I, Knausgaard

By Daniel Mendelsohn

WHICH WOULD PREVAIL — Scandinavian high literature or Meghan Markle?

This is the question that dogged me between May and August of this year, during which time I devoted myself to two cultural undertakings: reading all of “My Struggle” and watching all of “Suits.” “My Struggle,” as readers of this or any other literary publication will know, is the sometimes brilliant, sometimes tedious, intermittently frustrating and always genre-defying 3,600-page autobiographical novel by the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard that became a phenomenon among Anglo-American literati when the translation of Book 1 appeared here, in 2012, and whose sixth and last volume appears this month.

“Suits,” as readers of pretty much every other publication will have known since Prince Harry of Wales became engaged last autumn to Markle, one of the show’s stars, is a popular USA Network legal drama, currently in its eighth season — now of course sans Markle, who has abandoned fictional dramas forever, although whether being a member of the British royal family (currently the subject of another popular TV series) constitutes “reality” is a question beyond the scope of this essay.

But it is within the scope of this essay to ponder some implications of the differences between the two fictions, as I found myself doing over the course of the four months during which I was wrapped up...
The political bullying, brawls and bloodshed that preceded the Civil War.

By DAVID S. REYNOLDS

SO, YOU THINK Congress is dysfunctional?

There was a time when it ran with blood—a time so polarized that politics generated a cycle of violence, in Congress and out of it, that led to the deadliest war in the nation’s history.

In her absorbing, scrupulously researched book “The Field of Blood,” Joanne B. Freeman uncovers the brawls, stabbings, pummelings and duel threats that occurred among United States congressmen during the three decades just before the Civil War.

Freeman, a professor of history and American studies at Yale, mines a valuable document that gives us a front-row view of the action: the

THE FIELD OF BLOOD
Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War
By Joanne B. Freeman
Illustrated. 450 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $28.

11-volume diary that the political observer Benjamin Brown French kept between 1828 and his death in 1870. A New Hampshirite who worked as a lawyer and journalist before turning to politics, French moved in 1833 to Washington, where he served as a congressional clerk for 14 years. After that, he stayed close to the political scene, working as a part-time clerk, a lobbyist and a buildings commissioner under three presidents. Originally a Jacksonian Democrat, French became an antislavery Republican loyal to Lincoln, whom he served as commissioner of public buildings.

Using French’s diary as a lens on Congress, Freeman describes many violent episodes. “Between 1830 and 1860,” she writes, “there were more than 70 violent incidents between congressmen in the House and Senate chambers or on nearby streets and dueling grounds, most of them long forgotten.” In 1841, an exchange of insults between two representatives, Edward Stanly of North Carolina and Henry Wise of Virginia, led to a wild melee in which nearly all the members of the House pummeled one another. John B. Dawson of Louisiana “routinely wore both a bowie knife and a pistol” into the House and once threatened to cut a colleague’s throat “from ear to ear.” Angry over a speech delivered by the antislavery Ohioan Joshua Giddings, Dawson shoved Giddings and threatened him with a knife. Another time, Dawson pointed his cocked pistol at Giddings and was prevented from shooting him only when other congressmen intervened.

Giddings, an outspoken abolitionist, was accustomed to such treatment from the pro-slavery side. He was attacked at least seven times. Like the acerbic John Quincy Adams, the antislavery former president who represented Massachusetts in the House, Giddings intentionally goaded Southerners to violence in order to expose the barbarism of the slave power.

Freeman notes that the violence in Congress was like a spectator sport. Men and women crowded the congressional galleries with the expectation of seeing entertaining outbreaks, much the way fans of professional wrestling or hockey do today. Sometimes, she shows, French recorded in his diary his delight as a spectator. Describing the huge brawl of 1841, he wrote, “The Speaker & I had the best chance to see all the fun, & while he stood at his desk pounding & yelling, I stood at mine ‘calm as a summer’s morning’—enjoying the sport, and keeping the minutes of the proceedings!”

As Freeman notes, the Southerners were vulnerable to such goading because of the code of honor they followed. According to the code, even a mild insult could trigger a fight or, in some cases, a duel. Freeman tells us of the fiery Mississippi senator Henry S. Foote, who fought four duels in his political career and was wounded in three of them. On the Senate floor, he raised a pistol toward an opponent, the Missouri senator Thomas Hart Benton, who bore his chest and invited Foote to shoot, yelling: “I have no pistols! Let him fire! I disdain to carry arms!” Another senator grabbed Foote’s weapon and locked it in a drawer.

Although this confrontation did not prove fatal, another one, between Congressmen Jonathan Cilley of Maine and William J. Graves of Kentucky, did. Cilley, a Democrat, had charged a Whig editor, James Watson Webb, with having accepted a bribe. Outraged by the accusation, Webb wrote a letter in which he challenged Cilley to a duel. He sent the letter through Graves, a Whig friend. When Cilley refused to accept the letter, Graves felt insulted and made his own duel challenge to Cilley. The two men faced off with rifles on a dueling ground outside Washington. Both missed their targets in the first two rounds, but in the third Graves killed Cilley.

Offended Southern honor also lay behind the most famous violent congressional incident of the era, the near-deadly assault in May 1856 on the Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner by the South Carolina representative Preston Brooks. Having delivered his withering antislavery speech “The Crime Against Kansas,” Sumner was sitting alone in the Senate at

David S. Reynolds, a distinguished professor at the CUNY Graduate Center, is the author or editor of 15 books, most recently “Lincoln’s Selected Writings: A Norton Critical Edition.”

‘Between 1830 and 1860, there were more than 70 violent incidents between congressmen.’

his desk, which was bolted to the floor, when Brooks approached him. Declaring that Sumner had libeled his state and slandered a relative of his, Brooks pounded Sumner with his gold-headed cane, delivering at least a dozen blows before his cane broke. Sumner, trapped behind his desk, lurched and writhed under the assault, at last falling, “barely conscious,” in a pool of blood. Sumner, who eventually recovered from his wounds, became a hero in the North and a lasting reminder of the violent tactics of slavery’s defenders. Brooks, meanwhile, was lionized in the South, where editors, mass meetings and student groups hailed him.

He was showered with gifts, including canes with inscriptions like “Good Job,” “Hit Him Again” and “Use Knockdown Arguments.” His state quickly re-elected him to the House.

Freeman notes that the violence in Congress was like a spectator sport. Men and women crowded the congressional galleries with the expectation of seeing entertaining outbreaks, much the way fans of professional wrestling or hockey do today. Sometimes, she shows, French recorded in his diary his delight as a spectator. Describing the huge brawl of 1841, he wrote, “The Speaker & I had the best chance to see all the fun, & while he stood at his desk pounding & yelling, I stood at mine ‘calm as a summer’s morning’—enjoying the sport, and keeping the minutes of the proceedings!”

