

A Hungry Heart

L.K. Quinn's darkly beautiful novel wins the BookLife Prize

BY MARYJANICE DAVIDSON

In *The Toffee Man and the Kingdom of Ends*—the winner of the 2025 BookLife Fiction Prize, a yearly competition for self-published authors—readers meet April Smart. The heroine of L.K. Quinn's debut novel, chosen from the general fiction category of the prize, is as wondrous and resilient as a 10-year-old girl can be, and thank goodness, because she is surrounded by damaged, unreliable adults. She also has the gift of being able to find joy in the mundane, such as in this passage: "I sat back and looked across the garden and over the rooves down the hill into the valley. The outlines are sharp under the sun. The light slips between them like vanilla custard on chocolate crunch at school."

Quinn wastes no time plunging the reader into April's world, from the humble to the horrific. Additional characters include April's harried, mentally ill mother; her treacherous stepfather; her rambunctious brothers; and the lonely and enigmatic Toffee Man, a friend who offers kindness, refuge, and, of course, lustrous toffees. April is charged with too much too soon—she labors under society's (and her family's) continual insistence that she always be good, helpful, and nice, while those who should keep her safe repeatedly betray her in the worst ways.

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, author of *Terry Dactyl*, who selected the book as a finalist, extolled *The Toffee Man and the Kingdom of Ends* as "a book about childhood and longing, belief and loss, and the lies adults tell to imprison truth. Here we experience the making of a self in a world that refuses to allow girls to draw their own maps—all the intimacy and craving, the openness and heartbreak." The BookLife Prize critic's report for *The Toffee Man and the Kingdom of*



L.K. Quinn

Ends praised Quinn's ability to convey a childlike perspective without sacrificing subtlety or dimension. "Quinn creates a claustrophobic atmosphere, with an overriding sense of catastrophe brewing throughout," the reviewer wrote. "The novel's power lies in Quinn's ability to vividly sketch the all-too-common struggles of this world: poverty, abuse, marginalization, and a desperate search to carve meaning out of a life of suffering."

April Smart first came to the author in a dream. "I dreamt of a young girl watching an old man in a garden

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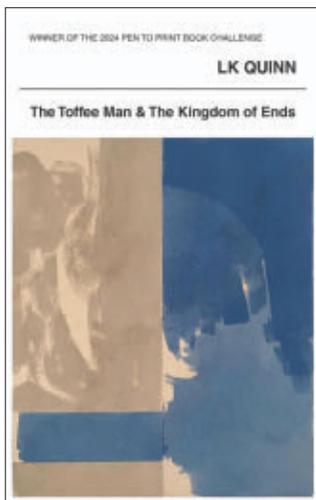
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and asking questions. When I was a child, there was an old man we called the Toffee Man who lived in our village. I barely knew him, but I thought about him a lot because people were very unkind about him, though he had the kindest eyes. I wished I had talked to him. I think that's where April began."

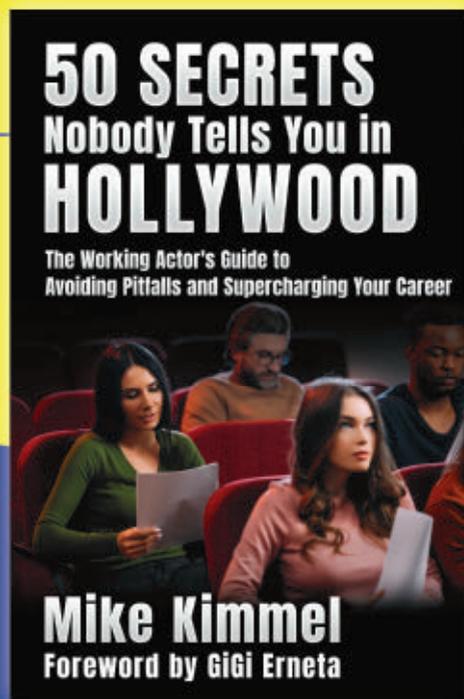
As with any character, however, April grew from an amalgam of personal experiences and interactions. When Quinn first began writing, she recalled a friend who died from a brain tumor when they were both in their early teens. "She was a very wise and emotionally intelligent person, and she was in what I later understood as 'a state of grace.' That experience sat with me, not least because we'd had what was termed a disadvantaged life," Quinn says. "When I started to write the story I was aiming for epic tragedy, with that state of grace as the flaw that made way for betrayal to express itself in a small life for which the world had little regard."

Because she's so young, the reader often has a better understanding of what April is enduring than she does. When asked about striking that balance, the author explained: "Once I found the story, I focused on April's sensory impressions, using language that was right for a 10-year-old, making sure that she was making connections and using references relative to her life experience." Quinn explains that she did some research into some of the technical aspects of language acquisition, though April's voice is so distinctive and full of acute emotion, readers will be hard-pressed to remember another character quite like her.

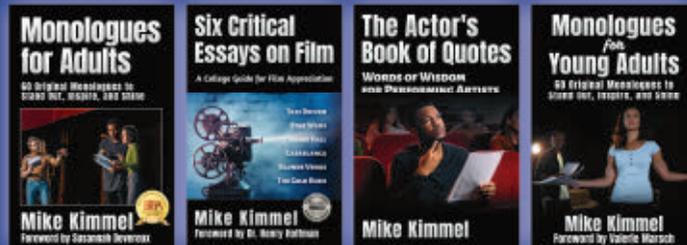
"I thought if the reader could feel what she felt, it would keep them ahead," Quinn says. "I didn't set out to construct a heroine so much as listen for one—the voice of someone caught between conscience and desire, between wanting to be good and wanting to follow the needs of a heart hungry for connection, for love."

April's understandable hunger makes her easy prey for her manipulative stepfather. When asked about some of the book's more difficult passages, Quinn explains: "Early on, I made the decision to make it clear who the abuser was and how the abuse could work without her mother, Hope, knowing.

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



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“With humorous and welcome candor, Kimmel provides a wealth of behind-the-scenes information and advice about auditions, interacting with agents, and prioritizing self-care, with actionable game plans for actors ranging in age from their 20s to their 50s.”

—*BookLife by Publishers Weekly Review*

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"I didn't set out to construct a heroine so much as listen for one—the voice of someone caught between conscience and desire, between wanting to be good and wanting to follow the needs of a heart hungry for connection, for love."

That really helped me to focus on April's voice, as I didn't have to think about building to the reveal. It was April's choice." Quinn notes that the technology and forensics available today were not available when the book is set: "It was a time when surveillance depended on neighbors and relationships were face-to-face... women and children still had few rights, and poverty was a personal failure."

The novel also integrates philosophy, particularly Kantian, as it raises questions about self-interest, desire, and moral duty. Kant's ideas helped to shape the story's moral conflicts, and they inspired the title. "His concept of the Kingdom of Ends—a world where every being must be treated as an end in itself, and not a means to an end—became implicit in the narrative," Quinn says. "Kant saw that our senses and our minds serve survival, not truth. We instinctively choose to see the world in a way that enhances our survival. As we reflect and understand the implications of our choices, we can do better."

April's fascination with space is another significant thematic element. While April is in many ways trapped in her circumstances, contemplating space travel serves as a source of escape and solace. Quinn says, "I was a young child in 1968, when space was more than a frontier—it was a promise. For us children, that sense of expansion was intoxicating. It said that imagination could be real. It was only as an adult that I understood the world was divided by politics and fear, yet above it all was this silent, shining possibility. The space age baked into my very being that I should dream, go boldly, and if only in my mind, that anything was possible."

As she was writing, Quinn thought back to the night of the moon landings, when she sat on the roof of her house: "I'd heard on the radio they had landed and thought somehow I could see it if I were closer."

Like April, Quinn grew up in a caravan in West Country fields, eventually becoming a ward of the state, and has been enchanted by the written word since she was a child. She's worked in the music industry, as an actress, and has written scripts. When it came to writing *The Toffee Man and the Kingdom of Ends*, the author says with April's charming frankness that she just needed to write, so she did.

Regarding her BookLife Prize win, Quinn says that, in addition to affirming her remarkable storytelling abilities, "This has had the benefit of buying me [my husband's] appreciation whilst I sit and write the sequel." 🍷

MaryJanice Davidson is a bestselling author who lives in St. Paul, Minn., with her family. Her newest release is The Reluctant Reaper.

BookLife Talks with Zac Engler

AI wasn't on many people's radars back in 2016 when Engler started talking about it. Since then, he's been named chief AI officer and worked at companies including Apple and Sanctuary AI. His first book, *Turning on Machines*, is designed to be a practical guide to AI that anyone can use.



You've been in the AI space for almost a decade. Why did you decide to write *Turning on Machines* now?

I've been working on *Turning on Machines* in some shape or form for the past decade. Back then, AI lived mostly in research labs and on engineering teams. I knew that the implications would be much broader, but it was hard to tell a story without real-world examples people could relate to. Today, that's changed. AI is becoming a part of the fabric of everyday life, creating efficiencies and very real uncertainty, and for the first time, a mainstream audience can feel the impact. The technology has finally caught up to the conversation I wanted to have.

Tools like ChatGPT have put AI into everyone's hands. Whether we actively choose to use it or not, it's going to influence how we work, communicate, and even think. That's why I wrote the book at an accessible reading level, because if only the Zuckerbergs, Altmans, and Nadellas of the world understand what's happening, we lose our chance to have a say in our future.

With AI technology growing by leaps and bounds, did you have to update *Turning on Machines* as you were writing it?

Not as much as you'd think. The book is built on historical patterns of how humans react to major shifts. While technology has changed significantly, those patterns haven't. Most of what I wrote in 2016 is unfolding as expected. The only real updates I made were the names of the companies involved and how fast people were adopting these tools.

