September 21, 2026

booklife®

YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING

32 New BookLife Titles Listed • 16 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

Indie Spotlight

In this edition of our monthly roundup of BookLife titles, we feature picture books.

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

PLAYFUL STORIES

Full Moon Speaks

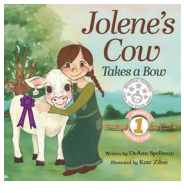


Carrie Weis

ASIN B0GS9FSX3J

Author statement: "*Full Moon Speaks* began as a painting that featured the toy animals my children played with, plants, and a full moon. Midway through painting, I began writing a narrative reflecting animal symbolism and timeless themes. I asked, 'What would the moon feel is relevant and ethereal as it converses with the creatures?' It is also a love letter. The last paragraph in each narrative is for the reader, such as: 'You are my curious fox with silken fur and secret heart.'"

Jolene's Cow Takes a Bow



DeAnn Spellman

ASIN B0GKCD9V56

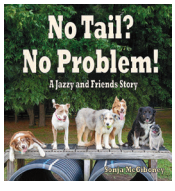
Author statement: "This story was inspired by a real cow and the simple beauty of farm life, which has always felt grounding and full of quiet lessons. I wanted to create a gentle, rhyming story that supports early literacy while showing young readers that healthy choices, confidence, and participation matter just as much as winning."

No Tail, No Problem

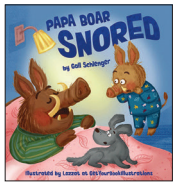
Sonja McGiboney

ISBN 978-1-964345-21-5

Author statement: "*No Tail, No Problem* is a story that celebrates inclusivity and friendship. Jazzy, a dog, meets all kinds of dogs in the dog park. Some have no tail or pointy ears. Some are different colors and some are older. Her friend Sam advises Jazzy not to befriend them, but Jazzy sees no reason why their differences should matter, and she chooses kindness and friendship instead. The story is accompanied by real-life photographs of Jazzy and her friends in action at the dog park."



Papa Boar Snored



Gail Schlenger

ASIN B0F86QHKG8

Author statement: "I love the sound of 'boar' and 'snored,' and chose a boar family because I wanted characters a little less familiar than the bears so often found in children's books. From the beginning, I knew I wanted to play with language, using repetition and alliteration that would be fun for young children to hear and anticipate. I also wanted Little Boar to be the problem-solver, trying one creative solution after another until he finally found a solution."

What a Silly, Silly Cat!



Vivian Santos

ASIN B0C1X7Y8Z9

Author statement: "I've always loved animals, and this story was inspired in part by the very real mischief of my own cat. Some of the little disasters, funny moments, and innocent expressions in the book came from things he actually did at home. Cats

Booksellers & Librarians:



How are you handling self-published books?

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

PW Reviews

look for "self-published" at the end of a review
publishersweekly.com/self-pub

booklife REVIEWS

paid reviews of self- or indie-published titles
publishersweekly.com/BookLifeReviews

PLUS

booklife PRIZE

PW reviewers critique thousands of self-published titles every year:
publishersweekly.com/BookLIfePrize

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

All powered by *Publishers Weekly* reviewers.

SPONSORED

booklife

Must-Read Titles



John Doe Does Not Suck

by Kathryn Berla

EDITOR'S PICK

ISBN: 196383240X

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

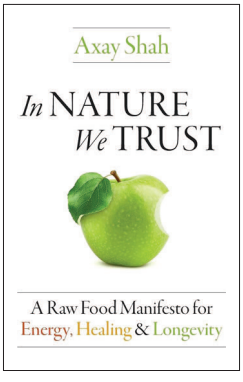


The Naga Sisters Chronicles: Scales of Destiny (Book 1)

by Som Phin

ISBN: 979-8245261041

"Undersea fantasy adventure dives deep into love, grief, and family.

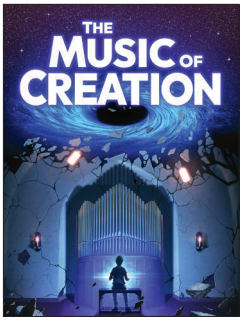


In Nature We Trust

by Axay Shah

ISBN: 979-8994037805

"Earnest, plant-based approach to health and longevity.

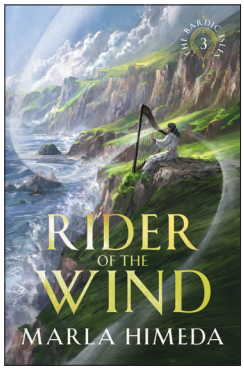


The Music of Creation

by Chris Allen

ISBN: 978-1963832365

"Moving fantasy melding big ideas with tender relationships and philosophical queries.



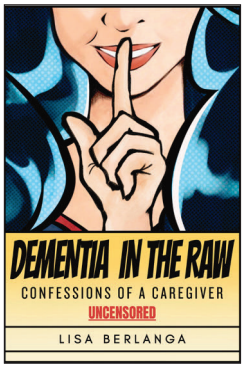
Rider of the Wind

by Marla Himeda

BOOKLIFE PRIZE SEMI-FINALIST

ISBN: 978-1959900078

"A vital, sometimes surreal, always inventive fantasy realm governed by the power of music.

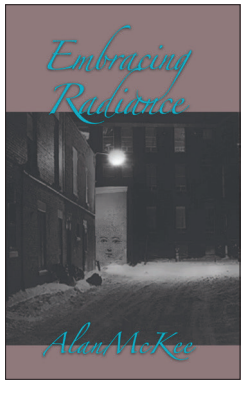


Dementia in the Raw: Confessions of a Caregiver Uncensored

by Lisa Berlanga

ISBN: 979-8996009718

"The writing is brutally transparent.



Embracing Radiance

by Alan McKee

EDITOR'S PICK

ISBN: 978-1035882823

"Symbolic narratives tap into emotional reservoirs of trauma and deliverance.



Magda Revealed

by Ursula Werner

ISBN: 978-1647428648

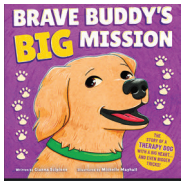
"Innovative retelling of the life of Yeshua (Jesus) from the perspective of Mary Magdalene.

"Quotes from BookLife Reviews

have an incredible talent for creating complete chaos and then looking at you as if they had absolutely nothing to do with it, and that became the spirit of this story."

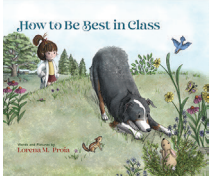
GROWTH AND MENTAL WELLNESS

Brave Buddy's Big Mission



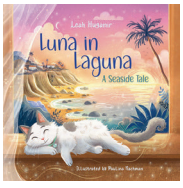
Gianna Scipione
ASIN B0FKWWRQN6
Author statement: "Long before I worked in pediatric healthcare, I was the seven-year-old girl anxiously waiting for surgery, wishing I had something or someone to make me feel a little less afraid. That memory stayed with me throughout my life and eventually became the heart of this story. While working at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, I had the opportunity to shadow Dilly, one of the hospital's incredible therapy dogs. Watching the comfort, confidence, and joy Dilly brought to children and their families was nothing short of inspiring."

How to Be Best in Class



Lorena Proia
ASIN B0C1X7QZJ
Author statement: "Obedience class is hard. Especially if you don't do things like the other dogs do. Phebe's flair for drama isn't appreciated by her classmates, and when Rae says 'Come!' she stays. When she says 'Stay!' she comes. Phebe was my Australian shepherd, and she never did anything in quite the expected way. She was smart, funny, dramatic, and entirely herself. As I wrote about her, I began to recognize something familiar in her behavior: it mirrored some of my own experiences as an adult with ADHD."

Luna in Laguna



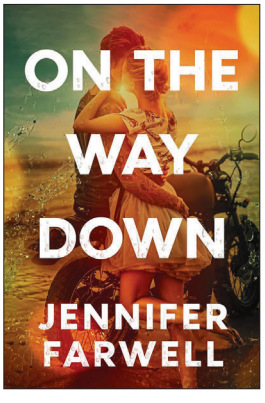
Leah Huganir, illus. by Paulina Nachman
ISBN 978-1-63918-928-1
Author statement: "I wrote *Luna in Laguna* to help children understand that slowing down, noticing what is around them, and being present can make a meaningful difference in how they experience the world. Luna's journey along the coast offers young readers a gentle introduction to mindfulness through an engaging story and vibrant illustrations."

Milly & Oli: The Great Big Move

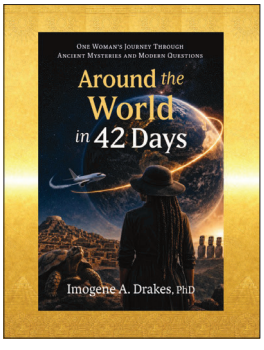


Eunice Wong
ASIN B0H8CMQS8V
Author statement: "I adopted my calico cat, Mila, during the Covid lockdown in Singapore in 2020. A few years later, Mila and I made the 20-hour journey from Singapore to San Francisco together. She burst out of her carrier and immediately began exploring our new home as if she had always belonged there. That's the book I wanted to write: not one that

booklife
Must-Read Titles
SPONSORED



On the Way Down
by Jennifer Farwell
EDITOR'S PICK
ISBN: 978-0998614366
"Second-chance whirlwind of passion, suspense, and sprinkles of tenderness.



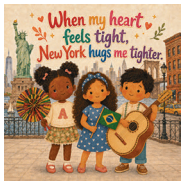
Around the World in 42 Days: One Woman's Journey Through Ancient Mysteries and Modern Questions
by Imogene A. Drakes, PhD
ISBN: 978-0985370428
"Clear-eyed memoir rich with wanderlust and cultural immersion.

"Quotes from BookLife Reviews

If you are interested in participating in our next group ad please reach out to **dali@publishersweekly.com**.

resolves the fear of moving, but one that shows what it feels like when curiosity is stronger than worrying, and when the right companion makes anywhere feel like home."

When My Heart Feels Tight, New York Hugs Me Tighter



Vivian Santo
ASIN B0HG13BSGR
Author statement: "I was born in Brazil and have spent many years working closely with children. I wanted to write a story about that very particular feeling of being somewhere new and not knowing yet if it can become home. New York can feel enormous, loud, and overwhelming, especially through a child's eyes, but it can also surprise you with small moments of warmth and connection. I wanted Sofia's story to show children that missing one home does not mean they cannot learn to love another one."

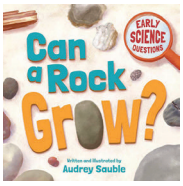
The Wildflower Children



Tara deVos
ASIN B0H275D2V1
Author statement: "I wrote *The Wildflower Children* while reflecting on a simple question: What do I wish every child knew? As a therapist, I had the privilege of witnessing both the incredible resilience of children and the quiet ways they sometimes questioned whether they were enough. I wanted to create a story that would gently remind them—and their caregivers—that every child is growing exactly as they should."

NATURE, SCIENCE, AND LEARNING

Can a Rock Grow?



Audrey Sauble
ISBN 978-1-946748-29-4
Author statement: "*Can a Rock Grow?* was largely inspired by a rockhound neighbor we had when I was growing up. I wasn't a science kid, but this neighbor introduced us to both obsidian and thunder eggs. Those rocks fascinated me, and eventually I started asking questions about rocks. That led to the big question behind this book: how do rocks change over time?"

The Frog Song



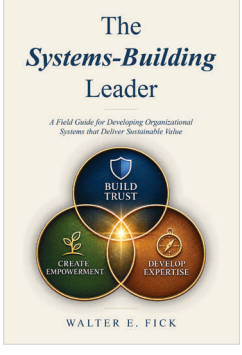
Sue Bogan
ASIN B0GS9JTGG5
Author statement: "When I learned that all frog species have a sound of their own, the idea for *The Frog Song* came to life with Bullfrog traveling the seven continents on a magic lily pad to bring different frogs together to sing. I imagined children singing along with the sounds the frogs make while learning about their habitat. Next came the beautiful illustrations from the very talented illustrator Brittni Hribar bringing my characters to life."

