NOVEMBER 9, 2026

booklife®

YOUR GUIDE TO SELF-PUBLISHING

20 New BookLife Titles Reviewed

Getting Your Books into Libraries

A librarian offers her tips for indie authors

BY LISA RABEY

I work in a small rural library. Since we don't have a lot of space or budget to buy everything we want to buy, we focus on books that are geared for our community. For example, our population is aging, so we have a good-sized large-print collection. Our patrons also like mysteries and thrillers, so we cater to that when buying new releases. We do have a general fiction collection that comprises classics, current titles, and the backlist of more popular authors. While we have romance, western, sci-fi, and fantasy sections, they are not as robust as the other collections because they are not titles that our community reads.

Recently, an author emailed to pitch her titles for us to include in our collection. We did not pursue her titles for circulation for several reasons. Though she specified genre and provided author comps, none of those titles were in our collections. The email did include samples of reviews from Amazon and Goodreads, but not professional publications. Additionally, the author did not take the opportunity to sell us on why we should specifically carry her books. Furthermore, there was no information on where we could buy her books, the books' format, the cost, or the ISBNs.

If the author had spent time researching our collection, she would have fared better in getting our attention or decided we weren't the right library for her. I'm going to sound repetitive on this topic because I want to drive this issue home: Bookstores and libraries of all shapes and sizes have limited space and budgets. They cannot have all the books. They are very selective about what they choose, and it is up to you to research the bookstore or library before you approach them. Here are some things to think about when publishing your titles, choosing who to approach about buying them, and crafting your pitch.



Lisa Rabey

WHILE PRODUCING YOUR BOOK

Think about all the aspects of your book: Is the title and your name clear and readable on the cover? Is it professionally edited? Does the formatting of the book match

industry standards? What kind of font are you using? You want to give bookstores and libraries the very best version of your title that you can. Caveat: It's almost impossible to catch all spelling and grammar errors, and even traditional publishers sometimes have things slip through. The point here is to make sure the copy is as clean as possible.

Next, consider the vendors through which your book is available. Bookstores buy direct from publishers or via industry distributors like Ingram and work with companies like libro.fm for digital audiobooks. Libraries rely on Ingram, Libby, or Hoopla. If your titles are not available from those vendors, they cannot buy them. They can only accept donated copies.

WHEN DECIDING WHICH LIBARIES TO APPROACH

First, consider relevancy to their collection. This goes back to the first column, when we talked about different types of bookstores and libraries. Reaching out to a romance-only bookstore like The Ripped Bodice when your title does not have romantic elements is counterproductive. Similarly, if the community is mainly Spanish-speaking, a library is more likely to seek out Spanish-language books.

Next, you'll want to identify comparison titles. Are you a Sarah J. Maas kind of writer, or more of an Emily Henry? Do Matt Haig's stories align with yours, or are you more of a Richard Osman type? Once you have your comps identified, search for them on a library's online catalog (no login needed) to see if the library is buying books like yours. Looking into this will save you (and them) time when you approach them.

Also consider your local ties. A lot of indie bookstores and libraries carry a local collection of titles that represent their community. This means that if your book is situated in that community or you're a local author, you have a greater chance of getting your book onto their shelves, as they can easily handsell or circulate it with similar titles.

Lastly, click through the library's website to see what kind of programming they do or what they are promoting. If a library does a lot of signings and panels, they may be open to pitches for events. Especially if you're local, offering an event like this could be a selling point. This is also true for bookstores.

CRAFTING YOUR PITCH

Once you've decided which libraries are worth approaching, make sure you include the relevant information in your pitch. You'll want to include: the genre, the comp titles that the library already has in the collection, and a sales pitch about why your title belongs in the collection, including any local connection; sample reviews (ideally from industry publications); information on vendors who carry the books, their cost, and the ISBNS; and any ideas for signings, panels, or other events.

I've given you a lot of food for thought! Now go forth and do your homework!

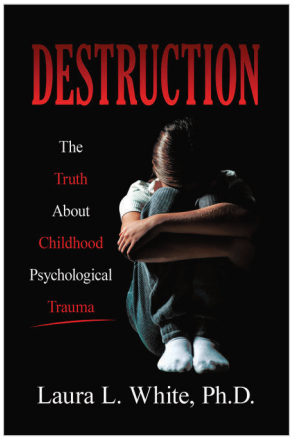
Lisa Rabey is a librarian, writer, content strategist, and educator.

Q&A SPONSORED

BookLife Talks with Laura L. White

After realizing that there was a dearth of books covering childhood psychological trauma, school psychologist White "knew, with absolute certainty, that [she] had to write this book." As a victim of psychological trauma herself, White was in a unique position to write *Destruction* as a mix of clinical examinations and her own memoir.





What do you hope your audience gets out of *Destruction: The Truth About Childhood Psychological Trauma*?

I love memoirs and I've read dozens of them; yet, I've never come across a memoir like mine, that is, one that describes childhood psychological abuse, occurring without physical and/or sexual abuse. There is very little information on the topic in either professional or popular literature. I want more people to understand the cruelty of psychological abuse, and how it affects a child's development.

You've mentioned that it was hard to write this book because it almost felt like psychological trauma is somehow less than physical or sexual abuse. Can you elaborate on that?

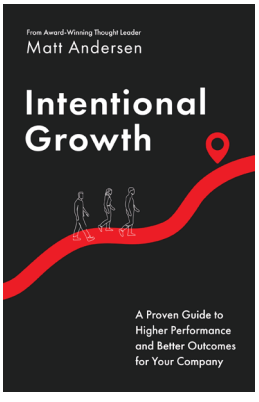
I thought about writing this story for years, but wondered how could I possibly tell a story about psychological abuse, when so many other memoir writers have bravely shared their horrific experiences of physical and sexual abuse, along with psychological abuse. When I finally put pen to paper, my experiences evolved from impalpable thoughts and memories to solid chapters that bore witness to the violence of psychological trauma, and I knew, with absolute certainty, that I had to write this book.

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

BookLife Talks with Matt Andersen

The BookLife Review for *Intentional Growth*, Andersen's debut leadership book, described it as a "detailed guide [that] turns ambitious business goals into measurable action." We spoke to Andersen about his career experience and how that led to him writing *Intentional Growth* for companies that "confuse activity with progress."





What made you decide to write *Intentional Growth*?
Honestly, I got tired of watching founders and CEOs work incredibly hard and still not get where they wanted to go. After 27 years and more than 175 transactions, I kept seeing the same pattern: talented people, real businesses, genuine ambition, and outcomes that fell short of what was possible. Not because of bad luck or bad timing, but because nobody had ever given them a clear framework for thinking about growth the right way. I wrote *Intentional Growth* because I wanted to give leaders the book I wish had existed earlier in my career. One that is practical, honest, and built entirely on what I have actually seen work.

What mistake do you see companies make over and over again?
They confuse activity with progress. I work with companies that are genuinely busy, full of talented people executing against long lists of initiatives, and somehow not getting closer to where they want to be. The reason is almost always the same: they never clearly defined where they were going in the first place. When you don't have a specific destination, everything looks like it might help. New markets, new hires, new tools, new strategies. It all goes on the list. And the list becomes the strategy, which is not the same thing as actually having one. The companies that build lasting value start with the end in mind and filter every decision through that destination. Most never do.

Was there a point in your career that you wish you would have had *Intentional Growth*?
Absolutely. Early in my career on the buy side, I was evaluating companies without a structured framework for understanding what actually made one business more valuable than another beyond the financial statements. I was looking at the numbers without fully understanding the organizational story behind them. The QVG (Quality, Value, Growth) framework we developed and write about in the book would have sharpened my thinking considerably in those early years. It also would have helped me have better conversations with the founders I was working alongside, because I would have understood more clearly what they were building and where the real gaps were. Experience is a great teacher, but a good framework accelerates the lesson.

How does your book stand out in the leadership genre?
Most leadership books are written from the outside looking in. Mine is written from 27 years of sitting across the table from founders and CEOs at the most consequential moments of their professional lives. The frameworks in *Intentional Growth* aren't theoretical. They come directly from what I have seen produce exceptional outcomes and what I have seen fall short. The book is also unusually honest about the personal dimensions of growth, the identity challenges that come with delegating, the emotional weight of succession planning, and the gap between knowing what needs to change and actually changing it. I did not want to write a book full of tidy advice. I wanted to write one that tells leaders what growth actually looks and feels like.

If you could pick anyone to give this book to, who would it be and why?
A founder who is about ten years into building their business, generating real revenue, and starting to feel like the company is outgrowing them. That is the moment where everything I write about becomes most relevant, and it is also the moment when most founders don't yet realize they need it. The decisions made in that window, about delegation, about systems, about what kind of leader they want to become, shape everything that follows. If I could put this book in the hands of every founder at that inflection point, I think it would change a lot of outcomes for the better.

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

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

Rita's Wait

Rina Pita | Atacama

383p, e-book, $19.99, ISBN 978-1-0675751-1-3



Moving novel of a woman's bold choices in 1910s Chile.

Great for fans of Marcela Serrano's *Ten Women*, Diamela Eltit's *Never Did the Fire.*

"Destiny is not a sentence. Believing it is can make it one," declares Angélica, an oracle-like figure, in Pita's wise, deeply evocative novel of Chile in the 1910s. Rita, the protagonist inspired by Pita's real-life great-aunt, is living in Antofagasta, a city "growing rapidly but chaotically," in 1918, at a time of political upheaval, persecution, and violence against minorities. Situated in what Rita's Aunt Gertie calls "the rear end of the planet," Antofagasta and its bay are wrapped in the camanchaca, or fog, "a source of myths and legends" that often swallows everything. Pita's vivid prose, alive with striking detail, pierces the mists, revealing the lives of working women at a time of "class tensions, labour unrest" and the anti-Peruvian violence of a group called "The Patriotic League," all as "the winds of modernity from Europe stirred ambition and hope."