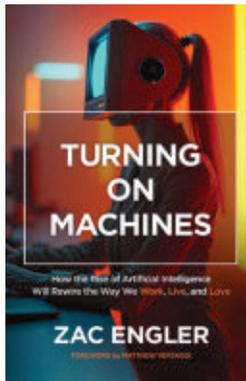
The book is broken up into three parts: Rise, Revolt, Reverence. Those parts symbolize the past, present, and potential future that AI has. When writing, why did you decide to approach the book like this?

The Rise, Revolt, and Reverence structure mirrors every major transformation in human history. Whether it's fire,

agriculture, or the printing press, humanity moves through the same emotional and cultural phases each time a major new technology is introduced.

Rise is the discovery phase. It's full of optimism, experimentation, and a sense that a new tool can expand our horizons. We're seeing Revolt play out with AI right now. Disruption spreads, jobs shift rapidly, institutions are challenged to adapt, and people struggle and resist what they cannot control. Finally, the Reverence stage is when the dust settles and the technology becomes an integral part of daily life.

I chose this structure because AI isn't a "tech story." It's a human story following a rhythm we've lived through many times before. It helps readers place today's chaos in context and see that what feels unprecedented is actually part of a much more familiar pattern.



You've designed the book to be accessible to anyone. Can you give an example of something that a layperson might get out of it versus someone in the tech field?

At the end of each chapter, I ask the reader a series of questions intended to prompt self-reflection. I chose to do this as a way to bring AI into the reader's sphere of control. The questions are designed so everyone can get something from the book, regardless of technological understanding.

A college student might use them to think about how AI will shape their career choices. A parent might consider what choices to make for their kids. A mid-career professional might reflect on the skills they want to build to stay relevant. Businesses can gain insights on AI integration, ethical use, team training, and how to use AI to create new opportunities rather than replace people.

I'm not trying to turn everyone into an AI expert. I want to give people a framework for understanding what's coming, where things could get messy or dangerous, and how they want to shape their future.

What do you think is the biggest misconception that people have when it comes to AI?

The biggest misconception is that AI is only for tech people. What I've seen in my work is that plenty of people who talk the loudest about AI still don't know how to use it properly. The gap is much smaller than most people think. This book gives you the tools to close it for good.

Just remember that AI isn't replacing you. But someone who actually knows how to use it might.

For more, visit zacengler.com/turningonmachines

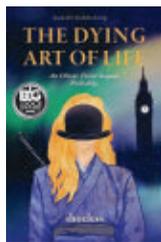


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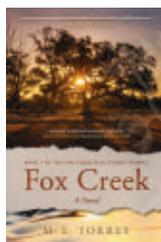


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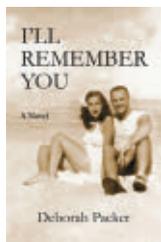
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The Wayfarer's Inn

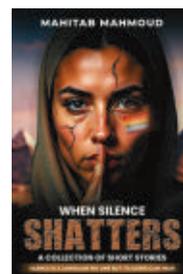


Peter Unger. Wipf and Stock. \$13.05 paper (128p), ISBN 979-8-3852-3481-3; \$2.99 e-book, ASIN BODQM1NLFB
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On the night Jesus was born, there wasn't room for him in the inn, but there's plenty of space for those who find themselves at The Wayfarer's Inn.

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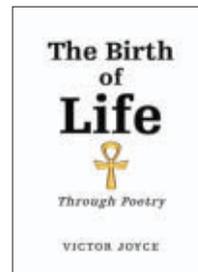
Mahitab Mahmoud. Mahitab Mahmoud. \$19.99 (116p), ISBN 978-1-970576-02-3; \$11.99 paper (114p), ISBN 978-1-970576-01-6



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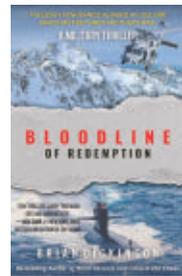


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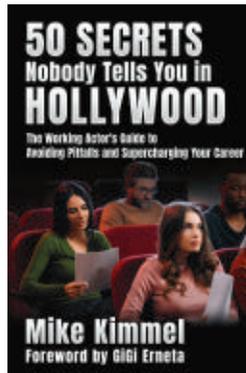


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BookLife Talks with Mike Kimmel

BookLife Reviews described Kimmel's latest work, *50 Secrets Nobody Tells You in Hollywood*, as a "practical, clear-eyed guide to achieving success in Hollywood." We spoke with Kimmel about where the book came from and what he hopes readers will get out of it, no matter where they are in their career.



What caused you to compile *50 Secrets*?

I worked as an actor in New York for 10 years before venturing out to Hollywood. I had pretty good credits and training, but after I arrived I found I still had a lot to learn that was specific to the Hollywood market. Because our industry is so competitive, there are many secrets and bits of advice people will be reluctant to share, but being unaware of these can negatively impact a performer's career. I wanted to create a book of lasting value that will help actors navigate one of the most competitive industries on the planet.

How much of your own experience did you draw from for the book?

All the anecdotes and advice in this book come from my own experiences and the shared experiences of trusted friends and colleagues. It's extremely important to have a solid support system in Hollywood and to surround yourself with reputable, well-intentioned people whose judgment and ethical standards you trust. I think actors will learn best through the practical, real-life examples of professionals who have worked in the industry for many years. Theory is great for the classroom, but there is simply no substitute for real-world experience. Believe me, there's not enough time to figure it all out by yourself. My colleagues and I have enjoyed great successes and also made some monumental mistakes. We've all taken our share of lumps. I hope this book helps actors duplicate our successes and avoid the pitfalls we learned from the hard way.

Who is your ideal reader and why?

I wanted to create a book that will be helpful for actors at all levels. This book will be most beneficial for mid-level actors, but I wanted to include enough good, solid content that even those with many years

of experience will find a nugget of information or new strategy to help them grow their careers too. Beginners can use *50 Secrets* as a long-term road map for building their credits and overcoming the many obstacles along the way. Several trade magazine reviewers have commented that the book will also be interesting for people in unrelated fields who want to learn more about the behind-the-scenes workings of the entertainment industry.

Out of all of the lessons in the book, which do you think will be the most surprising to readers?

Though this is a youth-oriented industry, it's still possible to enjoy a terrific career later in life. Just because you're starting late doesn't mean you're starting empty. My mother, Rose Kimmel, started acting at age 70.

Mom was a natural extrovert who genuinely loved people. Agents and casting directors didn't care that she didn't go to drama school or perform Shakespeare in the park. They appreciated her enthusiasm and saw her as a fresh face in the senior citizen category. My mother had some of the most wonderful experiences of her life in her golden years—by having the courage to follow her show business dream. It's only too late if you don't start now.

What's next for you?

I always work on three books at a time. When I get stuck on one, I move on to the next. It's a process that has worked well for me since 2014, when I released my first book, *Scenes for Teens*. This new book, *50 Secrets*, is my 12th. It's sometimes hard to predict which title is going to be ready next. Right now, I have four new books that are all about 90% completed. But the next one will be a book of two-character dialogue scenes for adult actors. I've been working on this for a long time and just asked a trusted colleague to write the foreword. I always like to have another pair of experienced eyes look my material over to make sure it's effective and applicable to the real-world challenges actors face daily.

For more, visit booklife.com/kimmel

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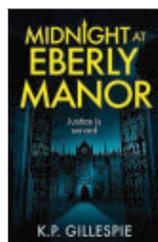
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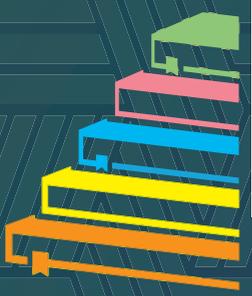
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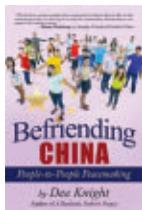
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The Day One Executive: A Guidebook to Stand Out in Your Career Starting Now

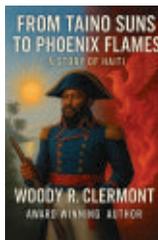


April Armstrong. Manuscripts. \$23.99 paper (418p), ISBN 979-8-88504-419-6; \$19.95 audio, ASIN BODMQ455Z5

Alibris, Amazon, Barnes & Noble

An indispensable career companion, this bestselling book will guide you towards long-term success, accelerate growth, and equip you to make an extraordinary impact starting on day one.

From Taino Suns to Phoenix Flames: A



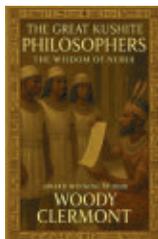
Story of Haiti

Woody R. Clermont. Woody R. Clermont. \$32.99 (234p), ISBN 979-8-2931-1931-8; \$19.99 paper (236p), ISBN 979-8-2929-9297-4

Amazon

From Taino Suns to Phoenix Flames traces the history, culture, and enduring spirit of the indigenous Taino people of the Caribbean.

The Great Kushite Philosophers: The



Wisdom of Nubia

Woody R. Clermont, illus. by The Unrelenting Alchemist. Woody Clermont Book Publications. \$13.99 paper (112p), ISBN 979-8-2664-5834-5; \$3.99 e-book, ASIN BOF51XQTZM

Amazon

This groundbreaking book restores Nubia to the history of world philosophy. If you are interested in African philosophy, this book belongs on your shelf.

The Health Blueprint: A First Principles Approach to Building Optimal Health

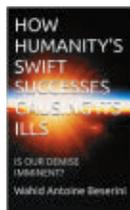


Pasha Gurevich. Pasha Gurevich. \$24.99 paper (312p), ISBN 979-8-2727-0492-4; \$9.99 e-book, ASIN BOFY8FG97V

Amazon

The Health Blueprint is a bold, practical framework that improves body and mind through simple, first-principles protocols.

How Humanity's Swift Successes Are Causing its Ills: Is Our Demise Imminent?



