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Fiction Reviews

-- Publishers Weekly, 9/1/2008

Miles from Nowhere Nami Mun. Riverhead, \$21.95 (304p) ISBN 978-1-59448-854-2

Mun's first novel is a 1980s urban odyssey in which Joon-Mee, a 12-year-old Korean-American, leaves her troubled Bronx family for the life of a New York City runaway. The novel follows Joon over six years, as she lives in a homeless shelter, finds work as an underage escort and a streetwalker, succumbs to drug addiction and petty crime, then tries to turn it all around. Along the way we meet a cast of addicts, grifters and homeless people, including Wink, a boisterous but vulnerable young street veteran ("I didn't even know they had boy prostitutes"); Knowledge, a friend who ropes Joon into helping steal her family's Christmas tree; and Benny, a drugged-up orderly and self-destructive love interest. Mun is careful not to lean on the '80s ambience, and Joon's voice, purged of self-pity, sounds clear and strong on every page. Individual scenes, including Joon's first job, her interview with an antagonistic employment counselor and her climactic encounter with a good-hearted former neighbor, are wonderfully written. Unfortunately, the novel's episodic structure prevents Joon's story from building to anything greater than its parts. (Jan.)

★ **Sing Them Home** Stephanie Kallos. Atlantic Monthly, \$24 (560p) ISBN 978-0-87113-963-4

Kallos's (*Broken for You*) enthralling second novel takes the reader by storm as Hope Jones, Nebraska mother of three, is whisked away by a 1978 tornado, her body never found. The novel opens 25 years later, when Hope's children—grown but not grown up—gather for their father's funeral after he's killed by a lightning strike. Llewelyn's death is one of many quandaries haunting his children: daughter Larken, an overweight professor beset by fear of flying; son Gaelan, a television weatherman with too many women in his life; and the youngest, Bonnie, who stays in Emlyn Springs working odd jobs. Alvina "Viney" Closs, Hope's best friend, also has issues to resolve. Themes of family bonds and conflicts, secrets and sorrows also marked Kallos's debut, and this time she weaves in an idiosyncratic view of the role of the dead in the lives of the living, sharp takes on business, academic and sexual politics, and a palpable empathy for small Midwestern towns. This novel will find a welcome audience in anyone who has experienced grief, struggled with family ties or, most importantly, appreciates blossoming talent. (Jan.)

Courage Alan Littell. St. Martin's/Dunne, \$16.95 (128p) ISBN 978-0-312-38436-4

An authentic-feeling ocean adventure, this slim novel is as much about the craft and lifestyle of seafaring as it is of the sea itself. The story involves a cargo ship in distress during a storm 150 miles off the coast of Ireland in the winter of 1950, and a second ship that sends part of its crew on a rescue mission. The protagonist, John Driscoll, overcomes a childhood fear of the water to follow the path of a life at sea. Throughout the book, Driscoll, who is dispatched to save the shipwrecked crew, comes to symbolize an attraction to the sea felt by many of the salty characters. Littell's affection for the lifestyle is palpable, and he's especially adept at turning mariner jargon into sharp-edged if strangely musical prose. Readers lacking at least a nodding acquaintance with the seagoing life will want to take a pass, but those with saltwater in their veins will not want to pass this up. (Dec.)

My Life at First Try Mark Budman. Counterpoint, \$24 (240p) ISBN 978-1-58243-400-1

This blazingly fast and funny "semi-autobiographical" novel follows a Russian man's comically earnest pursuit of the American dream. As a child, Alex, living in 1950s Siberia with his parents and grandparents, sees a picture of his American-born second cousin, Annie, and he believes he has

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found his destiny. Throughout his formative sexual experiences, he fantasizes about Annie, who embodies the exoticness of Western culture and the wholesomeness of the American dream. By the late 1970s, when Alex's parents decide to decamp for the U.S., Alex packs up his wife and their young daughter, too, and after the trio land in upstate New York, Alex goes to work at the IBM-like HAL Corporation while his wife, Lyuba, an internist, takes longer to settle in. At first, Alex is content with his new freedom-loving democratic identity, but as his children grow and Lyuba becomes more independent the dream begins to lose its sheen. The novel is hilarious, eye-opening and, by the end, a little depressing. It's tough not to have Alex's buoyant energy rub off on the reader. (Dec.)

Second Time Around Marcia Willett. St. Martin's/Dunne, \$13.95 paper (320p) ISBN 978-0-312-30666-3

Mathilda Rainbird wills her English seaside estate to distant relatives shortly before her death, and the three beneficiaries' decision to move in together kick-starts Willett's whimsical tale of independence and familial support. Tessa Rainbird, a 22-year-old dog sitter still mourning the death of her parents and baby brother; widower Will Rainbird; and Beatrice Holmes, a retired matron from a boys' prep school are immediately enchanted by the home's location, perched on a hill overlooking a private beach. Along with Isobel Stangate, Mathilda's former housekeeper who lives in an adjacent cottage, this group of genuinely honest folks forms a strong bond. As Tessa, Will, Beatrice and Isobel get to know one another, Willett artfully weaves in the idea that their unlikely situation is essential to their destiny and will allow each of them to move ahead to the next stage of their lives. With its strong, empathetic characters, this latest from Willett (*The Courtyard*) will appeal to both fans and newcomers to her warm, easy style. (Dec.)

The Unpossessed City Jon Fasman. Penguin Press, \$24.95 (288p) ISBN 978-1-59420-190-5

Bestseller Fasman, whose well-received debut, *The Geographer's Library* (2005), was set in *Da Vinci Code* territory, takes a compassionate look at the hard truths of modern-day Russia in his absorbing second novel. After a failed romance, 32-year-old Jim Vilatzer is working in his father's Rockville, Md., restaurant, trying to earn enough cash to pay off a \$24,000 gambling debt. In an attempt to earn more money, Jim uses his Russian language skills learned in college to get a job in Moscow with the Memory Foundation to interview and record the stories of former political prisoners. A series of interviews draws him into a far-reaching scheme involving the abduction of retired Russian nuclear and biotech scientists. The bio-thriller aspect of the plot provides a loose frame for Fasman's real concerns: Jim's personal, romantic and espionage relationships and, more importantly, the trials and tribulations of the new Russia itself. (Nov.)

