October 12, 2026

booklife®

YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING

15 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

Indie Spotlight

In this edition of our monthly roundup of BookLife titles, we feature scary stories.

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

SPOOKY SPECULATIVE FICTION

Chimera Island

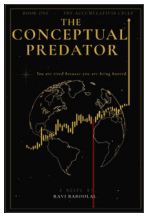


Martin Roy Hill

ISBN 978-0-578-91663-7

Author statement: "When a transport aircraft sent to evacuate scientists from a remote climate research station vanishes without a trace—along with a Chinese spy ship investigating the island—the U.S. Coast Guard sends its most secretive response unit to uncover the truth. A Coast Guard and Navy veteran myself, I have long pondered the mysteries and strange happenings that occur at sea, from ghost ships to mysterious disappearances, fata morganas, and unidentifiable objects above, on, and below the surface of the sea."

The Conceptual Predator



Ravi Baboolal

ISBN 978-1-06-786240-4

Author statement: "In December of 2025 I was walking my dog through snowy streets, pondering the exponential development of AI and humanoid robotics. I asked myself, who stands to gain? The answer stopped me in my tracks. It was the economy, as a singular entity, who stood to gain. Like a parasite, worming its way through human civilization, pushing us towards an inevitability where the only option was to welcome the machines."

Haunting Skies

Christian Kang Bachini

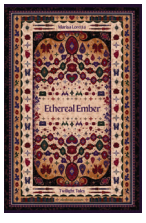


ASIN B0H89QJHWN

Author statement: "Earth has fallen to alien invaders, but a young girl possessed by Satan may be humanity's last weapon. The idea for *Haunting Skies* came to me years ago while watching an episode of *The X-Files*. I started wondering what would happen if aliens ended up abducting a human possessed by a demon and what would happen if two very different kinds of evil collided in the same story."

DARK FANTASY

Ethereal Ember



Marisa Loretta

ASIN B0FR4ZQNQ4

Author statement: "I have always been drawn to the unearthly worlds featured in fantasy tales and deeply inspired by both gothic and romantic poets. All of which has led to writing my own dark and deadly tales. *Ethereal Ember* also features my own illustrations to enhance the short stories, letting the reader experience this mystical world through both language and artistry."

False Sigil

Steven Nash

ASIN B0HCH4NX3B

Author statement: "*False Sigil* is a dark gaslamp fantasy mystery about an overlooked records clerk whose name is erased by the

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.



magical ward meant to protect his city. To survive, he must uncover why the ward no longer recognizes him while an inquisitor closes in and the city's records begin changing around him. I wrote *False Sigil* because I was interested in what happens when a system built to protect people begins deciding who counts as real."

That Lesbian Vampire Pirate Story



Raven Belasco
ISBN 978-1-960942-17-3
Author statement: "I'm personally very proud of the mix of history and horror in this book. Because it's set in the 1860s, the times dictate the flavor of the vampiric horror and violence, and even normal human life was horrific enough that all I had to do was be faithful to history. It's also my most popular story in the series, because of the ridiculous title. I think vampires and pirates are a perfect combo for Halloween, and adding the queer element makes it just that much better."

FOLKLORE AND THE PARANORMAL

The Daughters of Alba
Ursula Williams
ASIN B0HBRM5DN8



Author statement: "*The Daughters of Alba* is a Scottish fantasy in which the boundaries between the human world and the ancient supernatural realm begin to dissolve. The story grew from my deep connection with Scotland, where I once lived and to which I continue to return."

The Hanged Man



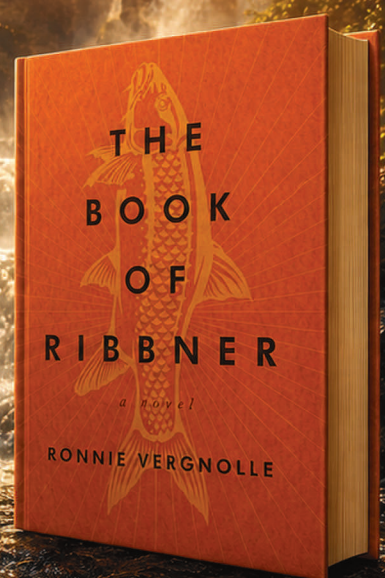
Jane Brookwood
ISBN 978-1-06-777920-7
Author statement: "In small-town Pineridge Hollow, Fiona Miller runs a metaphysical gift shop where she reads tarot, sells crystals, mixes tea, and generally minds her own business. But when she pulls the Hanged Man tarot card moments before learning her long-lost friend's son has turned up dead, she vows to uncover the truth. Tarot is a mirror that reflects subconscious workings, and, like any other tool, it's only as good as the person who wields it. A knife must be respected because it can cut. Tarot is no different."

The Haunted Mill: Bramble Grove Paranormal #1
Everett Jacobs
ASIN B0HJD64NLR
Author statement: "*The Haunted Mill* started with a real haunted

RONNIE VERGNOLLE

A story of
ADVENTURE.
A search for
MEANING.

One sacred fish. One final choice.



SCAN TO EXPLORE
RONNIEVERGNOLLE.COM

SPONSORED

booklife

Must-Read Titles



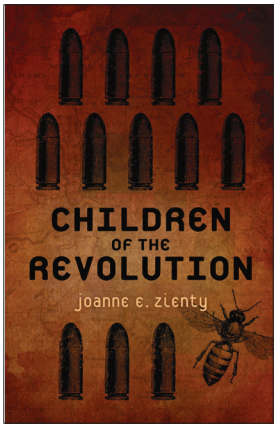
Thea

by Genevieve Morrissey

EDITOR'S PICK

ISBN: 979-8990119208

"Moving coming-of-age story of an ambitious girl in 1920s Oklahoma.



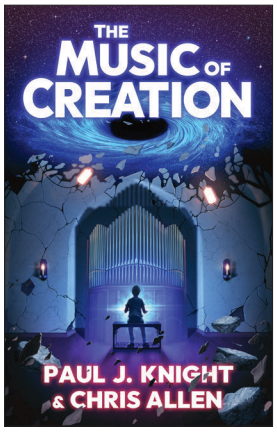
Children of the Revolution

by Joanne E. Zienty

EDITOR'S PICK

ISBN: 978-1733688109

"Urgent, humane story of resistance to corporate rule in a dystopian New Midwest.

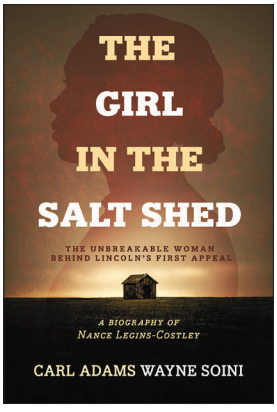


The Music of Creation

by Paul J. Knight & Chris Allen

ISBN: 978-1963832365

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



The Girl in the Salt Shed: The Unbreakable Woman Behind Lincoln's First Appeal

by Carl Adams & Wayne Soini

ISBN: 979-8234229236

Myth-busting biography of Nance Legins-Costley, long known as "the first slave freed" by Lincoln.

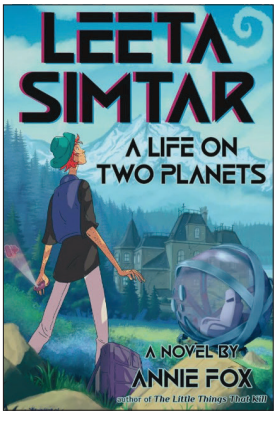


Cooking Up Magick

by HL Bernabe

ISBN: 979-8987119013

"Charming fantasy adventure blending the cozy, culinary, and epic.



Leeta Simtar: A Life on Two Planets

by Annie Fox

EDITOR'S PICK

ISBN: 978-1943649129

"Poignant, coming-of-age sci-fi tackling marginalization and racism.

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

"Quotes from BookLife Reviews

SPONSORED

booklife

Must-Read Titles

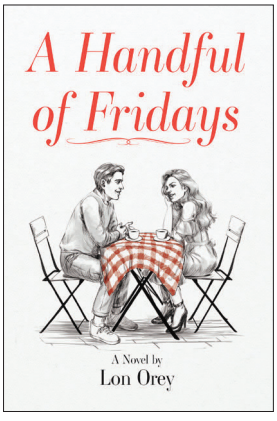


Poinsettia Girl

by Jennifer Wizbowski

ISBN: 978-1964700434

Wizbowski's writing is tender and lyrical, vividly portraying the heart of a child and her gradual transformation into a woman.

