

MAY 12, 2025

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— YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING —

13 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

A Labor of Love

A writer shares her experience producing audiobooks for her indie novels

BY JULIE MATHISON

So you've thought about turning one of your beloved creations into an audiobook. You've thought about it a lot. For a long time. If you're a self-published author, you've already covered similar territory in the long journey to seeing your words on the printed page and in the hands of someone else: a stranger, a disinterested reader, a *buyer*. There is so much to learn when embarking on the self-publication journey beyond the scope of writing a great book. And, now, you have to learn a whole new set of distinctions, technologies, sources, and skills in order to give voice to your words and add a new product to your portfolio. Daunting, right?

I thought about it for ages before I took the plunge. My middle grade tearjerker, *Believe*, is relatively successful on Amazon, selling 200–500 copies a month, except for December, when it hits the thousand range. Consequently, I started to receive queries from companies offering to buy the rights to produce it as an audiobook, as well as narrators and other professionals. I came close to selling off the rights, but, in the end, I couldn't quite do it. As an indie author, I've gotten used to calling all the shots. What if I didn't like the end result? Did I really want to part with my full panoply of rights and benefits for a period of seven years? How much would it really take to learn to do this myself?



I suppose I should have known how I would answer these questions. My approach to self-publishing, ever since the fateful day I lost my agent and took that fork in the road, has been to do almost everything myself. I sub out the cover design and hire a copyeditor, but I format the interior and handle all the production and marketing of my books, and, although it is a labor, I suppose it is one of love.

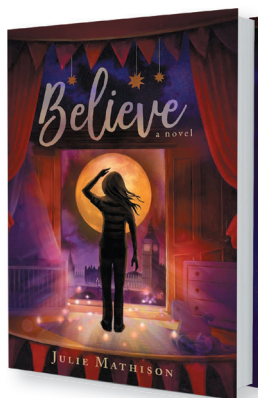
Once I had decided to produce an audiobook, my first step was to transform a large closet off an unused bedroom into an audio booth with the addition of some foam tiles and to research and purchase a microphone array. There are endless resources online about what to purchase and where and the decisions to be made along the way. The

research was significant, but not too daunting nor too technical. I had chosen to narrate the book myself as well as edit and master the audio files, and that required similar research, but, in the end, the process was relatively simple—if time-consuming. After many weeks of trial and error, and lots of growth as a narrator and editor, I finally had a finished product that I distributed through ACX on Amazon, which is where most (but not all) of my books sell.

I published in May 2024, and since then, according to my trusty dashboard, have sold 89 copies. I have also been named a finalist in a delightful indie contest, the Wishing Shelf Book Awards, which uses U.K. primary and secondary school students as judges.

I would not say that the addition of this asset to my portfolio has been a resounding financial success—not yet—but I have found it to be tremendously enriching. There is something about diving into your work from this new perspective that is surprisingly intimate as you rediscover familiar ground.

I've begun production on *Vasilisa* now, the first book in my Old Rus series based on Russian and Ukrainian folklore, and this time I'm working with a narrator, a friend and theater professional who brings



my witches and ogres to life. Here is another win-win: in our burgeoning joint venture, she is developing new skills, and I am hearing *Vasilisa* dramatized in a way that I would never be able to accomplish. Needless to say, I'm hooked. Once mastered, any new set of skills is yours forever, as are the assets you create.

Would I recommend this for everyone? Probably not, or at least not the way I'm doing it. There are so many ways to share the burden of production if you're willing to spend a bit of money and do the research to find your way forward. But, for those of us who like to own all of it, I highly recommend learning to do most of it yourself. The empowerment, the discovery, the joy are well worth the effort—as is the partnership if you can find people and friends who want to share the journey with you. If you decide, like me, to take the plunge, just remember to hold your expectations lightly and to look for the hidden benefits along the way. And, when you see that new product on your digital shelf, take a moment to appreciate all the effort and learning that went into creating it. That is the true joy of the indie journey. ☺

Julie Mathison is the founder of Starr Creek Press and the author of four novels for young readers.

REAL FANS READ

THE
FANATIC

BY PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

The Insider's Guide to Comics, Culture & Graphic Novels

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BookLife Talks with Jennifer Musser

Business consultant Jennifer Musser's debut book, *Align Your Business with the Real You*, received an Editor's Pick from BookLife Reviews, which called the book an "optimistic, well-ordered guide to building business success." We spoke with Musser about her book and how she feels it's particularly important right now.



What made you decide to write *Align*?

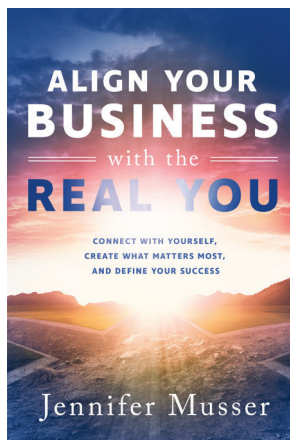
I felt drawn to immerse myself in the creative project of crafting a business book unlike others I had encountered. I envisioned a unique, relatable book geared toward curious, driven entrepreneurs and business leaders that would inspire action, wherever they were on their journey. I believed I could bring focus to a holistic personal business approach. So, I decided to inject vulnerability and blend personal, lived experiences with lessons learned and applications of those lessons in a way that was true to me. It was important that my readers felt connected to me and that I was on the journey with them, guiding and supporting them to blend their personal values and professional pursuits. I had organized these concepts in my mind before I communicated with anyone in the publishing industry about my project.

