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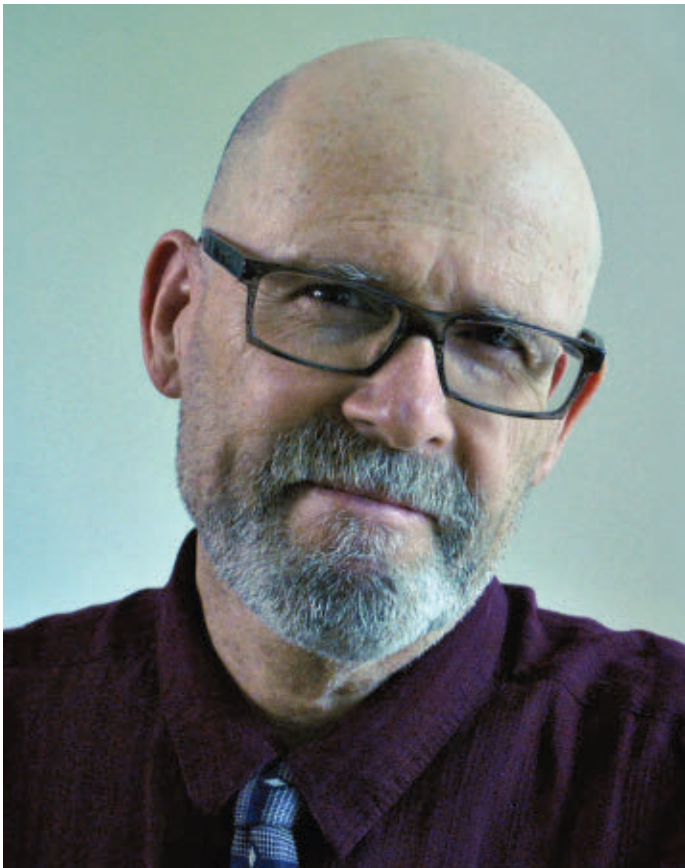
— YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING —

First Lines from BookLife Authors ■ 31 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

The Importance of Images

An indie author discusses picture book icon Ezra Jack Keats

BY MARRISSA LAWSON



Ezra Jack Keats's 1962 book *The Snowy Day*—about a Black boy who immerses himself in the magic of snowfall—remains a staple of children's literature. In *Ezra Jack Keats at Play in the World of Children's Books*, W. Nikola-Lisa, a renowned children's book author himself, examines Keats's lasting literary impact.

Before you were an author, you were a teacher. Could you discuss your attraction to children's books and the role they played in your classroom?

I was very fortunate to teach primary school-aged children in an alternative school in Bozeman, Montana, my first two years after receiving my education degree. I did this because I had met the woman who ran the school while I was traveling through Montana, and I liked her idea of education, a loose fusion of Kodaly-Orff music training and Rudolf Steiner "artistic" education.

Part of being an alternative school meant that we didn't have the resources for standard texts and other school materials, so off we went to the public library, where we cleared the shelves

each week, using real literature to teach reading, writing, and the appreciation of good literature. The more I used literature, rather than manufactured reading materials, to teach reading and the language arts, the more I fell in love with picture books in particular: they were just so beautiful, both visually and textually, ranging in content from the whimsical to the serious.

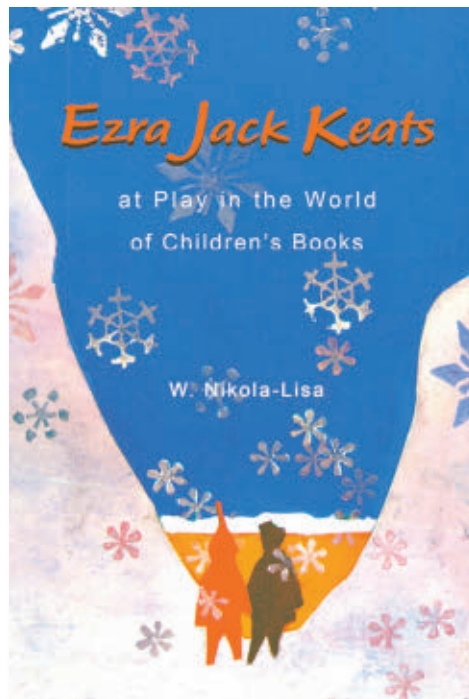
What initially drew you to the work of Ezra Jack Keats? How did he change the landscape of children’s picture books?

My teaching career began in the late 1970s, when Ezra Jack Keats was producing some of his best work. He was not an obscure author-illustrator, since he had won the prestigious Caldecott Medal for *The Snowy Day* a decade earlier. Not only did he introduce readers to children of color—Peter, Archie, Roberto, Louie, and others—in both major and minor roles, but he also introduced readers to the dynamic and colorful world of collage, an art form that was really beginning to take off in children’s picture books during the ‘70s and ‘80s.

Do you feel that there’s a way to comprehend Keats’s personality through his art technique?

It would all be speculation. Ezra Jack Keats was a very private man, open and accessible to close friends, but awkwardly shy and somewhat aloof to others. When I was studying his holdings at the de Grummond Children’s Literature Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi, I came across a box with the most unusual contents: an undershirt decorated with the Superman insignia. The story is

that a close friend of his gave this to Ezra before he accepted the Caldecott Medal because the friend knew that Ezra was very nervous about giving his acceptance speech—and what better way to gain resolve than to wear a Superman undershirt beneath your regular suit? To say that Ezra was shy or reserved might be a good guess, especially in unfamiliar company, but he also had a wicked, understated sense of humor.



Could you tell readers what you have come to understand about the relationship between the written word and illustration?

For most children’s picture books, the word comes first, and then the editor is tasked with the job of finding an illustrator who best complements the text, a challenge the editor rather enjoys—and sometimes takes too much credit for. The end goal is always the same: to create a book

where the words and images work hand-in-hand in an equally balanced manner. But it’s an odd process, especially for the author, who, after handing off the manuscript to the editor, is shown the door so the “real” process can begin between the editor, artistic director, and illustrator. Basically, what I learned early on is that illustrators want what I want—to be left alone. That is, to unleash their creativity in the company of no one, to soar to heights unknown.

From your perspective, what makes picture books so powerful and enduring?

I think of that in the context of medieval bookmaking. For the most part, the lingua franca of medieval society was not text; it was imagery. It had to be—except for the priestly class, the population was

Children’s book writers and illustrators come in all shapes and sizes, colors, and backgrounds, but they share an openness to the wonders of the world.

illiterate. Communication of church teachings was done primarily through iconography. It's also how children's picture books work: children often first "read" a book by looking at the illustrations, memorizing "the story," which enables them to "read" it back to the teacher, parent, or caregiver. At some point, the child connects with the text and then is able to read what is printed on the page. So, yes, we should revere the importance of images, especially images we present to children.



Ezra Jack Keats, c. 1950s

How does a children's writer stay aware of the balance between reality and imagination when delivering a story?

The great Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget taught us that children develop through various stages of cognition, from simple object play to abstract thinking—the latter wholly dependent upon the

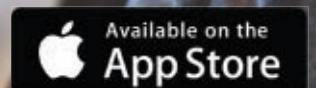
former, which brings me to the second question, and to Ezra Jack Keats. I ended my book on Keats by suggesting that he had an open vein to childhood; it's what kept him fresh, funny, and full of surprises in his writing and illustrating. Was he "aware" of the balance between reality and fantasy? I doubt it. In fact, the nature of the creative process is that it erases the line between the two, putting the creative person into a state of "flow," a concept we learned from the late Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Children's book writers and illustrators come in

all shapes and sizes, colors, and backgrounds, but one thing they share is an openness to the wonders of the world. ■

Marrissa Childs works as a freelance developmental editor and book reviewer in Arkansas.

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First Lines

This month, we've got a giant eagle, good wine, and more.

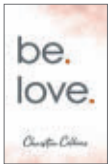
To submit a first line, email booklifeeditor@booklife.com.



The Adventures of Princess Ramele and Prince Peter, Vol. 2

MONA LEUNG

"High above the continent Porqueh, a giant eagle soared."



Be. Love.

CHRISTIN COLLINS

"We are a disconnected culture, and it's destroying our health and well-being!"



The Bloodwood Society

AINSLEY DOTY

"Far below where her bare feet dangled, a set of waves crashed against the rocky shore."



Bones: Anorexia, Anxiety and My Path to Self-Love

ROBYN SUMER, WITH NATASHA STOYNOFF

"I was eight years old the first time I stepped on a scale and silently prayed."



Coping Courageously: A Heart-Centered Guide for Navigating a Loved One's Illness Without Losing Yourself

DELIA CHIARAMONTE

"I keep a compost container on my kitchen counter."



Fade into the Night: Philly Heat Series

BECKY FLADE

"Dulcet tone from bow and string created grace as music soared to the vaulted ceiling and images of horror panned across the wall."



Found: Book One of the Vinyi Chronicles

LESLI WEBER

"Good wine was hard to come by on Mars."



The Gilded Age Promise: Kopp Chronicles

GREGORY KOPP

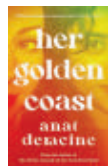
"Cold rain drenched the audience as they stood in front of a giant figure covered in a brightly tricolored French flag."



Havana Fear: A Pepper Ryan Mystery Thriller

TIMOTHY FAGAN

"Angel Cavada could feel the side-eye from his girlfriend, Marisol Borja, as they bumped along in a dirty taxi through the tropical afternoon heat."



Her Golden Coast

ANAT DERACINE

"A gorgeous, grapy dusk fell over the Bay Bridge, but the hills beyond were the color of ash and wildfires."



Inland

KATE RISSE

"At a brief pause in the rain, Martin, my mother, and I wedge ourselves into Duncan's banged-up, dark green F-150 pickup."



A Plum Blossom in Winter

RICHARD SJOQUIST

"Shuyuan tried to steady the fork on the front wheel of her bike as she nervously loosened her grip on the handlebar."

BookLife Reviews

BookLife Reviews are paid reviews of independently published books.