Q&A SPONSORED

BookLife Talks with Walter Fick

With more than 20 years of experience working in the leadership field, Fick has assembled the skills and practices he's developed into The Systems-Building Leader, a way for professionals to "build scalable organizational systems." We spoke with Fick about his career, what readers can expect to gain from the book, and how he plans to use *The Systems-Building Leader* as a jumping-off point for more targeted work.





What caused you to write *The Systems-Building Leader*?

I have spent the better part of two decades inside organizations trying to change. Some were growing fast. Some were in difficult transitions. Some just wanted to get better at what they already did well. What they had in common was a gap between what leaders intended and what they had designed. Although the intention was almost always good, the design was almost always incomplete. I kept watching capable people suffer the same consequences across different industries and different sizes. They were always the result of design challenges, and this book provides the framework and guidance to meet that challenge.

Why do you think your book stands out in the leadership genre?

Most of the leadership shelf tells you who to be. Be authentic. Be visible. Be decisive. That advice is not wrong; it's just not scalable. This book shows you how to build scalable organizational systems that do not depend on your presence to be effective. Every chapter ends with a Field Guide Tool, a diagnostic you run against your own operation rather than a concept you agree with and forget. Eighteen chapters, 18 tools. It is meant to be worked through, not just read. The argument without the application is interesting. The application is what changes things. That is the difference, and it is why the book belongs on a desk rather than a shelf.

For more, visit **booklife.com/fick**

PW SELECT

New Titles from Self-Publishers

Booksellers, publishers, librarians, and agents are encouraged to look at the TK self-published titles below. Each appears with a list of retailers that are selling the book and a description provided by its author. Some of these writers are waiting to be discovered; others have track records and followings and are doing it on their own. If you are a self-published author interested in listing titles in this section, please visit publishersweekly.com/pw-select for more information.

Fiction

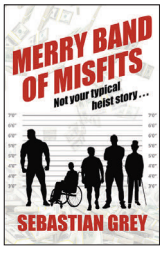
Adams Morgan Fugue



Alex Fardon. Alex Fardon. $15.99 paper (308p), ISBN 979-8-9943254-2-1; $14.99 audio, ISBN 979-8-9943254-3-8
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Bookshop.org, Libro.fm

When a ruthless investor fund threatens a D.C. neighborhood's beloved pizzeria, the Squad springs to action in this uplifting story of friendship, community, and second-chance romance.

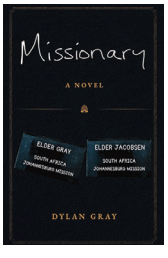
Merry Band of Misfits



Sebastian Grey. Bastian House. $16.99 paper (440p), ISBN 979-8-9946653-8-1; $4.99 e-book, ISBN 979-8-9946653-9-8
Amazon, IngramSpark

Vinnie, a man with Down syndrome, leads his found family of misfits to rob a bank–the last group anyone would suspect, which is exactly why it works.

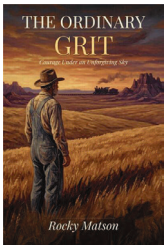
Missionary: A Novel (Missionary #1)



Dylan Gray. Mosiah. $11.99 paper (256p), ISBN 979-8-9966706-1-1; $4.99 e-book, ASIN B0H5L2NKP3
Amazon, Apple Books, Barnes & Noble, Kobo

The first book in a series chronicling one young man's humorous and heartbreaking attempt to reconcile his faith with the realization that he is gay and an LDS mission won't change him.

The Ordinary Grit



Rocky Matson, illus. by Tammy Matson. Rocky Matson. $19.99 (376p), ISBN 979-8-9957964-2-8; $5.99 e-book, ISBN 979-8-9957964-3-5
Amazon, IngramSpark

Oak Haven, 1889. A farmer, a veteran, a teacher, and a boy: four voices holding a fracturing prairie town together against drought and the railroad.

The Pickerings' Last Tango: A Very Different Love Story



John Grayson Heide. River Grove Books. $19.95 paper (336p), ISBN 978-1-966629-80-1; $15.99 audio, ASIN B0GVQ3TMXD
Amazon, Audible, Spotify

Life-affirming bonds are rediscovered when a rebellious teenage boy finds himself chasing his ailing grandparents as they embark on a blundered final journey.

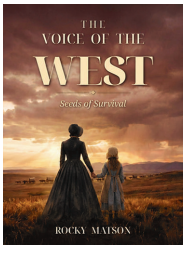
Signs of the Fall: A Collection of Stories



Sean M. Price. Koehler Books. $30.95 (338p), ISBN 979-8-89747-301-4; $20.95 paper, ISBN 979-8-89747-300-7
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Bookshop.org

A mosaic of 10 stories where desires face off at the crossroad of faith and freedom. Realism merges with the supernatural for the characters, places, and themes linking these stories.

The Voice of the West: Seeds of Survival



Rocky Matson. Homestead Publishing. $21.99 paper (344p), ISBN 979-8-9957964-5-9; $7.99 e-book, ISBN 979-8-9957964-6-6
Amazon, Barnes & Noble

A Boston widow crosses the 1847 Oregon Trail with her daughter and a journal. A modern archivist finds her name and refuses to let it stay a footnote.

What We Carry Forward



Aithal. Aithal. $4.95 e-book, ASIN B0GMDKNC93
Amazon

The book contains four connected novellas about migration, family, faith, identity, memory, and the choices people make to belong.

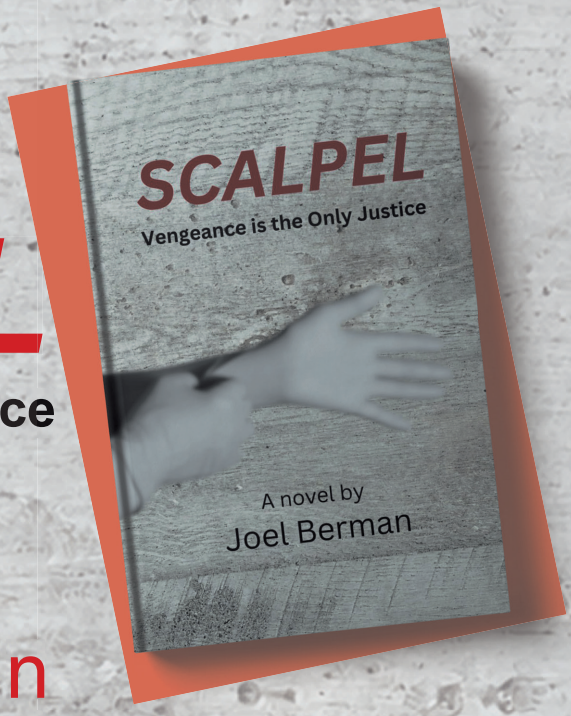
Work Forever, Live Forever: The Caspels of Capitalism

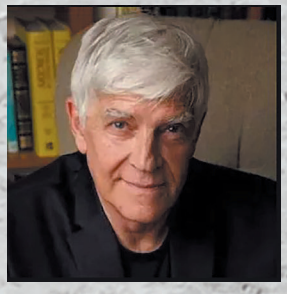
Sanjani Nairsingh. Nairsingh. $4.25 paper (38p), ISBN 979-8-235-76832-1; $.99 e-book, ASIN B0G4JXJBXG
Amazon, Apple Books, Barnes & Noble, Kobo

ISBN: 979-8346002895
No of pages: 267 pages
Genre: Murder, Suspense

SCALPEL

Vengeance is the Only Justice





A novel by
Joel Berman

An attorney is murdered. Another attorney is murdered. And another. It looks, one observer suggests, like somebody has a serious problem with attorneys. Two surgeons, a man and a wife. She is sued for malpractice and loses her case-a devastating blow to a proud professional that drives her into terrible despair and finally suicide. He watches his wife slowly pushed toward self-destruction by the cynical hostility of prosecutors in a legal system that has lost its concern for justice. But he decides he'll reintroduce justice into the system—his own kind, administered in his own way. Then malpractice attorneys begin to turn up dead. Each one is uniquely executed—and surgically altered in bizarre and disturbing ways. No fingerprints, no blood. And the killer (*a character akin to Dexter and Hannibal Lector*), as he contemplates what he's accomplished, silently dedicates each murder to the memory of his beloved wife. The police detective assigned to the case, Septius McClymonds, soon confirms that he is in a battle with a most unusual and highly intelligent serial killer. He is taunted with grim humor by macabre notes the murderer leaves on the bodies of his victims, celebrating yet another death. This develops a cat-and-mouse game between Mac and his quarry, until the elusive killer finally seems to have been identified and mac is about to nab him—except for...

A rapidly moving book with three sequels designed to keep you in a quandary between loving and hating the characters.

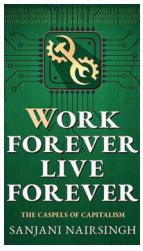
> "*Scalpel is a masterful thriller that expertly weaves suspense and intrigue into a gripping narrative. From the first page, I found myself immersed in a world where every twist and tun kept me on the edge of my seat.*
>
> - ***Tyson***

> "*Berman masterfully explores the surgeon's descent into vengeance, taking us deep into his psyche. As a reader, you understand his motive, even as you are horrified by his actions.*
>
> - ***Aunt Amy & Uncle Mark***

> "*What a fun read! It reminded me of Dexter meets Silence of the Lambs. Wish it were a tv show. Can't wait to see what Blanton does next!*
>
> - ***Troy Seymour***

BOOKSIDE Press
www.booksidepress.com
Office: (647) 330-9992
821 The Queensway, Lower Level, Etobicoke, ON, M8Z 1N6
support@booksidepress.com

Book is available for purchase at the following:
amazon | BARNES&NOBLE



The work is a sardonic expression of capitalist evangelism: to make the pursuit of the American dream more than palatable but one that requires faith in escalating consumption.

Mystery/Thriller

The Butcherbird (Marrow of Monsters)



Vince Dajani. Audiohm Media. $15.99 paper (332p), ISBN 979-8-9956886-2-4; $2.99 e-book, ISBN 979-8-9956886-0-0
Amazon

Eli's son died in a house fire and now the men responsible are being picked off in grotesque ways. As a prosecutor, it's Eli's job to stop this vigilante, right?

Orphans of the Sea



Charles Cooke. Driller Press. $9.99 paper (238p), ISBN 978-1-972585-01-6; $0.99 e-book, ASIN B0GX3CPVDX
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Bookshop.org

They murdered her family and sold her into slavery. Trapped aboard a deadly ship, Sook Joo must use every lesson she learned to survive, escape, and fight back.

SF/Fantasy/Horror

The GForce Paradox



R.L. Merz. Values of America. $12.99 paper (276p), ISBN 979-8-1926-5719-5; $4.99 e-book, ASIN B0HF34VDT5
Amazon

A mind-bending high-concept sci-fi novel exploring the ultimate clash between human strategy and quantum intelligence, set in the early 31st century.

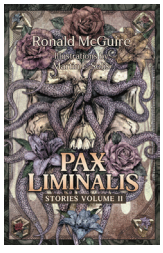
An Imprint of Evil and Other Hauntings

Stephen Tallevi. Stephen Tallevi. $13.99 paper (206p), ISBN 978-1-0690862-6-6; $2.99 e-book, ASIN B0G5LVNKF6
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Indigo, Kobo



Deliciously dark tales of haunted houses, occult secrets, cruel bargains, and sinister turns of fate. Dare to dive into this new collection of original spine-tingling tales.

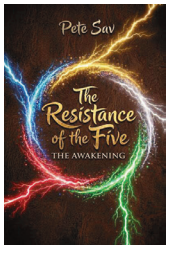
Pax Liminalis: Collected Stories Vol. II



Ronald McGuire, illus. by Martín Solís. Beach Book Press. $16.99 paper (210p), ISBN 978-1-965621-10-3; $6.99 e-book, ISBN 978-1-965621-11-0
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Bookshop.org, Waterstones

Literary and speculative stories where reality bends and identity shifts, often in quietly unsettling ways. Perfect for readers drawn to the strange, thoughtful, and unexpected.