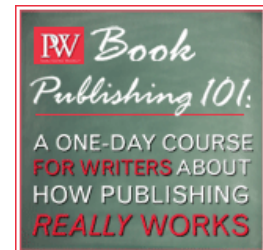
★ **Night Work** Thomas Glavinic, trans. from the German by John Brownjohn. Canongate, \$15 paper (264p) ISBN 978-1-84767-184-4

What if you woke up one morning to find that all life, both human and animal, had vanished without warning? That's what happens one ordinary July day in Vienna to Jonas, the hero of this extraordinary apocalyptic novel by Austrian author Glavinic (*The Camera Killer*). Jonas's newspaper hasn't been delivered, his TV isn't picking up any channels, and the Internet isn't working. Outside, the normally busy streets are empty, though clocks are running. Jonas begins to explore the city, leaving notes with his cell number in the hope that someone else is out there. As the days turn into weeks, he sets up video and audio equipment to record anything that might hint at another survivor. Predictably, he increasingly loses his grasp on reality. By leaving much to the reader's imagination, Glavinic creates a more subtle if no less nightmarish mood than such similar books as *The Day of the Triffids* and *I Am Legend*. (Nov.)

By the Sword F. Paul Wilson. Forge, \$25.95 (352p) ISBN 978-0-7653-1707-0

Wilson's 12th action-packed adventure of urban mercenary Repairman Jack picks up where *Bloodlines* (2007) abruptly ended, with Jack's ongoing efforts to thwart the sociopathic Kicker and its efforts to breed a malignant messiah. When a Japanese businessman offers him a new assignment tracking down a legendary *katana* with occult properties, Jack quickly finds himself struggling to keep the sword out of the hands of a cabal of yakuza gangsters, as well as the Kakureta Kao, a mystical order of monks who hope to channel its power to devastate New York City. Besides combining these disparate plot threads together with his usual dexterity, Wilson continues to lay the groundwork for Jack's long-awaited showdown with his supernatural nemesis, Rasolom. More violent and complex than its predecessors, this novel serves up the occult thrills fans of Wilson's series have come to expect and tantalizes with the promise of more surprises to come. (Nov.)

The Taker and Other Stories Rubem Fonseca, trans. from the Portuguese by Clifford Landers.



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Open Letter, \$15.95 (166p) ISBN 978-1-934824-02-3

The stories in Fonseca's collection, the first translated into English, are beautifully grim and superbly clever as stand-alone reading. Together, though, these tales of very bad people doing very bad things can be fatiguing. From the first story to the last (a bored businessman runs down pedestrians to relax; two women vie, fatally, for the narrator's affections), Fonseca is relentless in his cynicism toward the human condition. In the title story, a poet threatens, beats, rapes and murders his way across Rio de Janeiro before meeting his match, an equally masochistic woman. "Account of the Incident" is a relatively whimsical entry, about a fight among neighbors over a dead cow recently hit by a bus. Like Flannery O'Connor, Fonseca uses cathartic, revelatory horror to explore the logical ends of society's collective fears and foibles; in his world, hope is a foolish luxury and the only way to live is to take. For all his grim plotting, though, every story is wired with moments of explosive humor; fans of South American literature and the macabre should be pleased. (Nov.)

Night Sisters Sara Rath. Univ. of Wisconsin/Terrace, \$24.95 (328p) ISBN 978-0-299-22870-5

Rath's latest novel (after *Star Lake Saloon and Housekeeping Cottages*), a witty blend of the occult, suspense, mystery and a dash of romance, follows writer Eleanora "Nell" Grendon. When Nell first visits the Wocanaga Spiritualist Camp, it's for a magazine article she's writing, but she unexpectedly finds herself drawn to—and with an unexpected talent for—mediumship, the art of communicating with the spirit world. Under the tutelage of veteran Grace Waverly, Nell soon begins channeling Angella Wing, a 1920s radio actress and self-proclaimed "woman of a thousand voices"—and offering private readings (under a pseudonym). Nell doesn't realize Angella has an agenda (including sharing her trenchant thoughts on a blog) that throws a wrench into Nell's budding romance with George, a local musician, and brings to light long-buried secrets from Nell's own past; woven throughout are flashbacks to Nell's smalltown Wisconsin childhood with her best friend Polly Combloom and their vexing playmate Sharon Gallagher. With an unexpected ending and moments of laugh-out-loud humor, Rath delivers a satisfying paranormal melodrama. (Nov.)

Mean Town Blues Sam Reaves. Pegasus (Norton, dist.), \$25 (320p) ISBN 978-1-60598-003-4

At the start of Reaves's intricate stand-alone thriller, 27-year-old Tommy McLain suffers a stomach wound in the current Iraq war that ends his army career. Back in the U.S., he decides to seek a new life in Chicago, where he has an old high school friend, Brian Dawson. Through Brian, Tommy meets lovely Lisa DiPietro. When Lisa tells the men she's being stalked, Tommy offers to "talk" to the stalker, a decision that sets him on a collision course with two Chicago mob families, two police departments and the FBI. Tommy finds himself in increasingly tricky positions as he draws on his infantry training to protect others, including Lisa. Reaves (*A Long Cold Fall* and six other Chicago-based crime novels) has devised plenty of clever traps, escapes and a few surprises, but Tommy remains a less than compelling hero and unremarkable secondary characters fail to lift this effort to a higher level. (Nov.)

