

Book Review

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Articles selected for

HAMILTON **THE** SPECTATOR

2 MONEY TROUBLE Lionel Shriver tackles capitalism in her latest fiction

7 THE END OF DIPLOMACY Ronan Farrow warns about America's waning influence

PLUS A novel by Chris Offutt and a sideshow performer's memoir of grief



CHRIS BUZELLI

Let's Explore Tumors With Turtles

By Alan Cumming

STRAIGHT AWAY, I think it is in the common interests of transparency and full disclosure to tell you that over the last few weeks since I — and I fear this is no coincidence! — began reading the book that is the subject of this review, there has been a gradual, yet very distinct, change in my outlook, demeanor

and even my worldview. My life has assumed an overreaching hue that can be described only, and I do mean *be described only* as, well, Sedarian.

It first came to my attention in the Aspire Lounge of the Edinburgh airport, which, I assume, is so named because there is a relatively short window between when you have entered it and when you aspire to leave.

“Porridge is available on request” declared a sign

CALYPSO
By David Sedaris

272 pp. Little, Brown & Company. \$28.

next to the sausages. My U.S./U.K. power adapter was one of those annoying ones that have a protruding ridge, so the only way my computer charger would remain in the socket was to wedge my copy of “Calypso” between my chair and said socket, ensuring my laptop didn’t die but forcing me to restrict my movements to all but the most legato typing.

My husband had fallen asleep next to me, and I

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Buyer's Remorse

Fiction about acquisitions that come up frustratingly, but entertainingly, short.

By **STEPHEN MCCAULEY**

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE anyone accusing Lionel Shriver of being a timid writer. The author of 12 novels (including the international best-seller and Orange Prize winner “We Need to Talk About Kevin” and the National Book Award finalist “So Much for That”), Shriver tackles such complicated, zeitgeist-tapping topics as school shootings, the American health care system and anxiety about the national debt. After tackling them, she wrestles them to the ground with a novelist's appreciation for nuance and a journalist's grasp of facts and attention to detail.

Shriver's large and provocative body of work is evidence that she's a writer with an imposing intellect, a wealth of firmly held convictions and a take-no-prisoners confidence in her own abilities. Her insights into her characters are often

PROPERTY
Stories Between Two Novellas
By Lionel Shriver

317 pp. Harper/HarperCollins Publishers. \$26.99.

startling — both for their precision and for her willingness to pursue them, even at the risk of highlighting unsympathetic, sometimes unlikable traits: a husband's ranking of financial security above love; a wife's decision to deal with her brother's weight loss rather than her own troubled marriage; a mother's ambivalence about motherhood itself.

Off the page, Shriver also seems to prioritize telling her truth over courting likability. In 2016, in a speech at an Australian writers festival that addressed accusations of cultural appropriation in her novel “The Mandibles,” she warned about the “supersensitivity” of identity politics and charged that it could amount to censorship. The speech triggered fierce debate and a disavowal by the festival's organizers. (Shriver's decision to don a sombrero to drive home her point only added to the controversy.)

Shriver's intellect and talent, her political convictions and her impressive confidence are all on display in “Property: Stories Between Two Novellas,” her assertive, frequently funny and altogether satisfying first collection of shorter fiction. The book's epigraph from E. M. Forster poses an overarching question: “What is the effect of property upon the character?” Shriver sinks her teeth into this query in the novellas that anchor both ends of the book and the 10 stories that shore up the middle. A woman buys a repossessed house from the bank only to have her life upended by ghosts from the evicted owner's past. A man's relationship with his father is forever altered by a squabble

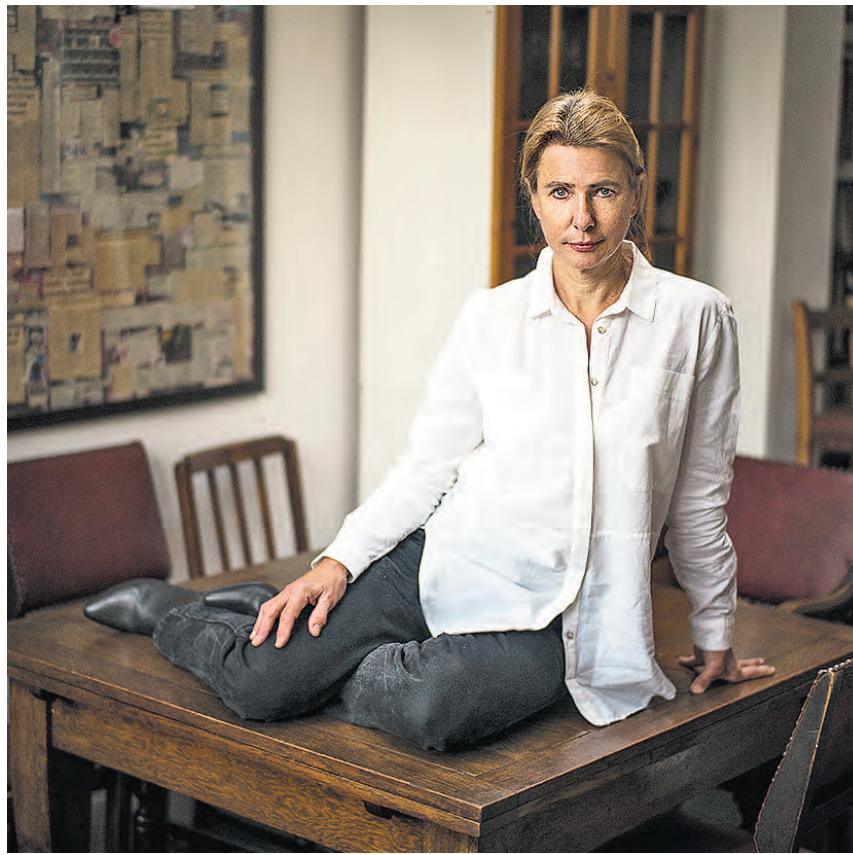
STEPHEN MCCAULEY'S seventh novel, “My ExLife,” has just been published.

over £160 and the price of an airmail stamp. A mother's desire for an empty nest leads her to bounce her unmotivated 32-year-old son onto the street, making him a spokesman for the disenfranchised. A tube of ChapStick resolves a man's indecisiveness about seeing his difficult, dying father for the last time.

In “The Standing Chandelier,” the emotionally sophisticated, irony-laced novella that opens the collection, a decades-long, mostly

guy (or girl) but who gets the “stuff.”

Shriver's settings range from Brooklyn to Belfast to London, from Lexington, Va., to Somerville, Mass. She is equally adept at inhabiting male and female characters, and equally convincing with natives of the United States and Britain. (Not surprising, since she divides her time between Brooklyn and London.) While employment — a subject usually touched on lightly in short stories — plays a



Lionel Shriver

platonic friendship between a woman named Jillian and a man named Weston ends when he gets engaged and agrees to his fiancée's demand that he stop seeing Jillian. The friendship, he realizes, is more important to him than he has cared to admit: “The more sizable a sacrifice his fiancée appeared to be demanding, the more amply it was demonstrated that she was right to demand it.”

THE FRIENDS PART amiably enough, but any lingering good feelings are reduced to rubble by an argument over an eccentric piece of art that both households consider their own. “The ties between the two parties had been severed. All that remained was stuff.” Thus Jillian concludes that “she had nothing to lose by savaging his good opinion of her, and one thing to gain: her chandelier.” Suspense — here and elsewhere in the collection — depends not on who gets the

significant role throughout, Shriver favors characters who live on the fringes of traditional careers: an artist who eschews galleries and survives on pieced-together odd jobs, who approaches “earning her keep like quilting”; an expat American freelance journalist who writes a chatty, low-paying column called “Yankee Doodles”; an international couch-surfer who secures hospitality through the diligent deployment of “brightness and enthusiasm.” The most ambitious character is a corporate embezzler driven to despair by the luxuries he can suddenly afford with his ill-gotten wealth.

Despite this variety, “Property” feels more unified than many story collections, and reading it has many of the satisfactions of reading a novel. This is largely due to Shriver's commitment to exploring her theme. From one story to the next, the acquisition of things — land,

money, empty nests — rarely leads to happiness and often stimulates character traits that might better be kept in check. As the disillusioned narrator of “Vermin” observes after she and her husband have come to regret buying a house they'd loved renting, “There may be such a thing as becoming too responsible.”

Readers who prefer stories in the minimalist mode with tersely evoked characters and murky endings should probably look elsewhere. Shriver favors a dense patina of detail. Her descriptions of rooms, wardrobes and appearances are full-bodied. Her use of the Irish Good Friday Agreement of 1998 as a plot point had me rushing to Wikipedia.

Shriver doesn't leave readers guessing about her characters' foibles. “The Subletter,” the terrific, politically charged novella that closes the collection, begins with two pages of exposition on the protagonist's weakness: “The trouble wasn't that she was incapable of generosity, but that if she was generous then she remembered being generous ... and remembered generosity didn't seem truly generous, quite.” “The Standing Chandelier” opens with five pages (delightful, sometimes hilarious pages, it should be noted) of the protagonist's feelings about being disliked: “On top of someone hating you, you cared that someone hated you and apparently you shouldn't. Caring made you even more hateable.” Several stories conclude with a summary of what the future holds for the characters, in some cases death.

