

# Women's Review *of Books*

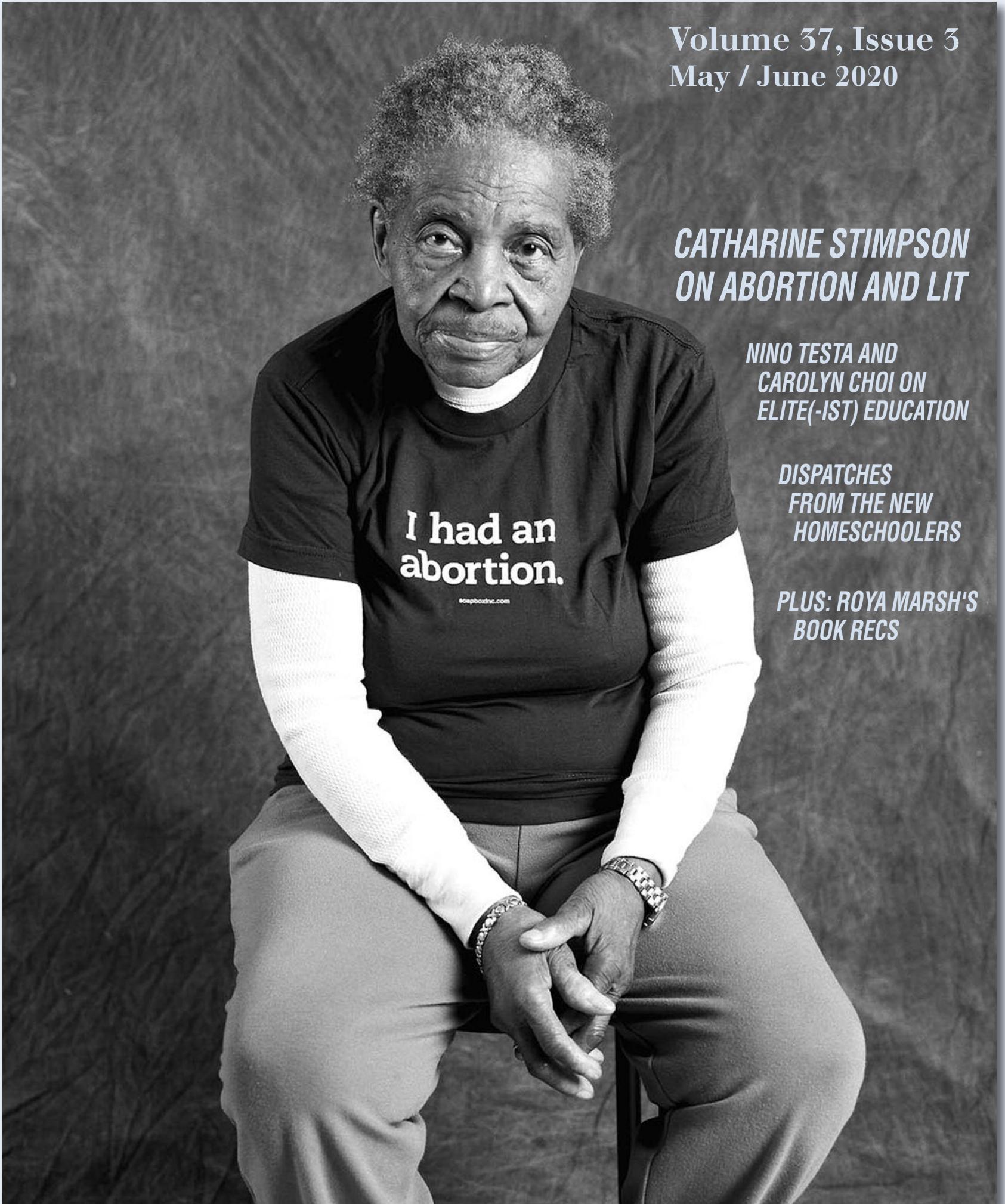
Volume 37, Issue 3  
May / June 2020

**CATHARINE STIMPSON  
ON ABORTION AND LIT**

**NINO TESTA AND  
CAROLYN CHOI ON  
ELITE(-IST) EDUCATION**

**DISPATCHES  
FROM THE NEW  
HOMESCHOOLERS**

**PLUS: ROYA MARSH'S  
BOOK RECS**



*Florence Rice, photographed  
by Tara Todras-Whitehill*

## EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear Readers,

What a difference a month makes. The March/April editor's letter (written on February 15) contained a plea for us all to visit our local bookstores and forgo Amazon. As I write this letter on April 14, we are well into the second month of a shutdown of almost all businesses, schools, bookstores, and libraries—with Amazon even more central to American households. Amazon prioritized shipping of essential items (not books) during this pandemic, allowing a counter to Amazon's hold on the book trade to emerge. Bookshop.org is a new site that allows a reader to buy a book online with the sale going to an indie bookstore of their choosing. They've raised nearly \$700,000 for local bookstores in the past six weeks. I've purchased from them and can recommend the experience.

While the books we review in this issue were assigned months ago, they harmonize in interesting ways with life under confinement. Laurie Stone's review of Olivia Laing's collected essays about art, for example, highlights perceptive writing about the AIDS epidemic. Catharine Stimpson's erudite appraisal of the anthology *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion* notes the manipulative use of the pandemic to block access to abortions. Two books explore how anti-Asian racism works in the US—*Minor Feelings* and *Degrees of Difference*—and it is an increasingly apt analysis as President Incompetent searches for scapegoats.

Several writers weren't able to finish their reviews because they are now homeschooling children, cooking three meals a day, as well as learning how to get anything done at home. The art director was waylaid first babysitting for the child of two doctors and then stepping in at the local bee association to wrangle four hundred packages of live insects that arrived just as the mostly elderly group of volunteers was cautioned to shelter in place.

For me, my March and April lecture tour for the new edition of *Manifesta* was cancelled, and the books I am publishing this spring are launching into a world temporarily without retail and libraries. My day repeats on a loop. I hear bird calls and ambulance sirens at all hours, but no other street noises. I indulge in a daily sob while I listen to The Daily podcast and make beds. There is the endless making and cleaning up of meals for the four of us, the confusing new homeschooling routines. I take ukulele lessons from my older son, and can now play "Eight Days a Week," slowly. We all dash to the window to hoot and clap and bang on pans for three minutes at 7 pm every night. That's it, and yet somehow, I don't have the time (or is it motivation?) to accomplish any writing or editing—or even reading.

My schedule editing the *Women's Review of Books* might be the only thing that remained basically as it was before. I don't know yet what that even means, but I'm grateful for its unchanged state.

Until a better day, I hope you stay safe and sane.

—Jennifer Baumgardner  
New York, NY



Jennifer and husband, Michael, at home in NYC

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the editor:

The latest issue of the WRB begins with the editor's bemoaning the chore of breaking down Amazon boxes but then she continues, praising independent bookstores as the antidote to this capitalist behemoth. Yes, the editor is correct: the smile on the boxes is "smirky" because it reflects the company's successful monopoly (just behind Walmart) of the country's retail industry. But few seem conflicted about continuing to purchase items, including books, from Amazon, thereby jeopardizing the future of mom and pop stores of all kinds and places for readers like Loyalty Bookstore.

In the interview at the end of the same issue, Julia Alvarez is asked where she acquires her books—library, bookstore, Amazon? Why is Amazon even on this list? Why consider it? Doesn't Jeff Bezos have enough of our earnings? Has it occurred to no one that we pay, as noted in the interview with Hannah Oliver Depp, \$28 for a book *because of Amazon*? How else can the women's bookstores stay in business given this competition? Having destroyed even large chains such as Barnes and Noble, Amazon has made survival of indies of all kinds all but impossible and has gone on to open its own Amazon bookstores. If we want independent bookstores to survive, we need to buy from them, of course, but we also need to boycott Amazon. (Anyone remember the grapes?) They undermine booksellers, often mail out shoddy non-book items, and encourage impulse buying, all at the press of a key.

In the review of *Barn 8*, the reviewer refers to the places that "give you a twitch of existential dread," including the "Amazon shipping facilities." These "fulfillment centers" are everywhere and dangerous to workers on whom they make unreasonable demands (see, for example, "I Was a Warehouse Wage Slave" in the March 2012 *Mother Jones* or the September 2011 "The Real Price of Amazon's Free Shipping").

Isn't it time to recognize our contradictory behavior, to discard that Amazon app, find the book or other item elsewhere, and refuse to contribute in any way to this online monster and its profits?

Deborah Hartman  
Hilliard, Ohio

Jennifer responds:

Touché!

On the cover: In 2004, Tara Todras-Whitehill photographed prominent Harlem-based consumer activist Florence Rice along with dozens of other women who shared their stories for the *I Had an Abortion* project. Rice's abortion story was featured in the 2005 film *I Had an Abortion* (that I produced with Gillian Aldrich) and she and I collaborated on the 2008 book *Abortion & Life*. (Todras-Whitehill's portraits also illustrate the review of *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion*, on page 22.) Florence Rice was 85 at the time of the photo shoot and is going strong today at 101.



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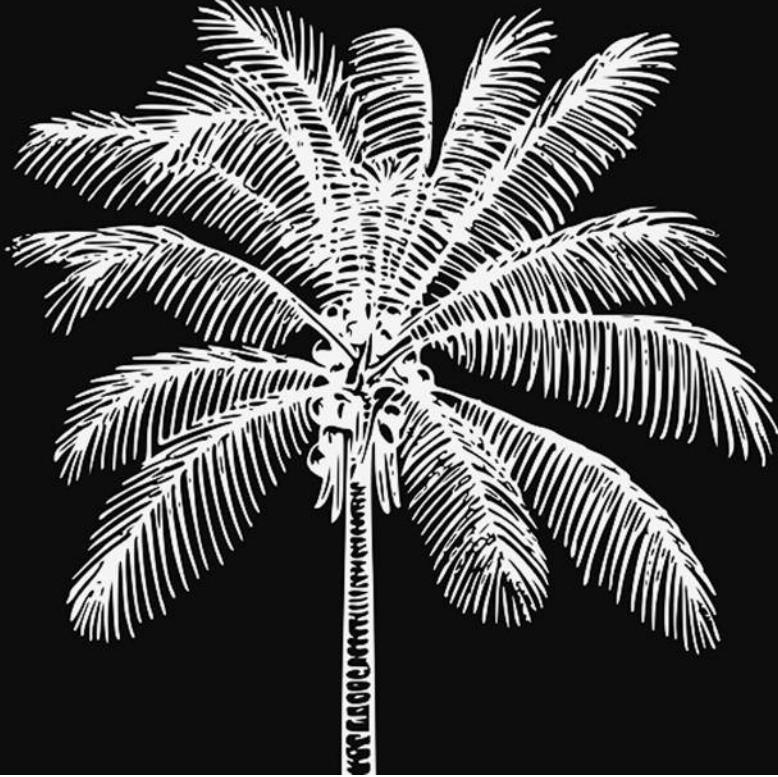
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# FIEBRE TROPICAL



## Tropeless

*Fiebre Tropical*

By Juli Delgado Lopera

New York, NY; Feminist Press, 2020, 240 pp., \$17.95, paperback

*Reviewed by Nino Testa*

At fifteen, Francisca moves from her home in Bogotá to an ant-infested townhouse in Miami with her mother, sister, and grandmother; she struggles to acclimate to a new city, a new school, a new culture; and she grapples with budding queer desires while under the watch of her newfound evangelical community. If this sounds like a story or combination of stories you have heard before—the immigrant family in search of a new life, the queer teen coming out—you will find that the sentimental tropes you may have as reference points for such a narrative are deflated within the pages of Juli Delgado Lopera’s painfully funny debut novel *Fiebre Tropical*. As Francisca, our narrator, informs us: this is no “Choose Your Own Migration multiple-choice adventure.” There is no tidy moral lesson, no American Dream, and no pandering to a white, liberal, American-born audience. Delgado Lopera’s memorable and complex characters struggle to make sense of their lives and their relationships without much regard for how they measure up to the flattened figures that populate many mass media representations of immigrants. Instead, with wit and irreverence, Francisca invites us into the inner workings of what she calls her family’s “Migration Project.”

An early scene sets the tone of the novel: Francisca’s new church helps to stage a baptism for her mother’s first child, Sebastián, who died as an infant seventeen years prior. The family frantically

checks off every item on the baptism to-do list: curating the music, buying infant crosses at the dollar store, cooking arroz con coco, and, of course, cleaning the face of the plastic baby doll that will act as a stand-in for Sebastián. Does this sound ridiculous? The characters have too much prep work to do to even consider the question. When the macabre ritual is over, no one knows quite what to do with the plastic Sebastián. Is he treasure or trash? Has the old Sebastián been saved? Will these rituals keep the family together, or further isolate them from one another? This new beginning feels, to Francisca, as if it is built on a warped familial inheritance and a new faith that looks like smoke and mirrors.

The Migration Project requires her to relinquish the signs and symbols of Catholicism—signs and symbols that were always complicated for a young queer, to be sure, but were at least familiar—and replace them with a newfound evangelical discourse. Her mother’s church places the highest premium on being born again, being made new for and by Jesus. Old traditions are flushed down the toilet, like holy water left over from her days in Colombia, rendered useless and devoid of its mystical properties in the ugly-as-sin Hyatt conference room that now serves as her idol-free church in Miami. Flush away who you once were, her mother insists. This is a new life.

But, of course, this new life contains the old, and a clean break is not so easy for any of the women in

Francisca’s family. Her mother, haunted by the past, slowly loses her grip on her mental health; her grandmother succumbs to alcoholism; and Francisca just can’t seem to get into the evangelical groove. Should she just pretend to be saved? The Migration Project is threatened at every turn, not least by Francisca’s startling realization that she is in love with a girl. And not just any girl. The daughter of her pastors. Carmen, raised in the church, works tirelessly to convert Francisca, to save her soul. One of the most charming aspects of the novel is the uncertainty with which the reader might approach Francisca’s journey to accept Jesus in her life. Is she doing it to secure her proximity to Carmen, with whom she tries to spread the good news by handing out Christian pamphlets at malls across Miami? Or is this an authentic religious experience? What, in the end, is the difference between the two? She has, after all, used her church to build community and develop relationships, like everyone else there. For these characters, like for so many, faith isn’t really authentic or inauthentic, compulsive or transformative; it is a flawed discourse used to help them better understand their place in a hostile world.

Francisca’s narration of her own life story is compelling, but the most powerful moments of the novel are those that offer the backstory of her mother and grandmother. In two gorgeous flashbacks, their histories open up like cavernous expanses that both explain and complicate our understandings of this family. In an innovative device, Francisca omnisciently narrates her mother’s and grandmother’s flashback chapters. Where the women once stood as bizarre, unknowable obstacles in Francisca’s angst-filled life, they become complex figures struggling to navigate the same normativities and systems of violence that have made Francisca’s life feel so unlivable. We might expect familial anti-queerness to organize Francisca’s story—and in many ways, it does, as Francisca experiences anxiety that her grandmother is clocking her queer desires with a knowing glare—but this is not your typical “coming out” narrative. The great joy of the novel is in tracing how and when Francisca’s mother and grandmother themselves grapple with queer desires that could not find a solid grounding or take root in their worlds. What a gift to follow a young queer person—who worries about how her identity will be encountered by her religious family—as she narrates the scene of her grandmother’s own queer awakening as a young woman. A memorable scene involving a naked nun is simply perfection—and adds a layer of erotic humor to the family’s revocation of their Papist ways. In one sense, the novel is about how histories of queer desire work their way through generations, shaping families with regret, paranoia, longing, and failure. Francisca’s rich prose while narrating these flashbacks breeds a sense of understanding, of forgiveness, even, of her imperfect family tree. We see, in this story, the possibility of queer kinship across generations.

It is hard to write a review of *Fiebre Tropical* without considering another recently released migration novel, Jeanine Cummins’s *American Dirt*, which has been clogging up social media feeds for weeks, reinvigorating an important discourse about who has the right to tell the stories of marginalized people. One of the most impactful responses to the *American Dirt* phenomenon has been the hashtag



© 2016 by Juli Delgado Lopera

*Juli Delgado Lopera*

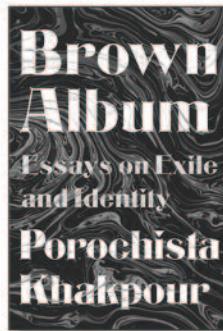
#MyLatinoNovel, which highlights the failings of the novel by specifically poking fun at its peppered-in Spanish phrases, not-so-subtly defined for non-Spanish-speaking readers. Queer Latinx advice columnist and Twitter star John Paul Brammer (@jpbrammer) offers an exemplary tweet that influenced the hashtag: “writing my Latino novel: ‘We fled late in the night, or *la noche* as Mami calls it. I’m always embarrassed when Mami says shit like that, but I forgive her because she’s one of eleven kids and is from *el barrio*.’” Cummins’s cringe-worthy use of Spanish reveals what the elaborate and highly successful marketing campaign for the novel confirmed: that the imagined audience for *American Dirt* was always a white, English-speaking audience. The genius of #MyLatinoNovel is how succinctly it encapsulates the liberal fantasy of the “immigrant experience,” which is always a homogenizing and dehumanizing fantasy. It is a fantasy that insists: I know you better than you know yourself, and what I learned about you from white people is all I need to know.

If you are looking for an antidote to the *American Dirt* phenomenon, *Fiebre Tropical*—which is written in a compelling and inviting Spanglish—doesn’t try to be the Great Migration Story. Francisca—a glorious creation, the likes of which you have most certainly never found in fiction before—cuts to the core failure of such a story in a way that only a goth-lite, disaffected, queer teenager who learned English by reading Sylvia Plath, can. Delgado Lopera doesn’t offer a reader’s guide to white, non-Spanish speakers like me, and that is what makes the book so wonderful. It isn’t all for me, and it doesn’t have to be. The novel’s refreshing disregard for the homogenizing tropes that characterize “the immigrant experience” is distilled in this reflection, by Francisca, on her decidedly deromanticized grandmother: “I wish I could say I remembered La Tata’s wise words about womanhood and strength (people always seem to remember having remembered a third-world granny saying shit that saved them), but really La Tata believed a trimmed pussy and one hundred dollars would get you anywhere.”

Nino Testa is the Associate Director of the Department of Women & Gender Studies at Texas Christian University, in Fort Worth, Texas, where he teaches queer and feminist studies courses. He lives in Dallas.



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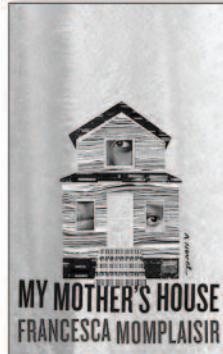
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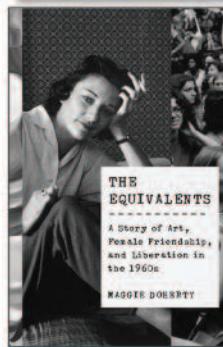


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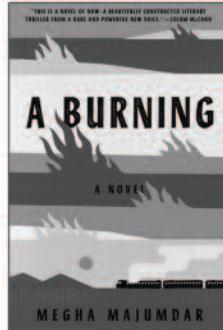
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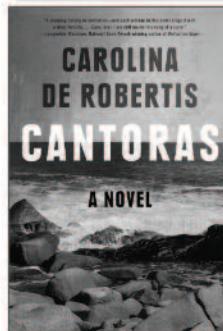
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# Darkness Visible



## Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency

By Olivia Laing

New York, NY; W. W. Norton & Company, 2020, 368 pp., \$26.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Laurie Stone

For her debut novel *Crudo* (2018), Olivia Laing devised the narrator Kathy, who guides the reader through eight or so months of Laing's life in 2017, when, fearing marriage, she married a man old enough to be her father and, when, stirring thoughts of apocalypse, Trump was threatening to bomb North Korea and Nazis gained a warmer

ever was. You don't. You can't.

Many of the pieces collected were commissioned as introductions to books or written as columns in the *Guardian*, *frieze*, and *New Statesman*, among others, and are addressed to readers assumed not to know much about figures as significant as Agnes Martin, David Hockney, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Hilary Mantel. The writing sometimes feels dutiful,

first hand. The through line concerns the direct-action politics of Act Up that profoundly changed global consciousness about people with AIDS. Laing looks back with awe and longing to a time when activists had the agency to affect public policy. Four pieces leap out of this book especially, stabbing the reader with ideas and passion.

