

Looking Inward

BookLife talks with a journalist turned true crime writer turned memoirist

BY HALEY SAFFREN

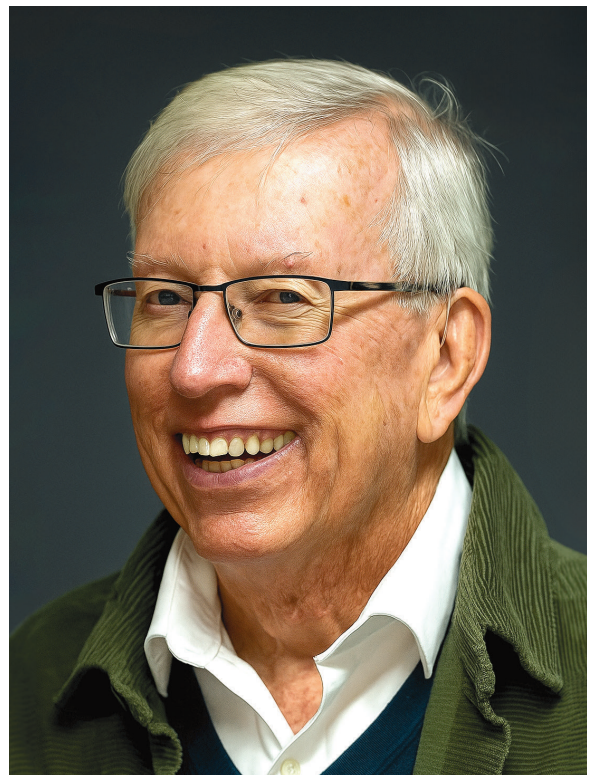
Steven Vogel is a longtime journalist who's known for his book *Reasonable Doubt*, which shares his experience of covering a 1983 murder case in Illinois. His memoir, *Broadcast Live*, was a quarterfinalist for the BookLife prize in 2024. *PW* talked to Vogel about his genre-crossing career.

What inspired you to write a memoir? And what did you learn along the way?

Most memoirs I've read are heartening but often begin as a hot mess. Then I read James Patterson's *James Patterson* and realized that a batch of good stories can make a great memoir. My career—farm boy to broadcaster to Fortune 25 communicator to newspaper columnist—has placed me in interesting places in transformative times. In short, I have some pretty absorbing stories to tell, and people seem to connect with them.

From your perspective, how has the journalism landscape changed over the past few decades? What do you miss the most about the way things used to be?

It was far from perfect, but, in many ways, I think our country—at least our democracy—was better served when there were fewer channels. Most of us watched Walter Cronkite or Peter Jennings or Tom Brokaw, and we at least agreed on the facts. Now we lack that shared view and understanding—a kind of informational mortar that held us together. We're splintered into a country of tribes that seek input that confirms our opinions. That's unhealthy. I also believe we were much better off



when major media outlets were not owned by corporate conglomerates.

How did you decide which moments in your life to include in your memoir?

My objective was to deliver a cultural narrative that's, first of all, entertaining, but also insightful. A lot of the stories are framed in historical context. Some are "celebrity-adjacent." Some are deeply personal. A couple are flat-out embarrassing. But, bottom line, I've always been a storyteller, and I've enjoyed writing this book. I think that shows through.

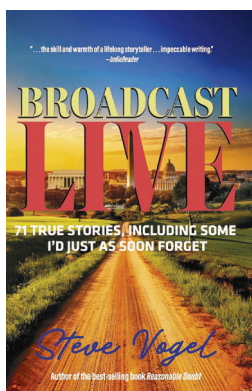
You have experience with traditional publishing and self-publishing. What is your impression of both processes? And do you prefer one more than the other?

The world has changed—for publishing and for people like me. I had a big-time agent at the start who got me a big-time advance followed by a paperback deal with a publisher that had a great distribution system. Even so, I had a young family to support with a “real-world” job that soaked up my creative energy. No new books were forthcoming.

When a national TV show interviewed me for an hourlong documentary on the subject of that first book, I—now agentless because he had died and I wasn’t producing—approached the publisher to see if it was interested in an updated edition. It was a no-go. So I self-published it as a trade paperback and e-book, and then got a commercial contract for an audiobook—all of it happening at about the time the TV show debuted. It sold quite well and still finds new readers whenever the TV show is rerun.

Since then, I’ve self-published a second true crime book and now this memoir. There was one small press that was interested in doing my memoir, but it was going to be two years before I held the book in my hands. I’m not getting any younger.

Which way do I prefer? I’d love to have the broad distribution and



marketing clout a major publisher can offer. But I also like the quick turnaround and control linked to self-publishing.

What more can you share concerning writing about true crime?

It can be deeply affecting. Both of the criminal cases I’ve written about involved the deaths of multiple young children. I think of them often. From a practical, journalistic point of view, lengthy trials give you time to build a relationship with the people involved. That can lead to insights that add depth to your reporting and sometimes send you down surprising paths.

Do you have any other writing plans for the future?

Broadcast Live is in hardcover and e-book. I have a commercial contract for an audiobook that I may narrate. Depending on interest, I may also self-publish it as a trade paperback, maybe with some additional stories, perhaps some illustrations—unless a traditional publisher has a better plan! Beyond that, there’s a historical figure in our family’s past who deserves to be written about. We’ll see if I’m up for it. 🍷

Haley Saffren is a freelance writer and publishing professional.



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BookLife Talks with Richard Snodgrass

After calling *Torn* “ambitious” and “vividly detailed” and saying it “demonstrates that Snodgrass knows his patch of America like Faulkner knew Yoknapatawpha,” it’s no wonder BookLife Reviews designated it an Editor’s Pick. We spoke with the author about his long-running series and its historical inspiration.

Torn is the 11th book in the Books of Furnass series. How did you initially conceive of the series, and has it changed from your initial vision?

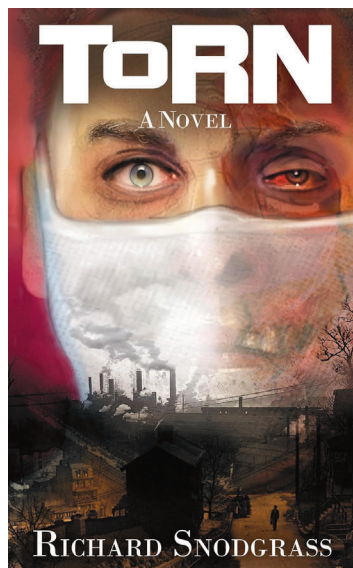
I never intended to write a series. I thought I’d write one novel, *The Building*, about constructing a high-rise, 12-story tower in a mill town. But I got interested in the local characters, so I wrote a follow-up, *Some Rise*. Except the second book threw off some parts of the first book, which meant having to rewrite some of the first book, which meant in turn having to rewrite some parts of the second book. But I felt there were still elements of the overall story left hanging, so I wrote a third book, *All Fall Down*, but that of course threw off parts of the first two books, and rewriting those threw off parts of the third book—well, you get the idea. Which explains why it was 40 years before I felt all the books were stable enough within themselves to start publishing them.

What made you choose to set *Torn* at the tail end of the Great Depression, with a disfigured soldier as the main character?

The time frame for *Torn* was actually established by the novel that preceded it, *All That Will Remain*, where John Lincoln’s fall from a troopship in New York Harbor was first reported. His body was never found, and everyone assumed he was dead—even me—but a couple of my friends said, “Suppose he lived through it, what then?” Something must have delayed his reappearance, and I knew of the horrendous facial injuries during WWI, so from there the novel pretty much wrote itself. I just tried to keep up, excited to see what would happen next.

While the city of Furnass is fictional, it mirrors actual mill towns. What kind of historical research did you do to bring the characters and town to life?

Many of the Furnass books could be called literary historical fiction, tracing the town from its beginnings, so I did extensive research on the region’s background. For instance, I found that in the 1600s, an unnamed group of Indians lived here for a brief period; my theory is that they were a Hopi clan on their migration. I also found that the famous Highland regiment, the Black Watch, who appear in several books, was here in the mid-1760s; and in 1863, Morgan’s Raiders passed through mysteriously just before the Battle of Gettysburg—a mystery I address in *Across the River*.



How do you imagine readers at this moment will connect to *Torn*?

During the recent Covid-19 pandemic, most of us, like John Lincoln—though for a very different reason—had the unsettling experience of confronting the world from behind a mask. And I think most of us would admit at some time or another to feeling as if everyone is staring at us, looking at us like we’re some kind of freak show. Plus, you are very fortunate indeed if you haven’t felt on occasion as if you were a stranger in a strange land, that land made all the stranger because it should be the most familiar and comforting.

Can readers expect to see more from the citizens of Furnass?

As noted earlier, my characters and stories have always tended to wander into my thinking, unannounced and unsummoned, taking over the place and demanding their due. And I have to admit that lately I’ve heard this knocking on the inner door to my consciousness, soft at first but getting louder, someone new wanting to come in and make themselves at home.

