The New York Times

Book Review

SEPTEMBER 7, 2025

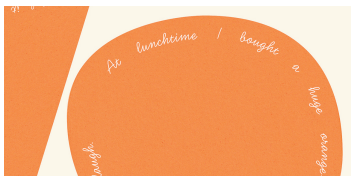
The New Power Brokers Jonathan Mahler's "The Gods of New York" portrays the city's rebirth in the 1980s as a glitzy capital of global finance — and a petri dish of ego, ambition and class division.

BY GARTH RISK HALLBERG | PAGE 9

MATT DORFMAN

Book Review

The New York Times
SEPTEMBER 7, 2025



Fiction & Poetry

7 **Crime & Mystery**
Reviewed by Sarah Weinman

8 **THE HOUNDING**
By Xenobe Purvis
Reviewed by Joumana Khatib

10 **BRING THE HOUSE DOWN**
By Charlotte Runcie
Reviewed by Jesse Green

14 **A DOG IN GEORGIA**
By Lauren Grodstein
Reviewed by Leah Greenblatt

14 **DOGS**
By C. Mallon
Reviewed by Isaac Fitzgerald

15 **COLLECTED POEMS**
By Wendy Cope
Reviewed by Dwight Garner

16 **SEDUCTION THEORY**
By Emily Adrian
Reviewed by Hannah Pittard

Nonfiction

9 **THE GODS OF NEW YORK**
Egoists, Idealists, Opportunists, and the Birth of the Modern City: 1986-1990
By Jonathan Mahler
Reviewed by Garth Risk Hallberg

11 **SUMMER OF OUR DISCONTENT**
The Age of Certainty and the Demise of Discourse
By Thomas Chatterton Williams
Reviewed by Justin Driver

17 **BLACK MOSES**
A Saga of Ambition and the Fight for a Black State
By Caleb Gayle
Reviewed by Greg Grandin

Children's Books

18 **Essay**
Why "Hamlet" Is My Favorite Piece of Writing
By Katherine Rundell

Features

6 **By the Book**
Mick Herron

12 **Essay**
"The Charterhouse of Parma," by Stendhal
By Liesl Schillinger

22 **Visuals**
The Art of the Book
By James Hill

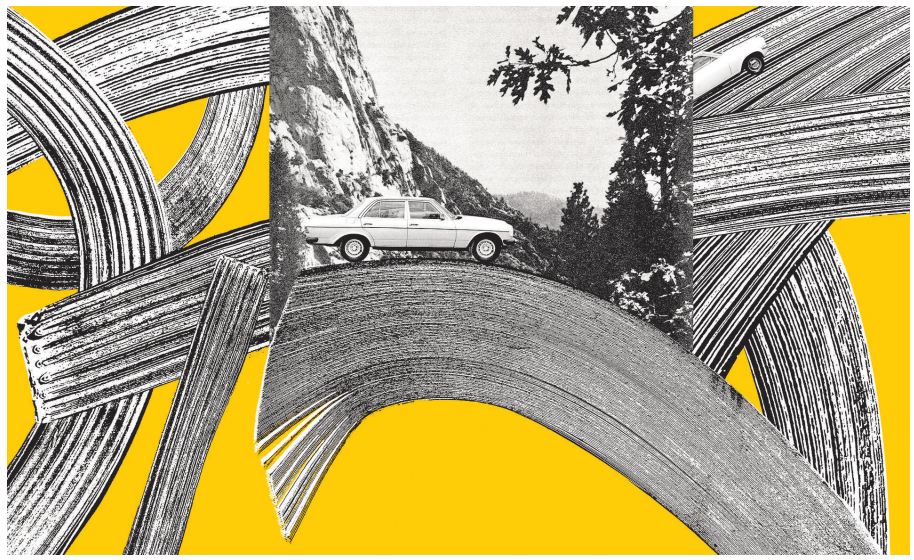
Etc.

4 Letters
19 Best-Seller Lists
19 Editors' Choice
20 Paperback Row

On the cover, clockwise from bottom left: Sharonne Salaam with William Kunstler; Yusef Salaam; an unidentified protester; Donald Trump; Rudy Giuliani; Ed Koch; Rupert Murdoch; and Al Sharpton.

COVER PHOTOGRAPHS, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: MIKE ALBANS/ASSOCIATED PRESS; PHILLIP SCHOULTZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS; OSEPH MAJOR/ASSOCIATED PRESS; RON GALELLA/RON GALELLA COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES (3); UPI/BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; RON GALELLA/RON GALELLA COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

Letters



On the Road, Again

TO THE EDITOR:
I was chagrined that Che Guevara's "The Motorcycle Diaries" didn't make the cut in "18 Great Road Trip Books That Aren't 'On the Road'" (Aug. 24). While I saw marginal inclusions like Robert M. Pirsig's "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" and Sonia Nazario's "Enrique's Journey," this classic road narrative deserves recognition.

Guevara and Alberto Granado's 1952 journey across South America on "La Poderosa," a 1939 Norton 500cc, belongs alongside Kerouac and Pirsig. Like Huck Finn or Thoreau, Guevara discovers that the road is more than scenery; it's where youthful idealism transforms into political consciousness. His encounters with Indigenous communities, miners and lepers push him from wanderer to revolutionary.

"The Motorcycle Diaries" influenced a generation of readers who saw Guevara's journey as a model of rejecting conformity and seeking radical purpose. It broadens the road tradition beyond the American Beats to include Latin American revolutionaries — all connected by the search for individual freedom and truth through wandering.

RAFAEL C. CASTILLO
SAN ANTONIO

♦

TO THE EDITOR:
My copy of the Book Review seems to have omitted the page describing John Steinbeck's "Travels With Charley: In Search of America" — because surely you wouldn't have excluded it? To this day, I think of it whenever I have breakfast on a road trip.

DANA WHALEN
ROCKY HILL, CONN.

TO THE EDITOR:
Great selections all, but you missed one: "Divine Right's Trip," by Gurney Norman, published episodically in Whole Earth Catalog (1971). I recently emailed a fan letter to the author, who is enjoying "a comfortable retirement following some years as a university professor."

KENNEDY GAMMAGE
SAN DIEGO

CORRECTION

An article on Aug. 24 about great road trip books misstated the circumstances behind "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," by Tom Wolfe, which detailed a cross-country bus tour undertaken by the novelist Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters. Wolfe reconstructed that trip after the fact from notes, film footage and interviews; it is not the case that he "rode along" with Kesey and the other passengers.

BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM

WHAT OUR READERS ARE READING

"I'm reading Lion Feuchtwanger's **THE OPPERMANNS**, a 1933 novel about the rise of Nazism in Germany," writes Lewis Beale. "It is terrifyingly prescient."

Anne N. Edwards is rereading Willa Cather's pioneer novel, **MY ÁNTONIA.** The story transported her to a different world, she writes, "one drenched in blankets of rich, warm color."

ILLUSTRATION BY LUCY JONES

Mick Herron

'Barely a page goes by without some new horror,' he says of 'The Wind in the Willows,' beloved by kids yet 'actually rife with criminal behavior.' The latest book in his Slough House series is 'Clown Town.'

What books are on your night stand?

"The Predicament," by William Boyd; "*frank: sonnets*," by Diane Seuss; and "The Eights," by Joanna Miller.

How do you organize your books?

Organize books? How would that work?

Are there books or authors from childhood that stick with you?

One I'll never unstick myself from is "The Wind in the Willows," a classic often regarded as a heartwarming tale about talking animals, but which is actually rife with criminal behavior — speeding, contempt of court, jailbreak, identity theft, horse rustling, hate speech ("Onion sauce!"), coercive deprogramming, child abduction, grooming, vigilantism, carol singing. Barely a page goes by without some new horror. It's also a heartwarming tale about talking animals.

How do you name your characters?

Either a name lands immediately (like "Jackson Lamb"), and I never question it, or it takes work. I've written passages in which a character is identified by an X while I wait for something better to arrive.

How do you sign books for your fans?

I often thank them for being readers. Without that small detail, neither they, nor I, nor the book being signed, would be present.

"Clown Town" has a great first line. Did you start there, or come to it later?

It came later, but it's the first big hurdle. I never start writing at Page 1 — I like to have a fair amount of material first: descriptions, character introductions, dialogue. Much will be discarded, but it helps to know it's there. Writing the opening is when the hard work starts, so having the right first line is crucial. Rhythm plays an important part. Rhythm bestows memorability. At the same time, you don't want it to be *rum-ti-tum-ti-tum*.

You've said that poetry is a big influence on your writing. Are there poems or poets that have seeped into this book?

Not as obviously as in "Bad Actors," the opening line of which reads: "The woods were lovely, dark, and deep, and full of noisy bastards." (A copy editor tried to remove that second comma. I asked her to take it up with Robert Frost.)

But the influence seeps deeper than simply making allusions. In poetry, every syllable counts. That's just as important in prose, especially if you aspire to humor — a punchline delivered in five syllables is more than twice as effective as one that takes 10. Rhythm and brevity are among poetry's lessons.

Could there be a Slough House book without a two-word title?

No. I hate to use the word "branding" with reference to my Slough House novels, but, you know . . . Branding.

Why are the Brits so good at capturing political bureaucratic skulduggery in their novels?

Because political bureaucratic skulduggery is in our bloodstream, like cricket, embarrassment and binge drinking.

How do you keep current on micro-tensions in office life now that you no longer work in an office?

Some things you never forget. Besides, such micro-tensions are born of human interaction, human behavior, and we're unlikely to have evolved beyond them in the space of less than a decade.

Can a great book be badly written? What other criteria can overcome bad prose?

No. Once you'd occasionally hear that a novel has such a cracking story line that it carries you beyond the poor prose — you know the kind of thing: "The characters may be wooden, and the dialogue stilted, but you really want to know what happens next." Not me. If the characters are wooden and the dialogue stilted, I don't care what happens next.

What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn't?

There've been plenty, but life's too short, and writing too difficult, to deliver blasts against books that disappointed. The one-star review — I've said this before — is the domain of the bitter and the thwarted.

If you were to write something besides spy stories, what would you write?

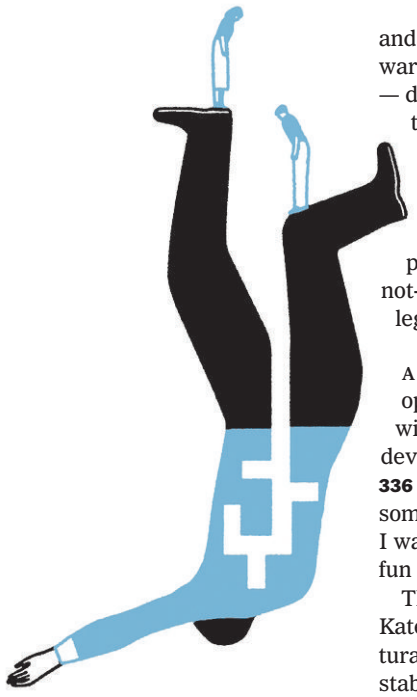
To-do lists, mostly. □

Email interview conducted and edited by Scott Heller. An expanded version is available at nytimes.com/books.

ILLUSTRATION BY REBECCA CLARKE

CRIME & MYSTERY / BY SARAH WEINMAN

The Art of Murder



New novels from Victor Suthammanont, Morgan Richter, Joe R. Lansdale and Randy Wayne White offer a variety of adventures to follow.

I'VE LONG BEEN fascinated with criminal cases that end in acquittals — not because of the trial or the spectacle, but because of the aftermath, and how being found "not guilty" can have a significant negative impact on the lives of everyone involved, particularly family members of victims and the accused.

So I was especially intrigued by the premise of **HOLLOW SPACES (Counterpoint, 384 pp., $28)**, which begins as John Lo, the only Asian American partner at his law firm, is acquitted of the murder of his colleague (and extramarital girlfriend) Jessica DeSalvo. After the trial, his marriage implodes; his two children, Brennan and Hunter, arrive at different conclusions about his guilt; and no one seems to care who killed Jessica if John didn't.

