

May 11, 2026

booklife®

YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING

18 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

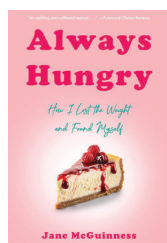
Indie Spotlight

In this edition of our monthly thematic roundup of BookLife titles, we feature memoir and autobiography.

Want to see your book featured? Check out the Indie Spotlight calendar at booklife.com/indiespotlight.

HEALTH AND AGING

Always Hungry: How I Lost the Weight and Found Myself



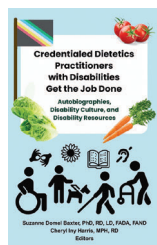
Jane McGuinness

ISBN 978-1-64742-986-7

Author statement: "I wrote the draft of my first book in a sleepless three-month blur, quite possessed! I was, and still am, thoroughly determined to reach the readers this memoir will benefit. As a registered psychotherapist, I am passionate about helping others heal

from disordered eating, as I did many years ago. I was also compelled to tell my story as it speaks to deeply entrenched size discrimination and thin privilege that remain rampant in society to this day."

Credentialed Dietetics: Practitioners with Disabilities Get the



Job Done

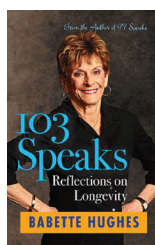
Suzanne Domel Baxter

ASIN B0F9C48QKR

Author statement: "After my acquired disability was diagnosed in 2010, I set out to learn everything I could about disabilities. The Disabilities in Nutrition and Dietetics Member Interest Group launched in June 2023 with me as its inaugural

chair. I decided to self-publish a book of autobiographies by disabled dietetics practitioners to encourage others with disabilities to join the profession, and to educate the non-disabled dietetics workforce about disabilities and accommodations."

103 Speaks: Reflections on Longevity



Babette Hughes

ASIN B0GPWYCZ78

Author statement: "This book isn't meant to offer advice or magic formulas. It's simply my story: the moments that shaped me, the lessons I stumbled into, and the people who left their fingerprints on my life. If there is any secret at all, maybe it's this: pay attention. Life is always whispering something."

Where Did I Go?



Francene Gillis

ISBN 978-1-989833-52-0

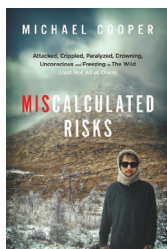
Author statement: "I wrote the memoir originally as therapy and to share all I learned after I fell on black ice and suffered a concussion and whiplash in 2016. It was written out of frustration when it took four months to find the appropriate help, and years to find the right therapies. Treating a brain injury requires a multidisciplinary approach, and upwards of 30% of us never fully recover. It is very much a memoir for patients, therapists, anyone working or living with someone who has a brain injury."

ADVENTURE AND SURVIVAL

Miscalculated Risks: Attacked, Crippled, Paralyzed, Drowning, Unconscious and Freezing in The Wild (Just Not All at Once)

Michael Cooper

ASIN B0FSH2W6SV



Author statement: “I originally decided to write *Miscalculated Risks* after my expedition buddies, family, and friends repeatedly urged me to memorialize the many near-fatal wilderness adventures I’ve had. But in the process of writing my memoir, it quickly also became a love letter to the wild. Realizing I had only one chance to tell the story well, it took five and a half years to write it to the very best of my ability, drawing from my four decades of experience as a professional journalist.”

The Ocean in Our Blood



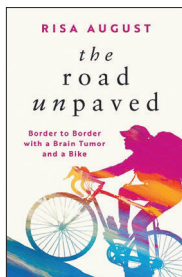
Tara Pyfrom

ISBN 978-1-990496-91-2

Author statement: “*The Ocean in Our Blood* is a survival memoir about what happened to my family during and after Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas. We had nine feet of ocean inside our home and spent 24 hours trapped in our attic, waiting it out and not knowing what would be left when it ended.

The book addresses trauma, rebuilding, identity, and figuring out how to keep going when your life no longer looks anything like it did before. It’s also an LGBTQA+ story about family and partnership, and the kind of love that holds you together in the worst moments.”

The Road Unpaved: Border to Border with a Brain Tumor and



A Bike

Risa August

ASIN B0CLF2B64N

Author statement: “I had wanted to write a book for years; I never imagined it would be based on my own life. Nonetheless, it arrived at exactly the right moment, when my life was in pieces. I was diagnosed with a brain tumor and a destructive disease, my 18-year marriage to a man was dissolving, and I was falling in love with a woman for the first time. After brain surgery and radiation treatments, I quickly realized I would never be the same person again. So naturally, I named my tumor ‘Bubba’ and took to the Pacific Coast Highway on my bike.”

SELF-DISCOVERY

As Time Goes By



W. Royce Adams

ASIN B0DFN28HYW

Author statement: “I am 95 and decided I should begin writing my memoir before I reach the past tense. During the process, I veered off track and into a fictionalized version of parts of my life. I ended up writing an autofiction of both my life and what might have been my life. I’ve noticed some readers accept the book as a true memoir. As Vonnegut would say, ‘And so it goes.’”

Eight Septembers: A Woman on Wall Street from 9/11 to Lehman

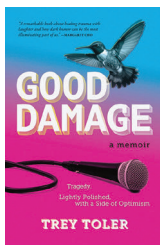
Jane Buyers

ISBN 978-1-965253-76-2



Author statement: “Nearly 15 years in the making, *Eight Septembers* helps make sense of a turbulent time in my life and in the financial industry where I worked. I have been as honest and forthright as my memory allows. Written for the general reader in the style of a fast-paced novel, my book attempts to explain some of the mechanics of the world of finance so people can understand the stakes and how they relate to their own lives and well-being. It is also a deeply personal look at how family dynamics are affected by addiction, dementia, divorce, and death.”

