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The Best Books of 2021

SPECIAL ISSUE

The Best 100 Indie Books of the Year
+ Our Full Dec. 15 Issue
FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK  |  Tom Beer

PODCASTS FOR BOOK LOVERS

One of the few silver linings of the past 21 months, for me, was the time and opportunity to explore the wealth of literary podcasts out there. At the end of last year, I wrote about some of the podcasts I discovered while looking for distraction during the lockdowns of 2020. This year I added even more to my rotation, making me a full-fledged podcast addict who listens while cooking, doing dishes, or folding laundry—i.e., any time I can’t be reading an actual book. Here are some of my 2021 discoveries.

Backlisted: Writer Michele Filgate turned me on to this long-running favorite from the U.K., presented by John Mitchinson and Andy Miller. Each episode—they’re up to No. 150—is dedicated to a backlist title that the hosts and their guests discuss with humor, warmth, and insight. Some favorite episodes of the year covered Leonard Gardner’s 1969 novel about a down-and-out boxer, Fat City (Episode 144), Dorothy B. Hughes’ moody 1947 noir, In a Lonely Place (Episode 142), and Penelope Mortimer’s autobiographical 1958 novel, Daddy’s Gone A-Hunting (Episode 134).

Once Upon a Time...at Bennington College: Season 2 of the podcast from Vanity Fair contributing editor and author Lili Anolik (Hollywood’s Eve) is an irresistibly gossipy look at the Bennington College Class of 1986, which included future literary superstars Bret Easton Ellis (Less Than Zero), Donna Tartt (The Secret History), and Jonathan Lethem (The Fortress of Solitude). Anolik analyzes the inspiration these writers found in the creative whirligig of the small Vermont college, featuring in-depth interviews with Ellis, Lethem, and many of their classmates. Noticeably absent: the reclusive Tartt, whose lawyers have fired off warning letters to the podcast’s creators, according to the New York Post. Listen while you can.

Mr. Difficult: Jonathan Franzen devotees—and haters, too—will delight in this in-depth exploration of the novelist’s work, with observations on his thorny public persona (hence that title), his nonfiction, and even the never-aired HBO pilot of a Noah Baumbach series that aimed to adapt Franzen’s 2001 breakthrough novel, The Corrections. Congenially hosted by Alex Shephard, a staff writer at The New Republic, and publisher’s lunch reporter Erin Somers, and Full Stop editor Eric Jett, it’s exactly the brainy book club you need to prep for reading the author’s recently released sixth novel, Crossroads.

Poured Over: The Barnes & Noble podcast, hosted by editorial director Miwa Messer is a no-frills affair, featuring straight-up one-on-one interviews with a wide range of contemporary authors such as Louise Erdrich (The Sentence), Kal Penn (You Can’t Be Serious), Richard Powers (Bewilderment), and Helen Macdonald (Vesper Flights). But oh, what interviews! Messer, a seasoned industry veteran, has seemingly read everything, and these intelligent, lively conversations are real treasures. She gets the very best out of her guests.

Across the Pond: This scrappy little startup launched in March and quickly became one of my must-listens. It’s hosted by Lori Feathers, owner of Interabang Books in Dallas (and a former colleague of mine on the board of the National Book Critics), and Sam Jordison, the U.K. publisher of Galley Beggar Press. Each episode features an author interview—their guests have included Sarah Hall (Burntcoat), Caleb Azumah Nelson (Open Water), and Doireann Ni Ghriofa (A Ghost in the Throat)—but the real pleasure is the freewheeling chat about book news from the U.S. and the U.K. that opens every episode. After listening to the podcast’s 19 episodes, Sam and Lori will feel like old friends.

FOR MORE REVIEWS AND FEATURES, VISIT US ONLINE AT KIRKUS.COM.
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The Kirkus Star is awarded to books of remarkable merit, as determined by the impartial editors of Kirkus.

In *Riley Masters*’ geopolitical thriller, a pair of “financial detectives” investigates a corporate shark involved in minerals—and maybe murder. Read the review on p. 189.
“David provides the model of activist scholarship that combines academic nuance and sophistication with an engaging writing style.”

