

The New York Times

# Book Review

JANUARY 14, 2024



*What Happens When Writers  
Embrace Artificial Intelligence as Their Muse?*

*By A.O. SCOTT*

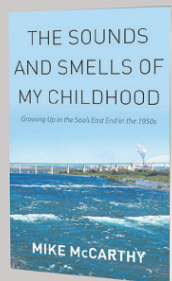


# AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

Ode to Youth in Mike McCarthy's

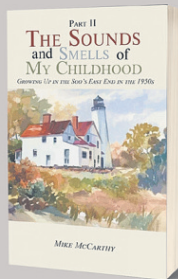
## "The Sounds and Smells of My Childhood" Series

A Journey Through Memory Lanes and Hometown Glory



In the pages of "The Sounds and Smells of My Childhood" series, Mike McCarthy invites readers on an intimate and personal journey back to the heart of Michigan's Upper Peninsula in the 50s. Born and raised in the East end of Sault Ste. Marie, McCarthy weaves a story that captures the essence of a bygone era, infusing humor, tears, and profound pride into the very sounds and smells that shaped his childhood.

As McCarthy unfolds his memories, he unveils the historical tapestry of Sault Ste. Marie. The pages come alive with the majesty of St. Mary's River, the grandeur of Lake Superior, and the unwavering pride and resilience of its people. Far more than a personal memoir, "The Sounds and Smells of My Childhood" series is a jubilant celebration—a tribute to a town and its citizens who have etched an indelible mark on the rich fabric of Michigan's history. It is a tapestry woven with threads of community, resilience, and the universal bonds of nostalgia that tie every individual together.



Join Mike McCarthy on a poignant journey through the sounds and smells that defined his life's journey. Traverse the landscapes of his youth alongside his brother and sisters: John, Mary, Kathy, and the comforting presence of his grandparents. Discover the timeless echoes that bridge between generations, a testament to the enduring beauty of shared memories.



Mike McCarthy's roots run deep in the rugged landscapes of the Upper Peninsula in Michigan. A proud graduate of Loretto Catholic High School and with a BA from Lake Superior State University, his life's journey from his hometown of Sault Ste. Marie in the 50s has set the stage for a remarkable career in economic development in the 70s. Now renowned as a top economic strategist and an impassioned fundraiser, McCarthy's companies have raised over \$400 million for communities across the United States and Canada.

His extensive career echoes in the boardrooms and communities he has touched, leaving a legacy of resilience and growth. A man driven by a deep connection to his roots, McCarthy's latest endeavor directs the proceeds of his autobiographies to the Soo Theatre Project in Sault Ste. Marie. He, currently, lives with his loving wife, Judy, in Denver, CO.



Unveiling Life's Lessons from the Departed: Dr. Carol Lee's

## From the Dead to You

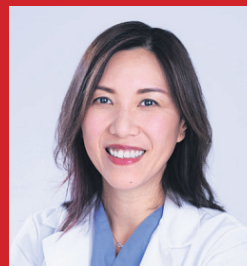
A Journey into Wisdom and Inspiration through Forensic Pathology



"From the Dead to You" stands as a profound exploration into the realms of memory, legacy, and the lasting impact of lives that have graced this world. It is more than a mere compilation of postmortem tales—it is a compassionate guide for those traversing the intricate paths of grief, extending solace, understanding, and a profound sense of connection with those who have departed.

Demystifying death and respectfully unveiling extraordinary narratives, "From the Dead to You" serves as a testament to the resilience, wisdom, and inherent humanity within all. With a remarkable ability to seamlessly blend scientific expertise with compassionate storytelling, Dr. Lee weaves one thoughtful narrative to another, imparting profound life lessons for the living from beyond the mortal coil. Each account encourages readers to perceive death not as an endpoint but as a continuation of stories echoing through the annals of time.

"From the Dead to You" transcends the conventional limits of a book; it is an exploration of the perpetual dance between death and life, leaving readers not just enlightened but deeply enriched and inspired.



Dr. Carol Lee is a distinguished physician and forensic pathologist/autopsy specialist, whose professional journey of over a decade has intimately entwined her with the narratives of the departed. Her awe-inspiring experiences with the deceased have not only marked her as a seasoned professional but also molded her into an imaginative storyteller. She penned the original story collection,

"From the Dead to You," and the children's book series, "Mom! What Is . . .?" Each title attempts to address difficult topics with honesty and compassion.


"From the Dead to You" unfolds as a poignant parable, illustrating lessons that transcend the conventional boundaries of life and death; and offering readers a unique perspective on the cyclical nature of life.

"Mom! What Is . . .?" series provides a valuable tool for parents to answer questions such as "What is Death?" and "What is Religion?"

Open the pages, read together, and embark on a journey of exploration and understanding, suitable for both the young and the forever young at heart.

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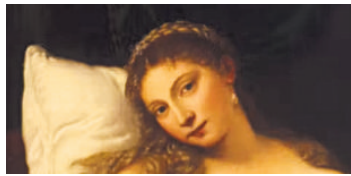
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# Book Review

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## The Athletic



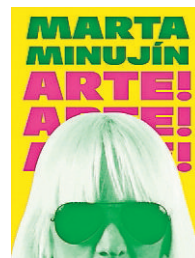
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## Newly Published / Visual



**MARTA MINUJÍN: Arte! Arte! Arte!**, edited by Donna Wingate. (Skira, \$65.) This volume, published on the occasion of a retrospective by the Jewish Museum, catalogs Minujín's extensive career as an Argentine conceptual artist known for the ephemeral nature of her sculptures and performances.



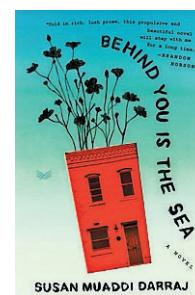
**EVELYN HOFER: Dublin**, edited by Andreas Pauly and Sabine Schmid. (Steidl, \$58.) This collection takes inspiration from the last installment of Hofer's city portraits series, gathering her photography of Dublin and its inhabitants in the mid-1960s. They are presented alongside an essay by V.S. Pritchett.

**MYRIAM BOULOS: What's Ours**, by Myriam Boulos. (Aperture, \$55.) Intimate and electric, this debut monograph chronicles a volatile year in Lebanon, from anti-government protests in 2019 to the August 2020 explosion at the port of Beirut.

**GARRY WINOGRAND: Winogrand Color**, by Garry Winogrand. Edited by Michael Almereyda and Susan Kismaric. (Twin Palms, \$85.) Culled from 45,000 slides shot across postwar America, the 150 images in this collection serve as a tribute to Winogrand's distinctive and lesser-known early color photography.

## ...Also Out Now

**MY LIFE AT THE WHEEL: Toward a Memoir**, by Lynne Sharon Schwartz. (Delphinium, \$26.) Written with wit and humor, these personal essays cover a wide spectrum of human experience, from childhood curiosity and teen angst to the give-and-take of adulthood.



**BEHIND YOU IS THE SEA**, by Susan Muaddi Darraj. (HarperVia, \$26.) The intertwined stories of Palestinian immigrants in Baltimore are thoughtfully rendered in this tapestry-like debut that grapples with questions of class, culture, generational strife and home.

**UNTIL I FIND YOU: Disappeared Children and Coercive Adoptions in Guatemala**, by Rachel Nolan. (Harvard University Press, \$35.) In this damning account of Guatemala's adoption industry, Nolan explains how officials helped to systematize coercive adoptions as part of a genocide against Indigenous Mayans.

**DIRTBAG: Essays**, by Amber A'Lee Frost. (St. Martin's, \$28.) In this political memoir, a writer, socialist activist and co-host of the Chapo Trap House podcast recounts political flashpoints in America, from Occupy Wall Street to the rise of Bernie Sanders.



Ella Fitzgerald in 1954.

**Liner Notes**

TO THE EDITOR:

I am writing about Dwight Garner's review of my book, "Becoming Ella Fitzgerald" (Dec. 24). Of course, I wish the review would have been more positive. So be it. But I do take objection to one line: Mr. Garner writes, "There are relatively few female voices in this book." To be sure, most of the reviews I cite were written by men because they dominated music criticism then, as now. But in contrast to the way Fitzgerald's story has been told over the years, my book includes unprecedented female voices in several different contexts.

The most important voice is that of Fitzgerald herself. While she spoke mainly in music, her words are also precious, and I recovered enough interviews she gave at home and abroad from recently digitized newspapers to organize them into a special category in my bibliography. I also quoted and acknowledged female oral historians, women writing in historically Black newspapers and magazines, and female columnists and critics around the globe. I did this with the purpose of not only focusing on Fitzgerald but to contribute to the still uncovered history of vocal jazz in the United States.

JUDITH TICK  
BROOKLINE, MASS.



TO THE EDITOR:

I'd like to comment on Dwight Garner's review regarding how Chick Webb hired Ella Fitzgerald.

It was a Cuban musician, Mario Bauzá, Webb's musical director at the time, who recommended Fitzgerald. If I recall Bauzá's words correctly he had seen Fitzgerald at the Cotton Club, and when Webb asked Bauzá if he knew of someone, Mario pointed to her. Perhaps after that Webb went to the Apollo Theater and

saw her himself, but the original connection was made through Mario Bauzá.

RUBÉN BLADES  
NEW YORK

*The writer is a Panamanian musician, composer and actor.*

**CORRECTION**

A review on Dec. 31 about the picture book "Empty and Me," by Azam Mahdavi, misstated the translator's surname. She is Parisa Saranj, not Sanraj. The review also misattributed, in one instance, the book's illustrations. They were drawn by Maryam Tahmasebi, not by Saranj.

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**WHAT OUR READERS ARE READING**

Stephanie Murphy is reading Christopher de Hamel's **MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE MANUSCRIPTS**: "Happily, I just unwrapped a gift from my husband: the author's sequel, **THE MANUSCRIPTS CLUB**."

Karen Rogers is "completely absorbed" in **THE BEE STING**, by Paul Murray: "There are aspects of it that remind me of the show 'Friday Night Lights.'"

"I just finished reading John Vailant's meticulously detailed **FIRE WEATHER**," writes Barry Auskern. "I can't remember having ever read a scarier book."

Ali Reis is listening to Rebecca Clarren's **THE COST OF FREE LAND** on audiobook: "A remarkable true story that is so relevant to our current Middle East crisis. Highly recommended!"

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## By the Book



# Common

‘Invisible Man’ ‘made me feel seen and heard,’ the rapper-actor says. ‘I can return the favor.’ His new book, ‘And Then We Rise: A Guide to Loving and Taking Care of Self,’ is out this month.

### What books are on your night stand?

The Bible, “The Selected Works of Audre Lorde,” edited and with an introduction by Roxane Gay, and “The Tongue — A Creative Force” by Charles Capps. “The Tongue” is a spiritual book based on Bible scriptures and how you use the word of God and apply it to your life to manifest the things you want. I love this book because it put in perspective that you don’t have to be a religious person to understand the power of words and the power of the word. I’m a believer in God’s word so learning how to apply that was really inspiring and impactful for me.

### What’s the last great book you read?

“The Wisdom of Florence Scovel Shinn” and Rick Rubin’s “The Creative Act: A Way of Being.” I started reading “The Wisdom of Florence Scovel Shinn” in my mid-20s and I don’t think I had gathered how powerful our minds are and how much the things we say to ourselves mean. I was really moved by “The Creative Act” because I think Rick Rubin has

experienced so much in life. He was one of the pioneers in hip-hop, so I really related to him and his journey. I learned from a musician friend of mine that so many things can contribute to your musical/creative vocabulary, even nature. When Rick Rubin mentioned it, it solidified that point. It’s like getting affirmed or talking to a therapist who’s also an artist. I felt like I got art therapy from him.

### What book has had the greatest impact on you?

The Bible. And after that, “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” and “The Mastery of Love” by Don Miguel Ruiz and Janet Mills.

### Which writers — novelists, playwrights, critics, journalists, poets — working today do you admire most?

Playwrights: I love Stephen Adly Guirgis and Tarell Alvin McCraney (who co-wrote “Moonlight” based on his own play). Poets: Morgan Parker.

### What book influenced you to become a musician?

“Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison. I read it in the sixth grade and it gave me the appetite to write. I loved what he was speaking up for and saying. It really impacted me as a young Black boy to want to be seen, heard and recognized, and his book made me feel seen and heard in certain ways. It made me learn that through the music and art I do I can return the favor and make people feel seen and heard as well.

### What’s your favorite memoir by a musician?

“Q: The Autobiography of Quincy Jones.” Because he was born in Chicago, I connected to that, but also, just knowing what he came from, when he talked about how poor his family was and what his family went through. To know that he eventually became the person who has worked with some of the greatest artists, from Michael Jackson to Frank Sinatra to Miles Davis — it was inspirational to think about a man who came from one of the poorest places in the country and became one of the most fruitful human beings on earth.

### What’s the one wellness book you’d recommend and why?

“A Return to Love” by Marianne Williamson. It’s a self-help book but that is wellness to me, spiritual wellness. I was already hearing quotes from “A Return to Love” before I read it, and the quotes were so impactful that I used them in speeches.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn’t serve the world.”

I needed to be reminded that I had light and something to offer, and that I didn’t need to dim my light for anyone.

### What was the most surprising response you received to your earlier memoir?

My mother told me, “Boy, I didn’t know you did all that stuff.”

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

James Baldwin, Nas and Kahlil Gibran. □

An expanded version of this interview is available at [nytimes.com/books](https://nytimes.com/books).