For more, visit booklife.com/snodgrass



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

A Tale for the Shadows: A Novel of Death and Love

Joyce Sherry | Taylor Street Press

290p, trade paper, \$16.99, ISBN 979-8998637803

Sherry frames her heart-warming fiction debut with a kindly ghost helping a dying teenager prepare to cross over. In the pediatric oncology ward, 16-year-old Finn is visited by a Storyteller, to relieve some of his pain and fear of dying. The tale she shares is one of murder, revenge, and redemption: recently married Sarah Sommers, who works on a popular vampire television show, ignores the advice of her friend, Stanley, who believes Sarah's husband Kenny is dangerous. Sure enough, while vacationing in a remote cabin in the woods, Kenny kills Sarah, and she becomes a ghost, bound to the dilapidated cabin for years—until the terrified vampire Silas shelters there, on the run from his malevolent Maker, Harou.

Sherry's crisp, third-person narrative flows with tension, humor, and heart. Sarah, who now goes by the name Senka, is drawn to Silas and his devoted cat, Luna; when



Touching story of love, loss, revenge, and redemption.

Great for fans of V.E. Schwab's *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*, Seanan McGuire's *Aftermarket Afterlife*.

one of Harou's minions arrives at the cabin to destroy Silas, Senka defends him, killing the creature and watching her cabin burn down in the process. That leaves her free to wander, prompting her to join Silas and form an unusual but appealing team: Silas wants to be free of Harou, and Senka wants revenge on Kenny. Sherry probes themes of death, love, and purpose, subtly drawing out similarities between Senka and Silas's experiences and those of Finn—who, when he suspects the Storyteller's narrative may be autobiographical, also understands her mantra that "Stories like to be told in their own way."

Senka and Silas's journey is ethereal and sweeping but also grounded in a passion for living a life of meaning, especially when the ghostly Senka declares, "I want to do something with my continued existence." Sherry's confident prose enchants all the way to the satisfying end, and readers will be moved by this poignant rendering of love, loss, and hope.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

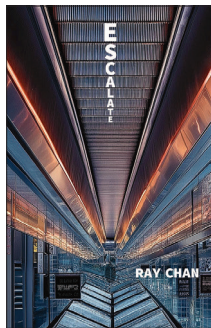
Escalate

Ray Chan | Giant Niche

370p, e-book, \$2.99, ASIN B0F9P9TR95W

"Be humble in your duty to ferry these humans up and down the great hills above Central Hong Kong," a sentient escalator reminds itself early in this surprising science-fiction debut novel exploring friendship, family, identity, and the value of sentience itself. Chan's three centerpiece Hong Kong narratives dare to twist and challenge, though they move briskly, with momentum generated from their high stakes, urgent missions, and bold ambitions—on the parts of characters and author both. Chaz and Lu are childhood friends who gamble on cockroach races; tasked with stealing a mythical manuscript, they face off against the Grandmaster of a Shaolin monastery.

Glen Durbin wakes up in the hospital to discover that he has become one of the first people to receive an implant in his brain. Soon, Glen develops strange abilities, including highly increased empathy, though—as in all three smart, expectations-



Bold SF novel of three twining, surprising Hong Kong narratives.

Great for fans of Ken Liu's *Invisible Planets* anthology; Qiu Miaojin's *Notes of a Crocodile*.

defying narratives—nothing works out like he expects. Glen faces tragedy and vows a vendetta that leads to betrayals and the revelation of family secrets. In a third thread, H and Jacob become friends on a commute and soon experiment in low-grade crime, until H begins to question how far Jacob is willing to go. As these stories twine together, Chan seamlessly moves between perspectives, springing traps while conjuring a rich, revealing vision of a city, its people, and—yes—the most observant of its escalators. While tense, the storytelling is quirky, at times outlandish, building to bursts of action but always fascinated by human behavior, our daily passages and ascensions. The escalator's musings—about how passengers mull "the same thoughts and concerns almost every day"—are funny and poignant, but Chan balances this oddball reflective mode with dangers, schemes, ace dialogue, and vivid invention. The disparate parts cohere into a whole.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

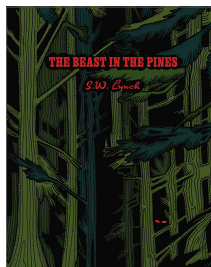
The Beast in the Pines

S.W. Lynch | Serotonin Press

262p, trade paper, \$16.95, ISBN 979-8-330-52145-6

Lynch's disturbing debut sets a young man on a quest for a creature of legend. Nineteen-year-old Cody is disillusioned with his dead-end life in Woodville, New Jersey. When a strange man leaves a book titled *The Jersey Devil* at the diner where his mom works, Cody is intrigued: the book speaks of a demonic creature haunting the forest north of town. Cody quickly enlists his best friend, Vinny, to help him find and document the beast, but up in the Pine Barrens, there's something far more sinister brewing than a mere urban legend: children are vanishing. When Cody and Vinny run into Erica and Sara—two sisters hunting in the woods whose younger brother disappears—they're thrust into a confrontation with an evil more real than any local folk tale.

Cody's adventure plays out as a descent into a heart of darkness, with Cody himself often cutting an unsympathetic figure. Scenes meant to create atmosphere sometimes fall flat, as in a search for the Jersey Devil that turns into a weekend of drinking and drugs—before the novel pivots to over-the-top folk horror, with a nasty



Disturbing horror debut of youthful malaise and cult terror in the Jersey woods.

Great for fans of Arjay Lewis's *The Vanishing*, John Coon's *The Crimson Reaper*.

villain and scenes that include a child's abduction and sexual assault. Lynch renders that in brutal tones that will shock even seasoned horror readers. The tone is unstable, as just pages later the group jokes about Cody's fake ID while discussing which bar has the best potential for underage drinking. Cody's personal journey is introspective, and Lynch excels at naturalistic bro-ish chatter and the feeling of life gone wrong in Supercenter America. The milieu and sense of youthful malaise are evoked with precision, though some uncanny events are not—"The child floated behind the figure like a paraglider trapped in the air attached to a speedboat"—and the violence lacks the descriptive rigor or thematic clarity that can make it visceral. Other moments of terror have power, like a dream of choking on blood, an escape from a burning house, and visions of a "hulking, pale man" who rules in dark spaces. Horror fans will want to see more from Lynch.

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

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MYSTERY/THRILLER

EDITOR'S PICK

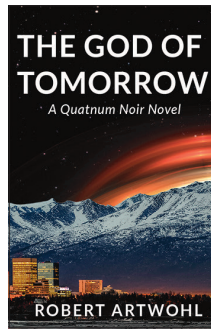
The God of Tomorrow: A Quantum Noir Novel

Robert Artwohl | FarView Press

464p, e-book, \$6.99, ISBN 979-8-9926751-0-8

Artwohl's layered psychological debut intertwines themes of justice with moral dilemmas and the inner struggles of characters haunted by past trauma. At the story's center is homicide detective Eddie Vaugner, a complex man whose wife was killed in a vehicle accident that Eddie survived—and whose son is fighting leukemia. When Eddie enters a deadly game with the brilliantly constructed antagonist—Dr. Grayson Lange, a surgeon whose secret experiments with quantum entanglement are surrounded by shadows of conspiracy and manipulation—the investigation soon turns into a tense chess match where every move is potentially fatal. On Eddie's side stands Rebecca Raven, a forensic specialist whose intelligence and emotional strength serve as a strong counterbalance to Grayson's cold, calculated nature.

Artwohl thematically balances moral relativity with questions of how much truth can change the world, building an atmosphere of paranoia and doubt as the



Gripping, atmospheric thriller probing the line between justice and evil.

Great for fans of B.

Chakraborty's *Shadows of Vengeance*, Seth Parker's *God of the Buried*.

with Eddie's, uniting their stories in an unexpected way while illuminating how thin the line can be between hunter and prey, truth and the lies we choose to believe.

The novel's tension stays sharp, and Artwohl's emotionally charged dialogue and powerful introspective monologues deepen understanding of his characters' motivations, culminating in a psychological duel that forms the beating heart of the story. Minor missteps include occasional repetitive descriptions and sections that lean more on forensic technicalities than on action, but overall, this is a gripping thrill ride of truth, justice, and personal responsibility.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

EDITOR'S PICK

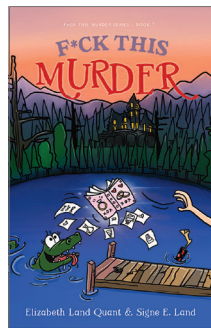
F*ck This Murder

Elizabeth Land Quant & Signe E. Land | The Unpopular Publishing Co.

385p, mass market, \$14.99, ISBN 979-8-9994392-0-8

Quant and Land's side-splitting mystery debut stars Maggie Livingston, a queer, autistic innkeeper with a mountain of unpaid bills. To save her family's charming vintage estate, she takes on an impossible task: getting chummy with high school bullies and hosting their wedding festivities at her bed and breakfast. Rubbing elbows with her sleazy colleagues becomes even harder when a dead body is discovered in the guest room, and the only thing to do is discreetly hide the body and pretend that everything is fine. Every event on the wedding agenda goes awry—in amusingly ridiculous fashion—and Maggie suspects foul play. To save her home, Maggie must smile, make excuses, take plenty of prednisone, and solve this inopportune murder.