Three decades later, Brennan and Hunter — a litigator and a war correspondent, respectively — decide to confront that mystery, which Suthammanont unspools with gorgeous precision. The heart of "Hollow Spaces" lies in the way children repeat their parents' mistakes — and the not-so-casual racism in privileged spaces.

A CRIME NOVEL featuring an opera singer's battle of wits with her understudy? I couldn't devour **THE UNDERSTUDY (Knopf, 336 pp., $28)** fast enough, and if some of the parts didn't quite gel, I was having too much delicious fun reading it to care.

The opera singer is Kit — Katerina on the stage — a coloratura soprano who, after an unstable childhood and years of toil, is about to take on her first starring role, in a production based on the campy 1968 film "Barbarella." Then Yolanda, the understudy, walks in, "voluptuous and radiating sexual confidence," her sultry charm instantly at odds with Kit's controlled cool. Yolanda wants what Kit has — all of it — and her sense of decorum is utterly nonexistent.

As Kit tells us: "The first time my understudy tried to kill me was on the day we met."

The game is on, escalating from a poisoned drink to subway platform shoves. But then someone else in the company dies, and Richter's plot pivots to something even darker as Kit learns what is really driving Yolanda's behavior.

HAP AND LEONARD, the stars of Lansdale's long-running East Texas-based private detective series, crack wise plenty and knock heads even more, but the best friends could not be more different in appearance, temperament and outlook. In **HATCHET GIRLS (Mulholland, 288 pp., $30)** it seems like the band might be breaking up, as Leonard is planning his wedding and distancing himself from the P.I. firm, while Hap and his wife are contemplating their own domestic issues.

But when a woman enlists their help to catch a 400-pound hog ("It's a hog. Sizable. Keeps attacking the family"), Hap and Leonard take on the case, only to be sucked into the vortex of a cultish group of women who have attached themselves to their hatchet-toting, revenge-seeking, society-torching leader. The question, as always, is how Hap and Leonard will live to fight another day.

The mood here is elegiac, if ruminations on aging and domesticity coupled with bursts of violence count as such. Hap and Leonard may end up in a new place in their lives, but it seems they will continue to be divining rods for trouble.

I ARRIVED AT a similar conclusion about **TOMLINSON'S WAKE (Hanover Square Press, 336 pp., $29.99)**, White's 28th novel featuring the marine biologist (and former government assassin) Doc Ford, who's trying, and failing, to live a quiet life on Sanibel Island.

When his friend Tomlinson's boat washes up empty on a reef off Honduras's Mosquito Coast after a hurricane, Ford heads there to find him. And he does, only to have Tomlinson tell him an incredible story: that he died during the storm, but was brought back to life by a one-armed 12-year-old who may be the last descendant of an ancient Mayan king, a boy many people do not want around lest he inspire a revolution. Tomlinson needs to hide the child, and he needs Ford's help.

Ford encounters a slew of shady characters — criminals and traffickers; an archaeologist sex addict; a menace known locally as Iron Baby — as he tries to get a handle on the situation. Then an earthquake hits, sending everything into disarray, and Ford realizes things are not as they appear: "One look, and I knew that this trap . . . had been set up by a boy who actually believed he was the hereditary King of the Maya." □

SARAH WEINMAN *is the Book Review's Crime & Mystery columnist.*

ILLUSTRATION BY PABLO AMARGO

Girls Gone Wild

Five orphaned sisters raise the suspicions of their neighbors in an 18th-century English village.

By JOUMANA KHATIB

WELCOME TO Little Nettlebed, England, where the "season of strangeness" has begun.

Heat is addling every resident's mind, priming them to feel indiscriminate rage — toward even "the sound of the birds, the air on their skin." A sturgeon, huge and unholy, is found beached along the shrinking river.

And there are the Mansfield girls — five orphaned, aloof sisters in mourning, whose self-possession and inscrutable mien make their neighbors uneasy. The local drunk, a misogynistic ferryman named Pete Darling, swears he's seen them transform into a pack of dogs, and before long, news of his dubious vision has bolted around town.

Xenobe Purvis's outstanding debut novel, "The Hounding," unfolds in 1700s Oxfordshire, but the atmosphere of paranoia and bloodthirsty groupthink often feels uncomfortably familiar.

The Mansfields — Anne, Elizabeth, Hester, Grace and Mary, so close that their names spoken aloud sound like an incantation, or a prayer — live just beyond town with their grandfather Joseph, a recent widower. Half-blind and benevolent, like a sweetly fictionalized John Milton, Joseph presides over what once was a happy, liberated farm. His wife had a fiercely independent streak: a point of pride for Joseph, and a trait they nurtured in their granddaughters. Now his greatest wish is to protect the girls from malign incursions, and he's right to worry — beyond his home is "a ravenous world, a world with teeth."

True to its name, there's an ominous air throughout Little Nettlebed. "If violence was their god, then the alehouse was their church," Purvis writes of the villagers. No one models this better than Pete Darling, who is prone to visitations from angels and vaguely biblical dreams while recovering from a bender.

He's in this state when he sees the Mansfield girls transform; gazing at them across the river, he witnesses five figures walking upright, then suddenly "growing close to the ground. Running on all fours. Barking."

Pete has been wrong before, but even villagers sympathetic to the girls — and there aren't many — recognize something just strange enough in the Mansfields that they can nearly believe him. The publican's wife, Temperance, who as a rule steers her customers toward restraint and feels the girls are being unfairly tarred, could picture their "rosebud mouths extending into snarling jaws." And from there, the rumor takes off.

In the Mansfields, Purvis has spun a subtle, clever riff on a vampire story. The horror, for this community, isn't in the girls' alleged transformation but in the idea that wildness and aberrance have been coiled in them from the beginning. That the Mansfields could be monsters in the shape of girls haunting the borders of their lives.

In a town where "a treat for drinking men could only mean one thing: Something was going to be hurt that evening," who is monstrous, really? (My warning to any reader with strong opinions about badger welfare: Brace for a terribly upsetting scene that, unfortunately, reveals much about the village's character.)

Hate and even sadism churn throughout Little Nettlebed: One particularly callous tradition calls for pregnant women to carry the coffins of mothers who die in childbirth.

Given the choice, I'd rather be a dog.

There are pockets of mercy. Two young men who work for the Mansfields are a welcome counter to the local prevailing, brutish model of manhood with their tremendous depth of feeling. Robin, a preternaturally gentle boy, is more unnerved by his neighbors' appetite for scandal than by the possibility of the girls' transformation (it's hardly stranger than tales of lost fortunes or hauntings, or a pair of ravens that signal impending death). And Thomas, who is hired to help with the Mansfields' hay-making and is eventually accepted into the girls' inner circle, immediately senses an otherworldly connection to them — one that "felt like ruling and serving simultaneously."

Purvis is adept at conjuring a mounting sense of dread, and it is a pleasure to linger in her imagination. Her attention to the natural world — one of cow parsley, hairy comfrey and the "pearly glint of spent mussels" — is a marvel, if not exactly a respite from the sinister atmosphere. Even in the silty, receding water of the river lies "a quick, darting disturbance, something emerging from the dark bed."

But her greatest creations are the sisters: Take the quietly powerful Anne, who seems to bewitch every man she encounters; the tomboy, Hester, who laments the arrival of her period by howling from a tree; or the youngest, Mary, who engages her grandfather in a slyly brilliant game of make-believe. Unlike so many other girls in town, the Mansfields have been encouraged to dream of rich, full lives, and in the process developed a shared idiom and wit that outruns anyone else's in town. It's also what makes them an ideal target.

Thomas, soon after beginning his work for the Mansfield family, gently broaches the rumors with one of the sisters. She intuits his real question: Is there anything actually wrong with them?

"Her face seemed suddenly very old. 'Oh,' she said. 'So much.'" □

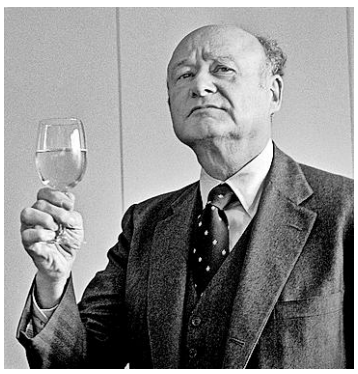
THE HOUNDING
By Xenobe Purvis
Holt. 226 pp. $26.99.

JOUMANA KHATIB *is an editor at the Book Review.*

ILLUSTRATION BY DAY BRIÈRRE

The New Power Brokers

A history portrays New York's rebirth in the 1980s as a capital of global finance — and a petri dish of ego, ambition and class division.



From left: Donald Trump, Al Sharpton and Don King; New York City mayor Ed Koch; Yusef Salaam; Senator Alfonse D'Amato (left) and U.S. Attorney Rudolph Giuliani; the Empire State Building.

By GARTH RISK HALLBERG

AMONG JONATHAN MAHLER'S many gifts is an extraordinary sense of timing. He was partway through the research for "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning," his nonfiction book about New York in 1977, when the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 ripped a hole in the orderly illusions of the Giuliani era. What could have been a mere nostalgia trip, the bad old days of the '70s as viewed from the end of history, became instead a suggestive mirroring: crisis calling to crisis, and possibility to possibility.

His new book, "The Gods of New York," attempts a sort of sequel. It seeks to tell the story of the city a decade later, amid the excesses and excrescences of the 1980s: coke jags and shoulder pads, AIDS and crack and Odeon. Mahler's preferred method remains the panorama. In one corner of his crowded canvas, "4,000 invited guests who'd paid $5,000 per ticket" watch as President Reagan zaps the Statue of Liberty with red, white and blue lasers. ("She's everybody's gal," he says, saluting her 100th birthday.) In another, a tracksuited Al Sharpton leads a protest march through Bensonhurst, where locals shake watermelons in fury.

Everywhere, the streets teem with arbitrageurs and ACT UP activists and the swelling ranks of the homeless. And high above, in his obsidian glass tower, an outerborough schemer named Donald J. Trump works to refashion himself as "the city's white id." A parallel can be drawn between this scene and our own, and Mahler, a staff writer for The New York Times Magazine, intends to draw it.

A couple of narrative through lines help get us from there to here. The first is "a series of heavily publicized, racially charged incidents" that dominated the tabloid headlines of the day. The book opens in 1986, with the apparent stabbing of the corrupt politico Donald Manes ("QUEENS BORO PREZ KNIFED"), and ends in 1989, in the auto-da-fé of the Central Park jogger case ("NONE OF US IS SAFE"). Along the way we revisit Bernhard Goetz and the Preppy Murder, Howard Beach and Tawana Brawley. It's possible to imagine, or even long for, a re-evaluation of these controversies through bottom-up reporting — say, an intimate look at the life of 16-year-old Yusuf Hawkins before he was shot by a member of a racist mob, or that of Yusef Salaam before he was convicted of a crime he didn't commit.

In fact, Mahler's storytelling is most powerful precisely where it digs the deepest. His writing on homelessness is particularly strong, revealing the housing crisis not as an insuperable fact of city life but as the outcome of deliberate choices: the failure to fund a planned system of transitional "community-based mental health centers," the scandalous clearing of the city's S.R.O. hotels to make way for high-end developers. Portraits of the homeless advocate Joyce Brown and the fifth grader David Bright, one of the city's numerous "hotel kids," glow with nuance and sympathy.

THE GODS OF NEW YORK
Egotists, Idealists, Opportunists, and the Birth of the Modern City: 1986-1990
By Jonathan Mahler
Random House. 452 pp. $32.

By and large, though, in keeping with the era's tabloid tenor, Mahler's protagonists are the titular "gods": a pantheon of boldface names, mostly white, mostly male, who keep popping up at the center of every story. We get pocket biographies not just of Trump and Sharpton, but also of Ed Koch and Rudy Giuliani. "A new breed of power brokers," the prologue calls them, "crisis opportunists with radically different agendas but a common set of abilities that made them perfectly suited for this moment."

Whatever its merits as history, the great-man approach succeeds admirably as cultural criticism. That is, it recovers the centrality of the now-diminished tabloids in shaping the city's hierarchies of attention. Beginning in the late 1970s, when Rupert Murdoch transformed The New York Post from "a dutiful liberal daily" (per "Ladies and Gentlemen") to a gleefully revanchist rival to The Daily News, the two papers (along with the "more dignified" Newsday — a "tabloid in a tutu," joked its competitors) rallied New Yorkers around"the same narratives and story lines," Mahler writes, "even as they divided them with their coverage."