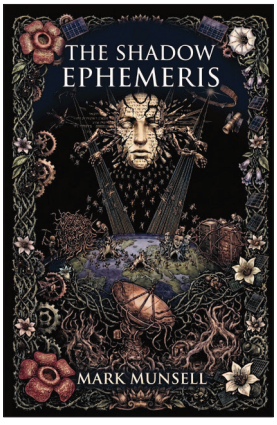


A Handful of Fridays

by Lon Orey

ISBN: 979-8318834103

A beautiful and captivating story of a love filled with challenges, some of them seemingly insurmountable.



The Shadow Ephemeris

by Mark Munsell

ISBN: 979-8197617538

A groundbreaking twist on science fiction, casting actual, unmanned Earth-orbiting satellites as the primary characters.



He Feeds Dinosaurs

by Daniel & Kristan Dow

ISBN: 979-8996824007

Told by his mother and father, Elijah's story is an engrossing portrait of love, heartbreak and laughter—and a provocative argument about the meaning of "autism."

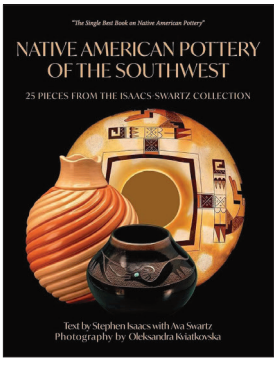


Accidental Tribes

by C.S. Pascoal

ISBN: 979-8995829812

An acclaimed tale for teenagers and adults about eight misfit teens judged by their online mistakes as they search for belonging, second chances, and the courage to trust each other.



Native American Pottery of the Southwest

by Stephen Isaacs

ISBN: 979-8295542626

"Striking tribute to beauty and cultural significance of America's Southwest Indigenous Pottery.

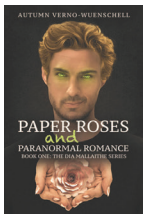
If you are interested in participating in our next group ad please reach out to **dali@publishersweekly.com**.

"Quotes from BookLife Reviews



attraction I visited as a teenager. It operated inside an old abandoned mill in a small town near me, and an eccentric older man dressed as an undertaker would personally lead people through the attraction. I loved how theatrical and kitschy the whole thing was. Years later, the mill burned down under troubling circumstances, and the man who ran it became the focus of suspicion and community hostility."

Paper Roses and Paranormal Romance



Autumn Verno-Wuenschell
ASIN B0H4H3YX23
Author statement: "P*aper Roses and Paranormal Romance* is an urban fantasy that serves as an introduction to William—an immortal Vampire/Djinn living in my imagination for years. I knew his powers, his lore, and his inevitability. What I needed was a way to make an invincible near-villain someone to root for. The answer was simple: let William tell his own story. Through charm, swagger, and carefully crafted illusions, he draws readers into the romance he wants them to see."

Tiktik: A Summer of Three Names



Peter Bautista
ASIN B0HCXW2DMY
Author statement: "I moved from the Philippines to the U.S. when I was four and grew up very American, but in a Filipino family. Some of the stories that stayed with me were the scary ones—the creatures that could make you think twice about what was outside the window or waiting in the dark. That's where *Tiktik* started. It's a story about monsters, but also about a girl trying to understand her family and figure out where she belongs."

CHILDREN'S STORIES

Ginger's Kooky Halloween Adventure



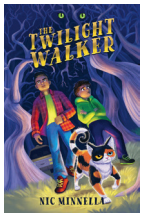
AimeeAnn Blythe
ASIN B0D3Y7MK7L
Author statement: "This Halloween, while the Hoomans (humans) head to the grocery store in town getting last-minute supplies for their party, Ginger (the deer with the orange collar) and her adorable forest pals decide to host their very own animal Halloween bash! But what will happen when the Hoomans return? Have fun with reading about a whimsical adventure filled with costumes, tasty treats, and Halloween surprises!"

Pumpkin Head Lost His Head

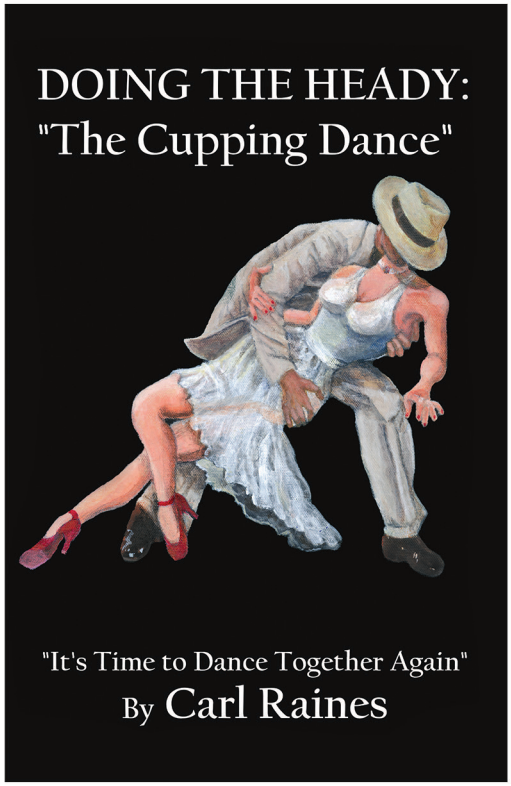


Quentin Lee, illus. by Elis Zill
ASIN B0C6R9HZZH
Author statement: "For me, *Pumpkin Head Lost His Head* holds two stories about facing fear. I wrote the manuscript at 16, shortly after immigrating to Montreal, but set it aside after repeated rejection. Nearly four decades later, I found the courage to return to the story and publish it myself. Within the book, two best friends must summon their own courage after an evening of trick-or-treating leads them into an eerie mansion, a witch's curse, and a daring rescue."

The Twilight Walker



Nic Minnella
ASIN B0GZ184PGK
Author statement: "Eleven-year-old Finn can't stand camping and is fed up with being picked on by his seemingly perfect older brother, Matt. Everything changes when their mother starts acting like a different person, and Finn—along with his cat, Pepper—is the only one who realizes the truth. I've wanted to build a story around a spooky campfire legend for a while. My young characters all face this challenge as they confront a haunted forest and a mysterious creature that lures them deep into the woods."



DOING THE HEADY:
"The Cupping Dance"

by Carl Raines

A novel about love - passionate romantic love, love of self, love of friendship, love of family and finding love within.

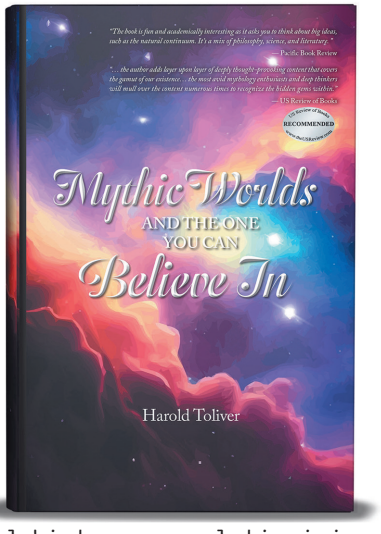
Available at 800-788-7654 and your favorite online bookstore

Publishers Weekly

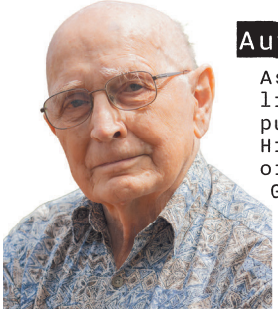
Harold Toliver Alan V. Goldman Jason Hauger Linda Knebel Pruden

Mythic Worlds and the One You Can Believe In

Paperback — 978-1778834462 $16.99
Hardback — 978-1778834486 $24.99



Combining philosophy, science, and literature, Mythic Worlds and the One You Can Believe In examines lingering misconceptions of world history as a continuing source of international tension. Awareness of the natural continuum, currently gauged at some 13.8 billion years overall, disarms sectarian zealotry and, in retrospect, explains some of the difficulties the literary and philosophical traditions have had in accommodating their beliefs to what undeniably exists. To this day, beliefs incompatible with natural history continue to intensify nationalism and support terrorist movements. As a work mainly in natural philosophy, this book uses the consensus natural continuum to critique the more prominent and durable misconceptions.