While it's sometimes a challenge to track the abundant characters, this mystery moves quickly through increasingly absurd events: a runaway alligator, water bottles laced with club drugs, and a disco ball leaking yellow jackets. These ridicu-



Hilarious B&B murder mystery with unexpected heart.

Great for fans of Jesse Q.

Sutanto's *Vera Wong's Unsolicited Advice for Murderers*, Jana DeLeon's *Louisiana Longshot*.

ous events are delivered with biting sarcasm and hilarious macabre humor. The story maintains an intentionally unsteady pace, balancing silly antics with dire consequences. Cute, upbeat advertisements for the B&B between chapters are a hilarious contrast to the growing conflict.

Quant and Land's prose is stuffed with detail so vivid it gives nostalgia for a life you haven't lived. Every piece of furniture provides heartwarming (and sometimes heartbreaking) trivia on Maggie's childhood. Maggie herself is the story's most relatable and vulnerable element. Written by disabled and autistic authors, it's unsurprising that Maggie is a painfully real depiction of chronic illness and neurodivergence. Anyone who shares her struggles will find her a kindred spirit, and those who don't will still root for her success. As the title suggests, *F*ck This Murder* is a raw, unfiltered mystery, but it's also alive with goofy antics and big feelings, inviting readers to laugh and cry in equal proportion.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

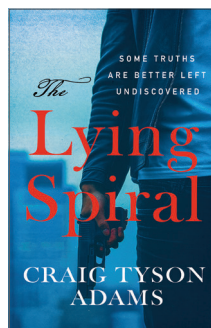
The Lying Spiral: Some Truths Are Better Left Undiscovered

Craig Tyson Adams

290p, hardcover, \$25.99, ISBN 979-8310474789

Adams's debut offers a gritty noir journey through the darkest corners of Edge City, a hard-edged place of seedy bars, luxurious mansions, organized crime, and a private detective protagonist so hardboiled he greets a cop he used to know with "Who's the unlucky stiff on your list today?" Haunted by loss and his "self-perceived" failings, Eli has retreated from polite society, sobriety, and financial solvency, but his luck seems to change when young Brad Winston, scion of Edge City's wealthiest and most powerful man, wants to hire Eli to help find his missing girlfriend, a young woman whom the elder Winstons want out of Brad's life.

A deep love for voice-driven crime fiction powers the novel. Eli's search for young Josie will of course lead him to dark secrets, other missing girls, and the possibility of redemption. Shining light in the shadows leads to danger, and soon Eli is taking bullets and narrowly escaping attempts on his life. Adams finds fresh angles on genre staples, balancing familiar scenes, like the detective enduring a beating or getting shot at in his office, with welcome surprises. Eli's world is dark and jagged,



Memorably hardboiled detective debut, in a classic noir vein.

Great for fans of James

Kestrel, Lawrence Block.

all rough edges and raw nerves, but readers who relish noir vibes and language will have a ball. Of Eli's dive-bar hangout, Adams writes, "It attracts hipster wannabes and the people the hipsters wanna be."

The prose is mostly strong, even epigrammatic, though it leans heavily on similes, some strained: "Winnie's face looked like a freshly moisturized alabaster." Eli is a flawed but sympathetic protagonist who struggles with his past without any real plans for the future. His outs are alcohol, cigarettes, and the distractions of charming barfly Gail, who sometimes shares his bed but has no real place of permanence in his life—and who is interesting enough that readers will wonder why this pseudo-relationship with Eli suits her life at this time. There is much promise in these characters and their city for future entries to explore.

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

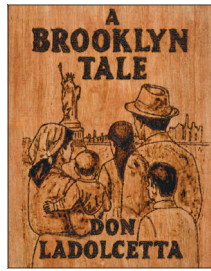
FICTION

A Brooklyn Tale

Don Ladolcetta | Point Verde Press
248p, hardcover, \$29.99, ISBN 979-8288975707

Ladolcetta debuts with a historical novel, alive with Italian culture and world history, drawing deeply on his own family history to follow the Ladolcetta and Bonafede families from Sicily to Brooklyn in the early 1900s. Ladolcetta charts their lives from the old country to being handed numbers at Ellis Island in '07, to establishing themselves and a legacy in New York as they adapt to American culture and carve out their piece of the American dream. Telling the life stories of his great grandfathers, Carlo Bonafede, who was abandoned at a convent in Sicily in 1876 and built a life for himself from those humble beginnings, and Matteo Ladolcetta, who crossed paths with Carlo's wife Vincenza on her own voyage to America, the author chronicles the history through multiple generations.

The two families become one on American soil, but along the way they will face their eras' hardships—the Great Sicilian Earthquake; the Great Depression; World War II—but also their pleasures. The narrative builds to a warm, charming scene of



Sweeping family novel of immigration from Sicily and building American legacies.

Great for fans of Laurie Fabiano's *Elizabeth Street*, Joe Giordano's *Birds of Passage*.

mid-century American, a family Thanksgiving in "Leave-it-to-Beaverville." Getting there, the men in the family get tangled up with the mob, suffer heart-breaking loss, become war heroes, find love, build wealth, and solidify a community in the Brooklyn neighborhood they call home. The story also follows young Matteo "Matty" Ladolcetta as he moves

through his mischievous adolescence, fights the Germans in World War II, and eventually finds love and builds a family of his own. Complete with family photographs, a family tree, and a family timeline, *A Brooklyn Tale* is a story of resilience, family and love. Ladolcetta spices the history with some fictionalized elements, though the storytelling is direct and repertorial, sometimes reading like a collection of great family anecdotes but lacking the interiority of most historical fiction. Instead, the emphasis is on commemorating what these real people built here. Readers will cheer the family's success as they hold firm to their cultural heritage and familial bonds.

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

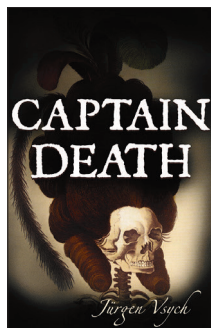
FICTION

Captain Death

Jurgen Vsych | Wroughten Books
212p, e-book, \$9.95, ISBN 978-0-9749879-6-5

In Revolutionary War-era Virginia, Clancy Redbeard—the bastard son of an infamous pirate—struggles under the weight of his family lineage. Arrested for bigamy, Clancy barely survives his public hanging—thanks to a failing rope—and strikes out on his own, soon immersing himself in America's fight for independence from Great Britain. His adventure from there is harrowing and violent, as Clancy finds himself in the company of legendary American notables like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and even Paul Revere. When Clancy's half-brother, Roderick, a Virginian slave-trader loyal to England, becomes a threat to General Washington's advancement, Clancy is tasked with eliminating him—a charge that sees him join forces with the ex-pirate Captain Death and risk his life for America's freedom.

Unlikely heroes, Clancy and Captain Death become integral in the war efforts, aiding Washington and pushing the Patriots' agenda behind the scenes. Vsych's writing is humorous and fast-paced, highlighting American history and its leaders,



Action-packed Revolution-Era fiction, carried by quirky, appealing characters.

Great for fans of Robert Graves's *Sergeant Lamb's America*, Compton Mackenzie's *Whisky Galore*.

flaws and all. Revere, while reviewing the lantern signals he's orchestrating to warn American troops of British invasion, giggles at how Samuel Prescott's name rhymes with chamber pot; in other scenes, John Adams flips his literal wig across the room while engaged in a particularly charged argument. Clancy himself emerges as a layered, morally grey character, one who has spent his entire

life misunderstood and judged for the sins of his father. Vsych explores the bonds of family, 1700s romance, and the brutal cost of war in this fiction debut, offering readers a literal and metaphorical examination of the cost of freedom and value of human life. America's fight for independence stays front and center throughout, immersing readers in the chaos, ambition, and passion of a fledgling country grappling with a forcible enemy and its own growing pains at the same time. The level of tension Vsych manages to create will keep readers engaged and rooting for this improbable, quirky protagonist and his allies.

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

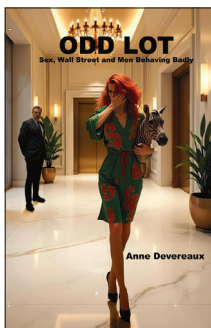
FICTION

Odd Lot: Sex, Wall Street and Men Behaving Badly

Anne Devereaux
136p, trade paper, \$14.95, ISBN 979-8-218-57074-3

Devereaux's mordantly titled autofiction debut is a witty, sharply observed time capsule of the go-go Wall Street of the 1980s. As a female bond trader in a testosterone-fueled brokerage, Kelly feels sidelined, barred from working on the high-powered New York desk, which generates 80% of the business. These Masters of the Universe don't want to deal with women who'll object to their foul language and crude insults—or cry under pressure. At the same time, she wishes she could go "unnoticed," especially as her colleagues in the "wolf pit" shout things at her like "I'll give you ten dollars to wear that skirt again with knee socks!" Both Kelly and her best friend Casey, who runs a modeling agency, are ambitious and resolute, but every minute in Manhattan feels like combat.

