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— YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING —

• 20 New BookLife Titles Reviewed •

The Funny Business of Sex Scenes

An author shares tips for getting the spice factor just right

BY RAVEN BELASCO

“Sex sells” is a tried and true marketing mantra. Nothing captures attention like some hanky-panky. But how to do it well is a serious concern for a writer. A badly written sex scene can ruin an entire book and keep readers from considering your future work.

Before you try writing your first sex scene, think long and hard—yes, of course, there will be puns in this article—about your readers. If you are writing a cozy murder mystery, perhaps the readers aren’t craving intense passion, so at best all your hard work would go to waste, and at worst you could alienate your readers.

On a more personal level, ask yourself if you can write an intimate scene and be comfortable with your parents, siblings, extended family, or even just friends reading it. Once you put that writing out in the world, it will be out of your control, so figure out what your own comfort level is before you let it all hang out.

If you have cleared the first hurdles and are ready for some bedroom calisthenics, there’s still a lot to learn. If you’re new to writing sex scenes, you need helpful



BookLife Talks with Janet Morrison

Diversity Determined, global HR visionary and executive strategist Morrison's first book, takes a look at the "emotionally and politically charged" diversity initiatives and breaks down the guidelines for what makes for a successful implementation of policies.

How has the HR field changed in the more than 20 years that you've been a part of it?

HR has evolved into one of the most vital strategic functions in business. It's no longer just about enforcing policy or managing transactional tasks—it's a strategic partner that helps develop talent, shape culture, and drive performance. We now leverage analytics, AI, and integrated systems to monitor engagement, predict workforce trends, and align people strategy with business goals.

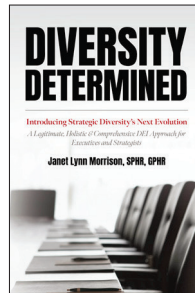
Most critically, HR is where operational excellence intersects with ethical leadership. From hiring practices to leadership development, HR ensures that opportunity is distributed consistently and that decision-making reflects both preparedness and principle. That's why *Diversity Determined* makes the case that diversity programs must live within HR—where professionals understand how to align intention with employment law, strategic outcomes, and long-term business growth.

What convinced you that *Diversity Determined* needed to be written?

Because the word "diversity" has become so emotionally and politically charged that it often distracts from the intent behind it. For some, it signals progress. For others, it raises concerns about fairness or legality. And in truth, some diversity programs were implemented without structure or alignment with employment law—leading to confusion, exclusion, or even legal claims. You can't ignore that reality, but you also can't let it paralyze progress. *Diversity Determined* was written to help leaders acknowledge those missteps without abandoning the mission. It shifts the conversation away from optics and toward outcomes—offering a strategic path where opportunity is rooted in readiness, qualification, and contribution.

Cindy Yared, CEO and founder of Spot On Talent, shared: "In *Diversity Determined*, Janet Morrison doesn't just discuss diversity's next evolution; she redefines the strategic roadmap so that corporations can build employment systems that work for everyone."

Is there an instance in your career that having *Diversity Determined* would have helped?



Absolutely. I've worked in organizations where diversity efforts began with sincere intent but lacked legal alignment, consistent application, or performance integration. That absence of structure led to confusion, conflicting messages, and missed opportunities—for both the business and its people. *Diversity Determined* would have given us a moment to pause and ask: Are we building something sustainable? Are we ensuring that our systems support both compliance and business success? Are we creating pathways rooted in merit and readiness? Holly Keen, CPA and founder of HireSolutions, LLC, said: "Readers will be catapulted into a vision for what is possible and armed with meaningful blueprints and examples essential to creating sustainable diversity programs."

Who is your ideal reader and why?

My ideal reader is an executive leader or a graduate student majoring in business, human resources, organizational development, or a related field—someone preparing to influence the future of work. These are individuals who understand that culture is not a slogan but a system. They believe in results, value consistency, and want to build organizations where people succeed based on readiness, capability, and contribution.

This book is especially for today's executive leaders and tomorrow's—those in graduate programs preparing to shape workplaces, systems, and cultures. Whether you're leading a Fortune 500 company or teaching the next generation of leaders, *Diversity Determined* offers the practical insight, legal grounding, and human-centered perspective to help you build something that lasts. *Diversity Determined* was written for those who want to create environments that are inclusive without being performative—where opportunity reflects preparation, and where leadership decisions are thoughtful, lawful, and scalable.

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

Diversity Determined challenges readers to look beyond labels and focus on what drives real results: building organizations where opportunity is earned, leadership is intentional, and systems reflect both integrity and impact. It's not about checking boxes; it's about creating cultures that scale talent, strengthen trust, and power sustainable business growth.

For more, visit booklife.com/morrison

resources. One of the best out there is by Rachel Kramer Bussel, who, after years of editing the Best Women's Erotica of the Year anthologies, penned *How to Write Erotica*. You can also find classes and online tutorials. One option is the platform Passionate Ink, which offers workshops on how to write better erotic scenes.

(Important note: just putting a sex scene into a story does not make it erotica—and don't let anyone tell you that it does. The definition of "erotica" is that the plot is in service to the characters' boinking. If the characters occasionally get laid, but it's in service to a larger plot, then you simply have a story with sex scenes in it.)

Of course, the best writing comes from what you know. If you have a willing partner available, there is no reason not to test-drive your ideas to see if they are realistic, and to get a better sense of how to describe the various sensations and emotions. If you do not have a partner? Well, the internet does have other sources of research material.

I suggest the hands-on approach because sex scenes are built on describing sensations, both physical and emotional. If you just write out the mechanics of it—"X did this, and then Y did that"—you're going to have something nobody will enjoy. But, if you imbue the action with vivid description of what the characters are experiencing in their minds and bodies and how the activities and sensations make them *feel*, you will have a sex scene readers will bookmark and come back to read again.

Prepare by going back to sex scenes you've read that made an impression. Reading good writing is always one of the best ways to learn how to write. Go over sex scenes that you found unforgettable and take notes.

One of the other best ways for learning how to write is by reading bad writing. There is a plethora of negative examples to teach you what not to do, so they won't be hard to find. Most have one thing in common: authors writing about things they clearly have never done, with unrealistic expectations for anatomy or the limitations of human stamina—this is somewhat less relevant for writers of paranormal or horror or science fiction—or who really can't put themselves in the minds and hearts of their characters.

No matter who you are and what experience you've had, you can "write the other" (or at least "the not personally experienced") in your sex scenes. But you can't—and I beg you not to try to—start rolling in unknown hay without serious research, a staggering amount of imagining yourself experiencing it and how it would feel on every level, and then a serious sensitivity edit before publication.

Just as vital as the deeper descriptions is the placement

Writing sex is complicated, should never be treated as trivial, and does add some risk to a writer's career and emotional well-being.

in the story. Much as in intercourse, you can't just thrust a sex scene in where it doesn't fit. Sex scenes should be as beneficial to the entire work as any other element of the story structure. It should move the characters along to where they need to be next. It should deepen the readers' connection with or understanding of the characters.