A lightning bolt (⚡) indicates an Editor's Pick, a book of outstanding quality.

FICTION

EDITOR'S PICK

Love at a Girls' School

Diana Altman | Tapley Cove Press

174p, trade paper, \$16.95, ISBN 979-8-21836-936-1

Altman (author of *We Never Told*) delivers an eclectic collection exploring the nuances and strangeness of everyday life, the sharp immediate dramas that explode from tense situations. She balances hefty character drama—the weighty “Unwanted Babies,” where a pregnant teenager is forced to give her baby up at birth, only to spend her entire life searching for her lost daughter—with the whimsical, as in “Itty Bitty Betsy” chronicling the life of a petite purse secretary, meant to help women with their untidy purses. Even the most seasoned reader will find moments of surprise and tenderness in this collection.

The collection flits between time periods, heavy with hints of nostalgia and sentiment. The titular story recounts youthful romance amid the changing social code of the 1960s, while “Receptions with the Poet” paints an atmospheric portrait of an English professor and student



Scintillating collection that probes the intense dramas of everyday life.

Great for fans of Mira Sethi's *Are You Enjoying?*, Otessa Moshfegh's *Homesick for Another World*.

studio, only for the night to descend into violent chaos.

Altman's prose is both acerbic and poignant, flaunting sharp turns of phrase—"I began to notice Jesus everywhere at the shelter. Sometimes it felt as if I'd fallen into a passion play in which half the players were saviors and the other half in need of saving"—and tightly woven dialogue to keep readers invested. As in the fish-out-of-water protagonist in “A Little Jew at the Farm,” who finds her footing as she tends to animals in the Catskills, Altman's stories are touching, each a delicate study on the foibles and fears that make us human.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **B+**

FICTION

The Scent of the Lilies

T.S. Riley

266p, e-book, \$9.99, ISBN 979-8-218-40673-8

Debut author Riley pulls from their own childhood experiences of being bullied to spin this redemptive story of grief, found family, and, above all else, unconditional love. Imari, a young Black boy horribly bullied by his peers—even as he's tethered to life by his mother's “blinding glow of acceptance and love”—struggles under the weight of his resentful father, George, who feels trapped by his family duties. Imari's mother Imani, on the other hand, pours her love into Imari, taking him on adventures and regaling him with creative stories, forming an incredibly close bond that is shattered by her quick and unexpected death from cancer when Imari is in fifth grade.

This is a moving story of a mother's eternal love, unbroken even by death, and the legacy such a love can bestow on others. Unbeknownst to Imari, his mother arranged for a new white family in the neighborhood, the Antenellis—whose daughter, Andrea, becomes a fast friend



Transfixing story that illuminates the power of a mother's love.

Great for fans of Rumaan Alam's *That Kind of Mother*, Claire Lombardo's *Same As It Ever Was*.

for Imari—to be his guardians after her death, a decision that comes with timely protection for Imari. When a neighborhood bully, Bruce, mercilessly torments Imari, Imari decides to take matters into his own hands, launching the two boys on a near-death collision course that's stopped at the last minute by Andrea's father, Andrew. Meanwhile, George descends further into destruction, eventually signing over his parental rights to allow the Antenellis to adopt Imari, conceding that Imari has “a right to get some joy in his life.”

From there, Riley paints Imari into a world of new beginnings, with the Antenellis' care and concern allowing him to start over and later return to his hometown, as an adult, with his own family. Readers will be transfixed as Imari carries his young son Jack down the very same paths he walked with his mother, bringing the “magic and wonder” of her love full circle.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A-**

FICTION

Eye Contact Over Truk

Stephanie Woodman | Vortex Press, LLC

309p, e-book, \$6.99, ISBN 979-8-989-94060-8

Woodman delivers a gripping exploration of war's unending shadow through the lives of two men from opposite sides of global history: Nick Mitchel, a veteran mourning his wife's death from cancer, and Junichi Takahashi, a World War II survivor grappling with his father's recent demise. When their respective losses lead them both to the Pacific lagoon known as Truk—a vacation spot for divers that once had been a major Japanese naval base and a theater of much terror and sorrow—a fated encounter between the men forces each to confront the brutal reality of their conflicted pasts. “When does a war actually end?” Nick asks, pondering the perpetual conflict that blurs the lines between oppressor and oppressed.

For Nick, Japan was the aggressor. For Junichi, though, his family was undeserving of the hell they endured at the hands of America. Woodman excels in portraying the psychological toll of war when Junichi realizes the possible involvement of Nick in the bombing of his father's



A war veteran and a war survivor seek closure from WWII's attack on Truk.

Great for fans of Jess Wright's *A Stream to Follow*, Gail Tsukiyama's *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms*.

ship decades ago, and neither can bring himself to cast the blame aside. Through heart-wrenching narration of Nick's nightmares and visions of dead comrades during his dives to shipwrecks, Woodman deftly captures the moral dilemmas and guilt that so often follow a confrontation with the long-term impact of our actions, avoiding common pitfalls of romanticizing and dehumanizing soldiers' experiences. “That's the way all wars are fought, by brave, naive young people who don't know what they are doing, but follow orders well.”

While the lengthy dialogues at times feel contrived—characters often become overly confessional in their war experiences—the novel offers rich historical insights on the attack on Truk in particular but also, more broadly, the overlooked reality of the costs of war. Trauma lingers, hate perpetuates, soldiers are shell-shocked, bodies are often unrecovered, and survivors are displaced and deprived of food and shelter. Woodman's empathy and insight will move readers to tears.

Cover: **B** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A-**

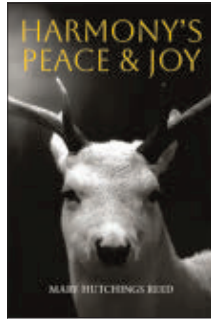
FICTION

Harmony's Peace & Joy

Mary Hutchings Reed | Ampersand, Inc.
279p, trade paper, \$17.95, ISBN 978-0-9722529-1-1

Reed offers a thought-provoking exploration of familial expectations, sibling rivalry, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment, set against the backdrop of a North Woods arts commune, where the complex relationship between two brothers is shaped by their father's demanding legacy. Stone Hunnicutt, a flashy, accomplished lawyer, and his younger brother Ted, a literary genius with one acclaimed novel under his belt, are at odds—but Ted, now living in a commune with his girlfriend, needs money, prompting Stone, who muses at “how much he actually like[s] his brother and how little he [understands] him” to visit, despite his hesitancy.

Reed (author of *Free Spirits*) masterfully crafts Stone and Ted's characters, presenting a stark contrast between the dutiful, successful lawyer and the once-promising novelist turned commune dweller. Keen insight into family dynamics shines throughout, as Reed unravels the impact of their father's Olympic-inspired motto—“Citius. Altius. Fortius. Scitius... Faster. Higher. Stronger. Smarter”—on the family's lives and



Touching novel of brothers, art, healing, and measuring up to expectations.

Great for fans of Ann Patchett's *The Dutch House*, Lauren Groff's *Arcadia*.

choices. Most compelling is Reed's portrayal of the women in Stone and Ted's lives, as they help the brothers confront and ultimately overcome the lasting effects of their father's very conditional love, an exploration of healing and growth that adds a hopeful dimension to the novel.

The pacing occasionally slows during introspective moments, but Reed's narrative remains engaging. As Stone muses that his relationship with Ted is “happenstance... [a] biologic accident,” and Ted refuels his writing off the fumes of their volatile relationship, Stone also reflects on how two brothers, raised the same way, could experience such different outcomes. They eventually find common ground in contemplating their father's implausible expectations, and Reed wryly observes that they've both internalized the belief that “you can't lose if you don't play [and] if you don't play, you won't win.” This will intrigue readers who appreciate literary fiction that plumbs family dynamics, personal growth, and the tension between ambition and authenticity.

Cover: **B** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **B+**

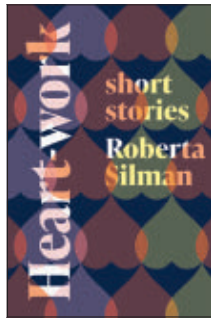
FICTION

Heart-work: Short Stories

Roberta Silman | Campden Hill Books
272p, trade paper, \$15, ISBN 979-8-985-9260-2

This moving collection by Silman (author of *Blood Relations*) sifts the intricacies of marriage, parenthood, and family, each played out against an omnipresent shadow of death. Beginning with “Here We Go Again, Alice,” Silman plunges into protagonist Joe's overwhelmed psyche upon discovering his impending fatherhood, closely examining his preoccupations—the sight of children on the street, the lingering trauma of his sister's untimely death when they were young, and the burden of secrets he has never shared with his wife. Joe's inner turmoil sets the stage for a theme that reverberates throughout the collection: the wordless, often unspoken fears and sorrows that barely escape our emotional armature.

Silman eschews grandiose plot twists in favor of more subtle exploration of the natural ebb and flow of family. In the collection's titular story, readers glimpse the changes that Laura undergoes—a daughter who fears for her dying father, an admirer of her mother's newfound determination to conquer old phobias, a parent who permits herself to be comforted by her daughter's wisdom. In other stories, Silman dis-



Tender stories probing the intricacies of relationships, family life, and love.

Great for fans of Raymond Carver, Alice Munro.

mantles the illusion of marital transparency, revealing how even the most intimate of relationships fluctuate. “On the Way to Courmayeur” finds a married woman wondering how she and her husband remain “very close, yet with each passing year he becomes

more and more mysterious,” while “Scent of Lilacs” follows Dinah as she contemplates “the range of feelings [and] the highs and lows” of marriage to her now deceased husband, Daniel. Through vignettes of her remarkable leads, Silman brings out the mundane moments that define a life—family vacations, befriending neighbors, coping with divorce, and building a new life after widowhood. These stories, conveyed with tenderness and compelling insight, resonate for their foundation in the ordinary, mirroring life's fears, hopes, and silent struggles. Silman navigates the core of being human, with an authentic, captivating message—to hold out for love in the end.

Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

FICTION

Magda Revealed: A Novel

Ursula Werner | SheWrites Press
328p, e-book, \$17.99, ASIN BOD2BZVSVK

This innovative retelling of the life of Yeshua (Jesus) takes the perspective of Mary Magdalene, known as “Magda” throughout, healed by Yeshua following a horrific attack she suffered at age 16. Speaking to readers from the afterlife, Magda recounts Yeshua's influence on her life—and his insistence that this moment, with Earth crumbling and humanity on a path to doom, is the perfect time to “tell people... what our time on Earth was all about.” As Magda and Yeshua's tale unravels, Magda, determined to “[set] the record straight,” reveals the misleading narrative portrayed in the Bible.

Magda's story draws on well-known biblical characters, including Peter and Paul—two men who led the charge for spreading the gospel after Jesus's death, but who, according to Magda, conveniently neglected to mention women's contributions to that history. Werner (author of *The Good at Heart*) pens an immersive story of the men and women who followed and loved Yeshua, all through the realistic perspective of a woman who viewed Yeshua as a human, flawed man with



Fresh take on the story of Jesus, from Mary Magdalene's perspective.

Great for fans of C.A. Gray's *Messiah*, Jill Eileen Smith's *Dawn of Grace*.

miraculous gifts. Magda interlaces this emotionally charged narrative with love, humanity, and religion, reflecting on Yeshua's days in Capernaum and Jerusalem and his time spent with disciples who “weren't all men.” As she shares insights on Yeshua's female followers—herself, Shoshanna, Yohanna, and Ilana—she also highlights Yeshua's true message of “radical equality and radical tolerance.”

Werner capably builds tension and suspense as Magda reflects on Yeshua's life—and her own destiny alongside him, including becoming his wife—using this familiar story to expose the “truth” of the Messiah—and his ultimate sacrifice for mankind. Throughout, Yeshua is painted in shades of unconditional love and peace, as Magda, and his other followers, join efforts to spread his message—and Magda seeks a balance between her very human love for Yeshua and the greater purpose surrounding them. Fans of historical retellings will be captivated.

Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

MYSTERY/THRILLER
Fade into the Night: Philly Heat Series, Book 5

Becky Flade | Tirgearr Publishing
224p, e-book, \$3.99, ISBN 979-8-215-51043-8

Flade's fifth installment in her Philly Heat series (after *Beautiful Dangerous*) pits two main characters against their deepest fears, transporting readers on a dark journey into the chaos of a serial killer. Sadie Potter is a sculptor and part-time forensic artist working with law enforcement. Her rich life is filled with work and friends, until FBI Special Supervisory Agent Noah Danes—who Sadie last saw at the sentencing of her mother's murderer—comes racing back in, hot on the heels of a serial killer known as the Beltway Romeo.

True to the genre, Flade fills this novel with dark turns and grim emotion, as Noah, a talented instructor for the next generation of FBI Academy cadets, tosses and turns at night over the eight female victims in his latest case—with a possible ninth waiting to be confirmed. He's both anxious and excited to be back in Sadie's life, divulging to her that while "you were working through tragedy and grief... I was bathing in it," and the heat between the two is often shadowed by their intense



Dark emotional ride into a serial killer's chaos.

Great for fans of Sharon Sala's *Bloodlines*, Patricia Potter's *Cold Target*.

prevent further death.

Accessible characters and smart narration smooth the way for readers to immerse themselves in this intricately knotty world of law enforcement, victimology, and trauma recovery. The alternating viewpoints of the main characters offer in-depth windows into complicated psyches, though the Beltway Romeo feels oversimplified, lacking in depth and nuance. Familiar faces from previous stories in the series crop up as well, but Sadie and Noah take center stage. Readers will find plenty of psychological thrills here to satisfy.

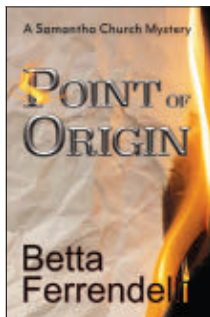
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations:— Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

MYSTERY/THRILLER
Point of Origin

Betta Ferrendelli | Betta Ferrendelli Books
293p, e-book, \$2.99, ASIN B0D64ZN9RX

The seventh installment in Ferrendelli's Samantha Church Mystery series, after *The Long Way Home*, follows Sam Church, a dedicated yet deeply insecure reporter, divorced mom, and recovering alcoholic, as she fights to unravel a series of deadly fires, all tied to arson, including the one that killed her daughter April's best friend, Carol. Adding to her problems is Sam's forbidden relationship with Wilson Cole, her boss and AA sponsor. As Sam draws deeper into an epic battle of good versus evil, Ferrendelli contemplates themes of family, grief, healing, and love.

Sam's devotion to her family is a highlight throughout, especially to April, as she's careful not to put work ahead of her time with her daughter—though her search for the arsonists sometimes overshadows those goals. Sam still carries guilt over her alcoholism, and Ferrendelli probes the limits of that dark emotion, using it as a catalyst to fuel Sam's efforts, sometimes misplaced, to help April's deep depression after Carol's murder—as in the scene where Sam gives April a pony, expressing to a friend that "I want nothing more than for her to be happy



Single mom fighting her own demons hunts for serial arsonists.

Great for fans of Sara Paretsky's *Burn Marks*, Christopher Pike's *Slumber Party*.

multiple references to Sam's physique, characterizing her throughout as trying to "shed the pounds"). Crime scenes are fittingly intense, and the arsonists' excitement—and obsession—at setting fires is disturbing to read, but the ending stays upbeat. Scenes at Sam's beloved ranch, her oasis of calm in a sea of chaos and evil, are uplifting, as is the blossoming romance between Sam's grandmother, Nona, and her longtime friend Howard, offering readers some glimmers of hope amidst the foreboding darkness.

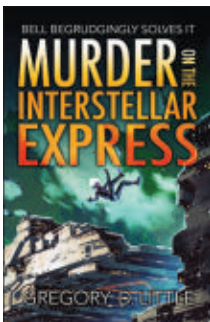
Cover: **B** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations:— Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

SF/FANTASY/HORROR
Murder on the Interstellar Express

Gregory D. Little | Cursed Dragon Ship Publishing, LLC
322p, trade paper, \$19.99, ISBN 978-1-951-44574-4

The playful first entry in the Bell Begrudgingly Solves It series takes readers on a wild ride through murder, the cosmos, and the colony ship *Ultima Thule* as Little spins a comic mystery bursting with surprises and snarky humor. Bell Beauregard hated her collectivist home colony, Anaranjado, even before she became a pariah charged with crimes against humanity. Her dream of getting out of its orbit becomes a reality when she is sentenced to indentured servitude on the *Ultima Thule*, as a crew of 1,000 set out to help establish a colony on a new planet. Bell is awakened from cryosleep ("Is there anything on this scow that won't taste like garbage?" she asks) to help maintain a hastily built ship with an unreliable "Brain," just one of many odd, amusing characters.

But when the brain announces a murder, our annoyed, proudly foul-mouthed hero is quickly assumed to be the prime suspect. Clearing her name is the mission, but Bell, who quickly develops a reputation for laziness, would rather put moves on her sultry-voiced crewmate Tas, who is having none of it. Little has crafted a brisk, pleasurable



Clever, funny spin on the murder mystery, in space.

Great for fans of Martha Wells's *Murderbot Diaries* series, Dennis Taylor's *Bobiverse* series.

Bell's situation grows more perilous, Little's sharp characterization, brisk prose, and skill with a joke will have fans of genre-crossing SF larks laughing out loud (a bit involving an anagram clue is inspired) and turning the pages, eager to solve a puzzle whose pieces have integrity. But for all Little's skill with a mystery, the novel is powered by its gently jaded comic vibe, its lived-in universe made convincing and inviting by Bell's being so deeply over it. SF and sleuth enthusiasts will appreciate the fun author and protagonist poke at tropes from both genres.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations:— Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

emotional burdens. When Sadie's brutally attacked in Maryland, and left alive with a message for the FBI, Noah's fears reach a fever pitch. What follows is a shocking tangle of emotion, bureaucracy, and scattered clues, all seemingly leading the team in circles as they race to

and okay. And I don't know what else I can do. She's all I have left of me."

The story stumbles when it centers too much on extraneous clues connected to the arsonists, getting bogged down by lengthy descriptions of firefighting equipment and Sam's obsession with her weight (Ferrendelli includes mul-

caping in the vein of Martha Wells's *Murderbot* series, but less militaristic and more juvenile: "Heh, insertion," Bell snickers, after an announcement uses that term. Dialogue is fast and funny, but moments of tension have power.

BUSINESS & PERSONAL FINANCE

Crypto and Bitcoin: A Millionaire Mindset for Opportunity

Michael A. Duniec | Actimor Publishing Group
232p, e-book, \$9.99 ASIN B0D5Z289KQ

With an emphasis on financial freedom, Duniec's enlightening debut offers an introduction to Bitcoin and cryptocurrency investing, presenting an historical account of the invention and rise of crypto, a look to its possible future, an introduction to monetary policy, and much practical guidance. Duniec presents this information using a narrative structure, telling the story of a fictional crypto-curious every investor named Roger. Through these eyes, readers get clear breakdowns of the evolution of cryptocurrency from its unregulated conception, the various stages of growth and development, to its current, ever-changing state in global markets. Duniec makes the case that, despite predictions of cryptocurrency crashing due to "drawbacks" like "high volatility, lack of regulations, and cyber-attacks," Bitcoin has survived and even "thrived"—but that entrants to the market must "become aware of the challenges they might have to navigate."

Before delving into the nitty-gritty of investing in tokenomics, Duniec



A comprehensive beginner's guide to Bitcoin and crypto investing.

Great for fans of Saifedean Ammous's *The Bitcoin Standard*, Ben Armstrong's *Catching Up to Crypto*.

inception of blockchain tech, the types of cryptocurrencies, crypto wallets, and problems like hacking incidents and fraud schemes.

