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— YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING —

- 28 New BookLife Titles Reviewed •

Moving the Needle

An indie novel scores a traditional book deal

BY LEAH GRISHAM

Tech entrepreneur-turned-author Thomas R. Weaver went from indie publishing to a six-figure, two-book deal with Del Rey, thanks in large part to the viral success of his debut, *Artificial Wisdom*. The book follows a journalist who is caught in the center of a murder investigation while chasing the biggest story of his career. Given the setting in the not-so-distant future, readers will see traces of our own moment in the climate-change-ravaged setting, where AI threatens to become all-powerful.

The novel gained massive traction on TikTok. Weaver leveraged this momentum to secure top-tier representation and a major publishing deal, including a forthcoming sequel to *Artificial Wisdom*, titled *Infinite Wisdom*, coming out in fall 2026.

Did you always want to be an author?

Somewhere around age 10, I read and reread *The BFG* by Roald Dahl. Sophie, the protagonist, gets to experience a dream where she has written a book no one can put down, to the point that people are bumping into each other on the street and crashing cars because they can't stop reading. I think something in this story triggered something primal in me. Sharing stories is, after all, one of our oldest pastimes as a species. We're wired to do so. And so I knew I wanted to become a writer, but, as I got older, this was tempered by an idea that most writers and artists struggle to make a living. I decided that I needed to make a living first.

Your background is in tech. How did you move into writing fiction?

For most of the 2010s, I was the CEO of a tech startup in the restaurant hospitality space. Being the CEO of a tech startup is to be



Thomas R. Weaver

something of an evangelist, because your main job is to keep the company well capitalized as well as to win big clients and convince people to come and work for you. That means you are telling stories constantly: the story of how you started and the story of what the world could become if you are successful.

We eventually sold the business to one of the biggest [food] delivery giants in the world, and a year later I was able to exit things completely. For a while, I didn't want to even open a laptop again. Then when the pandemic locked us in our houses, I decided I no longer had any excuses to stop me from doing what I always wanted to do. It was time to write.

Technology played a big part in how you've taken this book from self-published to a major deal. What was this process like?

For me, being a writer trying to get published is similar to

being an entrepreneur trying to raise money. You're a risk. No one knows if your book, or product, is going to work. My view when I started out was that there was nothing to distinguish me from others bidding to be published, and *Artificial Wisdom* was unusual enough that it might be seen as an even greater risk. Technology provided traction: getting it to enough people within the same community on TikTok to create momentum, being an active part of that community and getting to know the readers who became fans personally, an incredible Goodreads giveaway organized by my PR team, and hands-on participation with a Fable book club. I pinpointed an amazing agent with a track record in the space and queried him, careful to highlight the traction in reviews, TikTok posts, and sales that I'd had in the past months. Forty-eight hours later, we'd signed.

Have you experienced any surprises moving from self-publishing to working with a major publishing house?

I've been surprised by how many people work on the book across all the different teams. Building my own indie press, I had to essentially pay people personally to do anything—a structural edit, copy edit, proofread, press release, sales call. And so, when I get, for example, new copy edits that are incredibly detailed, I feel extremely honored by the effort.

What advice do you have for fellow writers who are looking to break out, especially those who may be struggling despite active self-promotion?

First, have a relentless focus on things that will move the needle of success that are also within your control. I recommend focusing on reviews and ratings before doing anything like advertising. My strategy for getting those early reviews was asking to send out ARCs of the book to as many people as possible. I found affordable book tours, did events, anything that could lead to a review. And I prioritized someone reading the book and reviewing it over a sale.

I think that the main job of an author is to make book influencers successful. Help them discover something cool to share and build their own followings and make viral content.

Finally, measure success in indie terms, not traditional. New indie authors often find their sales numbers demotivating, as I did at the start. You simply don't have any name recognition, nor the ability to market and sell like a traditional publisher does. But you can continue marketing and pushing a book for far longer. I think of it like this: traditionally published authors are sprinting the 100 meters in the Olympics. Indie and self-published authors are running the steeplechase. 🏃

Leah Grisham is a Cleveland-based writer and reviewer whose work can be found at Leah She Wrote.



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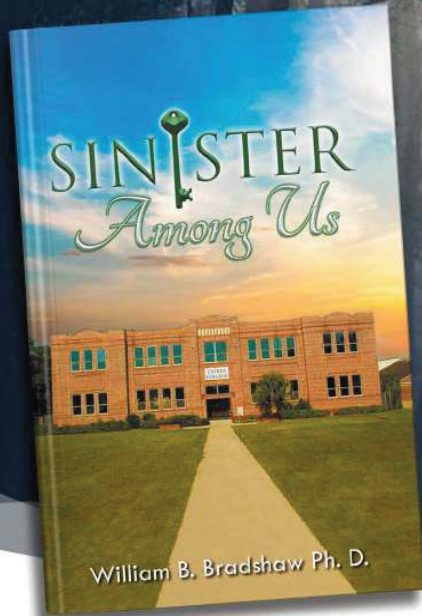
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SINISTER AMONG US



by William B. Bradshaw, PhD

ISBN: 978-1684869718

Unveiling the Darkness: Sinister Among Us—A Mystery of Power, Corruption, and Secrets

Nominated for the 2025 Eric Hoffer Award, *Sinister Among Us* is a riveting mystery novel that plunges readers into a web of crime and deception at a small Christian college in rural Indiana. Set in the quiet town of Copperville, the novel follows Dr. Bradley Green, the interim president of Cyprus College, as he unravels a series of shocking and deeply sinister events threatening the institution's very foundation.

What starts as an unsettling undercurrent of wrongdoing quickly spirals into a high-stakes investigation. Dr. Green is determined to expose the forces at play, but the challenges he faces are staggering: male professors exchanging grades for sex, faculty members running drug operations, a corrupt residence hall director coercing young female students into prostitution, and a network of illicit activities stretching beyond state lines, involving gambling and human trafficking. As if that weren't enough, funds from the college's scholarship program mysteriously vanish, secret meetings are held in an attempt to oust Green, and payroll tax withholdings are siphoned off for the college's own use. The disappearance of the College's Governing Board Chairman only deepens the mystery.

At the heart of it all lies a single clue—an actual key. It belongs to a safe deposit box, but with no identifying bank or number, it seems to be an unsolvable puzzle. That is, until an unexpected incident leads Green to the very bank that holds the answers. What he uncovers within the safe deposit box not only cracks the case wide open but also reveals the long-buried history of Copperville's name and the unexpected connection between Cyprus College and a distant Mediterranean island.

With a masterful blend of suspense, moral dilemmas, and social commentary, *Sinister Among Us* delivers a gripping narrative that keeps readers on edge. This novel isn't just a mystery—it's an exposé of power, corruption, and the relentless pursuit of truth.

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FICTION

⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

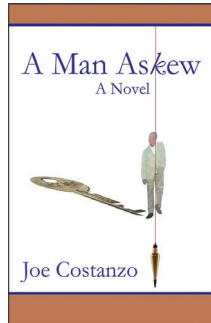
A Man Askew

Joe Costanzo

249p, trade paper, \$14.99, ISBN 979-8-218-55921-2

Costanzo's latest is the tale of a son's brooding, retrospective look into his father's life while evaluating his own role as a parent. After a near-fatal shooting at the hands of a raging criminal, Dexter Renshaw reawakens to slowly realize his "banal and unadventurous" life has undeniably changed. While healing, and despite his mother Patrice and cop sister Stacy's disapproval, he investigates the shooting and discovers that his late father, Detective Burke Renshaw, helped carjacking convict Frederick Novack rent a safe deposit box—and emptied it upon Novack's death. When Dexter stumbles onto another safe deposit box key on his father's key ring, his world is upended again: the contents total nearly a million dollars in cash.

Dexter—who, according to himself, is an "average, dull, underachieving, unadventurous, borderline asexual" person—emerges as a worthy protagonist. His dogged



Absorbing mystery finds a son investigating his father's past.

Great for fans of J.D. Robb's *In Death* series; RV Raman's *Conspirator*.

and uncertainty on how to right the wrongs of the past.

Costanzo (author of *Geodyseus*) plunges readers into the heat of shady dealings and dark secrets right from the start, with clues and new developments flashing through at regular intervals. The irony Costanzo sews into his ending heightens the nature of the original crime propelling the story, and, until the final reveal, he keeps things tantalizingly circumstantial, making the unraveling a delicious combination of both surprising and expected. This well-plotted mystery, with a fair share of suspense, highlights the complex nature of father-son relationships.

