

FEBRUARY 9, 2026

# booklife®

— YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING —

20 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

## Inside Hybrid Publishing

An indie author finds a home for her debut novel

BY KEHINDE WINFUL

Hybrid publishing is one of those terms that gets thrown around a lot but rarely explained. Hybrid publishing lives in the space between traditional and self-publishing: you invest in your book the way you would if you were indie, but you also work with a professional editorial, design, and distribution team—the kind of infrastructure you’d normally only get from a traditional press. For me, that meant creative control paired with guidance and accountability. It’s like going to a tailor with your own fabric: you’re paying for their skill, measurements, and execution, and when the garment is finished, it’s yours. The tailor made it, but they don’t own it.

It’s not the easy route some people assume; it’s a partnership. And like any partnership, it comes with both reward and risk.

### HYBRID PUBLISHING AND ME: GETTING STARTED

Once I’d finished writing *Flooding the River*, I went looking for a book home for my baby. Naturally, I started looking for agents. This process was long and daunting and, while I received many full requests, nothing quite landed. After setting her down multiple times and picking her back up again, I was ready to shelve her for good. At the time, I felt heartbroken, but I did not want to self-publish. Why? Because I was busy starting a new job and I wouldn’t have



the time. I also wanted to be “official.” I wanted to be like all my favorite authors who got huge book deals. But what I wanted even more was to have this book, my book, out in the world.

# Booksellers & Librarians:



## How are you handling self-published books?

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Let us help you find the best in self-published books!

All powered by *Publishers Weekly* reviewers.

I was stuck. Then I stumbled upon Wise Ink Creative Publishing, who had a call out for manuscripts. I didn't know much (anything) about hybrid publishing when I submitted my manuscript, but what I did know was that this was my last effort putting this novel into the world. If things didn't pan out with this publisher, *Flooding the River* would belong to me and my shelf only. With that I hit submit.

Within a couple weeks, the CPO (chief publishing officer) reached out to set up a meeting to learn more about me, my manuscript, my goals, and my ambitions for publishing. Before this meeting I did some research of my own, about the other types of books Wise Ink had published, the professionalism of their platforms, and the cover designs of the books they had published. I know you are not supposed to judge a book (or publisher) by their covers, but the covers of Wise Ink books were beautiful, well done, and professional. After the meeting, I was asked to send my full manuscript for evaluation. I was told that once my manuscript was evaluated, if Wise Ink decided to offer me a publishing contract, I would receive a project proposal.

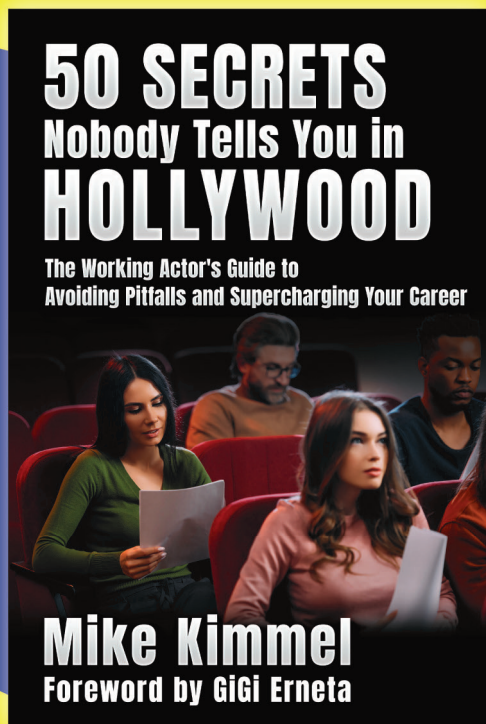
Here lies one of the key differences between hybrid publishing and traditional publishing. In hybrid publishing, there is no advance. Your book proposal includes the estimate of what you will need to spend upfront to bring

*Your book proposal includes the estimate of what you will need to spend upfront to bring your book to life: the costs of a developmental editor, a line editor, a cover designer, a book manager, and so on.*

your book to life: the costs of a developmental editor, a line editor, a cover designer, a book manager, and so on. All of the details are laid out bare with their associated prices. You can decide how many copies you want printed and what distribution methods you would like to use—factors that inform the basic pricing. (If you're wondering if you can change your mind down the road, the answer is yes.) In case it is not clear: You do not have to pay all the money at once. You pay half before each specific service and half after the specific service is completed.

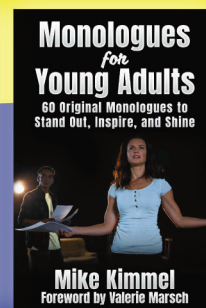
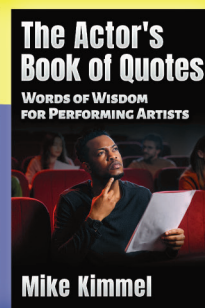
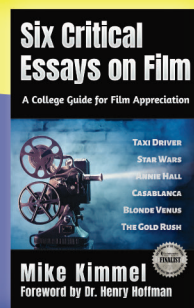
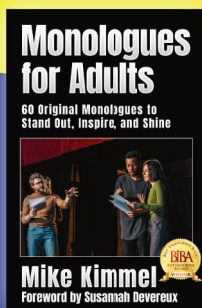
#### THE UPSIDES

To me, the upside of this process (which made some associated fees worth it) is that I did not have to go out and find the individuals who would be bringing my book to life via editing, design, and the like. I had a book manager who, through several meetings and several worksheets, was able to get the vision for the team I wanted working on my book and was able to go out and find them. For example, for *Flooding the River*, I specifically wanted a Black developmental editor and a Black



ISBN 978-1-953057-18-1 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-1-953057-17-4 (hardback)  
ISBN 978-1-953057-16-7 (ebook)

You can't win a fight you don't know you're in.



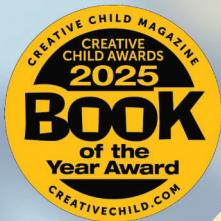
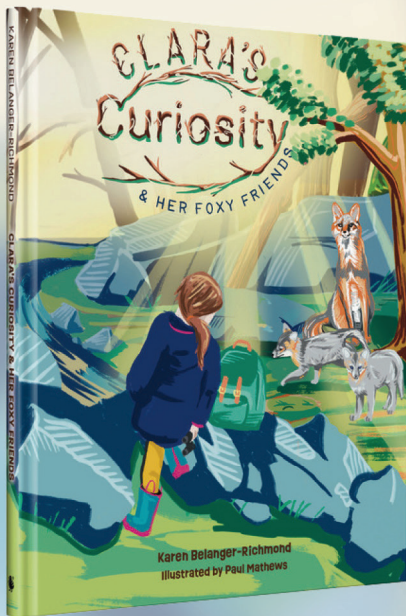
“With humorous and welcome candor, Kimmel provides a wealth of behind-the-scenes information and advice about auditions, interacting with agents, and prioritizing self-care, with actionable game plans for actors ranging in age from their 20s to their 50s.”

—*BookLife by Publishers Weekly Review*

“... the author guides would-be actors through lessons on dealing with managers, agents, and other performers, as well as the labyrinthine workings of the entertainment industry in general.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

Available from Ingram!



JUN 2025



AUG 2025

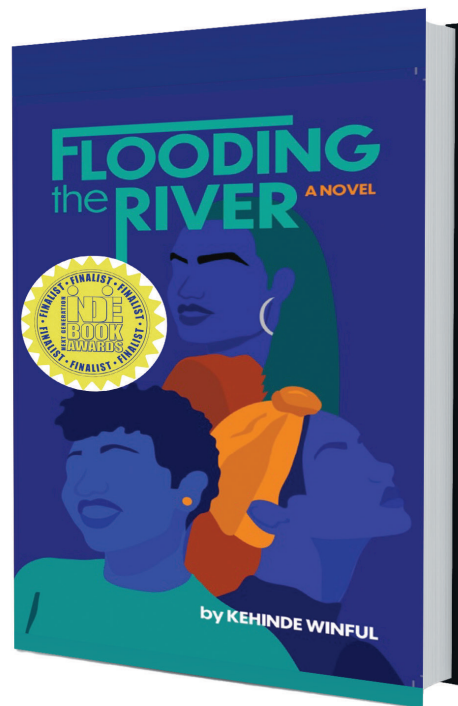


JAN 2026

“Your dedication, creativity, and commitment to your work are deeply evident, and it is an honor to recognize this milestone in your authorship journey.”