It is up to Rita to decide whether she takes charge of her own life—or simply accepts the destiny laid before her. She is 32, and her mother, Clara, sees her as a spinster. Rita falls in love with Xavier, a Peruvian with a tormented past, whose very presence puts her in the crosshairs of the Patriotic League. Pita dramatizes this and other conflicts among Rita's circle and family with scrupulous detail and much resonant feeling, examining different responses to societal turmoil—Rita's brother, Rodolfo, is content with his job and family life and wants no trouble, but atrocities against minorities unlock something in Rita.

Pita powerfully captures the feeling of love, politics, violence, and prejudice tightening their grip on Rita's life as she is torn between fleeing with Xavier and her duties to her mother. Rita's courage moves, and Pita's conjuring of the past proves convincing, engaging, and ultimately inspiring. Dialogue is especially strong and rich in insights: "the past is in front of us because we can see and learn from it, while the future is behind us because we cannot see it." Readers of historical fiction about life as it was lived will find much that moves and illuminates.

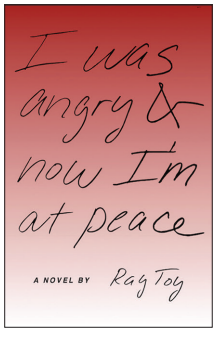
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **–** Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

FICTION

I Was Angry & Now I'm at Peace

Ray Toy | Ray Toy Press

188p, trade paper, $15, ISBN 979-8-240-84173-6



Sparkling autofiction of a queer writer's pain, joy, and striving to connect.

Great for fans of Katherine Packert Burke's *Still Life*, Renee Gladman's *My Lesbian Novel.*

"It's okay if lovers make me cry desperately," declares Tybalt, the narrator of Toy's sparkling autofiction novel. "Because when I cry, I write." Part of a lively, mostly queer experimental artist community in Philadelphia, Tybalt reports, in journal-like life updates, from a torturous liminal state, as they are detransitioning from being a trans man and constantly unsure of their own physical and mental health and their status as an artist. "I am sitting in a Manhattan bookstore feeling rejected but young," Tybalt writes, on a trip, observing how "bookstore people, gentle and discerning, laid my novel quietly on the table," quickly done with it. Tybalt once published their own diary and, in the great tradition of confessional writers, seem surprised that people they know read it; they agonize about a relationship with Yazo, an ex-lover in London, unsure if there is potential there for a real romance.

Presenting the creative life as narrative art, Tybalt proves witty, playful, and companionable on the page, as they share, in sharp-elbowed prose, the itinerary of the young(-ish), rejected, but still promising: near-romances, intense time with friends, parties that double as experimental art gatherings, accounts of drugs and supplements, and breaks to attend panels and support groups.

The prose is briskly epigrammatic, attuned to relatable longings, disappointments, and states of mind: "I'm in the cognitive swaying hammock of an edible and shoegaze"; "Nothing is ever enough for me, and the Buddha knows it." Toy presents everyday mundanities and intensely self-revealing moments with similar heat. The title suggests the narrative arc as characters and themes recur and Tybalt tries to come to terms with past trauma, their future as an artist, and how to take risks and communicate what matters in real life—not just in diaries. Readers who love the literature of the textures of life as it's lived, with jagged surprises and a sense of dish, will enjoy the disclosure.

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

FICTION

Ghost Music

Alice McVeigh | Warleigh Hall Press

387p, e-book, $5.99, ASIN B0DDQM3XTR



Music-forward mystery plays on the emotions of classical performers.

Great for fans of *Mozart in the Jungle*; Taylor Jenkins Reid's *Daisy Jones and the Six.*

Anchoring a supernatural thriller in her experience as a classical musician, McVeigh captures the behind-the-scenes dynamic of a London orchestra while also showing how these accomplished performers are so loath to define the ineffable that they fail to identify the otherworldly in their midst. She shifts between plot-driven third-person narration and first-person diary entries, which revel in the high drama of this artistic hothouse. Pete Hegal, orchestra manager of the Royal Sinfonia, describes himself as "an observer rather than a participant," but he understands the strange alchemy that binds together 90 musicians so they can play as a singular force.

The arrival of magnetic William Mellor changes the orchestra's chemistry, especially after he purchases a cello that has a mysterious provenance and resonates in unusual ways. McVeigh digs into the insular cellist's complicated love life: William's wife Margot, who has multiple sclerosis, learns about his affair with violinist Isabel Bonner (whose diaries reveal disintegrating morale at the rival Orchestra of London and her own toxic relationship with their domineering artistic director). Meanwhile, the eccentric and demanding Polish conductor, Leszek Zimetski, still rules the roost at the ascending Royal Sinfonia, even when he falls under the influence of another new musician, the alluring and possibly malevolent Janice.

McVeigh (*While the Music Lasts*) was a cellist with the BBC Symphony and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and she regales readers with a repertoire of Western classical music. In this revised version of her 1997 novel, she divulges the idiosyncrasies of a high-stakes orchestra, with its internal rivalries, romantic complications, and last-minute disasters. The supernatural element adds welcome urgency to a narrative overloaded with characters, each defined by their role in the orchestra and individual quirks. Doomed romance, a vengeful wraith, and heated workplace dynamics reach a crescendo of heightened reality in *Ghost Music*, as McVeigh immerses readers in a symphony of dissonance and resolution.

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

From Life's Deepest Waters To a Story Of Hope

Ann Simard Invites Readers on an Unforgettablę Journey

About the Author

Ann Simard is an inspirational memoirist whose writing is rooted in authenticity, compassion, and hope, with a background in nursing and a passion for encouraging others through story telling, she shares experiences that inspire readers to find strength, purpose, and healing through every season of life.





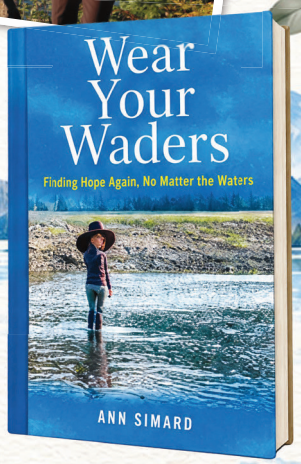






Begin the journey with Wear Your Waders - Volume I.

Scan the QR code to learn more about the book and connect with Ann Simard



Some stories entertain. Others leave a lasting imprint on the heart

In Wear Your Waders - Volume I, author Ann Simard shares a deeply personal memoir inspired by real life experiences, inviting readers into a journey shaped by resilience, faith, family, and the courage to keep moving forward through life's most challenging seasons.

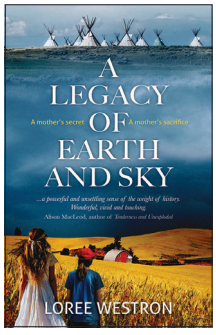
Drawing from years of personal reflection and her experiences as a nurse, Ann writes with honesty, compassion, and authenticity. Her story telling doesn't simply recount events, it explores the emotions behind them, reminding readers that even the most difficult chapters of life can become the beginning of something meaningful.

FICTION

A Legacy of Earth and Sky

Loree Westron

323p, e-book, $4.99, ISBN 978-1-0666360-2-0



Vivid epic explores personal and political legacies in American West.

Great for fans of Karen Russell's *The Antidote*, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*.

For descendants of prairie settlers like Westron's peripatetic flower child Margaret Dearborne, the impulse for constant movement battles against generations of stubborn rootedness, and her multi-generational epic digs into family lore and American history to find the source of this conflict. Margaret has always embraced the counterculture ethos of on-the-run reinvention, never staying anywhere for long, but by the 1980s, her teenage daughter Dylan longs to trade their chaotic life for some stability. So when Margaret drives their VW microbus to a farm in Idaho, Dylan is stunned to find she has a grandfather, two taciturn uncles, and a complicated family tree.

The dynamic between whip-smart Dylan and the resourceful mom she calls Maggie is central to Westron's panoply of voices. She captures the methodical way Dylan acquires information and the dreamy romanticism of Maggie's self-mythologizing, setting both personalities against the novel's broader examination of belonging. In one poignant scene, Dylan scrutinizes Maggie's past drifting and their arrival in Idaho, wondering whether they could finally "become a real family, at last." The Dearborne farm sets squarely in the Nez Perce Reservation, and Westron begins interrupting this central mother-daughter narrative with fictional letters and journal entries from the real-life explorer William Clark.

Clark embodies the mythos of Westward expansion, a complex history shaped by countless forms of violence against Indigenous nations. As Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Clark chronicles his frustrations, along with a tender longing for the child he fathered while staying with the Nez Perce. His abandoned son, meanwhile, has a different view of Clark's legacy, and Westron explores the generational repercussions of his actions, both as an individual and the representative of a rapacious government. Weaving together multiple viewpoints, including Nez Perce oral histories, Westron (*Missing Words*) connects characters through their deep love for a land that both challenges and defines them—and where homecomings are always bittersweet.

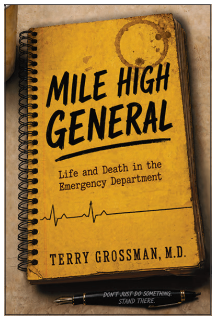
Cover: **B-** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: **–** Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **B+**

FICTION

Mile High General: Life and Death in the Emergency Department

Terry Grossman | 5000 Feet Press

320p, trade paper, $18.95, ISBN 979-8-9975731-0-2



Frank, revealing medical drama about an intern's education in the ER.

Great for fans of Samuel Shem's *The House of God*, Adam Kay's *This Is Going to Hurt*.

