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booklife®

— YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING —

11 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

Beyond the Blurb

An author explores the qualities that make a book reviewable

RENÉE K. NICHOLSON

Here's an uncomfortable truth I've learned as a professional book reviewer: some books are technically sound but offer critics nothing to say. They're well-written, competently structured, and utterly forgettable. I've been reviewing books since the mid-aughts, and, as a member of the National Book Critics Circle for over a decade, I've developed a sense of what makes a book not just solid but the kind of book that generates critical conversation.

"Reviewability" isn't about quality alone. I've read skillfully written memoirs that never engaged me in their larger story. Conversely, I've championed imperfect debut novels that took bold risks and entered into important conversations. Understanding what makes a book reviewable may help you make more distinctive choices in revision.

The most common issue I encounter isn't bad writing; it's competent writing that lacks spark. These books have clean prose and believable characters, but they don't make for exciting reviewing. What separates a competent book from one that demands critical attention?

IT TAKES A RISK

Reviewable books make bold choices: formal experimentation, unusual structure, or a distinct approach to familiar stories. Ask yourself: What's the boldest choice in my manuscript? Where am I playing it safe?

Common risks that generate discussion include unreliable narrators, nonlinear timelines, hybrid forms, and challenging subject matter handled freshly. Penny Zang's debut book, the neo-gothic novel *Doll Parts*, uses dual narrators, neither reliable, in different timelines to explore feminism in a fresh way. The execution isn't perfect, but the risk works.

The key? Structure should serve the story. Zang's risk revealed



something about character, theme, and human experience without becoming a gimmick.

IT ENTERS A CONVERSATION

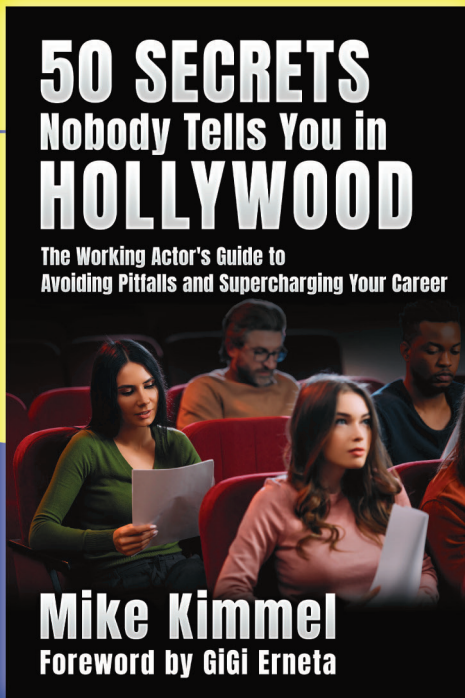
Reviewable books engage with conversations beyond themselves, such as literary traditions, cultural moments, or genre conventions, offering critics a framework for discussion. Ask yourself: What conversation is my book joining? Am I subverting, honoring, or reimagining a tradition?

This doesn't mean being trendy. Quite the opposite. Timely work taps into enduring questions through a contemporary lens, while trendy cookie-cutter work chases the moment and often feels dated and stale before it ever reaches publication.

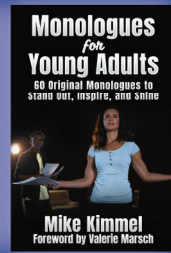
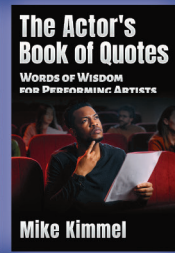
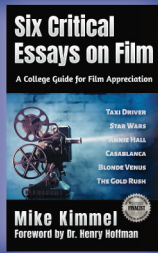
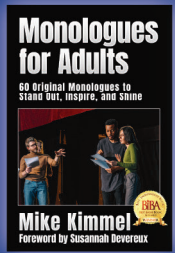
IT HAS A DISTINCTIVE VOICE

I can often tell within the first page whether a book has been revised into blandness—competent prose buffed smooth of idiosyncrasy. To avoid this, ask: What's unusual about my voice? Where am I most myself on the page?

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



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ISBN 978-1-953057-16-7 (ebook)



“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!

A strong, memorable voice often gets a book reviewed. Whether it's Claire Keegan's extreme minimalism and emotional precision or Ocean Vuong's lyrical vulnerability, distinctive voices signal attentiveness to language.

Red flags for generic writing include overwriting, repetitive sentence structures, tired metaphors, clichés (both linguistic and stylistic), and dialogue in which every character sounds the same. Make sure your sentence rhythms match your story's emotional tenor, word choices revealing character and the world.

IT OFFERS COMPLEXITY WORTH UNPACKING

Some books give up everything on the first read, with no ambiguity, no dramatic or thematic depth. Reviewable books operate on multiple levels. Unreliable narrators reveal biases we must decode. Plots fail to resolve neatly. Tension emerges between form and content.

Two kinds of complexities can make your work more multidimensional. To enhance character complexity, ask: Are my characters rife with contradictions? Do they have fatal flaws and blind spots? Are they human?

To bolster structural complexity, consider: Does my plot unfold organically? Have I earned my emotional beats? Does the middle third sustain momentum? Is my ending both surprising and inevitable?

IT SUBVERTS GENRE TROPES INTELLIGENTLY

Be clear about who your book is for and what makes it different from similar books.

The problem with “it's for fans of “ followed by a list of bestsellers is that such a list suggests you don't know what makes your book unique. Know your primary genre and be intentional about where you bend its conventions. A literary mystery works when both elements serve each other, not when it's literary fiction with a murder awkwardly stapled on. (Or, for that matter, a boilerplate whodunit with pretentious language.)