But Freeman never loses sight of the fact that the fighting in Congress was far more than a sport. It was part of the ever-escalating tensions over slavery. Throughout much of the period, Southern congressmen were the aggressors, and Northerners, who disdained violence, were considered timid or cowardly. By the 1850s, however, the North’s backbone had stiffened. As slavery became increasingly entrenched, Northern congressmen vowed to take action against Southern bullying and insults. Daniel Clark, a Republican from New Hampshire, warned that “a different class of men now came from the North. ... They are sent not to bow down, but to stand up.” The Pennsylvania Republican Galusha Grow declared that Southerners were “under the delusion that Northern men would not fight,” when, in fact, they “will fight in a just cause.”

Not long after Grow made the statement, Union soldiers under Abraham Lincoln were marching south to fight for a just cause. The South, despite its years of bullying and bravado, eventually buckled under the relentless advance of Lincoln’s armies. In the end, some 750,000 Americans lost their lives in the war that preserved the Union and ended slavery.

Like other great historical works, “The Field of Blood” casts fresh light on the period it examines while leading us to think about our own time. Although incidents like the Sumner caning and the Cilley duel are familiar, the contexts in which Freeman places them are not. Nor are the new details she supplies. She enriches what we already know and tells us a lot about what we don’t know. Who knew that the Sumner incident, for example, was just one of scores of violent episodes in Congress?

Freeman doesn’t make explicit comparisons between then and today. She doesn’t have to. A crippled Congress. Opposing political sides that don’t communicate meaningfully with each other. A seemingly unbridgeable cultural divide. Sound familiar?

All that’s missing is an Honest Abe to save us.
Sing, O Muse
Pat Barker revisits Homer from the women’s perspective.

By GERALDINE BROOKS

“WAR IS MEN’S BUSINESS,” Hector says in the “Iliad.” Pat Barker begs to differ.

The British novelist has made war her subject, winning the 1995 Booker Prize for “Ghost Road,” the final novel of her remarkable World War I trilogy, “Regeneration.” In her new novel, “The Silence of the Girls,” she takes on the foundational war story of the Western canon, giving voice to the muted women of Homer’s “Iliad.”

It’s a rich premise, since in the “Iliad” (if not the “Odyssey”) Homer’s women remain under-realized — static as statues, waiting patiently upon their plinths to be awarded as prizes, enslaved or sacrificed. Even Helen, the cause of the crisis between the Greeks and the Trojans, remains little more than a disembodied name.

While the “Iliad” begins in medias res, with the weary Greek armies encamped on the shores of Troy nine years into their stalemated war, Barker starts her story a few months earlier. The Greeks are closing in on the outlying Trojan settlement of Lyrnessus, home of Briseis, who is destined to become Achilles’ war trophy. When Agamemnon commandeers her, Achilles becomes famously enraged, refuses to fight and leaves the Greek army rudderless. Achilles’ beloved Patroclus goes out in Achilles’ armor and is killed by Hector, sparking an act of extraordinary vengeance. It’s potent stuff, and almost entirely blokey. Women cause the fights, but the men have them, and they get all the action and all the speaking roles.

Barker wants to end that silence. She allows us to get to know Briseis before Achilles and Agamemnon start fighting over her. It is Briseis’ voice, in a first-person narration, that largely carries Barker’s interstitial chronicle. Occasionally, and briefly, Barker switches into third person. The reason for the switch remains, for this reader, unsatisfying and opaque. Nothing in particular, either narratively or structurally, seems to be accomplished by the change of voice. Indeed, both voices are, for a writer of Barker’s large gifts, curiously flat and banal.

I began to lose faith on the first page of the novel when Briseis describes the retreat of the Lyrnessus women and children, hastening from their homes to seek refuge in the citadel: “Like all respectable married women, I rarely left my house — although admittedly in my case the house was a palace — so to be walking down the street in broad daylight felt like a holiday.” The jarring inauthenticity of this sentence is sadly characteristic of the novel as a whole. It’s implausible that a Bronze Age woman in a besieged city would be enjoying a stroll as she hears “shouts, cries, the clash of sword on shields” just on the other side of the city gates and knows that her husband and brothers are out there, fighting for their lives.

And soon the clichés fly like arrows, blotting out the sun. A dying man is “wriggling like a stuck pig”; the Greek looters are like “a swarm of locusts,” bad memories “cut like daggers.” And we’re not even at Page 15.

If, as they say, each generation requires its own translation of Homer, what Barker attempts to offer here is an “Iliad” for the age of #MeToo. However, it’s unlikely many readers need to be reminded that an ancient army was a “rape camp,” as Briseis reiterates in her final soliloquy.

If Barker is really after conveying the violent abuse of women in wartime, she’s remarkably circumspect about it. Rape by Achilles: “What can I say? He wasn’t cruel. I waited for it — expected it, even — but there was nothing like that, and at least it was soon over.” Rape by Agamemnon: “So what did he do that was so terrible? Nothing much, I suppose, nothing I hadn’t been expecting.”

I have mixed feelings about these cool, sanitized depictions: relief to be spared harrowing details of sexual violence, but also vexation. To confront a subject redolent of pain, Barker wants to end that silence. She allows us to get to know Briseis before Achilles and Agamemnon start fighting over her. It is Briseis’ voice, in a first-person narration, that largely carries Barker’s interstitial chronicle. Occasionally, and briefly, Barker switches into third person. The reason for the switch remains, for this reader, unsatisfying and opaque. Nothing in particular, either narratively or structurally, seems to be accomplished by the change of voice. Indeed, both voices are, for a writer of Barker’s large gifts, curiously flat and banal.

I began to lose faith on the first page of the novel when Briseis describes the retreat of the Lyrnessus women and children, hastening from their homes to seek refuge in the citadel: “Like all respectable married women, I rarely left my house — although admittedly in my case the house was a palace — so to be walking down the street in broad daylight felt like a holiday.” The jarring inauthenticity of this sentence is sadly characteristic of the novel as a whole. It’s implausible that a Bronze Age woman in a besieged city would be enjoying a stroll as she hears “shouts, cries, the clash of sword on shields” just on the other side of the city gates and knows that her husband and brothers are out there, fighting for their lives.

And soon the clichés fly like arrows, blotting out the sun. A dying man is “wriggling like a stuck pig”; the Greek looters are like “a swarm of locusts,” bad memories “cut like daggers.” And we’re not even at Page 15.

