

# THE CORNELL BOOK REVIEW



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Fall 2019 | Volume XVII

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Sponsored by the Student Activities Funding Commission

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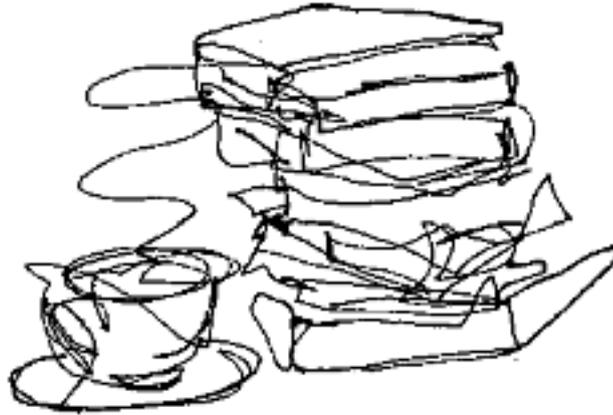
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# Editor's Note



Kimberly Koh

**“IF YOU ONLY READ THE BOOKS THAT EVERYONE ELSE IS READING, YOU CAN ONLY THINK WHAT EVERYONE ELSE IS THINKING.”**

- HARUKI MURAKAMI

One of my favorite parts about being Editor-in-Chief of The Cornell Book Review is getting to be part of this community of people who just love to read for fun. There are no judgements, no expectations, no good or bad opinions about what we're reading. Yes, we review books: for their merits, for their effects on us as readers. These critiques are a part of a process to better understand the book and consider what might have been changed to make the story a stronger narrative. But, in general, my philosophy as leader of this group is to just let readers be readers. Choose the books you want to read and let us know what you think. This organization, while it's been around as a staple publication at Cornell for years, is an outlet for our creativity, a fun way to schedule in time to read and converse about books outside of our classes.

So let's read some cool science fiction space opera. Let's talk about the way fantasy interplays with reality. Let's discuss the most newsworthy books about timely topics in our media. Let's choose these books we want to read because we're hungry for stories. We want to be more informed about different events happening in the world around us. We want to have a new perspective on life, whether it's through the lens of fiction or history.

I believe that our reviewers should have the choice to read and review whatever they want, whether it's the most popular, commercial hit of the season, or a quieter book that's flown under the radar these past few months. Let's just read some newly published books and have a conversation with one another. And for either situation: have your opinion, think what you think about the story you chose, and let us know your unique insights.

I hope you enjoy our Fall 2019 publication!

Sincerely,  
Kelly Stone  
Editor-in-Chief

# Ninth House

by Leigh Bardugo  
Reviewed by Kelly Stone  
Flatiron Books, 2019

*Ninth House* follows protagonist Alex Stern, an unusual member of Yale University's newest admitted class, as she navigates her position as arbiter between the school's eight secret societies. Raised by her hippie mother, Alex had dropped out of school and fallen in with crime from a young age. After surviving a double homicide that took the lives of her best friends, she finds herself in a powerful position: the mysterious society of Lethe recruits her to join their Ninth House at Yale, which oversees the secret societies. With a full-ride and a chance at an education she never would have imagined for herself, Alex feels unqualified for this, but she has one quality that sets her apart from all others: she can see ghosts.

Yale's secret societies are surrounded by myth and intrigue. Bardugo uses this mysterious atmosphere to siphon paranormal elements into the narrative. While the novel's setting is in New Haven, a vibrant college campus, the ghosts' and students' nefarious activities seem to go naturally hand in hand. The overall tone of the novel is sinister and suspenseful, despite its lack of categorization as a mystery or thriller. The presence of ghosts and the occult drive conflict and a sense of doom with each of Alex's actions because it is not clear to the reader exactly what evils the ghosts are capable of doing. Furthermore, the nature of the magic system is left a bit ambiguous, likely to be further explored in *Ninth House's* sequel.

While the setting plays a huge role in establishing the context for the paranormal twist on privileged student life, the novel presents a very character-driven story. One of the greatest strengths of the book is the way it humanizes Alex through its close third person point of view. *Ninth House* is Alex's lived experience, and the characters she meets along the way show some of the worst, and at times best, parts of people, particularly college students who are historically a distinct and difficult to grasp population in research and literature.

Alex's role as a protagonist is unique in that she has a lot of moral gray areas. She doesn't immediately strike the reader as a likeable character and the more Bardugo characterizes her, the more empathetic yet less relatable she becomes. Alex's background is a quite extreme worst-case scenario. Bardugo reveals snippets of Alex's past throughout the narrative in non-sequential order. However, once

the pieces are put together, the reality is acutely tragic.

Alex's experience growing up as the only person who could see ghosts forces her young self into feeling isolated from the world. While she tries to participate in a carefree way of life alongside her peers, it quickly becomes clear to her that she must hide her experiences away from others who cannot understand them. This culminates in a particularly gruesome sexual assault at the hands of a ghost when Alex is only a child that she can't explain to anyone. Alienation seems to drive Alex's life from then on. She finds a group of disreputable friends and boyfriends that lead her to an existence numbed by a drug-induced haze throughout her teenage years. The turning point in her life occurs just before the novel's beginning, when she nearly dies in an accident, loses her best friends, and is offered the chance to start over.

At Yale, Alex's experience continues to be characterized by an atmosphere of isolation. She is struck with sensations of both inferiority and superiority: her insecurities related to imposter syndrome and the authority of having control over the university's most powerful students in the secret societies. This duality allows for an intriguing tension that motivates Alex throughout the present timeline. Bardugo writes, "The greatest gift Lethe had given Alex was not the full ride to Yale, the new start that had scrubbed her past clean like a chemical burn. It was the knowledge, the certainty, that the things she saw were real and always had been" (20). From the start of the novel, Alex makes it clear that she feels a sense of gratitude to Lethe for accepting her for her true self, as someone who can see ghosts, which is a recognition that she has not been able to rest easy in before.

Darlington's role in Alex's life seems to mitigate her seclusion even further. Darlington is Alex's predecessor at Lethe, who must train her as his apprentice. Alex establishes a bond with Darlington, as her trusted mentor and friend, that is unlikely in a charmingly prophetic way. When Bardugo introduces Darlington in the past timeline, he is determined to loathe Alex because of the way she deviates from his expectations of their shared position. Surprisingly, they bond to an extent that leaves Alex heartbroken at the event of his disappearance just before the novel's start. This further ostracizes Alex from her peers at school as she has yet another secret regarding her friend's disappearance that she must guard from others. Bardugo discloses the circumstances behind Darlington's disappearance in the end. However, after having spent so much time establishing their relationship, it seems a bit over-dramatic for Alex to have jumped to such a bold conclusion about her friend that led to his disastrous accident.

Notably, Darlington appears in the current timeline as an entirely absent, yet essential character. In a way, he is a foil to Alex. A well-educated, well-bred, wealthy young

man, Darlington is the quintessential person to reign over Yale's secret societies. Then, Alex appears as his complete opposite and disrupts the status quo. Bardugo writes, "[Alex] had, by sheer virtue of her existence, robbed [Darlington] of something he'd been looking forward to for the entirety of his three-year tenure with Lethe" (28). The narrator's tone is instilled with Darlington's contempt for Alex in this moment of their first meeting. Yet, his shock wears down as they eventually develop into trusted companions. This relationship was one of the most interesting bonds between the book's characters because Bardugo allows the narrator to really get into both of their heads on many occasions and share their inner feelings, as exemplified by Darlington's callous first impression of Alex, which he expresses much more politely in conversation.

Furthermore, Bardugo utilizes an alternating timeline to lay out Alex's current and past pressing circumstances. This allows the narrator to withhold information about Alex's background and formative experiences until later in the narrative, for greater dramatic impact. This technique also elongates the mystery surrounding Darlington's disappearance, making it so that the end of the past timeline just catches up with the beginning of the novel, finally filling in the details that Bardugo initially withheld from the reader.

A haunting debut into the adult contemporary fantasy genre, *Ninth House* presents a grim world, concentrated within the bounds of a college campus setting. Alex's unconventional perspective on life, due to her difficult upbringing, further augments the drama of the plot, making her personal journey just as evocative as the overarching danger-seeking story.

## Where Reasons End

by Yiyun Li

Reviewed by Malcolm Hagerty

Random House, 2019

I think Yiyun Li's *Where Reasons End*, while marketed as a "novel," properly belongs to some other category. The "any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental" perfunctorily printed on the copyright page is grimly contradicted by the dedication across from it: "in memory of Vincent Kean Li (2001-2017)." Those who dance around the author's grave or bandy about phrases like "sometimes what you make up is realer than the real" have never much impressed me; the first principle of discussing this book will be acknowledging that its narrator is Li herself.

The inapplicability of the category "novel" hinges not only on the work's truth-content, though, but its un-

usual conceit and structure. After a wonderful Elizabeth Bishop poem for the epigraph ("Argument," from which the phrase "where reasons end" is taken), Li settles into her rhythm with little fanfare, understanding the reader will either know the premise already or quickly grasp it: a bereaved writer and mother, having lost her son Nikolai to suicide, takes to summoning up his voice so the two can converse outside the bounds of time. The sixteen brief chapters have no apparent progression, save the plodding along of events in the narrator's life; one gets the impression that Li wrote them out of spontaneous desire (or necessity) rather than deliberately for collection in a published book. The result, while intensely intimate, can feel aimless and enervated as well. Even on a micro level, the structure is extraordinarily repetitive, alternating routinely between bits of repartee and Li's recollections – so repetitive it goes beyond monotony into a certain rhythm (rather like *Moby Dick*, which in an interview I found Li says she reads each year). While I'm generally indifferent to this mode, it is perhaps entirely appropriate for a book about death and grief: the former's timelessness, and the latter's incessancy.

The discussions orbit elliptically around the central topic, impossible to broach directly, and gladly pursue every available tangent: squabbles about events, matters of personal conduct, the metaphysics of death – but more often about literature, and language itself. Language, Li affirms repeatedly, is a sort of refuge from the restrictions of time and space where the living and the dead can meet. It's no surprise that a writer would be particularly attentive to this possibility, as well as the specifics of enacting it: discussions of diction, metaphors, etymologies (real and imagined), and other literary musings constitute a great part of the book. The second greatest would be Li's aforementioned reminiscing, which frequently interrupts the dialogue. Simple as they are, these memories affected me more than anything else – from watching Nikolai and his friends kayaking on a gorgeous autumn day to Li, herself a child, being forced to knit with shabby yarn day after day... both simpler and darker moments alike all provide lucid windows into motherhood's difficulties and joys, and are equally bitter apposed to the awful future.