WHAT DOESN'T MAKE A BOOK REVIEWABLE

Author platform doesn't equal reviewability. Controversial subject matter alone isn't enough. Craft and execution matter. Personal significance doesn't equal critical interest. Reviewers need more than sincerity. Revision is where you can shift your focus from “Is this 'good?'” to “What makes this original?” The latter makes your work more likely to be reviewed.

As you revise, keep these key questions in mind: Where does my book make its most interesting choices? What conversations am I joining? What's the most compelling argument for why this book needs to exist?

A FINAL NOTE

Do your homework. See who reviews your genre and where reviews would most likely appear. Don't send indiscriminately. Understanding reviewability isn't about gaming the system or writing to please critics. It's about clarifying your book's place in the larger literary conversation. Understanding why some books generate critical discussion and others don't can help you make bolder choices. That benefits everyone: you, your readers, and reviewers like me who are always searching for new work worth championing. 🍷

Renée K. Nicholson is the author of a new poetry collection, Feverdream, as well as Fierce and Delicate: Essays on Dance and Illness and other books.

BookLife Talks with Peter Smit

After retiring from a long career in pharmaceutical research and development, Smit set out to start another career: novelist. As of last year, nonfiction has joined his fiction works. We spoke with Smit about his books, the inspiration behind them, and what readers can look forward to from him.

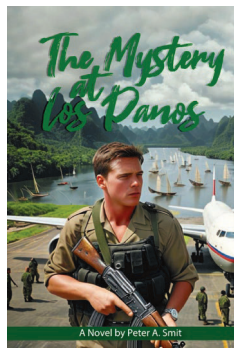
Has being an author always been a goal of yours?

Yes, becoming an author has long been one of my personal aspirations. I have always been deeply passionate about storytelling and the power of written words to inform, inspire, and engage readers. Writing allows me to explore complex ideas, human emotions, and global themes through narrative. Over time, I realized that I not only enjoyed writing but also possessed the discipline and creative vision necessary to develop compelling stories. My goal has always been to craft meaningful narratives that both entertain and encourage readers to think more deeply about the world around them.

The Mystery of Los Panos and *Life Will Never Be the Same Again* are international espionage thrillers. What kind of research did you do for each book?

For both novels, my research was grounded largely in real-world experience and observation. Having traveled extensively, I drew inspiration from diverse cultures, environments, and geopolitical realities that helped shape the authenticity of the settings and characters. I also relied on my understanding of current world affairs to create realistic scenarios and believable conflicts. Additionally, my professional background in infectious diseases and public health practice provided valuable insight into scientific and medical elements within the stories. Combining lived experience with professional knowledge allowed me to build narratives that feel both engaging and credible to readers.

22 Notable Public Health Essays: Chronicling the Human is a departure from your previous books, which were fiction. What prompted this change?



The shift toward nonfiction was largely influenced by the global experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. During that time, I was sheltering in place while the world faced immense uncertainty. Vaccines had not yet been developed or approved, and daily life was shaped by constant reports of rising infections and loss of life. Witnessing the profound human impact of the pandemic deeply affected me, particularly as over one million Americans lost their lives. I felt compelled to document not only the scientific and public health realities but also the emotional and human dimensions of the crisis. Writing these essays became a way to reflect on resilience, collective struggle, and the lessons humanity could learn from such an unprecedented event.

What is the one thing you want readers to know about your books?

At their core, my books are stories about courage, resilience, and the capacity of individuals to create meaningful change. While my novels are structured as action-thrillers filled with suspense and adventure, they ultimately focus on heroes and heroines who confront adversity with determination and moral conviction. I want readers to come away not only entertained but also inspired by characters who demonstrate that ordinary people can make extraordinary differences in the world.

Are you working on a new book now?

Yes, I am currently working on a new novel titled *The William Hunt Affair*. The story is developing into an international thriller centered around a mysterious and highly intelligent figure involved in a sophisticated art heist. The protagonist is pursued by an NYPD detective across multiple countries, creating a fast-paced global narrative. A unique element of the story is William Hunt's ability to continually reshape his identity, allowing him to evade capture and blur the line between reality and deception. The novel explores themes of identity, power, and pursuit while maintaining the suspense and action readers have come to expect from my work.

For more, visit booklife.com/smit



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

FICTION

⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

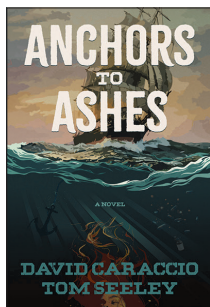
Anchors To Ashes

David Caraccio and Tom Seeley

350p, e-book, \$17.99, ISBN 979-8-218-87526-8

This sweeping, somber family saga—rooted in the Pacific Northwest's timber and shipbuilding industries—tracks the rise and unraveling of the wealthy Stevens dynasty across decades, interrogating how ambition, inheritance, and untreated mental illness calcify into generational fate. The novel opens in the early 1900s with brothers Joseph Stevens and George Stevens, partners in a rapidly expanding shipwright and timber business. Though aligned in enterprise, the pair is ideologically opposed: Joseph is relentless and profit-driven, measuring success through expansion and male lineage, while George is more domestically anchored, uneasy with the moral cost of their ascent.

That tension becomes painfully personal through George's marriage to Agnes, whose pregnancy losses and lack of a male heir expose the cruelty in Joseph's fixation on succession. The plan to adopt the son of an Italian immigrant fractures



Meticulously constructed family epic of inheritance as burden and blessing.

