

JUNE 16, 2025

# booklife®

YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING

An Author Navigates Loss • 13 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

## Indie Spotlight

In this edition of our monthly thematic roundup of BookLife titles, we feature memoirs, biographies, and autobiographies.

Want to see your book featured? Check out the Indie Spotlight calendar at [booklife.com/indiespotlight](http://booklife.com/indiespotlight).

### COMING OF AGE AND SLICES OF LIFE

#### Chatterbox: Stories from a Noisy Life

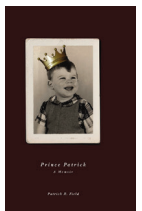


Barbara Worton  
ASIN B0DKH5MRB2

**Author statement:** “In 2017, my friend Rochelle Udell asked me to help her write her memoir. She told me stories about her life, and I told her stories about my life. Once Rochelle’s memoir was finished, we started a weekly blog. We each wrote and shared

stories from all aspects of our lives. Some of those stories gave birth to *Chatterbox: Stories from a Noisy Life*, and I continued writing about things I remember or felt or observed until I had 43 mini-memoirs that offer a heartfelt and relatable exploration of growing up, navigating relationships, and the beauty, humor, and complexity of life.”

#### Prince Patrick



Patrick R. Field  
ISBN 978-1-365-36197-5

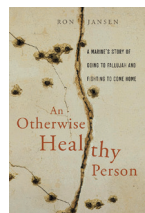
**Author statement:** “*Prince Patrick* is a memoir of a little gay boy who was ‘just a little too big for his britches,’ as my loving Southern mother would say. ‘Prince Patrick,’ a nickname given to me as a child by my family, reflected my perceived attitude and desire

to be treated in a manner befitting a little prince. I actually never thought of myself as royalty, rather that I was ‘special,’ destined for greatness and fame, and that I should be treated as an incubating celebrity. These stories of my eccentric exploits have made both

family and friends smile, giggle, and laugh hysterically, with the words ‘no he did not’ uttered more than once.”

### HEALING FROM TRAUMA

#### An Otherwise Healthy Person: A Marine’s Story of Going to Fallujah and Fighting to Come Home

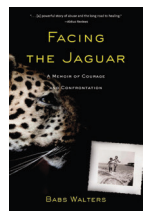


Ron Jansen  
ISBN 978-1-62586-292-1

**Author statement:** “Sometimes veterans like me tend to think our experiences are unique to us and that others won’t understand. However, the major elements of the veteran’s experience—duty, love, trauma, betrayal, loss, courage, fear, growth, and

healing—are universal to the human experience. We do ourselves a disservice by focusing on what sets us apart from others rather than focusing on the common elements that we all share. This book is an attempt to be real with myself about my own story and then to share it with others.”

#### Facing the Jaguar



Babs Walters  
ISBN 978-1-64742-920-1

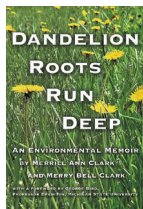
**Author statement:** “I held onto the worst kind of secret for nearly 70 years. Starting at age 11, I suffered sexual abuse at the hands of my father. Telling my story has taken an act of courage. I have learned to respect myself, flaws and all, and honor my promise

to make sense out of the confusion and shame of my young life. It’s not

easy or comfortable. There can be no far-reaching change without awareness first. We can no longer hide from the truth. As we repair ourselves, we are also repairing other dark corners of the world."

## TRAVEL, HISTORY, AND GENERATIONAL STORIES

### Dandelion Roots Run Deep



Merry Bell Clark and Merrill Ann Clark  
ASIN BOD47VR695

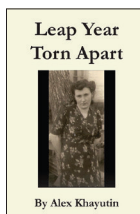
**Author statement:** "The story starts in 1944 and follows the lives of three generations of tenacious Midwestern women. My mother started this book approximately 20 years ago, before she developed Alzheimer's. It incorporates some of her mother's writing. I finished it after my mother stopped writing. After growing up and watching my mother fight one battle after another, I knew I would have to finish the story for her if she could not. She saw a connection between her own upbringing and the organic farm that she started with my father, and I saw the roots of tenacity underpinning everything, including the reasons I was able to survive cancer."

### Leap Year Torn Apart

Alex Khayutin

ISBN 978-1-06-886614-2

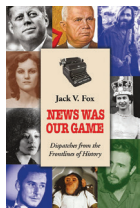
**Author statement:** "*Leap Year Torn Apart* is a bilingual, English/Russian rhymed biographical tale recounting the tragic fate of a



Russian-Jewish family devastated by events in Stalin's final years, during the early 1950s. This book began with the birth of my daughter, who is named after my late mother. This was the emotional catalyst for me to leave my daughter—and future generations—a lasting account of the tragedy that befell our family.

It was important to highlight my parents' determination, resilience, and especially my mother's unwavering commitment to preserving her cultural and ethnic identity."

### News Was Our Game: Dispatches from the Frontlines of History



Jack V. Fox and Linda Frakes

ASIN B0F8HSFY61

**Author statement:** "My father was a globetrotting journalist who covered some of the 20th century's biggest news stories, including the spellbinding trials of Charles Manson and Patty Hearst, the tragic assassinations of Jack and Robert Kennedy, the dramatic missions of the first astronauts, the doomed Bay of Pigs invasion, and many others. Long after his death, I discovered an unfinished memoir among his papers, a compelling portrait of his experiences. His great-niece (and BookLife editor), Matia Madrona Query, helped me assemble this book, which features newspaper clippings of his stories as they first appeared."

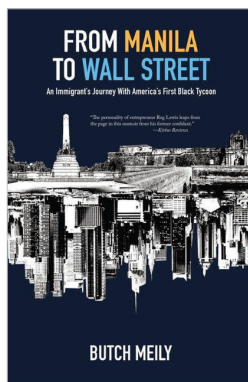
## Q&A SPONSORED

# BookLife Talks with Butch Meily

Meily's memoir, which BookLife Reviews called "more than a tale of business acumen" and "a moving dual portrait of ambition and friendship in the pressure cooker of 1980s corporate America," follows his journey from Filipino immigrant to PR specialist for Reginald Lewis, the first Black American to become majority shareholder of a billion-dollar company.

### Why or how do you think *From Manila to Wall Street* is particularly relevant now?

The book tells two stories about outsiders trying to make it in American society. One is a Black American; the other is a Filipino immigrant. Fate threw us together. That's something that I believe. And the result was one of the great adventures of my life. I believe that the book will inspire everyone who's ever had a dream and wanted to make it big in the U.S. And I have seen



that inspiration in the audiences I have spoken to in my first book tour. A largely Black audience in Philadelphia, a crowd of diplomats, former State Department and US AID representatives in Washington, various groups of financial executives, and Filipino Americans in New York. Very different audiences but the book and my talk seemed to resonate with each group.

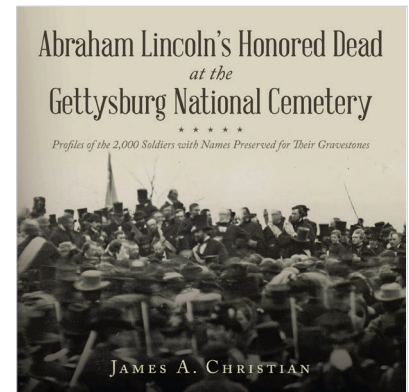
### Do you find any similarities between your work as a PR specialist in the 80s to and your current work as the head of a disaster foundation?