Most are of Nikolai. He comes across sometimes as an utterly normal child; usually as impossibly precocious. He bakes desserts for his classmates; takes umbrage at those who confuse his oboe for a clarinet; creates pictures, stories, poems, and dreams which, even from an early age, are beautiful and foreboding; is plainly odd, yet intelligent, self-assured, and presumably charismatic enough to have had many friends and grown-up admirers. Nikolai is, as one often sees in accounts of artists who died young, somehow too sensitive, too intense for life. Like that adage about brighter candles burning faster. Whether Li falls into cliché here or accurately describes her son is not for me to say. Of course, expecting her to withhold all sentimentality would be unfair.

# City of Girls

by Elizabeth Gilbert

Reviewed by Hanna Carney

Riverhead, 2019

“People will tell you not to waste your youth having too much fun, but they’re wrong. Youth is an irreplaceable treasure, and the only respectable thing to do with irreplaceable treasure is to waste it.”

-Elizabeth Gilbert, *City of Girls*

Elizabeth Gilbert’s *City of Girls* guides the audience through the delicious, complex life of Vivian Morris—a vibrant woman who was not built to follow the rules. The novel is told from Vivian’s perspective, who is now an eighty-nine-year-old woman, as she recounts the days of her wild youth in New York City during the 1940s. She was sent to live with her Aunt Peg in the city after she dropped out of Vassar her freshman year, and she charmingly recounts, “I had all those cigarettes to smoke...In short: I was busy.” Gilbert wastes no time in characterizing Vivian as a witty, facetious woman with a desire for thrill, and she, without a doubt, will find it.

Vivian’s Aunt Peg owns the Lily Playhouse, a rinky-dink theater in the city, and here is where Vivian finds those thrilling experiences. To start, she meets Celia, a showgirl with whom she has a somewhat erotic fascination. These girls share the same apartment, and it is Celia that introduces nineteen-year-old Vivian to a world filled with alcohol, parties, and sex (I’ll save it for the reader, but Vivian’s retelling of the loss of her virginity to a married doctor is both painfully awkward and outrageously funny).

Vivian falls in love with New York City, and there could be no better setting to nurture her proclivity for wildness. The energy of the city nicely accompanies her tendency to get lost in her nightly outings and morning hangovers, and without the constraints of parents, she feels as though she can get away with almost anything. Her only responsibility, to sew costumes for the actors at the Lily, opens the door for her to meet all these new people with exciting lives.

When the Lily creates the hit show “City of Girls,” Vivian befriends the endlessly-talented actor, Edna Parker Watson, and falls in love with the boyish and tastefully arrogant Anthony Roccella. Vivian is having the greatest time of her life (and some of the best sex of her life, she assures). In all, the first half of the novel describes a life that all too many of us wish we were living. Vivian has a sort of cou-

A friend tells me that writing in the voice of a loved one who’s passed away is a recognized method for dealing with the concomitant trauma. Even knowing this while reading the book, however, I don’t think would have diminished its feeling like macabre ventriloquism. How can a mother ever speak for her son – a teenaged son, no less? I kept having the thought that that were my own mother to write a similar book about me, her depiction of my inner life would be in no way accurate – which doesn’t reflect the specific character of our relationship (which is unfraught and full of mutual love) so much as humans’ essential separateness, which we barely breach even when closest together. Granted, Li understands this: Nikolai never specifies his motivations further than a self-destructive striving after perfection. Yet the larger target of his criticism by far is the narrator: mostly as a writer, but as a mother and person as well. Nikolai constantly berates her for slipping into cliché and sentimentality, using poor analogies, her vaguenesses, irrationalities, preferences for certain words over others, her melancholy, and (surely forgivable) inability to understand death. While he seems, from the flashbacks, to have been argumentative in life as well, I can’t help but see this castigation – which the narrator always meekly accepts – as a sort of self-flagellation, with a dead son as the scourge. But even if so, any moral offense I take at this founders next to my sympathy – that life can be horrible enough that this sort of emotional self-harm can help. It is, if anything, deeply human.

Li’s own mental health struggles provide a bleak background to her writing: in 2012, she had a breakdown, attempted suicide and was hospitalized. Though mostly unacknowledged, this (for me, literally) unimaginably painful history does rear its head at some of the book’s most impactful moments. “Why don’t we get to live like other people,” Nikolai asks toward the end, “on flat and solid earth before it was discovered to be round?” A few lines later, Li muses to herself:

What if, I thought, we keep trying? What if an abyss can be made into a natural habitat? What if we accept suffering as we do our hair or eye colors? What if, having lived through a dark and bleak time, a parent can convince a child that what we need is not a light that will lead us somewhere, but the resolution to be nowhere, even if it’s ever and forever.

Like many pieces of fiction, *Where Reasons End* draws its strength from what goes unsaid – yet perhaps too much so, resulting in a tension that never breaks. Can that be called tension at all? I wanted to see her break forth into unreserved rage or misery at least once, if only to emotionally contextualize the rest of the book. As is, it spends too much time on pedantry too successful at masking its underlying pain – more tedious argument than insidious intent.

But I hardly have any place imputing sentiments to Li which might not have even existed. More broadly, what can criticism really say to a document so personal, which from the beginning I’ve found so difficult to grasp? Only that I’ve gained something of pity and compassion, however humble.

rageous vivacity that many lack as she gloriously fumbles her way through New York, and it can be wonderful to live vicariously through her character.

However, reality brings both Vivian's adventures and the reader's carefree enjoyment to a grinding halt as she makes a life-altering mistake. Having slept with certain people, she has caused quite the scandal, and the entire city knows. In a single night, Vivian has carelessly destroyed her little life in New York. She has cost people their jobs and cost herself

Although the reader might like to continue living through Vivian and her hedonistic adventures in the city, the harsh snap back to reality is necessary. It provides substance to the novel and reminds us of what we try to ignore: life is hard. Gilbert emphasizes her reminder as the reader progresses to the second half of the novel.

Full of shame and having ruined most of her friendships, Vivian returns home to Virginia to live with her parents. From here, *City of Girls* loses its vitality, just as Vivian, too, loses her youthful exuberance—in a jarring number of paragraphs, the timeline skips every few years as Vivian matures into a middle-aged, and then old woman. We get only glimpses of a failed engagement, the raising of a son, the success of a business; there is something awkward about the pages dedicated to these events. They are both too short and too long. Not only that, but some events in the second half of the novel are a little unbelievable.

Sure, Vivian's adventures in New York City were of the extreme, but they were plausible, something a reader could easily imagine themselves a part of as well. On the other hand (spoiler warning), the meeting of Frank Grecco, a World War II veteran who middle-aged Vivian falls in love with, is a little cheesy and far-fetched. In fact, several years prior on her ride home from the city, she briefly met Frank when he called her "a dirty little whore." Then, decades later, they cross paths again, but this time, Frank apologizes. He claims that for years, he had been meaning to search for Vivian in order to convey

just how sorry he is for calling her such a slur. For the reader, this may be just a touch too hard to believe; what man, not to mention from the 1940s, would feel absolutely terrible for criticizing a "promiscuous" woman for her sexual endeavors? Not only that, but what man would feel the need to think daily about searching for said woman in order to apologize? The answer: hardly any. Perhaps I'm too pessimistic, but I find Elizabeth Gilbert a little too optimistic in her take on this apology. This love story is coincidental



Hanna Carney

many friendships; Anthony, the boy she once loved, now despises her. And worst of all, Edna Watson looks down on Vivian as a mere child who she tells:

"The things that you don't understand about yourself, Vivian, is that you're not an interesting person. You are pretty, yes—but that's only because you are young. The prettiness will soon fade. But you will never be an interesting person."

and convenient in a way that makes the reader cringe rather than swoon.

Despite the improbable reunion of Vivian and Frank, I did appreciate Gilbert's exploration of the complexity of human relationships. Vivian falls in love with Frank, and neither the reader, nor Vivian herself learns if these feelings are reciprocated. Perhaps this was due to Frank's marriage to another woman or his sometimes-debilitating PTSD, but Vivian has no intention of trying to seduce him. Nonetheless, she feels as though they are more than just friends, but she has no label for it. She doesn't want to label it. There is something to be appreciated about the pair's relationship, in that it offers a nice juxtaposition to all the sexual attraction and lustful encounters that Vivian has already experienced. Their relationship is intimate in its own way, and it is a kind of love, both pure and complex, that anyone would be lucky to find.

Elizabeth Gilbert's *City of Girls* unabashedly reminds us of what it means to live life and truly live it. The novel begs the question: what makes us interesting? Having read this novel from the comfort of my couch, the thought that I had been wasting my life, that I was not interesting, scared me, but Vivian has reminded me of all the adventures I may take and the mistakes I may make, and that buried my fear just a little. I hope other readers may find comfort just the same and the motivation to be courageous. In all, though the work can be awkward and lengthy at times, especially toward the second half, it sheds an appealing light on life's ups and downs. *City of Girls* is a book that I would recommend to anyone. However, women in their youth or those looking back on it may have something vital to take from this novel—in the midst of societal standards and pressures, we should not live our lives with shame, and more importantly, we should never look back on it with shame.

# The Nickel Boys

by Colson Whitehead  
Reviewed by Aaran Leviton  
Doubleday, 2019

Those who have followed events of the literary realm might recognize Colson Whitehead as the author of *The Underground Railroad* from 2016, also published by Doubleday. That novel won several big-name awards, including the 2017 Pulitzer for literature. *The Nickel Boys* is Whitehead's follow-up.

A young man named Elwood Curtis plays the protagonist in this novel. In 1963, a bright, ambitious Elwood

turns sixteen years old. He listens to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech at Zion Hill on record, reads encyclopedias and Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*. He works at "Marconi's Tobacco & Cigars" in Tallahassee, Florida, and saves money to go to Melvin Griggs Technical College. In short, Elwood has an intellectual bent to his practical nature and a he could well be a future intellectual and activist.

But through a cruel twist of fate, Elwood finds himself hitch-hiking to college on the first day. A man picks him up in a stolen Plymouth and, when the cops pull them over, Elwood gets wrapped up in the crime. On a false charge, he gets sent to the Nickel Academy.

I first became interested in *The Nickel Boys* this past summer, when I heard Colson Whitehead on NPR's *1A*. *Along with Whitehead*, a journalist named Ben Montgomery and a survivor of a reform school not unlike the Nickel Academy discuss the violent acts against the boys there. The non-fictional Dozier School "opened in 1900 and [was almost immediately] scandalized. Some investigators showed up in 1903 and found kids as young as six years old locked in irons like common criminals," Montgomery said. Even until its closure in 2011, Montgomery said, "we reported on kids being kept in horrendous conditions."

Whitehead has a passage about Elwood's experiences on the first night at the Nickel Academy:

The pillowcase smelled like vinegar, and in the night the katydids and the crickets screeched in waves, soft then loud, back and forth.

