

October 13, 2025

# booklife®

YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING

16 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

## Indie Spotlight

In this monthly roundup of BookLife titles, we feature scary stories.

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

### Chasing Moonflowers: A Gothic Historical Fantasy



Pauline Chow

ISBN 978-1-964733-03-6

**Author statement:** "I wrote *Chasing Moonflowers* to bridge worlds: the eldritch horror of Lovecraft and the ancient, precolonial lore of Hong Kong's gods. As a daughter of immigrants, I wanted to explore a heritage often obscured by imperialism, weaving it into a gothic mystery where the true horror isn't a monster, but a stolen history. This is a 'coming of power' story where my heroine must embrace the gray areas of her legacy. I wrote the book to subvert the common tropes of self-sacrifice for female heroines and using colonialism more than a backdrop for scary monsters."

### The Dream Mirrors: A Metaphysical Mystery of Magick



Megan Mary

ASIN B0FB11Z3LS

**Author statement:** "In *The Dream Mirrors*, there are two pivotal scenes. One is a fire. The second is a supernatural attack at the mysterious Skye manor, which causes all the mirrors in the bedroom hallway to shatter. In the early hours of a mid-January morning, I was working on the book.

The planets of Mars, Venus, and Saturn aligned in the sky over our house. A portable battery caught fire in our bathroom, which not only destroyed the vanity, but also shattered the mirrors. It was only through my husband's quick thinking, the protection of our spirit

guides, and the synchronistic alignment of all planets that *The Dream Mirrors* was published, and our house and cats were saved."

### The Flowers I Deserve



Tamara Jerée

ASIN B0FMNMWNNR

**Author statement:** "The title for *The Flowers I Deserve* came to me early in the drafting process and guided the narrator's character arc. One of the main thematic elements is the tension between the narrator's desire for validation and society's belief that her unique immunity is proof that she's connected to evil forces. Her lesbian awakening begins with a dream, just as mine did, and the women of the castle become her shadow guides as she navigates death, grief, and desire in true gothic fashion."

### Hell's Island



William Hardy

ISBN 978-1649-795-601

**Author statement:** "After many visits to the South Carolina coastal sea islands, I became familiar with the Gullah Geechee customs and beliefs which inspired me to write *Hell's Island* and the Gullah Gravestones series. I like to write about ordinary people who experience a frightening, unbelievable supernatural event while employing subplots to give mystery and suspense to the horror. My writing

## THE TALE OF THE WICKED OLD WOMAN AND THE VERY NICE 'BEAST' OF CROUCH END

by *Lance Lee*

In the vein of classic fables and morality tales Lee's latest is [a] charmingly illustrated... Inspiring tale of hope and love.

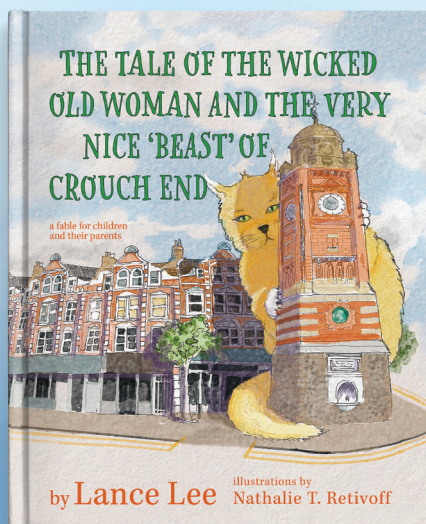
—*Booklife Reviews (Publishers Weekly)*

Lee presents a modern retelling of a classic tale of misunderstood magic and small acts of redemption. A gorgeously unusual, emotionally redeeming parable with plenty of heart and...magic.

—*Kirkus Reviews*

A truly sweet story told through elegant writing and enchanting imagery.

—*Asher Syed, 5\* Readers' Favorite Review*



Paperback: 979-8-21846-529-2 • \$17.99

Hardback: 979-8-21846-524-7 • \$31.99

Both playful and poetic [Lee's] story nudges us to consider how...joy can thaw even the iciest spell... A story to be shared across generations.

—*Priya Mathew, 5\* Readers' Favorite Review*



A quick light-hearted read that would be great for your readers.

—*LoveReading4Kids*

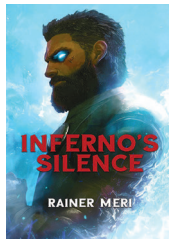
Available at

amazon

BARNES  
& NOBLE

technique is simple: I let storymaking ideas come into my head before falling asleep at night, and after many nights and enough ideas, I write the book"

### Inferno's Silence



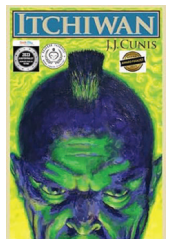
Rainer Meri

ISBN 978-1-0682964-0-6

**Author statement:** "The idea for the book grew from a mix of my fascination with the history of Eastern Europe and the region's present

reality, aiming to convey both people's frustration and their apathy towards corrupt governments. In many ways, I explored these themes through the lens of horror, letting oppression become a monstrous presence, authority fester like a rotting corpse, and the silence of the powerless echo louder than any scream in the dark."

### Itchiwan



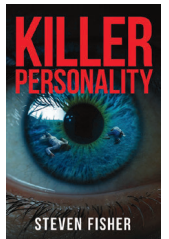
J.J. Cunis

ASIN B09S1YJRCH

**Author statement:** "In 1968, four 13-year-old boys of diverse racial backgrounds—two Wampanoag twins, Amos and Vern; an Irish

Catholic kid from Southie, Timmy (middle-class summer cottage people); and a WASP, Brett—meet on Cape Cod and form an unlikely bond that lasts a lifetime. In the summer of 1968, the boys are inseparable. They do things, which lead them to try other things, and as a result find something, which ultimately leaves them having opened Pandora's box, a box which will take them 24 years and two lifetimes to close... or so they think."

### Killer Personality



Steven Fisher

ASIN B0FKVQBTQV

**Author statement:** "A young man named Kevin meets lovely Olivia in a bar—a random event, or so he thinks. They fall in love. But she turns out to be

someone different than he thought, someone lethal. He goes on the road seeking to find out her true identity. It leads him down a trail

of Olivia's past, where bodies have a way of resurfacing. By day, I am a mild-mannered CEO of a global electronics company. I tend to write in the mornings and really enjoy the balance between my business career and my writing career."

### The Malevolent



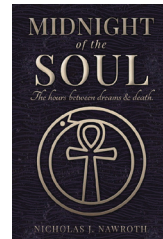
P.F. Roquelaure

ISBN 978-1-5092-6156-7

**Author statement:** "In 1983, Griffin Andrew Meade moves to Bartholomew Bay, settling into Antioch, the ancestral mansion of the

wealthy Bartholomew family. Unbeknownst to him, he soon discovers it is haunted by a restless spirit. I have been fascinated with gothic horror since I was young but was dismayed that there was sparse LGBTQ+ representation in the genre, so I have committed that all my speculative fiction novels have LGBTQ+ protagonists and themes."

### Midnight of the Soul: The Hours between Dreams & Death



Nicholas J. Nawroth

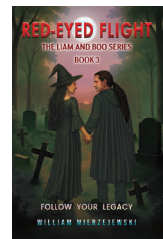
ISBN 978-1-956850-27-7

**Author statement:**

"Drawing from my lifelong fascination with mythology and dreams, *Midnight of the Soul* follows Anna, a young

spellcaster with amnesia, as she journeys through dreamlike realms inspired by Egyptian mythology. Guided by supernatural beings and encountering the spirits of her lost family members, she uncovers her true identity and magical heritage. Anna's quest culminates in a confrontation with a powerful dark force, as she battles to save herself and confront the mysteries of her past."