The two careers are in very different areas. However, I have managed to use the skills I developed as a PR person in my current job to increase the visibility of our foundation and our work. Being able to communicate is key to everything that I do. The ability to counsel high-level executives is a skill that I developed as a PR practitioner, and I have found that very useful in my current role.

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

## BookLife Talks with James Christian

A film kindled a lifelong interest in the Civil War and, specifically, the Battle of Gettysburg for debut author, Dr. James A. Christian. His book, *Abraham Lincoln's Honored Dead at the Gettysburg National Cemetery*, seeks to resurrect from cemetery grave-stones the human identities of thousands of Union soldiers killed in this battle.



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

As an African American youth growing up in the South in the mid-1960s, I wasn't so much interested in the Civil War as I was in our 16th U.S. president, Abraham Lincoln, in his famous Gettysburg Address, and in his role in emancipating the slaves. When, in 1984, I came north to Maryland to begin my medical residency, I took advantage of Gettysburg's proximity to visit the battlefield. But I knew little about the strategic movements in the battle, and I was overwhelmed by all the monuments on the battlefield. Then, in 1993, the movie *Gettysburg* came out. And although the movie gave a highly romanticized depiction of the battle, it did rekindle an interest in learning about the real battle, and relatedly, the Civil War.

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

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

### What was the typical research process like for each soldier?

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

soldier's birth date or year; his enlistment date and rank; his occupation and residence prior to enlistment; his promotions, detachments, and absences during service; his previous woundings in battle; the date the soldier was mortally wounded at Gettysburg, including any documented wound care received, mainly being amputations; and the soldier's date of death. I checked 1860 U.S. Census records to identify those soldiers who, having surreptitiously entered the army as minors, would be killed before their 18th birthday. I also accessed archived U.S. Pension Office files so that I was able to include in the soldiers' profiles the names of their dependent mothers, widowed wives, and fatherless children who had qualified for pensions. My inclusion of the ages in 1863 of these children is a bonus for genealogical researchers, as these children are the great-grandparents of millions of living Americans today.

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

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

### What's next for you?

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

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

# Writing Through Grief

An indie author finds beauty in profound loss

BY HALEY SAFFREN

**T**ony Stewart, known for his achievements in filmmaking and software technology, introduces *Carrying the Tiger*, his debut memoir and a semifinalist for the BookLife Prize Nonfiction Contest. After losing his wife, Lynn, to cancer, he shares what he learned about love and the grieving process.

## What gave you the will to share your journey with Lynn's cancer with the world?

*Carrying the Tiger* began as private journal posts on CaringBridge.org to keep friends and family informed about Lynn's cancer. This private audience freed me to share more than I would in a public forum. Our friends enjoyed reading the posts, which encouraged me to continue.

When the drugs stopped working and Lynn died beside me, I assumed I'd stop writing. But I couldn't—writing became integral to my healing. Several readers wrote that my journal helped them deal with their own grief. In those months, I realized using our story to help other people could turn my loss into something meaningful.

## What are your most cherished takeaways from your experience of loving and grieving a partner?

Our physical closeness when we walked together, Lynn's hand clutching my arm for support, her other hand grasping her cane, evokes real, tactile memories. These are metaphors for what I cherish most; Lynn's cancer brought us closer together.

By the time Lynn died, we were like two soldiers fighting a war, dodging bullets. This created a love and trust we'd never experienced, a true partnership. Lynn supported me as much as I supported her. In her last days, Lynn encouraged me to be open to love after she died. This final gift carried me through the shattering grief that followed.

## What role did writing play in your grieving process?

In the years before Lynn died, I grew to love writing the posts. During hospice I wrote almost every night. It was such a beautiful, spiritual time. I would wake at 3 a.m. filled with tender memories that I wanted to share. Then I kept writing even after her death. I think it's crucial for anyone experiencing deep grief to find a way to let out their feelings, whether that means sharing them with a trusted friend or a therapist or joining a grief support group.



Tony Stewart

## Looking back, are there any moments of your journey you now recall differently?

I see moments differently, not more richly. Writing *Carrying the Tiger* was an experience of iterative rediscovery. When I began, nine years had passed since Lynn's diagnosis and almost three since she died.

With each recollection, my memory became clearer, like a developing photograph. I started by editing the CaringBridge posts and finding the story's bones. The results were straightforward but dry. So I restored a lot of the comments. A solo journey became a caravan of friends giving us strength, insight, and encouragement.

Then I focused on what wasn't in those posts. I chronicled details Lynn had asked me to omit about pain, side effects, and fear to avoid being pitied.

Then came the biggest shift. This had been Lynn's story. In earlier drafts, I focused on her experience, barely mentioning my challenges—my breakdown, my terror when I thought she was losing her mind. This gave the book energy, an interesting perspective. One scene I cherish describes the couple we met in the Sloan Kettering waiting room. Considering how these experiences affected me, I realized the couple reminded me of others who faded away, a poignant observation that ended the scene.

## By the end of the book, it sounds like you've learned to live with a grief that was once overwhelming. Any life updates you'd like to share?

The last section of *Carrying the Tiger* explores integrating new love into my life while still deeply grieving Lynn. I don't want to spoil those pages for the reader, but things are going well. Most importantly, I enjoyed creating *Carrying the Tiger* so much that I've decided to continue writing. 🌈

*Haley Saffren is a freelance writer and publishing professional.*

## BookLife Talks with Glenn Shapiro

By creating different characters in different time frames, Shapiro hopes to capture the breadth of stories from WWII with his book *The Threads Remain*. We spoke with him about his creative process and his commitment to getting the story right.

***The Threads Remain* contains three different viewpoints set before, during, and after the war's end. Can you talk about your process for weaving it all together?**

Bringing the timelines and character arcs together was the most challenging part of writing this novel. I actually wrote each portion end-to-end, with placeholders for the other story arcs interspersed. When I had completed all three story lines, I wove them together. My goal was to create an experience for the reader that felt completely seamless, such that this complex story felt cohesively told in the end.

**What kind of research did you do to ensure historical accuracy?**

The broad research was primarily completed before I started writing. It consisted of researching the timeline and major flash points leading up to, during, and after the war. There are some wonderful reference tools available: the Holocaust Encyclopedia, the WWII Foundation, and several online resources from public libraries. It was important that I immerse myself in the era before the writing began. If I hoped to transport readers to a different time, I had to first transport myself.

When it came to more specific research, it happened more in real time. My characters would come across various situations, for example, driving in a military vehicle in Germany, and I would stop to research what that vehicle would have looked like, how it would have operated, felt, and so on. Those details are not necessarily crucial to the story, but I always feel that there is a contract between the writer of historical fiction and their readers—they have to trust that those small details are accurate so the experience can be fully immersive.



**The WWII historical fiction genre is quite large. What makes your book stand out?**

It is such a tragic period in human history and is therefore rich with stories. I'd like to think I have taken a unique approach to telling this story by using characters that span timeframes building up to the war, during it, and then years after the war ended. Multiple character perspectives will give readers a great deal to think about. As you walk in the shoes of a young Jewish couple with a life full of promise in the early 1930s, only to see their world upended by Hitler and his Nazi agenda, you feel the pain of their loss. As you follow a young German boy, drafted into war at 15, you feel a loss of innocence and the power of propaganda on young minds. Finally, as you follow a young man more than a decade after the war ended, desperately searching for his identity, you find that the war buried many people and many secrets.