Oftentimes, people treat a sex scene as if its only value is adding a bit of naughty thrill to a story. But a well-written sex scene can do a lot of heavy lifting, strengthening and deepening a story in a way that few other types of scenes can. If you want to get to the beating heart of your characters, this is one of the best ways to do that. (Not literally, of course—unless you're writing horror!)

Your final step is to make sure that your editors can handle your characters bumping uglies. If you have chosen to get a sensitivity edit, that's wonderful, and make sure to check in with all other editor(s) of this piece that they know there will be a sex scene (or more) in there, and that they are comfortable and experienced with editing amorous congress.

What can you expect once your spiced-up story is out in the world? Beyond possibly awkward conversations, get ready for some people to refuse to read your story because there's sex in it. Readers today have very specific demands from their fiction; for some it very well could be "closed-door" or "fade-to-black" romance (stories in which sex happens "offscreen," rather than being depicted directly). On the other hand, there are other readers who will be putting out the request in book recommendation groups for "super spicy open-door sex scenes!" So you will be both potentially losing and potentially gaining certain types of readers.

For a writer, dealing with rejection from readers is hard enough, and adding in sex scenes will add another way for readers to criticize and "DNF" your book. However, if you have written a strong, powerful sex scene that makes an organic whole with the rest of your story, there will be a good balance of readers who see what you have done and praise it in reviews—and come back for more.

Writing sex is complicated, should never be treated as trivial, and does add some risk to a writer's career and emotional well-being. But, if you have ever been moved by a well-crafted intimate scene, you also know how powerful and important that writing can be.

Be honest with yourself about whether you are ready. If you are, then start doing it, enjoy the process, and I hope you bring more beautifully-written sex scenes into the world. 🍷

Raven Belasco is a fantasy and nonfiction author.





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FICTION

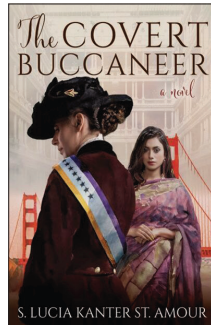
EDITOR'S PICK

The Covert Buccaneer: A Novel

S. Lucia Kanter St. Amour | Pactum Factum Press
388p, trade paper, \$18.95, ISBN 979-8-9927528-2-3

When single mother Ellie Benvenuto—raising her two young sons, Nathan and Luca, in present day San Francisco—is wrongfully terminated from the prestigious law firm Hutton & Fetterer for requesting caregiver accommodations to help cope with Luca's disabilities, she rebuilds her career at the Immigrant Legal Defense Collaborative, representing marginalized clients. Ellie finds steady support in her best friend, Anika Owens, while gradually opening herself to a relationship with Sam Varma, a neurosurgeon at Luca's clinic. But her journey truly begins when she discovers the story of her great-great-grandmother, Theodora "Teddy" Ellis DeLuca, whose 1800s story follows her transformation from rebellious Boston teen to fearless pioneer.

Basing her characters on her own ancestors, Kanter St. Amour (*For the Forces of Good*) writes, with keen insight and evocative prose, of the legal and emotional



Riveting testament to women's courage and legacy throughout history.

Great for fans of Maya Rodale's *The Mad Girls of New York*, Marcela Fuentes's *Malas*.

realties faced by women throughout history. Disguised as a boy, Teddy escapes societal constraints to venture across the American frontier, surviving the Great Chicago Fire and joining the Klondike Gold Rush, while her polyamorous relationship challenges norms of gender, race, and love. Over time, Teddy becomes a San Francisco architect, suffragist, and advocate for Indigenous rights, leaving behind a powerful legacy that reshapes Ellie's understanding of identity and inheritance—and inspires her to take on her former law firm, sparking national attention and driving policy change.

Even though Ellie and Teddy are separated by a century, their lives echo with shared battles: confronting discrimination, reclaiming agency, and redefining legacy. *The Covert Buccaneer* stands as a powerful testament to women who make history and refuse to be written out of it, urging readers to recognize that the past is not static, but something we must continuously confront and renew.

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

FICTION

Bad Americans: Part I

Tejas Desai | The New Wei, LLC
479p, hardcover, \$30, ISBN 978-1-7347278-2-1

In the summer of 2020, the world has come to a standstill; uncertainty lingers in the air, along with an infamous virus that need not be named, as people shelter themselves in their homes. In a mansion in the Hamptons, however, another world plays out. Reclusive billionaire Olive Mixer, known for his popular dating apps, has opened his doors for 12 hand-selected singles to lounge, mingle, and possibly strike romantic connections, all while indulging in the finest luxuries imaginable. The catch? Every night, each guest must tell the entire group a story. Grounded in a common setting, *Bad Americans: Part I* (the sequel to *Good Americans*) is a collection of six vivid short stories, relayed by people from different walks of life who may not always see eye-to-eye.

At a time in the United States marked by deep divides, Desai collates a variety of perspectives, many of them political, with remarkable sympathy and nuance. This first



Powerful rendering of the human experience uniting a divided America.

Great for fans of Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*, Anthony Doerr, et al.'s *Tales of Two Americas*.

part of his series finds six of Mixer's guests, who range from social workers to bikers to lawyers to soldiers, taking the stage, narrating the horror, insights, and debates that the COVID-19 pandemic sparked. Readers hear from a frontline health care worker as she describes the agony of grappling with the first wave; a gay teacher fictionalizing his life to share important truths of queerness and blackness; an immigrant who

leans on poetry to expose America's dark truths; and a soldier defending anti-immigration policies with a tale of the American Dream destroyed by corruption and greed. Desai's greatest strength lies in his ability to craft tales that are gripping in their own distinct ways—each story possesses a haunting quality that refuses to fade from memory long after it's been told. But what makes the collection particularly effective is Desai's timely and necessary exploration of American division, one that manages to find humanity even in our deepest disagreements.

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

FICTION

La Fête de la Vie: Stories & Poems

Jacqueline Miller Bachar | Rowhouse Press
174p, trade paper, \$14.99, ISBN 978-1-886-93411-5

In this reflective, spiritual collection of stories and poems, each piece is a meditation on remembering and the grief that takes up residence in the lives of Bachar's women characters, often living with the relatable "strain" of the years and of a "need for perfection." In the title story, a woman celebrates life in a Parisian restaurant as her mother passes away elsewhere in a hospital bed: "I wore my favorite black dress, the one with the tiny waist and the wide belt."

As the champagne and conversation flow in the joint in the Left Bank, Bachar introduces pockets of narration regarding the woman's mother's death, a pained counterpoint to the revelry.

The protagonist's cognitive dissonance in "La Fête de la Vie" lays the foundation for the rest of the collection, which grapples with the tension and juxtaposition of life and death. In "The Pledge," for example, an elderly man pulls his friend, whom he served with in World War II, out of his sick bed to fulfill his wartime promise and



Touching stories and poems of the beauty and pain of remembering amid loss.

Great for fans of Margaret Atwood's *Dearly*; Donald Hall.

bring him to breakfast, while in "Something of Value" a woman faces the dispiriting fact that, during the sale of her parents' estate, the realtor determines that, financially speaking, their possessions are essentially worthless. In each story, Bachar plumbs the act of remembering amid loss.