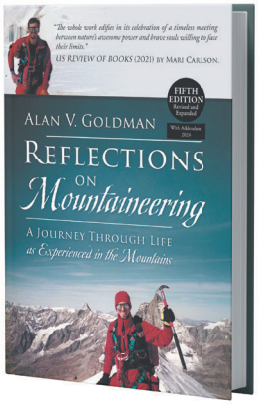
Author — Harold Toliver

As a professor of English and comparative literature, Harold Toliver has, until recently, published mainly literary criticism and history. His more recent publications have explored natural historys revolutionizing of the history of ideas, beginning in the Renaissance with Copernicus and Galileo and in England with Francis Bacon, and climaxing in the 1920s with the combined product of physics, astrophysics, astronomy, geology, evolutionary biology, and anthropology. As such, through such work, Toliver evaluates traditional assumptions made in literature, philosophy, and common beliefs about the place of the planet and its inhabitants in the scheme of things.

ISBN — 978-1778830556

Reflections on Mountaineering: A Journey Through Life as Experienced in the Mountains (FIFTH Edition, Revised and Expanded, with Addendum: 2026)

is a collection of 148 *narrative*-style poems in that each tells a story, some of which rhyme, others are in blank verse, or are prose-poems, distilling over three decades of climbing experience into a "meditation" on the human condition. The work uses the mountain environment as a lens to explore universal life themes — such as moral dilemmas, awe, fear, reality perception, and the role of chance — to make the often hidden insights of mountaineers more easily accessible to everyone. Ultimately, the collection asserts that climbers impart meaning to mountains through the very act of climbing them, offering a deep reflection on self-discipline, the trauma of defeat, and the elation of conquering peaks and exploring personal limits.



by: Alan V. Goldman

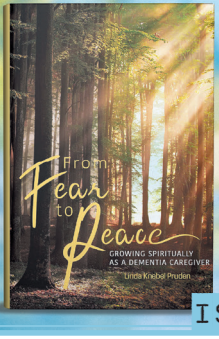


Jason Hauger

MARNA: Book 1

Lonely David finds friendship and magic when he meets Marna, a winged girl with secrets. They soar through adventures, and when Marna is captured, David faces old rivals to save her, discovering courage and the power of their bond.

ISBN — 979-8896494089



Linda Pruden

From Fear to Peace: Growing Spiritually as a Dementia Caregiver

This spiritual growth book explores Linda Pruden's experience as a dementia caregiver for her husband. Inspired by his own determination to find spiritual gifts embedded in the journey, her story provides encouragement for those living with a chronic illness and the people who love them.

ISBN — 978-1778839139

booklife REVIEWS

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

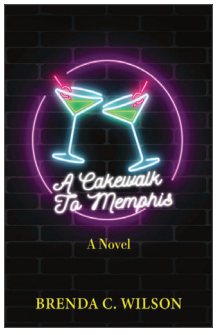
FICTION

EDITOR'S PICK

A Cakewalk to Memphis

Brenda C. Wilson | Redhawk Publications

181p, trade paper, $17, ISBN 979-8-899-33013-1



Moving novel of an urgent family mission across the Jim Crow South.

Great for fans of Maxine Clair's *October Suite*, Catherine Adel West's *The Two Lives of Sara*.

Wilson's brisk, moving debut brings vivid life to the Jim Crow South as, in 1958, Big Sallie Morning, a woman who has already lived beyond her years, embarks on a "crazy journey" through dry counties, juke joints, and A.M.E. communities, facing busybodies, criminals, and her own past and choices. Cast and milieu are drawn with engaging vigor, especially Big Sallie herself. She has served 10 years in prison for accidentally murdering her cheating husband in a segregated America. Now, when her pregnant niece's husband, Tony Earley, disappears without a trace, Memphis cleaning woman Sallie hits the road, determined to find him before the younger woman makes the kind of mistake that Sallie regrets—"For years," Wilson writes, "she had ached for the wrong reason and the wrong person." Striking historical detail abounds, made urgently personal. On her odyssey, Sallie will find that sometimes even those who remember history are still doomed to repeat it.

Wilson's storytelling blends a spirited travelogue with a woman's self-discovery and some page-turning suspense—handguns, plunging necklines, a barroom confrontation with a slick man who must be Tony but insists he is not. Every page, though, pulses with charged insight into American life, the choices faced by Black women throughout history, what prison does to good people, and what it costs to protect one's own in an unjust society. Scenes with Sallie's mother, whose "old-timer's disease" makes it hard to mend fences, prove as tense as the Tony thread.

Dialogue is sharp, funny, and pitch-perfect, and both it and the narrative voice prove rich with homegrown wisdom informed by the Bible and the blues, the gossip and hard truths of her self-sustaining communities. Big Sallie is old enough, and has seen enough, to know that while some things in life may change, much of what matters ultimately will not.

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

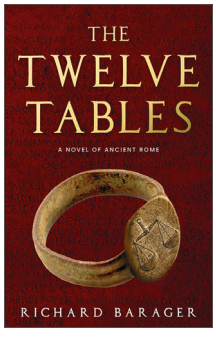
FICTION

EDITOR'S PICK

Twelve Tables: A Novel of Ancient Rome

Richard Barager | Koehler Books

282p, trade paper, $19.95, ISBN 979-8-89747-349-6



Meticulous tale of Roman ambition, romance, and political evolution.

Great for fans of Tiberian Norwood's *One Woman, One Empire*, Steven Saylor's *Roma*.

In this dynamic historical offering, Barager (*The Atheist and the Parrotfish*) presents the coming-of-age of a young man who rises from a bonded servant to a prosperous merchant during the early Roman Republic. In 462 BCE, 16-year-old Marcus Atilius's farmer father sells him into three years of bondage to pay debts. The teen quickly gains the trust of his savvy master, the salt trader Gaius Licinius, and, once freed, remains in Gaius's employ, eventually opening his own business and marrying Gaius's daughter, Gavia. Over the span of a decade, Marcus flourishes, survives the plague, and plays a key role in defending the common man's rights as his beloved city endures turmoil.

In telling Marcus's story, Barager also recounts the history of early Rome, backed by meticulous research that demonstrates how upward mobility allowed even a former servant or laborer to become educated and wealthy. The Twelve Tables, engraved bronze tablets listing laws that increased equality, gave voice to the commoner. When noblemen threaten those rights, Marcus's fight to maintain commoners' political expression is epic.

Those lucky enough to have visited Italy will thrill at mentions of famous locations like the Forum as well as depictions of ordinary people's daily lives, and well-chosen sensory details immerse readers in the city streets—where Marcus sells salt, the local tavern, his home life, and more. Barager regularly sprinkles in simple Latin vocabulary—such as *domus* for home—to add authenticity without overwhelming readers, though characters' first names are often similar and will require close attention to track. Multiple points of view, mostly Marcus's, enrich the storytelling, and thoughtful aphorisms lend a timeless tone. For those inspired to continue learning, Barager includes a bibliography of sources at the end, making this sparkling account of ancient Rome both informative and entertaining.

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

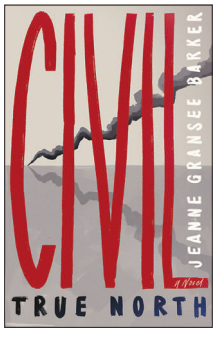
FICTION

EDITOR'S PICK

Civil: True North

Jeanne Gransee Barker | Dark Bird Press

327p, e-book, $7, ISBN 979-8-995-71380-7



Dystopian thriller explores crushing impact of PTSD on warring soldiers.

Great for fans of BH Panhuyzen's *A Tidy Armageddon*, Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars*.

In this speculative dystopian thriller, Barker (*The Intergalactic Adventures of Queen Bea*) wows with riveting action and philosophical insight into the impact of PTSD. In a near-future America, civil war divides nationalists from rebels. After her escape from a prisoner torture center, flashbacks torment Rachel Waterman, a lieutenant known as "the Raven" for her heroic fighting prowess. At a recovery camp, her anger softens into something more manageable. Meanwhile, Marine Captain Chet Miller spearheads a mission to track Rachel down and avenge the lives she took—but injury and dissension among his troops shake his belief that her execution will bring him relief. Once he and his troops infiltrate the camp, nothing goes as planned, forcing them to confront unsettling truths about themselves and the supposed enemy.