These characters intersect in unexpected ways. I suspect that many readers will think they know where the story is headed but will almost certainly be surprised at how it ultimately resolves.

**If you could pick anyone to give this book to, who would it be and why?**

This is a difficult question because I don't think there is a narrow definition of who will be moved by this story. Certainly, I hope that lovers of historical fiction will find *The Threads Remain* to be a carefully constructed and detailed book with rich characters illustrating a tragic period in history. I also think readers of any genre will find meaning in the book because we continue to have forces in the world who have not learned the lessons of WWII. Readers will see some themes that continue to exist in modern times. Ultimately, this is a human drama, set against the backdrop of a tragic time. The characters in *The Threads Remain* will resonate with a broad audience.

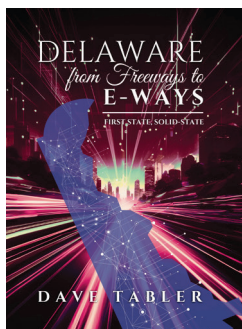
**Do you have any recommendations for similar books readers can seek out?"**

*The Nightingale* is one of my favorite historical fiction novels and also happens to be set in Europe during World War II. Other favorites that might interest readers are *The Threads Remain*, *We Were the Lucky Ones*, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, and *Beneath a Scarlet Sky*.

For more, visit [booklife.com/shapiro](https://booklife.com/shapiro)



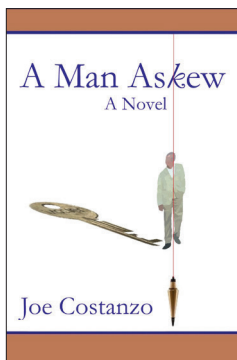
# Must-Read Titles



## Delaware from Freeways to E-ways

by Dave Tabler  
ISBN: 979-8987000663

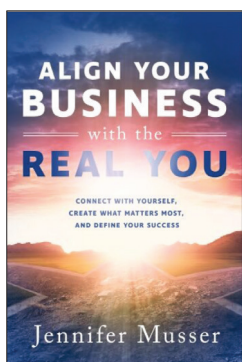
“Engaging, highly illustrated guide to Delaware history from the 20th century on.



## A Man Askew

by Joe Costanzo  
✦ EDITOR'S PICK  
ISBN: 979-8218559212

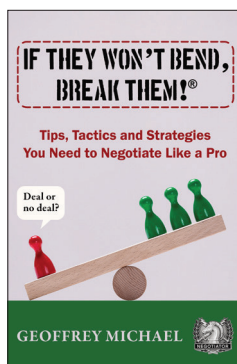
“Absorbing mystery finds a son investigating his father’s past.



## Align Your Business with the Real You

by Jennifer Musser  
✦ EDITOR'S PICK  
ISBN: 979-8991544221

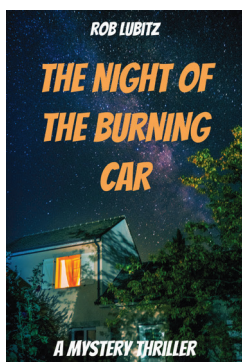
“Optimistic, well-ordered guide to building business success.



## If They Won't Bend, Break Them!

by Geoffrey Michael  
✦ EDITOR'S PICK  
ISBN: 979-8991032018

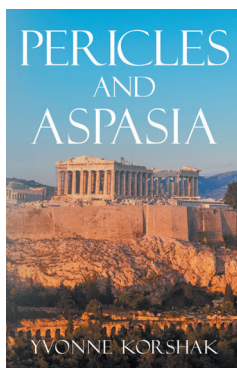
“Persuasive, practical guide to negotiation tactics in business and life.



## The Night of the Burning Car

by Rob Lubitz  
✦ EDITOR'S PICK  
ISBN: 979-8372097766

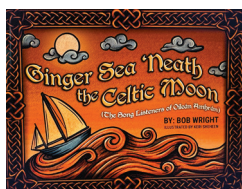
“A page-turning thriller about crime, corruption, and justice in the midcentury South.



## Pericles and Aspasia

by Yvonne Korshak  
✦ EDITOR'S PICK  
ISBN: 978-1959182214

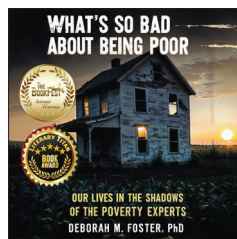
“A stellar, epic-length evocation of the golden age of Athens, rich with historical insight.



## Ginger Sea 'Neath The Celtic Moon

by Bob Wright  
ISBN: 979-8330530144

“Beautifully illustrated story of an Irish girl’s ocean-inspired songs for her grandmother.



## What's So Bad About Being Poor

by Deborah M. Foster  
ISBN: 979-8989763344

“Clear-eyed memoir of rising from poverty and the power of good social programs.



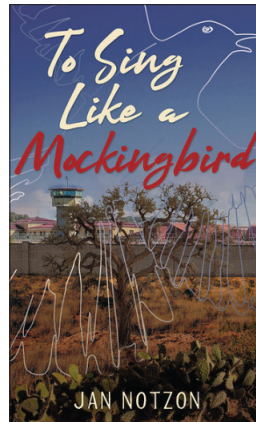
# Must-Read Titles



## **Dream-Shifter**

by Lois Wickstrom  
ISBN: 978-1954519411

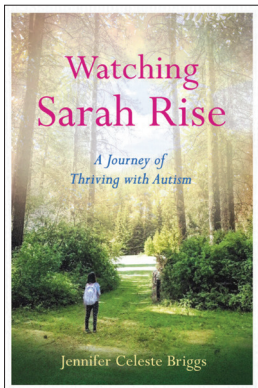
“ A fast-paced, action-packed story of a girl turning into an elk—and still trying to win her scholarship.



## **To Sing Like a Mockingbird**

by Jan Notzon  
ISBN: 979-8306253596

Justin Kopechne, surrounded by idealists and cynics, fights with his own resistance to accept the world as it is rather than how he'd like it to be.



## **Watching Sarah Rise: A Journey of Thriving with Autism**

by Jennifer Briggs  
ISBN: 978-1647428242

“ Inspiring story of a mother's fight to give the best life to a child with autism.



## **A. Nonny Mouse: Magical Moon Mouse Finds Merry Christmas**

by Doreen Lindahl  
ISBN: 978-1885708113

A magical moon mouse, who enjoys exciting illustrated adventures on Earth with the help of POUF! magic.



## **Legacy of the Golden Bird**

by Lainey Miles  
ISBN: 979-8332706844

“ Appealing fantasy that gleams with rich worldbuilding and compelling characters.