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## A Festival of Murder

ERNEST CUNNINGHAM, the star of Benjamin Stevenson's second meta-mystery, **EVERYONE ON THIS TRAIN IS A SUSPECT** (Mariner, 336 pp., \$30), promises at the outset "to be that rarity in modern crime novels: a reliable narrator. You can count on me for the truth at every turn. No hoodwinking." Of course, any seasoned mystery reader knows that a reliable narrator doesn't *really* exist. They may faithfully convey the truth, only to fool themselves.

Ernest displayed some of this disconnect in his first outing, "Everyone in My Family Has Killed Someone," where he outwitted a serial killer "picking off my extended family one by one." Now Stevenson plops him in the middle of a crime writers' festival taking place aboard an opulent train traveling through bleak stretches of the Australian desert from Darwin to Adelaide. Think "Murder on the Orient Express," but where every character (and suspect) writes in a different genre category.

"Seven writers board a train. At the end of the line, five will leave it alive. One will be in cuffs."

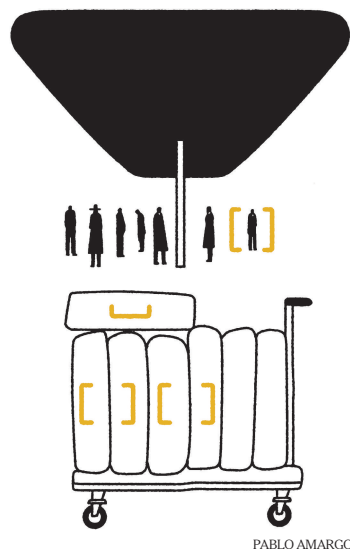
It's all very fun and diverting, with a plethora of red herrings. What gives the book weight is Ernest's relationship with his girlfriend Juliette, one that challenges the very heart of whose story gets told, and which mystery is solved.

In Amy Pease's indelible debut, **NORTHWOODS** (Emily Bestler Books, 276 pp., \$27), Eli North has returned to Shaky Lake, Wis., after a harrowing tour of Afghanistan, struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder. His mother, Marge — the town sheriff — throws him a lifeline: She loves her son, and thinks that working as her deputy might offer him a way out of the darkness.

But when Eli, responding to a disturbance call from a lakeside resort, discovers the body of a teenager named Ben crumpled in a small fishing boat, "blackness descended like a hood." Marge becomes convinced that "Ben's

death and Eli's life might be intertwined somehow." She's right, of course, and as Eli grapples with his problems, self-medicating with alcohol, the investigation plunges him into an abyss of ruthless pharmaceutical companies and personal betrayals.

This novel is not for the easily sensitized — the description of a child's injury made me gasp — but Pease's writing reflects the reality and the bleakness of living in a place like Shaky Lake. Through Eli, we see the damage, but also the promise of a way into the sunlight.



IN KAT AILES'S exuberant debut mystery, **THE EXPECTANT DETECTIVES** (Minotaur, 371 pp., \$28), Alice and her partner Joe have just impulsively fled London for Penton, an idyllic village in the Cotswolds that bears more than a passing resemblance to those in "Midsomer Murders." With a new house, a new community and the imminent birth of their first child, Alice is feeling stressed, especially because Joe is acting ever more distant.

But then someone murders a man in the same building where they're taking a prenatal class, giving Alice something else to focus on. Confident in her abilities to solve the crime after spending so much time watching TV crime shows, she enlists several other pregnant women from the class to investigate (thus annoying the

lead detective, who happens to be the sister of one of her pregnant pals).

Ailes sets a cheerful tone but doesn't shy away from emotional heft, especially when writing about the secrets testing Alice's relationship.

"I know you're playing a detective or something, but don't start trying to psychoanalyze me," Joe tells her. "I'm not in the mood." What is he hiding?

I'VE LONG MEANT to revisit the Benjamin January mysteries by Barbara Hambly, since the early ones — particularly "A Free Man of Color" (1997) and "Sold Down the River" (2000) — impressed me with their historical detail and setting, the 19th-century free Black community of New Orleans. Benjamin, a surgeon, musician and sleuth, returns in **THE NUBIAN'S CURSE** (Severn House, 256 pp., \$29.99), his 20th outing, which smoothly shifts between the present day (that is, 1840) and the circumstances surrounding an unsolved murder in France some 15 years before.

Back then, Benjamin was on a ghost-hunting expedition at the secluded Chateau Palongieux with, among others, the British explorer Deverel Wishart. Wishart turned up dead in the house's haunted southeast tower, his "face convulsed in open-eyed agony and horror," an ominous message scrawled in blood on the wall.

Arithmus, Wishart's Sudanese protégé, was nowhere to be found, leading others to presume he was the killer even though he had steadfastly refused to so much as cross the threshold of the chateau.

"He stopped dead, like a horse washed out. He said there was a smell."

Now Arithmus has resurfaced, but clearing his name catapults Benjamin into a forceful reckoning with his own past.

"The Nubian's Curse," weighed down with a few too many flashbacks, doesn't have the snap and crackle of Hambly's earlier series entries. Benjamin, though, remains a winning character, nimbly moving through parts of history we should all know better. □

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The joys.  
The tribulations.  
The twists.



### Modern Love

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# Icy Relations

The American journalist George Kennan's long-forgotten 1885 trip created tension with Russia.

By W. M. AKERS

GEORGE KENNAN LOST his faith in the Russian city of Tomsk. A journalist, he came in the summer of 1885 to report on the country's exile system, which every year sent thousands of men, women and children to the wilds of Siberia, intending that they should work, be forgotten and die. In Tomsk he found what one local official called "the worst prison in Siberia," where entire families crowded into cages too tight for them to move, the air was noxious and the hospital was so "saturated with dis-

## INTO SIBERIA

George Kennan's Epic Journey Through the Brutal, Frozen Heart of Russia

By Gregory J. Wallace

St. Martin's. 304 pp. \$30.

ease" that a physician there was lobbying to have it burned down. Kennan had come to write a defense of the sprawling network of work camps and prisons. Tomsk broke him.

"The exile system is worse than I believed it to be, and worse than I have described it," he wrote in a letter to the publisher of *Century* magazine. "It isn't pleasant, of course, to have to admit that one has written upon a subject without fully understanding it; but even that is better than trying, for the sake of consistency, to maintain a position after one sees that it is utterly untenable."

"Into Siberia," Gregory Wallace's new biography of Kennan, convincingly portrays him as one of the 19th century's most influential journalists, arguing that "Siberia and the Exile System," his account of his 1885-86 journey, was what first soured American relations with Russia. (Kennan was related to George F. Kennan, the Cold War-era diplomat who would later make his own mark on the Russo-American relationship.)

Kennan first visited Siberia in 1865. The stated purpose of that expedition was to lay telegraph lines, but Kennan was actually motivated by the same thing that drove so many Victorian explorers: fragile masculinity. As a child he'd seen a friend's arm crushed by machinery — an experience that scarred him not because of his companion's agony but because young Kennan had grown faint at the sight of blood. During that first trip he banished forever "the fear of being afraid, which had poisoned so much of the happiness of my boyhood." He endured cold and hunger, rescued lost Americans, got lost — and found — himself. It was the stuff of adventure stories. When he came home he

**W.M. AKERS** is a novelist, editor of the newsletter *Strange Times*, co-host of the film podcast *I'll Watch Anything* and creator of the game *Deadball: Baseball With Dice*.



George Kennan in Siberia.

turned it into his first book, "Tent Life in Siberia."

The book established Kennan as a journalist and an expert on czarist Russia at a time when Americans looked fondly on the country, which they considered, Wallace writes, "a colorful but mysterious land filled with tragically romantic characters." That's the place Kennan thought he was headed when he persuaded *Century* magazine to fund his 1885 trip: an eccentric place, certainly, but basically benign. He'd spent years defending the exile system, calling it "a more humane punishment" because it allowed families to remain together. The misery described in books like Dostoyevsky's "The House of the Dead" was, Kennan believed, "the relic of a bygone era." When he arrived in St. Petersburg, along with the illustrator George Frost, he found that "neither the country nor the people look as if they were oppressed by an iron-handed despotism." Tomsk changed his mind, but it was far from the worst that he'd see.

Kennan and Frost marched alongside chained men being driven thousands of miles across the wilderness. They crawled through silver mines where convicts toiled in near darkness, in tunnels dug during the reign of Catherine the Great, where the supports were so rotten that they were no longer recognizably wood. They met educated exiles barred from any intellectual activity, some of whom were driven mad

**They saw the full scope of a system that was chaotic, corrupt and exquisitely cruel.**

by boredom. They saw the full scope of a system that was chaotic, corrupt and exquisitely cruel.

Kennan responded to this ugliness by opening his heart. In the exiles he found "more people whom I could love, more people who would be dear friends, more people whose souls are akin to mine, than I had met in all the previous 10 years of my life." He told their stories in a mammoth book and on a yearslong lecture tour, during which as many as a million people watched him don the rags and chains of the marching exiles and sing their haunting "Begging Song." It was a performance that moved many to tears, including Mark Twain, who according to some reports responded, "If dynamite is the only remedy for such conditions, then thank God for dynamite."

In Wallace's bracing narrative, Kennan emerges as a cheerful, deeply decent companion, an uncompromising observer whose greatest strength was his ability to change his mind. He's a welcome change from the callous imperialists who people most Victorian travelogues, and his humanity allows "Into Siberia" to delve into horror without succumbing to despair. □

**Essay** / **The Mostest for the Hostess** / By Alexandra Jacobs

Be wary of the glaze recipes, but there's still delight in getting advice about etiquette, guest lists and fondue.

VINTAGE COOKBOOKS ARE a curious subdivision of the thriving antiquarian trade. They are, of course, more likely than most old books to be splattered with disgusting substances — maybe even to contain evidence of kitchen pests. They are as vulnerable as college texts to previous owners' margin notes ("Delicious!") and suggested modifications, sometimes helpful.

With his No. 1 best seller "Baking Yesteryear," the TikTok star B. Dylan Hollis has reawakened America to the food from community cookbooks of the past. But let's not neglect their more glamorous cousins: vintage entertaining guides.

In our gastronomically obsessed age, these are pleasurable not because of the recipes — though many contain a few perfunctory ones — but for their often humorous explication of how to be a good host, or as was far more common back in the day, hostess. They are replete with chafing dishes and towering candelabras, billowing chiffon sleeves and conversational pointers. And culinary shortcuts, à la Eleanor Roosevelt serving hot dogs to the king and queen of England: *The Joy of Not Cooking*.

They are a reminder that even in the worst of times, and without much expenditure, the home can be a respite of civility, friendship and grace.

Part of these books' charm is that — unlike classic recipes that are replicated ad nauseam online, lacking much copyright protection — they tend to be out of circulation and therefore feel like special finds. "DISCARD" reads the cruel library stamp on a copy of "How to Do It: Or the Lively Art of Entertaining," by Elsa Maxwell, from Rizzoli's 2005 reprint that someone painstakingly uploaded to the Internet Archive.

I can't remember how I came into possession of a 1957 first edition, marked in pencil at a bargain \$10, but "How to Do It" now roosts near my precious microwave with "Hostess" (1961), by the English florist Constance Spry, with an assist from Rosemary Hume (and some adorable cartoon illustrations); "All About Parties" (1968), by Edith Gilbert, a syndicated columnist; "The Party: A Guide to Adventurous Entertaining" (1997), by the Washington, D.C., fixture Sally Quinn; and more corporate but no less compelling volumes from Betty Crocker and Bloomingdale's.

The taxonomy of such books can be murkier than mock turtle soup. Dealers often marginalize them. Bonnie Slotnick, whose warren-like store in New York's East Village is filled with unexpected treasures like "The Pyromaniac's Cookbook: The Best in Flaming Food and Drink," warned that news media mentions of out-of-print books, like a *Veranda* magazine feature about "These Entertaining People: A Guide for the Elegant Hostess" (1966), by the fashion editor and television personality Florence Pritchett Smith, can artificially inflate the price.

Best to keep a cool head and, perhaps, plumb the shelves of your older relatives.

That's where I first discovered the fascinating career of Annemarie Huste, who worked for Jackie Kennedy (briefly, since she blabbed about it) as well as the diminutive impresario Billy Rose. Huste was a bona fide chef who ran a cooking school for a time, but her books, which include "To the Good Life! Entertaining With



A 1970s party buffet table includes lobster, artichokes and red wine.

Annemarie" (1990), nonetheless throw off strong hostessy sparks, as do those of Vincent Price, the actor best known for his Gothic roles, and his second wife, Mary.

Elsa Maxwell was right up there with those authors in the department of celebrity proximity: one of the most famous hostesses of the 20th century, as well as an occasional gossip columnist and actress — though her style of party-giving suggests she would have thrived as a director, possibly of musicals. She is acknowledged for popularizing the scavenger hunt and often introduced elements of surprise, like live animals, at her affairs.

"The fish course consisted of live seals she set free around the ballroom," her obituary in *The New York Times* dryly recorded of one.

She was not a fan of cocktail parties, "whose unlovely symbol is the ring on the best mahogany," she writes in "How to Do It," adding that "in nine cases out of 10 the people who are invited to cocktail parties are the people your host has not thought worth inviting to either luncheon or to dinner — so why, I ask, should I bother with them?"

A closeted lesbian, Maxwell rose from humble circumstances. *The Times* rather cruelly called her "roly-poly" and noted her multiple chins; let's just say no one was asking her, unlike today's empress of entertaining, to pose on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. She dished freely about her well-known friends, dissing one rager thrown jointly by Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau and castigating Noël Coward and W. Somerset Maugham as indifferent hosts who preferred "cronies" and "nonentities" at their own poorly organized "get-togethers."