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

FICTION

⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

Moonglade and Other Stories

Frank Castelluccio | Synthetic Prophetic

211p, trade paper, \$14.95, ISBN 979-8-985-60915-8

"Twenty-six years together and you never farted in front of me. Don't you find that strange?" So goes the memorable opening to the title story in Castelluccio's short story collection. That's a sign of the wit, toughness, and intimacy of these tales, which find a writer exploring, for the most part, a general but pressing theme: love over the long haul (or not long enough). But facing those evergreen concerns are a variety of characters, milieus, and dilemmas: a grieving woman ("Do-Over"), a virginal collegiate ("Cocoon"), an older man experimenting with contemporary hook-up culture ("It Was Only Sex, After All"), male lovers navigating the perils of 1990s Los Angeles ("Hollywood Ending").

"Moonglade" is perhaps the most emblematic entry, capturing Castelluccio's style in miniature: it jumps freely through time, across a relationship between two



Piercing, relatable stories of love over the long haul.

Great for fans of Peter Kispert's *I Know You Know Who I Am*, Curtis Sittenfeld's *You Think It, I'll Say It*.

men that may never have been meant to be, despite lasting for decades. One partner narrates, seizing upon incidents and concerns both everyday relatable and highly specific. "It wasn't until the day we moved in together that the thought crossed my mind—this isn't love, is it?" he recalls. From there, he spirals with hard-

won admissions about what his life is missing: "Is it supposed to feel sweet? Warm? Comfortable? Like putting an old sweater on a snowy day?" A number of the stories concern gay male couples, but even writing from a woman's perspective, as in "Do-Over," Castelluccio's prose is rich in striking and persuasive detail. The final entries break from the mold with one ("Wonder Bread") about Italian immigrants and another ("Favola") centered on love and heartbreak faced by a tailor in mid-century Genoa. "Favola" draws contrast between post-war poverty and the sumptuous pleasure of the protagonist's new Aston Martin. This collection shows off an original voice exploring key themes from fresh angles.

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

FICTION

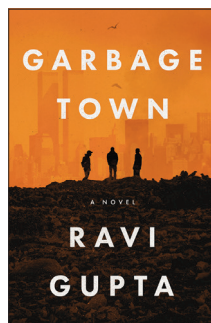
⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

Garbage Town

Ravi Gupta | Greenleaf Book Group

312p, e-book, \$27.95, ISBN 979-8-886-45313-3

Gupta debuts with a coming-of-age mystery thriller ride that exemplifies the subgenre that, inspired by 1980s films, has come to be called "kids on bikes," but with a decided Staten Island flair, including elements of a gritty mobster story and a focus on the infamous Fresh Kills Landfill. "On June 19, 1998, Fresh Kills gave up its secrets to me," announces narrator Rajiv Patel, Raj for short, an enterprising 14-year-old with both street and book smarts—plus a booming business selling bootleg CDs. As he strategizes ways to earn money to help his overworked single mother, Raj finds his summer upended by a chance meeting with Georgia, an intriguing new arrival from Mississippi, and by a run-in with the rival New Springville Crew, louts who love to crack bones and racist jokes. But things really spin out of control when Raj and his crew, The Victory Boys, witness an unspeakable crime out at Fresh Kills.



Vital coming-of-age thriller set on 1990s Staten Island.

Great for fans of Claire Jiménez's *What Happened to Ruthy Ramirez*, Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*.

scenes where the heroes face up to their fears. The sleuthing and adventure thrill as they strive to secure evidence, face forces much more powerful than them, and—in a sad twist—try to suss out whether a cop is on their side or on the take.

Complicating it all, of course, are the challenges of those in-between years. As they experiment with love, drugs, and identities, Gupta's characters feel like teens you could meet on any scalding summer day on Staten Island. When forced into unthinkable decisions, they make choices adolescents would actually make, and the fizzing flirtations are sweet, funny, and convincing. Period references will ping millennial nostalgia radars, but they never feel belabored. *Garbage Town* pulses with charm, suspense, and strong local color.

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

FICTION

Bare Life

Donald Mengay | Saddle Road Press
280p, trade paper, \$25, ISBN 979-8-990-05435-6

A fierce elegy in mosaic, this final entry in Mengay's Eldorado Trilogy (after *Ojo*) contemplates love, loss, art, sex, and "those dismal and dispiriting realizations that your country was run by a government of bigots." *Bare Life* continues the story of twins Jake and Wren, introduced in *The Lede to Our Undoing*, in New York City and the small Western town of Eldorado, where in the present a nephew faces life after they're gone—and questions of what to do with the "letters, journals, sketchbooks, canvases" left behind now that the world—and the art market—has embraced Jake's work posthumously. Mengay adopts a range of voices and perspectives to fill out these lives, offering spirited accounts of art-world scandals and disappointments "at the height of the panic about the 'gay disease'"; raucous and incisive discussions of religion and power and life in what one character calls "Puritania"; a bracing set piece of chapters in the voice of a young Russian man falling for the older Jacob; and much more.



Fiery elegy reflecting on lives, loves, and art in a bigoted world.

Great for fans of Felice Picano's *Like People in History*, Rasheed Newson's *My Government Wants to Kill Me*.

senator and a reactionary newspaper labeling "the work and me dangerous, a threat to society," only "helped skyrocket the auction price."

Mengay links such last-century scandals both to the present, through "the bigots' bannerman, Crumm", who has a tower on 5th Avenue, and also to the reign of Stalin, through moving excerpts from a family memoir. Time is fluid here, as past and present, legacy and self-invention, all burn with urgent power, and readers must work to keep up, but *Bare Life* yields continual pleasures, insights, and illuminations, in prose of rare precision.

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

FICTION

Breathings of the Moon

Byrd Nash | Rook and Castle Press
320p, e-book, \$4.99, ISBN 978-1-954811-32-4

Thanks to her gifts as a Memory Keeper—powers that enable her to collect memories and borrow personalities from other people—Zoe Underhill has been living for two peaceful years in New Mexico, as elementary teacher Ashley Maxwell. But all of that changes when her brother Ryan shows up, informing her that their mother, Brynn, has finally been located, two decades after she vanished—and it looks like she's been murdered. As Zoe and Ryan return home to pick up the pieces, Ryan is adamant that Zoe use her skills as Memory Keeper to uncover Brynn's killer, marking everyone connected to the affluent Underhills a potential suspect.

Nash (*A Spell of Rowans*) crafts the perfect mix of tangled family dynamics and suspense as Zoe unearths a cache of buried family secrets—and learns that the best kept memories often prove the most dangerous. Diagnosed with dissociative amnesia from high school, Zoe's true identity muddles with the memories she collects from others, and as her investigation progresses, she notes that, though



Family secrets and supernatural powers help uncover a killer.

Great for fans of Katherine Howe's *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane*, Zoraida Córdova's *The Inheritance of Orquídea Divina*.

"memories aren't facts," they just might be the key to unlocking her family's dark past. Nash capably renders the tensions that arise when those secrets come to light: the family's patriarch, Grandfather Nolan, is exposed as a philanderer; Aunt Belle's abusive treatment of Zoe colors the past; Uncle Owen's grief-induced rage threatens the family; and Zoe's parentage is under question.

Nash's firm grasp of magical realism weaves the practical with the surreal, starting with the Great Gale of 1898, when the Underhill family first received their supernatural powers, known as Charm and Memory, that reverberate through generations. Those elements make *Breathings of the Moon* richly symbolic—a centuries-old oak tree splits as the family crumbles, eerie premonitions are born from water—and the story clips along at a brisk pace, leading to a surprising and satisfying conclusion that marries the past with the present.

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

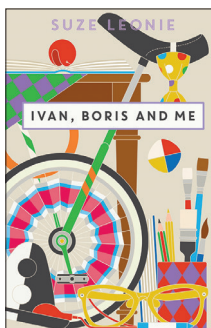
FICTION

Ivan, Boris and Me

Suze Leonie | Fidessa Literary
271p, hardcover, \$23.99, ISBN 978-9-083-37017-0

Leonie's magical realism debut breaks open the inner world of Elodie Ginsburg, a talented, reclusive artist whose socially awkward troubles arise mainly because of Boris, a circus clown puppet who is her constant companion and cheerleader—much to the disappointment of Elodie's prim and proper mother, who tries to convince her to take up a suitably "adult" profession instead of doodling with paints. Elodie's accident-prone life takes a decisive turn with the arrival of Ivan Lennard, celebrity cyclist, as her neighbor. Ivan—who is fighting a debilitating illness—makes an immediate impression on Elodie, and his presence in her life upends her comfortable rhythm with Boris.

