

bookish

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Ender, a Maine coon cat, hides from customers in the mystery section at the Recycle Bookstore in San Jose.

SHAE HAMMOND/STAFF

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A GUIDE TO BAY AREA AUTHORS, GREAT BOOKS AND BOOKISH THINGS TO EXPLORE



Tiny curbside libraries

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4 rising stars

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The Pulitzer winner

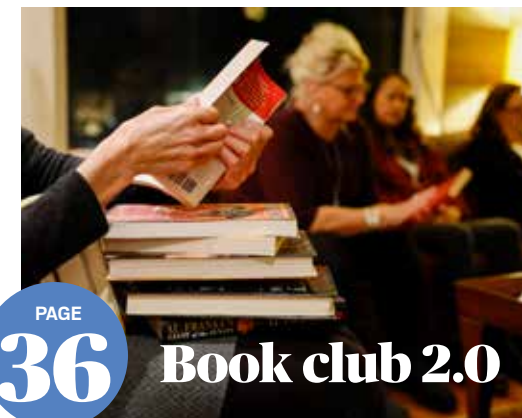
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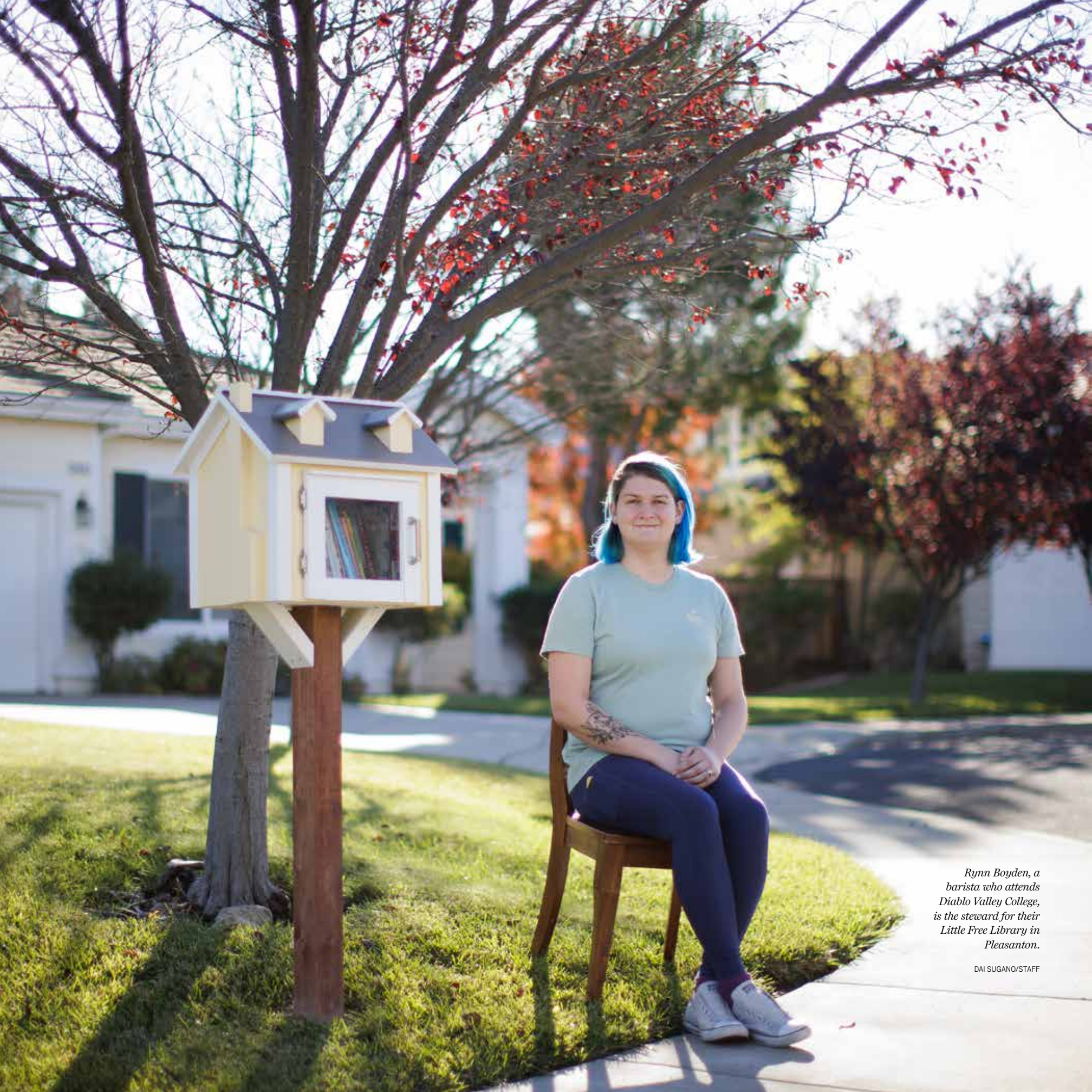
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Rynn Boyden, a barista who attends Diablo Valley College, is the steward for their Little Free Library in Pleasanton.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

Take it or leave it — or both

Curbside Little Free Libraries invite readers to share books

BY JOAN MORRIS

Whether it's a Hemingway classic, a George R.R. Martin fantasy, a steamy romance or a children's storybook you're looking for, one — or all—of those could be waiting just down your street.

Little Free Libraries have sprung up across the Bay Area in recent years in curbside boxes that are as unique as their stewards, from a Victorian steampunk-style version in San Jose to a midcentury mod in Pinole. They're not outliers, either. The nonprofit that promotes these little book-filled houses has registered more than 150,000 throughout the world. You see them perched on posts everywhere — on rural roads, suburban cul de sacs and urban streets, their little peaked roofs and plexiglass windows a sure sign that book lovers have been here.

The idea began in 2009, when Todd H. Bol erected a book-sharing box outside his home in Hudson, Wisconsin. Word spread. Soon, other book lovers began making their own curbside libraries. By 2012, the Little Free Library had incorporated as a nonprofit to promote and inspire neighborhood book exchanges.

