

NOVEMBER 10, 2025

booklife®

— YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING —

17 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

Building the Table Myself

An author reflects on publishing traditionally in Europe and self-publishing in the U.S.

BY ANDREW BRIDGEMAN

My literary debut began in victory. I'm not kidding. I sent one query letter to, arguably, one of the best literary agents in the world. She read my manuscript, signed me into her agency, and declared that my novel was "going to be our big book of the year."

Pretty cool, right? Every author's dream.

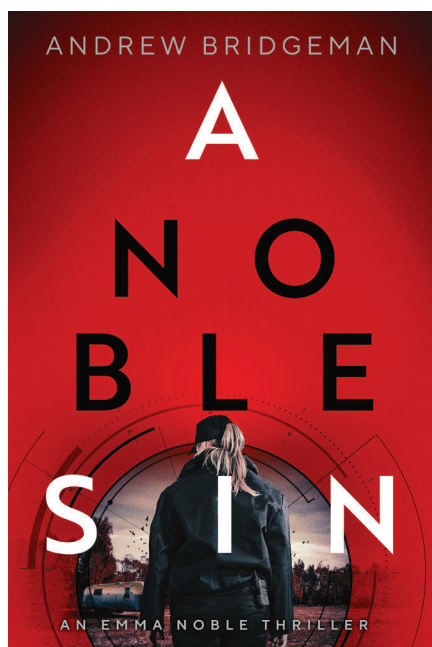
In my late 50s, for the first time in many decades, I began to imagine something extraordinary for myself. The giant wheel in the universe had finally turned in my favor.

Then it got even better. At the Frankfurt Book Fair, my novel was picked up by publishers in Hungary and Germany. I had secured the best agent and landed two foreign deals. All that remained was the inevitable U.S. publishing auction and the massive check made payable to that season's "hot" debut author.

If you're kind of hating my good fortune, I don't blame you. But don't worry. That beautiful 60 days of joyful anticipation became 90 days, then 200, then 365. Lots of nail-biting. Floor-pacing. No auction. No deal. No apparent interest.

Two years later... still nothing.





I used to think getting an agent was the golden key that unlocked all the doors to being traditionally published. What I've learned is that it's more like a hall pass. It gets you through one set of gates, but there are more ahead, and some of them won't open no matter how good your representation is. Or your manuscript.

Then my agent—who's a bulldog, but warm and generous—told me, with great kindness and empathy, that they were out of bullets. The trip was over. The dream had died.

So there I sat: Germany and Hungary waiting to birth my novel into languages I don't speak, while, in my native

country, I was unrepresented and a decidedly "not hot" commodity. Like many writers before me, I had to ask the question—you know the one. Could I do it on my own?

Could someone with no publishing experience launch a debut? Was it possible that a good book could find readers without publishing house money, connections, or marketing muscle?

My indie path wasn't glamorous. I researched hybrid publishing and found an amazing partner with Mission Point Press. That didn't keep me from struggling with social media strategy, cover specs, pricing, and marketing. In one early ad, I somehow forgot to mention the name of my book. But, to my shock, it worked out great. Curious readers clicked the link to learn more. It became my most successful campaign. That was the first time that I realized something essential: there are rewards in experimentation—and sometimes being flat-out dumb pays off, too.

Still, there are some challenges that feel unsurmountable. The biggest concerns credibility. To be honest I still struggle with it. Booksellers and libraries are inundated with self-published authors demanding shelf space. I kept at it, though, failing strategically. At 59, I decided to give TikTok a try—an experience my daughter describes as "unfortunate for all involved." Apparently, suspense novels and dad energy don't trend well. Still, I posted. Some flopped. Some didn't. That's indie life in a nutshell: keep throwing darts, and eventually something sticks.

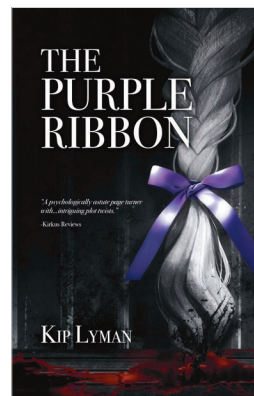
Q&A SPONSORED

BookLife Talks with Kip Lyman

Debut author Lyman's book *The Purple Ribbon* follows three characters in a coastal Florida town as their lives intersect and their actions ripple across the community. We spoke with Lyman about her inspiration, her connection to the novel, and her work on the sequel.

What is the story behind this book—why and how did you write it?

It feels as though *The Purple Ribbon*, for the most part, was already written and just waiting for the right person to come along to author it. It began one evening in the late spring of 2024 when I was watching a bizarre documentary on TV before bed-time. I literally woke up in the middle of that night with this dark, twisted psychological story flooding into my mind. That was just the beginning. For the months that followed, I continued waking with ideas and plot twists to add to the story until, seven months later, it was completely drafted.



As a first-time writer, what was the process like for navigating the three main characters of *The Purple Ribbon*?

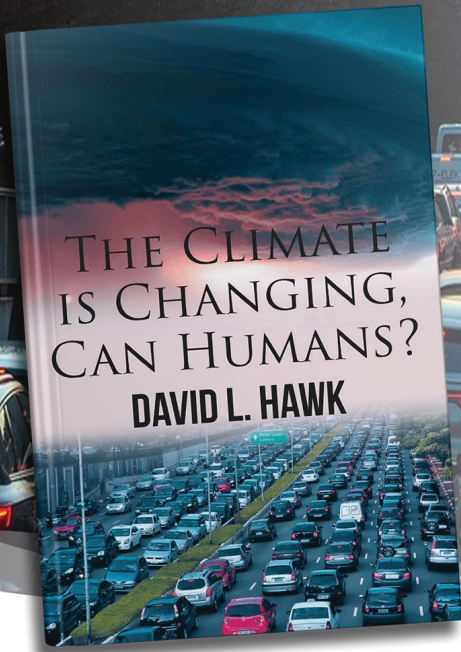
The process of developing the main characters in this story came quite naturally. The vision I had for the plot twists was crystal clear all along. I enjoyed developing all of them and the minor characters as well. Since ideas didn't always come to me in chronological order, the process of keeping dates and events properly lined up was a bit of a challenge.

For more, visit booklife.com/lyman

THE CLIMATE IS CHANGING, CAN HUMANS?

BY DAVID L. HAWK

ISBN: 9781967361342



A Stirring Call for Courage, Compassion, and Collective Change

When the world seems frozen in traffic idling in apathy, distracted by noise, uncertain which lane to choose, *The Climate is Changing, Can Humans?* invites us to open our car doors, step out, and start walking. Not just toward environmental healing, but toward our own humanity.