Elwood was asleep when a different roar commenced. It came from outside, a rush and a whoosh without variation. Forbidding and mechanical and granting no clue to its origin. He didn't know which book he'd picked it up from, but the word came to him: torrential.

A voice across the room said, "Somebody's going out for ice cream," and a few boys snickered (54).

Whitehead describes this as gallows humor. The ice cream comment is about the different colors of bruises that boys would get from beatings. From this moment forward, the book becomes progressively inundated with violence and inhumanity.

*The Nickel Boys* is a literary work, a novel, and we have to treat it as such. A novel, in one view, primarily functions on a basis of language. Considering it in that light, *The Nickel Boys* works fine, though not extraordinarily. The language can feel like a mere supplement to the subject at hand. For example, when Elwood meets Turner:

"The second thing Elwood noticed was the boy's eerie sense of self. The mess hall was loud with the rumble and roil of

juvenile activity, but this boy bobbed in his own pocket of calm. Over time, Elwood saw that he was always simultaneously at home in whatever scene he found himself and also seemed like he shouldn't have been there; inside and above at the same time; a part and apart. Like a tree trunk that falls across a creek—it doesn't belong and then it's never not been there generating its own ripples in the larger current (57).

Turner, we slowly discover, is important to Elwood's story. It makes sense to talk about his character in detail, but (without spoiling the book) I can say that this description really doesn't feel necessary. As far as the language is concerned, it flows, the metaphors make sense, and the description makes some things clearer, but overall nothing much would have changed if we didn't have it

There is a larger problem that I have with *The Nickel Boys*: the plot drives the characters. Anne Lamott writes that, in fiction, the characters ought to drive the plot: "Characters should not, conversely, serve as pawns for some plot you've dreamed up." Even with respect to the protagonist, Elwood, we don't need to know as much as we do. Sure, the background information makes his plight more sympathetic, but it all feels more or less disposable. Especially as regards the other characters, we could skip over their descriptions without missing out on much.

Someone might say that *The Nickel Boys* feels opportunistic. Not that it isn't respectable to think about these things, to seek out the stories that have been lost to time and suppressed by white supremacy, patriarchy, and a justice system that continues to serve a subset of American society.

Somehow, it feels like Whitehead's talent would have been better used telling this story in a different medium. The novel form does not seem suited to the purpose, nor does it do it particular justice. It spreads the word, yes, which is a wonderful and noble aim: no statute of limitations ought to bind ethical and moral judgments. But aren't there other reasons that we read novels? We read novels to connect with characters. We read novels to learn about others, ourselves, and the world. *The Nickel Boys* does the latter but, for me, fails at the former. It tells a story that, I would bet, many of its readers has never heard before. We discover a new world in Whitehead's novel, a world that existed and continues existing for many people.

For some readers, these stories are not fictions. These stories speak to many events in the past, and, more disturbingly, the present. We must recognize and lament that we live in a world where both the innocent and non-deserving may get violently awakened during the night, beaten to death, and buried in unmarked graves. Colson Whitehead spoke about what it meant to include the unmarked cemetery specifically as part of *The Nickel Boys* on NPR:

For me it's those hidden atrocities that are all around us and we have no knowledge of them. When I came across some of Ben [Montgomery's] reporting in 2014, it was the summer of Michael Brown being killed in Ferguson, Missouri, Eric Garner being killed by policemen in Staten Island, and then seeing that all these acts of violence against black folks were being recorded, but it's not like there was a spike, we just have the technology now. All those hidden crimes are all around us, no one is ever held accountable, and that's what compelled me to write the book.

Student archaeologists find the secret graveyard "in a patchy acre of wild grass between the old work barn and the school dump" (3). The discovery provokes a darkly ironic critique of white-supremacist capitalism and the defective judicial system. "The discovery of the bodies was an expensive complication for the real estate company awaiting the all clear from the environmental study, and for the state's attorney, which had recently closed an investigation into the abuse stories" (3). Most of all, there is a very relevant correlation with the preeminent problem of credibility in our time: "Plenty of boys had talked of the secret graveyard before, but as it had ever been with Nickel, no one believed them until someone else said it" (5).

This book is important. It may not be the most brilliantly crafted novel of the year or have the most memorable characters. Nonetheless, it does tell a story that needs to be told, and that's all we can ask from any story.

# Know My Name

by Chanel Miller

Reviewed by Isabella Ogbolumani

Penguin Random House, 2019

"You don't know me, but you've been inside me, and that's why we're here," writes the woman then known only as Emily Doe in her victim impact statement that was read around the world and even on the floor of Congress. The woman, who had been sexually assaulted by then-Stanford swimmer Brock Turner, reveals her identity in her new memoir, *Know My Name*: Chanel Miller.

Miller herself is not just a victim. She is a survivor, a daughter, a sister, a writer, and unquestionably, she is an inspiration. Vice President Joe Biden himself even sent her a letter following the release of her victim impact statement reading, "I see you." It was Miller's own words from that very victim impact statement that inspired what is perhaps the most famous line from Hillary Clinton's concession speech: "To all the little girls out there, never doubt that you are valuable and powerful and deserving of every chance and opportunity in the world to pursue and achieve your

own dreams.”

*Know My Name* serves as a way for Miller to reclaim her identity, for her to demonstrate that she, and all survivors of violent sexual crimes, are much more than just the worst experience that has ever happened to them. While the memoir criticizes the criminal justice system and rages against the way society treats survivors of sexual violence, it does not serve as an angry manifesto, but rather as an exploration of pain and identity. In fact, Miller even states of Turner, upon hearing testimony from his former teachers and an ex-girlfriend, among others, about what a good guy he was, that:

I never questioned that any of what they said about him was true. In fact I need you to know it was all true. The friendly guy who helps you move and assists senior citizens in the pool is the same guy who assaulted me. One person can be capable of both. Society often fails to wrap its head around the fact that these truths often coexist, they are not mutually exclusive. Bad qualities can hide inside a good person. That’s the terrifying part.

Miller’s statement reveals her beautiful soul. Brock Turner is the man who sexually assaulted her. He is the man who put her, and her family, through hell, for over two years. He is the cause of her sleepless nights. He is the cause of her stress, and he is, unquestionably, the cause of her pain. Regardless of all of these difficulties, she makes sure to tell her readers that he is still a good person, and she makes sure to tell Turner himself, “Your life is not over, you have decades of years ahead to rewrite your story. The world is huge, so much bigger than Palo Alto and Stanford, and you will make a space for yourself in it where you will be useful and happy.”

Despite being a memoir about a dark topic and featuring hard-to-read passages such as a detailed description of what the process of getting a rape kit done is like, *Know My Name* is nonetheless incredibly moving. Miller is clearly a gifted writer; one only needs to read sentences such as, “I’d been living with two teacups filled to the brim behind each eye” and “I had gone from a clueless river weeper to a prolific printmaker” and “I thought of my pain like my personal rain cloud; reading these letters was like watching the whole sky turn an inky black” to experience her gift with words.

Even the cover of the memoir is reminiscent of rising from the ashes. It depicts the Japanese art of kintsugi, also known as “golden repair,” which is art created by broken pottery pieces that are mended using powdered gold and lacquer, and the end product is the creation of something beautiful from something broken.

Perhaps the most significant line comes in the af-

termath of Turner’s atrocious six-month sentence. Miller states:

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“The judge had given Brock something that would never be extended to me: empathy. My pain was never more valuable than his potential.”

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This passage alone demonstrates what is fundamentally wrong with the criminal justice system when it comes to sexual assault cases: an abuser’s potential is always more important than its crimes. The excerpt also speaks to the broader theme of the memoir, which seeks to ask, and answer, the following questions: What about my pain? What about my potential? What about my worth? What am I, what is a survivor of sexual violence, worth in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of society?

Miller goes beyond sexual assault, also speaking at length about race. She discusses the case of Philando Castile. He was an unarmed black man shot and killed by a police officer. She also writes about how the criminal justice system fails not only survivors of sexual violence and women, but also victims of color as well. Miller speaks to the fact that:

Privilege accompanies the light skinned, helped maintain his [Brock’s] belief that consequences did not apply to him. In this system, who is untouchable? Who is disposable? Whose lives are we intent on preserving? Who goes unaccounted for? Who is the true disrupter, the one firing, the one fingering, who created a problem where there never was one?

She also comments on race as it relates to her in particular, even discussing how a probation officer incorrectly identified her race as “white” in a report. She states, “Never in my life have I checked only White. You cannot note my whiteness without acknowledging I am equal parts Chinese.”

Additionally, Miller continues to demonstrate her large capacity for empathy, going beyond her own case and her own experiences, all the more remarkable in a memoir that is fundamentally about her own pain. She takes readers through the election of Donald Trump, she discusses Larry Nassar, the #MeToo movement, Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, and even the testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey-Ford. It is Miller’s analysis of Dr. Ford’s courage that is the most striking:

For years, the crime of sexual assault depended on our silence. The fear of knowing what happened if we spoke. Society gave us one thousand reasons; don't speak if you lack evidence, if it happened too long ago, if you were drunk, if the man is powerful, if you'll face blowback, if it threatens your safety. Ford broke all the rules. She had none of the requirements society tells us we need before we dare open our mouths. She had every reason to stay hidden, but stepped straight into the most public, volatile, combative environment imaginable, because she possessed the single thing she needed, the truth.

Another feature of the memoir comes when Miller holds Stanford accountable for its lack of compassion, and action, towards her following her assault. She writes in great detail about the college's lack of communication. For instance, Stanford, upon agreeing to install a memorial in the form of a garden at the location where she was assaulted, time and again vetoed the words she selected (taken from her victim impact statement) to be displayed on a plaque with the memorial, claiming the words she chose were "triggering." Miller exhibits how Stanford's response is a perfect example of what not to do in the aftermath of sexual assault on a college campus. She implicitly implores other colleges and universities to carefully examine the way they respond to sexual assault, starting by saying, "it matters, what happened to you" instead of sweeping it under the rug.

*Know My Name* is a powerful memoir by an even more beautiful writer, one that should be mandatory reading for anyone working in law enforcement and the criminal justice system. It is a memoir that allows Miller to take back her identity and the humanity she was so unjustly denied. *Know My Name* should be read by young men, the next generation of could-be Brock Turners who have grown up believing that sex is their God-given right and a woman's body is theirs for the taking. Most importantly, it is a memoir that fundamentally changes, for the better, the way our society views sexual assault and treatment of survivors.