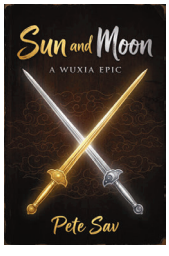
The Resistance of the Five: The Awakening



Pete Sav. Pete Sav. $0.99 e-book (232p), ASIN B0H9KY98MN
Amazon

A thousand-year tyranny. A shattered realm. Five sisters bound by blood, steel, and unyielding discipline. A martial arts fantasy delivered on a sweeping, cinematic scale.

Sun and Moon: The Tale of Aurivanor

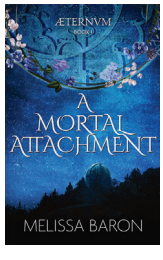


Pete Sav. Pete Sav. $0.99 e-book (436p), ASIN B0GQ2WLV69
Amazon

A wandering swordsman. A hunted royal princess. A frontier bathed in steel and shadow. A poignant tale of love and sacrifice.

Romance/Erotica

A Mortal Attachment



Melissa Baron, illus. by Tara O'Shea. Melissa Baron. $18.99 paper (352p), ISBN 979-8-9998681-1-4; $3.99 e-book, ISBN 979-8-9998681-0-7
Amazon, Apple Books, Barnes & Noble, Bookshop.org

A journalist visits a university to cover student murders and finds herself falling in love with the professor assigned to keep her from discovering their secret: it's run by vampires.

Unwritten Rules

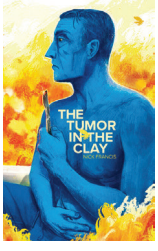


Faye Holland. Faye Holland. $31.99 (474p), ISBN 979-8-9928562-2-4; $21.99 paper, ISBN 979-8-9928562-0-0
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Bookshop.org, Books-A-Million

Real estate heiress Fallon Montgomery just wants to survive college. Instead, bad boy Brent Vaughn pulls her into a dangerous, high-stakes war for elite business supremacy.

Comics

The Tumor in the Clay

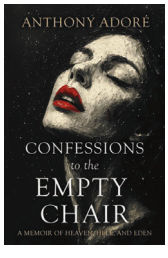


Nick Francis. Driftwood Press. $29.99 paper (234p), ISBN 978-1-949065-44-2
Asterism Books, Driftwood Press, IngramSpark

Nick Francis's *The Tumor in the Clay* plunges into surreal depths as a regarded surgeon turns his scalpel on himself in a journey of self-redemption.

Nonfiction

Confessions to the Empty Chair: A Memoir of Heaven, Hell, and Eden



Anthony Adoré. BookBaby. $27.95 paper (524p), ISBN 979-8-3178-2732-8; $12.99 e-book, ISBN 979-8-3178-2733-5
BookBaby

Wounded at three by an encounter with the unseen, a man wrestles desire, priesthood, and heartbreak from West Texas to Rome, until revelation reframes his whole life as a divine forge.

Forward Only: A Memoir

David Watson. Forward Only Publishing. $29.99 (258p), ISBN 979-8-234-15825-3; $19.99 paper, ISBN 979-8-234-16286-1
Iamdavidwatson.com, Amazon, Barnes & Noble,

BookLife Talks with Ken Heckenlively

After a slew of political nonfiction books, Heckenlively has moved into the realm of fiction. BookLife Reviews called his latest book, *This Never Happened*, a "briskly spicy satire of American politics, power, and honeypots."





You have a long history of nonfiction work. What caused you to make the jump to fiction?

In the course of writing my 18th book, with a former CIA officer who'd turned whistleblower, I found myself revisiting the Watergate story. The first oddity was the burglars themselves, the five men who actually broke into the Democratic National Headquarters, and their two handlers, G. Gordon Liddy, and E. Howard Hunt. Five of the seven men involved had CIA connections. That was unusual. Another oddity was that the famed "Deep Throat," the anonymous source for many of Woodward and Bernstein's tips, was later revealed to be the number two man at the FBI, an individual named Mark Felt. Had the break-in been a combined CIA/FBI operation designed to embarrass the Nixon White House? That was the premise I wanted to investigate in *This Never Happened: A Call Girl in D.C.*

What inspired the story for *This Never Happened*?

I thought I understood the Watergate scandal, which brought down President Nixon in August of 1974. After all, as a 10-year-old boy, the televised Senate hearings had played constantly as a daily drama in my house, my parents and the country talked incessantly about it, and when in 1976 I saw the film *All the President's Men*, I thought there could be no higher calling than becoming an investigative journalist like Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.

But the deeper I looked into the story as a 63-year-old man who'd written a number of whistleblower accounts, the less sense the story made. I went looking for alternative explanations and found them. I can't tell you if any of these accounts are true, but I thought it would make a great fictional tale and might provoke conversation about the stories we tell ourselves.

The book is written as the main character's memoir. Why did you choose this format, and did that affect your writing process at all?

Since I'm well-known as a nonfiction writer of whistleblower accounts, I thought it would be easy to use that literary device for a novel. In other words, this story was "brought to me" by a whistleblower, who wishes to remain anonymous. The writing came naturally to me because I'm usually in somebody else's head as I'm writing their account of events. Since most of my coauthors are "good guys" trying to find the truth, it felt naughty to write this story from the perspective of a small-time crook, a call girl, going up against the big-time crooks, the politicians.

Who is your ideal reader and why?

One of the things I thought about consciously in this story is writing escapist fiction for women, the same thing men get with something like James Bond. Women love relationship stories, and this is about a woman coming to understand politics through her "paid" relationships. I'm also old enough to remember a time when we had great political fiction that was read by people of all ideological persuasions because the characters we encountered reminded us of ourselves. We're trying to be good people, but we can be deceived, and then what do we do when we realize we need to change?

What can readers expect from you next?

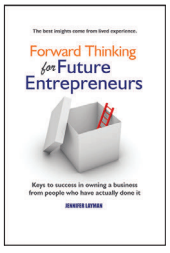
I'm back to nonfiction for my next effort, *Book of Secrets: Congress Tries to Find the Truth About the Deep State*, dealing with the work of the Task Force on the Declassification of Federal Secrets, coming out on Sept. 24, 2026. The book features extensive behind-the-scenes interviews with Congressional members working on this effort to uncover the truth behind many of our political assassinations, as well as things like the truth about Covid's origins, the Jeffrey Epstein affair, and UFOs.

For more, visit **booklife.com/heckenlively**



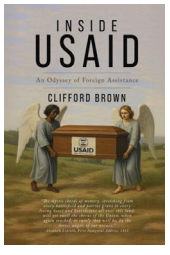
IngramSpark
A Texas man addicted to the chase loses everything—two prisons, a cartel's gun to his head—then finds his way home to his sons. A true story of running, reckoning, and redemption.

Forward Thinking for Future Entrepreneurs: Keys to Success in Owning a Business from People Who Have Actually Done It



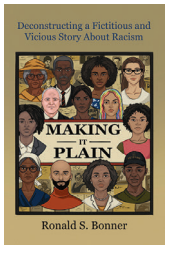
Jennifer Layman. Global Book Publishing. $19.95 paper (180p), ISBN 978-1-964644-63-9; $4.99 e-book, ASIN B0G5XKDCJJ
Amazon, IngramSpark
Insights from people who have been where you are right now and have gone on to become successful business owners.

Inside USAID: An Odyssey of Foreign Assistance



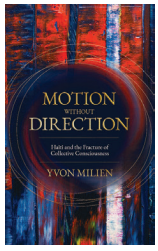
Clifford H. Brown. Mindstir Media. $20.99 paper (306p), ISBN 978-1-967458-91-2; $7.99 e-book, ASIN B0FSTKGBGP
Mindstirmediabooks.com, Amazon, Barnes & Noble
Beverly Hills lawyer partner quits to work in foreign aid for 27 years. A serious but often funny look at his postings in eight countries, and a eulogy for USAID and the damage done.

Making It Plain: Deconstructing a Fictitious and Vicious Story about Racism



Ronald Bonner. Gatekeeper Press. $17.99 paper (198p), ISBN 978-1-6629-6216-5; $9.99 e-book, ISBN 978-1-6629-6217-2
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Books-A-Million
Based on firsthand accounts and intellectual evidence, this book helps people unlearn racist narratives.

Motion without Direction: Haiti and the Fracture of Collective Consciousness



Yvon Milien. yMilien. $17.99 paper (244p), ISBN 979-8-9860364-6-5; $8.99 e-book, ISBN 979-8-9860364-7-2
Amazon, Barnes & Noble
Motion without Direction reframes Haiti's crisis as a failure of collective consciousness and moral synchronization, not of movement or capacity.

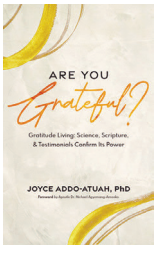
Terms & Conditions: A Memoir



Amy Goldmacher. Stanchion Books. $11.99 paper (98p), ISBN 979-8-90214-220-1
Stanchionzine.com
A 46-year-old hypervigilant anthropologist finds out she has a genetic mutation that means she is at risk of developing the same cancer that killed her father at 48.

Religion/Spirituality

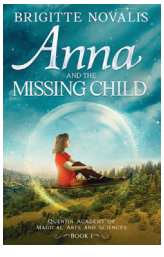
Are You Grateful? Gratitude Living: Science, Scripture, & Testimonials Confirm Its Power



Joyce Addo-Atuah. Crafters Global Communications. $8.99 e-book (178p), ISBN 978-0-9600075-4-7
Amazon
Readers discover the time-tested transformational impact of gratitude through scientific research, biblical wisdom, and lived experience with practical guidance to gratitude living.

Children's/YA

Anna and the Missing Child (Quentin Academy of Magical Arts and Sciences #1)



Brigitte Novalis. Novalis Press. $11.44 paper (272p), ISBN 978-1-944870-34-8; $2.99 e-book, ISBN 978-1-944870-33-1
Amazon
A magical academy. A missing child. A girl brave enough to face the invisible enemy. A first-year must unravel a supernatural disappearance before her peaceful world is lost forever.

Sophie Moon and the Honeybees



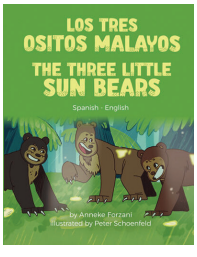
Szilvia S. Jennings, illus. by John Patterson. Szilvia S. Jennings. $19.99 paper (54p), ISBN 978-1-6664-1695-4; $2.99 e-book, ASIN B0GYTW2T8K
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, IngramSpark
A young girl overcomes her fears with the help of her grandfather and his honeybees.

The Super Students: Christmas Rescue



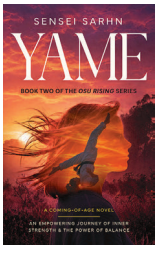
Erickson. Norse-Gael Books. $19.99 (32p), ISBN 979-8-9958912-0-8
Norsegaelbooks.com, Amazon, Bookshop.org
Join the Super Students in this action-packed holiday adventure as they outsmart the Naughty Pet Posse, save Santaman, and rescue Christmas!

The Three Little Sun Bears/Los tres ositos malayos



Anneke Forzani, illus. by Peter Schoenfeld. Language Lizard. $16.95 paper (28p), ISBN 978-1-63685-115-0
Amazon, IngramSpark, Language Lizard, Mackin
Set in a tropical rainforest in Asia, this clever retelling of *The Three Little Pigs* is perfect for all ages. This bilingual book is available in 20 languages.

Yame: A Coming of Age Novel; An Empowering Journey of Inner Strength and the Power of Balance



Sensei Sarhn. Empowering Books. $14.50 paper (378p), ISBN 978-1-7636312-4-3; $3.90 e-book, ISBN 978-1-7636312-6-7
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Bookshop.org, Kobo
17-year-old Olive balances karate, high school, and a mysterious newcomer while chasing tournament glory and uncovering a family secret that threatens her future.

BookLife Talks with A.K. Hayat

The Final Steep, debut author Hayat's gothic romantasy, follows a necromancer who brews teas to help anchor ghosts long enough to resolve their unfinished business. We spoke with Hayat about the series, his inspiration, and what romantasy fans have to look forward to in the Athergard trilogy.