With nearly half a century in medicine behind him, Grossman (*Transcend: Nine Steps to Living Well Forever*) revisits his early emergency-room work in this charged, eye-opening fiction debut. On Christmas night, 1979, Seth Remington begins a month-long rotation as an intern at Mile High General, a busy Denver public hospital, believing medical school has prepared him for what awaits. In one month, he confronts stabbings, overdoses, psychiatric emergencies, baffling symptoms, and patients whose stories conceal crucial information. "Someone else always needed me," Seth notes, and, overwhelmed, he must depend on observation, basic tests, and judgment he has not yet learned to trust. Outside the hospital, his relationship with his longtime girlfriend, Rachel, begins to deteriorate as his connection with nurse Rita grows. Grossman's medical experience lends authenticity to his depiction of the pressures and uncertainties of life in an emergency department.

Brisk, clear prose and scenecraft that emphasizes striking detail allow the urgency of the cases to carry the drama. Dark, frank humor powers the exchanges between exhausted doctors, nurses, and patients, offering moments of relief without diminishing the human suffering around them. Grossman drives home the idea of experience accumulating into expertise as Seth gathers a list of "Rules and Pearls" culled from the "chaos of the ED," lessons that connect the narrative's often self-contained episodes. As those lessons accumulate, Seth's early confidence gives way to humility and a deeper awareness of the responsibility he carries.

Reflecting the challenge of balancing such overwhelming work with a personal life, the romantic storyline that unfolds in brief intervals between shifts is less developed than Seth's medical education, with the women involved feeling less clearly developed than most of the patients, who tend to be the standout characters. Throughout, Grossman's compassion shines through as he never reduces patients to medical curiosities or props for lessons. Readers drawn to medical dramas will appreciate this vivid series of case studies.

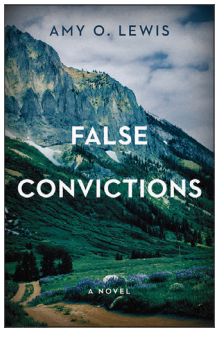
Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **–** Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A-**

MYSTERY/THRILLER

False Convictions: A Novel

Amy O. Lewis | Arrow Road Press

312p, trade paper, $17.95, ISBN 978-1-737-29776-5



Twisty cat-and-mouse thriller of false identity and creeping suspense.

Great for fans of Kate Michaelson's *Hidden Rooms*, Catherine Ryan Howard's *The Nothing Man*.

In the fourth entry of Lewis's Colorado Skies series (after *The Last Temptation*), the saga's hero-on-the-run, Kim Jackson (an alias she assumed after fleeing from a crime she was framed for in Chicago) has started her life over once more. Now settled in Gunnison—and unable to use the degrees she earned under her true identity—Kim has enrolled in the local university as a criminology student. She aims to keep a low profile, but when an unexpected murder rocks her department, Kim can't resist the criminology practicum right in front of her: investigating who shot her professor, Kent Dodge, in cold blood.

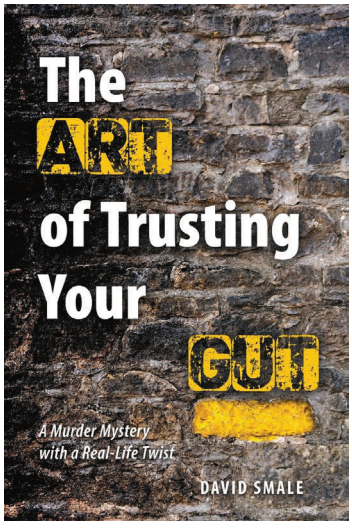
Of course, every criminology student is eager to apply their coursework, hoping to find what the police cannot, but Kim has one thing that her classmates do not: shortly before he was killed, Kent gave her a copy of his soon-to-be published crime thriller. The book's plot has some startling connections to Gunnison's local history, prompting Kim to wonder if someone was willing to go to any lengths to stop it from being published. Adding to the mystery is the unexpected arrival of Lena Fallon, a woman from Kim's past who is guarded about her reasons for suddenly showing up in Gunnison.

Lewis employs an unconventional technique by revealing the culprit early on to readers, who receive short glimpses of a killer unmasked: reflecting on their motivations for murdering Kent, confessing to related crimes, and planning their next move—to take out Kim before she uncovers the full truth. That intriguing approach flips the tables on the story's suspense, with tension coming not from the investigator closing in on the murderer but from the villain closing in on the hero. Even when things are at their most dire for Kim, she demonstrates remarkable resilience, never ceasing her drive for justice or her efforts to find a place she can truly belong.

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

BookLife Talks with David Smale





Sportswriter Smale's newest book *The Art of Trusting Your Gut* was a surprise even to himself. Smale considers himself a nonfiction writer, but the idea of Detective John Morrison's investigation into a seemingly reformed criminal was too good not to write.

Your previous books have all been nonfiction. What caused you to make the jump to fiction?

It's not really a jump to fiction as I will continue to focus most of my work on nonfiction. But I had this plot in my mind and fiction was the only platform on which to do it. My original idea was for a movie script that had the same baseline theme but in a love story setting. I never could get a cogent story that made sense. I like helping people tell their own true stories, which is why I'll stay with nonfiction. Also, although the main story is fiction, all of the characters are based on elements of people I know, including several parts of my own story. So, it's kind of a hybrid fictional story.

What is the story behind this book?

My wife is a two-time leukemia survivor. Through the two battles with the disease, I learned a lot about the treatment and the residual effects of that treatment. One of the unique aspects of the treatment is that the recipient of a bone marrow transplant, which is the primary treatment for the condition, takes on the DNA of the donor. That makes a case of misidentification from use of DNA very plausible. I had the beginning and ending of the story in mind but had to figure out how to tie them together. It was in an "aha" moment in the middle of the night that I discovered the connecting point.

You've mentioned that you've incorporated real life into *The Art of Trusting Your Gut*. What responsibility, if any, do you feel when adding those stories to the book?

It was very intentional. My wife survived (twice) because two different people went through the process of getting registered in the national bone marrow registry and then went through the process of having their bone marrow harvested. There are not enough people in the national registry, especially among ethnic minorities. I wanted to increase those numbers as a way to thank the people who donated to save my wife's life.

How do you imagine readers at this moment will connect to *The Art of Trusting Your Gut*?

I believe it has a compelling plot with enough intrigue to keep readers' attention. I also believe the characters will resonate with readers, because they're all based on real people that I know. The characters' real positive and negative personality traits will remind readers of someone they know, possibly even themselves. All the characters have flaws, which makes them relatable. The two protagonists have both overcome difficulties in their own lives, in totally different ways, and therefore are both worthy of being admired. That leads to those characters being rooted for, even when the odds are against them. They form an unexpected and unusual bond, which helps the reader pull for the unlikely outcome. I believe readers like a mystery where the solution is not easily deciphered. Unless one knows about the uniqueness of leukemia treatment, this solution is not obvious.

Can readers expect more mysteries from you?

I don't have plans for another mystery, but I won't say it won't happen. I never thought I'd write a fiction book, but the plot needed to be shared, so I did it. I actually tried to get the story told through a popular television drama, but I couldn't get anyone to take interest in it. So, I did it myself.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

Search For Redemption: Code 419

Paul M. Hamilton | Hampsy Press
212p, e-book, $4.99, ISBN 979-8-997-47480-8



Transatlantic thriller of redemption through accountability.

Great for fans of S.A. Cosby's *Razorblade Tears*, Kwei Quartey's *The Missing American*.

Hamilton's debut examines the difficult relationship between accountability and redemption. Sam Carter has finished eight years of probation in Texas and is nearing the end of his sexual offender registry requirement when an email arrives from "Princess Susan Saleem," a Ghanaian woman claiming she needs money to escape a dangerous relative. Sam, largely cut off from the internet during his supervision, fails to recognize an obvious 419 scam. Haunted by his offense as a teenager—and determined to prove he can become a better man—Sam takes the story at face value and travels to Ghana to rescue Susan. There, he discovers that she is actually Anna, a young woman trapped in a fraud operation. Sam's ensuing attempt to redeem himself turns into a desperate fight for their escape and survival.

Hamilton makes Sam's unlikely choices credible by rooting them in his isolation, shame, and need to believe he's capable of decency. His naïveté can be frustrating, but it feels plausible for someone whose years of isolation have left him poorly equipped to detect manipulation or question what he's being told. The first-person narration brings out Sam's literal-minded humor and constant self-questioning, while Anna gradually sheds the invented princess identity to reveal a wary, resourceful woman determined to make her own choices. Their developing relationship gives the thriller a strong emotional anchor, while probing the difference between working for good and casting yourself as a savior. The dangerous journey from Ghana to Texas maintains the story's momentum while repeatedly testing Sam and Anna's fragile alliance.

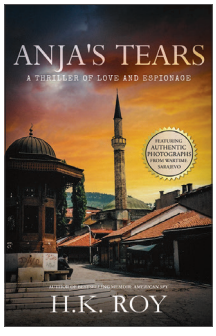
Hamilton's years of experience with trauma and rehabilitation within the justice system are reflected in his bold choice of featuring a registered sex offender as his protagonist—without diminishing the harm of his offense. Sam's journey makes a clear distinction between being forgiven and earning a different future through accountability and change, and fans of morally complex thrillers will appreciate Hamilton's unique approach.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

Anja's Tears: A Thriller of Love and Espionage

H.K. Roy | Manhattan Book Group
324p, e-book, $3, ISBN 978-1-972090-91-6



Smart, realistic spy thriller inspired by real events.

Great for fans of Matthew Palmer's *The Wolf of Sarajevo*, Douglas Cavanaugh's *Into Hell's Fire*.