Elodie's interplay with Boris begins when she's young, but now that she is an adult, she often rues the need to parent this childlike, adult clown. Still, his influence helps keep Elodie's inner child alive and well, amping up her creativity and enlivening the tale, though his unorthodox perspective and actions put a damper on Elodie's outside relationships. "In a family of lawyers, an artist hovering on the poverty line living together with a clown named Boris is an outlier," she muses, and her ability



Quirky artist learns to love deeply—and to let go.

Great for fans of Ruth Ozeki's *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, Max Porter's *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*.

to recognize the absurdity of caving in to Boris's behaviors, yet still coddling and coming to his rescue, makes the story seem stuck in a loop at times. Leonie breaks that cycle up somewhat with Elodie's growing attachment to Ivan, a development that irrevocably alters her relationship with Boris.

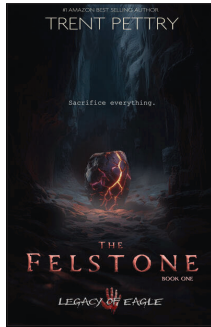
Though it's never clear who, aside from Elodie, can truly see Boris, Leonie cleverly uses the clown as much more than just Elodie's companion: he serves as her buttress against the outside world, until she gains the self-confidence and reliance necessary to go it on her own. Leonie's bittersweet conclusion finds Elodie and Boris finally securing a sense of belonging, though it looks different from what either of them expected.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER**The Felstone: Legacy of Eagle, Book 1****Trent Pettry**

297p, e-book, \$5.99, ASIN BODT8JF2SH

A meteor ties together the fates of Neolithic tribes, Oregon lycanthropes, demonic biker gangs, and a reservation's high-school football star as Pettry's Legacy series kicks off with this toothy thriller that opens more than 15,000 years in the past, with the coming of "the cursed stone" to the Takal people in the Pacific Northwest. These ancients worship and fear this "Felstone"—or "Fallen Sun"—in equal measure, and the ramifications of their panicked actions are felt far in the future, as Hot Springs Warriors quarterback Eagle, an Indigenous teenager from the Takhala tribe, discovers that he has a part to play in a dark and ancient tribal legacy. The action picks up with the Demon Wolves biker gang coming for Eagle and his friends, who begin to understand the depths of danger they're in when they encounter an FBI agent who has "tracked the Portland meth pipeline to its source." The gang is actually more of a cult, lorded over by the mad Sardin, a "sadist obsessed with some prophecy."



Toothy thriller of ancient tribal secrets and teen and biker lycan action.

Great for fans of Tom Hunter's *The Treasures of Death Valley*, T.S. Falk's *Artifact*.

With the help of his family, friends, and the voices of those he has lost, Eagle endures any number of indignities as he faces lycanthropic monstrosities, baleful villains, and long-buried family secrets, including the truth about his own bearish abilities. Some redundant phrasing occasionally distracts from the story, but that doesn't detract much from Pettry's memorable descriptions and scenes of action that both frighten and exhilarate: "The tomahawk's blade shatters his arm, bone splintering under the force, and buries deep into his wolf-like skull."

Though abrupt, the ending will leave readers eager for more—not just for the supernatural conflicts and unfolding mysteries, but also for young Eagle's personal struggles. For all its "teeth tearing through flesh," *The Felstone* isn't just about battling malevolent ancient meteorite slag; it's about understanding the past, staring down the abyss without flinching, the fierce bonds of friendship, and embracing family legacies.

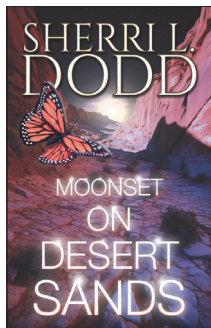
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: — Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

MYSTERY/THRILLER**Moonset on Desert Sands: Murder, Tea, and Crystals, Book 2****Sherri L. Dodd** | Black Rose Writing

300p, e-book, \$22.95, ASIN BODF33L1YW

Dodd's second Murder, Tea, and Crystals mystery (after *Murder Under Redwood Moon*) takes readers on a spiritual and suspenseful journey as a young woman tries to recover from the trauma of her past in Arizona's most pleasantly witchy town. Following the brutal end of Henry, the serial killer who made her life in the California Redwoods a hell, Arista seeks refuge in Sedona, hiding from her dangerous Uncle Fergus. Working at a metaphysical shop provides a semblance of normalcy, and new friendships begin to blossom. Dakota, the dashing security guard, and Trini, a pregnant woman who is being stalked, offer Arista glimmers of hope and community in her otherwise isolated existence. When Arista's family heirloom—the athame dagger—is stolen from police evidence, she and her guardian, Auntie Bethie, fear the worst. The dagger, supposedly imbued with magical power, could become even more deadly weapon in Fergus's hands.

From there, Dodd conjures an evocative blend of mystery, magic, and down-to-



This charming yet tense Sedona mystery boasts an inviting aura.

Great for fans of Yurie Kiri's Murder and Magic series, Juliet Blackwell's Witchcraft Mysteries series.

earth suspense among the striking beauty and barrenness of the desert, especially as Arista's fainting spells intensify, forcing Auntie Bethie, who believes Arista possesses spiritual gifts, to prepare for a Samhain ritual to sever the ties of possession that connect Arista to her great-great-grandfather. As magical forces, covens, and possessions increasingly entangle Arista's life, Dodd wrings pleasurable suspense from Arista's navigation of her family's fractured relationships.

Balancing these delicate connections while evading Fergus's pursuit keeps readers on edge. Dodd captures the desert Southwest's haunting beauty, blending vivid descriptions with a deep dive into Sedona's aura-reading, malachite-treasure, crystal-ball-studying mystique, with witchcraft, spiritual power, and coyote totems described with warmth and wonder. This rich backdrop will entice lovers of desert spirituality, and Dodd smartly uses portents and palm-readings to enhance the tension, but it's the characters, camaraderie, and lively talk of "supernatural stuff" that set this apart.

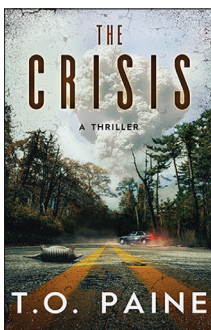
Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: — Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

MYSTERY/THRILLER**The Crisis: A Thriller****T.O. Paine** | Dark Swallow Books

409p, e-book, \$3.49, ASIN BODRW34HJS

This thriller from Paine (author of *The Excursion* and others) grabs from the start, as disgraced marine biologist Mattie finds her grim life taking a sharp turn when a young woman, Lucia, drops a cryptic note in the central Florida convenience store that Mattie is stuck working at—the White Sands Pay-n-Save, "miles from any sands." Lucia doesn't say anything, but she has a number tattooed—or branded—on her calf, and she is ushered from the store by a terrifying man. Mattie doesn't have to get involved in this apparent abduction, but fueled by past regrets, she takes off to track down Lucia, aided by teen trainee Calvin. Soon, they realize they are not the only ones on Lucia's trail: Jack, a hardened private detective, has been hired by Lucia's wealthy father to retrieve his daughter.

The stakes get ever higher as the story races down Florida highways, the miles marked with car chases, shoot-outs, tense confrontations, and surprise dips in the ocean. As Mattie and Jack chase Lucia and her captors, partially to do the right thing and partially to outrun their own demons, they discover that the kidnapping is part of a much larger, stranger plot. Paine tells the story through multiple points



High-stakes highway thrills as a Florida gas-station worker takes action.

Great for fans of Colin Holmes's *Thunder Road*, Riley Sager's *Survive the Night*.

of view: messy, morally gray Mattie; vengeance-driven Jack; a Cuban operative desperate to find a missing code; an exiled Russian turned tattoo artist now bereft of everything that makes him him; and Lucia herself, who, while at the mercy of her captors, grapples with her own regrets, studies opportunities to escape, and occasionally takes action.