The BookLife Review praised the "creative exercises" in the book. How did those come about?

I am delighted that the creativity of the 13 exercises is recognized, and being a BookLife Reviews Editor's Pick is exciting. I decided to include exercises in the book to provide as much value to my readers as possible within one product. Each exercise came to me as I dug deeper into the question of what I wanted readers to take away from a given chapter. I let myself have fun and design creative tools as another way to connect on a deeper level with my readers. The selected exercises reinforce key themes: pivots, confidence, kindness, resilience, focus, gratitude, trust, and more. I designed this book to be a resource readers can reuse as many times as they desire.

Was there a point in your career where you wish you had been given this book?

Yes, this book would have been a useful tool at two distinct points: during my last year of college, when



I was preparing to launch my finance career, and later, when I was leading business teams and managing people, change, and myself. At those times, the overarching reminder that our journey is our journey—that we are responsible for creating the change we want to see and feel and the life we want to wake up to every day—would have helped me stay more grounded in purpose and connected to my core values, wants, needs, and community. For example, part one, "Connect: Listen to Yourself," walks readers through finding where they belong so they can change course when a new path feels right and conquer opportunities to collect skills and confidence. The book builds four more parts from there: Clarify, Control, Cocreate, and Change. This material can alter career, and life, trajectories—when we act.

Why or how do you think this book is particularly relevant now?

Align Your Business with the Real You is a realistic road map to a fresh, aligned way forward at a time when the broad and rapid pace of change can feel overwhelming. Navigating business and personal success is heavy and challenging. It's easy to find yourself adrift. My book meets readers where they are right now, realizing some days are messier than others as we figure out who we are, where we want to go, and what that entails. I give readers perspectives, tools, and strategies to use immediately. This is more than a book; it's an experience that will be relevant today, tomorrow, and years from now.

What's next for you?

I'm living my life where chapter 13 leaves off. The real me continues to utilize my creative gifts to provide value and positive experiences for my clients and readers. I love writing, and it fits well with my consulting business. I have a couple of creative projects in mind; I don't know which one I'm going to pick.

For more, visit booklife.com/musser



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

FICTION

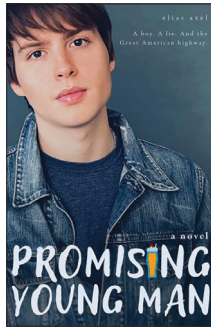
⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

Promising Young Man

Elias Axel | My Delightful Life Press
240p, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 979-8-992-06560-2

Axel debuts with a sharp, poignant novel of coming-of-age on the road, with a story of intergenerational bonding that captures the messiness of young adulthood—and insights into grieving—with humor and heartbreak. At the center is Oscar Danielsson, a quick-witted but deeply uncertain 18-year-old grappling with his ADHD, self-destructive habits, and an unclear future. After a reckless mistake, Oscar embarks on a cross-country road trip with his free-spirited grandmother, Grammy, leaving behind the possibility of budding romance. That's a lot to sacrifice for Graceland, Fort Defiance, and Route 66, but what starts as something of a form of punishment turns into an opportunity for self-discovery, as between comic mishaps Oscar must confront painful family truths and reevaluate his sense of purpose.

Axel's writing crackles with energy and hard-won insight, capturing Oscar's



Raw and witty coming-of-age road trip, bursting with life.

Great for fans of Jandy Nelson, Jennifer Niven.

inner monologue in a way that feels both authentic and deeply relatable. His frustration, self-doubt, and impulsive decisions make him a flawed but compelling narrator, and his evolving dynamic with Grammy moves and surprises, as Grammy pushes Oscar toward healthier habits, encourages him to open up to strangers, and assures him "if you give yourself a chance, one day, your transmitters will show you the love and wonder of yourself." Also compelling: Oscar's deteriorating relationship with his friend Christian, which underscores how isolating young adulthood can be.

The road trip offers Oscar space to see himself differently, to seize the remaining moments of his youth rather than resign himself to failure. Though his circumstances are bleak—failing to graduate, losing his job, facing legal trouble—the novel highlights the power of second chances and unexpected growth. Axel delivers a story that is messy, tender, and often darkly funny, a gripping read for anyone caught between adolescence and adulthood—or who wants to recall that moment.

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

FICTION

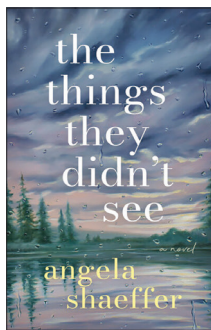
⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

The Things They Didn't See

Angela Shaeffer | Wander Lane Press
356p, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 979-8-9928252-1-3

Shaeffer breaks hearts with this exquisitely crafted debut tale of a family trying to survive tragic loss. Spanish teacher Jill grew up on Lake Koda with her father, Roger, after her mother left when she was just 12 years old. Now happily married to Matt and the mother of three sons—Jake, Connor, and Henry—Jill revels in sharing the lake she cherishes so much with her husband and kids. But when a freak storm disrupts a day on the water, bad weather—and a few questionable decisions—lead to the drowning death of 11-year-old Connor, Jill and Matt's middle son.

What ensues is a family fracturing, with each member feeling responsible and assigning blame for Connor's death—and wondering whether they will be able to survive the tragedy. Nearly every page drips with the devastating consequences of grief, made utterly raw and relatable in Shaeffer's capable hands. "The pain is so



Exquisite and deeply felt story of unimaginable loss.