★ **Just After Sunset** Stephen King. Scribner, \$28 (384p) ISBN 978-1-4165-8408-7

In the introduction to his first collection of short fiction since *Everything's Eventual* (2002), King credits editing *Best American Short Stories* (2007) with reigniting his interest in the short form and inducing some of this volume's contents. Most of these 13 tales show him at the top of his game, molding the themes and set pieces of horror and suspense fiction into richly nuanced blends of fantasy and psychological realism. "The Things They Left Behind," a powerful study of survivor guilt, is one of several supernatural disaster stories that evoke the horrors of 9/11. Like the crime thrillers "The Gingerbread Girl" and "A Very Tight Place," both of which feature protagonists struggling with apparently insuperable threats to life, it is laced with moving ruminations on mortality that King attributes to his own well-publicized near-death experience. Even the smattering of genre-oriented works shows King trying out provocative new vehicles for his trademark thrills, notably "N.," a creepy character study of an obsessive-compulsive that subtly blossoms into a tale of cosmic terror in the tradition of Arthur Machen and H.P. Lovecraft. Culled almost entirely from leading mainstream periodicals, these stories are a testament to the literary merits of the well-told macabre tale. (Nov.)

In the Devil's Territory Kyle Minor. Dzanc (www.dzancbooks.org), \$16.95 paper (230p) ISBN 978-0-9793123-6-6

This debut collection focuses on religion and doubt, and showcases the potential and inconsistency of its young writer. "The San Diego County Credit Union Poinsettia Bowl Party," which opens the collection, is Minor at his best—a powerful story about a man overcome with guilt, worry and resentment as the health of his wife and their unborn child hangs in the balance. It is followed by an

unwieldy, 68-page tale of a squeamish minister undressing his senile mother for a bath (which is then followed by a story featuring another minister with many of the same life details). In general, the frequent recurrence of circumstance, setting and, sometimes, character, is more repetitive than progressive. Still, Minor has a knack for capturing melancholy and establishing empathy for his book's many wayward characters, as in "The Navy Man," which tells the story of a Christian school principal's frustrated wife as she considers cheating (again) on her husband. Hopefully, the author's talents will be better displayed in his next book. (Nov.)

Blackout Gianluca Morozzi, trans. from the Italian by Howard Curtis. Bitter Lemon, \$14.95 paper (285p) ISBN 978-1-904738-32-9

In Morozzi's overly clever psychotriller, three people get trapped in an elevator in Bologna, Italy—Claudia, a student moonlighting as an exotic dancer; Tomas, a teenager planning to rendezvous with his girlfriend in Amsterdam and elope; and Aldo Ferro, who looks like Elvis and just happens to be a serial killer. When chance brings them together, stuck between floors in a deserted building on a summer weekend, they first try to survive. But as the temperature rises and tempers snap, all three react to the stress in ways true to their nature. Clearly influenced by Hollywood movies and such classic Japanese manga as *Battle Royale*, the story offers plenty of suspense and well-drawn characters. Unfortunately, some unnecessary sadism and a contrived closing twist will leave some readers feeling less than satisfied. (Nov.)

Museum of Human Beings Colin Sargent. McBooks (IPG, dist.), \$23.95 (352p) ISBN 978-1-59013-167-1

Playwright Sargent's debut novel is a stylish look at the fate of Sacagawea's baby son, Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, the first Native American to tour Europe—as a curiosity and entertainment, of course. Twenty-four-year-old Sacagawea, though married, becomes William Clark's lover while helping guide the Lewis and Clark Expedition; after she dies on the trail, Clark adopts her son, Baptiste. Soon, Clark establishes his home in St. Louis, as well as a garish museum dedicated to his expedition, and sets to educating his new son. Soon, Baptiste is traveling Europe under the protection of Duke Paul, a cruel man who, when he isn't exhibiting the boy to royal courts, repeatedly rapes young Baptiste. Six years later, Baptiste returns to America (astonishingly, still accompanied by Paul), where he confronts Clark over his mother's mysterious death; unsatisfied and restless, Baptiste heads west and finds work as a fur trapper, an Army scout and gold prospector. Increasingly haunted by his mother, Baptiste revisits her in memories and visions that lend themselves nicely to Sargent's lyrical prose. With historical cameos (Beethoven, Kit Carson, Washington Irving) and an impressively rounded portrait of the laid-back, introspective, nomadic Baptiste, this novel will satisfy fans of American history. (Nov.)

Conspiracy of Silence Martha Powers. Oceanview (Midpoint, dist.), \$24.95 (328p) ISBN 978-1-933515-18-2

When Clare Prentice, a Chicago journalist, discovers she's adopted in this cozy romantic thriller from Powers (*Death Angel*), she's disturbed enough to call off her impending wedding. The high school ring of her adoptive mother, who died two years earlier and was careful to keep Clare's true origin a secret, provides a clue that takes Clare to Grand Rapids, Minn., where she conveniently has an assignment to interview a reclusive novelist, Nate Hanssen. The pace picks up after Clare discovers that her birth mother, Lily Gundersen, was murdered in Grand Rapids. Clare becomes the target of a killer intent on silencing anyone who knows the real story behind Lily's untimely death. Meanwhile, a subtle romance develops between Clare and Nate. Full of red herrings, this suspense novel will appeal to those who also like traditional whodunits. (Nov.)

Vulcan's Fire: Harold Coyle's Strategic Solutions, Inc. Harold Coyle and Barrett Tilman. Tor, \$24.95 (352p) ISBN 978-0-7653-1373-7

In Coyle and Tillman's second thriller to chronicle the exploits of Strategic Solutions Inc. (after *Pandora's Legion*), the private military contractor that usually does the jobs that the U.S. administration wants to deny finds that such deniability has put the company in the political doghouse. Given the scarcity of new contracts, SSI must reluctantly accept a training mission to Lebanon from the Israelis. SSI's job is to train Druze militias so that they can resist Hezbollah attacks. The plan is for the trainers to avoid combat, but nobody bothered to tell Hezbollah. By attacking the Druze outposts, Hezbollah draws away attention from the border, where the organization will infiltrate suicide teams with black-market former Soviet backpack—nuclear devices into Israel itself. Both authors have military backgrounds, and this shows in the realistic battle scenes. At the same time, the book presents a scenario that those with any familiarity with the region will find all too credible. (Nov.)