One is about the artist David Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS in 1992. Here Laing quotes a passage from his 1991 collection of essays, *Close to the Knives*, that makes the plague at once individual and epic: "the people waking up with the diseases of small birds or mammals; the people whose faces are entirely black with cancer eating health salads in the lonely seats of restaurants . . . piece by piece, the landscape is eroding and in its place I am building a monument made of feelings of love and hate, sadness and feelings of murder." Later she quotes Wojnarowicz explaining his desire, as a visual artist, to "produce objects that could speak" when he no longer will be able to, and to make objects that make visible what legislation and other strictures sweep out of sight.

Laing deftly honors Sarah Schulman's brilliant analysis of official forgetting in her review of *Gentrification of the Mind*, in which Schulman argues that, like the gentrification of the Lower East Side, where so many people with AIDS, who were also poor, were replaced by Wall Street entrepreneurs, so mourning the dead of 9/11 has effaced public grief over AIDS. Writes Laing, "It's understandable that she might feel bitter at the institutional opulence of the 9/11 memorial to 'the acceptable dead', noting: 'in this way, 9/11 is the gentrification of AIDS.'" (Note: I've preserved the British spellings in the quoted text.)

Laing begins her rapturous tribute to artist/filmmaker/writer/gardener Derek Jarman with a keyhole view of her childhood that snaps into focus the stakes for her to write about gay experience, the natural world, and art that doesn't destroy things in order to be made. "My mother was gay," she writes, "and the three of us [including Laing's sister] lived on an ugly new development in a village near Portsmouth, where all the culs-de-sac were named after the fields they'd destroyed. We were happy enough together, but the world outside felt flimsy, inhospitable, permanently grey. I hated my girls' school, with its homophobic pupils and prying teachers, perpetually curious about the 'family situation'. This was the era of Section 28, which banned local

**“Again and again, she asks what art can do at a time like this.”**

reception in the US than they'd had in decades. Kathy is Laing as Kathy Acker, punk appropriator of any text not sealed in a bank vault. Kathy is every female who has attended the movie "Womanfuture" and walked out.

I loved *Crudo* and Laing's jump cuts from memoir to news coverage to art criticism to name-dropping gossip. I loved the effort she made to create the simultaneous big and little of things in a time of panic and disbelief. Her next book, *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency*—a collection of essays and art criticism—has perhaps been rushed out on the coat tails of *Crudo*'s acclaim and arrives when life is worse. How do you even publish a book these days, Laing wonders. How do you publish a book as if things are okay? Same as it

and Laing seems a bit bored by her role as usher. We're not sure what these figures mean to her.

More often, fortunately, the writing captures the breathless sweep of Laing's novelist voice, observing the way we keep living while the air burns and senile white men plot to bury us. Again and again, she asks what art can do at a time like this. The answer: No one knows, except to remember rapture and remind us of love. Silence still equals death, but so might speech in an age of lies.

Reading through these tributes to writers and visual artists, a through line of intimate involvement emerges. It's about the AIDS crisis that burst into our lives in the 1980s when Laing, who is 43, was too young to have experienced it

authorities from promoting homosexuality and schools from teaching its acceptability 'as a pretended family relationship'. Designated by the state as a pretended family, we lived under its malign rule, its imprecation of exposure and imminent disaster."

Jarman, too, died of AIDS, just two years after Wojnarowicz. In summarizing the meaning of his nature writing to her, Laing writes, tenderly and pointedly, "Derek still seems to me the best as well as the most political nature writer, because he refuses to exclude the body from his sphere of interest, documenting the rising tides of sickness and desire with as much care and attention as he does the discovery of sea buckthorn or a wild fig."

The fourth piece that stirs the reader with

special intensity is “Feral.” Unique in the book in being entirely a memoir, it meditates on Laing’s decision in her twenties to drop out of university and become involved in the environmental direct-action movement. The summer she is twenty, she moves into “a tiny protest camp in Dorset, established by locals to protect a strip of much-loved woodland from being bulldozed for a relief road.” She and the other protesters sleep in the trees to keep them safe (they succeeded). She writes, her descriptive powers at their giddiest, “Teddy Bear Woods was a beach hanger, falling steeply to a meadow. There was a net slung in the canopy, built as a defence for when the bailiffs came. Lying up there among the leaves, you could see the glittering blue ribbon of the sea a mile south. What did we do all day? We made endless trips to gather wood and water, sawed wood, chopped wood, prepped food, washed up. Without electricity, the most basic tasks took hours.”

What does she want? Community? Solitude? A walkabout free of social obligation? A way to get back to the garden that never was? She doesn’t know, and it’s her ability to stay in the unknowing place throughout the essay that gives it its urgency and tension. Living outside is another form of being homeless. “It was the sort of experience I’d longed for,” she writes, “but still I slept with an axe under my pillow... I was frightened all the time. I felt more exposed than I have ever since, almost unraveled by it, paranoid that I was being watched by the inhabitants of the scattered houses whose lights I could see winking through the fields at night.”

The more Laing finds beauty, the more she sees risk of its destruction. The more she sees beauty



Olivia Laing

destroyed—in the bodies of those with illness, in works of art that are silenced or erased, in the natural world that is defiled—the more ably she evokes life’s fragility. In May 1968, Jean-Luc Godard declared, “The problem is not to make political films but to make films politically.” The

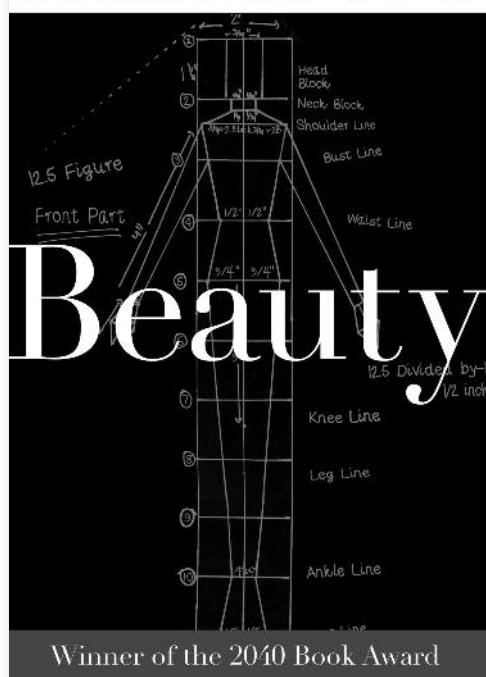
same might be said about essays—how to write them politically.

Throughout this book, Laing doesn’t ask readers to think about something other than their collective sense of powerlessness that does not produce a concerted front of resistance. She reminds us of it without shaming or virtue signaling. And she reminds us as well there is no such thing as distraction, maintaining that every moment in a person’s head has the weight of every other moment in that head. She values our precious and wasted moments, until there are no more moments, because we have died or the world has died. We think about the world dying all the time, Laing knows, and all the time we look at the sky, and plant iris bulbs, and stage stupid arguments with the people closest to us because peace is impossible and because friction reignites the tedium of existence. The gorgeous tedium of every day we are not detained at a border or made host to a virus flying free as a bird. 🐦

Laurie Stone is author most recently of *Everything is Personal: Notes on Now* (Scuppernong Editions, January 2020) and *My Life as an Animal: Stories* (Northwestern University Press/Tri-quarterly Press, 2016). She was a longtime writer for the *Village Voice*, theater critic for *The Nation*, and critic-at-large on *Fresh Air*. Her stories have appeared in *n + 1*, *Waxwing*, *Tin House*, *Evergreen Review*, *Electric Lit*, *Fence*, and *Open City*, among many others. Her next book will be *Postcards from the Thing that is Happening*, a collage of hybrid narratives.

Suki Dhandra

CHRISTINA CHIU



## The Eye

Beauty

By Christina Chiu

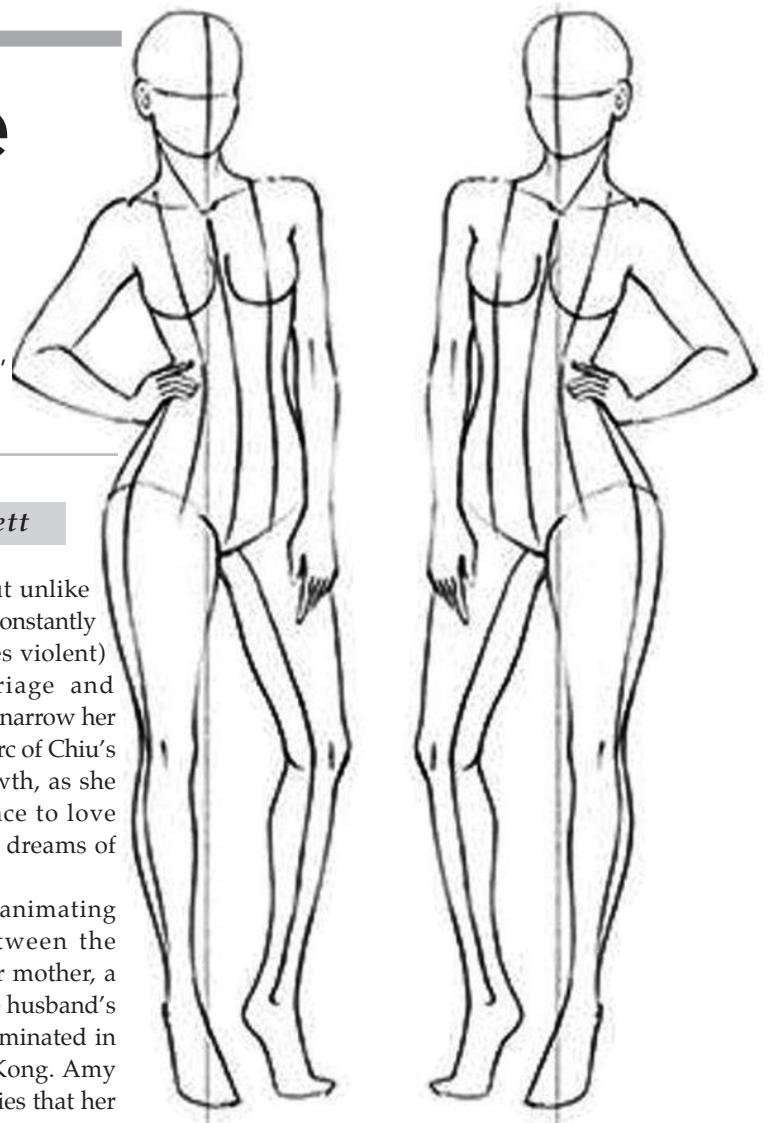
Santa Fe, NM; 2040 Books, 2020,

276 pp., \$15.95, paperback

Reviewed by Heather Hewett

beautiful and empowered woman—but unlike her fictional white counterparts, Amy is constantly targeted by an exoticizing (and at times violent) male gaze. As she falls into marriage and motherhood, a series of traumatic events narrow her life’s possibilities. At the same time, the arc of Chiu’s novel allows us to witness Amy’s growth, as she develops the resilience and confidence to love herself and reconnect with her lifelong dreams of making beautiful things.

The novel begins with the story’s animating conflict: the rocky relationship between the narrator, sixteen-year-old Amy, and her mother, a fashionable but mercurial woman whose husband’s frequent business trips abroad have culminated in an affair and another family in Hong Kong. Amy feels cast off and unloved, and she worries that her



Christina Chiu’s fast-paced and unsettling novel, *Beauty*, follows the life trajectory of Amy Wong, a second-generation Chinese American living in New York City whose plans to forge a career in fashion and find love get derailed. Like the sexually liberated foursome in the HBO series *Sex and the City*, Amy is a



Asian Chalon

Christina Chiu

mother blames her for their abandonment. Unlike her older sister, who excelled in their suburban high school and is on track to become a doctor, Amy's mediocre grades confirm feelings of not being good enough. Her feelings of worthlessness are only heightened when her mother impulsively flies to Hong Kong, dropping her off without warning at her sister's apartment in New York City.

As readers, we aren't fully aware of Amy's physical allure until a pair of boots catches her eye in a storefront window. She is attracted by the shoes—"Floral and paisley-drops. Open-toed, trimmed with leather, knee high"—but she doesn't have the money to buy them. The shoe salesman ogles her, rapturous about her body. Amy enjoys the attention: "Beautiful. No one has ever called me that." What ensues is a deeply disturbing scene during which Amy is simultaneously repulsed and attracted by her first sexual encounter—a statutory rape.

Amy's sense of her sexuality develops as she embarks on a series of relationships with men. Towards the end of her time as a student at Parsons, she meets famous designer and "fashion icon" Jeff Jones, who is immediately attracted to her. Even though she initially rejects him, they end up in an intense, on-again/off-again relationship. They hurtle into marriage and parenthood, forcing Amy to abandon her own career aspirations as she cares for their tantrum-prone child while her husband focuses his attention on his business and, eventually, other women.

**“Chiu’s compelling interest lies in beauty, and her novel explores its multiple meanings.”**

There's more that follows (divorce, a tragic family accident, a rebound romance), which leads to Amy's nadir: a second marriage to a man who turns abusive and violent. Her experience confirms what has become increasingly difficult to ignore in the #MeToo era: rape and sexual assault can happen to anyone. Amy must learn to contend with men who wish to control her body and her life, rejecting the shame and low self-worth that began in her childhood. She must find a way back to her own joy for fashion, her desire to create beautiful clothes, and her ability to love and trust herself.

**W**hile conversations about sexual violence have increasingly entered the mainstream in the past two and a half years, working to shift cultural norms that blame and silence victims, #MeToo has still centered around the experiences and stories of white women. Chiu's novel reveals how sexism and racism can intersect to produce a particularly virulent form of objectification: the "Asian fetish," a centuries-old Western fascination with "Oriental" women that frames them as exotic, erotic, and submissive. Amy is beautiful, but it is her identity as a young Asian woman that seems to make her a sexual target for the men around her. At the same time, Amy is no shrinking violet. Even though she possesses less clout than someone like Jeff Jones, she has agency and desires of her own. The strength of Chiu's novel lies in its unflinching examination of the shared messiness of interpersonal dynamics, even when one member of the couple seeks to dominate the other.

*Beauty* is tied to another story: the persistent whiteness of the book publishing industry, which translates into how many writers of color get published and what kinds of work they are expected to produce. *Beauty* was published by 2040 Books, an imprint founded to address racial disparities in the industry. Part of the Santa Fe Writers Project, an independent press, its name refers to the year 2040, when, according to the US census, "more than half of all Americans will be part of a minority group." *Beauty* won the imprint's James Alan McPherson Award; the inaugural year of the contest, Bonnie Chau won for *All Roads Lead to Blood*, a short story collection also focusing on second-generation Chinese Americans.

As the title suggests, Chiu's compelling interest lies in beauty, and her novel explores its multiple meanings. Physical beauty, of course, is initially something that (male) others see in Amy, sparking their desire for her. But ultimately a more multifaceted notion of beauty emerges as she comes to recognize beautiful qualities within herself and also within others, outside the male gaze and the strictures of heteronormativity. From her mother, Amy learns that beauty is something that you work at—taking the time to put yourself together, to care for yourself—as well as something that you learn to appreciate, an awareness that is cultivated. Spending time in her mother's closet teaches Amy to recognize craftsmanship and quality, characteristics that elevate clothes from their everyday utility function towards the realm of art. Jeff Jones has impeccable taste, and despite his flaws, he sees Amy's capacities for discernment as

well as vision. Amy's journey leads back to her own creative process as a designer and a maker of bespoke shoes. But beauty also fuels an industry, and the novel reveals how Jeff's company is torn between the artistic inclinations of its designers and the demands of its investors. At a time of growing awareness of the environmental problems tied to consumerism and the fashion industry (particularly fast fashion), I appreciated how Chiu's novel presented a nuanced, complicated view of the individuals working inside this sector. Had I not read *Beauty*, I confess that I might have immediately dismissed someone like Jeff Jones out of hand; and while I still found much of his elitist and self-centered behavior distasteful, his own maturation, coupled with his changing relationship with Amy and their child, challenged my knee-jerk inclinations.

My main quibble with the novel emerges out of the relatively long time span it charts. Because Chiu has to cover a lot of territory in order to get us through all the plot events, each chapter skips forward in time. While this allows the novel to cover a great deal of time, the result occasionally feels a bit clunky. In the moments when the narrator switches into exposition, I felt jolted out of the story. This contrasts with other scenes when I was fully pulled into the story (sometimes uncomfortably so). Chiu's talents as a writer shine at these moments, which are not only well-crafted but feel deeply true, at times raw. As our culture continues to grapple with the meanings and effects of the #MeToo movement, her voice is a courageous addition to our understanding of the intersections of race, gender, and sexual politics. 

**Heather Hewett** last wrote about Bassey Ikpi's *I'm Telling the Truth, But I'm Lying* for *WRB* and is currently at work on a volume focusing on the #MeToo movement and literary studies. She is an associate professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and an affiliate with the English Department, at the State University of New York at New Paltz.

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# Pure Guts

*Four by Four*

By Sara Mesa, translated by Katie Whittemore

Rochester, NY; Open Letter, 2020, 230 pp., \$15.95, paperback

Reviewed by Noelle McManus

Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel's 1962 film, *The Exterminating Angel*, depicts wealthy dinner party attendees who find they cannot go home, though no physical boundaries prevent them from leaving. Frantic, they deliberate amongst themselves, dissolve into chaos, commit acts of violence. The outside world moves on all the while; they are not missed.

*Four by Four*, Sara Mesa's 2012 novel, translated into English for the first time by Katie Whittemore, shows us a similar Spain: bleak, distantly dystopian. Among all the murder, destruction, and corruption, there appears a singular beacon of hope: Wybrany College, an elite boarding school designed to keep well-to-do children safe and separate. But, immediately, we know that something lurks under the manicured surface. The book's first part alternates between the first-person perspective of "Special" scholarship student, Celia, as she attempts to escape, and an omniscient view of the strange web of relationships and hierarchies in the Wybrany halls. The second part begins suddenly, bewilderingly, dropping us into a new perspective a few years later. It is then that we follow the journal entries of a nameless imposter who has infiltrated the school under the guise of his sister's ex-husband, a literature teacher named Isidro Bedragare. The imposter is little more than a failed-writer-turned-scammer, but when he learns of the disappearance of the man whose post he now holds, he becomes entangled in something far greater than his scheme. The third and final part of the book is someone else's manuscript, only twelve pages long. By the time we reach that point, we already know too much.

Wybrany College—pronounced in the characters' Spanish as *güibrani colich*—hinges on delicate power dynamics. The Specials must be above non-students. The Normals, students paying full tuition, must be above the Specials. The staff must be above the Normals. The headmaster, Señor J., must be above the staff. In conversation with Señor J., the imposter notes this hierarchy, "... maybe he was testing me, intending to unnerve, to piss on his territory and watch me tremble, bound hand and foot, obliged to smile, nod, accept." Meanwhile, relations between children and their teachers are off, the instructors molding the students into pets that both adore and despise them. In the first part, we see the teachers as looming, merciless figures who are always watching. In the second, we find that the teachers are just as frightened of the students. Testing this, the imposter instructs his students to write compositions on how they would hurt him, if given the chance. One, written by a student named Irene, reads:

WHAT I WOULD DO TO RUIN YOUR LIFE.... To ruin your life, I would put a pair of panties in your briefcase. I would take naked pictures of myself and put them between the pages of your books. Then I would tell my mother and we would report you.

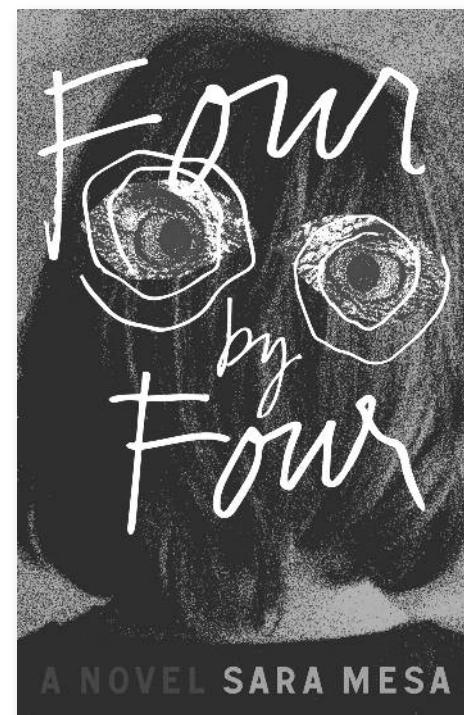
Everyone in the *colich* seeks to dominate someone else. The weak dream of being stronger only so they can push down those weaker than them. A metamorphosis occurs even in the imposter: The longer he stays, the more hateful he becomes.