### Red-Eyed Flight



William Mierzejewski

ISBN 978-1-5457-6317-9

**Author statement:** "Two years have passed since Liam and Boo's first encounter with the beast in Iron River, Michigan. A year later, they were lucky

## BookLife Talks with Benjamin Plumb

What started out as a memoir slowly evolved into what debut author Plumb calls a way to “live authentically” for introverts. We spoke with Plumb about his history as an introvert and his plans for a follow-up to *The Satisfied Introvert*.

### Was there something that pushed you to write *The Satisfied Introvert*?

I wanted to help other introverts detach from the persona, or “winning recipe” as I call it, that almost all of us create as children to help us “win” in an extroverted world. There are thousands of such recipes; mine worked in school but turned out to be a disastrous way to live because it was not authentic—it cost me relationships, jobs, and satisfaction. Introvert recipes tend to be indelible, but it is possible to detach from them if you wake up to the damage they have caused. I kept a journal for decades, and in reading through it when I retired, I discovered not only what my recipe had cost me but also principles that now I could put to use to largely escape from it. The book provides introverts with both a warning and a ray of hope.

### Your book is part memoir and part self-help guide. How did you achieve the balance between the two while writing?

The balance resulted from drafting the memoir first in 2022. It surprised me by winning three national book awards in the self-help category. I approached Greenleaf Book Group to see if more explicit self-help material might help the book to reach a larger audience, and they said it likely could. I kept the memoir largely as first published, then at the end of each chapter added Key Takeaways, Reflective Questions, and Practical Exercises. The result is the 2025 new and expanded edition to be published on October 7.

### How do you imagine readers at this moment will connect to *The Satisfied Introvert*?

Many will be astonished to discover not only that they do have a “winning recipe” but also that it is probably the source of much of the dissatisfaction they have being introverts in our society. Using the examples in the book, they will be able to tease out what the nature of their own recipe is, and by using

what I call the Twelve Tools of Detachment, they will also be able to disengage from it. What beckons then is for them to live authentically and openly as quiet persons, contributing the half dozen or so critical skills that all introverts naturally possess. If my case is any example, this will result in more satisfaction in life than they have ever known.

### Do you have any advice on how to recognize an introvert and make them feel comfortable in social settings?

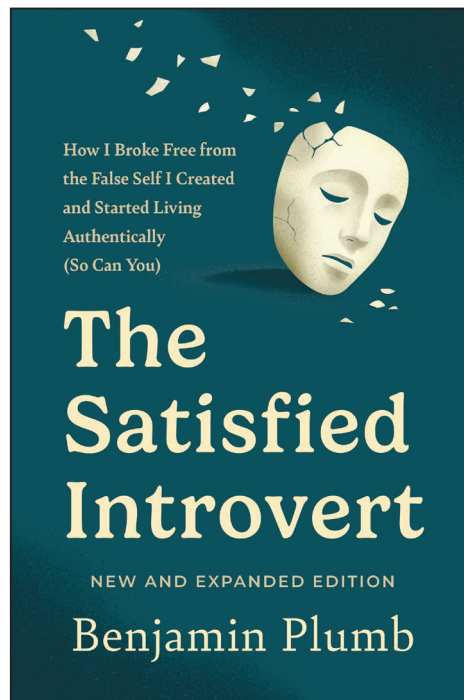
We introverts usually stand along the edges of a room and tend to listen more than we speak. Our eyes are usually active, scanning and noticing things even if we say little. To make us comfortable, approach us one-on-one—we love deep conversations with a single person. Try not to overwhelm

us with big gestures or rapid talking.

### What’s next for you?

I’m thinking of writing a prequel that addresses what I call the Introvert Flight Reflex, the tendency to flee from situations that become too overstimulating. It’s a common problem among quiet people, with high long-term costs: weakened relationships, unattained professional goals, and lack of resilience against future upsets. With the working title *The Grounded Introvert: How I Tamed my Flight Reflex and Found a Steadier Quiet (You Can Too)*, the book is based on my journal entries from six months in France when I was 20. It relates three dozen short experiences that accidentally taught me to soften the Flight Reflex—and thereby learn what I needed to know to write *The Satisfied Introvert*.

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



to survive the ghastly and elaborate trap that awaited them inside the ruinous hallways of the Elk's Estate in Pennsylvania. After nothing but horrible experiences over the past two consecutive summers, the family decides to spend their entire vacation close to home. Summer in their hometown of Chicago is going well, until something evil descends into their backyard. This time, Liam and Boo will discover their hidden family legacy. Most importantly, they will learn that the last line of defense is self-defense."

### Scare Record



Michael James Rogers Jr.

ISBN 978-1-64378-976-7

**Author statement:** "It started with the need of a new monster. I rediscovered the image of an ad for a vintage haunted house sound effects record. That's when I came across the Gayle House Haunting. I felt there would be a large following from vintage horror and comic book

collectors who only needed to be reminded of its existence. I watched the story unfold in my head as I drove across the United States. I immediately started writing when I stopped for my ten-hour breaks. I began seeing the story in my head reveal itself like I was taking dictation. It seemed to be writing itself!"

### Terror in Tuscany



Kirsten Pistorius

ASIN B0FH4RV3MJ

**Author statement:** "Terror in Tuscany: The Crimson Vines was inspired by my love for the Tuscan landscape—its vineyards, rustic villas, and ancient legends. I felt the beauty of the region held a haunting undercurrent, as if every stone wall had a story to tell. That tension between breathtaking charm and whispered danger became the heart of my novel."

### A Time of Blood and Dying



Paul Lonardo

ASIN B0FP3C59K2

**Author statement:** "A Time of Blood and Dying is a collection of 22 all-new dark fantasy and horror short stories, many of which have appeared in various horror magazines and ezines this year. Once a seed for a story gets in my brain, it starts to germinate and the writing

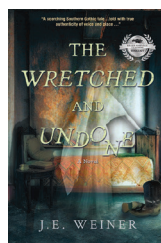
process begins. If this nascent idea for a story is not cultivated, it will wither on the creative vine and die. Whether you call it a muse, an inner voice, or some other mysterious force whispering in a writer's ear, wherever inspiration comes from, it cannot be denied. Maybe all people hear these whisperings, but a writer cannot simply dismiss them."

### The Wretched and Undone

J. E. Weiner

ISBN 978-1-963452-10-5

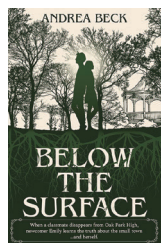
**Author statement:** "There was one story that surfaced from multiple sources that inspired *The Wretched and Undone*. Several witnesses



described strange encounters with a mysterious woman in white on an old cattle ranch near Bandera, Texas. She would often come to call, drifting across the fields and hills or silently imploring sleepy guests for help, terrifying one and all. I soon learned that this woman, the likely victim of a murder-suicide at the turn of the 20th century, was no stranger to the ranch or the residents of Bandera. Who was she? What brought her to this desolate scrap of land? And why won't she leave? Cue my decision to write this book: this is a story worth telling."

### YOUNG ADULT

#### Below the Surface



Andrea Beck

ASIN B0FRVW85KZ

**Author statement:** "My debut YA novel, *Below the Surface*, had been residing in my head for over a decade before I finally found the time, in an empty-nest home, to transfer it onto paper. Years earlier, I found myself, a west coast Canadian, residing in a quaint, midwest American suburb when a teenage boy suddenly went missing. The local community rallied together to find him, but as the days passed, I began to feel increasingly estranged as an outsider. I wondered what it might be like to be both a newcomer and a classmate to this boy: Would suspicions, judgments, even accusations arise? These dark questions propelled my story."

#### The Little Things that Kill: A Teen Friendship Afterlife Apology Tour



Annie Fox

ASIN B0DDM7WP1Q

**Author statement:** "A teenage drama queen who finds herself in an afterlife realm must piece together the mystery of what happened to her—from beyond the grave. With three first-person narrators (all unreliable), I gave myself a massive challenge with this novel. One

that took years to complete. Would I construct the plot that way again? Definitely. Each character has her own closely guarded secrets and needs her own voice."

