

24 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

# Getting Mental Health Representation Right

Two YA authors weigh in on writing characters' psychological conditions

BY CRYSTAL ALLEN AND KATIE KERIDAN

**E**ncountering characters who look, speak, and behave in familiar ways can help readers feel seen, heard, and, most of all, included. As writers, we want to create diverse and representative characters, and in today's context that means including characters with mental health challenges. Here are four tips to help indie writers create a child or teen character who accurately portrays what it's like to have a mental health challenge.

## ASK YOURSELF, WHY THIS ISSUE?

Why do you want to create a character with this particular mental health struggle? Do you have this diagnosis? Do you know someone with this diagnosis? Were you inspired by a character in a book or movie? Uncover any and all motivations for showcasing this particular mental health diagnosis. There's no special formula or set of questions that will determine whether you're "qualified" to write about a particular diagnosis. But it's never a good idea to create a character with a specific mental health challenge simply because that diagnosis is receiving attention in the news, was recently featured in a bestselling book, or is considered "trendy."



Crystal Allen (l.) and Katie Keridan

## DECIDE WHETHER TO NAME OR NOT TO NAME

It's important to decide what you will call the experience in your story. Some authors use standard medical terminology; others describe behaviors without giving the character a specific diagnosis. Crystal did both in her middle grade novel *Between Two Brothers*. One character is diagnosed with an anoxic brain injury, which leads to a host of mental and physical challenges. These challenges are described, along with his therapy appointments and relationships with friends and family. Another character, Uncle Jerry, has undefined mental health challenges. Crystal chose to describe his actions without giving him a specific diagnosis.

Using medical terms, such as “autism spectrum disorder” or “obsessive compulsive disorder,” can help destigmatize such labels while also ensuring that everyone is talking about the same thing. But, for better or worse, a diagnosis is still a label. And, in the real world, plenty of people meet criteria for mental health disorders without ever receiving an official diagnosis. The important thing is being consistent within your story.

## DO YOUR RESEARCH

Mental health diagnoses are made by trained professionals using the current version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders* or the *International Classification of Diseases*. This is not a perfect system, which means that, after establishing academic knowledge of a diagnosis, you need to understand how people experience the symptoms in the real world. This is important because the same mental health diagnoses can manifest in dramatically varying ways. Some cultures view mental health disorders as medical conditions that can be treated with therapy and/or medication. In other cultures, mental health issues are not discussed and are often not seen as treatable. You must understand cultural background, demographics, and spiritual beliefs to accurately represent mental health challenges in a novel.

Consider this fictional example based on Katie’s personal experience as a pediatric neuropsychologist. Imagine two children: The first child is a 10-year-old white girl. She’s an only child with two English-speaking college-educated parents who work in the technology industry in a large city. The girl attends a private school, takes horseback riding and dance lessons, and is learning Mandarin with a private tutor.

The second child is a 10-year-old Hispanic girl. She has three brothers and one sister. She recently moved from another country to a small town in the United States. Her mother speaks some English and is the primary financial provider. Her father speaks only Spanish and works long hours in the food service industry. The girl attends a public school with large classes and isn’t involved in after-school activities because she cares for her siblings every afternoon until a parent comes home.

Both of these children might ultimately meet criteria for depression (depressed mood, loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed, and so on) but the factors that contributed to their depression, what their symptoms look like, how their parents respond, and how others view their experience may be very different. Failing to understand how differently the same disorder can present in and affect two individuals can lead to myths, mistakes, and mischaracterizations.

## DON’T MAKE YOUR CHARACTER’S DIAGNOSIS THEIR FLAW

As readers, we love flawed characters because flaws are where we find hope and the possibility of healing. It may seem like giving a character a mental health diagnosis is making things hard enough for them, but your character is so much more than their diagnosis.

In order to create realistic flaws in your character, it’s important to know when their mental health challenges began. If a character is diagnosed at birth, they have time to develop life skills to manage their disorder. They may demonstrate higher levels of empathy toward other people who are dealing with mental health challenges. They may also always feel “different” or left out, and their behavior may reflect ongoing efforts to fit in. If a character hasn’t lived their entire life with a mental health disorder, they may experience denial after the diagnosis. They may pretend that nothing is wrong, refrain from asking for help, and refuse prescribed medication. They may seek to hide the truth from friends or extended family.

Everything is amplified during the tween and teen years, including the stress of friend choices, emotions, bodily changes, and likes or dislikes. When you have a mental health challenge, the amplification of these things can become an added stress, and that is where flaws should spring from.

As writers, we have a responsibility to accurately portray mental health disorders in the characters we create. Books unquestionably need more characters who depict what it’s like to live with a specific mental health diagnosis, and authors would do well to approach this aspect of their writing with the utmost care and respect. 🧠

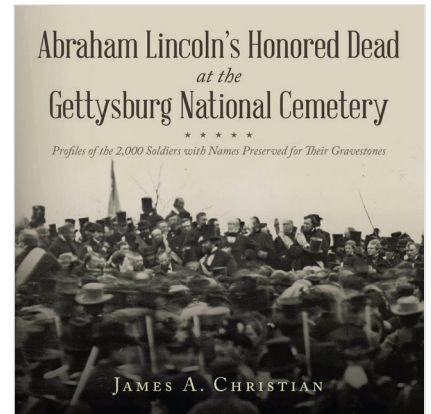
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*Crystal Allen is the author of How Lamar’s Bad Prank Won a Bubba-Sized Trophy, The Laura Line, and other middle grade novels. Katie Keridan, a neuropsychologist with a doctorate in psychology and a master’s in public health, is the author of YA fantasy novels including Reign Returned and Blood Divided.*



## BookLife Talks with James Christian

A film and a chance encounter with an author sparked a lifelong interest in the Civil War and, specifically, the Battle of Gettysburg for debut author Christian. His book, *Abraham Lincoln's Honored Dead at the Gettysburg National Cemetery*, seeks to resurrect the thousands of soldiers who lost their lives at that battle by making them more than just casualties.



### What sparked your interest in the Civil War?

As an African American youth growing up in the South in the mid-1960s, I wasn't so much interested in the Civil War as I was in our 16th U.S. president, Abraham Lincoln, his famous Gettysburg address, and his role in emancipating the slaves. When in 1984 I came north to Maryland to begin my medical residency, I took advantage of Gettysburg's proximity to visit the battlefield. But I was confused by all the monuments, and I had not studied the strategic movements of either side in the battle. In 1993, the movie *Gettysburg* came out. Although the movie was a highly romanticized depiction of the battle, it stimulated my interest in learning more about the real battle and the Civil War.

### What's the story behind this book—why and how did you write it?

Of the 4,000 dead buried in the Gettysburg National Cemetery, only 2,000 have their names preserved on the gravestones, the other 2,000 graves being simply identified as unknown. I wanted to write a book where the names that did appear on the gravestones acquired meaning. I decided to undertake the archival research that would allow presentation in the book of a capsulized biography for every named soldier buried in the cemetery. Such a book would honor both the named and unknown dead for their sacrifice at Gettysburg.

### What was your research process like for each soldier?

I began my research by reconciling the 2,000 names on the gravestones with the names of these men as verified by their military service records in the National Archives at Washington, D.C. I used these military service records to draft a capsulized biography for each soldier. These biographies include the

soldier's birth date or year; his enlistment date and rank; his occupation and residence prior to enlistment; his promotions, detachments, absences during the service; his previous woundings in battle; the date the soldier was mortally wounded at Gettysburg including any documented wound care received, which was mainly amputations; and the soldiers who, having surreptitiously entered the army as minors, would be killed before their 18th birthdays. I also accessed archived U.S. Pension Office files so that I was able to include in the soldiers' profiles the names of their widowed mothers or of their widowed wives and orphaned children who qualified for pensions. My inclusion of the ages in 1863 of these orphaned children is a bonus for genealogical researchers, as these children are the great-grandparents of millions of Americans alive today.

### What is the one thing you most want to tell readers about you or your book?

The importance of remembrance is what I'd most want to press upon the reader. The Union soldiers buried at Gettysburg are but a few of the hundreds of thousands of Americans who died to resolve the secessionist crisis of the 1860s. How different would this country, or indeed this world, be had they not done so?

### What's next for you?

The semi-quincentennial is next year. I recently learned that there are 11 Revolutionary War veterans buried in Arlington National Cemetery. I am intrigued by the idea of a book presenting the lives of these men together with the stories of their reinternments decades after Arlington's Civil War establishment.

For more, visit [booklife.com/christian](http://booklife.com/christian)



BookLife Reviews are paid reviews of independently published books. A lightning bolt (⚡) indicates an Editor's Pick, a book of outstanding quality.