Social media has since usurped this agenda-setting power. But where a newsfeed is fragmentary and private, sealing us inside algorithmically curated silos, the tabloids were demotic and public, a live-action chyron covering the face of every second stranger on the bus or subway with a legible record of the city's dreamwork. They had the virtue of naming aloud the obsessions this famously outspoken city elsewhere prefers to euphemize: race and sex and death and money.

Then again, as Joan Didion pointed out 34 years ago in "Sentimental Journeys" — still the best thing written on 1980s New York — the outcome of all that braying outrage was a perverse quietism: a triumph of the anecdotal over the political, a reduction of systems and structures to mere vibe and "energy," none of it really amenable to democratic control. And this narcotizing effect is reproduced in "The Gods of New York" — without, I think, the author quite realizing it.

It's not that Mahler underplays the class disparities that widened to a chasm after the '70s. At times, he even exaggerates them, in pursuit of his own "Bonfire of the Vanities." There is much trumpeting of the "rebirth" of the city, often linked to Trump (its "personification," Mahler says), or, more broadly, to the growth of the FIRE industries: finance, insurance and real estate. "Investment banking suddenly became sexy," Mahler writes, without obvious irony. "A city of renters became a city of owners."

But dig a little deeper, and the "rebirth" of the 1980s — the backdrop for Mahler's story of opportunity lost — reads as remarkably shallow and short-lived, particularly given the shortages of housing and good jobs and solidarity that persist four decades later. By 1986, a downturn in crime that tracked the end of a national recession had already abated. And in the fall of '87, the go-go era on Wall Street ended in a spectacular crash.

To the extent that the '80s constituted any kind of "rebirth," the high-flying decade lasted roughly the lag time from "The Muppets Take Manhattan" to "New Jack City." Another way of describing them is as an asset bubble. This is not to pine for a return to the depopulation and violence and insolvency of the 1970s; only to ask, was sexy banking ever a solution to the problems, or just a strategy to reapportion them?

"The Gods of New York" is, to its credit, a deeply political book. It records, in its dramatic leaps and juxtapositions, the coincidence of great fortune and mass marginalization. But Mahler too often avoids inferring any causal link.

Still, it is possible to glimpse through his narrative about narratives another, unsexier story. It goes something like this: In digging out of the crisis of capital accumulation that defined the mid-70s, the city's real power brokers — "a group of unelected officials including several business leaders" — decided to cut loose the working class and the poor, cleaning up the city's balance sheet (and their own) through a series of tax bonanzas and privatizations and regressive cuts to institutions like public transit and education. To purchase the consent of the middle classes, who stood to gain only in trickles, the primary victims were recast as a racialized other — a "them" who must be disciplined if any of "us" were to be "safe."

The resulting order we now call "neoliberalism"; it conditions not just our city, but our world. Attempts to challenge it locally have been met ever since with the specter of the 1970s: Do you really want to go back there?

But Mahler's charting of the fallout of the '80s boom, or, if you prefer, his demonstration that it was a chimera to begin with, complicates the question of alternatives. And it arrives at just the right moment, as New Yorkers prepare to vote, once again, on whether the benefits of a stratified city outweigh the costs — on whether it's time to turn the page on the ghosts of the past or to keep fighting them, like characters in someone else's dream. □

GARTH RISK HALLBERG *is the author of the novels "City on Fire" and "The Second Coming."*

PHOTOGRAPH, FROM LEFT: RON GALELLA COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES; NEAL BOENZI/THE NEW YORK TIMES; AP PHOTO/MALCOM CLARKE; TONY JEROME/NEWSDAY RM, VIA GETTY IMAGES; PETER KEEGAN/HULTON ARCHIVE, VIA GETTY IMAGES

Critical Mass

Drawing on her own experience, an arts journalist comically skewers bad men, bad faith and (unforgivably) bad theater.

By JESSE GREEN

HOW CRUEL MAY a critic be? I ask for a friend.

David Niven was once dismissed as "tall, dark and not the slightest bit handsome." (He hung the review in his bathroom.) John Simon described Barbra Streisand's nose in "A Star Is Born" as "a ziggurat made of meat" bisecting the screen like "a bolt of fleshy lightning."

Having never gone further than calling an actor confused or miscast, I find such put-downs shocking. But they pale in comparison to Alex Lyons's review of Hayley Sinclair in a one-woman Edinburgh Festival Fringe production called "Climate Emergence-She." After disemboweling the script, Lyons turns his attention to its author and star. "Hayley herself is so tedious, and so derivative," he writes, "that after you've endured the first 10 minutes of what the venue is loosely calling 'a show,' you'll be begging for the world to end much sooner than scheduled."

BRING THE HOUSE DOWN
By Charlotte Runcie
Doubleday. 304 pp. $28.

Should Lyons, the lead critic at a major British newspaper, be canceled for that? How about if, in the hours between writing the pan and its publication, he picks up Sinclair at a bar and sleeps with her? She reads her one-star review in the morning, not knowing until then that the man she spent the night with was its author.

And does it change the moral calculus if Lyons was right? The show sounds truly dreadful.

Those are the questions heating up Charlotte Runcie's debut novel, "Bring the House Down," which enjoyably pours fuel on both his and her sides of the dispute. Lyons is basically a #MeToo straw man, so grossly cavalier and indifferent to the sensitivity of other people, especially women, that you'd want to cancel him just for existing.

Nor does Runcie make Sinclair a shining heroine. In a canny and commercial act of revenge, the character instantly revamps "Climate Emergence-She" as "The Alex Lyons Experience," dredging up the history of the critic's indiscretions and releasing the monster of internet rage. With its parade of guest star exes and its bonus semi-nudity, the new show is the hit the old one could never be.

Though "Bring the House Down" has surely been exaggerated for our pleasure, Runcie, a British arts journalist, went through a similar shaming in the early 2010s, after giving a now-famous comedian's Fringe show a two-star review. She gets the critic's peculiar brew of idealism and indifference just right, noting that Lyons rationalizes his nastiness as a way of "contributing to the culture" and "maintaining high standards" yet also sensing that it's something weirder: a form of self-pleasure. "Dazzled by the brightness of his own cruelty," she writes, Lyons feels "the thrill of a strongly held opinion, well-expressed," as a physical delight.

If that makes him an awful man, and I'm not sure it does, he's the greater character for it. But alas, neither the overstated Lyons nor the underbaked Sinclair is the novel's central figure. Lyons's meek junior colleague Sophie Rigden is. Promoted only recently from writing "13 things you never knew about Picasso" listicles, she has been dispatched to Edinburgh to review art exhibits; when Lyons, sidelined from the theater beat, is billeted to obits, she must take up his pen and cudgel.

Her reluctance makes that a dreary outcome for both Edinburgh and "Bring the House Down." A critic whose questions about criticism cancel out her commentary is little use to anyone. "Did I have a greater responsibility to the actors onstage, the company and crew who made this obviously high-budget and well-rehearsed show," Sophie wonders, "or to the audience around me? Or to the people reading the paper, who would never see that particular production, but who kept up an interest in theater and just wanted some opinions to chew over with their breakfast?"

Saddled with such doubts as well as standard rom-com burdens — a tired marriage, a child back in London who needs mothering, an unlikely attraction to Mr. Wrong — Sophie sinks the middle of the story like the center of an iffy soufflé.

The edges of the soufflé remain tasty though. Lyons has an overwhelmingly charismatic mother, recently made a dame in recognition of her stage career. A bit of a monster herself, if a glamorous one — "her fingers and wrists were gilded with nuggety rings and heavy resin bangles" — she provides a clue to her son's apparent disdain for theater folk. Unable to secure her attention in childhood, he makes sure to get the attention of other actors as an adult.

But in indulging that bit of psychology, "Bring the House Down" sidesteps the most interesting question I wish it would answer. Should critics tell their absolute truth, even if it hurts? For Lyons the answer is yes: "A doctor saying that you have cancer doesn't *give* you cancer. You had the cancer already and the doctor just pointed it out." That seems a little extreme to me, but I'll buy another of his hot takes: "Clarity is generosity."

In that spirit I give "Bring the House Down" three stars. It's neither a bomb like "Climate Emergence-She" nor a blast like "The Alex Lyons Experience." It's a pleasant ride smack in the middle. □

JESSE GREEN *became the chief theater critic at The Times in 2020. He is the author of "Shy: The Alarmingly Outspoken Memoirs of Mary Rodgers."*

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTIAN PHILIP SCOTT

Seismic Shift

A journalist argues that George Floyd's murder in 2020 upended American racial politics — with lasting, often adverse effects.

By JUSTIN DRIVER

OVER THE LAST several decades, the United States has occasionally experienced dramatic transformations during compressed stretches of time. In 1968, the twin assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, separated by merely two months, yielded broad disillusionment. Six years later, as the simmering Watergate scandal boiled over and prompted President Nixon's resignation, many Americans adopted a posture of deep distrust toward elected officials. And, of course, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, inaugurated an enduring era of anxiety over safety and security. In these critical periods, an existing American order declined and a new paradigm ascended.

SUMMER OF OUR DISCONTENT
The Age of Certainty and the Demise of Discourse
By Thomas Chatterton Williams
Knopf. 245 pp. $30.

In "Summer of Our Discontent," Thomas Chatterton Williams argues that the United States witnessed another such epoch-defining moment five years ago. The inflection point, he contends, arrived on May 25, 2020, when Derek Chauvin slowly extinguished George Floyd's life outside the Cup Foods convenience store in Minneapolis.

The ensuing indignation over Floyd's murder, alongside the then-raging pandemic and extensive lockdown orders, fused to generate the largest protest movement in our country's history. That activism at once marked and marred the American psyche, Williams insists, as "the residues of the normative revolution of 2020 have lingered." In his view, a grave shift in mores and attitudes fomented a racialized "wokeness" on the left that, in turn, generated a ferocious backlash on the right, bequeathing our current, anguished hour.

Williams is right that the last several years have brought unusually intense ferment to American racial politics, and that the turmoil packed into what we might call the Long George Floyd Moment — beginning in the Obama years and stretching into Joe Biden's presidency — deserves rigorous scrutiny.

A staff writer at The Atlantic and prominent commentator on race and identity, Williams would seem well suited to explore how these recent seismic shifts have jolted American society. Amid a sea of intellectual orthodoxy, he admirably stands out for his willingness to pursue independent lines of thought, no small feat given his combustible topic. Much of his recent journalism can be construed as a broad-gauged expansion of the project initiated in his last book, "Self-Portrait in Black and White" (2019), which denounced what he viewed as America's pathological fixation on race and racial categories.

In "Summer of Our Discontent," he continues that critique, dissecting the fallout from "the racial reckoning of the summer of 2020," and positioning himself as a defender of traditional liberal values against the illiberal elements that he believes have captured progressives and conservatives alike. He styles himself as casting a plague on both American political houses, bemoaning "the ill-conceived identity politics of the left" and "the spiteful populism of the right." In fact, though, he fixates on mere blemishes dotting the house to his left and too often neglects the unmistakable stench of decay emanating from the house to his right. He portrays the reactionary mood in our politics as arising largely in response to the left's supposed excesses, rather than also endeavoring to probe its independent animating forces.

His reductive analysis reaches its nadir when he suggests that the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol can helpfully be viewed as, in effect, the left's chickens coming home to roost. Following in the wake of the post-Floyd protests, the Jan. 6 insurrection represented "a gross apotheosis of a kind of increasingly common tendency, visible on the social justice left for years now, to make the country's politics in the street whenever feeling sufficiently unheard," he maintains. Never mind that the thousands of post-Floyd protests were overwhelmingly nonviolent and that the protesters included among their number such notorious firebrands as Mitt Romney.

IN SHORT, Williams's analysis lacks proportion. He does not seem to grasp that the left's illiberalism occupies a marginal position in mainstream Democratic politics and the right's illiberalism possesses a stranglehold on the Republican Party. Today, many Americans justifiably fear rising authoritarianism and worry that the nation might not withstand sustained attacks on our core democratic institutions. But Williams manages to contort himself into asserting that the American left somehow poses significant threats along both these dimensions.