Great for fans of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*.

the family in unexpected ways, as the child, Edward, suffers traumatic beginnings. His arc, marked by wartime trauma and physical injury, reflects the novel's interest in how institutions—family, military, medicine—fail those they claim to protect.

Readers move fluidly between George, Joseph, Edward, and a rotating cast of secondary figures whose lives intersect with the Stevens empire. The final section centers on Sloane, Edward's daughter, whose early promise—athletic, charismatic, seemingly destined for fame—collapses under the weight of severe mental illness. Her decline is rendered with unsentimental restraint, through prose that favors clarity rather than lyricism, allowing historical detail and psychological consequence to do the heavy lifting. The novel's rapid temporal shifts can occasionally feel abrupt, but the overall effect is largely purposeful, reinforcing the idea that personal suffering can be compressed—or erased—by the weight of legacy.

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

FICTION

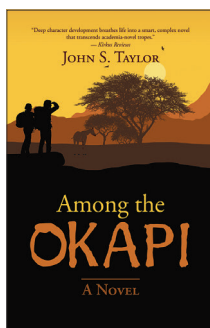
Among the Okapi

John S. Taylor | FriesenPress

225p, e-book, \$4.99, ISBN 978-1-03-916602-8

In Taylor's debut, a professor's hidden past comes to light, entangling a cadre of wildly imperfect characters in a dangerous web of secrets. Richard Smith—renowned department head at Waverly College, whose “rather extreme melancholy” makes him an outsider—serves as the novel's unifying thread, flanked by an intriguing cast drawn to his mysterious past. Lab assistant Fred Atkinson is tasked to compile Richard's notes on the okapi—an assignment he accepts with pleasure, though, as he wades deeper into the project, Fred realizes that Richard's years in Africa are more complex than he assumed. Meanwhile, orphaned college student Esther Barton catches Fred's eye. Soon, it becomes clear that no one is safe in Richard's orbit—and that everyone is harboring their own secrets.

Taylor weaves an intricate labyrinth of affairs, political maneuvering, and family drama. Esther's aunt Daphne suffers tension in her marriage due to an old affair;



Intriguing story of secrets and deception, with lively cast.

Great for fans of Kate Ruby's *Tell Me Your Lies*, Jacqui Rose's *The Good Wife*.

her husband John heads the family brewing company while struggling to connect with his son, Jason; and Fred's short-lived passion with his landlady Inge ends in disaster. As truths surface—and masks unravel—Esther emerges as the most affected, transforming from shy girl to disillusioned young woman. When she's

told about Daphne's affair, she wonders, “Perhaps all men are like that...perhaps everyone is like that!” At the forefront of this mess is Richard, a man whose past lurks behind every interaction. From mysterious journal entries to private and public outbursts, Richard's story begins and ends with surprising drama.

Among the Okapi is brimming with interesting characters who will keep readers invested. Tension builds as the layers peel back, with even Richard musing, “perhaps it is during the hunt that man is most truly alive.” That observation encapsulates not just his experiences in Africa but also the novel's central theme of pursuing meaning from the past's darkest secrets.

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

FICTION

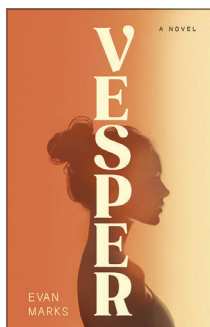
Vesper

Evan Marks | Kinderspiel Press

380p, hardcover, \$28, ISBN 979-8-9934861-0-9

Marks's sharp-edged protagonist offers readers a cynical but exuberant take on New York City's modern dating scene in this reflective debut. Vesper Elsegood, a 20-something with a rotating roster of eligible and not-so-eligible bachelors—all carefully vetted by her team of gal pals—escapes the doldrums of her consultant job by dipping her toes in the waters of the big city's flashy night scene. Eternally interested but wary of commitment, Vesper retreads the ever-relevant Carrie Bradshaw's steps sans Manolo Blahniks, while also striking out on some bold adventures of her own—Saint-Tropez, San Francisco—though the dating pool she wades through can't quite keep up.

That is until Vesper runs into Caspian—a roster “Category Killer” whom she finds particularly swoonworthy (though she's surprisingly convinced he won't reciprocate her intensifying feelings). Marks draws on alternating point of view narration to flesh out the novel's multiple perspectives, clueing readers in to not just the



Entertaining sketch of big-city dating, with sharp-edged female lead.

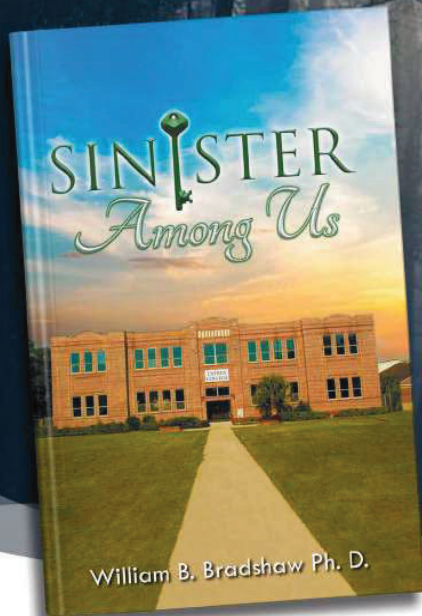
Great for fans of Jennifer Close's *Girls in White Dresses*, Marlowe Granados's *Happy Hour*.

ruminations of Vesper's male interests, but also the unreliability of her own assessments. That approach also reinforces the novel's philosophical center, Plato's Theory of Forms—the idea that “two people can sometimes experience the same moment yet hold radically different interpretations of it”—that crops up throughout, first as a thesis that

Vesper's friend, Deshan is writing, and later as a central thread in Vesper's own musings on her dating experiences.