Wahid Beserini. Wahid Antoine Beserini. \$14.99 paper (10p), ISBN 979-8-90056-625-2; \$2.99 e-book, ASIN BOFQ14V281

Amazon

The causes of humanity's overwhelming ills are linked to our swift evolutionary successes. The explosion of information has created persistent stress that leads to brain overload. The solution is *Salveo Essencia*.

The Long Flight Home: A True Story of Years Lost and Love Found

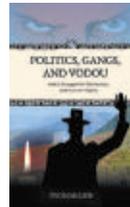


Beth Aubrey and Jim Aubrey. Aubrey-Redman Publishing. \$21.99 paper (336p), ISBN 978-1-7374638-0-1; \$9.99 e-book, ISBN 978-1-7374638-1-8

Amazon

Two teenagers, over 4,000 miles apart connect as pen pals via a pirate radio station anchored in the Irish Sea. They reunite 42 years later when he rediscovers a bookmark she sent him.

Politics, Gangs, and Vodou: Haiti's Struggle for Democracy and Human Rights



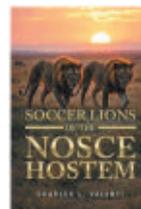
Yvon Milien. yMilien. \$18.99 paper (268p), ISBN 979-8-9860364-4-1

Amazon, Barnes & Noble

This book is a sweeping exploration of Haiti's past, its present, and the forces that shape its uncertain future.

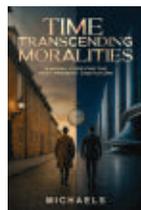
Soccer Lions of the Nosce Hostem

Charles L. Valenti. Integrity Publishing. \$11.99 paper (206p), ISBN 979-8-89465-123-1



Amazon, Barnes & Noble
His story is a testament to how American sports instincts, Italian soccer roots, and military-style strategy shaped a decade-long era of dominance for his son's Ridgewood, N.Y.C., team.

Time Transcending Moralities: A Moral Code for the Past, Present, and Future



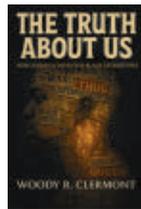
Michaels. Bookbaby. \$25.99 (112p), ISBN 979-8-3178-1315-4; \$1.99 e-book, ISBN 979-8-3178-1316-1

Amazon

Time Transcending

Moralities is a bold, urgent exploration of the patterns that shape human behavior, and the cost of ignoring them.

The Truth About Us: How America Invented Black Stereotypes



Woody R. Clermont. Woody Clermont Book Publications. \$15.99 paper (228p), ISBN 979-8-2750-5095-0; \$3.99 e-book, ASIN BOG2SLZF4S

Amazon

The Truth About Us exposes how stereotypes about Blacks were engineered, and how they continue to shape the lives and futures of millions.

Unshrink Yourself



Thanh Nguyen. Loving Heart Publishing. \$17.99 paper (180p), ISBN 979-8-9908930-3-0; \$9.99 e-book, ISBN 979-8-9908930-4-7

Amazon, Barnes & Noble

A heart-driven guide to silence your inner critic, let go of perfectionism, and rise with confidence. Discover the small shifts that help you live boldly and lead with courage.

Religion/Spirituality

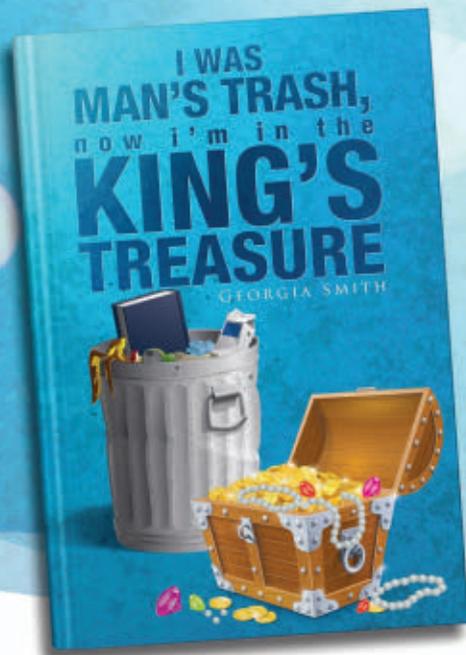
Dancing with Angels: True Stories of the Unexpected



Linda Keenan. Linda Lee Keenan. \$15.99 paper (196p), ISBN 979-8-9921524-0-1

Amazon

True stories. Unexpected happenings of ordinary people. Events that defy logic. Was it luck,



I WAS MAN'S TRASH, NOW I'M IN THE KING'S TREASURE

BY GEORGIA SMITH

ISBN: 9781684869817

When Georgia Smith sat down to write *I Was Man's Trash, Now I'm in the King's Treasure*, she wasn't just telling her story, she was offering a lifeline. Her memoir chronicles an extraordinary transformation: from seasons of rejection and emotional pain to the radiant realization of her true worth as a beloved daughter of God. Through raw honesty and unwavering faith, Smith reveals how the power of divine love can turn even the most broken life into something priceless.

Earlier this year, Smith's message reached dazzling new heights *literally* when her book lit up a billboard in New York City's Times Square for two days, capturing the attention of thousands. That momentum carried into a heartfelt national interview with renowned broadcaster Ric Bratton, where Smith shared her journey of healing and purpose with audiences across the country. She continues to connect with readers worldwide through her professional author website, virtual events, and a growing community of believers inspired by her testimony.

At just 136 pages, *I Was Man's Trash, Now I'm in the King's Treasure* is a concise yet powerful read, one that fits perfectly into today's busy lifestyles while delivering timeless wisdom. Priced affordably at \$9.99, it's an ideal addition to faith-inspired gift tables, women's empowerment displays, or seasonal features on hope and renewal. Readers on Amazon describe it as "a story of victory," praising Smith's courage and authenticity, while others celebrate its message of belief, resilience, and divine transformation.

With its cross-category appeal, this memoir bridges the gap between Christian inspiration and mainstream women's self-help, resonating with anyone who's ever struggled to rediscover their worth. The new 2024 edition offers bookstores and readers alike a fresh opportunity to experience a voice of truth, healing, and empowerment, a reminder that even what the world discards can become a treasure in the hands of the King.



Available at:



BARNES & NOBLE



*also in other major online bookstores

intuition, or angel help? You decide. Angels plus intuition is AI at its finest!

From the Back of a Donkey: Journey of a Lifetime (2nd ed.)



Nancy Elaine Hartman Minor, illus. by Karina Nissi and Nancy Elaine Hartman Minor. Light Bringer Publishing & Studio. \$19.99 paper (146p), ISBN 979-8-9874670-2-2; \$2.99 e-book, ISBN 979-8-9874670-3-9

Amazon, Books2Read, IngramSpark
Experience the Christmas story from Mary's point of view! You'll journey in intimate company with her from conception to the birth of Christ and be encouraged in your own faith walk.

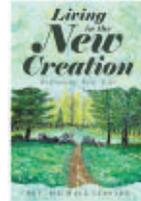
The Lamb Alone is Worthy: Understanding Revelation

Roland England. Dorrance Publishing. \$16.99 paper (190p), ISBN 979-8-89341-234-5; \$11.99 e-book,



ISBN 979-8-89341-733-3
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Dorrance Bookstore
The Lamb Alone is Worthy is a study and commentary of the Book of Revelation, a masterful, dramatic presentation of the struggle between truth and falsehood.

Living in the New Creation: Reframing Your Life



Michael Lessard. Brilliant Books Literary. \$9.99 paper (172p), ISBN 978-1-64133-888-2
Amazon

This volume explores how a pastoral-care-centered church community shapes Christian moral theology and challenges aspects of modern culture.

Unconditional Remembrance: Your Connection to Source

Laurie Seymour. Scribe Hive Publishing. \$19.99



paper (222p), ISBN 978-1-962112-27-7; \$9.99 e-book, ISBN 978-1-962112-28-4
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Bookshop.org, IngramSpark
Through personal stories, inspired writing, and practical guidance, Laurie activates your original blessing: that you are now and have always been a part of the essence of the Universe.

Children's/YA

Axolotl, Where's Your Toe



Terri Tatchell, illus. by Ivan Sulima. Fielding House Press. \$24.99 (32p), ISBN 978-1-998718-10-8; \$11.99 paper (32p), ISBN 978-1-998718-10-8
Amazon, Barnes & Noble,

Indigo

A tiny axolotl with a huge dream finds courage in unexpected places in this playful, rhyming adventure that helps kids discover bravery one small step at a time.

Q&A SPONSORED

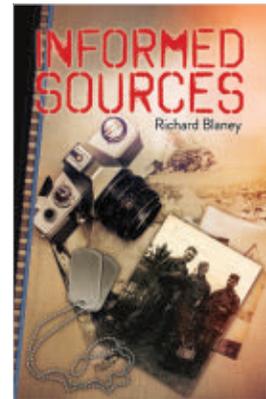
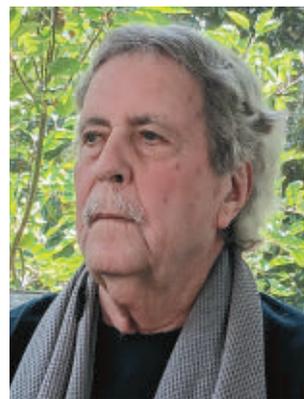
BookLife Talks with Richard Blaney

Blaney's latest work, *Informed Sources*, follows his recurring character James Flaherty as he returns to Vietnam, this time as a journalist, not a soldier. As a Vietnam vet himself, Blaney is no stranger to his subject matter. We spoke with him about that connection, and his goals for this new book.

***Informed Sources* is your third book featuring James Flaherty. What draws you to this character?**

James Flaherty could just as easily be called Richard Blaney, and bringing this story up is a way for me to deal with certain old haunts from that time. This part of the trilogy brings into focus the connection between the two other books and makes obvious how the "1,000-yard stare" became part of many vets' behaviors.