Great for fans of Jacquelyn Mitchard's *The Deep End of the Ocean*, Judith Guest's *Ordinary People*.

consuming," Roger reflects, "Just when you think it's eased up, it hits you all over again." Deftly switching between different points of view—Jill, Matt, their oldest son Jake, Roger—Shaeffer brilliantly captures the aching sorrow, misplaced blame, and complicated emotions that follow the unexpected death of a loved one.

Survivor's guilt steers many of the journeys here, and the clashes that follow—between Jill and Matt, Jill and her father, even Jill and Jake—ring true. Just as Jill finds balancing her despair with life's ongoing demands hopeless, Jake discovers that navigating adolescence in the face of such a reverberating loss is nearly impossible, prompting both, at separate times, to agonize, "I can't do this." Shaeffer's eloquent prose and deeply felt, beautifully rendered narrative captivates, urging emotional resonance that will haunt readers long after the story comes to a close. Anyone who has experienced painful loss will devour this emotive tour-de-force.

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

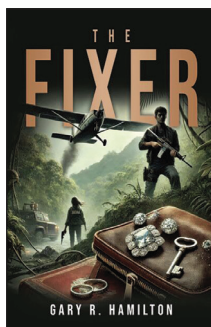
MYSTERY/THRILLER

The Fixer

Gary R. Hamilton | Citiofbooks, Inc.
212p, hardcover, \$24.99, ISBN 979-889-391504-4

Hamilton's breakneck international thriller debut sweeps readers into the dark and violent world of diamond smuggling. The story breaks with shadowy figures from the United States and Africa locked in a standoff for the biggest cut of the action, until one of their diamond-smuggling planes crashes into the Blue Mountains of Jamaica during a hurricane. To recover the goods locked in a safe on board, a team of smugglers enlist the help of naive, 18-year-old Janet Martin to carry their cryptographic keys through Miami's airport security, en route to a family holiday in Jamaica. When Janet turns up missing, her parents recruit Kenneth Johnson, aka "The Fixer," to find her.

Lost diamonds, a missing girl, and suspicions that maybe even the police can't be trusted lead Kenneth through a network of dangerous people who will stop at nothing to get what they want. As Janet's parents relate the strange events leading up to their daughter's disappearance, including a bizarre break-in at their house



Breakneck thriller with high-octane action and strong male lead.

Great for fans of Clive Cussler; Brad Taylor.

where only Janet's passport was stolen, a story begins to take shape: Janet, who mishandled the bag she agreed to carry, has been kidnapped. From there, readers see Kenneth and his team untangling the web of lies, violence, and crime that connects those in pursuit of riches and power, slowed only by such earth-shattering events as the kidnapping of Kenneth's own son and new murders at nearly every turn.

Hamilton leaves little room for breath as his characters jump from one horrific discovery to another, adhering to a brisk pace that eschews character development in favor of high-stakes adventure. Female characters fall flat, defined more by their physical appearance than what they add to the story, though the make-or-break central quest holds attention until the last page. Readers who fancy uncompromising action headed by dashing male leads will be entertained.

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

BookLife Talks with Oliver Martin

Using material gathered over a 20-year period, Swiss author Martin seeks to give readers a method to achieve their goals.

What does the title, *31 Bridges*, reference?

The title refers to the fact that for hundreds of years, bridges have been built to create a connection, from point A to point B. Bridges are merely a metaphor in this book. The idea is to connect different themes and create a clear vision. I realized very early on in my life that everyone has a different opinion on a given topic, which is sometimes quite wonderful. If I asked 100 people, I would probably get 80 different answers. Sometimes these can be simple topics, and with this book I am simply trying to share information. Each person can then decide for themselves what they want to do with it.

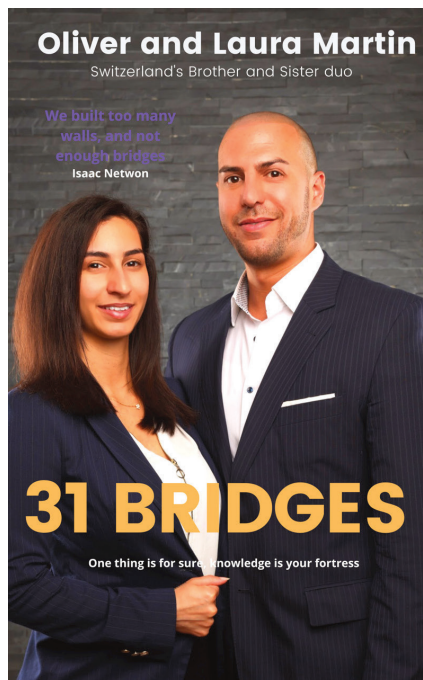
What was the writing process like for *31 Bridges*?

My first idea came when I was 16 years old. I've always read books, and it's been fascinating to write one myself. The years went by and then my son was born, so I had to wait. After that, I knew it wouldn't be easy, because it took me eight months of preparation to realize what I should write about. During this process, I also asked several people to help me with the book, so I would say it was a team effort. In this book, I have also interviewed athletes, lawyers, and other professionals about performance and discipline. This gives the reader different perspectives.

Was there a specific experience in your career that you feel helped prepare you to write this book?

Yes, there are different experiences; I think just one

experience would not be enough to write a book. One of these experiences was writing diaries in my childhood. Another very important one was when I was 20 years old and working in a Swiss bank. My main task was to gather information and read a lot of documents. There, I read and studied up to 200 pages a day.



There are a lot of strategy and investment books on the market right now. What makes yours stand out?