Good Damage

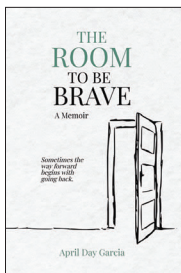


Trey Toler

ASIN B0GWS6RCN7

Author statement: “I wrote *Good Damage* for the people who are still in it—still grieving, still stuck, still figuring out which survival habits to keep and which ones are wrecking them. I’m a stand-up, and the book moves the way a set moves; the hardest truths land best when you trust the room to laugh with you. The through-line is a metaphor my sister once told me about vultures and hummingbirds: both birds fly over the same land, and both find exactly what they’re looking for. This book is about learning, unevenly, how to fly the other way.”

The Room to Be Brave

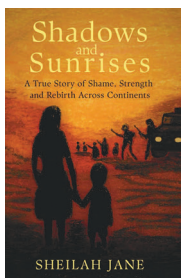


April Day Garcia

ASIN B0G75SX6Y

Author statement: “This book started as the story of my life. For years, I knew to tell my story I needed to return to the rooms where my identity was formed and sit with the pieces of myself I had left there. I understood intellectually that my past was shaping my present but I hadn’t fully walked back into the rooms where that shaping happened. Writing *The Room to Be Brave* was my way of doing exactly that.”

Shadows and Sunrises: A True Story of Shame, Strength and Rebirth Across Continents



Sheilah Jane

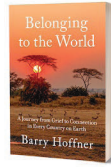
ASIN B0FWZ8YDBY

Author statement: “Growing up, silence was a form of survival: a way to protect family, history, and ourselves. It wasn’t until much later that I understood how deeply those silences shaped me. This memoir began as a way to make sense of inherited stories—of martial law, migration, motherhood, and love

expressed more through action than words. Writing it required patience and tenderness, especially toward my younger self. My hope is that readers who have lived between cultures, expectations, or identities will recognize themselves in these pages and feel less alone in their own becoming.”

BookLife Talks with Barry Hoffner

A tragedy pushed Hoffner, already a seasoned traveler, to lose himself in grief as he drifted across the globe. Over time, the connections he made with other travelers and people from the countries he visited helped him come back to himself. This year, Hoffner released *Belonging to the World*, which BookLife Reviews called “touching” and a “stirring debut memoir.”



As a self-described “globetrotter,” what draws you to traveling?

Travel wasn’t part of my youth, but it became a defining force in my life after a chance backpacking trip through Europe at 18. For the first time, I stepped into places I had only read about—hearing unfamiliar languages, navigating new cultures, and feeling the thrill of the unknown. It was like something ignited inside me.

What began as a search for adventure gradually became something deeper: a lifelong curiosity about people and the world we share. Over time, I realized that travel isn’t really about the destinations—it’s about connection. The moments that stay with me aren’t the landmarks, but the conversations, the unexpected kindness of strangers, and the shared humanity that transcends borders. Travel has expanded not only my understanding of the world, but also of myself.

Your grief journey was quite literally a journey that took you to almost 200 countries. What prompted you to turn that trip into a memoir?

I never intended to write *Belonging to the World*. After losing my wife in a tragic accident in Africa, I began traveling to escape grief and memories I wasn’t ready to face—at first, just putting distance between me and the pain. But somewhere along the way, something shifted. Travel stopped being an escape and became a path forward. It was helping me heal in ways I didn’t expect—through connection, through perspective, and through encounters that challenged what I thought I knew about the world.

About a year into the journey, after visiting places like Iraq and Afghanistan—destinations many warned me to avoid—I realized I wasn’t just rediscovering life after loss. I was witnessing a different side of humanity, one rarely reflected in headlines. That’s when I knew these experiences needed to be shared—not just as a travel story, but as a story about healing loss through connection.

How do you imagine readers at this moment will connect to *Belonging to the World*?

At its heart, this book is about finding connection and purpose after loss, told through the lens of encounters across our magnificent world. And right now, many people are searching for exactly that, whether they’re facing grief and uncertainty or simply feeling disconnection. I hope readers see themselves somewhere in these pages. Not necessarily in the journey across countries, but in the emotional journey—the struggle to move forward, the search for meaning, and the moments of unexpected grace along the way. I hope the book can be a way for the reader to unlock and tell their own stories.

If the book offers anything, I hope it’s this: a reminder that healing doesn’t happen in isolation. It happens through connection—to others, to the world, and to something larger than ourselves.

What can readers expect from you next? You must have countless stories from your travels. Was there one you wanted to include but couldn’t?

There are so many stories that didn’t make it into *Belonging to the World*. Some were too fleeting, others too complex to capture fully on the page—but all of them mattered. I think of conversations with guides and drivers in places like Afghanistan or Papua New Guinea, or chance encounters with fellow travelers in countries like Iran or Syria. And often, the most powerful moments were the simplest—sharing tea, exchanging stories, or experiencing a small act of kindness from someone I had just met. Those moments didn’t always fit neatly into a narrative, but they shaped me in profound ways. In truth, the book is only a glimpse—a collection of the experiences that best tell the story, but far from the whole of it.

What’s next for you?

While I’ll always continue to travel, my focus is increasingly on the humanitarian work that grew out of this journey. Through my foundation, Caravan to Class, we support scholarships for young women in West Africa—an initiative in my late wife’s name: Bourse Jackie (The Jackie Scholarship). This work feels like the natural continuation of everything the journey has given me. Travel helped me heal—but giving back gives that healing purpose. I was honored to receive the 2026 Most Purposeful Travel award from NomadMania, a global community of travelers, for our efforts to support the next generation of female leaders in West Africa. For me, that recognition isn’t an endpoint—it’s a reminder that the journey forward is about impact as much as exploration.