As both of these writers knew well, party scenes are

narrative staples, brimming with potential for confrontation and intrigue. They are improv played out on elaborate stage sets.

There's the dregs of a New Year's Eve party in Zadie Smith's "White Teeth"; Mrs. Dalloway's careful planning, Tolstoy's balls and *Gatsby's* extravagant windings, so indelible they have been franchised; the young married who catches her husband's hallway intimacy with another woman in Katherine Mansfield's short story "Bliss"; the masquerade misunderstanding orchestrated by Mrs. Danvers in Daphne du Maurier's "Rebecca"; the turkey curry buffet in "Bridget Jones's Diary."

Novelists know how much can go deliciously wrong when entertaining. These experts — rarely dictatorial, generous with attribution, nosing right into interesting people's homes — try endearingly to ensure everything will go right.

Gilbert, a proponent of morning coffees and bon voyage luncheons, suggests a "party log or diary similar to the call board used in" — yes — "the theater"; also progressive dinners spread over friends' houses like "two, three or more acts." Quinn won't serve red wine to large groups. Spry has plenty to say about poorly arranged breakfast trays, pretentious "sugar-tong manners" and meeting her Waterloo in the form of an unfamiliar artichoke.

Again, don't come to these guides for the food, more amusing than appetizing, and sometimes downright grotesque. (All that weird, off-putting glaze over hams, salads, cakes.) Rather, it's a kind of coaxing, feminine spirit that draws you in: the social butterfly alighting next to the bookworm, an eternal flame of hospitality a-flicker, under the dubious fondue. □

ALEXANDRA JACOBS is a *Times* book critic and the author of "Still Here: The Madcap, Nervy, Singular Life of Elaine Stritch."

# Period Style

Anthony Hecht was a poet of his time, for better and worse.

By DAVID ORR

TO WRITE ABOUT the poet Anthony Hecht in 2024 is to invite the question of why, in 2024, anyone is writing about the poet Anthony Hecht. His work is so wildly out of step with contemporary practice that it seems almost to come from another, possibly fictional timeline — one in which poets could recite long passages from “Lycidas” from memory and would, of their own free will, be photographed wearing bow ties.

A typical Hecht poem will revolve around a cultural reference that the average reader has barely heard of, like the Witch of Endor, who raises the spirit of the prophet Samuel in the Old Testament. Will that poem be a sonnet? Oh yes. Will that sonnet adhere strictly to the form, including a blank line between the octet and the sestet? Oh yes. Will it quote Shakespeare? Oh yes. Will it involve the words “sortilege”

## COLLECTED POEMS

Including Late and Uncollected Work

By Anthony Hecht

Edited by Philip Hoy

Knopf. 611 pp.\$50.

## LATE ROMANCE

Anthony Hecht — A Poet's Life

By David Yezzi

St. Martin's. 469 pp. \$40.

and “thaumaturges”? You bet. Will its last line include the word “engastrimythic” (which means “ventriloquized”)? Yes, and it should be noted that Microsoft Word's spell-check refuses to recognize this adjective, as if technology itself were saying, “Anthony Hecht, did you write this poem with a quill, or what?”

At this point, you may be wondering whether this review will be eight paragraphs of eye-rolling. Or you may be wondering whether the field will be reversed, and the unexpected merit of lines tricked out with words like “engastrimythic” will become clear. Neither of these things will happen. Hecht's career is emblematic of a tension at the core of poetry — especially poetry in the United States — and that tension deserves explanation and sympathetic understanding.

Both enterprises are aided by a couple of new books. The first is Hecht's “Collected Poems,” edited by Philip Hoy, which includes all seven of his individual collections in order (always the best way to present a poet), as well as a handful of poems published in a posthumous volume and some uncollected work. The other is “Late Romance: Anthony Hecht — A Poet's Life,” a biography by the poet and critic

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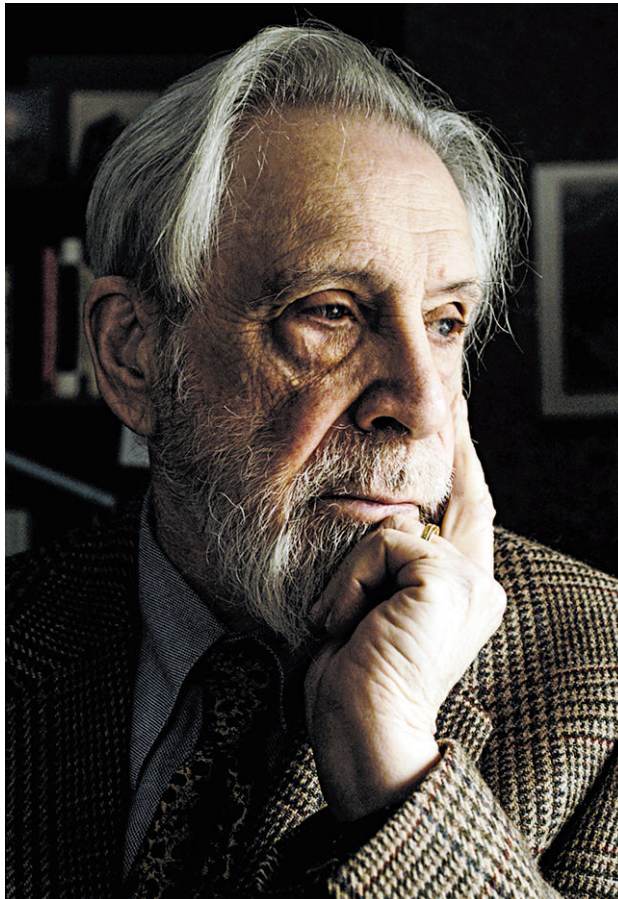
David Yezzi that delivers the desired curiosities (Hecht was once warned about the perils of a life in poetry by Dr. Seuss! He once stole a girl from a young Marlon Brando!) while maintaining a gratifying focus on the poetry.

Hecht, who died in 2004, is usually tagged with words like “mandarin” and “formalist” and grouped into a cadre of American poets born in the 1920s that includes Richard Wilbur and James Merrill. But in many ways, Hecht was different. He was Jewish, for one thing, an identity that, when Hecht was a young man, was fraught not only in the world of American literature (then under the spell of T.S. Eliot), but in many of the country's elite spaces. As Yezzi notes, when Hecht was preparing to attend Bard, his father suggested he “change his name to something less Jewish sounding, to avoid discrimination.”

The Second World War was the lodestone of Hecht's poetry, if not his life. He served in combat units but deliberately never shot at anyone, a decision that gave him, as Yezzi writes, “an excruciating sense of moral compromise.” Because of his language skills, Hecht was assigned to translate interviews after the liberation of the Flossenbürg concentration camp. Yezzi quotes a letter Hecht wrote to his parents: “What I have seen and heard here, in conversations with Germans, French, Czechs and Russians — plus personal observations — combines to make a story well beyond the limits of censorship regulations. You must wait till I can tell you personally of this beautiful country and its demented people.”

The poems that stemmed from this horrific experience are the ones typically reproduced in anthologies, particularly “More Light! More Light!,” which quotes words attributed to Goethe on his deathbed. Extreme subjects don't always have to be paired with extreme forms or diction — poetry isn't a toddler's shape sorter — but it's hard to read this work today without feeling a sense of mismatch, as grim scenes are delivered in filigreed writing. If a gun is about to be used to murder someone, it will have “hovered lightly in its glove.” If a bunch of killers are loitering, they will “loungue in a studied mimicry of ease.” If a poem is exploring the history of European violence, we will also have a “timbered hill,” “blue shadows” and “the crisp light of winter.”

Hecht's best work allows his fluent intelligence to enter the scene, rather than to draw its curtains. This is notable in less dire poems like “Peripeteia,” but also in perhaps his best poem, “A Hill.” The



Anthony Hecht in 2003, a year before his death.

speaker (figured as Hecht himself) is chatting comfortably with friends in a marketplace when abruptly, for no reason, the market vanishes and

*in its place  
Was a hill, mole-colored and bare. It  
was very cold,  
Close to freezing, with a promise of  
snow.  
The trees were like old ironwork  
gathered for scrap  
Outside a factory wall. There was no  
wind,  
And the only sound for a while was the  
little click  
Of ice as it broke in the mud under my  
feet.  
I saw a piece of ribbon snagged on a  
hedge,  
But no other sign of life. And then I  
heard  
What seemed the crack of a rifle. A  
hunter, I guessed;  
At least I was not alone. But just after  
that  
Came the soft and papery crash  
Of a great branch somewhere unseen  
falling to earth.*

*And that was all, except for the cold and  
silence  
That promised to last forever, like the  
hill.*

The vision of the hill ends, the market returns, but “for more than a week/I was scared by the plain bitterness of what I had seen.” The betrayal in “More Light! More Light!” is that when light is called for, no light appears. Here, the same lack of response seems bleaker, because there's no betrayal at all — this is simply how things are. “At least I was not alone.” But he is alone; he's always been alone.

THIS SENSE OF aloneness — of loneliness, really — is the theme that runs through Hecht's strongest writing and through Yezzi's biography. Yezzi is alert to it: At one point he quotes the poet and critic Richard Howard, who remarks, “Tony always wanted to be a member of the club.” This longing was evident even in Hecht's speaking voice, for which he cultivated a ludicrously plummy accent that made him sound like Benedict Cumberbatch. When Hecht was inducted into what is now the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he altered his suits, Yezzi notes, so that he could wear “the badge of membership, a ‘gaudy rosette,’ in his buttonhole.” It's hard to know whether to feel depressed, charmed or faintly embarrassed

by this revelation.

But all those responses apply equally to poetry itself. The question for poets is always, “How do I write poetry?” — and for a long time, the answer, provided in part by Eliot, was, “By knowing a lot about poetic tradition and making a show of it.” It's not the most obvious answer (the more one thinks about it, the stranger it seems). But for Hecht's generation, it was a reliable answer that led to measurable rewards, and it did so because a cohort of poets, editors and critics agreed that it would. This is the nature and temptation of period style: It offers a way to write and also a way to be seen as a writer, to be “a member of the club.”

Yet the question “How do I write poetry?” and the question “How can I be seen and respected as a poet?” aren't the same. In fact, they're frequently in tension, because the preferences of the “club” are so twisted by that group's tiny size and self-dealing that to satisfy them often says more about acceptability than artistry. Each club — and American poetry has had many — praises its members' small, speech-imitating creations, and yet suddenly, inevitably, the cold hill appears, and your fellow engastrimyths vanish along with their talking dolls. What speaks instead then is the empty air, and what it says is: “You're alone. How do you feel about that?” □

# The End of the Beginning

The diaries and memoirs of the people who lived through the era recreate a pivotal month during the Second World War.

By CAROLINE ALEXANDER

"THIS IS A BOOK about November 1942," the Swedish economist and historian Peter Englund explains in his introductory note to the reader, "the month that marked the turning point of the Second World War." November 1942 was the month that brought the Allies hard-fought victories in North Africa and inspired Churchill to say that the war had reached "the end of the beginning."

Englund's approach to the subject is more or less the same as it was when, more than a decade ago, he used the diaries and memoirs of people who lived and survived during an earlier conflict to compose his acclaimed account, *The Beauty and the Sorrow: An Intimate History of the First World War*.

"If you are wondering what I've added," Englund writes, somewhat sternly, of his new book, "the answer is: nothing." Apart from footnotes, then, all information — every detail of every day — is drawn from these records of personal experience. An "intimate history" does "not attempt to describe *what* the war was during these four critical weeks," he explains, "but will try to say something about *how* it was."

Some of the 39 writers he has selected are well-known figures — Albert Camus; the Soviet journalist Vasily Grossman; the Australian surgeon captured by Japanese forces, Edward "Weary" Dunlop; the English pacifist and nurse Vera Brittain; the British war poet and tank driver Keith Douglas — but most are relatively obscure.

Scattered across the globe, they each endure the anxiety or anguish that the war

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afflicted in a particular region: a middle-class housewife on Long Island; a Japanese commander on a destroyer off the island of Guadalcanal; a so-called *Totenjude* ("death Jew") prisoner at Treblinka; a Korean sex slave in Mandalay; a journalist who suffers through the siege of Stalingrad. Each experience is presented with equal weight, each diary or memoir paraphrased with dispassionate neutrality.

This format ensures an extraordinary — and bewildering — range of striking details. We learn that the bloated bodies of those who died in German U-boat attacks wash up along the coastline of Savannah, Ga.; that at the Treblinka death camp "there is almost always a jam when the door of one of the gas chambers is opened," as the limbs of the corpses are so densely entangled; that when British soldiers in North Africa take

## NOVEMBER 1942 An Intimate History of the Turning Point of World War II By Peter Englund

Translated by Peter Graves  
Knopf. 467 pp. \$32.

five Italian prisoners, one of them happens to be a tenor from the Milan opera, and all five sing as they help with breakfast; that a Chinese civil servant tasked by the Nationalist government with collecting taxes from the starving population of Henan reports that people are eating bark and grass and selling their children for steamed rolls; that U.S. troops at Guadalcanal, desperate for alcohol of any kind, drink after-shave lotion "filtered through bread"; and that when a private with the Red Army northwest of Stalingrad peers out from his trench one night, he discovers a scene of terrible and staggering beauty — a freezing rain, reflecting the full moon's light, has formed a shimmering veil over the landscape and the corpses of his dead companions.