– Nim Stant, CEO & Founder of International Impact Book Awards™

[ClarasCuriosity.com](http://ClarasCuriosity.com)



cover designer. For the book cover, I wanted a specific type of abstract artist who drew people and faces without specific features.

### THE DOWNSIDES

Despite what the above may suggest, like most things in life, hybrid publishing has some downsides. The two downsides I will focus on here are timing and marketing.

Within the book proposal there are estimated deadlines, but to make a long story short my expected publication day was pushed back several times because of things outside of my control. This busts one of the myths associated with hybrid publishing: that you are in control of the timeline. You are not. You are still subject to the whims of others like your editors and your book manager. So if you are type A-minus like me, this can be frustrating.

The costs of hybrid publishing also do not include a marketing/PR team. So if after fronting the money to pay to bring your book from manuscript to real-life tangible book you do not want to spend massive amounts on hiring a PR agency to market it, you may be out of luck. Hybrid publishers such as Wise Ink offer some related resources, such as templates for reaching out to media outlets and biweekly office hours where authors can seek advice on marketing. These present a good place to start when it comes to marketing your book, but you will need to invest in other methods and conduct some of your own research into opportunities.

### MY TAKEAWAYS

The answer to whether I would do this again, and by this I mean hybrid publish my debut, is a resounding yes; the answer to whether I will keep using the hybrid method for future books is not so certain. I would be lying if I said I did not have dreams of getting a traditional publishing deal.

Ultimately, I feel grateful that I was in a position to be able to afford hybrid publishing, but I know it is not possible for all people to front the money for their dreams. I welcome you to follow my story to see what's next for me, and what if any role hybrid publishing pays as I pave my path forward as an author. ☺

*Kehinde Winful is a first-generation Nigerian-American attorney and author. Her debut novel Flooding the River was published in January 2024.*

## BookLife Talks with Deborah Packer

Called “captivating” and “an eye-opening exploration of [WWII’s] toxic anti-Semitic attitudes” by the 2022 BookLife Prize, Packer based her debut novel, *I’ll Remember You*, on her parents’ whirlwind courtship. We spoke with her about putting that story to page and why she believes it’s so important in the current climate.

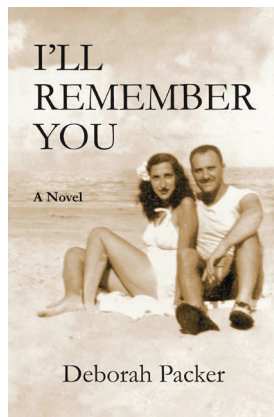
**With a background in theater and film, why did you think that a novel was the best medium for this story?**

It began as a repped screenplay in Hollywood in 1998, but it suffered from the same frustrating issue that the Academy Award-winning *Gentleman’s Agreement* suffered before production started in 1947. Jewish producers begged Darryl Zanuck not to make it “bad for the Jews” and “don’t call attention to the problems of antisemitism.” In 1998, I got questions like, “Would you be willing to drop some of those ‘controversial’ scenes?” I felt discarding them would compromise the entire story. I also understood that the great, socially conscious directors and producers of the ‘40s were either unavailable or long gone. So, my then agent suggested I write it as a novel with the hope of a more literary route to a film. It was a daunting assignment. I completed the manuscript in 2000 but put it away for over 20 years due to family illness. During Covid-19 and because of what was happening in our country starting with Trump’s first term, I realized I needed to get this story out and plunged into the brave new world of self-publishing. The novel is back to being a repped screenplay, but misplaced hate and intolerance have physically reached an all-time high, even in liberal Hollywood. You think I have timing problems?

**What inspired *I’ll Remember You*?**

This was my parents’ amazing, sometimes humorous, often complex tale of meeting in Miami Beach in 1943 and their whirlwind, conflicted union. The narrative seemed so cinematic to me and so crazy, but it all happened, and writing it became an opportunity to tell their story and honor them. It’s an intimate, character-driven love story. It focuses on two

strangers as they struggle through a hasty marriage, misunderstandings, and childhood trauma in a country fighting for democracy abroad but facing deep-seated hate and intolerance at home. My father’s haunting memories as a child in WWI Poland taught him that he wasn’t coming home from war. My mother grew up in a small town in Michigan and brought her own doubts and insecurities to a relationship with a complicated young soldier in a turbulent time in history.



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

I read histories from that period, but I was trained to teach Holocaust history in the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s small museum—before the Museum of Tolerance was built—learning how the issues of antisemitism and racism impacted the country during the war years. I spent many long hours at the Beverly Hills Library combing through their microfilm collection—ad nauseam—for news events of the ‘30s and ‘40s. I wanted to corroborate my family’s stories, including my grandfather’s inside

knowledge from family and friends involved in the politics of the day, with documented news accounts.

**Why or how do you think this book is particularly relevant now?**

Although basically a love story, it’s told in a time of bigotry and fear. In light of what we are experiencing today—rising hatred and intolerance, a right-wing populism bordering on fascism, and threats to our democracy—the parallels to the populism of the late ‘30s and ‘40s are palpable. Bradley W. Hart’s eye-opening *Hitler’s American Friends* brilliantly explores the extremism of that period. Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes” has become a horrific allegory for today’s reality.

**Can readers expect another book from you?**

I’ve finished another screenplay, a contemporary, romantic dramedy, but a book... perhaps if/after *I’ll Remember You* becomes a film or before my dotage. Whichever comes first!

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



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

## YOUNG ADULT

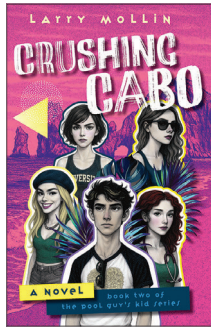
⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

### Crushing Cabo: A Novel

Larry Mollin | Shadelandhouse Modern Press  
316p, trade paper, \$16.95, ISBN 978-1-945-04961-3

Mollin's fast-paced sequel to *The Pool Guy's Kid* brings the Beverly Hills Five back together after scattering to different universities, and this YA mystery is as much about Gilly Montrose and friends reevaluating future plans as their dangerous trip to Mexico. *Crushing Cabo* throws readers straight into the action, and Mollin captures Gilly's intense emotional state and ping-ponging thought process in sharp first-person narration. After a deft summation of where relationships stand, Mollin employs a record-scratch moment to rewind the action back to their Palm Springs reunion.

Fern is hosting at her father's lavish estate, and Gilly hopes to rekindle their relationship. A gap has been widening between the resourceful Fern, who's been taking a semester abroad in Paris, and working-class Gilly (his aimless dad cleans swimming pools in Beverly Hills). The relationship dynamics get more complicated



*Fast, heartfelt YA mystery of Beverly Hills friends' Mexican rescue mission.*

Great for fans of Karen M. McManus's *One of Us Is Lying*, John Green's *Paper Towns*.

with the arrival of the enigmatic Aeura and witty Leticia, who's not only Gilly's ex, but is also dating his best friend VJ. Mollin adroitly weaves in their quirks, loyalty, and tangled romantic history so that new readers immediately understand their bonds and secrets.