In his newest release, author David L. Hawk confronts one of the most urgent questions of our time, not whether the climate is changing (it is), but whether WE can. This simple shift, from “will” to “can,” reframes the climate crisis from inevitability to opportunity, a challenge of courage and conscience. Sometimes the smallest word can carry the largest meaning. The title’s evolution, from “Will Humans?” to “Can Humans?”, was born in an unexpected moment of inspiration. During early discussions, Nancy, assistant to Vice President Kamala Harris, heard the working title and paused. Her gentle suggestion, replacing “will” with “can”, transformed the phrase into a question of possibility, not prophecy. Though Nancy’s contribution was originally acknowledged in the book’s introduction, Social Security officials later requested the reference be removed, citing federal policy restrictions on naming government employees in published works. What remains, however, is her spirit, a quiet, courageous reminder that change often begins with a single voice, speaking truth into a title.

Look closely at the cover and you’ll see a cinematic homage: a subtle nod to R.E.M.’s haunting *Everybody Hurts* video. In the iconic scene, stranded commuters step from their cars, leaving behind the motionless highway. Hawk draws on that same imagery, the moment when stillness breaks, when isolation gives way to agency. Like those figures in the traffic jam, the book urges us to “step out”, from complacency, from convenience, from carbon-heavy habits, and begin walking, both literally and metaphorically, toward a more sustainable and soulful life.

In a move that matches message with mission, 100% of author royalties from *The Climate is Changing, Can Humans?* are being donated to two nonprofits devoted to nurturing children, communities, and hope. Readers inspired by the book’s ethos can extend their impact through direct support.

1. St. Joseph’s Indian School

For more than 90 years, St. Joseph’s has served Native American children and families with education, care, and opportunity — ensuring that heritage, healing, and hope endure.

2. Children International

With a global mission to end child poverty, Children International offers healthcare, education, and empowerment to children and families around the world.

Every purchase, every donation, becomes part of a larger act, proof that humanity can choose generosity over greed, compassion over convenience.

While *The Climate is Changing, Can Humans?* stands firmly on its own, Hawk’s earlier works explore parallel questions of timing, action, and adaptation. His book trailer for *Too Early, Too Late, Now What?* offers a window into his creative lens, one focused on the intersections of urgency, awareness, and awakening. The same pulse runs through this new release: an insistence that there is still time, but not much, and that our response must be both personal and planetary.

In an age of anxiety and distraction, *The Climate is Changing, Can Humans?* is a clear, compassionate call to reimagine what it means to live responsibly — not just for the planet, but for one another. Hawk does not write to alarm; he writes to awaken. The book challenges readers to replace despair with direction, guilt with grace, and fear with faith — not blind faith, but the kind that moves feet.

“The question isn’t whether the climate can change — it’s whether we can.”

— David L. Hawk

Available at:

amazon.com®

BARNES & NOBLE



*also in other major online bookstores

THE TALE OF MR. CROCODILE TAKES TEA

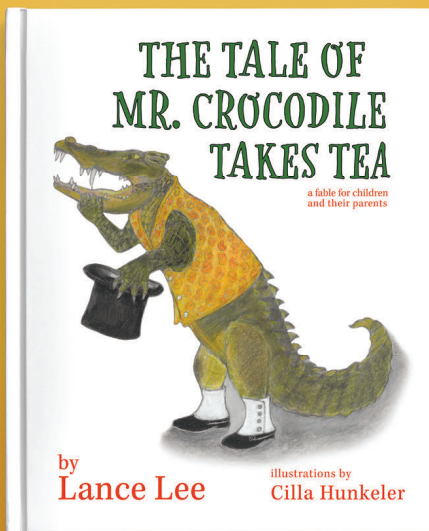
by Lance Lee

A heartwarming story that encourages readers to consider themes of acceptance and the importance of looking beyond external differences...an excellent read for children...a modern fable that entertains and educates, making it an excellent addition to a child's library.

—Carol Thompson, 5* Readers' Favorite review

Lee's second installment in his charming "Crouch End" series follows...an adventurous story of a crocodile learning to become a person...and offers a beautiful moral that all life has dignity and deserves respect.... *The Tale of Mr. Crocodile Takes Tea* offers a perspective that may positively inspire young readers....

—Booklife Reviews



Paperback: 979-8-21830-614-4 • \$17.95

Hardback: 979-8-21830-612-0 • \$31.50

Whimsical and delightfully thought-provoking

—Diane Donovan, *Midwest Book Review*

Delightful...Charming...Fantastical Whimsy!

—Aimee Jodoin, 4* *Foreword review*

A delightful little story of differences and respect

—Asher Syed, 5* *Readers' Favorite review*

A tale of unity told through a Crocodile's search for whether we're all persons

—Love Reading: *Love Reading for Kids, and: An Indie Book We Love*

Available at

amazon BARNES & NOBLE

I used to think getting an agent was the golden key that unlocked all the doors to being traditionally published. What I've learned is that it's more like a hall pass.

It's a strange position I find myself in. For over a year, I've been grinding—trying to find my readers, trying to figure out what works. And yet, abroad, my book will soon be released into bookstores all over Berlin, Munich, and Frankfurt—a hot new American voice for the European audience.

There, my traditional publishing path was incredibly easy. I didn't pick the cover. I didn't beg for blurbs. I literally did nothing. Then again, I learned nothing.

If I'd gotten my dream deal in the U.S., I'd know none of what I do now. In the long run, that's a problem. I consider myself fortunate to have been forced onto the self-publishing path. As an indie writer, you see everything: the wins, the misses. You experience the joy of selling a book or two in far-flung countries such as India and New Zealand. (Seriously, that was a fun day). And you also waste money and time on things that don't work.

You're the boss. There's no buffer between you and failure—but there's also no buffer between you and success either.

That clarity transformed me. I stopped measuring my worth through traditional publishing validation and began to recognize my own value as a writer on my own terms. I decided to redirect that energy into believing in myself and my work. My literary voice matters. I am in control. That works for me. No one will ever care about my book as much as I do.

I've learned that, if you're willing to learn, to ask questions, to fail publicly and keep going, that's enough to start. It doesn't mean I've sworn off traditional publishing. If the right opportunity comes along, I'll take the meeting. But I'll walk into it knowing exactly what I bring to the table—because I built that table myself.

The indie route gave me a direct line to the people that matter most: a growing audience of readers. We're starting to find each other. It's grassroots and it's wonderful.

So can you make it as an indie author without the publishing machine behind you? The answer is yes.

And also... kind of.

You don't get the book tour. You don't get the team. You don't get the baked-in legitimacy that still carries weight in some rooms. But you do get something else, something slower and harder to quantify: proof of your own resilience, a direct line to your readers, the feeling that you're not waiting anymore.

And you get moments, small ones usually: an unexpected email from a reader who loved the ending, a spike in sales after a blog post you didn't think anyone would read, the quiet thrill of watching how many pages of your book people are reading in real time. Those moments, I'd argue, are of deep value.

Maybe one day I'll even figure out TikTok—and my daughter will forgive me. 🙄

Andrew Bridgeman is the author of the *Emma Noble Thriller Series*. His latest book, *A Noble Sin*, is a *BookLife Editor's Pick*.