Rachel and Chet's alternating first-person points of view offer a chilling portrait of American strife that feels disturbingly plausible. Although these characters belong to warring groups, they have a lot in common: both have killed to avenge lost loved ones, endure survivor's guilt, and suffer physically and emotionally. "Is that how it works?" wonders Rachel. "You commit an atrocity, but if it saves a commensurate number of people, it cancels out?" Barker deftly paints the arc of Rachel's intense, gradually dissipating anger, showing how her journey is complicated by family dynamics. Readers will relate to Chet's increasing self-doubt as he homes in on his target.

Sarcastic banter and Barker's talent for humanizing fighters—particularly Rachel's love of coffee, which features prominently in her daydreams while imprisoned—inject the drama with uplifting moments. Perhaps most exciting is when deceptively ordinary characters reveal surprising motives, such as a knitter-turned-traitor and a seemingly inexperienced therapist who has endured more trials than Rachel realizes. Ultimately, this thriller's hunt-down plot and acute depiction of factions struggling for power drive home that no one truly wins in war.

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



ISBN 978-1778836756

The Change Center: A Week On A Ward

HOWARD BLAZEK

This is the story of a week the author spent on a closed psychiatric ward when he suffered a mental breakdown. He had returned to graduate school in his late 20s, hoping to be the great psychologist of his dreams. Instead, he woke up in a hospital bed not knowing who or where he was. This is his story. Follow him, his thoughts, perceptions and will to survive.

WWW.HDOUGLASB.COM

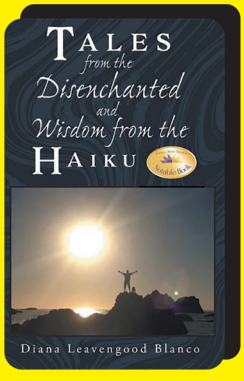
ISBN 979-8886153477

Ellie the Elf - The Spirit of Christmas



JOANNE KIERSARSKY

Come along for the adventures of Ellie The Elf. Using her golden pixie dust and magical snow globe, she helps Santa prove that the Spirit of Christmas is real.



ISBN 978-1968059323

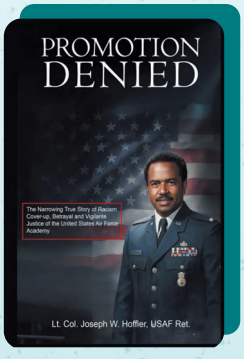
Tales from the Disenchanted and Wisdom from the Haiku

DIANA LEAVENGOOD BLANCO

My poems are oftentimes born from some great sadness. They usually speak of things that have been lost.They try to catch the soul and trap the memory -To tell the story... true...and-what-the cost.I rhyme because it helps me to remember.I rhyme so I must measure every word.I rhyme to help those lost things live forever.In rhyming, lilting, steeped-in-meaning verse.Words can prevail past flesh or thoughts or empires, And words can make souls live beyond the grave.So Man will ever know the wonder of them -The courage that they showed...the joy they gave.

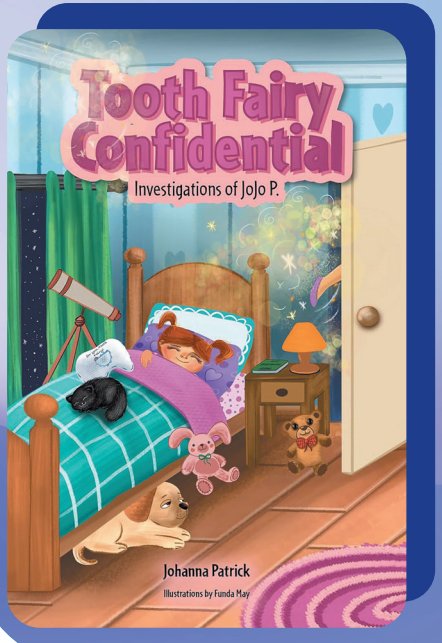
ISBN 979-8295570988

Promotion: Denied



LT. COL. JOSEPH W. HOFFLER USAF-RET.

Promotion: Denied is a powerful true account of institutional racism, betrayal, and moral courage within the United States Air Force Academy. In this deeply personal and meticulously documented narrative, Lt Col Joseph W. Hoffler, USAF (Ret.), exposes how a distinguished twenty-two-year military career was derailed by racial prejudice, unlawful investigations, and a deliberate cover-up by senior leadership.



ISBN 978-1038337009

Tooth Fairy Confidential (Investigations of JoJo P. Book 1)

JOHANNA PATRICK

We all know not to let strangers into the house—but what about the Tooth Fairy? When JoJo's second tooth starts to feel loose, she has second thoughts about letting this magical creature back into her room. She doesn't mind that Santa comes every year, because she gets to meet him at the mall, but the Tooth Fairy is a total unknown. JoJo is determined to learn everything she can before deciding if she's okay with handing over her teeth.

When every adult tells JoJo something different about their Tooth Fairy sightings, and no kid has seen her at all, JoJo decides to set up her own investigative experiments. Will she be able to learn the secret of the money-gifting magical creature? Can JoJo discover just who the Tooth Fairy is?

Tooth Fairy Confidential is light-hearted, entertaining read that encourages kids to ask questions and understand the world around them. Set at Christmas, it weaves together the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus to help kids answer all the questions they might have about these magical beings.

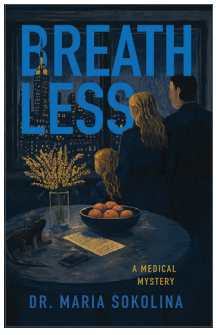
821 The Queensway, Lower Level, Etobicoke, ON, M8Z 1N6, Canada | 1 (877)-741-8091

BOOKSIDE Press

FICTION

Breathless: A Medical Mystery

Maria Sokolina | Manuscript, LLC
360p, e-book, $9.99, ISBN 979-8-901-02200-9



Intriguing medical mystery seeks holistic answers to evolutionary problems.

Great for fans of Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water*, Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder.*

In an "attempt to preserve moments and people who are no longer here in reality but remain vividly alive in memory," Sokolina—a dentist in real life—examines evolutionary adaptations through two women's efforts to unearth the connection between the mouth and the body. First, there is Olga, who finds her husband, Eugene, lying on the kitchen floor one morning and calls an ambulance, only to be informed that, at just 42-years-old, he's been induced into a medical coma due to heart failure. As Olga searches for where things went wrong, her colleague and friend, Dr. Maria Sokolina, is perplexed by the changes she's noticing in her dental patients: constant exhaustion, sleep disturbances, and shrinking jaw space that leads to unwanted extractions. Where their two paths intersect is in the idea that our bodies often speak the truths we are too afraid to examine.

Sokolina's portrayal of the worry, care, and adjustments that Olga and Eugene must make after his medical crisis is realistic and affecting. From adapting to a CPAP machine to nutritional counseling to learning how to reconnect on an intimate level, the couple represent the pain of trying to hold on when life begins to fall apart. Their gradual reawakening—and redefining of their physical and emotional health—forms the story's beating heart, with Maria's more clinical perspective shaping her theory on how modern civilization has learned to manage symptoms instead of correcting their underlying cause.

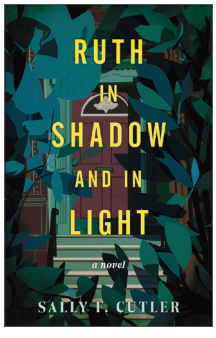
Though *Breathless* starts on a compelling note, the mystery feels overdrawn by the story's close, and the clues, medical theories, and curative answers have a tendency to become repetitive. Despite those issues, this remains a stimulating medical mystery that revolves around dentistry, teeth, and holistic wellbeing, while paralleling two women's journeys to "reclaim space, balance, and health" for themselves, their families, and society as a whole.

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

FICTION

Ruth in Shadow and in Light

Sally F. Cutler | She Writes Press
200p, trade paper, $18.99, ISBN 979-8-896-36226-5



WW2 miseries yield surprising secrets for young Jewish woman in America.