When recounting some liberals' all-too-credulous Twitter responses to the actor Jussie Smollett's 2019 hate-crime hoax, for example, Williams overplays his hand, glimpsing in the reflexive expressions of outrage a "manipulative rhetorical tactic that is a common feature of authoritarian ideological systems and movements." (Smollett, after alleging he had been attacked in downtown Chicago by noose-wielding men who spewed racist and homophobic invective, was convicted of filing a false police report in 2021, though his conviction was later overturned on technical grounds.) Similarly, Williams derides The New York Times's unvarnished coverage of the first Trump administration in bizarrely hyperbolic terms, asserting it posed "something like a crisis of democracy."

In passing, Williams labels President Trump "juvenile and polarizing," and notes that he exhibits "meanness and mendacity," among other drive-by opprobria. But he does not summon the energy to treat Trump with the sustained attention that the dominant political figure of our age demands. A book that purports to examine the last decade of racial politics but refuses to confront fully Trump's political ascent and career cannot help providing a myopic vision of our era. The neo-nativist, racialized conceptions of American citizenship central to Trump's worldview have assumed new prominence during his second administration. But they were blatant from his initial forays into electoral politics, when he doubted Barack Obama's eligibility for the presidency and declared an Indiana-born federal judge biased because he was "Mexican."

Williams's book is impaired by slapdash prose. His writing abounds with interminable, convoluted sentences that teem with digressions and then awkwardly limp toward disorienting conclusions. Here is one from the prologue:

> For non-whites, even though the mixed-race population has become the fastest-growing segment of the American demos and, in real terms, a disproportionate but statistically small and decreasing number of unarmed Black civilians were killed by police annually (typically between 15 and 25 per year from a population exceeding 40 million, according to The Washington Post's "Fatal Force" database) — and indeed other quality-of-life markers have been equalizing for significant numbers of Black people since the civil rights movement — the death of [Trayvon] Martin followed by [Michael] Brown (regardless of the specific contingencies of that case), and a high-profile slate of videotaped police and vigilante killings that converged with the proliferation of camera-equipped smartphones and the pervasiveness of social media, thwarted any self-congratulatory sense of the inevitability of social progress still alive in the first half of Obama's second administration.

Huh? In addition to such passages, "Summer of Our Discontent" includes many distended excerpts — some spanning three pages — from not-so-obscure sources, including The Times.

Midway through the book, Williams chides another writer on the race beat for propounding "an excruciatingly simplistic tale, fueled by a powerful unwillingness and incapacity to grapple with contemporary American racial and social complexity." Regrettably, I know the feeling. □

Demonstrators gather in Manhattan on June 15, 2020, to protest the death of George Floyd.

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMR ALFIKY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

JUSTIN DRIVER *teaches at Yale Law School. He is the author of "The Fall of Affirmative Action: Race, the Supreme Court, and the Future of Higher Education," which will be published in September.*

Hounds of Love

A New Yorker takes her identity crisis — along with her passion for animals — abroad in this novel.

By LEAH GREENBLATT

THERE IS A certain kind of midlife woman in literature, maybe you know the type: She is attractive, intelligent, generally beloved by friends and family. She is also secretly (or not so secretly) a mess — whipsawed by an unhappy marriage, an emptying nest or mere existential dread.

Amy Webb, the vexed protagonist of Lauren Grodstein's tart, emotionally attuned novel "A Dog in Georgia," is one of those unlucky lucky ladies, a former chef whose well-ordered life — a handsome and affectionate husband, a sprawling East Village apartment, a stepson successfully sent off to college — is fraying badly at the edges.

The husband, a charismatic bear of a man named Judd, spends long hours happily absorbed in the chic downtown bistro he owns and operates, and 19-year-old Ferris, now a Cornell sophomore, no longer needs his stepmother's constant care. That doesn't leave Amy much to do other than pick up fresh produce from the farmers' market, fret over her gentle German shepherd and gaze at her phone, a Möbius loop of unlikely animal-friendship videos — a baby goat cozying up to a donkey, a stray kitten nursed by a terrier — set to soothe.

LEAH GREENBLATT *is an editor at the Book Review.*

A DOG IN GEORGIA
By Lauren Grodstein
Algonquin Books. 296 pp. $29.

So when it appears that Judd has stepped outside their marriage again with a new and distressingly nubile employee (Amy is well familiar with her husband's susceptibility to the charms of pretty young women in his orbit; 15 years ago, she was one of them), she has a choice to make. She can stay and work through another infidelity, or file for divorce.

Or she can fly to Georgia, the small, politically unstable country wedged between Russia and Turkey on the Black Sea, and locate a lost dog named Angel that she knows only from the internet. Before the flummoxed people in her life can stop her, Amy is on a plane to the capital, Tbilisi, ready to lose herself in a rescue mission so quixotic that even Irine, the woman who runs Angel's website, can't quite believe she's there.

Angel has a face made for YouTube, it's true — "Lab-shaped, expressive brows, off-white fur" — and is much missed from her post as a crossing guard-slash-mascot at the local school where Irine is an administrator. But why some anxious 46-year-old woman has traveled thousands of miles from Manhattan to find her is, to nearly every bemused Georgian Amy meets, a mystery. (Oh, to be an American! So much freedom and expendable income, so little sense.)

Whatever her financial contributions to the cause, Amy is not a particularly good detective; the search for one mutt in a city already clogged with them mostly evokes needles and haystacks. Still, her presence earns her temporary lodging in Irine's ramshackle house, where the human dramas prove more fruitful — from the various aunties who pass along ancient gossip in pidgin English to the battle of wills unfolding between Irine and her kohl-eyed, fiercely political teenage daughter. There's even a handsome, haunted Russian boarder down the hall, escaping military conscription in the fight against Ukraine.

Nearly all of them provide some contemporaneous history lesson or slice of authentic Georgian life (and in the rugged Russian's case, a frisson of romance). In flashbacks, a fuller portrait of Amy also takes shape — the lonely, impoverished childhood and the brief modeling career that got her out of Minnesota; her late-blooming induction into food and love via Judd; the ongoing saga of Ferris's birth mother, an aristocratic heroin addict who sows pain and chaos whenever she shows up.

Grodstein ("We Must Not Think of Ourselves," "A Friend of the Family") has a knack for breezy, mordant observations about midlife disconnection and discovery. Her Georgia, too, feels pleasingly specific, though it can also read as one more exotic backdrop for white-lady self-actualization: "Eat Pray Love" with street protests, overstuffed dumplings and a lot more cigarettes. Even Angel is a bit of a MacGuffin in the end — secondary to the butterfly wings Amy only needs to unfurl, and learn to fly. □

Running Wild

A teenager's night out with friends dissolves into a collision of catastrophes.

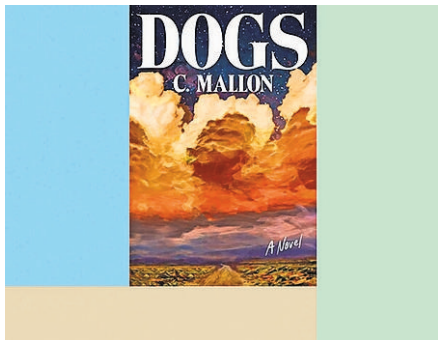
By ISAAC FITZGERALD

C. MALLON'S AORTA-SMASHING debut novel, "Dogs," tells the story of Hal, a teenager who does a good job describing himself, and his friends, when he says, "I mostly wanted to get different all of the time." This motley crew is a mess of wrestlers who hoover up alcohol and an increasingly potent slew of drugs over the course of an evening while driving around in the tragic beater of a car that belongs to the group's leader, Dylan. (The tale of how Dylan came to own the car, which opens the novel, is worth the price of admission alone.) As the events unfold, we are drawn into Hal's tumultuous, darkening world.

Mallon's prose is masterly — equal parts muscular and brutal, while also tender and mournful. Deep hurt and intensity stand poetically alongside magnificent descriptions of mall parking lots and cigarette-consuming small-town life. Take this account of a young child dressed up for Halloween, who has Hal meditating on his and his ruffian buddies' own loss of innocence: "The skeleton kid was so little. He didn't know anything. Most of us there in the car had been that way one time. The skeleton kid would get longer, and tough, and weird, sad, dark and angry." Hal laments that eventually the kid will become just like the older boys. What a harrowing, yet enviably lean, description of what a debacle it is to turn from a child into a teenager.

ISAAC FITZGERALD *is the author of the best-selling memoir "Dirtbag, Massachusetts." His next book, "American Rambler," is forthcoming in 2026.*

Every page of this tight-fist-of-a-novel is filled with similar, sneaky, staccato brilliance. We are stuck in Hal's head as his brain flits between tactile observations of, and burning emotion about, the chaos that surrounds him. A memory of Hal pulverizing a classmate in eighth grade is told with the same flamboyant confidence and style as his bottomless love for his giant dog, Tough Guy (an adoration so endearing it made me get up and hug both of my dogs with all of my might). Every thought Hal has flows seamlessly into the next, and Mallon's writing follows suit — there are no chapter or even paragraph breaks in the novel, nor quotation marks, only the occasional pause marked by three diamonds, as if Mallon wants to give readers a moment to catch some small bit of breath.



DOGS
By C. Mallon
Scribner. 199 pp. $26.99.

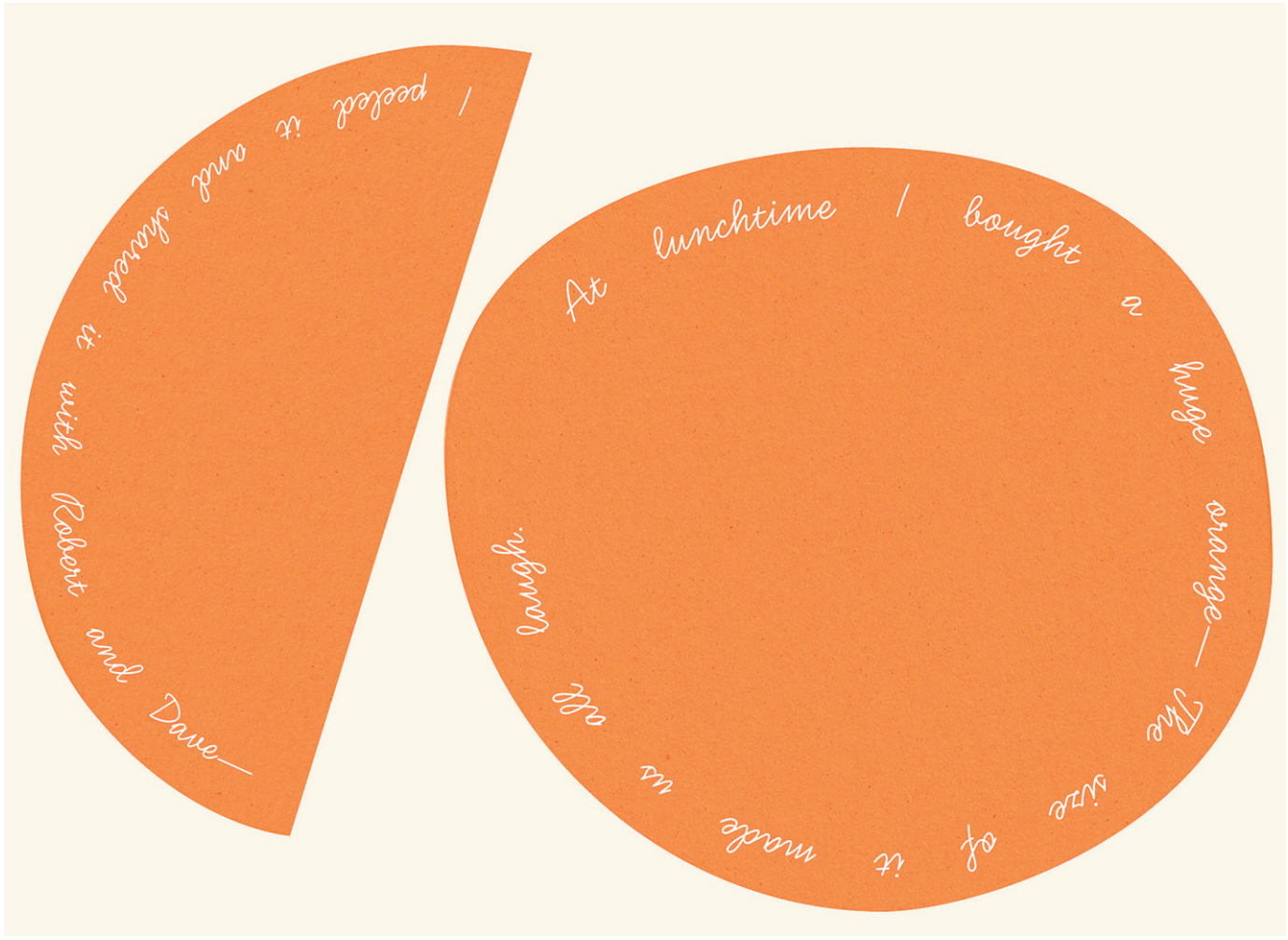
Toward the end, "Dogs" grows into a collision of catastrophes. Some might quibble with the cascading traumas and violent misunderstandings packed into the latter half of the narrative — I myself wrestled with their excruciating excessiveness. Until I realized that I was doing exactly what Mallon wanted me to be doing. Struggling. Pushing up against. Gasping for air. Feeling overwhelmed by the short, sharp prose I had been so enjoying mere pages earlier. Hal is drowning, and the reader is going to drown with him.