# Dark Age

by Pierce Brown

Reviewed by Brian Filipek

Del Rey Books, 2019

**Warning: Spoilers for previous books of the Red Rising & Iron Gold Series below.**

Pierce Brown's *Dark Age* starts off in the chaotic aftermath of *Iron Gold*: everything is going poorly, and fast. Gone is the intricate dance of familial drama and clever battlefield tactics; instead, Brown has opted to hammer home the message that war is hell. Stylistically, this book

features the same quality of writing as the rest of the series, rotating between a diverse cast of characters and weaving artfully crafted worlds for the reader. However, the setting's expanding scope quickly becomes unwieldy, and characters tend towards preaching Brown's antiwar message in long tirades. The characterization of these novels continues to be a strong point, creating drama and tension around each point of view, but Brown's increasing reliance on *deus ex machina* minimizes some of the drama overall. *Dark Age* is the most pessimistic work of the series, and the grisly subject matter does not always make for the lightest reading. Nonetheless, this novel is a strong continuation of the rich narrative of *Red Rising*, and continues to deliver action packed scenes in succinct, but descriptive language.

*Dark Age* continues Brown's earlier experimentation with multiple narrators. As the setting for the series grows, the scope of what the reader knows has to expand too. The massive size of the story creates difficulty moving through plot points since multiple characters learn or reconnect with multiple side characters, so expect to reference the character list numerous times each chapter for the first 100 to 200 pages. Lysander and Ephraim's threads were particularly difficult to read. Thankfully, Brown's ability to weave exposition into description eliminates the more cumbersome aspects of his massive solar system, but the huge cast of characters makes it difficult to distinguish anything notable about side characters. At points, I felt some degree of relief when a named character was killed. This exemplifies a broader problem with the scope of the novel: Brown does not have enough space to properly develop side characters and villains, especially since his breakneck pacing jumps from crisis to crisis with little downtime for new members of the cast to shine. The quick pace of *Dark Age* ensures that dull moments are rare, but it also means that side characters and villains can't develop easily. The moral ambiguity explored by point of view characters is excellent, but to keep throwing in suspenseful twists, Brown uses sadistic murderers as a crutch, which are portrayed as inhuman monsters and aren't given their own chapters. *Dark Age's* side characters suffer a similar kind of one dimensionality, but maybe Brown knows this given his propensity to kill them off every few chapters. The pessimism of the setting seems to disallow happy endings, so whenever a side character has outlived their narrative usefulness, they are quickly culled from the storyline. In earlier entries in the series, Brown's time jumps aided the series in eliminating tertiary or unimportant characters, such as those that trained Darrow. However, in *Dark Age*, these time jumps leave little room for characters to establish a personality before being thrown into potentially fatal situations.

Darrow and Lysander serve as foils to each other throughout the novel. Seeing The Society's view of The Reaper through Lysander, alongside the activity in Darrow's

army camp during the siege of Mercury creates a nice comparison as each character questions the nobility and purpose of their own side. While it may seem odd to establish moral gray areas in a war that has its roots in race-based slavery, Brown's project has always asked the question, "Victory, but at what cost?" By the end of this book, Darrow seems to have finally turned a corner from the slump that he was left in at the end of earlier books. It was a good move on Brown's part to write the story from other perspectives as Darrow's responsibilities mounted and it became unrealistic for him to depart on missions, but that leaves Darrow in a weird place where his character sets up major events, whines about them, then watches them happen. Alternatively, this book has Darrow make decisions, then the impact of those decisions are analyzed by Lysander. It's much neater storytelling, and Brown walks the line between reader knowledge and suspense extremely well. Meanwhile, Lysander brings back some of the old cutthroat Society politics that had been missing in earlier installments.

Out of all of the chapters, Ephraim's offers the most world building and action. The "thief with a heart of gold" is hardly a new trope, but Brown's take on the "soldier-turned-kidnapper" explores the increasing factionalism in the new republic while offering fantastic world building. *Dark Age* tries very hard to connect characters, even if they are worlds apart, so that each story contributes to the overall narrative. Ephraim's chapters suffer majorly from this, as the twists come externally from far away villains that never mention their intention to interfere with his actions. The problem that continues to hinder this storyline is one of development. New villains have very little time to establish themselves, and when Brown connects them to multiple storylines, it leaves the reader feeling somewhat incredulous at the new threats that seem to materialize out of thin air.

Lyra's chapters continue to view the messed up world that Darrow has left in his wake. While it is interesting to see the dysfunction of the Republic on the ground, Lyra's lack of agency makes it feel like Brown is dragging the reader along this thread merely to connect it to other storylines. Somewhat paradoxically, these chapters have the strongest cast of side characters since Lyra is stuck playing a victim strung along by the actions of others for much of the book. Her point of view is plainly uninteresting, Brown missed an opportunity to make a compelling story about Red Rising's caste system and instead settles for a sort of refugee revenge story. The revenge itself is cheapened since her character is so weak. *Dark Age* promises Lyra more development along its chapters but falls short; her character seems set to become more involved in the larger storyline later, which leaves me hopeful that she will become more than just a victim of circumstance.

Mustang also gets the point of view treatment, and manages to provide decent exposition. Her chapters alternate between boring political jargon and extreme action. It's often a crapshoot which type of chapter it will be, but each narration at least serves a purpose. Whereas Lyra's chapters have her actions dictated by others, Mustang tends to make decisions that have global impacts on other parts of the book. Brown's solar system is simultaneously massive and cramped, as Mustang has to contend with poorly fleshed out villains that are pulled from familiar places. *Dark Age* absolutely refuses to develop its supporting cast quickly enough for Brown to set up the tense action scenes and twists readers have come to expect.

*Dark Age* suffers when its characters tell rather than show. Ephraim has seen ghastly sights and reflects on them often, yet it's Lyra's interactions with war torn areas that truly showcase the horrors in store for those left behind. Darrow commands armies, but it's Lysander's view of the battlefield that maneuvers the reader through the chaotic implications of those commands. Brown would do well to trust his audience to read between the lines, and spend chapters developing side characters rather than philosophizing about past events.

Despite *Dark Age's* many flaws, it is still a strong entry in the Red Rising series. The core cast continues to shine, and Brown's outstanding world building ensures that even dull moments hold interesting exposition. Readers who were invested enough to read the four other books won't be too disappointed; *Dark Age* features quality writing with only a slight dip in the narrative's momentum. Brown is clearly setting up for a penultimate showdown for his sixth book, which will hopefully largely ignore the weakly set up side villains and instead feature a decisive clash between the strongest characters of the series: Lysander and Darrow.

# The Institute

by Stephen King  
Reviewed by Isaac Herzog  
Scribner, 2019

As an avid reader of Stephen King, with fifteen novels and two collections under my belt, I was not disappointed by his most recent page-turner, *The Institute*. Focusing on magic weaved into daily life (in a surrealism-esque style) and giving children the protagonist roles, this novel is characteristic of many of King's works. On top of his masterful storytelling and his unique style, King also wrote this novel in, as I see it, a realistic way: one where the good guys don't

always reign supreme. In short, *The Institute* is a well-written thriller, a classic King novel, and a great book to stay up late at night reading. And of course, it's set in Maine.

*The Institute* follows the lives of a handful of young kids, focusing on Luke Ellis: a twelve-year-old for whom the word 'prodigy' is an insufficient adjective to describe. One morning, Luke wakes up in a room that looks identical to his own, but with some exceptions. Namely, it is without a window. Luke was taken from his home and placed in the formidable "Institute." Here, he is tested, injected, dunked underwater, and given coins for "good behavior" (while, for bad behavior and smart-mouthing, Luke and his friends are zapped with tasers). Why are he and other children brought here? They're either telekinetic or telepathic. As far as the employees of the Institute are concerned, the kids' skills are simply refined at the Institute. To them, training and refining the kids is their duty: honorable and just. The kids clearly do not see it this way.

The plot unfolds and the reader follows Luke's experience in the Institute and his relationships with his friends he's made there. While locked in the concrete box that is the Institute, Luke has his first, watches 12-year-olds get drunk, and find a role model. He frequently plays in the outdoor playground with his friends. But most importantly, Luke uses his cool intellect to help his fellow tweens and kids across the entire country solve their predicament: how to get home.

In his typical style, King provides the reader with a seemingly useless storyline before diving into the true meat of the book. In this novel, that is the life of Tim who, after being fired, randomly decides to get off a plane and hitchhike to New York. This lands him in the small town of DuPray, South Carolina. Here, he joins up as a night knocker: he literally walks around the city at night, without so much as a gun, and makes sure the tiny village is safe (this occupation is rather reminiscent of old westerns, but which is essentially an unglorified night watchman). Tim and his menial job become relevant when our young hero Luke finds himself in the town of DuPray late in the novel.

At the beginning of the book, I imagined myself writing this review and saying something along the lines of "I was surprised by how uncharacteristic this novel is of King and how dull the plot is." However, partway through the book, I tossed this review into the trash bin of my mind. I found instead that *The Institute* was a riveting and beautifully written book, with snarky jokes and clever incorporations of seemingly minute details. King does a superb job of tempting the reader with small details to engage us and flip the pages faster (the infamous zero phone, Luk hacking his, Luke's friends smoking cigarettes, Tim deciding one day to just get off a plane and wander). In a similar fash-

ion, and again contrary to my initial beliefs, the book was quick-paced and exciting; I often found myself skipping paragraphs just so I could find out what would happen. I find that this generally attests to a book's prowess.

On a more refined note, what I've always admired about King is his ability to incorporate deeper meaning in a seemingly regular suspense/fiction/sci-fi book. *The Institute* is unlike novels like *1984* or *Beloved*, where the literary merit is clear, and indeed, is one of the main reasons to read it. This book- and other King novels- are not generally considered monumental pieces of literature, and will unlikely be taught in school in 100 years. Perhaps in Mystery-writing classes. Thus, King's integration of deep societal themes is all the more impressive, the way I see it. It takes true command of the pen to create a deeply moving, socially relevant, and philosophical book and present it as a NYT best-seller. *The Institute* does this beautifully. In a book that follows a boy with special powers, King still contemplates cross-global politics and policies (and, being the firebrand liberal he is, even subtly shows Trump's shortcomings on these issues). King uses complex mathematical properties to analyze this fictitious world. He even touches on the subject of police brutality in America (though, admittedly, not to the extent he has in previous novels, nor as much as I'd like). I believe this is a true testament to King's writing ability. Not only does the novel read easily, is enjoyable, and takes the reader into a new world with magic and evil and world domination; King also writes the novel so that one may analyze it and find critiques of modern-day issues.

The end of this magnificent novel exemplifies King's integration of modern issues. Towards the end, the head of the Institute approaches Luke and Tim (his ultimate savior). He explains that "[t]housands of children have died in this process, but billions of children have been saved" and this serves as the ultimate justification for the Institute's morality. While they steal children, murder their parents, and all but (and occasionally, do) torture children with tests and injections and dunk tanks, they do so so that their telekinetic and telepathic skills may be refined enough to stop world-altering events halfway around the world. In short, the Institute poses the age-old question: to sacrifice a few for the good of the many, or save the ones we love for our own best interest?