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

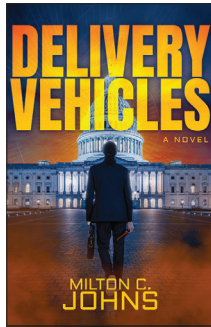
MYSTERY/THRILLER

Delivery Vehicles

Milton C. Johns | Atmosphere Press
325p, trade paper, \$16.99, ISBN 979-889-132365-0

With sharp dialogue, an unpredictable lawyer hero in a downward spiral, and a plot that moves from comedy-tinged legal procedural to conspiracy thriller with both personal and global stakes, *Delivery Vehicles* gleefully defies easy genre categorization. Ponytailed Virginia lawyer Mike Haskell is smart, quick-witted, and resourceful but also his own worst enemy, a man who will duck out on meeting with a desperate potential client, pour a drink, and then accidentally sit on his own shotgun. Now he has a court-appointed monitor, the young lawyer Christy White, who will serve as antagonist, ally, and more, challenging him in unexpected ways. He needs that challenge: his life and career are in shambles, and he can't help but alienate even in his role as narrator, cracking a crude masturbation joke just five sentences into the book.

Johns, a lawyer himself, brings welcome authenticity to the milieu, and fans of dude-ish legal thrillers who stick with Haskell (and his frequent appraisal of



Amusing thriller of a hot mess of a lawyer facing a global crisis.

Great for fans of Steve Cavanagh's Eddie Flynn series; Lenny Kleinfeld.

bedroom, and the courtroom where he alternates between moments of skillful savvy and whiffing recklessness.

Characterization is strong throughout, especially Haskell's rival, Matt Master, a former intelligence operative caught in a conspiracy, and Yousef Hamarashah, the brother of a former client whose legal troubles reveal a geopolitical crisis. Haskell's own carping about the shift toward race-against-time espionage thriller is a highlight: "Matt, this is all just the plot to a Tom Clancy novel," he complains. Blending dark humor and a dash of conspiracy, *Delivery Vehicles* is an unpredictable, voice-driven, proudly rakish story.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

The Others

T.C. Weber | Freedom Thorn Press
338p, e-book, \$4.95, ISBN 978-1-736-90173-1

Weber's gripping speculative fiction explores the hidden world of the Mazi, an advanced underwater civilization, and their tumultuous interactions with humanity. The story follows Mazi Trader Andreia and Will, a marine biologist Land-Dweller, as together they navigate political intrigue, cyber warfare, and personal sacrifice—in hopes of preventing a catastrophic war with the militant Karsk clan. The Karsk's fanatical actions, driven by the pressures of human overconsumption and climate change that have devastated their underwater ecosystems, threaten not only the Mazi but also the delicate balance between land and sea.

Weber's world-building is exceptional, creating an immersive underwater society that feels both alien and familiar. The detailed descriptions of the Mazi habitats, their advanced technology, and their unique adaptations—webbed feet to help with swimming, a thickened layer of subcutaneous fat for buoyancy—are described with scientific precision, reflecting Weber's background as an ecologist, and themes of environmental preservation and the interconnectedness of life are seamlessly



Land and sea must unite to save humanity.

Great for fans of Frank Schatzing's *The Swarm*, Peter Watts's *Starfish*.

of intense underwater battles and cyber warfare interspersed among more introspective scenes delving into character motivations and struggles—such as Will's grief over his wife's death and Andreia's isolation from her people. Andreia and Will's evolving relationship serves as the story's emotional core, with their love and mutual respect highlighting the possibility of unity across divides, while the ethical dilemmas Andreia faces—torn between loyalty to her clan and love for Will—resonate deeply. Supporting characters like Zoze and Sama add depth and diversity, and Weber amplifies the stakes with the Karsk's ruthless tactics, marking this appealing blend of science fiction, romance, and environmental advocacy as action-packed as it is thought-provoking.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

The Spring Dragon

Natalie Wright | Menaris Books
464p, hardcover, \$33.99, ISBN 979-8-987-49128-7

Wright's second Dragos Primeri novel (after *Season of the Dragon*) brims with the chief pleasures of epic fantasy—quests, friendships, longings, diverse cultures, strange creatures, and mysterious magic—brought to life with fresh vigor. This entry continues the thorny war between dragons and humans on a planet in a binary star system. Newly awakened from their thousand-year slumber, the dragons are shocked by how intelligent and violent humans—or "Two-Leggeds"—have become and vow to kill them all. Elite assassin Aldwin watched in horror when his lover, Quen, transformed into Ishna, the Winter Dragon. Now, as Aldwin and Quen are wanted by the oppressive Kovan Dynasty for high crimes, he learns that the Dynasty is also searching for something called the Heart of Magic to use as a weapon against the dragons, especially Ishna.

With new friends—diminutive mage Imbica, amiable Shel, and dour Dio—Aldwin and his giant snow tiger, Nivi, must search for Quen's brother, Rhoji, to share what he knows about Quen and obtain the Heart of Magic before the Dynasty does. Complicating matters: the dragons have their own quest to unite all four missing



This high fantasy adventure enchants with action, mystery, and drama.

Great for fans of Annabel Campbell's *The Outcast Mage*, L.R. Lam's *Dragonfall*.

everyday disorientations of lives of adventure, like adjusting to horse-riding or a Sea Singer's fish-out-of-water experience on land.

Wright again weaves politics and magic into an intricate setting that embodies classic high fantasy and a provocative world of cunning dragons, resolute characters, an abundance of action, and the occasional tender kiss. While a glossary helps with the many names and places, readers should begin with the first book in the series to absorb all the treasures of this expansive world.

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

women's breasts) will find him feeling his way toward new purpose as he faces jolting violence and gets embroiled in a case involving an Al-Qaeda splinter group. Whether facing court battles or the bottle, Haskell offers an unfiltered look at his struggles and failures, and Johns convincingly immerses readers in Haskell's world—the disarray of his law office, his

bedroom, and the courtroom where he alternates between moments of skillful savvy and whiffing recklessness.

Characterization is strong throughout, especially Haskell's rival, Matt Master, a former intelligence operative caught in a conspiracy, and Yousef Hamarashah, the brother of a former client whose legal troubles reveal a geopolitical crisis. Haskell's own carping about the shift toward race-against-time espionage thriller is a highlight: "Matt, this is all just the plot to a Tom Clancy novel," he complains. Blending dark humor and a dash of conspiracy, *Delivery Vehicles* is an unpredictable, voice-driven, proudly rakish story.

woven into the narrative. Both Will and Andreia grasp the urgency of protecting the ocean, and much of the interaction between Will and the Mazi revolves around creative ways to reverse humanity's damage to the planet.

Weber (author of *The Council*) ensures expertly balanced pacing, with moments

of intense underwater battles and cyber warfare interspersed among more introspective scenes delving into character motivations and struggles—such as Will's grief over his wife's death and Andreia's isolation from her people. Andreia and Will's evolving relationship serves as the story's emotional core, with their love and mutual respect highlighting the possibility of unity across divides, while the ethical dilemmas Andreia faces—torn between loyalty to her clan and love for Will—resonate deeply. Supporting characters like Zoze and Sama add depth and diversity, and Weber amplifies the stakes with the Karsk's ruthless tactics, marking this appealing blend of science fiction, romance, and environmental advocacy as action-packed as it is thought-provoking.

Primal dragons and then mount an attack on the humans. First, they search for Veridia, who carries the essence of life itself, after consulting with her hatchling, Aurixia. For all the inventive worldbuilding and narrative urgency, Wright grounds the story in pained longings—like Aldwin's hope to restore Quen to her human form before she is lost forever—and the

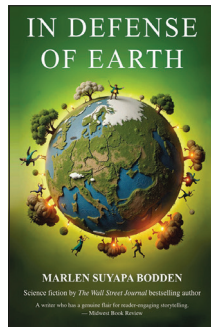
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SF/FANTASY/HORROR**In Defense of Earth**

Marlen Suyapa Bodden | Roatan Hall Press, LLC
106p, trade paper, \$12.99, ISBN 979-8-992-03090-7

This smart speculative novella from Bodden (author of *The Wedding Gift*) explores the intersection of advanced technology, environmental crises, and human resilience, set in a near-future Earth on the brink of ecological collapse. When Axy, an android from the Sombrero Galaxy, arrives on Earth in 2061 with a promise to save the planet by building geothermal facilities and removing harmful gases from the atmosphere, Earth's humans are pleased—their attempts to reverse climate change have failed miserably, and they could use Axy's help. However, Axy has a dark secret: its true mission is to extract a rare metal, irkat, from Earth's core, which would ultimately lead to the planet's destruction.