Aquamarine: Final Tales of the Revolution Peter Pessl, trans. from the German by Mark Kanak. Twisted Spoon (SCB, dist.), \$14.50 paper (155p) ISBN 978-80-86264-28-8

If you've ever dropped acid in the desert with a cabal of mad poets, Pessl's wacky trip through Mexico may feel familiar. Broken into seven stories featuring Marine and Aquamarine, the book is chockablock with dreamy imagery—"kissing her fleetingly, beneath her leg-colored fur skirt, waiting to remember, to forget, and indeed, staring along with an endlessly fixed stare, staring at it through that lemon-colored glass"—that leads nowhere. A noted poet, Pessl (and translator Kanak) can string together images for a few pages—blood and gore take over one of the book's more coherent sections—but there is no real entry point for readers, and after a few dozen pages very little reason to continue seeking them. In his preface, Kanak writes, "All are revealed in a sort of dark, flaming thicket of imagery that is the heart of the text, a disconcerting puzzle, pieces of a whole spread out in confusion and madness." In other words, readers may do well to take Marine's advice: "We will no longer try to understand." (Nov.)

★ **Skin Lane** Neil Bartlett. Serpent's Tail, \$14.95 paper (344p) ISBN 978-1-8524299-2-8

British author Bartlett (*Mr. Clive and Mr. Page*) deserves to win acclaim on this side of the Atlantic for this complex and rich journey into the heart of a lonely man, framed as a bedtime story. Mr. Freeman (aka Mr. F), a 46-year-old fur-skinner, has worked in the same office at the same job in a quiet London backwater for 33 years. Then, in early January 1967, he starts to have disturbing dreams that feature the nude corpse of an attractive young man. Soon after, his boss's teenage nephew, who's never named, comes into the business as Mr. F's apprentice. After realizing that the nephew resembles the body in his nightmares, Mr. F. finds himself sexually attracted to another person for the first time—an attraction that soon escalates into dangerous obsession. With loving detail, Bartlett brings Mr. F's workplace effortlessly to life. This remarkable novel's images and characters will linger long in the reader's memory. (Nov.)

Camera Jean-Philippe Toussaint, trans. from the French by Matthew B. Smith. Dalkey Archive, \$12.95 paper (122p) ISBN 978-1-56478-522-0

This sparse and stylized novel by Toussaint (*Monsieur*) pursues the listless cerebral meanderings of a Parisian man as he falls in love with the clerk at his driving-education school. The first-person narrator, who enjoys an uneventful life of indeterminate employment, reading newspapers and thinking, begins hanging out with the languid young lady at the driver's ed office, a sleepy divorced single mother named Pascale Polougaïevski. Throughout, the narrator's mind wanders (his thoughts are like "a moving stream that is best left alone so that it can expand... creating innumerable and magnificent branchings"), and while the two are on the ferry back to Dieppe, the narrator finds an abandoned Instamatic camera. Despite the dramatic ramifications of the titular find, the camera and the inept pictures taken with it turn out to hold no more significance than any other chance event. Absurdist and pretentious, Toussaint's close observations of nothing in particular possess a few hilarious moments, but the mundane is much more in evidence. (Nov.)

A Lion Among Men: Volume Three in the Wicked Years Gregory Maguire. Morrow, \$26.95 (336p) ISBN 978-0-06-054892-6

The entertaining third installment of bestseller Maguire's *Wicked Years* series, a revisionist chronicle of L. Frank Baum's classic *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, examines the tragically misunderstood life of the Cowardly Lion before and after his adventures with Dorothy and company. As all-out war looms between the Munchkinland guerrillas and the emperor of Oz's Emerald City soldiers, Brrr the lion, now working as an imperial spy, must somehow glean invaluable information from a crone named Yackle before she dies. But during his interrogation of the irritable oracle, Brrr, the proverbial loner and outsider, uncovers insights into his own mysterious past—and finally begins to understand what it feels like to belong. As usual, the author mixes some relatively weighty existential themes—the search for self, faith, redemption—into his whimsical story line. Newcomers to Maguire's Oz should probably begin with *Wicked*, the first entry in this darkly enchanting saga. *11-city author tour.* (Oct. 14)

Until We Reach Home Lynn Austin. Bethany House, \$13.99 paper (400p) ISBN 978-0-7642-0495-1

In 1897, the promise of the gold-paved streets of America can heal the broken hearts and lives of orphans Elin, Kirsten and Sofia Carlson, if only they survive the transatlantic trip from Sweden. Family secrets—ranging from the disgrace of suicide to shameful relations—churn like the ocean itself during a two-week crossing, only to haunt the girls after they reach Ellis Island. From the first

sighting of Lady Liberty through their travails to reach a newly rebuilt Chicago, the girls discover their strengths, a variety of new acquaintances and, most importantly, each other. And while they quickly experience the immigrant's harsh realities, they also find a way to make a life in their new world. Complete with room for happily-ever-after, this rich tale will not disappoint historical romance fans. Austin, three-time Christy Award winner, scores again with an engrossing tale of loss, determination and hope. (Oct.)