If this novel were set in the universe of *Doctor Who*, these questions are never so black and white: The Doctor always manages to save those he loves and the entire universe (albeit sometimes sacrificing himself). Should we be in the universe of *Star Trek*, Spock would remind us that "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." *The Institute*, however, takes these two options and essentially throws them into the fire to burn.

The classic dilemma begins after Luke is approached by the big boss of the Institute, and is informed that his escape has ruined the world, and essentially brought a world war down upon us. The boss explains that they have a team of people who can predict the more horrendous future events—once they do so, people like Luke and his friends stop these. After being told “we have stopped over 500 world catastrophes,” Luke pushes pure mathematical logic into the boss’s face: indeed, statistically, that’s an improbable claim.

This is King’s way of critiquing the world in which we live: Trump’s America. One need only take a look at King’s twitter feed to know his opinions on the POTUS. In fact, even though Stephen King is an author of horror novels, his Wikipedia page used to list his political party: Democratic. In a world where many countries clamour for the need to fix immigration, does fixing this issue grant governments the right to put people in concentration camp-like cages (do the “needs” of the legal American citizens outweigh the human rights of sometimes illegal, sometimes legal people living here?) In a world of systemic racism, seemingly daily shootings, hate crimes, queer youth suicides, do the first two Amendments give Americans the right to fly Confederate and Nazi flags, carry their AK-47s and yell “Blood and Soil”? (Does freedom of speech of the many outweigh the rights of the people this free speech affects?) It is these questions that King ponders in the last 20 or so pages of his novel.

In conclusion, *The Institute* is a classic King novel, with snarky jokes, minute details, and surrealism and children. It is a gripping novel, a classic pager turner. In the climate of 2019, the novel analyses modern issues and poses philosophical inquiries. Overall, I give *The Institute* an 8.7/10.

## Where The Forest Meets The Stars

by Glendy Vanderah  
Reviewed by Katherine Heath  
Lake Union Publishing, 2019

What would you do if a small child appeared on your doorstep? And furthermore, what would you do if they resisted all your attempts to make them leave? In Glendy Vanderah’s debut novel, *Where the Forest Meets the Stars*, this is the situation in which a young graduate student finds herself.

The setting is a small backroad in rural Illinois, largely untouched by humans. After a series of losses—first of her mother, then of her own sense of self, both due to

breast cancer—work is all Jo seems to have left. After renting a house meant for graduate students like herself, she doubles down on her ornithology research, staying out from dawn to sunset observing indigo bunting nests. Such is her life, until one fateful night, when a little girl shows up at her door and resists all Jo’s attempts to make her leave, going so far as to hide when Jo calls the police. The girl’s name is “Earpoor,” and she claims to come from a far-away planet known as Hetrayeh to get her PhD, which she can only do by observing five miracles. They should come easily enough to her, as Hetrayans have invisible particles called “quarks,” which make good things happen to those around her. Prodding for her backstory leads nowhere, but she at least agrees to be called “Ursa Major” instead, after the constellation her galaxy is part of. Out of desperation, Jo reaches out to her neighbor, Gabe, who she first knows only as “Egg Man” because of the egg stand he runs. Over time, the two become linked through their attempts to solve the mystery of who Ursa is, and where she belongs—but strangely enough, as time goes on, they find themselves less and less concerned. It is as if she never belonged anywhere besides with them. As the end of summer draws near, however, Ursa’s tale begins to unravel, and what emerges is something that none of them could prepare for.

If I had to describe the book in one word, it would be heartwarming, or perhaps moving. Above all, Vanderah excels in writing immersive dialogue. More than once, I found myself getting lost in the characters’ emotions, feeling them as if they were my own. There are enough details about the characters’ day-to-day lives that you can fully imagine yourself in their situation, but not so many as to bog down the overall story. And though the plot is relatively linear in nature, the author is not afraid to veer away from it and depict a lazy day in the woods if it means making the characters more relatable. These light moments and their resulting humorous banter make for some of the best moments in the book. But humor is not the author’s only strength: high-stress scenes are just as evocative as their low-stress counterparts. When a character feels fear or anger, you can’t help but be right there alongside them.

Vanderah’s writing is poignant and makes the characters empathetic even if one does not know their specific situation. For instance, Jo describes her final moments with her mother to justify her reluctance to continue pursuing Ursa’s real home:

When I knew my mother would be dead in a few months, I had two choices . . .” She looked at him. “I could distance myself from the pain or get closer to it. Maybe because I’d lost my dad without getting a chance to tell him what he meant to me, I decided to get closer. I got so close, her pain and fear became my own. We shared everything and loved each other like we never had when death was

some distant thing. In the end, part of me died with her. I'm not recovered from it even now, but I made the conscious choice to enter the darkness with her. Everyone I know who's lost someone they love has voiced regrets—they wish they'd done this or that or loved them more. I have no regrets. None."

Though not every reader has lost their mother, they can empathize with Jo's feelings of loss. The book oozes with emotive quotes such as these, which serve greatly in making the characters stand out.

I will state this: readers expecting a sci-fi novel are going to be disappointed. The novel is strictly contemporary fiction; no evidence for extraterrestrial beings is given besides Ursa's narrative. Much like Jo herself, the reader is encouraged to doubt themselves, from, "This is just dramatic

a graphic sex scene, which I appreciate), but it is not immune from being cliché: From his first introduction as "Egg Man," you get the hunch that the two will end up together by the end of the novel. The emotional tensions preceding their relationship were well-written and empathetic in the moment, but ultimately did nothing to ease the sense that this has all been done before. Even after the fact, the relationship is problematic: the characters seem written for each other, specifically to complement and solve each other's problems, which did leave me rolling my eyes on one or two occasions. Rather than out of love, the relationship feels more out of mutual desperation for someone, anyone to notice them. This is sort of glossed over, and while their dynamic is overall healthy, one gets the sense that in any other scenario, the two would not remain an item. It could be Ursa's "quarks," but I chalk it up to lazy characterization.

Speaking of characterization, faults are not limited to the main trio. Minor characters are greatly exaggerated as heartless crooks, who want nothing more than for Ursa to suffer. The police are unsympathetic and largely incompetent; the first one introduced goes so far as to encourage keeping kids in abusive homes instead of moving them to foster care, because, "They know how to survive the shit that's dealt them better than some welfare worker who never spent a day in one of those kids' shoes." This negative first impression is largely indicative of the treatment of officials throughout the novel: they universally claim they want the best for Ursa but incriminate themselves through their dialogue. I will cut the author some slack here: The book is written in third person limited, through Jo's eyes. Her biases are evident, and are intertwined with the narrative, such that it cannot be considered truly objective. Still, this doesn't prevent the characters from feeling villainous to the point of being comical, especially as the book winds down.

Finally, the last third or so of the book is not as well written as the prior two thirds, in my opinion. Without spoiling too much, the pace greatly slows down to the point of being stifling. Previous slow sections are not overly prolonged, and serve a purpose: showing the characters as they really are, outside of any kind of overarching plot. This section, on the other hand, is devoid of much of this. Large amounts of backstory are dumped on the reader all at once, and much of it suffers from the same sort of clichés that bog down Jo and Gabe's relationship. Everything is explained in the span of a couple of chapters, and then after one brief dramatic scene where Ursa runs away yet again, the book inexplicably tapers off. The resolution is a happy one, but the events leading up to this resolution are left wholly to the imagination. For a lighter narrative, this may work, but in this case, it just leads to confusion.

Still, I must stress that these faults look a lot more striking in theory than they are in practice, as many of these issues



Krysta Mostert

irony. She's clearly an alien," to "But is she really?" and back again. Ursa is magical in personality only, but that is more than enough; her antics and charm are enough to mesmerize the most hardened reader. Ursa draws the reader in and encourages them to look at life as she does: as someone who can see baby birds and kittens as miracles to be cherished, someone who is unafraid to speak what's on her mind, and someone who is unwilling to bend to those who think they know what's best for her.

Nothing is perfect, however, and this book is no exception. Though my personal complaints were more minor than these paragraphs will make them seem, they are enough to warrant mention for the more wary reader. The relationship between Jo and Gabe flows relatively naturally compared to many novels (and does not try to shoehorn in

are ones I could only articulate in hindsight. Despite the clichés, the novel flows well, and each individual chapter does not overstay its welcome—perfect for the reader on the go. I recommend the book if only because of how enchanting the writing is, how quickly one can find themselves drawn into the lives of these characters and overlook any issues there may be. Vanderah has a knack for writing, and for a debut novel, this book is impressive. I look forward to seeing what else may come from this writer, and perhaps what else lies in the stars for this trio.

# Celestial Bodies

by Jokha Alharthi (translated from the Arabic by Marilyn Booth)

Reviewed by Atharv Garje

Sandstone Press (UK) and Catapult (US), 2019

*Celestial Bodies* follows the lives of an extended family in Oman across the twentieth century. The novel is Jokha Alharthi's second and her first to appear in English. The novel primarily follows three sisters, Mayya, Asma, and Khawla, but also ventures into the lives and backstories of the people around them. Alharthi particularly focuses on examining the interactions between people from different parts of society, the relationships between parents and children, and the difficulties that come with living in a nation undergoing rapid change. From these focuses, Alharthi emphasizes the universality of various human experiences in people across the world, regardless of their background.

The novel switches between third-person chapters following the characters in the town and a first person narrative following Mayya's husband Abdullah's reflections on his life. The chapters are not chronologically ordered, and there are often jumps in time within chapters as well, especially when Abdullah is narrating. Having so many jumps in time across the novel could have made for a very confusing story, but Alharthi manages to skillfully tie the narrative in a way that makes it easy to follow. This risk pays off splendidly, as it further accentuates the deeper connections between characters and between different points in their lives.

For example, while Abdullah is reminiscing about a painful chapter in his daughter's life, he remarks "Praise be to God who has blessed humankind with the ability to forget!" (77). But the word "forget" reminds him of a man from his childhood who was never able to forget his past, leading Abdullah to remember many other instances in his life that he wishes he could forget or regrets forgetting. Alharthi uses this fluidity in time to demonstrate how memory is nonlinear, but different points in our lives can instead

be related by emotion and other associations. These associations also extend between characters and across generations, as Alharthi shows how similar emotions and pains are prevalent in people across time. No matter how much the nation or the village changes, common human experiences will always remain.