Sara Mesa

What is it about the *colich* that transforms people in this way? What became of the teacher that came before the imposter? Where do the students who fail out disappear to? The answers to those questions are all intertwined, though not easily explained. We begin to wonder whether the evil outside the school is any worse than the evil inside. Students begin vanishing; a strange fever spreads through the staff; there is, to quote the imposter, "[o]ne decapitation, at least"—maybe more. Mesa only tells us what the school is hiding towards the very end, and by then, it is too late to stop it. That reality runs under the school like an undercurrent of sewage: dark, dank, seeping up through the floors. It is somehow both entirely evident and so shocking that I held a hand to my mouth when I read it once, twice, three times.

And still, despite the *colich's* horrors, no one seems able to leave. The imposter first sets foot on campus on page ninety-one and only manages to exit sixty-six pages later. Like Buñuel's *Exterminating Angel*, or even Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, the rich are left rotting in a swamp of their own design. For this reason, the book is strikingly relevant. There is no more room in the world, it seems, for wealthy people who would rather die



stewing in their own depravity than leave the gates of their precious mansions and academies. Mesa writes:

Ceding to power, power expands: one plus is always one more.

The rest of us are left out of the equation.

We add nothing. We take nothing away.

At the front of it all, bringing us the disgust, uneasiness, and horrible beauty of Mesa's original vision, is translator Katie Whittemore. Her translation eases Mesa's style into an eloquent English. The result is succinct, alarming, lovely—a book written in the vein of classics, a story within a story within a story, in which readers of Spanish-language literature will find echoes of Cortázar's seminal *Hopscotch*. Whittemore brings *Four by Four* closer to us, to our reality, making us uncomfortably aware of the truth it is based in. Atmosphere rises forebodingly around us. Celia and the imposter wander endless corridors that seem reminiscent of our own. "*Hay una cualidad anómala en las sombras*," Mesa writes. "*Una temperatura enfermiza, como de destemplanza*." Whittemore's translation crawls brusquely out of the darkness: "There's an abnormal quality to the shadow. A sickly, intemperate temperature."

Spanish or English, first-person or third-person, *Four by Four* is an uncomfortably real look into the absurd world of the bourgeoisie. It is so complex and layered that, to reach a full understanding, one may have to read it two or even three times. Not a single character, after all, is what they seem. Everyone is hiding something; the school itself is built on a disgusting secret the staff and student body would rather overlook than have destroy their carefully crafted paradise. As the world rages on outside the grounds, Wybrany College crumbles. "And so," Celia muses to herself, "the transactions begin to lose their purpose, and become nothing but torn flesh, pure guts." Flesh, guts, and death all around—and yet the people inside just cannot seem to leave the dinner party. 🍷

Noelle McManus is a student of Linguistics and Spanish at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

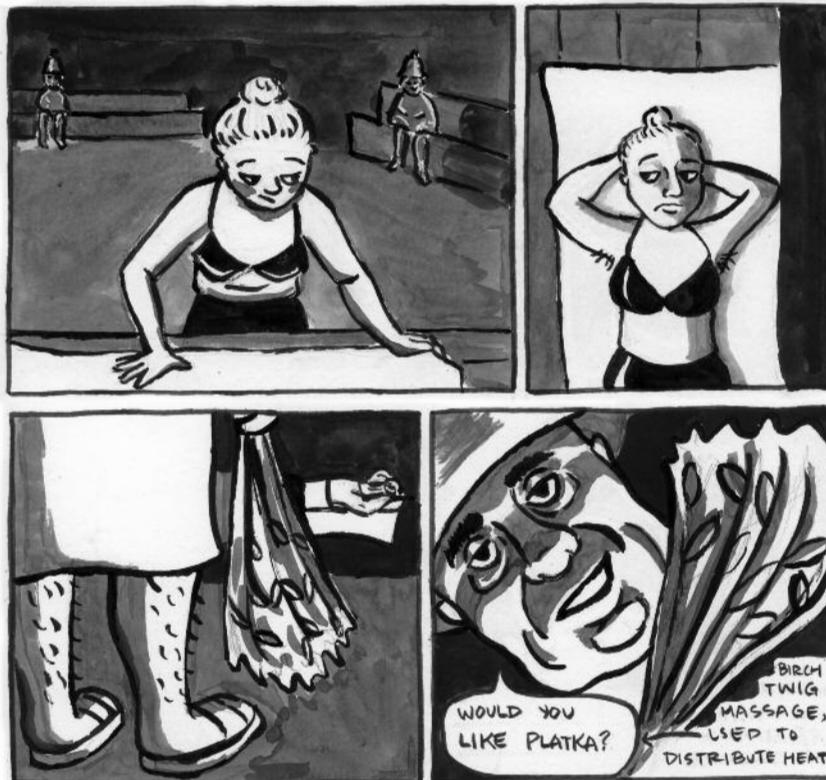
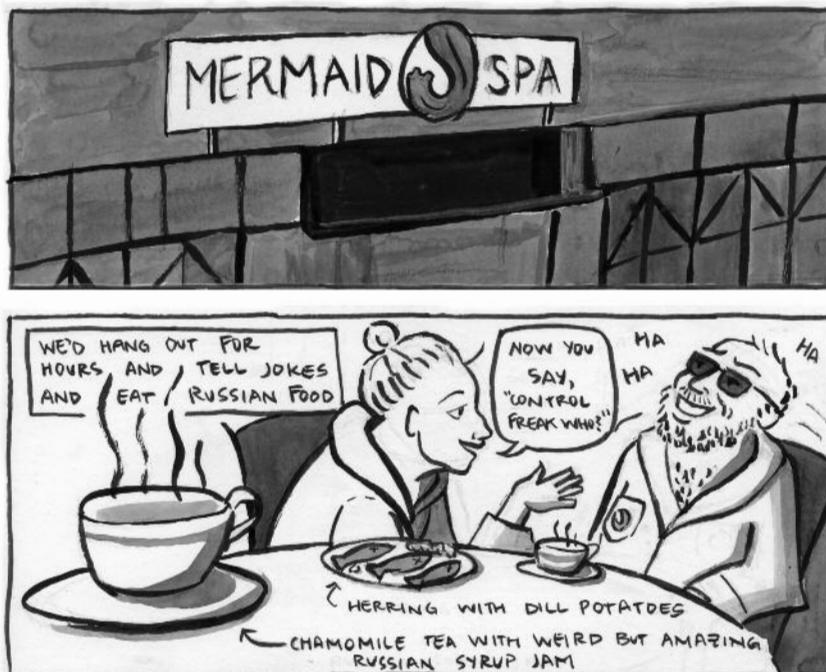
CARTOONS

The 2018 Supreme Court confirmation hearing for Justice Brett Kavanaugh triggered a flood of recollections of sexual harassment and humiliations, shared on social media and among women. The Boston-based comic-artist Anna Christine, thirty-two, became a repository of these tales as she listened to women in her life recall being grabbed, fondled, and text-stalked, usually followed by not being believed. “For each triumphant story that ended in the miscreant hit with a handbag or denounced as a creep,” Christine says,

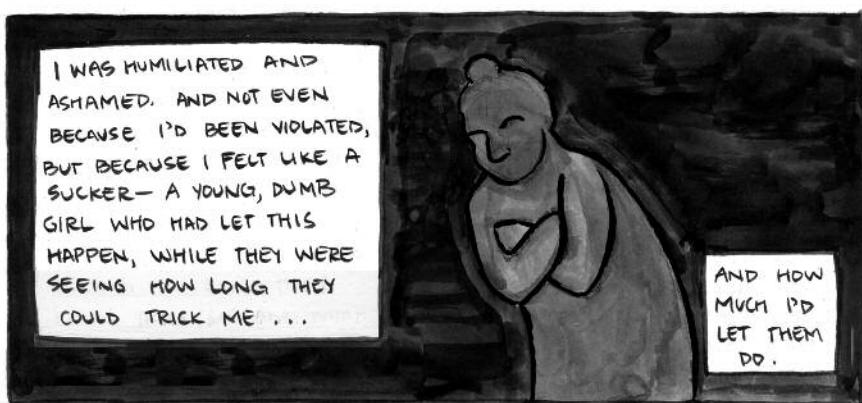
“there were three stories of self-recrimination, doubt, and powerlessness.”

Christine turned some of the stories, including her own, into a comic, excerpted here. In her story, an offer for a bracing platzka at a Russian bath turns creepy. Christine explores the sickening feeling “of lingering in something for too long,” the sully of a favorite place, and the frustration of finding the snappy come-back too late. In a few frames, she illustrates the confusing web of self-blame, rage, and loss that makes sexual harassment so demoralizing.

—Jennifer Baumgardner



# At the Baths



HEY, ASSHOLES: I GET THE LAST LAUGH.

Anna Christine is a doctoral student at Tufts by day and a cartoonist on nights and weekends. Her comics have appeared in *Resist! Volume 1* (distributed during the 2017 Women's March) and *Volume 2*, which were edited by Françoise Mouly and Nadja Spiegelman.

# Class Dismissed

Reviewed by Nino Testa



## *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University*

By Matt Brim

Durham, NC; Duke University Press, 2020, 264 pp., \$26.95, paperback

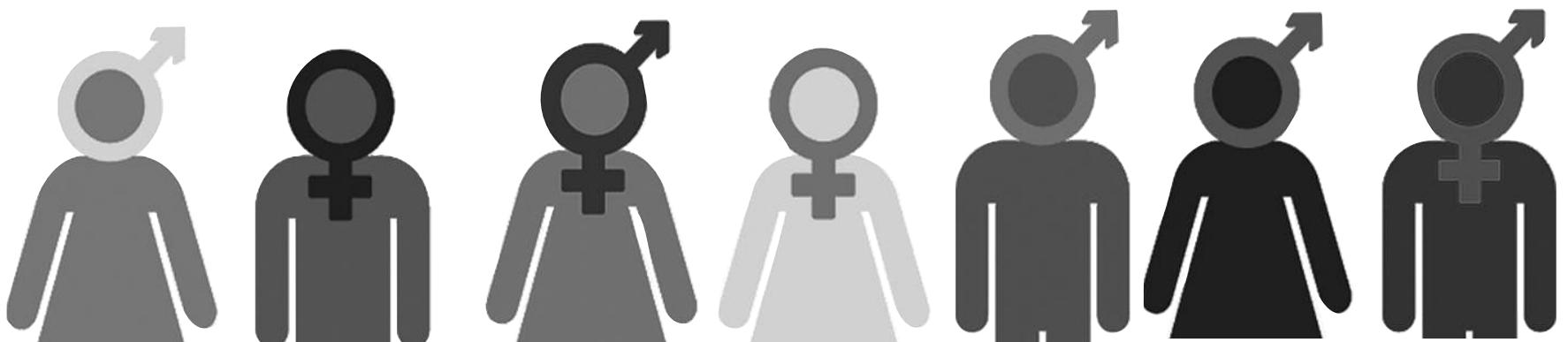
When I ask students in my queer studies classes at Texas Christian University to trace how hetero- and cisnormativity manifest at our culturally conservative school, they are quick to list Greek life, athletics, and the rigid gender binary in which they all feel implicated. But how might we think about the pull of normativity more broadly? With only a bit of prodding, they move on to the university's whiteness and the hostile learning environment it creates for students of color. They trace how a norm (whiteness) can be a product of power and can have a complex impact on student experiences. Some deep learning happens (for them, and for me), when they consider the implications of the catch-all label "nontraditional." Who is a "traditional" college student? What makes someone traditional? What traditions do they uphold? What traditions do *nontraditional* students disrupt? And, importantly, for the purposes of our inquiry in queer studies, what does any of this have to do with hetero- and cisnormativity? Students outline swiftly, brilliantly, the ways that our campus is set up for students under the age of twenty-five, who are not working full-time or even half-time jobs, not parenting, and not commuting very far from campus. Most of the "traditional" students at our school think little about the overall cost of their education or the daily costs that they incur—meals, books, printing, transportation. "Nontraditional" students have a distinct gendered, raced, and classed experience on a campus like mine, and are often made to feel like

guests at their own school. In the face of stifling conservative culture and explicit experiences of anti-queer discrimination, bias, and harassment, students are able to draw explicit connections between the experiences of LGBTQ students and "nontraditional" students (which are, of course, sometimes overlapping categories) in ways that illuminate threshold concepts in the discipline—concepts like *power*, *normativity*, and *queer*. If these undergraduates can articulate such a nuanced relationship between queer studies and class, why can't queer studies itself do the same?

In his provocative and timely new book, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University*, Matt Brim argues for a vital and undertheorized class analysis within queer studies, but he also argues for a rethinking of the relationship between queer studies and academe writ large. "Where class appears centrally," he writes, "queer often does a disappearing act." Rather than being in opposition to the racialized class sorting that constitutes today's academy, Brim argues, queer studies has been both witting and unwitting participant in the neoliberal logics and meritocratic fantasies of university life. At institutions like the College of Staten Island, where Brim teaches, so-called nontraditional college students look a lot more like the norm. The queer studies in which he engages bears little resemblance to the project of queer studies at the places most commonly associated with the discipline. He demonstrates how Poor Queer Studies happens in underfunded public institutions when students and teachers creatively

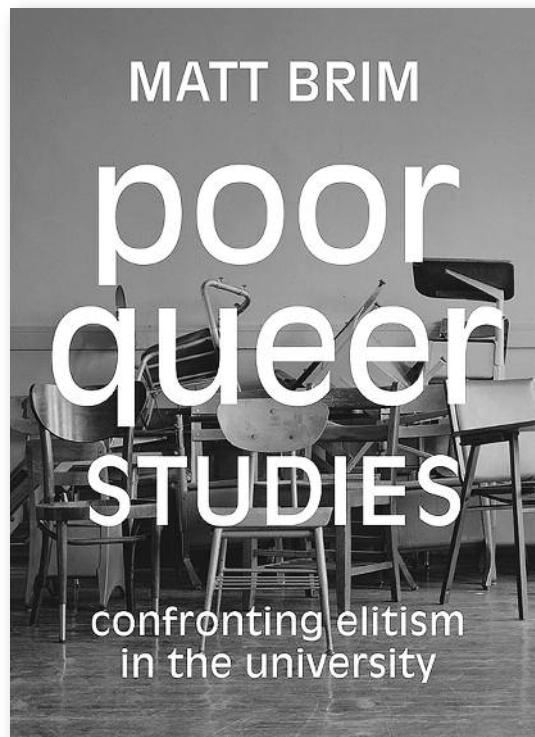
theorize, navigate, engage, and respond to the class-race-gender sorting that structures their lives. Meanwhile, Rich Queer Studies happens at elite private institutions when a mode of inquiry meant to lay bare the workings of power becomes little more than a pathway to upward professional mobility for students and scholars alike. Brim traces well-documented histories of the discipline in important new ways, naming how a small circle of scholars at elite institutions has come to stand in for the entire field of queer studies and to make their careers, necessarily, on the kinds of elitism that we might expect them to critique. They are doing Rich Queer Studies, but like the "traditional" students on their campuses, this category goes unmarked as such.

It goes without saying that the research of those scholars most associated with queer studies is made possible only by grossly inequitable resource distribution, but, thankfully, Brim does not let it go without saying. A real class analysis must account for the material realities in which scholarship develops and circulates. "With notable exceptions," Brim writes, "the field of Queer Studies as an academic formation has been and is still defined and propelled by the immense resources of precisely those institutions of higher education that most steadfastly refuse to serve representative numbers of poor students and to hire faculty without high-status academic pedigrees." The teaching of faculty at elite schools invariably supports the class interest of the moneyed few who are able to enroll at their institutions. Sure, some



students are there on scholarship. Some are working part-time or full-time jobs to make their way through. But do we doubt that the purveyors of Rich Queer Studies organize their pedagogy around the cultural needs of the dominant class? For instance, my institution, TCU, is a private, secular (despite the school's name), predominantly white institution with an endowment of \$1.7 billion, where the total annual cost for a student to attend and live on campus is currently \$66,600. The curricular and co-curricular queer work we are able to do at TCU—which is less than I would, like but increasing—is organized around the realities of our institutional wealth and the class status of our students and faculty. How much money does it take to invite famous queer speakers and entertainment to campus, or to pay for students to attend a professional theatrical production so that they can write response papers on their experience? Who can afford to work an unpaid internship for credit at an LGBTQ non-profit or has the ability to come to a late-night meeting of an LGBTQ student group?

Why should queer studies bear the burden of addressing the structural inequities of the world when we make no such demands on other disciplines? Brim argues persuasively for the unruly spirit of queerness as a mechanism by which we might undo some of the violent systems in which we find ourselves enmeshed. It is aspirational, to be sure, but Brim challenges us to ask: What are we



at elite institutions cannot help but dwell in this learning deficit." In another passage, Brim casually marks a well-worn bit of advice that teachers sometimes give to students who are reading complex theory—*read it more than once*—as constitutive of Rich Queer Studies, and laughably

critique be leveled at any other number of disciplines? Yes, of course—and this is precisely Brim's point. Why shouldn't queer studies, which has positioned itself as methodologically equipped to dismantle institutional and disciplinary norms, be putting its inquiry where its mouth is? By forcing us to recognize the intellectual wealth of a specific Poor Queer Studies archive at his own institution, Brim graciously offers tools of analysis that benefit thinkers at poor and rich universities alike.

In a particularly telling passage, Brim performs a close reading of Judith Butler's infamous joke about performing identity in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," that she is "off to Yale to be a lesbian." How many queer studies teachers have used Butler's joke as a way to investigate the limits of an identity category and of identity itself? How many of us have glossed over the institutional site of Butler's joke? Have we paused to wonder, with our students, how and why *Yale* comes to signify in Butler's joke? Brim's reading, born of the class analysis he argues for throughout the book, offers us a new way of thinking through this canonical text of queer theory with our students, asking them to consider the material realities that allow Yale to be a site of gender insubordination, but also a site of class reproduction. As Brim jokes, "I am more familiar with lesbians who go to our college so that they can be lesbians (and here, too, there are failures), not so that they, theoretically, can't be." What a wonderful

**“Brim argues persuasively for the unruly spirit of queerness as a mechanism by which we might undo some of the violent systems in which we find ourselves enmeshed.”**

doing to disrupt the immoral distribution of wealth in our world today if we work at institutions that were formed to normalize and protect that model of wealth distribution? How might we move beyond critique of the neoliberal academy to a more dynamic praxis? He insists that "as long as higher education operates by the current system of class and race sorting, as long as the rich get access to one kind of education and the poor get access only to another, and as long as Queer Studies follows the line of educational hierarchy rather than steps out of line to form collective resistance, our critiques of the neoliberal academy will be far queerer than the worlds they actually create." Brim's book offers a vision for what queer studies might look like if it began to share the wealth.

**B**rim utilizes compelling ethnographic accounts of his own teaching experiences at the College of Staten Island to illuminate the stakes of anti-elitist queer inquiry and pedagogy. When a student brings her young child to class, presumably because childcare fell through, her peers work to create an equitable learning space for her by spelling the words related to sex in class discussion. Rather than reading this anecdote as queer space bowing to the heteronormative pull of the Child, a queer-class analysis finds this a rich queer pedagogical invention and show of class solidarity. *Poor Queer Studies Mothers* are the focus of an entire chapter in Brim's book, and he insists that we see all that these mothers have to teach us: "Not every Queer Studies class has the benefit of Poor Queer Studies mothers' presence and pedagogy. Many professors who teach traditional college students—now the minority of college attendees—and especially those who teach

naive in the face of students at a school like CSI, whose work lives might barely allow that they read the theory once, let alone twice. But then, it is laughably naive at a rich institution like TCU, where some students who find their way into queer studies classes are inevitably working many hours, commuting from off campus, or parenting—those queerly "nontraditional" students. In what ways do my syllabus, teaching, mentoring, and assessment perpetuate normative race-class-gender expectations of my students and make queer studies inaccessible to them? How, Brim asks and answers, "working against the grain of nearly all critiques of the neoliberal academy, [might we] cultivate a vocational Queer Studies that trains students to become not only better queer theorists but better queer workers. For workers our students already are, if one teaches at all but a relative handful of selective colleges and universities." To expand on this provocative question, how might we take seriously the demand that queer studies prepare students to become queer studies teachers in their own communities, recognizing the potential of queer pedagogy in spaces outside of higher education, the places where our students work, play, live, and love?