Bodden enriches the narrative with scientific detail and speculative technology, grounding the plot in a balance of realism and imagination. The book delves into the complexities of human emotions and relationships, particularly through the character of Elaine, a geothermal expert who becomes deeply involved in Axy's



Gripping novel of alien tech, human nature, and climate change.

Great for fans of Kim Stanley Robinson; Ruthanna Emrys's *A Half-Built Garden*.

mission. The contrast between Axy's aloof observations of Earth's inhabitants and the awe—and fear—humans feel when interacting with Axy skillfully depicts the tension between hope and skepticism as humanity grapples with the potential benefits and dangers of Axy's advanced technology.

In Defense of Earth addresses broader themes as well, such as the ethical implications of artificial intelligence, the impact of climate change, and the lengths humanity will go to survive. Bodden's writing is both thought-provoking and emotionally resonant, touching on innovative sci-fi concepts while vividly depicting the ever-looming threat of climate change. The result is a well-crafted and timely novel that challenges readers to think critically about the future of our planet—and the role technology may have in shaping it. Bodden's ability to blend complex technological concepts with human drama makes for intense reading. The result is a compelling fusion of cutting-edge science and profound reflections on human nature.

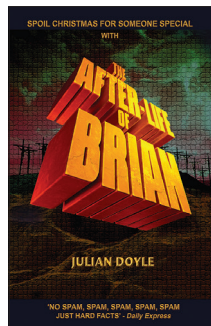
Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: **-** | Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A-**

HISTORY**The After-Life of Brian**

Julian Doyle | Chippenham Books
318p, mass market, \$15.66, ISBN 978-1-068-74650-5

"What I actually believe contradicts every academic paper ever written on the subject," Doyle declares early in this surprising study. Those aren't words that fill one with confidence when reading on any subject, and they're also not words one expects from a tome centered on one of the 1970s' most beloved film comedies. But Doyle, the editor of Monty Python's third film, is dead serious in his left-field argument: that the gleefully blasphemous comedy *Life of Brian*, in one crucial way, the most accurate depiction of biblical times—not because of all the grit and grime, but because it alleged—purely by accident, it seems—that the Romans never actually used crucifixion, not on Jesus Christ nor anyone else. The result is a strong contender for one of the strangest film-related books ever issued.

Across some 300 pages and nearly 30 chapters, Doyle—who did fine below-the-line work on many Python and Python-adjacent films and directed videos for the likes of Kate Bush and Iron Maiden—lays out his case. Some of his arguments



Monty Python editor takes on the Gospels and crucifixion itself.

Great for fans of Michael R. Licona's *Jesus, Contradicted*, Bart D. Ehrman's *Jesus Before the Gospels*.

have strong common-sense power. It's tricky, he posits, to construct countless crucifixes out of two pieces of wood that can reliably prop up a human, much less in a part of the world short on trees and maybe even nails.

The bulk of Doyle's book, though, is a familiar debunking of the Gospels based largely on textual inconsistencies, omissions, revisions, mistranslations, and questions like Elaine Pagels's: "Could a fisherman from Galilee have written the elegant, spare, philosophically sophisticated prose of this Gospel?" In that, *The After-Life of Brian* turns out not to be that eccentric after all, standing firmly in a genre at least as crowded as that of Python books. Doyle's contribution distinguishes itself by its conversational—even unpolished—tone, his tendency to quote generous sections of Python movie scenes, and the inclusion of a full chapter alleging that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus may have absconded with the most, uh, intimate of holy relics. That theory could make a great movie.

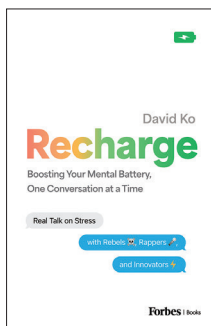
Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: **B** | Editing: **B** | Marketing copy: **B**

SELF-HELP**Recharge: Boosting Your Mental Battery, One Conversation at a Time**

David Ko | Forbes Books
186p, hardcover, \$29.99, ISBN 979-8-887-50494-0

Addressing the ever-growing presence of technology in business and personal lives, Ko highlights the importance of managing stress and practicing daily mindfulness in this empowering debut that will inspire readers to reflect on their feelings, mental state, and overall health. Ko draws from his experience as CEO of mental health company Calm, bridging the connection between the mind and the body while urging readers to have a "collective conversation" about the state of our mental health: "chronic stress is literally aging us ... and sometimes killing us," he writes, asking "why don't more of us do something about it?"

Through thought-provoking and relatable conversations with actors, business leaders, cancer survivors, and more, Ko delves into the shifts occurring behind our willingness to speak openly about mental health. Staying true to that theme, his advice is unflinchingly honest and transparent, covering coping skills like breathing exercises, how to overcome panic attacks, and various methods of "recharging our batteries," a fitting metaphor Ko returns to throughout the guide. Perhaps most



Plea to talk openly about mental health needs.

Great for fans of Wendy Suzuki's *Good Anxiety*, Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski's *Burnout*.

importantly, he calls attention to the stigma surrounding mental health, the strides corporations are making to enhance their employee wellness, and the need to detox from digital overload. "We are the walking wounded and are afraid to admit it," he poignantly notes.

Ko's call to action will motivate readers to invest time and energy in their well-being outside of the daily grind. Peace of mind and a less taxing lifestyle is possible, he argues—and that transformation starts in the small, safe spaces we allow deeper conversations about our mental health. "I hope you have conversations with those you love and care about, or those you lead at work, on how they are doing," he writes, "then we can heal, inspire, lead, and love, one conversation at a time." Anyone who feels overwhelmed, anxious, or stretched too thin will find this an encouraging and rewarding resource.

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

SELF-HELP

A Pilgrim's Guide to Walking Wisdom: 11:11 Insights

Renee Baribeau | Enlightenment Productions
177p, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 979-8-991-39730-8

Baribeau (author of *Winds of Spirit*) shares 11 revelations gleaned from her hike on the Camino de Santiago trail, where she learned to release “the weight of expectations, fears, and rigid structures that I no longer needed.” Counting the journey a spiritual awakening as much as a physical feat, Baribeau recounts omens she received on the trail—many centered around the number 11—and interprets those as ways to “heal [her] troubled spirit.” From preparing for life’s greater moments of opportunity to the importance of self-love and acceptance of others, Baribeau’s epiphanies offer readers their own path to enlightenment, delivered in a concise style that promises to illuminate “the wisdom and guidance of your heart, even when the road ahead is unclear.”

Beyond the deep wisdom Baribeau dispenses, her writing is peppered with lively descriptions and sketches of the Camino de Santiago, evoking the thrill of a nighttime



Insightful lessons drawn from hiking the Camino de Santiago.

Great for fans of Tim Mathis’s *The Camino for the Rest of Us*, Beth Jusino’s *Walking to the End of the World*.

spin in Spain’s tallest Ferris wheel alongside the dusty ache of sore feet trying to navigate cobblestone streets for hours on end. The camaraderie she develops throughout the journey lingers, though she notes that learning to let go—of relationships, loss, stagnant identities—is one of the trip’s most critical lessons: “Ultimately, letting go is a profound act of respect,” she writes, “respect for yourself and for the cycles that guide your life.”

Designed to be slowly digested and returned to over time, Baribeau’s book is buoyed by an infectious optimism, and her frank honesty—even when discussing actions she regrets—opens the door for readers to carefully examine their own life choices. To that end, chapters list reflection questions that encourage thoughtful contemplation and gently nudge readers toward taking the risks that matter: saying “yes” to new challenges even when afraid, changing perspective when needed for fresh awareness, and, above all else, understanding that “sometimes, slowing down is the most courageous step you can take.”

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

SELF-HELP

A Beginner's Dream Scene Adventures: Vivid Illustrated Fun Dreams

Doreen Lindahl | DynoTech Publishing
122p, trade paper, \$14.95, ISBN 978-1-885708-00-7

“The power of thought is your ticket to adventure” writes Lindahl in this meditative debut on the art of crafting “Dream Scenes”—visualizations, daydreams, or other ruminations fueled by imagination. Sharing her Dream Scenes with readers, Lindahl details how they have helped quell her fears, invite positivity into her life, and even relieve aches and pains in her body. As she walks through her dreams, she senses a resounding message that she shares with readers: “Light and Love and Life are one and the same.” Each dream adventure takes place with a companion guide who imparts valuable lessons to Lindahl, empowering her to take those insights back with her to the “Awake World.”