If, as they say, each generation requires its own translation of Homer, what Barker attempts to offer here is an “Iliad” for the age of #MeToo. However, it’s unlikely many readers need to be reminded that an ancient army was a “rape camp,” as Briseis reiterates in her final soliloquy.

If Barker is really after conveying the violent abuse of women in wartime, she’s remarkably circumspect about it. Rape by Achilles: “What can I say? He wasn’t cruel. I waited for it — expected it, even — but there was nothing like that, and at least it was soon over.” Rape by Agamemnon: “So what did he do that was so terrible? Nothing much, I suppose, nothing I hadn’t been expecting.”

If Barker is really after conveying the violent abuse of women in wartime, she’s remarkably circumspect about it. Rape by Achilles: “What can I say? He wasn’t cruel. I waited for it — expected it, even — but there was nothing like that, and at least it was soon over.” Rape by Agamemnon: “So what did he do that was so terrible? Nothing much, I suppose, nothing I hadn’t been expecting.”

Women cause the fights, but the men get all the action.

who suffer still, from war’s ardent atrocities.

It’s not that Barker doesn’t have it in her to convey horror. In a searing moment, she describes Agamemnon prying open Briseis’ mouth and spitting a gob of phlegm into it. It’s ghastly and cruel and one of the few instances when this reader felt authentic emotional recoil because, yes, that is exactly the kind of depravity in which a brutal conqueror might engage.

Henry James famously warned historical novelists never to go back more than 50 years beyond their own era, since “the old consciousness” would surely elude them. I’ve always thought James undervalued the universality of human experience — the timeless nature of love and hate, grief and joy and all of the common, powerful emotions that shape us. The endurance of the “Iliad” is in itself evidence of this. We all know talented, arrogant asses like Achilles, who indulge their rages no matter what the cost, in boardrooms just as on battlefields. We can all identify with Priam’s desperate grief for his fallen son. Mary Renault’s Alexander trilogy and Hilary Mantel’s magisterial “Wolf Hall” offer more recent examples of novelists who reach far into the dark backward abyss of time and give convincing voice to old consciousness.

Unfortunately, Barker’s voices are dissonant and unpersuasive. The girls, alas, remain silenced.
Readers will root for these underdogs — orphans, apprentices and elves — who become heroes.

**THERE'S UNDENIABLE ENTERTAINMENT** in watching an all-powerful Superman dish out justice to the bad guys. But it can be even more satisfying to see the job done by a hero without laser vision or invincibility or even much in the way of muscles. This is why underdogs work so well in children's literature, where, to the target readership, everything from a school bully to a burdensome homework assignment can feel as overwhelming as a supervillain.

**IS THERE ANY MORE classic underdog than the Victorian orphan? By all rights, Nan Sparrow — the spunky yet snarky protagonist of Jonathan Auxier's SWEEP** (Amulet, 368 pp., $18.99; ages 8 to 12) — shouldn't even be alive, let alone leading a chimney sweep uprising.

As if growing up female in 19th-century London weren't hard enough on its own, Nan's job keeps her perpetually filthy, malnourished, deprived of affection and forced to squeeze into lung-blackening spaces tight enough to give a hamster claustrophobia. (In what is sure to be a blow to Mary Poppins fans, the author's afterword explains how real-life sweeps had it even worse than those in the book.) Yet Nan perseveres. Granted, she's got the help of a magical soot golem. If you've ever wondered what Frosty the Snowman would be like if he were made of cinders and had awesome fire powers, that's Charlie the golem: a gift bequeathed to Nan by the kindly sweep who raised her among England's rooftops. Nan believes Charlie is meant to be her protector, but the creature is himself a childlike naif who needs Nan as much as she needs him, especially in a society that refuses to see him as anything but a monster.

Many of the most entertaining and touching scenes involve Nan schooling Charlie on everything from the alphabet to the weather. (“I broke the snow!” Charlie cries when the flakes melt against his hot cinder hands.) When juxtaposed with flashbacks of the old Sweep raising Nan, these bits add a layer of beautifully bittersweet parenthood allegory to a tale that is both uplifting and heartbreaking. When Charlie has an "Of Mice and Men" moment, accidentally crushing a baby bird, readers are torn between sympathy, frustration and fear for the future of this oddly beautiful little family. But as one character wisely says about caring for others, “If you're not afraid, you're not doing it right.”

**DANIEL JOSÉ OLDER** also uses the 1800s orphan theme in DACTYL HILL SQUAD (Scholastic, 256 pp., $16.99; ages 8 to 12), but he ups the threat level significantly by placing his parentless protagonists square in the middle of the American Civil War. This is an alternate history, however, taking place in a world where dinosaurs escaped extinction. Triceratops pull wagons down cobblestone streets, iguanodons lift lamplighters to gas-powered lanterns, microdactyls deliver messages like toothcarrying pigeons, and, on a much less whimsical note, gun-toting gangs of hooded men spread terror from the saddled backs of raptors and ankylosaurs.

Older fascinatingly blends thunder-lizard thrills with lesser-known but important aspects of American history. He starts the action (and then never really stops it) with a real-life incident: the burning of the Colored Orphan Asylum during the Draft Riots of 1863, when mobs of white New Yorkers, angered by their conscription into the Union Army, turned violently against their black neighbors. Suddenly homeless, the children face perils including the Kidnapping Club, a Jurassified version of a real gang who abducted free black people to sell into slavery. Aided by a pair of African-American Shakespearean actors (whose the-}
I, Knausgaard

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Knausgaard invites us to compare his book with Hitler’s “Mein Kampf.”

14 years I lived in Bergen,” he writes at the beginning of Book 5, “are long gone, no traces of them are left” — a sly claim, given that the 614 pages that follow constitute a seemingly “fac- tual” re-creation of that very period.

This faux factuality is the hallmark of all six volumes. Book 2 begins in the “present” of 2008, when Knausgaard, nearing 40, is living in Malmo, Sweden, with his wife, Linda, and their children, contemplating the novel that would become “My Struggle.” These scenes alternate with flashbacks to the period several years earlier when he had left Norway for Sweden; it is there, crippled by emotional and intellectual insecurities, that he ardously courts Linda, a poet with psychological troubles of her own. Book 3 leapfrogs back in time to provide an unexpected and often charming glimpse of his childhood and teenage years — the source of those awful insecurities (he describes his childhood as a “ghetto-like state of incompleteness”); in this volume, the author’s desire to recreate every aspect of the past extends to descriptions of his bowel movements.

Book 4 finds the 18-year-old Karl Ove living in a tiny town in northern Norway, where he spends a year as a schoolteacher, struggling with an increasingly alarming drinking problem, his attraction to some of the underage girls in his class and his attempts to write serious fiction. Book 5 moves on to the author’s 20s and early 30s — those 14 years during which he lived in Bergen and experienced his first literary failures and successes, as well as an early marriage that collapsed in part because of his infidelity.