#### Never Have I Ever



Harker Jones

ASIN BODL4JBVHV

**Author statement:** "Trust no one. Because it could be anyone. When eight teenagers in a small Michigan town start receiving texts urging them to play *Never Have I Ever*, they find themselves caught up in a deadly game of secrets, repentance, and retribution that may be

connected to a girl who disappeared the year before. I first wrote *Never Have I Ever* when I was 17 and living on a dirt road in Michigan. I had just graduated high school and had been writing since I was 13. Bored, I decided to jump in with a horror story that takes place in my hometown."

## BookLife Talks with Anna Dao

In her memoir, *Finding Lalla's Anna*, Dao, a student/teacher of Mali oral traditions and wisdom, uses her ancestry and love for her grandmother to explore her childhood and adulthood spent always seeking her true self.

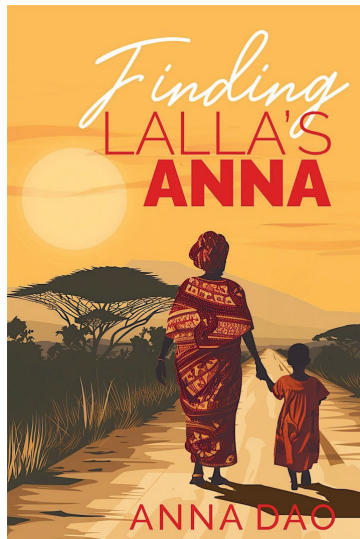
### You claim the label of storyteller. What does that title mean to you?

It's how I identify with myself. I come from a long line of storytellers: generations of hardworking people who spent their lives observing, learning, and understanding the behaviors of humankind and Mother Nature. They didn't know how to read or write. The knowledge they acquired was transmitted from mouth to ear, with the responsibility for the next generation to pursue and improve upon what was already known. Hence the old saying: The world is nothing but conversation. The world is nothing but storytelling.

### Had you always wanted to write your memoir, or did *Finding Lalla's Anna* come as a surprise?

The idea for my memoir evolved with time. The project was 20 years in the making. It started as a love letter and tribute to my late maternal grandmother, Lalla, and the elders of my community. They selflessly spent years offering their children and grandchildren the wisdom and lessons learned from their elders and their own lives. Why? Because the wind cannot break a tree that knows how to bend. In other words, with good rearing we were well equipped to face life's many challenges.

With time, the tribute evolved and became a memoir when I realized I was ready to tell my story and how Lalla, with her spirit and wisdom, became instrumental in guiding me out of despair into a quest to understand the whys of my unhappy life. She used to say, "Pursuit has two purposes: Either you find wealth, or you find yourself. What have you found?" And the elders taught that transformation happens



when you agree to go to battle against your own self and your deeply rooted beliefs. And after the intense and sometimes long internal struggle, you will emerge from the experience changed for the better or the worse. Indeed, humans sometimes need to imitate what we see in nature—like the seed that agrees to die so that the plant may blossom.

### How do you make sure you are telling “the truth” about events that happened decades ago?

I can only tell my truth. It happened when I turned my attention inward and asked myself the difficult questions: Why did I want the things that I wanted? Lalla had said: “Don’t rush, don’t force, and don’t rationalize. Let your gut give you the answers. Once you do that, you’ll begin to comprehend the things that now make no sense—the whys of all your years of struggle. Afterward, your dreams and ambitions might be different because they will finally be in alignment with who you truly are.”

### Do you have any advice for authors looking to write their own memoirs?

Tell your truth. Be willing to bare your soul, to write about uncomfortable and embarrassing events and circumstances. Know that your voice and your genre are not for everyone, but if you speak your truth, your words will resonate with others.

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

It is a love story about the unbreakable bond between a grandmother and her granddaughter. It is a story about family love where love is messy and love hurts. But in the end, I will always be grateful to the people who shaped and influenced me. Yes, we loved and hurt each other at times, but we were good people who acted and reacted the only way we knew how at the time. I am who I am because of them, and I have no regrets.

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



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

## YOUNG ADULT

⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

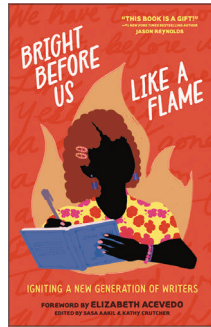
### Bright Before Us, Like a Flame

Edited by Sasa Aakil & Kathy Crutcher

306p, trade paper, \$21.99, ISBN 978-1-950-80782-6

This powerful anthology, edited by Aakil and Crutcher, assembles diverse voices of young authors from Shout Mouse Press—in collaboration with established writers such as Clint Smith and Safia Elhillo—to ignite a passion for writing and to “drea[m] and writ[e] a better world into existence.” Comprised of poems, stories, comic strips, and more, the collection explores themes of family, friendship, belonging, activism, and identity, drawing on intergenerational engagement to highlight unifying concepts. From stories like Cooper’s “Hoops and Hopes,” where it takes a family death to unite a father and son, to Erminia’s comic “I Cross Barriers to Change Myself,” which portrays her terrifying journey from El Salvador to the U.S. in pursuit of education and opportunity, readers will be deeply moved and inspired.

Each section includes writing prompts, discussion and excerpts from adult



*Powerhouse anthology highlighting the works of diverse young writers.*

**Great for fans of** Shannon Gibney and Nicole Chung’s *When We Become Ours*, Ibi Zoboi’s *Black Enough*.

authors, and reflection questions—a behind-the-scenes look that will motivate young writers to craft their own narratives. The power of stories to ignite, entertain, and electrify drives the collection, playing out in offerings such as Chala and Ugwu’s “Joy-Grace and the Dress Dilemma,” where a young girl channels her creativity to design a knockout dress that represents her diverse heritage—or the police shooting of a young Black boy that knits a community together in devastating ways in “The Day Tajon Got Shot,” by Whipple, Purvis, and Bates.

The blend of catchy art, multilingual narrative, and varied writing is reflective and engaging, propelled by stunning insight. From toxic masculinity to immigration to family connections, the collection probes universal and acutely personal themes, dedicating space to voices too often marginalized, forgotten, and discredited; this piercing, visionary powerhouse will stick with readers long after the last page.

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

## YOUNG ADULT

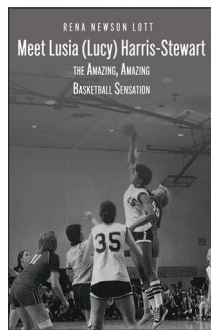
### Meet Lusía (Lucy) Harris-Stewart: The Amazing, Amazing Basketball Sensation

Rena Newson Lott | 105 Publishing

112p, e-book, \$9.99, ISBN 979-8-990-15295-3

There’s a reason Lott uses the word “amazing” twice in the title of her inspirational sports biography debut: Lusía “Lucy” Harris-Stewart was not just a trailblazer, she created the blueprint for the way women’s basketball is played today. This impassioned portrait is packed with detail, exploring Harris-Stewart’s childhood in the Mississippi Delta before moving on to her college basketball career as a Lady Statesman at Delta State University. Later, Lott details her time representing the U.S. in the first women’s basketball game played in the Olympics—and shares Harris-Stewart’s record of being the only woman ever drafted into the NBA.

Lott is admiring without being overly reverential. She puts Harris-Stewart in historical context: acknowledging the difficulties this gifted athlete faced while showing how changing attitudes offered her unprecedented opportunities. In 1972,



*Women’s basketball pioneer gets her due in this detailed and inspiring biography.*

**Great for fans of** Dawn Staley’s *Uncommon Favor*, Ann Meyers Drysdale’s *You Let Some Girl Beat You?*.

the year before Harris-Stewart graduated high school, Title IX became law. The 6’3” Harris-Stewart was a talented powerhouse whose “desire to win was predominant,” and her disciplined drive led to multiple championships, records, awards, and induction into halls of fame.