By “open[ing] the double golden doors” of her dreams for others to learn from, Lindahl aims to help readers shape their own Dream Scenes and gain wisdom that will help them resolve issues while awake. The book strictly follows that purpose, detailing the colors, guides, and lessons Lindahl has experienced, from dreams



Creative guide to visualizing dreams for self-awareness.

Great for fans of Cindy McGill’s *What Your Dreams Are Telling You*, Melinda Powell’s *The Hidden Lives of Dreams*.

readers to apply those lessons to their own lives.

Readers enticed by the power of meditation and visualization will find much to enjoy here, as Lindahl’s dreamscapes vividly explore self-awareness, growth, and a warm regard for others. Each scene is immersive, unfolding with striking colors, landscapes, and characters, though Lindahl’s digital images, aside from her own watercolor painting, lack the originality and vibrancy found in her dreams. Still, her message of the “three L’s”—love, light, and life—and encouragement to be centered and at peace is a timely message that will resonate with contemporary readers.

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

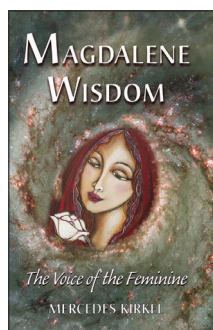
SPIRITUALITY/INSPIRATIONAL

Magdalene Wisdom: The Voice of the Feminine

Mercedes Kirkel | Into the Heart Creations
369p, trade paper, \$19.95, ISBN 979-8-9876633-2-5

This uplifting spiritual guide from Kirkel (author of *Mary Magdalene Beckons*) is predicated on the author’s claim that she communicates, via channeling, with the spirit of Mary Magdalene herself—and that this original follower of Jesus shares from beyond thoughtful answers to questions like “Can you talk about the Feminine energy of fullness?” and “How can I move through fear and not be paralyzed by it?” Readers and spiritual seekers open to that premise will find much here that is likely to resonate, as Kirkel presents this Mary’s feminine wisdom and spiritual message for humanity. Some messages come unprompted from Mary, while others arise in response to questions from Kirkel and attendees at her channeling events. Kirkel’s Mary relays warmly soothing messages on subjects such as grief, abuse, relationships, and more.

“The measure of your spiritual growth is your heart opening,” Kirkel’s Mary advises. Elsewhere, she laments that people today are “constantly shown sexual messages through your media that indoctrinate you into thinking that you should



A channeler's impassioned spiritual messages from Mary Magdalene.

Great for fans of Annie Kirkwood’s *Mary’s Message to the World*, Ann Crawford’s *Mary’s Message*.

be sexual all the time if you want to have any value.” Throughout these exchanges, Kirkel’s Mary speaks about her personal relationship and connection to Jesus, whom she calls Yeshua, and their urgent significance before, during, and after the crucifixion. This Mary strives to correct some “myth” from both testaments of the Bible while also revealing the “pearls, or secrets, encoded” therein, such as the story of Adam and Eve (a story actually about “awakening the kundalini”) and her own role as the Divine Feminine.

Impassioned, positive, and frank, this Mary’s teachings emphasize the balance between the Feminine and the Masculine, or “two faces of God,” seeking to bring forth the Feminine through the body, sexuality, and emotions. Kirkel also offers inviting spiritual advice while centering love and inner healing as the true path to spiritual growth and a closer connection to God—and perhaps even the ascension of humanity.

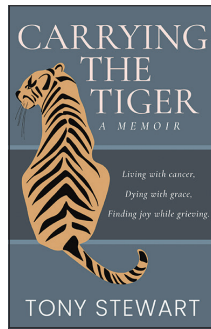
Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **-** | Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

MEMOIR

EDITOR'S PICK

Carrying the Tiger: Living with Cancer, Dying with Grace, Finding Joy while GrievingTony Stewart | West End Books
307p, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 979-8-9922649-1-3

Stewart crafts a beautifully devastating memoir honoring his late wife, Lynn Kotula, and their journey of navigating her terminal cancer. An artist with a sharp wit who treasures “kissing and talking,” Lynn’s vibrancy and passion invade every corner of Stewart’s debut. He filters their differences through a lens of unconditional love and admiration, marveling at her “talent, friends, [and] vivacity” while describing himself as more of a “cheerful introvert,” building on those contrasts to forge a striking portrait of their devotion—a portrait that trembles under the weight of Lynn’s devastating diagnosis. Stewart chronicles their fight to keep her alive, and his pathway to letting her go, through snapshots of his CaringBridge journal entries and personal photographs, in raw, vulnerable language that aches with hope, love, and loss.



Tender memoir of love, life, and death.

Great for fans of Suleika Jaouad’s *Between Two Kingdoms*, Gaby Laurent’s *Wrinkles Welcome*.

land,” a sentiment that will spark familiarity in any readers who have faced similar situations. Surgeries, radiation, and a slew of cutting-edge medications “[thread] the needle between realism and hope,” while Lynn slowly realizes she’s facing much more than a physical threat; as she sifts which of her hobbies will be destroyed, she tells Stewart “Maybe I can live with less... Maybe just being with you is enough.”

From his unique description of Lynn’s treatment to his assessment of her state of mind, Stewart shares milestones passed and lessons learned, continuing his journals long after Lynn passes away. His emergence on the other side comes with hard-won grace and a profound appreciation for the gift of life, making this a remarkable odyssey of learning to “live fully in the shadow of death.”

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

MEMOIR

How to Win a Million Dollars and BEEP Glitter: A Mostly True MisadventureLuke Stoffel | Cinderly
263p, e-book, \$8.99, ISBN 979-8-9917987-2-3

“We were all sold a sugar-coated lie—work hard, play by the rules, and success will fall into your lap,” writes Stoffel in the promising opening to his picaresque memoir, which he’s jokingly titled as a how-to. The truth, though? “Personally,” he admits, “I’ve found I’m more prosperous when I lie, cheat, and steal.” With wit and a sense of play that will keep readers of prankish comic memoirs turning the pages, Stoffel cuts the figure of a cad, a roué, a bouncer on the order of Redmond Barry, the antihero of Thackeray’s *Barry Lyndon*. “Let’s just say, I’m okay with you not liking me by the end of the book,” he purrs, swearing that after reading his book, “some of my closest friends could barely look me in the eye.” That, though, might prove his biggest lie of all: turns out, you will like him, at least mostly.

Stoffel is on the level in at least one clear way. He assures readers his tale “isn’t a ‘pull yourself up by the bootstraps’ kind of story.” It isn’t. It finds him forsaking a traditional, safe, button-down life for one of constant hustling and reinvention. It begins



Picaresque memoir that’s less tawdry than promised, for the best.

Great for fans of Natalie Beach’s *Adult Drama*, Johnathan Walton’s *Anatomy of a Con Artist*.

dealing with the early death of a loved one; dalliances with apps and crypto and, finally, AI (which helped him, someone with dyslexia, write the book, albeit not in toto).

Stoffel’s adventures prove to be rollicking fun, told with the élan of great dinner-party anecdotes, if not quite the criminal escapades he promises. That’s likely for the best, as these are more useful examples of scraping by on one’s wits than more tawdry tales would have been. Throughout Stoffel survives by being resourceful and open-minded. “Since 1980,” he writes in the epilogue, “we’ve all been caught up in that chase—more money, more status, more validation. And I’m no different.” But he is different, because he dared live an unlikely life in a society that punishes those who try it.

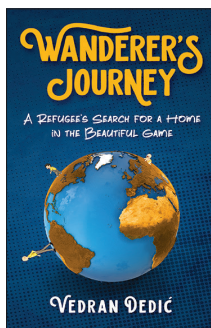
Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: — | Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A-**

MEMOIR

Wanderer’s Journey: A Refugee’s Search for a Home in the Beautiful GameVedran Dedić
290p, hardcover, \$24.99, ISBN 979-8-218-50944-6

Dedić, born in Banja Luka, Bosnia, narrates his quest for belonging and community in this striking debut. As a child, Dedić’s family immigrated to Germany when war broke out in their country, though that haven was short-lived: when the war ended, and Germany insisted that refugees return home, Dedić and his parents departed for Mobile, Alabama, where, at only 10 years old, he was forced to adapt to an unfamiliar culture as a middle-school student. “The looks of curiosity from the Americans—like I was some wild exotic animal—were piercing,” he writes, but he soon found acceptance through his love of football (or, as his American friends called it, “soccer”)—a passion that, throughout his lifetime, inspires kinship and camaraderie.