One of the common experiences that Alharthi examines in many characters throughout the novel is love. By following the marriages of the three sisters, Alharthi is able to portray three very different relationships, showing how love doesn't manifest in the same ways for all people. At the start of the novel, Mayya has just been betrothed to Abdullah, who is the son of a local merchant. Mayya has not had much interaction with Abdullah, but because her mother Salima has agreed to the match, Mayya feels obligated to go along with it. As Mayya's mother remarks, "these were her girls and marriage was women's business" (3). Asma is later married to an artist named Khalid, while Khawla spends the majority of the novel waiting for the return her childhood betrothed who had left for Canada. Especially towards the end of the novel, Alharthi pays special attention to the ways the sisters' perceptions of love change as they gain more experience.

This is especially true in Asma's case. Asma is drawn to the idea that lovers are two halves of the same soul searching to be reunited. But as an avid reader of novels and Arabic poetry, Asma struggles to reconcile the burning passion of lovers in fiction with her own less intense feelings. Upon her marriage to Khalid, she begins "to realize that there was no way she could be Khalid's other half" as the realities of married life set in (194). Alharthi makes an excellent choice in developing Asma's character in this way, as her transition from childhood to adulthood is made so much clearer when she realizes that reality doesn't always reflect fiction. In fact, all three of the characters' marriages represent a loss of the innocence of childhood before they were ready to let it go completely. This mirrors the tragic marriage story of their mother Salima, who is forced into a marriage against her will. This interplay between the ideas of marriage of love represents not only common human experiences, but the common experiences and pains that are passed between generations. Alharthi uses these varied depictions of love to show how people in different circumstances struggle with similar emotions and dilemmas.

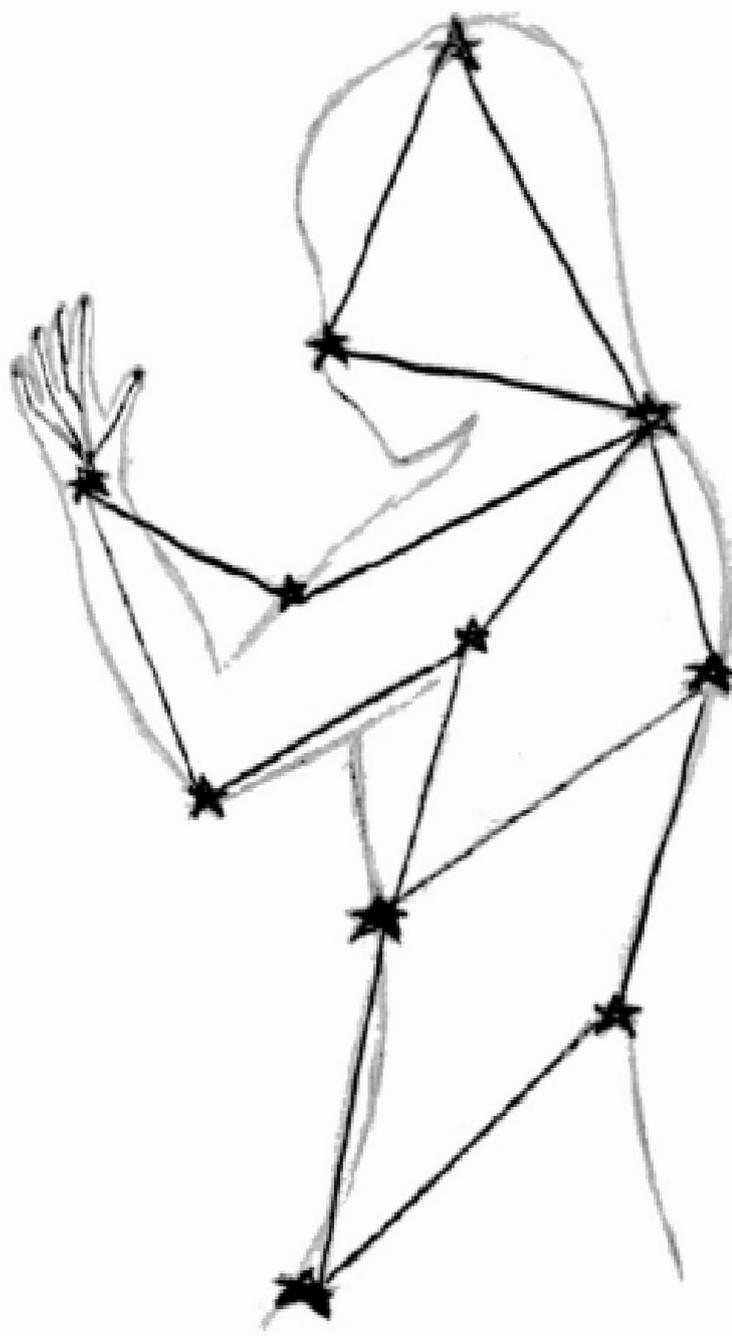
This novel shines most in its depictions of the pain that can tie family members together or keep them apart. For example, when Mayya and Abdullah's daughter London's partner becomes violent towards her, Abdullah feels as if he is carrying her pain. "Does it hurt because I gave into her, allowing the two of them to sign a marriage contract?", he asks himself in one of his despairing ruminations (154). His pain here comes because he feels that he has

a parent to protect his daughter from harm and it hurts him deeply to see how his daughter was changed by her abusive relationship. But, his pain also comes from what he sees as the failure of his own marriage. Earlier in the novel, he recounts that “when I asked Mayya, Do you love me? She laughed. She laughed!” (12). That incident, and other instances when he felt that Mayya may not have loved him the way he wanted her to, clearly influence his pain when he considers their broken relationship. That is why he asks himself if he is hurting “because Mayya never knew love

it really helps humanize these characters for the reader. The relationship between parents and children is especially prominent in this novel. Abdullah remembers a time when he was a child when he returned home late at night. His father launched into a tirade berating him for being disobedient and began to physically assault him. Abdullah remembers viscerally that injustice and how angry he felt at his father. But, years later, Abdullah finds himself taking the role of his father when it comes to his own son, Salim. When Salim returns from a night out, Abdullah asks him-

self “So why, twenty-five years later was I shouting at Salim, You’re not in bed yet? Where have you been?” (101). In many points throughout the novel, the work is left to the reader to draw connections between characters, which has its own rewards. But I found this scene to be especially memorable for how in-your-face Alharthi makes this comparison between Abdullah’s relationship to his father and Abdullah’s relationship with his son. Since Alharthi shows Abdullah occupying both the role of the strict father and the role of the wronged son, Abdullah is made all the more complex of a character. Alharthi’s ability to balance subtle comparisons between characters with more striking ones very effectively renders her characters so much more interesting for the reader.

Another character, Zarifa, is constantly reminded of the husband who left her when she looks at her child. When this child, too, eventually leaves her, Zarifa bemoans what her husband passed on to her child. “It was the seed,” she laments, “the one his father carefully planted before he could disappear” that made her son turn out the way he did (121). Zarifa sees in her son, as much as she loves him, the attributes of a man who she didn’t understand and who eventually abandoned her. The conflicting mess of feelings that Zarifa has towards her son is a brilliant



Krysta Mostert

and so she did not know, when London fell in love, how to deal with her daughter?” (154). This detailed introspection into the reasons for Abdullah’s pain is a powerful tool that Alharthi uses to let the reader enter Abdullah’s headspace. Alharthi uses these monologues throughout the novel, and

ed before he could disappear” that made her son turn out the way he did (121). Zarifa sees in her son, as much as she loves him, the attributes of a man who she didn’t understand and who eventually abandoned her. The conflicting mess of feelings that Zarifa has towards her son is a brilliant

example of how Alharthi highlights the complicated tangle of emotion that defines any relationship between family. One of the strengths of Alharthi's characterization of Zarifa and her son's relationship, which I also found in other relationships throughout the novel, is how relatable it could be to readers from many different backgrounds. Strip away the specific circumstances of Zarifa's situation and you are left with a moving portrayal of love that persists despite hardship. Alharthi's ability to make such portrayals of character relationships so moving further highlights the commonality of the human experience – any reader can find a character in this novel that they can connect with.

Even as the characters themselves show the ways in which common experiences crop up time and time again, the country they live in is undergoing rapid change. In the late twentieth-century, Oman was still trying to shake off British paternalism while also trying to integrate itself into the world economy. This is especially true in the country's capital, Muscat. Oman's desire to participate more in global networks is best summed up by Abdullah's irritation with many of the businesses of the capital. "In my own country! My Arab country, where restaurants, hospitals, and hotels all announced that 'only English is spoken here.'" (153). Alharthi shows both the benefits and drawbacks to rapid modernization. While modernization provides more opportunities for corruption and the dilution of traditional Omani culture, it also allows Mayya to give birth to London in one of several new hospitals and eventually allows London to study modern medicine. Alharthi portrays Oman as a country grappling with both modernity and tradition, something that readers from anywhere in the world can relate to.

But even as Oman tries to modernize, it must face up to some darker elements of its history from not very long ago. For example, slavery was only outlawed in the nation in 1970, and some of the characters of this novel, Zarifa most prominent among them, were only freed from bondage that year. This sudden change to society is something that both former slaves and slave-owners have difficulty with reconciling. When Abdullah's ailing father rants at Abdullah to tie up a slave, Abdullah must explain to him "Father, the government freed the slaves a long time ago" (13). Similarly, Zarifa's son is unable to grasp why his mother is having difficulty adjusting to her relatively new status as a free woman. "We are free – the law says so, free, Zarifa. Open your eyes," he tells her (104). Both Abdullah's father and Zarifa show how difficult it is for people to change their attitudes or adapt to rapid changes to the lives they had lived for decades.

While Alharthi succeeds in effectively relaying universal experiences through her characters, I felt that the flipping between third-person and first-person made the novel as a whole a little lopsided. In this review, I've largely

pulled quotes from Abdullah's chapters, and I think part of the reason why I found his account more memorable and more quotable was because he was allowed to tell his story in first person. The novel is sold as being about the three sisters, Asma, Mayya, and Khawla, but their stories' relegation to third person narration, alongside all the minor characters, made their importance fade in comparison to Abdullah's. It felt like they had to share space with so many other characters, whereas Abdullah's chapters focused mostly on himself.

Additionally, I felt like the end of the novel was weaker than the rest of it. Alharthi tries to resolve too many of the plot points in too short a time. One of the long-running mysteries throughout the course of the novel is the circumstances of Abdullah's mother's death very soon after he was born. But the way Alharthi reveals her fate felt rushed and confusing to me, which was somewhat of a letdown after she had so expertly set up the intrigue. In general the later chapters felt much less cohesive to me. Although the entire novel is made of disparate parts and for the majority of it, those parts function together well, I felt that towards the end, the various threads frayed too far apart.

That being said, I don't think this book was meant for readers who primarily look for plot. Rather, Alharthi has excelled in creating a character-focus that brilliantly portrays common human experiences. Oman is not a country most Anglophone readers are very familiar with, but Alharthi has brilliantly showed that our emotions and experiences, that which makes us human, can allow us to empathize and feel connections towards people who live in times and places so different from our own.