Vesper's sharp, biting inner monologue takes center stage, painting a portrait of a woman more than capable of holding her own but still searching for deeper connections in ways that even she seems unaware of. Her journey to discover whether that belonging comes from the outside or from within is poignant and relatable, and readers will cheer as she gradually realizes “the growth that comes from understanding that every connection, no matter how brief, adds something to the mosaic of who you're becoming.”

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



SINISTER AMONG US



by William B. Bradshaw, PhD

ISBN: 978-1684869718

Unveiling the Darkness: Sinister Among Us—A Mystery of Power, Corruption, and Secrets

Nominated for the 2025 Eric Hoffer Award, *Sinister Among Us* is a riveting mystery novel that plunges readers into a web of crime and deception at a small Christian college in rural Indiana. Set in the quiet town of Copperville, the novel follows Dr. Bradley Green, the interim president of Cyprus College, as he unravels a series of shocking and deeply sinister events threatening the institution's very foundation.

What starts as an unsettling undercurrent of wrongdoing quickly spirals into a high-stakes investigation. Dr. Green is determined to expose the forces at play, but the challenges he faces are staggering: male professors exchanging grades for sex, faculty members running drug operations, a corrupt residence hall director coercing young female students into prostitution, and a network of illicit activities stretching beyond state lines, involving gambling and human trafficking. As if that weren't enough, funds from the college's scholarship program mysteriously vanish, secret meetings are held in an attempt to oust Green, and payroll tax withholdings are siphoned off for the college's own use. The disappearance of the College's Governing Board Chairman only deepens the mystery.

At the heart of it all lies a single clue—an actual key. It belongs to a safe deposit box, but with no identifying bank or number, it seems to be an unsolvable puzzle. That is, until an unexpected incident leads Green to the very bank that holds the answers. What he uncovers within the safe deposit box not only cracks the case wide open but also reveals the long-buried history of Copperville's name and the unexpected connection between Cyprus College and a distant Mediterranean island.

With a masterful blend of suspense, moral dilemmas, and social commentary, *Sinister Among Us* delivers a gripping narrative that keeps readers on edge. This novel isn't just a mystery—it's an exposé of power, corruption, and the relentless pursuit of truth.

Available at:

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*also in other major online bookstores

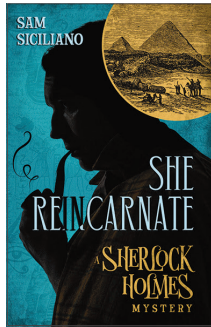
MYSTERY/THRILLER

EDITOR'S PICK

The Reincarnate: A Sherlock Holmes MysterySam Siciliano | Isola Curiosa Books
288p, e-book, \$8.99, ISBN 979-8-9938217-0-2

Like earlier entries inspired by *The Lair of the White Worm* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, this 10th title in Siciliano's delightful pastiche series featuring Sherlock Holmes and his cousin, Dr. Henry Vernier, pushes the great sleuth into the worlds of other storied novels—in this case H. Rider Haggard's proto-pulp Gothic adventure *She*. A phenomenon in 1887, Haggard's book mixed some Victorian spiciness with the English preoccupation with all things Egyptian and the tantalizing prospects of lost kingdoms and secret societies. All this, plus some capital deduction, comes together in Siciliano's fresh take involving a beautiful young lady, a plain but loving suitor, and the mystical doctor who insists that she is the all-powerful queen Ayesha, as in "she who must be obeyed."

It's up to Holmes, Vernier, and Vernier's brilliant wife Michelle, also a physician, to get to the bottom of the Vespere Sidus society's connection to thefts of mummies



Marvelously entertaining Sherlock Holmes yarn in the vein of H. Rider Haggard.

Great for fans of James Lovegrove's *Sherlock Holmes and the Shadwell Shadows*, Lyndsay Faye's *Dust and Shadow*.

shocking finale that exposes more than one secret among the crowd.

This sparkling read moves briskly, honors the authors who inspired it, and both rewards and upends reader expectations. (Familiarity with Haggard will enhance appreciation of Siciliano's witty appropriations but is not required to enjoy the yarn itself.) The trio of investigators are a pleasure to spend time with, and the wide-eyed heroine, while naïve, proves especially intelligent and determined to move past her mother's odd fascinations into a life of her own. Readers of old-school detective adventures and playful literary mashups will relish this.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

Set You FreeElmer Seward | Bay Rivers Publishing
233p, e-book, \$2.99, ASIN B07235HGLS

In this gripping thriller, Seward (*Hearts in the Storm*) blends small-town romance with on-the-run suspense. Along a highway near Chesapeake Bay, twenty-something mother Deena and her young daughter Kat trudge through a downpour. A handsome widower, Blake Moore, offers them a ride to the small coastal town of Opechancano. Thinking she has finally outrun her troubled past, Deena soon finds a house and a community of welcoming neighbors, especially the motherly Mama Jo. Meanwhile, Shank, a sadistic man covered in spider tattoos, and his violent sidekick home in on Deena's location, seeking revenge for past deeds. Can Deena's new friends protect her from the evil pursuers determined to punish her and her daughter?

Chapters alternate between multiple points of view, including the villain, allowing the reader to look at this multifaceted story from all angles, though sometimes the characters' questionable decisions will leave readers frustrated. The narrative also dips into a mysterious journal Blake finds in Deena's dilapidated rental home that



Brisk romantic thriller of a young mother trying to outrun her past.