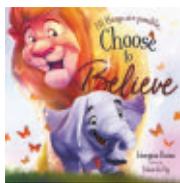
While your previous books are more about James and his journey, *Informed Sources* seems to be geared more toward shining a light on his fellow soldiers. What made you shift focus for this book?



I wanted to focus on the ridiculousness and drudgery of the Vietnam War during the chapter when it was winding down. Although our presence was dwindling, as well as our influence, there were many instances of bravery and heroism. The characters in this story are for the most part taken directly from my experience, with only the names changed—from the simple, almost clownish GI to the skag addict, the officer dangerously impatient with his troops, to a general who stood up for the officers beneath him. These all remain with me.

For more, visit booklife.com/blaney

Choose to Believe



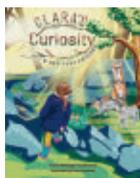
Georgina Owino, illus. by Eduardo Paj. Mighty Kids Publishing House. \$17.95 (44p), ISBN 979-8-9891006-1-3; \$14.99 paper (40p), ISBN 979-8-

9891006-0-6

Amazon, Mighty Kids Publishing House

Little Elephant has big dreams but even bigger doubts. Just as she's about to give up, she discovers a powerful truth: with God, all things are possible for those who believe.

Clara's Curiosity & Her Foxy Friends

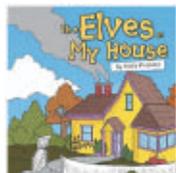


Karen Belanger-Richmond, illus. by Paul Mathews. Mascot Kids. \$24.95 (40p), ISBN 979-8-89138-109-4

Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Bookshop.org, Mascot Books

A beautifully illustrated 40-page children's book that tells the true story of a young girl's growing curiosity about nature by observing a family of foxes.

The Elves in My House



Molly Prickett. Writers Branding. \$9.99 paper (26p), ISBN 978-1-63945-081-7

Amazon, Barnes & Noble

A curious little girl discovers mischievous elves living in her house, responsible for missing socks and clogged sinks, revealing a surprising hidden world of troublemaking relatives.

Namtar: The Night Plague



C.D. Jones, illus. by C.D. Jones and Samantha "Sami" Ly. Lopsco Publishing. \$16.99 paper (472p), ISBN 979-8-9923940-7-8; \$4.99 e-book, ISBN 979-8-9923940-7-8

Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Google Books, Kobo Golden light erupts from Alex's hands. He's inherited an ancient bloodline. The Namtar plague is rising. He must master his powers or watch humanity fall to monsters his ancestor created.

Sybilla and the Clockmaker's Secret



Nic Minnella. Nic Minnella. \$10.99 paper (256p), ISBN 979-12-210-9340-7; \$4.99 e-book, ISBN 979-12-210-9339-1

Amazon

An old grandfather clock turns into a Time Portal, and 13-year-old Billie must solve a century-old mystery in order to save the present and Time itself.

The Year Winter Came Late



Michael Larzelere, illus. by Catherine Blaski. Michael Larzelere. \$10.99 paper (38p), ISBN 979-8-3002-9245-4; \$4.99 e-book, ASIN B0BG3BRY51

Amazon, Kobo, ThriftBooks

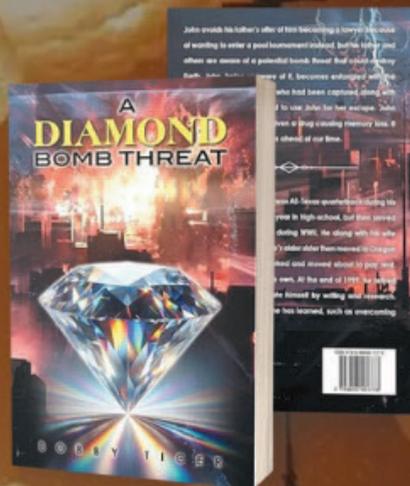
Winter is missing in Snowtown. Lisa must trick a mean old snowman, Mr. Sneezzy Snew, into returning winter to Snowtown.

A Diamond Bomb Threat

A Diamond Bomb Threat by Bob Ticer
A High-Stakes Sci-Fi Thriller with Cinematic Potential



Set three centuries in the future, *A Diamond Bomb Threat* immerses readers in a world where advanced technology and human ambition collide. Bob Ticer introduces John Luck, a man who trades a traditional legal path for independence, only to find himself entangled in a deadly conspiracy involving a diamond-powered bomb and a former employer hiding dangerous secrets. As John crosses paths with Nelly Nelson, whose mission to save her father is tied to the same technology, the race for truth becomes urgent, and survival becomes uncertain. Memory control, emerging weapon systems, and the ethical boundaries of innovation push the story beyond entertainment into a chilling reflection of where science may lead us. Fast-paced, inventive, and rich with tension, this novel reads like a film waiting to happen. With its futuristic world-building, compelling characters, and thriller energy, *A Diamond Bomb Threat* is a standout for fans of *The Expanse* and *Minority Report*, and a compelling candidate for the big screen.



amazon BARNES & NOBLE



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

MEMOIR

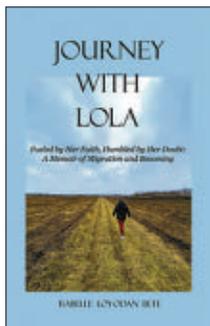
EDITOR'S PICK

Journey with Lola: A Memoir of Migration and Becoming

Isabelle Loy-odan Bete | Twin World Publishing
205p, trade paper, \$16.99, ISBN 979-8-999-39180-3

Bete debuts with a compelling tribute to the power of heritage, sharing the story of her upbringing in the Philippines and delving into the life of her grandmother, Lola, a formidable woman who lived by “the values of kindness, humility, generosity, and hospitality”—and warned Bete that leaving her home country could sacrifice the rich cultural and familial legacies that shaped her life. The memories passed down from her grandmother reach back to a time before the Second World War, offering a firsthand account of a world in transition. Through Lola’s innocent eyes, readers witness the profound changes brought about by war, the impact of foreign aid that made education possible, and the lasting influence of the American occupation on Filipino culture.

“I grew up with Lola, she grew old with me,” Bete writes, revealing the deep bond



Stirring tribute to heritage, culture, and the beauty of home.

Great for fans of Javier Zamora’s *Solito*, Xiaolu Guo’s *Once Upon a Time in the East*.

comforting word when she faces her own hardships.

Bete paints a vivid picture of Filipino culture and traditions, highlighting the importance of community and family, where mutual support is as natural as breathing. Readers walk the trails with her, as she reflects on “colonial mentality” and her choice to leave for America—after Lola passes away—to work as a nurse. Her writing reflects the promise and disillusionment of life in the U.S.—and her overriding hope that she and her children will “remain grounded” in history, seeking “beauty in life, but also learn[ing] from it.”

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

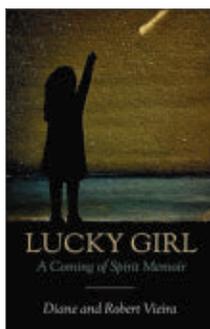
MEMOIR

Lucky Girl: A Coming of Spirit Memoir

Diane and Robert Vieira | Peter E. Randall Publisher
192p, trade paper, \$19.95, ISBN 978-1-942-15599-7

Diane Vieira and her husband Robert Vieira delve into her life from early childhood to her present days on the rooftop terrace of her home in Portugal, reflecting on “a legacy rich with meaning, offered to my family with both love and pride.” She recounts her younger years with a father who was largely absent, a mother who favored unconventional parenting, and the hauntings of “economic misfortune” that followed her family. Her earliest memories are of a happy family, though her adult lens views those experiences much differently. As she grows, Vieira suffers sexual abuse, witnesses domestic violence, and observes the eccentricities of coming of age in 1960s rural New England.

This is an authentic, vulnerable memoir with moments of sorrow and joy, written with adult awareness that a chaotic upbringing will shape later years. The authors don’t shy from the story’s uglier parts, laying them bare with storytelling that



Stirring memoir transforming pain into resilience and chaos into meaning.

Great for fans of Tara Westover’s *Educated*, Jennette McCurdy’s *I’m Glad My Mom Died*.

less bitterness and blame, more reflection and thoughtful perspective.

Vieira’s introspection and self-assessment is visible throughout, as she reflects on early fertility complications in her marriage, a life grounded by spirituality, and an overriding belief that, no matter how dark the times appear, she is “a lucky girl,” just as her grandfather—a man who “gained my trust and admiration, defining my standard of character for the male populace”—told her when she was young. This memoir is less chronological and more pensive, a profound awareness that “all my experiences, including the good and the bad,” forge a life well-lived.

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

MEMOIR

The Long Flight Home: A True Story of Years Lost and Love Found

Beth & Jim Aubrey | Aubrey-Redman Publishing
414p, e-book, \$9.99, ISBN 978-1-7374638-1-8

This poignant memoir by husband and wife team Beth Aubrey and Jim Aubrey unfolds across five decades and two continents, tracing the extraordinary journey of teenage pen pals whose love, once interrupted, is rediscovered in later life. In 1967, 15-year-old Beth, from Kentucky’s coal country, writes to a pirate radio station, Radio Avaline, seeking a pen pal—and receives a reply from Jim, a 16-year-old coalman’s son from England. Their friendship deepens through letters until Beth, coerced into marriage with her prom date, Steve, ends the exchange. Four decades later, a forgotten bookmark revives a love long buried by time, distance, and loss.

Told in alternating voices, *The Long Flight Home* intertwines Beth’s story of endurance in small-town America with Jim’s journey from Royal Air Force serviceman to artist in postwar England during their 42 lost years of correspondence. The dual structure enriches the memoir’s emotional scope, allowing readers to inhabit both



Faith-tinged memoir of lost and rediscovered love.