Bachar also includes a set of poems toward the conclusion of her collection, and though they are still concerned with the blurred line between life and death, and what it takes to survive in the aftermath, they also operate within a spiritual channel. Helping us face grief, loss, and nostalgia in Bachar's poems is God; she writes in "The Cross" "Surely goodness & mercy will heal me. // Steel angel's wings // enfold me to their heart." God is the balm that soothes the pain of loss and the fear of death and provides "Heaven where peace and glory await you."

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



TODAY WAS A GOOD DAY:

A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS FROM THE HEART OF A NEUROSURGEON

ISBN: 9781684868872

Leadership Lessons from the Operating Room: A Neurosurgeon's Guide to Personal Growth and Professional Success

In *Today Was A Good Day*, Edward Benzel, a distinguished neurosurgeon, offers an inspiring collection of essays that bridge the worlds of medicine and personal development. Through his unique perspective, Benzel imparts profound insights into leadership, effective communication, and the power of empathy and respect in both professional and personal settings.

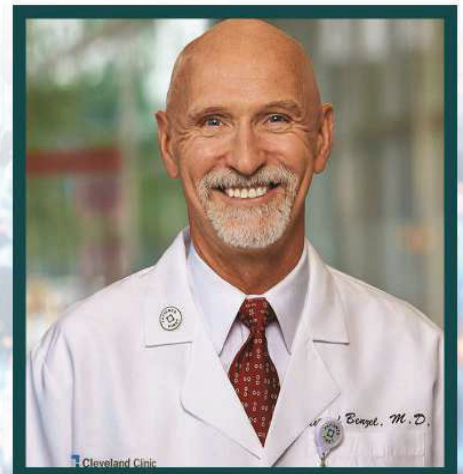
Each essay in this compelling book delves into practical tools such as stress management, introspection, and strategies for continuous self-improvement. Benzel teaches readers how to cultivate these vital qualities to enhance relationships and foster better leadership, both in the workplace and beyond.

One of the central themes of the book is the importance of empathy and respect in our interactions with others. Benzel shares how these qualities not only enrich communication but also contribute to more fulfilling, productive relationships. This book is a roadmap for those seeking to lead with both compassion and confidence.

Moreover, Benzel offers practical advice for managing stress—a crucial skill for maintaining balance and well-being. His strategies empower readers to face challenges with resilience and composure, ensuring that each day is indeed a good day.

With an emphasis on continuous self-improvement, *Today Was A Good Day* encourages readers to reflect on their personal growth and adopt a mindset geared toward becoming the best version of themselves. Through introspection and reflection, Benzel guides us toward greater fulfillment and success in every aspect of life.

In a world that increasingly values emotional resilience and mental well-being, Benzel's book resonates with those seeking to enhance their emotional intelligence while improving their professional skills. With its combination of medical insight and personal development, *Today Was A Good Day* is a must-read for anyone eager to lead with empathy, thrive under pressure, and pursue lasting fulfillment.



Available at:

[amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

[BARNES & NOBLE](https://www.barnesandnoble.com)



*also in other major online bookstores

FICTION

Shelf Life: A Librarian's Tale

Miles Vuko | Draft2Digital

165p, e-book, \$2.99, ISBN 979-8-231-18700-3

Told through a string of vignettes stretching from 1969 to the mid-2000s, Vuko's fiction debut unfolds as an autobiographical patchwork—one man's attempt to understand his identity, not in the sense of who he is but rather what he fails to become. The story begins with the narrator's early experiences of mockery and exclusion—being called a girl, accused of plucking his eyebrows, excluded from a long-anticipated class outing, and punished by his teacher in a rigid Jesuit-run school. As he recounts moments from his life across the former Yugoslavia, Europe, and the United States, a unifying theme emerges: the persistent and often painful pursuit of self-definition in the aftermath of familial, societal, and national fragmentation.

Vuko's prose mimics memory itself: jagged, digressive, and occasionally devastating. Language, too, becomes slippery terrain. Just as he finds it hard to fully embrace any sexual or professional identity, he cannot claim any nation or language as entirely his own. The disintegration of Yugoslavia becomes a symbol of this



A tender, offbeat chronicle of identity, exile, and near-misses.

Great for fans of Brandon Taylor's *Real Life*, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

struggle to assert or inhabit a coherent identity, just as his failed queer relationships and rejection from a dramaturgy program solidify his "pattern of giving up that often followed [him] through life." His desires are constantly stifled by fear, habit, or a lack of control over his life: failing to secure a longstanding position in the theater world, abandoning a promising modeling prospect in Milan, and

disengaging from sexual encounters—each missed opportunity reflects the burden of being out of step, both with his country and with himself. Vuko evokes the mournful dignity of a life of "almosts" with grace. Though the narrative's meandering style may dissuade readers, it profoundly reflects the finitude and quiet decay of lives spent searching. Yet, there is an unspoken integrity in this unresolved search. More than a coming-of-age story, it reveals the enduring weight of memory when life's turning points are left unmade.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

EDITOR'S PICK

To Know Good and Evil: A Novel

Daniel V. Meier, Jr. | Boutique of Quality Books

220p, e-book, \$7.99, ASIN B0DWHS86M

Meier's gripping mystery, the second in his Frank Adams Detective Series, opens on a summer evening with a plane crash in an industrial North Carolina hog farm. The small town of Scottsville, reeking of hog waste, is rocked by the accident and the death of the pilot, Dr. David Lanmore, a chemistry professor at the local college. Lanmore's former student Ted Grant knows that the doctor has recently achieved a breakthrough in his cancer research, so Ted reaches out to Frank Adams, a retired Aviation Safety Inspector turned P.I., to look into Lanmore's death. Frank hails from Scottsville himself, and Lanmore's death compels him to return despite his complicated relationship with his hometown.

Frank's investigation kicks off briskly, driven by engaging encounters that, in classic procedural fashion, reveal much about the milieu and Frank's clear-eyed impressions of "odoriferous" factory farms and swank cocktail parties. Meier again makes the nuts and bolts of investigating plane crashes fascinating, even for readers



Smart mystery pitting an aviation expert against a chemist's suspicious crash.

Great for fans of Noah Hawley's *Before the Fall*, Wiley Cash's *When Ghosts Come Home*.

who don't know what an exhaust stack is, and the shoe-leather sleuthing engages as well, with Frank navigating a complex web of associations and some ghosts from his past—most notably his late mother and his unofficial "uncle," Clayton Housley, an old-money scion. Frank must also contend with pharmaceutical CEO Hank Gordon and Malcolm, a young mechanic who seems afraid to speak. As Frank begins to connect the pieces of Lanmore's life, research, and death, secrets from his own past are revealed, leading him to reconsider many of his relationships and wonder whether uncovering the truth is worth risking his own life.