Living with the Dead Kelley Armstrong. Bantam Spectra, \$22 (384p) ISBN 978-0-553-80664-9

Bestseller Armstrong's newest will be greeted with warm enthusiasm by fans awaiting the return of the half-demon Hope Adams and her werewolf boyfriend, Karl Marsten. Hope's friend Robyn is mourning the recent murder of her good Samaritan husband, Damon, and trying to tolerate her job as a PR representative for Portia Kane, a tabloid celeb. But when Portia is shot and Robyn becomes the prime suspect, she flees, only to find herself inexplicably in the middle of the supernatural world Hope has been trying to shield her from. Stalked by a psychopathic clairvoyant and tracked by the cop, John Findley, who happens to see dead people, Robyn is way out of her league. Armstrong's newest is definitely more accessible as a stand-alone than her previous ones, but still, without having read the rest of the series, it's a bit confusing. The characters are great: Adele is a very disturbing villain and Robyn's grief over the loss of her husband is touching. The conclusion, however, is less than satisfying, clearly setting up the next entry in the series. New readers would do better starting off with earlier books. (Oct. 28)

Stepping into Sunlight Sharon Hinck. Bethany House, \$13.99 paper (320p) ISBN 978-0-7642-0283-4

Hinck, a 2008 Christy finalist for visionary fiction, offers an especially grounded tale of sudden trauma and slow healing. Narrator Penny Sullivan witnesses a horrific crime shortly before her navy chaplain husband is deployed, so she is forced to cope alone with the psychological fallout from what she saw. Family issues from her past complicate her struggle and enhance its credibility. Strong Christian themes form a natural part of the narrative. Penny Sullivan's faith is shaken, and she wonders why God would appear to permit evil and whether her emotional turmoil can be healed. A supporting cast of characters, from a nosy neighbor to the busy faithful servant to the downtrodden who heads a local mission, adds quirk and richness. Hinck is a mother of four, and it shows in authentic details in her characterization of the narrator's worried, loving seven-year-old son who gets his first pet in some cute comic relief. Hinck has done her homework on post-traumatic stress syndrome, and is not afraid to show readers that challenges can deepen faith. (Oct.)

Mystery

Greasing the Piñata: A Cape Weathers Investigation Tim Maleeny. Poisoned Pen, \$24.95 (342p) ISBN 978-1-59058-566-5

Maleeny smoothly mixes wry humor and a serious plot without sacrificing either in his third Cape Weathers mystery (after 2007's *Beating the Babushka*). When Jim Dobbins, a recently retired California state senator, and his drug-addict son, Danny, disappear in Mexico, Dobbins's estranged daughter hires San Francisco reporter-turned-PI Weathers to find them. Weathers journeys south of the border only to learn that the mutilated bodies of father and son have surfaced in a Puerto Vallarta golf course's alligator-infested pond. Aided by his Triad-trained associate, Sally Mei, Weathers pursues a case that reaches from a Mexican drug cartel to the San Francisco mob as well as the city's boardrooms. An appealing hero, well-crafted villains, snappy dialogue and an energetic plot show that Maleeny, while not quite in the same league as Robert Crais or Laura Lippman, is a definite contender in the private detective subgenre. (Dec.)

★ **The Fire Kimono** Laura Joh Rowland. St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95 (304p) ISBN 978-0-312-37948-3

Set in 1700, Rowland's outstanding 13th Sano Ichiro mystery (after 2007's *The Snow Empress*) finds Sano, whom the shogun raised to the rank of chamberlain several books back, waging a fierce struggle with his chief rival, Lord Matsudaira. The stakes are raised at the outset when Matsudaira's forces almost succeed in killing Sano's wife and occasional sleuthing partner, Reiko. The chamberlain soon suspects that someone else may have been behind the attack, but soon he faces a more daunting task—proving his mother innocent of the murder of one of the shogun's cousins, who vanished during the great fire that destroyed much of Edo and whose skeletal remains were just uncovered by chance. Sano must now question everything he thought he knew about his mother, with his own family facing execution should she be found guilty. Rowland has given her hero

his greatest challenge yet in this suspenseful look at feudal Japan. (Nov.)

The Archbishop in Andalusia: A Blackie Ryan Novel Andrew M. Greeley. Forge, \$24.95 (272p) ISBN 978-0-7653-1590-8

Greeley's breezy 17th Blackie Ryan novel (after 2007's *The Bishop at the Lake*) takes Ryan to the south of Spain for a conference, where the local cardinal requests his help preventing the murder of a beautiful and wealthy widow, Doña Teresa Maria, duchess of Seville, whose many relatives envy her money, title and power in the community. Blackie's sister, meanwhile, has put pressure on Blackie to nudge his nephew Joseph and Joseph's girlfriend, Peggy Anne Nolan, who have accompanied him on the trip, into setting a date for their wedding. To add to his concerns, Blackie receives word from the U.S. of the ill health of his superior, the archbishop of Chicago. Armchair travelers will relish the descriptions of Seville and Cordoba, along with the details of Spanish history and customs. Indeed, some readers may feel the travelogue aspects overshadow the mystery untangling, but all will enjoy Greeley's wit and good humor. (Nov.)

I Was Dora Suarez Derek Raymond. Serpent's Tail, \$14.95 paper (192p) ISBN 978-1-85242-799-3

First published in the U.K. in 1990, Raymond's searing fourth entry in his Factory series (*The Devil's Home on Leave*, etc.) opens with a psychopath hurling an old lady to her death against her grandfather clock—just after he took an ax to young Dora Suarez in a neighboring flat. That same night, the killer shoots Felix Roatta—part-owner of a seedy London club, who's expecting money from the killer—with a gun loaded with a soft-tip bullet (“The upper part of Roatta's head entirely disappeared”). Matters wind up in the hands of an unnamed narrator, a police sergeant, who (à la *Laura*) begins to develop an unhealthy fixation on Dora. Though some may find the sanguinary detail overdone, it's somehow rendered a shade less objectionable when translated into the British idiom. Raymond (1931–1994) was a prime practitioner of the not-so-gentle art of murder, Brit-style, and if anyone wants a sample of his wares, this is a fine place to start. (Nov.)