I refuse to give away any endings, so just know that this book's back half will bludgeon you. Early on in what becomes the novel's stampeding finale, Hal muses, "I should've been born a dog. I always wanted to have teeth the way that Tough Guy has teeth." Hal may not have his dog's teeth, but this book sure does, and I will not wish it had fewer of them just because they tore my heart up so.

"Dogs" walks right up to the line of becoming a horror story in its ending — hell, I'd argue it crosses that line and becomes one. But isn't a novel a searing success if it accomplishes what it set out to do, no matter how uncomfortable the person holding its pages becomes? I am so glad I took the time to consume and be consumed by "Dogs," one of the most intense — and often enjoyable — reading experiences I've had this year. I will surely be inhaling whatever C. Mallon writes next. □

Appropriate Feeling

An English national treasure collects a career's worth of poems in a new book.



By DWIGHT GARNER

LIKE CORNISH PASTIES and Branston Pickle, Wendy Cope's poems are a uniquely English product that's never caught on in the United States. Over there, she's an institution, an Oxford-educated intellectual, once said to be in line for poet laureate, who writes the sort of poems almost no one does any longer — ones that rhyme, are frequently hilarious and sell in large numbers.

Cope turned 80 this summer. She has largely given up writing new poems. What we have instead is her first "Collected Poems," a thick book that reminds us why English readers (and a few of us over here) lost their hearts to her.

One of the best things about Cope's work is how lightly she wears her erudition. She grew up middle-class (her father managed a department store) and is unimpressed by pretension of nearly every variety. As for inflated literary egos, she has a habit of gently taking the piss, as a Brit would say.

In her first collection, the ideally titled "Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis" (1986), she writes, in a poem titled "Triolet":

I used to think all poets were Byronic.
They're mostly wicked as a ginless tonic
And wild as pension plans.

In the same collection, she comments on one of England's literary lions: "It's worse than organising several zoos (several zoos)/Patrolling the unconscious of Ted Hughes." She picks a fight with Wordsworth's notion that, for a poet, emotion must be recollected in tranquillity. In Cope's opinion, "there's a serious shortage of tranquillity" these days.

COLLECTED POEMS
By Wendy Cope
Faber & Faber. 491 pp. $35.

Cope has a complicated relationship with other English institutions, such as poems marking formal events in the life of the country. (She has written a few of these.) One solution for their persistent triteness was to compose a bit of verse titled "All-Purpose Poem for State Occasions." Here is the last of its three delightful stanzas:

In Dundee and Penzance and Ealing
We're imbued with appropriate feeling:
We're British and loyal
And love every royal
And tonight we shall drink till we're reeling.

She has written poems criticizing London's rapacious press. ("She'll urge you to confide. Resist./Be careful, courteous, and cool./Never trust a journalist.") She has displayed her dislike of photographers, who move into people's houses for hours, push the furniture around and shine lights in subjects' faces "to get a better view of their blackheads."

Many of Cope's best poems are bittersweet; they deal with love and its endless discontents. Men, for example — how to pick one? "Bloody Men" begins:

Bloody men are like bloody buses —
You wait for about a year
And as soon as one approaches your stop
Two or three others appear.

You have no time to decide, she writes. If you make a mistake, it is sometimes too late to turn back. Another might not come for a while.

People argue about which of Cope's poems is her finest. My favorite on most days is "Faint Praise," from her 1992 collection "Serious Concerns." It is, at any rate, the best of her poems to read aloud. It begins:

Size isn't everything. It's what you do
That matters, darling, and you do quite well
In some respects. Credit where credit's due —
You work, you're literate, you rarely smell.
Small men can be aggressive, people say,
But you are often genial and kind,
As long as you can have things all your way.

It only gets better from here.

What gets lost in conversations about Cope is how much darkness she smuggles into her poems under the cover of her wordplay. There are poems about depression and health scares and death. She marks a place where Philip Larkin or James Fenton, rhyming poets each, might meet (to single out two American poets of dark wit) Kay Ryan or Deborah Garrison.

Overlooked as well is her subtlety. She consistently tinkers with form in her dexterous poems; you admire the integrity of her workmanship as she deals out sonnets, haikus, triolets, centos and her own translations. She understands how rhyme fixes words in our memories, but she is not a slave to those rhymes; she bends them to ingenious effect.

As a longtime reader of Cope's verse, I do have some bedrock consumer advice. This new book is not the place to begin. Too many of the previously unpublished poems are slight. Randall Jarrell said that a poet is someone who manages, "in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times."

Cope was struck more often in the first half of her career. Some of the poems from her later collections can blur on you. A much thinner and less expensive paperback, "Two Cures for Love: Selected Poems 1979-2006," contains most of what you need. In the meantime, one waits for a career-spanning book of her selected (as opposed to collected) poems. Also worth finding are the several anthologies of humorous poems that Cope has edited. They are ideal bedside reading.

England has absorbed Cope as affectionately as she has absorbed it. Despite its occasional drawbacks, this book is as English as a retrospective of Nigella Lawson's cookery, and I'm pleased that it exists.

Wendy Cope has an ideal last name. She seems always to know what to say, and what to do, in dark moments. Here is her poem "Loss" in its entirety:

The day he moved out was terrible —
That evening she went through hell.
His absence wasn't a problem
But the corkscrew had gone as well. □

DWIGHT GARNER *has been a book critic for The Times since 2008, and before that was an editor at the Book Review for a decade.*

ILLUSTRATION BY TOM ETHERINGTON

Thesis Statement

Two married creative writing professors have parallel affairs, with very different outcomes in this novel.

By HANNAH PITTARD

JUST THE IDEA of distilling Emily Adrian's cheeky new novel, "Seduction Theory," into a pithy elevator pitch makes my head hurt. Then again, I've always gravitated toward books that resist easy categorization. Among other things, this tour de force is a campus novel, a love story, a coming-of-age narrative, a satire, a performance piece, an M.F.A. exposé, a trove of literary references and a primer on writing.

Though this is Adrian's sixth book, it brims with the self-assured audacity behind nearly every great debut. This makes a certain amount of sense, as the body of "Seduction Theory" purports to be a graduate thesis written and submitted by Roberta "Robbie" Green, an M.F.A. student at the country's "sixth-best fully funded" program, at Edwards University in upstate New York.

It is also the means by which Robbie — a plucky Mr. Ripley without the instinct to murder but with a killer facility for language — seeks to expose the bad behavior of Ethan, the husband of the creative writing department's star scholar, Simone, who is both Robbie's faculty adviser and, more important, her crush.

Robbie, as our guide, doesn't present herself until the second chapter. Instead, she uses the first several pages to warp our perspective from a seemingly third-person perspective, buying our confidence as she sets the plot in motion: The department's "it" couple — believed by everyone, including themselves, to be deliriously happy — are both dangerously close to infidelity.

Ethan, an untenured faculty member "whose pedagogy skewed teddy bear," is weirdly tempted by the department's secretary, Abigail, who "could have been beautiful if there had been someone there to let her nap every minute of her life." Meanwhile, Simone, with "her 54,000 followers, her cheekbones, . . . her ability to run a sub-six-minute mile and her forthcoming scholarship on nonmonogamy in the 21st century," appears to be a little too fond of Robbie, or at least more open to Robbie's obvious interest than she should be.

What follows is an utterly compelling picaresque, which includes a baby raccoon, sex in the department chair's bathroom, several academic parties and, of course, a road trip: "If there's one thing I learned in grad school," Robbie narrates, "it's that everyone loves a road trip story."

The book is rife with writing advice, which it endorses and satirizes in equal measure. Says Simone, scantily clad and sipping gin: "In a good story, you only ever need three details to depict a party: something someone said, a smell and a song that played." This particular Easter egg rewards the observant reader, as Robbie's initial use of said advice occurs 80 pages earlier, when the department chair says of her dog: "'Then we discovered he hates females his own age but loves puppies, so we named him Humbert!' Temperate laughter. Someone's sandalwood perfume. 'Lola' by the Kinks."

The book's many self-references, and references to those self-references, are what make the reading experience such fun. Early on Robbie learns Simone has been recording the intimate conversations they've been having on their long, intense runs together. You can bet it's a trick Robbie will put to her own good use later in the narrative. And that's OK, even expected, because, as she says, "Life was meant to be stolen; plagiarism was a form of love." (It's worth noting that Simone wrote a critically acclaimed memoir about her mother's death, and Ethan wrote a novel about Simone grieving that death. "The books were essentially the same.")

The book is rife with writing advice, which it endorses and satirizes in equal measure.

Robbie's cruelty is youthful and motivated mostly by her own longing, and because of this it's slyly seductive: "Ethan sobbed. I had never seen a grown man sob and could have watched him all afternoon." The reader too in this moment finds pleasure in the man's tears. His "comfort novel" is "Pnin"! He has sex with his secretary! He shaves his ears before doing so! The only reason he confesses is that Abigail has already sent an email to his wife. As Robbie opines, "Like most apologies, his was self-indulgent." The problem with this affair, for Ethan, is less about attraction than logistics: "She controlled the photocopier."

Robbie is ruthless and indiscriminate in the people she'll skewer, including herself, her whole generation, other generations, poets, memoirists, novelists, trauma writers, breeders, non-breeders and those who, like her, would deign to dabble in, of all things, autofiction. And yet, Robbie's (and Adrian's) obvious joy in this overt and performed annoyance comes across less as exhaustion than as a real reverence for the genre's exhaustive possibilities.

Eventually the narrative leaves behind the conceit that we are living within Robbie's thesis and we move into a world in which, if Robbie has her way, that thesis will do its intended damage. The result is a finale full of surprises, including one fairy-tale ending, one imagined ending, and one perfectly executed reversal of our expectations.

For its wit and perspicacity, "Seduction Theory" can easily be cataloged in the company of Ann Beattie's "Walks With Men" or Lorrie Moore's "Anagrams" — but its intelligent, naïve, misguided narrator also begs comparison to Henry James's in "The Portrait of a Lady." Where James has been accused of chewing more than he could bite off, however, Adrian chews, bites and swallows in equal measure, and with obvious gusto. □

HANNAH PITTARD *is the author, most recently, of the novel "If You Love It, Let It Kill You."*

SEDUCTION THEORY
By Emily Adrian
Little, Brown. 213 pp. $28.

ILLUSTRATION BY STELLA MURPHY

Searching for the Promised Land

Edward McCabe dreamed of establishing a haven for Black settlers on the Western frontier in the 19th century.

By GREG GRANDIN

Edward McCabe

"GO WEST," the New York newspaper editor Horace Greeley advised in 1865, and African Americans did.