As this summary suggests, the life recounted here is one of unusually intense emotional extremes of the sort that can make for powerful writing. The childhood abuse, the alcoholism, the affairs and breakups are the stuff of many a memoir — a genre that, curiously, doesn’t figure at all in the numerous digressions on literature that dot the landscape of intentional quotidian banality here, even though “My Struggle” has far more in common with memoir than it does with fiction. (I suspect that Knausgaard decided to call his work a novel because memoir continues to be seen as a “soft” genre, and he’s after bigger literary game.)

And yet, despite all the emotional drama, I was rarely moved by this vast and often impressive work. As with some blogs or soap operas, the ongoing narration, however tedious it often is, can be weirdly addictive, and the suggestive play with fact and fiction can be intriguing. But in the end, the books left me cold and, not infrequently, exasperated. “Suits,” on the other hand, was offering just about everything that “My Struggle” wasn’t, and now and then even left me in tears — as artfully constructed narratives can do, propelling us toward emotions that flow naturally from certain kinds of situations. (There’s a marvelous scene in Season 5 when the young lawyer, guilt-ridden over the way in which his secret has compromised his friends’ and colleagues’ integrity, finally breaks down — as you will, too.)

As it happens, the ability to evoke emotions through art is something the author of “My Struggle” worries about, too. Writing in Book 3 about his father once more, he acknowledges that “even with the greatest effort of will I am unable to recreate the fear; the feelings I had for him.” But why not? Why, when to give the reader access to the emotions the writer wants to conjure is one of the great aims of any kind of writing, does Knausgaard make this strange confession of defeat? Why, if “Suits” can catch you u in its characters’ often preposterous crises, can’t “My Struggle”?

THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS BECOME CLEAR WHEN YOU FINALLY GET TO BOOK 6. IN MANY WAYS, THE FINAL VOLUME REPRESENTS A CONTRA- TION OF THE AUTHOR’S CHARACTERISTIC matter and method — with the addition of a hall-of-mirrors story line, since this climactic installment is, in fact, about the publication and reception of the “My Struggle” books in Norway. It opens in autumn 2009, just as the first volume is about to appear, and closes two years later, at the moment the author finishes writing the very book you’re reading. If the previous volumes track the narrator’s evolution into a writer (the same arc traced in Proust’s novel),
Meghan Markle in “Suits.”

For that reason, one recurrent theme of the preceding volumes — the difficulty of balancing life and writing — comes to dominate this final book. Earlier, the fine-grained narration of lived life occasionally blossomed into ruminations on art, literature, music and life. Here, the two strains seem to be in desperate competition, each demanding more and more space until the narrative literally breaks apart, its two autobiographical sections — the first 400 and final 300 pages — separated by a 440-page digression on literature and history. (One of the many literary models that Knausgaard cites in this extended reflection on art and life is James Joyce’s “Ulysses,” which, he implies, inspired the structure of his own novel: He observes that Joyce’s epic contains a lengthy section, Molly Bloom’s soliloquy, that in tone, content and style is nothing like the rest of the book.)

Perhaps because they have so much more to compete with, this volume’s evocations of domestic life — fraught spats with Linda about who will mind the children in the apartment in Malmo, grueling family vacations, simmering irritation with the stridently politically correct parents of the kids’ school friends, shopping for dinner parties — are not only exhaustive, but downright exhausting. Do we really need to know that his apartment building’s elevator is “the dark and narrow shaft that ran through the middle of the building”? It’s as if the particular, the concrete reality of “life” to which this author attaches so much importance, were trying to assert its claims in the face of the increasing preponderance of “art”: the metastasizing meditations on his importance, were trying to assert its claims “life” to which this author attaches so much seriousness. (Linda, too, is a writer.) Her mental collapse, to which the final 150 pages of the new novel are devoted, is evoked in the usual minute detail — which here, you feel, does in fact serve a strong narrative purpose, recreating Linda’s torturous descent in a genuinely agonizing way. Knausgaard understands that this is a gruesomely high price to pay for his lofty literary aims. But for all his theorizing about literature and modernity, he’s a true Romantic, in love with the sacrifices that must be made for Art — even when they’re not his: “And if you want to describe reality as it is, for the individual, and there is no other reality, you have to really go there, you can’t be considered.”

All this may well have you wondering just what kind of man this writer is, and it is to Knausgaard’s credit that he struggles with precisely this question in the book’s 450-page central section. This book-length excursion, representing a radical stylistic departure from the rest of the volume (this is the “Molly Bloom” section), explains, at last, his work’s strange and provocative title, which it shares with another famous book: Adolf Hitler’s autobiography, “Mein Kampf.”

UNTIL BOOK 6, and indeed through this volume’s first long autobiographical section, you’re tempted to take that title as a weak joke: What, after all, could the autobiography of one of history’s greatest monsters have in common with that of a middle-class, middle-aged Norwegian writer with his trivial day-to-day doings? (“I donned my Ted Baker shirt, which stuck to my still-damp shoulder blades and would not hang straight at first, then I got into my Pour jeans with the diagonal pockets, which usually I didn’t like, there was something so conventional about them...”) But Knausgaard wants to argue that any human life is, in the end, just that — a life. And it’s here that his ideological commitment to minutely representing reality — or, rather, his fervent belief that the particulars of our lives, in their complexity and their vivifying incoherence, always trump any attempt to impose ideology on them — achieves a strange fulfillment.

The central section, entitled “The Name and the Number,” begins with a reflection on the fact that, owing to his uncle’s threats, Knausgaard’s father can never be named in the book over which he so memorably looms, a necessity that compels the author to ponder the strange power of names. This, in turn, leads to a thrilling — there is no other word — 50-page explication of “The Straitening,” a poem by Paul Celan, a Holocaust survivor, in which the Holocaust is never named although it hovers over every word; another case in which presence and absence float in a kind of negative equilibrium.

All this, finally, brings us to the main event, by far the finest thing in this strange book and, in my experience, the best thing Knausgaard has written, marked by enormous intellectual panache and quite different from anything else in the novel (it is amazing how lively the writing suddenly is when he’s not writing about himself): a nearly 400-page close-reading of “Mein Kampf,” complete with detours through related texts, in which the author tries to recover and reproduce the lived experience of the frustrated, depressed and impoverished young man who would become the Nazi tyrant. The life of that sad human being, as Knausgaard’s far-ranging and brilliant analysis implies, bears more than a little resemblance to that of Knausgaard himself: the tyrannical father, the grandiose dreams of cultural achievement, the humiliations and the poverty. Yet Hitler became Hitler, and Knausgaard is just himself. A life is a life; that’s the struggle. No life “means” anything more than itself.