Great for fans of Judith Umlas’s *Soulmates & Strangers*, Nancy Kalish’s *Lost & Found Lovers*.

lives as they unfold separately yet remain bound by memory. Beth’s marriage to Steve descends into emotional abuse, forcing her to raise their two children alone amid poverty and social stigmas against divorced women. Her life becomes a series of unspoken letters to Jim, whose kindness remains a guiding memory, especially after her second failed marriage. Across the Atlantic, Jim’s career and loveless marriage mirror Beth’s loneliness, revealing how both endured parallel trials of heartache and resilience.

Though the memoir occasionally lingers on genealogies and travel minutiae, these details lend realism to memory and time. The prose is sincere and unembellished, sustained by a conviction that coincidences are divine interventions rather than chance. The authors’ separation is not portrayed as loss but as preparation—divine timing unfolding in its own season. *The Long Flight Home* becomes a quiet testament to faith, resilience, and the belief that love, even long silenced, can endure separation and be restored by grace.

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

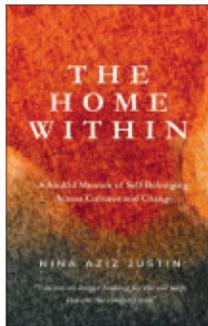
MEMOIR

The Home Within: A Soulful Memoir of Self-Belonging Across Cultures and Change

Nina Aziz Justin | The Resilience Mentor
282p, trade paper, \$15.99, ISBN 978-9-090-40580-3

Justin's deeply introspective memoir explores identity, migration, and self-discovery, recounting her journey across cultures, countries, and life's transitions. Divided into three parts that each chronicle her experiences of leaving her homeland of Malaysia and navigating life in foreign lands, the narrative weaves personal anecdotes with philosophical reflections and cultural wisdom, conveying a nomadic life "full of contradiction and longing" that, though punctuated by upheaval and restlessness, ultimately leads to Justin finding a sense of home within herself.

Justin's narrative is enriched by her blend of personal stories with universal truths. She reflects on the emotional and neurological shifts of migration, emphasizing how leaving one's homeland is a profound emotional and spiritual transformation. She also delves into complexities of motherhood, love, and self-



Lyrical exploration of what it means to belong.

Great for fans of Hasanthika Sirisena's *Dark Tourist*, Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage*.

tography is particularly compelling, as she examines how language, memory, and belonging intertwine to shape our sense of self.

The narrative voice is poetic and reflective, weaving personal anecdotes and universal truths. Justin's insight into the unspoken grief of migration and the paradox of non-belonging will resonate deeply with anyone who has felt the tension of living between worlds. The memoir's relevance lies in its ability to connect with readers experiencing change, loss, or the search for identity. Justin embraces the idea of the sacred intuition that guides us through uncertainties. Her ruminations on the spiral of becoming beautifully encapsulate the central message: that home is not a physical place but a rhythm, a practice, and a state of self-belonging.

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

MEMOIR

Stillness and Survival: A Life Between Trauma, Glitter, and the Echo of My Own Voice

Jacob Anthony Rose | JPride Entertainment
235p, e-book, \$15.99, ISBN 979-8-330-42642-3

Childhood trauma, self-discovery, and mental health drive this emotive debut memoir, as Rose tells the heart-breaking story of enduring physical abuse at the hands of his father and sexual abuse by non-family members. Haunted by the belief that "my existence was wrong, that love was something I had to earn, and safety was a luxury meant for other people," he shares with readers the long road to healing and acceptance, recounting the lifeline that music became and his time as a drag singer—known by the stage name Sheena Rose—juxtaposed with a wounded childhood and buried feelings of resentment simmering just beneath the surface.

The abuse Rose recounts is painful to read, narrated with vulnerability and grounded in the lost innocence of childhood. Forced to silence his voice, his dreams, and his sexual identity to survive, Rose reflects on the terror of his upbringing as well as the small moments of safety and connection he discovers, with Terrie—a



Stirring memoir charting trauma, resilience, and self-discovery.

Great for fans of Garrard Conley's *Boy Erased*, Robert P. Graves's *I, Rob Graves*.

Juan, his husband, who empowers him to embrace his true self.

Transparent and raw in its delivery, Rose's memoir is a poignant narrative of a survivor who overcame past trauma and, through his healing, comes to know who he is and what he wants from life. Behind-the-scenes glimpses into the life of a drag performer punctuate the darkness of Rose's trauma with buoyancy and hope, as he comes to realize that "choosing my peace, my truth, and the people who truly see and love me... [is] the only way forward."

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

FICTION

Souls Adrift: A Novel of Supernatural Suspense

Max MacCaigh | AvanteBooks
370p, trade paper, \$14.99, ISBN 979-8-992-00580-6

Launching a new series with the shipboard ghost story *Souls Adrift*, MacCaigh steers through grief and mystery with deliberate grace, using gothic horror to explore the fragile seam between the living and the lost. In 1873, Maribeth Eaton boards the cargo steamer *Eli Greaves* in Chicago, surrounded by the charred remnants of a city devastated by fire. With everything she owns in a single steamer trunk, she laments leaving England and investing her money in Chicago's failed industrial rebirth. Hounded by creditors and plagued by uneasy premonitions that shadow her every step, Maribeth is bound for Buffalo, New York.

Her departure is marked by eerie brushes with the supernatural, including a spectral Englishman who seals her conviction that "the other thing"—the inner sense of impending danger she sometimes experiences—has attached itself to her journey. En route, Maribeth befriends grief-stricken First Mate Atticus Miles and Osage man Jefry Walks, who warns her of trouble and speaks of a malevolent Algonquian spirit called Otshee Monetoo. After effectively setting the scene,



Eerie ship and personal hauntings make for potent historical suspense.

Great for fans of Sarah Perry's *The Essex Serpent*, Diane Setterfield's *The Thirteenth Tale*.

MacCaigh tightens the screws, and meta-physical tension engulfs the ill-fated *Eli Greaves*. With the ship's uncanny creaks, the captain's erratic behavior, and a shifting fog trailing their course, Maribeth questions whether she's escaped Chicago's ghosts or merely brought them aboard.

The richness of MacCaigh's debut comes from his extensive maritime experience and a fidelity to historical realism. The scorched streets of Chicago, claustrophobic life below decks, and vividly rendered Great Lakes trade routes are crafted with precision and quiet dread. He explores the corrosive effects of loss, exile, and memory, suggesting that catastrophe breeds not only ruin, but creates hauntings of conscience and faith. It's only when Maribeth takes on the role of protector that she begins to confront the specters that darken her life. Navigating a liminal world between history and the supernatural, *Souls Adrift* charts a transformative metaphysical journey with realistic terrors.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

Seeking Sasha

Laura Frost | Willow River Press
352p, e-book, \$11.99, ISBN 978-1-965059-61-6

Frost's promising debut spins a twisty psychological thriller about a woman named Bryn, Delilah, Crystal, Magda ... but, to Cole Dawson, she is always Sasha. Cole would know her anywhere, even if it's been 10 years since she ran away from her small town—and his deep feelings for her. He can't believe his luck when he encounters "my Sasha" out of the blue, but something is off. She looks scared, and some unsavory-looking "friends" are calling her a host of different names. This time, however, Cole isn't just a heartbroken teenager. He's a police officer who can't let her go, especially when he sees the fear in her eyes and knows there's much more to her story.

Cole has a protective streak, but that's not what Sasha thinks she needs. Frost explores this tense dyad with sensitivity, wit, and crisp, page-turning flair, teasing out both backstory and *what's-next?* suspense. Sasha has spent a decade moving from place to place, haunted by her past, trying to find someone to be. Readers will



Thriller debut of a woman of many selves and the cop eager to pin her down.

Great for fans of Jessica Knoll, Ashley Elston.

While the story boasts a strong hook, the spiraling relationship at times proves repetitive. Frost makes it clear that Sasha is not the only one with problems, as Cole proves willing to endure his own trauma of being rejected and emotionally abandoned. In most reprises of their cycle, he looks like the bad guy, demanding explanations, a trap for a would-be protector. Readers open to a resonant, thought-provoking thriller whose central couple might not be fated will enjoy working out what's next, what has happened, and—most urgently—whether Frost will offer a happy ending or let these two lives take what seems to be their natural course.

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

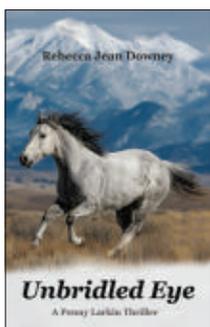
MYSTERY/THRILLER

Unbridled Eye: A Penny Larkin Thriller

Rebecca Jean Downey | Downey Creative Solutions
245p, e-book, \$12.95, ISBN 979-8-992-60316-3

U.S. Marshal Penny Larkin returns for Downey's latest series offering, following *Devil Eye*, in this gripping tale of resilience, danger, and redemption set against the backdrop of the American Southwest. As Penny grapples with personal trauma and professional challenges, she must investigate a series of barn fires in Tularosa, New Mexico, potentially linked to Mexican drug cartels. Meanwhile, Quarter Horse racing serves as a catalyst for criminal intrigue, with cartel higher-ups boosting their track winnings through a ruthless campaign—one that involves doping horses with substances like cocaine, corrupting law enforcement officials, and even resorting to arson against competing stables.

The narrative weaves together themes of trust, love, and the pursuit of justice, culminating in a high-stakes confrontation with cartel hitmen that forces Penny to not just solve crimes but also confront her own fears and past trauma. That journey showcases her vulnerability and strength as she navigates complex relationships, including interactions with Don Tellez, her ex-boyfriend's brother,



Character-driven thriller balancing action with emotional depth.

Great for fans of Darynda Jones's *A Bad Day for Sunshine*, Vicki Pettersson's *Swerve*.