For more, visit booklife.com/hoffner



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

POETRY

⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

Playthings

Ilan Mochari | Finishing Line Press
28p, trade paper, \$17.99, ISBN 979-8-89990-356-4

Mochari, author of subversive bildungsroman *Zinsky the Obscure*, offers an indignant delivery of the holistic consequences of deforestation and other symptoms of humanity's pathological greed in this smart poetry debut, from the effect on a tree—"your essence, these men brought to a shed to be boiled & poured into molds..."—to each other organism attempting to make a habitat within the Anthropocene. Mochari contextualizes the tree, the spider, and more on a broader timescale. Mochari emphasizes the contrast between their existence in pre-human and post-human worlds while celebrating their survival, however challenged, amid "a pandemic of cars."

Global overconsumption is not Mochari's only muse, however; one ekphrastic poem pays homage to Georgia O'Keeffe and identifies in her work a tension between proximity and distance, a theme that he continually revisits: "This canvas depicts,



Delightfully heady collection of poems on the climate crisis, art, and love.

Great for fans of John Ashbery and Robert Frost's "The Oven Bird"

this title affirms // An art in the juxtaposed distance of terms." In "5:45 Bus" Mochari describes being "tacitly consenting to strangers' hips and elbows touching our own," and compares the experience to "Mars and Neptune" seeming close though "billions of miles apart." Exposing such thoughts can create an unsettling feeling of intimacy, though Mochari maintains control, making the disclosures as insightful as they are at times destabilizing.

In "Gibbous Reflection," Mochari takes a Derridean approach to the moon and points out the difference in color between astronauts' testimony of moon dust—with hues of "gunpowder, then black as night sky"—and our archetypal understanding of it as "chalky, ghostly, bloodless." That captures something of Mochari's drive to ponder essences in truth, beyond the veneer of cultural assumptions. For such a short collection, only 20 poems, Mochari's poetry debut brims with philosophical insight and shows readers a mirror of their universe, just from fresh angles.

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

POETRY

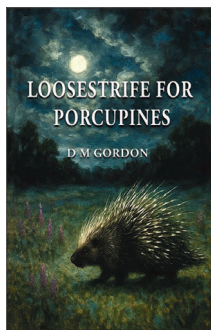
⚡ EDITOR'S PICK

Loosestrife for Porcupines

D.M. Gordon | Blue Light Press and 1st World Publishing
61p, trade paper, \$17, ISBN 978-1-421-83600-3

Gordon's magnetic, timely collection of prose poems reminds readers above all of the magic in the mundane and the mundane in the cosmic, which is a necessary perspective shift in Gordon's collection, as it is nothing less than a matter of survival. In "Radishes," Gordon meditates on happiness; must she find it in some lake-side Italian paradise, or can she find it while cutting radishes? She writes, "there's something about slow. Something about the knife. [...] I intend to sharpen it. Attend its whisper-slice and nothing else. How hard can it be?"

Presence is the key to contentedness in Gordon's collection, but her poetry also reminds readers that presence, though simple in practice, is not a straightforward endeavor: "Some days the monarch on the milkweed is simply a monarch, a pause of yellow. And joy. Some days monarch and milkweed are unbearable, lonely." That



Smart, heartening poems that make sense of the present through presence.

Great for fans of Frank O'Hara's "Intermezzo," Terrance Hayes.

which we notice, according to Gordon, changes meaning, since "everything is liminal, changing for every reason, and no reason at all," but paying attention—to moon phases, to Mozart, to crows, and in one playful entry the correspondences between a poem and a horse—is worth the effort. To put it another way, "I buy malted milk balls because, as the democracy crumbles, and people are dying, there is a grocery store." Being is being, no matter the despair.

Imbued with Gordon's unvarnished appraisal of the trash-filled, broken world, however, is an ironclad thread of hope. She imagines, in Chernobyl, that "a desperate Eden builds again" and notes that "one thing will surely lead to another, a voice whispers. The possibilities are infinite." Porcupines, puppies, and horses all act as spiritual teachers in a collection that encourages a rough-edged optimism and urges renewal by way of presence. With playful insight, Gordon asks readers, shooting stars, and raindrops to "begin again."

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

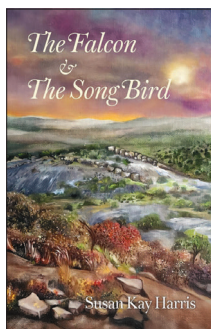
FICTION

The Falcon and the Songbird

Susan Kay Harris | Skylully
320p, trade paper, \$14.99, ISBN 978-28399-4933-0

Harris's poignant coming-of-age novel follows April, a fiercely independent teenager growing up in 1960s Texas Hill Country. In a household shaped by instability—her father chases construction contracts overseas while her mother Vie drifts through lonely days and drinking—April finds steadiness in her copper mare, Moona, and in her friendship with Ronnie, the lone Black student at Llano High. Later, April encounters Clay, a young ornithologist studying the Golden Cheeked Warbler on nearby land, who sagely observes, "what makes nature so efficient and, well, bountiful—I can't think of a better word—is all the incredible variety." As she navigates adolescence amid the sociocultural tensions of the '60s, April's vivid experiences expose her to questions of race, responsibility, and belonging.

April's emotional anchor rests with Ronnie, who moves "like a shadow from one class to the next, keeping her head bowed and never looking anyone in the eyes." Harris uses this quiet presence to illuminate the racial climate of early '60s Texas.



Thoughtful portrait of adolescence and moral awakening.

Great for fans of Jessica Anya Blau's *Mary Jane*, Lynda Rutledge's *Mockingbird Summer*.

April's gradual understanding of segregation and privilege unfolds without sentimentality or easy moral triumph, and the friendship between the two girls becomes the book's clearest argument about the courage required to see past inherited assumptions. "I understood that it was not hate or disdain that made her wary, but fear," April observes about Vie's racist attitudes, "fear of getting close to something that she had been told could cause her harm."