TRAILBLAZERS

 сталее

A girl finds an inventive solution to missing representation in the toy aisle in this clever debut picture book about inclusion.

Molly Morningstar is so excited to be invited to her friend Emma's birthday tea party. The invitation says to bring a doll, but Molly just can't choose. "Emma has lots of pretty dolls. And they all look like her. I wish I had a doll that looks like ME!" Molly laments. At the toy store, the brown-skinned, curly-haired Molly sees only pale-skinned dolls; even on the internet, Molly and her mother can't find a good match. When Molly comes up with the solution to make her own doll, she finds all the right materials and creates a twin for herself, impressing all her friends and making a doll she loves. Molly is a narrator who knows what she wants and is determined to find a way to achieve it—even if she makes a mess along the way. Coke uses a straightforward, realistic narration style to emulate Molly's voice, with occasional poetry sprinkled throughout. Orozco's exuberant illustrations capture Molly's attitude (and her mother's exasperation at those messes) while giving the story's lead a great range of diverse friends of both genders at the party—some whose dolls match them and some who don't. Emma's birthday present—a doll that looks like an action figure—is a nice touch that critiques gender expectations.

Creative kids, especially those who also feel unrepresented, will be inspired.

A beginners’ guide focuses on starting and growing a communications consultancy.

Darnell's book considers the basics of starting a business in the field of corporate and marketing communications, but it could just as easily apply to any professional services' sole proprietorship. The fundamental principles he covers are the cornerstones of most small businesses, and the lessons he shares are instructive. In Part 1, the author discusses reputation management, creativity, strategy, and personal branding.

After a worthwhile discussion of the importance of protecting the integrity of corporate reputations, the work makes a strong case for maintaining business and personal ethics. Chapters on creativity and strategy concentrate largely on the communications business. The material included about branding is more broadly applicable, particularly Darnell's recommended process for developing a personal brand. Useful for novice brand builders is his clear explanation of “The Copy Platform.” Part 2 is a kind of minicourse in business; it includes chapters on leadership and management, objectives, brands (with some intriguing case histories about “rebrands”), business development, customer service, integrated marketing, and cash flow/project flow. Again, all of these areas focus on communications yet have relevance to most professional service firms. Especially useful, albeit brief, is the content on managing projects. In Part 3, Darnell examines very specifically running a communications consultancy, discussing such issues as client size and media usage. A noteworthy aspect of this book is the “Exploration” section the author appended to the end of each chapter. Here, Darnell suggests exercises that test readers' knowledge and encourage hands-on practice; for example, “For your personal favorite brand, pick one area of The Promo Mix where you feel that a new campaign effort could introduce significant benefits for the brand. Describe the campaign using the Copy Platform format (see chapter 4).” The author personalizes the book by interweaving his own career experiences with instructional content; he also cites relevant sources and uses appropriate, engaging examples. While covering a lot of ground, the book does not delve deeply into any one topic, resulting in more of an overview than a comprehensive manual.

Valuable, if somewhat rudimentary, advice for the budding communications consultant.

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often “overlooked, misinterpreted, and often retold to present a false history.” The book starts with 50-plus pages of introductory material by David Lyah Beth LeFlore-Ituen, a producer, and Chandra D.L. Waring, a professor, that contemplates both the victimization and the resilience of Black women. LeFlore-Ituen’s essay, for example, uses the multigenerational history of women in her own distinguished family as a lens through which to explore the impact of Black women on shaping the lives of their communities. Regardless of the dominant narratives in traditional history books, she reminds us, Black women have been telling their stories “at the kitchen table” for generations.

The bulk of the nearly 700-page book comprises three parts that focus on Black women’s achievements in activism, dance, and sports. Each of the three sections begins with an introductory essay that provides a broad historical overview of the topic. Activists profiled include historical figures, like Harriet Tubman, Ella Baker, and Betty Shabazz, as well as modern figures, like criminal justice reform advocate Michelle Alexander and trans activist LaSaia Wade. The sections on dance and sports celebrate cultural icons from Josephine Baker and Debra Austin to Jackie Joyner-Kersee and Simone Biles. These chapters also challenge notions in sports broadcasting that paint successful Black athletes as “superhumanly ‘strong’ beings” and that fail to acknowledge their hard work, training, and mental fortitude.