Former CIA operative Roy (author of the memoir *American Spy*) turns to fiction to illuminate the horrors of the Bosnian War and the dangerous realities of tradecraft while still offering an action-packed thriller centered on a quest for revenge. Roy convincingly blends emotion, espionage, and crisply developed tension as Mick Caruso, a maverick Agency agent, is stationed in Sarajevo in 1995, in the midst of the conflict between the Bosnians and the Serbs. Caruso is devoted to his job, gathering intelligence for Langley and Foggy Bottom, and also to his young daughter, Katie, at risk from Caruso's troubled ex-wife. His emotions threaten his professionalism when he falls in love with Maja Marković, the widowed executive assistant of Colonel Nedžad Ugljen, number two in Bosnia's intelligence and security service.

Caruso is a skilled operative, but Roy never depicts him as perfect. Caruso wishes not only to bed Marković, but to turn her into an asset; when he arranges for her to slip him information, the pass is easily detected by the Serbs, and Marković is captured and threatened by Ratko Mladić, the real-life war criminal known as the Butcher of Bosnia. Mladić is the most notable of several historical figures turning up here, and Roy takes pains to balance a sobering depiction of the sadistic violence innocents suffered during this conflict with the page-turning suspense that thriller readers crave. As the title spoils too much, *Anja's Tears* takes loss seriously.

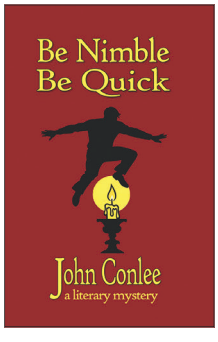
Caruso proves complex enough for readers to at times question his choices—he is touchingly devoted to Katie and knows that his ex is unfit to raise her, but still exposes himself to a high risk of dying. His low points here prove wrenching, without slowing momentum. Dialogue is sharp and persuasive, the wised-up, no-nonsense talk of all-too-human operatives; the sometimes corny jokes they (and Roy) crack bring welcome light into a dark narrative that will please readers who prefer their military/spy thrillers convincing.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

Be Nimble Be Quick

John Conlee | Pale Horse Books
272p, e-book, $18.95, ISBN 978-1-939917-98-0



Brisk thriller finds a man on the run from his past.

Great for fans of Amy Tintera's *Listen for the Lie*, Jeremy Duns's *The Dark Chronicles*.

In 1963, Conlee's Jack Barstow is living a fabricated life when a forced entry into his home in the middle of the night leaves him running scared, again. On the hook for six million he stole from the mob—after being manipulated into helping them—Jack knows his past is catching up to him. No stranger to reinventing himself and flying under the radar, he takes a job as a ghostwriter for the famously acclaimed author Errol Stanton Greene. There, he encounters the beautiful editor, Sheryl Sanderlin. As romance blooms, and Jack is forced to tell Sheryl the truth, he finds her a resilient ally determined to help him escape his deadly predicament.

Conlee delivers a brisk, twisty novel of deception, secrets, and high stakes. Facing legal troubles from the FBI in addition to his run-in with the mafia, Jack tries to lose himself in the world of literature, but the more roots he starts to put down, the more he understands how important freedom is. He's a complex character in nearly every way, desperate to erase his past, excited at the prospect of new love, navigating grief and regret, and fearful of the consequences to his actions—consequences that could very well cost him his life. Sheryl is a worthy accomplice: she's sharp, resolute, and quick on the draw, always ready with solutions to Jack's never-ending stream of problems.

Conlee smoothly blends romance with action, building an atmosphere of tension and unease not just through Jack's attempts to overcome the past but also through a deeply divided America embroiled in the Vietnam War while barely recovered from the Cuban Missile Crisis. In many ways, Jack's attempts to create a place of belonging mirror America's fraught pursuit of equality and community against a backdrop of racism and oppression. Jack's future is left unsettled, but Conlee does grant him a measure of happiness that resonates.

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

BookLife Talks with Beca Salmon





Salmon's debut, a memoir about the end of her 17-year marriage, tries to expand the narrative around divorce by examining the victim-perpetrator cycle that binds some relationships. We spoke to Salmon about her writing process and what she hopes readers get from the book.

What is the story behind this book—why did you write it?

The Third Option is a memoir about the abrupt and unexpected end of my marriage. Over 17 years together, my husband and I built a sweet and imperfect life, and within a few weeks, everything I thought was true about it was wiped away. The book is an exploration of young love that ultimately could not withstand the rocky waters of maturity, and a portrait of addictive relationships and toxic dynamics that undermine even the best intentions. It is also an ode to learning a new way to live in the world, a world that is a lot less rosy and a lot more honest.

The title, *The Third Option*, is a reference to something you talk about in the book. Can you explain what you mean by that?

The book is a juicy divorce memoir, set over a year of loss and revelations of betrayal. But that story, as a simple recounting of harm, has been told many times. Much of this book is also a personal reckoning of how I got and stayed involved in such a damaging situation. To do that, I had to explore the victim-perpetrator cycle. Those of us with a personal history of significant childhood abuse are usually offered only two options as an adult: be a victim or victimize others. This book offers a third option: getting free and creating a life that is not an altar to a history of pain. This is not a path that is often featured in our culture's stories. And I believe we need to push the narrative of trauma, especially for those of us in the West, beyond this simple and often deeply dismissive paradigm of harm. And instead ask bigger questions about how we move forward to create a life with safety and integrity at the center.

What responsibility, if any, did you feel to accurately portray past events and people?

I felt totally responsible and beholden to the truth. The last thing we need is another memoir of pain that is actually exaggerated for dramatic effect. I used journals to help confirm and reconstruct memories accurately. I also provided a veto to everyone in the book, including my ex-husband. There were things that I removed at his request to respect him as much as I could. I also allowed friends and family to read early copies and give me specific feedback on anything they felt uncomfortable with. And ultimately, I edited the book for so many years that even phrasing or wording that felt unnecessarily harsh were removed. I stand by everything in this book as an accurate and honest narrative of a moment in my life.

How do you imagine readers at this moment will connect to *The Third Option*?

First and foremost, I hope *The Third Option* reaches people who were suddenly left behind by someone they still loved deeply. This book grew out of a need that I had to hear the stories of partners who were blindsided by the end of a relationship. I also hope that it could be a support for people looking for stories about growing up and actually stepping out of self-destructive behaviors. So many of us struggle with this, and my book certainly highlights all the missteps and stumbles that I took along the way to a new sense of self-worth and wholeness.

What's next for you?

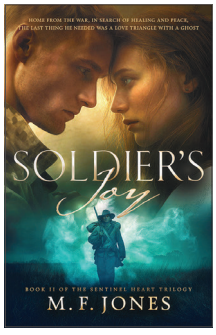
I'll keep working as a nurse practitioner, a job I truly love, and find time to keep writing. I am transitioning somewhat to writing about the challenges of working in our healthcare system and recently shared a piece on AI in healthcare. Writing is a new world for me and finding my voice in this medium has been a real joy.

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

ROMANCE

Soldier's Joy

M.F. Jones | Fieldwood Books
294p, e-book, $4.99, ISBN 979-8-991-82004-2



Tender portrayal of wartime love crosses boundaries of time and death.

Great for fans of Susanna Kearsley's *The Winter Sea*, Alice Hoffman's *The Rules of Magic*.

Jones's moving sequel to *Stones River* intertwines Civil War history, contemporary military trauma, and paranormal romance in a story about two wounded people learning to live beyond loss. Army veteran Avery Gowan returns from Iraq carrying survivor's guilt after losing comrades in combat, only to encounter the specter of a Confederate soldier who calls himself "Comrade." This ghost is Lemuel Sanders, Avery's long-dead ancestor, who once shared a transcendent, time-crossing love with Tennessee music teacher Jessie Gibbs. Now manifesting as a barefoot guardian, Lemuel bears an uncanny resemblance to Avery, creating an otherworldly bridge between two wounded souls who are haunted by the past.

Though much of the narrative reads like a traditional romance, Avery's relationship with Jessie offers a more complex view of love alongside a realistic perspective of how trauma affects intimate relationships. With haunting prose, Jones's unflinching depiction of Avery's post-traumatic stress—shameful public outbursts, inability to concentrate, flashbacks, retreat into violent video games, constant hypervigilance—is rendered with immense sensitivity, making his emptiness achingly palpable. Through Avery's experiences and Lemuel's letters, Jones's most significant message resonates: the reality of war is not to be diluted, glorified, or normalized. Avery recoils from easy military honors, while Lemuel's letters strip away heroism to reveal a frightened, fallible young man.

In giving these soldiers names, doubts, memories, and unfinished stories, Jones challenges readers to restore individuality to those whom war reduces to casualties. "We don't know how much time we have. We shouldn't wait to do the things we know we ought to do," Avery observes. Lessons about faith, forgiveness, courage, and healing occasionally arrive too neatly, explaining what the characters have already enacted, but the warmth and earnestness imbued in the narrative make for a compelling read, resulting in an affecting reminder that courage may mean learning how to live—and love—after surviving.

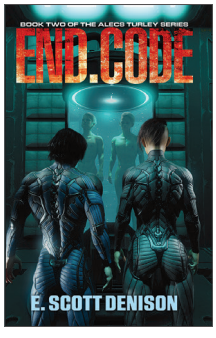
Cover: **B** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **–** Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

EDITOR'S PICK

END.CODE: The Alecs Turley Series, Book 2

E. Scott Denison
360p, trade paper, $17.99, ISBN 979-8-218-93843-7



Superior SF mystery of a Synth-killing virus and a kickboxing sleuth.

Great for fans of Nick Harkaway's *Titanium Noir*, Chris McKinney's Water City Trilogy.