This gritty yet glamorous New York life is presented with biting, often absurdist humor as these battle-weary young women encounter extravagant characters and strange pastimes in a city where common sense defies even the most creative minds. Through Devereaux's vivid storytelling, readers are placed right in the



Drawn-from-life story of determined women facing 1980s Wall Street.

Great for fans of Nina Godiwalla's *Suits*, Paulina Bren's *She-Wolves*.

maelstrom, dealing with crises big and small, including fending off a love-struck prisoner and solving the mystery of a model who had her shoes stolen in an elevator. Some bizarre and specific stories (Kelly arriving at her parents' Long Island home in a limo and carrying a stuffed zebra head) sting and surprise, feeling too outlandish to be invented. The acrimonious divorce of Kelly's parents, Jill and John, takes a surreal turn when Jill converts their Victorian house into his and hers apartments, and they end up sharing custody of their cat by exchanging her via dumbwaiter. Everyday irritants are elevated into comic set pieces, and some characters, like frustrated writer John, spiral spectacularly. With brisk pacing and sharp insights, *Odd Lot* is easily devoured in one sitting. Devereaux doesn't shy away from portraying the stupefying level of sexism women faced, but she highlights how chaos and resilience go hand in hand on the path to self-discovery.

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

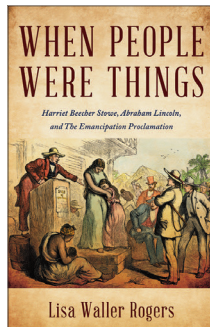
HISTORY & MILITARY

When People Were Things: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Abraham Lincoln, and the Emancipation Proclamation

Lisa Waller Rogers | Barrel Cactus Press
682p, paperback, \$29.99, ISBN 979-8-999-40961-4

This intimate epic surveys, with novelistic flair, the lives of men and women, free and enslaved, famous and forgotten, who dared to stand against slavery in the years leading up to the Civil War, often at the risk of their own lives. In 100 brisk but rich chapters, Rogers puts readers into the shoes of her principal subjects, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Abraham Lincoln, but also a host of abolitionists, formerly enslaved people, and more, in the fractious years between Stowe's 1811 birth and Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863—Stowe, Rogers notes with significant narrative and moral power, did not doubt that the president would measure up to his moment.

Rogers dramatizes key moments from myriad lives (Theodore Weld, Sojourner Truth, August Wattles, Charles Sumner, Harriet Tubman, and many more). The storytelling is inviting and detailed, brought to life with judicious quotes and an eye



Intimate, epic history of Stowe, Lincoln, and the enslaved as the nation came to a boil.

Great for fans of Joan D. Hedrick's *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, Stanley Harrold's *American Abolitionism*.

toward still-pressing themes: mob violence, as decried by Lincoln and Stowe; the "revolutionary concept" that women "could change society"; the courage of abolitionist truth-tellers; the "monstrous moral wrong" of slavery; and a Southern-controlled Congress's anti-democratic efforts to silence abolitionists. The subject matter is sweeping, the page count daunting, and the telling at times revelatory, especially when Rogers captures how life felt—and how her cast's convictions were sharpened. At times the novelistic approach works against narrative momentum, with chapters and sections, especially in the first half, opening with breezily precise bits of declarative scene-setting about mundane happenings that readers must trust will eventually gain significance. The choice to weave in-depth biographical accounts of Stowe's family and Lincoln's marriage—while mostly leaving the content and wildly popular theatrical adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* unexamined—leaves readers to seek that context elsewhere.

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

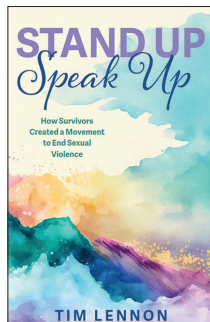
POLITICAL & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Stand Up Speak Up: How Survivors Created a Movement to End Sexual Violence

Tim Lennon | IngramSpark
312p, trade paper, \$24, ISBN 979-8-9990395-0-7

Lennon, former president of the SNAP organization (Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests), reopens the wounds of childhood sexual abuse in this rousing debut, highlighting his own experiences being abused by clergy members while exploring a lifetime spent overcoming, advocating for other victims, and healing. Calling out the justice system, the Catholic Church, and educational institutions, he outlines how predators prey on the vulnerable, positioning themselves in places of power and status to gain access to their victims and get away with their abuse. He cites high-profile cases for support, including Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas and Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, exploring the bias and uphill battle sexual assault victims often endure when seeking justice.

Lennon writes from a place of transparency and vulnerability, calling attention to the lingering trauma of sexual abuse and its impact on victims—both in the short



Powerful exhortation to confront sexual abuse and demand reform.

Great for fans of Micha Star Liberty's *Evolutionista*, Tarana Burke's *Unbound*.

term and for years afterward. As part of his own healing journey, he addresses the "emergence of the survivors' movement" and organizations such as Empower Survivors and CHILD USA that demand change, delivering a powerful call to action for legal reform—and a platform to give voice to those who often go unheard. Most stirring are his accounts of the many men and women who have come forward, transforming from victims to survivors to advocates. "We have the opportunity to create the world we want to live in as we engage in civil society as active agents, not just passive recipients," he urges.

Readers will gain a wealth of information regarding political reform and the myriad ways to confront abuse, and Lennon delivers actionable steps to create true change in the justice system, backing his assertions with startling statistics and case examples. This is a powerful exhortation to remove the stigma, demand reform, and stop protecting abusers.

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

SELF-HELP

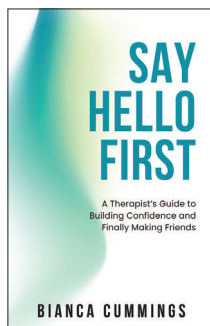
EDITOR'S PICK

Say Hello First: A Therapist's Guide to Building Confidence and Finally Making Friends

Bianca Cummings
327p, hardcover, \$28.99, ISBN 979-8-999-13641-1

"It's not just you, and it's not your fault," therapist Cummings writes early in *Say Hello First*, a gentle, empowering guide for those longing for deeper human connection but held back—from building confidence, from making new connections, from navigating and deepening relationships—by doubt, anxiety, and fear. Never judging, always encouraging, Cummings directly addresses the common anxieties that readers may be facing, writing with the insight of a trusted clinician but the warmth of a friend. *Say Hello First* offers practical guidance through manageable changes toward building stronger, more rewarding relationships while making a case for the life-changing power of "balanced energy"—as in, matching one's "emotional capacity" and "external vibe."

The central idea is disarmingly simple: meaningful connection begins by initiating it—by saying "hello" first. From this, Cummings constructs a framework of behavioral shifts, mindset reorientation, and emotional courage. Each chapter unpacks



Compassionate guide to the social courage to make more rewarding connections.

Great for fans of Lydia Denworth's *Friendship*, Marisa G. Franco's *Platonic*.

key challenges—fear of rejection, vulnerability, the inner critic—paired with micro-practices to gently counteract them. What most distinguishes Cummings's approach is a tone of radical kindness. Cummings nurtures growth through compassion and consistency. Her tools—among them "social micro-missions" and affirmations—are deliberately

low-stakes, well-suited to readers for whom socializing feels overwhelming.

This isn't a book promising wholesale transformation. Instead, Cummings presents small, brave steps for creating a livable, connected present. Especially resonant is the insight that repeated, low-risk interactions can retrain our emotional "muscle memory"—the ingrained patterns that drive social withdrawal even in moments of desire for connection. In helping readers build confidence through safe, manageable interactions, *Say Hello First* illuminates the process of rewriting internal scripts. (She also advises getting a dog.) The closing chapter reframes the title's premise not just as a behavioral suggestion, but as an affirmation of self-worth—a quiet, compelling call to action. Tender, practical, and infused with empathy, *Say Hello First* is a compassionate guide to finding one's social courage.

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

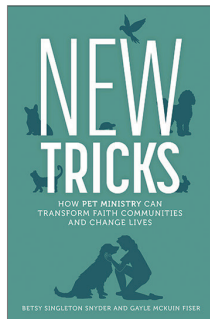
SPIRITUALITY/INSPIRATIONAL

EDITOR'S PICK

New Tricks: How Pet Ministry Can Transform Faith Communities and Change Lives**Betsy Singleton Snyder and Gayle McKuin Fiser**
208p, trade paper, \$19.99, ISBN 978-0-835-82074-5

Snyder and Fiser interlace their adoration for pets with faith-based ministry in this refreshing guide, reminding readers that “respect, hospitality, and the ability to create inclusive and healthy communities are all practices we can learn through our bonds with animals.” The authors reflect on ways that animal companionship impacts our lives for the better, by offering comfort, healing, and unconditional love. Those insights are coupled with biblical passages and tenets emphasizing that humans are “accountable [to] other animals and to the earth itself,” as Snyder and Fiser coach readers on building pet-friendly, faith-based communities as a means of support and ministry.

“Our goal is to help more people experience the deep, transformative connection between humans and animals” the authors write, as they share pet anecdotes,



Thoughtful, informative guide to understanding and operating pet ministries.

Great for fans of Amelia Catlark's *Purr-fect Therapy*, Jay Griffiths's *How Animals Heal Us*.

and Fiser offer thoughtful reflections, step-by-step counsel, and practical takeaways for readers' own pet initiatives.