During the last decades of the 19th century, tens of thousands of the newly emancipated — and already free people of color — migrated out of Southern states, scraping together money to buy a riverboat or train ticket to St. Louis. From there, they fanned out across the Great Plains, to Kansas, Oklahoma and beyond, some crossing the border to Mexico in search of the promised land.

Many Black migrants, the historian Nell Irvin Painter wrote in the 1970s, understood their flight as biblical, a sequel to God's deliverance of the Israelites from Pharaoh — in their case deliverance from hooded white vigilantes and debt bondage. "Every Black man is his own Moses now," was how one migrant described the exodus.

Caleb Gayle's "Black Moses: A Saga of Ambition and the Fight for a Black State" provides a timely reconsideration of this migration. Gayle, a professor of journalism and Africana studies at Northeastern University and a contributor to The New York Times Magazine, begins his book with an overview of the various pre-Civil War plots to remove dark-skinned people from the nation, including plans to send them to Liberia, Haiti and Central America, among other places.

"Your race suffer from living among us," Abraham Lincoln told a delegation of African American leaders at the White House in 1862, "while ours suffer from your presence." "Go where you are treated the best," Lincoln said, suggesting Panama as a potential homeland. Frederick Douglass and other Black abolitionists damned such schemes. "Our minds are made up to live here if we can, or die here if we must," Douglass wrote. "Here we are, and here we shall remain."

After the Civil War, "here" got bigger, as new states were added to the Union. The federal government's distribution of cheap land on the frontier made it possible for Black people to imagine staging their own exodus, to preserve their collective identity *within* the nation. As Gayle writes, the idea was to "begin again on their terms," to build a future in which they could sleep through the night without fear of being murdered or raped by night riders, send their children to good schools, grow their crops without overlords, vote without hindrance and live in dignity.

At the heart of Gayle's book is the story of one especially indefatigable Black Moses, Edward McCabe. Born free in Troy, N.Y., in 1850, McCabe eventually landed a job as a clerk in a Wall Street firm in Manhattan. Educated and energetic, he nevertheless had little chance of advancement in the world of finance. So he moved, first, in 1872, to Chicago, where he studied law and became active in the Republican Party, and then, a few years later, to Kansas.

Kansas was sacred ground for Eastern and Southern Black citizens. John Brown began his antislavery crusade there, and other abolitionists gave their lives fighting for Black freedom. Yet while the state's soil might have been washed with the blood of martyrs, the Plains' fierce dust storms seemed demonic. Black pioneers dug shelters out of sod mounds and survived on buffalo meat provided by the nearby Potawatomi.

McCabe arrived in one such settlement, Nicodemus, in 1878. He soon became the local notary and clerk, positions, Gayle notes, that made him central to Nicodemus's survival, responsible for distributing rations supplied by charities, the federal government and private businesses. McCabe helped turn the town into one of the most successful African American communities west of the Mississippi, with Black-run stores, churches and schools, the mud lean-tos replaced by neat frame houses lining tidy streets. McCabe delivered Black votes to state Republican candidates, and in return he was elected clerk of Graham County and, eventually, Kansas state auditor.

As Republicans moved away from a commitment to racial equality, and white vigilantes began to terrorize Black homesteaders in Kansas, he realized that neither racial equality nor his professional ambitions would be accomplished by focusing on the local level. McCabe set his sights on Oklahoma, then still a territory.

HE BEGAN RECRUITING as many Black settlers to fill Oklahoma as possible, with the goal of allowing the territory to enter the Union as a Black state: An African American Zion with Black politicians and federal representatives was the only way to realize the promise of abolition. In 1890, McCabe met with President Benjamin Harrison and asked to be appointed governor of Oklahoma Territory. "We are men and women capable of self-government," he told the president.

McCabe's dream of African American liberation required Native American dispossession, since a good part of Oklahoma was already set aside for Native Americans forcibly removed from their ancestral homes east of the Mississippi, including the Cherokee, Creeks and Choctaw. By the 1880s, Gayle writes, Oklahoma was a land "both promised and devastated," a dream for poor Black migrants and a nightmare for Native Americans, with the federal government opening Indian Territory to settlers.

In Kansas, Nicodemus sat on wide-open prairie where for centuries people like the Kaw, Osage and Pawnee had lived, traveled and hunted. In Oklahoma, African American homesteaders came into conflict with Native Americans, including the Cherokee, who ultimately sold off their land to the highest bidders — white settlers.

Black migrants did manage to establish scores of all-Black Oklahoma townships, but a Black state was not to be. President Harrison didn't appoint McCabe governor, and many of McCabe's detractors, both Black and white, balked at his effort to create what some were calling "another Hayti" in the nation's heartland.

Gayle writes with great empathy, and though "Black Moses" contains many tangents, he keeps bringing readers back to a main point: that formal emancipation was meaningless without substantive political power. Gayle isn't the first to note that truth, but his compelling study of McCabe's quixotic crusade for Black self-determination richly illustrates just how tenuous the promise of freedom remained.

McCabe died in 1920, 13 years after Oklahoma entered the Union as a state — not as a Black Zion but as a white-run apartheid. Black migrants had fled the South but the worst of the South followed close behind, with Oklahoma politicians adopting Jim Crow laws. Literacy tests prevented most African Americans from casting a ballot, making the services of vote brokers like McCabe obsolete. Native Americans, who in the early 1900s likewise sought to establish their own state, which they hoped to call Sequoyah, in the eastern part of the territory, were also disenfranchised under the same rule.

Today, with the White House attempting to control discussion of African American history — including in exhibits at Smithsonian museums, the National Museum of African American History and Culture among them — "Black Moses" is a useful reminder that for nearly a century after the Civil War, what was called democracy was indistinguishable from white power. □

BLACK MOSES
A Saga of Ambition and the Fight for a Black State
By Caleb Gayle
Riverhead. 286 pp. $33.

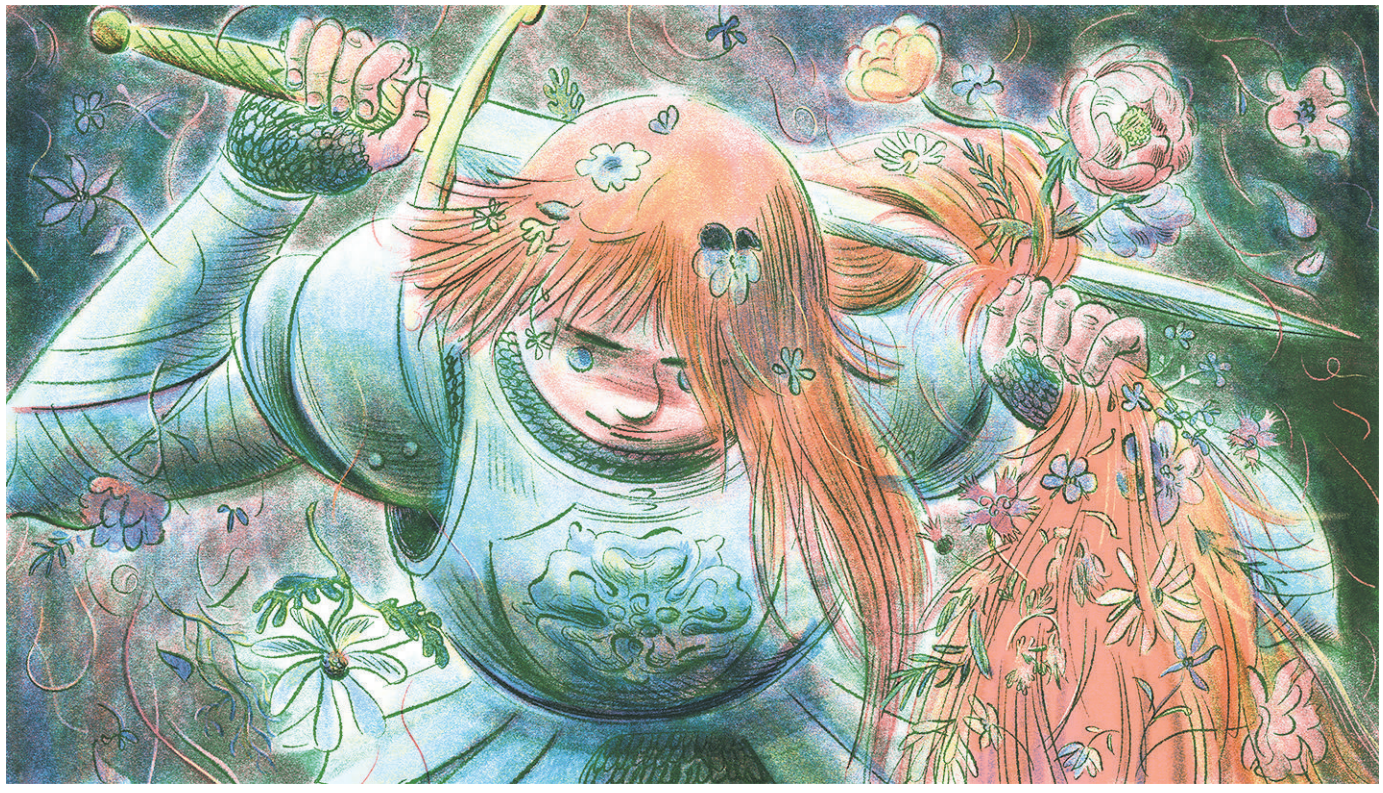
GREG GRANDIN *teaches at Yale University and is the author, most recently, of "America, América: A New History of the New World."*

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY/SCIENCE SOURCE

Why 'Hamlet' Is My Favorite Piece of Writing

It feels urgently important to show young people that stories have survived and procreated for thousands of years.

By KATHERINE RUNDELL



BOOKSHELVES ARE DECEPTIVE; they make books look static, mute, orderly, easily wrangled — all things they're not. Within a human mind, books can't file themselves in rows; from earliest childhood they exist not in a library but in something closer to an atrium, in which they fly and collide, escape and return.

Books are alive, too, in the sense that they give birth: They beget more stories. It feels urgently important to show young people that stories have survived and procreated for thousands of years while the world around them has burned and rebuilt and burned again; that the books they read are at once ancient and new, resilient against time and against chaos.

Take J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings," and its ancestors. Tolkien fished in the deep waters of Thomas Malory's "Le Morte d'Arthur," and borrowed Plato's Ring of Gyges, which makes the wearer invisible. His most obvious influence was Wagner's "Ring" cycle — which we know he closely studied — though he publicly disavowed it. "Both rings were round," he wrote, "and there the resemblance ceased." He loathed how Nazi propaganda had co-opted and distorted the Norse myths, and he sought through his seminal work of fiction to seize back control of these noble stories corrupted by tyranny.

Sometimes knowing the source material transforms a text. The plot of Alan Garner's middle grade fantasy masterpiece "The Owl Service" revolves around a teenage girl conflicted in love and the discovery of a set of old dinner plates whose pattern can be interpreted as either owls or flowers. Gloriously opaque and strange, it makes considerably more sense if you have read the 12th-century Welsh epic the Mabinogion. (I read Garner's novel at the age of 10 without context or warning, in a state I imagine to be very similar to that of having taken magic mushrooms in a primary school library.)

Perhaps the best example, though, of a story with a vast and ever-expanding family tree is my favorite piece of writing, "Hamlet," a tale that draws you into the teeth of despair, then offers you the sword to fight your way out.

Shakespeare reached far into the past for his source material. Saxo Grammaticus's "Gesta Danorum," written around 1200 A.D., includes the tale of Amleth, a prince who plots to kill his uncle, Feng, now the king, after Feng murdered Amleth's father and married Amleth's mother, Gerutha. Amleth feigns madness and slays an eavesdropper in his mother's room. His foster sister is a precursor to Ophelia. Saxo himself had cast backward to the saga of the semi-mythic sixth-century Danish king Hrólfr Kraki and his clan. When Kraki's grandfather King Halfdan is slain by his brother, one of Halfdan's two sons assumes a childlike disposition to evade suspicion and goes by the false name of Ham.

'Hamlet' draws you into the teeth of despair, then offers you the sword to fight your way out.