Great for fans of Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, Jamie Ford's *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet.*

Cutler's thoughtful debut explores how love and hardship shape a Jewish American family from Depression-era Brooklyn through the upheavals of World War II. Raised by her widowed physician father alongside her brothers Marvin and Joey, Ruth grows up in an immigrant household rooted in Jewish tradition. As the war begins, Marvin enlists while Joey's growing hostility fractures the family from within. Following a fatal winter accident that leaves her orphaned, Ruth inherits not only her family's brownstone but also the long-buried secrets surrounding her mother's past. As Ruth uncovers the fragments of her family's history, she also begins to understand herself.

Cutler's story weaves between decades, allowing historical and personal events to unfold without feeling rushed. Against the backdrop of WWII, she captures not only the anxieties of a nation at war but also the everyday lives of those waiting at home. Grief, faith, family, identity, and the immigrant experience are all organic parts of Ruth's journey, allowing the story to explore these themes without forcing them. Similarly, familial bonds and the Jewish traditions that shaped Ruth's upbringing are shown through simple declarations rather than melodrama, such as her aunt's straightforward assertion that "we are family" and her father's affectionate *mamaleh*—"little mother"—for Ruth.

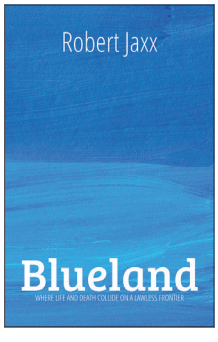
Contrasting perspectives prompt Ruth to look beyond the world she's always known—particularly her relationships with two men who challenge her to consider what she truly wants for her future and imagine how she might have a "joyful, even exciting life." Rather than relying on overt sentimentality, Cutler lets the novel's emotional moments speak for themselves. Certain phrases feel almost meditative, such as when Ruth asks, "Was love really the thing? Was love enough?" Readers will root for Ruth as she moves through the shadows of grief toward the light of self-discovery, and fans of literary historical fiction, transgenerational narratives, and coming-of-age novels will find much to admire here.

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

FICTION

Blueland

Robert Jaxx | Waterstone Press
275p, trade paper, $15.99, ISBN 979-8-234-01620-1



Realistic post-Civil War America is setting for new life out West.

Great for fans of Shannon Burke's *Into the Savage Country*, John Larison's *Whiskey When We're Dry.*

The Civil War is on its brutal way out in Jaxx's latest offering when Captain Alden Zur—leading a regiment of rangers for General Grant—decides he's had enough. Discouraged by Grant's treatment of Jewish Americans ("Grant was usin' Jews like me to fight battles with his left hand, he was throwin' Jews like me outta their homes with his right," he declares early in the novel), Alden heads home to Illinois shortly after General Lee's surrender, accompanied by fellow soldiers Eugene Byrd, Jesse Turnbull, and Charlie Rudolph. Together with his wife Edda, sons Levi and Morgan, and brother-in-law Ezra Neff's family, Alden joins a wagon train directed by the no-nonsense Tobias Henry, planning to travel West for a new life. After a harrowing journey, they reach Blueland, Colorado and settle in as cattle ranchers, but their troubles are far from over.

Jaxx (*Sunset House*) succeeds in capturing the utter chaos of the times with trigger-happy men whose adherence to the law is opportunistic at best and antagonistic at worst. With rickety jail cells, morally questionable sheriffs and their deputies, rivalries between neighboring ranches, and the widespread availability of firearms, it's nearly anarchic. Being Jewish or Black compounds the danger, and Alden's company experiences several terrifying moments of racism and bias that paint a convincing picture of a splintered America.

Almost midway through the novel, the narrative shifts focus—moving from Alden to his son Levi and Levi's friend, Arliss, as the pair embark on several violent and dangerous adventures—before returning to *Blueland* for the denouement. That sudden deviation for several chapters feels jarring, but Jaxx eventually brings the novel full circle. Between the sharp dialogue, brisk pace, and accurate rendering of American life during the post-Civil War years, Blueland offers an immersive experience of a time filled with barbarity and violence but also glimmers of hope and humanity.

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

In ***Wrong Side Out***, **Benton Savage** tells a starkly honest story of living through prolonged confusion, loss of control, and the slow work of reclaiming himself. Told from the inside, the memoir captures what it feels like when judgment falters, reality bends, and everyday decisions carry unexpected consequences, often with lasting personal cost.

Savage writes openly about isolation, damaged relationships, and moments when his own instincts could not be trusted, yet the book resists easy explanations or tidy redemption. Instead, it follows a long, uneven path marked by resistance, collapse, persistence, and gradual clarity. The struggle is not abstract or symbolic; it unfolds through real events, real mistakes, and the determination to keep going when forward motion feels impossible.

At its core, ***Wrong Side Out*** is a story of endurance and self-reclamation, of learning to live with limits without erasing identity, and of finding steadiness after years of imbalance. It is not about labels or diagnoses, but about what it takes to regain footing, rebuild trust in oneself, and fully reengage with life on one's own terms.

Benton Savage's life story is as rich and varied as his lines of writing. His time spent navigating personal changes and traversing the diverse landscapes has indelibly shaped his perspective and literary voice.

Today, Benton resides in Fort Walton Beach, Florida where he balances his property management business with his true passion, writing. His daily dedication to capturing his thoughts and experiences on paper is a testament to his unwavering commitment to exploring the complexities of the human condition.



His recently released poetry book, Fortune Cookies:100 Sayings to Help you Navigate Life's Challenges, a unique collection of poetic musings that mirrors the paper fortunes found in the heart of a cookie, reached number one on Amazon for new poetry in August 2024.

Savage's coming-of-age novel, Free and Satisfied, explores issues with impulsivity, alcohol, and nuances of an interracial relationship, was published in April 2025.

amazon ★★★★★

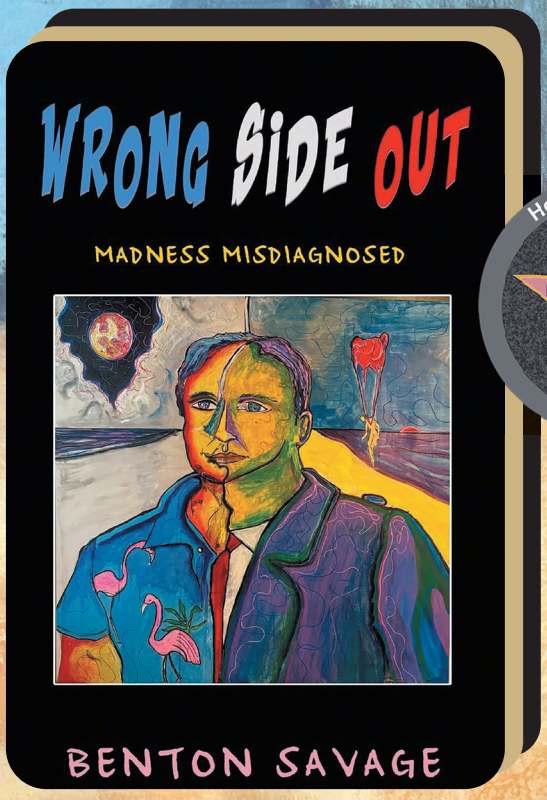
This book spoke to me in a way I never imagined. It's a powerful and thought-provoking read that challenges readers to question assumptions about mental illness and the human experience. The author's honest storytelling evokes empathy while revealing the emotional toll of being misunderstood and mislabeled. Each chapter encourages compassion, deeper reflection, and a willingness to see beyond appearances. Rather than simply recounting difficult moments, Savage offers hope, resilience, and the courage to reclaim one's identity. This compelling book reminds readers that healing often begins when someone is finally seen, heard, and believed. An unforgettable and inspiring journey.

Samaria Hugee, ***Finding Truth Beyond the DiagnosisBecoming.***

amazon ★★★★★

I just finished this, and honestly, it hit me in a way I didn't expect. I don't think it was the same neat, predictable way memoirs sometimes attempts to make it inspirational. It's uncomfortable at times, but in a way that feels honest rather than dramatic. I also appreciated that the author doesn't pretend isolation or broken relationships magically resolve, and that it's about figuring out how to live with limits without losing your sense of who you are. By the end, I didn't feel like I'd read a redemption arc so much as a reclamation. If you've ever gone through a period where your life felt upside down and you weren't sure how to get back to yourself, this book will probably land with you the way it did with me.