With persuasive urgency, Leticia rallies the group to search for VJ, who disappeared after a yoga retreat in Cabo San Lucas. The rescue mission quickly turns dangerous (they're breaking out of hospitals, fending off cartels, and escaping cougars), while personal secrets and heartbreak simmer below the surface. Mollin, a former *Beverly Hills 90210* writer, uses the ever-shifting lines between friendship and love to shape beautiful—and relatably messy—moments as the friends lean on one another for courage. Even with the breathless pace, *Crushing Cabo* isn't just about survival or adventure, and Mollin never loses sight of what matters most: facing fears for the people you love, and discovering that you're stronger together.

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

## YOUNG ADULT

⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

### John Doe Does Not Suck

Kathryn Berla | Artemesia Publishing/Shadow Dragon Press  
280p, trade paper, \$16.95, ISBN 978-1-963-83240-2

Menace and absurdity blend to power Berla's clever young adult vampire mystery, whose undead Transylvanian protagonist is passing as a disaffected 17-year-old. In first-person narration that moves fluidly between dry humor and aching lyricism, John Doe reveals his anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder—and the persistent fear that he'll accidentally kill his goldfish. He works a dead-end job in a 24-hour diner (aptly named the Gobble-Down-Suck-Up) while writing *The Last Vampire*, a melancholy memoir no one wants to publish. Survival means extreme caution, until a night-school criminology class disrupts his carefully managed solitude.

Paired up with the ambitious Angela Ruiz, John is dragged into an amateur investigation of a serial killer known as the Six O'Clock Slasher, whose methodology seems eerily familiar. As John becomes enmeshed in the mystery, Berla (*Ricochet*)



*Witty YA vampire mystery explores anxiety, morality, and surprising alliances.*

Great for fans of Holly Black's *The Coldest Girl in Coldtown*, Julie Kagawa's *The Immortal Rules*.

explores his fragile mental state and the emotional toll of centuries as a vampire, anchoring supernatural elements in trauma and dread. She explores vampirism in psychological terms, showing how John's coping mechanisms—drinking blood vials instead of attacking humans; counting rituals to stave off panic—function as both lifelines and self-made cages.

Even in John's isolation, he's gathered his own unconventional found family: Miss Henrietta Devine, an elderly neighbor and moral anchor; sharp-tongued teenager “therapist” Bibi Thottfel; and Angela, whose impatience with his evasions nudges him toward trust. While the investigation drives the action, it's John's interior life that distinguishes Berla's take on vampire lore. A fear of intimacy, and a gnawing sense of obsolescence, pervade his thoughts. *John Doe Does Not Suck* offers a compassionate, offbeat take on immortality as an ongoing internal battle that never offers the mercy of death.

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

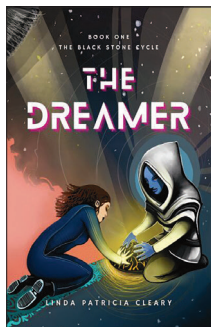
## YOUNG ADULT

### The Dreamer: The Black Stone Cycle, Book 1

Linda Patricia Cleary | BookBaby  
328, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 979-8-317-82091-6

This vivid sci-fi opener to Cleary's Black Stone Cycle series unites a newly orphaned teenager—who possesses mysterious telepathic gifts—with an eclectic group in a fight to outwit corruption and totalitarian corporations. Sixteen-year-old Ash Bennet has been living a nomadic lifestyle with her parents for a long time. But when the family lands their high-tech ship—designed by Ash's father—on a moon of Phobos (so named for the ancient Greek personification of fear), Ash's parents are murdered and her world descends into grief, chaos, and questions about her heritage. She quickly bands together with a trio of misfits to survive: Isaac and Isabel, twins and “Pathers” with telepathic and empathic abilities, and Edan, the attractive son of space pirates, who's intent on disowning his family's ruthless legacy and achieving redemption.

Cleary's engaging narrative draws on its own quirky language and social order to land immersive worldbuilding, where connections are forged through advanced



*Immersive SF with diverse characters, addressing larger social themes.*

Great for fans of Victoria Lee's *The Fever King*, Veronica Roth's *Carve the Mark*.

tech, nature is a thing of the past, and humanity is now guarded by fierce pather soldiers, known as Mind Squad Agents. Ash and company must fight to escape Phobos for various reasons, but chief among them is infiltration by those agents, whose sole purpose appears to be seeking out Pathers like Isaac and Isabel and kidnapping them. As the teens battle for survival, they also uncover a creeping darkness governing their galactic society.

All that action gets bogged down at times with dizzying inner monologues that punctuate the teens' travel back and forth between Ash's ship and their hideout, but the writing sets the stage for a larger saga, sweeping readers into a futuristic world with incredible detail and wonderfully diverse characters who portray queerness and neurodivergence in ways that feel neither forced nor superficial. Despite some pacing issues, *The Dreamer* is an explosive introduction to a series marked by complex social problems and interpersonal drama.

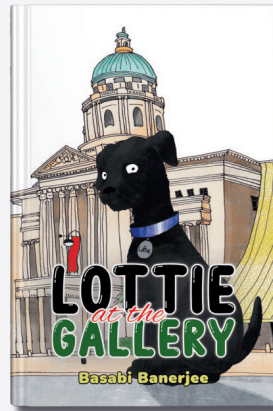
Cover: A | Design & typography: A | Illustrations: – Editing: A- | Marketing copy: A



The Birthday Party  
Marissa Koons



The Food Lady  
Ann Miles Sievers



Lottie at the  
Gallery  
Basabi Banerjee

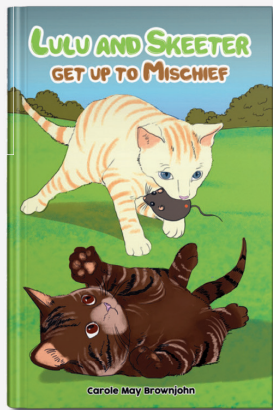


The Food Lady  
and Bucky  
Ann Miles Sievers

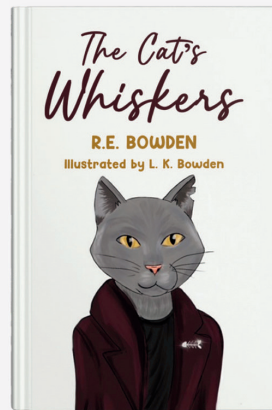
# ENGAGE IN STORIES FOR ALL AGES



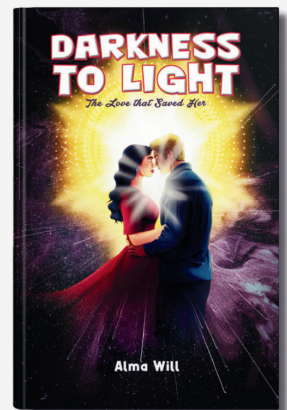
Places and Faces  
Andrew Maclean



Lulu and Skeeter  
get up to Mischief  
Carole May Brownjohn

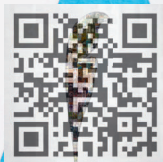


The Cat's Whiskers  
R.E. Bowden



Darkness to Light:  
The Love that  
Saved Her  
Alma Will

SCAN HERE



TO SEE THE BOOKS ONLINE!

## YOUNG ADULT

**The New Year's Tale from Kaironeth: Queen Adelia, Polina, and the Guardians of Time and Seasons**

Igor Ariën | Ancient Forest Press  
530p, hardcover, \$124.99, ISBN 979-8-295-42781-7

Ariën's Slavic-inspired winter fantasy follows Queen Adelia and the orphaned Polina as they navigate enchantments, trials of self-discovery, and the natural world's efforts to overcome human cruelty. While Adelia craves snowdrops—blossoms that emerge only in the first breaths of spring—to decorate her New Year's feast, 14-year-old Polina faces persecution from her stepmother and stepsister, cast into the frozen forest. Guided by the Guardians of Time and Seasons, both young women encounter magical beings and coming-of-age trials, as Adelia learns the meaning of leadership and humility while Polina's hardships see her transform into the Snow Maiden, embodying winter's mercy and resilience.