Great for fans of Terri Blackstock's *If I Run*, Lynette Eason's *Always Watching*.

tells the story of a teen who was smitten with the daughter of an abusive man—and ended up killing him to protect her. This mirrors the situation between Blake and Deena—a man dedicated to protecting a woman who is fleeing abuse—and perhaps offers Deena a path toward untangling her own dangerous past.

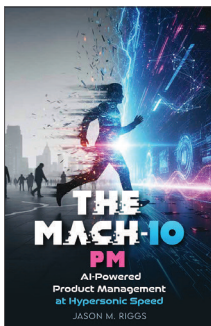
While the staunchly faithful Blake and winking, maternal Mama Jo feel like familiar archetypes, their kindness and relatable emotions allow readers to appreciate them. Perhaps the most memorable character is Enos, a jolly, childlike man who adores Kat. He represents a voice of hope that borders on the philosophical: "It ain't nothin' but where you been tryin' to keep you from where you goin'. Don't look down and don't look back." Although frightening, Seward's mentions of rape and sex trafficking are limited and not described explicitly. Ultimately, *Set You Free* is a quick, easy-to-read thriller that reveals the long-term effects of domestic violence and sex trafficking on innocent women.

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

BUSINESS & PERSONAL FINANCE

The MACH-10 PM: AI-Powered Product Management at Hypersonic SpeedJason M. Riggs | Perfect Wave AI Ventures
270p, e-book, \$2.99, ASIN B0FSP1Z1C4

Making the case that "speed without clarity is chaos, and clarity without speed is irrelevant," product manager Riggs offers an up-to-date, forward-looking guide to managing projects and products at the pace of a restlessly changing world without sacrificing quality, creativity, or precision. Key to Riggs's framework of faster launches and "smarter execution" is the suite of ever-improving, highly flexible AI tools bringing change to every industry. As he introduces the practices and possibilities of an AI analytics process, Riggs urges leaders not just to embrace these changes but to find inspiration in their rapidity—to move forward at the pace of the future. Here, that pace is called "MACH-10," which involves moving faster, of course, but also exercising "an AI-augmented" strategic leverage and "weaving AI into every stage of the product lifecycle" with smartly targeted prompts. Prompts, after all, are how we "aim" a system. Riggs makes a spirited case that "precise, outcome-driven" prompts tied to clear business goals can "surface sharper insights, expose blind spots, and open possibilities you might otherwise miss."



Brisk, flexible guide to the power of AI tools in product management.

Great for fans of Lisa Weaver-Lambert's *The AI Value Playbook*, Marilyn Nika and Diego Granados's *The AI Product Playbook*.

Orchestration Framework") emphasize processes of review and refinement. Even at these speeds, human "oversight and refinement remain non-negotiable."

Riggs presents AI as a "multiplier" of force, ingenuity, and insight, especially in a "fast-moving market [where] learning quickly is the ultimate advantage" and "disruptions are guaranteed." This guide is brisk and flexible, crafted to encourage those same traits in leaders getting up to speed with the promise of AI tools. Riggs's advice is clear, practical, and—in the end—human.

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

BookLife Talks with Mickie Kennedy

Publishers Weekly's review of *Worth Burning* called it "smoldering" and said that "Kennedy exhibits a remarkable ability to state his aims clearly and honestly." The poetry collection, out from Black Lawrence, covers his childhood through his late-in-life coming-out. We spoke with Kennedy about the book, the readers he hopes to reach, and where his work goes from here.



Can you share the story behind *Worth Burning*?

The story of *Worth Burning* is the story of my life. It almost functions as a memoir in verse, spanning more than four decades. It charts my nontraditional trajectory as a gay man who came out late in life, and as a survivor of an abusive, grief-fractured childhood home in rural North Carolina.

On a plot level, this book is full. We begin with the death of the speaker's father, a freak accident that unravels his mother into alcoholism, violence, and sexual abuse. The speaker hesitantly explores his gayness in adolescence, but the harsh reality of AIDS shuttles him back inside the closet. He marries a woman. They have two children. A decade passes. But when the speaker falls in love with a man, he re-exits the closet. His gayness does not come easy. Shame stays persistent. And the shadows from his past demand attention.

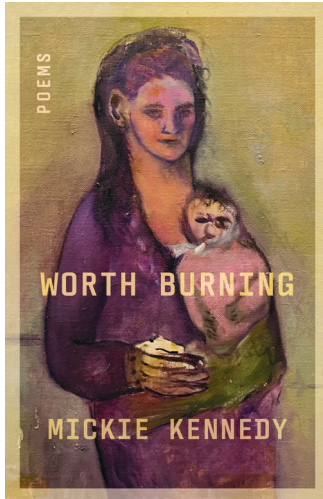
Beyond the plot, the manuscript orbits a set of unanswerable questions: Is it possible to keep the past in the past? Can we subvert and transform the violence we are forced to endure? In other words, how do we heal?

***Worth Burning* address familial trauma without flinching. How did you approach these difficult subjects on the page?**

I trusted the body first. Sensation. Scene. Small images, like folding blueberries into batter, that held gravitational significance. It's difficult to translate

trauma onto the page without its devastation overwhelming everything. That's why I let the objects, actions, and settings do much of the speaking.