“ Quotes from BookLife Reviews

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

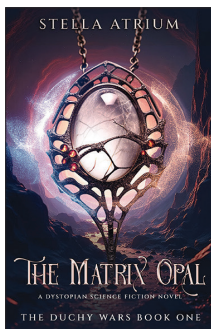
### SF/FANTASY/HORROR

EDITOR'S PICK

#### The Matrix Opal: A Dystopian Science Fiction Novel

Stella Atrium | Stella Atrium Writes, LLC  
508p, e-book, \$0.99, ISBN 978-1-958959-15-2

A rewarding travelogue through a richly drawn world and its cultures, this arresting series-starter finds Atrium, a master of anthropological science fiction, inviting new readers in through an enticing hook. Skull-capped Bybiis has the “talent” of a beast-master, enabling her to communicate with and command a host of creatures. For this, she is tortured, inked with magic-suppressing tattoos, and eventually targeted by other factions on the planet Dolvia. (Atrium's previous series is set there, too, but this new saga stands alone.) Bybiis joins a boat journey with a wide-ranging group to the city Qingdao for a storied regatta—this kind of journey, exploring regions and ways of life amid factional intrigue and narrative voices, is an Atrium specialty. Much of this lengthy novel concerns trade and travel, tribal politics, relations with the space-



*Thrillingly rich SF travelogue of young women whose “talents” make them targets.*

Great for fans of Ursula Le Guin, Sofia Samatar.

of it all. Bybiis and Ariseng, a potentially Talented young woman of the Siibabeen forest, are warned by a mystic shopkeeper, Ariseng's aunt, that the two are “stronger together than either is alone.” When Bybiis and Ariseng are targeted by forces and factions unknown, both will face hard choices and challenges while discovering more about their potential, their world, and who they can trust.

While *The Matrix Opal* offers an excellent jumping-on point, Atrium, as always, surveys a wealth of perspectives, relishing the details that make her world live, including complexities of language and glimpses into the minds of animals—minds Bybiis can touch. Scenes waste no words, but Atrium's work rewards explorers.

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

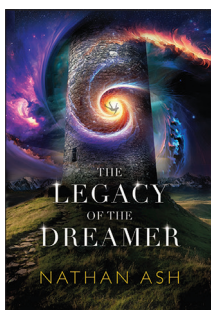
### SF/FANTASY/HORROR

#### The Legacy of the Dreamer

Nathan Ash  
294p, e-book, \$2.99, ASIN B0DR6197H3

In a world where magic is feared and forbidden, Renealt, during an assignment for the Natural Coalition—a group that hunts down mages—wakes after being mortally wounded, only to find his injuries healed and his memory of what happened just moments before hazy at best. He vaguely recalls seeing a woman who resembled his dead wife, Renay, during the attack, but when he digs up her grave and finds her body still there, Renealt is at a loss—and banished from his hometown of Therbir, where grave digging is a crime. From that point on, Renealt is a man obsessed and desperate for answers, but his search for those answers carries great risk—and unveils dark magic, including Renealt's sudden immortality.

Armed with this newfound knowledge, Renealt embarks on a quest to learn where this gift—or curse—derives from, striking up a peaceful existence with mages, trying his own hand at magic, and seeking the origins of a cryptic key—one engraved



*Rich fantasy adventure exploring love, magic, and life-altering grief.*

Great for fans of V.E. Schwab's *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*, David Eddings's *The Belgariad*.

Ash creates an imaginative story of magic, love, and the balance of life and death in this immersive debut. Renealt is a morally grey character—overwhelmed by unanswered questions and a life that seemingly has no end in sight—who eventually becomes unrecognizable, even to himself, despite his earlier contemplation of whether “it's magic that corrupts, or the people who seek it out” in search of power. His arc, both heroic and tragic, will keep readers engaged until the tale's revealing end.

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

### ROMANCE

#### Tamari Island

Joy Allyson  
333p, e-book, \$5.99, ASIN B0DFQKF1FG

Emmie Prescott—fleeing family scandal by taking a management position at Akemi Silks on the remote Tamari Island—sees sparks fly when she meets Jack Manderly, but she works hard at resisting the attraction, confessing that the last thing she needs is “another man who would not be there for her in the future.” Multiple factors align to keep their budding romance in check, especially when Emmie discovers Jack is a reporter for *The Washington Post*—the very paper that caused her to run from the States in the first place—and is on a mission to uncover secrets about her grandfather, a U.S. senator. But while keeping Jack at bay, Emmie encounters the dashing Captain Adam Thornton, leaving her in turmoil—and torn between two men.

Set in 1978 amidst aftershocks from the Vietnam War, *Tamari Island* is a slow burn romance that touches on grief, family secrets, and military life. Sharp-tongued Emmie—and the more analytical Jack, who believes he must “follow where the tale



*Intriguing character conflict elevates this appealing historical romance.*

Great for fans of Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants*, Jojo Moyes's *The Giver of Stars*.

takes [him]”—exude chemistry that leaps off the page, and Allyson (*Whiskey Secrets*) cleverly pits family loyalties against professional advancement as their main source of friction, setting them on an inevitable collision course with each other's guarded hearts. The storytelling is quick witted and punctuated by razor-sharp dialogue, well-developed characters, and immersive historical accuracy, as Allyson merges the blossoming love story with a realistic atmosphere endemic to the story's time period.

As the novel progresses, character secrets are revealed and emotions take precedence over logic between Emmie and Jack, who tread a delicate line between enemies and lovers. Mysterious deaths, terrorist attacks on royalty, and betrayals between lovers add tension and suspense to the mix, making this action-packed romance both classic and compelling. Fans of star-crossed romance, love triangles, and gripping historical context will be entertained.

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



# SECRET PROMISE

BY JOAN LIVIERI

ISBN: 979-8890618979

## LEGACY OF SECRETS AND LOVE: JOAN LIVIERI'S SECRET PROMISE

**S**ecret Promise is a sweeping tale of identity, sacrifice, and the relentless pursuit of truth, set against the stunning backdrop of Vermont's snowy slopes and Italy's timeless beauty. In this emotionally rich novel, Joan Livieri leads readers through an unforgettable journey of love, loss, and redemption.

The story follows Laura Kincaid, a woman whose life is forever changed by a chance encounter in Italy. While on vacation from her job in Stowe, Vermont, Laura meets Trista Serrano, a troubled young woman carrying a heartbreaking secret. In a desperate move to protect her newborn and hide her shame, Trista steals Laura's identity, listing Laura as the mother on the baby's birth certificate and falsely naming her brother, Dominic Deluca, as the father.

What follows is a cascade of life-altering events. Trista later appears on Laura's doorstep, ill and remorseful. She confesses everything and begs Laura to raise her child as her own. Touched by Trista's plight, Laura promises to keep the secret. Trista returns to Rome, where on her deathbed, she finally tells her brother Dominic that he has a niece named Cella.

Grief-stricken and confused, Dominic is left with nothing but questions and a burning desire for answers. Hoping to escape and reflect, he travels to Vermont, combining business with his love of skiing. There, at a secluded private resort, he meets Laura, unaware of the truth beneath the surface.

Their encounter sparks an immediate attraction, but a misunderstanding soon follows. Dominic is drawn to Laura, but when he discovers she has a daughter and no husband, suspicion clouds his judgment. Neither of them imagines the secret that binds them: Trista's daughter is the very child Laura is raising and the very child Dominic is unknowingly searching for.

As passions flare and truths begin to unravel, Secret Promise builds toward a dramatic climax. With vivid settings, emotionally complex characters, and masterful pacing, Joan Livieri crafts a story that teases just enough to draw readers in and leaves them eager to uncover the rest.