British tanks enter the Egyptian city of Marsa Matruh in November 1942.



The Soviet journalist Vasily Grossman in Schwerin, Germany, in 1945.

In explaining his approach, Englund quotes the American historian Paul Fussell, who warned against "the adventure story model" that tries to make an overarching narrative out of the accidents and flukes of war. Fussell's classic account of the First World War, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, was another intimate history, but the dark matter that held together the many diary and letter excerpts in that book was Fussell's own tone of white-hot anger. Englund's tone, in Peter Graves's lean translation, is determinedly cool.

Occasionally, Englund intervenes to allow a flicker of careful speculation — "We can assume that the adrenaline flooded through Wakabayashi"; "Are they scared? Are they tired? Are they hungry? We don't know" — but in general this is a work of remarkable restraint. To read "November 1942" is to watch riveting events through a clear but thick glass window.

Englund has arranged his many excerpts chronologically. Most of them are short, with few running to more than two pages, and the constant change of venue ensures that the reader is kept off-balance. During the week of Nov. 16, in the space of a few paragraphs, he moves from a squash court at the University of Chicago, where a team is at work producing plutonium for a new kind of bomb, to a Japanese prison camp on the island of Java.

Very often it is not at once apparent where in the world we are. "First comes an ordinary dirt road running through an open landscape," begins one early section. More descriptions of the terrain follow; there are "birch thickets that rustle in the cold wind," the earth is "boggy." Only at the end of the second, long paragraph does one

learn that we are in East Karelia in Russia, with the Ninth Rifle Company — but of which army? Another page and a half follows and at last it becomes clear that we are following a 19-year-old Finnish soldier.

As one progresses through these fragments of disparate experiences, it becomes possible to recognize and pick up the threads of the individual lives. Of more importance, the reader has come to a point where picking up the threads no longer matters. In short, we have come to the very place Englund was steering us: an acceptance of the impossibility of making sense of the events.

Like the war's actual participants, the reader never knows what is going to happen next, or how any day's events add up to any coherent purpose. Englund's chosen subjects repeatedly express ignorance of what is happening in the wider world and war; not even actual soldiers know where they stand at any given moment, let alone what the next day, or hour, will bring. It is not even apparent — to the reader of Englund's book, or to most of the war's memorialists — that November 1942 is the pivotal month of this seemingly endless war; no one, so to speak, has the big picture. The fact that this is indeed an significant moment is blurred by daily fears and preoccupations.

The idiosyncratic features of this history — the rapid and at times perplexing changes of geography, the unsentimental tone, the distance from events — succeed in doing exactly what Englund announced at the outset was his intention. There is no discernible arc to this story. Nonetheless, with a scrupulous and skillful hand he has created an original panorama of humankind's most destructive war. □

# Religious Fervor

In his new book, the journalist Tim Alberta subjects his faith's embrace of right-wing extremism to critical scrutiny.

By JENNIFER SZALAI

WHAT WOULD JESUS DO? It's a question that the political journalist Tim Alberta takes seriously in his brave and absorbing new book, "The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory," pressing the evangelicals he meets to answer a version of it — even if a number of them clearly do not want to.

Alberta, a staff writer for *The Atlantic*, asks how so many devout Christians could be in thrall to a figure like Donald Trump, whom he calls a "lecherous, impenitent scoundrel." According to one of the scoops

## THE KINGDOM, THE POWER, AND THE GLORY

American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism

By Tim Alberta

Harper, 493 pp. \$35.

in the book, Trump himself used decidedly less vivid language to describe the evangelicals who supported Senator Ted Cruz in the 2016 Republican primaries, telling an Iowa Republican official: "You know, these so-called Christians hanging around with Ted are some real pieces of shit." Many of Cruz's evangelical supporters eventually backed Trump in 2016; in the 2020 election, Trump increased his share of the white evangelical vote even more, to a whopping 84 percent.

This phenomenon, Alberta says, cannot simply be a matter of evangelicals mobilizing against abortion access and trying to save lives; after all, they have kept remarkably quiet when it comes to showing compassion for refugees or curbing gun violence, which is now, as Alberta notes, the leading cause of death for children in the United States.

What he finds instead is that under the veneer of Christian modesty simmers an explosive rage, propelling Americans who piously declare their fealty to Jesus to act as though their highest calling is to own the libs. No wonder the popular image of evangelicalism, according to one disillusioned preacher, has devolved into "Mister Rogers with a blowtorch."

Alberta's previous book, "American Carnage" (2019), detailed Trump's takeover of the Republican Party. His new book reads like a sequel, tracing the Trumpian takeover of American evangelicalism, but this time Alberta begins with his very personal connection to his subject. He is "a believer in Jesus Christ," he writes, "the son of an evangelical minister, raised in a conservative church in a conservative community," a suburb of Detroit.

In the summer of 2019, just after "American Carnage" was published, his father died suddenly of a heart attack. At Corner-



Donald Trump speaks to an audience at the evangelical Liberty University in January 2016.

stone, his father's church, some of the congregants approached the grieving Alberta not to console him but to complain about his journalism, demanding to know if he was on "the right side." One church elder wrote a letter to Alberta complaining about the "deep state" and accusing him of treason.

The experience was so surreal that Alberta decided to find out what had happened to his religious community. During Trump's presidency, his father had moved farther to the right, but despite their differences their love for each other was undiminished. Alberta interviewed his father's handpicked successor, Chris Winans, who is "not a conservative Republican" and spoke candidly about how "God's people" have always had to contend with worldly temptations that could lead them astray: "I want to be in power, I want to have influence, I want to be prosperous, I want to have security." Many of Winans's congregants left for a church down the road that preached the kind of "blood-and-soil Christian nationalism" they wanted to hear. "The church is supposed to challenge us," Winans says. "But a lot of these folks don't want to be challenged."

"The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory" charts a transformation in evangelicalism, from a midcentury moment when white American Christians were

## What he finds instead is that under the veneer of Christian modesty simmers an explosive rage.

such a dominant force in the country that many could "afford to forget politics" to a time when many more feel, as one prominent pastor puts it, "under siege." Alberta suggests that this panic has less to do with any existential threat to American Christianity than a rattled presumption of privilege. "Humility doesn't come easy to the American evangelical," he writes. "We are an immodest and excessively indulged people."

A crisis of leadership has compounded the problem. Alberta offers a deeply reported account of the cascading scandals that have consumed Liberty University, an "insular, paranoid family business" coupling authoritarian rules with "flagrant misconduct." (Jerry Falwell Jr., the former president of Liberty and the son of its founder, was already indulging his "tyrannical instincts" long before "he became ensnared in a love triangle with his wife and a Miami pool boy," Alberta writes.) Another chapter describes the struggle to bring to account pastors who victimized congregants in a church that has become "institutionally desensitized" to sexual abuse.

Alberta takes heart that new congregations are springing up in unlikely places. Attending a service in an Atlanta distillery, he sees people who are there "to be disciplined, not demagogued." But his reporting keeps leading him to opportunistic impresarios who realize that the painstaking work of building a congregation can be made infinitely easier with expedient shortcuts. Political mudslinging offers a "dopamine rush." Exaggerating threats and calling the other side evil means that whatever you do, no matter how outrageous or cruel or contrary to Scripture, can be defended as righteous.

In 2021, at a rowdy protest against pandemic shutdowns hosted by FloodGate Church in Michigan, a few miles from Cornerstone, Alberta saw a lot of American flags in the sanctuary but not a single cross. "I couldn't suppress a feeling of absolute disgust," he writes about the spectacle that followed. To get a fuller picture, he returned repeatedly to FloodGate and talked to its pastor, but the church was committed to political warfare at all costs. "I never ceased to be aghast at what I heard," he writes.

For the most part, though, Alberta hangs back, letting the people he interviews say what they want — or refuse to say what they don't. The most belligerent culture warriors tend to shy away from talking about helping immigrants and the poor, since bashing the left tends to stimulate conservative passions more reliably than trying to teach Jesus' example of good deeds and turning the other cheek. The dynamic turns out to be mutually reinforcing — or mutually destructive. One preacher, a "former Southern Baptist," says that pastors are now "afraid of their own congregants."

It's a situation that recalls Alberta's account in "American Carnage," in which establishment Republicans naively thought they could use Trumpism to their advantage while maintaining control over their party and constituents. "Those fabled gatekeepers who once kept crackpots away from positions of authority no longer existed," Alberta writes in "The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory." Instead of issuing guidance, too many "so-called shepherds" resort to pandering — and their congregants end up even more wayward than before.

At an event organized by the Faith and Freedom Coalition, Alberta meets a man selling T-shirts emblazoned with "Let's Go Brandon," the conservative chant that stands in for a four-letter expletive directed at Joe Biden. The T-shirts include the hashtag #FJB as a handy reminder. The proprietor explains that his merchandise is responding to the fact that "we've taken God out of America."

Alberta asks the man whether the #FJB is an appropriate way to bring God back. "People keep on asking for it," he replies with a shrug. "You've got to give the people what they want." □

JENNIFER SZALAI is the nonfiction book critic for *The Times*.

# Great Expectations

A historian explores the aesthetic standards for women in the 16th century — and just how they were achieved. (Recipes included.)

By **MARISA MELTZER**

SHAPEWEAR. STRETCH MARK REMEDIES. Nose jobs. Eyebrow shaping. These things are not just preoccupations of ours, but also concerned the women of the Renaissance.

In “How to Be a Renaissance Woman: The Untold History of Beauty & Female Creativity,” Jill Burke, a professor of Renaissance studies at the University of Edinburgh, brings us a breezy and readable portrait of 16th-century Italy through the lens of beauty standards and practices.

One source that inspired the book was Giovanni Marinello’s “The Ornaments of Ladies,” first published in Venice in 1562, which included 1,400 recipes for face, hair and body. Burke does some of her own translations from Italian and even adapts recipes for those readers interested in trying out their own distilled broad-bean flower water.

The 16th century, Burke notes, is a time, like the one we are living through now, when technology and visual culture collided. Developments in single-point perspective, draftsmanship and anatomy all influenced portraiture. And body ideals were changing from the gothic paragon, with narrow shoulders and big hips, to soft hourglasses, preferably complete with pale skin and golden curls.

There are plenty of noblewomen in these pages — their stories are usually the best documented — but Burke makes an effort to talk about women of many kinds: domestic help, peasants, widows, courtesans and all manner of sex workers. (The names mentioned also function as a great source for anyone in your life looking for a memorable and uncommon baby moniker. Consider Tullia, Lucrezia, Moderata, Isotta!)

Whatever the subject, the expectations are familiar: Women were held to unreasonable standards. “Women’s bodies,” Burke writes, “are presented as forever-unfinished projects, to be constantly improved and worked upon.” She quotes a tract from 1598 that reads, “If one sees a poor woman who has six pennies to her name, four of them are on her face.”

A woman of that era had no choice but to think about her appearance. “Looking good,” as the author puts it, “was important for women in a world where the legal rights and earning power of men meant that influence was often gained through manipulation, where beauty could raise your special status.” This was one area of their lives where they had, if not freedom, at least some agency. Women in this book are economically reliant on men, constantly under threat of violence, accused of witchcraft and killed.

**MARISA MELTZER** is the author of “Glossy: Ambition, Beauty, and the Inside Story of Emily Weiss’s Glossier.”



## HOW TO BE A RENAISSANCE WOMAN

**The Untold History of Beauty & Female Creativity**

By **Jill Burke**

Pegasus. 318 pp. \$28.95.

Burke speculates, too, that participating in rituals of bathing (which, in that era, was less about rinsing the body than rubbing it with cloths), cosmetics, skin care regimens — the whole of beauty culture — created a place for women to bond, and was a key part of their social lives. Crucially, it gave them a break from “the often violent and sneering menfolk.”

THEN AS NOW, there was no exact measure for how much participation in beauty was considered just enough — and how much would be judged as vain. A woman who spent visible time on her toilette could risk being considered to be guileful — by trying to deceive a man with cosmetics.

No-makeup makeup was all the rage in Renaissance Italy. “Artifice is acceptable” in this climate, says Burke, “but admired when concealed, when it is done so well that you cannot see it.” The contemporary feminist author Lucrezia Marinella wrote, “It is unworthy and repulsive to cover the face with thick coverings of red and white.”

The details are fascinating. The main challenge for this reader is keeping track of the many, many women mentioned, whose names and lives often receive just a few sentences or pages. Burke would have benefited from chiseling more of a narrative from her copious research, and including fewer rapid-fire anecdotes. (Then too, it would have been nice for her to step outside of Italy and give her opinion on the much-debated white makeup and blush used by Queen Elizabeth I.)

The real shock of the book is not what’s

unfamiliar, it is how much of it seems to mirror today’s obsessions and controversies. Yes, some of the treatments and rituals read as unusual to us now, involving goat fat, marrow, bran and bloodletting. Some ingredients, like mercury and arsenic, are toxic in quantity (but were employed nonetheless for skin lightening or other cosmetics) and would not be used commercially today. But other things — how much depilation to engage in; “breast bags,” a.k.a. bras; labiaplasty; lightening the hair and skin; as well as gender transitions for men and women — could and do fill our brains, our conversations and our feeds.

Maybe we’re the truly out-there ones. After all, we are living in a time of so-called Looksmaxxing online and attempts at changing the jaw shape via mewing and lymphatic drainage massage. We have neuromodulators and fillers and cryofacials. Basically, nothing our Renaissance cousins did in the name of beauty would shock anyone on TikTok. □



For women of the Italian Renaissance, writes the academic Jill Burke, elaborate beauty regimens were not only an expectation but a rare area of agency.