If few of the people in these stories are best-friend material (“Jillian had the kind of charm that wore off”), Shriver's humor and epigrammatic wit render most of them interesting: “A widow of 57 had both too much story left,

In these stories, suspense depends not on who gets the guy (or girl) but who gets the ‘stuff.’

and not enough. It was narratively awkward: an ellipsis of perhaps 30 years during which nothing big would happen.” “Emer was a taker. Everywhere she went she would siphon off a little more than she gave back. The Emers of this world were levied on the whole species, like a tax.”

There are a few stories in this ample collection that seem inessential, and Shriver's fondness for abundance leaves a couple feeling a bit overstuffed. But her confident grasp of the material and her natural gifts as a storyteller will keep you in her spell and leave you, at the end, slightly altered. “I don't know if the moral of this story is that you should never buy a house,” one narrator says. I don't know if that's quite the moral of “Property” either, but such is Shriver's power that I finished this persuasive and richly entertaining book wondering if I might not be better off selling mine. □

The Daughter Who Breathed Fire

A debut memoir tracks the loss of a loved one against the path of a traveling circus.

By RACHEL KHONG

“THE ELECTRIC WOMAN” is a sideshow act: Its star, “Electra,” sits on a chair and conducts electricity with her body, lighting light bulbs with her tongue. She doesn’t just *seem* to; she *does*. “There is no trick,” Tessa Fontaine discovers in her first “Introduction to Fire Eating” class at the start of her memoir. “You eat fire by eating fire.” Electrical currents and flames are elements simultaneously otherworldly and ordinary. This is an assured debut

THE ELECTRIC WOMAN

A Memoir in Death-Defying Acts

By Tessa Fontaine

366 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$27.

that doesn’t shy away from the task of holding the ordinary and otherworldly in its hand, at once. It’s herein that the book’s power lies.

In October 2010, Fontaine’s mother has a hemorrhagic stroke, “as big and bad a stroke as you can have and still be alive.” Her eyes turn from “bright, bright green” to “slug-gray.” She can no longer speak. But “The Electric Woman” is not about a dying mother being cared for by her attentive daughter; it’s not so simple or straightforward, and it’s unabashed about its complicatedness. When her mother’s stroke leaves her all but unresponsive, the author responds by joining a traveling sideshow — the last remaining American sideshow, the World of Wonders. It’s the classic running-away-to-the-circus fantasy: What appeals to her is a place “where the work was physically grueling, where the task was to transform into someone else, someone who could transcend a fragile human body. Someone who was and was not herself onstage.”

Fontaine takes us along on her carnival education as she eats fire, handles a boa constrictor, swallows swords and meets a motley cast of characters that includes a mermaid, a man with no legs, a knife thrower and his “target.”

Interwoven throughout this narrative is the story of her relationship with her mother, a story that is sometimes its own hard-to-watch sideshow act. Fontaine is unafraid to write the ugliness — the imperfect care and love — that takes place between people, and the memoir is most “electric” when it doesn’t shy from that imperfection. Fontaine recalls a particularly poignant conversation with her mother: “‘There’s one thing missing from my life,’ she told me when I was 21. ‘One thing that has been the biggest heartbreak of my life. The biggest hole. It’s you. It’s that you don’t love me.’ I didn’t say anything back.”

Guilt hangs over the author like a cloud for not being able to say the simplest sentence: “I could feel the words taut in my throat, getting so

RACHEL KHONG is the author of “Goodbye, Vitamin.”



CRISTINA DAURA

close that they pressed against the back of my teeth like an animal trying to escape.” In probing these questions, Fontaine exhibits flashes of brilliance. Picturing her mother in the past, she defines motherhood generally in a distilled and perfect phrase: “a person whom I did not possess, who did not possess me.”

These weaknesses that are foundational to the human spirit are also crucial to the book’s power. It’s an illness memoir without saints; its heroines a flawed mother and her flawed daughter. Speaking to her mother after the stroke, Fontaine observes how “my never-gentle-enough voice reminds her the thing in her hand is fabric, not a glass of water, is lotion, not a slice of apple, is tweezers, is a stone, and my hand will quickly but firmly move to her hand and guide the object away from her parted lips, and I will feel sorry for having done so.” In this passage and others — for instance, when the post-surgical bandage around her mother’s head looks “like a piece of popcorn that had begun bursting from its kernel” — I’m stunned by the beauty of Fontaine’s rhythms and images.

Fontaine’s relationship with her mother is sometimes its own hard-to-watch sideshow act.

The book is fragmented and imagistic. Fontaine narrates scenes from the hospital, then cuts to the circus, then cuts to historical sideshows for context. At their best, the various settings provide perfect reprieve: Before we have the chance to weary of the present-day sideshow, we’re whisked into those of yore, only to end up right back at her mother’s bedside. In one of these historical vignettes, Fontaine tells the story of a two-pound baby named Lucille Horn who, in 1920 (when infant mortality was common), was taken to the Coney Island sideshow, where a man named Dr. Martin Couney charged admission to see premature babies in glass incubators — a revolutionary development that wasn’t yet the standard in neonatal facilities. Couney kept thousands of babies alive using his machines, and charging admis-

sion fees was how he funded his research. Lucille spent six months in Couney’s incubator, then was taken home, where she lived to the age of 96. “Sometimes, a sideshow can save a daughter,” Fontaine writes.

What is our true identity, and what’s just a performance? The sideshow acts occasionally serve as their own pertinent metaphors. “Ms. Olga Hess, the Headless Woman” has “a metal pole where a head should be.” It’s an illusion, of course; she is part of “the world of box jumpers”: a tradition in which women contort their bodies and slip into and between boxes. Whether you’re a four-legged woman or a spider woman, what the audience sees is just pieces of you. Fontaine writes: “You will be whole only when nobody is looking at you.”

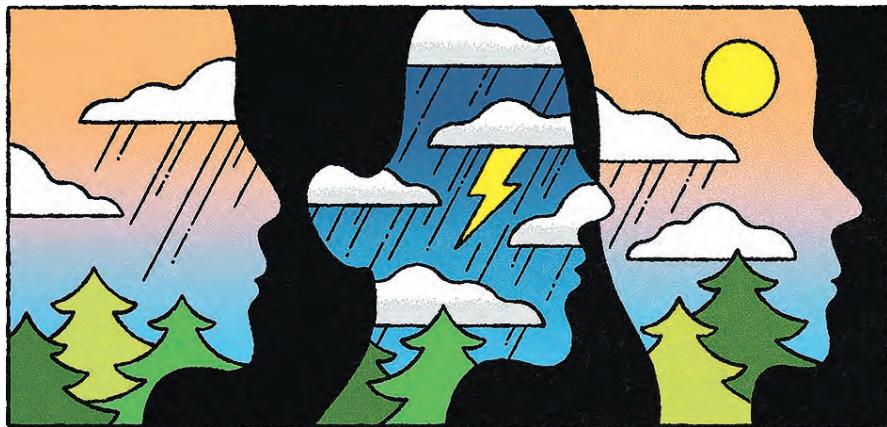
There is, at times, an “Orange Is the New Black” feeling to “The Electric Woman,” with Fontaine as the Piper Kerman to the rest of the sideshow: Everyone else’s story is far more interesting, including an amazing anecdote involving a Chihuahua that I won’t spoil. The book is longer than it needs to be, and that is its main drawback. There’s the sense that Fontaine manages to distill other people’s stories more succinctly than her own. Certain points are drilled home ad infinitum: Fontaine’s mother insists that Tessa is special and smart — much smarter than she is; Tommy, the circus manager, appears over and over to say just how “physically” and “mentally” taxing this life is, as though the author does not trust that we sufficiently understand how challenging it is for her to stay.

Leaving the circus tent, one day, a woman from the audience is unimpressed. “It was boring,” she says. “We were hoping for blood and guts. ... We didn’t see anything cool, no extreme gore at all.” On occasion, I as a reader see myself in her: the member of the audience who is unmoved, who wants more. When Fontaine becomes the Electric Woman — you knew, of course, she was going to — it’s another trickless trick. What she does is sit in the chair, put her hands on metal plates, and conduct electricity with her body. About the unimpressed woman who wanted more blood and guts, Fontaine writes: “Is it unclear that these are real human beings inside the show made up of actual blood, actual guts, some of which they are showing to the audience for two dollars?” And that’s just the thing: The quiet beauty of this book lies in its ordinary, enigmatic human feats of interpersonal connection.

In the end, “The Electric Woman” is about probing mysteries to which there is actually no mystery, but also no end. The woman in a box is disfigured, plain and simple; it’s an act that purports to be magic, and it is and it isn’t. Equally true and mystifying is the fact that we love — it’s plain and extraordinary and impossible to put into words. The ways in which mothers and daughters hurt each other, even as they love each other, are in themselves a world of wonder. □

This Land Is Our Land

Take a seat around the campfire of a young activists' retreat.



LAN TRUONG

By ZOE GREENBERG

BRIMMING WITH OPTIMISM about what they will do for themselves and the world, idealistic young Jews settle in the desert to create a holy place, ignoring one critical complication: They are building their dream on other people's land. That's the plot of Heather Abel's "The Optimistic Decade," which transpires not in Palestine generations ago, but in Colorado in the 1980s and '90s. The displaced people are economically devastated ranchers.

