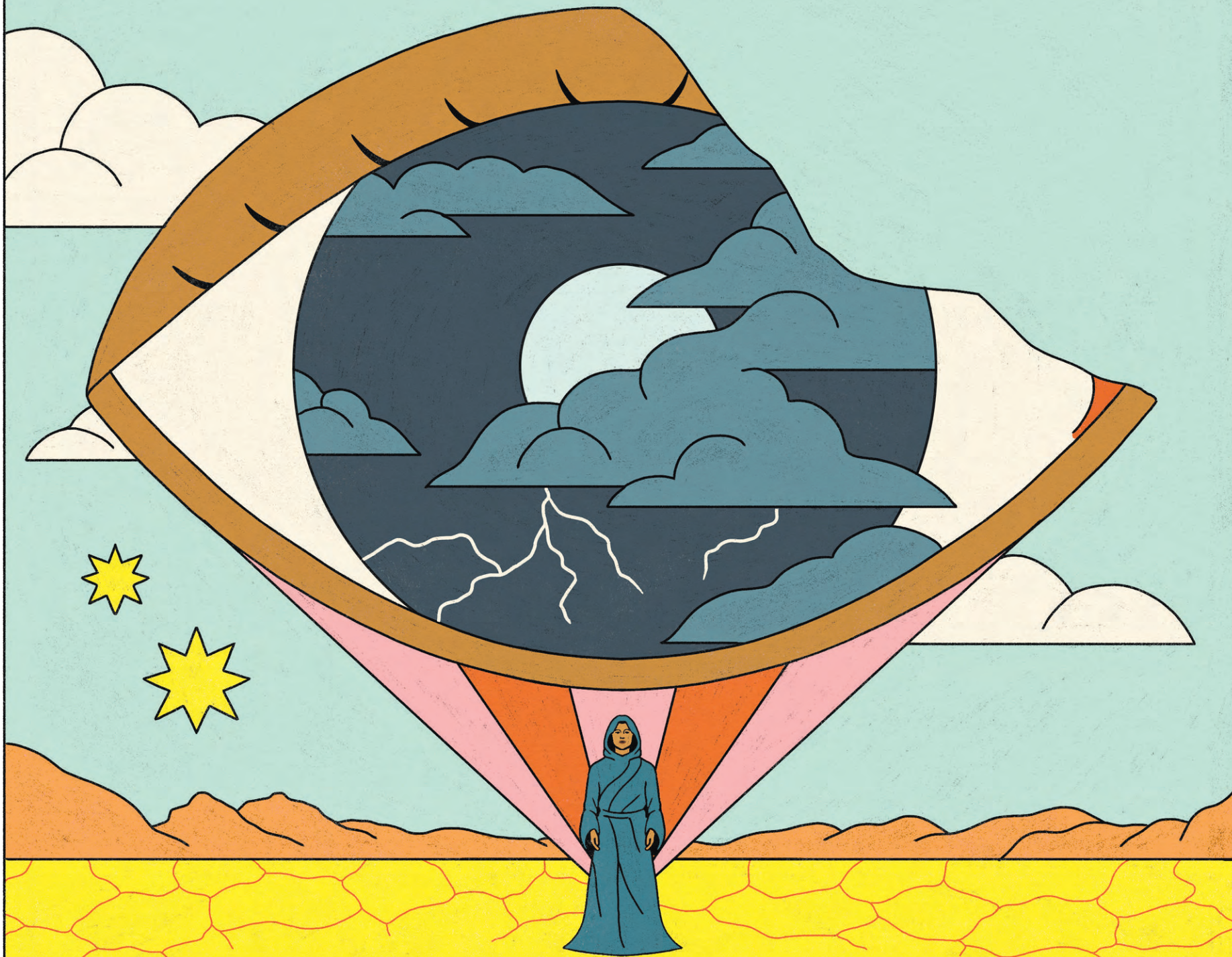


The New York Times

# Book Review

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## THE PROPHETIC

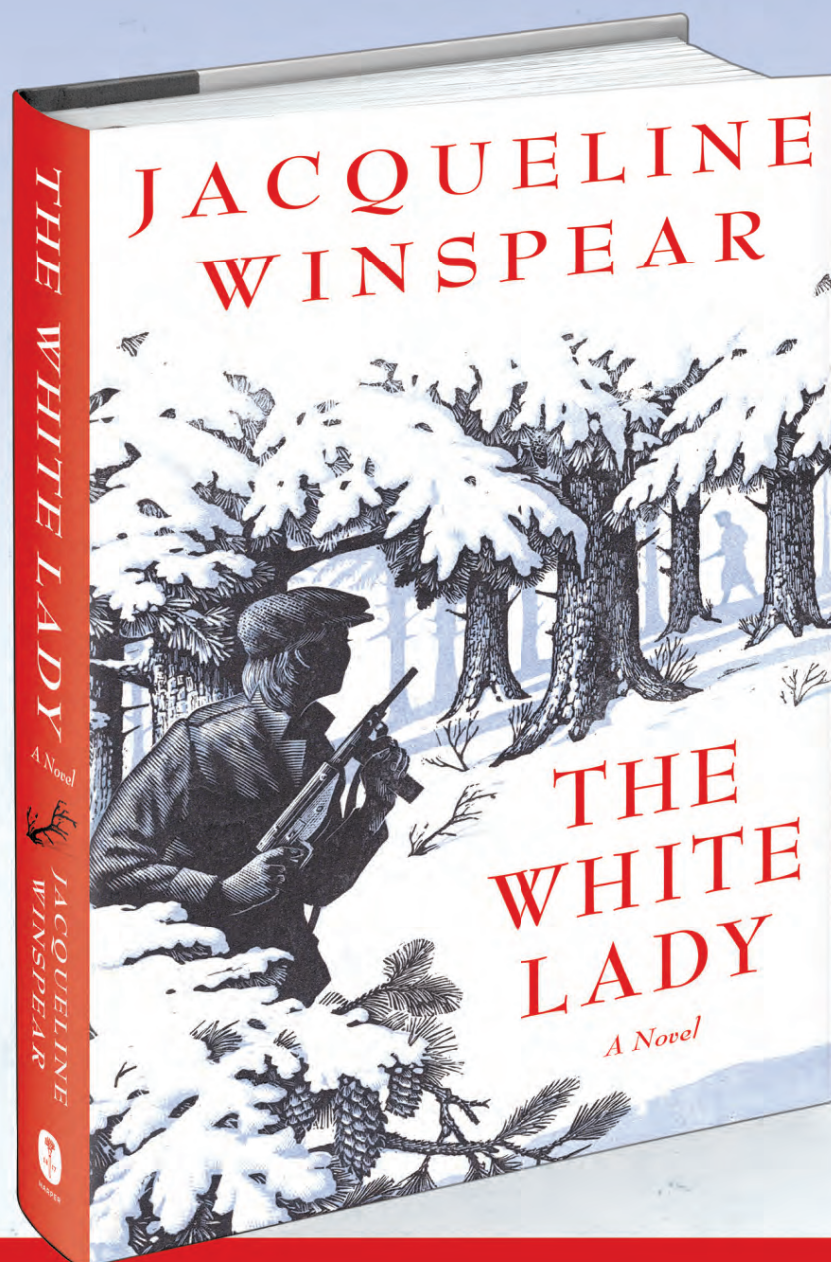
The first essay of an occasional series about literature and faith.

BY AYANA MATHIS



From the *New York Times* bestselling author of the MAISIE DOBBS novels

# “A TRIUMPH OF STORYTELLING.”\*



1947. Kent, England.

JACQUELINE WINSPEAR introduces a new heroine, ELINOR WHITE.