# In the Attic

Loyalties conflict and a family of roofers deals with dark secrets in a small Pennsylvania town.

By MARY BETH KEANE

WE MEET THE main players of Amy Jo Burns's poignant new novel, "Mercury," in that golden moment between childhood and adulthood, when they're young and strong, and it's just dawning on them that their worlds were circumscribed at birth.

## MERCURY

By Amy Jo Burns

Celadon. 336 pp. \$29.

The story is set in Mercury, a down-at-the-heels town near Pittsburgh, and revolves around the Joseph family, the owners of a local roofing company. Mick, a volatile father of three, expects his sons to continue the business. His wife, Elise, is beloved around town if somewhat cold at home. She's the glue who holds the family together.

In 1990, just a few weeks before the eld-

MARY BETH KEANE'S latest novel is "The Half Moon."



er two Joseph sons are to begin their senior year of high school, the beautiful Marley and her mother blow "into Mercury in their teal Acura with the windows down and the radio blasting." Not long after they arrive, two outfielders catch Marley's eye at a baseball game: Baylor and Waylon Joseph, who have "V-shaped torsos and dark hair." One taunts the other, they get into a brawl and Marley clambers "down the bleachers to climb the fence and force the brothers apart."

With this single act, her fate is set. She

becomes lover, mother, arbitrator, therapist and boss — every possible thing to the two boys and their younger brother, Shay.

Burns frames the novel around a gruesome discovery in the attic of the Presbyterian church: Summoned to fix a leaky roof, the brothers find a decomposed body hidden under old choir robes. Every narrative needs a situation as well as a story (see Vivian Gornick on this matter), and Burns proves the point. Her whodunit and motive feel unimportant and, at times, unnecessarily confusing. But "Mercury" is a character-driven novel; the point isn't the plot, but what the people enacting it reveal about themselves.

Though the book covers only nine years, there's something epic about the love story at its heart. And it is a love story, even if there's little romance involved. The Josephs, Marley, maybe all the people of Mercury — none are terribly articulate about how they feel and what they want, so they express themselves by fighting, drinking and disappearing. We know early on that Marley marries Waylon Joseph while still in high school, but which brother Marley truly loves is one of many

driving forces in this novel — a stronger one than the body in the attic. Another is the question of who deserves Marley's loyalty.

WHICH BRINGS ME to Elise, the lone woman in the family before Marley comes along. In her pleated dresses and maroon pumps, Elise embodies the traditional role of supportive wife and mother. She doesn't seem to like Marley very much, but she does recognize something in the young woman — a capacity for loyalty, perhaps, or the potential to be a successor.

But Marley is not Elise. She reflects, "The arc of a mother's life shouldn't have self-sacrifice as its inevitable pinnacle."

For me, this idea sums up the defining difference between women now and so many of the ones who came before us: No, we will not lose our minds and identities in order to get dinner on the table and clean clothes into dresser drawers. No.

And so the most powerful tension in this novel doesn't come from the dead body. It comes from the question of whether Marley will demand a place for herself — and for her voice to be heard. □

# Guilt Trip

A sophomore novel traces the long shadow of a tragedy with devastating consequences.

By MJ FRANKLIN

MIDWAY THROUGH Claire Oshetsky's beautiful, terrifying sophomore novel, a mother asks her daughter: "Did you leave Agnes Bickford in that cooler to die, Bunny?"

This turns out to be the central question of "Poor Deer."

Bunny is Margaret Murphy, our protagonist; Agnes Bickford is her childhood best friend and neighbor. On a rainy day when the girls were 4 years old, they raced out of their respective houses to play. Later, Margaret's mother found her daughter silently cowering under her dining room table. Agnes's mother found *her* daughter dead in a tool shed.

What happened, who's at fault, and is this person deserving of forgiveness? These uncertainties haunt just about everybody in the novel, especially Margaret herself. But she doesn't want to talk or think about what led to her friend's demise — and that's where Poor Deer comes in.

When we meet Margaret, now 16, she's sitting at a desk in a motel near Niagara Falls, attempting to write a confession at the behest of the titular beast, who acts as a

sort of ghost, urging her to confront her past. "Enough of your pretty lies," Poor Deer commands. "It's time to tell the truth."

But the truth is too much to handle. Initially, Margaret writes that Agnes ran into the magical woods near their houses, reached the Land of the Pirate King and became a pirate. "You've told it all wrong

## POOR DEER

By Claire Oshetsky

227 pp. Ecco. \$26.99.

again — you little monster," Poor Deer chastises. It takes two more drafts before Margaret gets anywhere near the facts of what happened; still, the whole story remains just beyond reach.

This setup frames "Poor Deer" like a thriller, but the novel is less a mystery about what happened on that fateful day, and more a psychological deep dive into how Margaret, and all those who orbited the girls, grapple with the tragedy.

"Guilt is the worst of all. Guilt is the hollow heart of it," Oshetsky writes. "Guilt will follow her everywhere, two steps behind."

Grief is a well-trod territory in fiction, but in Oshetsky's hands, this familiar topic



becomes fresh and strange. The book's narrative structure mirrors the grief-stricken mind — starting, stopping, looping back, stuttering, marching grimly forward. With her voice "like the drilling of a tooth" and eyes that "flash in primary colors," Poor Deer is a frightening anthropomorphism of the cruel inner monologue that so many of us hear in our lowest moments. (Her name is a malapropism of the response people said when they found out about Agnes: Poor dear.)

As Margaret struggles to grow up under the shadow of death, she becomes more and more isolated. Her mother embraces and then rejects her. She suffers a terrible

accident of her own; and, finally, yet another tragedy leads Margaret to her peculiar situation in the motel.

"Poor Deer" is the inverse of Oshetsky's debut, "Chouette," about a woman who gives birth to a baby who is half-human, half-owl. That book was a rowdy and dark meditation on motherhood, juxtaposing the rawness of a newborn with the savagery of an animal on the hunt. "Poor Deer," however, is quiet and somber. It's less about someone grappling with external pressures and more about someone trying to understand the weight of trauma. Despite their differences, if you were to encounter these stories with no name attached, you could easily identify them as Oshetsky tales. They both display her probing eye and ferocious imagination.

With "Poor Deer," Oshetsky proves herself the bard of unruly psyches. She shows how loss warps our realities, and how that distortion can be both a coping mechanism and a destructive force.

"Are you my angel or my devil?" Margaret asks.

"I am Poor Deer," the beast responds.

It's Margaret's job to figure out what this means. With nuance, grace and a touch of the uncanny, Oshetsky brings us along for the ride. □

MJ FRANKLIN is an editor at the Book Review.

# Revolutionary's Road

The Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser fostered autocracy among his Arab neighbors in the 20th century and beyond.

By **BEN HUBBARD**

ON SEPT. 1, 1969, a group of Libyan Army men launched a haphazard but ultimately successful coup that toppled the country's monarch, King Idris I, and put them in charge of the large oil-rich nation on the Mediterranean coast. Taking to the airwaves, their leader, a little-known officer in his late 20s named Muammar el-Qaddafi, announced the dawn of a new era in a country where "all will be free, brothers within a society in which — with God's help — prosperity and equality will be seen to rule us all."

## **WE ARE YOUR SOLDIERS** **How Gamal Abdel Nasser Remade** **the Arab World**

By **Alex Rowell**

Norton. 402 pp. \$30.

The putschists — a group of officers who had never run even a desert oasis — soon realized that they had no idea how to govern a country, so they sent a cable to their hero and role model, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of Egypt and one of the most prominent Arabs of his day, to ask for help.

And help he did. He sent arms, military experts and advice on how to talk to the West. He encouraged the officers to assure the United States, Britain and France that the coup posed no risk to their people or interests. He appeared publicly with Colonel el-Qaddafi to boost the rising young dictator's international standing and dispatched an aide to advise him on everything he needed to know, like the importance of hiring a trustworthy cook to avoid getting poisoned. ("If you don't succeed and secure this revolution," Nasser reportedly told the aide, "I'll kill you with my own hands.")

Colonel el-Qaddafi went on to rule Libya for 42 years, brutalizing his people, failing to develop his nation, sponsoring acts of terrorism and aging into a cartoonish thug who appeared at international forums like the United Nations General Assembly dressed in flowing robes and ranting like a kook. His long reign is but one strand of Nasser's disastrous legacy, according to "We Are Your Soldiers," by the Lebanon-based journalist Alex Rowell. Rowell takes the reader on a historical tour of the Middle East to illuminate how Nasser contributed to the region's "shared curse of political repression mixed with economic misery."

Most of the action takes place in the 1950s and 1960s, when many Arab states were establishing what would become their contemporary, independent political

**BEN HUBBARD** is the Istanbul bureau chief for *The Times*. He has spent more than a dozen years in the Arab world, including Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Yemen. He is the author of "MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed bin Salman."



A Palestinian fighter in Lebanon poses with a poster of the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in the lobby of a Holiday Inn in 1976.

systems. It was a time of great tumult, with ousted monarchs and repeated coups, and Nasser, the charismatic military officer who, in 1952, seized control of Egypt, the most populous Arab state, was a towering regional figure.

The book is not a comprehensive biography and does not spend much time on Nasser's life before he took power or on his broader international activities — his role in Cold War geopolitics or his 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal Company. Instead, it focuses on the harsher side of Nasser's rule and regional interventions, from the autocratic system he established in Egypt to his meddling in the politics of neighboring countries like Libya to strengthen dictators who became what Rowell calls "the rogues' gallery of despots who went on to bring such agony upon their societies."

In his quest for control in Egypt, Nasser developed a dictator's playbook: Gain a grip in the country's military, find disgruntled allies among the ranks, come to power in a coup and then smash anything that could threaten your power while claiming to act according to the people's will. To personalize the torment his reign caused, Rowell dedicates a blistering chapter to the mostly communist and other leftist activists tortured by Nasser's security forces at a prison near Cairo that Rowell argues could justly be called a concentration camp.

In other chapters, Rowell follows Nasser around the region, detailing the ways in which he sowed the seeds of future troubles. In Iraq, he supported coups and coup

attempts and granted recognition to putschists while hosting a young Saddam Hussein in Cairo for three years before Hussein returned home and, eventually, took over the country. Nasser sought to seize effective control of Syria by uniting it with Egypt in the short-lived United Arab Republic, contributing to the chaos from which President Hafez al-Assad rose to take power in 1970. Nasser pushed through a 1969 agreement with Lebanon that gave Palestinian militants free rein in the country in their fight against Israel, a reality that both contributed to Lebanon's disastrous 15-year civil war and made it harder to resolve.

In 1960s Yemen — "the darkest stain on his record by a considerable margin," Rowell writes — Nasser backed revolutionary forces who had toppled the country's hereditary ruler. His forces flew over the country with chemical weapons — never before used by an Arab military — and mercilessly dropped them on civilians.

Rowell's writing is at its best when he narrates the stories of lesser-known figures, allowing the cultural and political textures of these countries to shine through. He reconstructs the life and death of the pioneering Lebanese newspaper editor and Nasser critic Kamel Mrowa, who was fatally shot in 1966 in his office by a hit man who the Mrowa family believes was dispatched by Nasser. He also relates the ascent of Hazza al-Majali, a small-town lawyer in Jordan who rose to become an adviser to the king in 1947 and, in the following decade, prime minister. Nasser, too, had a hand in the plot that saw him blown

up in his office in 1960.

But in other chapters, Rowell's tendency to delve deeply into long-gone regimes and clog his story with the names of officials who were minor even in their time distracts from the bigger picture. Sometimes his efforts to link events to his subject's malign influence go too far. For reasons that remained unclear to me even after two readings, he opens the book with the murder of the Lebanese activist and intellectual Lokman Slim in 2021, an unsolved crime widely attributed to the militant group Hezbollah. Tying this assassination to Nasser can be done only with the most tenuous of threads.

Part of Rowell's motivation is to re-examine Nasser's legacy in light of the popular, anti-authoritarian uprisings known as the Arab Spring, which spread across the Middle East in 2011. Zipping through the more recent history of the countries he explores elsewhere in the book, Rowell suggests that Nasser bears significant responsibility for their current dysfunctions.

The Arab world's size and complexity make it a fool's errand to try to find one cause for the region's ills, and in focusing so squarely on Nasser, Rowell skates dangerously close to that trap. Still, there is value in highlighting the damage caused by an icon whose image remains, in some quarters, a shorthand for Arab dignity and freedom from foreign dictates. Unfortunately, autocracy is alive and well in the region today, depriving many citizens of the very dignity Nasser claimed to represent. The dictator's playbook that he wrote is still widely in use. □

# Voices of Peaceful Protest

How John Lewis and Coretta Scott King embodied the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy while each creating their own.

By **ABBY MCGANNEY NOLAN**

IT'S BEEN 40 YEARS since Martin Luther King's Birthday became a national holiday, and the question of how to celebrate it was probably best answered by the late John Lewis. The Georgia representative called it "a day on, not a day off," "a day of action, a

## CORETTA'S JOURNEY

**The Life and Times of Coretta Scott King**

By **Alice Faye Duncan**

Illustrated by **R. Gregory Christie**

Calkins Creek/Astra. 48 pp. \$18.99.

(Ages 7 to 10)

## CORETTA

**The Autobiography of Mrs. Coretta Scott King**

Illustrated by **Ekua Holmes**

Godwin Books/Henry Holt. 40 pp. \$18.99.