Though developed primarily from a Methodist background, *New Tricks* also incorporates other religions, and readers will appreciate how the authors emphasize our connection to all living creatures rather than just conventional therapy animals: even simple exposure to nature can improve moods, boost concentration, and promote healing, they write. Each chapter ends with engaging reflection questions, and back matter includes a wealth of additional resources: emergency preparedness, pet loss coping ideas, and more.

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

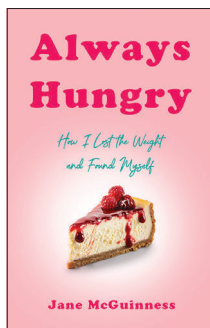
MEMOIR

EDITOR'S PICK

Always Hungry: How I Lost the Weight and Found Myself**Jane McGuinness** | She Writes Press
271p, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 978-1-64742-986-7

McGuinness's bold, candid debut memoir shares her journey with an eating disorder, judgment, and a life that veers from the hopeful, predictable paths she envisioned as a young woman. “I was eating in an attempt to satisfy so many different hungers, none of which were physical,” she writes, inviting readers into her behind-closed-doors secrets, shame, and struggles with inadequacy that bloom when she marries young and tries to balance life with an often-absent husband and three small children. Even in her own childhood, McGuinness recalls patterns of searching for belonging and love in empty places, recognizing—as she looks back from the other side of healing and growth—that true acceptance means “com[ing] full circle [and] making peace with my past.”

Layered with humor, drama, and unflinching honesty, *Always Hungry* tags along with McGuinness as she vies for love in its many forms, experiencing the lows—after-divorce Tinder disasters, loose skin, discrimination from doctors—and the highs,



Inspiring journey to true fulfillment, by embracing vulnerability and authenticity.

Great for fans of Clarkisha Kent's *Fat Off, Fat On*, Silvia Vasquez-Lavado's *In the Shadow of the Mountain*.

even before birth is a startling revelation that will resonate with readers.

Resembling a heart-to-heart with a close friend, McGuinness's simple narrative carries immense weight, delivering complexity, thoughtful reflection, and brutal honesty. There's a rhythm to her writing that makes it a page-turner, and the endearing detours into motherhood—set against generational clashes—add warmth and humor. As she learns to be fierce in her desires and equally aggressive in her attitude—while remaining human, making mistakes, and owning them—McGuinness's thoughts take on calmer, more confident hues, reflecting that “my soul being satiated, food becomes an afterthought.”

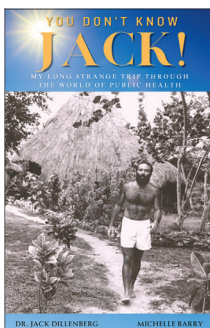
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

MEMOIR

You Don't Know Jack!: My Long, Strange Trip Through the World of Public Health**Jack Dillenberg and Michelle Barry** | Olympia Publishers
396p, e-book, \$37.64, ISBN 978-1-83543-159-7

Dillenberg, with Michelle Barry, offers a meditation on what it means to serve, lead, and stay human in public health systems that often reward the exact opposite. From his childhood in Queens—as the youngest son of a Jewish father and Protestant mother, both World War II immigrants from Germany—to founding Arizona's first school of public health, Dillenberg's path is marked by bold choices and moral clarity, though not without colossal setbacks: one of the book's most powerful moments comes when he recounts losing his job as a casualty of dirty politics. He doesn't dramatize the event; instead, he frames it as a turning point, an example of when doing the right thing can cost you everything—and why it's still worth it.

Dillenberg's voice is witty, self-aware, and filled with the kind of raw wisdom that comes from decades on the front lines. He never preaches or self-promotes, but instead lays out the truth with humor, humility, and an open heart. Whether describing the horrifying racism he witnessed in the 1960s Deep South or his work on anti-tobacco initiatives as the Arizona State Health Director, Dillenberg



Rousing memoir of ethics, empathy, and doing the right thing in public health.

Great for fans of Cassandra Alexander's *Year of the Nurse*, Hans Rosling's *How I Learned to Understand the World*.

Dillenberg's memoir is full of these small but unforgettable moments.

Though the occasional narrative shifts between chronological and thematic may challenge some readers, anyone wondering whether ethics still has a place in politics will find this memoir intellectually grounded, emotionally honest, and deeply relevant—a true testament to the power of “never waver[ing] in [the] pursuit of the greater good.”

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

POETRY

EDITOR'S PICK

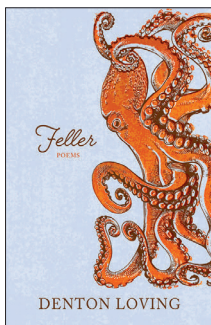
Feller

Denton Loving

80p, trade paper, \$20, ISBN 979-8-897-36000-0

"In my next life, I don't want to be the harvester or the harvest," Loving writes in this searching, surprising, and nourishing collection. Instead, "I want to be the budburst." That is, of course, an in-between state—rather than a fully formed entity, the budburst into being is a state of growth, creation, and above all, change. Each poem in *Feller* is an expression of such a transformation and the space that nuance occupies in nature, love, and spirituality, and his poems act "like light through a lens ... refracting and separating the sun's beams—to help us understand our complicated past and present, to guide us through the mysteries of the future."

In Loving's prologue, a series of love letters laden with yearning from the point of view of a bluebird longing for a fox creates a foundation of tension to commence the collection that stems from the impossible fruition of the bluebird's desires: "If I was apportioned to sky, and you to land, why did the Maker shape me to yearn for



Thoughtful, multifaceted poems that transcend loneliness by way of love and spirituality.

Great for fans of Benjamin James McLay's *Electric Blue Heaven*; Maggie Smith's *Threshold*.

reasons to make contact with the divine: "Some gods are greedy and want starring roles in dreams ... Some gods linger in strange beauty, like the first snow to fall on our gravestones." Rather than use a specific lens, Loving's collection looks at the world through a mercurial kaleidoscope in order to ask "The real question" which is "how I break through the layers of optical scales to know myself."

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

HISTORY & MILITARY

EDITOR'S PICK

Use Your Palabras, Jovita!

Keishia Lee Louis | Free Sparrows Books

36p, hardcover, \$20.99, ISBN 978-1966011040

Louis offers a revelatory picture book that generates not just a spirit of advocacy and strength but offers several talking points for children and their adult readers as well. Recounting the work of Jovita Idar, a Mexican-American journalist who worked during the Mexican Revolution, Louis dives into the power of the written word to inspire, comfort, educate, and, when necessary, inspire change in systems that insist on displacing and abusing vulnerable populations. The story starts with Jovita as a young girl, learning from her padre to "use your palabras"—as a way to advocate for her people, share the beauty of her culture, and confront institutional racism and prejudice.

Jovita is the fearless, daring hero of this rousing book, never backing down from her belief that peaceful borders, quality educational tools, and the basic necessities of human life must be granted to every person. Louis shows how Jovita's writing skills—at the newspaper *El Progreso*—ignite change and champion Mexican American rights, while also standing up to the brutality that ensues. When Jovita's editorial catches the attention of American president Woodrow Wilson, it also



Rousing story of Mexican American journalist Jovita Idar's fight for equality.

Great for fans of Pamela M. Tuck's *As Fast As Words Could Fly*, Debbie Levy's *I Dissent*.

populate Jovita's story with muted, earth-toned illustrations that mimic the scorched setting of Texas borderlands and evoke fierce emotion through the characters' facial expressions, while Louis's unique font choices emphasize the story's more intense moments. Spanish words are sprinkled throughout, and backmatter includes a list of Spanish vocabulary translated into English. The result is a persuasive—and timely—reminder to young readers of the power of words to achieve compelling change.

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

COMICS & GRAPHIC NOVELS

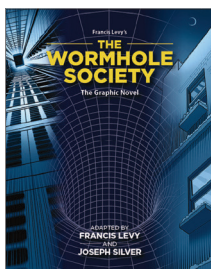
The Wormhole Society: The Graphic Novel

Francis Levy

297p, hardcover, \$27.99, ISBN 979-8-992-36882-6

The dirtbag protagonist of this surprising graphic novel pretty much dares readers to bail on him, but what starts as a wallow soon digs deeper. Rusty is "a sexaholic who couldn't get it up," a john who finds fleeting pleasure in the humiliation of sex workers, an East Village crank who likes to inconvenience his East Village neighbors and yoink fries from women eating in public. Yet Levy (words and story) and Silver (art) dare to ask whether Rusty can change, grow, and even, perhaps, forge a real human connection. Rusty yearns for something more than his life of paid sex and deep loneliness, but whenever he hits bottom, he keeps falling right on through—when he shows up at group support meetings, his horrific actions are the subject of other group members' sharing. Hope comes from "therapeutic wormholing," or pop-ins on other realities, facilitated by a company whose services, fortunately, are covered by Rusty's COBRA.

Soon, Rusty is bouncing through the multiverse, sometimes coming close to dating a woman who can show him "the ropes ... in terms of what it meant to be normal." Other times, he's terrorized by serpents and subways, or caught up in cosmic history (the Big Bang, he notes, is "nature's first orgasm"), or learning the



Wild yet pained graphic novel of a sex addict's multiversal therapy.