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**THIRST FOR SALT**

By Madelaine Lucas

262 pp. Tin House. Paperback, \$16.95.



Lucas's debut novel opens by describing a photograph that shows a man and a child. The narrator sees, for the first time, a picture of her former lover Jude with what she presumes to be his daughter. Confronting bad news about her fertility and nearing the same age Jude had been during their relationship, the unnamed protagonist is ripe for

remembrance, and the photograph sends her deep into the act of remembering.

The description of their love affair has much of the same feeling as the photograph, a static moment held captive and mined for meaning. The focus of the novel, ultimately, is the act of remembering itself. ("You're hung up on the past," the narrator's mother unsubtly points out.) Jumping back in time, the narrator revisits her first encounter with Jude on an Australian tourist beach the summer she is 24 and he is 42. What follows is a quick, hot love affair bracketed by "I remembers" and glimpses of later conflicts, constant reminders that the relationship is long finished and absorbed into the narrator's personal mythology.

But the retrospective voice is also lush and gorgeous. As Jude shifts from calling the narrator "Sharkbait" to calling her "love," their sun-soaked fling turns to winter domesticity, and she leaves behind the bare beginnings of an adult life with her college friends to hole up with Jude in his lovingly restored A-frame near the ocean. The scenes at Jude's home have a luxurious physicality, a sensual attention focused on homey objects laced with a languid nostalgia for the romance's most vivid scenes, such as Jude using rotting fruit to lure tropical birds to the narrator's bare arms. The result is a story with a pristine, time-capsule-like feeling. The cost, however, is an inability to fully sense the effects of the relationship on the rest of the narrator's later, more cosmopolitan life — a flaw the book tries to remedy by having the narrator indulge at times in some heavy-handed meaning-making, her purpose and message bearing down on the reader. But "Thirst for Salt" is a delicious read, beautifully written and emotionally satisfying.

**HOURLASS**

By Keiran Goddard

199 pp. Europa. \$25.



The title of Goddard's novel makes sense if you think about the different ways we measure time. Every clock or watch belongs to a network of timekeepers, their usefulness derived from collective agreement. An hourglass, however, is a closed system built of trapped particles. Unless it has been calibrated

to a clock, a turn of an hourglass is a unit of measurement that refers only to itself.

To read the incredibly spare writing of "Hourglass" is to be trapped with a consciousness struggling to point to or refer to anything in the outside world. This is an accurate representation of solipsistic masculine heartbreak, but it is, by its nature, extremely frustrating to read. The narrator, who writes essays like "People Bloody Love Astrology Right Now Because They Fear We Have Funneled the Entirety of Our Collective Divinatory Power Into Predictive Algorithms!," meets an editor at one of the magazines where he insistently sends these pitches. We don't learn much about this editor, who is addressed throughout as "you" and is described as the author of several "slim books about Restoration drama." But we do learn that "all of the things happened again and again" (translation: they had a lot of sex) and that these two people fall in love.

The substance of the book is so general that it becomes essentially nothing, empty universality punctuated from time to time with a vaguely gross detail, like the narrator eating balls of his love object's hair ("object" is the right word, since the editor never seems like a distinct individual) or, later, the narrator's drunken attempt to run a marathon while dressed in a sweater, collapsing less than a mile in. Sometimes the writing is funny, but often it's just deliberately opaque. Instead of dialogue, the reader gets, "We started telling each other all of the things that people who are falling in love tell one another." Instead of specifics about the editor, the reader gets, "You were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen." This should be considered a great compliment, the narrator declares, because there are more things in the world than there are people. But that explanation works only if the reader is willing to live inside the narrator's cyclical reasoning, a herculean task. Outside of this logic, in a world where people are at least trying to agree on a shared reality, you're left with someone calling the person he loves a thing.

**FRANCISCO**

By Alison Mills Newman

117 pp. New Directions. Paperback, \$14.95.