"218 million dead Synths should make their creators think again about continuing," declares a villainous thinker deep into this superior future-PI thriller of a 22nd century of Synth companions, omniscient neural networks, private droid armies, and a population that mostly "appears to be 27 to 35 years old." Killer details like that abound as former Space Force Ranger Major Alecs Turley, returning in the second book in the series named for her, and her synthetic partner, Keiji-T7, is tasked by the CEOs of the three major Synth manufacturers with tracking down who—or what—is behind a deadly virus that has the potential to wipe out the android population and cause "full societal breakdown. (The horror is teased in a suite of tense, shocking opening scenes that reveal the textures of Denison's world and powerfully elevate the stakes.) Turley investigates, in classic high-tech detective fashion, while Keiji works with scientists to produce a vaccine, all as Synths begin malfunctioning with catastrophic results. Throughout, Denison mines page-turning tension from the line between technological advancement and playing God.

Denison steeps readers in the minds of the Synths throughout the novel, revealing with wit, empathy, and horror what happens as the virus takes over their programming and bodies. Questions of identity, humanity, and the emotional state of these manmade machines prove as engaging as Turley's sleuthing, creating emotional, thought-provoking suspense as the death toll rises. Action is visceral, highlighting militarized robo-tech, Turley's own Ranger training, and teamwork between androids and their human counterparts.

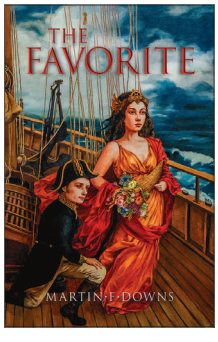
For all the heady ideas and cool, convincing tech, and an adversary who is always watching, Denison never forgets the human. "There is no amount of kickboxing proficiency that can defend against a pair of 300-pound 20R10s," Turley is told. Her response: "Then I guess I'll die trying." Readers who enjoy SF mysteries that don't skimp on action will relish the continued adventures of Turley and Keiji-T7.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

The Favorite

Martin F. Downs | Praeneste Press
217p, trade paper, $11.99, ISBN 979-8-234-08404-0



Action-packed story of myth, hero quests, and future unrest.

Great for fans of R.M. Meluch's *The Twice and Future Caesar*, Alan Smale's *Clash of Eagles*.

In *The Favorite*, civilization in the year 2202 has endured a cataclysmic collapse, and the society that remains is a curious mixture of ancient customs and fragments of futuristic technology. This radical world order finds Regulus Zegulus—the last living descendant of the distinguished Zeguli—newly elected as the Bompus (ruler) of Grith, an archipelago that was once coastal New England. But when he's ousted in a coup, Zegulus escapes on board the *Cornucopia*, a ship crewed by the favorites of Fortuna, the goddess of luck. With Fortuna's help, Zegulus sets out to reconquer his homeland and defeat the pesky pirates plundering it.

Given *The Favorite*'s place nearly two hundred years in the future, there's much about the world that has changed. Familiar countries have been reshaped into different kingdoms and empires, leaving Grith, once a model of "constitutional order," floundering, burdened by economic turmoil, political unrest, and a plague of piracy. Iceland and Vermont seem intact, but they too have come to mean very different things from what they once did. Downs populates this strange new world with unique phrases and systems, painting a backdrop that feels both familiar and decidedly quirky. Aboard the *Cornucopia*, the Favorites indulge in after-dinner orgies, Grith's government was intended to replicate that of ancient Rome, and the fierce pirate ships marauding the waters run on "foulfuels," the new term for diesel.

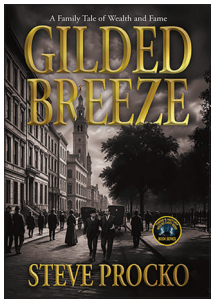
Beyond the story's rich worldbuilding, Downs creates a political system that seems remarkably fitting, including the dregs of the "old American empire" turned into plundering pirates known as the Dispossessed. Climate change, civil war, feuding gods, and the siren call of destiny fuel this brisk story, with the transactional yet loving relations between humans and deities giving Zegulus's quest an epic feel. The mythology, constant action, and delicate balance between seeking glory or working to improve the human condition make this an entertaining and convincing read.

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

HISTORY & MILITARY

Gilded Breeze

Steve Procko | There's History Around Every Bend
379p, e-book, $34.95, ISBN 979-8-9880244-3-9



Detailed family biography dissects American obsession with money and influence.

Great for fans of Paula Uruburu's *American Eve*, David Rooney's *The Big Hop.*

Intrigued by parallels between the rich and famous of late 20th century Manhattan and their Gilded Age counterparts, Procko found a narrative through line in the Breese family tree, whose deep roots draw from inherited wealth—but its sturdy branches were formed by their creative ingenuity. Procko's central figure is James L. "Jimmie" Breese Sr. (1854-1934), the son of an industrialist who began as an architect in the 1870s, pivoted to investment banking on Wall Street, and later founded Carbon Studio, which specialized in photographic portraits of New York's high society at the turn of the century.

Carbon Studio was also a de facto gentlemen's club, famous for notorious habitués like Stanford White and the "Pie Girl" scandal that followed Jimmie Breese until his death. During Procko's research, he tracks down the showgirl who emerged from a papier-mâché pie at that infamous party, a moving testament to the everyday people whose oft-forgotten stories are overshadowed by larger-than-life figures. In this action-packed biography, Procko (*Rebel Correspondent*) shows how the hard-charging Breeses ran roughshod through a rapidly-changing America, from mingling in elite circles to contributing to the technological advances of World War I.

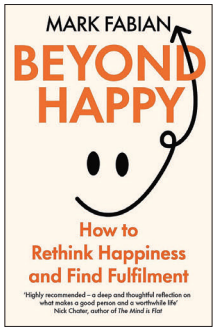
To complete *Gilded Breeze*, Procko accessed a treasure trove of letters, photographs, and journals from longtime friend Mark Breese Sink (a photographer who became part of Andy Warhol's Factory). Though this dense historical biography sometimes buckles under the weight of compiled material, Procko effectively contrasts how family members saw themselves with media coverage of their exploits. Those newspaper stories even captured heroic endeavors, like the U.S. Navy's first transatlantic flight in 1919, with Jim Breese Jr. serving as engineer. This intricate portrait of a dynamic period focuses on the excesses of a privileged few, but *Gilded Breeze* is all about sharing the wealth, and Procko turns his chronicle of a prominent family into an American saga of restless invention.

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

SELF-HELP

Beyond Happy: How to Rethink Happiness and Find Fulfilment

Mark Fabian | Bedford Square Publishers
320p, trade paper, $23.12, ISBN 978-1835010495



Smart guide, free of bromides, for readers seeking fulfilling lives.

Great for fans of Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz's *The Good Life,* Emily Esfahani Smith's *The Power of Meaning.*

Fabian brings an academic's skepticism to the crowded self-help field in *Beyond Happy*. Rather than treating happiness as the end goal, Fabian makes the case that a good life also requires satisfaction, purpose, and a sense that one's choices matter. He considers the ways that human evolution has kept lasting happiness out of reach; rather than try to escape this "happiness treadmill," he argues for building a life worth continuing to run for. Drawing on psychology, philosophy, economics, and his own experience, Fabian moves from disposition, character, and emotion to self-actualization, intrinsic motivation, and the relationships and communities that give life greater meaning.

Fabian has a gift for making psychological and philosophical concepts (Calvinism, Stoicism, self-determination theory, and much more) clear without flattening their complexity. Considering classic self-help topics like gratitude or flow, he separates evidence from opinion to arrive at concrete advice. With persuasive, step-by-step reasoning, he challenges ideas he finds unpersuasive. His discussion of mindfulness, for example, draws on the psychological benefits of various mindfulness practices while rejecting the Buddhist ideal of dissolving the self; Fabian instead treats self-awareness as a practical way to identify values and build a more coherent identity. That willingness to borrow useful ideas without accepting the philosophies or mystical beliefs that often surround them gives his advice appealing independence. Anecdotes, humor, and blunt diversions—he finds the discourse around the Easterlin Paradox "incredibly boring and even nauseating at times"—keep dense subjects approachable.

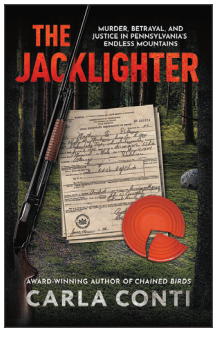
Fabian eventually brings his ideas about well-being into the larger realm of culture, morality, and collective purpose. He argues that people create meaning through what they choose to value and presents "metamodernism" as a culture shaped by sincerity, empathy, creativity, and cooperation. Some of the broader ideas feel speculative, as Fabian acknowledges. Even so, *Beyond Happy* stands out for treating well-being as a question of how to build a life and society worth caring about.

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

TRUE CRIME

The Jackfighter: Murder, Betrayal, and Justice in Pennsylvania's Endless Mountains

Carla Conti | Crimemoir Press
313p, e-book, $9.99, ISBN 979-8-9994601-7-2



Illuminating investigative account of a 1976 Pennsylvania cold case.

Great for fans of Becky Cooper's *We Keep the Dead Close*, Robert Kolker's *Lost Girls.*

Celebrated true-crime chronicler Conti (*Chained Birds*) revisits a case she first pursued three decades ago in this meticulous account of a Montrose, Pennsylvania, cold case with lasting repercussions. On June 2, 1976, attorney Martin "Marty" Dillon went skeet shooting at his family's woodland camp with physician Stephen Scher and never returned. Scher told authorities that Dillon chased a porcupine into the woods, tripped, and accidentally fired his shotgun. Despite inconsistencies in his account and questions surrounding the shooting, officials accepted his explanation and ruled Dillon's death an accident. Suspicion intensified after Scher married Dillon's widow, Pat, but the case remained closed until persistent calls from the Dillon family for a new investigation—and an exhumation—led authorities to reconsider what really happened in those woods.