Brim outlines an institutional history of the College of Staten Island that offers a model for queer institutional analysis by scholars and students alike. He also documents an impressive bibliography of queer scholarship and creative activity done by his colleagues at CSI as a way of highlighting how queer work gets done in spaces that aren't traditionally associated with queer studies. Brim argues that elite institutional affiliations, which have come to define Queer Studies as a field, stifle queer inquiry, collaboration, and innovation. Could the same

opportunity to think through with our students our own class locations, both as individuals and as participants in a classed institution.

*Poor Queer Studies* centralizes the queer-class knowledge of students and scholars at under-resourced institutions and non-academic spaces, marking Rich Queer Studies as provincial in its scope. While the underfunded system in which Brim teaches presents clear obstacles to pedagogy, the work that his students do is not at an intellectual deficit because of these inequities. The class-race-gender precarity of his students is a site of pedagogical possibility, where queerness is illuminated and theorized, often by the students he is there to teach. The book's parting gift is a model of "queer ferrying"—inspired by Brim's daily ferry rides to Staten Island—which makes the case for queer knowledge production across institutional and class affiliations and boundaries. If only elite sites of knowledge production returned this exchange, they might have much to learn. *Poor Queer Studies* will be valuable reading if you work at any institution of higher education—poor or rich; public or private; urban or rural; elitist or not—because it offers indispensable tools for navigating the crises of the academy. Brim challenges readers to imagine what a queer-class analysis might yield not just for their own scholarship and teaching, but for the lives of their students and the worlds they inhabit. 📖

**Nino Testa** is the Associate Director of the Department of Women & Gender Studies at Texas Christian University, in Fort Worth, Texas, where he teaches queer and feminist studies courses. He lives in Dallas.

# Women Reading



Reviewed by Linda Simon

Women read for any number of reasons. They read for escape from daily stresses or to experience other places and times. And, of course, they read for insight into who they are and who they might become. This is the not-so-groundbreaking thesis of Helen Taylor's *Why Women Read Fiction*. For this study of women's fiction-reading habits, Taylor, who has taught English at the University of Exeter and directed the Liverpool Literary Festival, queried more than five hundred British, mostly white and middle-class women about what reading fiction means to them. While Taylor's survey pool was drawn mainly to white writers and white characters—Jane Austen and *Jane Eyre* were frequently cited as favorites—the results prove that even this narrow demographic looks to fiction to fill diverse social and emotional needs.

Sometimes these needs are deep and desperate. In 2014, novelist and writing teacher Leslie Schwartz was incarcerated in Century Regional Detention Facility, a Los Angeles county jail, to serve out a sentence for drunk driving and assaulting an officer. After decades of sobriety, she had relapsed for more than a year, during which she describes herself as being "in a chronic state of blackout." Schwartz recounts in horrifying detail the dehumanizing conditions that she and the other inmates faced, as well as her overwhelming feelings of depression, shame, and loneliness during her period of incarceration. At this rock-bottom, reading became one of Schwartz's most important coping mechanisms. Friends and family sent her three books a week, and it was the books that saved her: Mary Oliver's poetry, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Pema Chodron's *When Things Fall Apart*, Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken*, many other novels, memoirs, and even *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*. "When the books arrive," she writes, "it's better than anything I have ever known." The books "united me with people," Schwartz writes, "... eased me into myself, then

pushed me away from myself so that I found my freedom." Many "not only enlightened me, they transformed me in ways that would permanently change me."

Schwartz's experience as a reader is extreme, to be sure, but her deep connection to books, and the solace she found in so many, is echoed by other women, like the ones who responded to Taylor, who read with a cat curled on their lap, or sitting in a verdant garden, or reaching for a cup of tea, or hoping for distraction from tedium on a train or plane. Anyone can experience the feeling of having picked up a particular book at exactly the right moment. When Schwartz read Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, for example, she felt an uncanny sense that Ozeki was speaking directly to her. "A time being," Ozeki writes on the first page, "is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be." How, Schwartz asked herself, did Ozeki somehow know what she needed to hear? "Did she know how I was living in suspended time, real time, unreal time. *Did she know I was in jail?*"

Memoirist Vivian Gornick's *Unfinished Business, Notes of a Chronic Re-Reader* explains this common experience of synchronicity as a result of "emotional readiness," a state that is "responsible for every successful connection ever made between a book and a reader." Unlike many of Taylor's respondents, who return, nostalgically, to tales fondly remembered from childhood, Gornick tends to reread novels that she encountered as a young adult. Colette's work, for example, which Gornick read raptly in her mid-twenties—when she was "still a novice insofar as erotic experience went"—contains wisdom she found "narrow and confined" fifty years later. Similarly, rereading Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* many times, she recognized how differently she understood Sue Bridehead at different times in her own life. Sue's struggle to rise above the misfortunes of her life "retained mythic power" for the young Gornick,

## *The Toni Morrison Book Club*

By Juda Bennett, Winnifred Brown-Glaude, Cassandra Jackson, and Piper Kendrix Williams  
Madison, WI; University of Wisconsin Press, 2020,  
208 pp., \$17.95, paperback

## *March Sisters*

By Kate Bolick, Jenny Zhang, Carmen Maria Machado, and Jane Smiley  
New York, NY; Library of America, 2019,  
196 pp., \$21.95, hardcover

## *The Lost Chapters, Finding Recovery & Renewal One Book at a Time*

By Leslie Schwartz  
New York, NY; Blue Rider Press, 2018,  
272 pp., \$27.00, hardcover

## *Why Women Read Fiction*

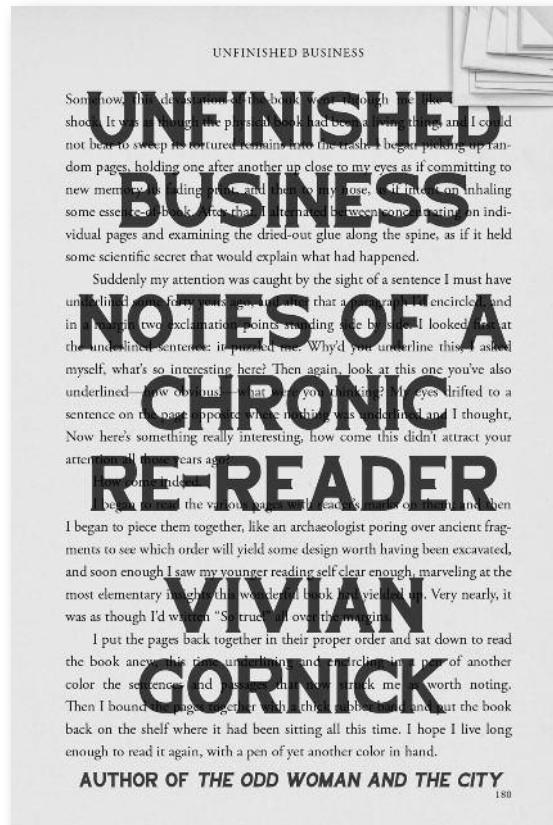
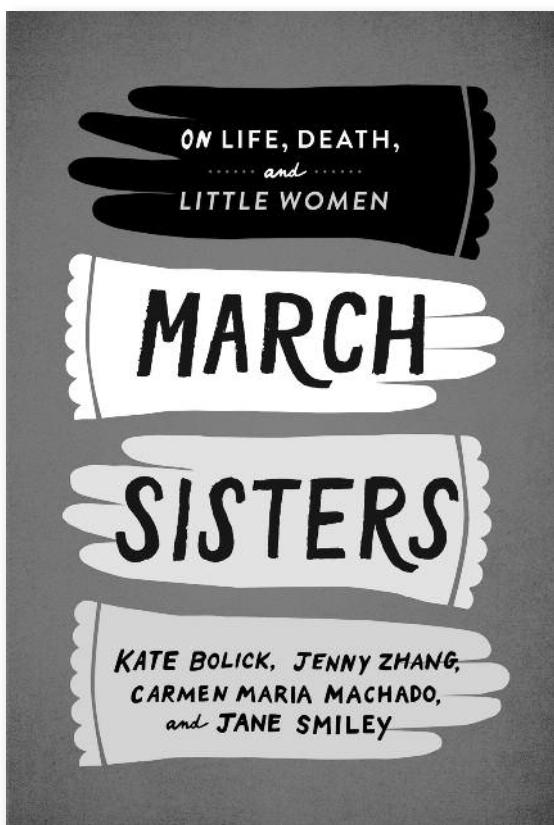
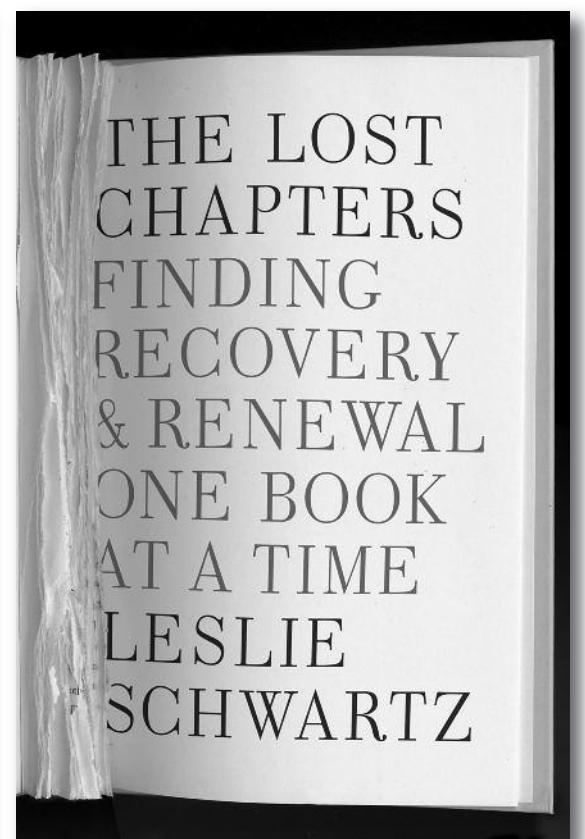
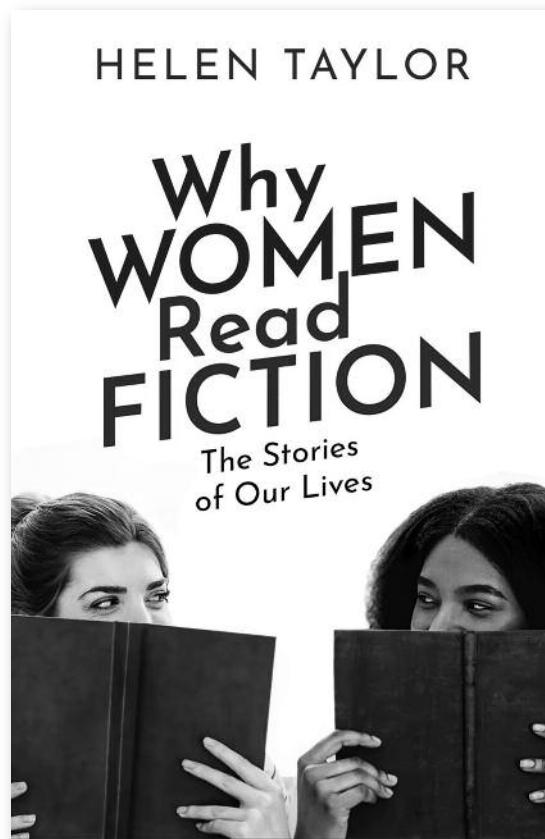
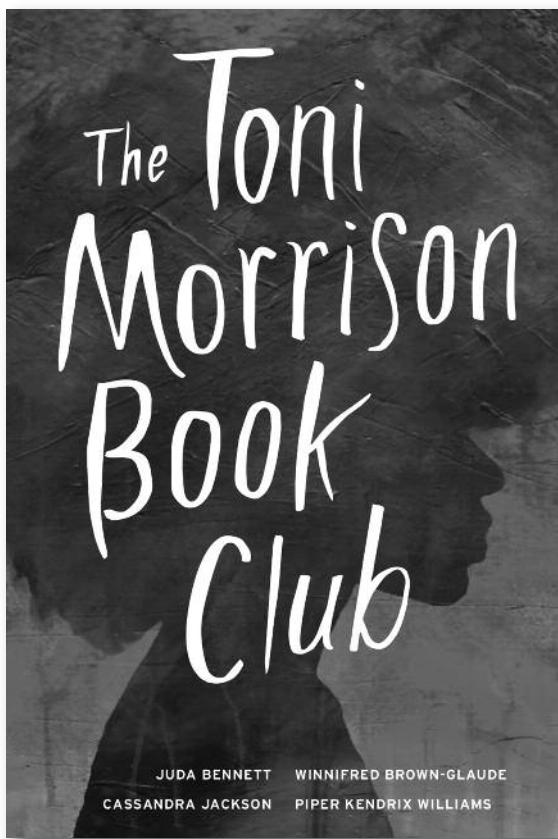
By Helen Taylor  
New York, NY; Oxford University Press, 2020,  
304 pp., \$18.95, hardcover

## *Unfinished Business, Notes of a Chronic Re-Reader*

By Vivian Gornick  
New York, NY; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020,  
176 pp., \$25.00, hardcover

but ten years later her attitude had changed: "Now she just seemed sexually frigid, and I was horrified by her grotesque regression into religiosity." Another ten years later, however, after Gornick's illegal abortion, her feelings again changed drastically: suffering "something like fear of retribution," she suddenly understood Sue's religious mania and superstitious dread.

In *The Toni Morrison Book Club*, four friends have similarly intimate yet diverse responses to *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *A Mercy*, and *Song of Solomon*. These friends—three women and one gay man, black and white, all professors at The College of New Jersey—met regularly, in person, on email, and through text exchanges to talk about Morrison's works and her connection to their lives. Considering Morrison not as literary scholars, but as thoughtful, often vulnerable, readers, their conversations cohere into a moving group memoir, a collection of forthright essays about Morrison's oeuvre. For the contributors, Morrison became a catalyst for writing about racism, power, parenthood, and,



more broadly, American society. Two writers were assigned to each book, to show “how the themes of a single novel might yield altogether unique opportunities.”

Like Gornick, many contributors reveal the surprising insights that came from rereading. Cassandra Jackson, for one, had read, reread, and taught *Beloved*, but after she had children, revised her take on the tragic tale of a former slave who kills her daughter to keep her from becoming enslaved. “It’s not a book about slavery,” she came to realize, but “above all else a book about love, the ferocious and sometimes dangerous love of a mother whose right to mother is never promised and whose children are not children but instead reflections of a nation’s greatest fears.” Similarly,

Winnifred Brown-Glaude reads *Song of Solomon* through the lens of parenthood, burdened by fears: not *if* our sons are stopped by the police but *when* they are stopped by the police.” Morrison’s novel, for her, offers hope and models of resistance to racial injustice.

Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* may seem a world away from Toni Morrison’s novels, but it elicits equally powerful responses from four contemporary writers in the essay collection *March Sisters*: Kate Bolick, Carmen Maria Machado, Jane Smiley, and Jenny Zhang each ring in on their engagement with one of the March sisters, bringing a twenty-first century feminist perspective to a novel that—as Greta Gerwig’s recent film adaptation demonstrates—has enduring appeal.

For Zhang, who emigrated to America from China when she was four and half, the novel spoke to her own resistance against a definition of femininity, passed down by her family and culture. “Let a man take care of you, be less strong, that’s how a woman should be,” her mother had warned her, or else you might end up a spinster. Zhang internalized this image of womanhood so thoroughly that, when she read the book at the age of twelve, although she was already a “a self-professed ‘rebel’ and ‘writing prodigy,’” she decided immediately that the character she detested most was Jo. While other young aspiring writers identified with the independent Jo (Taylor, and many of her respondents, felt a strong connection with the bookish oldest sister), Zhang was put off by her boyishness, her resolve not to marry, and “her utter lack of giving a fuck when it came to adhering to gender norms.” Jo’s ending up “miserable and alone” resonates with Zhang’s cultural inheritance. Even now, as a published writer, sympathetic to both Jo and Alcott herself, Zhang wonders, at times, if she rejected “the wrong things, the wrong people.”

What and how we read reveals a great deal about our personalities, our circumstances, and our social and cultural backgrounds. Indeed, reflections on reading have emerged as a sub-genre of the style of understated, intimate memoir that Gornick herself helped to advance in the 1980s, as this recent cluster of books on reading attests. Gornick, Schwartz, and the eight contributors of essays about Toni Morrison and *Little Women*, all deepen and expand Helen Taylor’s findings, reflecting a diversity of readers, and contextualizing their reading experiences within the political, social, and cultural realities of their lives. 📖

**Linda Simon** is professor emerita of English at Skidmore College and the author of biographies of Alice B. Toklas, William James, and Coco Chanel, among other books.

# The Mean(ing)s of Production

By Jacqueline Zeisloft

In the age of screens, silo-ing, and outsourcing, Brooklyn-based Radix Media stands dedicated to the material world. Founded in 2011 by Lantz Arroyo, an Occupy Wallstreet activist, Radix is a unionized, worker-owned printing press and, now, literary publisher. “There is a long history of printers operating as publishers,” worker-owner Nicholas Hurd says of their latest undertaking, “but there has become a disconnect between the two.” Radix brings all the lines of production under one roof to produce, for example, their 2019 science-fiction series, *Futures*, a gorgeous collection of six bespoke chapbooks. They are accepting submissions to their “Own Voices” poetry prize through the end of May (see [radixmedia.org](http://radixmedia.org) for details) and expect to publish two to three titles per year.

Community, feminist values, and an old school DIY ethos drives their workday and their business. Worker-owners Sarah Lopez, Lantz Arroyo, and Hurd (all in their thirties) operate the equipment, collaborate on design, select manuscripts for publication, and table at festivals. “We are constantly learning from each other,” says Lopez, “and learning how every part of this process affects the whole.” Their noble array of analog machines—offset and letterpress printers, mechanical folders, paper-cutters—is a rebuke to disposable culture; the technology hasn’t changed in more than a century. “We think there is value in keeping these machines alive,” says Hurd, and the same could be said for print as a whole.

Jacqueline Zeisloft is an editorial assistant in New York.