## COMICS/GRAPHIC NOVELS

### Life Lessons from a UFO Catcher: An Autobiographical Manga, Vol. 2

Kenny Loui | UFO Comics

272p, trade paper, \$24.99, ISBN 979-8-9899366-1-8

The second collection of Loui's Seoul-based, arcade-themed memoir comics series is packed with amusing asides, wacky fantasy elements, and an enduring affection for the narrator's family, all while highlighting Loui's quirks and foibles. The everyday story follows the author/protagonist, a graduate student in criminology, as his younger twin sisters, Sammy and Jinny, are trying to fix him up with a date. Loui's guardian spirit Somi watches over him, trying to nudge him in the right direction, often playfully breaking the fourth wall and addressing readers directly—and sometimes taking some behind-the-scenes actions that pay off amusingly later. The central conceit of Loui's obsession with the perennially frustrating metal-claw arcade game—the one where players try to grab prizes—serves as a metaphor for the power of patience and listening to others. It's also simply fun to



*Charming manga of dating, family, and that arcade claw game.*

**Great for fans of** Tamiki Wakaki's *The World God Only Knows*, Yoshida Satoru's *Hatarakanai Futari*.

glam-up montage tunes. Soon after, Somi offers non-Korean readers charming lessons in language and culture, explaining idioms and references in the story.

The date itself is an extended setpiece, funny and squirm-inducing, with any chance at romance derailed by a relentless, pointless argument about a plush doll named Riarukuma. Other somewhat romantic incidents follow, and a hilarious kicker involving Somi puts some of the narrative's stranger moments into fresh light. These twists show that, even in a seemingly low-key, slice-of-life story, Loui has a deft hand at entertaining, emotionally resonant surprises.

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

## COMICS/GRAPHIC NOVELS

### Dad vs. The World

Kenny Loui | UFO Comics

224p, trade paper, \$19.99, ISBN 979-8-9899366-4-9

In this sweet and funny slice-of-life manga, Loui (*Life Lessons from a UFO Catcher*) and illustrator Yamawe focus on Loui's childhood and the often ridiculous grudges that his father, Ken, has harbored against much of the world. Each chapter is presented, with mock epicness, as a battle, as Loui expands on Ken's grudges against a cat, snails, police, people on elevators, little old ladies, and more. The treatment of these is light-hearted and affectionate, especially as Loui notes that some of his own cantankerous nature must come from his father.

Some of Ken's grudges, like against snails, defy understanding, although Yamawe's art—crisp, dynamic, humorous, and imbuing the everyday with playful flair—makes moments of him chucking away the small mollusks continually amusing. One longer standout story concerns Ken's grudge against a stray cat, because he thought he was eating his apples. After a protracted series of battles involving a



*Charming slice-of-life manga of a father's battles against the world.*

**Great for fans of** Kōji Kumeta's *Kakushigoto*, Akiko Higashimura's *Blank Canvas*.

tennis racket, a cage, spoiled food, and a super-soaker, Ken at last seems poised to claim victory. Then he realizes he hasn't prevailed against the cat after all, but a gopher. Like the other tales, the ending is funny and absurd, but also a little heart-warming. Ken's grudges against his neighbor, traffic cops, and elderly women who reminds him of his strict mother reveal an aversion to anyone who dares to impose any kind of authority on him, while his occasional practice of pushing every button on an elevator to annoy others seems done out of pure, gleeful spite, or as he would say, "Just because." Stories about his dad getting him the wrong video game system or toy build to happy endings thanks to Ken's ability to bluff. The final story reveals Loui's particular form of misanthropy: messing with "lovey-dovey" couples who show too much affection in public. It's all in good fun, as Loui's affection for his family shines, even as he delights in making them comedic characters.

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

## FICTION

EDITOR'S PICK

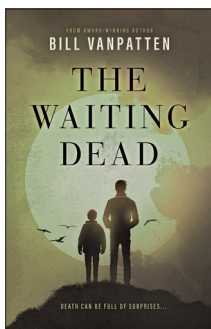
### The Waiting Dead

Bill VanPatten

236p, e-book, \$11.99, ISBN 979-8-303-28626-9

In VanPatten's afterlife, there is no heaven or hell, just dreary solitude in Deathway, where the dead live in their own homes and wait for their solitary telephone to ring. Guy, dead for 25 years, is shocked when his call finally comes: the voice on the other end belongs to his first love, TJ—his former partner who abandoned him for a 21-year-old. Despite his surprise, Guy's grateful for the opportunity to return to Earth and visit loved ones—his sister, his last boyfriend Matt, and, eventually, TJ—but when he meets fellow dead traveler Torrance, a 12-year-old boy on his own earthly mission, the two quickly strike up a friendship and embark on their three-day temporary reincarnation together.

VanPatten's take on the afterworld is a layered examination of the complicated emotions surrounding life and death. "In spite of poets romanticizing death in some way, there is nothing romantic about it. Death is merely the last breath you take—



*Emotive story of life after death and second chance reincarnations.*

**Great for fans of** William P. Young's *The Shack*, Claire North's *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*.

offering both souls a sweet closure by the story's end.

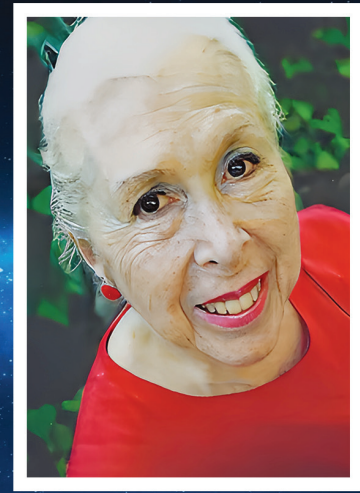
Secret revelations wind throughout this heartening story, threatening the fragile trust brokered between Guy and Torrance, but their passage through grief and time is capably wrought, a quest of redemption and restoration that echoes themes of loyalty, devotion, and a singular friendship that crosses all barriers of time and space. The heavy themes touch on graphically detailed child abuse, but VanPatten (author of *Refuge*) handles them thoughtfully, allowing readers to immerse themselves in Guy and Torrance's road to peace, healing, and forgiveness—even for those who don't deserve it.

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



# THE NEW PLANET

ISBN: 978-1-68486-069-2



The relationship between spirituality and science has long been a contentious one. The belief that these two realms are mutually exclusive has fueled conflicts and hindered progress for centuries. Yet, what if the gap between science and spirituality could be bridged? Could we find a way to integrate the peace and tranquility of spirituality with the empirical truths and expansive ideas of science?

In her novel *The New Planet*, author Carol Love Forbes explores this intriguing concept through the story of Marc and Alanna. Set aboard a galactic research station, the novel introduces Alanna, a project leader tasked with fostering harmony and collaboration within her team. Her challenge intensifies when Marc, a skeptical new pilot and non-believer, joins the station. Throughout their mission, Alanna attempts to guide Marc toward an understanding of spirituality. What begins as a professional dynamic evolves into a deeper connection, with their growing bond influencing their relationship and their mission's success in unexpected ways.

Forbes crafts a concise and compelling narrative that delves into the interplay between spirituality and science, revealing how these two forces shape our understanding of the universe. The novel emphasizes the importance of moving beyond differences to embrace shared humanity, a theme that resonates through the characters' spiritual journeys. The relationship between Marc and Alanna serves as the story's emotional core, drawing readers into their personal growth while introducing a richly imagined world and mythology.

This novel will appeal to fans of science fiction, particularly those who appreciate stories with strong spiritual undertones and romantic elements. Forbes' meticulous storytelling brings to life a narrative filled with dynamic character development and vivid settings, keeping readers engaged from start to finish. The passionate connection between Marc and Alanna underscores the novel's themes, creating a story that is both memorable and thought-provoking.

Emotional, insightful, and captivating, *The New Planet* by Carol Love Forbes is a must-read for science fiction enthusiasts. The fast-paced narrative, immersive world-building, and eloquent exploration of spirituality and romance ensure an unforgettable reading experience. Marc and Alanna's journey is heartwarming and a profound reflection of the novel's central themes, making this a standout addition to the genre.

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## FICTION

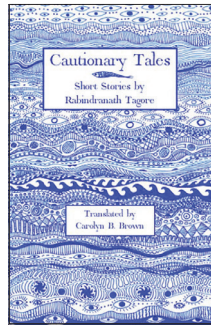
**Cautionary Tales: Short Stories by Rabindranath Tagore**

Translated by Carolyn B. Brown | Parabaas  
224p, hardcover, \$24.95, ISBN 978-1-946582-47-8

Brown's translation of short stories by revered Bengali author, artist, composer, social leader, and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) is a commendable effort in bringing Tagore to a contemporary audience. This anthology offers a curated selection of Tagore's short fiction from across his career, each reflecting the humanism and intricate storytelling for which he has long been celebrated.