The goal is simple: Encourage literacy and the joy of reading by providing free access to books of all kinds. Stewards of the curbside libraries implore their visitors to take a book and to leave one, too. You can keep a book for as long as you like, then pass it along to a friend, return it to the library or replace it with a different one. No one is standing guard or levying late fines.

The Bay Area has hundreds of Little Free Libraries scattered through neighborhoods in every city. You can find a Little Free Library — or the inspiration to create one yourself — at little-free-library.org. Meanwhile, let us introduce you to some of the stewards in Bay Area neighborhoods.

THE VICTORIAN STEAMPUNK LIBRARY

Michael and Lori Tierney, 368 N. 64th St., San Jose
Established: 2014

Michael and Lori are both chemists, although Michael is semi-retired. Their Little Free Library, built by Michael with a nod to steampunk and San Jose's Hensley Historic District, was one of the first 2,000 libraries registered. It's officially No. 1,878.

"My wife and I both love libraries and books," Michael says, "and we thought it would be a neat thing to do."

The couple put stickers in each book that passes through the library, and have so far seen more than 7,000 books come and go.

A few years ago, the library was vandalized — twice — and Michael considered taking it down. When neighbors heard, they rallied behind the little library, encouraging him to continue it and donating money for repairs and books to restock. Michael needed no other convincing.

What's in the library: At the moment, options include "Hey Ranger 2: More True Tales of Humor & Misadventure from the Great Outdoors" by Jim Burnett, "Red Storm Rising" by Tom Clancy and "CMOS VLSI Design" by M.S. Suma.

A COTTAGE OF BOOKS

Gillianna Diaz, 430 Boulder Drive, Antioch
Established: 2020

Gillianna's Blessing Library, contained in a cottage-style box, is the work of 12-year-old Gillianna Diaz, a seventh grader at Antioch's Holy Rosary Catholic school. Gillianna has always wanted to help



others in her community. When she learned about the Little Free Libraries, she told her mother she wanted to open one.

To raise funds for the library, Gillianna used the money she'd earned doing chores to buy chocolates that she sold outside her house, lemonade stand-style. When word got out about what she was trying to do, people from all over Antioch began contributing. She raised \$500 in three days.

Sticks and Stones Creations, a local company that does custom carpentry, offered to make Gillianna's library box on two conditions: that she help build it and that she donate the money she would have paid for the box to charity. No problem. Gillianna enjoyed learning how to build the box. Already a volunteer for Hijos Del Campo, a group that assists migrant farm workers, she used the money to purchase Christmas baskets for the workers and their families.

Although Gillianna has struggled with her own reading, she recognizes the importance of books and literacy, says her proud mother, Nereida Sarat.

What's in the library: "Dune" by Frank Herbert, "A Feast for Crows" by George R.R. Martin, "Moby-Dick" by Herman Melville

THE MINIATURE HOUSE

Rynn Liana Boyden, 263 Sullivan Court, Pleasanton
Established: February 2022

When COVID shut down communities, many people found themselves with a lot of free time. Rynn, a barista who attends Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill, began taking walks around

Gillianna Diaz, 12, helped build a Little Free Library in front of her Antioch home.

RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF

Opposite: The little book depot built by Mike Tierney and his wife, Lori, was one of the first 2,000 Little Free Libraries registered.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF



The nonprofit that promotes these little book-filled houses has registered more than 150,000 throughout the world.

their neighborhood, which boasts several Little Free Libraries.

An avid reader, Rynn decided to open their own library. Embarking on a little research beforehand, Rynn checked out all the libraries they could find, taking note of the style of the box,

the colors used and the selection of books inside. They borrowed a book from each library to include in theirs, then purchased a custom-made box from Etsy, painting and decorating it to match their own suburban home.

The library is stocked with



Books for kids are part of the inventory in a Little Free Library in front of Gilliana Diaz's home in Antioch. Diaz, 12, helped build the little library. RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF



Mike Tierney's Little Free Library includes some steampunk details. DAI SUGANO/STAFF

Opposite: Opposite: Pinole resident Nicole Botha stocks her Little Free Library with books she finds delightful or that capture the interest of her daughters, Kimberley, 4, and Ashlyn, 8. Neighbors and passersby occasionally contribute books, too. JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/STAFF

LITTLE FREE LIBRARIES BY THE NUMBERS

- Some 250 million books have been shared through registered Little Free Libraries, profoundly increasing book access for readers of all ages and backgrounds.

- More than 1,500 Little Free Libraries have been opened at no cost in communities where they are needed most, through the organization's Impact Library Program.

- Eleven cities have adopted the Read in Color initiative, which has distributed more than 30,000 diverse books celebrating BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized voices, and other communities have joined the Native American initiative to provide books on reservations.

- Worldwide, 115 countries have joined the Little Free Library network.

Rynn's own favorite books and those they purchased thrifting.

"Reading is very important for our community. I love doing it," Rynn says. "I think (this) is also a good place for people to donate books and to share what they read."

What's in the library: "Richard Scarry's Best Storybook Ever" by Richard Scarry, "A Light in the Attic" by Shel Silverstein, "The Girl on the Train" by Paula Hawkins

THE MIDCENTURY MODERN LIBRARY

Nicole Botha, 960 Barkley Court, Pinole
Established: 2020

Nicole was still a newcomer to Pinole when she came across her first Little Free Library. She

thought it was not only a great idea in general, but a good way to get to know her neighbors and become part of the community.

"I've lived in areas where I never got to know my neighbors," she says. The Little Free Library "has been a bright spot for the community."

Nicole and her husband built the library box themselves, giving it a midcentury modern feel, and keep it well stocked with help from random donations, including boxes of books left alongside the library.

What's in the library: "Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul on Tough Stuff: Stories of Tough Times and Lessons Learned" by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, "A Time for Mercy" by John Grisham; "Port Mortuary" by Patricia Cornwell

THE EAGLE PROJECT

Brian Coons, 557 Kahrs Ave., Pleasant Hill
Established: 2018

The Little Free Library outside Pleasant Hill's Episcopal Church of the Resurrection is one of the larger libraries in the area, with six shelves packed with a variety of books. The library box was an Eagle Scout project done by then College Park High student Brian, who did all the planning, fundraising, construction and initial stocking of the library.