Available at:

 amazon.com

 BARNES & NOBLE



\*also in other major online bookstores

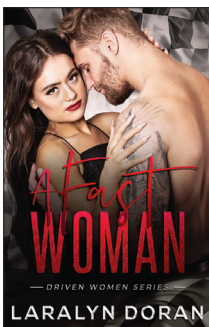
## ROMANCE

**A Fast Woman**

Laralyn Doran | Three Dogs Day  
456p, e-book, \$4.99, ISBN 978-1-735-34741-7

In the male dominated world of race car driving, CJ Lomax is finally getting her shot at potentially landing a NASCAR contract; all she has to do is team up with—and compete against—dream boat Indy driver Grady McBane, in a publicity stunt meant to boost both of their careers. Though CJ knows the only reason she has to share driving time with Grady is because she's a woman, she goes along with the media hoopla to earn respect—and fulfill her wildest racing dreams. Multiple run-ins, undeniable chemistry, and witty banter place the two drivers in a heated battle on and off the track, with their budding romance playing out in front of the world.

Doran's first in her Driven Women series simmers with relationship drama, complex rivalries, and high-octane stakes. CJ, still healing from the death of her longtime boyfriend, Tommy Dupree, is taking hits from all fronts: Tommy's brother, Dewey, blames her for his brother's death; she's struggling with her best friend's father, Everett



*Romance and racetracks unite in this steamy thrill ride.*

**Great for fans of** Samantha Towle's *Revved*, Paige Toon's *Chasing Daisy*.

Female empowerment, realistic social constructs, and a slow-burn love affair make this a spirited read, as Doran explores the harsh realities of a woman seeking balance and compromise when it comes to achieving both love and her professional goals. As CJ lightens up and opens her heart, she also learns that sometimes women can have it all without sacrificing for the sake of love. Fans of empowering love stories with plenty of heat will relish this thrill ride.

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

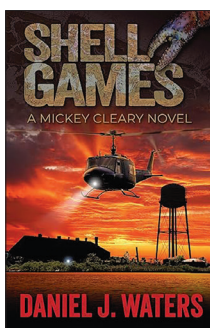
## MYSTERY/THRILLER

**Shell Games: A Mickey Cleary Novel**

Daniel J. Waters | BandageMan Press, Inc.  
364p, trade paper, \$15.99, ISBN 978-1-734-99999-0

Waters's latest thriller, the seventh in his Mickey Cleary series (after *Boardwalk Babylon*), finds the ever-resilient Long Beach Island detective adjusting to life as a widow and single mother. Now focused on raising her children, Michael and Eileen, in the wake of her husband Ronnie's death, Mickey balances the attention of two potential suitors while fending off a brewing custody threat from her in-laws. But trouble never strays far: a seemingly minor quid pro quo with Greg Devine, the island's old-money patriarch whose hands are in everything from law enforcement to real estate, entangles Mickey in a mystery with many moving parts and no easy way out.

Fast-paced and layered, this novel juggles a motley cast of characters—from amateur schemers looking to make a quick buck to power players with long-standing agendas. All of it gradually converges on Crab Island, a desolate industrial site with a defunct fish factory. It is against this bleak (and sometimes terrifying) backdrop that Waters stages the novel's central conflicts. Ever the detective, with a cop



*Sharp thriller propelled by a fierce lead and unpredictable plot.*

**Great for fans of** Julia Dahl; Attica Locke.

brain that “never really went to sleep,” Mickey is a worthy protagonist, finding herself compelled to follow loose threads—no matter where they lead or how much danger they may send her way. A New Jersey native, Waters brings a tactile sense of place to Mickey's ventures, from the shifting tides to the very decay of Crab Island itself, giving the book an eerie, lived-in realism. While the alternating points of view may distract—and the sheer number of characters occasionally crowds the narrative—what makes it all come together is Mickey herself—wounded and quietly worn down, but sharp and refreshingly unsentimental in her pursuit of justice. Both a satisfying continuation of Mickey's journey and a capable standalone, this installment is as gritty as it is engrossing—well-suited for readers drawn to character-driven thrillers.

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

## FICTION

**Delivered**

James Mondesir | IngramSpark  
356p, mass market, \$22, ISBN 979-8-349-24829-0

Jean Valuer, a bright Haitian American graduate student, is blindsided when at a party, his best friend, Marcus, asks him to hold his fanny pack—one secretly loaded with crystal meth. When the event turns out to be a sting operation, Jean falls victim to a justice system that too often mistakes Blackness for guilt. Nearly a year later, he is released early under COVID relief measures—into a city silenced by lockdown. As Jean comes to terms with a different New York City than he knew in the past, he vows to “focus on the gratitude for being free”—an admirable sentiment but one more difficult to achieve than expected.

Mondesir (*Sunrise*) charts Jean's return to the world with keen emotional and psychological precision. “Very quickly, he realizes that normal no longer exists [and] life will never be the same,” Jean muses, evoking a life surrendered to a world now radically altered by crisis. His relationship with long-time girlfriend Julia collapses under the distance; his father, devastated by his son's failure to uphold his promise to avoid drugs, struggles to reconnect; and Jean himself—grieving, guilty, and vengeful—must navigate not just financial and housing precarity but the



*Powerful, eye-opening story of racial injustice, betrayal, and redemption.*

**Great for fans of** Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage*, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

harrowing challenge of rebuilding himself. Through empathic lyricism that blends beauty and bluntness, Mondesir captures themes of racial injustice, addiction, and systemic failures that sacrifice the most vulnerable—all while revealing Jean's subtle evolution and quiet yearning for redemption. The prose moves with clarity and weight in moments of reckoning, such as a devastating visit from Jean's mother while he's incarcerated, his searing confrontation with Marcus, and the subtle discovery of a parent's love. Despite a few narrative digressions that stall the pace, *Delivered* places its value in grace and the disarming power of compassion; freedom, it suggests, is not the absence of bars, but the hard-won choice to forgive not just others but also oneself.

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

## HISTORY &amp; MILITARY

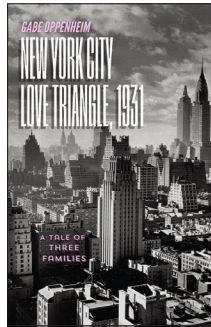
**New York City Love Triangle, 1931: A Tale of Three Families**

Gabe Oppenheim | Solitude

342p, e-book, \$9.99, ASIN B0DP1MNNHH

"Girl, Spurned by Doctor, Used Scalpel Before Gun." So reads a jolting 1931 headline in New York's *Daily Mirror*, dug up by journalist Oppenheim (*The Ghost Perfumer*) after research into his New York City building led to a fascinating story of last-century scandal, murder, and suicide—a case that would consume political parties, the art world, and the tight-knit community of Yiddish cinema. The press speculated with rabid interest about why Agnes Birdseye, whose family would invent frozen food, shot her employer, Dr. Milton Thomashefsky, "son of the most famous Yiddish actor worldwide"—and what was the involvement of young painter Norma Jeanne Bernstein, whose politician father was backed by Tammany Hall?

Oppenheim's title suggests the truth of these tangled lives. The scandalous collision of the Thomashefskys, Birdseys, and the Bernsteins shocked the world of high society to its core, and Oppenheim sets the scene in fleet, punchy prose worthy of the



*Fascinating account of murder and scandal in Depression-era New York.*

**Great for fans of** Harold Schechter's *The Mad Sculptor*, Bill Greer's *A Dirty Year*.

revealing the worlds they came from—and that they would shake.