But Shakespeare also added new details to freshen the old. When I was teaching Shakespeare to undergraduates, the "Hamlet"-like story they most relished involved the great Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, a precursor to Johannes Kepler. In 1566, at the age of 20, Brahe lost part of his nose in a duel over a mathematical formula, and for the rest of his life he wore a prosthetic; portraits suggest his fake nose was made of brass, with gold for state occasions. In order to call attention to his cosmological work, he cultivated a reputation as an eccentric. He kept an elk as a pet, which he sent out as an emissary to entertain noblemen. While visiting a castle, it supposedly drank too much beer, fell down the stairs and died.

Brahe's death in 1601 touched off a minor scandal. While the cause was purportedly a ruptured bladder — due to his refusal, out of politeness, to leave a banquet to relieve himself — rumor had it he'd been having an affair with the Danish queen, King Christian IV's mother, and there were whispers that King Christian might have ordered his assassination. Another Danish prince who murdered the man who slept with his mother? It's possible that contemporary reports of Brahe's death, filtered through diplomats' letters, reached Shakespeare, who was fascinated by news about the cosmos. Eleven years earlier, Brahe had sent a letter to England, to a friend of a friend of Shakespeare, in which he enclosed copies of an engraving of himself standing beneath the family shields of his great-great-grandparents: Sophie Gyldenstierne and Erik Rosenkrantz.

"Hamlet" thrilled London when it was first performed there. Just a few years later, in 1605, a footman named Hamlet in the comedy "Eastward Hoe" charged onstage and was saluted with the words, "Sfoot! Hamlet, are you mad?" From there, the power of Shakespeare's play blazed through time: to James Joyce's "Ulysses," in which Stephen Dedalus "proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father," and David Foster Wallace's "Infinite Jest," in which Elsinore is reincarnated as the Enfield Tennis Academy.

Then there is "The Lion King," the Sistine Chapel of Disney movies. In an early version of the film's storyboard, Scar is briefly victorious: He brutally murders Simba with the words "Goodnight, sweet Prince" before being consumed by a fire that lays waste to Pride Rock. Disney ultimately chose not to go with this ending, presumably on the grounds that "Bambi" had already inflicted enough lasting horror on the global childhood psyche.

With my fantasy novel "The Poisoned King," I wanted to tell a story that would take a girl's rage seriously; that would applaud her hunger for justice and acknowledge her thirst for revenge, in a world in which girls are rarely permitted their fury. So the book is based loosely on "Hamlet" — very loosely, in that it has more talking dragons than Shakespeare's original.

I hope that my child readers will one day come to "Hamlet" and feel a small spark of recognition that they have been there before. Now more than ever I would love for them to know that they stand within a living network of stories that insist on the value of the human heart, beating back against nihilism and welcoming invention, onward to eternity. □

KATHERINE RUNDELL *is the authorof the fantasy novel "Impossible Creatures," whose sequel, "The Poisoned King," is out this week.*

ILLUSTRATION BY WESLEY ALLSBROOK

Best Sellers

The New York Times

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

COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF AUGUST 17-23

Fiction

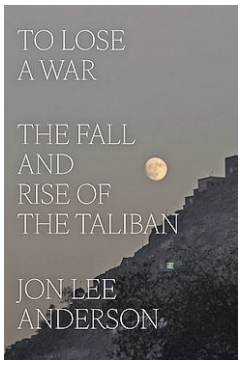
THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1		**QUICKSILVER,** by Callie Hart. (Forever) Saeris is transported to a dangerous land of ice and snow, where she must contend with a Fae warrior who has suspect agendas.	9
2		**THE SURROGATE MOTHER,** by Freida McFadden. (Poisoned Pen) Abby's personal assistant, who offers to be her surrogate, also carries an unspeakable secret.	1
3		**THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT,** edited by Christopher Golden and Brian Keene. (Gallery) A short story anthology based on Stephen King's 1978 novel "The Stand."	1
4		**LOVE ARRANGED,** by Lauren Asher. (Bloom) The third book in the Lakefront Billionaires series. Lily and Lorenzo's fake relationship comes with baggage.	1
5		**ON WINGS OF BLOOD,** by Briar Boleyn. (MIRA) A dragon rider named Medra Pendragon is captured by vampires and placed inside the dangerous Bloodwing Academy.	1
6	3	**PROJECT HAIL MARY,** by Andy Weir. (Ballantine) Ryland Grace awakes from a long sleep alone and far from home, and the fate of humanity rests on his shoulders.	19
7	4	**ATMOSPHERE,** by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Ballantine) In the summer of 1980, Joan Goodwin begins training at Houston's Johnson Space Center with a group of candidates for NASA's space shuttle program.	12
8	6	**MY FRIENDS,** by Fredrik Backman. (Atria) A young woman looks into the story behind a painting that was made 25 years ago and a small group of teens depicted in it; translated by Neil Smith.	11
9		**PEOPLE WE MEET ON VACATION,** by Emily Henry. (Berkley) Opposites Poppy and Alex meet to vacation together one more time in hopes of saving their relationship.	38
10	8	**ONYX STORM,** by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) The third book in the Empyrean series. As enemies gain traction, Violet Sorrengail goes beyond the Aretian wards in search of allies.	29

Nonfiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE,** by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	257
2	4	**THE ANXIOUS GENERATION,** by Jonathan Haidt. (Penguin Press) A look at the mental health impacts that a phone-based life has on children.	74
3	6	**THE IDAHO FOUR,** by James Patterson and Vicky Ward. (Little, Brown) Investigations into the murders of four University of Idaho students on Nov. 13, 2022.	6
4	7	**ON POWER,** by Mark R. Levin. (Threshold Editions) The Fox News host considers various facets of power and its effect on history.	4
5	9	**BLACK AF HISTORY,** by Michael Harriot. (Dey Street) A columnist at TheGrio.com articulates moments in American history that center the perspectives and experiences of Black Americans.	8
6	15	**ABUNDANCE,** by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson. (Avid Reader) A New York Times opinion columnist and a staff writer at The Atlantic evaluate obstacles to American progress.	22
7		**COMING UP SHORT,** by Robert B. Reich. (Knopf) An economist who served in three presidential administrations gives his perspective on his generation's impact on democracy, society and the economy.	2
8	2	**THE FORT BRAGG CARTEL,** by Seth Harp. (Viking) An Iraq war veteran and investigative reporter delves into unsolved murders connected to drug trafficking at the Special Operations base.	2
9	11	**EVERYTHING IS TUBERCULOSIS,** by John Green. (Crash Course) A chronicle of the fight against the deadly infectious disease tuberculosis.	21
10	8	**BORN A CRIME,** by Trevor Noah. (One World) A memoir about growing up biracial in apartheid South Africa by the former host of "The Daily Show."	98

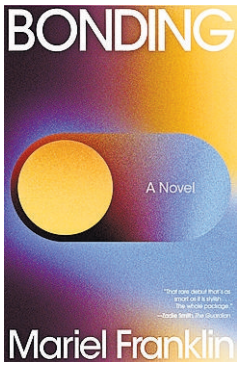
The New York Times best sellers are compiled and archived by the best-sellers-lists desk of the New York Times news department, and are separate from the editorial, culture, advertising and business sides of The New York Times Company. Rankings reflect unit sales reported on a confidential basis by vendors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

Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



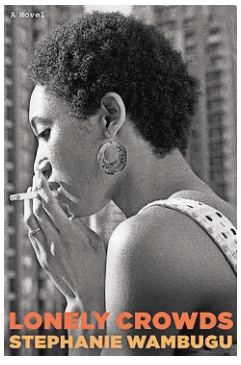
TO LOSE A WAR: The Fall and Rise of the Taliban, by Jon Lee Anderson. (Penguin Press. 371 pp. $30.)

One of this country's pre-eminent war reporters, Anderson covered Afghanistan for two decades at The New Yorker; this collection of his dispatches offers a grim portrait of the nation's challenges — from crippling drought and economic collapse to political feuds — in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal.



BONDING, by Mariel Franklin. (FSG Originals. 338 pp. Paperback, $18.)

"Bonding" is the story of a solitary 30-something woman tenuously employed in marketing for companies with names like Healthify. Though the novel is both kinky and futuristic, with a focus on dating apps, mass psychology and existential pharmacoloigy, Franklin's most salient gifts are old-fashioned ones: She's a confident storyteller with reserves of judgment and discrimination.



LONELY CROWDS, by Stephanie Wambugu. (Little, Brown. 288 pp. $28.)

Ruth is 9 when she meets Maria, the only other Black girl at their suburban Catholic school, and is instantly mesmerized by her new friend — who soon becomes something more like a sister, and then something harder to define. This debut novel traces their intense bond as they come of age, first amid the confines of their New England upbringing and then as artists in 1990s New York City.

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

PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF AUGUST 17-23

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		**QUICKSILVER,** by Callie Hart. (Forever) Saeris is transported to a dangerous land of ice and snow, where she must contend with a Fae warrior who has suspect agendas.	1
2		**ON WINGS OF BLOOD,** by Briar Boleyn. (MIRA) A dragon rider named Medra Pendragon is captured by vampires and placed inside the dangerous Bloodwing Academy.	1
3		**THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT,** edited by Christopher Golden and Brian Keene. (Gallery) A short story anthology based on Stephen King's 1978 novel "The Stand."	1
4		**PEOPLE WE MEET ON VACATION,** by Emily Henry. (Berkley) Opposites Poppy and Alex meet to vacation together one more time in hopes of saving their relationship.	1
5	3	**ATMOSPHERE,** by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Ballantine) In the summer of 1980, Joan Goodwin begins training with a group of candidates for NASA's space shuttle program.	12
6	4	**MY FRIENDS,** by Fredrik Backman. (Atria) A young woman looks into the story behind a painting that was made 25 years ago and a small group of teens depicted in it; translated by Neil Smith.	16
7		**THE DRAGON WAKES WITH THUNDER,** by K. X. Song. (Ace) The second book in the Dragon Spirit duology. The sea dragon Qinglong comes to collect what he thinks he is owed by the woman warrior Hai Meilin.	1
8	5	**ONYX STORM,** by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) The third book in the Empyrean series. As enemies gain traction, Violet Sorrengail goes beyond the Aretian wards in search of allies.	31
9		**HEMLOCK & SILVER,** by T. Kingfisher. (Tor) In this reimagining of "Snow White," a healer is summoned by a king to use her unconventional methods to save his daughter.	1
10	11	**BROKEN COUNTRY,** by Clare Leslie Hall. (Simon & Schuster) Beth must confront her past when the man she once loved as a teenager returns to the village with his son.	22

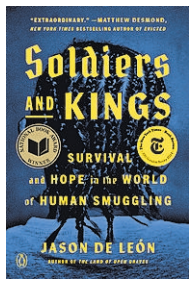
THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**THE ANXIOUS GENERATION,** by Jonathan Haidt. (Penguin Press) A co-author of "The Coddling of the American Mind" looks at the mental health impacts that a phone-based life has on children.	74
2	4	**ON POWER,** by Mark R. Levin. (Threshold Editions) The Fox News host considers various facets of power and its effect on history.	4
3	6	**THE IDAHO FOUR,** by James Patterson and Vicky Ward. (Little, Brown) Investigations into the murders of four University of Idaho students on Nov. 13, 2022.	6
4	7	**EVERYTHING IS TUBERCULOSIS,** by John Green. (Crash Course) The author of "The Anthropocene Reviewed" chronicles the fight against the deadly infectious disease tuberculosis.	23
5	8	**BLACK AF HISTORY,** by Michael Harriot. (Dey Street) A columnist at TheGrio.com articulates moments in American history that center the perspectives and experiences of Black Americans.	13
6	10	**ABUNDANCE,** by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson. (Avid Reader) A New York Times opinion columnist and a staff writer at The Atlantic evaluate obstacles to American progress.	23
7	15	**COMING UP SHORT,** by Robert B. Reich. (Knopf) An economist who served in three presidential administrations gives his perspective on his generation's impact on democracy, society and the economy.	3
8	9	**OUTLIVE,** by Peter Attia with Bill Gifford. (Harmony) A look at recent scientific research on aging and longevity.	114
9	2	**CUDI,** by Scott "Kid Cudi" Mescudi. (Simon & Schuster) The Grammy Award–winning artist describes obstacles he encountered during his career. (†)	2
10	14	**WHEN BREATH BECOMES AIR,** by Paul Kalanithi. (Random House) A memoir by a physician who received a diagnosis of Stage IV lung cancer at the age of 36.	73

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 LAURA THOMPSON

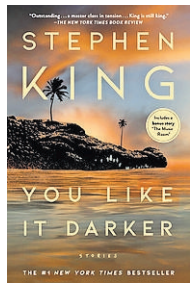
SHRED SISTERS, by Betsy Lerner. (Grove. 288 pp. $18.)