Now that Brian is at UC Davis, his dad, Richard Coons, has taken over stewardship of the library. He says it is organic and pretty much takes care of itself. People take books and drop off books. The shelves always are filled, and Richard just keeps an eye on it to make sure nothing is amiss.

What's in the library: "Treasure Island" by Robert Lewis Stevenson, "The Da Vinci Code" by Dan Brown, "Dancing in the Light" by Shirley MacLaine ■

5 GREAT WINTER READS

Kepler's Books

STORY BY BRITTANY DELAY

ILLUSTRATION BY JANE MOUNT

People are reading now more than ever — one of a very few lovely outcomes of the long pandemic lockdown. And while you can certainly use a Kindle or buy an e-book to get your lit fix, it's just not the same as holding an actual book in your hand and feeling the paper against your fingertips as you flip to the next page.

And nothing will ever replace the experience of browsing the aisles of a favorite bookstore, looking for serendipity to strike — or a bookshop staffer, gifted in the art of pairing reader and tome, to offer tips. Perhaps someone at Kepler's.

Founded in 1955 by peace activist Roy Kepler, this famous Menlo Park bookstore has deep roots in the Bay Area literary scene, drawing everyone from Beat poets to Stanford students. In 2005, when financial conditions had Kepler's teetering on the brink of insolvency, the community wouldn't let it go under. The outpouring of support allowed the shop to reopen. Today, it's a hybrid business that includes a community-supported bookstore and a nonprofit events foundation.

And Kepler's buyer Aggie Zivaljevic has some thoughts about what you should be reading this winter.

“Foster” by Claire Keegan:

“Foster is a majestically beautiful tale set in rural Ireland, centered around the story of a young girl's transformation within a loving home,” Zivaljevic says. “Written with purposeful economy and strict precision, Claire Keegan's words remain chiseled in the minds and hearts of readers. Don't miss this unforgettably spiritual story that reconciles the heartbreak of childhood with the power of kindness.”

“If I Survive You” by Jonathan

Escoffery: “This novel-in-stories brilliantly captures the complicated life of a young man's Jamaican heritage family as they go about their days in Miami, Florida. A fiercely authentic challenge to the typical immigration success story, the book surprises and arrests

readers with its genuinely raw, exuberant voice of humor, warmth and compassion.”

“Rabbit Hutch” by Tess Gunty:

“In this debut novel, author Tess Gunty masterfully channels the mystical powers of the novel's young main heroine, Blandine Watkins, and her uncanny insights. Blandine's otherworldly beauty and an astute awareness of other people's struggles make for an unapologetically unforgettable character. Beautifully dark yet charmingly humorous, it's impossible not to laugh through the tears of this cathartic fiction.”

“Passenger” by Cormac McCar-

rthy: “There is nothing that is not offered by this breathtaking, nomadic book centered on the travels of a plane crash survivor.



Within its pages, you'll encounter a never-ending flood of forbidden love, profound sorrow, cosmic loneliness, tormented minds, dreadful futility, empty religion, scientific theory and lingering mystery.”

“Last White Man” by Mohsin

Hamid: “This fablelike, thought-provoking story greets readers with a shocking premise: What if you woke up one day, and your skin had drastically changed tones? The book's main character takes readers on a tour of love, loss and rediscovery as he deals with the fact that he is darker than he was the day before. A masterly examination of personal and societal metamorphosis, race and mortality, the sheer force of these pages is absolutely haunting.”

BOOKSTORE EVENTS

Kepler's “This Is Now with Angie Coiro” series features journalist Coiro in conversation with authors and luminaries. These ticketed events are typically held at 7 p.m.

Jan. 17: In Conversation with Pico Iyer, “The Half-Known Life”

March 8: In Conversation with Lucy Jane Bledsoe, “Tell The Rest”

Details: Open from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday–Saturday and until 6 p.m. Sunday–Monday at 1010 El Camino Real, Suite 100 in Menlo Park; keplers.com. ■



Top left: Brittany Caine is the customer service manager at Kepler's Books in Menlo Park.

Scott Shafer, an employee from Menlo Park, organizes books.

SHAE HAMMOND/STAFF



Mottley, Kuo, Ho and Min

Mark these names as four
rising-star authors of color



BY JESSICA YADEGARAN

While many of us will remember the last year as a time when superstar authors published highly anticipated follow-ups — think Michelle Obama, Jennifer Egan and Hanya Yanagihara — it was also a banner year for emerging voices.

Bay Area authors of color, led by Oakland's Leila Mottley, whose powerful first novel is being translated into 15 languages, made splashy debuts we're still talking about. Here are four Bay Area authors to watch.



Leila Mottley

“NIGHTCRAWLING”

“Nightercrawling” (Knopf, \$28), Leila Mottley’s book about a Black girl in East Oakland who gets caught in a storm of poverty, sex trafficking and corrupt cops, blew the literary world away when it came out in June.

Dave Eggers called it “an electrifying debut.” Oprah Winfrey selected it for her book club, making it an instant best-seller. And the book was long-listed for the 2022 Booker Prize, making Mottley the youngest author ever to receive that honor.

Making Oprah’s Book Club “was the shock of a lifetime,” says the 20-year-old Oakland native. “It took months for the reality to set in.”

Despite the media frenzy, which included appearances on late night talk shows with Trevor Noah and Seth Meyers, the 2018 Oakland Youth Poet Laureate remains grounded in the day-to-day of her “real life.” Most young adults her age are working or going to college. She writes.

“It’s really not different than any other passion or pursuit,” she says.

Before becoming a famous novelist, Mottley worked as a preschool substitute teacher. After graduating from high school, she spent the summer of 2019 writing “Nightercrawling.”

Following a 13-way bidding war, the book was sold at auction to Knopf. Mottley was 18, midway through her second semester at Smith College, when she inked the deal.

The book follows Kiara, a 17-year-old high school dropout who falls into sex work while struggling to pay rising rent for herself and her older brother, who clings to visions of rap stardom. Their father is dead; their mother, absent.