(Ages 4 to 8)

## FIGHTING WITH LOVE

**The Legacy of John Lewis**

By **Lesa Cline-Ransome**

Illustrated by **James E. Ransome**

Paula Wiseman/Simon & Schuster. 48 pp.

\$18.99.

(Ages 4 to 8)

day of love, to give of ourselves to others and begin anew the building of the beloved community." A new picture book about Lewis and two about Coretta Scott King make for illuminating reading on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s holiday and throughout the year.

Written by Alice Faye Duncan and illustrated by R. Gregory Christie, "Coretta's Journey: The Life and Times of Coretta Scott King" provides a stirring introduction to a woman who stood strong before and after her husband's 1968 assassination. With telling details, Duncan describes the likely sources of Coretta Scott King's fortitude: her remarkable parents, her religious faith and a willingness to defend herself. One of Christie's radiant watercolors features young Coretta ready to "knuckle-punch" any detractors. Even in that stance, she seems to be honing her famously regal demeanor. Coretta's mother advised her two daughters to "get an education and try to be somebody," and the book's first half shows how Coretta became somebody in Alabama, Ohio and Boston.

Alternating between poems and prose, Duncan's text is informative as well as emotionally powerful, with a sense of cosmic destiny about Coretta's future with Martin sprinkled throughout: "Venus and

**ABBY MCGANNEY NOLAN** writes about children's books, pop culture and American history.



Clockwise from top: "Fighting With Love"; "Coretta"; "Coretta's Journey."

Saturn converged/Two agents for change." Christie's illustrations similarly range from dreamlike images (young Coretta sitting on an impossibly high tree branch and gazing at the stars) to real-life documentation (Coretta celebrating her husband's Nobel Peace Prize with him).

"Coretta's Journey" includes harrowing episodes, like the burning by white supremacists of her childhood home, alongside the satisfactions of creating change in the world, raising four children and ensuring that Martin's legacy would be honored. For 15 years, she pressed for a national hol-



iday — the first established to honor someone other than Columbus or an American president. In February 2006, her own eventful life was commemorated at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church: "Winter raindrops fell like tears/Four Kings bowed to pray/Blues hymns eased their bitter grief/Jesus called Coretta home."

Turning "My Life, My Love, My Legacy," a 368-page memoir written for adults, into the picture book "Coretta: The Autobiography of Mrs. Coretta Scott King" must have been challenging. The text draws directly from the adult book, with bracketed infor-

mation and ellipses indicating deviations from the original. Perhaps this approach was dictated by contractual necessity, but it distracts from her story. Transitions can be abrupt and some sentences are unwieldy: "Who could have dreamed that a little girl [who at age 10 hired herself out with her sister to pick] cotton for \$2 a week in the piercing hot sun would rise to a position that allowed her to help pick U.S. mayors, congresspersons or even presidents?"

Happily, Ekua Holmes's vibrant illustrations go a long way toward canceling out these quibbles. Starting with her luminous cover portrait, they do justice to a woman who had a mission well before her soon-to-be husband drove her home from their first date in his green Chevrolet. Holmes effectively incorporates pieces of the past — covers of *Jet* magazine, archival photos, bits of printed music and text — into her paintings, and her use of color and block shading helps to bring out the story's many nuances. Despite the hardships endured, this art suggests, the couple's marriage stands as the quintessential embodiment of what Coretta referred to in her memoir as "the power of love in action."

Born 13 years after Coretta Scott King, John Lewis also grew up in rural, segregated Alabama. In "Fighting With Love: The Legacy of John Lewis," Lesa Cline-Ransome and James E. Ransome show how Lewis's quest for learning, his sense of faith and fairness, and "the sun-beaten, sweat-soaked, hunchbacked farming his family did day in and day out" set him on his path. And they make a key internal moment visible, as a teenage Lewis listens intently to one of King's sermons on the radio: "John saw that the gospel could change not just hearts but laws, too."

We follow Lewis as he goes to seminary in Tennessee, steeps himself in the principles of nonviolent resistance, engages in sit-ins in Nashville and gets jailed for "disorderly conduct." In the summer of 1961, he marches onto a Greyhound bus as a Freedom Rider, seeking to desegregate buses and waiting rooms all over the South. Lewis then marches to Washington, D.C., where in August 1963 he speaks at the March on Washington. And he continues to march. The book ends in 1965, as he and some 600 others prepare to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala.

When young readers are ready to hear the details of Bloody Sunday and Lewis's subsequent, unflinching service up until his death in July 2020, his propulsive "March" graphic novel trilogy and its sequel, "Run," await. In the meantime, "Fighting With Love" offers a fine and — thanks to James Ransome's pencil drawings on "found, painted and purchased papers" — often gorgeous introduction to one of America's most beloved heroes. □

# Best Sellers

The New York Times

For the complete best-seller lists, visit [nytimes.com/books/best-sellers](https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers)

## COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF DECEMBER 24-30, 2023

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	<b>FOURTH WING</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) Violet Sorrengail is urged by the commanding general, who also is her mother, to become a candidate for the elite dragon riders.	35	1	1	<b>THE WAGER</b> , by David Grann. (Doubleday) The survivors of a shipwrecked British vessel on a secret mission during an imperial war with Spain have different accounts of events.	36
2	2	<b>IRON FLAME</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) The second book in the Empyrean series. Violet Sorrengail's next round of training might require her to betray the man she loves.	8	2	2	<b>OATH AND HONOR</b> , by Liz Cheney. (Little, Brown) The former congresswoman from Wyoming recounts how she helped lead the Select Committee to Investigate the Jan. 6. Attack on the United States Capitol.	4
3	3	<b>THE HEAVEN &amp; EARTH GROCERY STORE</b> , by James McBride. (Riverhead) Secrets held by the residents of a dilapidated neighborhood come to life when a skeleton is found at the bottom of a well.	9	3	5	<b>THE BOYS IN THE BOAT</b> , by Daniel James Brown. (Penguin) The story of the American rowers who pursued gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games; the basis of the film.	125
4	5	<b>ICEBREAKER</b> , by Hannah Grace. (Atria) Anastasia might need the help of the captain of a college hockey team to get on the Olympic figure skating team.	28	4	3	<b>THE WOMAN IN ME</b> , by Britney Spears. (Gallery) The Grammy Award-winning pop star details her personal and professional experiences, including the years she spent under a conservatorship overseen by her father.	10
5	6	<b>LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY</b> , by Bonnie Garmus. (Doubleday) A scientist and single mother living in California in the 1960s becomes a star on a TV cooking show.	60	5	4	<b>KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON</b> , by David Grann. (Doubleday) The story of a murder spree in 1920s Oklahoma that targeted Osage Indians, whose lands contained oil.	109
6	13	<b>THE HOUSEMAID</b> , by Freida McFadden. (Grand Central) Troubles surface when a woman looking to make a fresh start takes a job in the home of the Winchesters.	28	6	7	<b>FRIENDS, LOVERS, AND THE BIG TERRIBLE THING</b> , by Matthew Perry. (Flatiron) The late actor shares stories from his childhood and his struggles with sobriety.	25
7	4	<b>THE EXCHANGE</b> , by John Grisham. (Doubleday) In a sequel to "The Firm," Mitch McDeere, who is now a partner at the world's largest law firm, gets caught up in a sinister plot.	11	7	10	<b>OUTLIVE</b> , by Peter Attia with Bill Gifford. (Harmony) A look at recent scientific research on aging and longevity.	40
8	10	<b>THE SEVEN WIVES OF EVELYN HUGO</b> , by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Washington Square/ Atria) A movie icon recounts stories of her loves and career to a struggling magazine writer.	114	8	8	<b>ELON MUSK</b> , by Walter Isaacson. (Simon & Schuster) The author of "The Code Breaker" traces Musk's life.	16
9	14	<b>TWISTED LOVE</b> , by Ana Huang. (Bloom) The first book in the Twisted series. Secrets emerge when Ava explores things with her brother's best friend.	6	9	9	<b>PREQUEL</b> , by Rachel Maddow. (Crown) The MSNBC host and co-author of "Bag Man" details a campaign to overthrow the U.S. government and install authoritarian rule prior to and during our involvement in World War II.	11
10		<b>HOUSE OF EARTH AND BLOOD</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) Passion arises between Bryce Quinlan and Hunt Athalar as they seek to avenge the deaths of Bryce's friends.	5	10	13	<b>THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE</b> , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	174

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

## Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



**PEDRO PÁRAMO**, by Juan Rulfo. Translated by Douglas J. Weatherford. (Grove, paperback, \$17.) Rulfo's 1955 masterpiece, newly translated and featuring a foreword by Gabriel García Márquez, begins with a man searching for his father in a remote town in Mexico. What he finds instead are ghosts who reveal the dark history of the area and his father's ruthless involvement with its residents.



**GATOR COUNTRY: Deception, Danger, and Alligators in the Everglades**, by Rebecca Renner. (Flatiron, \$29.99.) When Renner, a journalist, decided to write about alligator poaching, she knew it would mean a return to her native Everglades. The result is not just an engaging story of people fighting to preserve wildlife but an impassioned love letter to the region.



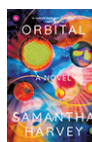
**THE OTHER SIDE: A Story of Women in Art and the Spirit World**, by Jennifer Higgie. (Pegasus, \$29.95.) This book by an Australian art critic turns a penetrating gaze on female artists who, in the 19th century and into the 20th, embraced spiritualism for sometimes uncertain reasons. What is certain is that their extraordinary works were too often dismissed.



**LIAR IN A CROWDED THEATER: Freedom of Speech in a World of Misinformation**, by Jeff Kosseff. (Johns Hopkins University Press, \$29.95.) In this sobering book about the difficulty of protecting free speech in an era of misinformation, Kosseff cautions against increased censorship. Better, he argues, to use measures already in place, and to punish people for things they do instead of things they say.



**THE BARS ARE OURS: Histories and Cultures of Gay Bars in America, 1960 and After**, by Lucas Hilderbrand. (Duke University Press, paperback, \$32.95.) In this sprawling, playful and rigorous account of the clubs, bars and bathhouses that served as petri dishes for queer identity, Hilderbrand illuminates the rocky path to our great gay present.



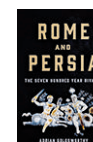
**ORBITAL**, by Samantha Harvey. (Grove, \$27.) In Harvey's poetic fifth novel, set inside a space station 250 miles above Earth, current events and national borders on Earth are trees lost to the forest, the author using this distance to reflect on what we miss when we stare too closely, bitterly, at our share of the bark.



**LEO LIONNI: Storyteller, Artist, Designer**, edited by Steven Heller, Leonard S. Marcus, Annie Lionni and Stephanie Haboush Plunkett. (Abbeville Press, \$39.95.) This survey of the artist and illustrator's legacy goes far beyond the children's books for which he's known, including sculpture, design work and more.



**THE SECOND STRANGER**, by Martin Griffin. (Pegasus Crime, \$27.95.) In this gripping thriller, an injured man arrives at a remote hotel, identifying himself as a police officer whose dangerous prisoner has just escaped. He is securing the premises when another injured man arrives, also claiming he is a police officer, and says the first man is the prisoner.



**ROME AND PERSIA: The Seven Hundred Year Rivalry**, by Adrian Goldsworthy. (Basic Books, \$35.) Goldsworthy's astute exploration of the relations between Rome and Persia in the first millennium A.D. concludes that both flourished when they promoted stability through trade and diplomacy.

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

## Inside the List

ELISABETH EGAN

How does a London-based novelist concoct a convincing story set in the United States? Some might splurge for a temporary relocation in the name of research, but Holly Jackson opts for a virtual visit via Google Maps. Navigating from street views to real estate listings — and even, eventually, to electoral records — she'll piece together a universe for her characters.



**'I like to joke that I'm a screenwriter trapped in the body of a novelist.'**

said in a phone interview.

The approach appears to be working: Her most recent book, "Five Survive," just spent 55 weeks on the young adult hardcover list. For this tale of a road trip gone awry, Jackson selected a secluded byway in North Carolina. Halfway between Philadelphia and Gulf Shores, Ala., the road is wide enough to accommodate a recreational vehicle and remote enough not to have cell service. Add college students, subtract air from tires via gunshot and you have the makings of a disaster scenario. As one Amazon reviewer put it, "Intensity builds to the extreme!"

Jackson's next novel, "The Reappearance of Rachel Price," takes place in Gorham, N.H. "This was slightly more personal since I have family who are from Randolph, which is an even smaller town next door. But it was so small it didn't have some of the stuff I needed," Jackson said. She scouted the nearest McDonald's on Google Maps, studied up on local speech patterns and even selected a home for her characters, who land on bookshelves in April.

Jackson said, "Some poor family that live in Gorham are probably going to recognize their house." Yes, she has taken the virtual tour; no, she will not reveal the name of the street.

Jackson claimed that her penchant for prowling is a form of procrastination — but it's also a helpful way of situating herself in a new project. "I like to joke that I'm a screenwriter trapped in the body of a novelist," she said. "I'm very visual. I need to be able to run the entire story, kind of like a movie in my head, before I put it down on paper."