I didn't want the book to be defined by a single traumatic revelation. Frankly, I didn't want the trauma to be a reveal at all. It's just there, like the foundation of a building—but I'm more interested in the building itself. I didn't set out to write about trauma as a subject. I wrote toward pressure. Toward what kept resurfacing when I tried to write around it. *Worth Burning* is a book of arcs, coalescing slowly, poem by poem, until the reader feels the cost of silence. I wanted the book to feel honest without feeling too exposed, or like a cry for sympathy. The goal wasn't catharsis. It was clarity.



Were you writing toward a particular set of readers when writing *Worth Burning*?

During the writing process, I didn't have a particular audience in mind. I wrote what I had to write. But I hope *Worth Burning* reaches survivors of childhood trauma. More specifically, survivors of sexual abuse. I also hope it finds the queer community, especially those who have lived through, and remain haunted

by, the AIDS epidemic. There's an intersection between these two audiences: queer people with fractured family relationships, nudging their adult selves towards healing. That being said, I believe this book is for all readers. This includes readers who have never undergone these particular traumatic experiences, but are willing to sit close to someone who has. In doing so, I hope they recognize something of their own hidden grief, shame, or longing.

What can readers expect from you next?

My next full-size book, currently unnamed, presents a kaleidoscopic view of gayness and illness, orbiting the narrator's lived experience with prostate cancer, inherited trauma, AIDS, and more. It's also, despite these decidedly morose subjects, quite funny!

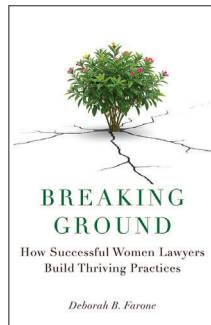
For more, visit booklife.com/kennedy

BUSINESS & PERSONAL FINANCE**Breaking Ground: How Successful Women Lawyers Build Thriving Practices**

Deborah B. Farone | Practising Law Institute Press
244p, hardcover, \$44.25, ASIN B0FYJCKXGY

Offering readers inspiring tips and advice from successful female lawyers, business experts, academics, and more, Farone delves into the dynamics driving the legal profession, noting, primarily, the “disconnect between what is rewarded and how women are often socialized to behave.” Attributing this to bias and a lack of business development training, Farone notes the tides are changing, citing a gradual move towards empathic, authentic leadership—a far cry from the transactional nature that has characterized the legal field throughout history. “This is a prime moment for women to lead,” she declares, providing advice on networking, how to break down systemic barriers, cultivating intentional relationships with potential clients, and more.

Farone’s debut is encouraging and energizing, devising a functional roadmap for readers to embark on marketing journeys. She includes personal and professional anecdotes, practical exercises, and hands-on principles to help master public



Empowering and enlightening business resource for female lawyers.

Great for fans of Sara Holtz’s *Bringin’ in the Rain*, Nora Riva Bergman’s *50 Lessons for Women Lawyers*.

speaking, LinkedIn, social media, content creation, and authentic branding, closing each chapter with an in-depth “think piece” from an expert in the field—those who have successfully applied Farone’s foundational concepts and can share genuine, hard-earned insight. Readers will learn thought leadership, public speaking strategies, how to harness the value of associations, and a slew of other

down-to-earth approaches to carve out their success in the business of law.

Breaking Ground advocates for authenticity over perfection, encouraging women to build long-lasting, purposeful client connections and a diverse workplace culture. Throughout, Farone highlights that business development is an ongoing tool to cultivate growth and success, and her straightforward guidance empowers female lawyers to know their value, be confident in what they bring to the table, and understand that “lawyers are not alone in their experiences, can learn from each other, and can support each other in achieving long-term success.”

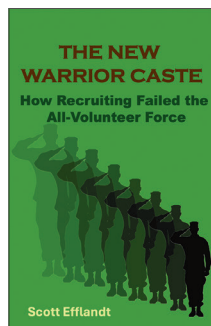
Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – | Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

HISTORY & MILITARY**The New Warrior Caste: How Recruiting Failed the All-Volunteer Force**

Scott Efflandt | IngramSpark
276p, trade paper, \$31, ISBN 978-9-9936087-1-6

Efflandt’s well-researched and well-argued assessment addresses what he believes are shortcomings of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) of the US armed forces, focusing on the Army in particular. Efflandt provides an overview of the history of America’s use of conscription versus a volunteer force throughout its history. He asserts that one of the benefits of the draft was the creation of an Army that was representative of its population as a whole, as well as reinforcing and inculcating what he refers to as “republican” values. By this, he means a spirit in the public of patriotism through duty.

The end of the draft in the early 1970s was partly as a result of the deep unpopularity of the Vietnam War and the belief that patriotism and tradition would keep the ranks of the Army at a sufficient size, and that it would continue to be representative of the population as a whole. Efflandt provides evidence that the numbers as a whole have dropped significantly since around 1990, despite occasional years in which growth rallies. He attributes this to the changing nature



Compelling case for expanding recruitment for the volunteer military.

Great for fans of William A. Taylor’s *The All-Volunteer Force*, Joseph Irving Reid’s *America’s Volunteers*.

of warfare, a decrease in veterans leading to fewer role models for republicanism, and a drift toward the southeastern U.S. as the dominant recruiting grounds. He refers to this limited geographic spread as “the crooked smile.”

In Efflandt’s view, this puts the burden of military service on too narrow a part of the population, creating the “warrior caste” of the title. This isolates the military from society as a whole and puts the nation at potential risk if it faces an existential threat. With persuasive clarity but also a tendency toward repetition, Efflandt suggests that recruiting needs to be refocused with an emphasis on restoring the concept of service to a wider swath of the population. Efflandt’s approach is systematic, methodical, and rigorous. Readers interested in military policy from the point of view of an expert scholar will find the argument Efflandt advances compelling.