That's right. There are a lot of books out there. In my opinion, many authors talk about giving advice, especially in the area of finance, without ever having had this experience themselves. As a Swiss citizen, I believe I have had the opportunity to gain experience and can pass this on. The book is not about strategy or finance but about all the information you need to reach a certain level. Teenagers especially want everything, and quickly. This is not how it works. It never has been and it never will be.

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

If you have an idea or a goal as a person, you should pursue it. Sometimes it can take years, and sometimes it can happen quickly. It depends on the type of information you look at or listen to. Don't just assume that a video is valuable information. Instead, take out what

is important for the moment. Read what you need. Sometimes things are not what they appear to be. I think it's more important than ever to ask yourself the right questions and not just blindly follow people to then realize that you've wasted a lot of your life. And that applies to many areas of life. Live your own life in the way that's right for you.

For more, visit booklife.com/martin

MYSTERY/THRILLER

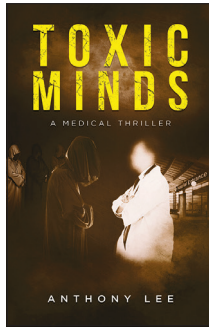
Toxic Minds: A Medical Thriller

Anthony Lee

388p, mass market, \$14.99, ISBN 979-8-348-33057-6

Lee's slow burn domestic terrorism thriller—the sequel to *Doctor Lucifer*—follows up with Dr. Mark Lin, a hospitalist at Ivory Memorial in California, whose patient is killed in a suicide bombing on hospital grounds—while he is on the phone with her. Not long after, Mark discovers a disturbing pattern of patients requiring emergency care after partaking in alternative treatments from a secret society called The Path to Purity. When signs point to the suicide bombing and wellness treatments being connected, Mark embarks on a dangerous journey, risking his career, sanity, and his life, by going undercover as a purported follower of the Path in hopes of uncovering the truth.

As Mark assumes a new identity—Eric Zhao—and takes part in dangerous rituals to prove his loyalty to the Path, Lee ratchets the tension for readers as well, who are swept into the dark world of a cult, where safety is suspect and no one can be trusted. Followers must pledge fidelity, accept a tattoo, and swear fealty to the



Tense thriller of a doctor undercover in a healing cult.

Great for fans of Gregg Olsen's *The Hive*, John Galligan's *Bad Day Breaking*.

as the story gradually reveals that the Path plans to decimate the medical system Mark's been an integral part of for years.

Lee nicely juxtaposes Mark's work at the hospital with his time spent in the Path, setting up a stark contrast that speaks to the story's deeper themes: the search for meaning amid life's struggles, harm caused by extremism, the spread of hate that can stem from disinformation. The ending is satisfyingly tense, leaving Mark pondering a timely sentiment: "Is humanity still stuck in the dark ages?"

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

EDITOR'S PICK

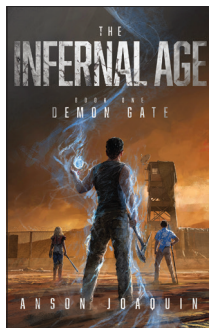
The Infernal Age, Book 1: Demon Gate

Anson Joaquin | Dubious Distinction Press, LLC

350p, e-book, \$7.99, ISBN 979-8-9926139-0-2

Joaquin's *Infernal Age* series starter thrusts readers into an apocalyptic nightmare when a high-energy particle experiment goes disastrously wrong, creating the Demon Gate—a black sphere tearing reality apart. Military operative Gabriel Rodriguez is deployed to the secret facility in Betelgeuse, New Mexico where the test went awry, joining Dr. Tamarind 'Tam' Sinclair, an overly philosophical scientist who warned of the experiment's dangers. But attempts at containment fail, unleashing monstrous alien entities into the world. With little more than fractured data and fading hope, Gabriel and Tam flee the site, seeking to warn authorities. Their journey, both physical and psychological, reshapes them amid the devastation.

Joaquin paints a world both desolate and hauntingly beautiful, from Betelgeuse's silent ruins to blue infernos devouring the sky. The descriptions of the demonic entities, particularly Hakk'rix, whose predatory instincts and intelligence set it apart from the others, evoke a sense of cosmic horror. Though science serves as



Failed experiment unleashes otherworldly destruction in this gripping ride.

Great for fans of JK Franks's *American Exodus*, Cixin Liu's *The Dark Forest*.

a mere plot device, Tam provides fascinating insight into the failed containment system and the reckless ambition behind the breach. While searching for survivors, they find Ripley, a traumatized yet resilient woman who joins their fragile alliance. Their journey transforms Gabriel from a hotheaded soldier into a reluctant leader, his body altered by radiation, his

soul by terror, and as the group navigates their surroundings, the horrors multiply—some born of the breach, others of humanity itself. Across a landscape crawling with nightmares, Gabriel and co. meet several factions, and the group must reckon with morality in a world where rules have burned away. Gabriel straddles the line between hero and monster, grounded by Tam's logic and Ripley's quiet strength, and Joaquin balances the feast of action with introspective moments that allow the characters to breathe. The cliffhanger ending wraps up this hypnotic descent into chaos, promising an exciting sequel.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

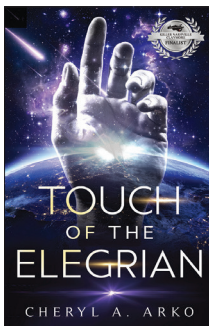
Touch of the Elegrian

Cheryl A. Arko | Pax Aire Press

376p, hardcover, \$27.99, ISBN 979-8-9923909-1-9

Arko kicks off her *Elegrian* Legacy series with this immersive debut following a disastrous First Contact and its resultant fallout a quarter of a century later. Erys—a telepathic Elegrian whose now-deceased father was responsible for the mishaps that occurred when his race first encountered humans years ago—is tasked with fixing the Loridan treatment system in the wake of fatal diseases threatening its humans. To do so, he must work with Kaytee Kessler, whose ailing niece will die if Erys is unsuccessful. As the first Elegrian to visit Loridan in 25 years, Erys has his work cut out for him—and a cruel saboteur bent on shattering the tenuous treaty between humans and Elegrians threatens his progress at every turn.

