

The New York Times

# Book Review

APRIL 9, 2023



## Emotional Distance

In “Hello Beautiful,”  
Ann Napolitano puts a  
fresh spin on a classic  
story of four sisters.

**BY BRUCE HOLSINGER**

**PLUS:**

**ISABELLA HAMDAD’S “ENTER GHOST”**

**OSAMU DAZAI, TIKTOK STAR**

**THE DIRTY TRICKSTERS OF WORLD WAR II**





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## Newly Published / Y.A.



**STATELESS**, by Elizabeth Wein. (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, \$18.99.) This historical murder mystery follows a teenage pilot, Stella, who is the only female contestant in a 1937 air race hosted to promote peace in Europe. But when she witnesses an unexplained “crash” at the beginning of the contest, Stella realizes there’s more at stake than just coming in first.



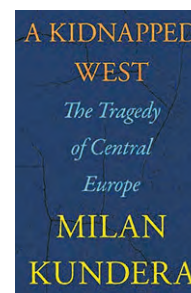
**STARS AND SMOKE**, by Marie Lu. (Roaring Brook, \$19.99.) An international pop superstar and a spy are forced to team up to stop a criminal tycoon in Lu’s latest young adult novel, an enemies-to-lovers romance that also explores celebrity culture.

**ANDER & SANTI WERE HERE**, by Jonny Garza Villa. (Wednesday Books, \$18.99.) Garza Villa’s new young adult novel, about a nonbinary artist who falls in love with a boy who is undocumented, is an intimate meditation on romance, stepping into adulthood, home, protecting those you hold dear and more.

**SILVER IN THE BONE**, by Alexandra Bracken. (Knopf Books for Young Readers, \$19.99.) Arthurian lore is at the heart of “Silver in the Bone,” the first book in a new Y.A. fantasy series. This novel follows a teenager on the quest to find a powerful magic ring that could save her brother from a dangerous curse.

## ...Also Out Now

**SWEET UNDOINGS**, by Yanick Lahens. Translated by Kaiama L. Glover. (Deep Vellum, paperback, \$16.95.) Set in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, this sweeping yet intimate novel follows a cast of characters reeling from the absence of a judge who was assassinated years earlier for crusading against rampant corruption.



**A KIDNAPPED WEST: The Tragedy of Central Europe**, by Milan Kundera. (Harper, \$24.99.) In these early essays by the Czech writer and dissident, he focused on the relationship of Europe’s central “small nations” like Czechoslovakia and Ukraine to Western culture and argued that their cultural identities were increasingly threatened.

**THERE WILL BE FIRE: Margaret Thatcher, the IRA, and Two Minutes That Changed History**, by Rory Carroll. (Putnam, \$29.) This thoroughly reported and thrilling history traces the lead-up to and aftermath of a fateful assassination attempt on Margaret Thatcher by the Irish Republican Army in 1984.

**BOOKWORM: Conversations With Michael Silverblatt**, edited by Alan Felsenthal. (The Song Cave, paperback, \$25.) Thirty years of Silverblatt’s interviews from the KCRW radio show “Bookworm” are compiled in this luminous collection, including conversations with the literary greats Toni Morrison, David Foster Wallace and more.



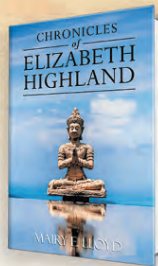
# GRAB THESE PAGETURNER BESTSELLERS!



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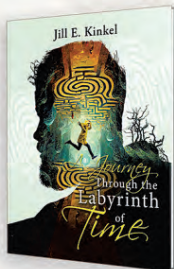
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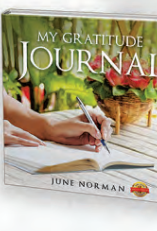
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**My Gratitude Journal**  
by June Norman

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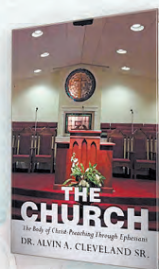
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**Toyotomi Hideyoshi: The Making of a Modern Hero**  
by Katrice Chanhsamone

Sixteenth Century Japan - the samurai ruled by both birthright and sword. To be a samurai, one had to be born a samurai. However, Hideyoshi was denied this pedigree at birth. So, how did he become such a powerful warlord heroized and enshrined by a nation?