The book is inspired by Mottley’s research into police sexual violence, including a 2015 high-profile sex abuse case, in which members of the Oakland Police Department were charged with sexually exploiting a minor. Mottley was 13 when the case broke and remembers how the coverage was focused on the officers and not on the implications for the young girl.

“I wanted the story to touch on vulnerability within Black girlhood and link that closely to what it means to be harmed by those who are supposed to protect us,” she says.

“Nightercrawling” will be released in paperback this spring. Mottley is currently working on her second novel and will be publishing her first collection of poetry, also from Knopf, in the next year.

The debut novel by Oakland author Leila Mottley, 20, has taken the book world by storm.

JANE TYSKA/STAFF



Jane Kuo

“IN THE BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY”

In San Carlos author Jane Kuo’s novel, “In the Beautiful Country” (Quill Tree, \$17), a lyrical, moving debut written in verse about family, struggle and belonging, the narrator is a 10-year-old Taiwanese immigrant named Anna. And she’s experiencing a beautiful country — the Chinese name for America — that is difficult, to say the least, and nothing like she dreamed. “I experienced a lot of the stuff she experienced in school,” says Kuo, who immigrated with her parents to northeastern Los Angeles in 1979. “I was subjected to racist taunts, bullied for wearing highwater pants and teased for my lunch.”

The book, which came out in June, mirrors parts of Kuo’s life. Anna lives in a one-bedroom apartment with her parents and spends her days after school helping out at the flailing fast-food restaurant they poured their savings into. The novel is set in the small town of Duarte in Los Angeles County, where Kuo’s own family settled. Like them, Anna’s family endures overt racism, vandalism and feelings of alienation within their own Asian-American community.

A career nurse, Kuo started writing the middle-grade novel in 2016 at the height of the deep racial tensions that surfaced during the presidential election. “As an Asian-American, I remember asking myself, ‘Do I feel welcome here?’” Kuo says. “From a cultural context, the book is really a family story with a lot of nostalgia.”

A fan of adult memoirs, Kuo didn’t set out to write a middle grade novel in verse. But once she found Anna’s voice — vulnerable, insightful and courageous — the 20,000 words flowed seamlessly from one poetic chapter to the next.

At times heartbreaking and desperate — “I’d like to have friends/ but I’ll settle/ for being left alone” — the book is ultimately about hope and finding advocates, such as Terry, a grocery store clerk who embraces the family. It’s about making a home. “There really was a Terry and (her husband) Don, and they really did take me to Disneyland,” she says. “What motivated these people to be so kind to us?”

Find out this summer, when Kuo’s follow-up, “Land of Broken Promises,” is released. It takes place a year later, when a more confident and stable Anna heads to sixth grade.

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Walks at Belmont’s Hidden Canyon Park keep author Jane Kuo inspired.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF



Joanna Ho

“THE SILENCE THAT BINDS US”

Palo Alto’s Joanna Ho has always been driven by a passion for equity and representation.

The Taiwanese-Chinese American writer spent years in education, first as an English teacher and later as vice principal of East Palo Alto Academy, a high school where 85 percent of the students are Latinx. She’s developed holistic, alternative-to-prison programs that fuse education with residential living. Even her journey as a children’s book author started from a place of inclusivity.

“I was looking for holiday books with diverse characters for my newborn and couldn’t find anything, so I decided to write one,” recalls Ho, the author of three children’s books, including the New York Times best-selling “Eyes That Kiss in the Corners,” a tender story about self-acceptance. “I believe all kids need to see themselves and others in books.”

So it’s no surprise that Ho’s debut young adult novel is a poignant call to action. Released in June, “The Silence That Binds Us” (Harper Teen, \$18) is about a grief-stricken Asian-American teen named May who loses her Princeton-accepted brother to suicide. In the aftermath, she contends with racist accusations hurled against her parents for “putting too much pressure” on him.

“The Silence That Binds Us” was inspired by Ho’s experiences

as an educator and her research into the high rate of suicide amid Palo Alto teens, as well as interactions in the community, once at a dinner party of predominantly white guests and another time in a ride-sharing car. Both times, people said the same thing: that because Asian families put too much pressure on their kids, it makes it too difficult for other students to compete.

“I’m literally so invisible, people don’t see me as they’re saying these things,” she says. “The book is timely in the public perspective, but the racism and invisibility is something Asian Americans have been dealing with for a long time.”

Ho is hopeful that change is possible. She is inspired by the “insightful, hopeful, observant” youth around her, similar to May, who goes against her parents’ advice to “keep her head down” amid the hate and instead publishes her opinions about these stereotypes and ultimately mobilizes support and solidarity against the racist accusations.

“She takes back the narrative, and that’s very powerful,” she says.

Ho, who is now a librarian at East Palo Alto Academy, has nine books coming out in the next three years, including her first middle-grade novel and “One Day,” a picture book about a mother’s hope of positive masculinity for her baby boy. “One Day” is due out in March.

Author Joanna Ho is a New York Times best-selling author of three books for kids.

SHAE HAMMOND/STAFF



Lio Min

“BEATING HEART BABY”

In the young adult novel, “Beating Heart Baby” (Flatiron Books, \$18), Oakland music journalist and author Lio Min cleverly weaves the worlds of anime and music into a coming-of-age story about queer teen love.

The novel, Min’s first, centers around two Los Angeles boys who find a sense of belonging in their high school marching band. There’s Santi, the artist and new kid who is navigating a world without his internet best friend. And Suwa, the prickly prodigy who is trans and working through a tumultuous relationship with his dad.

Both Asian boys are trying to find themselves when they find each other, and it is a shared history they didn’t know they had that provides the biggest, sweetest reward for readers of this lush, page-turning debut. Along the way, the novel explores issues of grief, abandonment and emotional abuse with hope and tenderness.

Its early seeds go back to a summer Min spent working as a camp counselor in Oakland and the illuminating interactions they had with kids as young as 5. Min, who identifies as trans and uses the pronouns they/them, says they wrote the book for

all youth, not just those living in marginalized identities.

“I want all kids to live in a world that is a little more tender and accepting than the one we live in right now,” they say. “You can only push yourself to the future if you can imagine there is a place for you in there.”