Harris's depiction of the landscape is striking, with "prickly pear cacti, usually so aggressively forbidding," appearing almost "sweetly chastened" after rain. Clay's entrance adds a different dimension. He reads the landscape with patience and attentiveness, and his influence on April is subtle yet significant in shaping her evolution from naively inquisitive to a young woman blossoming with confidence. April eventually realizes that boldness paves the way for justice—and becoming your own hero is the most powerful transformation of all.

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

BookLife Talks with Jeanna Valenti

With over 30 years in marketing as well as a long-time yoga practice, Valenti channeled those experiences in her book *The Yoga of Marketing*, which BookLife Reviews called a “concise guide on melding yoga’s mindfulness with effective marketing” and describe it as creating a “warm, inviting atmosphere makes the learning not just painless but intriguing... and fulfilling.”

It seems as though you’ve always worked in marketing. Have you always been interested in the mind, body, and spiritual aspects of life, too?

Yes. My mother took me to church with her when I was a young child. I was always curious about the spirit or soul and particularly the afterlife. I felt it existed, though it was hard to describe to someone who did not feel or envision what I felt and envisioned. I also had an NDE, a near-death experience, once. I had a glimpse into what I feel is heaven. It’s Nirvana and way better than what I could have ever imagined. I’d love for people to know that God loves them and forgives all of us for our screw-ups throughout our lifetimes.

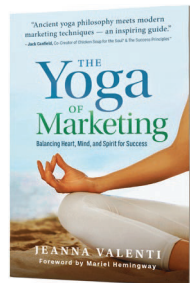
I’m also a Seven Spiritual Laws of Yoga instructor. The mind-body-spirit theme seems to follow me, or I follow it. My team and I are producing a health and wellness documentary called *There’s No Place Like OM* which touches on the unseen world. And I’m writing the accompanying book *There’s No Place Like OM: My Encounters with Modern Day Mystics*.

If a person knew nothing about yoga or marketing, how would you describe your book to them?

The book is a bridge between yoga and the business of marketing. I lay out the seven chakras and the seven correlating marketing centers as I see them. The book is half business (marketing) and half about yoga philosophy. *The Yoga of Marketing* explores yoga ideas alongside modern marketing techniques and shows readers how mindfulness and heart-centered thinking can better support them in their daily work lives.

You first presented *The Yoga of Marketing* to a class 15 years ago. Have any of the principles changed between then and the publication of the book now?

Not really. I mean the world itself has changed. We are much more technologically advanced. The world of



digital and social media is so much more evolved. With the unfolding of artificial intelligence, we are on an interesting journey where the machines, software, and algorithms seem to be thinking for us.

The differentiator with my *The Yoga of Marketing* principles is that they are timeless. Even though the modern world seems to be moving faster and faster, our internal world of consciousness, mindfulness, and awareness is still, unchanging, authentic, and real. It’s always there waiting for us to come back to center, back in alignment with our peaceful selves. The book is about returning to our balanced wholeness and operating from a calm, peaceful place.

If you could pick anyone to give this book to, who would it be and why?

I’d give the book to a young woman just starting out in her marketing career. Hopefully the book would teach her to take care of her own self first through yoga philosophy and techniques. Simultaneously, the book would help her with some practical marketing principles that I wish I had known when I was just starting my career journey 30-some years ago.

What do you see as the evolution of *The Yoga of Marketing*?

As far as the book goes, I created an online version of the class on Udemy, and I plan to record an audio version of the book to go along with the e-book. As far as the principles themselves, my friend Rachel Sacco, who contributed a chapter to the book, is considering writing *The Yoga of Leadership*.

Also, three of my closest colleagues and friends are contributing chapters to my next book, *The Yoga of Public Relations*. My original vision for *The Yoga of Marketing* concept was to develop a “The Yoga of” series. After we get through the industry-specific business books, we will branch out to more general titles like *The Yoga of Cooking*, *The Yoga of Parenting*, *The Yoga of Gardening*, *The Yoga of Painting*, and so on.

I based that concept on Jack Canfield’s model of the Chicken Soup for the Soul series. I am grateful that Jack wrote an endorsement for the book: “Ancient yoga philosophy meets modern marketing techniques—an inspiring guide.”

For more, visit booklife.com/valenti

MYSTERY/THRILLER

EDITOR'S PICK

The PinkMarshall Thornton | Kenmore Books
276p, e-book, \$6.99, ISBN 978-1-965-30611-6

This arresting historical mystery from Thornton (the Lambda-winning author of the Boystown Mysteries) blends a striking 1913 Chicago milieu, a Pinkerton investigator's tense first case, and urgent personal stakes as Lewis Walt, a devoted physiognomist, faces the possibility that the "science" of determining who has a "criminal character" could be turned against him. After all, Lewis is queer in an era when the term didn't exist—but exposure of his "proclivities" would risk everything. Lewis becomes one of the storied/notorious agency's "Pink"s—specialists in private investigating and security but known throughout Chicago for their history in strikebreaking—when, at age 22, his comfortable life is upended by his mother's announcement of financial distress.

Thornton deftly juxtaposes Lewis's private self against his family's expectations and the brutality of a city where characters spout dialogue like "You come in here



Smart, compelling historical mystery of a queer Pinkerton in 1910s Chicago.

Great for fans of David C. Dawson's Simon Sampson series, John Copenhaver's *Nightingale Trilogy*.

Packingtown. The objective: finding a reason for insurers to deny a claim.

Lewis pursues the evolving case, facing violence and scandal while attempting to evade his mother's meddling once and for all through a surprising new relationship. He proves an engaging protagonist—and, again, a more capable detective than he expects—while providing a compelling perspective on a richly realized but never sentimentalized place and time. Thornton resists imbuing Lewis with 21st-century sensibilities (he's indifferent to both "radical" politics and suffragist views), but seeing him mature is one of the novel's many pleasures. Readers will want more.