Conti brings unusual intimacy to the narrative through interviews and files she preserved from her reporting in the 1990s. She reconstructs the case from the original investigation and competing forensic evidence through two trials, Scher's conviction, and the legal battles that followed. Her return to old records and witnesses also uncovers a physician's alleged knowledge of a confession by Scher shortly after Dillon's death and probes why the information never reached a jury. Throughout, Conti emphasizes the humanity of Marty and his parents, Larry and Jo, amid the legal machinations, capturing the emotions, loyalties, and relationships that shaped the case in close-knit Montrose.

The wealth of documentation here proves both an asset, in terms of clarity and thoroughness, and a burden when it comes to narrative momentum. Long, detailed stretches devoted to motions, testimony, media coverage, and procedural disputes slow a story whose central circumstances already exert considerable pull. Still, Conti handles the complicated chronology with a reporter's discipline and carefully separates documented evidence from recollection and inference. Her persuasive scrutiny of decisions made by police, prosecutors, attorneys, witnesses, and the courts makes the account valuable beyond the question of Scher's guilt. True-crime readers drawn to well-documented, responsibly reported cold-case investigations and hard-fought justice will find Conti's account rewarding

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

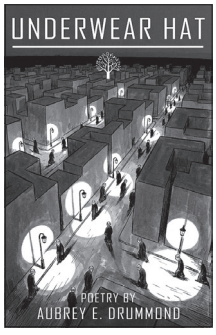
PAID REVIEWS

POETRY

Underwear Hat

Aubrey E. Drummond

226p, e-book, $6.99, ISBN 979-8-235-91400-1



Passionate poetry of grief, Black identity, and American despair.

Great for fans of Hanif Abdurraqib, Kaleel John.

The second collection in Drummond's "Life's Tree Spins On" series offers a charged diatribe of grief and longing from the perspective of a widower: "I seek the warmth / Of you in Heaven," the speaker of these poems beseeches, while circling a painful question: "will I ever love again? I don't think I ever will." Yet the grief Drummond writes of brings with it an intensity of feeling that allows for a deluge of poetry and song. Despairing, he writes that there is "no God in all of this," yet in almost the same breath, the poet finds hope: "let me / Fly away with you / So that I may / Spend my life with you."

Grief does more than cause pain in *Underwear Hat*; it also reshapes the survivor's identity as Drummond presents an often searing exploration of identity: as a Black man, as a husband, widower, father, worker, and American. "Am I free ? Or Am I not? / Or is this In-between? Sometimes free / Sometimes not I feel / I'm In-between," he writes, drawing attention to how systemic inequality and racism continue to make freedom conditional for Black Americans.

Throughout, Drummond examines the politically, spiritually, sociologically, and psychologically distressing state of living in America today, where "good is bad / And bad is good," and it's safer to "stay indoors" due to the oppression and violence waiting outside. The title poem shares a haunting dream of men who wander "Lost and helpless / Down these lonely pits," while other concerns—Florida heat, preparing for storms, the way the women in the house vanish on "game day" because "Ain't no one wants to be / Near you / Today"—broaden the thematic reach and reveal a sharp sense of the poetic power of everyday speech. Especially resonant: "Caught in the Rain," about seeing a loved one suffer, and the closing "Buying Your Wine," a minor-key comic blues. Sometimes Drummond even edges toward hope, as in "I Fly": "if I were a bird / I would fly / Since / I am not / I dance." Though the rhythms may be despondent, Drummond dances on.

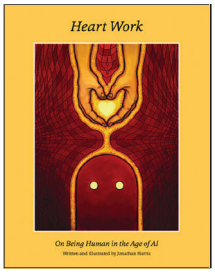
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: **–** Editing: **B** | Marketing copy: **A**

PICTURE BOOKS

Heart Work: On Being Human in the Age of AI

Jonathan Harris | Sunlight Papers

116p, hardcover, $26.99, ISBN 979-8-9922643-0-2



Thoughtful picture book explores what makes humans so irreplaceable.

Great for fans of Susan Verde's *I Am Human*, Cal Lopez and Natalia Ulloa's *Humans Are Awesome!*

Harris examines the profound experience of being human in the digital age in this intriguing debut, a picture book for all ages that differentiates what artificial intelligence can do from the lived emotions and intimacies of humans. Describing AI as "more than just tools… a new kind of creature that's fully diffuse," Harris lights on a resonant, of-the-moment question: "What kind of work is for humans to do?" He spends the majority of the book answering that query by examining the bonds, sensitivities, and irreplaceable skills that make us human before coming to the ultimate conclusion that heart work is what really counts: giving gifts, listening, and connecting to others in the warm, intimate ways that machines will never be able to match.

Readers wearied by the automated, on-demand pace of contemporary life will appreciate Harris's encouragement to slow down and spend time appreciating the little moments that build human connection and fellowship. Making new friends, sharing vulnerabilities, reveling in nature, and transforming a house into a home are just a handful of the experiences the book spotlights, each one accompanied by Harris's vibrant, hand-painted illustrations. The jeweled tones of people walking the earth, celebrating in song, building towering bonfires, and appreciating the moon's shimmering reflections on a nighttime lake evoke a sense that we belong to something much greater than ourselves, reminding readers of the centuries we have coexisted while building, loving, conversing, and honoring the human condition.

Despite a rhyming structure that sometimes feels forced, *Heart Work* more than lives up to its title, particularly in the scenes that feature loved ones gathered at an older person's bed and, later, their gravestone, where they find the "courage to cry" while commemorating their grief by nurturing a memorial tree. Harris makes the text more interactive with a challenge to find hearts embedded in the illustrations, and he closes with a unique nod to his own creative process that will delight younger readers.

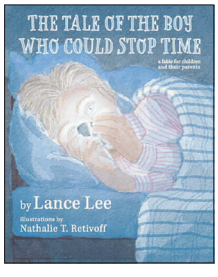
Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **B** | Illustrations: **A** Editing: **A-** | Marketing copy: **A**

PICTURE BOOKS

The Tale Of The Boy Who Could Stop Time: a fable for children and their parents

Lance Lee, author; Nathalie T. Retivoff, illustrator | LWL Books

96p, trade paper, $15, ISBN 979-8-234-15445-3



Bullied boy gains strength of character through confidence-building magic.

Great for fans of Lisa Fipps's *Starfish*, Nikki Grimes's *Garvey's Choice.*

Lee's Crouch End series reveals fantastical creatures living in the north London neighborhood, and in their fourth middle-grade fable, a bullied boy uses Arthurian magic to resist violence. Gentle and thoughtful, 10-year-old Peter Goforth refuses to fight the bullies who regularly taunt him. He's been their target for years, but after this long-distance runner writes a poem about loneliness that reduces their teacher to tears, the harassment gets worse. Still reeling from his parents' heated arguments, which led to an acrimonious divorce (and a father "too busy" to visit regularly), Peter keeps his troubles to himself.

His mother Holly is worried and tries to bring Peter out of his shell. On their daily walks to and from school, they pass a garden overrun with roses, and Peter impulsively asks an elderly gentleman if he can pet the orange tabby cat who eyes them with eerie perception. Her owner introduces himself as Merlin Smith-Jones, and Holly jokes about the fabled King Arthur's powerful wizard. After deflecting this identification, Merlin gives Peter a black stone with a lightning-shaped white vein, along with the warning: "Be careful when you squeeze it!" In a panicked moment, Peter grasps his talisman—and time stops.

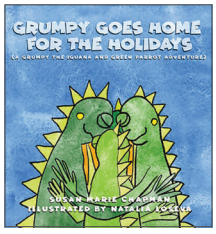
Peter can move while everything around him freezes, and he uses the opportunity to confound his bullies. Merlin has seen Peter's inner turmoil and recognizes the compassion that moves him to help others. Lee encourages Peter to enjoy this beneficial magic but also sets up high-stakes situations where the boy can make a difference without it. Nathalie Retivoff's illustrations beautifully reinforce Lee's kind-hearted coming-of-age narrative, and her delicate pen-and-ink drawings and watercolors capture Peter's fragility and resolve. Lee combines real-world struggles with fanciful magic in *The Tale of the Boy Who Could Stop Time*, allowing a sensitive kid to be strong without donning armor.

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

PICTURE BOOKS

Grumpy Goes Home For The Holidays: A Grumpy the Iguana and Green Parrot Adventure, Book 4

Susan Marie Chapman | The Gourmet Dog, LLC
42p, hardcover, $19.55, ISBN 978-1-734-54295-0



Sweet story of Christmas homecoming illustrates a family's love.

Great for fans of Cory Edwards's *The Christmas Lizard*, Eve Bunting's *Going Home*.

The warm fourth entry in Chapman's Grumpy the Iguana series (after *Two if by Sea*) follows the lovable lizard on a Christmas trek to visit his family, who live in the Florida Keys. After his best friend, the Green Parrot, sells one of his treasured feathers to purchase a ticket, Grumpy boards the local bus with presents in hand—thanks to his pal Mr. Squirrel, who made Grumpy's dad a stylish sun hat (a must-have accessory for any self-respecting iguana) and found the perfect sea glass for his mom and sister. But Grumpy's haste when he arrives in the Keys prevents him from noticing his sea glass has fallen on the ground, setting him up for a Christmas that looks much different than he expects.