The novel, Abel's first, takes place almost entirely at a back-to-the-land summer camp in the

THE OPTIMISTIC DECADE

By Heather Abel

354 pp. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. \$26.95.

high plateau where the desert meets the Rocky Mountains. The camp's charismatic founder, Caleb, forces out the original owners and then invents a creation myth that he comes to believe himself: The land needed saving and he was the only one who could do it. He names the camp Llamalo, Hebrew for "why not?"

Though Caleb, his devoted camper David and his reluctant counselor Rebecca all have a tenuous relationship with Judaism and certainly don't practice or pray, it's hard to ignore the particularly Jewish stakes of the story (or their biblical names). The land is originally desert, but the first owner irrigates it and soon the desert blooms. The owner "named the irrigation trough 'the Jordan River,' after the river that flows through the Holy Land, but everyone usually just referred to it as 'the ditch.'"

Abel, who previously worked as a reporter, is a perceptive writer whose astute observations keep the book funny and light even under the weight of its Big Ideas. One of my favorite moments is when Rebecca muses that "she spent most of her time lying down or

ZOE GREENBERG is on the Opinion staff at *The Times*.

lounging uncomfortably on her elbows, as if the purgatorial condition of college students meant that they were both too young and too old for chairs."

The characters want to both make the world better and make themselves feel better, but they stumble trying to figure out how. Llamalo offers one answer: Change yourself and you can change the world. At camp, individuals transform; the suburban kids learn to disdain electricity and throw themselves into hiking, swimming in the river, making out, and singing hippie songs around the campfire.

Leftist activism offers another possible solution. Rebecca's father is the publisher of a radical newspaper who has decided nothing ever changes; Rebecca is majoring in "third world revolt and media studies" at Berkeley but has doubts of her own.

Abel draws convincing parallels between the rituals of camp and those of activism: the sign-making, the protesting, the weekly editorial writing. Through her characters' eyes, summer camp is the more euphoric of the two; activism is largely a hopeless slog. As Rebecca describes it, "nobody will come to the rally, but still we go; nobody will cover the rally, so we write about it; nobody will publish our point of view, so we'll start a newspaper, which nobody will read but us."

Is this a book about the failure of Zionism, an exploration of the limits of idealism or a literary coming-of-age novel? It's a bit of all three. Most interestingly, it doesn't just rehash the story of the Holy Land we already know, but imagines a new, subversive ending. Despite the emphasis on the land — its particular specialness and beauty — the devoted of Llamalo come to a radical conclusion: It's not about the land at all.

Instead, action, however imperfect, is offered as the key to both a meaningful life and a community of faith. As Caleb explains to Rebecca, Christians take Jesus into their heart, which gets them saved. But Jews, he says, "set up certain actions — or mitzvahs — and by doing them, again and again, you might start to believe. One way to think about Llamalo is that it's not a place, but a series of actions we do." □

What Remained? A Pen?

A classic French memoir of revolution and exile.

By ALAN RIDING

IN HIS LIFETIME, François-René de Chateaubriand won renown as a politician, diplomat, novelist and travel writer. Today he is best remembered for his "Memoirs From Beyond the Grave," a gigantic 42-volume work intended for publication only 50 years after his death. In the end, though, obliged by poverty in old age "to pawn my tomb," as he lamented, the memoirs appeared soon after he died in 1848, at the age of 79, in Paris.

This new edition, which comprises the first 12 books of the memoirs (considered by many critics to be the most interesting), covers Chateaubriand's aristocratic upbringing in Brittany, the first two years of the French Revolution, a six-month trip to the United States, his combat alongside Royalists resisting the revolution, the loss of family and friends to the Ter-

MEMOIRS FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE, 1768-1800

By François-René de Chateaubriand

Translated by Alex Andriessse

550 pp. New York Review Books. Paper, \$19.95.

ror and his eight-year exile in England, which ended in 1800.

What distinguishes this endeavor, however, is less its historical overview of the turbulence that preceded Napoleon's rise to power than Chateaubriand's examination of his own character and feelings amid multiple setbacks. Indeed, it is the lyricism and intimacy of his language, convincingly translated here by Alex Andriessse, that made Chateaubriand a precursor of French Romanticism.

Fittingly, melancholy permeates "Memoirs From Beyond the Grave." As early as Book 1, he writes: "My brother perished on the scaffold, my two sisters departed their painful lives after many years spent languishing in prison, and my two uncles didn't leave enough to pay for the four planks of their coffins. As for myself, literature has caused me both joy and sorrow, and I don't despair, God willing, of dying in the poorhouse."

While Book 1 is dated 1811, most of it was completed in 1821 and 1822 when, as Louis XVIII's ambassador to London, Chateaubriand had time to reflect on his life. However, the accuracy of his account has sometimes been questioned. While visiting the United States in 1792, for instance, purportedly to discover the Northwest Passage but in truth fleeing the revolution, he recounts a meeting with George Washington. In a translator's note, Andriessse describes this as "almost certainly fictitious."

ALAN RIDING is a former European cultural correspondent for *The Times*. His most recent book is "And the Show Went On: Cultural Life in Nazi-Occupied Paris."

Occasionally Chateaubriand steps outside the years covered in these memoirs. Writing in 1811 of Napoleon, who tolerated his return to France in 1800, he now denounces him: "The man who gives France power over the world today only to trample her underfoot, this man whose genius I admire and whose despotism I abhor, this man encircles me with his tyranny as with a second solitude; but though he crushes the present, the past defies him, and I remain free in everything that preceded his glory."

More touchingly, Chateaubriand is visited at his embassy in 1822 by a woman he has already described falling for 27 years earlier: "My Lord, do you recognize me?" she asked. "I found myself unable to utter a word," he writes, "my eyes welled up with tears, and through these tears I looked at her in silence. I felt, by the strength of what I was experiencing, just how deeply I had loved her. Finally I was able to say to her in turn, 'And you, Madame, do you recognize me?'"



François-René de Chateaubriand

Chateaubriand's most unsparing writing comes during his time as a Royalist soldier, when he's wounded, infected by smallpox and discharged to wander the French countryside. Finally, he finds a boat to the Channel Islands. "My constitutional vigor was finally exhausted. I was no longer able to speak, and the swell of the rough seas was nearly the end of me. I could hardly swallow a few drops of lemon water, and when bad weather forced us to put in to Guernsey harbor, it seemed certain that I would die." Still not fully recovered, he reached London to join hordes of French exiles no less impoverished than himself. Struggling to survive, he asked himself: "What remained? A pen? But the pen was unknown and untried; I was ignorant of its power. Could my unborn taste for letters, the poems of my childhood, the rough sketches of my travels, command the attention of the public?" Filled with doubts, he nonetheless began writing.

Chateaubriand's first book, "Essai Historique," was, in his own words, "a compendium of my existence, as a poet, a moralist, a polemicist and a political thinker." More than two decades later, as he was working on his memoirs, he no longer harbored doubts about his achievements. "In my person, with the so-called Romantic school," he writes with rare immodesty, "there began a revolution in French literature." This claim, at least, is not challenged today. □

What's the Matter With Kentucky?

Chris Offutt's new novel, set in the world of backwoods moonshiners, can be bleak — but it's also shot through with light and love.

By SMITH HENDERSON

AT THE OUTSET of Chris Offutt's new novel, "Country Dark," a young veteran of the Korean War crosses from Ohio into Kentucky, and it's not long before he's facing down a gun. A wary, fierce country kid who doesn't care for towns with "too many people doing too many things at once, and everything boring in its repetition and noise," Tucker is built for trouble. As the coot giving him a lift draws down on him, Tucker turns his body to make a smaller target of his vital organs. The old derelict orders Tucker to take a drink of corn liquor from the glove box. You wonder where this goes and how fast.

If you're familiar with Offutt's fiction or can simply hazard a guess at the import of the title "Country Dark," you get a grim idea. But

COUNTRY DARK

By Chris Offutt

227 pp. Grove Press. \$24.

after Tucker drinks, the man hands over the pistol. The derelict is just a lonely lush avoiding his old lady, and now he wants Tucker to make him throw one back. To this old sot, the gun represents some kind of high hilarity. That is, until Tucker aims it at the man's head and calmly splits for the woods with both moonshine and pistol.