This follow-up to *Guidance to Death* stands on its own and will be easy for new readers to follow. Characters are engaging and well-developed, with their distinct personalities sharply etched by Meier's spirited, straightforward prose. The story deftly infuses the characters' multifaceted relationships and motivations with surprising twists and sustained tension that will keep readers invested even after the killer is revealed.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

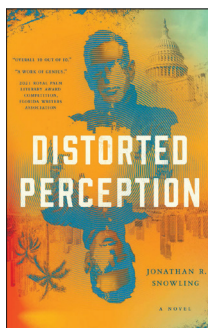
Distorted Perception

Jonathan R. Snowling | The Great Story Network

251p, hardcover, \$28.84, ASIN B09ZL6JPKP

When American campaign manager Rex Nash heads to Panama to guide a promising presidential candidate to victory, he expects the usual challenges of political warfare—hostile media, dirty tricks, and backroom deals. What he doesn't expect is to become the target of a shadowy conspiracy that will frame him for an attempted assassination and force him to flee with real bullets at his back. In this corruption-riddled nation, where certain forces pose a dangerous threat to democracy, Rex must navigate an intricate web involving the presidency, knife-wielding gangsters, and the CIA, to expose the conspirators before they murder him and the woman he loves.

Snowling draws from his experience as a political consultant in the United States and Panama to craft a chilling—and realistic—look at the culture of modern political campaigns, where the line between democracy and conspiracy is dangerously thin. Rex accepts what seems like a straightforward assignment, but he quickly discovers there's more going on behind the scenes: Panama is grappling with shady dealings and severe poverty as it gears up for a national election, and promising anti-cor-



Ruthless, heart-racing game of politics, corruption, and survival.

Great for fans of William Maz's *The Bucharest Legacy*, Jack Carr's *The Devil's Hand*.

ruption candidate Vasquez is mounting what most consider a harebrained challenge against the incumbent president. In a parallel to real-world power plays, sinister forces will stop at nothing to take Vasquez down and ensure their own victory, with Rex quickly becoming the perfect fall guy. Snowling expertly combines high-stakes action, a unique setting, and his own insider knowledge to produce this heart-racing debut. By anchoring Rex as the central protagonist, he ensures that, despite the complex web of characters and motives, readers never lose footing in the intricate plot. The result is an engaging and satisfying narrative spread across the gritty political landscapes of both America and Panama, reminding us that no matter the setting or the players involved, politics remains a ruthlessly dirty game.

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

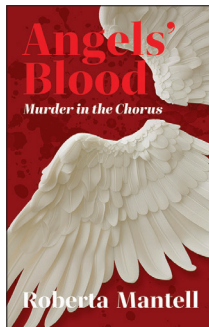
MYSTERY/THRILLER

Angels' Blood: Murder in the Chorus

Roberta Mantell | Indies United Publishing House
304p, e-book, \$17.95, ISBN 978-1-64456-801-9

Murder meets musicology in Mantell's debut, a finely detailed mystery that explores classical music history and the passionate drama fueling a contemporary choral group. Newspaper arts columnist Piper Morgan has joined the New York Luminoso Chorus for their crowd-pleasing December performance of Handel's *Messiah* when tragedy strikes: after intermission, soprano Daphne Paige is found dead backstage. Instead of a puff piece about singing with the chorus, Piper finds herself in the middle of a murder investigation.

Maestro Todd Barlow and his wife, Nicole Jennings-Barlow, are at the heart of Mantell's smart interlocking mysteries. A distraught Todd was conducting a barely concealed affair with Daphne and becomes the prime suspect, although there's plenty of discord (and other suspects) within the 120-person chorus. The personalities have spark, but what sets *Angels' Blood* apart is Mantell's persuasive exploration of music history. The tantalizing hook: looking through 19th-century manuscripts, Nicole



Dishy mystery and music history harmonize in this smart debut.

Great for fans of Alexia Gordon's Gethsemane Brown Mystery series, Sarah Fox's Music Lover's Mystery series.

choral music shines through on every page, and by interspersing Lisha's revealing letters throughout *Angels' Blood*, she highlights the obstacles women faced to having their music heard, and what it meant to be acknowledged by their peers. There are times when Mantell's elucidations of music and history come at the expense of narrative momentum, but she also provides a you-are-there immediacy to the chorus scenes that bridge past and present. This blend of murder mystery, choral music, musicology, and art history offers a fascinating perspective on the musicians who maintain the legacies of composers, both famous and forgotten.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

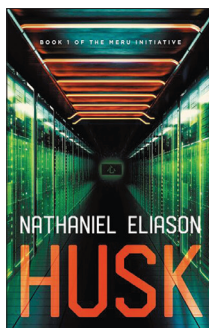
EDITOR'S PICK

Husk: The Meru Initiative, Book 1

Nathaniel Eliason | Heart Mind
373p, e-book, \$4.99, ASIN B0F162FTWR

Eliason's riveting debut blends post-apocalyptic adventure with a conspiracy-based sci-fi thriller. Isaac is a lowly Tech maintaining a server station outside the town of Epsilon, counting down the days until he can trade his everyday tedium (punctuated by raids from roving bands of scavengers) for the virtual world of Meru. Isaac's faith in the digital bliss offered by Meru's founder, the mythical Felix, is shaken when his best friend, Luke, sacrifices himself to destroy the town's transfer chamber. Forced into exile, Isaac is rescued by a group of survivors fighting to create a new world, and finds everything he thought he knew turned upside down.

"If I die the day before I become immortal, I'm going to feel like an idiot," Isaac declares, and this opening line sets the tone. He's earnest but also a bit glib, always capable of surprising readers, but as he moves from naïve follower to inquisitive skeptic, Isaac's evolution will keep readers engaged, even as the plotting around him occasionally gets tangled. Any technical hiccups are smoothed out by Eliason's



Gripping sci-fi thriller blending action and existential questions.

Great for fans of Ian Lumsden's *Saifa*, J.D. Lasica's *The Golden Relic*.

one character puts it, "surrendering what made us human."

Eliason, a former philosophy student, digs into humanity's existential fixation with death in the digital age. Incorporeal immortality is not only feasible in Isaac's world, it's expected, and this idea of a digital heaven is woven into their everyday life. The heady mixture of philosophy, spectacle, and heart will delight readers who enjoy both action and speculation in their science fiction. Satisfyingly succinct and holistically human, *Husk* makes for smart, satisfying reading. A promising start to a series.

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

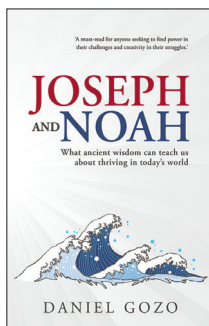
BUSINESS & PERSONAL FINANCE

Joseph and Noah: What Ancient Wisdom Can Teach Us About Thriving in Today's World

Daniel Gozo | Quickfox
244p, e-book, \$8.99, ISBN 978-1-037-02812-0

Gozo explores "the lives of fascinating individuals who have found success, in whatever way they define it" in this perceptive debut. Acknowledging that global markets are both interconnected and volatile, he steers readers toward ancient wisdom instead, drawing primarily from biblical figures Joseph and Noah, but also gleaning insight from more contemporary examples, such as New Zealand businessman James Coddington's advice to increase earnings and then prioritize investing, or Magic Johnson's childhood lessons on "put[ting] in honest, hard work" that propelled him into a stunning basketball career. Through easy-to-follow metaphors and real-life models—pulled from both the business world and nature—Gozo provides a detailed guide to managing finances and implementing winning strategies for success.