In the novel, which is set up as an album, with track numbers as chapters with an A-side and a B-side, Santi and Suwa find their places among the Sunshower marching band community, which, like the entire book, is filled with a diverse cast. There are trans, biracial and pansexual characters as well as Black female role models, like Santi’s loving guardian, Aya.

Min developed the characters and overall book as a novelization of shōnen anime — their second love, after music — but with an element of inclusivity that they felt has long been missing from the genre, which is marketed to adolescent males.

“Even fans of the shows will agree that girls are often ancillary to the story, their interiority is narrow and they’re not treated as well as the boys,” Min says. “I wanted to build an anime from the ground up and do it in a way that was correct to someone like me.” ■

“Beating Heart Baby” book author Lio Min, of Alameda, finds inspiration for writing near waterscapes such as at Robert Crown Memorial Beach in Alameda.

RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF



KALEIL ROBERTS

‘Lost’ brings more ‘Less’ from Pulitzer-winner Greer

BY JIM HARRINGTON

One of the best things about writing “Less,” says San Francisco author Andrew Sean Greer, was that he felt completely ready to move on afterward.

“It’s hard to make a book and let it go, because you feel like it’s unfinished. Not this one,” he says, describing his 2017 novel. “It was a book that I loved writing that then the reviewers loved. And I was like, ‘Done.’ I was moving on to the next book.”

But a funny thing happened on his way to his next project.

“Nine months later, I win a Pulitzer Prize for ‘Less,’” Greer says. “I had not thought about the book. It was long gone.”

The prize was, of course, a game changer for Greer, whose previous novels include “The Confessions of Max Tivoli,” “The Story

of a Marriage” and “The Impossible Lives of Greta Wells.”

So, what did Greer do for a follow-up? Something he never expected: He gave the reading world more of “Less.”

“I was not going to write a sequel,” Greer says. “That was not in my mind, because ‘Less’ very definitely has an ending. It’s a complete book — I worked hard for that. But I kept sort of fiddling, just for fun, with the things I cut out of ‘Less’ or other fun ideas.”

The result is the just-published “Less Is Lost,” which finds the author expanding upon the storyline of protagonist Arthur Less.

“My agent told me not to write a sequel to a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel,” Greer says. “But if there is anything you get to do after you win a prize like that, it’s sort of write whatever you want and try to pretend no one is paying attention.”

Greer can pretend all he wants, but the fact is that “Less Is Lost” has created sizable buzz in the book world and earned some very favorable reviews.

“It’s a huge relief,” Greer says. “You should have seen me the week before this published. I was just a nervous wreck, because I thought, ‘No one needs a sequel.’”

Then again, not every character is as fun to read about as Less, a San Francisco-based writer that many readers assume is based upon Greer himself. Indeed, they share many traits, but there are some differences.

“I have a little better sense of humor than (Less) does,” Greer says.

The author certainly has “wait



a sec, which one is which?” experience. He grew up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., with an identical twin brother.

“Our loved ones say that we sound the same — the way we talk,” he says of being a twin. “Our ideas are very similar. We are both very geeky. He’s married to a woman, and I have a boyfriend — and that is the main difference.”

After earning a bachelor’s degree from Brown University, followed by an MFA from the University of Montana, Greer moved to Seattle, where he scored a cool gig writing about video games for Nintendo.

“That was a dream job,” he says.

In the mid-’90s, Greer relocated to San Francisco, where he wrote for Esquire, The New Yorker and other publications — and eventually released his debut novel, “The Path of Minor Planets,” in 2001.

Oddly enough, the novel that ended up winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction was not the one Greer initially set out to write.

More novels followed, but it was “Less” that made him famous. Oddly enough, the novel that ended up winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction was not the one Greer initially set out to write.

“It was (originally) a serious novel about a middle-aged gay man in San Francisco,” he remembers. “It was so mopey and pitiful, I could not stand to be near it. I just threw it all away — almost all of it — and started over.”

“I was swimming in the bay one day, and I just thought, ‘What am I going to do?’ And I thought, ‘I could try making fun of him. I mean, it’s a disaster anyway — why not try that?’ It was such great fun.”

Greer wrote much of the sequel, “Less Is Lost,” in Milan, where he has a second home with his Italian boyfriend. He moved there about three years ago — and yes, the pandemic lockdown made Italian life significantly less glamorous or sweepingly cinematic as one might have hoped.

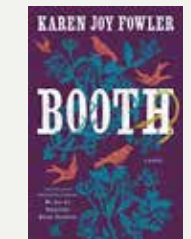
“It was good for getting my writing done,” he says, “because I didn’t go to the cinema or opera. We did get a lot of gelato and pizza.”

Now that “Less Is Lost” is earning raves, might Arthur Less turn out to be Greer’s version of James Bond?

“That would be great fun,” he says. “I am actually not writing another one at the moment, to my agent’s great relief. But I bet I’ll write another one in the future.”

The books: Frantic to avoid both his upcoming 50th birthday and his ex’s impending nuptials, Arthur Less rushed off — often disastrously — to literary gigs halfway round the world in the original novel. The delightful sequel, “Less Is Lost” (Little, Brown and Company, \$29), finds our hapless protagonist more settled but still grappling with various woes by — yes, of course, he’s hitting the road again, this time bouncing across the U.S. in a rusty camper dubbed Rosina. ■

What’s on Andrew Sean Greer’s bookshelves



“Booth,” Karen Joy Fowler: “She’s a fantastic Santa Cruz writer, known for ‘The Jane Austen Book Club.’ Every book of hers is different and brilliant. This one is about John Wilkes Booth and the Booth family.”



“The Luminous Novel,” Mario Llevero: “It’s one of these gigantic 800-page books that’s just like someone going

on and on in a hilarious way. It’s basically, he gets a Guggenheim grant, and he just obsesses over what he is going to do with it — for 800 pages. That’s either your thing, or it isn’t. I was totally charmed by it.”



“Acting Class,” Nick Drnaso: “It’s a sort of dark and fascinating graphic novel about this group of people who take this mysterious acting class and the way they transform in their imaginations. I found it really riveting.”