Penny's past struggles—and difficulties trusting those around her—add layers to her character, though their consistent reemergence detracts from the novel's urgency. Despite that, Downey delivers twists that keep readers engaged, particularly the sections detailing drug-laced horses and underground cartel tunnels. The resolution of that storyline feels somewhat rushed and may leave readers with more questions than answers, but *Unbridled Eye* remains a compelling read for fans of crime thrillers and character-driven narratives, balancing action with emotional depth and offering a protagonist who is both relatable and inspiring.

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

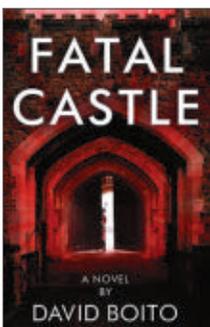
MYSTERY/THRILLER

Fatal Castle

David Boito | Wise Media Group
264p, e-book, \$6.99, ASIN B0FC9MWWX5

Boito (*Bee Conspiracy*) crafts a story bursting with vivid descriptions of the Tower of London's history, fused with an action jewel heist grounded in character work. The narrative revolves around father-daughter duo Clive and Ashley Bellamy, who, though distant, are joined by the renowned Koh-I-Noor Diamond, housed in the Tower of London, where Clive serves as the Chief Yeoman Warder in charge of the famous Beefeaters. When the diamond-obsessed Ashley tries to reconnect with her father—and marvels at the Koh-I-Noor's beauty—she runs straight into ancient curses and the ripple effects of greed, with a false flag operation headed by rogue bomb defusing expert Richard Bindar that leaves Ashley and Clive defending the Tower against enemy invasion.

Complete with office politics, a budding love interest, and an obnoxious American billionaire VIP, the first section of Boito's novel has all the makings of a pleasant comedy. That tone shifts abruptly with Bindar's threat of a fake bomb he uses to lock down the Tower, seeking the Koh-I-Noor for himself. That about-turn sees Ashley and Clive taking back the castle in a fun series of action set pieces, as



Classic heist story rich with history and strained father-daughter dynamics.

Great for fans of Grace D. Li's *Portrait of a Thief*, Janet Evanovich's *The King's Ransom*.

Clive relies on the Tower's unique defenses—such as murder holes, which allowed defenders to pour scalding liquids on their foes—and ancient weapons to take out their opponents. As the heist's ringleader reveals his true intentions and becomes increasingly unhinged, Clive reunites with his fellow Beefeaters and they battle the thieves together, with the police serving more as bumbling bureaucrats.

Ashley plays a key role in the climax, as the superstitious villain, running from a reported curse that any man who tries to possess the diamond will die, insists that she carry it for his escape. The happy ending feels easy, but Boito spends enough time on character development to make it believable. Most importantly, the story's historical asides transform into thrilling action sequences that will keep readers entertained.

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

MYSTERY/THRILLER

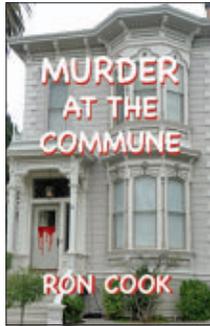
Murder at the Commune

Ron Cook

264p, trade paper, \$16.95, ISBN 979-8-9857889-6-9

In Cook's 1960s murder mystery, Robbie Jones is fresh off a tour of duty in Korea when he joins up with fellow veterans to form a rock band. Finding the perfect communal home in San Jose, Robbie and his new band mates—Marty, Deke, Terry, Jimmy, and soundman Cliff—soundproof their basement and start testing the waters with progressive rock. Their search for the perfect lead singer steers them to next-door-neighbor Carol Legrand, a typist with a photographic memory and a smile that breaks hearts. It doesn't take long for sparks to fly between Carol and Robbie, and things seem to be going smoothly—until band members start turning up dead.

Alternating between the viewpoints of Robbie and Carol, this tension-filled thriller is a brisk mystery immersed in rock 'n roll, the fast life of stardom, and the heart-pounding plot of a stalker playing cat and mouse with their prey. Cook (*Time on Our Hands*) weaves layers of romance with twists and turns that will keep readers



Lively 1960s murder mystery of bands, love, and communal living.

Great for fans of Donna Amis Davis's *Good Day Sunshine* with *Morning Fog*, Kal Smagh's *Larceny in Liverpool*.

on the edge of their seats, and the stakes are as high as they get: not only is the band's fame at risk, but their actual lives hang on the whim of a stealthy killer. As Robbie and Carol's romance blossoms, the band dabbles in amateur sleuthing, swept into the work of local law enforcement to solve the murders—and keep the remaining members alive.

Cook's saga unfolds in compact chapters rich with foreshadowing and cliffhanger moments that propel readers toward the unexpected ending, while he punctuates the suspense with the nostalgic, buzzy world of '60s rock and roll—whether Robbie's relaxing to the Beatles' Rubber Soul album or Crosby, Stills, and Nash serenade his softer, more private moments with Carol. The motive, when it emerges, reveals the darker issues driving the turbulence of the era, leaving readers a curious mix of unsettled, nostalgic, and entertained.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

EDITOR'S PICK

Acadia

Sterling Nixon | S&J Publishing

446p, e-book, \$4.99, ASIN B0FRZTFHHQ

In this smart but muscular fantasy, Nixon (author of the middle grade series *In the Heart of EarthWorks*) imagines the futuristic metropolis of Acadia built from the ideological remnants of the Roman Empire, but his fortress city is both a sanctuary and prison. Technology is harnessed for an endless war with monstrous mega-insects collectively known as Roaches, and the Acadians, whose warrior culture is ruled by a rigid hierarchy, pride themselves on maintaining this last bastion of humankind for two centuries. They've established a ruthless system that measures every citizen's worth by a sacred score that rises with obedience and achievement—and falls with dissent and failure.

Cojax endures a brutal rite of passage to join their ranks, getting no pass for being the son of formidable general Titan, who defines the Acadian Code as "Merit above all. We are given only what we earn." Nixon makes this compelling but also smartly upends expectations with the arrival of a ragged girl, Jessica, from the



Rousing series-starter of a cyberfuture city under siege and facing change.

Great for fans of K. J. Parker, Arkady Martine.

presumed wasteland beyond the walls. Titan insists that Jessica should be protected and studied, while his rival, Atlas, demands her death. In Titan's household, Jessica learns Acadia's language and laws, faces grueling tests both physical and tactical, and even introduces a foreign concept: compassion. Her presence has

already fractured Acadia's unified front, but Jessica's quiet revolution spreads to Cojax, who begins to question his father's unforgiving perfectionism.

The first in a trilogy, *Acadia* does a lot of heavy worldbuilding, and Nixon balances admiration for what this society has achieved with the case for its necessary upheaval. The cyber-Roman world, deftly described, fascinates throughout, and the intense philosophical debates, digging into social structure, rituals, and more, prove as exciting as the memorable action. As the truth of Acadia's origins comes to light, the focus shifts from rebellion to revelation. Nixon dissects a dystopian society and shows that an outsider can reveal the rotten underpinnings of a civilization that denies basic humanity.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR

The Xenologist

Michael Joseph Dutton | Rivenstone Media

275p, e-book, \$4.99, ISBN 978-1-068-16051-6

Epic in scope yet briskly told, Dutton's series-starting debut blends planetary exploration, alien architectural mysteries, all-too-human politicking, and hard-charging military SF into a rousing whole. Julian Voss, Earth's first "xenologist," is dispatched to help make sense of ancient ruined cities on a sun-blasted distant planet recently named, by some *Dune*-loving prankster, Sikarra. In both surface towers and underground crystal domes some 80,000 years old, Voss and company face a curious absence—the abandoned planet seems scrubbed clean of all biological evidence of life, right down to the molecular level, even in the sewers. As Voss achieves a satisfying breakthrough in translating alien glyphs, security agent Ray "Rayk" Kostin—whose neural-spinal interface has restored his mobility after an injury—uncovers evidence of a deadly on-world conspiracy and something mysterious lurking in the desert wastes.

Dutton keeps the narrative moving in fleet, crisp chapters, even as he layers in subplots, complications, and scheming characters who, in the interest of suspense, often stop just short of saying what they're up to. ("Once certain projects reach



Rich SF epic blending archaeological mystery with sharp military action.

Great for fans of Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Shards of Earth*, Jonathan Maberry's *Nekrotek*.

fruition, our position here will be significantly enhanced," a villain declares.) Also in the mix: the imminent arrival of an unscheduled fleet; a strange intelligence seemingly in communication with the sun itself, monitoring the planet with great annoyance; and an urgent cross-desert chase, in some unannounced timeline, with a desperate man and woman fleeing cultists while bearing a device and a man called a "Designer."

If that sounds like a bit much, this isn't the book for you. But readers who favor ambition and don't mind a protracted page count will relish the twining mysteries, steady revelations, moments of awe and action, and prevailing intelligence—this is science fiction that never forgets the science. Some of the scene-setting grows repetitive, but Dutton never lets the momentum flag, springing pleasing shocks and twists. His vision of a universe that fumigates threats to itself is as frightening as Voss's unexpected rise to leadership is rousing.

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

SF/FANTASY/HORROR**Magicbound**

C.C.S. Jones | Radiant Quill Publishing
355p, hardcover, \$29.99, ISBN 979-8-991-85860-1

Jones's epic fantasy series debut introduces readers to Lusa, a mage trying to handle the darkness simmering within her, in a world where magic must be balanced between light and dark. Waking up at the Temple of Mages surrounded by death, Lusa has no memory of what happened—or why she's the last mage left alive. As she fights to keep her Dark Magics at bay—and to remember what her role in the temple's massacre was—she runs into bounty hunter Kaden, who convinces her to let him turn her in to the empire. But there's an evil threatening Aetherealm, and it quickly becomes clear that Lusa is the only one who can stop it. Darkness is taking over, and her voices—"Them"—are becoming harder to control, but she must find a way to restore the world's balance.