The novel's fairy tale elements are vividly portrayed, with an enchanted forest that comes to brilliant life, spreading snowdrops, strawberries, and raspberries in rich, out-of-season magic, while talking animals share clever insights on human



*Ethereal journey of magic, growth, and winter wonder.*

**Great for fans of** Marissa Meyer's *Gilded*, Kayla Eshbaugh's *Moonlit Wings*.

behavior—particularly the sharp-witted raven. Ariën's coming-of-age lessons unfold against that ethereal backdrop: Adelia—initially a proud and impulsive ruler—grows into a wise, compassionate leader through her forest journey and encounters with Polina and January, the Winter Lord; meanwhile, Polina's transformation from a timid orphan to the radiant Snow Maiden symbolizes personal growth and inner strength. Her interactions with the Guardians, especially April, reflect emotional and spiritual development that gives the novel depth.

Ariën (*Snow and Shenanigans*) delivers simple yet expressive storytelling, combining magic, tradition, and personal growth into a tale of wonder and wisdom, while the Slavic folklore enriches the narrative, reflecting the cyclical nature of life and the region's wintry traditions. Digital illustrations scattered throughout vary their textures and styles, creating a disconnect between the pictures and the otherwise evocative narrative. Still, this is a striking portrait of metamorphosis and redemption.

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

## MIDDLE GRADE

**A Flash of Fire: The Phoenix Rising Trilogy, Book 1**

A.L. Wyss | Camellian & Quills  
314p, e-book, \$12.99, ISBN 978-1-960479-00-6

Wyss's fantastical middle-grade adventure offers a fast-paced, often tart-tongued story of a young girl coming to terms with her destiny—and having to tell herself “You're a superhero, not a loser. Act like it.” Vivian Carmine is an ordinary high school girl until one day at a science fair she taps into her latent firepower. As her parents try to explain away the experience, they soon come clean and tell her the truth—she is a mythical being, the first-born child of two immortal phoenixes. Learning the truth about her heritage, her parents' secrets, and her own supernatural abilities overwhelms Vivian, but her feelings take a backseat when her parents go missing and she follows the clues to a secret spy school called RISE. Here Vivian pieces together her parents' secret life as she begins to hone her firepower.

Facing the wrath and power of deities—specifically the ruler of the Underworld, Hades—Vivian finds new allies and potential foes among her fellow students, learning that not everyone wants her to succeed. The mythic, playful world that Vivian must



*Fun series starter of a young woman, a magic school, and a fiery destiny.*

**Great for fans of** B.B. Alston's *Amari and the Night Brothers*, Leah Johnson's *Ellie Engle Saves Herself*.

make sense of will appeal to young readers, as will the heroine herself, a smart, strong-willed young woman who does not back down from a fight or turn her back on those she loves. Still, Wyss makes clear throughout that such strength demands effort. That relatable realism grounds the inventive fun of the school, which comes to life in surprising detail—including a cool Phoenix suit and

old Dance Dance Revolution mats—and amusing near disasters. Wyss balances the pleasures of discovering friends and powers with effective tension, especially as some characters' loyalties and motives remain uncertain until a climax that pays off many smaller mysteries. As Vivian builds connections with Sam, the son of Hades, and Scarlet, a fairy who takes Vivian under her wing, she becomes stronger and more confident. Readers who enjoy school fantasies and Greek myth will be eager for more of this promising trilogy.

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

## MIDDLE GRADE

**BFFs! Black-Footed Ferrets: Love for One of North America's Most Endangered Mammals**

Elaine Miller Bond | True North Editions  
64p, hardcover, \$25, ISBN 978-1-943013-38-8

Wildlife photographer Bond gives readers a delightful glimpse into the high-spirited life of one of North America's most endangered animals: black-footed ferrets, those territorial, night-hunting mammals who also happen to be extraordinarily cute and playful. Bond shares all the basics—their habitats, food sources, social behavior, and more—alongside photographs that feature them leaping, frolicking, and charging across the pages. Young readers in particular will relish the book's abundance of entertaining facts: these fascinating creatures are “slinky and stinky” thanks to scent glands that aid in their communication, ferrets set out on their own at just five months old, their digging in the soil makes them “ecosystem engineers,” and their lack of body fat means constant activity is a must just to stay warm. With a résumé like that, it's no wonder black-footed ferrets are “a flagship species of the prairie.”

Beyond the entertainment factor, Bond delves into the danger of extinction that black-footed ferrets face, recounting their uncertain history—by the winter of 1985, only 10 remained in the entire world, all living in a prairie dog colony in Meeteetse,



*Delightful rendering of black-footed ferrets and their importance.*

**Great for fans of** Rachel Grack's *Black-Footed Ferrets*, Catherine Barr's *Red Alert!*.

ways to support their survival.

The text is enlightening and brimming with important facts, but what steals the show are the photographs of these disarming critters as they hunt, pounce, snuggle, and make merry together across North America's prairies. Whether showing off their flexible spines, periscoping out of underground holes to monitor danger, or springing through the air during “play-dance,” these black-footed dazzlers will bewitch readers of all ages.

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

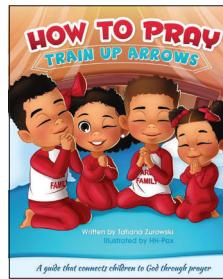
## PICTURE BOOKS

**How to Pray: A Guide That Connects Children to God through Prayer**

**Tatiana Zurowski** | Harvested Works Group  
33p, hardcover, \$12.99, ISBN 978-1-737-59080-4

This engaging Christian children's book invites young readers to incorporate prayer into their daily lives, when "you're happy, mad, or blue," even if talking to God might at first seem "a little odd." Sharing practical advice on how to pray and why prayer is important, Zurowski creates a welcoming introduction in chipper rhyming verse ("Do not minimize what God can do / Be specific, persistent, and powerful too"). Zurowski guides readers toward easing worries and insecurities through prayer and faith while giving thanks, praying for others, and building stronger relationships with God. Weaving in scripture and interactive examples of when to use the skill of prayer, *How to Pray* will please adult readers who want children to learn "when praying to God you're never alone."

Zurowski highlights relatable scenarios that will resonate with young readers, such as bullying experiences, worrying over grades, anticipating pain, and being thankful and full of gratitude in their daily lives. The foundation of the tips and tools



*Inviting guide for young children about how, when, and why to pray.*

**Great for fans of** Steph Williams's *How Can I Pray?*, Tanner Olson's *All the Things I Say to God*.

is the A.C.T.S. prayer method, which adds some clarifying rigor to the act of prayer by focusing on the themes of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. Included in the back matter is a helpful "prayer hand" that can serve as a guide and reference when unsure of how to or what to pray. Zurowski also introduces young readers to the "Fruits of the Spirit": love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Teaching kindness, empathy, compassion, and gratitude, *How to Pray* demystifies prayer and demonstrates how religious beliefs and practice can fit into children's daily lives.

HH Pax's warm digital art follows a relatable family through a variety of incidents; the emphasis is on smiles and connection, both between the people themselves and with God. Parents looking to help their young children grow closer to God, learn biblical text, and learn the many reasons and opportunities for prayer will find this a valuable resource.

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

## PICTURE BOOKS

**Lil Moo's Adventures**

**Kris Whalley** | Alpha Graphics  
26p, trade paper, \$15, ISBN 979-8-218-83046-5

In Whalley's charming debut, readers follow along with the lively adventures of Moo, a "chunky, lovable pup" exploring nature's glory in Colorado. Moo's first stop is the stunning Pagosa Springs, a lovely vista full of cerulean waters that rumble across the page, set against lush foliage and fawn-colored rock bluffs. From there, Moo and her parents visit green pastures full of chummy cows, dog-friendly cafés, and the towering heights of the Royal Gorge Bridge, sampling all the interesting culture, snacks, and outdoor activities along the way. In each area they visit, Moo and her family spend time doing what pet owners love most: roaming new places while bonding with their best friend.