This is your first published work. Did you always want to become an author?
No, I never thought I would become an author, not in the slightest. My daughter did. She was writing a novel of her own, and I sat down to help her with it. We talked about how a chapter earns its ending and why you hide the sentence that matters in the middle of a dull paragraph, so the reader walks right past it. I'd loved being fooled that way since I was 11, finding a clue on the second read that had been sitting in plain sight hundreds of pages earlier. Somewhere in those lessons I stopped explaining and started wanting one of my own. That became *The Final Steep*. She's in the dedication. That seemed fair.

What's the story behind *The Final Steep*–why and how did you write it?
The Final Steep started with a mental image: a woman running a tea shop who was also a necromancer. Tea necromancy clicked almost immediately. I liked necromancy being practical and hands-on: ingredients, timing, preparation, and rules that don't bend for the characters. The story grew around the shop. I wanted it to begin in a small, intimate space, with a much larger world just beyond it. A lot of the world and characters arrived while I was writing. I did know where the important reveals had to land and what the magic had to cost, even when I hadn't worked out every step between them.

You describe the book as gothic romantasy. What do you think romantasy readers will love about your book?
Ash is dead. That's the first problem. Teyra anchors him, but the magic gives him only seven days, and strong emotion can destabilize what is keeping him here, including what is growing between them. So, they're falling toward each other across magic that makes getting closer increasingly dangerous. The cruel part is that Teyra is trying to save him while getting closer makes saving him harder. The Touch Barrier sits between them too, so even reaching for his hand becomes a decision. Then his memory starts coming back. He doesn't know who he loved when he was alive, or who loved him, and those answers arrive just as she's beginning to matter. Here, wanting someone might be the thing that makes you lose them.

What's your favorite tea and what would you pair with *The Final Steep*?
Darjeeling, second flush. It has enough depth to make me slow down and pay attention without needing anything added to it. I'm aware it's not a very gothic answer. I'd pair it with *The Final Steep* because tea is where the book's magic lives. Teyra measures carefully, and one of her more dangerous brews has to steep for 40 minutes. Darjeeling asks far less of you. Leave it too long, though, and it turns sharp. In her shop, getting the cup wrong can cost more than the cup.

When can readers expect the next book in The Athergard trilogy?
Later this year. The next books are *The Long Descent* and *The Kept Name*, though I'm keeping the structural surprises under wraps for now. For readers who want more of Velundra before then, *Malanthia: The Dark Violet* is already out. It isn't part of the trilogy; it's a standalone prequel set in the same world, and it can be read independently. Athergard stays at the center of the story. Beyond it, even necromancy follows different rules. Teyra encounters people who work with the dead through fire rather than tea, and what they recognize in her magic raises questions she has never thought to ask. The conflict gets more political and more supernatural, and things that seemed settled in the first book stop looking settled. The further the story travels, the stranger Velundra gets.

For more, visit **booklife.com/hayat**

booklife REVIEWS

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

EDITOR'S PICK

Manhattan .45

Robert Brace

280p, hardcover, $29, ISBN 978-1-968103-02-6



Superior PI mystery, deftly blending action, sleuthing, and prewar New York.

Great for fans of Max Allan Collins's Nathan Heller series, Ace Atkins's *Devil's Garden*.

Brace demonstrates a superior ability to conjure up the feel of pre-World War II P.I. classics in this accomplished mystery, featuring a Mike Hammeresque Manhattan gumshoe, Jack Kerrigan, who is compelling enough to power a long-running series. Kerrigan is hit hard by the Depression, and 1936 finds him reduced to living in his Empire State Building office and nicking food from crime scenes and shadowing spouses suspected of infidelity. Kerrigan gets a greater challenge when femme fatale Lola Deshaines offers him a $1,000 retainer to look into a consignment note.

The document looks suspicious; the German auto firm Daimler-Benz is listed as having sent Mercedes parts to a recipient whose name is covered with black ink. Kerrigan accepts the lucrative assignment despite believing his client is lying through her teeth. Fans of sleuth noir will not be disappointed when those misgivings prove warranted, with Kerrigan facing a tail, then a frame-up. Before long, he's up to his neck in a perilous investigation involving J. Edgar Hoover, the Nazis, and a host of on-the-edge characters, like a "Bolshie" bookie or the hoods who make businessmen purchase "a special type of insurance." Brace allows Kerrigan an engaging inner life, as when he imagines squiring Lola to the Stork Club: "We walk in like Fred and Ginger. I'm putting on the ritz: tux, bow tie, the whole shebang."

Brace gets every key element of the genre right: the world-weary mindset of his less-than-scrupulous lead, conveyed in jaundiced first person; a mystery with broader implications than are first apparent but which remains plausible; and tantalizing, accurate historical detail. While the storyline features familiar tropes–like the bewitching client who can't be trusted–Brace makes them feel fresh, even for readers who've already walked down many mean city streets in the pleasurably disreputable company of a good private eye.

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

ROMANCE

Hard Count: Book One of The Piper Ashton Saga

Lucas Malone

297p, e-book, $2.99, ASIN B0GZVFPL5D



Dark, funny, explicit football romance and melodrama.

Great for fans of Rachel Reid's *Heated Rivalry*, Riley Hart and Neve Wilder's Playing for Keeps series.

"Let the gay football sex opera begin," Malone declares in an author's note at the start of this first entry in the saga of Piper Ashton, Los Angeles's anxious golden-boy quarterback. That sets expectations, but Malone also digs deeper in this story about reclaiming choice and learning what safe love feels like. *Hard Count* centers on Piper's unexpected connection with Noah Reyes, the MVP of the Seattle team, forced into Piper's orbit in the name of publicity: a league-manufactured rivalry. Readers will anticipate what the men themselves cannot see coming as antagonism gives way to attraction neither star can acknowledge. Complicating everything is "creepy" billionaire Jayson Days, the controlling benefactor whose financial support of Piper's career has at its heart a deeply toxic, long-concealed arrangement dating back to Piper's college injury.

With his Rolex Sky-Dweller and locked-down secrets, Piper proves the novel's most compelling element, a man who has achieved his dreams but is paying a deeper cost. The romance lands because Noah gradually recognizes the frightened man beneath Piper's cultivated image. The players' explicit encounters are plentiful, but the strongest moments involve Noah refusing to let Piper disappear emotionally. Noah asks, after they first give in to passion, "You regret last night?" Piper's response: "No, but it was a bad idea for our careers."

Malone's maximalism is both the book's engine and its occasional weakness. The soundtrack cues, designer labels, celebrity references, sexual set pieces, and sharply drawn supporting players immerse readers in a funny, campy world, though extended comic and business scenes sometimes diminish momentum. A shift toward thriller territory may test readers seeking a more grounded romance. The emotional arc reaches a satisfying point, but the central danger remains unresolved as this is the first installment.

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

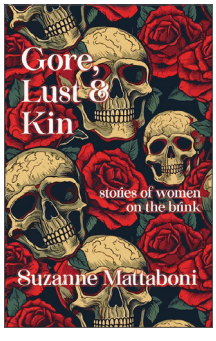
SF/FANTASY/HORROR

EDITOR'S PICK

Gore, Lust & Kin: Stories of Women on the Brink

Suzanne Mattaboni

192p, trade paper, $22.95, ISBN 978-1-963-69580-9



Sharp, playful, sometimes shocking stories of women, bodies, and life.

Great for fans of Elle Nash's *Nudes*, Isabella Falconeri's *Fragmentations*.

Haunting amorphous creatures, five a.m. booty calls, and deceased loved ones visiting in dreams–so it goes in Mattaboni's wicked, eclectic collection, which both lives up to its title and takes "Gore," "Lust," and "Kin" as organizing principles. The first section, "Gore," focuses on body horror, with sharp, surprising premises that it's best to know nothing about. Let Mattaboni's squirmily witty descriptions entice: "I could see my suited half-self below, slumped and impossible against the cement, pants full of melting black cherry jam that painted the sidewalk" and "she was a smoldering pile of melted muscle, slinking up the stairs."

A second section, "Lust," features stories that focus on the intimacies of relationships, new and old, and sexuality. The messy anxieties of the characters–Jackie, who moved to Queens after college, vows to find her way to being a normal person again and catches herself saying to a lover, "*I bled for you for weeks*"–are matched by the brisk confidence of the storytelling. "Kin," the tenderest section, explores familial ties and childhood. Within these themes, Mattaboni plumbs the minds and bodies–corporeal and otherwise–of characters who struggle with all it means to be human. In "Change for Domenik," protagonist Gina's mother is said to have "this near-psychic ability to pinpoint a person's character down to the bone within two minutes of meeting them"; in eerie detail, she foretells what her daughter could expect from a guy named Domenik.

The stories are singular but also overlap in striking imagery and hard truths. Rena in "Dragonflies" says "acting, I was good at. Living, not so much" after the death of her partner leaves her in the limbo of loving a memory, while Genevieve in "The Last Ember" faces the pain of living with the ghost of her mother due to a brain disorder; the moments of clarity might "only last a few moments before she falls back into obscurity." Mattaboni shocks, dazzles, moves, and illuminates shadowy depths.

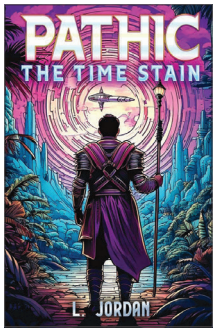
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **–** Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A-**

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

Pathic: The Time Stain

L. Jordan

324p, e-book, $1.99, ISBN 979-8-2955-6954-2



Ambitious space-opera sequel of a young man of mysterious legacy vowing dark revenge.

Great for fans of Will Wight's *The Engineer*, K.B. Wagers's *Behind the Throne*.

"The lure of revenge is like an itch to you. Just keep scratching it until you're ready." So declares an aged and secretive teacher to a young man of volatile, mysterious power deep into the second book of Jordan's ambitious space-opera saga. Despite some engaging scoundrels staging heists, the Pathic books lean into the genre's mystic and generational elements. Jordan relishes ancient secrets, visions cryptic and revelatory, and lost fortresses "stained" by the ghosts of the past. The plotting involves the weight of legacy and a society of telepathic warriors—the pike-wielding masters of the Mind Space called Pathics—purged a generation ago. Jordan finds new energy in these elements as a young man, Wee, boards a spaceflight with thieves casing a mine. Among the crew: Basque Avidin and Offer Dione, Pathic humans who survived the purge. In Wee they sense great power—and a possible connection to the Pathic leader who slaughtered his own kind.

Named for the moments when Pathics experience themselves removed from their present, *Time Stain* twists a classic adventure narrative of young person's discovering-one's-place-in-the-universe. Wee discovers his power and driving force—revenge for the death, decades past, of his father, Azhi. The novel builds to an operatic high when he vows that the scattered Pathics "will serve the first of the Dragon Lords, the son of Azhi."

Jordan's storytelling is focused and intense, digging deep into the feelings that could push a young person down a path of darkness but never neglecting the pleasures of space opera: a varied roster of planets; cool tech ancient and new; big personalities with memorable dialogue; well-seeded plot devices that power tragic turns and surprise returns. Jordan imbues the material with much heart and invention, though the text would benefit from a firmer editorial hand in terms of polish and pacing—early chapters tend to quickly summarize action while allowing the cast to muse about what it all means before readers have a chance to get the basics down. Starting with the first Pathic book is recommended.

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

FICTION

Three to Tango

Anna Rikko | Fifth Force AB

365p, hardcover, $28, ISBN 78-91-990566-0-9



Intimate study of desire, displacement, and unresolved wartime grief.

Great for fans of Steven Galloway's *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, Anthony Marra's *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*.

Rita Kovac is a woman defined by two worlds: her professional success as a dedicated neo-natal doctor in Denmark and a past fractured by the siege of Sarajevo. Having survived the horrors of the Bosnian War—including the loss of her family and a first love, Dragan—Rita has spent years within a predictable marriage to her husband, Jacob, the psychologist who helped her escape the horrors of her youth. That fragile equilibrium collapses when a volcanic eruption grounds European flights and strands Rita in Paris, where a chance meeting in a five-star hotel introduces her to Martin Peters, a world-famous musician drowning in addiction, scandal, and creative paralysis—and whose resemblance to Dragan unsettles her "isolette" life.