Arko's prose is evocative and lyrical, bringing a delicate touch to the novel's darker themes of narrow-mindedness and marginalization. Readers will immediately connect with Erys, who senses the world around him through profound intuition and is able to experience the scent of others' feelings: uncertainty smells like stale dust, righteousness like something scorched, and discord is a "suffocating



Dynamic aliens versus humans sci-fi with incredibly high stakes.

Great for fans of S.M. Anderson's *A Bright Shore*, Michael Simon's *First Command*.

matter the cost, while Chief Krenshaw assumes the role of a belligerent human convinced Elegrians are essentially worthless.

Failure isn't an option for Erys, not least because the penalty for his unusual methods is death. The result is an engaging story with striking worldbuilding, gripping suspense, and believable characters who aren't afraid to put it all on the line in the name of protecting life—no matter its form.

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

"Sun Priest," who "loves die-hard commitment." Mark ensures he appears fully devoted, progressing through the program in record time and being chosen as the Sun Priest's assistant—a position that places him in grave danger while allowing him access to the group's innermost secrets. Those revelations are shocking,

as the story gradually reveals that the Path plans to decimate the medical system Mark's been an integral part of for years.

Lee nicely juxtaposes Mark's work at the hospital with his time spent in the Path, setting up a stark contrast that speaks to the story's deeper themes: the search for meaning amid life's struggles, harm caused by extremism, the spread of hate that can stem from disinformation. The ending is satisfyingly tense, leaving Mark pondering a timely sentiment: "Is humanity still stuck in the dark ages?"

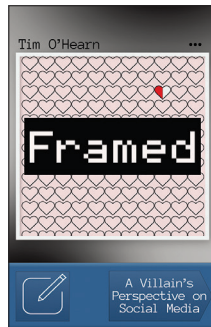
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: — Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

TECHNOLOGY

Framed: A Villain's Perspective on Social Media

Tim O'Hearn | Luscious Ventures LLC
440p, e-book, \$0.99, ASIN B0DW2X8YSK

"Elders used to ask if I 'ever put that thing down," referring to a video game controller," software engineer O'Hearn writes in this revealing debut that blends memoir, exposé, and social critique. "Now I notice them mindlessly holding their phones." In *Framed*, O'Hearn endeavors to demonstrate how social media grew so addictive, through his first-hand experience of helping engineer it to be that way. O'Hearn grew up during the heyday of "Web 2.0," when social media sites like Myspace began to reshape culture and connections. He learned to code and became a programmer for startups whose profitability depended on attention and engagement. His work often tended toward the dubious, from gently manipulating users to engage with an app more frequently to the artificial boosting of customers' Instagram follower counts. He writes with tart authority about the evolution of engagement culture, the opaque ways in which it operates, and the often-illusory foundations it's built upon.



Revealing first-hand account of how social media became so addictive.

Great for fans of Sarah Wynn-Williams's *Careless People*, Chris Stokel-Walker's *TikTok Boom*.

O'Hearn draws shrewd connections between the gamer culture of the early aughts and how social media sites keep people hooked today—and how the temptation to cheat manifests in both. He can be gratifyingly blunt: "Content creation has never been more democratized, yet fewer people bother. When they do, it's just front-facing camera drivel." Instead, like so many others, would-be creators "prefer to scroll, swipe, and like"—an understandable choice in gamified platforms where perceived fame demands users either "git gud" or cheat.

With welcome precision and vivid color, O'Hearn describes the shady methods used to boost user accounts, though he mostly leaves it to readers to contemplate the hollowness of the pursuit itself. While the minutiae of the processes he reveals fascinate, the end goal itself seems so meaningless—internet fame, whether purchased or earned, can be fleeting, and, for most people, not worth the money or effort. *Framed* provides a clear, informative, no-nonsense look at the largely artificial power behind the digital curtains.

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

NONFICTION

Children's Wartime Adventure Novels: The Silent Generation's Vicarious Experience of World War II

Jacqueline T. Lynch
386p, hardcover, \$74.49, ISBN 979-8-3303-1413-3

Lynch illuminates a fascinating, little-studied chapter of publishing history in this study of exactly what the title suggests: World War II adventure novels for young American readers, printed during—and in a few cases before—U.S. involvement in the war itself, in which protagonists in their late teens and early 20s set aside the anxieties of youth to do their part to stomp out fascism. In title after title, pilots and soldiers (the men, mostly) and nurses, reporters, WACs, WASPS, WAVES, and more (the women) evince courage, endurance, dedication to the cause, and a savvy sense for identifying fifth columnists. Lynch celebrates the novels' sense of "spirited adventure" and ethos of "patriotic self-sacrifice" while digging into thorny questions of propaganda and indoctrination, including racial and ethnic stereotyping. Declares a radioman in Gregory Duncan's *Dick Donnelly of the Paratroops*, judiciously quoted by Lynch, "When I shoot at the enemy, I'm not shootin' at any one person. I'm just shootin' at



Fascinating study of WWII teen adventure novels and the American character.