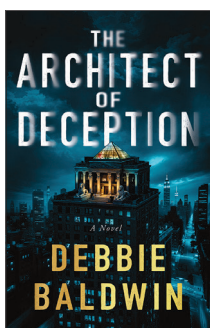
Cover: **B** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: — Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

MYSTERY/THRILLER

The Architect of Deception: A NovelDebbie Baldwin
376p, trade paper, \$19.99, ISBN 978-1-662-97034-4

Erasmus James, known as "Razz," is a man who has everything—money, good looks, an Ivy League education, and a townhouse in the West Village, all by the age of 28. But underneath that glittering façade is a man mired in grief after his twin brother Vincent's death years before. Unable to move forward, Razz is straddling the precipice between "self-destructive and suicidal" while his best friends, Hatcher Boudreaux and Archie Stonebridge, agonize over his inevitable fall. But when he comes across a cryptic invitation to join a mysterious group called Scepter & Scythe—offering an elusive reward in exchange for solving a riddle that points to the luxe home of billionaire Apollo Peck—Razz is hooked.

While Razz embarks on the quest of a lifetime, Baldwin keeps the rest of New York City's elite on their toes with the introduction of a cat burglar going by the name of Nemesis, whose calling card is to steal priceless items from their victims and leave them at the residence of their next mark. Before too long, the story's two paths intersect, murder comes knocking, and Razz is jettisoned into a high-stakes hunt



Deliciously twisty murder mystery of secrets, revenge, and deadly power.

Great for fans of Mary Watson's *The Cleaner*, Ande Pliego's *You Are Fatally Invited*.

Razz's love interest Mia Sweet comes with surprising ties to his past, and the detectives on the case—Randy Glick, Marty Ryan, Sasha Birch—undertake a steady, measured slog through the story's numerous red herrings—and interject some bombshells of their own. The final reveal offers a taste of sweet revenge for Razz, illuminating how secret lives and silent demons so often steer people off track.

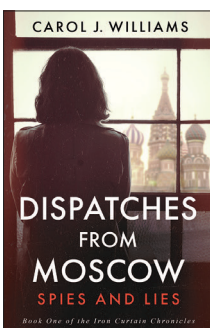
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: — Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

MYSTERY/THRILLER

Dispatches from Moscow: Spies and LiesCarol J. Williams | Stoney Creek Publishing
340p, trade paper, \$23.95, ISBN 978-1-965-76659-0

Williams launches her Iron Curtain Chronicles with this Cold War thriller, set in the Soviet Union between 1986 and 1988—the dying years of the Soviet empire, the era of Mikhail Gorbachev's tumultuous reforms, and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. In April 1986, Natalie Chester, an idealistic American journalist, arrives in Moscow to begin her dream assignment as a foreign correspondent for the American News Agency. Almost immediately, all hell breaks loose. Her fiancé Mark, who was supposed to join her, bails on her over the phone. Max Miller, her bureau chief, criticizes her enthusiasm for Gorbachev's reforms and categorizes her as nothing more than a diversity hire. Before Natalie has time to recover, Chernobyl occurs, thrusting her into a frenzy of political intrigue and personal upheaval.

Readers get a front row seat to the dangers—and thrills—of being a foreign correspondent in a country teetering on the edge of reform. Natalie and her fellow journalists struggle to obtain reliable information, as Soviet authorities restrict access to Chernobyl's disaster zone. Natalie quickly discovers that the truth is hard to come



Haunting portrait of the paranoia and fragile hope of the USSR's final years.

Great for fans of Elena Gorokhova's *A Train to Moscow*, Ludmila Ulitskaya's *The Big Green Tent*.

At the same time she's uncovering history in the making, Natalie must fight the surveillance state on a personal level, particularly when evidence points to Soviet officials installing listening devices in her apartment. Meanwhile, the intelligent and charismatic Tolya Vladimirovich, a Soviet diplomat, represents the new generation of reformists—and provides Natalie's arc with emotional ballast. Their heartbreaking love affair sparks yearnings for the "day when our dreams for the future are not considered delusions."

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

talking like that and someone will knock your block off just to say they did." Surprises abound in this briskly told story—Lewis tries to bungle his interview, resulting in a Holmes-esque deduction scene that ends up being more accurate than he intends. The job diffuses romanticized notions about private detective work, as Lewis is tasked with investigating a death in working-class

through corrupt cops, secret romances, dangerous grudges, and long-buried secrets.

Baldwin (*Siren Song*) delivers plenty of twists and turns alongside shocking revelations that will keep readers invested in this compelling mystery. The cast is large but easy to track, and answers—when they come—are often hiding in plain sight.

by in Soviet Russia, a problem that extends beyond Chernobyl to other major developments, including the war in Afghanistan. The stark contrast between the spreading radiation crisis, the atmosphere of repression, and Gorbachev's efforts at liberation functions as a driving force throughout the novel, prompting Natalie's excitement at "writing the stories of historical transformation she'd yearned to tell."

MYSTERY/THRILLER

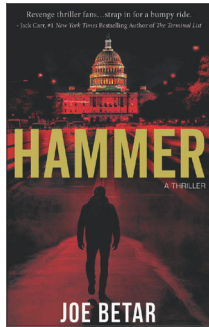
Hammer

Joe Betar

384p, trade paper, \$19.99, ISBN 978-1-968-12722-0

Betar's political thriller follows retired MMA fighter Jack "Hammer" Garrett, the son of US Congressman Louis Garrett and his wife Dottie. When the staff of the Terlingua River Ranch in Texas find Louis and Dottie shot to death, zip tied, and hung from the ceiling in their room, the FBI suspects a Mexican cartel execution. Jack, however, is not about to take anyone else's word when it comes to his parents' murder. His vigilante quest soon leads him into a deep conspiracy involving not just the cartel but also a crooked humanitarian aid organization, Bulgarian arms dealers, South African militants, and his own family's long-kept secrets.