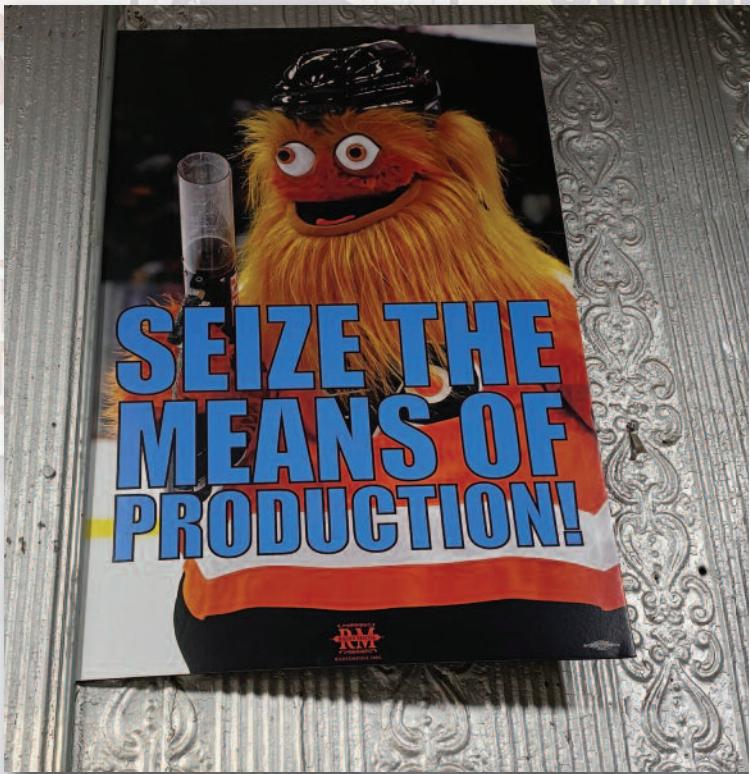
A collection of political posters designed and printed by Radix for local and national activist groups



Left to right: Lopez, Hurd, and Arroyo. Not pictured: Meher Manda, the newest member of the Radix team



Drawers of wooden and lead letterpress blocks, which are handset to print banners and posters



A Radix-designed poster featuring Gritty, the Philadelphia Flyers mascot, who has been re-appropriated as a socialist and anti-fascist symbol



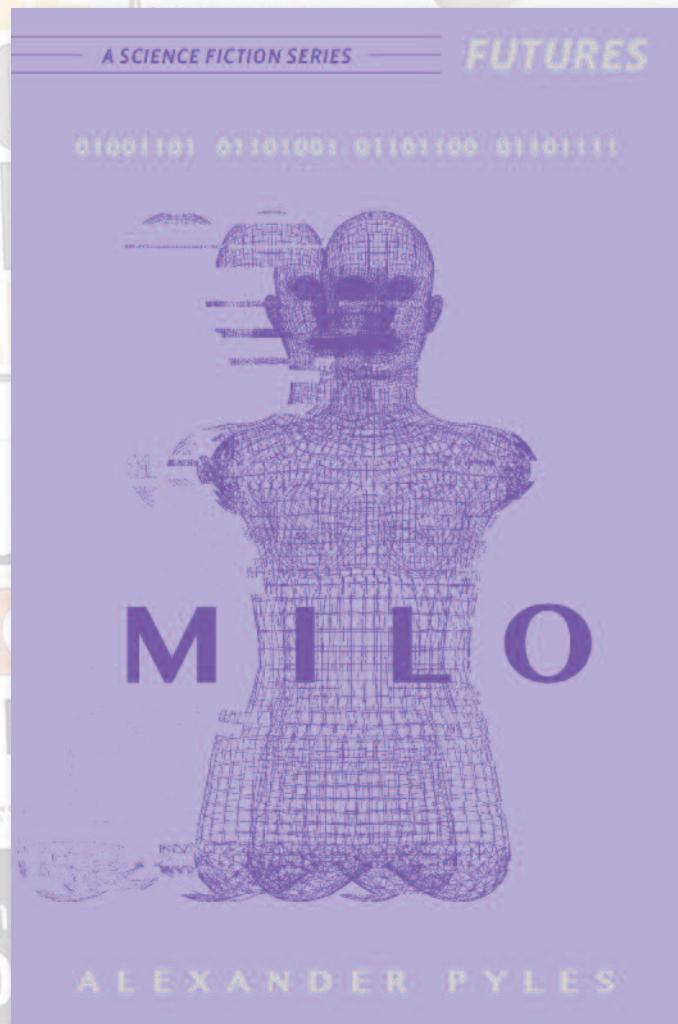
This 1970s Heidelberg Platen Press, nicknamed "the windmill," is used to print everything from book covers to business cards



Organized chaos: the workroom's bookbinding and flattening machines



An offset press; a quick and efficient machine for printing book interiors



Cover for Milo by Alexander Pyles, part of the Futures series

# Women's Work

*Climate Justice: Hope, Resilience, and the Fight for a Sustainable Future*

By Mary Robinson

New York, NY; Bloomsbury, 2018, 176 pp., \$26.00, hardcover

*Gender and Climate Change: Impacts, Science, Policy*

By Joane Nagel

New York, NY; Routledge, 2015,

264 pp., \$41.95, paperback



*Reviewed by Judith Chelius Stark*

The process of women cleaning up the messes that men make is nothing new, but our work takes on new urgency within the context of the climate crisis.

Over thirty years ago, two key events brought the issue of climate change to the fore. The first: In 1988, the United Nations and the World Meteorological Organization established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Since that time, the IPCC has issued five Assessment Reports and is currently underway on the Sixth Assessment Report to be released in 2022.

Women, however, have been taking on environmental challenges for some time. Almost sixty years ago, Rachel Carson published the watershed exposé *Silent Spring*, in which she challenged the wholesale and indiscriminate use of chemicals in farming and industrial practices. Instead of receiving the respect she deserved as a first-class scientist and brilliant writer, Carson was vilified and denigrated as a hysterical woman. Quiet and undeterred, she testified before Congress and gave televised interviews, even as she was battling for her life against cancer.

The two books do much to inform readers about the deep and structural connections between gender and climate. While Nagel's book is a comprehensive analysis of the areas in which gender permeates and underpins climate change, Robinson's *Climate Justice* is a climate policy and activist memoir. She acknowledges that she came late to the climate crisis—a surprising admission, considering the number of high-level, prestigious positions she's held: first woman president of Ireland (1990–97), U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (1997–2002), founder of Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative (2002–10), and most recently (2010), founder of the Mary Robinson Foundation on climate justice. Despite her late arrival, Robinson has come to understand the central role of climate change in all aspects of social and international life and as one of the most powerful drivers of gender inequality around the world.

*Climate Justice* is an elegant and readable account of climate information and policy, embedded in ten powerful accounts of climate activists from around the world, eight of which focus on women. In one account, Oxfam convenes a panel of African farmers that features four women and one man. All of them speak about the drastically changing local climate and their experiences becoming climate ambassadors in an effort to bring their indigenous knowledge to the wider world. They then bring valuable analyses and innovative projects to their home communities. In another story, the Yupik people of Western Alaska have known for years that local conditions have been changing drastically and destructively. Seeing these local changes, Patricia Cochrane, an Inupiat trained in science, brings her scientific training and indigenous knowledge to the table of climate policy and chairs the Alaska Native Science Commission. And in yet another story, Vu Thi Hien, an accomplished scientist at Hanoi University, realizes that

**“Women knew more and worried more than men about climate change, and [not surprisingly] were more modest about their knowledge.”**



Then, on an unusually hot day in late June of 1988, climate scientist James Hansen testified before Congress about the serious dangers of climate change (called “global warming” in those early days). Posted at the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, Dr. Hansen drew clear cause-and-effect connections between the increase in greenhouse gases and rising global temperatures. The account of his testimony appeared the next day on the front page of *The New York Times*, where Hansen is quoted as saying, “It [climate change] is already happening now.” Then, in 1989, Senator Al Gore began giving presentations on global warming; later, as vice president, he promoted the Kyoto Protocol to its ratification (95-0) in the U.S. Senate (1997). Gore's presentations resulted in his book and the film documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006).

After Carson's death, it did not take long for other women to take up the challenge and establish both theoretical and problem-solving approaches to environmental degradation. The French feminist Francoise D'Eaubonne coined the term “ecofeminism” in 1974, and her work inspired many to begin to analyze the linked domination of women and nature perpetrated by patriarchal systems. Some of the many women who contributed to this effort include Ynestra King, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Patricia Hill Collins, Vandana Shiva, and Karen Warren. I bring up their groundbreaking work to acknowledge their courage and leadership, and to place Mary Robinson's *Climate Justice* and Joane Nagel's *Gender and Climate Change* in their larger context, as part of the deep and serious environmental work that women have accomplished over the last sixty years.

Vietnam's forests are being ravaged by overcutting for timber, mining, and farming. Moreover, the US's use of the toxic defoliant Agent Orange during the Vietnam War accounts for the destruction of six percent of Vietnam's forests. Undeterred by the powerful gender hierarchies in her culture, Hien begins to educate local communities—and especially women—as forest stewards.

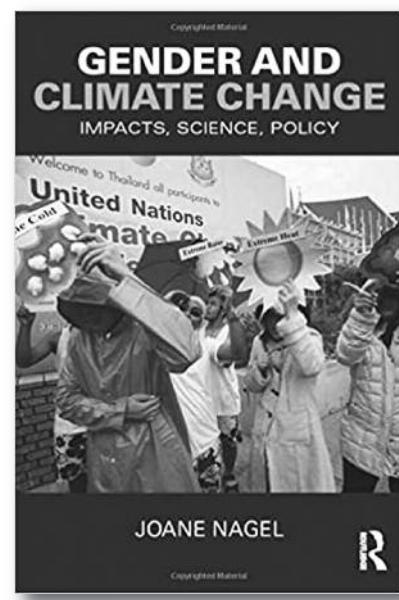
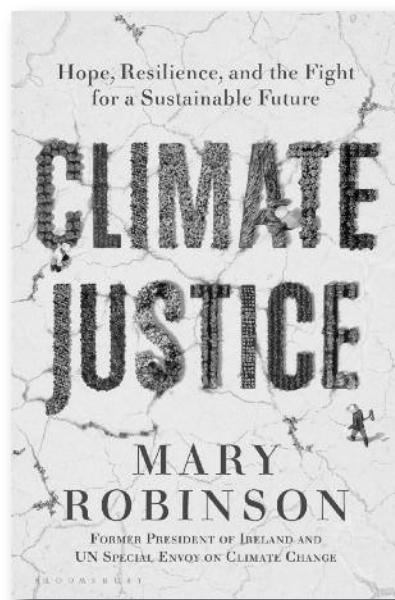
The accounts in *Climate Justice* share a trajectory of awakening, power, and the promise of deep, community-based change. What Robinson does not take into account are the millions of women whose lives and well-being are often sacrificed on the altar of Western-style “development.” There is much hope and resilience in her activist memoir, but the stories of loss, sexual violence, and cultural destruction perpetrated against girls and women should also be told.

Conversely, if Nagel's *Gender and Climate Change* reads like a textbook, that's because it could easily be the primary text for a course on gender and climate. Don't be put off by its style: It's jam-packed with tremendous amounts of information about the effects of climate change, climate science, and climate skepticism on women around the world. In contrast to Robinson's activist memoir, you may not read *Gender and Climate Change* cover to cover in a few days. It will, however, be your go-to book on the many ways in which gender and climate intersect.

Two of Nagel's examples serve to illustrate these points: First, women do much of traditional agriculture around the world, particularly in the global South. In fact, women's work accounts for well over half of all the food produced in the world. Droughts and changing seasonal patterns have profound and deleterious effects on local food production, and these conditions hit women and their families particularly hard. Second, women and girls are the ones who find and fetch water for their communities. Throughout much of the developing world, they are likely to spend twice the amount of time procuring water than the men in the community. With increasing drought conditions, more time carrying water means less time to spend in school—another driver of gender inequity.

Two other aspects of *Gender and Climate Justice* are particularly revelatory: the gender politics of climate skepticism (especially in the United States) and the military-science complex as a moving force behind climate change research and policy. Both of these areas reveal deeply masculinist approaches to war, science, and the denial of science, and Nagel presents the research about climate-change denial with rich discussions about gender's impact on understanding and accepting climate change. Overall, women are much more likely to accept the science on climate change, especially when it comes to what is called anthropogenic global warming (caused by us humans). Nagel notes that women are more likely than men to be "other oriented and socially responsible." A Gallup poll also shows that "women knew more and worried more than men about climate change, and [not surprisingly] were more modest about their knowledge."

Robinson and Nagel point to new and fruitful ways to think about gender and climate change. Intersectionality has become a powerful heuristic for



analyzing and understanding the multiple interlocking dimensions of identities and power since Kimberlé Crenshaw first introduced the term in 1989. I now propose an expanded notion of intersectionality that brings geographic place and local climate conditions into the mix. By including climate change, we can foreground issues of environmental injustice, especially as it affects women and girls, and we will get a more complete picture of the real costs of the climate crisis that is now upon us. Women's work. ♻️

**Judith Chelius Stark, Ph.D.** is a Professor of Philosophy and the Environment at Seton Hall University in South Orange, NJ. Dr. Stark lectures and writes about the ethical dimensions of climate change. She is currently writing a book about the application of virtue ethics to the challenges of climate change.

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# MIRROR IMAGE

## *The Exhibition of Persephone Q*

By Jessi Jezewska Stevens

New York, NY; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020, 224 pp., \$26.00, hardcover

Reviewed by Noelle McManus

Percy Q cannot stop trying to kill her husband. That is the situation Jessi Jezewska Stevens drops us into in her debut novel, *The Exhibition of Persephone Q*. Many times, Percy (whose real name is, in fact, not Percy, but something that she never reveals) has woken up in the middle of the night, “pinch[ed] his airways closed,” and then let go. Is it power she craves? Freedom from her current situation? She is not sure. The Towers fell just a few months before, and nothing is certain anymore.

Stevens spins a bizarre, ghostly story in a bizarre, ghostly New York, flickering with memories and hallucinations. Percy has just learned she is pregnant but cannot bring herself to tell her husband, Misha—whom she barely even recognizes. One day, she receives an unmarked package: a pamphlet advertising her ex-fiancé’s new photography show, “The Exhibition of Persephone Q.” Each photo shows a nude, sleeping woman, her face turned away, blissfully unaware as buildings gradually disappear from the skyline:

*Though the world within the photographs grows increasingly menacing and strange, the woman on the bed seems unconcerned. The passage of historical time, recorded in the destruction of the city out the window and in the deterioration of the room, has no effect on her...*

This seemed a little unfair. She was asleep, after all. Who knows what she would have felt if she’d woken up?

It takes Percy a moment to realize that the woman in the photos isn’t just an allegory or a faceless representation of the feminine; it’s *her*, in her old apartment, body on full display. But she has no way of proving this, there being no evidence on the new internet, and no one she tells seems to believe her. She’s alone in a city of millions of people, a frantic Cassandra pleading to be recognized.

Percy spends the bulk of the book learning to recognize herself. Stevens give us moments of dizzying self-awareness, claustrophobic reminders that we exist just as much as anyone around us. “The city became a length of reel snipped from

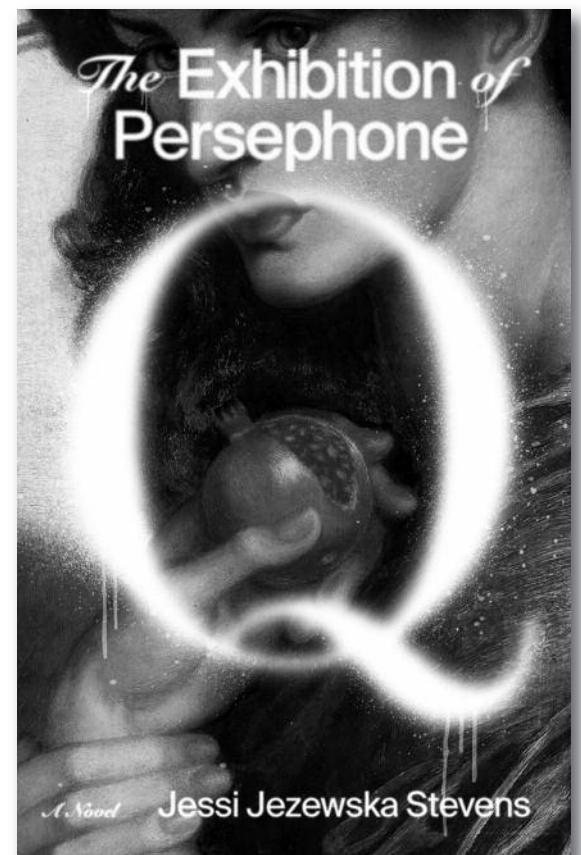
silent film,” Percy notes once, “melodramatic, halting, and poorly spliced. It never occurred to me that was how I looked most of the time.” She becomes painfully mindful of the fact that she is real and can be seen, to the point of near-insanity. But this feeling of craziness is exactly what Stevens would have us feel; an important facet of the book is the notion of so-called “hysteria.” Why is it that Percy starts to feel like she’s losing her mind? Because everyone else seems to think she is. In a conversation with her ex-fiancé (who she, interestingly, still refers to as only “my fiancé”), he pities her:

The corners of his eyes softened with a sadness I found persuasive. He shook his head.

Percy, he said softly. You know that’s absurd.

Her story is one many women will find familiar. How often are female victims of harassment and assault looked down upon, not believed? How often do abusers gaslight the people they prey upon, insisting that they must be imagining things? In *Persephone Q*, it seems that the entire world is laughing at Percy, telling her she’s *surely* overreacting. We as readers even begin to question her narration’s legitimacy. If everyone else says it isn’t her in the exhibition, couldn’t it be possible that they’re right? Maybe pregnancy hormones have started to mess with her mind. Maybe she’s desperate to rationalize the emptiness left behind in her ghost town of a city. As a reader, as I began to think like this, I tried to stop. *Believe survivors*, I’d remind myself. *Believe women*. But even Percy herself starts to question her intuition, musing, “And I suppose that is how casually one version of reality detaches from the truth; it peels away naturally, like damp wallpaper in a neglected room.”

Unusually enough, Stevens—who has a BA in mathematics—analyzes these abstract issues with heavy technicality. It’s an unorthodox choice, and tricky at first, but it soon becomes clear that no other style could fully encapsulate Percy’s story. “In any scenario, *p* was the chance that something terrible would come to pass, and *q* was the status



quo,” she tells us. “The coin flipped day to day.” She views her situation from the perspective of an outsider or a researcher, examining her mental decline with the same pragmatism as she lists simple facts and observations. Her logical outlook on the world is a guard; she tries to shield herself from the absurdity of her situation by recounting it rationally, but to no avail. Frighteningly dreamlike events still slip through the cracks, and Percy has nowhere to hide.

Technicality, after all, cannot work in a time where nothing makes sense. New York has surely changed, and Percy knows that. She says, “The world was trash. There was never enough. Lower Manhattan was built upon it, we shipped whole landfills out to sea, on barges bellowing mighty horns.” Inexplicable occurrences are scattered throughout the story: a neighbor who disappears and never returns, cryptic encounters with strangers on the street, the puzzling death of Percy’s mother. Human as she is, Percy wants to make sense of things, to find answers. But this broken New York weighs heavy on her back; there aren’t any answers at all.

Stevens has combined the surreal with the actual to create a book painfully relevant to this new age of female testimony. *Persephone Q* deals dexterously



Nina Subin

Jessi Jezewska Stevens

with the theme of the Muse. Anyone, she teaches us, can make a woman into whatever they'd like her to be. A woman, after all, is only an object of art—a statue, a portrait, a naked form on a bed. Why should it matter to the world that Percy sees her own form on those gallery walls? The woman in the photographs is no longer "her"—she's someone else entirely, Persephone Q, the woman her ex-fiancé wanted all along. No one in this novel is allowed to remain as themselves; they must always be subject to others' perceptions and whims. Even Percy herself falls into the habit of changing the people around her. She reforms her idea of her husband; she fantasizes about meeting with an old friend she's lost all contact with; she creates new images of her late mother, noting, "This was the upside to not knowing enough. I could imagine her however I pleased. I wondered if I'd recognize her, were I to see her

now. If, in my visions of her, she'd recognize herself." At the end of it all, it makes no difference which version is the original. Both become real at the moment of conception. Both become independent of each other.

*The Exhibition of Persephone Q* leaves us at the tail end of a crucial moment, one that perhaps could've been developed to a cleaner resolution. But in all other aspects, Stevens has written a fantastic debut that asks more questions than it gives explanations. The reader may see herself in nearly every facet of Percy, whether or not there are any similarities to be drawn. The protagonist we envision after following Percy's story can never be the exact one that Stevens designed. 

**Noelle McManus** is a student of Linguistics and Spanish at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

POETRY

## Resisting Intrusions



ren't you tired of the daily onslaught of mass emails that buttonhole you for a response, addressing you by your first name as if you were old friends? (Looking at you, Nancy Pelosi, who is probably my most frequent correspondent these days.) Take this survey! Donate! Come on, we know you care! The people who write these emails have no idea who you are, but they are geniuses at creating a false sense of intimacy that they

hope will morph into a sense of obligation. Rachel Blau DuPlessis captures the spirit of these emails perfectly in "The Self." As the title suggests, the real subject of the poem is the target of all that badgering, wheedling, begging, and increasingly exasperated nudging. Who is this "Rachel" whose attention is being demanded in such a rude and intrusive way? She seems to be resisting. At least so far.

—Katha Pollitt

### The Self

Rachel, you have a new suggested connection to review.

Rachel, we've asked and we've asked.

Can I be honest with you, Rachel.

Rachel: you've been selected to complete a time-sensitive digital poll. We are 12 responses short in 19146 of being able to analyze our data with statistical confidence.

I am asking you personally, Rachel

Hey Rachel! I saw you forgot to respond to this?

rachel are you ignoring our survey on purpose?

—Rachel Blau DuPlessis

**Rachel Blau DuPlessis**, poet, critic, and collagist, is the author of the multi-volume long poem *Drafts* (1986–2012), collage poems *Graphic Novella* (2015) and *NUMBERS* (2018), and other books. Her most recent critical book, *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (Iowa, 2012), is part of a trilogy of works about gender and poetics that includes *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* and *Blue Studios: Poetry and its Cultural Work* (both from University of Alabama). She has published many other books of poetry, and critical books on modern poetry, fiction, and gender, and has edited or co-edited four anthologies, including *The Feminist Memoir Project* (with Ann Snitow). She is Professor Emerita of Temple University in Philadelphia.