Andrea Cercado, ***Raw and Real***



Hollywood Book Reviews
EXCELLENT MERIT

ISBN 978-1968059323

WRONG SIDE OUT

BENTON SAVAGE

bentonsavageauthor.com

Book is available for purchase at the following:

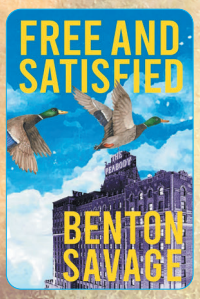
BARNES&NOBLE amazon inks & bindings

P.O. Box 493, Yorba Linda, CA 92885, USA
1 (888)-290-5218

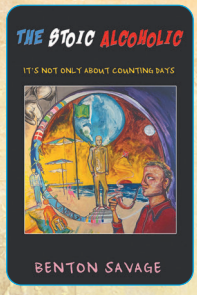
other books:



ISBN 979-8895700983



ISBN 979-8893157154

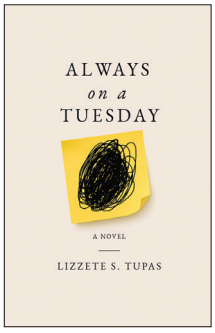


ISBN 978-1968059323

FICTION

Always on a Tuesday: A Novel

Lizzete S. Tupas | Studio LT Press
250p, hardcover, $28.99, ISBN 979-8-9955411-2-7



Compelling narrative of a recovering perfectionist's unquiet mind.

Great for fans of Elizabeth Strout's *The Things We Never Say*, Vincenzo Latronico's *Perfection*.

The first-person narration of Tupas's anxiety-driven debut captures the debilitating nature of perfectionism, as the widening gap between expectation and reality forces a hyper-competent woman to reexamine her identity. Loren Jamieson Santo Tomas is the manager of clinical revenue integrity for a large San Diego health system. She's a numbers person who also became their "magic" problem-solver, a high-pressure role that Loren takes to heart. "People trusted me to find what everyone else had missed," she explains. "I trusted myself to do the same." Until that Tuesday, when she discovers a variance of $220 million.

This discrepancy sends Loren spiraling. She doesn't make mistakes like that—or does she? Loren digs into the spreadsheet, finds the cell that corrupted her numbers, and awaits the "quiet satisfaction" that usually floods her brain with soothing relief. It doesn't come, replaced by a gnawing fear that she can no longer function at the level everyone expects. When more responsibilities are dumped into her lap and curveballs come out of left field, she wonders if Tuesdays are cursed. After all, it's the day she broke up with the "radiant" Bethany, who Loren suspected was out of her league.

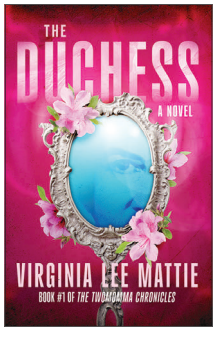
Tupas immerses readers in Loren's amorphous anguish. As her facade of untroubled competence begins to crack, Loren's forced to confront hard truths she meticulously avoided. Whenever a problem rises to the surface, it creates a ripple effect on her psyche, and Tupas adds another brushstroke to this rich portrait. While the prose on occasion can be overcooked, Tupas's ability to weave complex mental health conversations, gender identity confusion, and generational trauma shows a deep understanding of how these issues impact not only the individual directly experiencing them but also everyone in their orbit. Capturing the circuitous mindset of a deeply troubled perfectionist, *Always on a Tuesday* is an incisive examination of the sacrifices women make to become invaluable, while too often ignoring their own inherent worth.

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

FICTION

The Duchess: The Twomomma Chronicles, Book 1

Virginia Lee Mattie | Sense of Place
464p, hardcover, $26.99, ISBN 979-8-9999675-1-0



Warm and lively comic novel of an unforgettable Southern matriarch.

Great for fans of Fannie Flagg, Dorothea Benton Frank.

The spirited, often hilarious first entry in Mattie's Twomomma Chronicles series kicks off with a mystery: Navy Seaman Sissy Beddoes learns that her security clearance has been placed on hold because of surprising questions about her mother's background. Praying that this does not derail her career, Sissy reflects on growing up under the influence of her grandmother "Twomomma," an outspoken matriarch with strong ideas about how Sissy and everyone around her should live. Twomomma's opinion on Sissy's career choice: "The Navy must be hard-up if they are recruiting females!" Known as "the Duchess of Sparta," this hard-praying, hard-smoking, cotillion-minded, sugar-pie-baking, larger-than-life perfectionist grandmother powers the novel: "If I had participated in the Miss North Carolina pageant in 1936, I would have won!" she declares. That sentiment, expressed around the time of the moon landing, is funny enough, but Twomomma barrels on: "The winner had the same measurements as I do, but I was the prettier one."

Killer lines like that exemplify this family story about childhood, family secrets, and the truth behind carefully maintained facades—that "valuable crystal heirloom" might be "stacked to the ceiling" at K-Mart. Twomomma is the sugar in this novel's tea: she is controlling, dramatic, funny, and boasts a consummate sense of dish. Mattie surrounds her with relatives willing to challenge her rather than simply let her dominate. Arguments over manners, education, housekeeping, and Sissy's upbringing accumulate into a touching portrait of a family facing changing ideas about respectability. The humor comes naturally from the characters' talk and teasing, feeling warm even when the family is at odds.

The novel's length sometimes works against it. After establishing Sissy's clearance problem, The Duchess shifts into an extended account of her upbringing and family life, staying there for much of the book before returning to adult Sissy's search for answers, sometimes feeling like a collection of family stories lacking a dramatic throughline. Still, readers looking for an inviting, laugh-out-loud funny Southern family story will relish this.

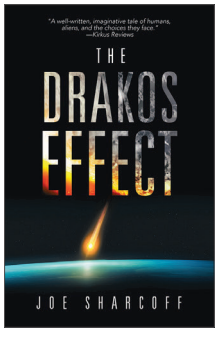
Cover: **B** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **–** Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

EDITOR'S PICK

The Drakos Effect

Joe Sharcoff | iUniverse
300p, trade paper, $20.99, ISBN 978-1-532-03526-5



Big ideas, action distinguish this SF novel of humanity discovering its place.

Great for fans of Robert Charles Wilson, Jack McDevitt.

Boasting bold setpieces and engaging ideas, Sharcoff's smart thriller encompasses first-contact anxiety, utopian daydreams, dystopian nightmares, complex politics, the secret origins of our species, and a broadly humanistic perspective on potential futures. Set on 22nd-century Earth, the narrative begins *in media res*, as biologist Shana Savarino is spending time with an alien scientist from a race known as the Cephians. Humans have nicknamed the alien "Charles Darwin" as the Cephians are on Earth to evaluate whether humanity is worthy enough to join a larger alliance of alien civilizations known as the Mosaic. On a walk together amid the splendor of Yosemite National Park, they're attacked by humans who believe the Cephians are there to destroy us all, an encounter revealing Shana's antipathy toward humanity's hateful tendencies.

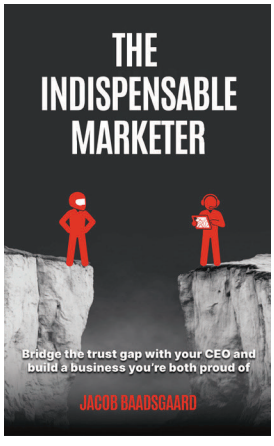
Complicating matters: an underground nuclear test awakens an eons-long-dormant intelligent device, inspiring more human paranoia. Opposing Shana is an imposing military officer who blames the Cephians for the death of a loved one and suspects them of dark intentions; some globe-shaking tragedies will test Shana and humanity alike in a story that connects ancient human fears and themes of sacrifice to contemporary explorations of the nature of consciousness. The stakes prove epic with the revelation of the origins of the device, known as an Archmage Sequencer, and its connection to other spacefaring species.

With exciting prose, Sharcoff conjures some spectacular action and conflagration, as "gamma rays burst" from a beast's "midnight jaws," but it is the focus on the hows and whys of futurism that makes the narrative so fascinating on a philosophical level. Shana proves a compelling and complex protagonist who evolves in fascinating ways, so much so that readers likely will not worry that the rest of the characters feel underwritten by comparison. Her passion, her irascibility, and her deep concern for all life fully round her out in a narrative that balances cynicism and idealism in equal, hearty measures.