Grumpy's delight in surprising his family is endearing, and their warm, welcoming reception will remind younger readers of how special family bonds can be. When Grumpy shows up, his mom and sister are preparing Christmas dinner, while his dad listens to a pelican drone on about the weather, but they immediately set aside what they're doing to embrace Grumpy. The family spends Christmas Eve in companionable silence, reconnecting while snuggling under a blanket and admiring the waves splashing against the dock, prompting Grumpy to reflect, "How did he get so lucky to have such a wonderful family?" That close connection continues into Christmas morning, when Grumpy discovers he's missing a present: instead of being upset, this caring family informs him that "having you home for the holidays is our gift."

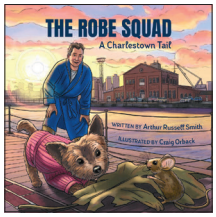
Natalia Loseva accompanies that sweet message with engaging pictures of Grumpy's family hugging, smiling, and relishing each other's company; Loseva imbues these good-natured iguanas with lifelike expressions and emotion, the recognizable feeling never diminishing their reptilian essence. The ending has a satisfying surprise as well, leaving Grumpy with a full heart—and fun memories—for his return trip home.

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

PICTURE BOOKS

The Robe Squad: A Charlestown Tail

Arthur Russell Smith | Seacoast Press
24p, e-book, $4.99, ISBN 979-8-952-85611-0



A man and his dog show the value of extending kindness to everyone.

Great for fans of Mikela Prevost's *Let's Have a Dog Party!*, Samantha Shannon's Jake the Growling Dog series.

In Smith's heartwarming debut picture book, a man and his dog demonstrate the value of extending friendship and kindness to those in need. Artie and his dog Gizmo live together in a small home near Boston Harbor, where they love watching sailboats, playing games, and sharing meals. Most of all, they "loved to wear comfy, fluffy bathrobes together," with Artie's a striking shade of royal blue and Gizmo's "a warm pink." One chilly evening while taking a walk in their robes, they encounter a mouse shivering beneath a leaf. Right away, Artie reacts with care and concern: "Oh, you poor little guy ... That leaf is too thin to keep you warm, right?"

With the mouse in tow, Artie and Gizmo make a quick stop at the vet to make sure their new friend is healthy. On their way home, Artie has an important realization: "their squad wasn't two anymore. It was three." This sweet story's power comes from its simplicity—Artie and Gizmo live a peaceful, uncomplicated life where their greatest pleasures are wearing their robes and spending time together. When they discover another creature in need, they don't hesitate to help, and they make their world bigger to accommodate their new friend. This will encourage young readers to extend similar kindness to new people and animals.

Craig Orback's evocative illustrations are firmly grounded in the Charlestown setting, with Artie and Gizmo strolling past sailboats, sparkling water, and local landmarks that Smith explains at the end of the book. Each scene feels warm and welcoming, with the sunset turning the clouds pink and showering Artie and Gizmo with golden light. Their lounge-ready wardrobe feels playful and signals their belonging. That sense of meaning comes full circle when kind-eyed Artie knits a tiny golden robe for the grateful, grinning mouse, showing the power of generosity and compassion.

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



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

FICTION

Bedside Manner
David J. Winters. SubGenre, $2.99 e-book (160p)
ISBN 978-0-9916803-5-1

Winters (*Interventionism*) launches a promising series centered on nurse-turned-homicide investigator Eminence Gray. Before she joined the force, Eminence's tender treatment of her patients earned her the nicknames "Florence Nightingale" and "Empathy Gray"; as a cop, that ability to relate to others is a key component of her investigative prowess. Before Eminence can dig into the case of a young male robbery victim who's found dead in a park, she's handed another: Bertrand Park, heir and majority shareholder of the Park-Mart Department Store chain, has been found strangled in the company's flagship location with a pig mask on his head and a sign hung around his neck reading "Pock-Mark Pigs Get Stuck." In her probe, Eminence learns that Park hired a PI to investigate whether Park-Mart's CEO, Charlie Reime, had been stealing from the company, making Reime a prime suspect even though the gumshoe turned up no evidence of wrongdoing. As Eminence digs deeper, Park-Mart's opaque unionization efforts prove crucial to solving the crime. With solid banter, straightforward action, and a well-clued conclusion, this bodes well for Eminence's future adventures.

Behaving Badly (Tess Hammond #1)
Rochelle Staab. Garfield & Lloyd, *$4.99 e-book (216p)*
ISBN 979-8-9956763-1-7

This gritty and satisfying series launch from Staab (the Mind for Murder Mysteries) introduces Tess Hammond, a veteran reporter in 1930s Los Angeles. While working the city desk at the L.A. Examiner, Tess gets a tip that takes her to the scene of a shoot-out in the tunnels underneath a hotel. The violence has left one LAPD detective badly wounded, and the other—Tess's husband, Johnny—dead. Tess learns the culprit is a mob informant who decided to kill any cop who might be able to identify him as a rat. Bereft, Tess is given another crime to cover: teenager Merilee Lockwood has disappeared, and her influential father, Hamilton, has asked the Examiner's owner, William Randolph Hearst, to assign a journalist to the case. Though she initially suspects that Merrilee ran away, Tess gradually uncovers something more sinister, with a possible tie to Johnny's death. Staab's plotting is brisk and clever, and she avoids making her Depression-era setting a cliché. Fans of hard-boiled noir who want to follow a female lead down L.A.'s mean streets will be pleased.

The Color of Mourning
Kim Dempster. Kim Dempster, $25 (282p)
ISBN 979-8-3102-5695-8

This wrenching if meandering debut from Dempster portrays the oppression of women under the rule of the Islamic State in Syria. It opens in 2013 Raqqa, with father Jorem, a doctor, journalist mother Nooda, and teenage daughter Layal playing a game of backgammon. The happy domestic scene is interrupted when soldiers loyal to President Bashar al-Assad barge into their home, demanding to know the whereabouts of son Tarek, a suspected rebel fighter. Not satisfied with Jorem's answers, they take him away. Not long after, Tarek and his rebels liberate Raqqa, but ISIS steps into the power vacuum, and Nooda and Layal, fearing their freedom may be curtailed, attempt to cross into Turkey but fail. Meanwhile, Tarek, who had been unemployed, gets a government job, and Layal is forced into marrying Tarek's mentor, Saad, an ISIS commander. Dempster successfully conveys the chilling effect of ISIS's presence, as they make threats "calmly and without emotion" to women in Nooda and Layal's community who defy the group's radical fundamental rules, such as neglecting to wear hijabs or spend time unaccompanied with men. Unfortunately, the plot is choppy and an upbeat conclusion feels tonally unbalanced with the rest of the material. It's a mixed bag.

Dead Flowers
J.M. Petrick. Matchbook, $9.99 e-book (360p)
ISBN 979-8-218-70832-0

Petrick's accomplished debut follows a former child star as he searches for his missing brother. Identical twins Will and Billy Benson appeared for six seasons as the U.S. president's mischievous sons in *First Brats*. After the show's abrupt cancellation when the boys were 11, Will's acting career ended, his father spent all of their earnings, and he and Billy drifted apart. At 40, Will loses his job as a security guard after a violent argument with his boss. He then gets an unsettling visit from a visibly agitated Billy, who tries to mend the rift between them. After Billy leaves Will's apartment, Will realizes he'd been wearing a bloody shirt. The next morning, Billy vanishes. As Will devotes himself to finding Billy, he learns that he's not the only person searching for his brother, and he plunges into the seedy L.A. underworld Billy had been moving through in hopes of staging an acting comeback. With moody narration from Will ("Child actors are like beautiful flowers. Plucked from the ground or cut from the vine, then presented to the world for its delight") and a twisty, unpredictable plot, Petrick makes a major impression. Here's hoping this is the start of a long career.

The Dog Sitter
Eva Lesko Natiello. Fine Line, $5.99 e-book (326p)
ISBN 978-0-9982851-2-2

Natiello (*The Memory Box*) serves up a sharp and humorous tale of an aimless woman's search for purpose. Forty-something Colleen Fitzroy's life hits the skids after her gambler husband loses their house. Homeless, jobless, and divorced, she grudgingly accepts a temporary gig at foodie magazine Savor, where she'd been fired two years earlier for chewing out her chauvinistic boss, Massimo Locatelli. She's stunned to learn what the job entails: dog-sitting for one month in Massimo's Manhattan apartment, while he's in Italy. Alone all day with Aldo, Massimo's slobbering English Setter, Colleen hopes to plan her next steps. But distractions are plentiful, as Aldo turns out to be popular with Massimo's friends, daughter, dog park acquaintances, and bossy housekeeper, all of whom keep intruding. Meanwhile, Massimo makes daily video calls to check in on the dog. He also pressures

Colleen to get involved in his sketchy new Italian truffles business. As Colleen and Massimo forge an unexpected friendship during the calls, Colleen gradually warms to Aldo, too, helping him with separation anxiety and including him in her efforts at self-improvement. ("It's time to reclaim our happiness," she tells Aldo. "Our worthiness. Our joie de vivre.") Natiello charms with her portrait of a beleaguered but pugnacious protagonist. It's a hoot.

Due South
Margerie Bruce. Margerie Bruce, $4.99 e-book (366p)
ASIN B0H66DL9M1

Bruce's impressive debut contrasts the experiences of a combat medic on the Western Front in WWII with his wife's quiet life back home in small-town Minnesota. Harrison Lawrence, a barber and dentist, is drafted into the U.S. Army Air Corps shortly after marrying Iris, a nurse. Due to the Army's shortage of medics, he receives training as a battlefield medic on the strength of his dentistry license. Soon, he's in the thick of battle in Europe, trying to both survive and save lives during the D-Day landings at Normandy. Later, he treats prisoners liberated from Dachau. Though Iris's letters to Harrison reach him, he stops writing to her, shaken by the horrors of war and his fear that he's no longer the man she married. Meanwhile, back in Minnesota, Iris continues working as a nurse and receives signs that Harrison is still alive in the form of war souvenirs he sends to her. Yet she also understands his reticence at writing to her, having experienced her own share of tragedy, including the death of her first husband and the loss of her baby. Drawing on the real-life stories of her grandparents, Bruce capably captures the toll of combat and the anguish of those back home who fear for their loved ones. It's an authentic tale of lives transformed by war.