With a strong sense of striking and intimate detail, Oppenheim unearths diaries, letters, and other forgotten documents, plus breathless press accounts and illuminating artifacts like Bernstein's paintings. Oppenheim tours readers through the institutions and cultural and political spheres of his milieu, like Yiddish theater companies and their rivalries; a "divided and hierarchical" Tammany Hall; girls' education options; and the rich family histories of the principals. This account studies sensationalism while offering humane substance, though Oppenheim's strong research and storytelling are undercut by haphazard e-book formatting.

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

## SELF-HELP

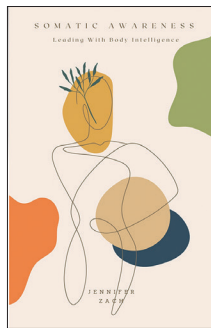
**Somatic Awareness: Leading with Body Intelligence**

Jennifer Zach

75p, e-book, \$16.95, ISBN 979-8-867-39623-7

"Somatic awareness is critical to forming healthy human relationships and generating positive business results," Zach writes in this concise guidebook. To help readers better recognize and understand their threat responses, Zach first delves into the body's autonomic processes, covering how the vagus nerve communicates physical sensations to the brain, why our bodies cannot discern between real and perceived threats, and how somatic awareness can prompt thoughtful and deliberate behavioral responses. Those skills are key to positive leadership, Zach asserts, as learning how to regulate our nervous system "is the secret to developing resilience in ourselves and the people we lead, teach, and coach."

Though the material can be heady, this compact guide is easy to follow, as Zach clearly outlines the impact of chronic stress, trauma, and fear on our body's functioning. Contemporary life is full of distraction, she writes, pulling us away from bodily awareness and increasing the likelihood of knee-jerk reactions to



*Compact, easy-to-follow guide to sensory awareness.*

**Great for fans of** Willa Blythe Baker's *The Wakeful Body*, Alane K. Daugherty's *Unstressed*.

your body after experiencing triggers, and more. Particularly helpful are Zach's three Pillars of Somatic Awareness—Notice, Name, and Navigate—that help heal the connection between the emotional and rational sections of the brain.

Much of the guide is tailored to individual work, though Zach encourages readers to use the insights they glean here in workplace settings, to nurture "an environment of safety, connection, and high-level performance." Exercises included at the end of each chapter—ranging from body scanning to counting breaths to mindful walking—will help readers implement Zach's advice, and throughout, she urges readers to "trust your instincts," acknowledging that physical sensations—and their triggers—are different for everyone. Readers interested in recognizing and regulating their sensory data will find this useful.

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

# Booksellers & Librarians:



## How are you handling self-published books?

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

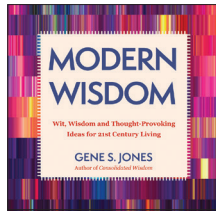
## SELF-HELP

**Modern Wisdom: Wit, Wisdom and Thought-Provoking Ideas for 21st Century Living**

Gene S. Jones | Dreamquest Publishing  
246p, trade paper, \$19.95, ISBN 978-0-998-32407-4

"Choose the words you say to yourself with great care," Jones (*Consolidated Wisdom*) urges in this compendium of original advice, aphorisms, insights, and occasional puzzles. Like that mostly forgotten bestseller *Life's Little Instruction Book*, Jones's tome offers one bon mot per page, usually staking out a middle ground between self-help bromides ("It's essential to acknowledge your weaknesses in order to overcome them") and Poor Richard's Almanack truisms: "Those who make no mistakes usually make few discoveries," Jones writes. More conventional guides to life, success, and fulfillment would dutifully tease out the nuances of such a declaration, offering anecdotes of big-name entrepreneurs or acronymic action steps for transmuted mistakes into breakthroughs.

As he shares spare, hard-won insights about listening, embracing the moment and one's passions, eschewing perfectionism, conceiving of luck as a skill or talent that demands work, and much more, Jones resists the temptation to explicate much, outside of an occasional sentence or two. Instead, he trusts readers to find their own meaning and own path. He never argues that this just-the-nuggets



*Fresh aphorisms with hard-won wisdom about life, love, and mistakes.*

**Great for fans of** Seth Godin's *Official Rules of Life*, H. Jackson Brown Jr.'s *Life's Little Instruction Book*.

approach bests wordier wisdom tomes, but the nuggets themselves make a spirited case: "Information overloads can block the path to the solution of a problem," he notes. And elsewhere: "The creative mind finds inspiration in chaos."

Readers seeking inspiration and food for thought presented without pretensions to an overarching system of success will find much here that resonates:

"Strong intuition deserves strong consideration." Some entries lack the precision, concision, wit, and surprise that elevate the best aphorisms, and some parallelisms feel rote: "While there are no politics in wisdom, hopefully someday there will be more wisdom in politics." For the most part, though, the words are not only chosen with care but imbued with an empathetic vision clearly arrived at through experience and contemplation. Jones balances a hopeful spirit with how the world actually works, insisting that "No thought is unheard and no prayer goes unanswered," but also that "Faith also needs an action plan."

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

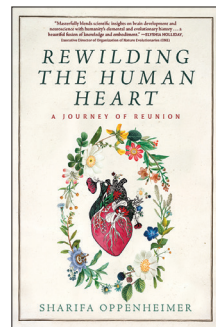
## SPIRITUALITY/INSPIRATIONAL

**Rewilding the Human Heart: A Journey of Reunion**

Sharifa Oppenheimer | Red Elixir Books  
122p, trade paper, \$18.95, ISBN 978-1-966-29303-3

In this spiritual guide to reconnecting ourselves to the core elements and realms of nature, author Oppenheimer (*Heaven on Earth*) takes readers on a journey of transformational growth, healing, and understanding of the world within and without, laying out the steps it takes to "bring our soul-dreams into manifestation." Oppenheimer provides a guided resource on meditation that allows individuals to create oneness and peace with the world. Focusing on the elements—earth, water, fire, air, and ether—and pairing them with the five realms (mineral, plant, animal, human being, unseen being), this meditative resource explores mindfulness practices such as visualization, breathing techniques, and delving deeper into multicultural stories and the importance of storytelling. Through it all, Oppenheimer urges immersion "in the components of our luminous biosphere."

Pulling from a global range of cultures and spiritual traditions, each chapter is



*Encouraging meditative resource for reconnecting with the basic elements of nature.*

**Great for fans of** Wes Nisker's *Being Nature*, Ian Wright's *Dynamics of Stillness*.

rooted in an element and a realm. Simple and practical, actionable steps are laid out in this organized guide that allows for deeper practices that "bring understanding through various learning modalities." The material might prove heady for newcomers, but Oppenheimer proves an inviting coach, laying out with clarity topics like "self-creating and self-maintaining" techniques to tap into a

deeper consciousness and connection with the world. Oppenheimer cultivates practices that draw on all senses to build a path to awareness of self and creation.

A welcome resource for readers eager to dig deeper into meditation and mindfulness guidance, *Rewilding the Human Heart* is crafted to help strip away distractions and reconnect with the fundamentals of existence. Through song, movement, breath, blessings, and storytelling, Oppenheimer demonstrates how to unplug, unwind, manage emotions, and train bodies and minds for when life becomes overwhelming.