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

BookLife Talks with Jacob Baadsgaard





Professional self-reflection was the catalyst for Baadsgaard's first book, *The Indispensable Marketer*. A CEO and their marketing leader can't just have a good working relationship, he argues. They must both speak the same language in order to align with a company's "goals, strategy, and execution." We spoke with Baadsgaard about how his book fits today's business landscape and who would benefit the most from it.

What made you realize you needed to write *The Indispensable Marketer*?

I fired five marketing leaders in eight years. Good people. Talented, hardworking, committed. Every time, I told myself I'd hired the wrong person. Then Chad de Lisle, my sixth, stood up in an executive meeting after I'd grilled him in front of the room and said, "I might not be the right guy for this job." I was ready to agree. Instead, I finally asked the question I'd been avoiding: What if the common denominator was me? It was. Chad wasn't failing because he lacked talent. He was failing because the environment I'd built made the job impossible. So, we spent the next year figuring out why and documented everything we built to fix it. That became the book. I owe it to Chad, and honestly, I owe an apology to the five who came before him.

You coined the term the "Trust Gap." Can you explain it a bit more?

The Trust Gap is what happens when a CEO and a marketing leader don't share a common language for goals, strategy, and execution. The CEO's vision lives in their head. The marketer guesses. The CEO reacts. The marketer guesses again. Eventually the marketer feels like a vending machine. Insert budget, pull lever, dispense revenue. Here's what took me too long to learn: the Trust Gap isn't a personality problem. It's a structural problem, so it has a structural fix. In the book, that fix is VSET: Vision, Strategy, Execution, and Team. It gives both sides the shared language they've been missing.

Who is your ideal reader and what do you hope they take away from *The Indispensable Marketer*?

The marketing leader who's talented, working harder than ever, and quietly wondering if they'll survive the next bad month. If you've ever lain awake at 3 a.m. rehearsing how to explain the numbers to your CEO, this book is for you. I hope every reader walks away with one of two things: either the tools to become indispensable right where they are, or the clarity to see their CEO isn't ready for alignment and the courage to find one who is. Both are wins. And if you're a CEO reading along, welcome. This book will show you how to stop burning through marketers and start building with one. I learned that the hard way so you don't have to.

Why or how do you think your book is particularly relevant in today's corporate landscape?

Two reasons. First, CMO tenure has long been among the shortest in the C-suite, and that pressure rolls downhill to every marketing role.

Second, AI. Cheap software can already draft copy, build reports, and optimize spend. Execution is becoming a commodity. If your value is doing tasks, you're more replaceable than ever. What AI can't do is sit across from a CEO, pull the vision out of their head, and turn it into a strategy the whole company believes in. That's what makes a marketer indispensable. The book is about building that muscle before the market forces the question.

What's next for you?

The book is the beginning. Chad and I cohost *The Indispensable Marketer* show and newsletter, where we keep having the conversations the book started. We've also built a course and a cohort for marketing leaders who want to put VSET to work with their own CEO, plus a free assessment at indispensablemarketer.com so readers can see where they stand today.

The goal hasn't changed. I want to help as many marketers as possible close the Trust Gap and become the leader they're meant to be. That's the greatness I see in them.

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

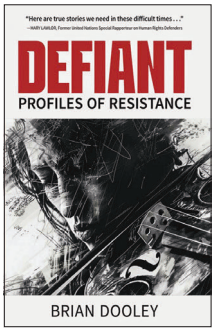
BUSINESS & PERSONAL FINANCE

EDITOR'S PICK

Defiant: Profiles of Resistance

Brian Dooley

272p, hardcover, $27, ISBN 978-1-967-49402-6



Inspiring accounts of everyday Europeans fighting injustice and oppression.

Great for fans of Andrew Hsiao and Audrea Lim's *The Verso Book of Dissent*, Ijeoma Oluo's *Be a Revolution*.

In the introduction to this charged, hopeful book documenting everyday Europeans' resistance to a "crisis of growing state violence and repression," longtime human rights activist Dooley (author of two books about the Troubles in Ireland and a study of Robert F. Kennedy) writes about a 1960s Irish civil rights leader who described herself as an "accidental activist." In *Defiant*, Dooley profiles a diverse crew of citizens who have likewise found themselves taking up brave, difficult, often dangerous activism in the face of intense government and societal pressure.

Dooley lets his subjects tell their own stories while providing clear-eyed context about the forces against them. Dooley's subjects offer testimony about refugee crises, past conflicts like the Troubles, environmental degradation in Ukraine and Turkey, and anti-LGBTQ discrimination in Poland. Likewise, Dooley's activists come from a variety of backgrounds. Elderly married couples Fidelma and Cormac McAleer and Lorena Fornasir and Gian Andrea Franchi fight a gold mine in the Irish mountains and tend to immigrants' medical needs in Italy, respectively; food scientist Bülent Şık battles his former government employers over unchecked industrial contaminants. Dooley describes his cast's lives with care and precision while demonstrating an ear for a choice quote: "I knew my dad was really angry from the very aggressive way he was playing UNO," gay-rights activist Kamil says, a small detail that speaks volumes. Hajrija Čobo, working to save a Bosnian forest from a mining operation, sold cigarettes and coffee beans during the Bosnian War. "They'd give me a small gold ring for five cigarettes … That's when I learned that gold has no value in a catastrophe."

Such insights abound as *Defiant* demonstrates the common motivations that drive exploitation and the shared beliefs that inspire resistance to greed and injustice. As Lorena Fornasir puts it: "When you see someone in danger or in need, do you have to think about it twice? No, we just acted immediately."

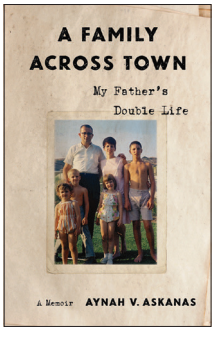
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **–** Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

MEMOIR

A Family Across Town: My Father's Double Life, a Memoir

Aynah V. Askanas | She Writes Press

290p, e-book, $12.99, ISBN 979-889636-217-3



Shocking family secret prompts profound soul-searching.

Great for fans of Dani Shapiro's *Inheritance*, Maud Newton's *Ancestor Trouble*.

In her debut, Askanas explores how toxic family secrets upended her childhood and how she learned to handle the fallout with grace and understanding. Growing up in Southern California, Askanas was used to the frequent absences of her pediatrician father, Matthew Cohen, and his unwillingness to bring his family to office functions. As an adult, she learned the shocking truth: he was supporting a second family across town. "Dad lived in two households and supported two families, splitting his time fifty-fifty: Mom's 'husband' and father to Rob, Steve, Dana, and me; Lorna's 'husband' and father to Randi and Lisa." This revelation propels Askanas into a painful yet necessary excavation of her family's complicated history.

Askanas and her siblings were also blindsided when they learned their parents had never been married—and that their affair had been going on for more than 30 years. "But there is no guidebook called What to Do When You Discover Your Father's Other Family, so we all dealt with it the best we could," she quips. While Askanas looks back on her parents' relationship and flags instances of her father's duplicity, she reflects on how generational trauma may have conditioned her mother to believe she deserved mistreatment: "Perhaps some of us are drawn to the painful feelings of our past, doomed to repeat and relive them."

By relating her family's heartbreak and her journey toward healing, Askanas offers a pitch-perfect explanation of how secrets poison relationships. Her fear, anger, and sadness will resonate with readers through her powerful prose, but most noteworthy is her strength. "Family secrets are destructive, but if they are exposed and you have the genuine love and friendship of family, you can triumph over them," she asserts. In the end, readers will empathize with Askanas through her willingness to confront a festering family secret and take an unflinching look at the truth.

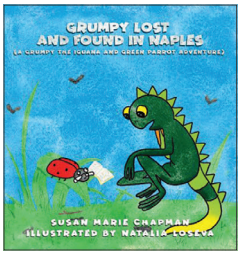
Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **–** Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A-**

PICTURE BOOKS

Grumpy Lost And Found In Naples: A Grumpy the Iguana and Green Parrot Adventure, Book 12

Susan Marie Chapman | The Gourmet Dog, LLC

44p, hardcover, $9.80, ISBN 978-1-736-80567-1



Endearing iguana faces surprising challenges in this series entry.

Great for fans of Jessica Meserve's *The House that Love Built*, Elisha Cooper's *Beaver Is Lost*.