## Talking to Strangers

by Malcolm Gladwell

Reviewed by Valeria Gomez

Little, Brown, 2019

*Talking to Strangers* is yet another one of Gladwell's masterpieces that psychologically analyzes the human mind. Like in *The Outliers*, Gladwell relies on both pop culture and historical events to clearly back up his claims.

*Talking to Strangers* is centered around the idea of why humans feel a certain way towards the strangers that they encounter. The book is divided into 4 parts in understanding a stranger including what he calls: "the default to truth, the transparency problem, the mismatch problem, and the coupling dilemma." Gladwell shows that because we are human, we create prejudices that drag us away from reality. The default to truth: people who we believe to be truthful can trick us to the point where who we thought

they were was a complete lie. The transparency problem: we assume the worst out of those who we perceive as nervous, we cannot rely solely on facial expressions. Lastly, the coupling dilemma: we cannot make sense of strangers without knowing their overall context. Gladwell would like for us to approach strangers with caution and humility, and with each section of the book he furthers this idea. He wants us to see that our behaviors are linked to the situations we encounter as humans and because we do not encounter the exact same situations as another, it is impossible to interpret each other. We must develop the context of another's life when finding out the truthfulness of a stranger but, as Gladwell shows, this is not easy to do.

Gladwell starts and ends with the example of a black woman named Sandra Bland who led the most perfect of lives. Sandra was a positive influencer in her YouTube career, a community volunteer, and both a sorority and marching band member during college. Yet, she was later found dead in her jail after being unreasonably arrested and questioned by a cop due to failing to signal a lane change. The cop believed Sandra was a criminal sort of figure, while Sandra assumed the cop was racist leading to Gladwell's conclusion that we cannot judge people based on "prejudices and incompetence." Gladwell pleads that we also see that the cop was unsure of what to do with Sandra's incompetence as she did not want to put out her cigarette when instructed to do so by the "racist" cop. The cop might have been prejudiced due to her incompetence or failure to follow his orders but Sandra was also prejudiced in her assumption that the cop was racist. Sandra's suicide made us question whether we ever really knew her, while her death played a major role in the Black Lives Matter movement. However, he defends the cop in stating that the cop could have not possibly known that Sandra was a good person, he had never encountered her before in his life, Gladwell is not afraid of siding with the perpetrator to defend his point that it is difficult to make assumptions about a stranger. Gladwell takes the Brock Turner case, in which a Stanford swimmer raped an unconscious woman "Emily Doe" and finds that Turner made a wrong assumption that cost him his reputation and cost the woman her sanity. Gladwell states that Brock and "Emily Doe" were both drunk to a point that Malcolm states the woman's hippocampus was temporarily disabled and Brock was unable to make a conscious decision. Gladwell fearlessly defends liars and sees beyond the hidden realities we assume. This is a very controversial way of looking at things and is sure to stir some conflict for Gladwell in the future.

Gladwell has managed to review cases in which this default to truth has failed even the most recognized agents and obvious of places. In the Ana Montes case, Montes nicknamed "the queen of Cuba" because she was one of the CIA's top agents in Cuba, was discovered to be a double agent. This occurred after a series of obvious hints

passed through the eyes of the CIA. This then brings Gladwell to the Madoff fraud scandal in which Madoff tricked the top financial markets and scammed tons of money for himself. Gladwell allows us to see that this human failure to see that a person is lying after defaulting to the truth, is a weakness of the human mind. Madoff destroyed the lives of thousands of investors and Ana Montes singlehandedly infiltrated the CIA. Contrast this with the case of Amanda Knox, who was jailed for years because she was thought to have murdered her roommate. If Knox had been as confident as Madoff, Hitler, or even Ana Montes, she would have not spent as many years in jail as she did according to Gladwell. Those who convicted her assumed she was guilty because she seemed "nervous" and was overall not a normal person. However, if Gladwell shows us that judges believe that they can tell if someone is guilty or not just by seeing their face then they were obviously wrong by condemning Amanda Knox guilty for several years. Gladwell brings up scenes of the characters from Friends in which their emotions are clearly shown through their facial expressions to demonstrate how people heavily rely on these expressions to decode a human being. If people could have taken the hints and seen the lie that stood in front of their eyes, things could have ended with much less destruction.

Gladwell expands into stating that when people communicate with each other, they default to perceiving others as truthful, good, and overall the best version of themselves when speaking for the first time. Nevertheless, Gladwell argues that this is a mistake and when talking to a stranger we cannot believe this perception. When Jerry Sandusky, a college football coach and child molester was convicted of pedophilia, this failure to have condemned Sandusky sooner was the human mind's default to truth. We then begin to see that Gladwell reemphasizes the point that as humans, we believe that we know and understand people, but we really don't. When people commit suicide it tends to be out of the mix of convenience and overall the environment a person grew up in, just as many of our actions are. The story of Sandra Bland is brought back, in the end, to defend that Gladwell's ending point that we blame strangers for disparities in our feelings towards one another just as jump to conclusions, biases, and stereotypes to define others.

In creating this book, Gladwell through his typical writing style does tend to overload the reader with examples which can be overwhelming if read all at once. Gladwell hits the reader with anecdotes, statistics, and relatable examples just to develop his views. It can be seen that Gladwell's views are very biased in that he cherry-picks information to back up what he believes and does call other people's views of the world wrong. His book utilizes heavy words such as "Nassar was doing something monstrous" which goes to show that the entire book is very biased towards Gladwell's arguments.

As an author, Gladwell can back up his claims with respectable studies and examples that are interesting and fun to read, however, these examples are very biased towards how Gladwell wants us to see the world and it weakens his overall credibility. I cannot deny that Gladwell is correct in that interpreting people is a worldly conundrum which leads to the conclusion that people are much more complex than we perceive them to be. Yet, it is difficult to view the Sandra Bland case and the rape of a woman in the Brock Turner/Stanford swimmer case as just a simple misunderstanding and I cannot say that agreeing with Gladwell in many of his views is correct.

# The Water Dancer

by Ta-Nehisi Coates  
Reviewed by Gabriel Terrell  
One World, 2019

Ta-Nehisi Coates places us quickly into a world with hints of magical realism in *The Water Dancer* as our narrator recounts the properties of Conduction. Memory, which is for most fleeting and difficult to recall, is for Conductors so real that it becomes raw energy that folds the land like cloth, literally creating bridges from one place to another. Ta-Nehisi Coates sets our young protagonist Hiram Walker on the tobacco plantation Lockless; upon land ejecting whites whose thousand-acre plantations across Elm County have bled out the red Virginian topsoil and inflamed passions to move plantations and slavery westward to Tennessee or into the Deep South, down Natchez-way.

This is a story of family fragmentation during slavery and of the painful, splintering memories not recorded in history books. Conductors may only fold time and space if their recall of all past events are whole and this story follows Hiram on a journey to develop this power and recover his memory, which was perfect, except for a fog that prevented him from remembering his mother. It is obvious for Coates that for those whose history is not written down, Conduction is that vital link to maintain historical memory, because it can transport people and groups to homelands. We are told that Hiram's grandmother Santi Bess walked down to the river from Lockless to the river Goose and disappeared with forty-eight other Tasked (slaves) on the strength of "the oldest story she knew, one that would turn back time itself, and journey her back to that place where her fathers were buried in honor, and her mothers gather their own corn."

Hiram has been able to draw upon his powers of Conduction on two occasions but is unable to command the

power at will and has no mentors or teachers to help him. However, he and his power of Conductions are known to the Underground Railroad's Virginia station and they buy his freedom yet keep him in captivity until they feel he is ready to join their ranks. A cruel recruitment to the Underground, but we learn that disguises and camouflage are this station's modus operadi.

The Virginia station is led by Corrine, who is "their prim Southern belle, an ornament to their civilization, turned back against them," that had sacrificed her own parents to gain control of the plantation Bryceton. The Underground lives and labors on the plantation and fool passers-by who don't recognize the agents in the field are working to extend "the light of freedom into Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and even into Tennessee." They do so by gathering intelligence from stolen correspondences and financial records of slave-owning families in order to forge legal documents and fake wills, testaments, and bank records that eliminates the economic and legal hold slave-owners have on the Tasked.

At Bryceton, Hiram begins his double life and resumes the trades he had left at Lockless. By day, he and the others work in the fields but by night Bryceton turns into a training ground for the Underground. The agents complete calisthenics and cross-country runs just like "the German '48ers, men who'd fought for liberty in their old country, and found common cause here in the Underground." Hiram's training also includes a classical education of Greek and Latin, arithmetic and geometry, that takes place in the large study beyond the false paneling of the mahogany marriage chest. Education provides motivation not only to read and write but, as Coates points out, a way to create personal history and record thoughts down on paper that reflect upon significances larger than and beyond the present concern.

Coates argues that a fundamental freedom is lost when individuals have their history written for them. Both Corrine and Hiram are singular actors with knowledge that historically most of their brothers and sisters did not have. Since the days of Rome, Corrine states, even women born into society were not intellectually free and were instead cast and kept ornamentally ignorant. Ladies could read novels and tales but nothing on politics and papers. Coates provides Hiram and Corrine the power of self-determination by subverting the structural forces that would have written their history for them. Corrine recounts how to become someone else, "I have not simply read, my boy. I have learned their language and custom—even those that should be beyond my station, especially those that should be beyond my station, and that this been the seed of my liberty." Corrine hands Hiram the necessary articles to re-

write history in an envelope “and found inside of it the life of a man. There were letters to family. There were authorizations. There were certificates of sale.”

Hiram is tasked each week to put the splinters of a man’s life together and comprehend his life beyond his status of a gentleman with education and slaves, through which Hiram proves his utility to the Virginia station. Hiram works his way through balance ledgers, journal entries of deaths and other stolen artifacts to construct more than



Kimberly Koh

a man’s history, but also his morals. Before Corrine, Hiram constructs this man down to his waistcoat to find what he covets and why he acts and even to forge his own words, his voice, down on paper. Hiram learns how to contribute to the mission of the Underground, “the power extended out from my right arm, projected itself through the pen, and shot out through the wilderness, right at the heart of those who condemned us.”

Yet, Hiram was not bought by the Virginia station to forge letters, but rather to learn to control the power that the Underground believed he shares with one other, the legend Moses, who “Conducted, seemingly at will, the Tasked from the shackled fields of the South to the free lands of the North.” Yet only on two, near-death experiences drowning, had Hiram ever folded space to transport himself to safety miles away upon the riverbank. While he had become a fine agent, he could not determine how to command painful or joyous memories to serve him and decides to travel North to a mentor to teach him to Conduct.