This powerful digression is ultimately joined to a sorrowful reflection on the July 2011 mass shooting on Norway’s Utoya island, where 69 people were shot by a sole gunman, Anders Behring Breivik, pretending to be a police officer. Here, Knausgaard uses the insights afforded by his reading of “Mein Kampf” to theorize about the similarities between Hitler and Breivik. What made the inhumanity of the two possible, he suggests, was the fact that their psyches embraced only the first and third...
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

grammatical persons: an “I” (the grandiose perpetrator) and a “they” (the dehumanized victims) but never a “you” — the second person, who, in confronting us one-on-one, forces us to engage an “other” as a human being.

Yet this intriguing notion forces you into an uncomfortable reconsideration of Knausgaard himself. As I closed the final volume of “My Struggle,” struck by how little this hugely ambitious artistic undertaking had moved me, I thought about the emotions that course through it and how they are presented. Like the grandiose figure he writes about in his masterly central section, Knausgaard, too, is always telling you about his feelings and how profound they are, his weeping, his lusts, his ambitions, his insecurities, his frustrations and regrets. But precisely because the feelings are reported rather than evoked, they belong only to the author; between him and his characters — “I” and “they” again — there is no room for “you,” the audience.

This poses a serious challenge for the reader — and, indeed, suggests a certain incoherence in the author’s aesthetic ideology. At one point early on, Knausgaard waxes emotional about how moved he can be by certain pre-20th-century paintings — artworks, as he puts it, “within the artistic paradigm that always retained some reference to visible reality.” But those works move us because the reality to which they refer is a shared reality (the world), whereas the overwhelming reality of “My Struggle” is Knausgaard himself. The books constitute a kind of genre novel in which the author himself has become the genre.

Hence their effect: If your experiences in life happen to overlap with the author’s, you can find yourself stirred by certain passages; still others may leave you impressed by his intellectual dexterity, as in the dazzling analysis of “Mein Kampf.” But to be conscious of how the novel functions, of how it’s designed to make you “think” about the “subject,” means that you’re in the presence of a work that is, in the end, less like the 19th-century paintings the author so admires than like a very current genre indeed: conceptual art, which invites you to nod in recognition when you “get” how it generates its meanings, but rarely provokes large human feeling.

It is for this reason that “My Struggle” in fact bears so little resemblance to the work that the author himself so frequently refers to as an inspiration, and to which his magnum opus has so eagerly been compared by reviewers: Proust’s “In Search of Lost Time.” In that novel, the life of the narrator, its arc from childhood to middle age, climaxing in his becoming a writer, functions as a prism through which virtually every aspect of the lived reality of the author’s time — art, music, literature, sex, society, class, theater, technology, science, history, war, memory, philosophy — is refracted, in a way that enlarges you, gives you a heightened sense of the world itself, its contents and possibilities.

Knausgaard’s creation, for all its vastness and despite its serious intellectual aims and attainments, reduces the entire world to the size of the author. This is happening everywhere now — as the writer himself, with characteristic insight, recognizes in a long passage about the ways in which the internet and social media, by forcing us endlessly to perform our own lives, threaten to trivialize the very notion of selfhood: “Our identities … gradually recalibrate toward the expectation of an observing ‘everyone’ or ‘all.’” But, just as typically, he seems unaware of the extent to which he and his novel participate in the disturbing phenomenon that he so acutely analyzes. What work more than his deserves to be the great new classic of the age of the blog? □

Me and My Shadow
A graphic memoir that confronts the weirdness within.

By JENNY LAWSON

YOU KNOW WHEN you have a book report due but you’re not sure you completely understood the nuances of the book and you feel stupid and doubt yourself entirely and panic a little and you have to admit to Mrs. Johnson that it’s wonderfully written but you just aren’t smart enough to understand what the hell is going on in “Finnegans Wake”?

That’s exactly what happened to me with

PASSING FOR HUMAN
A Graphic Memoir
By Liana Finck

Liana Finck’s graphic memoir “Passing for Human,” except that the self-doubt ended up being an entirely fitting emotion for confronting this book.

At first I focused on the illustration and design and considered using pretentious-sounding words to try to sound like I knew about art. Then I settled on exploring the idea of otherness and its impact on the human psyche. Then I drew a picture of me eating a spaghetti sandwich because I was hungry. None of it was right. I tore up all these attempts and started from scratch:

“Passing for Human” is a graphic work — Finck’s second, after her earlier “A Bintel Brief.” It is drawn in a straightforward pen-and-ink style but each simple drawing captures such raw emotion. It’s wonderfully intimate, like reading someone’s diary. And in a way that’s what it is. It tells the story of the artist’s search for her lost shadow. The first time I flipped through the book I wasn’t sure what that shadow represented: alienation, regret, creative angst, self-doubt? I read it again.

Finck tells the story of her life, beginning with her mother, who had a similar shadow that she lost and found. Her mother’s shadow speaks to her but is sent away and returns during her struggle to find love and fulfillment in spite of her anxiety about her own strangeness. Finck writes beautifully of this struggle but is suddenly beset with self-doubt that gnaws at her in the form of literal rats. She listens to the fear. She tears up the story. She starts the book again but this time focusing on her father, a man who struggled with feelings of otherness, of the fear of being discovered for what he is … a weirdo.

It’s all so poignantly relatable that it makes me a little achy. But the rats of self-doubt return. Finck rips it up again. She starts over with her childhood. She starts over with her love life. She starts over with her shadow.

Again and again she destroys her work, and herself, even though it’s all exactly perfect. I could recognize my own struggles with being a creative misfit as each chapter revealed itself (and was destroyed). Each section exposed more about the things we do to cut ourselves off from the frightening strangeness that makes us who we are, and how terrifyingly vulnerable it can feel to reveal that difference to the world.

What is the shadow? It holds us back, it pushes us forward. It hurts and it helps. I think perhaps it means something different to each reader, as good art should. To me, however, the shadow wasn’t as important as what made the shadow.

In every chapter the characters run up against the same fear of otherness that so many of us feel — the anxiety born of the knowledge that we are somehow different, the terror that accompanies the idea that we are alien and will be misunderstood or outed as broken. Yet that same sense of our own aberration is the very thing that makes us special, needed, that makes our voices unique. It is the light that shines inside us. And if you let your extraordinary light shine you will cast a shadow, a dark pool of fear that goes hand in hand with courage. Perhaps the shadowy fear is there not as a warning to dim your strangeness, but as proof that your inner light is shining like a beacon in spite of the fear. And that’s a good thing.