A ROAD TO A PROMISED LAND

BY LLOYD H. MULLER

ISBN 979-8886938029



A ROAD TO A PROMISED LAND: A BIBLICAL EPIC READY FOR THE BIG SCREEN



What makes a story timeless? It is not only the grandeur of events, but the beating heart of ordinary people caught in extraordinary circumstances. Lloyd H. Muller's *A Road to a Promised Land* offers exactly this, a fresh retelling of the Exodus that gives voice to the countless Hebrew families whose faith, doubts, and resilience made history possible. While most Exodus narratives spotlight Moses, Muller shifts the lens to the nameless and faceless, like Saul, a weary Hebrew brickmaker, and his wife Devorah. Through their eyes, readers experience the burden of slavery in Egypt, the last of overseers, the whisper of hope sparked by a leader called Moses, and the terrifying decision to abandon everything familiar for the uncertain promise of freedom. It is a story of courage, sacrifice, and enduring faith. But more than that, it is the kind of sweeping, human-driven epic that naturally translates to cinema.

Biblical films have long captivated audiences, from *The Ten Commandments* to *The Prince of Egypt*. Yet few have explored the Exodus from the ground level of its people, their hunger, their heartbreak, their small triumphs that together forged a nation. Muller's narrative offers filmmakers a rare chance to combine breathtaking spectacle with intimate human drama.

Visually stunning scenes leap from the page: sun-scorched brickyards, tense whispers in the slave quarters, Pharaoh's intimidating court, and the perilous march into the wilderness. This is a story with scale and soul. In an era where global audiences crave authenticity and emotional depth, *A Road to a Promised Land* delivers both.

Dr. Lloyd H. Muller – U.S. Air Force officer, professor, and international consultant, draws on a lifetime of global experience to bring historical authenticity and human depth to *A Road to a Promised Land*. At its heart, this is a story of faith, doubt, and the endurance of spirit against impossible odds, a universal tale with cinematic power. With today's growing interest in epic, faith-driven narratives, Muller's novel stands out as timely, visually breathtaking, and ready for the screen.

[Website](#) [Book Trailer](#)

Rights and film adaptation inquiries are welcome



Available at: **amazon** **BARNES & NOBLE** *across all major online bookstores.
BOOKSELLERS



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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

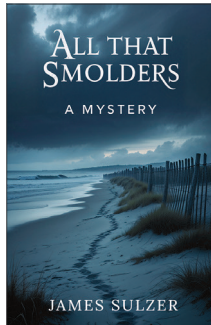
All That Smolders: A Mystery

James Sulzer

271p, trade paper, \$19.95, ISBN 978-1-636-98757-6

Despite being set in 1980, Sulzer's debut mystery is a clever reworking of golden age detective fiction, with Agatha Christie serving as the inspiration not only for journalist Peter Christie (Agatha's fictional great-great nephew here), but also in the way his investigation reveals the rotting underpinnings of a closed-off community. With first-person narration that reveals as much about Peter as the crime he's investigating, the amateur sleuth explains how a bitter divorce and losing his *Boston Globe* byline led him to this insulated New England island. Peter prides himself on his sharp instincts, but there are some glaring blind spots.

One of those blind spots is matter-of-factly telling his girlfriend, Haddie, that the murder victim is Chester Danville, lawyer for the island's wealthy recluse—and her grandfather. Vowing to solve his murder as a form of penance, Peter's drawn into



Christie-inspired mystery untangles an intertwined but divided island community.

Great for fans of Rachel Hawkins's *Reckless Girls*, Jane Casey's *Let the Dead Speak*.

the investigation by Detective McGuane, who asks for help deciphering a poem left in the victim's pocket. Soon, Peter starts receiving similar cryptic poems and realizes he needs to learn a lot more about his adopted home. He understands all too well the importance of established, affluent residents, distrusting a "washshore" like Peter.

What Peter finds is as unexpected and intrinsic to the island as the freshwater swamp he visits with Haddie, who works in nature conservation. Nantucket resident Sulzer (*Writ in Water*) builds the taut mystery around an island community's social hierarchy and income inequality. As Peter works to unravel which of these conflicts led to murder, Sulzer inserts his brief but potent journal entries that reveal his past mistakes and the lingering effects of growing up with an abusive, philandering father. Built as a classic Christie whodunnit, *All That Smolders* highlights the Queen of Crime's secret sauce: studying the living as much as speaking for the dead.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

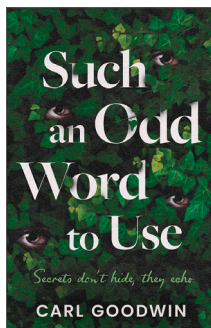
⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

Such an Odd Word to Use

Carl Goodwin | Whitefox Publishing

160p, mass market, \$13.99, ISBN 978-1-917-52362-2

The fact that a workaday planning application is the catalyst for Goodwin's smart, slippery, and playful fiction debut indicates that *Such an Odd Word to Use* will be an intellectual type of mystery rather than the parade-of-corpses variety, a puzzle driven by ideas and obsessions. So does Mark, its first-person narrator, himself. Though he makes references to a day job that had previously required him to travel a lot, he comes off as a chilly, introverted type, one with a passion for Charles Dickens, a fascination with chess, and a tendency toward theatrical metaphors. The investigation he launches here will plunge him deeper into paranoia and solitude. During the 2010s, Mark decides he wants to make an alteration to his London home, once a recording studio, before selling it. But his initial planning application is rejected, primarily because of opposition from his standoffish neighbor Alistair.



Smart slow burn of a London mystery, with lively puzzles and literary heft.

Great for fans of Jonathan Lethem, Paul Auster.

The reason for Alistair's opposition fuels the central mystery. So do the strangers Mark glimpses snooping around the house and following him on the street. Or are these figures all in his imagination? With evocative prose that moves briskly despite allowing, like Mark's literary hero, room for inspired observation and atmosphere, Goodwin keeps readers guessing, not just about the case. Help unraveling the conundrums comes from an unexpected source: Lana, a precocious child whose drawings, the novel's prologue suggests, turn out to be more than just whimsy.

Perhaps it's fitting that a mystery as cerebral as this resolves with a mundane solution, even if it can't help but feel underwhelming in the moment. Still, there are rewards along the way. Goodwin's depiction of technology failing to make Mark feel secure is especially pungent. Despite a spirit of dry detachment, Goodwin's vision of a man who no longer feels in control of the world around him unsettles nevertheless.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

The Graffiti Killer

David Milnes | what tradition books, s.a.

208p, trade paper, \$11.99, ISBN 978-1-916-18321-6

This sinister psychological thriller lingers in the mind long after the final page. Told through the raging voice of its 69-year-old narrator, the novel reads like a confession wrapped inside a manifesto, where obsession with art and disgust for the "mindless trash" of "Americana" curdle into a chilling compulsion to kill. A failed actor turned band promoter, the narrator recounts his past with sardonic humor, even as he descends into violence. His disdain for the woman he lived with—an aspiring painter he derides as shallow—drips from every page, while his contempt for graffiti artists, pop performers, and even literary figures reveals a worldview that is equal parts cultured and corrosive.