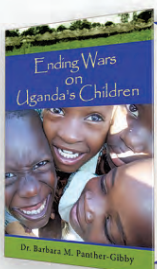
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**The Church: The Body of Christ-Preaching Through Ephesians**  
by Dr. Alvin Cleveland

As a pastor, Dr. Alvin Cleveland understands that "the church must be large enough to include all people." And this is the message he wished to preach to the readers.

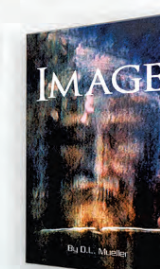
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## Letters



CIARA QUILTY-HARPER

### A Rich Review

TO THE EDITOR:

This is how you do it! Often, I want to decry the proliferation of reviews relying on plot summary filled with spoilers. Instead, I must applaud Amy Bloom for her review of Donal Ryan's novel "The Queen of Dirt Island" (March 12). She deftly comments on the characters, language and structure of the novel. She places the novel in its historical context and weighs her response to male and female characters. Finally, a rich impression of the book without the sense that I've already read it.

MARY ROTELLA  
LOUISVILLE, KY.

### Icy Influences

TO THE EDITOR:

In his homage to "Wisconsin Death Trip," by Michael Lesy (March 26), Dwight Garner misses a literary work most inspired by it: Robert Goolrick's "A Reliable Wife."

The story of a mail-order bride on the make who arrives in Wisconsin in the brutal 1907 winter, Goolrick's 2009 novel is as eerie and unsettling as Lesy's famous collage of photographs and text.

Goolrick acknowledges the influence in the novel's afterword, where he notes that "Wisconsin Death Trip" had haunted

him since first reading it in 1973.

BETTY J. COTTER  
SHANNOCK, R.I.

### Regretful Readers

TO THE EDITOR:

In her *By the Book* interview, Mona Simpson (March 19) contends that her younger self could've made better use of her reading time than with *Bobbsey Twins* and *Nancy Drew* mysteries. She says, "I didn't even read them for the feel and texture of [the characters'] family lives."

Nothing is wrong with reading for feel and texture! I'm a devotee of the P.G. Wodehouse Jeeves and Wooster novels and stories, but the plots are hardly the attraction. Bertie Wooster ends up in the soup once again, accidentally engaged yet again to some lady, despite his pathological terror of matrimony, and Jeeves, in between tut-tutting at his employer's crocus-yellow-and-mauve-striped hosiery, saves his bacon. There are variations, of course, sometimes involving silver cow creamers or stolen policeman's helmets, but the template remains reassuringly fixed. And although Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry could not possibly have been improved upon in the title roles, I couldn't get too interested in the Jeeves and Wooster TV series. Because if you omit Bertie's narrative

voice, you omit too much. Feel and texture are as crucial to these stories as they are, to Jeeves, in the fabric chosen for Bertie's bespoke suits.

DAVID ENGLISH  
ACTON, MASS.



TO THE EDITOR:

Mona Simpson contends that some men are not constitutionally suited to read "Middlemarch." It is no doubt true. It is also true that we have numerous elected officials — representatives, senators, governors et al. — who are not constitutionally suited to read the United States Constitution.

LOUIS PHILLIPS  
NEW YORK

[BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM](mailto:BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM)