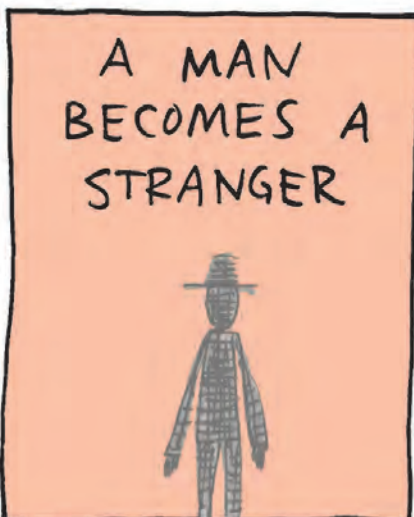
Originally published in 1974 and too long out of print, "Francisco" is a dazzling book written with the immediacy of life. The novel's sharp, funny, first-person narrator makes her way through the Black Arts movement of the 1970s, searching for her own way of seeing and describing the world. The sentences brim with rebellion and pleasure,

creating a sensual odyssey of self-discovery and experience.

The narrator is, as Mills Newman was in real life, a young Black actress who is tired of working in white-dominated Hollywood. She falls in love with an intense and driven independent filmmaker, the titular Francisco. Francisco becomes a sort of anti-muse, their relationship inspiring the narrator not to create, but to experience. (Francisco himself finds lust detrimental to work, frequently shutting himself away from the narrator to finish his film.) In this novel, the creative impulse is cut off from the urge to create products for consumption. Instead, this energy is funneled into the sheer exuberance of being alive.

The result is a loose narrative written with keen observations and driven by the narrator's own hunger for Francisco, food and connection. (Some of the best writing takes the form of descriptions of meals, demonstrating how the narrator and Francisco seduce and care for each other through their stomachs.) Each scene is wonderful on its own and refuses to build into a traditional narrative structure: a filmed dance party in a borrowed mansion for one of Francisco's movies, a naked confrontation with the "madness" of the ocean, sex in other people's beach houses, a drawn-out battle with a waiter for just one more bowl of guacamole. This delightfully smart and funny protagonist is a reminder of the difficulty and beauty of a life lived on its own terms.

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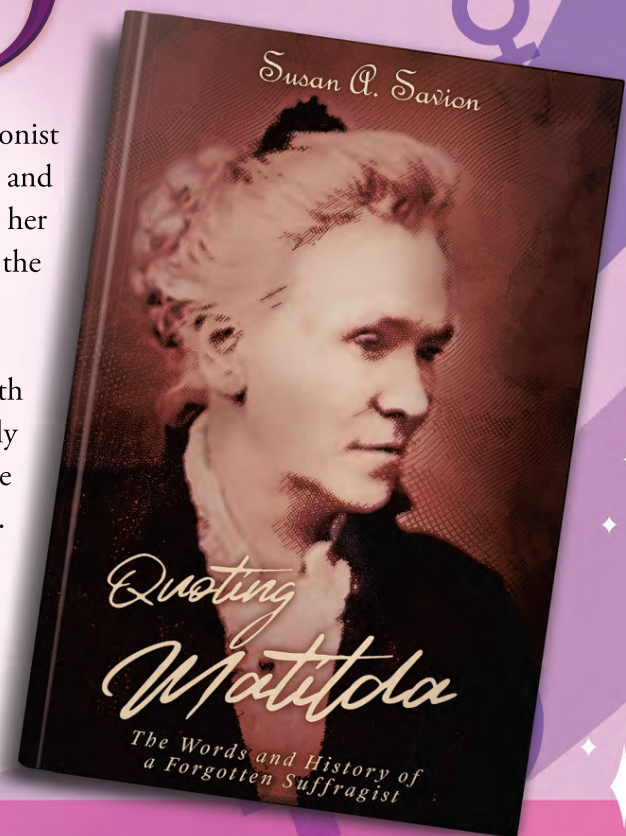
## Susan A. Savion

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