Great for fans of Helen Wells's Cherry Ames series; Mike Hutton's *Children of the 1940s: A Social History*.

an idea I hate, an idea that will ruin the whole world if it isn't stopped." Lynch writes with infectious enthusiasm for the subject, soaring through detailed summaries of the stories of dozens of books like *Red Randall at Pearl Harbor*, *Nancy Blake, Copywriter*, and the surprisingly grim nurse adventure *Ann Bartlett at Bataan*, which is frank about wartime surgery: "a tattered mass of flesh and bone." Especially engaging are Lynch's considerations of the differences between the novels with girl heroes—these stories of the "protectors of the homefront" sometimes boasted career advice and a "surprisingly feminist spark of independence and derring-do"—and the high-flying, battle-oriented novels starring boys.

While Lynch is always engaging, the many summaries can get repetitive, and readers wish for more insight into these books' creation, sales, and cultural impact. Late chapters surveying questions of patriotism and stereotypes across a host of books, though, offer continual revelations and insights, a rich contribution to the study of American literature and propaganda. These books deserve serious study.

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

Booksellers & Librarians:



How are you handling self-published books?

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

PICTURE BOOKS

The Adventures of Marie and LeeLee

Lisa Cortez | IngramSpark

24p, hardcover, \$19.99, ISBN 979-8-218-56490-2

Cortez's joyful picture book celebrates the strong connection and playful relationship between two childhood best friends. When Marie and LeeLee meet through their older sisters, they hit it off immediately. The girls spend hours together laughing, talking, and enjoying treats like pizza and frozen yogurt. They also go on trips to the Grand Canyon and Palm Springs, exercise by their favorite lake, and play outdoors, splashing in the water during the summer and crunching through the snow in wintertime. Like many best pals, they never leave each other's side, even attending the same class at school, making them more family than friends.

This debut serves as a simple tribute to the special connection best friends share, showcasing Marie and LeeLee's delight in spending time together and trying out a variety of activities. Many of their favorite pastimes are screen-free, allowing Cortez to highlight what friendships can look like without technology, as the girls



Sweet, inspiring celebration of childhood friendship.

Great for fans of Layla Steele's *My Girls & Curls*, Sara Gillingham's *How to Grow a Friend*.

the beautiful person you are inside, and you are loved because you are YOU!"

Laura Watson's bright illustrations burst with energy, mimicking the girls' many excursions and high-octane adventures. Dark-haired LeeLee and blond Marie smile and laugh as they tell each other jokes, attend a school dance, and stay up late. Each scene feels welcoming and fully realized, with small details adding to the charm: as the girls watch a movie, a cat jumps onto Marie's lap, while another scene finds the pair enjoying hot chocolate in front of a crackling fire. This sweet ode to friendship will encourage kids to nurture those relationships in their own lives.

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

PICTURE BOOKS

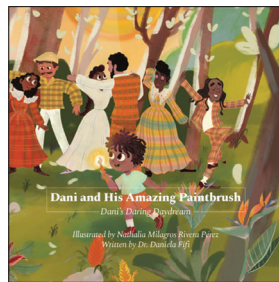
Dani and His Amazing Paintbrush: Dani's Daring Daydream

Daniela Fifi | Victory Education, LLC

30p, hardcover, \$22.99, ISBN 979-8-990-66351-0

Dani—a young boy who loves art, music, and colorful clothing to express himself—spends his free time painting and daydreaming, until one day a group of teasing classmates make fun of his favorite shoes and shake his confidence. Luckily, Dani's best friend, Boscoe, steps in to defend him and cheer him up by spending an afternoon playing music together to blow off steam. Despite their fun, Dani can't seem to escape his newly found self-doubt, until his favorite teacher, Mr. Samedi, challenges him to "to see where your daydreams lead you," an invitation that reignites Dani's creative spirit.

Inspired by a painting created by Trinidadian artist Geoffrey Holder, Fifi imagines a bold story about being different, embracing art, and influencing others through daring imagination. Listening to Mr. Samedi's advice transports Dani to a blank canvas, in a world where Geoffrey, a guide who looks eerily similar to his teacher, advises Dani that "when you use your imagination, you can create anything you



Vibrant exploration of creativity and individuality.

Great for fans of Vanessa Brantley-Newton's *Just Like Me*, Ed Vere's *The Artist*.

want." Younger readers will jump right into Dani's reveries—bolstered by Nathalia Milagros Rivera Pérez's vibrant, energetic illustrations—as he daydreams a stunning tapestry of color, personality, and music into life. Fifi's debut uses Dani's vision—and willingness to push through his fears of rejection—to deliver a valuable message on self-acceptance, compassion toward others, and the power of loving support to inspire self-confidence. As Dani embraces the characteristics that make him unique, readers will also feel motivated to follow his lead and try something new. Beyond those crucial lessons, *Dani and His Amazing Paintbrush* is visually stimulating, immersing readers in a luscious world of art and color that showcases the beauty of giving into one's fancy. As Dani lets his imagination run wild, his classmates discover their own vision, prompting Dani's proud declaration that "I will always dare to be different."