The Philadelphia Underground was “so strong as not to be underground at all” and there Hiram feels the open, fear-

less optimism and love which were present during the good times at Lockless before the topsoil bled away and families began to be sold downriver Natchez-way. Those close bonds are recalled in the free North, Proustian-like, that take him back in time after the black bakery-shop man Mars gives Hiram ginger snaps, which waft pangs of recognition. After he sits on the bench by the river promenade and opens the paper wrapping of ginger snaps, he looks up to see the kitchen of his youth at Lockless and a colored woman singing softly. She slips him ginger snaps, which accompanied a feeling so strong Hiram runs “to her, the ginger snaps still in my left hand, and hugged her, long and hard. And when I stepped away, she was smiling big as day, big as the baker Mars had smiled at me only that morning.” Fog seeps into that kitchen and Hiram looks around to see himself back at the river promenade, though his half-eaten gingerbread and parchment paper have stayed put after his Conduction several bench seats away.

Philadelphia is where Hiram meets Moses, real name Harriet, who takes him one night onto the pier on the Delaware where fog grows out of the darkness. Through the fog Hiram sees, “this light was not yellow but a pale spectral green, and I saw that this light was not in Harriet’s hand, but was Harriet herself.” As they continue to walk out onto the pier, far into the Delaware, they are suspended above it, the water barely touching their boots, and continue walking as Harriet narrates past memories until they reach an outcropping on a small bank hundreds of miles away in Maryland. Harriet teaches Hiram that to control Conduction, he must lift the fog blocking him from recalling the memory of his mother. Hiram returns to Lockless in search of a lever, a memento that might help jostle his memory and reveal his mother.

Hiram returns to the plantation and begins to reconcile his past through his relationships with those who still live at Lockless. He cannot forgive his father, the plantation owner, for the historical wrongs, but is able to reconcile with the love interest from whom he separated while with the Underground, and connects again with his surrogate mother, Thena. This group is the core of what remained at Lockless: Hiram, who was the servant to his brother Maynard, is now a servant to his father and we are reminded of potential humanity in these mixed-race ties. Yet, even at the twilight of his father’s life Coates reminds us of the deep divide that remains between the two even in reconciliation. They had the world of Virginia between them, “as close as any Quality and Tasked in Virginia could be, still he could not look at me and speak with truth.” Coates helps us understand why there is such a divide by revealing that Hiram cannot remember his mother because of a childhood trauma brought on by the act of his father. After a failed escape from Lockless, his father punishes his mother by sending her downriver, further “into the coffin.” It was a moment so painful

that even his invincible memory would not sustain it and in not doing so, he lost, temporarily, the power he now gains back to use memory as a bridge to transport people over water as his grandmother Santi Bess could. Coates creates a strong argument that family separation creates splintered history and tremendous barriers for historical memory that takes nearly superhuman powers to put back together.

# The Whisper Man

by Alex North

Reviewed by Kimberly Koh

Celadon Books, 2019

Chapter one of *The Whisper Man* opens with the kidnapping of a six-year-old child, Neil Spencer on his walk from one separated parent's home to another. He is frequently left alone, neglected by his alcoholic mother and father, and has begun to act out at school, all of which his abductor knows too well. Despite the nightmarish quality of this opening and the subsequent exposition, author Alex North quickly pushes past the expectations of horror to deliver a complex story which, like life itself, is not limited to the genre boundaries.

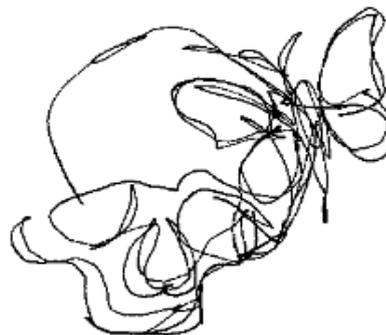
The book vacillates between two seemingly disparate storylines: one centered around writer Tom Kennedy and his son Jake, and the other around a weathered cop named Pete Willis. Tom is a single father, still reeling from the recent death of his wife Rebecca. Although he tries his best, Tom still finds it difficult to connect with his son, Jake, whose only friends seem to be imaginary and whose eerie statements worry him. Is Jake's behavior just a child coping with the death of his mother or something more abnormal? Despite the challenges, Tom genuinely seems to care about Jake and always questions whether he's doing a good enough job as a father.

In the nearby town of Featherbank, DI Pete Willis is troubled by the disappearance of Neil Spencer. Twenty years before, a young Willis was in charge of an investigation into a suspiciously similar series of missing children cases in which the abductor would whisper to young boys through their windows at night before taking them, earning him the title of "The Whisper Man". Though he eventually caught the perpetrator, Frank Carter, Detective Willis is still haunted by one of the victims, a child named Tony Smith whose body was never found. Even though each visit leaves him emotionally drained, Pete continues to visit Frank Carter in prison in hopes of finding the body and giving closure to Tony's parents.

Storylines converge when Tom Kennedy considers moving Jake and himself to a new town for a fresh start away

from memories of his dead wife. While browsing a real estate site in Featherbank, Jake chooses an unusual looking house in Featherbank and, unaware of the recent abduction that occurred there, Tom agrees to move the family to the home. It isn't long before Jake begins to hear whispering at night and talking about the "boy in the floor".

It's no wonder that movie rights to *The Whisper Man* have already been bought by the production company ABGO. The quaint English village of Featherbank serves as a hauntingly aesthetic backdrop to this eerie story. While the alternate perspectives — The Kennedys to DI Willis and back — mirror the pacing of a tv police procedural, the story's slow build-up to its climactic moment maintains enough tension to keep it in the thriller category. This novel, in all its horrific glory, promises to be a hair-raising, wide-awake experi-

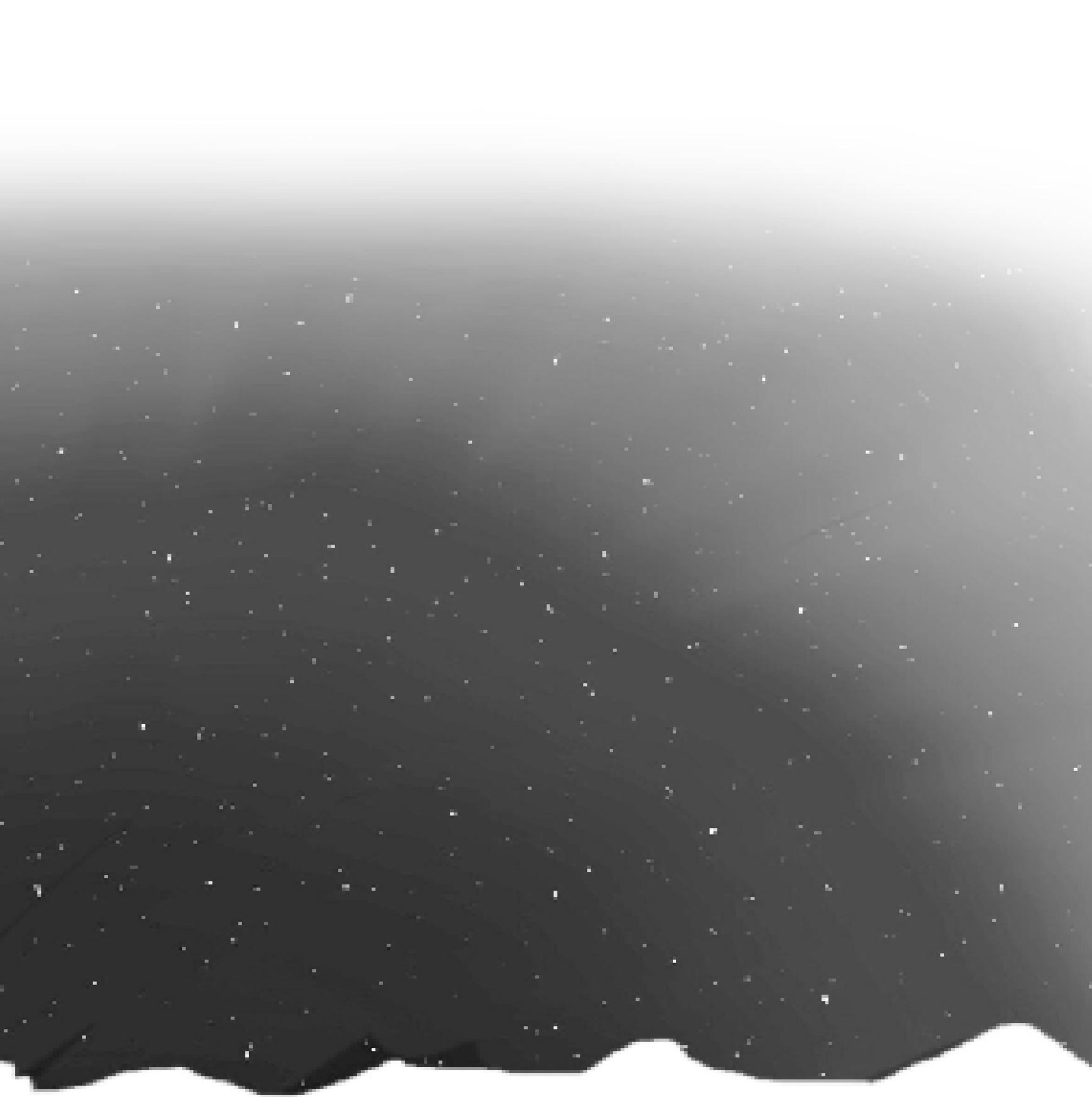


Kimberly Koh

ence, but when movie-goers exit the theater, they'll be leaving with a little bit more than just adrenaline.

North's ability to delicately interweave a story about family, inheritance, and healing throughout a spine-tingling thriller elevates this book beyond typical horror pieces. North catalogs every tender, frustrating, and heartbreaking interaction between Tom and Jake as they tiptoe around the ghost of the woman who held them together. Recovering alcoholic Pete Willis's tragic family history swirls around the bottom of a bottle of whiskey. Even the stories of Frank Carter, Neil Spencer and a colorful cast of supporting characters are driven to some extent by their families. As North continues to peel back the layers of Featherbank, pasts and futures become increasingly entangled and the residents of Featherbank grow uneasy. A child abductor is still on the loose! Unexpectedly, this moment of fear brings fathers, sons, enemies, and lovers ever closer to one another in seen and unseen ways.

What might make this story so touchingly accurate is Alex North's relationship with his own young son. In fact, Jake's line about the "boy in the floor" was a line from North's son's mouth. Children aren't as limited by convention as adults and often accidentally say screechingly funny things, however, those odd little statements can also veer sharply into the spine-chilling. *The Whisper Man's* exploration of fathers and sons is similar, in that audiences can expect a variety of unexpected moments not limited by the conventions of genre.



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