What begins as an impulsive 1,200-kilometer drive from Paris to Copenhagen evolves into a desire for human connection. Along the road, Rita reveals her refugee history, while Martin recounts the implosion of his band amid drugs and legal inquiry. Rikko's prose is polished and sensory-forward, mirroring the rhythmic push-and-pull of the dance for which the novel is named. The third presence in the title is not merely another lover, but the past itself. Rita's struggle to reconcile her memories with the woman she has become is handled with impressive emotional intelligence, and, as the narrative shifts to London medical conferences and confessional revelations in Barcelona, Rikko avoids the clichés of the "rock star romance" subgenre, instead delivering a nuanced study of how survivors of war carry their trauma into the domestic sphere.

Dialogue carries much of the novel's weight, revealing the lingering impacts of war and the necessity of confronting the past through what is withheld as much as what is spoken. Readers drawn to cosmopolitan literary romance will find this book a thoughtful meditation on fidelity, identity, and the lives we might have lived.

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

FICTION

Love from Afar: Finland

Ford von Reyn | Epigraph Publishing

194p, trade paper, $24.95, ISBN 978-1-966-29352-1



Compelling long-distance love conquers the test of time.

Great for fans of Jessica Sorensen's *The Forever of Ella and Micha*, Jamie Quatro's *Fire Sermon*.

A ski salesman from New Hampshire embarks on a life-changing trip to the Soviet Union, via a Quaker peace delegation to Finland, in von Reyn's emotive debut. While there, he meets Finnish nurse Immi Jarvi, a married woman who feels like "an escape from the life he was resigned to thousands of miles away." That relationship leads to new perspectives when Frank returns home to the United States—and to his wife and children. Though his marriage to Mary is falling apart—and he's keeping up a clandestine correspondence with Immi—he stays put, supporting Mary through the tragedy of their son Josh's death from AIDS and her own battle with multiple sclerosis and eventual death, while, in the back of his mind, always reflecting on the "secret new dimension added to his existence."

Von Reyn's unpretentious prose mirrors Frank's personality. Though he hides his affair with Immi, there is a certain disarming innocence about him. His enthusiasm for learning, his wide-eyed appreciation of new things, his pursuit of his goals, and his steadfast refusal to leave his wife combine to make him a likable character. Immi, too, is devoted and unwavering in her love for Frank, though they are separated by vast distances. Among the other characters, Michael, Frank's insightful psychiatrist friend, and Josh—who desperately hopes "his AIDS would be different"—linger.

The narrative begins in the present day, with an older Frank sick and hospitalized while being tended by his granddaughter Suzie. From there, it moves forward and backward, beginning with Frank's trip to the USSR. Von Reyn captures the longing of the two separated lovers effectively through their letters, which evolve into not just professions of passion and longing but also evidence that each becomes the other's friend, confidant, and guide through life's ups and downs. The end result is a touching portrait of love that transcends space and time.

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

FICTION

On Alaskan Fighting Bulls

Derek Prall

286p, trade paper, $24.95, ISBN 978-1-963-69571-7



Brutal blue-collar livelihood forces a fierce self-reckoning.

Great for fans of Hiroko Oyamada's *The Factory*, Stewart O'Nan's *Last Night at the Lobster.*

Prall's debut novel captures the self-loathing of a college grad whose alcoholism and reckless behavior alienate him from his peers. Fresh out of school, Martin Lambert discovers the best he can do is toil in an Alaskan salmon packing plant—a job his best friend, Danny Winters, encouraged him to try in hopes of netting some quick cash. Martin doesn't consider it slumming, but he's woefully naive about the harsh, grueling environment and exploitative working conditions. His first season starts off badly and ends worse: in his luggage, Martin finds a break-up letter from his girlfriend, who's heading to medical school, and, after expecting a sizable first paycheck, receives a whopping $26.34, since the company (which owns the dorms as well as a store and restaurant) deducted most of it for his gear and purchases.

Things deteriorate further when Danny begins to resent having to baby Martin while he's constantly drunk. After she starts dating Toro, an experienced seasonal worker trying to find purchase in the slippery system, Martin befriends two sketchy co-workers—who later violently betray him. Despite those problems, he returns to Alaska for another season—one that ends in shocking chaos and sees Martin forced to take care of Danny, for once.

While Martin reads Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, Prall uses his first-person narration to portray the punishing reality of processing plants that grind down their workers. His time in Alaska is incredibly harrowing, punctuated by nonstop drinking, drugs, and relentless self-abasement. "I knew I was lying," Martin says after denying that he's drinking on the job, "It's humiliating when they make you lie." Prall's nonjudgemental approach allows hard truths to emerge, and the bleak isolation puts his characters' desperation in sharp relief. *On Alaskan Fighting Bulls* uses a harsh landscape to mirror internal struggles as intractable and damaging as the physical sacrifices demanded of disposable labor.

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

FICTION

The Forget Rule

Zellie Karl

398p, e-book, $9.99, ISBN 979-8-9969573-4-7



Metaphysical thriller seeks to replace Earth's greed with universal knowledge.

Great for fans of Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*, Seth Dickinson's *Exordia.*

Karl's Holly and Harry series continues its otherworldly crime solving in this fifth installment (following *The Dominant Pair*). The danger hits close to home this time, when Holly—a sketch artist aided by her ability to communicate with ghosts—goes missing while helping her fiancé Harry, a former homicide cop turned private investigator, solve a bizarre case in Oklahoma: a cryptic woman named Sally, running errands for an unhoused encampment, who can't be seen on cameras. When Sally shows up mid-investigation, Holly ventures out to meet her and disappears—returning with an eerie message that Sally is a "nonhuman being," Earth is the Forget Planet, and humans live by the Forget Rule: "with no memory of who we actually are, where we've been, what we've learned so far."

So begins a wild journey of supernatural interactions and deeper consciousness. When Holly is abducted once again, the story turns to the need for Earth—which Holly declares is "circling the drain"—to change its selfish ways. The ultimate goal, according to Holly's now-enlightened mind: acquire universal knowledge and take responsibility for individual actions—only then can Earth "wake up to what we're doing to this planet and turn things around." Holly and Harry's team of friends—Mack, Harry's business partner; Nick the "manny" to Mack's twins; computer-savvy Avery; Fritzy, the former owner of Holly and Harry's farm; and hearing-impaired farmhand Thomas—join the fray, navigating a slew of crises both physical and unearthly.

The plot's metaphysical elements require careful attention from readers to track, and awkward turns of phrase can feel out of place ("He turned nonchalantly feeling eyes" ; "With this much friendliness his hope flew into the ether"), but Karl's analysis of contemporary politics (characters declare "Politicians rely on greed to manipulate... [and] hate people who are 'woke'") and the story's overarching message—that "Love is dominant over hate [and] generosity is dominant over greed"—will feel timely for contemporary readers.

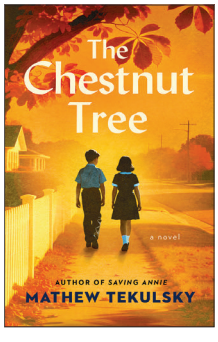
Cover: **B-** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: **–** Editing: **C+** | Marketing copy: **B-**

FICTION

The Chestnut Tree

Matthew Tekulsky

154p, trade paper, $12.99, ISBN 979-8-822-98078-5



Nuanced slice-of-life journey set in 1960s New York.

Great for fans of Cindy Morgan's *The Year of Jubilee*, Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees.*

Harkening back to a more innocent time, Tekulsky (author of *Bernie and the Hermit*) constructs a sweet coming-of-age novel following 12-year-old Adam Jacobs in 1960s Beachmont, New York, who is on the cusp of so many things: becoming a man in the Jewish tradition, first love, and opening his eyes to the world around him. It's a world that's still segregated: Black vs white, Jewish vs Catholic, and rich vs poor. In fact, his German father lost everything yet escaped from Germany to the United States where he rebuilt his life as a dry cleaner.

Life, for Adam, moves along much as any other child's. His heart belongs to Sally, a young Catholic classmate whom he trails home from school daily. He and his "slow" friend, Jimmy, while away the hours playing basketball, smoking cigarettes, dodging bullies, and reading Jimmy's father's *Playboy* magazines in their clubhouse. Yet Adam's life begins to change after he befriends Gladys McKinley, the neighborhood curmudgeon—who turns out to be both author and activist. Through his regular visits with Gladys, Adam begins to catch glimpses of how things work in the world—whether it's the Vietnam War, understanding his father, or even pursuing his own passions.

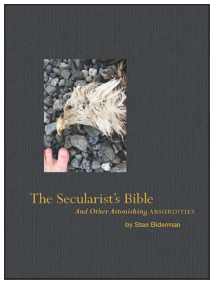
Tekulsky's tell-not-show style may distract readers from the singularly poignant glimpses of a life when time moved a bit differently. However, the love-letter to some of the seminal touchstones of a generation will immerse them in a slice-of-life view that deftly blends the fictional with reality and the historical with imaginative, from Saturday night dance parties to Peter, Paul, and Mary to Walter Cronkite broadcasts about the horrors of Vietnam. Solid characterization offers nuanced layers that flesh out the experience and chart Adam's growth from a simple boy into a young man fueled by purpose, friendship, questions about what he was raised to believe, and first love.

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

POLITICAL & SOCIAL SCIENCES

The Secularist's Bible and Other Astonishing Absurdities

Stan Biderman | The Secularist Press
204p, hardcover, $35, ISBN 979-8-234-02126-7



Pointed essays and vignettes on secularism, Judaism, and America—plus feet pics.

Great for fans of John Fugelsang's *Separation of Church and Hate*, wikiFeet.

Biderman, former CEO of BookPeople, returns with a lively collection of personal convictions. Part memoir, part political philosophy, and part meditation on mortality, *The Secularist's Bible* explores contemporary challenges in American democracy through a secular humanist lens. The collection is narrated via an extended dialogue between Saba, the Hebrew word for grandfather, and Pfoot, a "provocateur" and disembodied foot occasionally photographed before international landmarks and digital art.

Irreverent, provocative, and surprisingly moving, Biderman's dialogue teases out the connections between his family's experiences during the Holocaust, their lives as refugees in America, and the dangers of living "in a time of demagoguery, bullying, and incivility." Biderman offers pointed warnings against all forms of fundamentalism, a call for building secular institutions , and an empathetic reminder that "refugees are infinite and eternal." "Like most fleeing families, my parents were hard workers," Saba recalls. That seriousness is balanced by Biderman's conviction that "a good joke is worth 1,000 prayers."

The politics certainly won't be for everyone, but that's by design. Koan-like section headings proclaim, "Religion is not our enemy" and "Those who try to impose their religion are our enemy." Biderman is committed to defending secular democracy in an age of rising fascism, tracing a throughline between religious fundamentalism, American right-wing politics, and his own complex upbringing as "a Texas Jewish boy." He also just happens to use feet pics—and plenty of puns—to do it. "Seems like I'll always be stuck with you," Saba ribs his companion early in the collection. "I skim the low road, and you probe the high—the prankster and the wisdom," Pfoot agrees. Despite refusing easy classification, Biderman's writing remains accessible, playful, and stirring. The collection closes with an ardent defense of the U.S. Constitution. For better or worse, though, Pfoot gets the last word.

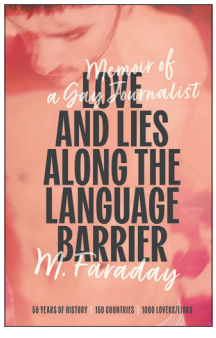
Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: **A-** Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

MEMOIR

EDITOR'S PICK

Love and Lies Along the Language Barrier: Memoir of a Gay Journalist

M. Faraday | HMD
208p, e-book, $4.99, ISBN 978-1-83556-690-9



Frank, funny account of gay love, world travel, and lively connections.