Kids will love watching Moo's spirited antics, and Whalley includes a photograph of the real-life Moo at the book's end, giving the story's events a tangible realism. For readers who are already familiar with Colorado, well-loved state must-sees also make the list, from the Garden of the Gods—a breathtaking landscape of russet sandstone outcroppings and scenic hikes—to Cañon City's Bunk House Burgers,



*Charming pup visits breathtaking Colorado with her well-loved family.*

**Great for fans of** Sofie Wells and Ali Barclay's Charlie Wags series; Anousha Syed's *Lost Stick*.

where Moo gets "tasty bites" from a mouth-watering patty. Isaac Baca complements Moo's escapades with richly textured colored pencil illustrations, noting tiny details like the heart-shaped ketchup drops on Moo's purloined french fries alongside grander panoramas composed of wild terrain and striking skylines. Readers of all ages with a fondness for dogs—and a sense of wanderlust—will enjoy this series opener and look forward to experiencing more travels through Moo's curious, active perspective. She consistently refers to herself as a "princess" throughout, and her excitable gazes and perky ears imbue the story with eager anticipation. Whalley ends the book with Moo snuggling "up close to mom and dad... [who] make me feel so safe and warm," while she dreams of the family's next journey: the sunny beaches of San Diego.

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

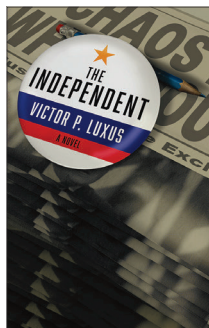
## FICTION

**The Independent**

**Victor P. Luxus** | Enlibre Press, LLC  
316p, trade paper, \$11.99, ISBN 978-1-7330347-0-8

Luxus's astute and companionable satiric novel introduces Monroe Taylor, the hard-working editor of the dwindling *Latrobe Independent* in that perennial swing state, Pennsylvania. When he scores a surprise windfall, Luxus makes a dramatic decision: he's going to use his unexpected millions to run for president of the United States in the age of Donald Trump—and, as the title suggests, Taylor, tired of the tribalism and gridlock of the two-party system, campaigns as an independent. With several trusted members of his newspaper joining his staff, Taylor faces the nitty-gritty of creating a campaign infrastructure, getting onto ballots, and handling travel, hostile crowds, and a biased media eager to take him down. Fortunately, Taylor—like Luxus—is smart, funny, well informed, and highly opinionated, and he's not afraid to show this to the public. "I have masturbated, fornicated, masticated, salivated, urinated, and defecated," he admits to an early crowd, before adding, "I hope I have now illuminated."

Set prior to the 2020 U.S. election, *The Independent* finds Taylor going up against Trump, whom Taylor sees as an enemy of the free press and critical thinking. His



*Smart novel of polarization and an unlikely candidate facing Trump.*

**Great for fans of** Paul Greenberg's *A Third Term*, Adam Wilson's *Sensation Machines*.

frankness provokes charges of "elitist" and "liberal" from some crowds, especially as Taylor specifically targets MAGA-heavy communities for public appearances. While he endures hostile questions, moles in his staff, and the occasional attempt to make him look like a debauched sinner, Taylor also manages to earn some respect, all as Luxus contemplates just how American politics became so divisive.

*The Independent* is less about a long-shot fantasy coming true and more about what the process of an honest, principled, and policy-based campaign might look like in an age of infantile sound bites. Taylor's success or failure doesn't come in winning or losing, but rather in changing the discourse. He does it one speech and one voter at a time—the hard way. Policy wonks, independents, and readers interested in straight talk about American politics will find much to ponder.

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

## FICTION

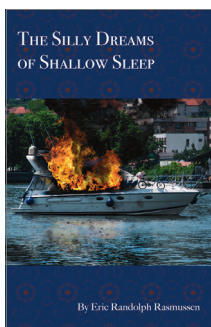
**The Silly Dreams of Shallow Sleep**

Eric Randolph Rasmussen

272p, e-book, \$4.99, ASIN B0FL88Q199

This complex, multi-layered narrative by Rasmussen dives into themes of addiction, identity, morality, and the human condition, as Angel Bimini—a former porn star now working as a private investigator—navigates a labyrinth of personal struggles, professional challenges, and international intrigue. When she's hired by renowned immunologist Doug Brannigan to investigate the mysterious death of his former colleague, Austin Pryce—who allegedly died by suicide on a burning yacht—Angel is quickly drawn into a web of intrigue and danger. Doug suspects foul play, hidden assets, and a connection to “Chinese government enemies”—all shocking elements in a job that requires Angel, essentially, to spy on a dead man.

Fans who are already familiar with Angel's arc in *Zip Monkey* will quickly be swept into her thrilling new adventures here. Rasmussen's writing is rich and evocative, blending sharp wit with poignant observations about human nature, and the characters are deeply flawed yet compelling, each grappling with their own demons



*Sharp, poignant story examining addiction, trauma, and the human condition.*

**Great for fans of** Eleanor Catton's *Birnam Wood*, Yrsa Daley-Ward's *The Catch*.

and desires. Angel, who in one particularly resonant scene muses “I don't like happiness unearned,” fascinates—resilient, resourceful, and unapologetically raw, her journey through addiction, betrayal, and redemption is both heartbreaking and inspiring, making her a character readers will root for. The book's structure is unconventional, with fragmented narratives and

shifting perspectives that mirror the chaotic lives of its characters, and, while that approach adds depth and complexity, it can also be disorienting at times, requiring careful attention for readers to piece together the story's intricate puzzles.

Rasmussen explores dark themes of addiction and trauma, often through the lens of Angel's relationships, her past, and her work as a PI, offering thought-provoking commentary on the human experience against a backdrop of noirish humor and philosophical musings. The result is a bold, boundary-pushing work that challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves and the world around them.

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

## FICTION

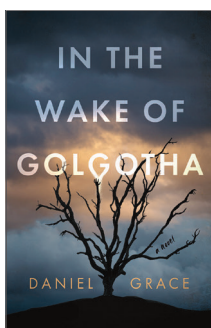
**In the Wake of Golgotha**

Daniel Grace

354p, hardcover, \$31.95, ISBN 979-8-888-24896-6

Grace's debut thriller plummets readers into themes of justice and mercy that echo through millennia, as the biblical Judas Iscariot and Pontius Pilate are reincarnated, this time as social worker and self-styled lit professor Jude Issachar and Peter Pheiffer—a twitchy lawyer from a slimy corporate firm who can't seem to outrun his past guilt. Jude, unlike Peter, vividly remembers his prior lives—each one ending in his suicide by hanging, just as he did after betraying Christ two thousand years ago. A “drifting outcast... cast in many a role since he'd first knotted his noose, spilled shekels at his feet,” Jude now finds himself walking uncomfortable—though familiar—grounds with Peter, while a third character, Balthazar Bedrossian, enters as a serial killer, personifying the very essence of ancient evil.

As the narrative slowly conspires to bring the three together, readers glimpse Balthazar's chilling combination of childhood trauma and seeming possession by a shadowy presence that lives to torture and confound others—particularly Peter, who is tapped to defend Balthazar in court for his murderous actions. As Peter



*Dark thriller exploring guilt and personal responsibility in humanity's redemption.*

**Great for fans of** Ted Dekker and Rachel Dekker's *The Girl Behind the Red Rope*, James L. Rubart's *Soul's Gate*.

gradually comes to understand his past—and how crucial it is for him and Jude to find a path toward forgiveness for each other and themselves—Grace builds to a confrontation between the two that is charged with tension—and finds Peter desperately trying to convince Jude to break his cycle of death and destruction. Grace's unsettling mix of spiritual quagmire, supernatural mystery, and morality gives the book's suffocating atmosphere serious weight, as characters question whether past wrongs can ever be righted—and if evil can truly be conquered. Ultimately, each man comes to understand and accept their role in Christ's passion play and find a measure of peace, even as the threat of evil's shadow remains ever present. Readers willing to sift through centuries of suffering in hopes of rebirth and redemption will be entertained.