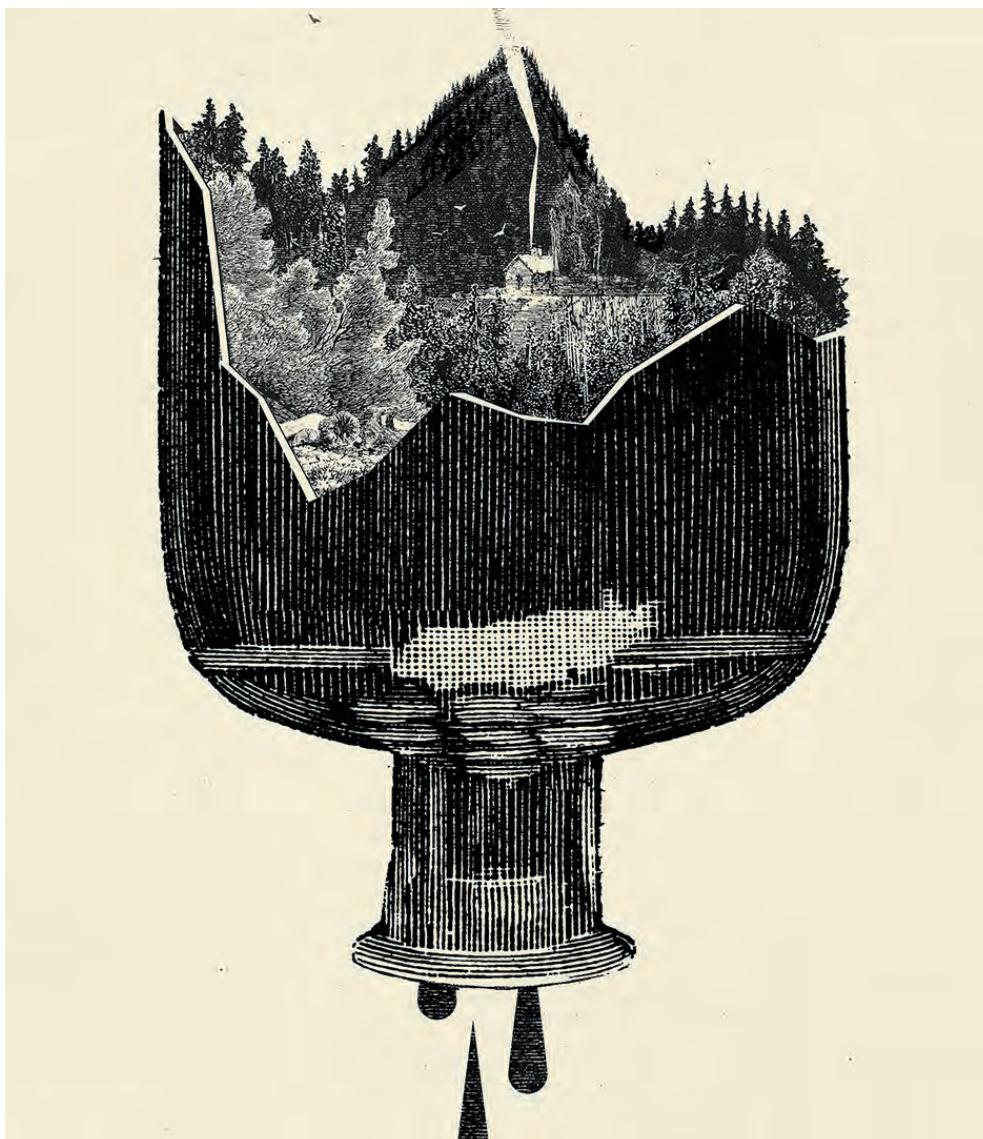
Soon Tucker is under the "unfathomable depth" of a cloudy night. "It was country dark. He closed his eyes feeling safe." He's back home in one of the two Kentuckys — "east and west, dirt and blacktop" — and you can guess which. The one populated by pale people who live shortened days in the hollers, where the air and forest are thick and heavy. Where the very first person you meet is the same midwife who will greet your siblings, your cousins and eventually your children. It is an old world, older than the 1954 in which the story begins.

It's a darker world too, but darkness is cover. Raised in this hard country, Tucker is almost unfairly prepared for war: "He shot quicker. In hand-to-hand combat, he struck first." When he hastens back with that pistol and booze, Tucker is like an animal back in his lair. Tucker cooks a squirrel and wood sorrel roots with henbit and dandelion. He sleeps. He eats a rattlesnake. He swims in a pool. Eastern Kentucky is a kind of Eden — for a minute.

Of course, the most dangerous thing in the woods is always other people, and soon Tucker is observing a woman running from a car on a dirt road. Then he is observing the driver attempting to rape her. Then Tucker isn't observing anymore.

What ensues is a lot like the unexpected turn in the pickup, a beguiling hallmark of

SMITH HENDERSON is the author of the novel "Fourth of July Creek."



MIKE MCQUADE

Offutt's storytelling. Tucker subdues the man with a rock, saving his bullets for squirrels. We learn the man is her uncle. We learn the man is the sheriff. The girl, Rhonda, doesn't want him killed on account of her conscience. Tucker can't have the man coming after him, nor can he kill him. He conjures a solution out of threats and cash. Offutt's magic is that all of Tucker's entanglements are dealt with in a manner so roundly humane you feel bathed in light, not plunged in the dark.

Dazzled by this courageous man from the woods, Rhonda falls for Tucker, wondering already if their children will have his mismatched eyes. Tucker, for his part, can't look at her because she's so pretty. "Her cheekbones were as prominent as railroad gravel. She was as small a woman as he'd ever seen." He already feels the weight of his love, the sheer responsibility of it, and now he has "to think like an officer and issue orders to himself." Sol-

Tucker cooks a squirrel and wood sorrel roots. He sleeps. He eats a rattlesnake.

diering was but a preparation for the troubles the world has in store.

After the first section in 1954, the story leaps 10 years ahead. Tucker and Rhonda have five kids. Tucker's mismatched eyes aren't passed down, but something bad keeps going wrong in Rhonda's womb. The kids are born severely handicapped, bedridden. Rhonda and Tucker have been examined, but no cause is found. Only little Jo is normal and healthy, but she spends much of her time helping her overworked mother, who bears a biblical load: "She loved the babies with every cell of her being but it always felt one-sided. They were too bad off to love her back."

Social services are involved. They tell Rhonda to cease relations with her husband, that

the state will care for the burdensome children. Rhonda is outraged. Tucker, who runs bootleg liquor to parts north, promptly takes steps to defend his family.

You oughtn't know much more heading in. The story rollicks from 1964 to 1971, careening downhill. There is a fantastic climax, a satisfying resolution. And "Country Dark" is audacious without seeming so at all. Routinely shifting points of view, Offutt accesses feelings and tones within tense and complicated moments with playful alacrity. After transacting some nasty business in the book's late going, Tucker realizes, "War and prison had taught him that sides didn't really exist, that everyone was eventually caught in the middle of something." Novels can teach the same thing. We see all the sides. We are caught.

There is a saying that the Lord doesn't give folks more than they can handle, which is another way of saying people get what they deserve. However you put it, it's a Puritan lie. Outside your door are people heaped with more than anyone could handle. We'd do well to remember we are all caught in something eventually.

"He could stay here until he died of thirst," Tucker thinks in the face of more than he can handle. "He could shoot himself in the head. He could climb higher on the hill and leap off the tunnel cut and land on the railroad track. No, no and no. Beanpole owed him ten thousand dollars."

Books like this tell the truth. You'd rather die than bear the unfair burden. It's a bloody fight getting what you deserve.

"Country Dark" is dark, but deeply humane. The love in this book is deep and powerful. And winsome twinkles shine through the blackness throughout, thanks in no small part to Offutt's keen ear and eye. The coffee remains "strong enough to float a rock." An old boy is commended for still being on his "hind legs." Beanpole is fat with "table muscle" and Tucker remains "either-handed as a spider."

"EITHER-HANDED" IS AN apt description of Offutt as well. His creative urges have found expression in memoir, short stories, comic books, essays and television. From his first collection of short stories, "Kentucky Straight," to now, the quality always astonishes. His previous book, "My Father, the Pornographer," found him reckoning with his dad's career as an author of dark erotica and the man's impact as a paternal and creative force on his son. I came away from that book with little wonder that Offutt's own output is so catholic.

And yet it is surprising to realize that this is only Offutt's second novel. His first, "The Good Brother" (1997), was so powerful that more seemed destined to come. Thankfully, his either-handed efforts still include novels of mythic power. This is the Chris Offutt book I've been waiting for — an achievement of spell-binding momentum and steadfast heart. □

When Generals Call the Shots

Ronan Farrow looks at how American policy is being driven by military leaders rather than diplomats.

By DANIEL KURTZ-PHELAN

IN 2010, JUST before Thanksgiving, American foreign-policy makers flew into a panic. The United States government had gotten word that an outfit called WikiLeaks was preparing to release an enormous cache of secret diplomatic cables, in coordination with teams of journalists from this and other newspapers. At the time, I was a policy hand in the State Department. It fell to me and my colleagues

WAR ON PEACE The End of Diplomacy and the Decline of American Influence By Ronan Farrow

Illustrated. 392 pp. W.W. Norton & Company. \$27.95.

to dutifully craft apologies on behalf of our bosses, whose sensitive communications and private insults — speculation about, say, a foreign leader's mental aptitude or mysterious wealth — were about to become public. They, meanwhile, confronted weightier concerns, scrambling to anticipate the coming fallout. Would missions and sources be compromised? Would activists be exposed to persecution? Would anyone ever talk to American officials again?

Almost no one, however, anticipated what would prove to be one of the more lasting consequences of the leak: surprised admiration for American diplomats. "My personal opinion of the State Department has gone up several notches," the British historian and journalist Timothy Garton Ash wrote. He compared one veteran ambassador's prose to Evelyn Waugh's, and deemed other analyses "astute," "unsentimental" and "hilarious." Beneath their "dandruffy" exteriors, he concluded after browsing the classified offerings, these diplomats were sharper, and funnier, than they looked.