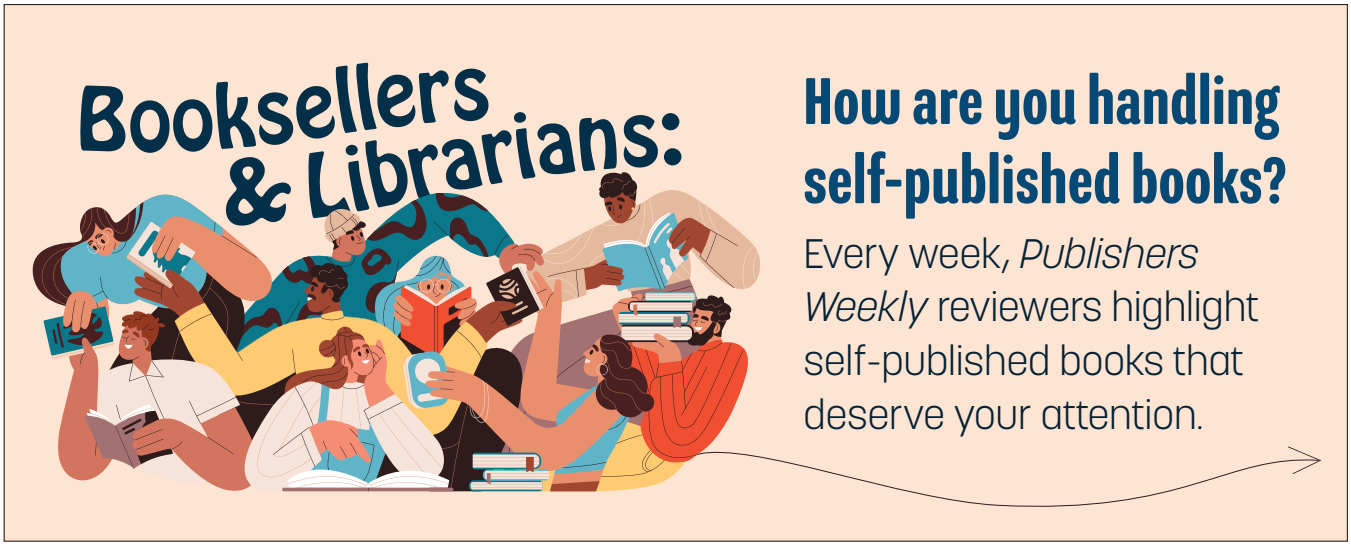
Great for fans of Andrew Evans's *The Black Penguin*, David Tuller's *Cracks in the Iron Curtain.*

Writing under a pseudonym, Faraday—who gives tantalizing hints about a distinguished writing career—delivers a racy account of domestic romance, casual sex, and dodgy hookups in far-flung, often politically unstable locales. Living up to its title, *Love and Lies Along the Language Barrier* blends a memoir of late-20th-century world travel with graphic depictions of gay sex, resulting in a spicy cocktail for a select readership.

"A sometimes mystifying (and, by virtue of mystery, intriguing) labyrinth of cultural differences ... at times presents itself," Faraday writes of his current relationship with a Colombian with whom he shares little language in common. That line could also describe other amorous and sociopolitical positions in which the author finds himself throughout the book. Freelancing for various magazines, Faraday ventures to Afghanistan in the 1970s to interview warlords' sex slaves, and to (barely) pre-Idi Amin Uganda to write about abortion. On these travels, amid ambiguous signals and hidden threats, Faraday manages to find men to have sex with, assignations that he describes in frank, sometimes humorous detail. "I generally avoid sex in public places unless very well concealed" is a characteristic sentence of the tamer variety. Occasionally, these encounters can be hair-raising—in the opening story, Faraday appears to narrowly escape being murdered in the Romanian wilderness by a scheming sexual partner. But mostly they are affectionate portraits of gay men looking for a good time, some material support, or a little understanding. One story of a Turkish lover, his girlfriend, his other male lover, and his gay friend has the makings of a classic farce.

Readers who enjoy adventurous sex scenes in wildly varied climes will find plenty to relish in this brash, vivid memoir. Those with a high tolerance for spicy material will be rewarded with piquant details like Faraday getting hit with hippo snot or his droll account of a traditional Turkish wrestling match. The best news for readers on his wavelength: Faraday promises more volumes to come.

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



MEMOIR

Greater Things Shall I Do: A Guided Journey from Broken Places to Bold Purpose

Sherneatha G. Youngblood | Youngblood Publishing Group
142p, e-book, $9.99, ISBN 979-8-9959103-2-9



Inspiring memoir focuses on rebuilding after life's setbacks.

Great for fans of Stephanie Foo's *What My Bones Know*, Ashley C. Ford's *Somebody's Daughter.*

In this inspirational debut memoir, executive leader and Army veteran Youngblood shares her triumphant story of overcoming childhood adversity, abuse, and trauma. Growing up with six siblings in East St. Louis, she reflects on a childhood of living in poverty and being abused by trusted adults, sharing the lessons that upbringing instilled in her. Chapter-ending "prevailing principles," a motivating leadership framework, and uplifting affirmations will help readers overcome challenges and step into a life of purpose and meaning, as, from the foster care system to obtaining multiple degrees, Youngblood's story is one of incredible resilience, determination, and unwavering strength.

Readers may find Youngblood's odyssey painful at times: from abuse to years spent in foster care to being unhoused to dealing with tremendous grief after her son's death, she writes with unflinching honesty and transparency. "I am not telling you this for sympathy," she declares, "but because I need you to understand what kind of resourcefulness is built in a child who learns early on that survival requires creativity." Messages like that abound here, and Youngblood strongly advocates for personal development throughout, exploring how unprocessed pain and unforgiven grief can hold a person back. Her Bridge Model for leadership integrates four emergent constructs into established theoretical frameworks, resulting in a system that "views women's advancement as a dynamic process involving the alignment of external opportunity structures and internal agency."

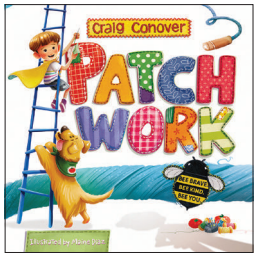
A true testament to rebuilding, this memoir explores psychological principles and studies surrounding post-traumatic growth, narrative identity, and stress inoculation, highlighting how tending to past wounds can result in unexpected growth and healing. Youngblood strikes a rewarding balance between well-researched advice and personal wisdom, resulting in a heartfelt, transformative roadmap of healing, forgiveness, and "transform[ing] pain into purpose."

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

PICTURE BOOKS

Patch Work: Bee Brave. Bee Kind. Bee You.

Craig Conover
40p, hardcover, $19.99, ISBN 978-1967836888



Young boy overcomes bullying and insecurity, embracing his true self.

Great for fans of Maria Dismondy's *Spaghetti in a Hot Dog Bun*, Mary Whitcomb's *Odd Velvet.*

In Conover's warmhearted debut, a young boy overcomes bullying and self-doubt to embrace his authentic self. Little Craig enjoys unique hobbies for a boy—gardening, beekeeping, and, above all, sewing. He spends his free time choosing threads in his favorite colors and making hats for his beloved pet dog. When his teacher announces an upcoming talent show, Craig is excited to display his skills with a needle and thread—until his classmates start to tease him. "Sewing? That's weird," a boy named Trent asserts, causing Craig's stomach "flip-flop-fli[p]." When Craig gets home, he starts to wonder if he should even share his sewing, but his mom reassures him: "You love what you love. And that's great."

After briefly considering doing karate instead, Craig ultimately chooses to be true to himself, a decision that will resonate with young readers who have likely encountered their own bullies and felt the need to make themselves smaller in response to teasing. Seeing Craig stand up and proudly present what he loves even though he's afraid will inspire readers to adopt the same kind of confidence—particularly when his skills help solve an embarrassing problem for another classmate. In the end, Craig chooses to be kind to Trent, revealing that beneath Trent's hurtful words was a need for acceptance and belonging.

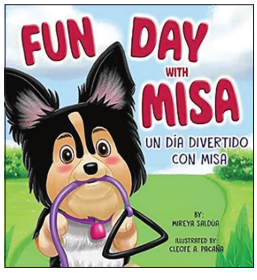
Maine Diaz's expressive illustrations immerse young readers in a familiar, lived-in classroom setting, as Craig and his friends sit at desks piled with markers and books, their backpacks slung over the chairbacks. When their teacher announces the talent show, they enthusiastically imagine their presentations—juggling, jumping rope, balancing precariously atop a stack of chairs. Craig's love of sewing shows through his broad smile, while his later slumped shoulders and tear-stained cheeks reveal his hurt at Trent's belittling. Ultimately, Craig's decision to embrace his passion will nudge kids to be authentic, even when it's hard.

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

PICTURE BOOKS

Fun Day with Misa (Un día divertido con Misa)

Mireya Saldúa | Hot Tamale Publishing
44p, hardcover, $18.99, ISBN 978-1-966-00100-3



Adorable dog savors everyday delights in bilingual picture book.

Great for fans of Susan Meddaugh's *Martha Speaks*, Troy Cummings's *Can I Be Your Dog?*

The miniature Australian Shepherd puppy Saldúa introduces in this joyous picture book is so full of life that she'll inspire readers of all ages to make every day something special. Misa's sense of wonder will appeal to pet owners and animal lovers, but there's an additional element: Her positive, approachable first-person narration is bilingual, with English and Spanish next to each other for easy comparison. Seeing Misa express herself so easily in two languages will inspire young readers, especially those who move between different cultures. Misa shares her enthusiastic observations during an enjoyable day, blending familiar routines with new experiences.

She's a rambunctious bundle of energy, and when Misa's parents go to work, her granny Maria arrives to take her on a long walk in the park. "I like to prance! (¡Me gusta brincar!)," she declares, lifting her front paw like a show pony. Illustrator Cleofe A. Pacaña deftly captures characters' emotions, as both animals and humans here exhibit warm, relatable, sometimes comic feelings. (Pacaña's attention to ear fuzz is admirable and charming). Misa displays an infectious curiosity and does everything with gusto—even taking a nap. When she looks straight at the reader, it's with a mischievous expression that invites them to join her adventures. Pacaña's relentlessly bright colors showcase Misa's heightened reality, imbuing domestic scenes with a curious glow.

Making Misa the upbeat narrator is an inspired choice, and Saldúa (the real-life Maria for her own Australian Shepherd "grand pup") puts young readers into her positive mindset. Encouraged by a loving family who appreciates her, Misa explores her surroundings in this low-stakes introduction, which also contains important lessons. The active Misa worries about being bored, but along with the stimulating activities her family arranges, she eats and sleeps regularly during the day, never objecting to the interruptions. Throughout her *Fun Day with Misa,* Saldúa demonstrates to young readers how to relish quiet, restful moments, which provide the necessary fuel for all the exciting activities that they crave.

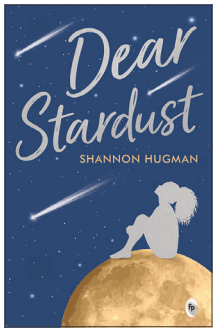
Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: **A-** Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A-**

YOUNG ADULT

Dear Stardust

Shannon Hugman

232p, trade paper, $9.99, ISBN 978-9-370-89795-3



Warm coming-of-age finds magic in growing up.

Great for fans of Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, Lisa Fipps's *Starfish*.

In *Dear Stardust,* Hugman follows 13-year-old Sunny through a summer of emotional turmoil, bodily change, family tension, and first love. Sunny lives in a house ruled by her mother's strictness, but things shift when her grandmother Neppy comes in and offers warmth and a cosmic language for self-trust. Through journal entries, beach nights, surf lessons, family revelations, and a sweet connection with Zolt, whose dad owns a music store in Sunny's town, Sunny begins to understand her body and emotions not as problems to fix or endure, but as part of something larger.

Hugman captures the awkwardness of early adolescence without sanding it down. Sunny's voice feels age-true, especially in the way she goes between self-consciousness, wonder, embarrassment, longing, and sudden hope, and the relationship between Sunny and Neppy gives the book its pulse. Neppy's stardust philosophy—that "the molecules in our bodies are from the same elements as the stars"—could feel overly whimsical in lesser hands, but here it becomes a language of reassurance, one that helps Sunny move from shame toward self-acceptance. The journal structure also works well, allowing Sunny's private thoughts to deepen the story's emotional honesty.