In real life, Jackson has been to a handful of states, including Florida, California, New York and New Jersey. "In the next few years, I think I'm going to be coming to the States a bit more for work," she said. "I'm excited to see the parts you don't necessarily go to if you're just there to be a tourist." □

## PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF DECEMBER 24-30, 2023

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	<b>FOURTH WING</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) Violet Sorrengail is urged by the commanding general, who also is her mother, to become a candidate for the elite dragon riders.	34	1	1	<b>THE WAGER</b> , by David Grann. (Doubleday) The survivors of a shipwrecked British vessel on a secret mission during an imperial war with Spain have different accounts of events.	36
2	3	<b>IRON FLAME</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) The second book in the Empyrean series. Violet Sorrengail's next round of training might require her to betray the man she loves.	8	2	2	<b>OATH AND HONOR</b> , by Liz Cheney. (Little, Brown) The former congresswoman from Wyoming recounts how she helped lead the Select Committee to Investigate the Jan. 6. Attack on the United States Capitol.	4
3	2	<b>THE HEAVEN &amp; EARTH GROCERY STORE</b> , by James McBride. (Riverhead) Secrets held by the residents of a dilapidated neighborhood come to life when a skeleton is found at the bottom of a well.	19	3	3	<b>THE WOMAN IN ME</b> , by Britney Spears. (Gallery) The Grammy Award-winning pop star details her personal and professional experiences, including the years she spent under a conservatorship overseen by her father.	10
4	5	<b>LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY</b> , by Bonnie Garmus. (Doubleday) A scientist and single mother living in California in the 1960s becomes a star on a TV cooking show.	86	4	5	<b>FRIENDS, LOVERS, AND THE BIG TERRIBLE THING</b> , by Matthew Perry. (Flatiron) The late actor shares stories from his childhood and his struggles with sobriety.	25
5	4	<b>THE EXCHANGE</b> , by John Grisham. (Doubleday) In a sequel to "The Firm," Mitch McDeere, who is now a partner at the world's largest law firm, gets caught up in a sinister plot.	11	5	8	<b>OUTLIVE</b> , by Peter Attia with Bill Gifford. (Harmony) A look at recent scientific research on aging and longevity.	40
6	7	<b>THE LITTLE LIAR</b> , by Mitch Albom. (Harper) The actions of an 11-year-old boy help facilitate the delivery of Jewish residents, including his family, to Auschwitz.	7	6	7	<b>PREQUEL</b> , by Rachel Maddow. (Crown) The MSNBC host and co-author of "Bag Man" details a campaign to overthrow the U.S. government and install authoritarian rule prior to and during our involvement in World War II.	11
7		<b>THE SERPENT AND THE WINGS OF NIGHT</b> , by Carissa Broadbent. (Bramble) The first book in the "Crowns of Nyaxia" series. Oraya enters a tournament held by the goddess of death.	2	7	6	<b>ELON MUSK</b> , by Walter Isaacson. (Simon & Schuster) The author of "The Code Breaker" traces Musk's life and summarizes his work on electric vehicles, private space exploration and artificial intelligence.	16
8	6	<b>HOLLY</b> , by Stephen King. (Scribner) The private detective Holly Gibney investigates whether a married pair of octogenarian academics had anything to do with Bonnie Dahl's disappearance.	17	8	12	<b>I'M GLAD MY MOM DIED</b> , by Jennette McCurdy. (Simon & Schuster) The actress and filmmaker describes her eating disorders and difficult relationship with her mother.	64
9	9	<b>DEMON COPPERHEAD</b> , by Barbara Kingsolver. (Harper) Winner of a 2023 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. A reimagining of Charles Dickens's "David Copperfield."	61	9	4	<b>MY NAME IS BARBRA</b> , by Barbra Streisand. (Viking) The EGOT winner chronicles her journey in show business and reveals details about some of her personal relationships.	8
10	10	<b>TOM LAKE</b> , by Ann Patchett. (Harper) Three daughters, who return to their family orchard in the spring of 2020, learn about their mother's relationship with a famous actor.	19	10		<b>THE KINGDOM, THE POWER, AND THE GLORY</b> , by Tim Alberta. (Harper) The author of "American Carnage" looks at divisions within the American evangelical movement.	2

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

## Paperback Row / BY SHREYA CHATTOPADHYAY



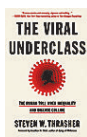
**STILL PICTURES: On Photography and Memory**, by Janet Malcolm. (Picador, 176 pp., \$18.) Malcolm, a renowned journalist and author, died in 2021. Her final book, a memoir organized by images which traces her life from leaving Prague in 1939 to her decades at The New Yorker, "has the clarity and brevity of a book by a writer who knows that time is short, and that there's much to say," our reviewer wrote.



**IN THE UPPER COUNTRY**, by Kai Thomas. (Penguin, 352 pp., \$18.) When Cash, an old woman who has recently arrived at the end of the Underground Railroad in 1859 Canada, shoots a slave hunter dead, Lensinda is enlisted to collect her side of the story. But instead of defending herself, Cash proposes an exchange: a tale for a tale. Thomas's novel plumbs Black and Indigenous histories of the Americas, and the power of a story.



**THE FARAWAY WORLD: Stories**, by Patricia Engel. (Avid Reader, 224 pp., \$17.) "A look reveals more than a fingerprint," Engel writes in her second collection, an Editors' Choice pick. Its 10 short stories follow Latin Americans across borders of class, nation and the human mind, from a Cuban novelist terrified of his impending move to a Colombian domestic worker who both comforts and flees her employer.



**THE VIRAL UNDERCLASS: The Human Toll When Inequality and Disease Collide**, by Steven W. Thrasher. (Celadon, 384 pp., \$19.99.) In this deep dive into the inequities illuminated and reified by Covid-19, Thrasher argues that "just as marginalized people are made vulnerable to viruses, viruses are also used as justification for the policies and systems that marginalize people in the first place."



**BETTER THE BLOOD**, by Michael Bennett. (Grove, 352 pp., \$17.) When the British still ruled New Zealand, six soldiers wrongfully killed an Indigenous Maori chief. Now, Hana Westerman, a Maori detective, is following a series of murders accompanied by mysterious inscriptions. Though 160 years separate the chief's murder from the recent ones, Hana realizes they might in fact be intimately related in this debut thriller.



**ROUGH SLEEPERS: Dr. Jim O'Connell's Urgent Mission to Bring Healing to Homeless People**, by Tracy Kidder. (Random House, 320 pp., \$22.) Kidder spent five years following O'Connell, who turned away from medical prestige to provide health care to homeless people in Boston, tracing his life-saving interventions as well as his patients' struggles with housing and the legal system.

## AUDIO MONTHLY BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF DECEMBER 3-30, 2023

THIS MONTH	Audio Fiction	MONTHS ON LIST	THIS MONTH	Audio Nonfiction	MONTHS ON LIST
1	<b>FOURTH WING</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Recorded Books) Violet Sorrengail is urged by the commanding general, who also is her mother, to become a candidate for the elite dragon riders. Read by Rebecca Soler and Teddy Hamilton. 20 hours, 47 minutes unabridged.	8	1	<b>OATH AND HONOR</b> , by Liz Cheney. (Hachette Audio) The former congresswoman from Wyoming recounts how she helped lead the Select Committee to Investigate the Jan. 6. Attack on the United States Capitol. Read by the author. 12 hours, 14 minutes unabridged.	1
2	<b>IRON FLAME</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Recorded Books) The second book in the Empyrean series. Read by Rebecca Soler and Teddy Hamilton. 28 hours, 16 minutes unabridged.	2	2	<b>THE WOMAN IN ME</b> , by Britney Spears. (Simon & Schuster Audio) The Grammy Award-winning pop star details her personal and professional experiences. Read by Michelle Williams. 5 hours, 31 minutes unabridged.	3
3	<b>TOM LAKE</b> , by Ann Patchett. (HarperAudio) Three daughters learn about their mother's relationship with a famous actor. Read by Meryl Streep. 11 hours, 22 minutes unabridged.	5	3	<b>OUTLIVE</b> , by Peter Attia with Bill Gifford. (Random House Audio) A look at recent scientific research on aging and longevity. Read by Peter Attia. 17 hours, 8 minutes unabridged.	10
4	<b>NONE OF THIS IS TRUE</b> , by Lisa Jewell. (Simon & Schuster Audio) Alix Summer becomes the subject of her own true crime podcast. Read by Kristin Atherton, Ayesha Antoine, Louise Brealey et al. 10 hours, 13 minutes unabridged.	5	4	<b>FRIENDS, LOVERS, AND THE BIG TERRIBLE THING</b> , by Matthew Perry. (Macmillan Audio) The actor shares stories from his childhood and his struggles with sobriety. Read by the author. 8 hours, 49 minutes unabridged.	8
5	<b>THE HEAVEN &amp; EARTH GROCERY STORE</b> , by James McBride. (Penguin Audio) Secrets held by the residents of a dilapidated neighborhood come to life when a skeleton is found at the bottom of a well. Read by Dominic Hoffman. 12 hours, 22 minutes unabridged.	4	5	<b>ELON MUSK</b> , by Walter Isaacson. (Simon & Schuster Audio) The author of "The Code Breaker" traces Musk's life. Read by Jeremy Bobb. 20 hours, 27 minutes unabridged.	4
6	<b>LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY</b> , by Bonnie Garmus. (Random House Audio) A scientist and single mother becomes a star on a TV cooking show in the 1960s. Read by Miranda Raison, Pandora Sykes and the author. 11 hours, 55 minutes unabridged.	17	6	<b>KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON</b> , by David Grann. (Random House Audio) The story of a murder spree in 1920s Oklahoma that targeted Osage Indians, whose lands contained oil. Read by Will Patton, Ann Marie Lee and Danny Campbell. 9 hours, 45 minutes unabridged.	9
7	<b>HOUSE OF EARTH AND BLOOD</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Audible Studios) Passion arises between Bryce Quinlan and Hunt Athalar as they seek to avenge the deaths of Bryce's friends. Read by Elizabeth Evans. 27 hours, 50 minutes unabridged.	2	7	<b>MY NAME IS BARBRA</b> , by Barbra Streisand. (Penguin Audio) The EGOT winner chronicles her journey in show business and reveals details about some of her personal relationships. Read by the author. 48 hours, 15 minutes unabridged.	2
8	<b>THE COVENANT OF WATER</b> , by Abraham Verghese. (Recorded Books) Three generations of a family living on South India's Malabar Coast suffer the loss of a family member by drowning. Read by the author. 31 hours, 16 minutes unabridged.	8	8	<b>THE BOYS IN THE BOAT</b> , by Daniel James Brown. (Penguin Audio) The story of the American rowers who pursued gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games; the basis of the film. Read by Edward Herrmann. 14 hours, 25 minutes unabridged.	1
9	<b>THE EDGE</b> , by David Baldacci. (Hachette Audio) The second book in the 6:20 Man series. Read by Zachary Webber, Erin Cottrell, Will Collyer, Erin Bennett and Tiffany Smith. 11 hours, 45 minutes unabridged.	2	9	<b>THE KINGDOM, THE POWER, AND THE GLORY</b> , by Tim Alberta. (HarperAudio) A look at divisions within the American evangelical movement. Read by the author. 18 hours, 15 minutes unabridged.	1
10	<b>DEMON COPPERHEAD</b> , by Barbara Kingsolver. (HarperAudio) A reimagining of Charles Dickens's "David Copperfield." Read by Charlie Thurston. 21 hours, 3 minutes unabridged.	14	10	<b>THE WAGER</b> , by David Grann. (Random House Audio) The survivors of a shipwrecked British vessel on a secret mission during an imperial war with Spain have different accounts of events. Read by Dion Graham and the author. 8 hours, 28 minutes unabridged.	6
11	<b>RESURRECTION WALK</b> , by Michael Connelly. (Hachette Audio) The seventh book in the Lincoln Lawyer series. Read by Peter Giles, Titus Welliver and Christine Lakin. 10 hours, 29 minutes unabridged.	2	11	<b>PARIS</b> , by Paris Hilton. (HarperAudio) The pop culture icon shares her personal and professional rise in the age of influencers. Read by the author. 8 hours, 22 minutes unabridged.	3
12	<b>REMARKABLY BRIGHT CREATURES</b> , by Shelby Van Pelt. (HarperAudio) A widow working the night shift at the Sowell Bay Aquarium is aided in solving a mystery by a giant Pacific octopus living there. Read by Marin Ireland and Michael Urie. 11 hours, 16 minutes unabridged.	11	12	<b>GREENLIGHTS</b> , by Matthew McConaughey. (Random House Audio) The actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over 35 years. Read by the author. 6 hours, 42 minutes unabridged.	39
13	<b>PROJECT HAIL MARY</b> , by Andy Weir. (Audible Studios) The fate of humanity rests on Ryland Grace's shoulders. Read by Ray Porter. 16 hours, 10 minutes unabridged.	16	13	<b>THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE</b> , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin Audio) How trauma affects the body and mind. Read by Sean Pratt. 16 hours, 17 minutes unabridged.	38
14	<b>INHERITANCE</b> , by Nora Roberts. (Macmillan Audio) A graphic designer receives an inheritance that stipulates she must live in a haunted Victorian house for at least three years. Read by Brittany Pressley and the author. 13 hours, 58 minutes unabridged.	1	14	<b>I'M GLAD MY MOM DIED</b> , by Jennette McCurdy. (Simon & Schuster Audio) The actress and filmmaker describes her eating disorders and difficult relationship with her mother. Read by the author. 6 hours, 25 minutes unabridged.	17
15	<b>HOUSE OF SKY AND BREATH</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Audible Studios) The second book in the Crescent City series. Read by Elizabeth Evans. 27 hours, 42 minutes unabridged.	3	15	<b>PREQUEL</b> , by Rachel Maddow. (Random House Audio) The MSNBC host and co-author of "Bag Man" details a campaign to overthrow the U.S. government and install authoritarian rule prior to and during our involvement in World War II. Read by the author. 13 hours, 10 minutes unabridged.	3

Audiobook rankings are composed of sales in the United States of digital and physical audio products from the previous month. Sales of titles are statistically weighted to represent and accurately reflect all outlets proportionally nationwide. Free-trial or low-cost trial audiobook sales are not eligible for inclusion. Publisher credits for audiobooks are listed under the audiobook publisher name. **ONLINE:** For more lists and a full explanation of our methodology, visit [www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers](http://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers).