Ronan Farrow aims to achieve a similar effect in "War on Peace." At a time when the Trump administration has called for gutting the State Department's budget and filled foreign-policy jobs with military officers, Farrow draws on both government experience and fresh reporting to offer a lament for the plight of America's diplomats — and an argument for why it matters. "Classic, old-school diplomacy," he observes, is "frustrating" and involves "a lot of jet lag." Yet his wry voice and storytelling take work that is often grueling and dull and make it seem, if not always exciting, at least vividly human. A Foreign Service officer's hairstyle is "diplomat's mullet: peace in

DANIEL KURTZ-PHELAN is the executive editor of *Foreign Affairs*. His new book is "The China Mission: George Marshall's Unfinished War, 1945-1947."



Richard Holbrooke in Afghanistan, 2009.

the front, war in the back"; an Afghan strongman's choice of décor is "warlord chic."

With his knack for getting on-the-record access — he recently shared a Pulitzer Prize for his *New Yorker* reporting on Harvey Weinstein's abuses — Farrow managed to interview every living secretary of state, up to and including Rex Tillerson. In a sense, Farrow is telling a story with a well-known ending but a surprise beginning. Much has been made of Trump's disregard for diplomats. But the disproportionate flow of resources to military and intelligence solutions has been going on much longer, at least since 9/11. "In many of America's engagements around the world," Farrow argues, "military alliances have now eclipsed the kind of civilian diplomacy that once counterbalanced them, with disastrous results." He traces those results through fights over Afghanistan strategy, as well as through less prominent policy debates — like the case of a massacre by an American-backed Afghan militant (currently serving as his country's vice president).

At the heart of Farrow's book is the time he spent as an aide to the legendary diplomat Richard Holbrooke, then a special representative working on Afghanistan and Pakistan while longing for a bigger job. Recounting his arrival at the State Department early in the Obama administration, Farrow offers himself as the ingénue, poised for an education in the ways of Washington. (Farrow and I served in the department at the same time but never worked together directly.) What followed was part "West Wing," part "Veep." His job interview with Holbrooke began in

a fluorescent-lit office, continued into an elevator and a meeting with the secretary of state, then into a taxi, then into a bathroom. "What about negotiations with the Taliban?" Holbrooke asked while urinating, Farrow just outside the door.

Holbrooke was a larger-than-life figure, by his own willful design. "There were reminders of his view of our place in history everywhere," Farrow notes of their offices. By that point, Holbrooke's place in history was already assured, thanks to his success in negotiating the Dayton peace agreement that ended war in Bosnia a decade and a half earlier. But he was intent on earning at least one more entry, by repeating a version of that diplomatic feat with the deteriorating American war in Afghanistan. To that end, he was "grasping, relentless" and "oblivious to social graces in the pursuit of his goals." When Farrow defied an instruction, Holbrooke erupted into a tirade — "I know you think you're special. I know you think you have a destiny" — that ended only when an assistant started weeping. Yet he also inspired total devotion in a staff of acolytes, making them equally relentless in pursuit of his goals.

One part of Farrow's education was prosaic. The biggest obstacle to Holbrooke's ambitions, for himself and his diplomacy, was that the president and senior White House aides just didn't like him. "Beneath the sweep of history," Farrow reflects, "was a small human struggle, of ego and age and fear." So in an administration that promised to privilege diplomacy over force, philosophical convergence was undercut by personal animosities. Farrow shares the view of other Holbrooke advisers that their key diplomatic aim — peace talks with the Taliban — got short shrift in overall strategy as a result.

Ultimately, all policymaking is personal. When Holbrooke died suddenly in December 2010, his heart giving out after months of punishing travel, progress toward those talks had barely begun. But Farrow sees the rift as about more than just personalities. Holbrooke's sidelining, in Farrow's analysis, was of a piece with a more general sidelining of diplomacy amid a continuing "militarization of foreign policy." Holbrooke "had spent his final days alarmed at the dominance of generals in Obama's Afghanistan review," Farrow writes. Under Trump, this phenomenon expanded "almost to the point of parody."

The problem with "militarization" is not that military leaders are especially intent on using force. In fact, they are often more reticent than their civilian counterparts to resort to it. (For recent examples, look at debates over military action in Iraq and Libya.) Secretary of Defense James Mattis's line — "If you don't fully fund the State Department, then I need to buy more ammunition" — has been endlessly (and fruitlessly) quoted to the Trump White House over the past year.

The distortions are more subtle. Even



Ronan Farrow

when a stated policy aims to balance diplomatic and military concerns, how the message is delivered matters. If the diplomatic piece comes via a State Department official who arrives alone, flying coach and rolling a suitcase, and the military piece comes via a uniformed officer who arrives in his own airplane, with an entourage and a package of security assistance, it's not hard to guess which is likely to come through more clearly to foreign leaders. And if investment in diplomatic tools is erratic and inadequate, those tools lose their effectiveness, giving policymakers little choice but to resort to military alternatives. Farrow lays out the vicious cycle: "American leadership no longer valued diplomats, which led to the kind of cuts that made diplomats less valuable. Rinse, repeat."

Yet real as these dynamics are, Farrow's account of them comes with some omissions that skew the broader picture. Even while Holbrooke's push was stalled, other diplomatic processes were just getting underway, against long odds. Only in the final pages, in the context of Trump's threats to dismantle the Iran deal, does Farrow get into the years of diplomacy that yielded that agreement. He similarly has little to say about the other diplomatic accomplishments of the Obama years — the opening to Cuba, the Paris climate accords — let alone the diplomatic efforts that ultimately failed. (Remember the Russia reset?)

Those omissions are in themselves telling, since they reflect a deeper challenge that reinforces the dynamics Farrow deplores. Even the most towering diplomatic achievements are at best partial victories; what look like necessary compromises at the negotiating table become ripe targets for political attack when diplomats come home and present uncertain promises and half-measures to a public that prefers silver bullets and sweeping principles. Reflecting on the Iran deal, one of the great career American diplomats of recent years, William Burns, reminds Farrow that "diplomacy was always going to produce something short of a perfect solution." Americans rarely appreciate imperfect solutions, at least until they're gone. □



Can two kids who feel roughed up by their real lives find true friendship playing online Scrabble?

By MEG WOLITZER

SCRAMBLE SOME OF THE LETTERS IN the word *xylitol*, and you can find the words *toil*, *toll* and *till*. And the words *waiting room* will yield *migration*. Such verbal gymnastics are on offer in Erin Entrada Kelly's emotionally rich and charming novel **YOU GO FIRST** (Greenwillow, 288 pp., \$16.99; ages 8 to 12) because words are of great interest to her two main characters, who meet in a school-sanctioned online Scrabble message board and form a friendship while playing the game itself. Words dance and bend and reorganize themselves to the will of 12-year-old Charlotte Lockard, who is particularly resourceful at moving letters around. And 11-year-old Ben Boxer, who reaches first place on the leaderboard, has a strong command over words as well. (Charlotte and Ben are respectively known online as Lottie Lock and Ben Boot.) If only the rest of their lives were as easily managed. But in fact both Charlotte and Ben find themselves

MEG WOLITZER is the author, most recently, of *The Female Persuasion*.

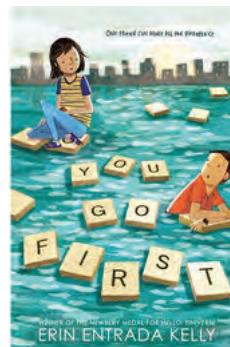
in difficult situations, and no amount of clever rearranging can possibly help.

Charlotte, a brainy future geologist who lives near Philadelphia, has a father in the hospital after a heart attack. She is afraid to visit him, and bears her pain silently. And while a friend would be a good repository for that pain, Charlotte overhears her best friend, Bridget, speaking with shocking cruelty about her to other girls at a table in the school library. Charlotte, eavesdropping while pretending to read a book — though in actuality staring at a photo of someone named LaFayette C. Baker, whose first name's letters, she notes, can be arranged to make fealty, fettle and latte — listens as Bridget describes her to other girls: "She's like a parasite, I swear. I feel bad saying it, but it's true."

Off in Lanester, La., Ben has his own troubles. After being blindsided by his parents' divorce announcement, the ingenuous, intellectually omnivorous Ben makes an unlikely run for student council, for which he is bullied by kids at school.

Home and school are the two central fronts in these kids' lives; but their little corner of the virtual world expands to include phone calls

and texts, providing a third front, and a refuge. There is much less actual Scrabble playing in this book — which is told in alternating chapters, over nearly a week — than the reader might infer from looking at the book's cover, with its oversize letter tiles floating on water like life rafts. No drama centers on a par-



ticularly thrilling move or victory. Instead of creating a classic game-play competition tale, Kelly, who won the 2017 Newbery Medal for her novel "Hello, Universe," aims for something subtle: letting us see two young people who start to realize, based on only the mildest information and clues, that they share a sensibility.

In Katherine Applegate's new book, the only surviving member of a species tries to keep hope alive.