Lott constructs a roadmap to her life that will appeal to female readers interested in an athletic career or

understanding the evolution of women’s sports. Harris-Stewart paved the way for current WNBA stars, though her post-collegiate career was markedly different. She played in the fledgling (and low-paying) Women Professional Basketball League (WBL), and became a coach, eventually returning to Mississippi. But Harris-Stewart, who died in 2022, was never forgotten. Acknowledged as one of the best female athletes in a single sport during her lifetime, the Queen of Basketball lives on in this biography celebrating her outstanding achievements and humanity.

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

## FICTION

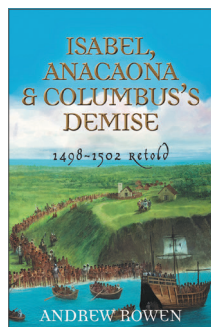
### Isabel, Anacaona & Columbus’s Demise: 1498—1502 Retold

Andrew Rowen

452p, hardcover, \$34.95, ISBN 978-0-999-19616-8

“Relief from the pale man’s conquest might never come, but hopelessness was inexcusable,” muses Taíno chief Anacaona in Rowen’s third entry detailing the Spanish conquest of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Now a widow and grandmother, Anacaona harbors that meager hope despite the horrors she’s witnessed in the years since Admiral Columbus’s arrival. Rowen, following *Columbus and Caonabó*, demonstrates how, at the turn of the 16th century, Anacaona could still find reason to believe that Spain’s conquest might progress differently than the tragic course that history later shows. After all, in this volume, she witnesses rebellion against the admiral by his own men and finds the conquistadors in disarray in the face of hurricanes, politics, and Columbus hauled to Europe in chains.

None of that suggests naivete on the part of this fascinating woman. Like all of Rowen’s principal characters, Anacaona is drawn from historical record, a savvy



*Deeply researched, devastating novel of the dawn of Caribbean colonialism.*

**Great for fans of** José Barreiro’s *Taino*, William T. Vollmann’s *The Dying Grass*.

leader who expects and plans for betrayal. Speaking to her daughter of Francisco Roldán, a conquistador who strikes a deal to bring his rebels to Anacaona’s village, she says, “The day may come when spying on him requires intimacy, and you must be prepared both to stomach that and to poison him to death.”

Rowen’s storytelling prioritizes fidelity to the historical timeline, vividly capturing power shifts and what the major players thought and felt at each development. Dialogue is invented, but the chapters read like reported history, with copious footnotes. Violence is alluded to rather than relished, as the novel illuminates the drift of history and how a diverse array of leaders—Roldán, Queen Isabel, Bartolomé Colón, Anacaona, and Columbus himself—arrived at decisions that shaped history. This deeply researched and quietly devastating entry builds to a moment of quickly-dashed, mild hope, as Anacaona contemplates the future and the Spanish subjugate the Taino while insisting slavery is not their goal.

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

## FICTION

**Slow Bright Things**

Becky Bohan | NanBec Books

308p, trade paper, \$15, ISBN 979-8-296-04213-2

Bohan's sequel to *A Light on Altered Land* returns her beloved characters to a tender slice-of-life study on love, family, and self-discovery. It has been five years since Kathryn Kepler and Ellie Belmont fell in love when Kathryn's high school boyfriend reaches out and invites her to dinner—only to proposition her and insinuate that Kathryn's life with a woman could not truly be substantial. As outraged as she is by her ex's implication and sheer entitlement, the interaction leaves Kathryn vulnerable to the “internalized homophobia” she has yet to entirely unpack since falling in love with a woman. Kathryn's hesitancy to fully embrace her sexuality leaves Ellie reeling as well, as a lifetime of heteronormative-induced insecurity comes flooding back.

Both women love each other deeply, but the steadiness of their devotion to one another is tested by Ellie's doubts and Kathryn's struggle to define what they really are to one another. As they work to communicate their issues and navigate



*Tender, healing lesbian romance between two older women.*

**Great for fans of** Patricia Grayhall's *A Place for Us*, Lauren McBryer's *Like a House on Fire*.

cannot be easily excised from the relationships most important to us.

Because the narrative is less plot heavy and more character driven, the pacing may be a bit slow for some readers, but Bohan's expert command of characterization shines through, and the well-developed cast, rich with distinct voices, makes the novel well worth a reader's time. Endearing and humorous, *Slow Bright Things* follows in its predecessor's footsteps as a beautiful celebration of queer love, illuminating that it is never too late in life to fall in love and rediscover yourself.

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

## FICTION

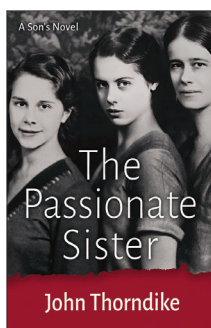
**The Passionate Sister**

John Thorndike | Beck &amp; Branch

262p, trade paper, \$15, ISBN 979-8-9926682-1-6

There's a wistful intimacy to Thorndike's speculative autofiction, which reimagines a pivotal moment in his mother's life and grants her a second chance to connect with her adult children. Waiting for son Rob to pick her up, Virginia (called Ginny by loved ones) is both anxious to leave her posh Connecticut rehab facility but terrified to return to the house in Sag Harbor where she overdosed on pills and alcohol. While driving the same Manhattan-to-Long-Island route that was once her daily commute, Ginny glimpses her past as a respected anesthesiologist, experiencing a rush of guilt and shame.

Still shaky, Ginny finds a reason to succeed in her recovery: reconciling with the family she neglected during years of addiction. That reconciliation takes place during the heady, uncertain period between 1960s counterculture—when Rob joined a “three-couple marriage” in an Ohio commune—and the 1980s outbreak of AIDS, which alters the future of son Jamie and his partner, Miles. While managing her own sobriety, Ginny turns to her children's pressing needs, offering medical



*Moving, redemptive story of a beloved mother and addict.*

**Great for fans of** Emily Adrian's *Daughterhood*, Violaine Huisman's *The Book of Mother*.

“weakness” but Ginny suspects is schizophrenia.

Thorndike's mother died of an overdose at 57, and he's previously reconstructed her life story in a close-to-the-bone portrait of addiction with *The World Against Her Skin*. With spare, piercingly beautiful prose, he reaches a new level of forgiveness in *The Passionate Sister*. It's a poignant gift of understanding and compassion, allowing Virginia to face hardship with resolve and undying love. Instead of an addict, twisted with unfulfilled appetites and frustrated into stagnation, he imagines his mother transforming from a doctor to the healer of her family—and herself.

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

## MYSTERY/THRILLER

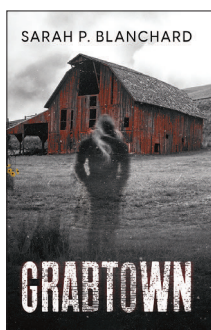
**Grabtown**

Sarah P. Blanchard | Eagle Ridge Farm

454p, e-book, \$3.99, ASIN B0FKJQKK9P

“Small towns are great for scolding the kids who throw too many snowballs, but not always good at spotting real evil,” Blanchard (*Drawn from Life*) writes early on in *Grabtown*, capturing the uneasy heartbeat of this family drama and creeping mystery set in rural Connecticut. Cassie Masterson, long estranged from her family and the rhythms of her sleepy town, returns to her childhood home shortly after her mother's funeral, hoping that a week with her twin sister, Ana, will be enough to settle the estate and move on. But the house—littered with their mother's handwritten notes and her beloved geraniums—begins to gnaw at the walls Cassie has so carefully built around herself. And when those walls finally collapse, she's forced to confront a past more twisted than the one she thought she'd escaped.