Through dramatized conversations with friends, Roger shares straightforward investment advice but doesn't shy away from the cons of investing in such a highly volatile asset. While Duniec acknowledges the potential for exaggerated price swings and volatility, financial empowerment is the end goal for readers. "Bitcoin and Crypto could make you a millionaire with the right mindset and balance of careful research, diversification, time, and some luck," he argues. This comprehensive guide is ideal for readers new to the world of Bitcoin and digital money investing.

Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – | Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

BUSINESS & PERSONAL FINANCE

Your Power Unleashed: How Savvy Women Use Courage to Get Promoted, Get Paid, and Find Fulfillment

Kisha Wynter | Bublish
276p, e-book, \$13.99, ISBN 978-1-647048-29-7

Wynter supports women stepping into their power and confidence in leadership roles in this expansive debut, through her own "DIVA" method—an "internal coach that guides you to your most resourceful state, where self-doubt loses its power." From visualization activities to recognizing self-sabotaging patterns, Wynter highlights how women can channel the DIVA method to secure leadership positions and "drive the positive change we've been waiting for others to champion." The guide is brimming with hands-on exercises, each designed to help readers apply Wynter's inspiring advice in their own professional and personal lives.

Wynter's 20 years as a corporate HR leader—and experience as an executive coach—have afforded her a unique perspective, and she uses that perspective to advocate for women's success in a male-dominated industry. But Wynter doesn't stop there; she also provides actionable steps for men in management roles to cultivate leadership achievements



Inspiring resource for women to achieve career success.

Great for fans of Lisa Nichols's *Abundance Now*, Elizabeth Leiba's *I'm Not Yelling*.

for women within their corporations, arguing that gender equality will only be gained through "partnership[s] with men." She maps out strategies for overcoming fear, emphasizes the importance of accountability, and teaches women to seize their power and readjust their mindset and expectations, through tools such as her "6a Spiritual Practice for Courageous Women," a daily exercise focused on six steps—abiding, awareness, appreciation, affirmation, action, and applause—to securing success.

"Dismantling an oppressive system is both an internal mindset endeavor as well as an external systemic and culture work," Wynter explains, and her advice can be applied outside of the workforce as well, to "liv[e] a life imbued with purposeful power." She packs the guide with real life examples, many of them culled from her own "gender-aware transformational coaching," and readers will find her pointers as sensible as they are easy to follow. For women eager to take control of their road to career success—and men ready to insist on gender equality—this is a must read.

Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – | Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

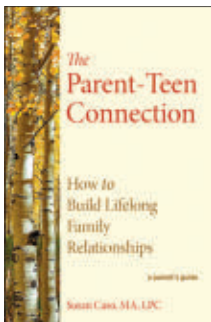
PARENTING

The Parent-Teen Connection: How to Build Lifelong Family Relationships

Susan Caso | Radius Book Group
240p, hardcover, \$28.99, ISBN 978-1-635-76936-4

Therapist Caso debuts with this refreshing guide on helping parents build healthy connections with their teenage children, drawn from her experiences with former clients alongside proven research. Embracing the art of communication throughout, a skill that she considers crucial to avoid teenagers "sitting in tough feelings alone, which can be hard, confusing, and sometimes scary," she outlines several easy-to-follow strategies to help parents create a safe, comforting environment where being open, transparent, and vulnerable is key. "Teens are looking for a meaningful relationship with their parents," Caso encourages, entreating families to routinely touch base on "how [their] connection is feeling," rather than waiting until a disagreement arises to share their feelings.

Caso starts by exploring the role attachment styles play in the way parents interact with their teens, urging adult readers to self-reflect unsparingly to understand how the past may be influencing the present.



Refreshing advice on creating meaningful connections, for parents of teenagers.

Great for fans of Mark Wolynn's *It Didn't Start With You*, Frances E. Jensen's *The Teenage Brain*.

From identifying anger and what lies beneath it to creating family traditions that build trust, Caso outlines actionable steps parents, and their teens, will welcome—such as giving each other the benefit of the doubt, paying attention to bodily sensations that accompany emotions, and interrupting negative thought patterns. Caso also addresses the fraught nature of today's world for teenagers, where advancements in technology and social media expose them to more bullying and peer pressure than ever before, highlighting the need for teens to feel both comfortable and confident in coming to their parents for help.

Perhaps most helpful is the myriad of real-life examples Caso provides, arming parents with a wealth of information to build a foundational level of trust in their parent/teen relationships. "Mistakes will happen," she reassures readers, but "by making small efforts to evolve and change, you will... facilitate your relationship to evolve with your teen's changing needs." She closes with a nod to self-care, reminding parents that striking a balance between solitude and connection is key.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: – | Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

HISTORY & MILITARY

Delaware from Freeways to E-ways: First State, Solid-State

Dave Tabler

133p, e-book, \$9.99, ISBN 979-8-987-00066-3

The third volume of Tabler's celebration of The First State and its history moves from the late 19th century to what Tabler calls the "E-era," charting the building of skyscrapers, highways (envisioned as early as 1911 by T. Coleman du Pont), and a leading edge in the development of the world's digital present and future. As always, Tabler includes surprises (Neil Armstrong "took mankind's first steps on the moon in a Delaware-designed and manufactured space suit"), like his delightful look at the rise and fall of the reputation among the upper crust of the Reebird, a native of Delaware that "has been viewed through three lenses" across history: as a juicy delicacy, then a pest, and finally "as a fragile species warranting legal protection." Its fall from grace as an epicurean event and fashionable accoutrement is captured by this turn-of-the-century dismissal from a newspaper columnist: "The up-to-date girl has finished with the toothsome reebird and asks now for a stuffed partridge."



Engaging, highly illustrated guide to Delaware history from the 20th century on.

Great for fans of John Riley's *Delaware Eyewitness*, Kennard R. Wiggins's *Delaware in World War I*.

Striking details like that abound, as in Tabler's online writing and previous volumes as he sweeps across the history. This volume covers DuPont chemist Wallace Hume Carothers's invention of nylon, educational activist Martha G. Bachman's life-long campaign to improve and extend vocational education opportunities, and the founding of the Delaware Art Museum, originally conceived of as a one-time 1912 event to honor the work of "the recently deceased 'father of illustration'" Howard Pyle and his protégés. Tabler also digs into the local impact of the Suffragist and Civil Rights movements, the World Wars, Prohibition—the Coast Guard was ill-equipped to deal with rum runners—and more.

Tabler closes with a look at the internet age, making a compelling case for the central role played in its development by three students from the University of Delaware. The result is an engaging, entertaining, warmly inclusive, and occasionally playful history with style and verve.

Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: **A** | Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

HISTORY & MILITARY

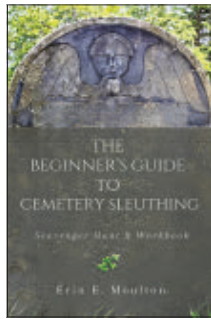
The Beginner's Guide to Cemetery Sleuthing: Scavenger Hunt & Workbook

Erin E. Moulton | Moulton and Casket

138p, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 979-8-218-32753-8

Moulton deviates from middle grade fiction to transform the macabre into a cornucopia of history, genealogy, and more in this absorbing guide. "Prepare to discover something old, learn something new, and have fun doing it," she writes, and from there jumps into the symbols, epitaphs, and monuments found in cemeteries, exploring the deeper meaning behind our memorials to loved ones. Moulton dedicates a bulk of the guide to understanding the markings on tombstones—broken up into categories, from winged death's-heads to stone carvers to hallmarks of organizations, clubs, and secret societies, among others—but also dives into the history, both on a personal and societal level, of graveyards, headstones, and "days gone by."

Readers will find this entertaining, interactive, and, above all, respectful, as Moulton honors burying practices throughout, encouraging readers to observe the hushed reverence that shrouds cemeteries—and even offering suggestions on how to get involved in



Interactive guide that makes cemetery exploration interesting and engaging.

Great for fans of Loren Rhoads's *199 Cemeteries to See Before You Die*, Greg Melville's *Over My Dead Body*.

used in cemetery engravings.

What's most appealing in Moulton's guide are the interactive activities she includes, ranging from scavenger hunts for recurring symbols to space for readers to record their favorite epitaphs. Her emphasis on cemeteries as a wealth of historical information is eye-opening, and she offers a local history challenge for readers to research headstones that catch their attention. Black and white photographs of various markers and monuments dot the pages, rooting Moulton's in-depth analysis in dramatic visual imagery, while appendices offer opportunities for further sleuthing, including typical symbols, abbreviations, and potential archives to "make your research more exciting."

Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **A** | Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

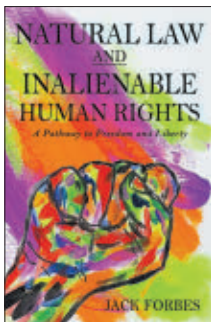
POLITICAL & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Natural Law and Inalienable Human Rights: A Pathway to Freedom and Liberty

Jack Forbes | JAFO Publishing

300p, e-book, \$14.99, ISBN 979-8-986-87748-8

This updated third edition of Forbes's exploration of the development, over history, of inalienable human rights and freedoms, offers an extensive examination of the written and unwritten rules, regulations, and ethics that shape modern society, governments, and corporations—and how, in Forbes's words, individuals are "charged with a responsibility—indeed, a necessity... To secure liberty, freedom from oppression. To secure—human rights." Forbes traces the evolution of these laws from ancient Mesopotamia, the writings of Plato and Aquinas, and the religious codifications of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and beyond, building to the enshrinement of rights in the Constitution of the United States and, later, the United Nations Charter and international treaties. Forbes examines the notion of "us" versus "them" in early societies, illustrating how this dichotomy compelled humans to grapple with concepts of humanity versus inhumanity, right versus wrong, in encounters with competing interests and security.



Urgent examination of the roots and responsibilities of humanity's natural rights.

Great for fans of Pierre Manent's *Natural Law and Human Rights*, Michael Boylan's *Natural Human Rights*.