By LAUREL SNYDER

KATHERINE APPLIGATE MAY BE best known for the Newbery Medal-winning novel "The One and Only Ivan," but she is also the writer who gave us the young adult science fiction series "The Animorphs." Her new book, **ENDLING THE LAST** (Harper, 381 pp., \$17.99; ages 8 to 12), calls to mind both accomplishments as it blends careful and often lovely prose into a wild, fast-paced fantasy — the first book of a promised series.

Byx is a young dairne, a thoughtful sort of dog-human hybrid, and when the book opens, she is living in hiding with her critically endangered pack. Almost immediately, tragedy strikes. Human soldiers of the merciless ruler Murdano arrive while Byx is away from home, and her pack is destroyed. Byx returns to the bloody scene, where she realizes she

LAUREL SNYDER'S recent books for young readers include "Orphan Island" and the Geisel Award-winning "Charlie & Mouse."

may well be the last dairne alive, the Endling of her species.

Through a quick succession of events, Byx finds herself in the company of Khara, a human girl, and Tobble, a comic sidekick called a wobbyk. As typically happens in journey books of this type, the three unlikely friends make their way through a treacherous land (here, it's Nedarra), dodging disaster and building bonds of friendship as well as meeting up with a few more travelers, before they continue on their quest for Dairneholme, where Byx hopes to find others like her.

Into this engaging adventure Applegate weaves a surprising number of serious themes: the relationship of family to identity, the importance of expansive gender roles, the dangers of authoritarian government and misinformation, the looming threat of species extinction and the destructive appetites of humankind. "There's one thing you can be certain of with humans," Applegate has a character say. "They always want more."

But these subjects are approached personally, through Byx's broadening engagement

with the larger world. This is not a book about extinction. It's a book about one dairne figuring out what it might mean to be alone in the world.

Perhaps the most powerful thing about "Endling the Last" is that the characters are capable of serious wrongdoing as well as genuine goodness. We learn early on that Byx has, herself, tasted wobbyk flesh, but in their first encounter, she still risks her own life to save Tobble. Khara initially encounters Byx while hunting her with a band of poachers, and then enslaves her. Despite that, Byx rescues her in a moment of peril, noting that "I was about to save the very person holding me captive."

Khara eventually returns the favor. As these characters are threatened or empowered and come to know one another better, their instincts and relationships shift, and so does our understanding of them. We see that almost anyone has the capacity to become a hero or a villain.

Another surprising element in the story is that dairnes have a unique power — the ability to detect untruth. They also never lie, and this honesty surfaces and evolves throughout the story. "Although dairnes don't lie, we do sometimes ... hope," Byx tells us early on, setting up an interesting relationship for the pages to come.

Later, in a moment of despair, she cries, "This hope of mine is ridiculous." But we un-

The friendship of Ben and Charlotte is a testament to the uncanny ways people can find one another. Given a chance to reveal themselves, they feel it's easier to present idealized versions than the true ones. Ben confesses that he "just wouldn't mind being two inches taller, like six feet." Never mind that "over the course of one sentence, Ben had grown almost an entire foot." Later, Charlotte confesses, "The thing is ... I don't want to be friends with my best friend anymore and I don't know how to tell her." She adds: "It's just ... she can be irritating sometimes, you know? Always hanging around me. Stuff like that."

Scrabble provides a catalyst, and an appealing kind of background noise in this novel, with a nod to family as well. And it's fitting that the game these characters play is indeed Scrabble and not, say, chess. In Scrabble, one player might start off with a strong rack filled with high-point "power tiles," while the other might start off with, say, a horrible "Old MacDonald" rack: EIEEEEIO. In that particular sense, Scrabble isn't exactly "fair." But there is something pleasing in the way the letters in a word can be rearranged, and the word itself transformed into something else entirely. Charlotte and Ben are both thrust into unfair emotional situations. But as this wonderful novel unfolds they find out how the world works: its unfairness, to be sure, but also its gratifications. □

derstand that the group needs both truth and hope to stay on their path. "In truth lies strength" may be the pack motto of Byx's lost family, but by the end of the book, we realize that even truth isn't enough, all by itself.

"Endling the Last" is perhaps not quite so perfect a book as "The One and Only Ivan." In



reaching for wild adventure, a big cast of characters and a complex fantasy world, Applegate has sacrificed a little poetry and clarity. But if it sometimes feels a little messy, it also feels triumphant. Readers will fall in love with Byx and race with her through Nedarra, breathless and eager, thinking deeply all the way. □

Let's Explore Tumors With Turtles

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

worried that if his head lolled even a few centimeters he might scupper the entire perilous system — yet waking him to warn him might result in the exact same outcome.

What would David Sedaris do? I thought.

I was trapped, I realized, on the inside of a mask once worn by the man himself. I felt his potency. It was palpable. He seriously could start a cult. It would be a total hoot. Not for everyone, true — but I'm in.

It's not like there weren't warning signs: That morning as I drove to the airport I listened to BBC Radio Scotland and nearly drove off the road laughing at a new campaign to encourage people to learn CPR by using the Proclaimers song "I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)." "And I will press 500 times/And I will press 500 more/Just to be the one to save you/ Till the ambulance comes to your door," declared Carol Smillie, a TV host long beloved by my people.

It seemed that this entrancing collection of essays, and my fascination with its author, had sucked me into some nerdy netherworld where real life becomes weirder and funnier and darker and bleaker than, well, real life.

I have come to the conclusion that David Sedaris is not just some geeky Samuel Pepys, as I had assumed all these years. True, he may shed a revelatory light on the more extreme facets of our societal spectrum through his bizarre and pithy prism. Yes, his worldview — a fascinating hybrid of the curious, cranky and kooky — does indeed hold a mirror up to nature and show us as others see us. But make no mistake: He is not the Fool, he is Lear.

West Sussex in England and Emerald Isle in North Carolina are his kingdoms. Amy, Gretchen, Lisa, Paul and the tragic Tiffany are his royal siblings, ever shifting in their allegiances and presence in one another's lives. Lou is his father, once so distant and scornful of his fragile son, now softer and benign, proffering unwanted gifts that Sedaris has learned are easier for all concerned to accept with grace.

The family home in Raleigh was once presided over with gusto by Sharon, the Sedaris matriarch. Her death from cancer hangs over these pages like a long-ago exhaled puff of a Winston. Like the plot of nearly every decent Disney movie, the young Sedaris princes and princesses were sent out into the scary grown-up world motherless and rudderless but buoyed by her magnificent spirit.

Sharon had developed slowly into a messy alcoholic. It took her kids many years to realize this about the woman they all adored, who mightily would clutch the kitchen counter to steady herself as she launched into one of her hilarious and biting rants. *I got them laugh-*

ing was both her mantra and catchphrase, yet none of those truly loving children could ever bring themselves to challenge her about it, let alone help her. And, alas, their silence did not protect her.

This failure, this regret and, actually, this neglect is haunting to the point of being unbearable, yet Sedaris's brash and raw eloquence allows us to never linger too long in the darkness. He doesn't just bring gallows humor, he brings gallows rimshot.

This book allows us to observe not just the nimble-mouthed elf of his previous work, but a man in his seventh decade expunging his darker secrets and contemplating mortality. "Calypso" chronicles his latest attempts to come to terms with the slings and arrows of truly outrageous fortune that life has flung at him.

For Lear the storm is the central metaphor: the elemental storm, the societal storm he has engendered and the internal storm as he struggles with pride, age and looming madness. For Sedaris a snapping turtle with a partly missing foot and a tumor on its head becomes an unlikely leitmotif. He encounters the turtle in a canal on Emerald Isle, and a semiotic friendship begins. Well, perhaps not a friendship, but certainly a one-sided appreciation. Not only does the author visit the turtle to feed it scraps like some novice apostle leaving sacrifices for his deity, but when he himself finds a tumor on his tummy, one of the harmless fatty ones that nonetheless grow to the size and consistency of a hard-boiled egg, he decides to have it removed and take it back to the island to feed it to his turtle friend — both the ultimate act of devotion and the creation of a new literary genre: *tumor humor*.

Initially at least, these plans are foiled by his surgeon. "It's against federal law for me to give you anything I've removed from your body," he tells the author, who promptly flees the scene, tumor intact. A less staunch man might have abandoned his plan there and then, but Sedaris perseveres and eventually finds a lovely Mexican lesbian who offers to perform the surgical deed after he tells the story of his first, failed attempt to feed the turtle his lump during a book reading in El Paso. The woman — her pseudonym is Ada — sends the tumor to his sister Lisa, who keeps it in her freezer until the next time the Sedaris clan gathers at Emerald Isle.

The brilliance of David Sedaris's writing is that his very essence, his aura, seeps through the pages of his books like an intoxicating cloud, mesmerizing us so that his logic be-

comes ours: I found myself rooting for him to be able to keep his tumor and longing for the beautiful, climactic reunion scene when the sick turtle eats it.

And it soon becomes clear why Sedaris finds it so important to be the master of his tumor: He sees himself in that turtle — weird, slightly damaged, set in his ways — so feeding it a part of him is also replenishing himself. King Lear gave away his lands, David Sedaris gives



David Sedaris

'I have come to the conclusion that David Sedaris is not just some geeky Samuel Pepys, as I had assumed all these years.'

away his fatty lump.