While sorting through the house, Cassie and Ana uncover a manuscript written by AJ Porter—their mother's closest friend. At first, the novella seems like a small-town thriller naming familiar neighbors—and even their mother. But as Cassie reads on, it begins to feel less like fiction and more like a first-person account of a buried



*Small-town thriller of secrets, silence, and buried mystery.*

**Great for fans of** Shari Lapena's *Everyone Here Is Lying*, Amy Tintera's *Listen for the Lie*.

The novel's greatest strength lies in Blanchard's deft control of mood and tone. Gothic motifs and haunting imagery lend the book an atmosphere of constant unease, right up to the final page. Yet it never overshadows the emotional force of Cassie's discoveries, nor the sharper social commentary on the silences small towns demand. In the end, *Grabtown* is a story about refusing the inheritance of secrets and cycles of harm—and mustering the courage it takes to rise above them.

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

defining their relationship, they are met with the complications of fractured family dynamics, external judgement, and an increasing anxiety around the current political climate at nearly every turn. From interfering exes to missed loved ones to obstinate children, the heart of Kathryn and Ellie's story is a thoughtful exploration of how outside influences in our lives

advice and emotional support. Thorndike paints their evolving relationships with strokes of poignancy and a heartbreaking reality, as Ginny focuses on Jamie's fears after Miles is diagnosed with ALS and Rob's fallout from the demise of his relationship with Natalia—who, after the birth of twins, suffers from what she calls a

crime with dangerous implications. Blanchard cleverly uses this book-within-a-book device to unravel the town's hushed-up history, while pressing against Cassie's fragile present—her frayed bond with Ana and her uneasy dependence on a husband who seems disturbingly intent on pulling her back to California.

**MYSTERY/THRILLER****Vengeance Is Hers**

**Robert Chazz Chute** | Ex Parte Press  
483p, e-book, \$4.99, ISBN 978-1-927-60798-5

Chute's thought-provoking crime thriller tells the story of Molly Jergins, a bright, restless teenager who grows up in the small town of Poeticule Bay, Maine, a tight-knit, picturesque village floundering and long dominated by a single powerful family. When Keith Faun, the town's hockey star and the son of its most influential businessman, brutally assaults a younger boy and escapes punishment, Molly finds herself consumed with revenge fantasies. Her petty pranks soon escalate into a campaign to drive the Fauns out of town: she sabotages their family business and publicly damages their credibility, with each act calculated to chip away not only at their sense of untouchability but also the broader community that enables it.

At its core, this novel is an exploration of the insular dynamics unique to small towns—blind loyalty to old families, unthinking hostility toward outsiders, and reflexive protection afforded to their golden boys. What stands out most are not



*Dark small-town thriller examining the line between justice and obsession.*

**Great for fans of** Gillian Flynn; Paula Hawkins.

trusted with justice—or if it falls to individuals to enforce it.

This ethical dilemma is embodied most clearly in Molly herself. While she obviously cares about fairness, her obsessive tendencies leave readers questioning whether she is driven by justice or simply by her power to deliver it. The story's pace sometimes falters under the sheer number of revenge plots, with these convoluted sequences limiting Molly's character development—but she remains a complex, morally gray protagonist who readers will want to follow, if only to see how far she will go. Overall, those who are drawn to dark small-town noir will enjoy the clarity with which this gripping tale examines power and complicity.

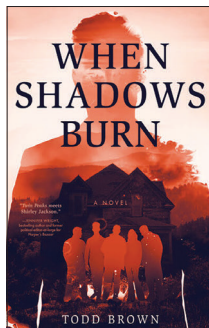
Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

**MYSTERY/THRILLER****When Shadows Burn**

**Todd Brown** | Koehler Books  
312p, e-book, \$30, ISBN 979-8-888824-873-7

Brown mixes Southern Gothic horror with popular vampire tropes in this haunting debut, revolving around a once-opulent mansion now watching over the town of Raven's Cross with an eerie silence, echoing decades of pain. When true crime podcaster Tim Michaels returns to take care of unfinished business with the house, he feels more like a stranger than a man coming home, mistrusted by the town's assortment of bizarre personalities and its quiet, smoldering hatred of outsiders. His attempts to rent the mansion fall flat, as its cryptic new owners—the flashy R.F. Reardon and his silent partner Pat Striking—move in and establish an antique bookstore on its grounds. Before long, people start disappearing, tempers rise, and everyone is suspicious.

Brown quickly ratchets the tension when a teen girl, Roxy, disappears during a nighttime walk in the woods with her younger sister, April. A search ensues but turns up no results, and, when April also disappears, rumors run rampant: supernatural causes are suspected, the townspeople start whispering that Reardon and



*Classic Southern Gothic horror with plenty of modern twists.*

**Great for fans of** Isabel Cañas's *The Hacienda*, Ashton Noone's *Vicious Creatures*.

striking are vampires abducting people and turning them, and even Tim—along with his former teacher, Bob, and Roxy's high school friend, James—gets pulled into the fray. Meanwhile, elements of the town view Tim as the real threat, particularly when his interest in local illustrator Amanda Roberts blossoms. Curtis Vickers, a small-town cemetery ground-

skeeper carrying an unlikely torch for Amanda, takes the most offense, physically assaulting Tim and forming a vigilante squad against the Martian House newcomers. What Brown does best is illuminate the vicious gossip and closed-minded views of a small town hostile to outsiders; from Amanda's parents to Curtis to even the town's sheriff, prejudice and judgment are the norms. The story's otherworldly edge founders in comparison; there are monsters in Raven's cross, but they're not the supernatural type—they're just good old-fashioned fear, ignorance, and hatred of those who are different.

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

**SF/FANTASY/HORROR****Eye in the Blue Box: Eyes of Awakening, Book One**

**Ann Yihyang Kim** | Blue Wolf & Eye Publishing  
416p, trade paper, \$18.99, ISBN 979-8-9925555-1-6

Kim's dark fantasy series starter follows the slothful James Mun, who spends his days fiddling with his fat and slurping ramen. That changes when he wakes up in the Flowering, a dimension accessible only by sleep, whose inhabitants speak a special language and navigate a dangerous world of shifting planes and untold threats. There, James hooks up with Crew Blue—who follow Bloom, a giant blue wolf—and battles monsters. But he isn't down for any of it, and Kim wastes no time letting readers know just how out of his depth James really is.

Kim delivers a world that is beyond intriguing. Anyone transported to the Flowering lives—and dies—by a special watch marked on their wrists, one that ensures they get at least eight hours of sleep a night; the citizens of the Flowering alternate between strange creatures that appear human and vicious killers; and even the weapons James and co. carry aren't dependable. At times, the book reads almost like a horror novel, with gruesome battle wounds stitching themselves back together, moulded citizens absorbing the bodies of those around them to gain



*Fast-paced dark fantasy packed with deadly challenges and monsters.*

**Great for fans of** Rachel Gillig's *One Dark Window*, Gareth Brown's *The Book of Doors*.

power, and a grisly parade of cleavers, knives, and body parts slithering across the pages. Despite those terrors, James discovers the Flowering isn't all bad, finding a surprising sense of belonging with his ragtag crew.

Between the eerie nightmares of the Flowering, James's bewilderment, and the monsters he's forced to fight, *Eye in the*

*Blue Box* is a thriller that never lets up—but still shows humanity threading the Flowering's inhabitants together. In the end, they're all just doing what's necessary to survive, and Kim constructs plenty of touching connective moments amid the chaos. The result is a non-stop fantasy novel with themes of family and friendship, culminating in an abrupt but satisfying ending that leaves the door open for a sequel.