Through these lenses, he considers contemporary controversies, too, like compulsory inoculations, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and whether a state court should have the power to kick a federal candidate off a state electoral ballot. Each chapter focuses on different periods in history and how perspectives on human rights and morality have evolved. Forbes poses critical questions about widely accepted maxims such as "All's fair in war" and "The ends justify the means" and provocatively discusses the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, questioning whether the often unreliable results of such extreme measures are worth their deep and enduring societal costs.

Self-defense is another crucial topic, as Forbes considers court cases, Israel's use of force against Hamas, and more, urging readers to consider the broader implications. Forbes's exploratory research draws from a diverse array of sources, from ancient texts to TikToks, making the book both informative and engaging. His conclusions eschew easy left/right orthodoxies, offering deep insights into the evolution and application of human rights.

Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **-** | Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **B+**

POLITICAL & SOCIAL SCIENCES

The End of Education: The Rise of Five Wisdom Teachings

Samo | Amz Publishing Pros

564p, mass market, \$39, ISBN 978-1-917-30675-1

Samo's debut opens with a call for nothing less than the "end" of education in a world that seems "heading towards destruction." The apocalyptic language, though, is a method of highlighting the urgency of the author's true project: the transformation of existing educational systems toward an enlightened, more practical, less knowledge-based education that nurtures humanity's "inherent virtues and wisdom." Samo proposes new curriculum and techniques rooted in five "universally applicable and secular" "Wisdoms" derived from ancient teachings pioneered by the Sramanas, the ascetic Indian sect that gave rise to Jainism and Buddhism. The bulk of this hefty, impassioned treatise explores how these Wisdoms could "elevate the pinnacle" of education around the world, how they might be implemented in different nations and cultures, and how if just one to five percent of humanity embraced them the world would be transformed, with "malevolent forces ... effectively restrained



Impassioned call for education emphasizing ancient wisdom and virtues.

Great for fans of Y.

Nithiyandam's *Buddhist System of Education*, Sean Steel's *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Happiness in Education*.

and Medical Insight, which entails understanding of medical conditions "even surpassing the standards of professional medical practitioners."

Crucially, study of the final Wisdom—Inner Enlightenment—as well as teaching of the "ten good deeds" helps prevent the abuse of the others for "evil" purposes. Samo proves persuasive when encouraging an integrated approach between contemporary science and technology and ancient teaching, but claims of a "correlation between the general mindstate of humanity and climate conditions," as exemplified by an explosion of kindness after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, are unpersuasive, and Samo's argument that an educational system should produce a "multitude of [Elon] Musks" will prove contentious.

Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **B** | Illustrations: – Editing: **C** | Marketing copy: **B-**

SELF-HELP

Self-Esteem in a Selfie World: Sculpting the True You

Shobha Nihalani | Passionpreneur Publishing

244p, e-book, \$4.99, ASIN B0C8FYFHT2

Noting how contemporary life can turn "the self-assured into self-doubter," Nihalani (author of *Whispers of Worth*) delves deep into the centuries-old question of what self-esteem is, how this "deepest sense of who we are" is formed, and how to nurture growth and in some cases survival. "The only way to build self-worth is through our actions," Nihalani argues, making the case through vignettes of people who succeeded or were able to overcome self-doubt and blows to their sense of self, whether cultural, professional, or social. Nihalani centers Indian culture in her examples, analysis, and practical guidance. Along with selfie culture, imposter syndrome, and other hot-button topics, Nihalani explores the impact of the caste system, the tradition of respect for elders seen as faultless, and a work culture where "bosses are treated with a kind of reverence"—so much so that even an erroneous criticism from a boss can "can undermine our sense of self."

Nihalani pulls from various research and well documents her resources at the end of each chapter, to explore how lack of self-esteem



Encouraging guide to nurturing healthy self-esteem in the social-media age.

Great for fans of Kim Dabbs's *You Belong Here*, Corey Keyes's *Languishing*.

on one's perceived value, and the sharp distinctions between how success is measured for women versus men.

With an inviting tone, incisive insights, and a wealth of practical takeaways and hard-won advice, Nihalani encourages accepting one's flaws and imperfections and not running from bad feelings but not dwelling on them, either—feel them and move on, she advises. Other choice suggestions: use the cognitive dissonance that occurs when behavior does not match beliefs as a motivator for change, and that self-managing time spent on social media helps recalibrate how people see themselves in reality.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

SPIRITUALITY/INSPIRATIONAL

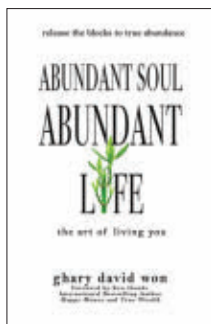
Abundant Soul, Abundant Life: The Art of Loving You

Ghary David Won | Living and Dying Media Group

260p, hardcover, \$22, ISBN 979-8-9910699-5-3

"We bring to us that which we are, not what we want" writes Won in this inspiring spiritual debut, sharing his journey to finding happiness and tapping into the "God Source." Won opens by pointing out the illusion of life—"that our experience here in this physical world is what we call 'real' ... and that our main purpose is to acquire things"—and prescribes its antidote as a path of self-discovery that revolves around authenticity and love. Won explores the practice of manifesting, the importance of journaling, and how "being honest with ourselves" can lead to true bliss.

As Won shares personal anecdotes and his own struggles with being seen, being true to himself, and finding happiness, he provides actionable steps to aid readers in pursuing their own abundant lives. "By deciding to move from using our ego to one of authenticity, we give up the unnecessary struggle," Won writes, explaining that, by existing in the ego, most people focus entirely too much on fears of failure and rejection, struggling to escape their own head and getting bogged down by



Inspiration to move away from the ego and into love.

Great for fans of Don Miguel Ruiz's *The Four Agreements*, Vex King's *Things No One Taught Us About Love*.

internalizing what others think of them. He also delves into the conscious, subconscious, and superconscious, explaining how all three areas of the mind "influence our actions and outcome in the manifestation process."

The material is often abstract and complex, as Won touches on themes that include grief and death, finances, authenticity, and more, but he capably breaks down even the most perplexing topics in language that simplifies while it enlightens. At the end of each chapter, Won includes questions to help readers explore, through journaling and self-reflection, how his guidance can be personalized. For readers intrigued by the metaphysical, Won provides the steps to discover their path to happiness and the tools to meet the challenges of the road ahead.

Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A-**

MEMOIR

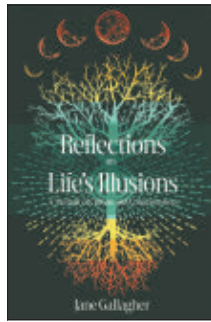
Reflections on Life's Illusions: A Memoir of Culture and Consciousness

Jane Gallagher

323p, trade paper, \$16, ISBN 978-1-633-37907-7

Gallagher's debut memoir interweaves social, political, and cultural events from her life into a broader context of her own search for meaning, as she ponders why stories are crucial to "the continuous flow of Earth's living process." Her portrayal of childhood is relayed in nostalgic vignettes, reflecting on the early experiences that shaped her inner consciousness, including her toddler drive to "move incessantly," a mother's trust in her daughter's innate passion for life, and soothing, cherished bonds with her family of origin.

Painted with rich, evocative details, Gallagher's narrative swiftly transports readers into the past, in lively scenes of political intrigue and sociocultural upheaval. She probes the impacts of Senator McCarthy's hearings on her family and the United States, her suffragette grandmother's fight for equal voting rights, and her own introduction to God in early life Quaker meetings, using those experiences as jumping



Memoir reflecting on the power of stories amid sociocultural upheaval.

Great for fans of Carolyn Forché's *What You Have Heard Is True*, Stephen E. Smith's *The Year We Danced*.

off points for the "power of cultural stories... [that sustain] the life of the emotional resonance the story elicits across generations." But Gallagher dives beyond her own story as well, interacting with science, culture, and the environment in her examination of modernism, climate change, and more.

Readers eager to experience the fabric of American life, especially through the 1950s and '60s, will find plenty that resonates here, as Gallagher skillfully humanizes history by embedding well-known events—from Vietnam War protests to the chemical development of DDT to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech—into her personal story. She introduces engaging ideas from a variety of intellectuals as well, smoothly transitioning from concepts of mindfulness and healing to biological evolution and the interconnectedness of life on Earth. Ultimately, this is a compelling glimpse into what it means to be alive, a study on "the creative force igniting all living" that arises "when words in the form of thoughts have quieted enough for the silent, wise knowing beneath them to emerge."

Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **B+** | Illustrations: – | Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A-**

MEMOIR

Rainy River Girl: A Memoir

Toby M. Gershfield and James N. Gershfield | Scribal Scion Publishing

148p, trade paper, \$14.99, ISBN 979-8-886-65010-5

The Gershfields' candid memoir centers on 90-year-old Toby Gershfield's quaint childhood in the 1930s and '40s as a young girl in rural Rainy River, Ontario, where her family was the only Jewish family in town. After leaving Lithuania "soon after the Pogroms in the early 1900's," Toby's grandparents and parents settled in Winnipeg, Manitoba, dubbed "the Jerusalem of Canada" due to its thriving Jewish community. There, Toby's grandfather grew to be a prominent rabbi in the city and nation as a whole. Toby's father, meanwhile, sought a position as a dentist in Winnipeg, but none were available, so he had to search further afield.

Further afield led him to Rainy River, a town of 1,000 residents that existed to serve the railroad and railroad workers who passed through on a cross-country train. As the only Jewish family there, the Helmans could not access Kosher foods and supplies, synagogues, or Jewish community in general; such was their isolation that when a circus came into town with a Jewish owner, they invited him over for dinner just to



Slice-of-life memoir of a Jewish upbringing in rural Ontario in the 1930s

Great for fans of Helen Waldstein Wilkes's *Letters From the Lost*, Allen Levine's *Seeking the Fabled City*.

spend time with someone familiar with the culture. Despite the challenges, the Helmans made a home there, and Toby learned that she was "able to remain true to my Jewish roots in spite of living in a non-Jewish world."