This is not a fast-paced chase but a deliberate unraveling, punctuated by moments of shocking brutality that jolt readers like a rifle crack. Milnes (*The Pathology of Graphology*) grounds his dark character study in an urban backdrop that feels sharply authentic, an immersive setting capturing the grit, restlessness,



Dark, unnerving portrait of obsession, combined with biting social critique.

Great for fans of Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, John Cohn's *Kill Beth*.

and creative hunger familiar to city dwellers. Characters like Moos and Arus feel tangible and alive—their fear palpable, their choices desperate, and Moos's struggle to balance art making with survival rendered in vivid, relatable strokes. "I once thought I was a nihilist," she reflects, informing the narrator while his rifle is trained on her, "I wish you had caught me painting a wall or something when I was a nihilist, because maybe I wouldn't have minded if you'd killed me for something so trivial."

The strength of the novel is its unsettling intimacy, though its flow occasionally falters due to the absence of chapters, paired with long, chunky paragraphs. The text shifts between meandering prose and abrupt, disjointed dialogue that mirrors the narrator's circuitous reasonings and fragmented reactions to the outer world, while Milnes returns again and again to a man whose ultimate desire is to escape "the unnameable oblivion" of being unseen, insignificant, and forgotten.

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

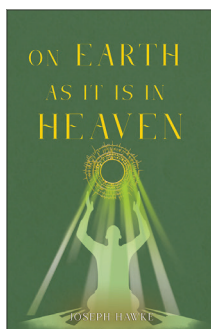
FICTION

On Earth As It Is In Heaven

Joseph Hawke | Vanguard Press
108p, trade paper, \$10.99, ISBN 978-1-83794-928-1

Hawke's well-honed autofiction debut unfolds in vignettes that capture the tension of his cross-cultural identity, one that's complicated by religion, immigration, and assimilation. Joseph Hawke, who was born Yousuf Haq, captures the fragmentary nature of memories, each one carefully exhumed and beautifully exhibited. *On Earth As It Is In Heaven* chronicles his parents' courtship in assured third-person narration, a union that doesn't make her Canadian Catholic father or his extended Pakistani Muslim family at all happy. Meeting as college students already inclined to defy tradition, the couple moves from Ottawa, Ontario, to Waco, Texas, for a fresh start.

On a fateful trip to New Orleans, Mary crosses herself when passing a Catholic church, but opts to continue on with Muhammad for "a breakfast of café au lait and beignets rather than the wafer and wine being consecrated." Hawke's imagery is sparse and vivid, and when he switches to first-person narration, more pointedly



Incisive novel of intersecting influences of immigrant tradition and American expectation.

Great for fans of Hisham Matar's *My Friends*, Ghassan Zeineddine's *Dearborn*.

confessional. Yousuf reveals a gnawing frustration he can't quite articulate, lashing out during everyday encounters that symbolize middle-class life (like a fraught trip to Dairy Queen). Born in 1968, Yousuf experiences the pendulum swings of American culture through the viewpoint of an embedded outsider.

Hawke (*American Justice*) combines elements of coming-of-age storytelling with an insightful reckoning into the struggles of the protagonist's parents, epitomized by the machinations that must go into buying a house from another immigrant family, a thread that brings ingrained cultural expectations and American-bred grievances to the forefront. When Hawke depicts religious turmoil (Yousuf quits Islamic studies and gets baptized), he includes small and intimate details that capture the specificity of his upbringing and the universality of his experiences. Cultures and faiths collide in *On Earth As It Is In Heaven*, and Hawke examines his loving, fallible family in incisive snapshots of a vibrant, resourceful American life.

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

FICTION

On the Edge of Grace

April Y. Jones
194p, e-book, \$9.99, ASIN B0FN3HGY3

A poignant exploration of love, betrayal, forgiveness, and self-discovery, Jones's adult fiction debut follows Blou Whitmore, a successful attorney whose seemingly perfect life unravels when her husband, Gable, walks out, leaving her with a cryptic letter explaining he has an illness and needs solitude. As Blou navigates the emotional wreckage of his departure, she uncovers a web of secrets, including Gable's hidden child. Simultaneously, her first love, Zamir, re-enters her life, reigniting unresolved feelings. The story delves into Blou's journey of healing, her strained relationship with her brother, Brave, and her ultimate quest for grace and self-acceptance.

Jones knits complex themes of grief, abandonment, and resilience into a narrative that feels deeply personal and relatable. The characters are richly developed, with Blou's internal struggles and emotional growth taking center stage, and her interactions with her friends—Neveah and Aurora—provide a strong support system, showcasing the importance of sisterhood in times of crisis. The strained sibling



Moving odyssey of self-acceptance, belonging, and grace.

Great for fans of Raven Leilani's *Luster*, Kiley Reid's *Such a Fun Age*.

dynamic between Blou and Brave is another highlight, as it evolves from resentment to reconciliation, offering a touching portrayal of familial healing by the story's end.

The novel's pacing is steady, with moments of tension and introspection balanced by lighter, heartwarming scenes, and Jones's background as a marriage and family therapist is evident in her nuanced portrayal of relationships and their emotional complexities. She infuses the narrative with faith-based reflections, adding depth to the themes of forgiveness and grace, as Blou tries to decide whether she and Gable can weather the storm and reunite, or if she needs to start over and build something from the ground up with someone else. This is a compelling debut that offers heartfelt explorations of life's messiness and the quiet strength it takes to rebuild. Fans of character-driven stories with themes of redemption and emotional healing will find it deeply satisfying.

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

FICTION

Billy McKenzie, A Story of Love

Colin MacKinnon
260p, e-book, \$28, ISBN 979-8-9929580-1-0

MacKinnon (*The Contractor*) weaves multiple timelines together in this historical romance, exploring political rebellion, personal healing, and the strange ways lives echo across time. In 1895 London, married anti-tsarist Flora Lijak emerges from emotional numbness to fall for American anarchist Billy McKenzie, whose life ends in betrayal. The beginnings of their affair take place as Flora is writing her first novel, *Ribeiro*, and their story interlaces with her work smuggling banned literature into—and out of—the Russian empire. A parallel storyline, set in modern-day Washington, D.C., follows literature scholar Ozzie Hosseini, who discovers a mysterious manuscript chronicling Flora's life and works in tandem with NSA decoder Mark Morehead to uncover long-buried secrets, finding her own unexpected love as she deciphers the past.

The novel's structure melds past and present into one haunting narrative, allowing readers to gradually uncover layers of identity and betrayal, both personal and political. Flora's emotional awakening through love is rendered with vivid, visceral imagery, making her transformation deeply felt, and the Lijak Manuscript



Stirring evaluation of love as a healing, transformative force.