Brown's translation is both faithful and refreshing, capturing the essence of Tagore's prose while making it accessible. This collection is divided into two sections: "Professions" and "Marriage and Other Tribulations," each exploring various facets of human life and societal norms. Stories like "Postmaster" and "The Fouled Nest" resonate deeply with themes of love, loss, and the human condition, showcasing Tagore's ability to weave complex emotions into simple narratives.

Including lesser-known works alongside famous pieces like "Postmaster," Brown



*Inviting fresh translations of Rabindranath Tagore's short fictions.*

**Great for fans of** *The Best of Tagore*; *The Essential Tagore*.

of poetry: "Charu and Amal sat in the shade of the hog plum elaborating on their impossible dream," runs one key line in a lively, surprising tale of the child bride of a wealthy man embracing an imaginary garden and the art of writing. "A Muslim Girl's Tale" and "The Sentence" likewise highlight Tagore's sensitivity to social issues—plus some heartening views on gender and class—in narratives whose brisk prose does not diminish the depth and richness of his vision.

While contemporary readers could benefit from more contextual information, these elegant, evocative translations preserve Tagore's lyricism while reaffirming his timeless resonance. *Cautionary Tales* is a well-selected and beautifully rendered collection that both introduces and honors the spirit of Tagore's storytelling.

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

## FICTION

**The Unseen Goddess**

Sangeetha Shinde | Villa Magna Publishing  
203p, trade paper, \$18.99, ISBN 978-1-940-17875-5

Shinde's deeply moving novel follows the life of Madhuri, a young girl from the slums of Chennai, India, where the sun dizzies her four-story climb home and her evenings after school are harried by "the scolding of my mother and the drunken shouting of my father." Madhuri's world is upended when her father dies and her mother, left with no other choice, places her in the Anni Ashram, a shelter for children with mental disabilities, where Madhuri must learn to survive in a world that seems to have abandoned her.

Both compelling and heart-wrenching, Shinde's narrative captures the essence of Madhuri's strength while skillfully portraying the stark contrast between the lives of India's wealthy citizens and those mired in poverty. In a system entrenched in inequality, Madhuri is forced into unpaid labor and servitude, encountering relentless cruelty and exploitation, including an abusive marriage and the tragedy of giving up her children later in life. The comparisons of the slum where she lives and the luxurious homes she works in paint a grim backdrop to her struggles and



*Relentless poverty and hardship punctuated by moments of vivid resilience.*

**Great for fans of** Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*.

of warmth and humanity, offering glimpses of kindness and solidarity in an otherwise brutal world. Some readers may find Madhuri's relentless hardships overwhelming, but they are vivid examples of the challenges faced by many women in similar circumstances. This is a powerful and evocative read that sheds light on the tenacity of the human spirit, and Shinde's storytelling is both raw and beautiful, making *The Unseen Goddess* a must-read for those who savor stories of empowerment against all odds.

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

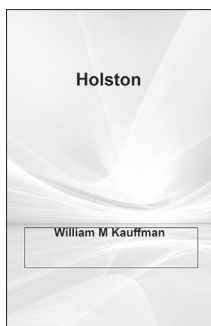
## FICTION

**Holston**

William M. Kauffman  
156p, e-book, \$16.95, ISBN 979-8-218-33627-1

In pained, perceptive, and interconnected short stories, *Holston* snapshots the daily comings and goings of the small community of Greenville, a rural town in the foothills of the Appalachians, where life revolves around Zack's Chicken, the "Budget 6 motel south of the four-way," and Sanchez Grocery, which supplies the Market Street Diner with its taco and burrito ingredients. That supply-chain detail is just one of many through which Kauffman demonstrates mastery over his fictional-but-deeply-lifelike territory, another American town racked by gun violence and whose meat-packing plant thrives thanks to the labor of the undocumented. In the opening story, 75-year-old Ephraim encounters a mass shooting at the front of the store, leaving multiple people dead and a mystery shooter on the loose.

The violence threads through the lives populating each story that follows, which center, with welcome sociocultural precision, everyday working-class concerns in times when people seem to be pickling in their juices. In one, a teenage boy finally works up the nerve to ask the girl he's been crushing on for a date, but after months



*Incisive and moving short stories of small-town life.*

**Great for fans of** Tom Franklin's *Poachers*; Breece D'J Pancake.

of spending time together, he ghosts her. In another, a twentysomething smoothie-shop worker begins dating an older shift supervisor who is masking dark thoughts about the opposite sex. Repetitive at times, Kauffman's writing is simplistic and

relatable. Each story peels back their hopes, disappointments, and insecurities, capturing with a persuasive, muted humanity their often cyclical thoughts in the face of daily struggles. Each character on the outside appears to be complacent, accepting of the lives they have carved out for themselves, but Kauffman plumbs their inner turmoil and isolation. Though the writing is clunky and disjointed at times, the author reels in the readers with these layered characters and their interconnected degrees of separation from each other. Fans of innovative contemporary fiction that lays bare quiet lives and loud thoughts will be fully immersed in this humorous and at times dark collection.

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

# SHOULD WE BUY A GUN?

Authored by Dave Cowen  
Illustrated by Gabriel Wexler

## SHOULD WE BUY A GUN?



AUTHORED BY  
**DAVE  
COWEN**

ILLUSTRATED BY  
**GABRIEL  
WEXLER**

ISBN: 979-8-9920550-9-2  
Publisher: SerioComics  
Author: Dave Cowen  
Illustrator: Gabriel Wexler  
Format: Full-color, 6x9 trim size,  
330 pages  
Distributor: Ingram  
Retail Price: \$35.00



Dave Cowen  
Author



Gabriel Wexler  
Illustrator

**.. THIS MAY WELL FILL THE GAP FOR A GREAT AMERICAN (GRAPHIC) NOVEL ABOUT GUNS IN OUR CULTURE. ..**

Rebecca Yeldham, Producer of *The Kite Runner*, *On The Road*, and *The Motorcycle Diaries*



SerioComics  
seriocomicspublishing@gmail.com

A graphic novel about the gun debate aimed to help heal our polarized divide, *Should We Buy A Gun?* unites a provocative, heartfelt story with simple, enchanting art.

Maggie & Adam are newlyweds building a life in Austin, TX. He's a NYC transplant and school counselor. She's a native Texan and NPR journalist. The like-minded pair are eager to start a family.

But everything changes after a mugging. They're shocked to find they have opposing views on guns. Whether to buy one, try for a family, or even stay together is now in question.

11 years in the making, authored by someone politically left and illustrated by someone politically right, this graphic novel doesn't claim to have the answers, it only asks that we stay open-minded.



"I FOUND IT A SUCCESSFUL WAY FOR FOLKS OF ANY AGE TO GET THEIR HEAD AROUND THIS URGENT TOPIC."

Eric Orner, Author, *Smahtguy: The Life and Times Of Barney Frank* and 2024/25 Cullman Fellow at The New York Public Library

Shannon Wheeler, two-time Eisner-Winner

"BOTH DARING AND HOPEFUL, THIS WILL BE A CONVERSATION STARTER AT A TIME WHEN WE URGENTLY NEED ONE."

"WHAT STARTS AS A SIMPLE PLOT WITH SIMPLE DRAWINGS SLOWLY UNFOLDS INTO A COMPLICATED AND NUANCED COMIC, RICH WITH HISTORY, CONTEXT, AND RELEVANCE. A BEAUTIFUL GENUINE STORY."

Ieva Jusonyte, Ph.D., Author of *Exit Wounds: How America's Guns Fuel Violence Across the Border*



## ROMANCE

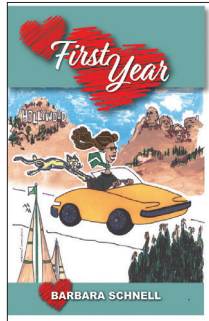
**First Year**

Barbara Schnell

384p, e-book, \$8.99, ASIN B00JYIV9D6

Schnell's sprawling fish-out-of-water romance finds young actress Stephanie "Stevie" O'Neill meeting Rob Anderson on a girl's night out in Los Angeles. After a whirlwind romance that mildly sizzles, the two marry, and Stevie finds herself moving with Rob to South Dakota, where she's thrown into a life that leaves her feeling like she is the one doing all the compromising. Not much of a homemaker, cook, or hunter, Stevie finds acclimating to her new home and family a challenge. Still, Stevie throws herself into the role of wife and tries to be a good sport. Soon, though, Stevie discovers that this new role comes with more drama than any of her acting gigs and that her marriage is never going to work unless she can find a balance between being a wife and still having a fulfilling life of her own.