Some rough pencil sketches punctuate the Gershfields' memoir, suggesting the drawings elementary-school Toby might have made in 1940. Her volume of recollections, co-written with her son James, is idyllic, nostalgic, and illuminating of its time and place, capturing the texture of life as it was lived and a family and community as they held firm to themselves and flourished. Striking details abound: about winters with only a wood-burning stove for heat, about studying Torah in girls-only classes in Winnipeg; the surprise terror of first spotting the Northern Lights on a Halloween night in Rainy River. The memories are connected by theme more than narrative structure, but readers fascinated by the milieu will find welcome additions to the historical record.

Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **B** | Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

MEMOIR

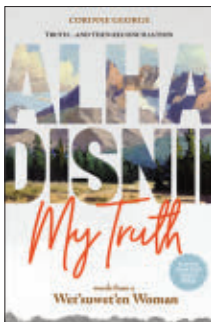
Alha Disney—My Truth: Words from a Wet'suwet'en Woman

Corinne George | Medicine Wheel Publishing

128p, trade paper, \$16.95, ISBN 978-1-778-54041-7

George, a Wet'suwet'en woman from the *Gidimt'en* Clan, tells her story, and that of her community, in this commanding debut, delving into her experiences as an Aboriginal woman living in predominantly non-Aboriginal spaces. She touches on the trauma that she and her ancestors have experienced, along with the impact of colonization on her family, community, and culture, adding in reproduced photographs to bolster the historical record. George explains the tenets of Wet'suwet'en culture—and her family's attempts to both stay connected to it and try to make it in a Western world—while exploring systemic and institutional racism, in the process dispelling colonial myths and spotlighting the Indigenous experience.

Readers will be transfixed by George's story, from her mother's use of "traditional food" (mainly moose and salmon) to feed her family in the face of an overpriced Western economy to the cherished time she spent on Wet'suwet'en ancestral territory. Her trauma is vividly ren-



Unflinching memoir of an Indigenous woman navigating impacts of colonization.

Great for fans of Thomas King; Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse*.

dered as well, as she recounts heartbreaking scenes of sexual abuse as a child and memories of painful family deaths—including taking part in a search for a missing cousin who was later found deceased. Those early experiences shaped George's development into adulthood, creating in her a deep

desire to advocate for issues such as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

George weaves some background from Canada's Indian Act as well as its Truth and Reconciliation Commission throughout the book, but the bulk of the memoir relies heavily on the emotional weight of personal narratives, painting Canada's troubled relationship with Indigenous peoples through shades of vulnerability and honesty. As George comes to a reconciliation with her community, and, through that, with herself, readers will find it a powerful experience. "Throughout my life, I was treated as invisible," she writes, but "my connection to my ancestors and my culture has always been my stronghold."

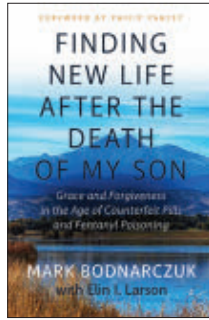
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – | Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A-**

MEMOIR

Finding New Life After the Death of My Son: Grace and Forgiveness in the Age of Counterfeit Pills and Fentanyl Poisoning

Mark Bodnarczuk | Breckenridge Press
387p, trade paper, \$20, ISBN 978-1-963-46121-3

This searching, exhaustive memoir from Bodnarczuk (founder and executive director of the Breckenridge Institute and author of *Diving In*) centers on a tragic loss: the 2021 death of 18-year-old son Thomas after taking a counterfeit Xanax purchased over Snapchat and containing fentanyl. Bodnarczuk's account digs deep into how he and his wife, coauthor Elin I. Larson, faced "the black hole of the early days of the grieving process" and then the next two years, which found the couple "transitioning from our old reality and identity as a family of three to our new reality and identity as a family of two." Facing every parent's nightmare, Bodnarczuk, a Christian seeker deeply invested in Jungian psychology and dream study, documents the wrenching challenge of living in the aftermath, from practical concerns like arraignments and autopsies—the couple strives to forgive the young man who sold Thomas the pill—and moving from California to Colorado.



Searching, spiritual memoir of parents' loss of a child, steeped in Jung and dreams.

Great for fans of Timothy Keller's *Forgive*, Verena Kast's *Time to Mourn*.

Thomas shared his parents' questing spirit, asking hard questions of the world—his "doubts," Bodnarczuk notes, "[lived] side by side with his faith in God." Bodnarczuk plunges into hard questions himself, exploring with tender frankness why Thomas would have purchased Xanax illegally—and digging into Thomas's adolescent nightmares.

Recalling those disturbing visions leads Bodnarczuk deep into spiritual, Jungian, and Christian analysis. As Bodnarczuk stares down the hardest questions of all—why?—the pages pulse with a real spiritual struggle, described with rare frankness and clarity, worked through by a thinker who never professes to have all of the answers but whose hard-won insights, in the end, will offer comfort to other believers facing losses that might seem unendurable.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **A** | Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

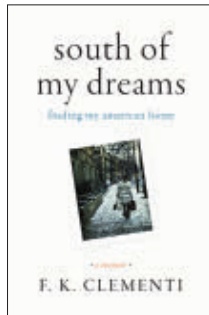
MEMOIR

South of My Dreams: Finding My American Home

F.K. Clementi | University of South Carolina Press
376p, hardcover, \$26.99, ISBN 978-1-64336-495-7

Alive with telling detail, incandescent prose, and fresh insights into her adopted nation and city, Clementi's sweeping memoir follows her from a childhood in Rome that found her dreaming of New York City, to graduate school in the "bubbly ferment" of Brandeis, near a Boston that is stubbornly not Manhattan; and then to exciting, unexpected opportunities in New York. Her circuitous route at times proves harrowing. She endures relentless sexual harassment as a young writer and thinker in Rome—"America may be militaristic, imperialistic, and hypernationalistic," she notes, "but it recognizes the right of 'No' for women"—and later endures assault and rape during a brief New Jersey marriage.

But Clementi refuses to yield her story to horrible men. Despite moments of tension and heartbreak, *South of My Dreams* is a richly pleasurable read, its heft and discursiveness lightened by a restless intelligence and a passion for living. Her first days in New York find her falling in love with an Upper West Side diner and then hoofing it all the



Exuberant, incisive memoir of dreaming of and inventing a New York life.

Great for fans of Tova Mirvis's *The Book of Separation*, David Adjami's *Lot Six*.

way down Broadway to the Battery. "What a pity that immigrants' first impression today is but a frigid airport," she writes. That energy persists when, in the late 1990s, she finds work as a reporter for the *Queens Tribune* ("\$16,000 a year, no expense reimbursements") before moving on to Town & Village (for whom she once interviewed a thoroughbred pug), and elsewhere. Apartment hunting, how sex and dating differ from sitcoms, the city's deep Jewishness, and the surprising way Bill Clinton is responsible for her green card, are all explored with wit and vigor.

A late destination, teased by the title, surprises: Clementi becomes an "eccentric Italian professor of Jewish literature" in South Carolina. That adjustment compels, but Clementi is especially strong on the topic of cities and self-authorship, noting that her New York is a bit of a fantasy but that "I invent it a little too, hoping that my version will make room for me." NYC lovers will find much to feast on.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: — | Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

PICTURE BOOKS

EDITOR'S PICK

Four Fallen Eagles

Karen Whetung | Medicine Wheel Publishing
32p, hardcover, \$16.95, ISBN 978-1-778-54043-1

When four eaglets face a devastating storm that knocks them out of their nest, they're swept into an odyssey of self-discovery that leaves them questioning their place in the big, unfamiliar world around them. As the eaglets try to make sense of their surroundings—and the strange animals they run into—they also fight for a sense of belonging: when they happen across a squirrel, who bears some slight resemblance to them with its coloring and habitat, the eaglets quickly latch onto its way of life, though only one decides to stay, the others "trek[ing] out on their own, away from the only world that they'd known."

Whetung (author of *The Corn Chief*) offers younger readers the chance to ride along as the story's eagle stars embark on the adventure of a lifetime, taking flying lessons from crows, learning hard life truths from a cunning raven, and more. Some of those lessons come with a hefty cost, as when two remaining eaglets discover, from a raven with some tricky plans, that not everyone can be trusted. Whetung allows the



Four eaglets discover their purpose and place.

Great for fans of Nancy Van Laan's *Rainbow Crow*, Nadia Sammartok's *The Owl and Two Rabbits*.

bursts of burnt orange splashing through, in the eaglets' beaks, claws, and the ever-present sun beating a steady rhythm in the background.

Whetung delivers a valuable lesson for young audiences: "the language, the culture, [and] the home of [your] kind" is never out of reach, and a caring mentor may be all that's needed to uncover one's path. Each of the four eaglets eventually settles on their purpose and place, a happy ending that, though diverse in its outcomes for the story's leads, will resonate.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **A** | Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

PICTURE BOOKS

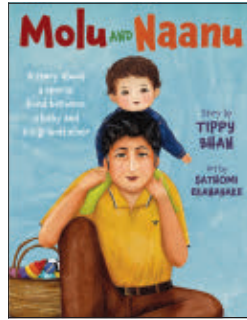
EDITOR'S PICK

Molu and Naanu: A Story about a Special Bond between a Baby and His Grandfather

 Tippy Bhan | Luminare Press
 58p, e-book, \$5.99, ISBN 979-8-88679-606-3

Bhan's touching debut children's story finds infant Molu spending the day with his grandfather, Naanu. Though Molu is just eight months old, he and his grandfather have their own special way of communicating and enjoying each other's company during their playtime. When Naanu's beard scratches Molu's face, Naanu quickly shaves it off, prompting a slobbery kiss and happy "Aghaa" from Molu, and when Molu refuses to eat, Naanu wisely distracts him with a cherished picture book. From changing diapers to snack time to story time, Molu and Naanu enjoy a full day of bonding.

Adult readers will treasure Molu and Naanu's extraordinary connection, and Sathomi Ekanayake's warm illustrations highlight the different ways that babies bond with their family members. Naanu's daily caretaking tasks—changing diapers, feeding, and tucking Molu in for a nap—are



Touching tribute to the bond between an infant and his grandfather.