Elsie Robinson

a legend restored

Trailblazing Bay Area writer re-emerges in 'Listen, World!' bio

BY MARTHA ROSS

A memorable passage in “Listen, World!” a rousing new biography of pioneering Bay Area journalist Elsie Robinson, details the torturous daily ritual of getting dressed as a teen in turn-of-the-19th century Benicia: encasing herself in undershirts, stockings, underdrawers, petticoat and a corset so she could present herself as a proper Victorian maiden.

Robinson later described that whale-boned corset with a mix of humor and horror: “Armored like a war tank, reaching from armpit nearly to knee, to be laced until your tonsils cracked. I had a 19-inch waist. Where did I put my insides?”

Robinson shed those restrictive garments after she escaped an oppressive marriage to a rich but puritanical Vermont widower. Returning to California in 1912 and forced by

Elsinore Robinson Crowell, seen here circa 1919, was the creator of the wildly popular Aunt Elsie's Magazine, a children's publication that ran in the Oakland Tribune on Sundays.

OAKLAND TRIBUNE ARCHIVES



circumstances to support herself and her young son by mucking in a gold mine, she donned a loose skirt fashioned from tent canvas, a man's flannel shirt, boots and sombrero.

After World War I, the newly divorced mom hunted for writing jobs at San Francisco newspapers, joining the throngs of other women on Market Street, who now moved freely in loose-fitting frocks and bobbed hair, “so swift, so sleek, so competent,” as she wrote in her 1934 memoir, “I Wanted Out!”

For biographers Julia Scheeres and Allison Gilbert, Robinson's evolving fashion sense becomes a metaphor for her lifelong resistance to the restrictions placed on women in the first half of the 20th century. Breaking out against these restraints, the future 20th century icon forged a highly successful career as a fiction writer, children's author, illustrator, poet, reporter and nationally syndicated columnist for William Randolph Hearst.

Beloved by generations of children for her “Aunt Elsie” children's pages, which she began at the Oakland Tribune, Robinson became the highest-paid female writer in Hearst's newspaper empire and America's “most-read woman,” as the subtitle for “Listen, World!” attests. The book's title comes from Robinson's most influential column. Every day, 20 million Americans opened the paper to read what she had to say about current events and culture in her “Listen, World” column.

What's startling is that Robinson's groundbreaking legacy has largely been forgotten.

During an authors' talk at the Oakland Public Library this fall, moderator Liam O'Donoghue, who hosts the East Bay Yesterday history podcast, said he's familiar with most of the major figures in Oakland history but had never heard of Robinson. Scheeres and Gilbert say she fell prey to the forces that often relegate women's lives to the bin of “lost history.”

Quoting at length from Robinson's memoir and other writing



Above: The biography 'Listen, World!' profiles pioneering columnist, author and cartoonist Elsie Robinson.

Right: The pirate and witch-centric July 20, 1924, edition of the popular Aunt Elsie's Magazine featured Elsie Robinson's signature illustrations, comics and kid-centric news.

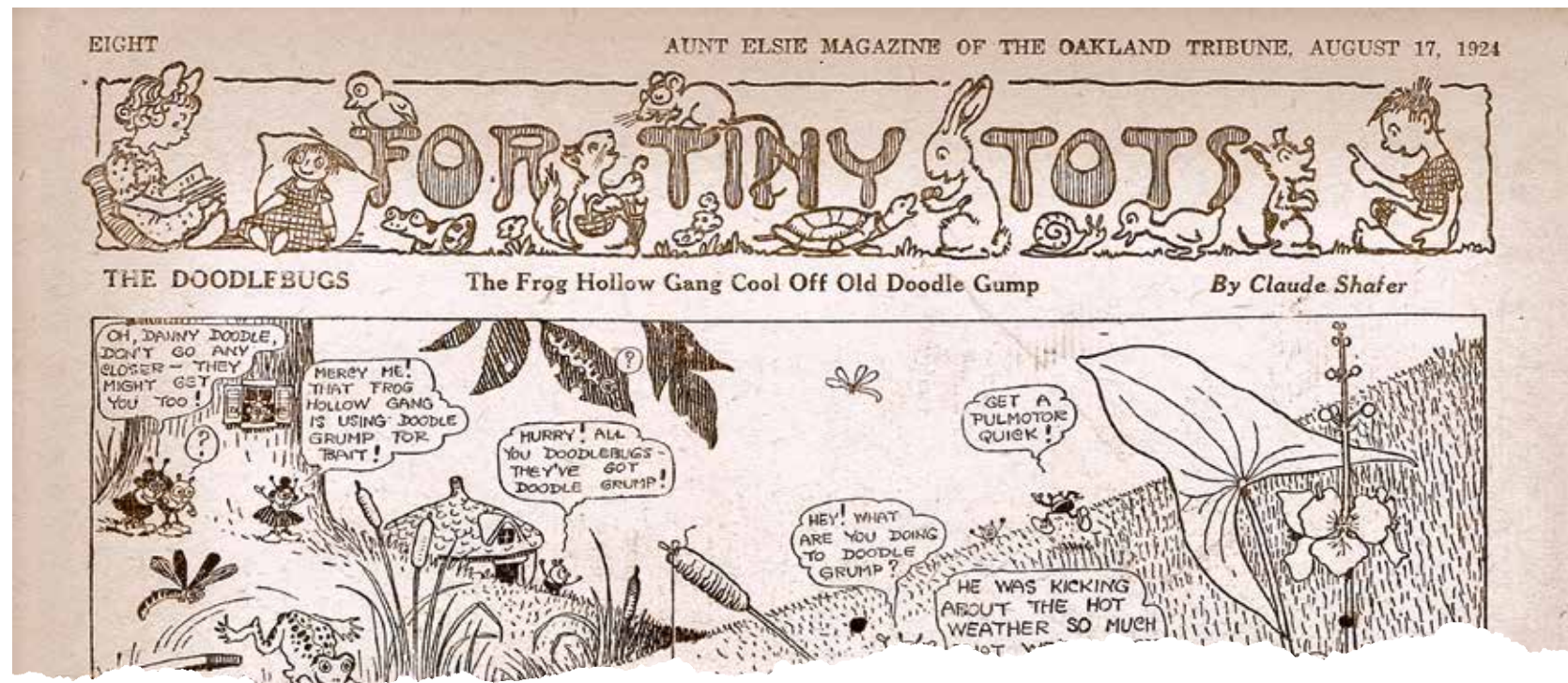
in their book, they show that the syndicated columnist wasn't just a beautiful, thoughtful writer about her own life. She also was ahead of the curve in addressing issues that still occupy us today: racism, antisemitism, the death penalty, labor rights and economic inequality.