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

MIDDLE GRADE

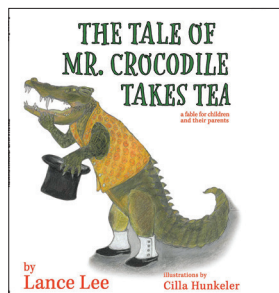
The Tale Of Mr. Crocodile Takes Tea: A Fable for Children and Their Parents

Lance Lee | LWL Books

84p, trade paper, \$17.95, ASIN B0F12VK8BB

Lee's second installment in his charming "Crouch End" series follows an African crocodile who "once upon a time – no, recently – [...] took High Tea," among the humans in the village that sits at the edge of his home, the Sillibilli River. He dons a vest, dress shoes, and a smart hat, munches on "cucumber, egg salad, and salmon paste sandwiches," and assimilates into the ways of humanity so much so that the people in the village dub him "Mr. Crocodile Person." Thus, Mr. Crocodile develops "a new way of thinking about himself: he was a Person, not merely a Crocodile."

But personhood is not as straightforward as simply calling oneself a person. Besides knowing the rule that no persons harm other persons, Mr. Crocodile wonders what it means to be a person at all. To decide who gets to be categorized as persons, he books passage to Crouch End, England, to visit a boy named Thomas who he had dreamed would have the answers he sought. Sponsored by the "Greatest Living Great White Hunter" he met in Africa, Mr. Crocodile and his family visit



Adventurous story of a crocodile learning to become a person.

Great for fans of Robert Munsch's *Paper Bag Princess*, Ellen Potter's *Big Foot* and *Little Foot* series.

England, but they quickly learn that in England, not everyone treats each other with kindness and respect. Though they depict lively scenes of lush foliage and vibrant crocodile skin, Hunkeler's illustrations often appear flat on the page—and occasionally a bit toothily scary. (Many images are repeated throughout Lee's story.) Mr. Crocodile's journey offers a beautiful moral that all life has dignity and deserves respect, though older readers will note that the narrative doesn't explore or update its colonial underpinnings, like the Kipling-esque idea of the Great White Hunter or the vagueness of "Africa" itself as a setting, as if the whole continent is like the village depicted here, rather than a specific locale within a specific country. Still, *The Tale of Mr. Crocodile Takes Tea* offers a perspective that may positively inspire young readers to evaluate their relationship with the animal kingdom.

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

YOUNG ADULT

EDITOR'S PICK

Ash & Feather

Sharon Frances

242p, trade paper, \$16.95, ISBN 978-1-734-41964-1

"Weave and sing / watch and listen," chirps the young person called Phoenix, the narrator of this searching novel in verse, discovering at last a way to handle the grueling everyday anxieties while facing a parent's experience of cancer. Phoenix, a 14-year-old, has elected to "weave" a nest for warmth and comfort, just one of many ingenious, intuitive avian ideas that give *Ash & Feather* its urgent pulse. The poems here, from the perspective of Phoenix, follow a small family—"Eagle, my one and only parent / Duck, my one and only grandparent"—in the aftermath of the discovery of a tumor in Eagle's brain. As Eagle endures hard treatments and uncertain diagnoses, Phoenix writes in a journal, imagining the family as birds ("Duck fills the room with muffled, worried quacks"). But beneath the soothing fantasy of flight and plumage, Phoenix addresses, with candor and a touching sense of play, the fear, grief, and challenges of life in cancer's shadow.



Wise, moving poems of a young person facing a parent's cancer.

Great for fans of Brianna Pastor's *Good Grief*, Nina May Schiller's *But I'll Carry the Love of You*.

The poems address the everyday experience of trying to get on with school and the business of growing up, while allowing Phoenix to describe, in crisp and resonant free verse stripped of all excesses, feelings of being trapped, of yearning for the chance to think about something besides cancer, and learning breathing exercises to help in moments of panic. Phoenix takes warm comfort in family—plus a counselor, Hen, and a friend/crush, Ing. These loved ones find themselves "Learning again and again / who we are / together."

While individual entries are strong, the verses gain significant power for being read together, as they capture, with a gentle urgency, Phoenix's shifting feelings, new approaches to handling anxiety, and even fleeting moments of relief, as in a sweet connection with Ing. Frances's linocut relief prints—depicting nests, feathers, alarm clocks, hummingbirds, and more—add an evocative hand-crafted counterpoint to the poems, giving readers further reason to linger over these moving pages.

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

YOUNG ADULT

Spring: The Lighthouse Islands Series, Book 1

J. Jacque Meadows | 360 Book Publishers

454p, e-book, \$6.99, ISBN 979-8-895-90268-4

Vivian Attwater is the self-proclaimed "queen" of the Lighthouse Islands, off the coast of Lake Superior on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Founded by her family, the islands have become home to an array of diverse families, a development that Vivian despises. Her only goal is to restore the islands back to their "superior" inhabitants—wealthy people who look like her. By channeling the aid of dark influencers with telepathic powers, called Xicons, Vivian wields her influence on the islands' political leaders, leaving only her daughter, Callie—and a group of high schoolers whose families have been affected by Vivian's elitist hate—standing in her way.

This fast-paced coming-of-age story, the first in Meadows's Lighthouse Islands series, boasts unlikely heroes and high stakes, illuminating the irreparable harm that accompanies unchecked hatred and power. Meadows writes simplistic prose that grounds an otherwise complex fantasy, though the storyline sometimes chokes on the intensity of its worldbuilding, where the human cast struggles against super-



Imaginative coming-of-age brimming with magic and relatable characters.