### WHAT OUR READERS ARE READING

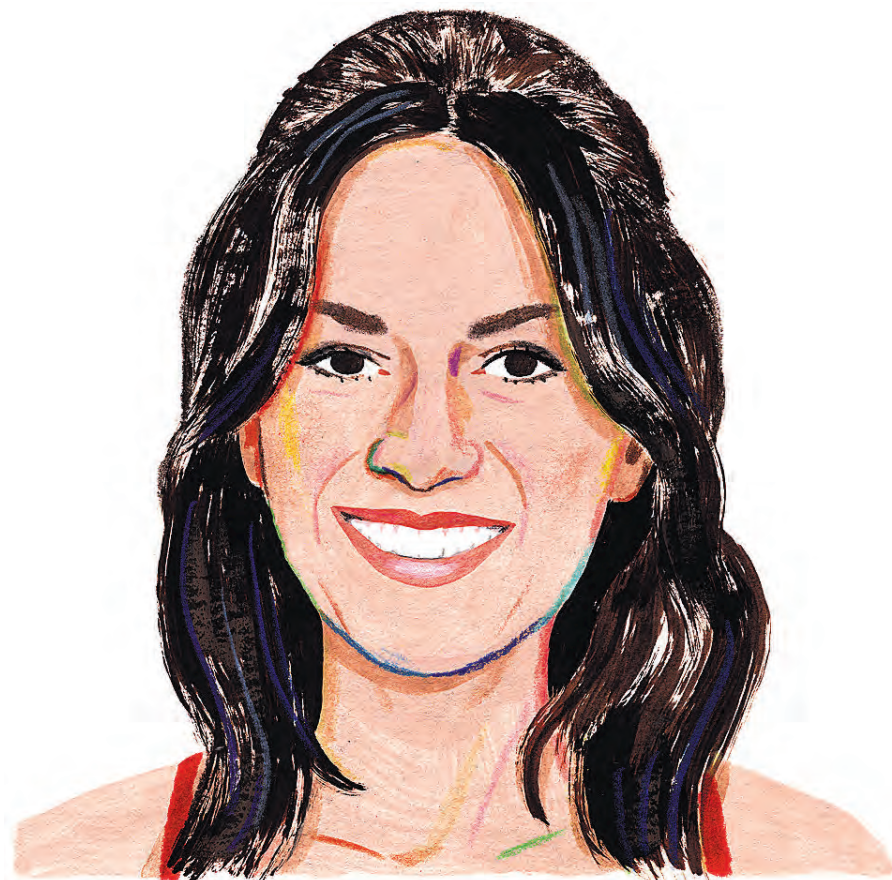
Kristy Alley is "currently listening to Rebecca Makkai's **I HAVE SOME QUESTIONS FOR YOU**, a thought-provoking mystery that also asks some pointed questions about the way murder, usually of women, has become the basis of so much entertainment. Julia Whelan does an incredible job with the narration."

"I finally got to read Lynda Rutledge's **WEST WITH GIRAFFES**," writes Helene Bednarsh. "A delightful read and departure from other novels. Anyone with knowledge of the Dust Bowl will appreciate the context."

Ingrid Furlong is rereading the works of James Baldwin: "The writing is literary, lyrical and so immediate and personal. His influence on Toni Morrison is clear. It's great stuff, something everyone should revisit."

Mariana Fiorentino, a "big fan of Peter May," has read almost all his books. "However, the one I'm currently reading, **COFFIN ROAD**, is a departure from anything he has ever written. It is a very strange tale indeed."

## By the Book



# Susanna Hoffs

The singer, whose debut novel is 'This Bird Has Flown,' has a dollar bill signed by William S. Burroughs: 'He ... gave me a mischievous half-smile and said, "Ah, defacing U.S. currency."'

### What books are on your night stand?

"Dickens and Prince: A Particular Kind of Genius," by Nick Hornby. "Lincoln in the Bardo," by George Saunders. "The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois," by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers. "Giovanni's Room," by James Baldwin. "A Single Man," by Christopher Isherwood. And always on my night stand, "The Book of Questions," by Pablo Neruda. At the moment, I'm reading Truman Capote's novella "Breakfast at Tiffany's." He's a gorgeous writer. And somewhere in the stack is George Eliot's "Middlemarch," which I keep meaning to read but never seem to get around to.

### What's the last great book you read?

I just reread "The Great Gatsby," which I do every few years. There is something voluptuous, intoxicating in Fitzgerald's prose which never fails to seduce me, to make me feel tipsy, which is great, because I gave up the booze years ago and I miss that feeling. Nabokov and

Updike write that way too. I also recently reread Zadie Smith's "White Teeth," John Fowles's "Daniel Martin," Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the D'Urbervilles." As with a favorite song or film, great novels demand repeat play.