Chapman's lovable iguana embarks on an unexpected out-of-town adventure that will please fans of the long-running series as it challenges Grumpy to adapt to some serious new changes. The story opens with Grumpy slogging through another Florida winter, where temps can drop so low that he transforms from a carefree iguana to a "frozen Popsicle." Since he's cold-blooded, Grumpy can't manage cool weather like some animals, and the thought of being chilled scares him—for good reason: Chapman explains that cold iguanas "lose all control of their body parts" and, without warning, plummet to the ground from their tree perches. Grumpy wants no part of that, so when he stumbles onto a family at the local park, he nestles into their blanket for a snuggly nap.

That choice sends Grumpy to places he never dreamed of, as he's accidentally packed into the family's belongings and whisked out of town—to Naples. (That's Florida, not Italy.) There, Grumpy does not recognize that he has come a long way from home. A ladybug welcomes him but is little help to a scared, sobbing lizard, and younger readers will empathize with him when he cries, "How am I ever going to find my way home?" Luckily, Chapman brings in a familiar face to comfort Grumpy: the trusty Green Parrot, who followed Grumpy's inadvertent adventure. He doesn't have great news about getting this endearing iguana back to his digs, however, and kids will be surprised at the story's cliffhanger ending.

This entry (following *Growing Up Is Hard to Do*) is packed with informative facts that build geographical literacy and showcase the habitats that iguanas need to survive. Natalia Loseva follows those lessons with giggle-worthy illustrations of Grumpy morphing into a popsicle, sunning himself on a beach chair, and conversing with a comically erudite ladybug. This startling development for our beloved iguana will definitely leave readers eager for what's next.

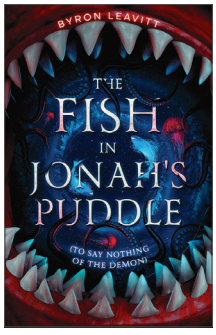
Cover: **B+** | Design & typography: **B +** | Illustrations: **A-** Editing: **B+** | Marketing copy: **A-**

MIDDLE GRADE

The Fish in Jonah's Puddle: To Say Nothing of the Demon

Byron Leavitt | Brain Waves Press

192p, trade paper, $12.95, ISBN 978-0-9907235-6-1



Imaginative teen and fantastical creatures fight devouring demon.

Great for fans of AJ Vanderhorst's *The Mostly Invisible Boy*, Alysa Wishingrad's *Between Monsters and Marvels*.

Leavitt is an expert worldbuilder, and his middle-grade debut incorporates fantasy and horror into a fast-paced, dimension-hopping adventure that hinges on the importance of imagination. Jonah Hutchins has plenty of that, too much if you ask his parents, who worry that his attachment to imaginary companions will keep the teenager from making real friends. What they don't see is apparent to the creatures who've become part of Jonah's orbit. The well-mannered, debonair troll Humphrey and wise-cracking, mischievous harpy Calisto understand that there's something special about Jonah, who can harness his creative resources and draws otherworldly attention.

So when a salmon politely introduces himself as Stuart, Jonah is unfazed. It's just another strange occurrence on a fateful day, when a violent rainstorm has left the Hutchins' backyard full of eerie puddles. Stuart shares his pond-sized waterhole with a toothy demon known as the Maw, whose rapacious appetite has torn through the membranes that separate dimensions—and who gobbles up Jonah's unsuspecting parents. Suddenly seeing her "weird" brother in a new light, the terrified Debbie joins Jonah and his (now visible) scary friends, who set off on a mission to stop the Maw from engulfing all their worlds in devastating darkness.

Drawing on different traditions (including folklore and Greek mythology), Leavitt anchors Jonah in Christian iconography, echoing his biblical namesake when he's swallowed by the demon. The Maw's murky interior is a magnificent realm: a ruined city of tilted skyscrapers, wet from flowing gastric juices, with disembodied mouths taunting defiant survivors. By illustrating his hodgepodge characters (like the prophetic Ms. Finch, who has an octopus head), Leavitt pulls young readers deeper into his creative mindset, where whimsical figures become unrelenting warriors. As these ragtag allies skillfully battle evil in *The Fish in Jonah's Puddle*, their rollercoaster ride is powered by Leavitt's full-throttle ingenuity firing on all cylinders.

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

YOUNG ADULT

EDITOR'S PICK

The Thirteenth Cagebreaker: A Cantara Academy Novel

Melissa Jean Vallejos | Iron Quill Press

457p, e-book, $4.99, ASIN B0G6LRSPM3



Magic and romance in a dark academy's spooky halls.

Great for fans of Allison Saft's *A Far Wilder Magic*, Naomi Novik's *A Deadly Education*.

In the tradition of dark academia, Vallejos's promising, well-written YA debut introduces another spooky set of hallowed halls where students venture to learn about magic. Sparrow "Roe" Kettler, an 18-year-old with a magically gifted voice, has just received a scholarship to Cantara Academy, sponsored by the prestigious Arcement family. For a dock girl from the lower city, the offer is appealing—it could reshape Roe's entire future. Unfortunately her family's history with Cantara Academy casts a dark shadow, as her mother escaped radical magic containment protocols when she was a student there. Now a similar fate may be waiting for Roe when she receives the same amethyst designation as her mother, labeling her gifts as "rare, powerful, and dangerous."

Containment is the obvious answer when students receive an amethyst designation, with Roe only the thirteenth such student in 300 years. Manifesting in a purplish glow, untamable magic is a threat to safety and stability – or so argues the academy board, staffed with dubious members including Roe's benefactor Lord Arcement. Despite this adversity, Roe works to perfect her magical expression alongside other scholarship students and Lord Arcement's talented, complicated son, Blaise. While at first Blaise regards her with cool detachment, over time he becomes her greatest admirer, reminding her through her challenges that she is "so deeply, impossibly loved."

Young readers will want to root for the frightened yet determined Roe as she strives to harness her gifts in a way that others will not find threatening—and to uncover the truth of what it means to be "caged." At times, the ligaments joining these familiar tropes feel strained, but *The Thirteenth Cagebreaker* will please fans of dark academia: it features a classically styled institution, found family, dark school secrets, and an overbearing set of villains disguised as ordinary staff. This will especially appeal to young readers who may have also been told at times they're "too much."

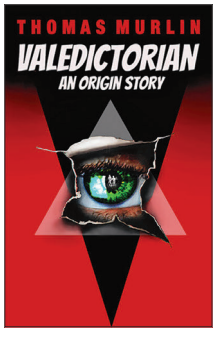
Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

YOUNG ADULT

Valedictorian: An Origin Story

Thomas Murlin | Emory House

384p, e-book, $8.99, ASIN B0H3C4Q73C



Inventive origin story takes troubled teen on a wild ride.

Great for fans of Jamison Shea's *I Feed Her to the Beast and the Beast Is Me*, Vanessa Len's *Only A Monster*.

In Murlin's trilogy starter, Jack Shaw is a man torn between two worlds. At a Harvard admissions interview, he reflects back on the unusual changes that occurred during his freshman year in high school, his memories teetering the line between reality and fantasy: when his estranged uncle Mike gifts him a comic book collection for his 14th birthday, Jack is immediately consumed, losing himself in stories of Superman, Johnny Storm, and the Green Goblin. But his rich inner imaginings of superheroes swooping in to save the day don't seem to make it into real life, as Jack is bullied at school, struggling in class, and desperate to impress his father, whose only desire is for his eldest son to become a Harvard man.

Gradually, events start to change: Jack strikes up a friendship with the unconventional new kid at school, Ryan Fisher; he cultivates a budding affinity with collectible shop owner, Mr. Shelby; he starts to see odd things that the adults in his life call hallucinations; his grades suddenly become perfect; and, when, he discovers a domino with a hidden symbol on it, it becomes a talisman, of sorts, as Jack works to gain control over the superhuman powers quietly growing inside of him. Thus begins Jack's transformation, one that Murlin credits to his experience of tragedy—an inventive spin on a superhero's origin story.

Murlin's protagonist is buckling under the weight of life's changes, from his first romance to a fracturing family to his difficulties coping with anger and resentment at school. As Jack's reality becomes increasingly twisted, and his identity starts to splinter, his uncle Mike's wise words—"You can't spend your life pretending to be someone you're not"—become a powerful refrain. Murlin rounds out Jack's journey with a truly shocking ending, as Jack learns the explosive truth that no good story exists without the perfect villain.

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