Using Joseph and Noah's stories of preparing for famine and floods, overcoming adversity, and combatting those who sought to destroy their life's purpose, Gozo paints a relatable depiction of the trials and setbacks that can occur in life and in



Compelling blend of ancient insight with contemporary financial wisdom.

Great for fans of John C. Lennox's *A Good Return*, Seth M. Jones's *The Biblical Path to Financial Freedom*.

factors needed to triumph over difficulties, prepare for the future, and "emerge from the storm with renewed purpose and strength."

Gozo packs his guide with useful research and data pertaining to today's financial markets, skillfully weaving the past with the present to capture ancient knowledge and apply it to present-day patterns. Many of his personal experiences are culled from his work as a finance executive in South Africa, but the insights he shares—from his contemplation of herd behavior to humanity's destructive "fear of missing out"—apply to any global trade, giving readers versatile tools to adjust and pivot in response to changing business trends.

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

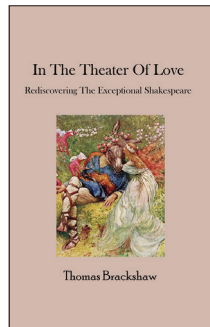
ARTS, LITERATURE, THEATER

In the Theater of Love: Rediscovering the Exceptional Shakespeare

Thomas Brackshaw | Villaggio Publications
364p, e-book, \$8.99, ISBN 978-1-7367522-8-9

"Is love a tender thing?" asks Romeo, that excitable Veronan teen, not long before he meets the young woman who will teach him what tenderness is all about. Before that bewitching encounter, though, Romeo insists that love is "too rough, / Too rude, too boisterous, and it pricks like thorn." Brackshaw makes a spirited, accessible case throughout this inviting study of love, desire, sin, and morality in Shakespeare's plays that Romeo's education in love is emblematic of a recurring truth in the Bard's works: like Rosalind, from *As You Like It*, Juliet and Shakespeare's other "best heroines ... teach their men the finer points of genuine love." For them, love is "a presence ... whose light provides guidance through a wicked world but whose true worth remains mysterious and therefore under-appreciated."

Love is deeply appreciated in this study, in all its sundry forms, be the relationships marital, filial, reckless, divine, or even murderous. Writing for an open-minded



Inviting study and celebration of love, passion, and morality in Shakespeare.

Great for fans of Mark Van Doren's *Shakespeare*, Emma Smith's *This Is Shakespeare*.

and self-sacrifice" of Shakespearean heroines, like Cleopatra, who strive to "transform" relationships limited "by male self-indulgence into something far richer." (The *Antony and Cleopatra* chapter is especially enlightening.)

Brackshaw eschews academic jargon and trends in favor of an impassioned celebration of Shakespeare's grappling with love and desire. Crucial context comes from consideration of Christian morality in Shakespeare, plus what the Bard himself read about love, in Ovid and courtly romances. A companionable guide, Brackshaw demonstrates how Shakespeare challenged and reflected conventions. These close readings, crafted to reward casual and expert readers, reveal and revel.

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

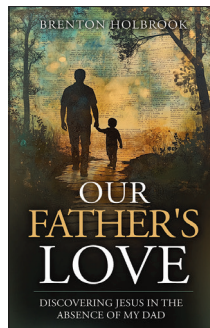
SPIRITUALITY/INSPIRATIONAL

Our Father's Love: Discovering Jesus in the Absence of My Dad

Brenton Holbrook | Holy Water Press, LLC
183p, trade paper, \$14.99, ISBN 979-8-9987537-0-1

Holbrook elaborates on the fulfilling nature of God's love in this spiritual debut, exploring Christian beliefs and teachings through the lens of his own absent father. "Growing up without my dad was not just a fact of life; it was a profound emptiness that influenced every aspect of my being," he writes, sharing how he healed those childhood wounds by discovering a peaceful, purposeful life through Jesus Christ. As Holbrook's narrative builds to a devastating loss, reunion, and eventual closure, he imparts wisdom through letters to his younger self, his father, and of course, his readers, offering comfort and hard-earned insights while emphasizing the importance of forgiveness and self-acceptance.

Holbrook's transparency and vulnerability resonate as he pinpoints the exact moment that he turned to his "Heavenly Father." He leads readers on a poignant narrative of self-discovery and faith, supported by biblical scripture and five foundational principles he has applied to his own life: reading the Bible, engaging



Moving guide exploring childhood wounds healed by God's love.

Great for fans of Kia Stephens's *Overcoming Father Wounds*, Blair Linne's *Finding My Father*.

"That shadow is where your father should be. Unfortunately, that shadow will stretch far into your life. It will affect you profoundly despite those days that seem ordinary," he reflects.

Despite the darkness of the past, this is a heartwarming reassurance that, with openness, faith, and an uplifting support system, anyone can forge a brighter pathway forward, discover self-worth, and lean on the love and strength of their spiritual father. Holbrook includes additional resources—faith-based books, worship songs, and guided devotions—to spark introspection and remind readers that "God is with you... cheering you on, running with you, and matching you step for step."

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

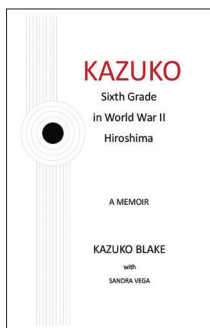
MEMOIR

Kazuko: Sixth Grade in World War II Hiroshima

Kazuko Blake with Sandra Vega | Wide Angle, LLC
162p, hardcover, \$32.99, ISBN 979-8-990-80320-6

Kazuko Blake's memoir, co-written with Sandra Vega, recounts her childhood in Japan during World War II, focusing on her experiences in Hiroshima before, during, and after the atomic bombing. The book explores themes of resilience, cultural transformation, and the human cost of war, beginning with Kazuko's early life in Kobe, where she spends days watching her father swim in the ocean, making after-school stops for udon with her mother, and experiences the beginning fractures of a nation at war. Eventually, Kazuko's family moves to Hiroshima for her father's career, resulting in her firsthand account of the Hiroshima bombing on August 6, 1945.

One of the book's strengths is its vivid, personal storytelling. Kazuko's recollections are harrowing and deeply moving, particularly her description of the flash, destruction of her school, and her later escape through the rubble. Her strength shines through as she recounts living in a bomb shelter, viewing the horrific injuries her neighbors and friends received from the attack, and her family's shock at Japan's



Stirring and unforgettable memoir of a Hiroshima atomic bomb survivor.

Great for fans of Dan King's *A Tomb Called Iwo Jima*, Michihiko Hachiya's *The Doctor of Hiroshima*.

including the shift to coed schools and cultural Westernization.