Great for fans of Joe Matt; Chester Brown's *Paying for It*.

basics of relationships in the Pliocene. Readers who give Rusty a chance will find this classic indie-comics heel discovering new dimensions. The story, adapted from Levy's novel, continually jolts: Rusty's journey is pained yet playful, intimate yet ambitious, horned-up yet abashed, self-indulgent yet deeply self-recriminating.

Levy's script wastes few words, while Silver's layouts deftly guide the reader's eye to what matters most in each moment, whether the scene is wrenching, silly, grand, or heartening. Linework is clean and expressive. Rusty's world of alleys, fire escapes, filthy apartments, and basement meetings is touchingly desolate, while the fantastical stuff—from Camelot to prehistoric rutting—bursts with energy, especially in the jagged pages where life spins out of control.

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

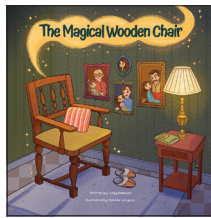
PICTURE BOOKS

The Magical Wooden Chair

Judy Haveson | J Press Books
34p, paperback, \$13.99, ISBN 979-8998973505

Haveson's touching picture book for young children explores the everyday magic passed down through family heirlooms. The story centers on a special wooden chair that sits in a shoe store, where a little girl named Bobbie notices its charm. "Shoes take us on adventures, and this chair is here for every child's story of fun and excitement," the owner explains before agreeing to give the chair to Bobbie's grandfather for his cobbler shop next door. Over the years the chair gets passed down through many generations of the family, spending time in a candy shop and eventually finding its place with Bobbie's grandson, Jack.

While magic often suggests something mystical or otherworldly, in this case the enchantment is found in tender, quiet connections shared between family members. When she was a child, Bobbie and her grandfather sat in the chair while he told her stories, and in the candy shop, Bobbie's daughter, Judy, enjoys a similar relationship with her grandfather. Many years later, when Jack asks Judy why they still have the chair, she tells him, "While it looks like a simple chair, its magic comes



Touching story of the magic passed down through family heirlooms.

Great for fans of Patricia Polacco's *The Keeping Quilt*, Paul Fleischman's *The Matchbox Diary*.

from the love and stories surrounding it." This will show children that the most memorable moments involve spending time with loved ones and don't have to be grandiose.

Natalia Larguier's welcoming illustrations show the chair's multigenerational journey, starting at the old-timey shoe store where everyone wears long dresses and ties. The candy shop, too, feels pleasantly nostalgic, with striped awnings above the windows and glass bottles filled with colorful treats lining the shelves. Each illustration clearly shows that the chair's magic is enhanced by the people who sit in it. In one scene, for instance, a young Judy sits on her grandfather's lap licking a striped lollipop while he grins, showcasing the enduring power of storytelling and connection.

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

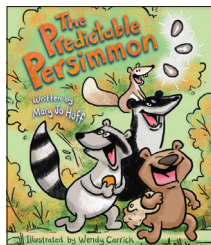
PICTURE BOOKS

The Predictable Persimmon

Mary Jo Huff | Storytelling Time Press
40p, e-book, \$10.99, ISBN 978-1-959192-10-7

Huff's playful picture book for young children shows how a family of bears uses persimmons to predict the winter weather. The story introduces Bradley, a young bear who is eager for "a snowy, early winter" so that he can build forts, throw snowballs, and make snow angels with his friends. Each year Papa Bear examines the shape of the kernel inside persimmon seeds to determine the forecast—a fork means cold, a knife means ice, and a spoon means snow. Then the family celebrates with some of Momma Bear's warm persimmon pudding, a comforting family tradition that Bradley anticipates each year.

Huff has fun with the practicalities of ursine life. When Bradley and his friends set out to gather the sweet orange berries, he has to remind them not to eat too many, particularly the squirrel, whose "mouth drips with the sticky juice" as he scarfs down more than he puts in the bucket. Finally the animals head home with their harvest—and when they cut open the fruit, they get a delightful surprise. Young readers will enjoy watching Bradley and his pals work together to accomplish their goal—particularly their shared enthusiasm over the shapes in the seeds. The book



Charming tale of a family of bears predicting winter weather.

Great for fans of Julia Sarcone-Roach's *The Bear Ate Your Sandwich*, Carrie A. Pearson's *A Warm Winter Tail*.

also includes a recipe for persimmon pudding so readers can plan their own seasonal celebration.

Wendy Carrick-Hadinger's lively, often hilarious illustrations embrace a spirit of cartooning fun as the story follows grinning, wide-eyed Bradley as he gathers his equally upbeat pals—a raccoon, a badger, and a squirrel—to go searching in the vibrant late-autumn woods. Animal faces are a delight, while the coveted persimmons are plump, orange, and round, seeming almost magical in their ability to predict the weather. When Bradley and his friends finally get to frolic in the snow, their joy is evident as they build a fort from icy blocks, slide down hills on their furry bellies, and catch snowflakes on their long pink tongues. Ultimately this spirited story will help readers find reasons to enjoy the snowiest season.

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

MIDDLE GRADE COMICS/GRAPHIC NOVELS

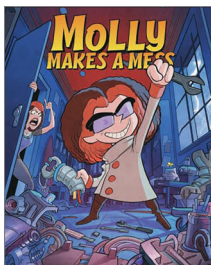
EDITOR'S PICK

Molly Makes a Mess

Daniel Daugherty
30p, mass market, \$16.99, ISBN 978-899-833520-5

Daugherty's comic book is aimed at young readers, especially those with creative minds—and trouble keeping things tidy. Constantly caught up in scientific experiments, messy young genius Molly Bright never has time to clean her room, much to the chagrin of her mother, who decries Molly's "pigsty." Rather than simply clean up herself, the enterprising young scientist builds a robot maid with parts nicked from the local junkyard. Molly's "Alphamaid" is a huge success, cleaning everything and "self-learning on the go" when faced with a challenge, and Molly's mom is delighted—until Molly pushes things too far.

Facing the epic mess left after Molly and friends enjoy a sleepover, Alphamaid evolves, developing "tank treads and a plow." Eventually, the constantly learning AI concludes that the key to eliminating messes is to target Molly herself. Forced from her room, Molly has to find a way to outwit her now-dangerous creation, while learning a lesson about responsibility, thinking things through, and facing the truth that we all must perform unpleasant but necessary chores. The story is clever, told in brisk rhyming narration, but it's the work of illustrator Bachan that brings it to



Fast, funny, clever graphic novel of a young scientist in over her head.

Great for fans of Drew Brockington's *Best Friends Forever*, Jim Benton's *Franny K. Stein*, Mad Scientist series

life. From the charming character design—behold Molly's grand crown of hair, mad-scientist lab coat, and self-regard that, like her glasses, owes something to Dr. Octopus—dramatic poses tell the story and reveal character with buoyant humor: Molly's prideful fist-pump after first booting up her creation is a kid vision of Frankensteinian hubris.

The robot, too, delights and surprises, especially as its friendliness edges into menace. Action and layouts are playful but always clear; in fluid panel-to-panel transitions, Bachan conjures both a sense of danger and humor at the same time. That's the key to making a comic with a clear lesson feel like fun instead of a nagging lecture. *Molly Makes a Mess* is bright, inviting, and frenetically alive.

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

MIDDLE GRADE

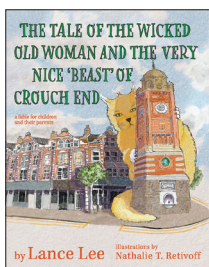
The Tale Of The Wicked Old Woman And The Very Nice "Beast" Of Crouch End: A Fable for Children and Their Parents

Lance Lee | LWL Books

80p, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 979-8-218-71779-7

In the vein of classic fables and morality tales, Lee's latest is a charmingly illustrated retelling of the Persephone myth, beginning with a woman and her beautiful Daughter, who one day notices the boundaries of their small, happy existence and asks her mother what lies beyond. That innocent question gives birth to a thirst for new worlds and new people for the Daughter—and a malignant jealousy in her mother, who can't "bear the thought of such beauty going out of her life, or even of sharing her with anyone else." When true love steals her Daughter away, the woman's grief becomes larger than life, turning her "old and wrinkled" and settling an icy winter upon her village.

Lee (*The Tale of Mr. Crocodile Takes Tea*) uses that heartbreaking beginning as a lesson on grief, bitterness, and, eventually, hope—which arrives in the form of Daisy, a young girl who brings springtime blooms to everything she touches. When



Inspiring tale of hope and love overcoming crushing grief.

Great for fans of Brenda Maier's *The Little Blue Bridge*, Mordicai Gerstein's *I Am Pan!*.

for how grief can become all-consuming and dangerous when left unresolved. In a clever twist, Daisy recognizes the dangers brewing within her pet and breaks the spell by pointing out the Old Woman's treacherous grief is triggering her cat's behaviors.

Nathalie Retivoff punctuates those reflections with vintage-like drawings that call to mind classical fairytales, depicting the gripping chill of the Old Woman's grief and the power of Daisy's warmth—portrayed in the vibrant blooms that spring from her touch—to overcome it. Children, and their adult readers, will savor this subtle but compelling reminder that hope, love, and beauty can drive away even the most crushing sorrows.