Veil of Lies: A Medieval Noir Jeri Westerson. St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95 (288p) ISBN 978-0-312-37977-3

Crispin Guest, a former knight who was stripped of his rank after being implicated in a plot against Richard II, now makes his living as a “tracker,” the medieval equivalent of a PI, in Westerson's promising debut, set in 1384 London. Nicholas Walcote, a wealthy cloth merchant, hires Guest to investigate his younger and attractive wife, Philippa, whom he suspects of infidelity. Guest's cursory probe is derailed after his client is found stabbed to death in a locked room. Philippa retains Guest's services to find her husband's killer, who may have been motivated by Walcote's possessing a legendary relic reputed to force those in its proximity to tell the truth. While featuring a hard-boiled medieval sleuth instead of a monk or a nun may not be quite as groundbreaking as the author suggests in her afterword (e.g., Susanna Gregory's 14th-century Cambridge physician Matthew Bartholomew), this is nonetheless an entertaining read that makes the prospect of sequels welcome. (Nov.)

Frankly My Dear, I'm Dead Livia J. Washburn. Kensington, \$22 (224p) ISBN 978-0-7582-2566-5

Gone with the Wind provides the inspiration for Washburn's fun Literary Tour mystery, the first in a new cozy series. Divorcée Delilah Dickinson, who owns an Atlanta travel agency, has high hopes for her new tour to sites associated with Margaret Mitchell and her landmark novel. Unfortunately, by the time the group reaches “Tara” for a dinner dance, which includes local actors portraying the famous characters, nothing's running smoothly. Then Steven Kelley, the actor playing Rhett Butler, turns up dead in the mansion's garden. In classic Agatha Christie fashion, a sheriff's department investigator tries to catch the killer by keeping the group at Tara overnight—with Delilah's unasked for assistance, of course. Much like the charismatic Rhett, Steven had an eye for the ladies, but otherwise lacked any Clark Gable charm. Washburn (*Murder by the Slice*) supplies an amusing, breathlessly quick resolution to what proves a featherlight crime of passion. (Nov.)

A Good Death Elizabeth Ironside. Felony & Mayhem (www.felonyandmayhem.com), \$24.95 (336p) ISBN 978-1-934609-19-4

British author Ironside (*Death in the Garden*) convincingly depicts the trauma of life in Vichy France in her compelling second novel. In 1944, after the Allied liberation, Theo de Cazalle, who faked his death four years earlier and joined the French Resistance, returns to his remote country estate, Bonnemort, where someone has slit the throat of a German officer and dumped the naked corpse in front of the house. De Cazalle suspects his wife, Ariane, believed to have betrayed her countrymen by becoming the Nazi's mistress, of the murder. Through flashbacks, which include Ariane's

perspective as well as that of a Jewish schoolgirl Ariane has rescued and is concealing, Ironside deftly presents the powerlessness of her characters and the hard moral compromises they have to make to survive. Finally, amid multiple horrors and personal sacrifices, the author succeeds in making the fate of a beloved farm animal moving. (Nov.)

Dirty Water Mary-Ann Tirone Smith and Jere Smith. Hall of Fame (Midpoint, dist.), \$22.95 (256p) ISBN 978-0-9776240-2-7

Smith (*Girls of Tender Age*) and son work real-life members of the 2007 Boston Red Sox, most notably David “Big Papi” Ortiz, into a mystery plot with the adeptness of a successful double steal. The troubles for the team begin with the discovery of an abandoned baby in the Red Sox clubhouse. When a woman’s body turns up in a remote area of the fens near Fenway Park, Boston homicide detective Rocky Patel gets on the case, partnered by Sgt. Marty Flanagan. Meanwhile, an unscrupulous agent has been trafficking in Cuban baseball stars. The authors know how to heighten the intrigue, but readers should be prepared for some tiresomely detailed descriptions of street routes and an omniscient narration that compulsively shares incidental thoughts of insignificant characters. Such filler has all the charm of a rain delay in the middle of a tense Sox-Yankees game. *10-city author tour. (Oct. 29)*

SF/Fantasy/Horror

★ **Alembical** Edited by Lawrence M. Schoen and Arthur Dorrance. Paper Golem (www.papergolem.com), \$24.95 (172p) ISBN 978-0-9795349-1-1; \$12.95 paper ISBN 978-0-9795349-2-8

This superb small anthology comprises four solid speculative novellas whose sole common element is their length. Jay Lake’s “America, Such as She Is” populates postapocalyptic Oregon with beautifully written character studies. In “13 Miles to Paradise,” Bruce Taylor occasionally gets too self-indulgent, but the story itself—five internal monologues of a family heading to a vacation spot—is highly enjoyable. James Van Pelt’s “Harvest” is a moving ghost story in which three believably complex high school students deal with grief, love and religion. Ray Vukcevic anchors the book with the witty “Now You See Us,” a love story set against the background of a lost Arctic village and lecherous, time-traveling Finnish monks. Short story writers Schoen and Dorrance have chosen well: these novellas cover a wide variety of subgenres and show off the talents of four impressive writers. The finely crafted writing should appeal to fans of both speculative and mainstream fiction. (Nov.)

The Gods Return: The Third Volume of the Crown of the Isles David Drake. Tor, \$25.95 (400p) ISBN 978-0-7653-1261-7

Charming Prince Garric, determined Princess Sharina and rejuvenated wizardess Tenoctris were hoping for a bit of rest after their last adventure (2007’s *The Mirror of Worlds*), but circumstances conspire against them in this shallow conclusion to the Crown of the Isles trilogy. The conquered Empire of Palomir, unable to admit defeat, uses human sacrifice to produce an army of menacing Rat Men. Pirates wield the power of Franca the Sky God to bring forth a gigantic worm that feeds on entire towns, and former priests of the Lady of the Grove are entranced by a mysterious entity known only as the Scorpion King. Facing this triple threat with courage, ingenuity and a bit of fancy wizardry, Drake’s heroes often glide too easily through their challenges. Though his characterization of women has greatly improved since the series began, most of the people appear bland compared with the challenges they face. (Nov.)