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

MEMOIR

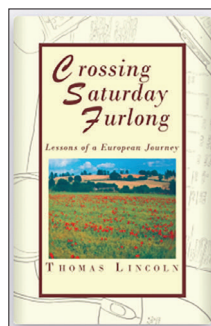
EDITOR’S PICK

Crossing Saturday Furlong: Lessons of a European Journey

Thomas Lincoln | Xlibris
208p, trade paper, \$16.99, ISBN 979-8369452813

Lincoln’s warm and witty European travelogue charts memorable journeys of the pre-internet era, each offering escape, discovery, and lively comedies of errors. On these trips, one in 1986 and one in 2000, language and customs serve both as barriers and invitations to new ways of living. The heart of the adventure occurs during the earlier sojourn, as Lincoln, in his 20s, abruptly quits a numbing corporate job and convinces his reluctant romantic interest, Jennifer, to embark on an impromptu European trip. The problems, described with wit and verve, begin before even leaving the States: as he’s loading boxes into a U-Store-It, Lincoln’s “back turns to Jell-O”—an injury no backpacker can afford.

Still, in Lincoln’s telling, the spirit is the more accidents the merrier. In London, the couple encounters rooms whose “mattresses haven’t been changed since the Blitz.” In the Swiss Alps they have to contend with “Night Yodelers,” and in Paris they meet a French tutor who can’t speak French. Lincoln’s wryly elegant prose



Funny, insightful memoir of traveling Europe just before the digital era.

Great for fans of Kyle James’s *Not Afraid of the Fall*, Mark Pearson and Martin Westerman’s *Europe From a Backpack*.

blends the literary and the dishy, the wisened-up and the wise. Striking detail, sharply sketched characters, and surprise bursts of wisdom abound—“I said to keep your dreams; it does not mean that you have to make them real,” an old sea captain tells him in Dubrovnik.

While Lincoln’s storytelling is often comic, especially in brisk and pungent dialogue, the turbulence of global conflict is a persistent theme. In Paris they come face to face with Hezbollah’s targeted bombings, and much of the city of that sea captain and his family is later destroyed in the Balkan wars. What is not destroyed but severely tested is the travelers’ relationship. If in the beginning Jennifer is something of a reluctant sidekick, in Olvera, Spain, she emerges as the person in charge. Lincoln’s account brims with excitement and optimism, and his enthusiasm—and desire to escape everyday corporate life—is contagious. This is travel writing that rewards, illuminating both the world and our lives.

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

MEMOIR

EDITOR'S PICK

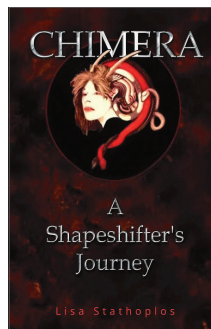
Chimera: A Shapeshifter's Journey

Lisa Stathoplos | Vanguard Press

328p, trade paper, \$25.99, ISBN 978-1-83794-800-0

With this lively memoir, actor and educator Stathoplos illuminates the challenges and triumphs of a career working with emotionally and behaviorally disabled young people. While gigging as a thespian and voice performer, Stathoplos earns a graduate degree and teaching certification, later running a special education program at a high school, where she administers individualized education plans for neurodivergent or otherwise troubled students. In reflecting on society's failure to properly address mental illness, Stathoplos draws, with insight and sensitivity, on her son Eli's experiences with anxiety and depression and her ex-husband's struggle with alcoholism.

Though the material is often heavy, Stathoplos's strong voice and sense of humor make *Chimera* an engaging read. The narration displays both the raw, intimate honesty of a diary entry and the expressiveness of a one-woman theatre piece. Whether railing against drivers who follow too closely or venting about well-meaning



Actor and educator's warm reflections on teaching students with special needs.

Great for fans of Tanya Frank's *Zig-Zag Boy*, Rachel Aviv's *Strangers to Ourselves*.

involving self-harm, illness, and loss.

True to its title, *Chimera* changes gears often, structured as a series of vignettes and anecdotes that jump around in time rather than unfolding in a straight line. Chapters are named in homage to the author's favorite rock songs, and each one is paired with an evocative illustration by her partner Michael Crockett, many of which appear to be treated photographs. If the timeline is occasionally hard to keep track of, no individual chapter is ever less than fully realized, and the cumulative effect of Stathoplos's experiences and observations—as a mother, a jobbing actor, and a teacher—is greater than the sum of its parts.

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

POETRY

born in the wild

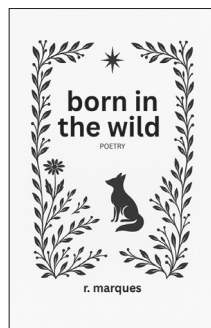
r. marques

156p, trade paper, \$12.99, ISBN 978-1-919-39710-8

"The wild does not care / if I am lost. / it has no need to find me," Marques writes in this windswept, dreamy poetry debut that imagines the wild as its own entity, complete with personality, whim, and motive. For Marques, though, it is also something that exists within: "the earth is not outside me // it is in me." Marques's triptych is organized into chapters that chart the course of a life in and out of nature: "Born in the Wild," "Raised in the Village," and "Living in the City."

A fortifying pillar of the work as a whole is a yearning to connect with the wilderness and, through this, discover a more intimate and deepened connection with the self, though that impulse is complicated by the fact that humanity must also live among its own creations and be shaped by them.