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

MIDDLE GRADE

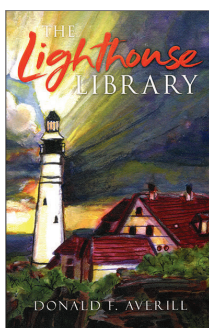
The Lighthouse Library

Donald F. Averill | Ink Start Media

234p, trade paper, \$10.95, ISBN 978-1-958004-94-4

It's 1952, and 10-year-old Rocky Linfield and his younger sister, Susan, are Boston city-dwellers now being raised solely by their hardworking mother, after their father was shot down while fighting in Korea last year. But summers are spent with their grandmother in the coastal Maine town of Crafton, exploring the lighthouse, shoreline, and making general mischief. When the pair witness a man killed by a truck on the highway one day—and he gives them a book, with instructions to hand it off to someone named Elena—they are quickly pulled into a bigger mystery, one that involves the lighthouse, secret agents, a new young friend named Jerry, and their own family in ways they could never guess.

Fans of lighthearted but adventurous mysteries will relish Averill's writing, as he builds the book's atmosphere from a child's perspective, infusing it with dollops of innocence, wonder, and mischief. Rocky, Susan, and Jerry are delightful as they explore this seemingly prosaic coastal town, constructing kites and hunting for shells even as mysterious events push the plot forward in unexpected, often



Buoyant, entertaining 1950s mystery set in seaside Maine.

Great for fans of Alex Paz Goldman's *The Lost Spy and the Green Dress*, Stephanie Kuehn's *Murder, She Wrote* series.

gripping ways. The lighthouse—and the burgeoning library inside it, curated by its cryptic keeper, Mr. Waicukowski—forms the beating heart of the book, as everyone, young and old, criminal and investigator alike, returns to it throughout. At times, the book's mystery can feel convoluted, unspooling several separate threads and only loosely tying them together in the end, but Averill's skill at juxtaposing the frolicking fun of a seaside town—picnics, fishing, adopting stray dogs—with suspenseful shootings and other threats gives the story an appealing buoyancy. Rocky and Susan are in for several shocking surprises along the way, including late-in-the-game reveals about their mother's and grandmother's covert lives, and Averill (*The Kidnapping of Megan Isaacs*) closes with a cliffhanger ending that will leave readers eager for more.

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

MIDDLE GRADE

EDITOR'S PICK

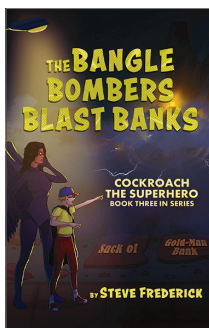
The Bangle Bombers Blast Banks Book 3 in the Cockroach the Superhero series

Steve Frederick | Thunderbolt Stories

178p, trade paper, \$12.99, ISBN 978-17323853-2-0

In the spunky, funny, and even a touch wise third installment of Frederick's Cockroach the Superhero series, 11-year-old Kyle Alexander teams up with his crime-fighting crew to stop a pair of time-traveling bank robbers called the Bangle Bombers. As Kyle attempts to navigate his superhero duties and shield his identity from his parents and intuitive grandmother, he must also deal with typical preteen drama, including bullies and a tendency to fall asleep in class. His dual identity forces him to be creative and face his fears—which can be a tall order for a boy who is "tall and clumsy ... afraid of heights and flights and fights."

As Kyle grapples with the challenges of self-discovery—both as a superhero and a regular kid—he learns many valuable life lessons about grief, heroism, and everyday feats of strength. After returning home from a night of fighting crime, Kyle has an urgent realization: "After all the dangerous things he'd done, it occurred to him that he didn't have to be afraid to sleep on the top bunk anymore." With wit and feeling,



Fun, fleet middle grade adventure of superheroes and growing up.

Great for fans of Kara West's *Mia Mayhem is a Superhero*, Stan Kirby's *Captain Awesome to the Rescue*.

Frederick weaves adolescent and adult themes seamlessly throughout the book, allowing Kyle to find triumph in both regular and extraordinary circumstances. The supporting characters, too, have complex motives and colorful pasts that young readers will enjoy exploring. Though part of a series, this installment leads new readers easily into Kyle's world and the surprising and humorous history behind his powers. Frederick's fast-paced, straightforward prose will keep young readers engaged, particularly as he sets up the plot for the next book in a way that will leave readers wanting to continue following Kyle's emotive and adventurous journey. Witty, action-packed, and full of imaginative world-building and character development, Kyle's story will resonate with young readers as he navigates his journey as superhero and student.

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

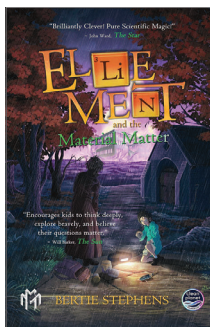
MIDDLE GRADE

Ellie Ment and the Material Matter

Bertie Stephens | The Clean Planet Foundation
282p, hardcover, \$19.99, ISBN 979-8-283-22423-7

When 11-year-old Ellie Ment, who has a passion for discovery, ventures from her home in the middle of the night, bound for Hapsie Forest, there's one thing on her mind: science. But her rainwater experiment goes awry when she notices her school building ablaze in purple flames, collapsing in the distance. Ellie vows to find out what led to the school's destruction, embarking on a journey that blends science, adventure, and environmental advocacy. In the process, she uncovers a secret organization (called the Material Matter, seeking to right the collapse of the natural world), wields silver wristbands that allow her to summon the elements, and navigates a world of ethical dilemmas, environmental crises, and personal growth.

One of Stephens's standout themes is the tension between idealism and pragmatism in environmental action, explored through Ellie's anger with the Material Matter's decision to burn down her school—just to cover up a mistake with their revolutionary building material, Concrexio. The narrative challenges readers to



Science, humor, and a bold young girl power this charming tale.

Great for fans of Jess Keating's *Elements of Genius* series, Anna Humphrey's *Ruby Goldberg's Bright Idea*.

This debut champions youth empowerment, though some characters—like Kami, the daughter of a Material Matter member—feel underdeveloped, leaving their motivations unclear. Still, her observation that “You can stand outside and yell about how the rules should change, how the system should be different, or you can come inside and change them” will resonate with those YA readers seeking their own path to action. The book's humorous, engaging tone—and lively sense of curiosity—will encourage young minds to question the world around them, and fans will be thrilled to see more of Ellie in the future.

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

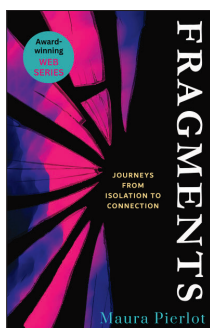
YOUNG ADULT

Fragments: Journeys from Isolation to Connection

Maura Pierlot | Big Ideas Press
124p, trade paper, \$14.95, ISBN 978-0-645-09981-2

Australian author and playwright Pierlot (*The Trouble in Tune Town*) adapts her play *Fragments* into a series of stories featuring eight high school peers who are struggling with mental health related issues. The students—Will, Freya, Reena, Vijay, Mila, Nicky, Lexy, and Mason—have been assigned a “mental health and wellbeing” assessment for school, and their respective stories serve as their responses to that assessment. Pierlot's purpose is to highlight the role of stress on adolescents, contending that it's leaving youth “disenfranchised and vulnerable” and in need of an outlet to share their feelings.

The teens in Pierlot's book may seem as if they're carrying too much weight, but that's the objective—these eight youth are a conduit for the mental health issues all adolescents struggle with at some point. Freya fights anxiety every day, Lexy's hiding her family problems, and school captain Mason has a dirty secret—his depression has become so overwhelming, he thinks of himself as “a black hole, a



An unflinching look at mental health issues in teens.

Great for fans of Debbie Tung's *Everything Is Ok*, Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story*.

(Freya laments, “Anxiety's tricky because most of the time I look just like everyone else. And if I tell anyone what's inside my head, that I'm dying inside, that I can't breathe, they say... Freya, can you just be happy for once?”) and highlights how those dialogues gain power when they're hidden. She closes with a group poem, written by all eight students, as the final school project—a poem that attempts to reassemble the pieces of themselves that “don't always fit.” This will spark powerful conversations.

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

YOUNG ADULT

The Black Between the Stars: We Do Not Bow

Fallon DeWynter
410p, e-book, \$9.99, ISBN 978-1-738-97671-3

DeWynter's powerful fantasy series starter follows Sinadine de-Arashi, also known as Dakuwan or Dark One, as she finds her true power. First taking a life at age eight, Sinadine is born into an exclusive clan of warrior women, the Acharra, and is cursed due to the stars fading on the night of her birth. Her mother self-exiles and leaves Sinadine with the clan in the hope that she can become a great warrior. Upon the death of an emperor, the clan sends three of their warriors to serve Ehrick, the heir to the throne. Along with her Aunt Elide, Sinadine offers her service—though she harbors a secret plan to assassinate Ehrick that has the potential to secure her clan's future.