Great for fans of Jean Reagan's *How to Babysit Grandpa*, Anne Bowen's *When You Visit Grandma & Grandpa*.

vividly rendered, their joy and love painting an inspiring narrative, and Ekanayake portrays Molu's emotions in lifelike, heartwarming detail. Even the pair's cuddle time during their afternoon rest is adorable, as Molu's mother and grandmother return from their day to find "their two favorite boys cuddled together in a beautiful, peaceful slumber."

Bhan's celebration of the attachment between baby and grandparent is a powerful message, one that will resonate with readers of any age and leave them eager for more adventures with Molu and Naanu. From magic tricks at nap time (including lullabies and a favorite pillow) to rousing games of peekaboo, Naanu truly is a champion grandfather, able to play, comfort, and safeguard Molu at every turn. Goodbye, when it comes, is heartrending, but Naanu once again saves the day by gifting Molu his own toy dog for the ride home. This is the perfect introduction to the memorable moments young ones and family members can create during their quality time together, and Bhan's tender message of family love is universally appealing.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **A** Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

PICTURE BOOKS

The Sharing Circle

 Theresa "Corky" Larsen-Jonasson |
 Medicine Wheel Publishing

40p, hardcover, \$17.95, ISBN 978-1-778-54042-4

On the Great Plains, "where the grasslands [stretch] out for miles under a never-ending sky," the animal community discovers just how destructive conflict can be when fox friends Morning Star and River have a falling out after a playful jaunt in the creek ends in disaster. When the argument drives them to denounce their friendship, the ripple effects extend to many of the other forest animals, prompting an older Buffalo Woman to seek the counsel of the Great Horned owl, Kokom, a master at problem solving.

Kokom wisely uses metaphors of the water cycle as a lesson for the animals, helping them create a "Sharing Circle" as a safe space to share their feelings, be heard, and make amends. "When something happens that may harm our community, we come together and form our own sacred circle" he declares, a valuable lesson on handling life's difficulties that Larsen-Jonasson weaves throughout this tranquil story. Young readers will glean a myriad of ideas on how to communicate well with their own friends and family, as the animals make use of a talking stick to open up



Gentle approach to solving conflict, drawn from Indigenous wisdom.

Great for fans of Derek Munson's *Enemy Pie*, Katie Smith Milway and Shane W. Evans's *The Banana-Leaf Ball*.

to each other without interrupting, learn to respect others' perspectives, and, eventually, make amends, restoring Morning Star and River's friendship in the process.

Jessika von Innerebner's beautifully illustrated pictures capture the animals' emotions in their expressive eyes and lifelike mannerisms, transforming the book's

characters into fun, vibrant animals dishing out an array of teachable moments, as when Kokom shares that "we have always respected each other... every animal has a duty to care for another." Larsen-Jonasson closes with a list of expectations for readers' own sharing circles (be purposeful about the circle's time and keep what's shared private, among others) and instructions on making a talking stick, as well as the Cree names for the book's animal stars. This is a gentle, refreshing way to approach conflict and communication.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **A** Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

Booksellers & Librarians:



How are you handling self-published books?

Every week, Publishers Weekly reviewers highlight self-published books that deserve your attention.

PICTURE BOOKS

Today Is Orange Shirt Day

Phyllis Webstad | Medicine Wheel Publishing
24p, hardcover, \$11.95, ISBN 978-1-778-54036-3

It's not easy to discuss certain aspects of history with kids, particularly when they involve difficult subjects—but these conversations are not only important but necessary for collective growth and understanding. Webstad's inviting picture book for very young children offers an introduction to Orange Shirt Day, a Canadian holiday officially known as the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation that recognizes the devastating impact of the nation's Indian residential schools. At these institutions, the last of which closed as recently as the 1990s, thousands of Indigenous children were forcibly assimilated into Canadian culture, and many did not come home.

As the founder of Orange Shirt Day and a residential school survivor herself, Webstad is committed to creating a future where "every child matters." Her book encourages children and their parents or caregivers to "gather together, listen, and learn the truth" about the past. Each page contains only a few simple words in large print that hint at the



Inviting introduction to the celebration of Canada's Orange Shirt Day.

Great for fans of Richard van Camp's *Little You*, Monique Gray Smith's *When We Are Kind*.

In Natassia Davies's warm and comforting illustrations, everyone wears an orange shirt that reads "every child matters." Indigenous individuals are shown embracing, smiling, and standing together beside the sea gazing at orcas in the distance, demonstrating the strength of their relationships and culture. Touchingly, the final page shows a mirror, encouraging children to imagine themselves as part of the brighter future the book envisions. Most importantly, this story opens up many opportunities for discussions about the devastating and far-reaching impacts of discrimination and how we can work together to create a more inclusive and peaceful world.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **A** Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

MIDDLE GRADE

EDITOR'S PICK

Olaf and Essex

Patti Calkosz | Pretty Cool
372p, trade paper, \$12.99, ISBN 979-8-9901433-7-1

Calkosz's charming adventure invites readers of all ages into a whimsical world where magic and reality intertwine. Set in an alternate New York City, this entertaining debut follows Olaf, a kind-hearted bear living in Central Park, who unknowingly saves off a pair of witches, leading to an unexpected discovery—a baby left behind in the chaos. Believing the child needs saving, Olaf, with the help of his loyal friend Essex the fox, sets out on a journey to return the baby to its presumed parents, Mabel and Harvey.

Olaf, Essex, and their newfound companions handily navigate this magical city where foxes communicate with trees and witches lurk under cover. The novel delves into themes of connection and belonging, with each character on a quest to find or reconnect with loved ones; Olaf yearns for his mother, Baby the cat yearns for her former owner, Betty, and Essex pines for her late mate, Bolton. That thread of longing loops the different



Sweet tale of the power of found family.

Great for fans of S.D. Smith's *The Green Ember*, Dave Eggers's *The Eyes & the Impossible*.

characters together into a united quest, of sorts, forcing them to consider how a makeshift family may be just the answer they're all looking for—despite the lack of blood ties. Olaf—who eventually decides to keep the child and soon learns that she was kidnapped from her true father, Chief Detector Damon Thomas—embraces his role as protector and, with the help of witches Hilda and Helga (one evil, one good), he and Essex face challenges that test their bond and resolve, but ultimately reaffirm the power of love and chosen family. "Life was not a tale signifying nothing. He loved other beings, and they loved him. That was something. That was neverending" Olaf muses. Xiao's black and white illustrations bring the story's animals to vivid life, making this heartwarming tale a delightful read for both children and the young at heart.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **A** Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

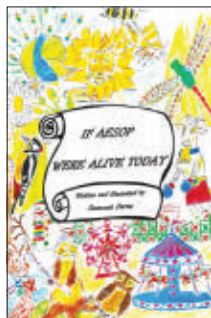
MIDDLE GRADE

If Aesop Were Alive Today

Susannah Davies | Independent Publishing Network
90p, mass market, \$16.99, ISBN 978-1-738-57335-6

Davies crafts contemporary fables reminiscent of classic Aesop in this creative reimagining. In "The Peacock and the Lion," a male peacock and male lion meet "under the shade of a lofty limba" tree to regale each other with tales of their masculine prowess, only to learn a valuable lesson about humility after their wives point their own role in ensuring each family's survival, while "The Angling Otter" finds a lazy otter learning the devastating effects of pollution caused by his own carelessness. Throughout this debut, Davies addresses racism, classism, and deforestation, among other topics, through vivid imagery, engaging prose, and entertaining lyrical alliteration.

In traditional Aesop form, Davies animates her featured animals, endowing them with very humanlike emotions and problems, and offers a moral at the end of each story—themes that are both "current and controversial," in Davies's words. From a productive goat who becomes lazy and unfocused after he's gifted a mobile phone to a moth who hates his own reflection, Davies tackles issues that young readers



Lighthearted reimagining of Aesop's fables, for today's youth.

Great for fans of Vivian C. Olsen's *The Good, The Bad, and the Goofy*, Mike Bennett's *Aesop's Fables Reimagined*.

will immediately relate to. In "The Owl and His Dilemma," a roller-coaster loving owl learns to deal with bullying over his dinner choices, after a gaggle of geese tease him for enjoying a "field-mouse burger." That incident prompts him to explore the culinary choices of other birds, inciting his epiphany that "we should just eat what tastes good to us and not

mock anyone if their dinner is different to ours," a message that Davies ties into accepting others and avoiding judgment.

Each fable begins with a colorful, hand-sketched illustration hinting at what readers can expect from the tale, and younger readers will enjoy Davies's outlandish characters, humorous situations, and figurative language (just as adult readers will appreciate the opportunities scattered throughout to learn new, unfamiliar words, such as "pulchritudinous" and "avaricious"). This is a lighthearted tribute to Aesop's brilliance.

Cover: **B** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: **B** Editing: **B** | Marketing copy: **B+**

MIDDLE GRADE

The Goshenite

L.Y. Abu Al Rub | Dar Al Hamed
262p, e-book, \$5.13, ISBN 978-9-957-66433-6

This mystical debut spins a tale of the Ghazalli family: Badr, his parents, and his five siblings, all gifted with special magical powers. When Badr—who can hear others' thoughts—uncovers a plot by his school's headmistress, Mrs. BeeZahara, to strip schoolchildren of their magical powers, he enlists the help of his family to stop her. Thus ensues an epic quest and journey into the unknown, as Badr and family navigate treacherous seas, solve intricate riddles, and confront fanciful creatures, all while evading the sinister machinations of Mrs. BeeZahara.

The Ghazalli family forms an engaging base in this fantasy-rich story; each member is a force field of distinctive powers, but they manage to stay relatable at the same time, while working through the issues that so often accompany large families. When an ancestor's ghost links them to an ancient prophecy, the family must unite to hunt down seven magical stones scattered across the Middle Sea, harnessing their unique strengths to overcome trials by sea, land, and air. The cost if they fail, as



Epic family quest rooted in Arabian mythology.