Though full of dark magic, and sporting a significant chip on her shoulder, Jones somehow makes Lusa instantly endearing. Once she meets Kaden, readers will hope they stay on the same team, whether that's just friends or more, purely for



Dark mage and reluctant allies battle for humanity in this riveting fantasy.

Great for fans of R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War*, Naomi Novik's *Uprooted*.

Jones sweeps readers into a journey both perilous and heart-pounding, racing through the sky on griffins, creeping through forests and dark caves with potential death around every corner, and facing disgusting trolls, swampdrakes, and other fearsome creatures who pale in comparison to the rising evil of humanity. It's a wild ride, but readers will be riveted—and, as Lusa pushes forward for the ultimate battle against the darkness destroying the realm, Jones leaves fans with glimmers of hope for a brighter, more promising future.

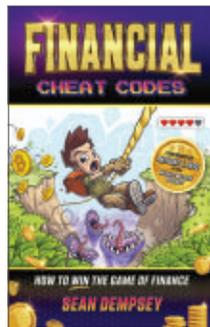
Cover: **A** | Design & typography: **A** | Illustrations: – Editing: **A** | Marketing copy: **A**

BUSINESS & PERSONAL FINANCE**Financial Cheat Codes: How to Win the Game of Finance**

Sean Dempsey | Peter E. Randall Publisher
224p, trade paper, \$29.95, ISBN 978-1-942-15589-8

Dempsey (*The Investor's Warp Whistles*) transforms a childhood love of video game cheat codes into an intriguing personal finance guide, promising readers faster debt resolution, increased savings, and investments with higher yield and less risk. He urges readers to “buck the common trends,” arguing against 401k plans (they're “financial purgatory” in Dempsey's words) and suggesting instead his four-tiered “wealth pyramid”: tier one—the largest section—should include assets that are safe, controllable, and liquid; tier two focuses on assets that can be used as collateral but are more challenging to sell; tier three consists of startup businesses, short-term rentals, and the like; and tier four is reserved for “hit or miss” speculations such as mutual funds, stocks, and cryptocurrencies.

Throughout this earnest guide, Dempsey highlights passive income as a necessary stepping stone to creating generational wealth—and, for true financial freedom, he asserts, passive income must be greater than monthly expenses. For readers



Colorful and unapologetic guide to financial success.

Great for fans of John Y. Campbell and Tarun Ramadorai's *Fixed*, Bill Perkins's *Die with Zero*.

new to these concepts, Dempsey clarifies basic terms, highlights established industry standards (such as Nelson Nash's Infinite Banking Concept), and delves into different strategies for “legally avoid[ing] taxes.” His opinions are bold and unapologetic, whether decrying that “income tax is a ruthless, criminal penalty imposed on success” or advising readers

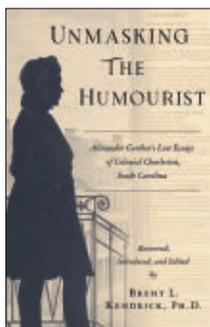
to “run—don't walk—from college.” The impact of those convictions is somewhat offset by the guide's retro-flavored illustrations—credited to Jason McIntosh—that evoke the two-dimensional graphics of video games like Dempsey's old school favorite, *Super Mario Brothers 3*. Dempsey's stance may be considered unconventional for contemporary readers, but his passion is clearly evident, and he sprinkles nuggets of wisdom throughout—including the value of real estate investing, strategies for paying off debt, and the importance of analyzing examples from real life. To that end, Dempsey closes with a summary of his own investments over a period of several years as a litmus test for his advice.

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

LITERARY CRITICISM, ESSAYS**Unmasking the Humourist: Alexander Gordon's Lost Essays of Colonial Charleston, South Carolina**

Brent L. Kendrick | Luminare Press
204p, mass market, \$27.95, ISBN 979-8-88679-915-6

In 18th century Charleston, a writer known as The Humourist began publishing satirical essays in the *South-Carolina Gazette*, offering “sharp, literary, and wry” commentary about Carolina life, lampooning hypocrisy and challenging orthodoxies. The identity of the author of these bold missives that ran amid notices for runaway slaves has never been made public. Kendrick (editor of *The Infant Sphinx*, the collected letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman) offers a persuasive answer to the mystery in this lively and companionable study, which offers an introduction to the Humourist, a compelling argument for the Humourist's identity, and a welcome collection of (and commentary upon) the essays themselves, published in the 1750s. Kendrick meticulously breaks down the evidence pointing to Alexander Gordon, a member of South Carolina's governmental bureaucracy, as the author of these witty, incisive columns. Tracing details like Gordon's extensive worldly and literary knowledge, the view from his home of a half-finished church in Charleston, and his familiarity with Egyptian



Illuminating study of satiric essays from 18th century Charleston.

Great for fans of Richard Davis's *A Colonial Southern Book Shelf*, Eric Burns's *Infamous Scribblers*.

literary contexts in which their author assailed, with spirit and charm, the “specious Pretences, and other insidious Means” through which “Mankind deceive each other.”

Kendrick supplements the Humourist essays with clarifying introductions and notes that both illuminate the Humourist's allusions and demonstrate a breadth of knowledge that, Kendrick argues, points to Gordon. The essays themselves might not be laugh-out-loud funny to contemporary readers, but there is ample wit, charm, insight, and stylistic flourish to appreciate. Kendrick's guidance makes these shine brighter. Humor is often considered bound to its moment, but Kendrick brings to revealing life what amused, annoyed, and preoccupied Charleston—and demonstrates how much it connects to us today.

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

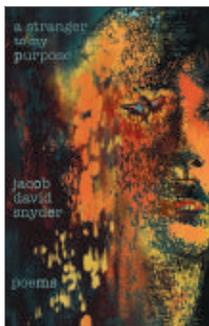
POETRY

A Stranger to My Purpose

Jacob David Snyder | Traveling Companion Publishing
80p, trade paper, \$15.99, ISBN 979-8-2187-3581-4

Love, loss, and growth power Snyder's debut raw yet incisive collection, which celebrates a kiss in a graveyard "where the stones were nameless," acknowledges that the "hardest part is seeing you become just another word in this book," and captures what it's like to "retch" oneself out while "repeating, repeating / i am the cage." But there's possibility of connection and purpose, too, in this charged yet somber triptych, much of which is written like reportage from a ghost wandering the world, reflecting on the temporal, fragile nature of mortal existence. Each section opens with a gritty, shadow-heavy illustration, the first depicting a lone man in a rainstorm staggering toward the ruins of an old church, bell still intact. He declares in italicized free verse, "god speaks in metaphor calls me cardinal calls me lone," laying the cracked foundation of abject isolation and spiritual death that fuels this haunting study of woe and renewal.

The first section, "Elegy," describes a hellish internal landscape of abandonment



Loss, heartache, and spiritual rebirth rendered in ghostly, staccato verse.

Great for fans of Shaun Hill, Dorianne Laux.

and alienation, with a recurring image of being "lost in a desert." The second, "Effigy," by contrast, addresses a muse—sometimes the speaker's self, other times a lover lost—asking, "why do we play at permanency." Its accompanying illustration depicts a man as a cave inside which the self sleeps; they are not in sync but separated by levels of consciousness. The man in the drawing can't reach his inner self; as the poet writes in "Effigy," "known many beds // many beds and no sleep."

In the final act, "Apogee," the illustration shows a man no longer alone but dancing with a woman in a graveyard beneath rose-shaped clouds. Spiritual growth does not arrive in glittering revelation but rather through transformation: "i open my mouth // swallow myself // whole // retch myself // out // repeating [...] serpent // self-fulfilling // ouroboros." The third act fulfills the arc with an upward spiral of hard-won hope, captured with the vigor, intimacy, and spirit of experimentation that distinguishes the earlier passages: "i feel the light trickling upward // in a gravity of its own make // from my roots // from the earth // and i begin to understand."

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

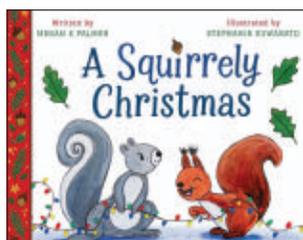
PICTURE BOOKS

A Squirrely Christmas

Megan K. Palmer | WinnBrook Press
34p, hardcover, \$21.99, ISBN 978-1-967983-02-5

It's the squirrels' turn to decorate the Christmas tree in Palmer's picture book debut, and all the woodland creatures are curious to see how they'll do—especially after last year's celebration, when the hummingbirds used flowers to create their holiday masterpiece. But Pumpkin and Clover—the two squirrels in charge—are overeager and high-strung. As Turtle watches the mayhem and warns the pair to "slow down," Clover vows it will be "as easy as cracking an acorn," and Pumpkin assures the crowd they'll "do it in record time." Their impulsive holiday cheer leads to a near-disaster of tangled lights, broken branches, and epic crashes.

Kids and their adult readers will find these squirrels' misadventures charming—and an important lesson in how to manage impulsive emotions that threaten to undo even the best of intentions. As their fellow animals watch the holiday plans spiral out of control, Pumpkin and Clover become increasingly irritated with each other, prompting Rabbit to cry out, "What if the tree doesn't get decorated this year?" That potential outcome spells doom and gloom for the story's stars—but



Festive woodland celebration that teaches teamwork and patience.