The Adventures of Langdon St. Ives James P. Blaylock. Subterranean (www.subterraneanpress.com), \$38 (476p) ISBN 978-1-59606-170-5

Long recognized as a master of steampunk fiction, Blaylock (*The Man in the Moon*) collects four short stories and two novels featuring indefatigable and unflappable Victorian scientist Langdon St. Ives in a deluxe omnibus edition profusely and masterfully illustrated by J.K. Potter. In “The Ape-Box Affair,” St. Ives attempts to launch an orangutan named Newton into outer space, but the ship crashes in a pond in St. James Park, terrifying the people of London into believing that they’ve been invaded by aliens. In Philip K. Dick Award–winner *Homunculus*, St. Ives battles the evil, hunchbacked genius Dr. Ignacio Narbondo, who attempts to awaken the dead, while in *Lord Kelvin’s Machine*, a grief-beset St. Ives must counter Narbondo’s threat to throw the Earth in front of a passing comet. Intricately detailed if somewhat haphazardly plotted, at once droll and horrific, these highly mannered tales are classic examples of this popular subgenre. (Nov.)

The Engine’s Child Holly Phillips. Del Rey, \$15 paper (384p) ISBN 978-0-345-49965-3

In this murky, unpleasant novel, set on a world almost entirely covered with water, Moth, a preternaturally gifted young woman, defies her priestly vows for love. She quickly finds herself pregnant by her clandestine lover and the pawn of political and religious machinations on all sides. Secret societies battle, one obsessed with returning to a possibly mythical perfect world and the other driven to build the titular engine, a piece of magical technology intended to harness the spirit of the planet and drive ships out to sea in search of new land. Pretentious fantasy vocabularies and didactic cardboard characters weigh down the narrative. Worst of all, bratty, unlikable Moth is not so much an unreliable narrator as a straightup liar, claiming ignorance of crucial facts only to later reveal that she knew all along. Readers struggling to know what to believe will quickly realize they have no reason to care. (Nov.)

Sunborn: Volume Four of the Chaos Chronicles Jeffrey A. Carver. Tor, \$27.95 (432p) ISBN 978-0-312-86453-8

The long-anticipated fourth entry in Carver's Chaos Chronicles (after 1996's *The Infinite Sea*) is space opera at its most agreeably and classically science fictional. Someone or something is plotting murder on an interstellar scale, and a small company of exiles led by human John Bandicut may be the galaxy's only chance of salvation. The prospective victims are sentient stars living in the Orion Nebula; half the challenge is simply opening communications. Luckily, Bandicut's allies and sponsors include robots, "noncorporeal symbiotes" and the incredibly ancient multidimensional entity Deeaab. With such a large cast and a parallel plot involving a threat to Earth itself, character development is necessarily sketched broadly. Some may find the narrative overly stage-managed, but Carver skillfully rotates viewpoints and weaves the choreography directly into the plot. This installment is a cut above the earlier books and will be entirely accessible to any reader who appreciates high-powered stellar and n-dimensional physics blended with old-school space-faring. (Nov.)

Mass Market

Fifty-to-One Charles Ardai. Hard Case Crime, \$7.99 (336p) ISBN 978-0-8439-5968-0

High-speed action and nonstop thrills highlight the 50th novel from Hard Case Crime, penned by publisher and Edgar-winning writer Ardai (*The Good-Neighbor Policy*). Smalltown girl Trixie becomes a dancer in a New York nightclub in the 1950s and decides to write about the dirty side of the business. When her tell-all becomes a sensation, mob boss Sal Nicolazzo threatens the publisher, demanding to know who committed the heist chronicled in the book. Trixie's fiction is mirrored by fact, and \$3 million of mobster money is missing. With time running out and lives on the line, Trixie races to discover the truth. Ardai sets an impressive standard for the new wave of pulp crime fiction. With good girls, bad girls, mob kings and grifters, suspense is guaranteed, though astute readers may see through the twists. Breathless action and entertaining characters make this a page-turner from start to finish. (Nov.)

Murder Packs a Suitcase Cynthia Baxter. Bantam, \$6.99 (304p) ISBN 978-0-553-59035-7

Veteran mystery writer Baxter (*Monkey See, Monkey Die*) kicks off her new series with a respectable but uninteresting start. Recent widow Mallory Marlowe embarks on a second career as a travel writer. Her first assignment is to go to Orlando and see what she can find of "old Florida." When one of the other writers on her press junket is killed, she becomes the prime suspect. Determined to clear her name, Mallory takes the investigation into her own hands and soon discovers that everyone on the trip had a reason to hate the dead man. As she visits various attractions, her investigations draw her closer to the identity of the killer. Baxter clearly did a lot of research on Florida, but Marlowe is a familiar, unexciting archetype, and the lack of red herrings will leave readers wishing for less tourism and more mystery. (Nov.)

Red Jordan Summers. Tor, \$6.99 (368p) ISBN 978-0-7653-5914-8

Summers (*Off Limits*) occasionally stumbles in this intense series launch, a futuristic paranormal romance set in an ecologically desolate 2160. Gina "Red" Santiago, the lone woman in the elite international tactical team commanded by the grandfather who raised her, travels off-duty to Nuria in the Republic of Arizona to investigate a woman's mysterious, brutal death. Gina doesn't believe in the rumors of supersoldiers, vampires and werewolves created by a secret government genetic engineering project, until she learns that almost everyone in Nuria is a werewolf and finds herself powerfully attracted to lycanthrope sheriff Morgan Hunter even as she connects others in his pack to the murder investigation. Complex and sometimes confusing world building combine with a steamy and conflicted romance between a strong heroine and a literal alpha male hero, with plenty of chemistry to fuel future volumes. (Nov.)