Hammer is a propulsive yarn with tight pacing and word-level economy that keep the story moving. At the center of its conspiracy is Elijah Cargill, whose wife Marguerite is a proud daughter of one of the cartel's most powerful families. As founder of Helping Hands—a global humanitarian organization—Elijah has friends



Dense, twisty political thriller with a deep respect for vigilante justice.

Great for fans of Mike Lawson's *Untouchable*, Ben Coes's *First Strike*.

have known about his work quickly becomes integral to Jack's investigation.

Many of Betar's tropes are familiar, and *Hammer's* moral universe is fairly black and white. The plot links multiple threads and a colorful cast: a hitman who steals a button from the clothing of his kills, an FBI intelligence analyst with an IQ of 180 and a crippling case of Tourette's syndrome, and a young South African boy who turns out to be one of Jack's biggest fans. The message of this novel may be a simple one, but Betar has the props necessary to hammer it home.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

The Everborn: The Everborn Chronicles, Book 1

Nixon | House of Nixon Small Press

310p, hardcover, \$21.99, ISBN 979-8-218-75461-7

Nixon's series opener pits dueling vampire factions against each other in Malmö, Sweden, as American vampire Leo—who views humans as “flawed creatures” in need of sympathy—seeks answers about his origins. What he discovers is a city teetering on the edge of chaos, where the Everborn—vampires without “pure blood,” treated as “second-class citizens” by the rival Night Walkers—are led by the enigmatic Jericho. Leo is quickly pulled into a desperate search for a stolen diary—sought by both the Everborns and Night Walkers—rumored to contain secrets capable of tipping the power balance between the two groups. As Leo ventures deeper into Malmö's mysteries, he uncovers ties to his own past that make him question not just the Everborns and the Night Walkers but also his true place among them all.

The Everborn moves at a brisk, tense pace. Within the opening chapters, Leo has encountered Michael—a sardonic, impeccably dressed Everborn who becomes his uneasy guide—and discovered that Malmö's undead population is anything but



Confident series opener of morally ambiguous, warring vampire factions.

Great for fans of Jim Butcher's *Twelve Months*, Lena Meydan's *Twilight Forever Rising*.

united. Nixon's most interesting structural choice is the story's unreliable mentorship, with Leo moving from Michael to Jericho to Natalie—a Night Walker who saves him despite being his enemy. Each of those characters offers a competing version of this world, and, by the time the mysterious Susanne appears—a woman with a cryptic connection to the diary as well as both Leo and Michael—readers will wonder who can be trusted. Nixon establishes early on—particularly with a prisoner interrogation scene that sees Michael calmly ordering a finger removed to extract information—that neither side occupies clean moral ground.

Thanks to Nixon's skill at action sequences—visceral fight scenes and a chilling cinema-worthy vampire feast where Leo observes the “animal in me [take] over” have real momentum—the story's revelations land with genuine force, and the novel develops just enough of the novel's mythology to keep readers invested in the next series offering.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

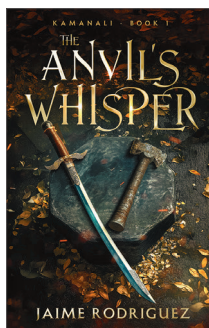
The Anvil's Whisper

Jaime Rodriguez

311p, e-book, \$0.99, ISBN 979-8992173321

A reluctant prophet is tasked with averting a religious war in the big-hearted opener to Rodriguez's Kamanali fantasy series. The land of Anakuatl is home to many faiths. In the valley of Aralonis—where adherents worship the god Toteko, who values courage and justice—19-year-old Yordan Arano believes he's destined for more than just being a blacksmith. After he dreams of an angel telling him a great destiny awaits him, Yordan travels to Lumina City to have his dreams interpreted. On the road, Yordan and his best friend, Sam, who is blind, encounter urgent evidence that Lumina is no longer a place of religious tolerance: Ojtlist believers burned out of their homes; followers of Zetianism are not allowed inside the Grand Temple.

In a cave, a burning flame speaks to Yordan, revealing it is Toteko, who has noticed that the world is out of balance. Toteko declares, “through you, I shall reveal my wonders. You shall bring light to the darkness and smite those who kill the innocent in my name.” Rodriguez emphasizes Yordan's everyday humanity even after receiving this divine charge, and the most powerful passages of *The Anvil's Whisper* concern



Promising fantasy series starter of warring religious factions.

Great for fans of S.A. Chakraborty, R. Scott Bakker.

Rodriguez creates an elaborate sense of place in a convincing world facing discord, populated with diverse emotional characters and a hesitant hero who yearns for purpose in his life. Especially rousing is the concept from which the series derives its title, a call for “unity and compassion, a reminder that we are all interconnected.” The narrative, though, shuffles along at an inconsistent pace, with dense descriptions (“The air was thick with the acrid scent of burning coal, mingling with the metallic tang of hot steel”), some repetition, and graphic sex scenes not always clearly connected to the thematic concerns. Still, there is ample heart and promise here.

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

HISTORY & MILITARY

EDITOR'S PICK

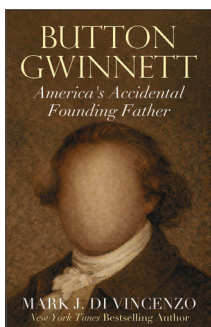
Button Gwinnett: America's Accidental Founding Father

Mark J. Di Vincenzo

370p, trade paper, \$18.99, ISBN 979-8-218-75617-8

Di Vincenzo (*Buy Shoes on Wednesday and Tweet at 4:00*) aims to pin down historical figure Button Gwinnett—an “intelligent, confident, selfish, and impulsive character”—in this entertaining, illuminating, well-researched, and persuasively argued biography. Despite signing the Declaration of Independence, Gwinnett is challenging to study due to the minimal paper trail available, but Di Vincenzo still presents, primarily through meticulous analysis of the public figures surrounding Gwinnett, a life that cuts against popular assumptions about the nobility and genius of the founders: Gwinnett failed at business endeavors, was an enslaver, owed debts, and was uninterested in public service. He emerges as a smooth, persuasive talker interested in money and power—and happened to be at the right place at the right time.