Though fast-paced and bustling with incident and character, this is a slow-burn romance, where the newlyweds still have a lot to learn about each other. Schnell



*Warm, funny romance of the big adjustments that come after "I do."*

**Great for fans of** Lynn Painter's *Happily Never After*, Monica Ali's *Love Marriage*.

is forced to look within and grow into the role of a wife, all while figuring out if this marriage and Rob are what she truly wants out of life.

Revealing and layered, this witty romance centers around the exploration of love, getting to know one's spouse, and the conventional ideals behind marriage and partnership. *First Year* realistically highlights the perils of rushing into marriage and the challenging adjustments that come with melding two separate lives together. Fans of contemporary fiction and quickie "Vegas" wedding romances will be thoroughly entertained as this slice-of-life romance unfolds.

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

## ROMANCE

**My Dark Prince**

Parker S. Huntington, L.J. Shen | PSH Publishing

436p, trade paper, \$18.99, ISBN 978-1-950-20917-0

Huntington and Shen craft a complicated dark romance, taut with repressed desire, haunting memories, and family secrets. Unfolding through the alternating perspectives of Briar Rose Auer and Oliver von Bismarck, Count of Carinthia, the story's happily-ever-after is hard-won, as Briar and Oliver's fraught history together—15 years before the present time—haunts their future. As teens, the two were inseparable, desperately in love and pledging forever, but a devastating family accident led to broken promises. Now unexpectedly thrust together as adults, they're at odds, but a near-death head injury Briar suffers shortly after they meet again leaves her with amnesia and no memory of their past—except for how very in love they are.

Briar and Oliver play a scorching enemies-to-lovers game that will electrify readers. In the present time, Briar is an intimacy coordinator on film sets, determined to protect others and adamant that Oliver, now a cold, wealthy playboy whom she's grown to hate, will never break her heart again—until she's hit with amnesia, that



*Two former lovers crash back together in this exhilarating dark romance.*

**Great for fans of** Vivian Arend's Thompson & Sons series, Corinne Michaels's *Help Me Remember*.

whole charade cracks at the seams, with mounting secrets threatening to destroy their love all over again.

Witty and scorching hot with tension, this third installment in Huntington and Shen's Dark Prince Road series (after *My Dark Desire*) sets a compelling stage, lush with sultry chemistry and entertaining side characters. Both Oliver and Briar are driven by secrets, kindling plenty of suspense throughout the novel, though their affair has endless sweet moments as well. Dark romance fans will inhale this lush, contemporary fairytale that weeps danger and passion in equal measure.

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

## ROMANCE

**Journeying Home**

Emily Saxe Nydam | Hildebrand Books

311p, trade paper, \$18.99, ISBN 979-8-895-03002-8

In Nydam's tender debut, the parallel stories of two women unfold: Gwen, a modern-day woman navigating a pending divorce from her cheating husband while coping with empty nest syndrome, and her great aunt, Lizzy—a nurse in France during World War I—whom Gwen met only once in childhood. Lizzy's professional legacy is remarkable—she received presidential recognition for her influence on America's public health—and, as one of her few surviving relatives, Gwen is granted the opportunity to represent that legacy during a ceremony at Lizzy's college of nursing. Hoping the trip will distract her from life's upheaval, what Gwen discovers sends her on a personal journey of courage, change, and romance.

Lizzy's story steals the spotlight, reflecting the lasting impacts of generational trauma alongside the plight of women in early 1900s America. As a 12-year-old, Lizzy was abused by her alcoholic father—leading to a pregnancy and miscarriage that paved her way to the doorstep of Mrs. Jensen, the town midwife, who took Lizzy under her wing and nurtured her desire to create a different life. Nydam



*Touching tribute to resilience and tenacity, spanning generations of women.*

**Great for fans of** Simone St. James's *The Broken Girls*, Sarah Penner's *The Lost Apothecary*.

Gwen's path forward from her surprising revelations about her aunt.

As Gwen unearths shards of hope in her research on Lizzy, her life transforms in Nydam's capable hands, blossoming into a quest of self-discovery and new beginnings. Readers will be enthralled by the intersections of both women's lives, as buried secrets explode in dual storylines awash in both sorrow and resilience, making this a touching concession to the pain—and beauty—of starting over.

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

shines at developing a cast boasting charm, personality, and spirited banter. Stevie is a California girl with big dreams, a bit of a hopeless romantic who sees something in Rob that inspires her to throw caution to the wind and jump into their relationship full tilt. As Schnell unveils Rob's personality and some less-than-appealing traits as a husband, Stevie

is. The authors deftly use that as the springboard for a steamy cat-and-mouse between the two, with Oliver playing caretaker to a confused, lost-in-the-past Briar, who's convinced that something dark is lurking beneath her memories of their devotion. Oliver plays along well—urged to do so by Briar's doctors—until her memories start to resurface and the

## SF/FANTASY/HORROR

EDITOR'S PICK

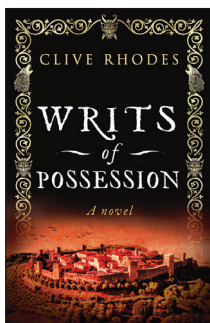
## Writs of Possession

Clive Rhodes | Knightsbury Press

334p, e-book, \$14.99, ISBN 978-1-0690340-0-7

It's the spring of 1519, and infernal lords are pulling the strings here on Earth as Rhodes's debut, a fiendishly clever Renaissance adventure bursting with puzzles and surprises, kicks off with nothing less than the voice of Satan, who declares that, Dante be damned, Hell is actually "the ordinary, mundane world inhabited by mortals and the handful of demons who are condemned to eternally roam among them." Eager to usurp ultimate power over the universe from his parents, Satan and company dispatches, through trickery, 15-year-old Michel de Nostredame (yes, that's Nostradamus) to uncover an ancient manuscript, currently in the workshop of Da Vinci, with the intention of ushering in the apocalypse. On this journey, Nostradamus meets (through more trickery!) Hans Holbein the Younger and Madeleine, "a beautiful, young, red-headed woman who mysteriously never seemed to age."

With a spirit of highly literate play, *Writs of Possession* proves as unpredictable



*Witty Renaissance puzzle box of demons, Da Vinci, and young Nostradamus.*

**Great for fans of** James Morrow's *Towing Jehovah*, Elizabeth Knox's *The Absolute Book*.

Stones and *Arsenic and Old Lace*), Rhodes ultimately offers a most human journey.

As Nostradamus, Holbein, and Madeleine cross Alps and nations, digging into clues in *The Last Supper*, they are pursued by demons who bounce through multiple human vessels and must peel back, like "the layers of an onion," a host of demonic lies, all while facing urgent questions and secrets about life and death, myth and belief, the truth of the Mona Lisa, and much more. Everything builds to a jolt of an ending that casts previous events (and perhaps existence itself) in a new light. Rhodes has crafted a singular blend of hellish satire, Templar treasure hunting, and allusive, energetic escapes, jokes, and moral inquiries.

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

## SF/FANTASY/HORROR

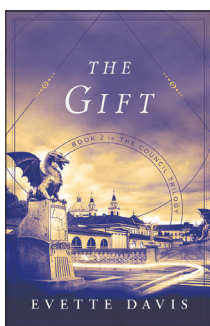
## The Gift: The Council Trilogy, Book 2

Evette Davis | SparkPress

288p, e-book, \$17.99, ISBN 978-1-684-63296-1

In Davis's second installment of *The Council Trilogy* (after *The Others*), Olivia confronts her dual heritage as a human-witch hybrid, catalyzed by a fateful tarot reading from the enigmatic clairvoyant Nadia, who warns Olivia of impending trouble and foretells her greatest adversary: Nikola Pajovic, a centuries-old vampire camouflaged as a Serbian hotel magnate and the probable orchestrator of her mother's death. With Nikola poised to hunt down Olivia and seize control of the Council, the governing body of humans and Others, Olivia must once and for all accept and master her rare and burgeoning empathic and telekinetic powers to upend Nikola's tyranny and exact revenge.