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# Write to Life

*Choice Words: Writers on Abortion*

Edited by Annie Finch

Chicago, IL; Haymarket Books, 2020, 420 pp., \$28.95, hardcover

*Reviewed by Catharine R. Stimpson*

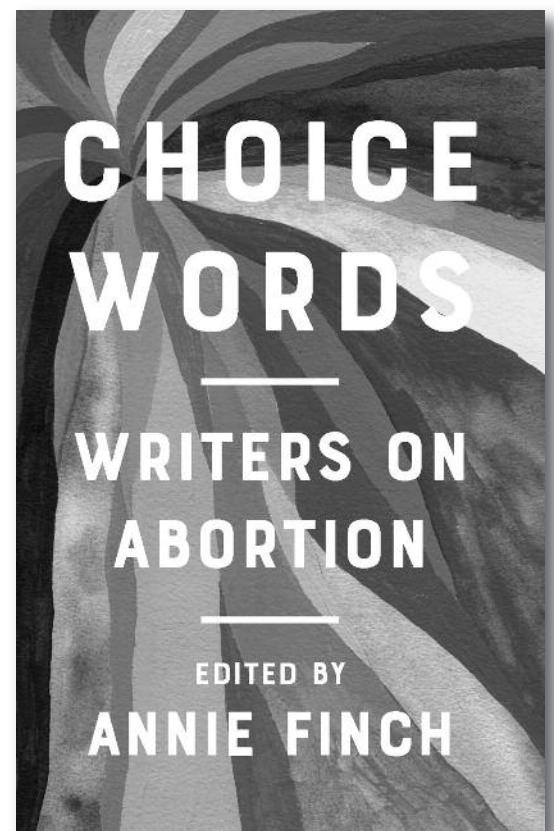
In March, as the coronavirus pandemic was growing into a public health emergency as blatant as the siren of an ambulance, I read the landmark anthology *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion*. The collection's editor, Annie Finch, wants "to make clear that bodily autonomy is key to human freedom and integrity." The title—*Choice Words*—is a nice pun. The hundreds of selections focus on whether a woman can make decisions

about her health, but "choice" also describes something of special worth, and the power to choose is worth fighting for.

In a poem by Sylvia Ramos Cruz, the heroine is an overworked, humane, harassed doctor "...[who] knows/ (safe) abortion is health care." In 2017, the World Health Organization estimated that 25 million unsafe abortions occur around the world each year. I thought of this poem as some states were putting containment and mitigation strategies into place, such as delaying non-essential surgeries and medical procedures. Ever alert for opportunities to burden women needing terminations, the governments of Texas and Ohio quickly moved to define abortions as non-essential, cynically conjoining the public health crisis of COVID-19 with the public health crisis of abortion constrictions. If the coronavirus is nature's creation, the vicious tragedy of unsafe abortions is a human one.

I never had an abortion—I was too frightened of getting pregnant, too lucky, and too much in love with women rather than men. Growing up, however, I attended several "shotgun weddings," a code we all understood. The bride's pregnancy had forced a marriage between two teenagers, given an unwanted child "legitimacy," and "saved face" for a family. The children were born. Some "turned out well." Some did not. Some of the marriages lasted. Some did not.

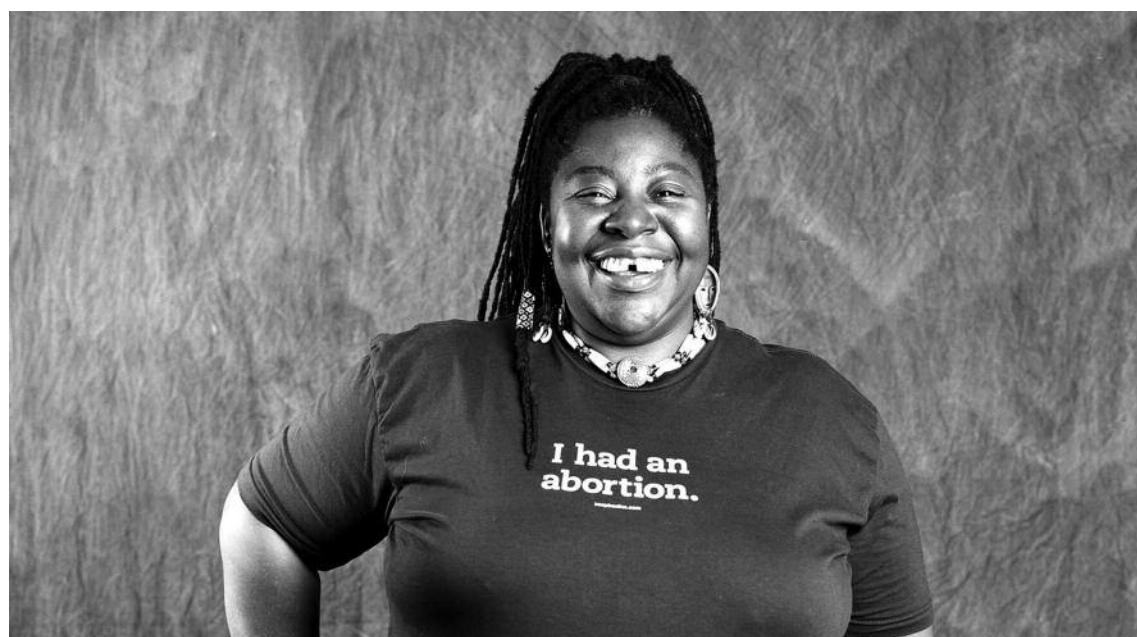
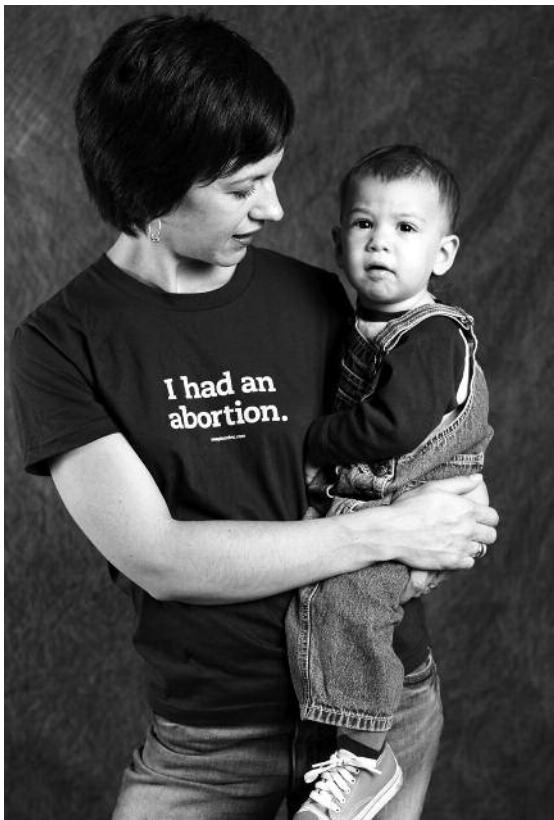
Finch did have an abortion—in 1999, when she was already the mother of two, an experience that came with an "initial sense of shock and loss." A poet with a PhD in literature, she turned to her subject for help. Literature, she reasoned, not only provokes understanding of both self and others. It



also offers poetic justice to women who have suffered but whose voices have gone unheard.

Searching through cultures of past and present in the United States and globally, Finch unearthed an astonishing diversity of authors who had written about abortion. Some—Amy Tan, Joyce Carol Oates, Audre Lorde, Margaret Atwood—are well-known; others are a cause for discovery and wonder. Together, they deploy a range of genres: fiction, poetry, plays, essays, autobiographies, liturgies, and rituals. Grateful though I am for this bounty, I missed the French and American manifestos in which women, some with the power of fame, publicly stated that they had had illegal abortions—potent weapons in the fight to legalize abortion. (Fortunately, another recently published book, *Burn It Down: Feminist Manifestos for the Revolution* by Breanne Fahs, includes Simone de Beauvoir's "Manifeste des 343," signed by her and 342 other women, some major celebrities and cultural figures, saying they had had abortions, then illegal in France.)

Inseparable from the variety of genres is the diversity of writers. Not surprisingly, then, they show the differences among women of "poverty, wealth, politics, ethnicity, (race), class, religion, marital status, age, geography, and/or nationality." The authors live under disparate laws and customs. Abortions, and the larger policies about gender and reproduction in which they are embedded, have cruelly different meanings and practices nation by nation. Ana Bladiana's ironically titled "The Children's Crusade," for instance, published in a student magazine and secretly distributed, condemns a 1966 decree that all Romanian women give birth to at least four children. An excerpt from Mo Yan's novel *Frog* dramatizes the violent struggle by Chinese Communist party officials to force a village woman to abort her fourth child, a number that exceeds the family's official allowance. "You Have No Name, No Grave, No Identity" is Manisha Sharma's elegy for the Indian girls, perhaps more than six million each year, who are wiped away in sex-selective abortions (an antiseptic name) in a culture that too often values boys over girls.



**“Searching through cultures of past and present in the United States and globally, Finch unearthed an astonishing diversity of authors who had written about abortion.”**

In excruciatingly sharp contrast, “Sorry I’m Late,” by Kristen R. Ghodsee, tells of a lunch in contemporary Bulgaria in which an American interviews a local woman who works for an NGO. The Bulgarian apologizes for her delay, but she has had an abortion that morning, then had to run some errands and found herself in bad traffic. The abortion for her is neither traumatic nor shameful nor a “big deal.” Indeed, the writer muses, as birth control goes, a Bulgarian abortion compares favorably with her years of ingesting hormones.

Because of these demographic, legal, and social differences, and because of the stubborn ineluctability of individuals, each of the women in these texts has experiences specific to her. Desiree Cooper’s “First Response” depicts a chorus of women responding to their pregnancies and abortions: “Joyce didn’t have sex until she was married eight years later. Trish went back to work like nothing ever happened. We made a donation every anniversary. We were pregnant with memory for the rest of our lives. We never thought about it again.”

Unifying these diversities are two blunt facts. First, fertile women can become pregnant. Fertile men cannot. They impregnate. Second, women are neither playgirls nor playthings who giggle their way through abortions. Although some may be in denial, most intuit when they become pregnant. They then traverse the many chambers of the self, soul, and society. As Katha Pollitt (author of *Pro: Reclaiming Abortion Rights*) writes in her introduction, “Abortion is always serious. As serious as birth.”

To represent, narrate, and symbolize these facts, Finch calls on literature. She believes in the salutary powers of this fusion of language, perceptions, feelings, imagination, and craft. Although charged with metaphor and linguistic skill, the texts in *Choice Words* are relatively readable. Only a few—for example, those of Kathy Acker or Camonghne Felix—are formally experimental. Yet, all, from the most gentle of elegies to the most sarcastic and angry of condemnations, radiate a compelling honesty.

Inseparable from Finch’s belief in literature is her conviction in the necessity of women being able to use language, to speak and to write, whether we are professionals or not. One of the haunting themes of *Choice Words* is the price women pay for being unable to act as self-possessors of language, for being deprived of words, for the biting of the tongue and the suffocation of the mouth. The reasons? Shame, fear, vulnerability, poverty, isolation. In “She Did Not Tell Her Mother (A Found Poem),” teenagers in Kenya know young girls have died during an abortion. However, before her ghastly procedure, “She did not tell her mother. She started crying at night.”

Of course, people have also long talked or written about abortion. Especially, when abortion is illegal and/or socially shunned, language has taken three major forms: private or coded, lies, and public discourse. Accounts of the first appear consistently in *Choice Words*: speech that is solitary, or, if shared, is secretive, underground, words passed along a network. These are stories of a frightened young woman talking to a friend, or a mother, or a doctor who might understand. As texts by Judith Arcana and Paula Kamen remind us, in the 1960s women in

Chicago could find safe illegal abortions if they had access to a piece of paper with a phone number and the code words “Call Jane” on it.

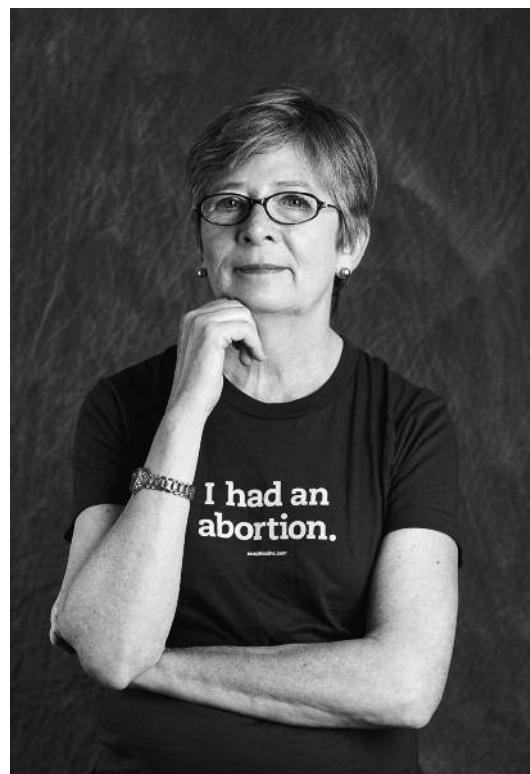
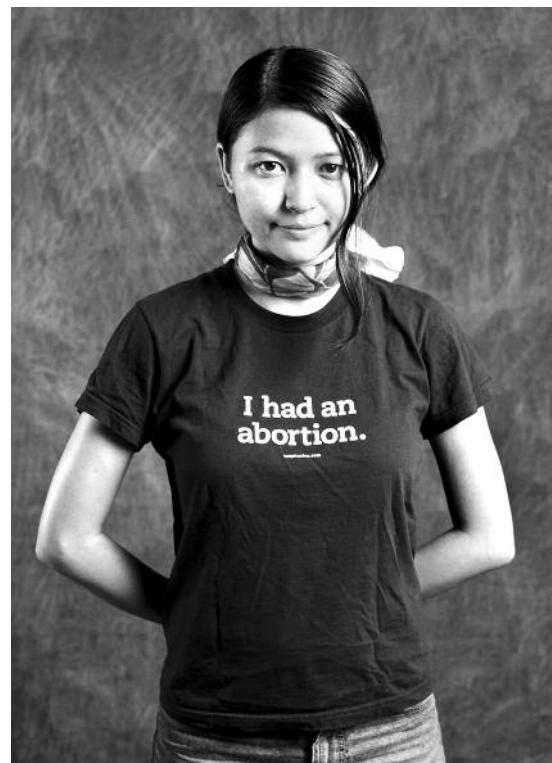
Although some private or coded language leads to useful communication, it also enables a second form of language: the lie. In Langston Hughes’s 1934 story, “Cora Unashamed,” a badly exploited black maid psychologically adopts Jessie, the “slow child” of her employers. When Jessie becomes pregnant, her mother takes her to Kansas City for an abortion from which she eventually dies. The official cause is a lie: fatal indigestion caused by big city food. Cora, at great personal risk, exposes the lie in the middle of a Very Respectable and Pure White funeral and accuses the parents of killing Jessie and her child.

As text after text dramatizes, the lies, if no Cora upends them, breed the most awful social hypocrisies, those enraging discrepancies between social appearance and reality. In “The Scarlet A,” Soniah Kamal interviews women who were once members of the same high school class in Pakistan. Unmarried women, who have lost their virginity outside of marriage, go for agonizing abortions to a “butcher under the bridge,” but married women, who have theoretically lost their virginity on their wedding night, have safe abortions with anesthesia in hospitals where they afterwards rest comfortably on pillows brought from home.

The third major form of language in *Choice Words*, public discourse, comprises the varying legal, political, philosophical, and religious arguments about gender, reproduction, and power. The abortion “issue” is fought not only about abortion as a practice, but about which narrative should prevail—for example, that of the “undeserving” girl who wants to fit into her prom dress *vs.* that of the rape survivor with a heart condition for whom abortion is a life-saving procedure. Katha Pollitt speaks to the frequent flatness that occurs in public speech about abortion when she recounts that her files were “crammed with articles” about abortion, yet, “... the debate over legal abortion is curiously abstract; we might be discussing brain transplants.”

By contrast, the literature of *Choice Words* is vividly concrete. Here are exact lists of medicinal herbs, the color of a pregnancy test, the look of the abortionist’s table, the sounds of metallic instruments in preparation for a curette, the chilly feel of the stirrups as feet are elevated and grasped, the smell of vomit, the excruciating cramps and pain, the look of streams and clots of blood, perhaps a glimpse of embryonic mucus, the stomach-clenching guilt. A woman cannot break her silence about abortion without deploying such physically, psychologically, and ethically precise language. It marks pain and scars, but it is also a breakthrough to memory, partial or full healing of trauma, and community.

Among the concrete experiences are being forced to listen to shouts of “murderer” or “baby killer” as a woman approaches a clinic. Some of the most powerful texts tell of these physical encounters and of encounters with punitive laws. In “Tweets in Exile from Northern Ireland,” Jennifer Hanratty tells of her 2018 journey, with a supportive husband, from Northern Ireland to



England so they can obtain a legal abortion. Until the law was changed in October of 2019, women and health care providers in her home country could get up to life imprisonment for ending a pregnancy. The couple's decision to go, like the trip itself, is "tortuous." However, their son Linus, if carried to full term, would have been born fatally ill, suffering from anencephaly, the medical term for being born without a brain. Hanratty tweeted, she tells us, so people can understand "the real impact of the law: not in an abstract way, but its real visceral human impact."

When the anti-abortionists have power, their punitive yearnings, if implemented, can take visceral form. An iconic figure in *Choice Words* is Purvi Patel, raised in an immigrant family in Indiana, who was sentenced to twenty years for "feticide" after a self-induced abortion. (Patel appealed, with the help of organizations such as National Advocates for Pregnant Women, and was released from prison in 2016.)

Because nothing is, or should be, alien to literature, writers must explore and imagine the lives of these anti-abortion activists. Thus, they are here in *Choice Words*: the protestors who stifle their doubts, the protestors who do not, the religious zealots who organize demonstrations and offer up a witchy woman to fight and a patriarchal God to worship. One such text, an Ursula K. LeGuin

passage from "Standing Ground," is a split-screen narrative. On one side is Sharee, seeking a clinic abortion, and her daughter Delaware, keeping her company. Sharee may be mentally challenged, but she knows why she wants an abortion. She was impregnated in a rape. On the other side are the protestors. One is a young woman, Mary, a common name in the texts that tear apart rigid Christian ideologies. Mary is scared, but feels at war, part of an "army of the Right." For an older man, Norman, the protest is an outlet for two otherwise frustrated drives: aggression and eros. In lascivious detail, he imagines the women in the "Butcher Shop."

Reading about Mary and Norman, I returned to a memory of being a young activist in New York working to legalize abortion. I am speaking on a panel in a school auditorium. On the right side, in middle rows, are our opponents: women dressed in pale, collared blouses. Voiceless, they are holding red roses. Their spokesperson is a middle-aged man who tells us about the travels of a sperm through the vagina and onwards, about the baby it engenders, and about the equivalent travels of an instrument that will murder the baby—only because a woman without God selfishly wanted sex. Voice roiling with passion, he is turning himself on in public while wearing a suit and tie.

The organizing structure Finch devised places her texts in one of five sections: "Mind," how women make their decisions; "Body," the physical aspects of abortion; "Heart," its emotions; "Will," the "personal and political power inherent in our ability to give life, and the courage and determination that the exercise of choice can require even where it is legal and culturally acceptable"; and, finally, "Spirit." These divisions establish artificial boundaries among the texts, which do co-mingle mind, body, heart, will, and, often, spirit.

Moreover, if *Choice Words* had been organized chronologically rather than thematically, I could have more easily discerned dramatic historical changes and comparisons in "real time" among countries. In the United States alone, change since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 has included the growth of anti-abortion movements, their partial shift from violence to legislative activities, and the rise of pharmaceutical abortifacients such as RU-486. (My thanks to the anthropologist Faye Ginsburg for historical insight.)