Kazuko's anecdotes are compelling, delving into her post-war adjustment as she grows into a young woman and eventually marries a US Navy officer, later emigrating to America, where she adapts to a new life while preserving her Japanese heritage. Personal photographs pepper the narrative, bringing vivid life to Kazuko's rememberings, but what most stands out is the portrait of a resilient, hopeful girl amidst unimaginable adversity. Despite some minor structural weaknesses, the book leaves a lasting impact, reminding readers of the enduring strength of the human spirit.

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

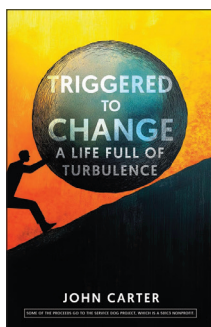
MEMOIR

Triggered to Change: A Life Full of Turbulence

John Carter | Selfpublishing.com
60p, trade paper, \$15.99, ISBN 979-8-896-94058-6

Carter's motivational debut draws from the traumas in his own life to encourage readers that even the worst situations can be transformed into positive learning experiences. The catalyst for Carter's transformation came on the heels of a horrific encounter: at just 17 years old, working for the Worcester Mafia in Massachusetts, he was shot in the head during an attempt to collect money. Carter survived that ordeal and, after months of grueling physical therapy, recovered, though he bears lasting scars as a reminder of his brush with death. Still, he views it as a moment of revelation, reflecting that "you'd be surprised to see how far you could go to overcome life's challenges."

Though brief, Carter's book offers a wealth of both cautionary tales and passionate advice. In looking back on his choices, he recognizes the patterns that caused problems in his own life, using those events as springboards to demonstrate



Surprising, motivational story of transforming trauma into personal growth.

Great for fans of David Goggins's *Can't Hurt Me*, Rich Paul's *Lucky Me*.

Carter's candid, nonjudgmental writing paves the way for readers to examine their own lives. He takes responsibility for his decisions and consistently emphasizes that it's always possible to bounce back from disaster—a refrain that sees him through many crises, losses, and pain, as he eventually becomes sober and starts his own business. The personal photographs included at the end bring vivid life to his story, and his emergence on the other side of trauma, addiction, and poor choices will inspire readers to "keep fighting, walk through your fears, and eventually... find happiness waiting for you."

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

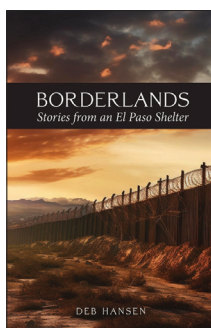
MEMOIR

Borderlands: Stories from an El Paso Shelter

Deb Hansen | Apocryphile Press
396p, trade paper, \$20, ISBN 978-1-958-06185-5

"I've been a border-crosser for all my adult life," Hansen writes in this engrossing memoir set along the US-Mexico border, describing her fascination with "the variety of ways people of different ethnicities and cultures see the world." Hansen meticulously documents her time volunteering at Annunciation House in El Paso—a privately-funded network of shelters and congregations helping migrants crossing into the US from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Turkey, and other countries. Upfront and sincere, Hansen declares that "political borders are made up by the powerful," warning that the crisis unfolding along the US-Mexico border is a "dress-rehearsal" for the large-scale climate displacements that could be triggered by global warming.

Hansen's impressions unfold in a series of conscientiously documented diary entries, each describing the highlights of her work—usually revolving around new shelter arrivals, daily chores and conversations, and the ins and outs of how cross-border migration really works. From cultural experiences during holidays—



Enlightening account of a volunteer's work at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Great for fans of Jessica Goudeau's *After the Last Border*, Jenn Budd's *Against the Wall*.

including a touching Thanksgiving ukulele performance by shelter residents—to learning that Mexico's minimum wage equals around seven dollars a day, every interchange Hansen notes is an experiment toward a bold new world, sans borders and replete with humanity. Though the day-to-day ledger of shelter activities is insightful, Hansen's detached writing style undermines the memoir's emotional impact, often venturing no further than cursory descriptions of the people, surroundings, and routines she experiences. Flashes of insight invite deeper reflection, such as Hansen's musings that capitalism has changed the Indigenous beliefs that "water, soil, air, and fire [are] sacred" or her pain at not being able to offer second helpings when serving community meals. The police arrests Hansen describes can be tense and shocking, prompting her to wonder about "human rights violations against people in migration seeking refuge and a better life," but most powerful are the photographs she includes, each one highlighting the everyday interactions necessary to provide "a waystation, an oasis in the storms of life."

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

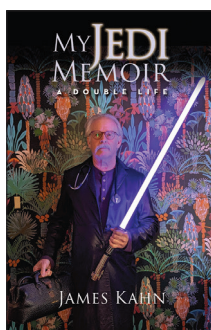
MEMOIR

My Jedi Memoir: A Double Life

James Kahn | BearManorMedia
261p, mass market, \$29, ISBN 979-8-88771-730-2

Even before he met Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, James Kahn had built a remarkable dual career. Kahn served as an E.R. doctor, saving lives while he wrote SF novels on the side. When a producer working on *E.T.* called the hospital seeking advice for the scene where medical pros attempt to resuscitate the ailing alien, Kahn's suggestions led to a brief cameo in the movie and an encounter with Spielberg that resulted in a gig writing the novelization of *Poftergeist*. That led to the job whose history Kahn reveals here: the novelization of *Return of the Jedi*, the best-selling novel of 1983.

Kahn blends a chapter-by-chapter recounting of his work on that project—including in-depth analysis of the novelization's plotting and composition, informed by discussions with Lucas—with loosely linked incidents from his medical career, his domestic life, and his Hollywood efforts, which included writing novelizations of *The Goonies* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (evocative first line: "The night club had that wild and smoky air.") and a stint writing and producing the era-defining Fox soap *Melrose Place*. *Star Wars* fans will be riveted by the nitty-gritty



Surprising memoir of novelizations, medicine, Hollywood, and Jedi.

Great for fans of Bill Kimberlin's *Inside the Star Wars Empire*, Craig Miller's *Star Wars Memories*.

myth-making details, with Kahn revisiting notes and the final manuscript, sharing what he beefed up, what he wondered about, what he wishes he could have done differently, and what challenges he faced, like having to describe the climactic revelation of Darth Vader's face without access to a production still. Among the revelations: the surprisingly historical reasons behind the decision to name the genre of peppy music played in Jabba's lair "jizz" (yes, Kahn is the guy responsible for this) and his fruitless attempts to get George Lucas to change the movie's ending. (Kahn also shares an inspired suggestion for the climax of the third Indiana Jones film, which he wishes he had gotten to discuss with Lucas.) *Jedi* fans will feast, but Kahn's life, work, and hard-won insights are fascinating enough that readers will likely hope for a followup that spends more time in a galaxy closer to home.

