

Booklist

Leading book discovery

Vol. 117 No. 8
12/15/2020



Starred
Reviews
2020

The Year in
Review



The Bright Side of Going Dark. By Kelly Harms. Amazon/Lake Union, \$24.95 (9781542020916).

Harms examines both sides of the ever-growing technology debate, especially the pros and cons of life as an influencer.

Bubblegum. By Adam Levin. Doubleday, \$29.95 (9780385544962).

Levin's monumentally imaginative, breathtakingly bizarre novel in the form of the protagonist's memoir is set in an alternative future and teems with humanity, humor, and pathos.

A Burning. By Megha Majumdar. Knopf, \$25.95 (9780525658696).

Majumdar's electrifying debut about Jivan, a shopgirl who is beaten and jailed for a Facebook post, serves as a barometer measuring the fragility of human life and connections.

Butter Honey Pig Bread. By Francesca Ekwuyasi. Arsenal Pulp, paper, \$19.95 (9781551528236).

Ekwuyasi's craftsmanship is stunning as her debut tells a complex story of family, love, trust, wounds, and intimacy.

The Cactus League. By Emily Nemens. Farrar, \$27 (9780374117948).

In this melancholy but curiously hopeful first novel set in the world of Major League Baseball's spring training, Nemens focuses on a gallimaufry of characters struggling to hang on just a little bit longer.

A Candle for San Simón. By Kelly Daniels. Owl Canyon, paper, \$18.95 (9780998507392).

Daniel's powerful debut novel portrays a long-gone, alcoholic American entangled in gang crime in Guatemala and his missionary son's thwarted attempt to save him.

Catherine House. By Elisabeth Thomas. Morrow, \$27.99 (9780062905659).

Ines Murillo enrolls in Catherine House, an immersive post-secondary school with devoted alumnae, only to become so involved in the odd curriculum and formal traditions that she barely notices something unsettling is afoot.

The Chicken Sisters. By KJ Dell'Antonia. Putnam, paper, \$16 (9780593085141).

Rival fried chicken restaurants and estranged sisters battle it out on a reality TV competition that brings out old secrets and wounds in Dell'Antonia's hilarious debut.

The Choice. By Gillian McAllister. Putnam, paper, \$16 (9780593188002).

A smart, ferociously paced novel about a woman who fatally fends off an attacker and tells two stories, one in which she turns herself in and the other in which she runs.

Cleanness. By Garth Greenwell. Farrar, \$26 (9780374124588).

Expanding the story introduced in *What*

Women in Focus: Fiction

Real-life women, their experiences, and the ongoing battle for women's rights inspired these women writers to create exceptionally powerful, women-centric biographical and historical novels.

Betty. By Tiffany McDaniel. Knopf, \$26.95 (9780525657071).

A sweeping and heart-wrenching exploration of how we understand our parents' lives and how our children will one day understand our own.

Code Name Hélène. By Ariel Lawhon. Doubleday, \$27.95 (9780385544689).

Lawhon's magnificent and gripping novel dramatizes the valor of a real-life woman molded by war, sacrifice, and love: Australian expat journalist Nancy Wake, who helped organize French resistance fighters.

The Joyce Girl. By Annabel Abbs. Morrow, paper, \$16.99 (9780062912879).

Abbs' moving U.S. debut novel delivers a luminous portrait of James Joyce's daughter, Lucia, whose dreams of becoming a dancer were thwarted by her role as helpmate and muse to her father.

The Once and Future Witches. By Alix E. Harrow. Orbit, \$28 (9780316422048).

Women's suffrage and witchcraft collide in this story of three sisters who unknowingly call forth a mythical tower that proves that magic still exists.

The Paper Daughters of Chinatown. By Heather B. Moore. Shadow Mountain, \$26.99 (9781629727820).

Moore vividly fictionalizes real-life Dolly Cameron, who ran a home for young Chinese women, such as Mei Lien, the novel's other main character, who were lured to 1880s San Francisco and enslaved as prostitutes.

Red Letter Days. By Sarah-Jane Stratford. Berkley, paper, \$17 (9780451475572).

Stratford's latest historical novel tells the too-little-known story of blacklisted women in the early days of television who left the U.S. to work in England.

Something Worth Doing. By Jane Kirkpatrick. Revell, paper, \$15.99 (9780800736118).

Kirkpatrick offers a powerful fictionalized version of the remarkable life of Abigail Scott Duniway, a fierce advocate for women's rights.

Tsarina. By Ellen Alpsten. St. Martin's, \$27.99 (9781250214430).

This debut chronicles the extraordinary rise of Catherine I from humble serf to Empress, and the often-uncredited role she played in husband Peter the Great's strides in modernizing Russia.

Belongs to You (2016), an American expat in Bulgaria prepares to leave the country while reflecting on his evolving understanding of his own desire.

Crooked Hallelujah. By Kelli Jo Ford. Grove, \$26 (9780802149121).

A multigenerational Own Voices novel that reads like interlinked short stories, connecting readers to the heart of a family of Cherokee women.

Daughters of the Wild. By Natalka Burian. Harlequin, \$27.99 (9780778310013).

The powerful story of foster siblings, who grew up cultivating a magical plant on a family farm, searching for a missing baby both in the Vine and in the outside world.

Days of Distraction. By Alexandra Chang. Ecco, \$26.99 (9780062951809).

Chang portrays her narrator's early-adulthood exploration of her Asian American identity

with elegance and an offbeat humor that complements her poignant observations.

Dear Edward. By Ann Napolitano. Dial, \$27 (9781984854780).

This expertly paced, wondrous read follows the 12-year-old sole survivor of a plane crash in his efforts to build a new life.

The Death of Jesus. By J. M. Coetzee. Viking, \$27 (9781984880901).

Coetzee concludes his Jesus trilogy with a novel rich in allegory and philosophical discourse, intensified by strong currents of grief.

The Death of Vivek Oji. By Akwaeke Emezi. Riverhead, \$27 (9780525541608).

Emezi's novel about a young man's struggles in Nigeria, a society which too often strait-jackets one's identity, is achingly raw and ultimately redeeming as it upends established definitions of family and community.