We need beacons to draw us onward.

Finck writes: “A draw-er doesn’t draw because she loves to draw. She doesn’t draw because she draws well. She draws because once, she lost something. And by drawing, she will find it again.”

I believe with this book she found it. And she found me as well. In the light. And in the shadows. □
Teacher Evaluation

A protagonist once groomed by her charismatic prep-school English instructor decides to reckon with the relationship.

By SOPHIE GILBERT

“THIS IS NOT a story I’ve told before” is how “His Favorites” begins — a caveat, but also a statement that binds its narrator, Jo, into a larger collective. When she was 15, and a student at an elite Northeastern boarding school, Jo was coerced into a sexual relationship with a charismatic and manipulative English teacher. Many years later, she’s confronting what happened to her: how she was cajoled and groomed by a skilled predator, and how his actions were imprinted on the rest of her life.

“His Favorites” isn’t so much a novel — or even, at a slender 150 pages, a novella — as an experiment in taking control of a narrative. Not the kind of metaphorical control that implies empowerment or recovery, but literal control. Jo tells her story not in clear, linear prose, but in leaps back and forth through time, switching tenses, perspectives and styles. Her narrative is looping, meandering and evasive. She’ll arrive at a crucial point in her history and then dart away for 13 pages, throwing out distractions that delay the inevitable. One critical early scene is detailed first in short staccato bursts, and then in a single extended sentence that slowly unfurls.

The newest book from Kate Walbert, “His Favorites” arrives not quite a year into an unprecedented outpouring of testimony from women about their own experiences of sexual harassment and assault. Walbert is a masterly and rich purveyor of female characters, having conveyed the breadth and ambition of women’s dreams and desires in “A Short History of Women” (2009) and the resilience of two widows in “The Sunken Cathedral” (2015). “His Favorites” is primed to be a major work for the #MeToo movement, but rather than seek connection with readers, it stubbornly defies it. Jo is a difficult narrator, circling the pivotal parts of her story until she can’t avoid them any longer.

The result is that her abuser — a 34-year-old modern literature professor called “Master, or Master Aikens, or M,” is the flimsiest part of “His Favorites,” a shadow rather than a substantive presence. The book seems to be set some time during the 1970s, when Jo is exiled to Hawthorne, just outside Boston, after a tragic accident in her Maryland hometown. She quickly becomes aware of Master, “one of those teachers,” just as swiftly as he zeroes in on the girl reading Tolstoy alone in a local diner, whose checkered history makes her vulnerable.

If Walbert declines to make Master more than a sketch, she renders his methods in more detail. He identifies lonely girls and outcasts, subjects them to special attention, flatters them, touches their hands, sends them letters that become increasingly explicit. He also positions himself as an intellectual lodestar, doling out lectures on language and grammar that torment Jo in later life with their indelibility. “It was as if he molded me from clay,” she recounts.

It’s tempting to interpret the fluctuating style of “His Favorites” as a rebellion against Master’s dictates. Master urged his students to embrace the beauty of declarative sentences; Jo has come to know the necessity of qualifying her own words. But “His Favorites” also conveys the circular nature of coming to terms with something. Recovery isn’t a linear path of progress — it entails the kind of avoidance and dodging and backward steps that Jo uses in her narration. And “His Favorites” isn’t a simple narrative of trauma and survival, but something more challenging, and potentially more valuable — a reckoning not just with the reality of abuse, but with the pernicious ways it can shape and inform everything, even the stories you tell yourself.

From America With Love

A young Indian immigrant finds his way in a new country.

By JABARI ASIM

IN HIS CONSISTENTLY entertaining new book, “Immigrant, Montana,” Amitava Kumar, an Indian-born writer and scholar, recalls the youthful romantic adventures of Kailash, an Indian-born writer and scholar. The fuzzy distinctions between the author’s life and that of his fictional protagonist are multiple and intentional. “This is a work of fiction as well as nonfiction,” Kumar explains in an author’s note, “an in-between novel by an in-between writer.”

The relationship between fact and fiction provides an animating tension throughout Kailash’s recollection of his salad days. While pursuing graduate study at a university that sounds a lot like Columbia, he researched the life and career of Agnes Smedley, a real-life American writer, best known for her book “Daughter of Earth.” Kailash describes it as “neither a memoir nor simply a novel. And when I read it, I thought Smedley offered us a model for writing.” He found a similar example in a charismatic professor named Ehsaan Ali. “From Ehsaan we wanted narrative,” Kailash recalls. “We didn’t always care how much of it was nonfiction or fiction. Ehsaan lived — and narrated — his life along the blurry Line of Control between the two genres.”

Kailash navigates those same categories from the vantage point of middle age, looking back on events that happened more than two decades before. He organizes his remembrances according to the women with whom he was involved at the time. These include Jennifer, an older grad school dropout; Nina, the enigmatic center of Kailash’s memories and perhaps of the novel; and Cai Yan, a “slim and elegant” grad student from China. He stumbled through these affairs of the heart while also weathering the complications of immigration and the ineluctable tug of home. “It was easier to keep the worlds apart,” he says, “even if doing so meant seeing myself as split or divided. I was already learning that I was moving away from my parents; their world now seemed so different from mine.”

Kumar faces up to the consequences of this fissure, punctuating his narrative. “neither a memoir nor simply a novel. And when I read it, I thought Smedley offered us a model for writing.” He found a similar example in a charismatic professor named Ehsaan Ali. “From Ehsaan we wanted narrative,” Kailash recalls. “We didn’t always care how much of it was nonfiction or fiction. Ehsaan lived — and narrated — his life along the blurry Line of Control between the two genres.”

Kailash navigates those same categories from the vantage point of middle age, looking back on events that happened more than two decades before. He organizes his remembrances according to the women with whom he was involved at the time. These include Jennifer, an older grad school dropout; Nina, the enigmatic center of Kailash’s memories and perhaps of the novel; and Cai Yan, a “slim and elegant” grad student from China. He stumbled through these affairs of the heart while also weathering the complications of immigration and the ineluctable tug of home. “It was easier to keep the worlds apart,” he says, “even if doing so meant seeing myself as split or divided. I was already learning that I was moving away from my parents; their world now seemed so different from mine.”

Kumar faces up to the consequences of this fissure, punctuating his narrative. “neither a memoir nor simply a novel. And when I read it, I thought Smedley offered us a model for writing.” He found a similar example in a charismatic professor named Ehsaan Ali. “From Ehsaan we wanted narrative,” Kailash recalls. “We didn’t always care how much of it was nonfiction or fiction. Ehsaan lived — and narrated — his life along the blurry Line of Control between the two genres.”