Great for fans of S.A. Chakraborty's *The City of Brass*, Saladin Ahmed's *Throne of the Crescent Moon*.

in all great hero quests, is perilously high: cosmic peril. But the Ghazallis willingly take on the challenge, working to the refrain of "whatever happens, we'll make it through as a family."

The Goshenite immerses readers in the vibrancy of the Middle Kingdoms—and hints at more to come after this first installment in the author's *Echoes of Destiny* series—while blending evocative landscapes and enchanting magic with the heritage of the Qayrans and Elysians, two bloodlines that merge in the Ghazalli family. A host of AI-generated images add little, making characters who seem singular in the prose look glossily generic, but this debut beautifully balances tradition with innovation, interlacing ancient lore and mystical beings deeply rooted in Arabian mythology—like genies, dragons, and sea creatures—into a culturally rich narrative. As Badr's mother proclaims, "there's a time and place for magic," and readers will find it overflowing here.

Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: **B-** | Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

YOUNG ADULT

A Plum Blossom in Winter

Richard Sjoquist
321p, e-book, \$2.99, ASIN B0D8TYHJQ

Sjoquist's fiction debut delineates the life of shy, quiet Beijinger Shuyuan—her anxieties, challenges, and sorrows. On her maternal side, Shuyuan's people belong to the marginalized minority Hui community; her father, Zhong Lai, works for a struggling government construction company, prompting strained financial circumstances for the family, as Shuyuan's mother maintains only a part time job. Shuyuan struggles with self-doubt, resentment over her family's poverty, and sadness at her low grades—that preclude her from a position at her coveted senior middle school—but her friends, Wei Wen Ho and Wu Yu, help stem the tide of her angst.

Sjoquist paints an empathetic portrait of an intriguing Chinese family, held up by their rigid value systems and customs, struggling to carve out a life for themselves. As Shuyuan bridges against the thought of living in poverty like her parents, she fights the balance of wanting peace—or "break[ing] the cycle and mak[ing] something of herself."



Moving story of Beijing teenager fighting for meaning and purpose.

Great for fans of Ann Liang's *If You Could See the Sun*, Wang Gang's *English*.

Shuyuan craves acceptance and approval from her parents, but in China, praise is not easily bestowed, stoking Shuyuan's jealousy of her successful cousin, Chen Lei, and transforming her into an entirely relatable character.

Beijing's descriptions are vividly wrought in Sjoquist's capable hands—the Summer Palace, savory kebabs and juicy striped watermelons, the sun beating through the side streets—and Shuyuan's outings with Wu Yu and Wei Wen Ho demonstrate the deep bonds of friendship and camaraderie shared by the three. Shuyuan's interest in learning English, and the efforts of her teacher to shore up Shuyuan's confidence, are well-delineated, as are her efforts to live carefree, if only for a moment, instead of just battling to survive. Readers will find this an informative peek into the lives of not-so-privileged Chinese children, a reflection on the fight to discover meaning while plodding through the lost innocence that comes with growing older.

Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: — | Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**



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The following are reviews of self-published titles that have previously appeared in *PW*

Fiction

Crab Bait

Joseph Brennan. Hard Crossing, \$30 (276p) ISBN 978-0-6455553-3-2

Brennan (*Loose Lips*) impresses with this atmospheric whodunit set against the backdrop of Jack the Ripper's killing spree in 1888 London. Rather than the mean streets of Whitechapel, however, Brennan focuses on "the golden age of the gentleman's club," the most notorious of which is Sizar's, an establishment whose members are "soilingly, ruinously ungentlemanly" in their sexual proclivities. Stewart Marsh, who scouts young men willing to have sex with Sizar's members, is on holiday in Brighton when he stumbles on the drowned corpse of London escort Marty Piper. Marsh's gruesome find soon comes to the attention of Det. Insp. Oscar Glass, who investigates London's gentleman's clubs for criminal activity. While Glass struggles to narrow the list of suspects—Piper accrued plenty of enemies as a "boy-whoring master villain"—he's handed a second, possibly connected murder to solve. Brennan's reveals, when they come, are plenty shocking, but the narrative's main strength is its vivid portrayal of a segment of Victorian society rarely depicted in mysteries. This illuminates a dark corner of British history, with grimly satisfying results.

In the Day of Trouble

Taj Magruder. Sunbury, \$22.95 e-book (280p) ISBN 979-8-88819-200-9

Magruder fictionalizes a fascinating real-life murder in his impressive debut. One morning in 1910, Susan Mummey warned her husband not to go to work at DuPont Mill in Western Pennsylvania after dreaming he was in danger. He ignored her, went to work, and died in an explosion, earning Susan the nickname the "Witch of Ringtown Valley." Two decades later, Union Township resident Albert Shinsky breaks into 63-year-old Susan's home and shoots her while she's sleeping. Detective Louis Buono and DA LeRoy Enterline learn that Shinsky had fallen on hard times and blamed Susan, believing she placed a hex on him. While the

case appears open-and-shut, the Schuylkill County prison warden takes note of Shinsky's erratic behavior, insisting he undergo a psychiatric evaluation that finds him insane and unable to stand trial. Magruder supplements his evocative prose (Union Township is "nestled, or imprisoned, in the foothills of a rugged and majestic mountain range") with news clippings that capture the paranoid tenor of Pennsylvania's so-called "Hex Belt." Readers will thrill to this well-paced resurrection of a forgotten crime story.

The Moonshine Messiah

Russell W. Johnson. Shotgun Honey, \$15.95 e-book (310p) ISBN 978-1-956957-25-9

Johnson makes an auspicious debut with this evocative Southern crime novel. Mary Beth Cain, the 40-year-old sheriff of Jasper County, W.Va., has her hands full with a steady stream of criminal activity—much of it perpetuated by her mother, the leader of a syndicate known as the McCray County Mafia, and her brother, a right-wing talk radio host with a significant following who's stockpiling weapons to form a militia. Meanwhile, she's under scrutiny for allegations of coerced confessions and evidence tampering. The pressure on Mary Beth increases drastically when her ex-boyfriend, federal prosecutor Patrick Connelly, shows up in Jasper County to make an offer: if Mary Beth goes after Sawyer and his violent followers, the feds won't pursue charges against her, which could include civil rights violations and election fraud. At first, Mary Beth refuses, knowing most (but not all) of the charges are unfounded, but then Sawyer and his followers carry out a terrorist attack at a local courthouse, and she agrees to try and stop him before things get any bloodier. Johnson perfectly marries pace and character development, resulting in a breakneck neo-noir populated by complicated people whose actions never feel inauthentic. Eli Cranor and Ace Atkins fans should take a look.

Pescadero

Hollis Brady. Palo Alto, \$14.99 trade paper (272p) ISBN 979-8-9877277-2-0

Brady debuts with a resonant parallel narrative of a teen girl's coming-of-age and

the struggles of a migrant worker's family. Hilde, 14, is upset when her mother, Janine, announces they are leaving Wisconsin and Hilde's father to run a goat farm near San Francisco. Her older brother, Ethan, takes the news even worse, angrily defying Janie's expectation that he help on the farm. Janine, overwhelmed by her new duties, hires day laborer Gabriel as a farmhand, though she soon grows suspicious of migrants due to the influence of her ultra-conservative new boyfriend. Meanwhile, Hilde, who feels out of place at her new school, drifts toward a local pastor whose ministry efforts support the migrant community. Gabriel's younger brother, Joaquín, is still in their native Mexico, and Brady shifts from the California story line to Joaquín's perilous attempt to join Gabriel. After Joaquín's first illegal border crossing, he is swiftly caught and returned to Mexico. During his second attempt, his tenacity is tested by the grueling Texas desert. Though the stakes of the story lines are starkly different, Brady effectively explores how migration upends all of her characters' lives. The result is a powerful story of dislocation.

Stranger in Love

Teymour Shahabi. PageWing, \$15.95 paperback (464p) ISBN 978-0-9978760-6-2

Shahabi (*The Secret Billionaire*) delivers a heartfelt and formally experimental romance between two strangers who match on a dating app. Taylor and Jamie—New York City residents whose names were "chosen specifically... to leave the genders up to the reader," Shahabi writes—begin a tentative yet quippy relationship over text messages. Their budding emotional connection is relayed entirely through journal entries, emails, texts, Google searches, and social media posts, creating fragmented portraits of who they are both together and apart. Shahabi uses this format to capture the anxiety and excitement of falling for someone who is still nothing but a profile picture and a series of online messages. The lengthy text message threads allow for plenty of banter, but there are also downsides to the gimmick, with both leads

remaining somewhat removed from readers, who have limited access to their desires and fears. Despite the hefty page count, there's virtually no backstory on offer nor mention of the characters' hobbies and loved ones (other than one often-ignored friend whose sole purpose is to ease Taylor's romantic woes). There's also very little conflict to keep the pages turning. Readers used to angst and spice will find this too tame, but those looking for a quirky and compassionate account of falling in love online will be well pleased.



Children's/YA



The Ordeals of Elly Robin

P.D. Quaver. CreateSpace, \$12 e-book
(370p) ASIN B00XVCXR16

Quaver (*Unplugged*) kicks off a nine-volume series with the immersive if simplistic story of a piano prodigy orphaned during San Francisco's 1906 earthquake. Six-year-old Elly Robins is touring in a vaudeville troupe with her parents when the earthquake hits. Because she barely speaks as a result of her trauma, she's assumed to be mute and is sent to a charitable asylum for "unfortunate girls," where a sadistic matron subjects her wards to electroshock treatments. After Elly escapes, she meets a group of older hoboes and pretends to be a boy in order to join them. In the vein of dime-store adventure novels, Quaver unspools a colorful picaresque, as Elly hops trains up and down California, learns the ropes of the hobo jungle, and by the time she's 10, earns money playing piano in a saloon. Quaver's attempt at channeling the language and sensibilities of the period leans a bit too much on stereotypes when it comes to his Black, Chinese, and Jewish characters; only Elly's depiction feels truly inspired. Still, it's an intriguing slice of Americana.