What makes the book especially memorable is the way it smoothly links girlhood, family inheritance, and body awareness. Hugman makes room for difficult realities like maternal distance, generational hurt, fear around puberty, and the vulnerability of first attraction, while keeping the novel emotionally safe for readers. Sunny's romance with Zolt is believable, and Neppy's special way of describing her granddaughter ("you are the Universe. You're the plump Full Moon and the dark New Moon. You are stardust," she declares) envelopes Sunny in tender affection. This is a sweet and not overly complicated coming-of-age debut that understands how huge it can feel to be 13 and uncertain—and how life-changing it is when just one adult teaches you to see yourself with kindness.

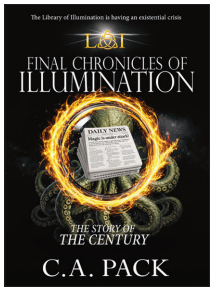
Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: **–** Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

YOUNG ADULT

Final Chronicles of Illumination: The Story of the Century

C.A. Pack | Artiqua Press

444p, e-book, $9.99, ISBN 978-1-970-02818-8



Interdimensional teen adventure meets legal drama in series conclusion.

Great for fans of Rachel Caine's *Ink and Bone*, L.E. DeLano's *Traveler.*

In the rousing climactic installment of Pack's Library of Illumination fantasy series, teen librarians and sweethearts Johanna and Jackson must defend the magical, interdimensional Library of Illumination from a viral exposé that threatens its future. Disclosed by Jackson's former friend, the library's secrets (magical books, space travel) attract violent mobs, federal agents, and even the SETI Institute. Johanna and Jackson rush to restrict the fallout to a single timeline on Earth, but the damage is done: the two face federal charges in an epic courtroom battle that, in the novel's final third, builds to dramatic speeches, tense questioning, clever legal wrangling, and a judge having to say to the jury, "I don't know whether you believed in extraterrestrial life before you were selected for this trial ...."

Pack's series freely mixes magic with space and time travel, superpowers like telepathy, and welcome attention to how all this would work together—or not. With so many abilities and possibilities baked into the worlds of the novel, our heroes have plenty of avenues for fixing problems but also inadvertently creating new ones. From Jackson's magical training on a Welsh island to Logan's mishaps with a "portable portal" leading to other dimensions, Pack balances nonstop worldbuilding that sets up dramatic reversals with a sprawling cast. The imperative of paying off a series' worth of development results in some overstuffed scenes, causing the pacing to lag, but Pack raises interesting questions about interdimensional parent-child dynamics, how we treat alien species, and the shifting nature of digital reality.

Teen readers who love fantasy and science fiction will enjoy the interstellar romp, the touching portrait of a misunderstood alien hero, and a cast that includes Sun Tzu and Edgar Degas. Longtime readers of the series will also be pleased at how the trial emphasizes everything special about the library. Ultimately, Pack provides a satisfactory conclusion to a series a decade in the making.

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

PW Reviews
look for "self-published" at the end of a review
publishersweekly.com/self-pub

booklife REVIEWS
paid reviews of self- or indie-published titles
publishersweekly.com/BookLifeReviews

PLUS
booklife PRIZE
PW reviewers critique thousands of self-published titles every year:
publishersweekly.com/BookLifePrize

Let us help you find the best in self-published books!
All powered by *Publishers Weekly* reviewers.

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

FICTION

Ashes and Ruins

K. Lang-Slattery. Pacific Bookworks, $18.98 trade paper (400p)
ISBN 979-8-9862013-1-3

Lang-Slattery (*Immigrant Soldier*) delivers an authentic and affecting tale of a Jewish woman forced to leave her home in Germany during WWII. In the late 1930s, widow Clara Lang lives alone in Meiningen, her three children having immigrated to England and the U.S. She's only recently found happiness after a cold marriage to her now-deceased husband, having fallen in love with a physician. Then a friend warns her the Nazis will soon evict all the Jewish residents of the city. Devastated, Clara leaves for London to stay with her daughter, Edith. She helps care for her granddaughter and witnesses her son-in-law George's erratic behavior, which she chalks up to shell shock resulting from his combat at Dunkirk. As the bombing raids become more frequent and rationing ramps up, Clara and Edith increasingly rely on one another, especially after George returns to active duty. Slattery renders the wrenching effect of antisemitism on her characters as they desperately try to survive. Fans of WWII fiction ought to take a look.

A Cesspool of Spies

Linda Watkins. Argon, $5.99 e-book (354p)
ISBN 978-1-944815-22-6

Watkins (*Storm Island*) revisits the dawn of the CIA in this shrewd espionage thriller. In 1950, WWII veteran Simon Biggs is finishing his college degree at the University of Pittsburgh when the promise of grad school tuition for new recruits entices him to attend a presentation for the agency. He catches the attention of Major Bradley Sullivan, who's surprised to learn, after Biggs applies to be an agent, that the CIA's psych unit has eliminated him from consideration. Biggs's Navy commander informs Sullivan that Biggs's "callous disregard for the lives of his fellow sailors" stood in the way of his receiving a Silver Star. Sullivan, however, sees such ruthlessness as a positive and overrides the psych unit's decision. Before long, Biggs is trained as a spy and dispatched on a hazardous mission to assassinate a man in Turkey who's been aiding the Soviets. The mission proves more morally complicated than it appears, and Watkins supplements riveting spy craft with slow, crucial drips of backstory about Biggs and Sullivan that lend the proceedings emotional depth. The result is mesmerizing.

The Dancer and the Swan

James L. Peters. Six by 9, *$16.95 trade paper (482p)*
ISBN 979-8-9985884-0-2

Peters (*Fortune Falls*) weaves a saccharine story of two women coming to terms with their painful pasts. It takes place at a Catholic-run hospice in Illinois, where new volunteer Pauline Swanson, 53, cares for 76-year-old resident Deborah "DeeDee" Deneaux, who's dying of an inflammatory disease. Pauline harbors two secrets that complicate her relationship with the church: she was molested by a priest as a young girl and terminated a pregnancy as an adult. But she was drawn to volunteering at the hospice after the recent death of her father, whom she spent two years caring for ("I need something... to feel good about, and helping others makes me feel good," she narrates). At first DeeDee is tight-lipped, but gradually she opens up. In flashbacks, the novel shows how DeeDee left her native New Orleans for San Francisco, where she made ends meet as a stripper before finishing college and pursuing an advertising career in Chicago. In the present, DeeDee's son, Raymond, visits her at the hospice. He resents her for being an absent mother while he was growing up, and Pauline tries to help them reconcile. Peters crafts DeeDee as a well-rounded firecracker of a woman whom readers will root for, but Pauline's story veers into the maudlin as she learns of an ex-lover's duplicity and wrestles with whether to speak out against her abuser. This one doesn't quite take flight.

F*ck This Murder

Elizabeth Land Quant and Signe E. Land. Unpopular, $19.99 trade paper (386p)
ISBN 979-8-9994392-0-8

Sisters Quant and Land debut with an amusing whodunit centered on Maggie Livingston, the autistic owner of a brand-new bed-and-breakfast called Henry's Point. Maggie's plan to launch Henry's Point by hosting the wedding of her teenage nemesis gets off to a rocky start when Mr. Trembolt, an acquaintance of Maggie's father who asked to lodge at the B and B before its official opening, is found dead in his room, apparently of natural causes. A harried Maggie hustles to hide the body with the help of her best friends, Mia Hernandez Webber and Sutton Antonoff, so arriving guests won't cancel their reservations. The trio gets off to a strong start, with Maggie crediting "countless hours spent watching murder movies on Lifetime" for their success. But before long, their cover-up unravels: the coroner's report flags possible foul play in Trembolt's death, and Maggie learns he was lying about his identity. She sets out to solve the murder while keeping the wedding festivities afloat, to mixed success. The authors nail Maggie's acerbic voice and keep the plot twists coming fast and furious enough to hook readers. A sequel would be welcome.

Goodbye, Sweetberry Park

Josh Green. Sager Group, $20.99 trade paper (366p)
ISBN 978-1-958861-52-3

Green (*Secrets of Ash*) delivers an acerbic and zany story of gentrification in 2018 Atlanta. It begins when deranged zookeeper Gerald McCaffrey lets 17 deadly snakes loose in the city. Reporting on the community response, freelance journalist Archibald "God" Johnson, nicknamed for his white hair and beard, describes gun-toting good old boys organizing hunting parties and forming militias. Meanwhile, unscrupulous developer Lawrence "Lotto" Livingston swindles many of the elderly home owners in the predominantly Black section of Sweetberry Park, known as the Flank, out of their shotgun-style houses. Lotto, who plans to relocate the houses 35 miles south of town and turn them into a museum, wants to develop the neighborhood into a subdivision for white millennials. God laments Lotto's scheme: "There's history

and character under these roofs that can't be replicated." He rallies the eccentric holdouts of the Flank—blues singer Genteel, loud-mouthed gossip Americana Mama, and loose cannon Tall Walt—to shoo out the interlopers along with the black mambas, adders, and a giant anaconda unleashed by McCaffrey. Green diverges from typical heartwarming rally-the-community plotlines in the dramatic climax, as God takes drastic action in the name of preservation. Full of history, down-home rhythms, and unabashed hucksterism, it's a memorable slice of Americana.

Killswitch Protocol
M.J. Kuhn. Cade & Camda, $32.99 (326p)
ISBN 979-8-9936620-1-5

Pivoting into cyberpunk, Kuhn (*Thick as Thieves*) delivers an exciting tale of rebellion in a dystopian society. The 24th-century city-state of New Avarita is governed by a shadowy Board of nine mega-powerful CEOs who puppet-master the figurehead President Chairman. Its citizens aspire to "the Ascent," pitched as a way to transcend this reality, but security worker Liv Spencer is awoken to the horrifying realities of New Avaritan life when first her husband, then her best friend, are "selected for Ascent"—in other words, killed—right in front of her. Spurred into action, she joins an underground rebellion alongside master hacker Emerson Quinn and Signe Remy, a talented strategist and fighter, who hope to free New Avarita from the controlling regime. While some of the elements at play here feel underdeveloped—the briefly mentioned governments of other city-states, for example, or the way that Emerson is arbitrarily able to hack or not hack certain systems entirely based on what's most convenient for the plot—there's no denying that it's a page-turner, complete with fascinating ethical questions about the uses and responsibilities of power. Readers who fell for Kuhn's fantasy heist novels will find her turn to sci-fi just as gripping.

The Line Between Us
Syreeta Harvey-Pasley. Sienna-Rose Press, $29.99 (312p)
ISBN 979-8-2186-4517-5

Harvey-Pasley explores the tensions of being a Black employee of a racist police department in her assured debut. Camden, N.J., has become the latest epicenter of anti-police protests after two white cops fatally shot Black college student Darius Porter when a neighbor mistook him for a burglar. With Camden's Black community up in arms and its police force on the defensive, Black police detective Jada Edgars is caught in the middle. Adding to Edgars's stress is a baffling missing persons case she's just been assigned, in which two Black women seem to have vanished into thin air. Her initial investigation leads her to fear the disappearances might mark the return of the Yellow Rose killer, an unidentified assailant who murdered several Black women in Camden years earlier and left a single yellow rose by each of their bodies. Harvey-Pasley conveys the pressures bearing down on her protagonist with empathy and skill, keeping the emotional stakes high as she brings the core mystery to a satisfying end. This bodes well for the author's future efforts.

Memoir of an Innocent Brat
Aaron Wang. Books in Color, $5.99 e-book (218p)
ISBN 978-1-0695064-0-5

In this cheeky satirical thriller from Wang (*Between Two Names*), gay Brooklynite Pete Chan's Charli XCX–informed transformation ends with the death of his ex-boyfriend. Pete is introduced driving back to Brooklyn from Chicago, only to be arrested as soon as he sets foot in his apartment and charged with murdering Toby Lu, whom he'd recently broken up with. With his freedom at stake, Pete recounts the weeks leading up to his visit to Chicago. After hearing Charli XCX's album Brat, he was inspired to quit his dull job as a communication coordinator and break up with painter Toby, whose aimlessness had been working on Pete's nerves. He took a job as a barista while figuring out his next move, only to go viral for a heated dispute with a customer that ended with Pete throwing a latte. He was subsequently labeled the "BRATista," a folk hero for beleaguered service workers. His sudden fame exposed him to online trolls, including the Chicago-based Frankie, whom the newly emboldened Pete drove cross-country to confront. Wang tracks Pete's wild character arc with tongue firmly planted in cheek, bringing a sharp wit and an ear for dialogue to his tale. This is a blast.