For example, in so ordering the poems, I would have started with "The Mother," a tender, beautiful poem of 1945 by Gwendolyn Brooks, in which "the mother" remembers with grief and love "the children you got that you did not get." Surely, this must allude to the children of enslaved women, ripped from them, as well as abortions; such children who are at once presence and absence. Then, I would have found the 1962 Anne Sexton poem "The Abortion," a foundational text of "Confessional Poetry," a far more self-lacerating narrative of the drive to an abortionist in Pennsylvania. Then, Marge Piercy's adamant feminist declaration (1980), "Right to Life," seizes the name of an anti-abortion movement and makes it her own. Defiantly, the speaker declares, "This is my body. If I give it to you/ I want it back. My life/is a nonnegotiable demand."

Finally, I would have encountered a narrative about events in 2016, "River," by Hanna Neuschwander. The anti-abortion presidency of Donald J. Trump looms on the horizon. However, a couple still has access to legal abortions. New diagnostic technologies of reproduction—ultrasound, a fetal MRI—also exist, but they inform the parents that their twenty-two-week-old fetus has severe brain abnormalities. Technical knowledge can make decisions harder. As so many others do, the parents mourn and bite on the truth that "there is no right way for your child to die."

Through a Kickstarter campaign, Finch has raised money to donate copies of this book to clinics where literature might serve a woman sitting and waiting for her turn. Finch also hopes that the book will pollinate a collective and deeper understanding about women's experiences within and across cultures. *Choice Words* tells us of decisions that demand some degree of moral and psychological and physical courage. None of these texts is about giddily throwing bouquets and confetti into the air, but the collection is asking for a kind of marriage: of understanding sex, of compassion, of common sense about a mother's health and a child's flourishing, and of respect for a woman's capacity to say, "Perhaps there is no impeccably right way, but this is the best way now." 📖

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# Love and Death

*Boys of Alabama*

By Genevieve Hudson

New York, NY; Liveright, 2020, 272 pp., \$26.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Kait Heacock

Here's what I learned from reading debut novelist Genevieve Hudson's previous short story collection, *Pretend We Live Here*: She unravels her stories with a slow, measured pace; she is equally fascinated with the quotidian as she is with magic; and her plots and sentences twist in ways the reader rarely sees coming. Hudson has followed up her often Southern and very queer story collection with the gothic coming-of-age tale, *Boys of Alabama*.

Boys are a fascinating subject, and there are no shortage of books attempting to better understand them. Contemporary feminist writers like Liz Plank and Peggy Orenstein explore masculinity and young manhood in their recent nonfiction works, *For the Love of Men: A New Vision for Mindful Masculinity* and *Boys & Sex: Young Men on Hookups, Love, Porn, Consent, and Navigating the New Masculinity*, respectively. What drew me to *Boys of Alabama* as a sort of fiction version of books by feminists about boys was my shared interest with Genevieve in using our queer female gaze to turn the lens on teen boys. I suspect our fascination with them is that they represent confidence and freedoms teen girls rarely feel.

The main boy of Alabama is recent German transplant Max, who has relocated to the small town of Delilah because of his dad's job transfer to the local car plant. Max joins the football team and quickly makes friends at his new school, partially because his Germanness is exotic to them and partially because many of them are Christian zealots determined to save his agnostic soul. The one kid at school who allures and intrigues him is Pan, a self-labeled witch who dresses in girl's clothes and sticks out like a sore thumb among the preppies and cowboys. The two boys strike up a fast and intimate connection, bound by their shared outsider status and Pan's discovery of Max's secret.

Soon, magic enters what would otherwise be a sweet story of first love peppered with gritty Southern characters and commentary on religion, manhood, and homosexuality. Max's secret is this: "Death had begun calling out to him years ago, when puberty mounted his body." Whenever Max lays hands on a dead creature, be it animal or plant, it comes back to life, leaving "stains of sweetness in his mouth." He uses his ability to resurrect trampled flowers, smashed bugs, and even dead pets. It gives him side effects like headaches and a strange candy taste on his tongue. Before coming to Alabama, Max "had finally detoxed off death. His hunger for sugar subsided. His headaches fled him. When a craving rose up, he ran instead ... When death stopped him in his tracks, he had comforts to turn to for relief." But all that progress has been negated by the move to Alabama, where the need to heal surpasses Max's will.



Thomas Teal

Genevieve Hudson

In his new home, Max is pulled by two different sides, like in a classic good-versus-evil superhero story. Pan encourages him to lean into his power and raise more than plants and stray animals back from the dead. Pan represents a wild rebelliousness, but he also brings back Max's repressed memories of his first boyhood love and the tragic death he didn't reverse in time. On the other side of the struggle for Max's soul is the Judge, his classmate's father and a politician who tells any constituent who will listen about the time he fell from a cliff, was dead for three days, and then drank poison because a vision from God told him to do so. Max is drawn to the Judge's certainty because he thinks faith might help him better understand his unexplainable power. "Max wondered, as he often compulsively did, how science would explain his ability... He questions if a god was indeed *out there* and if God had bestowed this power, this curse upon him."

The Judge recruits Max to work alongside his son and other teenagers on his campaign. He tells him, "We're building up a Christian army, son, and not everyone is up to the task. But what do you think? You want to be a warrior?" As Max slips further into the Judge's world, he begins to worry

both his atheist mother and Pan, who knows firsthand the Judge's view of homosexuality and how easy it is for "good people" to use the Bible to justify hate. Max knows this too, but the warmth of the Judge's smile and the eternal forgiveness it promises is enticing. His struggle is to form an identity, both as a person who possesses a supernatural ability and as a young gay man in an intolerant place. "Max knew people became the place where they lived and made up all kinds of reasons to justify their becoming. He knew normal kids whose grandfathers had been Nazis. Max wondered what kind of a man he would become if given the choice. No one could tell him that yet."

Hudson, originally from Alabama, paints the setting with absolute care and richness, a town where there is nothing to do but "wander through the Walmart or drive out to the river to go inner-tubing and get drowned." The setting is lush, and the protagonist is lived-in, but I had some trouble keeping track of the many boys in young Max's orbit. The football team is made up of Boone, Lorne, Wes, and Knox—monosyllabic boys who feel mostly interchangeable. I wish they could have been shaded as deeply as Max's artist mother, who is supportive of him but apprehensive of her new residence, or even the neighborhood gossip, Miss Jean, who drinks a diet cola in the morning and wears football jerseys and red nails.

That the boys are not fully formed is likely due to the sheer number of them. This isn't a story about a ragtag high-school football team; it's Max's story, and so precise characterization, like the story's only instance of magical ability, is bestowed onto him. Yet the teen-boy supporting cast shines brightly when Hudson treats them as a whole. When you are a teenager, you want nothing more than to belong, and to be unique like Pan is an invitation for harassment or worse. The boys move in a pack and make all decisions with a testosterone-ripened groupthink. Hudson writes about these boys with more than an anthropological interest; she writes about them with awe.

As the struggle for Max's soul propels the plot forward, he is torn between Pan's belief that "good is better than normal" and the Judge's warning that the "wages for sin is death." The plot points toward a showdown that never really comes. As Max ultimately reflects: "Pan and the Judge weren't so different. They both needed to believe in something. To have a purpose higher than themselves." The conclusion might be anticlimactic, but I guess literary fiction doesn't owe its readers the same resolution as a straightforward superhero story, and Hudson more than makes up for a lack of plot with a memorable main character and a unique spin on the coming-of-age story.

Watching Max come to terms with his differences, watching him yearn for understanding, meaning, and a place in the world is a joy, despite the heartbreak that is inevitable in adolescence. Like Pan and the Judge, "Max wanted a purpose, too. He wanted to believe life wasn't for nothing." This is the ultimate lesson of *Boys of Alabama*: Whether it is magic, a higher power, or yourself, have the courage to believe in something. 📖

Kait Heacock is a writer and book publicist based in Seattle.



# A PhD in Survival

*Degrees of Difference:  
Reflections of Women of Color on Graduate School*

Edited by Kimberly D. McKee and Denise A. Delgado

Champaign, IL; University of Illinois Press, 2020, 224 pp., \$19.95, paperback

*Reviewed by Carolyn Choi*

Women of color constitute less than ten percent of full-time faculty across universities in the United States. While faculty, staff, and student-led demonstrations, combined with consciousness-raising movements like #MeToo and #CiteBlackWomen, are making visible the systemic injustice that indigenous women and women of color (the book uses the acronym IWWOC) in the academy face, the experiences of IWWOC graduate students remain still marginal to these discussions. Microaggressions and racism in academia do not materialize upon gaining an academic job; they occur much earlier, often at the beginning of our graduate education. Within white institutions, IWWOC and queer students sit within a complex and uneven web of power structures and relationships. Our futures are beholden to the whims of our advisors and committee members, many of whom are unaware of their racial and gender biases. Meanwhile, our labor as instructors, research assistants, and administrative staff largely goes unacknowledged.

*Degrees of Difference*, a collection of eight first-person narratives of women of color in the academy, gives space to these rarely heard stories. Editors Kimberly D. McKee and Denise A. Delgado met as graduate students at Ohio State University and bonded over sharing strategies for surviving. A successful panel they produced at the 2015 National

Women's Studies Association meeting convinced them that IWWOC needed a book that would prepare them for the unique challenges they'd face in graduate school. The editors see the book "as a tool for women of color doctoral and master's students" as well as those just contemplating entering the academy to share in the knowledge of self-care, building solidarity, accessing pipeline programs, establishing mentorship, and creating lasting ties with communities and families. *Degrees of Difference* contributes to larger conversations about the systemic violence and injustice women of color face in higher education and works towards creating strategies for transformative change within and beyond the Ivory Tower.

Stories in this book are situated within the chronic failure of "diversity initiatives" in universities and departments to meaningfully confront the intersectional experiences that impact nonwhite women graduate students. Within neoliberal academic workplaces, commitments to diversity and inclusion have often served as mere illusory optics that ignore problems of racial wealth gaps within departments and university workplaces while exploiting those who have benefited from such programs by perpetuating notions of minority tokenism. This scenario played out frequently during my own graduate school career, starting even before applying to graduate school, when a male

professor man-spained to me that "sociologists don't like activists" and to "play it down." In grad school, I was part of student efforts to bring attention to the low numbers of Black and other minority students in doctoral programs at the university to expose institutionalized practices of racism and discrimination. The administration responded by increasing "diversity enrollment" via international students, many of whom were accepted with government funding to study abroad. By ignoring the issues that students of color and IWWOC brought to the table, the university signaled its refusal to make reparations for a long history of racism, continue its whitewashing, and undermined the efforts of faculty and students of color for racial justice and the eradication of gender bias.

As a remedy, one of the important themes of this book is to encourage women of color graduate students to embrace different aspects and intersections of our identity and become our "whole selves." Women of color graduate students are often told that to be successful academics they need to give up a portion of themselves—whether that means changing the way we look or dress or giving up the idea of children before tenure. Many of the stories in this book share the struggles of women of color in higher education having to choose between our families, communities, and careers. Carrie Simpson highlights the multitude of (often submissive) roles that women of color pursuing education are expected to play: dutiful daughters, sacrificing sisters and mothers, and A-rated academics. Confronted with a dominant culture that is only willing to accept tamed and one-dimensional versions of ourselves, women of color graduate students are not only forced to relinquish parts of their "whole selves" for their careers but to normalize these "superwoman tendencies"—what Soha Youssef describes in Arabic as *sett bmit ragel*, meaning "a woman as good as 100 men."

In her chapter, Youssef introduces this Arabic phrase to critique the dominant tendency of normalizing, even idolizing, women who seem to "do it all." In challenging patriarchal perceptions, Youssef, who is an international student, does not trade one culture for another in pursuing her

educational dreams but preserves her whole self: she situates her educational moves as part of the larger women's rights struggle in the Middle East while contesting the gaze of white faculty in her department. Youssef includes a fascinating discussion of being encouraged to dress more formally than her white peers. She writes:

The professor—a white woman, probably in her fifties—provided us with the typical advice that teaching students have to dress professionally on our teaching days.... She confirmed that women of color, like me, [needed to overdress] to overcompensate for our skin color.... For me, and probably for the other two women of color in the classroom, our professor's response meant extra work for us.

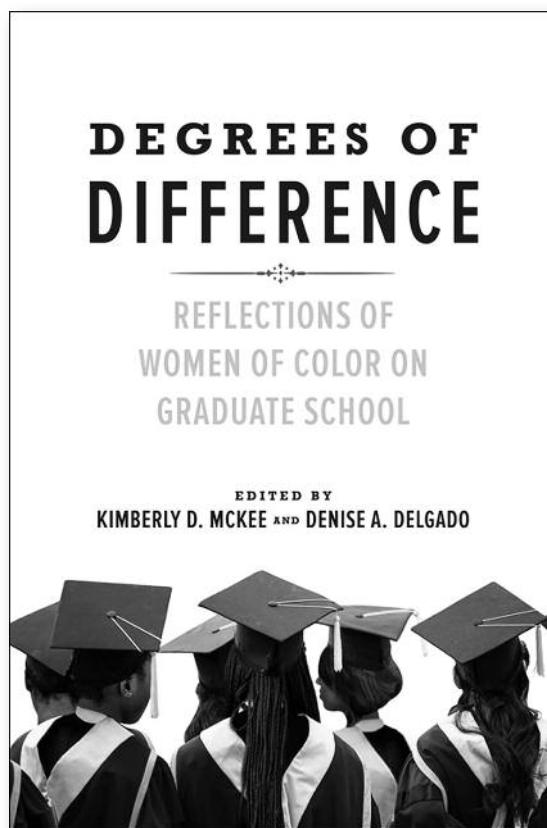
Dressing in white or western camouflage is further examined by Regina Emily Idoate's essay about being asked to hide Native American cultural regalia at her PhD graduation. Idoate was wearing a stole (a Western academic tradition) with the insignia of her Native American Studies program and reflecting sacred Indigenous colors when she was told by an administrator to take it off during the ceremony. Although she acquiesces at first, the author stands up for the right to represent her "whole self" during this important moment in her life—and to honor the biography that inspired her to pursue a PhD in indigenity public health in the first place. Regaining control over our image is a powerful way to steer the narrative as IWWOC.

These battles are fought not just at the institutional level but within the private confines of our intimate lives, as Carrie Simpson's chapter, which shares her experience of having children in graduate school, illustrates. Many women of color enter graduate school during prime childbearing years, but they do not qualify for paid or unpaid

**“Building a community of women of color scholars becomes a challenge when institutional structures do not exist.”**

leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act. These gendered structural inequalities of the workplace are exacerbated at home, where women are inundated by the "second" even "third shift." Taking an intersectional approach, Simpson delineates how men of color are often implicated in the compounding of women's powerlessness and oppression by upholding patriarchal, gendered structures within the home. Acknowledging the difficulty in navigating the unevenly gendered structures of intimacy she offers helpful strategies—such as letting go of cultural expectations to be the main caretaker of children or negotiating a more equitable co-parenting system with partners. Renegotiating expectations and responsibilities are key to creating a sustainable support system as graduate students, mothers, and partners.

Delia Fernández draws from her own experiences as a former McNair Scholar (a federally funded initiative to increase underrepresented students in academia) to outline a framework for cultivating our own supportive spaces by finding mentors, building friendships with people with shared backgrounds, and carving out time for ourselves. Building a community of women of



color scholars becomes a challenge when institutional structures do not exist. This point is nowhere more poignant than in Délice Mugabo and Jenny Heijun Wills's chapter. In it, they describe the power of a no-need-to-say-why connection between women graduate students of color, in their case, manifested in the form of a much-needed *hug*. These kinds of real connections allow women of color graduate students to sustain their day-to-day lives under oppressive conditions.

But a hug is more than a temporary support—these friendships serve as the building blocks for forming strong academic communities that can sustain the hard work of decolonizing the academy.

In the same essay, Mugabo walks us through her experience in co-founding the Black Intellectuals' Reading Group in Montréal as a supportive space for mentorship, community building, and emotional and cultural support for students of radical Black studies. In the absence of critical race studies programs in Canada, the formation of this group becomes a transformative moment in establishing a home base for Critical Ethnic Studies and Black Studies but also starting the process of writing into existence the erased legacy of settler colonialism and slavery in the telling of French-Canadian "history."

The erasure of the histories and struggles of communities of color, however, does not just happen within the context of white academic institutions. Unfortunately, this also happens within progressive movements, many of which resist transformative change, and requires reflexivity among us. Aerial A. Ashlee's essay addresses the omission of Asian Americans in scholarship, examining systemic racism within the academy. Linking this omission to the perpetuation of the model minority myth, which portrays Asian Americans as a homogenously "well-off" racial

group, she argues that this tendency redacts the long history of Asian American racism. Although Asian American women make up less than one percent of PhD graduates in higher education, Ashlee points out Asian Americans are often excluded from IWWOC scholarship, "dangerously contribut[ing] to the erasure of Asian Americans' racialized experiences as people of color." These internal divisions are not just found in the US context but across transnational lines. Wills's work sheds light on the violence that occurs when US Ethnic Studies narratives conflate histories to establish racial consciousness on campuses in Canada in the name of a united front of "Continental North American Ethnic Studies." Despite shared experiences of marginalization, the author underscores the reflexive need to decenter the US-dominant narrative of ethnic and racialized experiences in foregrounding the distinct history of the Canadian Ethnic Studies struggle.

While powerfully framing the need for introspection from the larger scholars of color network and community, this book emphasizes the critical and transformative role of self-care. As Audre Lorde has written, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is ... an act of political warfare." In her essay, Arianna Taboada describes racial battle fatigue as a daily grind in the struggle to "navigat[e] spaces in higher education where subtle institutional racism and microaggressions are constant and unrelenting." This includes being subject to triggering remarks from racist faculty and grappling with the imperial roots of our respective disciplines. In addition to finding community and carving out time for our personal lives, medical student (now doctor) Nwadiog Ejiogu reminds us in her chapter to put our health and well-being first and simply survive. This means preparing our loved ones for the demands of graduate school, picking our battles in addressing inequalities in the classroom, and anticipating demeaning remarks from faculty and creating a self-care plan for that eventuality. Ejiogu counsels activist women of color not to be afraid to see a therapist, because "survival is resistance."

Ejiogu's tips came at a good time for me, a woman of color entering the last year of my PhD program. After more than five years of non-stop fighting—for our right to unionize on campus, for the rights of graduate students of color unfairly dismissed from our program, for a safe healthcare environment free of predators—I was depleted, hollow to the point that I wanted to give up. If not for my friends, fellow graduate students of color, I wouldn't have made it. Being able to connect with other women of color graduate students through this book has, in many ways, renewed my strength and passion for doing this work. The book reinforced the truth that women of color must put ourselves first and survive. In a time of confusion and countless disappointments, *Degrees of Difference* guided me to embrace my "feminist killjoy" (as Sara Ahmed puts it) and stay true to myself—no matter what. 📖

**Carolyn Choi** is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Southern California specializing in education, gender, and globalization. She has published in *Sexualities*, *International Migration Review*, and *Global Networks*. She is also co-author of the feminist children's book *IntersectionAllies: We Make Room for All*.

# The Epic of Girlhood

An essay by Margaret Morganroth Gullette

**L**'*Amica Geniale* is the title Elena Ferrante gave her novel about the strangely intense, ineluctable bond between two postwar Neapolitan girls, which somehow lasts through all the vicissitudes and estrangements of their adult lives, continuing deep into their sixties. In English the title appears literally as *My Brilliant Friend*. But I read it recently in the original Italian, which triggered an insight. Spoken in Italian, "l'amica geniale" sounds almost the same as "la mica-geniale," which translates as "the girl who is in no way brilliant."

Being playful and thoughtful with language, Ferrante may have had this feminist, two-faced Freudian pun in mind. Certainly, instances of the bright child's obtuseness crisscross the novel, if you look, but Ferrante's rapid, suspenseful, dramatic-prose fireworks keep us moving too fast. Lila's precocious abilities are so early made to seem "stolgorante" as well as "terribile"—dazzling as well as awesome—that even when confronted with her failures and masochistic twists of agency, readers consider Lila a genius suppressed, rather than diminished.

The first awed reading discerns only the obvious side of the hold that Lila has on Lenú. The alternative title asks: *If not brilliance, then what?* This ambiguity prompted me to work out the machinery of Lenú's enthrallment. Constructing the novel, Ferrante needed a psychologically plausible theory of why that bonding first occurred, and then, as the book swelled from one volume to four, plausible psychic supports for the vast structure of the whole relationship.