Great for fans of Carlos Ruiz Zafón's *The Shadow of the Wind*, Kristen Loesch's *The Last Russian Doll*.

adds a quirky, mystical element, filled with erotic drawings and an indecipherable script. It acts almost as a character in and of itself, carrying hidden voices, feminine power, and unspoken truths. The story's dual timelines mirror each other: Ozzie's grief reflects Flora's emotional numbness, and her journey through the manuscript becomes a rediscovery of how love can both heal and harm.

This is a rewarding and layered novel, though its pacing can feel uneven. The historical sections—especially Flora's revolutionary life—are richly textured and emotionally resonant. In contrast, the modern storyline involving Ozzie and Mark feels more rigid, with moments of character development that are not always fully earned. Though the emotional arc in the contemporary thread doesn't quite match the intensity of Flora's narrative, the interplay between timelines is thoughtful, and the novel excels in language, atmosphere, and its exploration of love as a transformative force.

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

HISTORY & MILITARY

EDITOR'S PICK

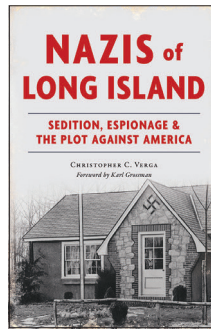
Nazis of Long Island: Sedition, Espionage & the Plot Against America

Christopher C. Verga

176p, trade paper, \$24.99, ISBN 978-1-467-15649-3

Verga (*The Ferguson Brothers Lynchings on Long Island*) delivers an eye-opening account of treason, sedition, and a surprisingly robust “breeding ground for an American Reich” in Long Island and neighboring New York City in the days leading up to and during World War II. Much more than an agricultural backwater or Manhattan bedroom community, Long Island was a prime target for Nazi espionage—home to defense plants, railroads, small ports, and, on its western tip, the Brooklyn Naval Yard. The island also was home to German American Bund camps like Camp Siegfried in Yaphank, which offered a beer hall, outdoor fun, youth indoctrination, and full-fledged Nazi rallies—all “ten miles from the region’s most extensive military base.”

Verga’s crisply told history alarms and surprises, with striking detail drawn from newspaper accounts, government records, personal testimonies, photographs,



Urgent, eye-opening history of Nazi infiltration on Long Island.

Great for fans of Bradley W. Hart’s *Hitler’s American Friends*, Mike Wallace’s *Gotham at War*.

Island Railroad to New York City. From there, they conducted espionage, met with sympathizers, or traveled to other parts of the country, infiltrating defense plants, government agencies, and media outlets. The LIRR also delivered thousands of supporters to the dismayingly large Nazi rally at Madison Square Garden organized by the Bund in 1939—an event many today are surprised to learn actually occurred.

Especially troubling, in Verga’s account, is how quickly Nazis mastered the media and swayed public opinion to their cause—and ample support Nazi groups received from organizations that turned a blind eye to their activities and ideology. Compact, insightful, and invitingly direct, this urgent volume reveals hard truths about how quickly American ideals can be corrupted—it could not have come at a better time.

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

HISTORY & MILITARY

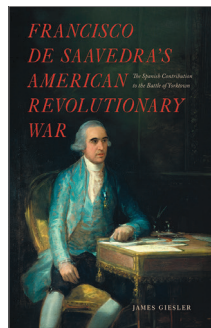
Francisco de Saavedra’s American Revolutionary War: The Spanish Contribution to the Battle of Yorktown

James Giesler

372p, e-book, \$11.95, ISBN 978-9-893-63121-8

This brisk and illuminating biographical history explores, through the life and career of Francisco de Saavedra, the pivotal role that Spain played in the American Revolution. Drawing deeply from Saavedra’s journals and letters, Giesler brings life to a story of ambition and politicking in Spain and the Caribbean, where the Seville-born Saavedra, eventually named Royal Commissioner by King Carlos III, faced hurricanes, imprisonment by the British, a bickering Junta of Spanish military leaders, and a host of other travails as he united the French and Spanish navies and oversaw victory against the British at Pensacola. There, Giesler notes, “the Spanish quickly overran the British fort before the stunned survivors could offer any resistance.” That force’s part in a subsequent victory, at the Battle of the Chesapeake, would be coordinated with the American rebels, led by George Washington, and hasten the birth of the new American Republic.

Saavedra had qualms about American independence, warning of “the great



Fascinating account of man behind alliance that turned the Revolutionary War.

Great for fans of Larrie D. Ferreiro’s *Brothers at Arms*, Gabriel Paquette and Gonzalo M. Quintero Saravia’s *Spain and the American Revolution*.

Giesler’s Saavedra, revealed through the man’s own pen, is savvy, learned, and intuitive, as comfortable translating books from Spanish to French as at reading men with power and securing common ground. Chapters on the Battle of the Chesapeake focus on Saavedra’s ally, the French admiral François Joseph Paul de Grasse, whose correspondence, sometimes with General Washington, is engaging. This is a fascinating, focused account of the world-changing power of diplomacy and alliances, centered on a man who insisted that people overestimated his capabilities.

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

POLITICAL & SOCIAL SCIENCE

EDITOR'S PICK

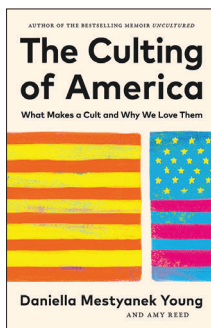
The Culting of America: What Makes Cult and Why We Love Them

Daniella Mestyaneck Young and Amy Reed | Opterpine

374p, hardcover, \$35, ISBN 978-1-955671-82-8

Mestyaneck Young has intimate, hard-won understanding of how cults work. Besides her master’s degree in organizational psychology, she grew up in the Children of God cult, which she left at 15, an experience that, along with her years as an Army intelligence officer, shaped her celebrated 2022 memoir *Uncultured*. With *The Culting of America*, Mestyaneck Young broadens her view, casting her experienced eye on other American institutions with cult-like aspects. “I want to expand our collective imagination of what a cult can be,” she writes, and her targets prove to be unexpected and varied, from grindset-rife Silicon Valley corporations to Alcoholics Anonymous, the Salvation Army, and even the Girl Scouts.

Mestyaneck Young, with her co-writer Amy Reed, doesn’t strive to condemn most of these institutions (though she strongly criticizes Elon Musk, the anti-vaccine movement, and Donald Trump). Rather, she views cultishness as a “spectrum,” with clearly defined hallmarks and traits that appear in most organized groups. Cults,



Authoritative, provocative look at cult dynamics in American society.

Great for fans of Amanda Montell’s *Cultish*, Tara Isabella Burton’s *Strange Rites*.

she demonstrates, use tactics like isolation, specialized language, and apocalyptic thinking to create strong bonds and promote increasingly extreme beliefs and behavior. “Extremism works because it’s comforting,” Mestyaneck Young writes, noting that cults “offer mission, purpose, motivation and community,” the essentials that give meaning and coherence to human life. The problem, according to Mestyaneck Young, begins when loyalty to the group overrides critical thinking and personal responsibility.