Davis's worldbuilding is top-notch, transporting readers from San Francisco's mystic charm to Serbia's magic-laden streets and Ljubljana's diplomatic soirées. The landscape features a pantheon of beings—vampires exuding beauty and terror, wise witches with power tempered by human fragility, and fairies who remain largely peripheral. This expansive characterization, oozing with bloodlust energy, comple-



*Enthralling Gothic blending romance, self-discovery, and political machinations.*

**Great for fans of** Deborah Harkness's *A Discovery of Witches*, Charlaune Harris's *Dead Until Dark*.

Davis uses to offset the book's colder political machinations.

*The Gift* is a goldmine of contemporary relevance as it tackles the dynamics of hierarchical power, corruption, and family betrayals with a sharp, feminist lens. Olivia's resistance to patriarchy, embodied by Nikola's dominance and her father's loving but controlling nature, echoes the broader struggles of women reclaiming autonomy. Davis's ability to balance these weighty themes through a fast-paced Gothic drama ensures the novel remains entertaining while also deeply thought-provoking. Davis withholds just enough secrets in the end to leave readers eagerly anticipating the trilogy's explosive finale.

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

## SF/FANTASY/HORROR

## The Amulet's Power: Blood of the Vampire

Kendra Powers | JAS Publishing

200p, trade paper, \$12.99, ISBN 979-8-991-92511-2

Powers (author of *Surprise Twins for the Vampire*) conjures a lush paranormal romance, steeped in the tempestuous relationships between vampires, witches, and secret creatures that live in darkness. Through a powerful amulet, Iris, a time-traveling witch, is bound to wealthy, ancient vampire Alistair D'Arcy, a mover-and-shaker in the Parisian scene. It's a connection she knows—but he feels it on a visceral level only after spying her amidst the glimmering lights of a masquerade ball. Once Iris convinces Alistair of their centuries-old connection, and the "rising darkness" poised to destroy their kind if they don't unite their efforts, the pair embark on a quest to stop a coming war, their steps fueled by an ancient prophecy.

This prophecy and the concept of fate govern their steps ("whatever was coming, it was going to change everything" Alistair muses), but it's the heated romance, one born in destiny—at least from Iris's viewpoint—that forms the foundation of Powers's tale. As they traverse from the depths of the underground vampire city in Paris's catacombs through the black twists of endless forests, nature wars with



*A powerful amulet entwines the destinies of a vampire and a witch.*

**Great for fans of** I.T. Lucas's *The Children of the Gods* series; Sadie Kincaid's *Forged in Blood*.

man—in the form of the forbidding Council and through Lucien, a vampire with eyes for the amulet's powers. Along the way, Iris and Alistair are aided by guardians and friends—though their presence in the story is more plot-forward and restrained by unrealized potential.

The novel's sweeping scope and richly detailed tapestry provide the perfect foundation for the alternating viewpoints of Iris and Alistair; though the prophecy they seek to fulfill remains murky—and Powers's character motivations at times lack subtlety—the focus on hope and perseverance in the face of almost insurmountable odds will have readers cheering the pair's trials and tribulations. Lovers of glittering, compact gothic romances teeming with non-stop action will find themselves captivated.

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

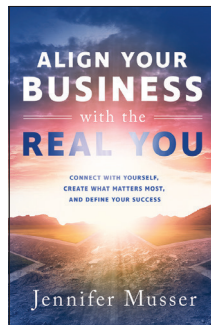
## BUSINESS &amp; PERSONAL FINANCE

EDITOR'S PICK

**Align Your Business with the Real You: Connect with Yourself, Create What Matters Most, and Define Your Success**Jennifer Musser | PenRock Press  
262p, hardcover, \$31.99, ISBN 979-8-9915442-2-1

Musser presents readers with five steps “to propel you forward wherever you are on your entrepreneurship journey” in this refreshingly optimistic debut. Those steps—connect, clarify, control, cocreate, and change—come with 13 usable lessons to help readers implement Musser’s advice, covering such important topics as being able to change tack in response to life’s storms, infusing gratitude into daily routines, and more, each one delivered in a well-ordered, practical fashion. She accompanies each lesson with snapshots from her own life to illustrate the mechanics and uplifts readers with a sprinkling of wise sayings, including “[give] yourself permission to feel your emotions” and “you can succeed at what matters to you.”

More than just a roadmap for career success, *Align Your Business with the Real You* gently steers Musser’s followers onto a path of autonomy, as she puts the



*Optimistic, well-ordered guide to building business success.*

**Great for fans of** Brianna Wiest’s *The Pivot Year*, Ed Mayo’s *Values*.

responsibility for change squarely on readers’ shoulders in respectful, compassionate terms. When it comes to delegating, she appeals to readers to “stop trying to do it all so you can redirect yourself toward meaningful achievements,” and her definition of alignment charges readers with the task of organizing their lives according to their true selves—a concept that she builds from the bottom up, starting with how to listen to yourself and accept life’s many curveballs.

Musser’s pointers are an interesting blend of insight and practicality, leaving readers with opportunities for reflection and resources for further learning. The guide culminates in a handy summary of each step and its lessons, including a rundown of its many creative exercises (a word search cleverly tailored to “stop overthinking and get going” is particularly memorable). While navigating the gap between business and personal success can be tricky, Musser’s direction leaves readers with a full toolbox for “owning yourself and the life you choose to live.”

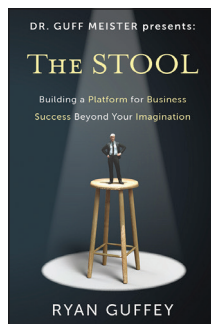
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: — Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

## BUSINESS &amp; PERSONAL FINANCE

**The Stool: Building a Platform for Business Success Beyond Your Imagination**Ryan Guffey | 1TON Publishing Company  
210p, e-book, \$2.99, ISBN 979-8-223-74518-1

This creative business guide takes the form of a fictional story, following Dr. Guff Meister, who lives in The Mind and pontificates on what it takes to nurture professional success. Meister—who asks readers to visualize themselves as an imaginary person not “obligated to the restrictions you place on yourself based on your personality, your experiences, or your world view”—envisions success as a stool: the four legs represent confidence, control, creativity, and computers; the base is strengthened by adding rungs of math, motivation, momentum, and mobility; and the seat symbolizes success.

The format of this unusual book allows Guffey to embark on musings that may feel out of place in more conventional business guides. Meister often addresses readers directly, imploring them to actively use their imaginations to visualize success as it pertains to them, and he centralizes the message to “fake it until you



*Business success guide blending fictional characters and engaging advice.*

**Great for fans of** Spencer Johnson’s *Who Moved My Cheese?*, Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander’s *The Art of Possibility*.

make it.” Acting confident is the first step to gaining confidence, he declares, and that benchmark starts with the imaginary “stand-in” he urges his audience to embrace. That persona (whom Meister terms a “Confidence Double” and later “Imaginary Success Guru”) can pinch hit anytime readers feel they aren’t prepared, and Meister’s recommendations include several opportunities to put these principles into play—though some may feel

awkward to readers, such as “pound[ing] your chest like an ape for five seconds” before entering a networking situation. Visualization and ingenuity are the cornerstones of Guffey’s debut, aimed at helping readers transform their inner selves into business leaders in an engaging way. The stool metaphor serves as a road map throughout, offering readers starting points to revamp shortcomings into strengths. Guffey’s ideas will surprise—motivation is pointless, he writes, because everyone possesses it inherently—but his originality makes this an entertaining read.

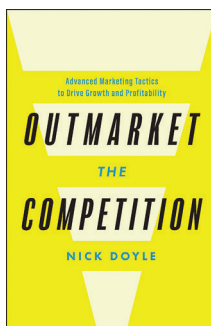
Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **B** | Illustrations: — Editing: **B-** | Marketing copy: **B**

## BUSINESS &amp; PERSONAL FINANCE

**Outmarket the Competition: Advanced Marketing Tactics to Drive Growth and Profitability**Nick Doyle | Fast Company Press  
272p, hardcover, \$27.95, ISBN 978-1-63908-103-5

Doyle offers a five-pronged marketing structure to “initiate, boost, and secure long-term profitability” in this easy-to-read business debut. His mission—to take the guesswork out of marketing without losing sight of the creative process—revolves around the concept that a singular marketing approach will never net the same results as plans that combine multiple strategies. To solve that problem, Doyle merges five separate techniques—brand and performance marketing, lifetime value framework, understanding customers, integrating campaigns, and artificial intelligence—to help readers overcome sales plateaus and achieve substantial growth.