More than anything, Robinson challenged her era's views on women. Decades before Betty Friedan and other second-wave feminists explored the drudgeries of domestic life and wrote frankly about sexuality, Robinson described her sexual curiosity as a teen girl — once peering into a shack along Benicia's wharf to see a prostitute servicing a client. She recounted her confusion about her wedding night and the terror of childbirth, when Victorian ladies were given next to no information about the mechanics of reproduction. Throughout her life, she encouraged women to seek personal fulfillment outside the



Below: The July 20, 1924, edition of the popular Aunt Elsie's Magazine featured Elsie Robinson's signature illustrations, comics and kid-centric news.

Below: A cartoon illustration from the magazine showing a woman and a man, with text: 'YOU REMIND ME OF A CAMEL? "WHY?" "BECAUSE YOUR FACE AND HANDS CAN GO SO LONG WITH OUT WATER!"' BY ROBERT STEEDMAN FIRST PRIZE '10'



traditional confines of marriage and motherhood.

She had the attention of 20 million Americans a day, yet no one ever collected her works into an official archive. Scheeres and Gilbert painstakingly built a paper trail by hunting through microfiche copies in libraries and the archives of prominent men she worked for, including Hearst.

That search began more than 10 years ago after Gilbert's mother died. When Gilbert was going through her mother's books, a typewritten copy of a breathtakingly honest poem about grief and loss fell out. It was attributed to a writer named Elsie Robinson.

This "For Tiny Tots" page from "Aunt Elsie's Magazine" in the Oakland Tribune on August 17, 1924, section features a cartoon by Claude Shafer and poetry and short stories submitted by members of the Aunt Elsie Club.

Curious, the New York-based Gilbert began looking for more information.

What Gilbert and Bay Area writer Scheeres discovered as they teamed up on the project was the story of a woman who seized on the promise of the California dream. Robinson's parents were settlers, and her independent spirit was nurtured by the bohemian, frontier-town culture of Benicia and a working class family who valued education, including for their daughters.

Unfortunately, financial hard times made it impossible for her parents to send Robinson to UC Berkeley. At 17, she saw no future

for herself unless she married. That's when she crossed paths with Christie Cowell, a 27-year-old widower visiting from Vermont. Like Jane Eyre, Robinson fell for this sad, handsome man, writing, "Sickly and a widower: Was there ever a girl who didn't adore tragedy?"

But in Vermont, neither Crowell nor his parents warmed to Robinson's "uncouth" California ways, and they made her life as a young wife miserable. As much as Robinson later downplayed "the maternal instinct," she found a purpose when she gave birth in 1907. She adored her blond-haired boy, George. It was for him that she first took up a pen to write and illustrate stories, though she also wanted, she said, "to understand people, to grasp life, to make some ordered pattern out of all this seeming waste and confusion."

George gave Robinson another reason to leave her marriage: He was diagnosed with severe, debilitating asthma, and she wanted to raise him in California's warmer climate. But she fled at a time when only one percent of marriages ended in divorce, thereby

More than anything, Robinson challenged her era's views on women. Throughout her life, she encouraged women to seek personal fulfillment outside the traditional confines of marriage and motherhood.



Youngsters in fancy dress performed in a show given by the Oakland Tribune's Aunt Elsie Club at the American Theater in Oakland on August 20, 1921. They are from left to right, front row: Betty Jane Tepple, Dudley Manlove, Bob Phieffer, Bernice De Pasquale. Second row: Gladys Silva, Dorothy Burke, Adele Leahey, Mildred Mitzman. Third row: Carol Hammerton, Alberta Blair, Bernice Claire Jahngren, Evelyn Cavanaugh, Josephie De Pasquale. Many clubs were formed around the popular children's section of the newspaper.



Diana Sychr, above, an Aunt Elsie fan club member as a child, attended a discussion by authors Allison Gilbert and Julia Scheeres, at right, about their biography of Elsie Robinson at the Oakland Library on Oct. 2.

ARIC CRABB/STAFF

“taking ownership of her life in a way that few women of the era dared to contemplate,” Scheeres and Gilbert wrote.

Robinson and George were accompanied to the West by Robert Wallace, a darkly handsome writer and former mental patient, for whom she illustrated some children’s books. They likely were lovers, according to Scheeres and Gilbert, although Robinson never copped to it, probably because she feared losing her son if her husband proved adultery.

The three ended up in Hornitos, a once-thriving mining town in the dry, rolling foothills west of Yosemite National Park. Wallace hoped to strike gold and become rich. That never happened, and at some point, he evaporated from Robinson’s life. Left alone to support George, she went to work in a mine, taking up dangerous and backbreaking work that was usually reserved for men.

But the labor and the company of cowboys, gamblers, miners, hobos and others “who traveled fast and light,” was liberating for the writer. At the end of each day, after putting George to bed, she wrote stories by candlelight, using an old typewriter borrowed from a friend, the town’s Black postmistress. Robinson’s stories, which she sold to national magazines, featured free-spirited



BOOK TALK

Julia Scheeres, the co-author of “Listen, World!” (Seal Press, \$30), will read from the book and talk about Elsie Robinson’s life and legacy with Bay Area News Group writer Martha Ross at 4 p.m. Jan. 21 at Book Passage in Corte Madera; www.bookpassage.com/corte-madera-events.

protagonists, like the socialite who debated whether to tell her new rancher husband she wasn’t a virgin.