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

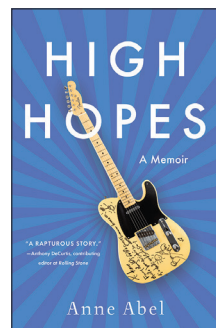
## MEMOIR

**High Hopes: A Memoir**

Anne Abel  
256p, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 978-1-647-42972-0

The Boss stirs life in this touching memoir of a healing rock 'n' roll pilgrimage, inspired by Abel attending her first-ever concert—at age 59—and discovering transcendence. "For three-plus hours, Bruce Springsteen had made me feel like I had a chance," writes Abel, who admits that, before this, she had only the vaguest idea of who Springsteen even was. She caught six more shows over the next six months. These, too, proved cathartic and transformative for Abel, who has endured depression since her teen years and never found any treatment offering "significant relief."

Facing 60, Abel embarked on a bold rock 'n' roll pilgrimage: traveling alone to Australia to see Springsteen and his band "prove it all night" at eight different shows. In the music, Abel finds more than pleasure and abandon. An interview in which drummer Max Weinberg links his art to the concept of *seder* inspires a surprising emotional breakthrough in the exercise room of an Aussie hotel. Weinberg "established order, *seder*, for the band," Abel writes—the same stability and



*Rousing memoir of self-discovery Down Under at Bruce Springsteen shows.*

**Great for fans of** Cindy Ingram's *Art Is About Being Whole*, Jonathan D. Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers's *Long Walk Home*.

encouragement we owe those we love. She develops this idea throughout the book, tying it to heartbeats, order, James Brown, and the responsibility to let loved ones explore while providing them a "strong center."

Abel's account of following the beat of her own drummer finds her making fresh discoveries about herself, her relationships, and how to live life for all it's worth. She meets Weinberg, Joan Jett, Tom

Morello, Jake Clemons, longtime Springsteen manager Barbara Carr, and perhaps most fruitfully, critic Dave Marsh. She frankly addresses despair and doubt—both as a parent and as an all-in consumer of deeply commercial art—including the morning she castigates herself as "stupidly gullible" and "fooled by the Springsteen Money Machine." But such qualms are fleeting, as the next show stirs the feeling of being "reborn at a gospel revival." Springsteen devotees will love this, but Abel's self-discovery, powered by urgent art and performance, transcends fandoms.

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

## PICTURE BOOKS

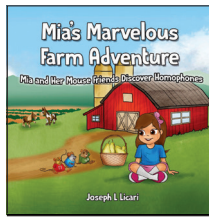
**Mia's Marvelous Farm Adventure: Mia and Her Mouse Friends Discover Homophones**

Joseph L. Licari

39p, trade paper, \$15.99, ASIN BODYLTZB91

Licari, author of *Mia's Mouses*, returns with more lighthearted wordplay in this bubbly picture book. This time around, Mia and her adorable mice pals—Squeaky, Speedy, and Nibbles—experience the joy of homophones as they explore a friendly neighborhood farm, wandering the dirt roads, picnicking in orchards, and meeting the farm's lively animals. But their adventure brings confusion when Mia realizes that some words sound the same but have alternate spellings—and completely different meanings. Luckily, her big sister, Pia, quickly teaches her what a homophone is, encouraging Mia and company to investigate the farm and discover just how entertaining language can be.

Mia is a lively, curious young girl whose thirst for knowledge opens a new world to younger readers, and Licari's choice to use a farm for the story's setting allows kids to learn about the outdoors in tandem with a quick, engaging study on some tricky words. While a farmer bales hay—and bails water from a trough—he also greets Mia with an enthusiastic “Hey”; the orchard drops pairs of pears for Mia and the



*Young girl discovers the joy of homophones in this lively story.*

**Great for fans of** Gene Barretta's *The Bat Can Bat*, Raj Haldar's *No Reading Allowed*.

mice; and the farm's group of fowl doesn't “like the foul smell of their heap.” Such fun with words may prove tricky at first, but it infuses the story with energy while giving kids—and their adult readers—several opportunities to recognize common homophones.

Victor Nieto's flashy art is just as busy as Mia and her mice companions, layering multiple digital images on top of each other in brightly colored scenes that can feel scattered at times. Squeaky, Speedy, and Nibbles are the charming exception, cavorting through the story with glee as they munch on cheese, dance, and explore. Licari closes with a brief rundown of homonyms as well, and includes a list of frequently used homophones—some of which, he notes, also made an appearance in *Mia's Mouses*.

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

## YOUNG ADULT

EDITOR'S PICK

**Erased**

Anders Edwards | Echo Press Publishing

305p, e-book, \$14.99, ASIN BOF2TJ3FNB

For all its high-tech suspense and revelations, Edwards's assured dystopian debut is immediately relatable, as a likable cast in an unnamed city in 2123 find their emotions monitored and manipulated by tech companies—and face the promise and terror of being disconnected. Seph Thompson has just graduated from The Institute and has secured a position at NexTech, the expansive company credited for the city's safety and stability. NexTech has upgraded its popular nanochip, a device designed to improve healthcare, with new innovations for collecting “emotional data,” purportedly to help decrease crime rates and promote public safety. After a shocking discovery, Seph is forced to see the technology for what it really is: a tool for surveillance that offers users a false sense of security.

Careful to hide “secrets and missions hidden beneath a veneer of ambition,” Seph discovers allies who are equally disillusioned, plus a budding romance with NexTech colleague Emma. From there, the story moves with quick efficiency, and



*Smart dystopian novel of tech, freedom, and muted emotions.*

**Great for fans of** Cory Doctorow, Neal Shusterman.

readers will root for Seph and his friends as they strive to expose the truth behind NexTech's plans. With this endearing cast comes a multiple-perspective narrative, woven together seamlessly and inviting readers into a range of inner conflicts that stir empathy with the three narrators'

struggles, which center on a resonant YA theme: the possibility that one's true feelings may be dangerous.

Edwards finds a smart balance between adventure, warning, and social critique, establishing the world, stakes, and themes with brisk clarity and dead-serious gravity. Issues of privacy and surveillance are woven seamlessly into the challenges and dilemmas faced by the heroes, right down to Emma fighting to suppress her feelings in a charged interrogation. Like the best dystopian novels, *Erased* is a testament to the genre's power to provoke a more nuanced examination of personal and societal values. It provides a harrowing look into a world where humanity is reduced to an algorithm, constantly quantified and analyzed for manipulation.

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



Reviews

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### FICTION

#### **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 bookbinder 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.

#### **Children of Ever After**

**Avery Yearwood.** Thomas Gray, \$12.99 trade paper (268p)  
*ISBN 979-8-3355-7103-6*

Yearwood (*Peyton and Isabelle*) delivers a heartrending story of two women linked by a child custody battle in Philadelphia. University professor Rebecca, 40, has longed for children her entire life, but her husband, Will, has put off the question. Still, Rebecca holds out hope until their marriage finally cracks and Will leaves for a new job in New York. In a parallel narrative set across town, 22-year-old Brittney has two toddlers and is pregnant with her third child. Her conservative cop husband, Chris, encouraged her to be a stay-at-home mom, but after he's fired, he abandons her, and she flounders. Neighbors complain she's neglecting the children, and all three are taken by child protective services. Rebecca becomes their

foster mother and attempts to adopt them, and initially the two women compete for custody. But after they meet during Brittney's CPS-approved visit with the children, Rebecca sympathizes with her desire to get her kids back, while Brittney realizes Rebecca genuinely wants the best for the children, and the two work together to provide the best possible outcome. Yearwood tackles the complex issues of family planning, motherhood, and adoption head-on, and the story works as well as it does because she offers no easy answers. This is a winner.