Though *Outmarket the Competition* is structured around understanding and implementing his Five-Tactic Marketing plan, Doyle also makes good use of established research, building on “the shoulders of others” while offering experience-based solutions to common business problems. He uses real-life examples to support his recommendations and includes graphs and charts that help clarify



*Comprehensive marketing guide blending best practices with fresh research.*

**Great for fans of** Brant W. Maxwell’s *Modern Marketing Strategy and Tactics*, Craig A. Huey’s *The New Multichannel Integrated Marketing*.

data, including eye-opening graphics illustrating the science behind content rankings, emotional versus rational messaging, and more. Doyle addresses artificial intelligence in depth as well, arguing that the growth in data sets has made AI exponentially more powerful and a crucial tool for marketing professionals. Artificial intelligence, he argues, can help in nearly every business process, from creation to operations to optimization;

still, “AI is not an isolated consideration... it must be deployed in conversation with other frameworks and strategies.” Readers unfamiliar with basic marketing strategies may find Doyle’s material fairly advanced, as he focuses on implementing best practices rather than defining them. Still, this guide is brimming with practical tools, including step-by-step suggestions to enhance customer experience and hands-on guidance for optimizing campaigns. Doyle’s insistence that “by combining all the tools at our disposal, we can transform our futures and the futures of our companies” drives the guide, leaving readers with a comprehensive, thoughtful approach to marketing success.

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

## TRAVEL

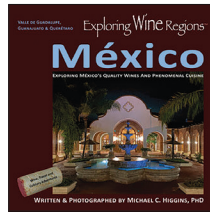
EDITOR'S PICK

**Exploring Wine Regions: México**

Michael C. Higgins | International Exploration Society  
340p, mass market, \$34.95, ISBN 978-0-996-96606-1

With this stellar fourth entry in the Exploring Wine Regions series, author and photojournalist Higgins performs a welcome service, introducing the English-speaking wine world to Mexican viticulture, terroirs, and above all wines. This inviting, informative, highly practical, and unabashedly opinionated ("I have only included wineries that have good-tasting wines," he promises) guide to touring, imbibing, and eating refreshes both for Higgins's choice to venture beyond familiar locales in Europe and California and for the rich pleasures of that tour itself, captured in gorgeous photography and clear, descriptive prose that suggests the richness of the many tasting experiences that Higgins recommends as he profiles wineries, bistros, restaurants, microbreweries, and more. These suggestions go beyond wine to include food—the "exquisite" cuisine of the Purepecha Plateau looks particularly inspired—plus lodgings and activities.

Higgins's survey of the premium wines he encountered in all these regions opens new doors to the adventurous wine traveler. The focus is on Baja California's Valle



*Gorgeous, practical guide to touring Mexico's booming wine regions.*

**Great for fans of** Martha Cisneros Paja's *Mexican Wines*, Ralph Amey's *Wines of Baja California*.

de Guadalupe, which has boomed in wine production in recent decades, plus the states of Querétaro and Guanajuato. Ten years ago, Higgins notes, the latter state had eight wineries. Today, it has nearly 50 and counting. So fresh is this territory that Higgins addresses a question some readers might harbor: what if one is "not sure" about Mexican wines? Such uncertainty is "understandable," he writes, before digging with persuasive evidence and excitement into the promise, pedigree, and likely future prominence of the nation's viticulture.

Higgins writes in an engagingly direct, unfussy style, unclogged with the hyperbole and specialized vocabulary of much wine writing. Rather than showcase his erudition, Higgins celebrates wine, food, and locations worth discovering. He covers a host of off-the-beaten-track wineries, restaurants, and hotels with clear-eyed, super-localized tips for travel, packing, and getting the most out of the trip. Readers will find their appetites whetted and senses of adventure aroused.

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

## TRAVEL

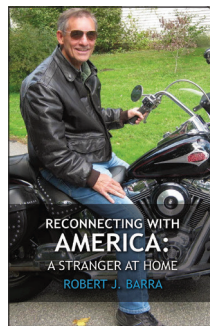
EDITOR'S PICK

**Reconnecting with America: A Stranger at Home**

Robert J. Barra | RJB Limited  
352p, e-book, \$7.99, ISBN 979-8-9877891-1-2-4

Barra sweeps readers into an epic, coming-home motorcycle venture across the United States after living in Europe for several years. Following his retirement, he experiences an awakening: "I want to travel across America and get to know my country again," he writes. As his time in Europe ends—and he feels detached from his homeland—Barra lights on the idea to reconnect with his two sons, one of whom lives in Boston and the other in California, with a cross-country jaunt to measure his country's national mood.

The people Barra encounters take up just a sliver of this lively adventure, but their impressions will stick with readers. "Twenty years ago, when I got home from work, I had my TV and beer. I'm retired now and I still have my TV and beer. It doesn't matter who's in the White House or which party is in power" declares Dick, a retired fireman Barra meets in Idaho, who embraces a sentiment that isn't always echoed in the rest of Barra's travels. In Eureka, Nevada, Barra encounters Lola, a hardworking



*An American journeys cross country to reconnect with his homeland.*

**Great for fans of** Bill Bryson's *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*, Blythe Roberson's *America the Beautiful?*

Mexican immigrant who accepts President Trump's broad-brush denunciations of migrants as criminals because "being poor in America is better than being poor in Mexico." Revelations like that shift Barra's mood to one of contemplative disquiet, as he ruminates on America's volatile treatment of immigrants who have "struggled and gambled to get there, worked hard to gain a foothold, then fought to keep it."

Beyond Barra's deep reflections on the powers driving his country, his debut thrums with the thrill of the road, as he battles the elements and nurtures his fondness for America's breathtaking landscapes, always aching to uncover what's around the next bend. Each page breathes a thundering need to understand America's "pervasive insecurity" he encounters, but he closes with a glimmer of hope that we will, one day, escape the world's "race to chaos."

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

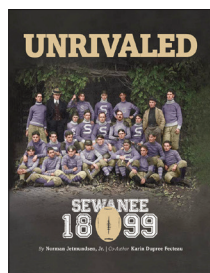
## SPORTS

**Unrivaled: Sewanee 1899**

Norman Jetmundsen, Jr., and Karin Dupree Fecteau | Shakerag Hollow Press  
176p, hardcover, \$75, ISBN 979-8-218-42019-2

Adapting the documentary film of the same name (written and co-directed by Jetmundsen), this rousing, richly detailed history offers a thorough examination and celebration of one of the most tremendous feats in the history of college football: the 1899 season that found the University of the South (aka Sewanee) winning five games in six days on a train journey across the South. *Unrivaled* explores crucial historical context, especially why football took root so quickly in the South, suggesting that for many, the game was both a direct substitute for war and a chance to finally beat the North.

Both game-to-game excitement and the bigger picture shine here. Using interviews from the players' descendants, newspaper accounts, letters, and other sources, Jetmundsen reveals a story larger than the actual games. Tales of gate receipts being divided at gunpoint, the players bringing their own spring water for fear of poor sanitation on the road, escaping a near-riot after beating Auburn, and trash talk from coaches in the newspaper only add to the legend. This was a different era for college sports, one where the players had to raise their own funds for uni-



*Richly detailed history of an early triumph of college football history.*

**Great for fans of** Timothy P. Brown's *How Football Became Football*, Tex Noel's *Stars of an Earlier Autumn*.

forms, travel, and coaches. The game was also much more brutal and debilitating, with players handling both offense and defense, playing the entire game with few substitutes. These players' obsession with the sport was eventually matched by the enthusiasm of the fans they drew along the way.

The Sewanee scheme to play all of those games was born out of a money dispute with arch-rival Vanderbilt; the spectacle of their breakneck pace was a way to make money to fund the rest of their season. Jetmundsen also discusses the unique, close-knit qualities of Sewanee that persist to this day, a century after they were a significant force in college sports. A breathless quality occasionally overwhelms the narrative, but persuasive storytelling and vital, fascinating photographs and ephemera bring the era to life.

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

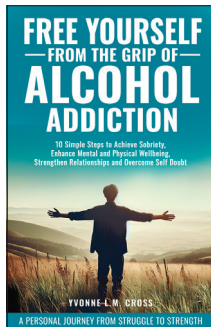
## SELF-HELP

### Free Yourself from the Grip of Alcohol Addiction: 10 Simple Steps to Achieve Sobriety, Enhance Mental and Physical Well-Being, Strengthen Relationships, and Overcome Self-Doubt

Yvonne L.M. Cross | IngramSpark  
162p, trade paper, \$19.99, ISBN 978-1-965346-01-3

After years of “letting [herself] down,” Cross conquered her alcohol addiction through an arduous journey of physical, mental, and emotional work, and she shares that hard-earned wisdom here, through her 10 steps to establishing sobriety and living full-filling lives free from addiction. She dispels myths surrounding alcoholism—such as drinking in moderation, detoxing, and withdrawals—and advocates for others struggling with addiction to change their mindset, set up a strong support system, and explore the true reasons behind their desire to quit using. Cross advises that “admitting you have a problem doesn’t make you weak; it makes you honest.”