### Are there any classic novels that you only recently read for the first time?

"Lady Chatterley's Lover." I found the . . . explicit . . . use of the word "crisis" *interesting*. Who doesn't enjoy a good crisis? Some people even have multiple "crises." I've heard that's possible.

### What's your favorite book no one else has heard of?

Yoko Ono's "Grapefruit," a collection of poems (a to-do list of fanciful prompts) which I found at a bookstore on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley in the late 1970s when I was in college. This small square of a book was instrumental in inspiring me to be an artist, as were

those bookstores in Berkeley. I once met William S. Burroughs in one, when I queued up to get his autograph with nothing but a dollar bill for him to sign. He glanced up, amused, gave me a mischievous half-smile and said, "Ah, defacing U.S. currency," and proceeded to sign it.

### You were a founding member of the Bangles in the 1980s, and your novel features a heroine who also had a hit pop song. Who writes especially well about the music industry?

Whenever I'm asked what it's like being in a band, I say, "Watch 'Spinal Tap.'" So, Christopher Guest, Michael McKean, Harry Shearer, Rob Reiner.

### What book most influenced your decision to become a songwriter and musician or contributed to your artistic development?

Perhaps "Jane Eyre." Something in the fierceness of the character's convictions; despite being small, female, without resources, she perseveres. When I set out to write "This Bird Has Flown," I kept returning to "Jane Eyre" and "Rebecca." Love. Fate. Ghosts of relationships past.

### Who are your favorite musician-writers?

Patti Smith. I loved "Just Kids," and in "M Train" I discovered we share a love of detective and crime shows, as well as black coffee.

### Has a book ever brought you closer to another person, or come between you?

Recently, in attempting to organize my library, I came across the hardback of "Sophie's Choice," by William Styron, and saw that I'd inscribed the book to my future husband, soon after we'd met on a blind date. We're about to celebrate our 30th anniversary, in April. I wanted to share a book I was passionate about — and probably I wanted him to know he was headed into a love affair with the granddaughter of a rabbi.

### What author would you want to write your life story?

John Waters. He would be great with my dating life in the '80s.

### You're organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?

Charlotte Brontë. James Baldwin. Truman Capote. □

An expanded version of this interview is available at [nytimes.com/books](http://nytimes.com/books).

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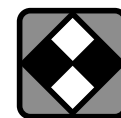
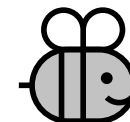
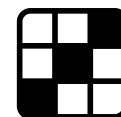
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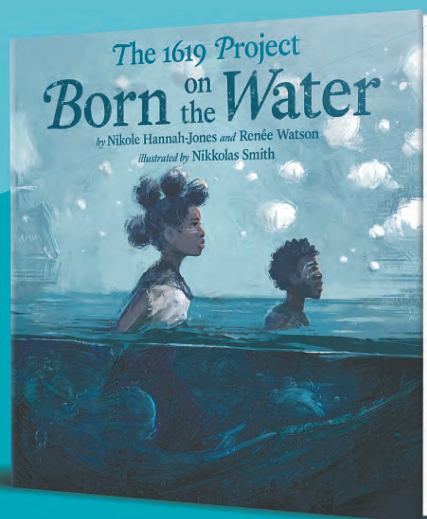
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⊗ HISTORICAL FICTION / BY ALIDA BECKER

## Real People, Reimagined

ONE OF THE GREAT attractions of historical fiction is its ability to approach the past from unexpected angles, allowing us to consider famous figures in surprising ways. It's a tactic that pays off brilliantly in Stephen May's elegantly acerbic **SELL US THE ROPE** (Bloomsbury, 240 pp., paperback, \$18), which features a thuggish former poet who calls himself Koba. The world will later know him as Stalin.

The novel's action takes place in London in the spring of 1907. Playing host to the Fifth Congress of the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party, the city is awash in combative dissidents and the spies, both czarist and British, intent on monitoring them. Lev Davidovich Bronstein and Vladimir Illyich Ulyanov (a.k.a. Trotsky and Lenin) are engaged in maneuvers with "the safety-first Mensheviks" while Rosa Luxemburg (a flamboyant freethinker who requires no alias) coolly observes their machinations. "Our fragile leaders get upset when the women get noticed," she remarks. "It's a scientific law. Attention for women causes dyspepsia in men."