Mt. Forgotten
Kevin Abrams. Bublish, $4.99 e-book (362p)
ISBN 978-1-64704-956-0

Glory Peak, a popular family-run ski resort in the Pacific Northwest, becomes a battleground for competing interests in Abrams's exciting debut. The resort was founded in the 1940s by WWII veteran William Jefferson Macklemore, who ran roughshod over the local Le'Echuwanna tribe, building on their ancestral land despite their protests. William goes on to fight his own family decades later, pulling strings to block his son, Bobby, and daughter-in-law, Annabelle, from starting a nearby alpaca farm. By 1988, Annabelle and Bobby plan to divorce. During one last hike together in the mountains, they're swept off the trail by an avalanche and disappear, presumed dead. The nonlinear narrative eventually focuses on their daughter, Clover, who was raised in town by her late maternal grandmother, who spearheaded a rival resort that's under construction nearby. Clover grew up at odds with both Bobby, who tried to make her a champion cross-country skier, and William, who once shot at her boyfriend. Disenchanted and despairing, Clover develops a ketamine problem and attempts suicide. Meanwhile, the Le'Echuwanna, led by brash elder He Who Eats Rabbit Tails, have long chafed at the Macklemore family's exploitation of the land. As the conflict draws toward a violent crisis point, He Who Eats and Clover form a murky alliance. Abrams keenly portrays his characters' animosity toward each other and their frustration with their circumstances. This will keep readers turning the pages.

Murder Italian Style: A Killer Fashion Mystery
Diane Vallere. Polyester, $7.99 e-book (286p)
ISBN 978-1-9545-7919-4

Vallere's enjoyable latest outing for fashion expert and amateur sleuth Samantha Kidd (after *Ranch Dressing*) strikes a balance between mystery and humor. Samantha is vacationing in Italy with her husband, Nick, when Isabella—an

Italian native and the daughter of Nick's father's business partner—asks her to crack a closed case. Almost 30 years earlier, Isabella was romantically involved with a shoemaker's apprentice named Pasquale. On the same day Isabella told Pasquale she'd been diagnosed with cancer and had to leave for monthslong treatment in Switzerland, Pasquale was arrested for murdering Alfredo, a man he'd recently argued with at a bar. When Pasquale was convicted, Isabella believed he was guilty—but in the years since, doubts have crept in. Samantha agrees to take a look at the case and quickly finds holes in the original inquiry, including the fact that Italian police never firmly established Pasquale's motive. As Samantha charges forward in her investigation, Vallere peppers the narrative with memorable turns of phrase ("Like a Chia Pet that had been recently watered, I felt buds of curiosity bursting through the fertile ground of my mind") and charming local color. The result is a breezy cozy that's well suited for poolside reading.

The President

Xander Beattie. Pronk, $15 mass market (136p)

ISBN 978-1-967449-03-3

An author's daring short story exposes him and his publishers to death threats in this engrossing debut set in 2012 South Africa. At the outset, a man named Max submits a piece to online literary magazine *Vula* via flash drive, using the pseudonym Gabriel Roberts. The story, titled "The President," is a raw account of a sexual encounter between a rent boy and the male president of an unnamed African country. Given the South African government's hostility to the LGBTQ+ community—Richard Lindela, the minister of traditional affairs, is advocating that same-sex relationships be outlawed—the story's publication causes a stir. Soon, a henchman for Lindela—a sinister figure only known as "the Knife"—starts a campaign of threats against Max and the staff of Vula. In an afterword, Beattie identifies the novel's real-life inspiration, but to his credit, the action doesn't read like thinly disguised reporting. Instead, like the best political thrillers, it's suspenseful, propulsive, and infuriating at once. Readers will be rapt.

Saturn's Favorite Music

Laura Lee. Elsewhere, $9.99 e-book (368p)

ASIN B0F4J5B34K

A rookie radio DJ pays her dues in small-town Michigan in this wry portrait from Lee (*Identity Theft*). It's 1992 and Clara Jane is fresh out of broadcasting school in Detroit and looking to lead a glamorous life as a DJ. Willing to do whatever it takes, she accepts a midday slot in rural Saturn and surrenders to the indignity of playing soft rock, despite her preference for grunge. Her first day is a disaster—she mispronounces a name while reading the obituaries and unwittingly plays a song with overt drug references. Another DJ, 37-year-old divorcé Seth Jones, tries to make Clara feel at home by having her as a regular guest on his morning show. Their friendship remains platonic despite everyone at the station thinking they're sleeping together. Meanwhile, the station owner starts cutting costs, axing on-air personalities and expecting Clara to handle administrative responsibilities in addition to DJing. Lee shines in scenes with Clara and Seth on air together, showing how their camaraderie develops through humorous banter. It's a crackling look at a medium in transition.

A Series of Rooms

A.J. Barlowe. A.J. Barlowe, $26.99 (310p)

ISBN 979-8-3305-4967-2

Barlowe's promising debut kicks off with a meet-awkward between two young gay men in a bar bathroom. It's art student Liam's 21st birthday and he's attempting to clean a spilled drink off his shirt. Meanwhile, Leo is crying in one of the stalls and rebuffs Liam's concerned questions. The guys unexpectedly reconnect in a hotel room later that same night, when it's revealed that Liam's friends hired Leo, a sex worker whose real name is Jonah, as a surprise birthday present for Liam. Their night together is chaste, as Liam comforts a still upset Jonah. Afterward, Liam can't get Jonah out of his head and arranges a second meeting. Jonah eventually reveals that he ran away from his homophobic parents and was introduced to sex work by a terrible ex-boyfriend. Now he's living in a halfway house for recent parolees as an alternative to serving time for having killed a man, and working for a cruel pimp who is blackmailing him. Privileged, innocent Liam never judges Jonah's survival methods and the men share some tender moments, including Liam's first kiss. The drama ramps up when their relationship is abruptly severed by Jonah's handlers and a distraught Liam goes to the police. Meanwhile, Jonah learns a shocking truth that changes everything. The men's genuinely sweet connection balances out the grittier, more melodramatic, and occasionally contrived moments. Readers are sure to get invested in these two.

The Sound of Murder (Musicals Are Murder #1)

Joseph Zellnik. Ziggurat, $9.99 e-book (415p)

ISBN 979-8-9923999-3-6

Theatrical composer Zellnik (the Libby Seale Mysteries) draws on his Broadway expertise for this promising series launch that pairs a clever whodunit with a tantalizing behind-the-curtain narrative. In November 1959, Rodgers and Hammerstein's The Sound of Music opens successfully in New Haven, Conn. The following morning, Eva Rossi—understudy for lead actor Mary Martin—fails to show up for rehearsals and is found dead in a hotel room that's not her own. Next to her body is a Playgoer magazine pinned to the bedside table with a dagger thrust through Martin's photo; over the bed, the lyric "How do you solve a problem like Maria?" is scrawled in red. Shrewd assistant stage manager Lee Solomon assists the police in their investigation, which rules out suicide after they learn of an earlier attempt on Martin's life. Solomon, the real-life assistant stage manager for the original run of The Sound of Music, was Zellnik's uncle, and the author bases his characterization on Solomon's journals. Other delightful nuggets of Broadway trivia dot the narrative. Musical theater fans would do well to check this out.

Tethered Spirits

Corinne Hoebers. OC, $25.99 e-book (430p)

ISBN 978-1-98983-356-8

Hoebers (*Call of a Distant Shore*) delivers an immersive if overwrought saga of the Seven Years' War in Nova Scotia. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1756, a young German settler named Christian was

captured and adopted by a Mi'kmaq family, who gave him the name Bear Cub and taught him the tribe's language and customs. Christian's story intersects with that of his younger sister Hanna, who lives with her father, Michael, and sister, Elisabeth, on a farm near the colonial village of Lunenburg, and who has visions that Christian is still alive. Like her brother, she's deeply sympathetic to the Mi'kmaq. At 12, she urges a doctor to tend to a wounded Mi'kmaq man, shot by English troops. Years later, Michael scolds her for giving bread to a starving Mi'kmaq woman. When Christian returns to visit, hoping to make peace with Michael before marrying a Mi'kmaq woman, his attempts prove futile. While Hoebers's research into the language and customs of the Mi'kmaq people is stellar, the plot is choppy and the dialogue is a bit clunky ("Our passion was real but only for those two young innocents we once were," Elisabeth tells a former lover). It's a mixed bag.

Wild Heart
Randy Kemmerer. Randy Kemmerer, $9.99 trade paper (238p)
ASIN B0C47SW9K8

Kemmerer's spirited if retrograde debut depicts a young man's survival and soul-searching while he's stranded in the wilderness. Narrator John Greystone, a 20-year-old UCLA student, takes a job as a fire lookout for the Forest Service in the summer of 1980. Before reporting for duty, he visits his best friend and roommate, Kyle Sage, at the Sages' ranch and winery. Kyle's 18-year-old sister, a "beautiful blond creature" named Stephanie, falls in love with John and wants a kiss before he leaves, but John says he isn't ready for commitment, even though he tells Kyle she might be the one (in John's mind, marriage "took away a guy's freedom"). John leaves to meet helicopter pilot Rusty, who drops him off in Sequoia National Park to scout a location for a new lookout tower but never returns to pick him up. Stranded and without shelter, John draws on the survival skills passed on to him by his Cherokee grandfather. He finds water, gathers fiddleheads, and ponders a possible future with Stephanie. The narrator's sexist attitudes feel like they're out of a time capsule, but Kemmerer effectively depicts the beauty and danger of the wilderness, from delicate wildflowers and sightings of shy deer to run-ins with bears and mountain lions. It's a capably told story of self-discovery.

The Vatican Deal: A Marty & Bo Thriller
Michael Balter. Mission Point, $17.99 trade paper (300p)
ISBN 978-1-965278-44-4

Balter's blistering sequel to *Chasing Money* sends bumbling businessmen Marty Schott and Bo Bishop on a high-octane adventure involving art forgery and mafia intrigue. Marty and Bo are in Rome to buy the Chiurazzi, "the world's most valuable sculpture foundry," as part of a plan to license and replicate art held in the Vatican's museum, then sell the replicas for charity. The idea came from Leo Giacobbe, who purports to be an intermediary between the Holy See and the secular world. Leo tells Marty and Bo that he's in a position to sell any item in the Vatican's Apostolic Library, but just before the deal goes through, a hulking stranger delivers a purse to the partners, claiming it's from Natalya Danilenko, the chairperson of their company. To Marty and Bo's horror, it contains a photo of Natalya, one of her bloody fingernails, and a message reading "Leave Italy. Stay away from the Chiurazzi." They set out to rescue Natalya and unmask Leo, dodging several gangsters along the way in a series of thrilling set pieces. This proves that Marty and Bo can sustain a series.

NONFICTION

A Country Called Brooklyn: A Memoir
Hane Selmani. Silent Truth, $19.95 trade paper (354p)
ISBN 978-1-971423-00-5

★ Kosovo-born, Brooklyn-raised writer Selmani debuts with a powerful account of female submission and family secrets that centers on the murder of her sister, Jariyeh, in 1979. Thirty years after Jariyeh was killed by her husband in South Brooklyn, Hane attempted to cut through her family's innuendos and discover what actually happened. Drawing on court records, interviews with family members, and her own memories, she recounts how Jariyeh's husband, Mehmet, became addicted to heroin after selling it for several years, and his behavior deteriorated until Jariyeh was desperate to escape the marriage with their children. Believing her departure would bring shame to their family, Mehmet shot Jariyeh and falsely accused her of infidelity to justify the murder. Only 16 years old and asleep in her bed upstairs on the night Jariyeh was killed, Hane was dogged with guilt and questions about the story for three decades. Her detailed account of the Albanian customs that bound Jariyeh to Mehmet and governed her family's shame-fueled response to the killing lend this more potency than the average true crime memoir. It makes for wrenching, edifying reading.