While providing insights on the road to sobriety, Cross tackles a slew of crucial issues: she breaks down the effects alcohol can have on the brain, body, and



*Realistic guide to overcoming alcohol addiction, written with empathy.*

Great for fans of Richard O'Connor's *Rewire*, Erica C. Barnett's *Quitter*.

relationships; differentiates enabling from being supportive; explores the duality of forgiveness and self-forgiveness while mending relationships; and analyzes the choice between quitting cold turkey or gradually reducing intake. She writes from the perspective of lived-in experience, which gives weight to her suggestions, and shares recommendations in informative, empathetic language that resonates.

Though Cross's debut focuses primarily on alcoholism, the steps and advice she includes can be generalized to any addiction, as she touches on overall health, maintaining patience and grace for the task ahead, and incorporating mindful techniques to fuel goals and solidify motivation. Cross's encouraging, compassionate style never wavers, as she delves into self-reflection, healing, and challenges readers with a realistic look at what's in store for anyone choosing to kick their dependence. Readers willing to put in the hard work will feel empowered to let go of their fear and begin a transformative journey to the other side of addiction.

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

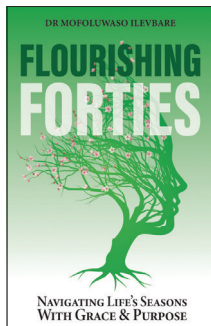
## SELF-HELP

### Flourishing Forties: Navigating Life's Seasons with Grace & Purpose

Mofoluwaso Ilevbare  
186p, e-book, \$2.99, ASIN B0DJHLLZZQ

Ilevbare reminds readers that “age is not a limitation; it is a testament to the richness of your experiences and the depth of your wisdom” in this uplifting guide, using the changing seasons—spring, summer, autumn, and winter—as parallels for the growth and new beginnings women can experience as they age. Affectionately referring to women in their 40s as “forticians,” Ilevbare explores six categories they can fall into, from feeling ready for the new decade to experiencing intense “anxiety and disappointment,” and offers the acronym F.R.E.S.H. (freshen, reprioritize, evolve, systemize, and hope) as a method to thrive in each season.

As in her previous works (*Uplift Your Conversations*; *Stop Wishing, Start Doing*, and others), Ilevbare keeps the focus positive and encouraging, empowering women to confront life's transitions more purposefully through preparation, rewiring the brain's response to failure, and cultivating a “visionary mindset.” She draws from her own experience and Christian faith to impart inspirational advice, mindfulness



*Transformative, uplifting resource for women entering their 40s.*

Great for fans of Brianna Wiest's *The Pivot Year*, Lindsey Mead's *On Being 40(ish)*.

practices, and an abundance of intuitive exercises to help women navigate “the journey of womanhood” that is, she writes “a remarkable one, full of twists and turns, changes and detours.” Her techniques include worksheets to help implement creative visions, journaling prompts that address topics like ageism and bouncing back from mistakes, and catchy graphics

that break down thinking errors, outline coping strategies for mood struggles, and more. Ilevbare's writing is passionate and dynamic, rich with insightful prompts that will leave readers reflecting on such weighty questions as “What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?” or “Who dictates which standards you measure yourself by?” Compassion drives the guide, as Ilevbare urges women to view this stage as an opportunity to redefine themselves, overcome fears, and live authentically. “In your 40s, your fight is different... push!” she writes—a sentiment that will resonate with any woman seeking purposeful ways to bloom in all of life's seasons.

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

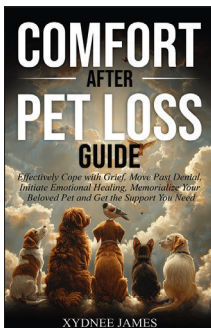
## SELF-HELP

### Comfort After Pet Loss Guide: Effectively Cope with Grief, Move Past Denial, Initiate Emotional Healing, Memorialize Your Beloved Pet and Get the Support You Need

Xydney James | Sawa Amana & Jaha, Inc.  
161p, e-book, \$9.99, ASIN B0DGD9M9PT8

Losing [a pet] can feel like losing a lifeline, leaving one to navigate the challenges of daily life without their constant source of emotional support and unconditional love,” writes James in this comforting, straightforward guide to dealing with the death of a beloved animal. Drawing from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's grief model, James walks readers, step by step, through the process of grappling with and ultimately accepting the mortality of their pets, starting with the deep emotional bond that forms between humans and animals. That bond—and the daily interactions we experience with our pets—is what makes their death so painful, according to James, as it transforms “every memory... [into] a reminder of the depth of the relationship and the gap left by their absence.”

James's passion for animals drives their writing, resulting in a gentle, graceful handling of what can be a distressing topic. Their useful coping strategies include keeping up with routines, such as walks you may have taken with your pet; erecting



*Caring, compact guide to grieving the death of a pet.*

Great for fans of Jeannie Wycherley's *Losing My Best Friend*, Jon Katz's *Going Home*.

memorials; volunteering at animal shelters or other pet welfare organizations; and journaling, including a creative idea to write a “letter to your pet expressing the things you never got to say.” James also focuses on how to help children deal with the passing of a pet, as well as assisting readers with the process of

acquiring a new pet at the right time, which, they write, “can be seen as a tribute to the love you shared with your former companion.” The brevity of James's guide, drawn largely from their own experiences, makes the material more general than precise, but for readers seeking an across-the-board approach to managing grief while celebrating their pet's life, *Comfort After Pet Loss Guide* offers a wide array of tips that will bring comfort, closure, and insight. Hints on anticipatory grief and the encouragement to “embrace this path without judgment” are particularly helpful.

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

## MEMOIR

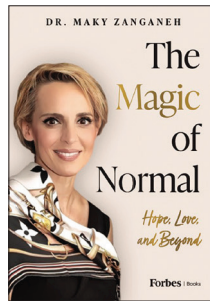
**The Magic of Normal: Hope, Love, and Beyond**

Maky Zanganeh | Forbes Books

320p, hardcover, \$24.99, ISBN 979-8-887-50515-2

Cancer survivor and biotech CEO Zanganeh takes readers on an intimate journey of her battle with breast cancer, alongside her behind-the-scenes cancer research, all driven by a determination to “fight till the end and never give up.” Chronicling her ambitious career as the CEO of a company responsible for critical advancement in cancer treatment, Zanganeh delivers expert insight on the duality of being both a cancer patient and medical professional, highlighting the familial bonds and strong business connections that have empowered her success. Her story is one of unflinching determination and resilience, of grief and devastating illness balanced against the joys of being a parent and “the magic of normal,” everyday life.

Growing up in war-torn Iran during the Islamic revolution and the Iran-Iraq War with her parents and two sisters, Zanganeh’s childhood narrative is deeply profound and moving as she pays tribute to her strong family unit and their enduring support. She takes readers on a poignant journey from Iran to Silicon Valley in inspirational



*Engrossing career memoir from a biotech exec, alongside her personal cancer journey.*

**Great for fans of** Tessa Miller’s *What Doesn’t Kill You*, Charles Graeber’s *The Breakthrough*.

Operation Lindbergh—a medical advancement that allowed intercontinental surgical procedures—and in the company Computer Motion, responsible for developing the “future of robotic surgery.” She includes personal letters from her team at Pharmacyclics, giving her career recollections an intimate sheen that will resonate with readers, and her emotive story of battling cancer in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic is tenacious and inspirational. She closes, fittingly, by paying homage to her Pharmacyclics team members, highlighting the “brilliance and passion... [of their] incredible adventure” together.

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

## MEMOIR

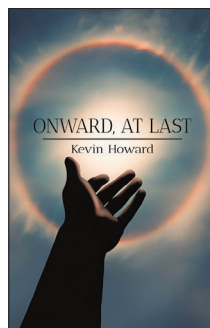
**Onward, at Last**

Kevin Howard | Atmosphere Press

290p, e-book, \$16.99, ISBN 978-1-63988-608-1

Howard debuts with a thoughtful exploration of life, happiness, and the pursuit of meaningful change, challenging conventional ideas on satisfaction versus fulfillment. “Satisfaction brings us fleeting moments of happiness, but fulfillment brings us joy that never wanes,” he asserts, urging readers to move beyond surface-level gratification toward a deeper, lasting contentment—a state of being that must take into account humanity’s interdependence while promoting our common interests. Central to his message is the idea that American values—particularly the “fundamental right to pursue our own happiness”—can impede on the well-being of others and leave us feeling dissatisfied and futile.

