julia, her college roommate has a huge secret of her own that will shatter any reconciliation between the two of them.



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A vintage silver microphone with a ribbed grille is positioned on a stand in the foreground. Behind it, an open book is visible, with its pages slightly blurred. The word "Audiobooks" is written in a bold, black, serif font across the center of the image, overlapping the book and the microphone.

# Audiobooks

# Ed Borowsky - The Great Mongolian Bowling League of the United States of America

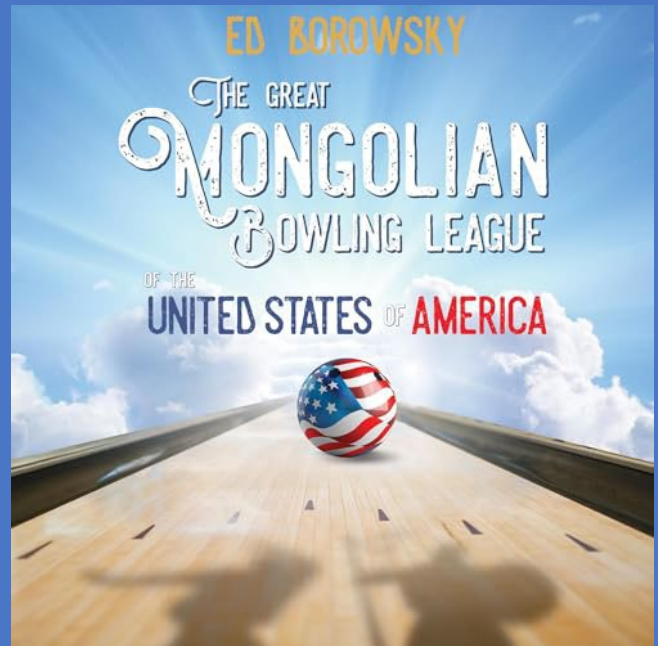
Genre: Audiobook/Fiction/Comedy/literary fiction/realism  
Narrated by: David Cantor

Harold Kushner and his roommate of 30 years, Murray Schwartz, are average senior citizens facing down their mortality in a trailer park in Land O' Lakes, Florida. Two self-professed “best Jewish bowlers ever” wind up contestants in the first-ever Great Mongolian Bowling League Tournament in the US.

The rivalry becomes a high-stakes roll-off as Harold approaches “perfection” (defined in the bowling world as three 300-score games in a row) despite a fix set by the alley's mobster owners. As the reporters and camera crews swarm to cover his amazing feat, Harold finds himself in a life review spanning back to his Bar Mitzvah and a past incarnation as a Mongolian warrior in the era of Genghis Khan, as he ponders profound questions we all ask as we near the end of our lives: Did my life have meaning? Did I fulfill my potential? Was I a good person?

Can Harold roll perfection to help his new Mongolian friends and live to tell the tale? The uncanny action unfolds in this beautiful comedy illuminating that although we come from worlds far apart, we share a common humanity. The outcome will impact millions...and strike you right in the heart.

Find more about Ed Borowsky at <https://edborowsky.com/>



# Available NOW!

## Amy Shannon's Balls-Town

In celebration of the Village of Ballston Spa's anniversary of 217 years, Amy Shannon is releasing her first historical nonfiction book, *Ball's Town: A community of history, friends, neighbors, and lingering spirits*.

The book covers past and present, and also brings back to life those forgotten books by forgotten authors who dedicated their writing to Saratoga County, and its healing mineral springs. These springs bubbling up with their medicinal value, were the start of getting settlers to Ballston Spa, not just businesses like Taverns, Boarding houses, and hotels, but farmers and industrial business men as well.

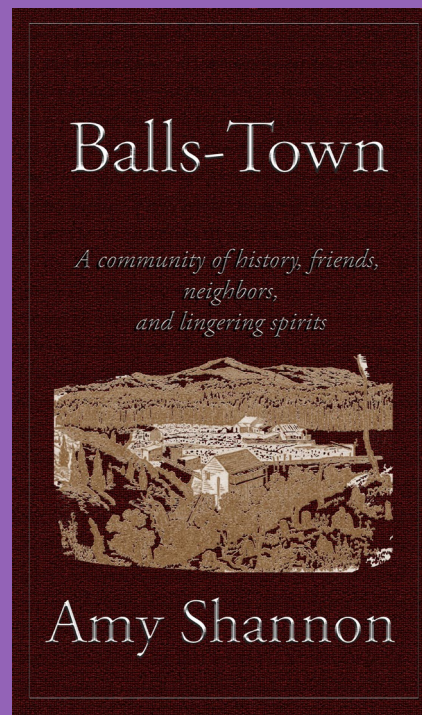
A lot of reading and research went into writing this book.

Books as resources and those that have been found on digital copy, are available for viewing on the website at

<https://essencecenterpriseus.com/the-history-of-balls-town>

Some things that were not included in the book, but have been researched, will also be available for viewing. I offer some of the digital files for downloading, if you want a resource, but only those books that were available free for download.

### Advertisement



### Synopsis of Balls-Town

With such lush and savage history, the Towns of Milton and Ballston were one, Balls-Town. The settlers, pioneers may still be recognized for the start of the towns, but there is more to the story. People, not just prominent, and the writings of people, long past, where their work may be long forgotten. It is a shame that some are forgotten, so with this being a history of Balls-Town, the incorporation of the Village of Ballston Spa, it is also an homage to those who wrote about these precious lands of the towns. Some stories, poems, historical writings about these hometowns, may have been once lost, but in this book, some of them are being revived.

I'm Amy Shannon, and this is my hometown, and its community of history, lingering spirits, and neighbors