Any Given Doomsday Lori Handeland. St. Martin's Paperbacks, \$6.99 (352p) ISBN 978-0-312-94919-8

Handeland (*Thunder Moon*) launches the intriguing Phoenix Chronicles urban fantasy series with a strong story that's only missing one thing: a glossary of the multitude of paranormal creatures tied to biblical lore. Psychic ex-cop Elizabeth Phoenix reluctantly takes the case after her foster mother, Ruthie, is murdered by monsters. Soon she's pointing out demons to her ex-boyfriend Jimmy, a half-vampire battling an army of Nephilim who plan to enslave and destroy humanity. They fight their way from Wisconsin to the southwest, where Jimmy leaves Elizabeth with Sawyer, a powerful Navajo shape-changer who awakens her libido as well as her psychic powers. Elizabeth's wry demeanor and complex relationships with Sawyer and Jimmy share center stage with the dramatic story line. The biblical component, while often confusing, adds dramatic dimension, and the demons' evil plans and vividly described handiwork create immense suspense for the final battle. (Nov.)

Comics

★ **Aya of Yop City** Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie. Drawn & Quarterly, \$19.95 (128p) ISBN 978-1-897299-41-8

Abouet and Oubrerie's sequel to their 2007 graphic novel *Aya* is a charming comedy of manners about a group of young women—a sort of Jane Austen scenario transplanted to the Ivory Coast of the late '70s. Aya's friend Adjoua has a new baby, and everybody's pitching in to help take care of him, although he looks rather less like the purported father than like an irresponsible bounder by the name of Mamadou. Meanwhile, their starry-eyed friend, Bintou, is plunging into a new romance with a man whose urbane extravagance blinds her to his sneakiness. Mostly, though, this volume is about the cheerful, communitarian spirit of the place and time it sketches out—a moment of postcolonial African history when people didn't have a lot of resources (Adjoua is entering a beauty contest in the hopes of winning cooking oil for the fritters she sells), but had high hopes for the future. Oubrerie's scrappy, witty pen-and-ink artwork is a small delight: everybody's got exaggerated but subtly expressive body language and facial expressions, and the story's dashed-off but dead-on settings—with traffic blocked by wandering sheep and tin roofs near ambitious office buildings—make its tone of historical transition between tradition and modernization even more vivid. (Sept.)

Wanted Matsuri Hino. Viz, \$8.99 paper (208p) ISBN 978-1-4215-1934-0

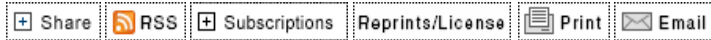
This single-volume trilogy of connected short stories will be a quick read for shojo fans. Armeria is a girl with a powerful singing voice; while performing for a wealthy family, she falls in love with the handsome Luce, only to see him captured by pirates a short time later. Eight years pass, and she comes across the ship that took her love and manages to sneak aboard disguised as a boy. It's not long before she's outed, though, and soon discovers why Captain Skulls, the handsome pirate with the heart of gold, looks so familiar. To call Skulls's identity a twist or a surprise is being overly kind, but this is a book that is more about emotion and the exploration of longing than about any real plot emphasis. The third chapter, however, does revolve around an interesting story idea, a piece of music that appears to be cursed. Throwaway running commentaries from the author (“I did study the various historical backgrounds, but I've ignored them to make things convenient”) are a bit of a distraction, but romantic-minded readers won't be bothered by them, and instead will enjoy her lush detailed art. (Sept.)

Janes in Love Cecil Castellucci and Jim Rugg. DC/Minx, \$9.99 paper (176p) ISBN 978-1-4012-1387-9

The second book of the PLAIN Janes series returns to the four Janes of suburban town Kent Waters and their public art “attacks” as People Loving Art in Neighborhoods (PLAIN). This time the story line is sprinkled with bits of romance as the various Janes struggle to approach their love interests for dates to the school dance and the main Jane applies for an art grant. Castellucci writes with ambition, including threads that pull in issues of terrorism, fear, free art and adolescent anxiety. Unfortunately, the resulting tangle of political overtones sometimes clutters what could have been a clearer story of one girl's artistic aspirations and the underlying theme of friendship. Rugg, whose art and unfettered concepts of femininity soared with *Street Angel*, is more constrained with the two-dimensional characters he's illustrating. As the second book of the series, a character breakdown or introduction would be helpful to new readers. Otherwise, it's a suitable read for those who enjoyed the first Janes book, but not a good entry point for anyone unfamiliar with the series. (Sept.)

Samurai Elf, Vol. 1: Set Apart Miguel Guerra and Suzi Dias. Iberian (www.iberianpress.com), \$13.95 paper (180p) ISBN 978-0-9778454-0-8

Ardan is an elf, the last of his kind, who's being hunted by some bad guys named the Horde. Narrowly escaping an assassination attempt, Ardan seeks refuge at the Temple of Ithra, where he is trained in the way of the samurai by the grumpy, enigmatic master dwarf. When Horde robot ninjas attack the Temple, Ardan runs away, teams up with a sympathetic innkeeper's daughter and sets off to find his destiny. For a fannish mishmash of *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings* and kung fu movies, this graphic novel feels oddly inert. Guerra's art is carefully rendered, resulting in a clean line and showing a nice command of gray scale and shadow. But he seems more comfortable in the realm of still life and concept art than dynamic motion: his slavish rendering of action scenes robs them of some necessary chaos and life. (Also, a choice to render word balloons as semitransparent is odd and distracting.) Guerra and Dias have clearly taken great pains to develop an alien world, but those pains weigh down the story with exposition exactly when the pedal ought to be pressing to the floor. Guerra and Dias should loosen up and enjoy the playfulness of their premise. (Aug.)



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