The recipient of this pronouncement is Elli Vuokko, a fiery 19-year-old delegate representing Finnish lathe operators whom Rosa befriends during morning self-defense lessons and soaking sessions at the public baths. And it is Elli whose hesitant relationship with Koba helps unearth the few shades of humanity within his already ruthless character. Koba and his cohort aren't yet immensely public figures, so May (and Elli) can view them as almost comically fallible—until a plot by the Okhrana, the czar's secret agents, provides a stark warning of the dark days ahead. Fittingly, May takes his novel's title from an old saying quoted by Comrade Ulyanov: "When it comes time to hang the capitalists, they will sell us the rope."

ELLI VUOKKO WAS a real person who fought for the Red Army in Finland's civil war. Just as May has invented a back story for her,

ALIDA BECKER is a former editor at the Book Review.

so has Sophie Haydock imagined histories for a quartet of little-known women whose lives intersected with that of the controversial Austrian artist Egon Schiele, who died in 1918 at the age of 28.

**THE FLAMES** (Overlook, 464 pp., \$28) is primarily divided into sections devoted to his younger sister, Gertrude; his longtime model and mistress, Vally; and Adele and Edith, the upper-middle-class sisters who become rivals for his attention.

Denounced as "the pornographer of Vienna" for his sexually explicit nude portraits, Schiele is an object of fascination, "tall, mesmerizing, almost demanding



MICHELLE MILDENBERG

to be touched." All four women will model for him, and all will eventually consider him a toxic influence. To his sister, he's a betrayer of their childhood intimacy. To Vally, he's a manipulator who will never publicly legitimize their bond. To melodramatic, hyper-romantic Adele, he's a misguided soul mate. And to Edith, he's a far too worldly-wise husband, a man who will demolish her sheltered existence.

Egon Schiele's life is revealed through the eyes of the women around him. His single-minded pursuit of his art and his callous self-indulgence lead one of them to madness, another to self-mutilation and an early demise. Yet all pay tribute to his talent. Facing him at his easel, they saw "there was something powerful in letting

your guard down. He captured what was left." Outside his studio, though, the scandal Schiele engenders clings to them as well. "Only men can navigate disgrace," Vally concludes, "and spin it into success."

THE SCREENWRITER AND director John Sayles takes a different tack when it comes to those who inhabit the official record of the past. In his sprawling new novel, **JAMIE MACGILLIVRAY** (Melville House, 704 pp., \$32), he gives historical heavyweights like Washington, Montcalm and Wolfe secondary roles, appearing in the background as he unfolds the adventures of two fictional 18th-century Scots—the title character, a landless and luckless follower of Bonnie Prince Charlie, and Jenny Ferguson, an impoverished crofter's daughter swept up in the British reprisals for the Jacobite rebellion.

Bracketed by battles at Culloden in Scotland and the Plains of Abraham in Quebec, Sayles's narrative plunges his main characters into fetid prisons and indentured servitude in the colonies. From this point, their fates diverge, at least temporarily. Using a split-screen strategy, Sayles moves from a French military outpost in Martinique to a besieged fort in maritime Canada, from the deck of a slave ship in Maryland to fledgling plantations in Georgia and Pennsylvania, then off to the encampments of Native peoples pushed farther west by tribal skirmishes and the encroachment of white settlers.

The expatriate Scots take on new identities as their needs for survival dictate: for Jamie a hard-won adoption into the Lenape nation, and for Jenny stints as a military mistress, a farmer's wife and a not-very-convincing nun. Given Sayles's credentials, it's no surprise that his storytelling is inflected with Highland-accented dialogue and untranslated but easily deciphered French, along with bits of Erse and Lenape. The result is an immersive reading experience that swirls with complex personalities, illuminating the many sides of what would come to be called the French and Indian War. □

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# 1500

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cross-country

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# 40

hours trekking  
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