Merging reflections on current events with self-discovery, politics, social evolution, and spirituality, Howard offers readers digestible chapters that prompt deep reflection. He balances searing critiques of systemic issues like scarcity and inequality with proposed solutions that foster a sense of hope, nudging readers to consider how money often drives the very freedoms we seek—and challenging them



*Examination of lasting fulfillment through challenging societal norms.*

**Great for fans of** Rutger Bregman’s *Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari’s *Homo Deus*.

to start change at a basic level, with an honest self-inventory and reordering of priorities to reflect that “the one common denominator of experiences that bring fulfillment is our commitment to any interest beyond our own.”

At its core, *Onward, at Last* is both informative and thought-provoking—a light introduction to philosophy interwoven with raw, personal insight that deconstructs concepts like decency, sensitivity, and autonomy. These nuances, Howard argues, are essential to grasping the urgency for change, and readers will sense his hunger for that transformation threaded throughout this passionate call to address societal division, disconnection, and general despair. His message is clear: a healthier, more fulfilling future is within reach if humanity embraces its collective responsibility to act. *Onward, at Last* serves as a reflective guide for that outcome, offering both an assessment of the present and a hopeful vision for a more constructive path moving forward.

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

## POETRY

EDITOR’S PICK

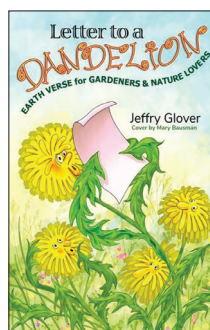
**Letter to a Dandelion: Earth Verse for Gardeners & Nature Lovers**

Jeffrey Glover | Poems for Pleasure Press

200p, e-book, \$4.99, ISBN 978-1-948-85409-2

Glover’s charming collection, an homage to the poet’s “yard and lovely garden,” finds the universal in the particular as it celebrates, through spirited rhyming paeans to ripe strawberries and unexpected garter snakes, humanity’s relationship to nature within the context of gardening and stewardship of one’s land. Blending the reverent (“We thank you, sun, for every day // With all of nature on display”) and the playful, Glover’s relatable poems make ample use of puns and humor to stir delight; in describing the chipmunk’s toil, Glover writes, “their insurance plan makes a ‘hole’ lot of sense.” Throughout, Glover considers forbears like Whitman, Wordsworth, Untermeyer, and more, as in the section “Leaves on Grass,” wherein the poet suffers through the toil and ethical quandary of raking leaves: “I rake and rake and haul and haul; // It’s simply part of fall.”

For all the collection’s brightly welcoming pleasures, key lines achieve a sophistication, grace, and insight: “The weeds that we inherit // Are hiding under-



*Light, cheerful poetry celebrating nature and the joys of gardening.*

**Great for fans of** Germaine Greer’s *Poems for Gardeners*; Robert Frost.

ground. // We may not quite admit it, // But that is where they’re found,” Glover writes in “Weeds We Inherit,” which offers a depth of multiple meanings that wonder at humanity’s connection to nature and humanity’s connection to itself. Glover calls the sight of apple blossoms falling “magic for a little while,” and his poems suggest, over the course of the collection,

that the magic lies both in the wonders we encounter in nature and in the fact that humanity gets to perceive it at all during the relative brevity of a lifetime.

Though much of Glover’s collection is a lighthearted assessment of the struggle of gardening, it is a treatise on loving the natural world; the toil, like the writing of poems, is an act of devotion. In “The Gift,” one of the best in his collection, Glover quietly meditates on the universe: “A miracle it is, by far // That we exist and simply are // Able to observe it’s so.” The great privilege of life, Glover asserts, is that we have the capacity to pay attention to the universe’s gifts, “from galaxies to layered rose,” and cherish them.

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

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

### FICTION

#### Downriver

Jennifer M. Lane. Pen and Key, \$16.99 trade paper (344p)  
ISBN 978-1-7366691-2-9

An orphaned teen takes on powerful men in this rousing series launch from Lane (the Ramsbolt series). Charlotte Morris and her younger brother, Emmett, hail from the coal mining town of Stoke, Pa., where her miner father agitated for better working conditions. After both of their parents die from illnesses related to pollution from the coal mine in 1900, Charlotte and Emmett go to live with foster parents in North East, Md. The Ryans, alcoholic Finn and stern Regina, offer the siblings a cold welcome and put them to work with fishing and other chores. When Charlotte sees the town's mayor on a train platform meeting with the owner of Stoke's mine, she suspects the mayor of corruption and starts connecting the dots between the pollution in Stoke and the massive fish die-off in North East. Gathering allies, including a group of suffragists, Charlotte concocts a plan to continue her late father's labor activism and expose the truth behind the environmental devastation. Her crusade is complicated by increasing tension with Emmett, who chafes against Charlotte's protectiveness, and Charlotte struggles with whom to trust. The pacing and character work are a bit rough, but Lane succeeds at making Charlotte a heroine to root for. Those who appreciate muckraking social realism in the vein of Mary Doria Russell's *Women of Copper Country* ought to check this out.

#### A Sham Betrothal

Jennie Goutet. Millefeuille, \$12.99 trade paper (210p)  
ISBN 978-2-494-93026-1

A British woman attracts the attention of a French marquis in the chaste but alluring fourth installment of the multiauthor Georgians in Paris series (after Sofi Laporte's *The Vicomte's Masquerade*) from Goutet (*A Whimsical Notion*). Sophie Twisden meets Basile Gervain, Marquis de Verdelle, while visiting Paris with her grandmother in 1774. Basile's flirtation with Sophie annoys her pompous British

escort, Sheldon Cholmsley, who's courting her. Sheldon and Sophie are both in for a shock when, soon thereafter, Basile—seeking to ward off the unwanted attentions of another woman—publicly announces his engagement to Sophie. Sophie goes along with it, hoping to similarly shake herself free of Sheldon's advances. The stakes of their fake engagement intensify, however, when their relationship catches the interest of Marie Antoinette. Now their ruse must withstand both her scrutiny and their own shifting feelings. Goutet transports readers to the glittering aristocratic world of pre-revolutionary France, spotlighting the soapy gossip and machinations of society's elite. Historical romance fans looking for a vacation from Regency England will find this hits the spot.

#### Suburban Monsters

Christopher Hawkins. Coronis, \$18.99 trade paper (240p)  
ISBN 978-1-937346-12-6

Hawkins (*Downpour*) spins the familiar into the grotesque in this chilling collection of 13 horror shorts. The author excels at putting dark twists on everyday domestic circumstances. A painter escapes an unhappy marriage with some supernatural aid in "Moonrise Over Water with Sargassum, 2022. Oil On Canvas." In "Green Eyes," a child cares for her ailing mother even after the woman's death. An uncanny children's TV show takes center stage in "The Stumblyum Imperative," while in "A Candle for the Birthday Boy," a six-year-old's birthday party goes horribly wrong. The exceptional gore—narrators perform revolting actions such as probing "the glistening yellow-gray" of their own exposed fat, which "yields beneath [their] touch like molded gelatin" ("Storms of the Present")—makes looking away impossible. Not all the stories are quite as successful, however. If, as in "Interlude," about a little boy whose parents think he has a rash, the buildup is too mundane in its purposeful misdirection, what should be a delightful shock ending turns into a cheap trick. Still, plenty of entertainment lies within these pages. Readers will be thinking about Hawkins's skin-crawling fables long after they turn off the lights.

#### The War Photographers

S.L. Beaumont. Paperback Writer's Publishing, \$4.99 e-book (368p)  
ASIN B0CNL85KH4

Beaumont (*Shadow of Doubt*) delivers an intriguing tale of WWII espionage and the last days of the Cold War. In 1943, Mae Webster, a codebreaker at Bletchley Park, meets and falls for Lt. Jack Knight, New Zealand war photographer. After learning Jack's security clearance is higher than hers, she suspects he's a spy. They get married the next April, and after Paris is liberated, Jack travels there to take photos, including one that appears to capture a Bletchley colleague passing an envelope to a Soviet agent. Mae never sees Jack again. In a parallel narrative set in fall 1989, Mae tells her granddaughter Rachel Talbot, a London-based photojournalist, that she's seen a television clip of the Stasi officer she believes was responsible for Jack's death. The mystery of what happened to Jack in Paris gradually unfolds as Rachel investigates the officer while on assignment in Berlin, covering the imminent fall of the Berlin Wall. Beaumont skillfully links Jack's and Rachel's stories as each character's search for the truth leads them into mortal danger. Readers will be enthralled.

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