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

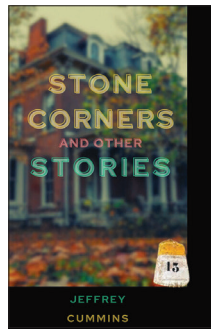
## SF/FANTASY/HORROR

## 13: Stone Corners and Other Stories

Jeffrey Cummins | ForgivenAm Publishing House  
500p, e-book, \$3.99, ASIN B0FH3JQKN7

Cummins blurs the line between the living and the dead in this second entry of his Thirteen series, depicting ghosts that emerge as much from memory and pain as they do from graveyards or basements. Across 13 tales, he explores fear, faith, and the echoes of family secrets, whether imagining the transformation of his grandparents' house into a metaphorical mindscape where childhood memories melt into something darker in "A Sort of Homecoming" or revealing the true nature of a ghost in "Tearing at Holes": not an external spirit, but the embodiment of a mother's fears.

Cummins's writing is often inspired by his life, situating the supernatural within familiar American locales such as bars, churches, and basements—normalizing the extraordinary while portraying ghosts as powerful allegories for addiction, trauma, and the memories binding us to the past. The collection is anchored by "Stone Corners," which introduces the Raven Twins—Kelley and Mercury Branscombe—



*Uneasy tales melding the supernatural with memory, pain, and secrets.*

**Great for fans of** Paul D. Davis's *Spirit Tales*, Kevin Brockmeier's *The Ghost Variations*.

whose uncanny abilities manifest in each other's proximity. Cummins revisits the twins across various tales, from "Sympathy for the Strawberry," depicting Kelley's childhood amid changelings and disappearances, to "Blue Harvest," where Mercury tests adolescent initiations and the paranormal. These linked stories, while underdeveloped, explore how

hauntings are passed down through family lineage, memory, and myth. By blending the supernatural with emotive storytelling, Cummins serves readers both a collection of shudder tales and a meditation on the ghosts we carry, though the digitally-produced images scattered throughout and a handful of editing errors lessen the sway. Much of his writing carries a thread of Christianity, with references to Bible verses and church settings, and Cummins explores the idea that love, faith, and forgiveness can protect from hauntings, pitting those blessings against pain and fear. These tales may not terrorize, but they leave a sense of unease, a faint inkling that the supernatural is more accessible than we think.

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

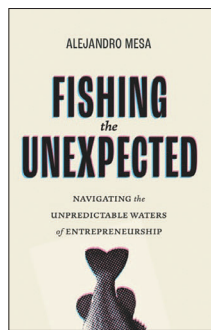
## BUSINESS &amp; PERSONAL FINANCE

## Fishing the Unexpected: Navigating the Unpredictable Waters of Entrepreneurship

Alejandro Mesa | Houndstooth  
134p, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 978-1-544-54684-1

Arguing that failures are our most powerful narratives, Mesa dives into his business mistakes and triumphs, blending personal insight, practical advice, and entrepreneurial psychology to help readers "avoid the mental traps and errors in judgment" that threaten professional success. He first builds a foundation of his experience investing in Piscicola El Rosario, an aquaculture business in Colombia, recounting the company's accomplishments alongside its harrowing missteps. Later, he uses those missteps to explore the biases and errors in judgment that led to the company's mounting debts and eventual liquidation, outlining alternative methods to help readers invest in and successfully execute their own businesses.

Mesa's honesty and openness are compelling; rather than getting bogged down in past mistakes, he uses them as effective learning tools, starting with his foremost advice to only invest in "core areas," or those businesses where you have experience



*Powerful analysis of business missteps, with concrete solutions.*

**Great for fans of** Reeves Wiedeman's *Billion Dollar Loser*, Andy Dunn's *Burn Rate*.

and prior knowledge. From there, he launches into group dynamics, why the success of a business is not always dependent on the "dictates of economics and finance," and more. "Business is pure biology," he declares, and he applies three evolutionary stages—differentiation, amplification, and selection—to professional settings, urging readers to adopt a growth mindset and focus on logical, well-planned action as opposed to "throwing more and more resources at problems." His lessons offer concrete steps to avoid errors, such as seeking opposing viewpoints, appointing a team "devil's advocate," and ensuring information and data are extensive and readily available.

The writing style is personal, reflective, and accessible, and Mesa's message is clear: a leader who understands their own mental filters—and dedicates time and energy to remedy them—stands a far better chance of avoiding costly mistakes. Mesa eschews rigid frameworks in favor of analytical strategies, producing a debut grounded in lived experience, reminding readers that readiness, openness, and self-awareness are our most valuable professional and personal tools.

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

# Booksellers & Librarians:



## How are you handling self-published books?

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

## NONFICTION

EDITOR'S PICK

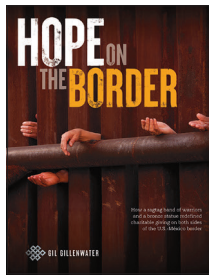
**Hope On The Border**

Gil Gillenwater

240p, hardcover, \$28, ISBN 979-8-899-01437-6

"Life on the border is raw... It bleeds," Gillenwater writes in this moving account of his work as president of the Rancho Feliz Charitable Foundation, an organization intent on improving the lives of residents in Mexico's impoverished village of Agua Prieta—one of many refugee towns along the U.S.-Mexico border. Rancho Feliz believes neither in open borders nor welfare; instead, it encourages "reciprocal giving," where those on each side of the transaction provide something as part of an exchange. Such a method aims to preserve dignity while promoting empowerment and mutual respect—basic human needs that form the foundation of Gillenwater's work.

*Hope on the Border* is a stunning blueprint for lasting, meaningful change. To reinforce the poignancy of this transformative account, nearly every page explodes in color, bursting with photos that illustrate how improving living standards even in one small village can have far-reaching effects. Through vivid personal accounts of the families and individuals impacted by Rancho Feliz's work, Gillenwater shows



*Powerful account of humanitarian efforts along the U.S.-Mexico border.*

**Great for fans of** Jonathan Blitzer's *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*, Alejandra Oliva's *Rivermouth*.

Gillenwater reflects on policies that have shaped the crisis, sharply calling out the U.S. culture of excess and privilege that contributes to "desperation, challenges, humiliation, and lack of opportunity." He includes a touch of the spiritual as well, with his imagining of the Border Virgin—a bronze sculpture symbolizing Rancho Feliz's purpose. His scrutiny of America's "hunger for meaning" as a mirror to the material poverty in Mexican border towns is compelling. Ultimately, Gillenwater suggests that service to others is "the one form of social capital that never loses value in the marketplace of human happiness."

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

## NONFICTION

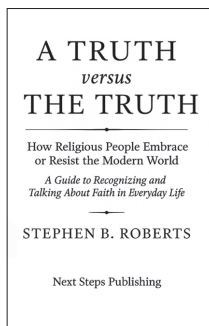
**A Truth Versus the Truth: How Religious People Embrace or Resist the Modern World**

Stephen B. Roberts | Next Steps Publishing

180p, hardcover, \$28, ISBN 979-8-999-38800-1

Roberts, a rabbi and professional chaplain, introduces his *Modernity Spectrum* in this thought-provoking spiritual guide, seeking a way to "understand how religious people and communities respond to the modern world." He constructs 10 identifying markers to demonstrate where an individual falls on that spectrum, from the modern side—where religion is practiced in a way that fits well within our contemporary society—to the non-modern side, characterized by people choosing to live separately and rejecting present-day trends. His analysis touches on several religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and more, as he highlights the different ways faith has evolved. In the process, he weighs human kindness and compassion against strict religious tenets and principles.