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

## MYSTERY/THRILLER

**Raven**

Robert T. Kelley | High Frequency Press

312p, trade paper, \$19.95, ISBN 978-1-962-93135-9

Mev Hayes, a 20-year-old computer prodigy recently expelled from her small-town college following an overblown hacking incident, has landed a coveted spot at a prestigious MIT tech lab, handpicked by Dr. FitzRoy himself, a professor celebrated for his pioneering work. Mev quickly seizes on the chance to not only salvage her professional future but also to distance herself from her family's troubled past—her father is imprisoned for white-collar crimes, and her mother is bitter and withdrawn. But Mev's hopes prove to be short-lived, and she quickly finds herself caught in the middle of a high-stakes investigation, where FBI agents, mobsters, and spies abound, all with competing agendas.

Set in the 1990s, this novel captures both the excitement and the anxieties of the times during which the internet, as we know it today, first took shape: universities chasing new innovations, policymakers struggling to regulate, and a culture wary of technologies it did not understand, such flux giving way to not merely innovation but also exploitation. Mev, brilliant by all accounts but young and naive, finds herself at the cusp of inventing breakthrough tech while simultaneously



*Gripping techno-thriller with high-stakes drama and smart storytelling.*

**Great for fans of** Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon*, Andrew Mayne's *Death Stake*.

navigating the many politics of the industry, including male colleagues jealous of her success, predatory advances from the unlikeliest of sources, and a near-constant threat to both her credentials and her freedom. In building the plot with sharp insider knowledge, Kelley—with a decades-long career in tech under his belt—lends the setting a lived-in feeling that brings both the technology and its dangers to vivid life. And while the plot can sometimes be weighed down by the sheer number of smaller threads, Kelley maintains a brisk pace with a palpable cat-and-mouse tension that carries it through its most winding moments. The result is a gripping techno-thriller, sure to be enjoyed by those drawn to immersive, plot-driven narratives.

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

## MYSTERY/THRILLER

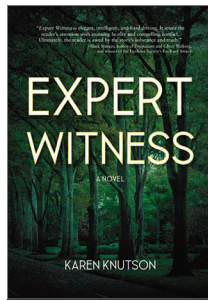
**Expert Witness**

Karen Knutson | Warren Publishing, Inc.

296p, hardcover, \$31.95, ISBN 978-1-966-34327-1

For her engrossing debut mystery, Knutson draws on her experience as a nurse practitioner and care manager to create an unconventional protagonist: an investigator who ferociously protects her elderly clients—even when it puts her own life in danger. Twenty-nine-year-old Elle Larson runs a geriatric care management business and is hired to evaluate Charlie Blackwell before his contested guardianship hearing. At the Blackwell mansion, she discovers Charlie nearly comatose, with multiple Fentanyl patches on his abdomen. Following this apparent attack, Charlie's caregiver is found dead, and Elle is quickly drawn into shady—and dangerous—Blackwell family business.

What starts out as a routine assignment to assess Charlie Blackwell's mental competency quickly turns into a noirish web of intrigue, complete with a femme fatale and corrupt doctors—even lost gold mines. Along with Knutson's thorough attention to medical detail, her evocation of 1990s Charlotte (the starkness of



*Determined nurse practitioner turns investigator to protect geriatric client.*

**Great for fans of** Nina Atwood's *The Expert Witness*, Sue Grafton's *T Is for Trespass*.

Carolina pines in November) sets the mood and revelations about local history (the 19th century gold rush in North Carolina, which preceded California's by decades) give *Expert Witness* a distinctive flavor. There's also a long family history of infighting and battling over financial control.

While introducing a host of suspects, Knutson explores the complex Elle, still haunted by the death of her parents and not quite able to pursue romantic possibilities. She keeps the pace steady as Elle prepares her report about Charlie while also investigating his attack, but on the day of the guardianship hearing, the narrative shifts into overdrive: along with legal pyrotechnics, there's an attempted murder in broad daylight. Amid the action in this twisty mystery, Knutson painstakingly reveals the mechanics of elder abuse, and her passion and urgency make *Expert Witness* a rallying cry to keep the vulnerable safe, especially elderly relatives being exploited by their so-called loved ones.

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

## MYSTERY/THRILLER

**Skinless**

Maggie Moor | Pearl of Peace Publishing

374p, trade paper, \$19.99, ISBN 979-8-9931212-2-2

Moor's fiction debut strips away pretense and sacrifices comfort for vulnerability, following the tormented Charmay through a life saturated with abuse, addiction, and the exhausting work of simply existing. Structured across three parts, the novel charts her trajectory from a damaged childhood into adulthood, where relationships with figures like Sam and Rex become battlegrounds of manipulation and fleeting tenderness. Central to the narrative is Charmay's splintered sense of self, constructed through her alternate personas: "Cindy" as shelterer; elsewhere, "Little Trash Girl" and "Rainbow Girl" as the exposed core requiring protection. In "Boogit," she admits these identities have become difficult to separate, a psychological fracturing that the book's structure reinforces at every turn.

What makes *Skinless* distinctive is how Moor's prose operates. The writing is deliberately fragmented, refusing the neat architecture of conventional storytelling, with sentences that break off and thoughts that collide. In "Say Again?" Sam's erratic movement and Charmay's splintered reflections mirror a relationship tee-



*Powerful portrait of a traumatized woman splintering at the seams.*

**Great for fans of** Harley L. Rosee's *Twinsgate*, Lucy Treloar's *Days of Innocence and Wonder*.

tering on collapse. This isn't stylistic flourish for its own sake; it's the only honest way to render a mind trying to hold itself together. Just as unflinching is Moor's imagery; she never shies from depicting bodily trauma, as in "Labor Day," when Charmay copes with the aftereffects of an abortion: "Violent red from silver bucket. Fetus size a quarter, turned

out." These moments land with force precisely because they're presented without editorial distance or cushioning metaphor.

Moor's nonlinear construction demands active engagement from readers, and the subject matter (domestic violence, substance dependency, the long shadow of childhood wounds) is relentless. But the novel isn't interested in making trauma palatable—it's determined to render it visible. For readers willing to inhabit Charmay's chaotic interior landscape, *Skinless* offers something rare: a portrait of survival that doesn't sanitize the mess. That portrayal is uncomfortable, occasionally overwhelming, and undeniably powerful.

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

## MYSTERY/THRILLER

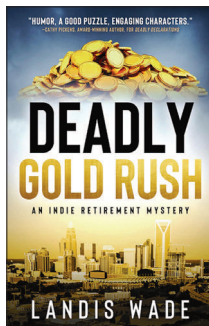
**Deadly Gold Rush: An Indie Retirement Mystery**

Landis Wade | Lystra Books

378p, trade paper, \$18.95, ISBN 979-8-9921363-5-7

Wade takes readers on a high-octane ride in this second entry of his Indie Retirement Mystery series, following *Deadly Declarations*. Lawyer Craig Travail receives an email warning his friends at the Independence Retirement Community—affectionately known as Indie—of impending catastrophe. Soon after, a body, covered in coins, is found under Harriet Keaton's childhood home. Since the suspect has a known grudge and criminal history, the case seems cut-and-dried—but Craig knows from experience there's more to this murder than meets the eye. He joins forces with the fiery Harriet and upbeat Yeager Alexander to uncover the truth, though that venture will take them deeper into Charlotte, North Carolina's gold-mining history than anyone anticipates—and if they don't act fast, the entire Indie community could be lost forever.