By that point, she warns, it’s usually too late. “People usually don’t realize they’re in a cult until they’re deeply entrenched.” Most of Mestyaneck Young’s breakdown of cult dynamics builds on previous research, but her personal experience in a capital-C cult and social groups that exhibit aspects of cultish thinking (she sharply exposes the sacrifices expected of American mothers) gives *The Culting of America* an unusual and valuable perspective on larger cultural forces at work. Tightly written, impassioned, and provocative, it carries a strong sense of authority, even if “authority” is what Mestyaneck Young distrusts most of all.

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

SPIRITUALITY/INSPIRATIONAL

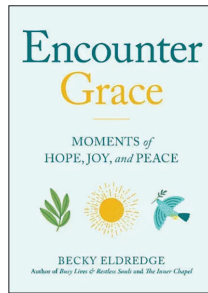
Encounter Grace: Moments of Hope, Joy, and Peace

Becky Eldredge

96p, trade paper, \$15.99, ISBN 978-0-829-46060-5

Eldredge (*The Inner Chapel*) invites readers to explore “the beautiful gift of the inner chapel, where God resides within each of us,” in this inspirational guide, drawn from the teachings of Ignatian Spirituality. She includes anecdotes, brief contemplations, and reflection questions to strengthen faith and connection with God, referencing religious tenets and biblical passages for further study, while emphasizing the importance of prayer, reading scripture, and forming relationships with people who can support spiritual journeys. “Sometimes our own voice gets in the way,” she cautions, and her writing addresses that by offering readers guided moments to set aside the world’s noise, meditate on the Bible, and “fill the void” with God.

Eldredge’s messages are uplifting and positive, exploring God’s love, grace, and desire to be in relationship with those who seek Him. Love, she writes, “is truly the gift of God’s mercy” and should be embraced, pursued, and cherished. “I think much



Uplifting resource exploring God’s grace and love on a daily basis.

Great for fans of Terry J. Stokes’s *Prayers for the People*, Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie’s *Good Enough*.

of our faith journey is trying to open ourselves, every day, a little bit more, to God’s transforming love,” she passionately declares, as she challenges readers to welcome discernment, faith-driven guidance, and the calling God has placed on their lives.

The guide’s formulaic structure makes it easy to follow, offering readers a daily opportunity to apply biblical principles to

their own lives, and Eldredge also includes practical techniques on mindfulness, time management, avoiding worldly distractions, and more. Only through spiritual intimacy with God, she writes, will we “understand that our identity is inseparable from our relationship with [Him]”—a gentle reminder that although we may feel lonely at times, we are never truly alone. Eldredge contends that knowledge of God’s presence is a comfort in her own life, and she urges readers to transform the love they receive from God into a gift they can share with others.

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

MEMOIR

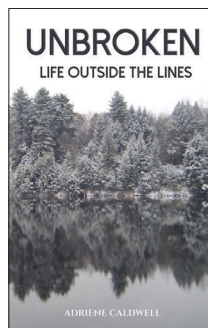
Unbroken: Life Outside the Lines

Adriene Caldwell

254p, e-book, \$4.95, ISBN 979-8-218-23192-7

Caldwell’s memoir, a debut, opens with a gut-wrenching prologue: a gun against her temple, the trigger pulled—twice—and life stubbornly refusing to end. From this near-death moment, Caldwell reports a life scarred by poverty and domestic abuse, beginning with a childhood raised by a schizophrenic and abusive mother, Marygold, whose own trauma stemmed from sexual assault by Caldwell’s grandfather, himself schizophrenic. This generational cycle of pain casts a long shadow over Caldwell’s life, illustrating the corrosive legacy of untreated mental illness and sparing no reader from its most disturbing truths.

When the state finally intervenes, hope curdles. Placed in a “therapeutic” foster home, Caldwell recounts enduring more abuse and feeling herself and other children becoming broken: “I stopped trying to connect with others, convinced that I was unlovable and destined to be alone,” she writes, with her usual blunt candor. Yet her instinct to survive refused to die. A scholarship to Germany cracks open a portal to freedom—a daring leap toward independence, intellectual growth, and a life



Searing, courageous memoir of rising above generational and systemic trauma.

Great for fans of Andrea Lee’s *Such a Pretty Picture*, K. L. Small’s *Letters from Shadow Oaks*.

unbound by trauma. “We are not defined by our damage. We are shaped by our resilience,” she writes, a manifesto ingrained in every page. Caldwell’s candor and fierce introspection transform this memoir into something galvanizing, as she contextualizes her suffering within the broader systemic failures that perpetuate abuse and neglect.

One welcome element distinguishing *Unbroken* from the bleak annals of trauma literature is Caldwell’s refusal to wallow in victimhood. Though trigger warnings and precisely recounted sufferings abound, Caldwell crafts a narrative of meaning and reclamation. Her voice, intimate and unsparing, brings her work beyond mere autobiography into social commentary. The inclusion of psychological evaluations and diagnostic language provides a jarring clinical counterpoint to her lived torment, underscoring how deeply personal wounds are compounded by institutional apathy. Her journey from a child discarded by circumstance to a woman forging purpose feels like a triumph wrested from the jaws of despair. Readers will leave gutted yet inspired as Caldwell illuminates what refuses to break within.

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

MEMOIR

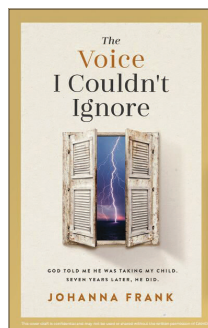
The Voice I Couldn’t Ignore

Johanna Frank | Marrow Publishing

248p, e-book, \$5.99, ISBN 978-1-738-29077-2

Faith and grief center this touching memoir, as Frank shares a lifetime of premonitions and mystifying conversations with God, who, she believes, is “proving to me he was not only real but also in my life.” For years, a particular vision of a man holding an ax haunts Frank—one she later learns is tied to a violent family heritage of murder and revenge. That vision fades over time, but when her youngest daughter, Sadie, is just 10 years old, Frank perceives God warning her that he will take Sadie in the future. Seven years later, Sadie is diagnosed with sarcoma, hurling Frank and her family into a maelstrom of tests, treatments, and desperate prayers for healing.

When the unthinkable happens and Sadie dies, Frank is weighed down by grief—and chooses to make the journey of a lifetime to draw closer to God, embarking on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the Middle East. As she deepens her faith, she works through stages of bitterness, doubt, and intense misery, drawing comfort from the visions she receives of Sadie—happy, healthy, and whole. She also turns to her Bible, determined to learn spiritual truths in scripture alone, and begins



Grief, faith, and healing intertwine in this heartfelt memoir.