Great for fans of Karma Wilson's *Bear Stays Up for Christmas*, DK's *The Grumpy Reindeer*.

also serves as the catalyst for Pumpkin and Clover to slow down, take a breath, and apologize for rushing. Their change of heart paves the way for a sweet do-over, as Palmer shows them working together, taking their time, and even sharing a quick snack. Stephanie Suwarato's festive illustrations use delicate lines and bright colors to capture the season's twinkling lights, powdery snow, and lush shades of the perfect Christmas tree. The final touch—a sparkling golden acorn to top the evergreen—sparks cheers and exclamations that it's "the best tree we've ever had," a delightful transformation from the story's earlier disarray. Palmer closes with a quick hint at what the foxes may have planned for next year, plus entertaining squirrel and evergreen tree facts for kids and adults to learn together.

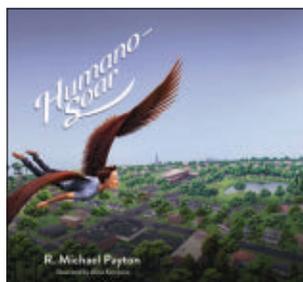
Cover: **A-** | Design & typography: **A-** | Illustrations: **A-** | Editing: **B+** | Marketing copy: **A**

MIDDLE GRADE
Humano-Soar

R. Michael Payton | Christian Faith
175p, hardcover, \$32.95,
ISBN 979-8-88943-504-4

Payton's lively debut sweeps a preteen boy into the adventure of a lifetime. Twelve-year-old Randy Archer lives in Ohio with his parents and older sister, spending his days hanging out with his friends, Molly and Jacob. When his 13th birthday rolls around, Randy's Uncle Bill sends him an incredible gift: his very own drone—and an airline ticket to visit him in Portland for a month over summer vacation. But when Randy's flight makes an emergency landing and crashes in northwestern Wyoming—next to the Dinosaur Research Center—a bizarre accident puts him on a collision course with a newly discovered artifact. The results are every young boy's dream: Randy starts to develop dinosaur-like attributes, including greatly improved vision and hearing—and a remarkable pair of wings.

Dino lovers will relish Randy's adventures, though the mechanism for his change feels underdeveloped. At the research center, an artifact—the remains of an Archaeopteryx, a link between dinosaurs and birds—breaks and covers Randy in primordial gas. From there, his superhuman abilities gradually progress, until he's



Young teen develops superhuman abilities in this lively adventure.

Great for fans of Cory Putnam Oakes's *Dinosaur Boy*, Kathy Reichs and Brendan Reichs's *Virals* series.

learning how to fly and rescuing people in danger. All of that is a heavy load for a 13-year-old boy, but, thanks to the support of his parents and a school system that handles the situation with care, Randy emerges proud rather than embarrassed. His friends are in awe, his new girlfriend is smitten, and Randy discovers a greater purpose: "to use these unique abilities nature had given him to help others." Payton pairs Randy's evolution with detailed black-and-white illustrations by Alina Korolyova, depicting dinosaurs in their natural habitat, Randy's terrifying airplane crash, and the striking transformation from regular boy to one who can fly. Despite the story's overreliance on exclamatory phrases, Randy's journey is an exciting one to watch—and middle-grade readers with avid imaginations will be entertained.

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

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

FICTION

François!

F.A. Loomis. *Storm Peak*, \$12.95 trade paper (196p) ISBN 979-8-3381-4784-9

Loomis follows up *Blue Duwamish* with a lively if mystifying portrait of French Canadian fur trader François Payette (1793–1844) and those in his orbit during his exploration of the Pacific Northwest. Framed as an oral history, most of the narrative comes from Payette himself as he chronicles the day-to-day events of his life as a trapper, including his dealings with Indigenous peoples, such as a woman named Wades in Marsh Water, who gives birth to his son. Their child, Baptiste, narrates his own section about his experiences in the residential school system, while Wades in Marsh Water describes her work as a healer and medicine woman. Others, such as settlers to the region, discuss their relations with Native Americans and the taking of their lands. Loomis makes clear in an author's note that he's taken liberties with the historical record, but a few anachronisms stick out, such as a mention of Alberta long before the name was used. Still, the writing is energetic and colorful, as in Payette's description of his fallen scout during an attack by Walawalaíama Indians ("He looked like a porcupine after he was showered with arrows and crawling"). Western fans ought to take a look.

The Girl Who Fell into Myth

Kay Kenyon. *Kay Kenyon*, \$14.99 trade paper (400p) ISBN 978-1-7336746-3-8

At the start of this entertaining but uneven series-launching fantasy from Kenyon (*Prince of Storms*), 21-year-old Yevliesza is whisked from the mundane world to magical Numinasi, her ancestral homeland, by a dragon-like creature known as a dactyl. Once in this unfamiliar land, one of many alternate realities evolved from human myths, Yevliesza is taken under the wing of dashing ne'er-do-well Lord Valenty. While feeling like an outsider and struggling to adjust to matriarchal Numinasi's political and magical workings (and lack of modern conveniences), Yevliesza discovers unexpected abilities and becomes infatuated with handsome elven prince Tirhan. Danger

arises in the form of enemy forces known in this world as the Volkish, but which Yevliesza recognizes as Nazi troops from Earth. When the Volkish threaten to invade, Yevliesza must master her powers in time to stop them. Kenyon's worldbuilding is vivid, ambitious, and expansive, but it often raises more questions than it answers. Frequent shifts in point of view, meanwhile, result in some characters being less developed than others and a slightly overcomplicated plot. Still, the romantic tension is well drawn, the heroine is easy to root for, and Kenyon lays solid groundwork for future installments. Readers will be excited for more.

Indelicate Deception

V.S. Kemanis. *Opus Nine*, \$7.99 e-book (350p) ISBN 978-1-73784-792-2

In the propulsive latest from Kemanis (*Thursday's List*), a young woman tries to find out what happened to her long-lost mother. Feisty firefighter Delicate Soul "Caty" Robertson, 19, was raised by her Black father, Paul Leroy "Roy" Robertson, in early 1990s Berkeley, Calif., after her white mother, Leonore "Len" Witaker, took off when she was an infant. In search of clues, Caty visits her estranged maternal grandmother, who tells Caty a private investigator tracked Len to Los Angeles shortly after her disappearance, but the trail went cold. Caty travels to L.A., where she manages to track down a woman who might be Len. In a parallel narrative set in the 1970s, flower child Len falls in love with Vietnam War veteran Roy, who dreams of opening his own restaurant. Len's well-off parents disapprove of the relationship and threaten to cut Len off from the trust fund established by her grandmother. Shortly before Caty is born, Len makes a startling choice that forever alters her and Roy's lives. A further twist near the end of the novel strains credulity, but for the most part, Kemanis adroitly portrays the longing that drives Caty's search. Readers who enjoy family dramas will find much to admire in this buoyant tale.

The Middle Generation

M.B. Zucker. *Liopleurdon*, \$5.99 e-book (434p) ISBN 978-1-956569-14-8

Zucker (*The Eisenhower Chronicles*) offers a

comprehensive if occasionally stilted biographical novel of John Quincy Adams's tenure as secretary of state. Spanning from 1817 through Adams's inauguration as president in 1825, the story covers the consequential episodes he navigated, including the annexation of Florida, the Missouri Compromise, and the meddling of European empires in the Western Hemisphere that pushed him to create the Monroe Doctrine. Zucker conveys the competing demands of decision makers, including Andrew Jackson, James Monroe, Henry Clay, and various European diplomats, while providing context for the era's political debates. Interspersed among the political machinations are more modestly revealing insights into Adams's home life, including his tense relationship with his wife, who feels undervalued, and his sons, whose lack of ambition causes him to bristle. The long conversations between Adams and others lack flavor, but the first-person narration credibly evokes the pressures and strain he felt, especially given his disgust with slavery and the bargains he made that allowed it to expand. Readers interested in early American history will appreciate the depth of detail.

Ruby's Revenge

Christine Gallagher. *Richmond*, \$4.99 e-book (268p) ASIN BODNTSY2NN

A woman grapples with her husband's infidelity in the delightful debut novel from Gallagher (*The Divorce Party Handbook*). Ruby Bixler is making spaghetti carbonara for her newscaster husband, Brad Diamond, when she answers his cellphone. It's a receptionist at a hotel, announcing that Brad left his watch there earlier that day. At first, Ruby believes Brad's lies, but when irrefutable proof emerges that he's having an affair with his 25-year-old assistant, Natasha, Ruby transforms from people pleaser to diabolical enforcer of marital justice. After her husband forces her out of their home, Ruby goes ballistic, sneaking back into the house to hide shrimp in curtain rods and dump dirty cat litter on their bed. She also seduces Brad into sex, which she secretly films with a nanny cam, planning to share the footage with Natasha ("Ruby

knew that she had in her possession a nuclear bomb, a powerful weapon which must not be squandered but must be implemented with great respect"). At times, Gallagher leans a bit heavy on exposition, but she keeps the reader on Ruby's side with wicked humor and playful irony, as when Ruby sees a billboard advertising Brad as "the newsman you can trust." Readers are in for a treat.

Some Like It Hott

Serena Bell. Serena Bell, \$17.99 trade paper (320p) ISBN 978-1-953498-33-5

Bell's diverting third *Hott Springs Eternal* contemporary (after *Hott Take*) finds New York City financial analyst Preston Hott angling to cinch a promotion when he learns of the life-altering provisions in his curmudgeonly late grandfather's will. To keep *Hott Springs Eternal*—the wedding venue run by Preston's sister, Hanna—in the family, Preston must return to the Oregon property and create an activities program for the town's upcoming summer festival. If the program gets less than a 4.5 rating from attendees, the family land and business will be sold to a mining company. Fortunately, uptight Preston will have help from Natalie Archer, *Hott Springs Eternal*'s spunky activities coordinator. As they work together, sparks fly and Preston quickly realizes how much he needs Natalie's creative flair in his life. Their chemistry soon becomes too much to ignore, but will their relationship survive Preston's return to his high-flying life in New York? Bell mines her leads' opposites-attract dynamic for some heady sexual tension. The result is both sizzling and poignant.