Dedić’s writing is as much a history of 21st-century football as it is a narrative of his life, and his enthusiasm for the sport anchors him during a time spent desperately searching for identity. Dedić soaks up every opportunity to revel in football’s wonder, even confessing to measuring the passage of time in terms of World Cup



Touching quest for belonging, discovered through passion for football.

Great for fans of Abby Wambach’s *Forward*, Amy Bass’s *One Goal*.

with his father, a football-themed honeymoon with his wife, and a deep appreciation for the country of Argentina, which he visits in 2022 and lovingly describes as his “imagined community.” “Football has connected me through time and history,” Dedić reflects, “[it] has helped me in finding my people.” That sentiment eventually erodes the “otherness” he felt early in life, marking his transformation from displaced to firmly rooted and granting him, finally, a much-needed “refuge mentally and emotionally.”

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

In evocative, sometimes joyful prose, Stewart captures the intricacies of not just a losing battle with cancer, but also a love that must flex and adapt to the changing waters surrounding it. Recounting Lynn’s initial prognosis, Stewart feels like “Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole, with no idea of where we’ll

land,” a sentiment that will spark familiarity in any readers who have faced similar situations. Surgeries, radiation, and a slew of cutting-edge medications “[thread] the needle between realism and hope,” while Lynn slowly realizes she’s facing much more than a physical threat; as she sifts which of her hobbies will be destroyed, she tells Stewart “Maybe I can live with less... Maybe just being with you is enough.”

From his unique description of Lynn’s treatment to his assessment of her state of mind, Stewart shares milestones passed and lessons learned, continuing his journals long after Lynn passes away. His emergence on the other side comes with hard-won grace and a profound appreciation for the gift of life, making this a remarkable odyssey of learning to “live fully in the shadow of death.”

with him as a kid in the 1980s trying to scam multiple national contests run by the likes of Cap’n Crunch and McDonald’s. These ruses, though, are as hissable as he gets. The rest of his story finds him eking by in more or less respectable fashion: cleaning toilets for the original off-Broadway production of *Urinetown*; bumming around Paris; surfing in Hawaii;

dealing with the early death of a loved one; dalliances with apps and crypto and, finally, AI (which helped him, someone with dyslexia, write the book, albeit not in toto).

Stoffel’s adventures prove to be rollicking fun, told with the élan of great dinner-party anecdotes, if not quite the criminal escapades he promises. That’s likely for the best, as these are more useful examples of scraping by on one’s wits than more tawdry tales would have been. Throughout Stoffel survives by being resourceful and open-minded. “Since 1980,” he writes in the epilogue, “we’ve all been caught up in that chase—more money, more status, more validation. And I’m no different.” But he is different, because he dared live an unlikely life in a society that punishes those who try it.

matches, and he often veers into play-by-play rundowns of specific games, including a memorable recap of his experiences watching the 2022 World Cup held in Qatar—which, he writes, “took my emotions to another level.”

That all-consuming passion sparks several meaningful developments for Dedić—close friendships, a stronger bond

MEMOIR

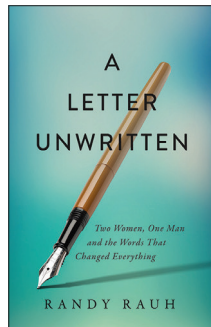
A Letter Unwritten: Two Women, One Man and the Words That Changed Everything

Randy Rauh

254p, hardcover, \$29.99, ISBN 979-8-218-55999-1

Rauh's heartfelt portraits of both his mother and wife offer a peek into the lived experiences and realities of American women in recent decades, people whom, he notes, society would never commemorate with a statue but whose lives are "nonetheless heroic." His mother, Betty JoAnn, married at 18 to the much older Lee Rauh, had to contend with Lee's abuse and take over the responsibility of bringing up her three little children when Lee was institutionalized with schizophrenia. While shaken by this, young Randy, happily, went on to marry his high school sweetheart, Bonnie Helm. Due to health complications, she was unable to have children, so the couple adopted Megan and Matthew as Bonnie faced multiple serious health challenges with courage. Rauh's sincere portrait of these two strong women celebrates their contributions to the family and the community.

Rauh's treatment of his father's story, both sensitive and nuanced, illuminates



A son and husband's sincere memoir of two American women of heroic strength.

Great for fans of Christopher Sorrentino's *Now Beacon, Now Sea*, Brian Morton's *Tasha*.

faced a hysterectomy. Initially indifferent to Bonnie's attempts at adoption, he found that the children's arrival transformed him, with Rauh becoming a loving father, celebrating their presence.

Powering the narrative is Rauh's admiration and devotion both for his mother and his wife. He appreciates their inner strength, cheerful and hardworking natures, and willingness to place others before themselves—Rauh's eulogy for his mother, printed in full, abounds with warm wisdom. Also compelling: his accounts of quitting and rejoining churches, acknowledging that he had stayed away so long because he "considered myself unworthy." This is a heartfelt, often moving read.

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

MEMOIR

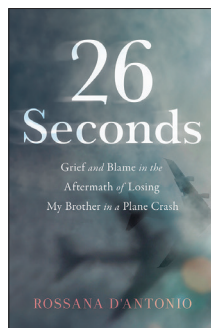
26 Seconds: Grief and Blame in the Aftermath of Losing My Brother in a Plane Crash

Rosanna D'Antonio | She Writes Press

248p, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 978-1-647-42904-1

D'Antonio's pained, probing memoir documents a mission to uncover the truth in the aftermath of an aviation disaster. In 2008, D'Antonio's younger brother, Cesare, was one of four people who died when a TACA flight landing at Honduras's Toncontín International Airport overran the runway and crashed into an embankment. Cesare, 40, was the plane's pilot and known for his skill and professionalism. "He was one of our best," another pilot told the author. "If he couldn't nail the landing that day, none of us could have." As D'Antonio demonstrates, Toncontín is a notoriously dangerous airport, with short runways and a history of similar accidents. *26 Seconds* recounts her initial shock and grief, the numbed multi-day odyssey of her journey back to her family in El Salvador, and her efforts to understand the last seconds of Cesare's life—and why official reports would brush the accident off as a case of pilot error.

D'Antonio writes with crisp clarity about the family's confusion and horror after



A sister's moving, alarming examination of an air tragedy.

Great for fans of Donald J. Porter's *Flight Failure*, Charlene Pell's *In This Altered Body*.

always used to make sense of the world.

What she discovered—and her hard questions about pilot priorities and airline policies—belies the official record of the accident, which D'Antonio persuasively describes as an effort to scapegoat her brother. Her consideration of the uses of blame—how it "can help break down a frightening event into something more tangible"—is both wise and alarming, especially as she considers, in later years, other air disasters and the systems that can fail to illuminate their complex causes. A compact, powerful read.

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

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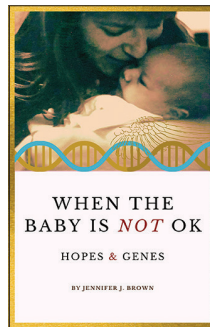
When the Baby Is Not OK: Hopes & Genes

Jennifer J. Brown

358p, e-book, \$14.99, ASIN B0D77MZ7YL

Brown's nonfiction debut shares a remarkable story of parenting her two daughters, Lily and Sophie, who were both diagnosed with phenylketonuria (PKU) shortly after birth. A rare genetic disorder that prevents the amino acid phenylalanine from being broken down effectively in the body, PKU initially looms over Brown's early days as a mother, threatening a slew of complications and debilitating health conditions that color her view of the future. As she seeks available information on the disorder—a natural reaction for someone who was, at the time, studying to become a geneticist—Brown discovers promising news: with a special low protein diet and routine care, her daughters can develop and progress at the same level as children without PKU.

Brown regales readers with raw vulnerability, sharing her heartbreaks, setbacks, and triumphs as she navigates unknown waters with two young ones in tow. Most striking is her constant fight with medical professionals, who deliver fear and



Inspirational story that marries motherhood and science.

Great for fans of Emily C. Bloom's *I Cannot Control Everything Forever*, Kate Swenson's *Forever Boy*.

she shares here in great depth, balanced by personal anecdotes that reflect on her journey as a mother, provider, and champion for her daughters.