Like its predecessor, this title is inspired by real Charlotte history. Wade weaves nuggets of Charlotte's gold rush into the underlying mystery, from family ancestry to an underground mining museum. This culminates in a nail-biting trial which, thanks to Wade's experience as a trial lawyer, is an exhilarating push and pull on



*Lively mystery bubbling with unforgettable characters and historical spirit.*

**Great for fans of** Ellen Byron's *Solid Gold Murder*, Lindsey Davis's *The Silver Pigs*.

both sides. The stakes are high, but the story retains its characteristic humor, jumping between wheelchair croquet fights, themed banquet spreads, and sexy salsa parties.

Despite their age, the residents of the Indie shouldn't be underestimated. The cast brims with unexpected talent, from retired judges and history professors to coin experts and gossip queens, with unforgettable characters like the tobacco-chewing, salsa-dancing Roscoe Brady and NASCAR Nelli who starts fights in a motorized wheelchair. The main trio of Craig, Harriet, and Yeager have an enjoyable banter, from Craig's lawyerly pragmatism to Harriet's snappy wit and Yeager's light-hearted loyalty, and, by the end, readers will fully understand Harriet when she says "there are a lot of one-of-a-kinds at the Indie." Readers who prefer their mysteries served with both humor and character depth will enjoy this lively offering.

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

## SF/FANTASY/HORROR

**For the Honor of the Agency: The Honor Trilogy, Vol. 1**

Andrew J. Harvey | Hague Publishing  
319p, e-book, \$1.99, ISBN 978-1-922984-09-8

On an alternate Earth, Margaret Peric—the newly appointed Director of Food and Agriculture for the Cross-Temporal Empire—is field agent Markus Ackov's last hope. He's been tracking a suspicious crop blight and, despite being shunned by higher-ups, is desperate to share his unsettling discoveries with Margaret. But when he tries to approach her, Markus is brutally attacked, his eight-year-old daughter Jessie in tow, leading Margaret—and her bodyguard, Jade Carvello—to realize that someone intends to keep Markus's revelation quiet. Jade—an agent of private security firm The Rucker's Agency—takes it upon herself to find answers. That path leads her to infiltrate the Anarchists, one of many groups “seeking social change” after the recent civil war, in hopes of discovering the truth.

The stakes are high in this sci-fi thrill ride, as secrets and conspiracies are uncovered and lives are put at risk. While on mission, Jade teams up with one of the



*Sweeping sci-fi thrill ride set on an alternate Earth.*

**Great for fans of** A.G. Riddle's *The Extinction Trials*, Karin Tidbeck's *Amatka*.

Antarchists' members, Carlos Babineaux, and sparks fly between the two—causing a conflict of interest for the star-crossed lovers. Harvey (author of *The Clemhorn Trilogy*) weaves together a layered story of intrigue, romance, and political agenda from there, featuring two strong female leads who are intelligent, powerful protagonists—and willing to put everything on the line to protect their loved ones.

Readers will be entertained by Harvey's blend of suspense, sci-fi, and dystopia, supplemented by worldbuilding that constructs a believable government and new social order. He is careful to include snippets of history to keep readers abreast of the Cross-Temporal Empire's formation, and developments like the romance between Jade and Carlos elevate the tension, pitting morality against corruption, love against duty, and sacrifice against survival. Plot twists build a convincing case for a conspiracy with deeper roots than anyone expects, and Harvey leaves readers with both revelations and a dangerous new mission that promises more action in the series' future.

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

## SF/FANTASY/HORROR

**Escala's Wish: Tales of Valla, Book 1**

David James | Trash Panda Publishing  
661p, e-book, \$5.99, ISBN 979-8-999-97992-6

Penned as a tavern tale spun out by the gnome Wigfrith Foreverbloom, “Bard Medic of Misty Springs,” this lively and companionable fantasy debut celebrates love and friendship, courage and selflessness, the pleasures of quests, weird magic, and the riddling ways of the fey. James's narrative, channeled through Wigfrith's breezily discursive please-the-crowd storytelling, freshens up familiar fantasy elements as impulsive pixie Escala Winter finds herself exiled from the Court of Dreams for violating her realm's rule against meddling “with the True Cycle of mortal lives.” Escala, the princess daughter of the lord of the Court, knows nothing of the scheming that actually led to her ouster, setting out into the mortal realm with a confounding mission: “to remove the boulders from the True Cycle.”

James mines that intentionally vague brief for some terrific fun and mystery as Escala, in the form of an elf, encounters the dangers and opportunities of a somewhat generic fantasy world. Escala quickly makes friends with adventurers with defined roles (scout, bard, shape-shifting druid) and enlists them in what she



*A lively, touching bard's tale of a faerie's adventures in the mortal realm.*

**Great for fans of** T. Kingfisher, Katherine Addison.

interprets as her purpose: removing boulders—i.e., hardships—from people's lives. (Like any good CRPG hero, she keeps a log of completed quests.) The plotting, too, skews traditional, to a fault: a warlock with ulterior motives dispatches the party on the most basic of quests, while Escala struggles with her forbidden—and dangerous—attraction to a human. But with fantasy in the classic vein, it's the telling that matters, a spirit of vigorous adventure and making the most of time spent among friends. In this, James excels. Wigfrith enlivens it all with drinking games, witty recaps, and info-dumps sweetened with stand-up comedy, and the characters' chatter, confessions, and playful magic use (especially of druid Sticky) delight throughout. Readers will be eager for more well before a climax that touchingly ties courage in the face of danger to daring to bare one's soul.

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

## HISTORY &amp; MILITARY

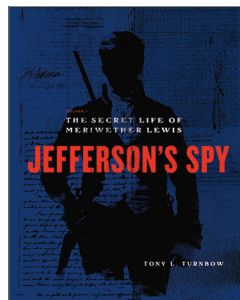
EDITOR'S PICK

**Jefferson's Spy: The Secret Life of Meriwether Lewis**

Tony L. Turnbow  
439p, hardcover, \$35, ISBN 978-1-7362608-3-8

Turnbow (*Hardened to Hickory*) tackles enduring mysteries of the life and death of Meriwether Lewis in this informative work, asking hard questions and analyzing available evidence about the circumstances of his abrupt end, deemed at the time a death by suicide, a conclusion that Turnbow finds unconvincing. *Jefferson's Spy* also digs into all that is fascinating about Lewis's storied life, examining how a man with a seeming “hero's invincibility” functioned as an explorer, government spy, and political operative in early 19th-century America. The first in a series, this offering covers his early years, his Corps of Discovery Expedition with William Clark, his troubled governorship of the expansive Louisiana Territory, and more. Turnbow promises to detail his research on the ultimate fate of Lewis in a future volume, though he touches on the controversy here, exploring contradictions he finds in Lewis's “suicide narrative.”

For context into Lewis's choices, personality, and life events, Turnbow briskly demystifies the politics of the early American republic and its western frontier,



*Informative study of Meriwether Lewis and his America.*

**Great for fans of** Thomas C. Danisi's *Uncovering the Truth about Meriwether Lewis*, John D.W. Guice's *By His Own Hand?*.

with persuasive and engaging introductions of figures like General James Wilkinson, Aaron Burr, and, of course, Thomas Jefferson—who “used” Lewis as “point man, agent, or spy from the time Lewis was twenty years old.” He frames the expedition against the backdrop of a fledgling country seeking full control of the continent—at the expense of Indigenous lives—“as a contest between the newly formed American states and European powers.” Turnbow teases out the nuances of Jefferson's efforts to disseminate his political ideals of self and limited government with the “practical military aspect of removing potential enemies from the hemisphere.”