In his memories, Kailash’s eager exploration of love’s splendors and pitfalls took place amid considerable political and intellectual commotion. His grad student cohort talked about mobilizing against war in the Persian Gulf. Wine-fueled parties and bull sessions abounded with talk of Gramsci, Chomsky and Stuart Hall. When he finally completed his master’s thesis, Kailash realized what he really wanted to write about was love. Readers will be neither surprised nor displeased by this epiphany, since Kailash has managed to do so all along, with considerable wit to boot.

“I have always wanted to be in love,” he says, looking back. “All I have managed to do is tell a story.” We should all accomplish so much.
In Bullwinkel’s creepy, deadpan debut, bodies become objects, objects become bodies, and bodies and objects fuse and part in fascinating, unsettling ways. For readers with the stomach for it, the book is full of squirming pleasures. In one story, a woman who is corresponding with a prisoner sends him a sketch she’s done of his corpse cut into pieces and turned into an elegant armchair; in another, a couple hire a man to act as a bra for their teenage daughter. He scuttles around her, stooping to cup her breasts in his hands. In “Arms Overhead,” a blackly funny fairy tale, a pair of teenage girls grow obsessed with cannibalism. One of them fantasizes about killing her baby brother: “I was thinking it would be best to boil him,” she says. “Do you think his skin will fall off?”

In the most emotionally powerful story, though, the desire to consume another’s body is not an impulse toward violence but, instead, a form of mourning — the desire to internalize and preserve. In “What I Would Be if I Wasn’t What I Am,” a widow grieving her husband at the end of an imperfect marriage reckons with the way he remains always a part of her, even years after his death. When she has sex with other men, she’s haunted by the sense that her husband is physically inside her: “It’s not that I feel Ray is in the room, watching me, no, I feel that Ray is inside my chest, occupying half my brain, sharing the body that is taking place in the physical act.” As disturbing as this image is, the widow later comes to see it as a kind of wish-fulfillment, and the line that ends the story expresses a deeper, perhaps even universal, yearning: It’s a desire to be more than a single person trembling, a wish to be forever coupling so that I am not just simply alone.”

The author of “Under the Sea” is also a poet, and his extended verse “Romantic Comedies” consists of a series of epigrammatic lines describing couples who, by the logic of the genre, are simultaneously destined and doomed. “She’s the principal and he’s the janitor. . . . She’s a sassy black oncologist and he’s a racist with prostate cancer. . . . He gouged out Christy Schumacher’s face in the yearbook and she is Christy Schumacher.” Ideally read in a single sitting, and even better aloud among friends, the poem is a triumph. Each line, amusing enough on its own, builds on the next until its audience is breathless with laughter and — somewhat inexplicably — profoundly moved.

The stories in “Under the Sea,” Leidner’s first fiction collection, lack that propulsive momentum; though they’re consistently funny, many are overlong and could have used a more stringent editor. Like “Romantic Comedies,” the central piece, “I Extremely Bad Breakups,” pushes its conceit to the point of absurdity, and then far beyond. Many of the bad breakups involve people getting hit by buses, and the story has rather outstayed its welcome even before the aliens arrive. But the book is redeemed by three near-perfect stories in its second half: “Garbage,” “K-4” and “Lost in Translation.” Less showy and frenetic than the entries that precede them, these tales succeed by embracing, rather than exploding, the form. In “Garbage,” a woman stands in line at a coffee shop behind two girls who are complaining about a mutual acquaintance, creating a set piece of virtuosic dialogue that’s equal parts hilarity and horror. “She’s garbage,” says friend A. “I know,” agrees friend B. “Then, the first one said it again, as if it were a new idea. She’s a garbage human being.’ ‘Oh my God,’ said that other, ‘garbage.’ ‘I mean, she’s just garbage.’ . . . And I’m not even, like, angry, or even care really? Does that make sense? . . . It’s just that she’s garbage.” On and on it goes, mounting in fury and absurdity, until one of the girls tries to introduce a variation to the sequence, and it all comes toppling down.

Many of these delicate, thoughtful stories are devoted to unpacking the intricacies of infidelity in long-term relationships. Thought indeed takes up a lot of space here: The characters are prone to a level of analysis (of themselves, of their partners) that borders on obsession. The strongest of these slim narratives capture the claustrophobia of being caught in a disintegrating partnership in which two people have wrapped themselves around each other so tightly that neither one can move without causing the other pain.

Ben, who is trying to conceal an affair from his wife, Miriam, thinks about Miriam, thinks about thinking about Miriam, and then thinks about the way that he thinks about how he thinks about Miriam. “He reflected, as he had frequently in recent weeks, upon the difficulty of assessing when his behavior was suspicious. There was too much latitude for suspicion, was the problem. Being cooperative and helpful was potentially suspicious, as was being romantic. But so was being brusque, distracted, critical or cranky. He felt like he was navigating some tricky video game, quicksand everywhere; then he questioned why this mental picture dressed itself as a video game, instead of some real (if still imaginary) bayou. Was Ben that severed from reality these days, that his fantasies packaged themselves in pixels?”

The way that these multiplying layers of consideration and interpretation can, in fact, move you further from the truth of a relationship is a theme that Magowan ably explores. But by the end of the nearly 30 individual stories in the collection, the cyclical returns to the same set of ideas start to feel repetitive rather than iterative. Thankfully, a handful of linked stories provide much-needed space for expansion, offering a sense of psychological movement rather than continual, stifling return.
### BestSellers