That tension powers these thoughtful, muted poems. The village that raised the speaker "was small, but the love in it was larger than any city," and "at sunset, the whole village turned to golden, as if the sun wanted to paint us in its memory." Like the wilderness, the village is also a whole of which the speaker is a part; it shapes



Thoughtful poems exploring origin and the presence of wildness in all of us.

Great for fans of Ocean Vuong's "Night Sky With Exit Wounds," Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese"

Marques's discovery, on the page, of these complexities, though sometimes the poet's declarative mode edges toward tautology: "each mountain / I climb, / is an obstacle that I have to conquer." The contrasts prove destabilizing, particularly because the speaker is an immigrant—"I dream in my native language and wake up in english"—yet he nonetheless holds true to his roots. He invites readers to find their wildness when he joyfully declares, "not all paths lead out of the wild, / but some lead deeper— / to places where even the wolves know peace."

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

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

FICTION

Cayman Conundrum: A Liz Adams Mystery

Stacy Wilder. Wild Hawk, \$4.99
e-book (200p)

ISBN 979-8-9907831-1-9

Wilder's lively fourth whodunit featuring PI Liz Adams (after *A Christmas Conundrum*) sees her tracking down her new husband's missing friend. Liz has just married her former client Brad O'Connor. After she helped Brad identify who was hacking his identity-theft protection company, he and his business partner, Tim Knight, sold the business. Tim has moved to the island of Grand Cayman to try his hand at writing, planning to fold his research about the area's history of money laundering into his first novel. Before he can complete his manuscript, however, he vanishes. When Liz and Brad, who are in Grand Cayman for their honeymoon, learn about Tim's disappearance, they determine to find him. Their probe is made more complicated when it intersects with that of Liz's old flame, JP, a French intelligence operative who's been assigned to investigate money laundering in the Caymans. Wilder's answer to the question of Tim's whereabouts is both logical and surprising, and the tropical setting offers plenty of pleasures for armchair travelers. Fans of Carolyn Hart's cozies will enjoy themselves.

Girl Unreserved

Tashia Hart. Not Too Far Removed, \$23.99
(140p)

ISBN 978-1-7353453-3-8

A Native American girl discovers her sexuality and reels from sexual abuse in this frank outing from Hart (*Native Love Jams*). Winnow Sticks is five when she and her friends mimic a sex scene from a movie they glimpsed their parents watching. At 10, Winnow is sent by her parents, who are getting divorced, from their Red Lake Nation home in Minnesota to live with her aunt Shelly in Arkansas. There, she befriends a girl named Sarrah, who kisses her. Shelly gives Winnow a pornographic magazine to explain sex, which she and Sarrah look at. Then Winnow moves with her aunt to Texas, where Shelly forces her

to attend a weekly Bible study session at a local church, during which Winnow regularly locks herself in the bathroom to masturbate. The narrative blends Winnow's coming of age with harrowing episodes of sexual assault, as when she's abducted as a preteen by two boys who threaten to kill her if she doesn't have sex with them. Here and elsewhere, Hart's gritty and plainspoken chronicle glimmers with poetic insight—Winnow, humiliated by the attack, spends the night outside, “staring up at the stars, wondering how far my pain and fear stretched out beyond my body. It felt like it was traveling to at least the edge of the solar system.” This bracing tale is worth a look.

The Pope's Jew

Eva Mekler. Manhattan Book Group,
\$14.59 trade paper (288p)
ISBN 978-1-963844-44-3

A ghostwriter uncovers her client's secrets and finds love and danger in this enticing tale from Mekler (*Sunrise Shows Late*). In 1980 Paris, wealthy industrialist Luc Kasten hires 30-something American journalist Diane Jameson to ghostwrite a memoir to share with his family. Diane accepts, intrigued by the charming older man, and agrees to spend the weekend with him at his home in the south of France. Despite Luc's claim that he wants to set the record straight (“My life has been half-truths for a very long time”), Diane has trouble getting him to disclose seemingly innocuous details, like the name of his childhood best friend. When she presses him, he redirects by flirting, and she begins to fall for him. She also starts digging into his past, casting doubt on his stated birth year of 1920 and discovering that Guy Thibault, an old enemy of Luc's who was responsible for sending him to a concentration camp during WWII, is now blackmailing him, having recently figured out his long-ago misdeed, which Mekler doesn't reveal until late in the novel. With Diane enmeshed in Luc's life and Guy after him, the narrative blends an enriching morality tale with a suspenseful game of cat and mouse. WWII fiction fans won't want to miss this.

When We're Broken

Shawna Holly. Three Sparrows, \$3.99
e-book (425p)

ASIN B0DD6VWCCR

Holly returns to small-town Alabama in the emotional companion piece to *The Stories We Keep*. Cat, 17, bonds with new student Glen Lewis in 1981 over the loss of their fathers—hers recently died in a work accident, while his abandoned the family. The pair start dating, but trouble brews during the summer months when their classmate Ally spreads rumors that Glen had sex with her. Glen then informs Cat that Ally is telling the truth, but that it happened before he started dating Cat. Later, Cat spies Glen talking with another girl at a Fourth of July party and then sees him hanging out with Ally outside of a bar. Cat chooses to ignore further rumors of Glen's infidelity and marries him immediately after graduating from high school. She gives birth to a daughter, Jenna, a couple of years later, but Jenna is colicky, and Glen becomes distant and neglectful, often spending time at a bar after work, and Cat wonders if she should have heeded earlier warnings. The narrative can feel repetitive, especially as Cat and Glen constantly pick at each other, but it builds to a satisfying and hopeful conclusion. Readers will be stirred by this bittersweet bildungsroman.

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