The Haunted Artist (Julian Peale Art-Crime Mystery #4)
Larry Witham. Archway, $20.99 trade paper (218p)
ISBN 978-1-6657-7260-0

Witham follows *Incident at Devil's Finger* with another propulsive whodunit featuring former naval intelligence officer Julian Peale. After leaving the military, Julian tried to break into the art world but settled on working as a PI specializing in art crimes. His latest case comes to him via his son, Nathan, an MIT senior who's approached by his classmate, Colleen Mason. Colleen's older brother, Samuel—a rising painter who was about to open his first New York City solo show—has been found dead of an overdose in his Philadelphia studio. Colleen is adamant that Samuel, whose paintings have gone missing, was murdered. Julian agrees to the take the case and soon learns that Samuel was in business with Albanian mobsters who used art sales to launder their money. He also finds out that Samuel was deeply interested in the occult, which leads Julian down some dangerous, borderline-supernatural paths before he's able to deliver Colleen a series of difficult truths. Julian remains an endearing protagonist, and Witham keeps the red herrings coming at a satisfying clip. Fans of Ryan's Genevieve Lenard series should check this out.

I Trust Her Completely
Christine Henneberg. Christine Henneberg, $17 trade paper (290p)
ISBN 979-8-9860667-2-1

Henneberg, a physician and author of the memoir *Boundless*, explores in her insightful debut novel the complex friendship between two San Francisco women as they navigate motherhood. In 2019, 39-year-old Josie, a copywriter and aspiring novelist, unexpectedly reconnects with her old friend Radhika. The two were close in college, when Radhika supported Josie after an abortion, but they fell out of touch while Radhika battled breast cancer. Josie, single and queer, has just gotten pregnant via IVF, and Radhika, now a family planning doctor, invites Josie to meet her young twins. Josie jumps at the chance to reconnect, having viewed Radhika as a mother figure after losing her parents in an accident. Both women are working on manuscripts, and Radhika suggests they help each other like they did in their college writing classes. Things get complicated over the course of the pregnancy as Josie falls for the twins' nanny, Mercy, and makes plans to raise her baby, while Radhika, who loves her children but doesn't love being a mother, thinks Josie should be focusing on her novel, and meddles by surreptitiously sending Josie's manuscript to her agent, angering Josie. With well-rounded characters and a wrenching final act, Henneberg's novel powerfully dramatizes the limits of chosen family and the tension between maternal desire and professional ambition. This skilled and nuanced tale is worth seeking out.

Liked
Jessa White. Mindseed & Good, $14 e-book (386p)
ISBN 979-8-9941906-0-9

White debuts with an authentic view into the perils of internet fame. Jersey Mau, 17, resents that her mother left her and her father, Sherman, a Los Angeles talent agent. One day, at Sherman's office, Jersey berates one of his influencer clients for being fake, then impulsively posts an unfiltered video about her depression, confessing that she wishes her life would end and pointing out that the "really fucked-up part is that I'm the problem for wanting that." She also calls out influencers for pretending that everything is fine: "People on here... are all, like, slightly different versions of the same fake person pretending to be okay." The clip goes viral, and Jersey attracts an agent whose career is waning and sees in her a chance to turn things around. As Jersey's star rises, she's consumed by attacks from an online troll and a feud with one of Sherman's top influencer clients. Though the novel's conclusion strains credulity, White's insights into the world of influencers and her characters' emotions are adept. (Depression, White writes, is "like a toxic best friend who's always ready to remind you of the worst parts of yourself"). This manages to capture the truth behind social media's shiny veneer.

The Last Luau (Mac Ross #1)
Guy McCullough. Agile, $4.99 e-book (181p)
ISBN 979-8-3329-6021-5

McCullough debuts with a shrewd historical whodunit set in the immediate aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The day before the bombing, PI Mac Ross, a former Honolulu police detective, receives an anonymous letter offering information about the brutal murder of his partner, Hes Heston, if Ross will fork over more than the advertised $1,000 reward. Ross's inability to crack the case had eaten away at him for

months, but the tides have turned recently with the revelation, from Heston's widow, that two similar killings have taken place in San Francisco. The day after the Pearl Harbor attack, Honolulu businessman Kintaro Sato offers to identify Heston's murderer if Ross solves a separate crime: the fatal shooting of Japanese American schoolteacher Daniel Nakajima. Seeking justice for Nakajima at the precise moment that anti-Japanese sentiment is surging makes Ross's inquiry tricky, and McCullough smartly incorporates these social obstacles into his two cleverly constructed parallel mysteries. Fans of James Kestrel's *Five Decembers* will enjoy this well-crafted puzzle.

The Man on the Bench (Callie McFee #3)
Hy Conrad. Mason Hill, $14.99 mass market (340p) *I*
SBN 978-1-7355555-8-4

Monk writer Conrad's satisfying third whodunit featuring Austin, Tex., journalist Callie McFee (after *Sins of the Family*) revolves around the murder of an unhoused man named Barney. Callie and her brother, homicide detective State, have been guarding a sensitive family secret: their father, former Texas attorney general Buddy McFee, is in cognitive decline. As Callie manages the situation, she finds solace in casual interactions with Barney on her way home from work, in which the two discusses an array of topics, including Victorian poetry. One day, Callie confides in Barney about her father's condition—a choice she regrets when Barney is gunned down a short time later with notes about their conversation in his pocket. As Callie helps State probe the murder, she learns that Barney was hiding secrets of his own, and occasionally lied about his whereabouts during his daily chats with Callie. The mystery deepens when one of Barney's friends is also killed. Callie's sleuthing is ingenious, the novel's tone is unwaveringly genial, and Conrad juggles a large number of suspects with ease. This delightful procedural has all the charm of the author's work on Monk.

Pearly Gates
Bonnie Solomon. Bonsol Press, $19.99 trade paper (362p)
ISBN 979-8-9926133-1-5

Solomon debuts with a zippy fantasy rom-com following Pearly Gates, who is probably the afterlife's most fabulous drag queen—until her soulmate leaves her, fed up with her inability to change and grow, even after multiple reincarnations. Single, heartbroken, and staring down the unsatisfying remnants of her afterlife, she heads to the celestial bar. There, she befriends an overworked White Robe, one of the afterlife elite responsible for guiding human souls while still alive, and impulsively offers to take over his caseload while he gets a much-needed vacation, which might finally prove to her bosses that she's ready for a promotion. Suddenly Pearly is deep in small-town Illinois, looking after three troubled souls: a young widow who can't move on, a recent college grad with only months to live, and a partially closeted trans woman trying to fit her true self into her old life. Seems like nothing some of Pearly's sparkle can't fix—until she realizes that the gorgeous barista running the town's coffee shop is her reincarnated soulmate. Now she must not only help her three charges toward their happy endings but also reclaim her own. There's a lot of heart and humor to this quest, and Solomon is refreshingly unafraid to explore Pearly's faults and foibles. Fabulous, funny, and sweet as a pumpkin spice latte, this hits the spot.

Rears & Vices
E.M. Caro. E.M. Caro, $18.99 trade paper (380p)
ISBN 978-1-968767-00-6

Caro debuts with an entertaining polyamorous pirate romance set in 1816. After the disastrous loss of his ship, Capt. Everard Anderson de Anglada is just trying to hang onto his Royal Navy career long enough to be put to shore with a pension. When he's called to assist in a court-martial, Everard finds one former lover, Post-Capt. Preston D'Arcy, at his side as part of the court-martial panel—and another, Vitaliy Gray, in the dock, under charges that mean he'll hang. Panicked, Everard fabricates enough evidence to contradict the charges. But Vitaliy is more than just a Marine, as Everard thought; he's the notorious pirate V. Varfolomey, and defending him means Everard has put his own neck on the line. A grateful Vitaliy concocts a plan: should Everard become his husband and heir to his command, Vitaliy's crew will surely accept him. But with D'Arcy joining them as they flee south, intent on rekindling things with Everard himself, and three nations and a rival pirate crew all after them, the path to a happy ending is far from smooth sailing. The quantity of double crosses and political intrigue sometimes overwhelms the love story, but the emotional and physical chemistry between the men is strong and the swashbuckling adventure is good fun. As naughty as it is nautical, this is a winner.

Wish You Were Here (Bluebird Basin #3)
Jess K Hardy. Pinkity, $15.24 trade paper (360p)
ISBN 979-8-9885163-7-8

Hardy's third contemporary featuring characters in their 40s (after *Lips Like Sugar*) is a tender paean to love and resilience. After dropping out of grad school, Davis returned home to small town Bluebird Basin where her stepfather, Madigan, runs sober living home Little Timber. She fell hard and fast for one of the residents, Kev, and the pair were happily in love until Kev started using heroin again. Davis and Madigan found him when he overdosed and forced him into rehab. Now Kev is back, clean, and determined to make things right with Davis, who is traumatized by Kev's near-death experience. Lovingly described scenes of equine therapy help Kev gain confidence and resolve, while working with the universally kind and encouraging Little Timber men provides Davis with new career goals as well. This unwavering support system also gives her and Kev the courage to try again, this time with a more open understanding of each other's experiences. Bolstered by sizzling mutual attraction, their second-chance romance is toothachingly sweet, though the ease of their reconciliation sometimes strains credulity. Still, this uplifting tale has lots of charm.

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