Lerner's debut novel is a classic bildungsroman, following a woman named Amy Shred as she navigates a lonely suburban childhood, a misguided academic career and her hard-fought success in the publishing world, all the while living in the shadow of her stunning and volatile older sister, Ollie. As Ollie's mental state worsens through the years, this Notable Book of 2024 offers a warts-and-all view of unconditional love.



SOLDIERS AND KINGS: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling, by Jason De León. (Penguin Books. 400 pp. $19.)

This National Book Award-winning feat of reportage — also one of our Notable Books — is an immersive dive into the billion dollar industry of illegal border crossings. De León, an anthropologist, condenses the years he spent embedded with smugglers in Mexico to paint a humanizing portrait of the people who are profiting (sometimes reluctantly) off Latin America's overlapping crises.



YOU LIKE IT DARKER: Stories, by Stephen King. (Scribner. 528 pp. $16.)

The king of horror — pardon the pun — returns with 12 stories that range from an uneasy, slow-boil tale of alien encounters to a hyperrealistic "literary shanking," as our horror columnist Gabino Iglesias put it. There's something in here for any horror reader, wrote Iglesias, but the "crown jewel" of the collection is a dreamlike crime novella, plus plenty of Easter eggs for King's die-hard fans.

CHILDREN'S & YOUNG ADULT BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF AUGUST 17-23

Middle Grade Hardcover

THIS WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	**WONDER,** by R. J. Palacio. (Knopf) A boy with a facial deformity starts school. (Ages 8 to 12)	507
2	**REFUGEE,** by Alan Gratz. (Scholastic) Three children in three different conflicts look for safe haven. (Ages 9 to 12)	298
3	**IMPOSSIBLE CREATURES,** by Katherine Rundell. Illustrated by Ashley Mackenzie. (Knopf) A place where magical creatures reside. (Ages 10 and up)	50
4	**ODDER,** by Katherine Applegate. Illustrated by Charles Santoso. (Feiwel & Friends) After a shark attack, Odder recuperates at the aquarium with the scientists who raised her. (Ages 8 to 12)	118
5	**THE MISFITS: A ROYAL CONUNDRUM,** by Lisa Yee. Illustrated by Dan Santat. (Random House) Olive is sent to Reforming Arts School. (Ages 8 to 12)	26
6	**BLOOD IN THE WATER,** by Tiffany D. Jackson. (Scholastic) Kaylani McKinnon investigates a mysterious death on Martha's Vineyard. (Ages 9 to 12)	8
7	**SNOOP,** by Gordon Korman. (Scholastic) Confined and bored at home after a skiing accident, Carter hacks into his town's police cameras. (Ages 9 to 12)	8
8	**HEROES,** by Alan Gratz. (Scholastic) The friends Frank and Stanley give a vivid account of the Pearl Harbor attack. (Ages 8 to 12)	67
9	**J VS. K,** by Kwame Alexander and Jerry Craft. (Little, Brown) Two talented fifth graders vie for Dean Ashley Public School's annual creative storytelling competition. (Ages 8 to 12)	8
10	**RESIST,** by Alan Gratz. (Scholastic) Samira goes on a dangerous mission to save her mother on D-Day. (Ages 9 to 12)	15

Young Adult Hardcover

THIS WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	**HOUR OF THE PUMPKIN QUEEN,** by Megan Shepherd. (Random House/Disney) Sally and Luna fall through a portal to Time Town. (Ages 12 and up)	7
2	**A THEORY OF DREAMING,** by Ava Reid. (HarperCollins) Effy and Preston return to the University of Llyr. (Ages 14 and up)	4
3	**GLORIOUS RIVALS,** by Jennifer Lynn Barnes. (Little, Brown) The stakes are raised for the seven players on Hawthorne Island. (Ages 12 to 18)	4
4	**NOTHING LIKE THE MOVIES,** by Lynn Painter. (Simon & Schuster) Wes tries to win back the heart of Liz. (Ages 14 and up)	47
5	**IMMORTAL CONSEQUENCES,** by I.V. Marie. (Delacorte) At Blackwood Academy, six students compete to change their fate in a cutthroat magical competition called the Decennial. (Ages 14 and up)	4
6	**WINGS OF STARLIGHT,** by Allison Saft. (Disney) Clarion is determined to confront a monster that threatens the land. (Ages 12 to 18)	29
7	**LONG LIVE THE PUMPKIN QUEEN,** by Shea Ernshaw. (Disney) Sally must save her town from a sleeping curse. (Ages 12 to 18)	43
8	**WRITE ME FOR YOU,** by Tillie Cole. (Bloom) Two teens find love while battling devastating cancer diagnoses. (Ages 14 to 18)	4
9	**FABLE FOR THE END OF THE WORLD,** by Ava Reid. (HarperCollins) Inesa, the hunted, and Melinoë, the hunter, fall in love in a postapocalyptic society. (Ages 14 and up)	12
10	**HEARTLESS HUNTER,** by Kristen Ciccarelli. (Wednesday) Rune, a witch, and Gideon, a witch-hunter, fall in love. (Ages 13 to 18)	47

Picture Books

THIS WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	**THE SMART COOKIE,** by Jory John. Illustrated by Pete Oswald. (Harper) Cookie builds up her self-confidence. (Ages 4 to 8)	30
2	**LITTLE BLUE TRUCK AND RACER RED,** by Alice Schertle. Illustrated by Jill McElmurry. (Clarion) Red challenges Blue to a race. (Ages 4 to 8)	21
3	**THE WONDERFUL THINGS YOU WILL BE,** by Emily Winfield Martin. (Random House) A celebration of future possibilities. (Ages 3 to 7)	439
4	**CHICKA CHICKA TRICKA TREAT,** by Julien Chung. (Beach Lane) The alphabet letters climb the creaky old tree for Halloween. (Ages 4 to 8)	2
5	**DRAGONS LOVE TACOS,** by Adam Rubin. Illustrated by Daniel Salmieri. (Dial) What to serve your dragon-guests. (Ages 3 to 5)	484
6	**SEE YOU LATER, ALLIGATOR!,** by Sally Hopgood. Illustrated by Emma Levey. (Sky Pony) A departing tortoise says goodbye to all his animal friends. (Ages 3 to 6)	6
7	**THE DAY THE CRAYONS QUIT,** by Drew Daywalt. Illustrated by Oliver Jeffers. (Philomel) Problems arise when Duncan's crayons revolt. (Ages 3 to 7)	409
8	**ON THE FIRST DAY OF KINDERGARTEN,** by Tish Rabe. Illustrated by Laura Hughes. (HarperCollins) A little girl's first 12 days of kindergarten. (Ages 4 to 8)	3
9	**TIME FOR SCHOOL, LITTLE BLUE TRUCK,** by Alice Schertle. Illustrated by Jill McElmurry. (Clarion) Blue gives a friend a ride to school. (Ages 4 to 7)	45
10	**THE CRAYONS GO BACK TO SCHOOL,** by Drew Daywalt. Illustrated by Oliver Jeffers. (Philomel) The crayons can't wait for art class. (Ages 4 to 8)	23

Children's & Young Adult Series

THIS WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	**THE SUMMER I TURNED PRETTY TRILOGY,** by Jenny Han. (Simon & Schuster) A beach house, summer love and enduring friendships. (Ages 12 and up)	141
2	**THE HUNGER GAMES,** by Suzanne Collins. (Scholastic) In a dystopia, a girl fights for survival on live TV. (Ages 12 and up)	385
3	**PERCY JACKSON & THE OLYMPIANS,** by Rick Riordan. (Disney-Hyperion) A boy battles mythological monsters. (Ages 9 to 12)	791
4	**HARRY POTTER,** by J. K. Rowling. (Scholastic) A wizard hones his conjuring skills in the service of fighting evil. (Ages 10 and up)	857
5	**DIARY OF A WIMPY KID,** written and illustrated by Jeff Kinney. (Amulet) The travails and challenges of adolescence. (Ages 9 to 12)	858
6	**THE WILD ROBOT,** by Peter Brown. (Little, Brown) Roz the robot adapts to her surroundings on a remote, wild island. (Ages 7 to 12)	83
7	**THE POWERLESS TRILOGY,** by Lauren Roberts. (Simon & Schuster) A story of forbidden love between Paedyn, an Ordinary, and Kai, an Elite, in the kingdom of Ilya. (Ages 14 and up)	58
8	**A GOOD GIRL'S GUIDE TO MURDER,** by Holly Jackson. (Delacorte) Pippa Fitz-Amobi solves murderous crimes. (Ages 14 and up)	199
9	**BOYS OF TOMMEN,** by Chloe Walsh. (Bloom) In Ireland, friends at the private school Tommen College prepare for adulthood. (Ages 16 to 18)	48
10	**GIVER QUARTET,** by Lois Lowry. (Clarion) Exploring human connection in a post-apocalyptic world. (Ages 12 to 18)	173

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

In this Parisian atelier, bookbinding is a beloved and painstaking family practice.

FIRST COMES A love of books.

Great patience and skill is required to restore old books, but equally important is the belief that each one is a work of art.

The women who run the Atelier Devauchelle in Paris sew and create new bindings. They restore old bindings and torn pages. They create slipcovers and special boxes to protect fragile books.

Their workshop is located near Drouot, the auction house, which sells antiquarian books.

Naïk Duca has worked at the atelier for 19 years. She presses a thin heated roller onto foil to repair gold lines on leather book covers, a process known as gauffering.

She also uses an array of brass stamps to emboss elaborate patterns onto the leather.

"What I like is that it changes all the time, even if it seems I'm always doing the same thing," she explains. "I need to adapt to each book according to its structure and materials."

Miki Tsuzaki, who has worked at the atelier for 22 years, specializes in binding and gold embossing. Her movements must be extremely precise when she sews the pages together with waxed linen thread.

The craftswomen handle an extraordinary stock of materials, including silk, mother of pearl, wood and leathers that come in a vast range of colors and textures.

"Because we are working with objects that are a part of our heritage, we feel responsible," says Catherine Colin, who directs the workshop. She has been there for 35 years.

Isabelle Devauchelle, the owner, says that the workshop often doesn't know the value of the books it is repairing: "It's better that way."

Her grandfather started the business in the 1950s, and she took it over after her father died in 2011. "We are the largest bookbinder doing entirely artisanal work in Paris," she says.

Anne Lecat, who has been at the workshop for 17 years, specializes in paper restoration. First, she dips damaged pages into a special solution to remove the mold. Then she immerses the pages in a tinted gelatin bath, which returns them to their original hue.

Despite the hands-on expertise work at the atelier requires, the business continues to fare well.

"The number of clients has remained constant over the last years," says Colin. "They come because they have a love of books, and often the financial resources."

But who does the work has changed considerably. "Originally it was just men," Devauchelle says. "Then, when I came it was mixed. And now it's just women." □

Clockwise from top center: Atelier Devauchelle, a notable Parisian bookbinding workshop, in the morning hours; Naïk Duca uses a thin heated roller to press gold lines from foil; the shop's brass stamps, which are used to emboss patterns onto leather-clad books; restoring a volume of an 18th-century scientific dictionary.

JAMES HILL *is a Paris-based photographer. He has covered news and features for The Times since 1993.*

Who does the work has changed considerably.

Clockwise, from top left: Catherine Colin, the workshop director (at right), cuts card for a casing; colored calf leather is used to make a new cover for a book being restored; leather supplies; Miki Tsuzaki, who specializes in binding, at work; tinting a page for an 18th-century book restoration; applying glue to paper book sleeves; the atelier's thread supply.