Fittingly, Brown's work as a scientist is a natural springboard for her spotlight on women in STEM. Touching on the trials of excelling in a traditionally male-dominated field, she gives readers a behind-the-scenes look at the difference between a scientific perspective and the view of a woman juggling her professional goals while parenting two special little girls. The result is a relatable, informative, and empathetic narrative that inspires as much as it educates. Brown closes with resources for parents facing similar situations.

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

PICTURE BOOKS

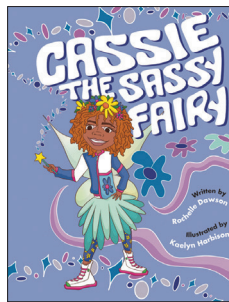
Cassie the Sassy Fairy

Rochelle Dawson

37p, hardcover, \$21.99, ISBN 979-8-988-13192-2

From her insatiable curiosity to her fondness for practical jokes, Cassie is decidedly different from the other fairies; she's "unique and marches to her own beat," which gets her into trouble more than once. Though her pranks are mostly harmless—from tying snakes around logs to gifting a special pair of wings to a frog—Cassie's bold decision to shadow the tooth fairy on her nightly rounds lands her in hot water. When a sleeping girl's sparkling bracelet distracts her, Cassie breaks the fairies' most important rule—to "never, EVER be seen by humans"—and the Fairy Queen is furious.

Dawson (author of *Josiah the Great*) builds a world thrumming with magic in this darling story, as the fairies flit and caper through the radiant Flower Valley, where flowers "bloom as far as the eye can see" and kaleidoscopic fish leap out of aquamarine waters. Kaelyn Harbison paints that stunning landscape in dizzying shades of color that explode across the page, mirrored in the flashy ensemble that Cassie sports: groovy high-top sneakers, leggings, and a splashy zip-up give her



Fun story of a young fairy's curiosity getting the best of her.

Great for fans of Nikki Rogers's *Born to Stand Out*, Naomi Jones's *The Perfect Fit*.

a jazzy feel, much different from her fellow fairies, whose sky-high heels carefully match their dainty dresses. But that's just the start of what makes Cassie special, and Dawson uses her delightfully cheeky countenance as both her strength and her downfall.

Younger readers will quickly catch on that Cassie must learn to rein in her sass, as her no-holds-barred thirst for adventure piles up the consequences, including a banishment that leaves her hanging just outside her home and wondering where to go—and how to fulfill the Queen's assignment that she must "complete three unselfish acts" to return. Readers will have to wait and see just how Cassie achieves the impossible—Dawson leaves the ending open for a sequel—but Cassie's zippy energy will have no trouble drawing them back in for future adventures.

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

YOUNG ADULT

EDITOR'S PICK

Finding Frances

Kelly Vincent | KV Books, LLC

322p, e-book, \$2.99, ISBN 978-1-509-22903-1

Teenaged Retta Brooks's struggles against her mother's overprotectiveness turn into a battle with grief, terror, and guilt when her entire world is upended in one night of fear and violence. This empathetic debut by Vincent, who later would write the celebrated *Art of Being Ugly* series, blends thriller elements with an intimate, empathetic story of growing up and facing trauma. Retta feels like her life is just beginning when she enrolls in public school for the first time at age 15, finally starting to make friends. That means she also begins to pull away from her deeply protective mother, a development that prompts a series of fights and a bold choice: Retta sneaking out to meet friends at a bonfire. When she returns home, she discovers the shock of her life—her mother has been murdered, and a strange man seems to be chasing after Retta.

The action picks up as Retta flees, finding help in the hands of her cute classmate, Jack, and in a secret network of women who help victims of domestic violence escape into new lives. Soon, family Retta didn't know existed is on the news begging



Moving novel of a teen facing tragedy and building her life anew.

Great for fans of Jandy Nelson's *When the World Tips Over*, Nina LaCour's *We Are Okay*.

for her safe return, and with the suspected killer in custody, Retta reluctantly comes forward to begin yet another phase of her life. Vincent's ambitions extend beyond suspense, however, as Retta now must get back to something like a normal life, slowly settling into her mother's family, struggling with grief and PTSD, and trying to face her future.

Though thriller lovers may find the pacing slow, *Finding Frances* excels as a character study and coming-of-age story, as Retta's growth and adaptation—dutiful therapy, much running, digging into and memorializing her mother's surprising past—proves richly moving. Readers will cheer for Retta both as she strives to build an identity beyond the narrow life her mother has confined her to and as she picks up the pieces after her world crumbles.

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

YOUNG ADULT

Forever We Dream

Mark Workman | Birdeto Books
258p, e-book, \$4.99, ISBN 979-8-989-80671-3

Workman's heartfelt debut dissects the uncertainty and self-doubt that can cripple dreams, portrayed through the eyes of the conjoined Banfeer triplets—Bellamona, Gabriella, and Elliana—as they navigate the challenges of their unique condition while pursuing their passion for music and entertaining. When the TV talent show *Your Shooting Star* opens its brand-new teen edition, five bands are culled from hundreds of applicants to compete, and the Banfeers make the cut. The spotlight comes with a hefty price, however, as they're forced to face their fears and insecurities in front of millions of people—all while holding out hope that their newfound fame will help them find their estranged mother, who's been missing for years.

The Banfeers' journey is filled with trials, from dealing with bullies like the dazzling but self-centered child star Twyla-Violet to uncovering painful family secrets. Workman uses those struggles to spotlight the triplets' resilience and



1970s conjoined triplets navigate identity amid music fame.

Great for fans of Jandy Nelson's *I'll Give You the Sun*, Adib Khorram's *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*.

determination, firmly keeping their desire to reunite their family at the center of this touching narrative. Themes of forgiveness, self-acceptance, and family lace throughout, and the triplets' bond is particularly compelling as they search for identity and fight to be accepted for who they are.

Workman's 1970s setting is rich with nostalgic charm, from references to the Bee Gees and Volkswagen vans to the decade's emerging fight for equality that helps propel the Banfeers' efforts to be recognized in their own right. The triplets' interactions with their father, Benson, and their eventual discovery of their mother's whereabouts add depth to the story and highlight the complexities of family relationships, while behind-the-scenes snapshots of the music industry convincingly portray both its cutthroat nature and the thrill of a shot at the spotlight. A sprinkling of Workman's characters—including the egotistical Twyla-Violet—feel over the top, but the end result testifies to the strength of the human spirit and the enduring bond between siblings.

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

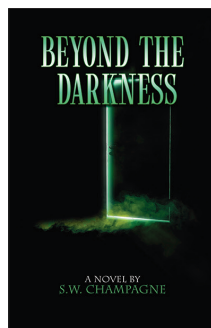
YOUNG ADULT

Beyond the Darkness

S.W. Champagne | DNP Publishing
458p, trade, paper, \$22.95, ISBN 979-8-897-05999-7

When 28-year-old technology manager Cynthia Johnson wakes up in modern-day New York City and sees a face in the mirror that is not her own, it's the least of her worries: she's getting cryptic messages in her mailbox, would-be kidnappers and assailants are trailing her every move, and a handsome stranger named Brian keeps stepping in to save her—and calling her Samantha Johnson. She spends the next several days trapped in cat-and-mouse races throughout the city, strapped to laboratory tables undergoing bizarre procedures, and watching as giant alien spears lance Manhattan. In the midst of all the action, Cynthia learns the truth about her father—he was a scientist working with alien DNA.

Champagne delivers rich cinematic flair in this roller coaster debut, capturing brisk action scenes and multiple character perspectives that rotate at blistering speeds. That leaves little room for deep character insights, though Cynthia's gradual realization that her upbringing—and biological makeup—are literally out of this world gives the narrative a hefty thrust, and her coming-to-terms with that discovery



Frenzied race to save humanity from a deadly alien invasion.

Great for fans of Pittacus Lore's *I Am Number Four*, Demitria Lunetta's *In the After*.

feels authentic and relatable. Champagne deftly walks the line between real and artificial, crafting scenes that are so complex, they become hard to track at times, and Cynthia's grasp on reality wavers throughout the novel, especially after discovering her father injected himself with alien genetic codes before his death—and passed that DNA on to her.

That's the impetus for her sudden transformation and supernatural abilities, and it places her in a precarious position of helping to save humanity from a fierce alien invasion.

Readers should prepare for lavish world building and countless characters to keep track of, from soldiers to aliens to Japanese gangsters and more, but for those ready to suspend their disbelief, this high-octane blend of old-fashioned pulp sci-fi with relentless action and scraps of horror will prove irresistible.

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



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