Great for fans of Kimberly Drushea Mailey’s *Broken in a Million Beautiful Pieces*, Tim Challies’s *Seasons of Sorrow*.

journaling her dreams, discovering her “innermost persona... [and] that we all have a place, a purpose, a role.”

Throughout, Frank shares raw, vulnerable moments of motherhood—from her pleas with God to allow her to take Sadie’s place to her worry that she isn’t doing enough to save her daughter. The love between mother and child beats steadily in the background, unfolding in un-

expected laughter, quiet whispers, and the suspension of time when Sadie takes her last breath. Emotive and faith-driven, this memoir recounts not just the debilitating loss of a child but also the transformative spiritual journey that follows—and the resilient strength of a mother as she begins to heal on the other side.

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

MEMOIR

Racing Against Time: On Ironman, Ultramarathons and the Quest for Transformation in Mid-Life

Jeffrey Weiss | MSI Press, LLC
336p, trade paper, \$23.50, ISBN 978-1957354699

Weiss will inspire readers with this debut memoir of pursuing athletic fitness in middle age. Considering himself “not a runner” for most of his young adulthood, he details how a presentation during a running class inspired him, in his 40s, to successfully complete his first 10K, setting in motion a burning desire to improve his stamina and physical health while conquering some of the most grueling races known to mankind. Once he’s hooked, Weiss incorporates principles from Chris Crowley and Henry Lodge’s *Younger Next Year* to push himself harder and faster than he thought possible, moving from 10K races to the quintessential “measure of human fitness”: the Ironman.

No matter the stressor or injury—including a painful separation from his wife of 25 years and numerous knee and hip issues—Weiss keeps plowing forward with an admirable display of determination and focus, accomplishing three Marine Corps



Inspiring tribute to ultra-running for full life transformation.

Great for fans of Dana Ayers’s *Confessions of an Unlikely Runner*, Dean Karnazes’s *A Runner’s High*.

Marathons and difficult Ironman competitions, among other challenges. “The same motivation that has driven me to Ironman and ultras” has spilled into other areas of his life as well, he writes, including law school, corporate start-ups, and “most important of all, the partnering in the raising of four wonderful children who continue to delight.”

Weiss weighs in on several fitness factors, such as reduced alcohol consumption, plenty of rest, and a can-do mental attitude, while describing a course of action readers can use to pump up their own wellness goals, both physically and emotionally. His journey is impressive and brutally honest, candidly detailing his challenges and eagerness to learn from them, which will empower readers on the same path. Such dogged determination conveys the extra grit needed to power past negative beliefs, and Weiss makes it clear that our only limitations are the ones we place on ourselves. He closes with personal photographs documenting several of his race experiences.

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

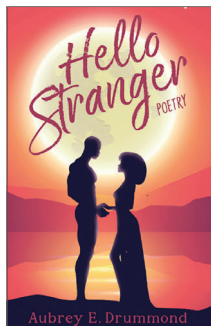
POETRY

Hello Stranger

Aubrey E. Drummond
80p, e-book, \$3.99, ASIN B0F67N3CHN

Drummond’s fifth poetry collection, following *Blackbird*, explores mortality, loneliness, and love, with crafty, rhythmic verses that unify the musicality of language and feeling: “Flying bird // Why flee // From me? // From me can’t you see // The love I have for thee // Flying bird, please hear // my plea.” This collection marvels at such wonders of nature as much as it expresses a yearning for spiritual and physical connectedness. The speaker in “Flying Bird,” for example, longs to be part of something larger than themselves, as they write, “just want to be a part // of your song.”

Yet the desire for connection also appears as a wish to fulfill the American dream, which seeks a future entrenched in the idealized utopia of wealth. “In This Life” finds Drummond writing, “I hope to own // A house // White picket fence // A tree // With a backyard swing // A little spring // That puddles along,” and though the speaker’s dream is humble—“It need not be big // The house, that is”—it may seem unattainable for many across the world. Later offerings contemplate humanity’s



Hopeful, lyrical collection touching on existential and spiritual connection.

Great for fans of Lucille Clifton’s “my dream about the second coming”; Gwendolyn Brooks’s “We Real Cool.”

violence—“It grinds on me // The presence // The people... The gunfire // The knifing”—alongside the destructiveness of greed, with Drummond declaring “Everyone in pursuit // It’s just the love of money... Cold eyes of greed, green seed, deranged // ‘Can any of them be sane?’”

Romantic love also acts as a balm for loneliness in Drummond’s collection, as the series of letters featuring the salutation “Hello, stranger” show. In “Letter Two,” the amorous speaker writes “There is no trouble with // the time nor the meeting place // It’s just that it seems with you // I can do it anyplace,” implying that their love is one that allows the external stimuli of day-to-day life to dissolve in the timeless power of connection. Lovers and philosophers alike will find this collection artful and inspired.

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

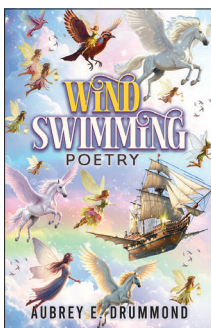
POETRY

Wind Swimming

Aubrey E. Drummond
102p, e-book, \$2.99, ASIN B0FMZX52QQ

Drummond, author of standout collections including *Boy! Kant You Read* and *How Hot It Be in Hell*, invites readers into another playful, provocative poetry collection that echoes the rhythm of ocean waves and evokes the horror and awe of that abyss. “Hear them // Their songs I can’t ignore // The beast within // The beast without // They play upon the floor,” he writes in “Ocean,” and in the poem, the waves take on a consciousness of being that both obscures and reveals the sea’s threatening nature, yet they also represent the inevitable onslaught of time and life’s ephemeral existence.

Yet for all the change brought about by time, in Drummond’s poems, time has yet to relieve oppression, inescapable for a Black man in America: “A new world awash in sunshine beams // Blooming flowers, an early spring // A lasting love that reigns supreme // The celebration of joy in everything // Waiting— // I’m Still Waiting.” The notion of equality, or even equity, is not yet realized, but through his poetry and dream of an America unsullied by racism’s caustic thread, he affirms that “all I need is self-esteem and the knowledge that I too truly can stand strong



Musical, philosophical poetry collection that catalogues the rhythms of life.

Great for fans of Terrance Hayes’s “When the Neighbors Fight” and Donald Hall’s “Affirmation.”

in being a Black man.”

Though it explores the depths of sorrow caused by heartbreak, racism, and grief, Drummond’s collection offers rousing hope for the future and expresses much curiosity for life and its mysteries. As he writes in “Roads,” “and still, I stand... // Dithering down these roads // These two long and winding roads // Wondering which one to take // Or even if it’s my decision to make,” and his questioning is both an existential one and a spiritual one that cuts to the core of the human condition. In “Wind Swimming,” Drummond offers a rich set of verses that imagines a world where “we can laugh, play // And love as all brothers do.”