I hazard the guess that, as Ferrante wrote, she was not remembering a relationship from her own childhood but rather *inventing* Lenú's character to explain the nature of passionate girlhood bonding. I asked women my age about *their* first close friendships, and of those who had one, none of them remembers the reason for the bond, or even thinks it needed a reason. "She lived across the street." "How could I know now what I felt then?" Looking back, they find wisps of sensation, not a backstory. When I ask, "Which of you was the *leader*?" not one thinks the relationship was unequal. In fact, they deny the possibility of inequality. Equality—doing nice things together—is the content of their stories. In later life, none is still in touch with the other girl.

Except me. And my theory about why I bonded to my taller friend Marsha is amiable and thus different from Ferrante's ferocious *données*. Marsha's easy wit and good humor, balms to my sober, cloistered earnestness, contrast with Lenú's appetite for otherness and alienation. The tensest event of Marsha's and my saga was playing pick-up-sticks. We were goofy together. But I had been lonely until Marsha came into my life. And even the most innocuous, serene, ephemeral friendship serves to end the existential solitude of childhood, to mask its abject powerlessness, at the bottom of the monumental hierarchy of human divisions, still barely visible to children. It is then we learn class and status anxiety, fear, and the gall of injustice, first within the family and the neighborhood, and thence on up.

What often brings two children together are complementary needs, which fit them together like oddly cut puzzle pieces. But Ferrante forges links so hard that this friendship remains believably shatterproof for half a century. For this, Ferrante creates a fantastical, bull-headed leader and a mild follower. Lenú's character is revealed indirectly through scenes that show her subordinated and imitative, frightened and rash, time and again. With motiveless malignity, Lila throws Lenú's beloved doll down the cellar window into the basement of the local loan shark, the Ogre; so Lenú throws Lila's doll too, down into that frightening pit. At Lila's look, she asserts impenitently, "Whatever *you* do, *I* do." Lila decides they will walk upstairs to confront that same Ogre, Don Achille, and pulls Lenú with her, hand in hand. When Lila decides to walk out of the neighborhood to finally see the sea, Lenú obediently skips school and heads off with her, hand-in-hand. Lila goes forward willfully, physically dragging the other girl into fearful unknowns. But in late adulthood, the

impression of warm, dangerous solidarity, skin-to-skin, remains vivid. "I still feel Lila's hand in mine." "She pushed me to do one of the many things that alone I would never have had the courage to do," Lenú says of Lila. We aren't invited to ask what Lila needs from Lenú. But Lila's abrupt and dangerous way of being attracted to the timid girl who wanted to be braver, the good girl who wanted to be wilder. "I knew that Lila was a very bad girl." "I believed everything that she said to me." "She seemed the strongest of us children." "Any obstacle ahead of her lost its solidity." Lila throws a stone like a hard-ass boy—the kind of abused lad who acts out rather than cringing and learning self-discipline.

Indeed, what repels Lila's obedient friend are the rare times when Lila becomes timid, suffers like a normal subaltern child, seems too much like Lenú herself: "I felt her suffering, I couldn't bear the trembling of her lower lip and I was almost ready to burst into tears." "She was suffering, and I didn't like her sorrow. I preferred her when she was different from me, very distant from my anxieties."

Lila never leaves Naples and Lenú rarely returns, and yet the tightness of the bond survives so many authorial inventions that might drive them apart as the decades go by: divergent socioeconomic milieus; different intellectual and creative interests; amorous debacles, several of which involve the same man. But what I—and women like me—love most about the series is that which occurs in the first novel: the curious,

compelling, not immediately explicable cementing of the bond. The moving, intensely imagined relationship between the two Neapolitan homegirls has resonated with grown women around the world: The novel has sold a million copies in forty countries. But, to my mind, the second volume, when the girls become sexual, is less riveting than the first, the third less than the second, the fourth less than the third. Something about the first volume keeps its hold on this reader, who recommends it unconditionally.

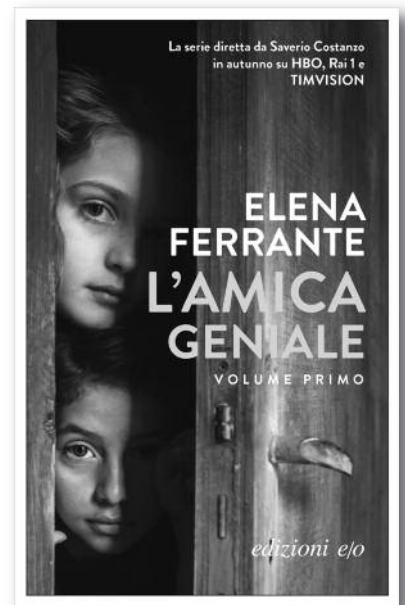
Many novels recognize children as precious selves with projects. But Ferrante's is the genius that gave the world meaningful girlhood. Just as Lenú and Lila read a copy of *Little Women* until it falls to bits, *My Not-Brilliant Friend*, with its unsettling girl-bonding and harsher realities, shreds the conventions of children's literature. Ferrante highlights childish ignorance and confusion: "My doll knew more than me," Lenú writes from the higher ladder of her years, a sentence that would be incomprehensible in the world of Louisa May Alcott. In Ferrante's Naples, those girls of six and seven and eight are already particularized persons with terrible motives. Every sentence respects each girl's weird integrity.

The truth is, first dyadic friendship has never before had the epic scribe it deserves, who recognizes the terrors of childhood and its ignominious defeats. Most such friendships do not have lastingly loyal consequences. Ferrante's representation of Lila and Lenú is gripping just *because*, so often in our own lives, we drift away from that first friend whose hand we held, at a time of life when that touch was an unimaginably unexpected, thrilling gift. In adulthood we are rarely grateful enough for the first friendship, even if we were once lucky enough to have found it young. Who else put a warm palm in ours, confidingly? Someone who never reproached or shamed us, who never pestered us; who, whenever we wanted company, was never too busy or irritable—someone outside our family, who, under no obligation to love us, did. 

**Margaret Morganroth Gullette** is the author of prize-winning nonfiction books, most recently *Ending Ageism, or How Not to Shoot Old People*. Her essays are often cited as notable in *Best American Essays*. She is a Resident Scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis.



Margaret Morganroth Gullette



# Distance Learning



**W**omen's History Month began normally enough. Schools emptied out for spring break mid-month with a shadow of uncertainty, but those just-in-case on-line learning plans quickly became a new academic reality, transforming dynamic, live education into glitch-filled Zoom meetings. We checked in with several students in high school and college, some of whom have worked for WRB, to see how they are faring during quarantine.

—Jennifer Baumgardner

## “What a kid I was then.”

Noelle McManus, junior, University of Massachusetts, Amherst



**I** come home after walking my dog (twice around the block, just to feel the sun on my skin) to find a text from my best friend. She has entirely lost her sense of taste and laments not being able to distinguish the flavor of her tea. It's a joke. A half-hearted smile. I laugh and then stop laughing. My father is away, an essential worker; the house is quiet. In an hour or so I will turn on my computer and face fifteen people I barely know to discuss a subject I can hardly remember. Assignments are due. I don't know if I can do them. The streets are empty. I am so tired.

It was a good year, at first. My junior year schedule consisted of five classes and a TA position I adored—all to push me towards my goal of graduating on time with two majors and a minor. A friend and I had rented an apartment together. I decorated my bedroom walls with paintings, photos, old movie tickets, and feathers. At night, she and I drank tea and watched cartoons. I remember telling her, just before we left, “We'll be back in a few weeks,” because it was just the flu, really, and everyone was overreacting.

Now my uncle, his wife, and their baby are coughing in their Washington Heights apartment; my nurse next-door-neighbor cries on the sidewalk; and I

am no longer a student, no longer very much of anything, spending most of my time lying in bed and trying to find the drive to open my window shades. They say that it'll go on for the rest of the year, maybe into the next. I flinch every time I hear my father cough. It's a constant state of *something-is-coming*, except something has already come. I feel ages older than the self I was a month ago. What a kid I was then.

I take my mother's car to drive along the coast, watching the blue silhouette of Manhattan breathe above the water. In another time, I might pull over and stand there for a moment. But now, I keep driving. There is nothing to do and nowhere to go, except home.

## “I don't know how I feel.”

Kayla Bert, senior, Penn State University



**W**hen I heard that we weren't going back to campus this year, I was distraught. I didn't think I would be able to handle living at home, but I'm writing this on day 25 and realizing it isn't so bad. I spend the majority of my days yelling at my mom or sister to be quiet, but I enjoy doing things I couldn't do at school, like drive or masturbate whenever I want to. I *deeply* miss my feminist people, but I had prepared myself to part with the place I called home for three and a half years. It's a weird cycle: I go back and forth between acknowledging that my college experience was cut short and countering to myself that

the end was inevitable anyway. I grieve missing out on the celebration that I worked up to, but then I think that a graduation ceremony is a small loss compared to the national and global trauma of this pandemic.

I think I am doing the best I can. I'm making lots of tea. I love and respect tea. I clean hardcore and save my laundry for specific days in which I revolve all of my impulses around scrubbing. I blast music in the car and sing loudly when I venture out to get groceries for my grandparents and family. I attend all

of my Zoom classes for the sake of familiarity and routine. I am *not* watching the news (I disabled all notifications on my phone). I started working out again.

I am naturally good at establishing routines and being organized, so adjusting to class on Zoom and completing my work has been easy. In really terrible situations, I sometimes feel nothing. In quarantine, I find myself in moments of craze and I quickly check out. I have been thinking about my cognitive dissonance as a useful coping mechanism (I'm a psychology major). We don't have to critique how we cope right now as long as it's not harmful to others. That said, —shout out to my therapist, a woman—I'm doing a lot of self-reflective work to understand how I *really* feel.

## “In a pandemic, casual roommate drama can escalate to the level of crisis.”

Charis Caputo, MFA student, New York University

The week before New York's stay-at-home order, I went to stock up on groceries with my roommate, K. He and I and our third roommate were already working from home, cooking and drinking together in the evenings, keeping up morale. As K and I stood in the checkout line, I said: “Are you sure you have enough canned goods? Because, if not, we may have to resort to eating each other.”

“Yes,” said K. “We will have to eat each other out.” And then he put his hands around my waist.

I said nothing, just stood there, rigid. I'd lived with K for two months, and for one of those months he'd been making sexual advances, which I'd ignored because, mostly, K was chill and he always did his dishes. An economist who's lived in three countries, he's good for a brisk political debate over drinks. The



occasional sexist remark notwithstanding (“Why did you cut your hair off, did you want to look like a boy?”), I valued his camaraderie. I also feared conflict and hoped his come-ons would stop if unreciprocated.

To live in New York as a single twenty-something is to live in a small space with a lot of people you might not trust. Since I moved here for an MFA program in 2018, I've had four roommates in my 800-square-foot Bushwick three-bedroom, and I've gotten along with half of them. But in a pandemic, casual roommate drama can escalate to the level of crisis. This city, now bereft of its magnificent public spaces, has become a nest of cramped private ones, in which, I imagine, millions of us are negotiating the prospect of indefinite quarantine with near strangers.

Two days after the innuendo at the grocery store, K flipped a switch, got icy with me, then verbally abusive. The rupture in his personality coincided with the announcement of the stay-at-home order as well as his realization that I was dating a woman, Emma, and was serious enough about her to negotiate how the relationship might move forward under social distancing. When I tried to converse with K about all this, he screamed over me, “if I'd known you were this type of person, I would never have lived with you.” It was like a mask had been removed. I could see all of K's rage, and under the rage was fear: fear of sickness, fear of women, fear of lesbians, fear of losing his job, his visa, his manhood.

That same night, my other roommate fled to his parent's house in California. I called Emma. She drove me to a vacated one-bedroom of a friend of hers who'd left the city for Texas. There, in a strange bedroom, we spent the night thinking it through: I could go back to Chicago and ask my ex-boyfriend to take me back (sheltering in place, I could trust him not to cheat, I guess). I could go back to small-town Illinois and live with my mother in the house I've spent ten years doing anything to avoid.

“I know this is stupid,” I said, “but I don't want to leave New York.”

“Agreed,” Emma said. “Let's stay.”

And that's when I shacked up with a girl I just started dating in an apartment that belongs to neither of us. Every few days, Emma drives me back to my place to check on my belongings and let K know I'm not afraid of him. Mostly I'm here with her, working remotely, taking Zoom classes, cooking elaborate meals out of dwindling ingredients. At seven, the neighborhood cheers. At night, from the balcony, we see stars in an unrecognizably clear sky. Sometimes Emma projects YouTube videos of strangers walking around Manhattan on a summer day a million years ago, and we feel sad and grateful, safe and healthy in our home of sorts. I wonder how many of us are learning to love or to hate the near strangers to whom we find ourselves bound for as long as this takes.

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## “I have never felt so distant from learning.”

Lola Blackman,  
senior, Beacon High School, Manhattan

Friday the 13th of March was my last day in high school and it was straight out of an apocalypse movie. I was one of about ten seniors in attendance that day. Teachers didn't know what to say. The hallways, normally cacophonous, were filled

with an anxious silence: coronavirus was the only thing anyone could talk about.

I don't think anybody imagined we would be spending our second semester of senior year in Quarantine. But here we are, holed up, living these last few months in this city with just our families. I like to think this is exactly how

we're supposed to leave high school. Forced to learn (or not) completely by ourselves with no teachers to guide us. It is entirely up to me how much I learn, how I survive, how I reach out, or how I take care of myself. It is the ultimate lesson in independence.

Every day is a new challenge. Even getting out of bed to check on all of my friends seems impossible sometimes. After that, maybe I can start thinking about getting work done. I've been admitted to college already, so grades don't matter—if I was *in* school, I might be playing hooky, and I am supposed to be focused in these online classes? “Distance learning” is right. I have never felt so distant from learning—which I have always loved, but this feels like busywork. A way that the school can say we received an education, that they gave us something to do. Maybe living through this is enough of a thing to do?

I wish I could say that I established a routine in quarantine, and that I do all my schoolwork because it is a great distraction from all this madness. But that is not the truth. I miss my friends, I miss sitting in school (I never thought I would see the day!), I miss the subway, I miss normalcy. And there is no online class brilliant enough to distract me from that.

I don't think anybody knew on March 13th that this was our last day together. If we had known, we would have all been hugging, thanking each other for growing up over the past four years together.

## Moving Back to My Childhood Home Because of Covid-19

Priyanka Voruganti, high school senior, Michigan's Interlochen Arts Academy



We set goals. I promise to learn how to cook dosa. How to make chai. Brother sets up a gym outside. He orders yoga mats for us. Says we'll do tree pose as the sun rises. Mom opens boxes and boxes of dust.

Furniture slowly fills up the home, gains color. I see a new ottoman appear today, stationed in the left corner of the living room. It sits among a room of empty, so much empty, and I remember that one year that we had an ant infestation, chunky abdomen parts squished everywhere on the floors, ant juice seeping in the spaces between tiles. Every

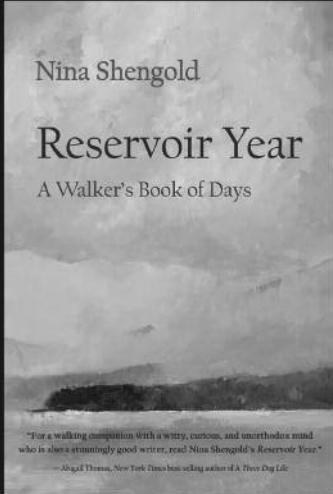
morning I take a deep breath and count to ten, just to make sure nothing's wrong. But I decide, a few days in, once semi-settled in the chamber, that this would be a beautiful place to die. We all think we're sick. We all feel aches. Brother takes his temperature every morning, reports back a whopping 98.2. Before

we moved back, Brother said on the phone, *It'll be fun. Like we're kids again.* My body feels so large in this childhood bedroom. I had play-dates and tea-times and tantrums in this room, I imagined ghost faces subsuming me, monsters licking feet, dolls turning devilish in this room. In this room, I'm

eight and I'm dancing and I can't find my stuffed animal. In this room, I'm six and I'm crying and Brother

won't stop teasing. In this room, I hoard toilet paper and wine bottles and take pictures of my naked body to disseminate around the world. People in hazmat suits and huddled in closets and trapped in the Bahamas will marvel at my naked body, my huge adult thighs, my cemented face, and I'll be here, a kid, a kid in a kid's room. 📷

We walk the perimeter of the home, interact with the swing-set, piss in the dead garden, shovel holes in the grass. We plant things as a game. We don't think anything will actually grow. We sit in the kitchen where we camped out that one time during Hurricane Irene, surrounded by cheap candles. We sit there and play Connect Four, even though we still have working devices.



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# Roya Marsh on:

**Black Girl Magic, Knock-Knock Jokes, and Reading with Students in Mind**

**W**hat books are currently on your nightstand?

I'm actively working on a decent sleep schedule and don't invite books into the bedroom with me. Now, my dining-room table, that's a different story! I've got a solid mix of poetry and novels that I'm working my way through. I'm constantly scouring for resources and new and relevant work to promote critical and analytical thinking with my students. On the table, staring right at me, are Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which features lovely drawings by Ellen Forney; Adam Falkner's *The Willies*, in which he navigates queer boyhood, addiction, and appropriation; and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*, a surreal masterpiece. Each of these works makes me question the status quo and consider the cyclical behaviors of our nation, the effects they have on our everyday lives, and how language and time can be bent in the telling and retelling of stories.

**Where do you get your books? Library? Bookstore? Amazon?**

I've actually never ordered anything from Amazon. Most of my books come from libraries, bookstores, and classrooms, or I get them as gifts or friendly recommendations. I'm diligent about supporting local and community bookshops as a means of fighting gentrification. Recently, I've been honored with the task of blurbing and reviewing the work of my contemporaries. So a lot of books also come to me courtesy of the publisher.

**What's a book that made you cry?**

*The Kite Runner*.

**What's your favorite work of feminist nonfiction?**

*Thick and Other Essays* by Tressie McMillan Cottom is a must-read. I've attended institutions of higher learning where I've experienced racism and sexism and was forced to combat various inequities on a daily basis. McMillan Cottom's approach is rigorous, analytical, intersectional and extremely accessible. The personal experiences that she describes resonated with me deeply. *Thick* addresses the tensions between popular and academic takes on the lives of Black women in America.

**What's your favorite novel of the last two years?**

I am all about YA right now, and, honestly, there are just too many amazing projects to have a single favorite. I loved *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds (and anything else his mind creates), and everything from Elizabeth Acevedo, who makes room for my students to smile and laugh and hear themselves and love themselves and take up space that they didn't know existed. These writers are telling stories that ring true for my students, challenging their ideas around violence, vengeance, independence, heritage and the meaning of survival.

**What is a book that changed your life?**

*The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 2: Black Girl Magic*, which was edited by legends Mahogany L. Browne, Idrissa Simmonds, and Jamila Woods. The anthology features some of the greatest and most daring feminist writers and contemporary Black women geniuses. It gives breath, energy and a platform to so many amazing voices from groups that are often silenced. Black girls, women, trans women, and GNC folks are absolutely magic



Laquan Dawson

Roya Marsh

and worthy of all praise. We are not a monolith. We are here. We are writing. We are teaching. On a personal level, this book put me in spaces I may never have otherwise entered. Visibility is a key component in my work and mission. Being published in this anthology was both affirming and inspiring for this Black butch woman from the Bronx.

**What book are you confident recommending to anyone?**

*DAMN.* by Kendrick Lamar. It's not a book, but it could be (if you simply printed out the lyrics and bound the pages). That album earned Kendrick a Pulitzer and solidified his spot as one of the greatest storytellers of all time. The work speaks for itself. Listen to it. Read it. Honor it.

**What do you read to relax?**

I have been dog-earing and paperclipping Bobby Hundreds's *This is Not a T-Shirt* for a few months now. I've always had a passion for fashion, and there are so many gems within those pages about perseverance in the face of doubt and building community through culture. But when I'm really, really, really trying to relax, I love to read knock-knock jokes and little-known facts. They're the best space fillers for those awkward moments between poems during a reading.

**Roya Marsh** is a Bronx native and a nationally recognized poet/performer/educator/activist. She is the Poet in residence at Urban Word NYC and works feverishly toward LGBTQIA justice and dismantling white supremacy. Marsh's work has been featured in *Poetry*, *Flypaper Magazine*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Village Voice*, *Nylon*, *The Huffington Post*, *Button Poetry*, Def Jam's *All Def Digital*, *Lexus Verses and Flow*, NBC, BET, and *The BreakBeat Poets Vol 2: Black Girl Magic*. 📖