With a clear goal to find opportunities for open communication and connection, Roberts works his way through his 10 markers, delving into topics like education and the treatment of women, while staunchly cautioning against othering. His



*Thought-provoking resource gauging how faith intersects with contemporary life.*

**Great for fans of** Kelsey Osgood's *Godstruck*, Leslie Dorrough Smith and Steven W. Ramey's *Religions of the World*.

writing is straightforward and concise, and he argues throughout that value systems and beliefs are individual, and that "multiple truths can exist at the same time." From politics to marriage to abortion, Roberts provides a wealth of information on religious practices and how each faith views contemporary issues. Engaging narratives include Hasidic Jews who use "kosher phones" to

restrict technology; Hutterite communities who often prefer natural healing methods; and Muslim feminists leading mosques and religious studies, "embracing faith while insisting it evolve." Roberts writes with respect and reverence for individual preferences, handling potentially controversial topics with empathy while inviting readers to contemplate the intersections of faith and contemporary life. By recognizing how your faith responds to today's society, he writes, we can "encourage honest, respectful conversation about why"—and empower understanding, acceptance, and belonging regardless of divergent religious beliefs.

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

## SCIENCE, NATURE, TECHNOLOGY

**Amazing Hummingbirds You Can Find In Arizona: Strategies for Attracting, Feeding, and Photographing These Miniature Marvels**

Kelly Isley | B&amp;B Publishers

162p, hardcover, \$55, ISBN 978-0-988-75184-2

Isley delves into all things hummingbird in this delightful offering, sharing beautiful photography, intriguing physical facts, helpful tips on attracting these "fascinating flyers" to your garden, and more. A hummingbird devotee from a young age, Isley recounts her excitement when helping hang feeders or practicing her blossoming photography skills on family vacations, declaring that "the beauty of hummingbirds is something worth capturing and preserving." She spreads that joy to readers, sharing facts that will entertain—some hummingbirds weigh no more than a dime, and their feathers can shift color in different light angles—and identifying the best spots in Arizona for readers to spot these wonders of nature.

This is a comprehensive resource on hummingbirds, and Isley nicely balances her penchant for photography with helpful pointers, such as why gardeners should avoid pesticides, how to interact safely and respectfully with hummingbirds, and even rare opportunities to view them, including the annual Sedona Hummingbird Festival. She shares why that festival is so important—based on her interview with



*Informative look at Arizona's hummingbirds, with gorgeous photography.*

**Great for fans of** Laurel Aziz's *Hummingbirds*, John Shewey's *The Hummingbird Handbook*.

Alice Madar, the executive director of the International Hummingbird Society—while counting Sedona as an important migration stop for these buzzing beauties. Nature lovers will appreciate Isley's nod to conservation efforts, as she explains that Arizona is a hotbed for naturalists—and butterfly admirers, taking a detour in the book's closing chapters into the types of butterflies that can be found there, their unique habitat needs, and more. The photographs she includes of hummingbirds, butterflies, and their natural environments are lovely, offering bright visual breaks in an otherwise information-heavy narrative, and she credits experts like Stephen Vaughan and Kristy Gallo for the book's countless insights into these fascinating creatures. Whether learning about the rare Plain-capped Starthroat (named for the star-like markings on its throat) or Arizona's more common Anna's hummingbird—that requires nectar from up to 1,000 flowers a day to survive—readers will be captivated by these "miniature marvels."

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

## MEMOIR

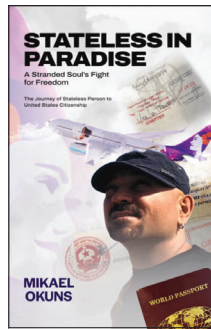
**Stateless in Paradise: A Stranded Soul's Fight for Freedom**

Mikael Okuns | Lynx Publishers

467p, e-book, \$9.99, ISBN 978-1-968012-05-2

With an intimate, unflinching voice, Okuns recalls growing up queer in the ruins of post-Soviet Central Asia, and his raw and poetic memoir of displacement carries the weight of silence, repression, and hope with remarkable grace. The Soviet Union was a surveillance state, and his childhood in Azerbaijan was shaped by the fear of being labeled subversive. But beauty persisted in small rebellions: his sister playing Chopin on a battered Soviet piano, or a friend whispering the plot of a banned book. These are Okuns's first encounters with freedom, and the beginning of a lifelong search for the chance "to love without guilt and be loved without punishment."

Instead of a traditional dramatic arc, the narrative unfolds through quiet, precise vignettes. Each chapter feels like a breath held too long, then finally exhaled. Grounding his memoir in lived experience—where joy is fleeting and danger is always near—he learns to speak in a world that punishes honesty. The way Okuns balances



*Beautifully rendered memoir of the harsh realities of LGBTQ exile.*

**Great for fans of** Putsata Reang's *Ma and Me*, Edefe Okporo's *Asylum*.

vulnerability with clarity will resonate with readers who have lived on the margins of family, country, or faith. Becoming stateless means paperwork, fear, disconnection—and a strange kind of freedom. Okuns begins to define himself. He writes and speaks, falls in love, and finally begins to feel that his story matters.

Rooted in the specifics of language, geography, and memory, the structure of *Stateless in Paradise* mirrors the inner life of someone learning to exist after erasure. The final chapters, which explore his newfound and tenuous sense of belonging, move swiftly, demonstrating how many moments in a life will blur while others pierce. Arriving in U.S., in Houston, he finds both sanctuary and labyrinth, and these passages capture the urgent charge of discovery, both of city and of self. In poetry readings and crowded cafés, Okuns shares his voice, not just to survive, but to connect. Paradise, he suggests, is less a place than a state of being that can be built, quietly, word by word.

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

## MEMOIR

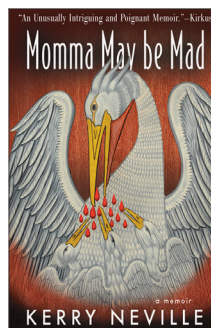
**Momma May Be Mad: A Memoir**

Kerry Neville

268p, trade paper, \$21.95, ISBN 978-1-963-69541-0

There's a searing urgency to Neville's memoir that pulls readers into her fractious state of mind, piecing together her chaotic mental health struggles from a near-miraculous perspective of stability. When Neville is diagnosed with bipolar disorder, she recognizes the "racing thoughts, insomnia, impulsivity, mania, depression, suicidality"—and knows that they're compounded by her alcoholism and anorexia. She tries therapy and medication, is hospitalized multiple times, and even submits to a "desperate exorcism (bona fide with priest!)." The slew of "unasked-for-but-miraculous interventions" she's subjected to include the frightening process of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT); it doesn't cure her, but along with antipsychotics, it does make "soupy mush" of her memory.

A visit to Flannery O'Connor's house crystallizes the hope that Neville clings to: "A conscious, unquestioning (yes, oxymoron) faith in the belief that what is coming... will also offer the possibility (but only the possibility, no guarantee) of salvation." Much of that process involves writing, and after two short story collections



*Harrowing recovery memoir extols honest writing as path to peace.*

**Great for fans of** Bassey Ikpi's *I'm Telling the Truth but I'm Lying*, Daphne Merkin's *This Close to Happy*.

(*Necessary Lies* and *Remember to Forget Me*), *Momma May Be Mad* is Neville's riveting and impressive act of remembering, putting readers into her active mind as she processes the constant struggle to find a way forward. Inspired by Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Emily Dickinson, Neville finds her own expressive style to document her journey from desolation.

As Neville recounts how her husband and two young children were affected by her mental health, her narrative jumps between recent years and her childhood, incorporating journal entries, poetry, candid letters, and asides into this raw memoir of vulnerability and resourcefulness. She's achieved her dreams of becoming a writer, traveling, and learning more about her Irish background, while frankly documenting what it took her to get there. There's nothing soothing about this recovery narrative—her prose is all jagged edges—but it is comforting: Neville lived to tell her story and shines a light for those who follow.