**The New York Times**

**COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BESTSELLERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiction</th>
<th>This Week</th>
<th>Last Week</th>
<th>Weeks on List</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>JUROR #3, by James Patterson and Nancy Allen. (Little, Brown) Ruby Bozarth defends a college football star charged in a felony case complicated by a second murder.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>SHADOW TYRANTS, by Clive Cussler and Boyd Morrison. (Putnam) Juan Cabrillo and his crew fight two destructive adversaries.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>CRAZY RICH ASIANS, by Kevin Kwan. (Anchor) A New Yorker gets a surprise when she spends the summer with her boyfriend in Singapore.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>THE FORBIDDEN DOOR, by Dean Koontz. (Bantam) Jane Hawk, a former F.B.I. agent, must stop a secret group using mind-control technology.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>LEVERAGE IN DEATH, by J.D. Robb. (St. Martin’s) Lieutenant Eve Dallas investigates a mysterious act of terror.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>CHINA RICH GIRLFRIEND, by Kevin Kwan. (Anchor) The second book in the Crazy Rich Asians trilogy.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>THE TATTOOIST OF AUSCHWITZ, by Heather Morris. (Harper) A concentration camp detainee tasked with permanently marking fellow prisoners falls in love with one of them.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>A SIMPLE FAVOR, by Darcey Bell. (Harper) A single mother’s life is rattled when her best friend disappears.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>IN HIS FATHER’S FOOTSTEPS, by Danielle Steel. (Delacorte) The successful son of two Holocaust survivors struggles to become his own person after his marriage falls apart.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>RICH PEOPLE PROBLEMS, by Kevin Kwan. (Anchor) The final book in the Crazy Rich Asians trilogy.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>ORIGIN, by Dan Brown. (Doubleday) After reconnecting with one of his first students, who is now a billionaire futurist, symbology professor Robert Langdon must go on a perilous quest with a beautiful museum director.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>THE FALLEN, by David Baldacci. (Grand Central) Amos Decker, known as the Memory Man, puts his talents toward solving a string of murders in a Rust Belt town.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>ROBERT B. PARKER'S COLORBLIND, by Reed Farrel Coleman. (Putnam) Police chief Jesse Stone works to solve racially motivated crimes and to clear the department’s first black female deputy.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING, by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>ELEANOR OLIPHANT IS COMPLETELY FINE, by Gail Honeyman. (Penguin) A young woman’s well-ordered life is disrupted by the I.T. guy from her office.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonfiction</th>
<th>This Week</th>
<th>Last Week</th>
<th>Weeks on List</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>FEAR, by Bob Woodward. (Simon &amp; Schuster) Based on hours of interviews with sources, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist describes debates and decision-making within the Trump White House.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>EDUCATED, by Tara Westover. (Random House) The daughter of survivalists, who is kept out of school, educates herself enough to leave home for university.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>THE RESTLESS WAVE, by John McCain and Mark Salter. (Simon &amp; Schuster) A memoir by the recently deceased Republican senator from Arizona.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>21 LESSONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY, by Yuval Noah Harari. (Spiegel &amp; Grau) Technological, political and social issues in the modern era, and the choices individuals might consider in facing them.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>UNHINGED, by Omarosa Manigault Newman. (Gallery) The reality TV star and former White House staffer describes her time and relationship with Donald Trump.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>ACCESSORY TO WAR, by Neil deGrasse Tyson and Avis Lang. (Norton) Observations of the two-way relationship between science and military power.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>THE RUSSIA HOAX, by Gregg Jarrett. (Broadside) The Fox News analyst makes his case against the F.B.I. investigation into collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>SAPIENS, by Yuval Noah Harari. (Harper) How Homo sapiens became Earth’s dominant species.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>ASTROPHYSICS FOR PEOPLE IN A HURRY, by Neil deGrasse Tyson. (Norton) A straightforward, easy-to-understand introduction to the laws that govern the universe.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>THE CODDLING OF THE AMERICAN MIND, by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt. (Penguin Press) An investigation of cultural trends that the authors argue are failing the next generation.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>EVERY DAY IS EXTRA, by John Kerry. (Simon &amp; Schuster) A memoir by the former Massachusetts senator, secretary of state and 2004 Democratic presidential nominee.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>CONTEMPT, by Ken Starr. (Sentinel) The former independent counsel recounts his investigation of the Clinton administration and its outcomes.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>BAD BLOOD, by John Carreyrou. (Knopf) The rise and fall of Theranos, the biotech startup that failed to deliver on its promise to make blood testing more efficient.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>GRIT, by Angela Duckworth. (Scribner) A psychologist argues that passion and perseverance are the keys to success.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>LIARS, LEAKERS AND LIBERALS, by Jeanine Pirro. (Center Street) The legal analyst and Fox News host argues in favor of President Trump.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A dagger (†) indicates that some bookstores report receiving bulk orders. **ONLINE: E-BOOKS AND EXPANDED RANKINGS:** For more lists, more titles, more rankings and a full explanation of our methodology, visit www.nytimes.com/best-sellers.

### Editors’ Choice / Staff Picks From The Book Review

**WASHINGTON BLACK,** by Esi Edugyan. (Knopf, $26.95.) This eloquent novel, Edugyan’s third, is a daring work of empathy and imagination, featuring a Barbados slave boy in the 1830s who flees barbaric cruelty in a hot-air balloon and embarks on a life of adventure that is wondrous, melancholy and strange.

**CAN YOU TOLERATE THIS?** By Ashleigh Young. (Riverhead, $26.) The New Zealand poet and essayist writes many sly ars poeticas in her collection — a lovely, profound debut that spins metaphors of its own creation and the segmented identity of the essayist, that self-regarding self.

**BIG GAME: THE NFL IN DANGEROUS TIMES,** by Mark Leibovich. (Penguin Press, $28.) Agossipy, insightful and wickedly entertaining journey through professional football’s sausage factory. Reading this sparkling narrative, one gets the sense that the league will survive on the magnetism of the sport it so clumsily represents.

**THE REAL LOLITA:** The Kidnapping of Sally Horner and the Novel That Scandalized the World, by Sarah Weinman. (Ecco/HarperCollins, $27.99.) Writing “Lolita,” Nabokov drew on the real-life story of a girl held captive for two years by a pedophile. Weinman tracks down her history to complicate our view of the novel widely seen as Nabokov’s masterpiece.

**THE SCHOOLHOUSE GATE: PUBLIC EDUCATION, THE SUPREME COURT AND THE BATTLE FOR AMERICAN MIND,** by Justin Driver. (Pantheon, $35.) This meticulous history examines rulings on free speech, integration and corporal punishment to argue that schools are our most significant arenas of constitutional conflict.

**TICKER: THE QUEST TO CREATE AN ARTIFICIAL HEART,** by Mimi Swartz. (Crown, $27.) The long, arduous effort to invent and then perfect a machine that could stand in for the human heart offers Swartz a scandalous story filled with feeding doctors willing to stretch ethical boundaries to make great achievements.

**UNDERBUG:** An Obsessive Tale of Termites and Technology, by Lisa Margonelli. (Scientific American/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $27.) Margonelli, who believes termites are underappreciated, makes her case via the researchers who study them — especially their ability to build the insect equivalent of a skyscraper.

**HARBOR ME,** by Jacqueline Woodson. (Nancy Paulsen/Penguin, $17.99; ages 10 and up.) In this compassionate novel, a perceptive teacher requires six struggling middle school students to spend one class period a week together, just talking.

**LOUISIANA’S WAY HOME,** by Kate DiCamillo. (Candlewick, $16.99; ages 10 and up.) Louisiana Elefante, first introduced as a minor character in DiCamillo’s “Raymie Nightingale,” hits the road with her grandmother, nurturing practical optimism despite hardship.

The full reviews of these and other recent books are on the web: nytimes.com/books.