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

PICTURE BOOKS

EDITOR'S PICK

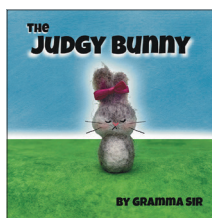
The Judgy Bunny

Gramma Sir | Hobdi, LLC

32p, trade paper, \$9.99, ISBN 979-8-9992871-0-6

This delightful picture book by Gramma Sir (the pen name of Nicola Moore) introduces young readers to a perfectionist bunny whose criticism of her own flaws leaks out to her friends on the farm. Bunny has a secret: she's a half-lop, with one ear pointing straight up (just the way it should, according to her) and one flopping over. Because she "want[s] her ears to be perfect," Bunny carefully ties them with a bow before she leaves her burrow. But that intense need to look flawless carries over to her relationships with other animals on the farm, leading her to find fault with all the little things that make Bunny's home so unique.

In Bunny's world, everything must be precise and perfect. That can make her a bit judgy at times—and hard to connect with. When Goat—who, naturally, has a penchant for nibbling on tin cans—gets too noisy with his afternoon snack, Bunny doesn't hesitate to point it out, loftily informing him that "You should eat something healthier... And quieter!" And she doesn't stop there: poor Horse needs bigger shoes,



Adorable bunny learns a lesson in empathy and self-acceptance.

Great for fans of Pat Zietlow Miller's *Remarkably You*, Bonnie Clark's *Taste Your Words*.

and Pig is too dirty. All that criticism leaves her fellow farm friends a little down in the mouth, wondering how they can ever measure up to Bunny's high standards.

Gramma Sir's darling illustrations—composed from her own hand-felted work—are a delight for the eyes, making the characters stand out against the story's farmland setting. Bunny's burrow is particularly intriguing for younger minds, right down to the tiny felted carrot waiting in a dish on Bunny's table. Bunny's transformation from judgmental to accepting is well-earned, as she shockingly wakes up one morning to the unintended consequences of her harsh criticism—and accidentally allows the entire farm to see her ears in all their natural, splendid glory. Kids and their adult readers will adore this lesson in self-love, empathy, and friendship.

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

MIDDLE GRADE

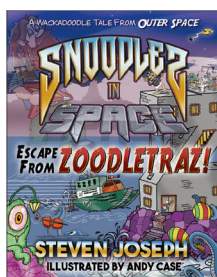
Snoodles in Space: Escape from Zoodletraz

Steven Joseph | Enigami

66p, e-book, \$4.99, ISBN 979-8-9896772-1-4

This exuberant third entry in Joseph's Snoodles in Space series opens to a glorious montage of the many triumphs of Noodleham—a "city of heroes" where intergalactic travel is the norm and the waters are free of nasty grool. The town is finally at peace with their prior enemy, the Zoodles, allowing them to turn their attention to the finer things in life, like their passion for the arts—an obsession that has led to a hopping Noodleham music scene. But when Cloodle the Grand Roodle—from Zoodle itself—decides he's going to take advantage of Noodleham's musical success, his act falls flat, launching him on a revenge-fueled quest that threatens the fragile armistice between the two planets.

As in prior entries, Joseph delivers an excess of zany wordplay, eye-rolling puns, and adventure that never stops. Cloodle hits Noodleham where it hurts this time: he kidnaps their beloved Schmoodle the Poodle and locks it in the impenetrable—and inescapable—Zoodletraz. Also imprisoned is one half of the first-ever Earth-Zoodle marriage on record, Drooodle the Poodle, because "pets are strictly forbidden on



Rollicking tale of wacky wordplay and out-of-this-world adventure.

Great for fans of Marcus Emerson's Hall Monitors series; Tom Angleberger's Two-Headed Chicken series.

Zoodle." Once they're locked up, the two Earth poodles make instant friends with a band of rhythmic cats banished from Zoodle as well, while back in Noodleham the town hatches a rescue plan.

Joseph's wordplay gets quirkier as the story progresses, with a spicy noodle—the jalapeño-pepper-powered popadoodle noodle—serving as the key to saving Earth's kidnapped poodles. Kids will get a kick out of their adult readers piecing together these silly words, and Andy Case's flashy illustrations thrum with fevered energy as characters dance, plot, and rollick their way to a happy ending. That ending finds the poodles freed—though their time locked up was far from miserable—and Zoodletraz transformed into a cultural music center, marking this another successful feat for our beloved Snoodles.

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

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

FICTION

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.

Happy Bunny and Other Mischiefs

Rebecca Gransden. Cardboard Wall Empire, \$29.98 (158p)
ISBN 978-1-4452-2005-5

Gransden (*Anemogram*) brings together 14 surreal and eerie stories mining scares from technology, domestic life, and the natural world. In the wonderfully bizarre opener, “Turducken: Confirm Humanity,” a turducken comes to life, waddles from its roasting pan, and discovers the wonders and horrors of the internet. The lines between video games and reality blur in “Fuck It Cat and the Mod Hex from Hell,” while the protagonist of “ReWipe” is driven to an act of violence by the realization that he can no longer “like” anything on social media. Other stories offer more intimate horrors: an abusive mother drags her

teenage son in “Sleeping Willow,” leading to strange hallucinations; and in “Pageant,” teen beauty queens turn violent against their controlling mothers. “The Disco Rice Club,” one of the standouts, delves into body horror after a heist attempted by a trio of garbage men goes horribly wrong (the “disco rice” of the title refers to maggots). The high-concept title story serves as a finale, following the exploits of Happy Bunny, a character who exists in a liminal grey room between calls to perform his part in the real world. Several of these tales take abrupt violent turns that successfully shock but feel somewhat unmotivated. Still, the inventive concepts and haunting, dreamlike imagery will appeal to horror fans.

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.

Safe Haven: Where Hope Lives

Elizabeth Stiles. Elizabeth Stiles, \$4.99 e-book (302p)
ISBN 979-8-9918689-0-7

Stiles debuts with the enchanting tale of a family's tragedy and miraculous new beginning. At the outset, 40-year-old Chicago TV reporter Michael Russo loses his job. He and his fiancé, Anna O'Leary, consider buying a dilapidated two-bedroom farmhouse in the country, and have sex in the barn while visiting the property. Back in Chicago, Michael, an atheist, clashes with his future in-laws, staunch Irish Catholics Colin and Grace, causing Anna to walk out on him. Seeking a new start, Michael buys the house himself, where he receives

wisdom and renovation tips from a local handyman and priest who suggests to Michael that the barn has magical powers. When Anna visits, she and Michael begin to reconcile, and she tells him that she's pregnant. Before their wedding date, Anna dies in childbirth after going into labor three months early. Their baby, Brie, unexpectedly survives, a miracle in the eyes of Colin and Grace, which Michael attributes to the fact that she was conceived in the barn. As a little girl, Brie is slow to speak, but she develops an uncanny ability to communicate with animals, and Stiles suggests she's able to perform miracles, such as bringing a dead lamb back to life. Stiles's hopeful novel is rich in detail and symbolism. Readers will relish this satisfying story.