“Gwinnett is perhaps the nation’s most apathetic and selfish Founding Father,”



Fascinating portrait of an unlikely and uninspiring Founding Father.

Great for fans of Colin Gwinnett Sharp’s *Button Gwinnett*, Gordon S. Wood’s *Revolutionary Characters*.

Catherine’s—which gave him status and a chance for public office.

Di Vincenzo’s ability to spin a compelling narrative out of figurative cobwebs goes a long way in contextualizing American history and separating fact from legend. What stands out is his rich background of early America, from the plight of enslaved and Indigenous people to antiquated medical practices to our foundational politics. He defines Gwinnett by the lives of his friends and enemies. The result is a convincing portrait of a man who “never lacked for confidence” but perhaps was not the patriot some have made him out to be.

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

MEMOIR

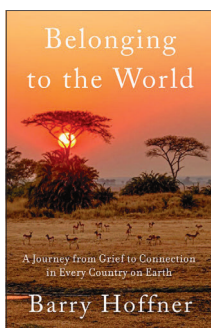
Belonging to the World: A Journey from Grief to Connection in Every Country on Earth

Barry Hoffner | Girl Friday Books

336p, trade paper, \$18.95, ISBN 978-1-964721-41-5

After experiencing a personal tragedy, the powerful force of connection and search for meaning drive Hoffner to visit as much of the world as humanly possible. What he comes back with is new insight on grief, healing, and hope in this stirring debut memoir. When Hoffner’s wife Jackie dies in an accident in Africa, his shock and devastation are palpable—but they propel him into a different future, “a path, a pilgrimage, [and] a mission” to reshape his life by immersing himself in the beauty, landscapes, and people of the world. Channeling travel as a way to heal, Hoffner vows to visit all 193 existing countries, initially wandering in what feels like a spiritual desert but—through conversations, contemplations, and his own near-death experiences—slowly rekindling his passion for life.

Hoffner writes with the tone of an old friend, unleashing the strength of human bonding to overcome his most debilitating emotional challenges. He lays bare the



Grief propels global connection and rebirth in this touching memoir.

Great for fans of Susan Bloch’s *Travels with My Grief*, Becky Livingston’s *The Suitcase & the Jar*.

underlying—and often overlooked—ties that bind us to each other, regardless of our origins, and transforms seemingly dead ends into brilliant moments of meaning and purpose. From refugees to cab drivers to monks and shamans, Hoffner bravely exposes his innermost feelings to a global community and they, in turn, leave him with enough wisdom and comfort to keep him moving on to the next destination. His voyage hopscoches across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, with stories that are sad, perplexing, and even comical—but always poignant in his search to “buil[d] a new life.”

For Hoffner, it quickly becomes apparent that life is more about the odyssey than the destination, and his narrative reflects that awareness, with detail-heavy prose describing his many trips and sprinkled insights on the universality of emotions like grief, bewilderment, and loneliness. His adventures offer closure, company, and glimmers of hope that “connection across cultures is not only possible; it’s essential.”

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

MEMOIR

Life and Music: A Memoir

Idil Biret | Chestnut Hill Press

336p, hardcover, \$35, ISBN 979-8-88855-008-3

The lively, illuminating *Life and Music* is technically not a biography of celebrated Turkish pianist Idil Biret. The heart of the book consists of a series of questions posed to Biret by a French professor and her lengthy responses. Lacking the unity of a true autobiography and the outside perspective of a biography, this idiosyncratic approach nonetheless provides a direct and approachable first-person account of a life in classical music. This wealth of insights is supplemented by helpful pieces written by others: an opening essay, a preface, and a lengthy appendix about the musician’s experiences, work, and importance.

Biret may not be a household name in the United States, as is pointed out early on, but her recordings of the complete piano works of Chopin, Brahms, and other key composers have won critical acclaim, sold in the millions, and made her an international star, as her delightful recounting of various stops around the globe attests. “I had a strange phobia about the Sphinx, and I was not ready to confront it,” she says with typical candor of her first visit to Egypt, in 1966. Before her august, globetrotting career, though, she was a child prodigy in Turkey, astounding visiting



Vivid, detailed, and idiosyncratic look at a life devoted to classical music.

Great for fans of Grant Johannesen’s *Journey of an American Pianist*, Susan Tomes’s *Women and the Piano*.

musicians and local VIPs with her ability to play complicated pieces by ear, from memory. So impressive was her talent that the Turkish government created a law to ensure her quality schooling abroad. Thus, we get up-close anecdotes about such legendary musicians/instructors such as Nadia Boulanger (“full of energy, rather formidable due to her clairvoyance”), Wilhelm Kempff (“you knew that he had reached true serenity within himself”), and Alfred Cortot (“he was strictness personified”). Biret writes about music and technique with professional rigor and descriptive flair: “if he had been a painter, [Wilhelm] Backhaus would have used greens, reds, dark ochre, and golden browns. And he would have worked with a chisel too,” she writes of one pianist’s style.

Though it’s not comprehensive, *Life and Music* provides much insight into the life of an artist and the power of classical music. Most importantly, it will leave you wanting to know more about Biret and eager to listen to her work.