Great for fans of Cinda Williams Chima's *The Wizard Heir*, Jordan Ifueko's *Raybearer*.

natural enemies that can feel more contrived than threatening. The plucky yet kind-hearted Callie, facing her own mother as a villain, drives this intricate tale of family dynamics and privilege, with her dependence on fellow high school students Trace, Morgan, Sudhir, Marcus, Krista, and Palo highlighting the enduring bonds of friendship that overcome adversity.

Meadows draws on the story's supernatural elements to counterbalance its heavy themes of racism and marginalization, as the islands' positive forces, called Beacons, use their influence to offset Vivian's evil doings. The narrative is moving, touching on subjects that can be challenging to wade through, but Meadows creates a world with characters who are easy to root for, tackling the struggles teens often face at home while examining the weight of balancing school while planning for the future. Fans of complicated familial relationships and epic battles of good versus evil will enjoy this.

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



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FICTION

Broken Hope

Carrie Rubin. Indigo Dot, \$4.99 e-book (286p)

ISBN 978-1-958160-08-4

Former physician Rubin (the Liza Larkin series) impresses with this disquieting thriller about an unusual vigilante. Boston internist Hope Sullivan is jogging past an alley when she spots one of her elderly patients being mugged. She intervenes and sends the attacker fleeing, but the encounter convinces her that too many violent criminals walk free. Two years later, Hope is far from over the incident: despite insisting that “as a doctor, I don’t enjoy deliberately inflicting pain,” she’s become a self-appointed (and violent) guardian angel, even going so far as to kidnap and torture a patient’s abusive husband. Hope’s new “macabre pastime,” as she calls it, gets disrupted when she receives an anonymous email that insists “I know what ur doing.” That message is followed by several others, each with escalating threats. Hope realizes she’s met her match when another vigilante drugs and kidnaps her, seeking revenge on behalf of one of her victims. Rubin manages to make Hope an empathetic figure, despite her transgressions, and maintains taut suspense straight through to the devilish climax. This is a winner.

Echoes of the Garfy Multiverse

Aaron Pryka. KDP, \$7.99 e-book (304p)
ASIN B0D4B89692

Pryka debuts with a tart if uneven satire of Hollywood ambition and the craze for self-improvement. Nerdy and obese Craig Bunny, 34, lives with his mom outside Los Angeles and can only find acting work in commercials for an IBS treatment. He’s certain that he’s destined for more and hopes his increasingly complex plans for a film adaptation of a classic comic strip called *Garfy* (a thinly veiled *Garfield*) will be his big break. When Natasha, an attractive newcomer to his writing group, announces that she’s secured the rights for a film about Prince Michael of Sealand, Craig decides it’s time to make some changes. He hires a life coach named Chad, who puts him on an extreme diet and exercise regimen and encourages him to

affect a husky voice. Under Chad’s guidance, Craig grows more confident, even as he goes broke from the coach’s exorbitant fees. He pressures his agent, Denise, into getting his script in front of industry folks, but as his behavior becomes erratic, he risks blowing his chances. Much of the novel’s intended humor is scatological, and it wears thin. Better are the caustic showbiz jokes, as when Denise, who told Craig she specializes in scouting for “normal people,” tells others that she’s actually in the business of “freak hunting.” This has its moments.

The Glass Bottom Hoax: A Madison Night Mystery

Diane Vallere. Polyester, \$8.99 e-book (248p)

ISBN 978-1-954579-99-6

Dallas interior decorator Madison Night exploits her remarkable resemblance to Doris Day in her frothy latest adventure (after *Please Don’t Push Up the Daisies*). Donna Nast, owner of Big Bro Security, has been hired by Texas Luxury Cruises to stop a spate of burglaries aboard their ships. Donna, however, isn’t sure that the cruise company is operating aboveboard, and hires Madison to help vet her suspicions. Madison and her boyfriend, police captain Tex Allen, are to board the next cruise, with Madison posing as a professional Doris Day impersonator and Tex as her manager, to see if they can dig up any dirt. The couple happily accepts the assignment, but soon after the *New Nautilus* has set sail from Galveston, purser Homer Manalo, the one crew member who knows why Madison is onboard, is stabbed to death. Once again, Madison is forced to draw on her sharp observational skills, both to ferret out Homer’s killer and to determine if the *New Nautilus* is home to a crime ring. The plot beats are familiar, but Vallere hits her marks, delivering a clever, fairly clued solution. This gets the job done.

The Days Before Tomorrow

Mark Hass. Peconic First Books, \$25 trade paper (402p)

ISBN 979-8-9899094-0-7

Hass debuts with a memorable tale of discrimination and hardship faced by a young

Jewish man in pre-WWII eastern Poland. In 1933, teenager Wolchi lives with his parents, brother, and sister in a small town in Galicia, where his father works as a book-binder and printer. Their financial stability is upended when wealthy neighbor Igor Goreki stops the government from using Wolchi’s father as its printer after Igor’s son, Nicholas, is injured while taking part in an antisemitic attack on Wolchi’s family. Determined to fight back against the escalating violence, Wolchi and his sister, Leja, speak out against the town’s antisemitic persecutors. Then, after rising tensions with the Gorekis end in more brutality, they’re forced to flee to Krakow. When the Germans take control of the city, Wolchi and Leja return to their now Russian-ruled town, where more tragedies ensue. As the plot unfolds, Hass documents the gradual erosion of Wolchi’s family’s rights in fine-grained detail, showing how they’re uprooted by the German and Russian occupations alike. Readers will be moved by this story of a never-ending struggle for survival.

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