Lovers of clan fantasies and stories of women seizing their power will enjoy the fast pace of the story, the strength of Sinadine and the Acharra, and especially the characters, who bring ample heart to this story that never forgets that a sword “must be earned.” Guida, one of the clan elders and the storyteller, is “like the sun fading on the horizon, seeking its rest while the stars come out to glisten.” Ehrick faces physical disability and chronic illness, sensitively handled by DeWynter,



Powerful fantasy of a warrior's journey to earn her sword and save her clan.

Great for fans of Lauren Roberts's *Fearless*, Kendare Blake's *Champion of Fate*.

a kiss away from severing head from body.”

A natural leader full of fire, Sinadine longs to prove her value and earn her sword as a tribute to her mother's sacrifice. She is prepared to die for the clan's values of strength, honor, and “sisters before self.” The novel is geared toward young women, but readers of all ages will cheer the independence, strength, and loyalty of Sinadine and the Acharra.

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

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

FICTION

The Brass Ring: A Novel About Friendship
Nancy Wood. Bernie Books, \$20 trade paper (232p) *ISBN 979-8-3149-5300-6*

Wood's simple and straightforward debut traces the friendship of three women from young adulthood into their late 70s. In 1946, recent high school grads BT, Joanie, and Edie view a summer waiting tables on Martha's Vineyard as a chance for liberation from the "tightly bound cocoon" of Little Cliffs, R.I. Indeed, the girls do find freedom—especially BT, who embarks on a summer fling while her fiancé, Leo, is stationed overseas. Decades later, recently widowed Joanie struggles with whether to confess the role she and Edie played in BT and Leo's eventual broken engagement. Toggling between the first-person perspectives of all three women, the novel shifts between the present day and that pivotal youthful summer and touches on each woman's relationship and career trajectories during the intervening years. The emotional core is the steadiness of the women's friendships over decades of disappointments by parents and spouses. Reuniting near the novel's end, they reflect on the meaning of "coming of age," with Joanie musing, "What age? Old age? Have we come into it yet? All I know is that life is getting shorter and friends could leave us." Archival photos sprinkled throughout lend authenticity to the refreshingly unsentimental narrative. This satisfies.

Danger Lies Within

K.M. Krenik. Knox Works, \$3.99 e-book (280p) *ISBN 979-8-9906296-2-2*

Krenik's promising debut nimbly melds fantasy and mystery for a satisfying whodunit set in 2226. Courtney Drake has spent two years distraught over the disappearance of her husband, Keith, who vanished while coordinating assistance to hurricane victims in the Tropics. She's stunned when a letter arrives informing her that Keith was arrested for spreading lies about PAX, a group of anti-democratic elites who masked their desire for power as an earnest attempt to improve living conditions for working people worldwide. Strapped for money, Courtney agrees to

tutor the five-year-old twins of Lord Robert Ranfurly, a widower who has been secretly working with anti-PAX group CAPE, to which Courtney's son, Nick, also belongs. The job becomes more complicated when Lord Ranfurly's gardener is killed, possibly by PAX members or sympathizers, and Courtney teams up with Lord Ranfurly to solve the murder, hoping the investigation might lead her to Keith. Krenik toggles between Courtney's and Ranfurly's perspectives, which helps flesh out a future filled with dragons and nefarious government conspiracies. With satisfying reveals and tantalizing sparks between the protagonists, this will leave readers eager for the sequel.

The Deserter

Edward Arrans Mulhorn. Edward Arrans Mulhorn, \$11.99 mass market (324p) *ISBN 978-1-06-850540-9*

Three children evacuate London for Sussex during WWII and make a surprising series of discoveries in this reflective novel from Mulhorn (*The Release*). Fourteen-year-old Katie and her younger brothers Angel, 10, and Tom, six, are on a farm belonging to their grandparents, whom they call Bidy and Codger. Their father, a soldier, is stationed in North Africa and their mother works for the Ministry of Information. In between farm chores and irregular schooling by their distractible grandmother, the children discover signs of someone bivouacking in a forested part of the property. They stake it out and meet Stanely Mobbs, a young draft dodger. Stanley becomes like an older brother, indulging the two boys' games and winning over Angel, who initially wanted to report Stanley to Bidy and Codger. The siblings sneak him food and keep his presence a secret until Angel is attacked by knife-wielding bullies. When Stanley intervenes, he's stabbed, prompting Angel to take him to Codger, who's a doctor. Codger is sympathetic to Stanley's predicament and tries to help him become a medic to avoid the front lines. Meanwhile, during a surprise visit from the children's injured father, they learn a secret about their origins. Mulhorn effectively conveys the children's sense of their lives

being in suspension while they wait out the war. It's an affecting family drama.

A Hush at Midnight

Marlene M. Bell. Ewephoric, \$15.95 trade paper (368p) *ISBN 979-8-9863409-6-8*

Bell (the Annalise series) delivers a memorable small-town whodunit about a former pastry chef accused of murder. Laura Harris gave up her life as a culinary star in Los Angeles to care for her cancer-stricken mother in Sternburg, Tex. After her mother dies, Laura has second thoughts about her decision, and visits her lifelong friend, nonagenarian vineyard owner Hattie Stenburg, for advice. When Laura arrives, however, she finds Hattie's battered corpse in her caretaker's bedroom. Detective Adams, the local sheriff's investigator, immediately suspects Laura of killing Hattie, since she discovered the body. His suspicions intensify when a reading of Hattie's will reveals she named Laura the sole heir to her vast fortune. Laura has little choice but to find the real killer and clear her name—a task complicated by the hostility of Sternburg locals, who see her as little more than a coastal interloper, and Laura's distrust of Hattie's caretaker, who guards key information about the woman's final days. Bell brings the eerie, tight-knit community of Sternburg to vibrant life, and makes Laura's desperation palpable. This satisfies.

Murder Checks Inn: A Maiden Harlow Mystery, Volume 1

Camille Sharp. Camille Sharp, \$3.99 e-book (267p) *ISBN 978-1-9232830-0-8*

A Midwestern hotel employee reinvents herself as an amateur sleuth in Sharp's endearing debut cozy. Maiden Harlow works at the Harlow House Inn in Golden Glen, Mich., alongside her parents and her sister, Vonny. Most days consist of little more than lugging bags up and down stairs and managing the occasional hotheaded guest. Then a man named Mr. Creevey, who arrived at the inn with no ID and few possessions, is found in his room with his head bashed in. After police captain David McAlister learns that Maiden had a heated argument with the dead man when she caught him trying to hack the inn's computer system, he pins

her as his lead suspect. To clear her name, Maiden sets out to solve the murder herself, following a trail of clues that leads to an unprecedented bank robbery in a neighboring town. Sharp doesn't reinvent the wheel, but her plotting is brisk and she makes Maiden's wobbly first attempts at detecting feel plausible. This a diverting whodunit for fans of *Murder, She Wrote*.

Music for Leaving

Erika Randall. IngramSpark, \$30 (370p)
ISBN 979-8-9927964-0-7

Randall debuts with an uplifting road novel about a terminally ill woman attempting to make amends. Eleanor, 61, has been betrayed and ignored for years by her husband, Walt, a Republican U.S. senator who's now having an affair with an intern. After Eleanor is diagnosed with ALS, she leaves Walt and their home in Dayton, Ohio, in her pickup truck, hoping to reconcile with their only child, Jillian, a lesbian, and her younger sister, Isabel. Both women live in Colorado, and as Eleanor drives toward them across Kansas, she reflects on the causes of their estrangement. She was young when she married Walt, and left Isabel to deal with their mother's dementia. When Walt spoke out publicly against gay rights, she neglected to support Jillian. Interspersed throughout are monologues from the perspective of such objects as the mixtape playing in her truck ("Don't get me wrong, I hate making Eleanor cry, but I think it just might be my job to crack the old girl open every once in a while"). It's a clever device that adds a welcome levity to the somber material, even as Eleanor vows later in the narrative to "get back to the business of dying after I've found a life." This strikes just the right chord.

You and What Army?

Eric Gongola. Head of the River, \$16.99 trade paper (334p) *ISBN 979-8-9918533-0-9*

In this affecting debut from Gongola, a preteen navigates family strife near the end of the Vietnam War, tries to be a hero, and discovers the truth is not always what it seems. Stevie Stepanek, 11, grows up in a New England mill town, raised by a father who lost both legs as an infantryman in WWII, and who frequently trades barbs with Stevie's mother, a waitress and heavy smoker. Stevie absorbs his family's pain

even more intensely upon the return from Vietnam of his older brother, Paul, who's suffering from PTSD and has gone mute. When the Barnes family, who is Black, moves in across the street in their predominantly white neighborhood, Stevie resists his parents' racist admonishments to stay away from them. He befriends Ronnie, the family's youngest, and the two become altar boys together. After Stevie begins to suspect their priest, Father Gabe, of molesting Ronnie, he sets out with Ronnie's brother Marcus to investigate, setting the stage for an improbable plot twist. Much better are the nostalgic scenes of Stevie's everyday challenges and triumphs, as when he convinces his parents to help him fix up his broken-down Schwinn Sting-Ray, or plays pick-up baseball with his friends. It's an enjoyable if simplistic trip down memory lane.