#### **Harmony's Peace and Joy**

**Mary Hutchings Reed.** Ampersand, \$17.95 trade paper (280p)  
*ISBN 978-0-9722529-1-1*

Reed (*Free Spirits*) delivers a heartwarming tale of second chances, focused on two middle-aged brothers and lifelong rivals. Stone Hunnicutt, a litigator in Madison, Wis., receives a letter from Harmony, the partner of his younger brother Ted, asking for \$10,000 to renovate a historic home in her rural community, a hippie commune called Peace and Joy. Stone visits Ted, whom he hasn't seen for 10 years, to determine if he should donate to the cause. There, Stone discovers that Ted, a former professor who has published one well-received novel and was their father's favorite, is now living in poverty. While Ted is momentarily away, Stone finds a cache of his unpublished novels and steals the manuscripts. Moved by love for his brother and a desire to improve Ted's life, Stone sets out to get the books published, drawing ire from Ted for invading his privacy. The feud escalates until Stone's wife and Harmony try to get the brothers to make peace. The writing is a bit rough (a cherry placed on a napkin "bled brightly like fresh blood"), but Reed offers appealing insights on the relationship between art and life and generally sidesteps sentimentality in her portrayal of the brothers' conflict. This has plenty of charm.

#### **The Independent**

**Brad Goodwin.** Sweet Briar, \$16.99 trade paper (300p)  
*ISBN 979-8-9910315-0-9*

Goodwin debuts with a sleek political thriller that imagines the long-term conse-

quences of legislative gridlock. In 2044 America, frustration about the impotence of the Democratic and Republican parties has led to the rapid growth of the SoMAD movement ("somebody make a decision"). When a SoMAD rally in Washington, D.C., turns violent, one of the movement's activists, law student Max Peller, ends up in a coma. His father, tech CEO Ethan Bessette, persuades Max's mentor, former prosecutor Jack Sanborn, to run for president. Bessette's offer to donate billions to Sanborn's campaign convinces him to get in the race, but Sanborn faces formidable opposition from Clay Overton, the Republican Speaker of the House, who's dreamed of winning the Oval Office for decades. Meanwhile, Sanborn's sudden emergence as a public figure makes him the target for an aggrieved man who believes he botched an old case involving a teenage victim. Goodwin pulls strong suspense out of both the impending election and the question of whether Sanborn's legal past will catch up with him, and he dodges a heap of near-future clichés with levelheaded worldbuilding. Admirers of Andrew Yang and Stephen Marche's *The Last Election* will be entertained.

#### **Lunch Ladies**

**Jodi Thompson Carr.** Century House, \$3.99 e-book (282p)  
*ASIN B0DKPJFRKK*

Carr debuts with a charming story of three lonely Minnesota women who find a renewed sense of purpose during preparations for their town's 1976 bicentennial celebration. School lunch ladies Crystal, Sheila, and Coralene are tasked by their ambitious boss, Gordon, with putting together meals for the town's Independence Day parade. The plan draws each of the women out of her quirky routines. Crystal is fixated on reading obituaries and imagining who among her acquaintances might have made a good match for the deceased, a habit that distracts her from worrying about her ailing grandmother who raised her. Coralene, who's very happily married, frets over her 20-year-old nephew, whom she raised after her sister's death from cancer eight years earlier. She worries that his

drifting lifestyle means she failed her promise to her sister to set him on the right path. Sheila holds everyone at arm's length except for Lexie, a waitress at the Denny's where she dines every Friday night. When Lexie tries to set Sheila up with a school plumber, she surprises everyone by agreeing. As the holiday approaches, each woman's story line builds to a climax. Along the way, Carr develops a colorful portrait of grief in its varied forms, shot through with just the right amount of humor. It's a satisfying slice of life

### Rise of the Black Cross

Steven F. Freeman. Steven F. Freeman, \$4.99 e-book (296p)

ASIN B0DG8Z2NH1

Freeman (*The Blackwell Files*) kicks off a new series set in Renaissance-era Italy with this stylish espionage thriller. Ship captain Niccolo Corsini is summoned by banker Lorenzo de' Medici, the de facto ruler of Florence, after a fleet of ships bearing the mysterious sign of a black cross on their sails attacks the coast of San Vincenzo. Believing that a flotilla of Florence's armed ships would be quickly overwhelmed by the unknown assailants, Medici hopes that Corsini's merchant vessel will be able to get near enough to the fleet to learn who's leading it and what their intentions are. The mission proves hazardous when Corsini's own crew is infiltrated by a spy for the mysterious fleet. Eventually, Corsini grows conflicted about his role as an enforcer for the often-cruel Medici. Freeman brings the period to vivid life (though a cameo from Leonardo da Vinci feels somewhat out of place) and provides enough runway to keep readers on the hook for a sequel. Historical fans should give this a look

### Russian Nonsensical

Edward D. Webster. Dream House, \$14.95 trade paper (330p)

ISBN 978-0-9970320-7-9

Webster's gonzo second romp for L.A. PIs Stan Stein and Bud Randolph (after *American Nonsensical*) is a rewarding ride. Bud, envious of Stan's engagement to the pair's assistant, Melanie, decides to seek his own wife through a service called Russian Brides Unlimited. Meanwhile, their detective agency gets a pair of new clients.

Emelia Clark, who works in a bank's fraud department, wants photos taken of anyone entering or leaving a particular house between the hours of 8 a.m. and noon. She won't explain, but the request appears to have some connection to a shadowy federal investigation. Then reverend Clem Dudas, a snake-handler, hires Stan and Bud to retrieve two of his beloved rattlesnakes, Dobie and Maynard, whom he believes were kidnapped by his wife. Dudas shares Bud's devotion to Donald Trump, and he asks Bud to mail a letter to an unknown recipient once he's in Russia to meet women. Webster manages to fit each of the story's outlandish pieces together, largely thanks to his mischievous sense of humor (at one point, Bud states he was at the Capitol on January 6, identifying himself as "the one in the red cap"). Carl Hiaasen fans will hope to see more of Stan and Bud soon

### NONFICTION

#### Freeze-Drying the Harvest: Preserving Food the Modern Way

Carolyn Thomas. Homestead, \$39.99 (388p)

ISBN 978-1-963008-99-9

Idaho homesteader Thomas guides readers through freeze-drying food at home in this comprehensive manual. Initially skeptical about trying a freeze dryer, Thomas became a believer after processing a surplus of eggs from her 80 hens: "When I did a test run with these eggs and made a big pan of scrambled eggs for my family, no one could tell they were not fresh." She lays out the benefits of freeze-drying, including its convenience as well as the fact that it saves space and cuts back on food waste. In her brief history of the method, she explains that people in South America used to expose food to freezing temperatures at high altitudes to make it last longer. Elsewhere, Thomas shares tips for shortening the process by pre-freezing food; explains how freeze-drying differs from dehydrating; outlines what to know before purchasing a freeze dryer; and offers a step-by-step guide to the process, starting with prepping food and ending with rehydration. Thomas doesn't skimp on details, and she encourages readers to learn from her mistakes, admitting that "my path to learning to freeze-dry was not all rosy. I

think I lost about 50% of those early jars of eggs." This is essential reading for those looking to up their food preservation game.