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

POETRY

Reprise

Victor Marrero

46p, e-book, \$7.99, ISBN 978-2-953-2785-8

Marrero's sophomore collection, following *Atlas*, *Bound*, resurrects the precedent for these unprecedented times in verses that read like whispered sighs echoing the breath of forebears who bore witness to the chaos of tyranny in decades past. "Despondence hovers aloft," he writes in "Foreboding," "It clouds the air around the bar, as dense cigarette fumes mimic the acrid smog of polity now choking the capital." This despair, Marrero makes clear, is not unique; instead, it is an unfortunate throughline of human history, especially as despots reshape the world. Marrero calls on "Yeats. Auden. Poets all," to "tell us what you know," and the poets answer.

Speaking in the voices of Yeats, Auden, and other poets who used art as a means to hold to a vital independence of spirit in the face of authoritarianism, Marrero honors the canon of poetic resistance and contextualizes contemporary tyrannical trends as part of the same wheel of human history as the Third Reich: "Dr. Goebbels.



Urgent poems seeking guidance from the past about resisting despotism.

Great for fans of Bertolt Brecht's "All of Us or None," and W. H. Auden's *September 1, 1939*.

Minister of Propaganda, // arbiter of taste and truth. // Charged to broadcast news, // he sells a rubber-stamped culture." When Marrero asks those same poets how to reckon with a God who allows the horrors of the world to unfold, they say "Of what we see ahead the most frightful // lies beyond our frontiers in time and // history."

According to these imagined prophecies of Marrero's sources of inspiration, the worst is yet to come, in a future where "phantoms, decades gone, will rise // again // as gray smoke emerging from graves // and // debris—demanding recognition, // clamoring relentlessly // for restoration of their reign." In the face of such darkness, Marrero argues, poets, writers, artists, and musicians must take up the mantle of defiance against regimes that seek to dehumanize and oppress their citizenry. Marrero's collection contextualizes our times while finding fresh guidance for survival from the past—and sounding an urgent call to artists and writers to stand up and tell dangerous truths.

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

PICTURE BOOKS

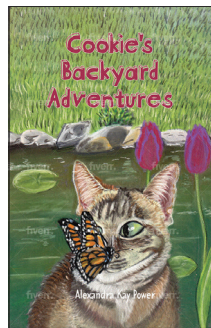
Cookie's Backyard Adventures

Alexandra Kay Power | Basswood Hill Books

32p, e-book, \$6.99, ISBN 978-1-069-08674-7

Power's charming picture book for young children follows a tabby cat named Cookie on a series of everyday adventures in her backyard. The story begins with Cookie gazing out the window and hearing the frantic buzzing of a bee caught in the hummingbird feeder. Cookie knows it is up to her to save the trapped pollinator, so she sneaks out the back door and swats the feeder until the bee is able to zip away. She spends the afternoon helping others in various ways—she saves birdseed from a determined squirrel, swats a basketball back to some kids, and peacefully admires some tulips and goldfish instead of devouring them in typical cat fashion.

When Cookie returns home, she sneaks back through the same hole in the screen door. Her human mom is waiting to greet her, seeming both relieved and exasperated with her partner for leaving the door open again. This creates some tension in the family dynamic and shows that some situations are ethically ambiguous. As an indoor cat, Cookie wasn't supposed to be outside, but she found the experience



A cat's charming everyday backyard adventures.

Great for fans of Karen Obuhanych's *This Little Kitty in the Garden*, Marianna Coppo's *A Brave Cat*

empowering, helped other creatures—and planned a special surprise for her mom. This will create an opportunity for children and caregivers to discuss how to balance freedom with safety in their own lives.

The colorful illustrations, handcrafted with clear and touching love, follow brown-and-black-striped Cookie around her suburban backyard, showing her delight in simple activities like exploring the garden and observing monarch butterflies. The yard feels rustic and verdant, an endearing setting for a cat to explore. While the perspective in some scenes is a bit skewed, the pictures still believably depict Cookie's clandestine outdoor romp and will help young readers stay engaged with the story. Overall, Cookie's tale will encourage both kids and adult caregivers to find the value in freedom and exploration.

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

PICTURE BOOKS

Bull & Bear Build a Bright Future with Bonds

Craig A. Robinson | Nolyne Publishing

33p, hardcover, \$18.99, ISBN 979-8-218-49476-6

Robinson brings the stock market to life for younger readers in this picture book debut, the first of a financial series for kids featuring best friends Bull and Bear, hailing from a place called Moneyland. Though chummy with each other, the two approach money in completely different ways, as readers familiar with markets might expect: Bull is a risk taker who craves fast growth, while Bear is more cautious, carefully monitoring "market shifts with his keen brown eyes." When the inevitable happens—and the market has a downturn—Bull, who invested only in stocks, is devastated, but Bear's diversifying helps him weather the storm. That kickstarts a learning experience for Bull, as the pair head to Wall Street to figure out what he can do differently the next time around.

This is a sophisticated topic for a children's book, but Robinson's easy rhymes and appealing characters help bring the information down to an understandable level. Bright, cheery illustrations by Carolina Buzio grab attention, offering a slew of tiny details that pop out and entertain: an interactive map of Moneyland brimming with fun landmarks, busy city streets full of lively characters, and catchy graphics that demonstrate the ups and downs of the stock market. Those cheerful offerings



Entertaining introduction to stocks, bonds, and investment for kids.

Great for fans of Kelly Lee's *What Is Money?*, Monica Eaton's *Money Plan*.

help break up the book's complexity, and Robinson smartly includes two delightful guides for Bull and Bear to teach them important financial concepts: the brilliant Piggy Banks, who introduces the idea of bonds, and the Moneyland Treasury's very own Eagle, who educates Bull and Bear on the history of bonds and explains their role in achieving financial stability.

To give purpose and meaning to the idea of acquiring wealth, Robinson presents bonds as a way to give back to the community as well. "We use bonds to build schools, roads, and parks across the land," Eagle declares, inspiring both Bull and Bear to invest their funds in ways that can help others. Robinson closes with a useful dictionary explaining important financial terms.

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

YOUNG ADULT

EDITOR'S PICK

Mica Powers and the Legend of the Superstitions: When Lightning Strikes Heroes Are BornM.S.V. Walker | Desert Star Media
260p, hardcover, \$25.97, ISBN 979-8-992-33910-9

Drawing inspiration from classic magic-academy fantasies while forging its own path, the first entry in Walker's promising series stars Mica Powers, a 13-year-old daredevil who travels the Superstition Mountains on a thunder cycle. While searching for his kidnapped mother, he dreams of spinning storms like the rest of his friends. Along the way, he meets Estee Bradford, an orphan sold for her powers. As Mica and Estee's powers manifest, another power sleeps, hunted by those with evil intentions. Entangled in this wild clash, Mica and Estee must use their new abilities to uncover the legend of the Superstition Mountains.

As students at the Domain Arizona School of Spinical Studies, Mica and his perceptive pals star in a spellbinding, swiftly paced introduction to this magical world. Walker's vivid imagery fully immerses the reader in each surprising scene:



Electrifying opener to an action-packed, character-rich YA fantasy.

Great for fans of Shannon Messenger's *Keeper of the Lost Cities* series, Richard Paul Evans's *Michael Vey* series.

mythic feats keep the story fresh and exciting.