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

MEMOIR

Loving the Fire: Choosing Me, Finding Freedom

Deborah Santana | Broad Book Press
220p, hardcover, \$30, ISBN 978-1-963-54940-9

"I was discovering the woman beneath the roles, the one who no longer needed to hide her light," writes Santana of her fierce, transparent journey of self-reinvention. After divorcing her famed husband, Carlos Santana, she embarks on a quest to connect to her faith, reshapes her professional ambitions, and works to carve out a space for herself in the world, ultimately realizing the power of both beginnings and endings. Santana starts with her California childhood, recounting a family history of resilience and spirituality, and, as an adult analyzing the past, judges her upbringing one that "gave me the gift of believing in myself"—a crucial attribute for a woman who, at mid-life, steps away from the familiar and into the unknown.

One of Santana's strengths is her intuitive exploration of cultural identity. As a young child born to a white mother and Black father, she recalls racial slurs from children at school and her parents' distinctive ways of dealing with the world's



Powerful memoir of self-reinvention and identity after divorce.

Great for fans of Maria Shriver's *I Am Maria*, Sheila Johnson's *Walk Through Fire*.

civil rights and equality in a variety of public positions.

Santana's memoir is a testament to being authentic, fearless, and grounded in unconditional self-acceptance. Her vulnerabilities are laid bare for readers, providing behind-the-scenes insights on the joys and pains of actively choosing yourself—no matter the cost. Personal poetry is sprinkled throughout, and Santana's epiphanies give birth to compassionate philanthropic ventures that resonate. The result is a captivating tapestry of the delights of womanhood, the importance of human connection, and the will and desire to curate a life full of passion, love, and positive impact.

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

PICTURE BOOKS

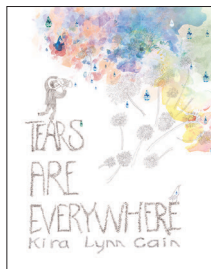
EDITOR'S PICK

Tears Are Everywhere

Kira Lynn Cain
36p, hardcover, \$25, ISBN 978-1-967-05807-5

Cain's picture book debut offers a wholly unique approach to the adage "it's okay to cry" by showing readers that the world is full of tears, and not just human ones. In fact, "tears are everywhere" and "you can see them // secretly," in all things. Those tears are not a source of shame or embarrassment, but a beautiful and necessary phenomenon that occurs over and over, across species, landscapes, and atmospheres. Cain conveys such profound sentiment with intentional brevity, which allows young readers to draw their own conclusions about the tears in clouds, pockets, and music.

"Tears in the sky, asleep. They are another day's tears," Cain writes of the clouds that hold rain, which falls so that "grass and dirt can drink them" to nourish the trees. For humans, tears indicate sadness, joy, confusion, and more, but Cain illuminates their capacity to sustain the workings of the Earth and universe by showing their presence even in our responses to the intangible wonders of life, like music. All water is made of tears in Cain's book, and her typography and illustra-



Moving, whimsical exploration of the omnipresence of tears.

Great for fans of Noemi Vola's *If You Cry Like a Fountain*, Sibylle Delacroix's *Tears*.

tions beautifully complement her message that our tears, and all tears, are part of an all-encompassing water system that unifies us all.

Toward the conclusion of Cain's debut, for example, a watercolor-splotted, vibrant illustration depicts a man playing a horn, accompanied by the words "Listen.

Sounds of invisible tears." The sound could be the music the man plays, powerful enough to bring the listener to tears, or it could be the silence. The minimalist illustrations, relying on heavily textured line work and abstract clouds of boundaryless color, appear as if drawn by tears, and even the font is transparent, like water. Cain's debut achieves brilliant, singular artistry alongside a simple yet emotionally resonant message, and young readers and adults will delight in her one-of-a-kind story.

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

MIDDLE GRADE

EDITOR'S PICK

Shaila Holmes Fairy Detective

Lori Keating | Literary Leaf Press
122p, trade paper, \$13, ISBN 979-8-295-55946-4

The greatest of all literary sleuths has been reborn in many guises over the ages, but the Holmes family tree still has some branches that surprise, like fairy detective Shaila Holmes, a grandniece who takes over his investigation business in Keating's whimsical mystery stories for early readers. Sherlock's former office is a morel mushroom, and she hangs up a new sign: "All Mysteries Welcome!" Shaila Holmes uses her namesake's familiar methods to solve cases for insects and woodland creatures in the Englewood Forest. No detail is too small to interest her, and she takes meticulous notes, cleverly retraces steps, kindly interrogates suspects, and sorts through cryptic but tantalizing clues.

Keating details her cases in short, sweet chapters: Shaila works to recover a baker's stolen pie, carefully reunites baby birds with their cuckoo mothers, and discerns why vibrant flowers are suddenly wilting. Her first investigation, "The Mystery of the Missing Hourglass," is the baffling case of a black widow spider whose distinctive red markings have disappeared! She tackles these mysteries alongside Itsy, her faithful hummingbird sidekick, the same avian breed that



Adorable fairy detective uses Sherlock skills to solve worrisome mysteries.

Great for fans of Elizabeth C. Bunce's *Premeditated Myrtle*, Brittany J. Thurman's *Opal Watson: Private Eye*.

Sherlock employed. Unlike that dour detective, Shaila also accompanies her investigations with a song: "No case is too small or too big for me./With one flick of my wings,/I'll solve any mystery!"

Illustrator Kyria McKie works beautifully with Keating to create this adorable world. They bring young readers into every corner, from the Redwood Grove, whose harvest festival has intoxicating aromas of "warm apple cider and pumpkin pie," to Petunia Village, where "blossoms of every kind burst with color." McKie even creates an illustrated map that's both whimsical and practical. While Keating (*The Memory Quilt*) excels at the former, she also emphasizes the latter, including scientific information to help budding Sherlocks understand logical deduction. *Shaila Holmes Fairy Detective* is an utterly charming incarnation of Holmesian lore, providing young readers with a model of problem-solving, thoughtfulness, and empathy.

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