Health matters, aging and death itself are omnipresent in this book, like tentacles pulling a collection of stories together into a whole. Nowhere is the pain and mundanity of loss more hauntingly evoked than in the revelations about the suicide of the writer's sister Tiffany. Her death is mentioned early and referred to throughout, each heartbreaking detail adding a piece to this jigsaw of suburban family pain and confusion.

Sedaris's description of his last encounter with Tiffany — beautifully lobbed at the reader from left field — describes her waiting for him

at the stage door after one of his rock-star-like literary entertainments. That evening Sedaris feels empowered enough to deny his unpredictable and flailing sibling access to him. He feels content enough to think of his own well-being above her toxic needs. He revels, for a tragic, misplaced moment, in the power of being a star, and at his behest the door closes on Tiffany's face. They never see each other again, and she later kills herself in a manner

as determined and cold as her brother's rejection that night.

Of course such a tragedy sends reverberations throughout the family. Realignment is inexorable. He did not seek the position, and has somewhat reluctantly assumed the role, but there is no doubt that David Sedaris has become the daddy of his family. The geeks really do inherit the earth.

One day recently when walking home across town in Lower Manhattan, I bumped into Amy Sedaris, the author's sister. We had worked together on "The Good Wife" when she came into the show to be my character's professional rival and love interest. One scene had her squirt whipped cream on my fingers and lick it off, and she actually bit me. Quite hard. I am nuts about her.

We stopped to say hello. I noticed she had been shopping and was carrying several packages and bags. My mind flashed to the chapter in this book where she, her brother and their sister Gretchen travel to Japan to go shopping. But not just shopping. They become cave men, shopping beasts, consumer omnivores. And now here was one of them, today's catch in hand, beaming shyly

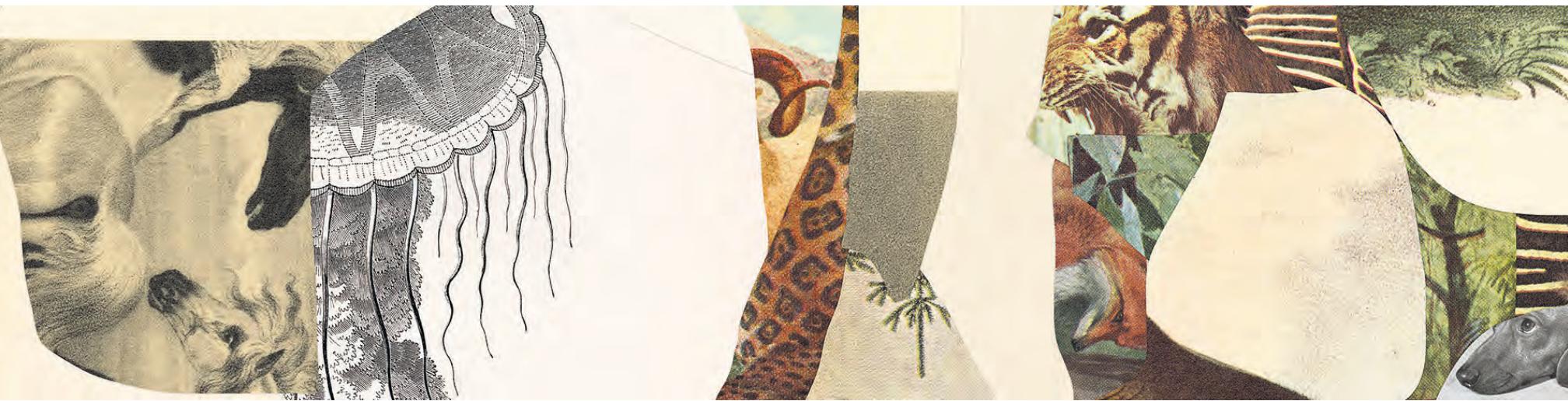
at me in the middle of Broadway. It felt like a character from a book had tumbled down from the sky into my life, and of course she had. If I now viewed my life in glorious Sedariscope, it felt completely logical that one of his sisters should be enacting a story from the book in front of me. And also logical that seconds later, mid-pleasantry, we should both realize that the lights had changed to green and we were about to be mowed down and become New York City roadkill.

Death and family are what this book is all about. Maybe what all David Sedaris's work is about? Maybe what all good writing *has* to be about for they are really the only constants in all our lives? We can avoid neither and the existence of both reminds us that we are no different from one another.

As Sedaris says: "They've always done that for me, my family. It's what keeps me coming back." □

ALAN CUMMING is an actor and author of four books, most recently "The Adventures of Honey and Leon."

PHOTOGRAPH BY INGRID CHRISTIE



SPINELESS
The Science of Jellyfish and the Art of Growing a Backbone

By Juli Berwald
 336 pp. Riverhead. \$27.



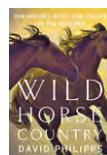
If there really is such a thing as “jellyfish journalism,” as Berwald says, then she’s the dean of the genre, and a fun one at that. In “Spineless,” her memoirish, witty, insightful work, she explores her fascination with ocean science and the detours in her life—academic, professional and personal — that led to an unexpected and happy obsession with jellyfish. Through her charismatic writing, we learn about huge “blooms” of jellyfish. In large numbers, these fragile animals can stop boat traffic, devastate fisheries, or gum up the cooling systems of a power plant, as they once did in the Philippines, causing a massive blackout. We meet many kinds of jellyfish, including the giant jellies that can weigh in at nearly 500 pounds, and immortal jellyfish, the size of “the tip of a ballpoint pen” that can “reverse-age,” Berwald says, like “Benjamin Button.” We come to know the anatomy and biochemistry of jellyfish notorious for stinging swimmers (about 150 million zaps a year), even famous ones like Diana Nyad. Box-jellyfish toxins included, Berwald makes this world inviting and easy to visualize. The jellyfish *Beroe ovata* looks like “a cellophane bag used to wrap up a fancy cookie,” for instance. A “newly minted” jellyfish larva resembles “a furry Tic Tac.” Her presentation of concepts is equally vivid: In the darkness of the ocean, most creatures use light to communicate, she notes. Swirling a jar of bioluminescent phytoplankton in seawater and watching them glow, she’s “seeing their screams.” There’s a jellyfish known to exclaim in a big way too, lighting up “like the Wheel of Fortune.”

The story of jellyfish — how they respond to the challenges of warming, acidification and overfishing, how they affect and are affected by their surroundings — is a significant part of the environmental story. Berwald’s engaging account of these delicate, often ignored creatures shows how much they matter to our oceans’ future.

VICKI CONSTANTINE CROKE covers animal issues for the NPR show “Here & Now” and is the author of “Elephant Company.”

WILD HORSE COUNTRY
The History, Myth, and Future of the Mustang

By David Philipps
 316 pp. Norton. \$27.95.



Wild mustangs galloping across open plains: For years, they’ve been the perfect poster ponies for the concept of American freedom. And yet, it turns out, almost half the nation’s wild horses now live in captivity. How did that happen?

Philipps, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter who writes for *The New York Times*, sets out to tell the story with an unexpected perspective: “I am not a horse person,” he writes at the start of “Wild Horse Country.” He is driven, instead, by a love of “wildness” and the West, and the question he’s asking is what is “the proper place for the mustang in the West, if any?”

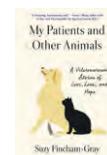
His thorough reporting focuses largely on the work of the federal agencies and the policies that make up mustang management — much of it angering already polarized groups, chief among them ranchers and wild horse advocates, who have very different views on how public lands should be used, as well as grazing rights and whether the needs of wild animals should even be considered. In some formidably parched places across 10 Western states, including Nevada, the horses prove their hardiness by surviving and reproducing. But how many horses are allowed on how much land? Which land? What is a “sustainable” population? What is humane?

These have been the central questions for decades. In the “round up and ground up” era, so-called mustangers used to keep numbers down by brutally herding the animals to slaughter. Today, helicopter roundups remove about 10,000 horses a year. The animals are available for adoption, but most go to long-term storage on feedlots and in pastures.

Philipps’s big picture is very big. He goes from prehistory — 55-million-year-old fossilized jaws of tiny early horses — through the horse’s place in the history of the Old West, to the present day, with cowboys celebrating a roundup’s end with a round of strawberry daiquiris at a bar. The horses provide Philipps a way into the vital question of freedom and its costs.

MY PATIENTS AND OTHER ANIMALS
A Veterinarian’s Stories of Love, Loss, and Hope

By Suzy Fincham-Gray
 270 pp. Spiegel & Grau. \$27.



When zebras make an appearance in Fincham-Gray’s memoir they serve as metaphors, not patients. “When you hear hoofbeats, think of horses, not zebras,” is standard advice for eager young doctors, of animals and humans alike — a caution against the rookie penchant for overlooking the obvious in search of obscure diagnoses.

Fincham-Gray hears that warning as an intern at the University of Pennsylvania’s veterinary teaching hospital. She envies the assurance of the senior clinicians, able to justify a treatment choice with the simple phrase “in my experience.” How she gains that experience, starting as a student at the Royal Veterinary Hospital in her native Britain, is the heart of her story.