The wonder of Spinical magic is balanced by relatable characters and a commitment to emotional realism. Mica himself has a reckless, passionate charm and a yearning for his mother that pulls at the heartstrings. Estee, too, evokes sympathy with a life so loveless she questions even the smallest acts of kindness. The Spinicals boast distinct personalities that are a joy to watch in action, especially when they work together. Adolescent readers will find them easy to relate to and root for. A thrilling start to a series full of whimsy and passion.

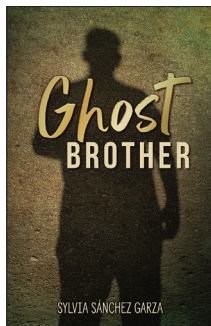
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

YOUNG ADULT

Ghost BrotherSylvia Sánchez Garza | Arte Publico Press
182p, e-book, \$9.99, ASIN B0DQ287V1M

Garza's fiction debut is a poignant tale of love, loss, and redemption, exploring the bond between two brothers—one living and one deceased. As 15-year-old Cris grapples with the tragic death of his twin brother Carlos in a drag racing accident, Carlos, now a ghost, attempts to communicate with him, guiding him through the challenges of uncovering the truth behind the accident, while Cris reconnects with their estranged father, navigates the ravages of grief, and confronts the complex relationships in their small Texas town. The story alternates between the two boys' perspectives, offering a unique exploration of what comes after death—and the enduring connection between loved ones that can cut across time and space.

Ghost Brother is deeply rooted in Mexican American culture, weaving in traditions like spiritual cleansings (limpias), curanderas, and beliefs about life after death. These cultural elements enrich the narrative, adding depth and authenticity to the characters' experiences, as when Cris's Grandma Blanca—a spiritual healer—visits,



Touching examination of love's ability to transcend mortality.

Great for fans of Emily X.R. Pan's *The Astonishing Color of After*, Lauren Oliver's *Before I Fall*.

it comes to her portrayal of grief and healing. Cris's journey from despair to acceptance is both heart-wrenching and uplifting, as he learns to forgive himself, his father, and even those who may not merit forgiveness at first glance. The subplot involving Selena—a mysterious girl with ties to Cris's family—adds intrigue and layers to the story, blending themes of identity, family secrets, and redemption. This heartfelt exploration of familial bonds, cultural heritage, and the hope of life beyond death will resonate with readers who have experienced loss, offering comfort from the belief that love can transcend mortality.

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

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

FICTION

The Snow Melted in August

Aldona Martynenka. Misunderstood, \$10.59 e-book (282p) ASIN BOD9DRTG3F

In Martynenka's passionate if uneven debut, a young woman reflects on her infatuation with a rock star and his untimely death from a drug overdose. As a teen in 2008, Janina travels from Belarus with her rock journalist father to Ukraine, where he's covering a music festival. After catching a set by Rockets, she falls for keyboardist Raman. They later connect over social media, and in 2015, he invites her backstage at concerts in Belarus with his new band. At one point, Raman even declares his love to her from the stage, but he also keeps her at a distance, typically abandoning her after a show to hook up with another woman or do drugs. Janina's friends frequently warn her that Raman isn't good for her, but she persists in obsessing over him and trying to get him help for his addiction to heroin, even as friends start leaving his side. After Raman dies, Janina is plagued by survivor's guilt. The narrative contains some astute observations about the nature of addiction, though they're often delivered in unpolished prose ("I needed the constant embrace of alcohol to shield me from the overwhelming emotions"). Still, it's a convincing depiction of one person's unhealthy pull on another.

Strawberry Gold

Chris Gerrib. World Castle, \$3.99 e-book (275p) ASIN BODJDFSP14

Sci-fi author Gerrib (*One of Our Spaceships Is Missing*) delivers a solid suspense debut. In 1986, high school senior Pat Kowalski is working on an oral history of Eastville, Ill., for his final project. He spends his birthday at his great-grandmother Barb's nursing home in hopes that she might offer up useful stories, but he's unsure how seriously to take her claims that, in 1896, a stranger with gold coins and a gun in his pockets dropped dead outside her Eastville home. Barb tells Pat she found the stranger's bag nearby, which was overflowing with gold, and kept it for decades as a rainy day fund. She says \$12,000 remains, but grows confused

when Pat asks her where it is. With his father dying and his mother facing foreclosure on the family home, Pat sets aside his history project to track down the treasure with only Barb's foggy testimony as his guide. His search catches the attention of his classmate, Vincent "Three Sticks" Bisceglie, who also needs cash, and who proves he'll go to surprising lengths to get it. Gerrib wrings a lot of tense fun out of the treasure hunt, and Pat is an appealingly sensitive teenage lead. This grown-up Goonies riff is a treat.

Unicorns Can Be Deadly: A Discount Detective Mystery

Charlotte Stuart. Walrus, \$17.95 trade paper (266p) ISBN 978-1-940442-51-8

Stuart's fifth Seattle-set whodunit featuring PI Cameron Chandler (after *Moonlight Can Be Deadly*) succeeds as both a mystery and a poignant exploration of homelessness. Cameron works for the scrappy, budget-conscious Penny-wise Investigations, whose office is in a shopping mall. While walking through the mall one afternoon, Cameron spots a young boy fleeing two violent men. She hides the child in her office, feeds him, and asks why he's in trouble. He tells her his name is Cole White, and that he was being followed because he witnessed his pursuers kidnapping a woman named Bess who lived in the same homeless camp as him. Cameron decides to take Cole into her home and investigate the matter pro bono. As she digs, she learns that Bess is just the latest in a string of victims who have been snatched from homeless encampments across the city, and that most of the crimes haven't been reported to the police. Stuart makes Cameron's empathy and anger palpable as she tries to track the kidnapers down, offering a fresh and quietly hopeful spin on noir conventions along the way. This is a winner.

The Sunset Sovereign: A Dragon's Memoir

Laura Huie. Laura Huie, \$2.99 trade paper (196p) ISBN 979-8-8650-9146-2

In this melancholy fantasy, Huie (the Thedre trilogy) unspools a dragon's centuries-long life story. Young warrior Sisal grew up hearing her grandparents'

tales of the monstrous red dragon that has been oppressing the town of Vakfored, hoarding precious materials and devouring any who disobey. Now Sisal is the chosen hero to slay the beast—but when she enters the dragon's cave, he politely introduces himself as Vakandi Foreldri, once known as Life Giver by the people of Vakfored. He promises to "leave Vakfored alone if you listen to my story." The dragon goes on to chronicle how, 800 years prior, he saved a group of humans, orcs, and dwarves from wolves and led them to a safe place to start a village. Over the centuries, he protected the townsfolk from monsters and foreign invaders. Vakfored came to excel in art, music, and magic, but always relied on Vakandi for protection, something the dragon realized too late could bring about the town's downfall. He knew he had to teach the townsfolk to defend themselves, even if it meant they turned on him. It's a promising premise, and though the prose is a bit clunky, Huie imbues Vakandi's backstory with a good mix of sorrow and affection on the way to a heartfelt conclusion. This poignant tale is sure to please dragon lovers.

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