Lewis emerges as a driven, sometimes melancholy man with far-reaching “political and business ambitions.” Turnbow shares extensive research to support his perspective, ultimately concluding that an environment of complex political scheming contributed deeply to Lewis's eventual death, whether by suicide or murder. History buffs will find much here that illuminates.

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

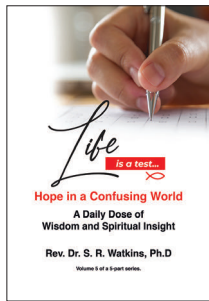
## NONFICTION

**Life is a Test: Hope in a Confusing World: A Daily Dose of Wisdom and Spiritual Insight**

S. R. Watkins | New Start Ministries, Ltd.  
396p, e-book, \$33.50, ISBN 978-1-7387566-9-8

Licensed minister Watkins delivers a Christian devotional with 365 daily entries—the fourth installment in his five-part series—that explore themes of spiritual leadership, understanding scripture, living by faith, viewing work as worship, and more. “My prayer is that as you read, the Lord ignites a fresh fire within you that draws you into a deeper, more intimate relationship with Him,” Watkins writes, inviting readers to explore the Bible for their own enlightenment, be open to new understandings, and seek confirmation of biblical truths from the Holy Spirit. Each devotional includes biblical verses and examples, guided reflection questions, and, in many cases, suggestions for resources that Watkins has found useful in his own efforts to understand the Bible.

Watkins counsels Christian readers to be steadfast in their faith, trust in God’s timing and will, and use biblical principles to navigate life’s hardships. His writing



*Uplifting yearly devotional delivering faith-driven wisdom and understanding.*

**Great for fans of** David Jeremiah’s *Walking with God*, Paul David Tripp’s *New Morning Mercies*.

Bible, or teaching the Seven Spirits of God (Lord, wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and fear of the Lord), Watkins challenges readers to align themselves with scripture and “Let God turn every moment, expected or not, into an opportunity to walk in His purposes.”

This energizing resource provides a road map to building a strong belief in a higher power and altering one’s perspectives on life’s challenges. Watkins’ daily doses of inspiration and encouragement can be applied to personal, professional, and spiritual endeavors, and he closes with a heartfelt prayer for the new year alongside an extensive reading list formulated from his own book club.

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

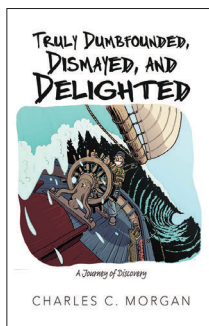
## MEMOIR

**Truly Dumbfounded, Dismayed and Delighted**

Charles C. Morgan | Dorrance Publishing Co.  
212p, mass market, \$19, ISBN 979-8-894-99352-2

The title captures the spirit of this playful memoir from lawyer Morgan, author of a weighty tome about the intricacies of Massachusetts state law. Rather than deliver a straightforward autobiographical accounting of his life, Morgan instead offers a series of brief anecdotes and vignettes, many comic, loosely grouped around themes such as women, awkward moments, and philosophical musings. These prove refreshingly free of doctrine, revealing a mind open to possibilities. “My ‘God’ is the Universe and all the rules governing the way in which it works,” Morgan declares, in an entry covering religious experiences; it is followed by compact reflections on abortion laws and lessons learned at a summer job selling Fuller brushes.

Morgan avoids strict chronology, but the outlines of his life and development soon come into focus: his days in college and a couple law schools; a difficult first marriage; and a career in life insurance and pension law, including stints in Newark and Houston, where he was surprised by the drive-through liquor stores. Stories



*Lighthearted memoir in anecdotes of law, life, love, and learning.*

**Great for fans of** Clifford C. Nichols’s *A Barrister’s Tales*, Allie Brosh’s *Hyperbole and a Half*.

of his innocent younger days generate the biggest laughs. When a secretary shows him nude photographs of herself and her husband, Morgan politely hands them back, not understanding that this was likely a proposition. Morgan’s deliberative, legal mind and understated style add to the humor. “I don’t really learn anything very well unless I experience it,” Morgan writes. That tendency serves him well when discovering, with evidence, how life and the world work. Sometimes, readers may wish Morgan would depart from his lawyerly attention to plain facts and dig deeper into impressions and speculations—a story about riding in a members-only train car with Bill Cosby ends without climax. More detailed is his tale of a beef with the General Society of Mayflower Descendants and the time he snipped the hair off a hippie dorm mate without consent. This genial miscellany, studded with amusing cartoons from Morgan and Cartoon Studios, led by Andrew Scott, has enough heart and smarts to make the sidebars engaging.

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

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### FICTION

#### **An Exaltation of Larks**

Suanne Laqueur. Suanne Laqueur, \$4.99 e-book (510p) ISBN 978-1-37074-239-4

Laqueur (*The Man I Love*) unspools an evocative if meandering tale of a sex worker questioning his sexuality. As a teen growing up in 1970s Queens, N.Y., Javier “Jav” Gil deSoto is caught having sex with a male cousin by his father, who beats him and throws him out. Working as a waiter, Jav comes across a woman named Gloria who mentors him as a male escort. He then meets a young man named Alex Penda, who fled Chile as a young boy without his parents after Pinochet’s military coup. Alex introduces his foster sister, Valerie Lark, to Jav, and she hires him for sex multiple times. Jav is just as interested in Alex, and wonders whether he’s bisexual. In 2006, Jav learns that his estranged widowed sister has died from a fall, and that her will names him legal guardian of her 17-year-old son, Aaron. When Jav travels from New York City to meet Aaron in the Hudson Valley, he runs into Alex, who is now married to Val, and much drama ensues. Laqueur offers colorful insights into sex work (“Everyone has something fascinating about them, Jav,” Gloria tells him. “Your job is to find it. Then you can fuck it”), but the novel becomes overly sentimental as it barrels toward its climax. This sprawling tale is a mixed bag.

#### **Her Golden Coast**

Anat Deracine. Mayavin, \$6.99 e-book (250p) ASIN BOCYBG4FBW

Deracine (*Algorithms of Betrayal*) offers a nuanced depiction of a friendship between two women that might become something more. The story takes place in Silicon Valley on the eve of the 2008 recession, when Laurie Lamont toils as an administrative assistant for a tech start-up. She runs into her colleague Mal Kumar on a double date, and the pair hit it off, agreeing to become roommates. Mal becomes a steady and comforting presence in Laurie’s life, helping her weather a series of breakups and health problems, as when she undergoes a hysterectomy after a blood clot is found in her uterus. The novel gets off to a slow start,

but it offers a realistic view into the frustrations of dating in Silicon Valley—one boyfriend installs spyware on Laurie’s devices, while another merely avoids commitment. It gets better as the friendship deepens and Laurie develops feelings for Mal, causing readers to hope the women will eventually find their way to each other. This charms.

#### **The Middle Generation**

M.B. Zucker. Liopleurdon, \$5.99 e-book (434p) ISBN 978-1-956569-14-8

Zucker (*The Eisenhower Chronicles*) offers a comprehensive if occasionally stilted biographical novel of John Quincy Adams’s tenure as secretary of state. Spanning from 1817 through Adams’s inauguration as president in 1825, the story covers the consequential episodes he navigated, including the annexation of Florida, the Missouri Compromise, and the meddling of European empires in the Western Hemisphere that pushed him to create the Monroe Doctrine. Zucker conveys the competing demands of decision makers, including Andrew Jackson, James Monroe, Henry Clay, and various European diplomats, while providing context for the era’s political debates. Interspersed among the political machinations are more modestly revealing insights into Adams’s home life, including his tense relationship with his wife, who feels undervalued, and his sons, whose lack of ambition causes him to bristle. The long conversations between Adams and others lack flavor, but the first-person narration credibly evokes the pressures and strain he felt, especially given his disgust with slavery and the bargains he made that allowed it to expand. Readers interested in early American history will appreciate the depth of detail.

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