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



Reviews

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

### FICTION

#### **Ancient as the Stars**

**Maya Darjani.** Starshot Press, \$22 (400p)  
ISBN 979-8-8691-7724-7

Darjani's Broken Union series debut is an assured space opera with a fascinating, time-bending premise. It opens in the 24th century, with discontented flight officer Ren Yilmaz of the Earth Spaceship Hawking, being dressed down by a commanding officer, who happens to be her ex-husband. Ren considers herself the "classic star that flamed out too early, who gave up on her career, who used words and scowls as armor," but she remains determined to be "somebody, one day." When the ESS Hawking unexpectedly jumps 62 years into the future, she gets to see just who she turns out to be, coming face to face with her future self: the confident, happily married, and mysteriously immortal Earth Union Fleet Capt. Karennia Yilmaz. Ren and Karennia clash, but find common cause in fighting Badal, a terrorist group contesting Earth's control of human colonies. While the military plot is fun, Darjani's true strength lies in characterization, making both Yilmazes sympathetic but flawed in different ways and mining impressive psychological depth out of their differences and similarities. It's a promising start.

#### **Artifact**

**Carol Pack.** Artiqua, \$5.95 e-book (342p)  
ISBN 978-1-970028-16-4

YA author Pack (the Chronicles of Illumination series) pivots to adult fiction with this propulsive conspiracy thriller. Tray Lennox, an FBI agent investigating art crimes, gets a frantic call from his identical twin brother, nuclear inspector Carey, who swears he's being followed. Before Tray can act, Carey is shot and killed by the unidentified pursuer. Tray suspects the bullet was meant for him, because he's been searching for the Hero's Knot—an ancient artifact comprising "space debris made up of nanoparticles of extraterrestrial biological origin"—for the Bureau, and he knows he's not the only one after it. Hoping to deceive Carey's killer into thinking they shot the right brother, Tray switches his wallet with Carey's at the scene. He then sets out to

avenge his brother's death on top of his original mission, the stakes of which are raised when Tray learns that the Hero's Knot can be modified to detonate nuclear weapons—and that Carey was tracking down people who'd sabotaged some of the nuclear reactors he'd inspected. Pack hits the ground running, grabbing readers from the opening pages and refusing to let go until the satisfying denouement. Dan Brown fans will be pleased.

#### **The Bluestockings**

**Wendi Nunnery.** Nook, \$16.99 trade paper (264p) ISBN 979-8-218-58624-9

In this uneven debut from YA author Nunnery (*The Next Best Thing*), a girl goes on a crusade to save the family business. Twelve-year-old Eleanor Black has been raised by her father since she was six and her mother vanished after a day of work at the family's small-town Georgia bookstore. Eleanor's lonely life gets a boost with the arrival of Maggie, who's visiting her reclusive aunt, Ruby, while her parents are settling their divorce. The girls become friends and Eleanor confesses to Maggie that she learned from "foreboding letters" found in her father's desk that they're about to lose the bookstore. The girls start scheming ways to save it, and as Eleanor spends time at Ruby's mansion, the two form a kinship based on the fact that Ruby also lost her mother when she was young. When Eleanor discovers an old manuscript in a desk's hidden compartment at the bookstore, she hopes it's valuable enough to save the shop. Researching the book and its author, however, leads her down an unexpected path with supernatural implications. The fantasy elements are a jarring shift from the thoughtful character-driven story. Still, this tenderhearted tale has its moments.

#### **Her Pretty Knight**

**Mariah Rae Birch.** Mariah Rae Birch, \$13.99 trade paper (292p)  
ISBN 979-8-3432-2528-0

Rae introduces an inventive if somewhat underexplored magic system in the brisk kickoff to her Sapphic Lady Knights series. In this world, magic is thought of as a corrupting plague and those with access to it

routinely transform into inhuman monsters called malignants. As a result, all witches are being rounded up and executed. To escape such a fate, death witch Della and her sister, Anette, strike a deal with Princess Cordelia of Hevalon. Cordelia is eager to avoid an arranged marriage to Prince Valin of Glea and, given their striking resemblance, asks Della to go in her stead and use her magic to appear to die before the ceremony. The logic of this plan doesn't hold much water, but it serves to set a captivating plot in motion as Della undertakes the deception and winds up falling not for her supposed betrothed but for the bodyguard he assigns her, Sir Galleon, one of Glea's famed lady knights. Rae makes her heroines' yearning for each other palpable as they fight their feelings amid plentiful court intrigue. Unfortunately, plot twists are set up with little payoff, Valin's late turn to all-out villainy feels somewhat unearned, and the worldbuilding, while fascinating, raises more questions than answers. Still, the simmering romantic tension and striking leading ladies offer plenty to enjoy.

#### **Love by a Landslide**

**K.L. Parsons.** K.L. Parsons, \$15.99 trade paper (344p) ISBN 979-8-9906842-0-1

Parsons kicks off her Stranded in Leavenworth series with this wilderness-set charmer. Lucy O'Malley is happily planning a romantic outdoorsy vacation in the quaint town of Leavenworth with her workaholic, somewhat emotionally distant boyfriend, Brodan—until he dumps her on her 30th birthday. Meanwhile, widowed wilderness tour company owner, Jonathan Miller, whose wife, Cynthia, died four years earlier in a white-water rafting accident on an expedition he was leading, has vowed never to allow anyone else into his heart. Then Lucy comes bounding into his life and announces that the trip she booked for two will actually be a one-on-one tour. Reluctantly consenting to lead Lucy on her solo hiking trip, Jonathan is soon won over by her grit, especially as the multiday climb turns out to be harder than she'd expected. Through landslides, torrential rainstorms, and renegade tents, Lucy and Jonathan grow closer—but will their pasts prevent

them from getting together? Lucy's sweetness and sass convincingly slips beneath Jonathan's high walls, and their grumpy/sunshine dynamic is a treat. Supporting characters, especially Lucy's drag-queen bestie, Dirty O'Feelya, provide enchanting pockets of levity. This well-crafted romance will have readers hooked

### **Shooting Bogies**

**Ralph Monti.** Ralph Monti, \$8.99 e-book (342p) ISBN 979-8-218-36892-0

Monti's first novel (after the memoir *I Remember Brooklyn*) is an amusing crime caper in the vein of Elmore Leonard. Rocky Delmonico, a New Jersey golf hustler, gets into trouble with mobster Gino Lofaccio during the funeral of Gino's father. As the casket is being lowered into the ground, Gino's mother leaps on top of it, and Rocky can't stifle his laughter. Afterwards, an infuriated Gino tells Rocky that, to make up for his faux pas, he'll become the golf pro at Fair Play, a course run by slimy businessman Pincus Bogalinsky. Gino hopes to buy the property Fair Play sits on and turn it into a "condo goldmine." He instructs Rocky to earn Pincus's trust and gather any information that might help him make the purchase. Rocky reluctantly accepts the assignment, but soon discovers that Gino is not the only person looking to take Pincus down. As Rocky stumbles into ever more dangerous dealings, he struggles to keep a target off his own back. The premise's familiarity ends up being more of an asset than a demerit as Monti manages to puts his own droll twist on the travails of small-time Jersey mobsters. For readers who like their crime with a side of comedy, this gets the job done.

describes victims of freak accidents on cemetery grounds and graveyard employees who died of natural causes on the job, including security guard Barry Brutchey, who was found dead in his truck less than an hour after completing a patrol of the Glendale Memorial Park Cemetery. As Blanch runs through his list of cases in brief, photo-heavy chapters, he occasionally details efforts by amateur ghost hunters to communicate with the deceased at the sites of their death, but the book's ghost hunting through line is thin. Still, Blanch's concise recollections of human tragedies are affecting. For true crime obsessives, this is worth a look.

## **NONFICTION**

### **Haunted Arizona: Deadly Graveyards**

**Jethro Blanch.** Paranormal Playground, \$19.99 trade paper (114p) ISBN 979-8-89542-000-3

In this offbeat debut survey, paranormal historian Blanch details 13 deaths in cemeteries across his home state of Arizona, many of which he purports have become hot spots for supernatural activity. The most engrossing chapters concern grief-stricken Phoenix real estate agent Julian Holmes's 1954 suicide at his wife, Margaret's, grave; Holmes shot himself after laying flowers beside her headstone. Blanch also