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# Political Convert

A new biography dissects the life and legacy of a Confederate general who became a devoted supporter of Reconstruction.

By **BRENDA WINEAPPLE**

"BAD AS WAS BEING SHOT," the former Confederate general James Longstreet said years after he took a bullet in the neck from a fellow soldier in 1864, "being shot at, since the war, by many officers, was worse." In the decades after being hit by friendly fire at the Battle of the Wilderness, Longstreet was pilloried and hounded by unreconstructed white Southerners who said it was a shame the wound he received during the war hadn't been mortal.

Shockingly, this indefatigable fighter, Robert E. Lee's second-in-command — Lee called Longstreet his "old war horse" — had accepted the Confederacy's defeat; after Appomattox the war was essentially over, the South lost, there was no longer a

## LONGSTREET

### The Confederate General Who Defied the South

By **Elizabeth R. Varon**

Simon & Schuster. 441 pp. \$35.

Confederacy. Longstreet celebrated the passage of the 15th Amendment, which guaranteed Black men the right to vote and helped form a multiracial Louisiana State Militia.

In word and deed, then, Lt. Gen. James Longstreet refused to perpetuate the romantic myth of the "Lost Cause," the idea that the way of life the South was fighting to preserve, a way of life that included chattel slavery, was genteel, humane and noble and would someday be vindicated.

All this seemed an incredible turnaround for the soldier who once warned his troops that the Yankees were hellbent on making "the negro your equal." Such a man could only be a traitor — a "Confederate Judas" — as the historian Elizabeth R. Varon points out in "Longstreet," her impassioned biography, arguing that the arc of Longstreet's life embodies "American culture's unfolding contest over the Civil War's legacies."

Truly, his is a fascinating, but not altogether explicable, life. Born in 1821 in South Carolina to slave-owning planters, Longstreet was sent to Augusta, Ga., as a young boy to live with his uncle Augustus, a prominent jurist and ferocious disunionist who implored fellow Southerners to ban "polluted" Northern books, avoid Northern schools and cultivate their own pro-slavery books and institutions that would "elevate and purify the education of the South."

Augustus also made sure that young Longstreet would attend West Point,

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where he distinguished himself by finishing near the bottom of his class. He also met the fellow cadet Ulysses S. Grant, a lifelong friend who married Longstreet's distant cousin and whom Longstreet later called "the man who was to eclipse all."

After the battle of Fort Sumter in 1861, Longstreet resigned from the United States Army and joined the Confederacy, first as a brigade commander and then as a major general, leading his own division. He crushed Union soldiers at the Second Bull Run, Fredericksburg and Chickamauga.

But at Gettysburg, he disagreed with Lee about the wisdom of a frontal offensive and suggested a maneuver that would force the Federal troops to attack first. "The enemy is here," Lee replied, "and if we do not whip him, he will whip us."

Longstreet obeyed but, years later, to some observers and angry commentators, he seemed deliberately to have dawdled and cost the Confederates a knockout victory. In retrospect, this was the beginning of what Varon calls a "struggle over Civil War memory," in which Longstreet became an easy scapegoat.

By the end of the 1860s, he was endorsing Black suffrage and imploring fellow Southerners to abandon "ideas that are obsolete" in order to recreate and rebuild the devastated South. Varon suggests that Grant's liberal terms of surrender at Appomattox and his message of reconciliation motivated Longstreet's political conversion. Perhaps; Grant helped secure his old West Point friend amnesty from Congress and got him a plum job as surveyor of customs for New Orleans. From that point on, Longstreet was in the employ of the country he'd so fiercely fought.

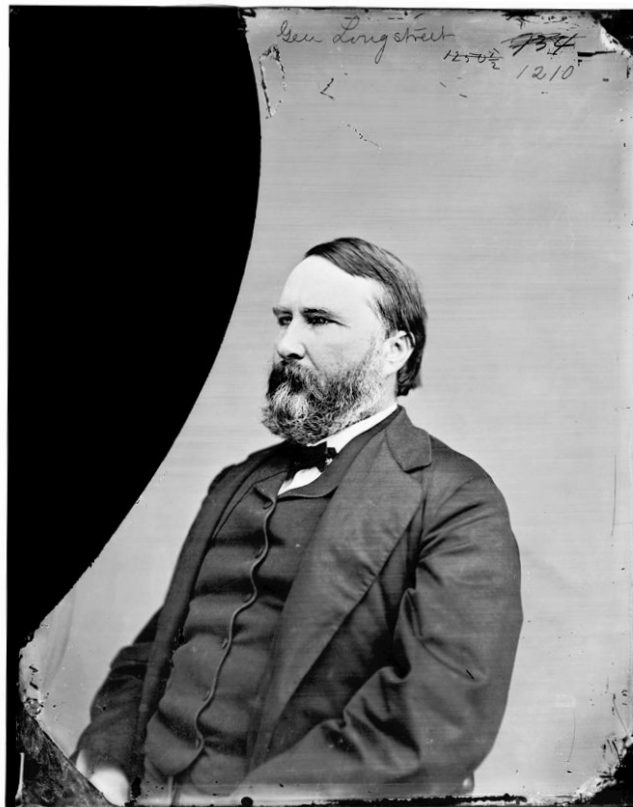
In 1870, the Republican governor of Louisiana appointed Longstreet to the command of the state's multiracial militia. The apostate Longstreet led and supported Brig. Gen. Alexander E. Barber, a Black Army veteran and state senator, as a brigade commander, and under Longstreet's leadership, all militia members had to pledge that they would "accept the civil and political equality of all men." His stature nose-dived among former Confederates.

Varon does a nice job of combing through the tangled web of Louisiana's postwar politics. Longstreet's strong commitment to racial inclusion meant he would have to battle many of the men who had once fought under him. Intending to topple the Republican government in Louisiana, Confederate veterans and white su-

premacists were forming paramilitary groups, called White Leagues, to massacre white Republicans and Black citizens.

In September 1874, the Crescent City White League opened fire on the multiracial police force and broke their line. Reinforcements arrived too late. Federal troops eventually restored the besieged government, but Longstreet's militia had been humiliated.

Longstreet and his family moved back to Georgia, and as a loyal Republican, he served as deputy collector of internal revenue and then as postmaster. President



James Longstreet, after the Civil War.

face of vigilante violence and internal wrangling. And though many Black Republicans distrusted Longstreet, they respected his willingness to fight for Black voting rights and to make interracial alliances. During the McKinley administration, with the assistance of several Black Republicans in Georgia, Longstreet was appointed U.S. railroad commissioner. By now, though, Civil War veterans, Federal and Confederate, were being "swept up," Varon writes, "in the burgeoning cult of sectional reunion." The purpose of this reunion, she implies, was to paper over the real cause of the war — slavery, and its pernicious legacy — so that both sides "could share the moral high ground in American memory."

Though Longstreet continued to refute the myth of the Lost Cause in articles and interviews, he gave up on Reconstruction. Once again, Varon notes, Longstreet managed a "political balancing act." In the 1890s, he broadly condemned white supremacist violence, but he compared lynching, which he considered deplorable, to the labor strikes and disorder in the North — an echo of the comparison trotted out by the advocates of slavery before the war to justify the peculiar institution. In this new equivocal spirit of comity and negligence, North and South, radical and conservative, could thus join hands presumably to bury the bloody past and ignore the present.

While Varon brilliantly creates the wider context for Longstreet's career, she leans, alas, far more toward historiography than biography. Quoting extensively from the 19th-century press and modern histori-

ans, Varon contends that Longstreet's recent biographers depict him as politically inept and ignore the complexity of a brave man whose very "legacy would prove to be a battlefield of its own."

Her book, then, is not so much about Longstreet's character or his motivations or even how he came to possess the "courage to change," as she poignantly observes, but about a symbolic Longstreet who embodies incompatible postwar narratives.

Caught in the snares of propaganda that still echoes today, when the meaning and legacy of slavery are being vigorously debated, the iconoclastic, fallible and human Longstreet, Varon acutely concludes, is more tabula rasa than marble man. Marble monuments enshrine the Lost Cause, which General Longstreet, whoever he was, valiantly knew to be a cause well lost. □

**Essay** / **Just Don't Call It a Book Club** / By Molly Young

Reading Rhythms invites guests to read silently for an hour and then chat with strangers about their books.



At FourFiveSix, a bar in Brooklyn, over 60 people showed up to read in companionable silence with strangers last month. At right, John Lifrieri, one of the founders of Reading Rhythms.

“YOU JUST MADE A rookie mistake,” the young woman told me.

It had been under three minutes since I'd arrived at FourFiveSix, a bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. A mistake at a bar in under three minutes was a personal record.

“What did I do?” I asked.

The woman laughed. “You chose a backless seat.”

This was true. After fetching a drink, I had chosen a padded bench. Normally the topic of lumbar support would be irrelevant on a night out, but this evening was different.

On a cold Monday in December, 65 people were gathered for Reading Rhythms, an event that bills itself as “not a book club” but “a reading party.” The parties, which began in May, take place on rooftops, in parks and at bars. The premise is simple: Show up with a book, commit to vanquishing a chapter or two and chat with strangers about what you've just read.

The attendees that night, each of whom had paid a \$10 entry fee, were the lucky ones: 270 people were on the wait-list to get in. Just because a city never sleeps doesn't mean it isn't crammed with introverts who wish to turn pages in companionable silence.

The idea for Reading Rhythms emerged when four friends in their 20s — Ben Bradbury, Charlotte Jackson, John Lifrieri and Tom Worcester — discovered a shared sense of alarm over the deterioration of their book consumption. The causes were what you'd expect: annihilated attention spans, too much socializing, the treacherous enchantments of the iPhone.

Bradbury and Worcester, who are roommates, hosted the first event on their rooftop. A playlist was compiled, 10 friends showed up with books, everyone read for a bit and talked about what they'd read, and then . . . went

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**MOLLY YOUNG** is a critic for *The Times*, a contributing writer for *The Times Magazine* and the creator of the newsletter *Read Like the Wind*.

home. It was, Bradbury later recalled, “quite special.” No, really!

“I got an hour of reading done and I hung out with some of my best friends, which I'd wanted to do anyway,” he said. “*That* doesn't usually happen.”

Jackson left the first party feeling that she'd “scratched the itch of being in the library at school, waxing philosophical late at night with friends,” but without the burden of an exam or essay on the horizon. “There was no end game; it was purely fun.”

The four solidified a format, gave the series a name, planned additional parties, opened up the invite list and started an Instagram account. Since May there have been parties in New York, Los Angeles and (of all places) Croatia. The parties have grown in size: One scheduled for February has capacity for 175 readers, and the lion's share of the slots are already filled.

In November, a TikTok video about the series went viral. Predictably, skeptical commenters chimed in: “Hipsters recreated the library and think it's profound 🤔” and “soooooo000000 . . . a glorified library?”

But at the event last month, none of the guests seemed to operate under the illusion that they'd reinvented any wheels. And “glorified library” actually described the ambience well: Seating included antique armchairs, deep sofas and velvety settees; flickering votive candles emitted an amber glow; hot toddies and beer were available. There was live piano music. A faux fire faux-burned cozily against one wall.

As the founders continued to host parties, they settled upon a structure. Attendees are given a name tag and half an hour to find a seat and settle in. A host then gets up before the crowd and explains the night's schedule: 30 minutes of reading, a break, 30 more minutes of reading and then a set of discussions organized around loose prompts. Parties are held early in the week to capture gentle, non-weekend energy.

The first 30 minutes passed quickly. Lifrieri, one of the founders, suggested everyone pluck an idea from what we'd just read and “turn to a stranger” to discuss. An icy dart of trepidation shot through my body at the command, but to a stranger I turned: Dilvan, 29, who was reading Michael A. Singer's “The Untethered Soul.”

Dilvan shared a paragraph that she'd highlighted and we discussed its implications, which turned out to be mutually troubling. Conversation turned to other topics: Dilvan had moved to the United States from Turkey for college, specifically to study in “a cold location” featuring snow. The idea of weather-based school selection was fascinating to me. Dilvan landed in Minnesota, which satisfied her temperature requirements and also prompted her to learn English rapidly thanks to the absence of other Turks in the area.

A glance around the room revealed strangers deep in conversation. Everyone had found her Dilvan.

The second reading chunk was announced and people obediently reopened their books. Nearby titles included “A Common Life: Four Generations of American Literary Friendships and Influence,” by David Laskin, “The Verifiers,” by Jane Pek, and “Anam Cara: A Book Of Celtic Wisdom,” by John O'Donohue.

Reading postures varied. Some attendees sat cross-legged with a book resting lapwise. Others were curled up on a sofa. Many adopted a modified “The Thinker” position. One man read his book standing ramrod straight, like a marsh bird. Not once did a cellphone chime.

By the time the second block ended, a spirit of modest accomplishment pervaded the room. Sitting close by was a man named Adam who had attended three Reading Rhythms events and planned to host one in the near future. What had converted him so swiftly?

“Outside of school and religious ceremonies, there are hardly any environments where we get to read in unison,” Adam said. “It's kind of beautiful, no?” □

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## **The Book Review Podcast**

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