The first book in an anticipated six-volume set, this is an inspiring, comprehensive work. With a multidisciplinary background in music, design, and poetry, David provides the model of activist scholarship that combines academic nuance and sophistication with an engaging writing style that is accessible to general readership, such as David’s essay that convincingly demonstrates how women served as the “foot soldiers” of the civil rights movement. Backed by impressive endnotes and references, each chapter is encyclopedic in breadth while offering fresh analytical insights into Black women who are well covered in the existing literature, like Rosa Parks. The choice to combine the topics of activism, dance, and sports makes for an eclectic collection. More consistency could have been paid in the formatting of chapters, which vary significantly in length. Accompanied by dozens of stark, powerful black-and-white photographs and portraits, this is a visually arresting volume whose words match the power of its images.

An exciting resource in a promising, thorough multivolume celebration of Black women.

WIND
Davidson, Ellen Dee
Luminare Press (582 pp.)
978-1-64388-718-0

This middle-grade adventure sees a girl take up a fantastic quest alongside an alien companion.

One day, sixth grader Katie Noriega stares outside during class. She notices an oak tree and hears a voice ask, “Will you listen to me?” She does and learns that the tree doesn’t want its branches cut. When she passes this on to Mr. Pinksi, her teacher, the class ridicules her. Her best friend, Amy Scott, tells her that pretending to talk to nature is embarrassing. Even more discouraging, Katie’s parents have been fighting and may get divorced. After school, her cat, Sasha, says, “Earth.” Katie is unsure of the message—until the ground shakes and she falls into the family’s basement. There, she meets Za, a young gnomelike alien from the planet Stella. He has purple skin and a bright orb that reveals they’re actually in a cave. They follow a stream through this place that’s “stuck between” and encounter a woman named Dania, who leads them to her forest dwelling. Za’s guardian arrives and gives them gifts, a charm bracelet and a journey song, to help the kids in their search for the Winged Ones and a way back to their respective worlds. Meanwhile, a battle with the all-consuming Poison One lurks ahead. Davidson shares her passion for fantasy and the environment in this vibrant novel. Katie’s character is grounded by the threat of her parents’ divorce. She also bonds, despite the bickering, with Za, whose parents live on different planets. Younger readers will recognize familiar fantasy components, including Kira, a lion; elemental dragons; and Seidon, the lord of the waterways. Love for nature shines as the author’s overarching message; for example, Seidon says, “Although I continue to sense the other waters...Many are now polluted, and I can’t reach them.” An excellent scene showing the connection between trees and fungi gives adventure fans a topic for further study. Also noteworthy is that Katie and Za could not look more different, but they win by embracing their similarities. A winged horse named Wind stays with Katie in the end, hinting at further escapades.

A bright, vividly told tale that will bring readers closer to the natural world.

THOSE BRISBANE ROMANTICS
de V alera, Danielle
Old Tiger Books (390 pp.)
978-0-9942745-6-4

An Australian agriculture student forms a tightknit bond with creative friends and lovers who are planning for their futures in this literary novel.

Dara Mahoney is living with seven other students in Brisbane in 1961 in an old rooming house. They are agriculture students, but their hopes and dreams veer far from the secure futures their degrees promise. Dara carries a torch for Joe Gordon, who yearns to play the violin in Europe. Bill Hereward wishes to motorbike to India, and Cass Clayton wants to sing. The guys stay up late drinking and planning an ocean voyage on a catamaran. They all feel pressure to get married young but fear that a wedding may signal the end of their aspirations. Against the backdrop of the White Australia Policy, Cass is in a relationship with Ling Chang, an Indonesian facing deportation. Doug Jarratt wants to marry Tripta Srivastava,