From the start, it’s clear that Fincham-Gray isn’t intending to be James Herriot, the beloved British vet and author known for comforting scenes of country life. In a stark scene in the opening chapter, she squeezes the trigger of a pistol to euthanize an ailing horse in the pasture. The distance from the sweetly pastoral widens by miles as Fincham-Gray moves to the United States to train and practice in Philadelphia, Baltimore and San Diego. Here, her patients include a Doberman pinscher suffering from a gunshot wound, a tortoiseshell cat impaled by an arrow and a miniature dachshund seriously sick after eating a hot dog.

Fincham-Gray must learn to diagnose with her hands as well as her brain, and she is adroit at showing us the process. Lifting the sick dachshund, Fritz, from his cage, she feels a “tense tremor” of pain, notes that his back “instinctively arched” to protect his belly, and reports that the “soft skin of his abdomen” is too warm.

She doesn’t always deliver on the personal introspection she’s reaching for in this memoir, but elements like her short profile of the pancreas, which, in part, describes the organ as “pale and malevolent, hiding between the smooth, jolly pink intestines and the dense, bloody liver,” are memorably vivid.

Best Sellers

The New York Times

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COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

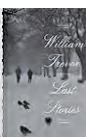
SALES PERIOD OF MAY 6-12

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	THE 17TH SUSPECT , by James Patterson and Maxine Paetro. (Little, Brown) The latest installment in the Women's Murder Club series. Detective Lindsay Boxer searches for a killer in San Francisco.	2
2	2	THE FALLEN , by David Baldacci. (Grand Central) Amos Decker, known as the Memory Man, puts his talents toward solving a string of murders in a Rust Belt town.	4
3		THE CROOKED STAIRCASE , by Dean Koontz. (Bantam) The rogue F.B.I. agent Jane Hawk is on the lam from the government and a secret group causing a rash of murder-suicides.	1
4		THE HIGH TIDE CLUB , by Mary Kay Andrews. (St. Martin's) An eccentric millionaire enlists the attorney Brooke Trappnell to fix old wrongs, which sets up a potential scandal and murder.	1
5	3	TWISTED PREY , by John Sandford. (Putnam) The 28th book in the Prey series. A federal marshal looks into the actions of a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee.	3
6	4	THE MIDNIGHT LINE , by Lee Child. (Delacorte) Jack Reacher tracks down the owner of a pawned West Point class ring and stumbles upon a large criminal enterprise.	12
7		INTO THE WATER , by Paula Hawkins. (Riverhead) In this psychological thriller by the author of "The Girl on the Train," drowned women are found in an English river town.	12
8	9	LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE , by Celeste Ng. (Penguin Press) An artist upends a quiet town outside Cleveland.	29
9		THE OTHER LADY VANISHES , by Amanda Quick. (Berkley) Adelaide Blake escapes a private sanitarium and takes refuge in a 1930s seaside resort town where Hollywood players vacation and a psychic is murdered.	1
10	8	THE GREAT ALONE , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's) A former prisoner of war returns from Vietnam and moves his family to Alaska, where they face tough conditions.	14
11	12	BEFORE WE WERE YOURS , by Lisa Wingate. (Ballantine) A South Carolina lawyer learns about the questionable practices of a Tennessee orphanage.	33
12		WARLIGHT , by Michael Ondaatje. (Knopf) In Britain after World War II, a pair of teenage siblings are taken under the tutelage of a mysterious man and his cronies who served during the war.	1
13	13	CAMINO ISLAND , by John Grisham. (Doubleday) A search for stolen rare manuscripts leads to a Florida island.	23
14		RESCUING WENDY , by Susan Stoker. (Susan Stoker) The eighth book in the Delta Force Heroes series. A soldier and a telemarketer take their relationship to the next level.	1
15		THE COUPLE NEXT DOOR , by Shari Lapena. (Penguin) A couple's secrets emerge after their baby disappears.	1

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		THE SOUL OF AMERICA , by Jon Meacham. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer contextualizes the present political climate through the lens of difficult moments in American history.	1
2		BARRACOON , by Zora Neale Hurston. (Amistad) A previously unpublished, first-person account of Cudjo Lewis, a man who was transported and enslaved 50 years after the slave trade was banned.	1
3	1	A HIGHER LOYALTY , by James Comey. (Flatiron) The former F.B.I. director recounts cases and personal events that shaped his outlook on justice.	4
4	2	I'LL BE GONE IN THE DARK , by Michelle McNamara. (Harper) The late true-crime journalist's search for the serial murderer and rapist known as "the Golden State Killer."	11
5	5	KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON , by David Grann. (Doubleday) The story of a murder spree in 1920s Oklahoma that targeted Osage Indians, whose lands contained oil.	47
6	3	HILLBILLY ELEGY , by J.D. Vance. (HarperCollins) A Yale Law School graduate looks at the struggles of the white working class through the story of his own childhood.	75
7	4	EDUCATED , by Tara Westover. (Random House) The daughter of survivalists, who is kept out of school, educates herself enough to leave home for university.	12
8	6	WAR ON PEACE , by Ronan Farrow. (Norton) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist chronicles the deterioration of American diplomacy.	3
9		MEASURE WHAT MATTERS , by John Doerr. (Portfolio/Penguin) How a goal-setting system helped large tech companies succeed.	2
10		THE ORDER OF TIME , by Carlo Rovelli. (Riverhead) The Italian theoretical physicist uses ideas based in philosophy, science and literature to explore the mysteries of time.	1
11	11	THE LIGHT WITHIN ME , by Ainsley Earhardt with Mark Tabb. (Harper) A memoir by one of the hosts of "Fox & Friends."	3
12	8	THE ASSAULT ON INTELLIGENCE , by Michael V. Hayden. (Penguin Press) A former director of the N.S.A. and the C.I.A. identifies domestic and international threats.	2
13	7	FASCISM: A Warning , by Madeleine Albright with Bill Woodward. (Harper) The former secretary of state examines the legacy of fascism in the 20th century and its potential revival.	5
14		OUR TOWNS , by James Fallows and Deborah Fallows. (Pantheon) A couple who flew around America in a single-engine prop airplane describe how solutions for issues faced on a local level differ from national-level dysfunction.	1
15	12	FACTFULNESS , by Hans Rosling with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlund. (Flatiron) A look at our biases and the argument for why the world is in a better state than we might think.	5

A dagger (†) indicates that some bookstores report receiving bulk orders. **ONLINE: E-BOOKS AND EXPANDED RANKINGS:** For more lists, more titles, more rankings and a full explanation of our methodology, visit www.nytimes.com/best-sellers.

Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



LAST STORIES, by William Trevor. (Viking, \$26.) The great Irish writer, who died in 2016 at the age of 88, captured turning points in individual lives with powerful slyness. This seemingly quiet but ultimately volcanic collection is his final gift to us, and it is filled with plots sprung from human feeling.

FASCISM: A Warning, by Madeleine Albright with Bill Woodward. (Harper/HarperCollins, \$27.99.) Albright draws on her long experience in government service and as an educator to warn about a new rise of fascism around the world. She is hopeful that this threat can be overcome, but only, she says, if we recognize history's lessons and never take democracy for granted.

MOTHERHOOD, by Sheila Heti. (Holt, \$27.) The narrator of Heti's provocative new novel, a childless writer in her late 30s — like Heti herself — is preoccupied with a single question: whether to have a child. Her dilemma prompts her to consult friends, psychics, her conscience and a version of the I Ching.

INTO THE RAGING SEA: Thirty-Three Mariners, One Megastorm, and the Sinking of the El Faro, by Rachel Slade. (Ecco/HarperCollins, \$27.99.) Pieced together from texts, emails and black box recordings, this is a tense, moment-by-moment account of the 2015 sinking of the cargo ship El Faro during Hurricane Joaquin.



SEE WHAT CAN BE DONE: Essays, Criticism, and Commentary, by Lorrie Moore. (Knopf, \$29.95.) The first essay collection by this gifted fiction writer features incisive pieces about topics like Alice Munro, John Cheever, "The Wire," Dawn Powell and Don DeLillo, all of it subject to Moore's usual loving attention and quirky perspective.

CAN DEMOCRACY SURVIVE GLOBAL CAPITALISM? by Robert Kuttner. (Norton, \$27.95.) Kuttner returns to the argument he's been making with increasing alarm for the past three decades: Countries need to have autonomy to control their economies, otherwise they'll be crushed by the whims of the free market.



THE GIRL WHO SMILED BEADS: A Story of War and What Comes After, by Clemantine Wamariya and Elizabeth Weil. (Crown, \$26.) As a 6-year-old refugee of the Rwandan genocide, Wamariya crisscrossed Africa with her sister, enduring poverty and violence. She recounts her path to America lyrically and analytically.

AND NOW WE HAVE EVERYTHING: On Motherhood Before I Was Ready, by Meaghan O'Connell. (Little, Brown, \$26.) This honest, neurotic, searingly funny memoir of pregnancy and childbirth is a welcome antidote in the panicked-expectant-mothers canon—though its gripping narrative will appeal to nonparents, too.

WHITE HOUSES, by Amy Bloom. (Random House, \$27.) A psychologically astute novel that celebrates the intimate relationship of Eleanor Roosevelt and the A.P. reporter Lorena Hickok.

The full reviews of these and other recent books are on the web: [nytimes.com/books](https://www.nytimes.com/books).