When the Hornitos mine closed at the end of World War I, freelancing couldn’t offer Robinson a steady income. Facing starvation, she returned to the Bay Area in the fall of 1918 to find work. After San Francisco’s three main newspapers turned her down, she took the ferry across to Oakland, where she walked into the newsroom of the Oakland Tribune to pitch her services. The editor saw something he liked and offered her \$12 a week to write a children’s column.

“I had my first newspaper job!” she proclaimed. “I would not have to go on the streets. And my boy and I could eat!”

Robinson’s column became popular so swiftly, the Tribune soon expanded it into an eight-page section called Aunt Elsie’s Magazine. The magazine soon spawned “Aunt Elsie” clubs in 65 California towns whose members held parades and competed to publish their stories and illustrations in the paper.

Aunt Elsie is the only part of Robinson’s legacy that endured past her 1956 death, when her column was continued by another writer. And Aunt Elsie is still remembered fondly in some quarters today. At the Oakland library event, 76-year-old Diana Sychr stood up to say she grew up reading Aunt Elsie’s columns in the 1950s and delighted in once getting a letter back from the author.

But from that start with the Oakland Tribune, Robinson branched out into homemaking and relationship columns, and became a national figure when she launched “Listen, World!”

in 1921. Soon, an editor at San Francisco’s Call and Post, a Hearst paper, lured her away, paying her \$95 a week. A year later, Arthur Brisbane, the legendary editor of Hearst’s New York Evening Journal, vastly upped her salary to write for him — her \$20,000 a year salary would be equivalent to \$350,000 a year in today’s dollars.

But just as Robinson reached the pinnacle of success, George, then a 21-year-old student at Sacramento Junior College, died during an influenza epidemic. Elsie wrote about the “heart-breaking sorrow — fresh-rendering pain” in losing her only child and “loneliness beyond all measure of imagining.”

Yet, she kept writing. Through the Depression, Hearst sent her to cover major national news stories, including the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, and she scripted a popular NBC radio show that depicted fictional couples looking to save their marriages. After securing permission from her editor to work remotely, she wrote from a cabin she bought outside Sonoma. She also penned her memoir, which was critically acclaimed by major U.S. newspapers for its frankness and courage and serialized by Cosmopolitan magazine.

“She turned to narrative storytelling as a grief-stricken 46-year-old columnist for the same reason she turned to it as a lonely, 26-year-old wife: ‘To save my life,’” Scheeres and Gilbert wrote.

Robinson concluded her memoir by writing: “Was there ever an adventurer really born ‘brave?’ Was there ever an adventure that was not bought at the price of fear and agony? Are not the bravest also the terrified? I know it was so with me.” ■

Marion Davies in her own right captured in ‘Captain of Her Soul’ bio

BY MARTHA ROSS

Like other legendary women in history — from Anne Boleyn to Madame du Barry — silent film star Marion Davies enjoyed the perks that came with being the girlfriend of a powerful man.

As the longtime partner of newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst, Davies played hostess and mingled with some of the most fascinating people of the 20th century at his California coastal castle in San Simeon and his other lavish estates. The one-time Ziegfeld Follies chorine could also count on her boyfriend to generously fund her film projects and rely on his newspapers, including the San Francisco Examiner, to offer favorable publicity.

But there were downsides to her association with the larger-than-life titan of industry, who was 34 years her senior. Unlike Boleyn and du Barry, she didn't literally lose her head, but it always hurt that Hearst couldn't marry her, and she lived with the public perception that she lacked talent to be a film star on her own.

A new biography, “Captain of Her Soul” (University of California Press, \$35), by Oakland author Lara Gabrielle aims to correct some of those misapprehensions about one of the pioneering artists of America's

Lara Gabrielle, of Oakland, is the author of a biography of Marion Davies. JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/STAFF



burgeoning film industry.

Davies was a gifted, charismatic comedienne who set the template for the later screwball genius of Carole Lombard, Lucille Ball and Carole Burnett. Davies also was a savvy businesswoman who negotiated her own film contracts, invested smartly in California real estate and donated a substantial portion of her wealth to philanthropy. She maintained a loving relationship with Hearst throughout their 32 years together and was known for her generosity to family and close friends.

Above all, Davies saw herself as an independent spirit who made her own choices, including the decision to not push Hearst to divorce his socialite wife Millie. The book's title, Gabrielle said, comes from the last lines of “Invictus,” the poem by William Ernest Henley, because that's how Davies saw herself.

“I'm the captain of my soul. And therefore what I want to do I want to do myself, regardless of what other people think I should do,” Gabrielle said, quoting Davies.

One challenge in telling Davies' story is that her acting work isn't as well known as other stars of old Hollywood, such as Greta

Garbo or Norma Shearer, who more successfully transitioned to sound films in the late 1920s. For Davies, always self-conscious about a mild stutter, her biggest success came in silent movies, which aren't as widely available as later film classics.

Another challenge is the specter of Orson Welles' “Citizen Kane,” the acclaimed film widely understood to be based on Hearst. Through the character of Susan Alexander, Charles Foster Kane's singer-girlfriend, Welles' 1941 masterpiece fed the idea that Davies only got film roles because she had a powerful boyfriend.

Some aspects of Kane and Alexander's cinematic relationship draw on elements of the Hearst-Davies romance. But Welles later expressed regret for the damage “Citizen Kane” did to Davies' reputation. He wrote in 1975 that, unlike Susan Alexander, Davies was “no dim shopgirl.” She was the “precious treasure of (Hearst's) heart for more than 30 years. Theirs is truly a love story.”

One way Hearst expressed his love was his determination to make Davies “the brightest star in the business,” according to Gabrielle. Hearst was already involved

in the nascent moving-picture business, when he fell in love with Davies in 1917 while watching her first film, “Runaway Romany.”

As Hearst got to know Davies personally, he was captivated by her “earthy humor” and “infectious joy,” Gabrielle said, a contrast to the high-society pretensions of his wife. But he believed her career would best be served if she appeared as the “angelic, ethereal” ingenue in the lavishly costumed historical dramas that he financed.

Davies had other ideas, as did close colleagues, who knew of her gift for physical comedy and mimicry. “She could be laugh-out-loud funny,” Gabrielle said. Despite Hearst's interference, Davies still managed to appear in films like “The Patsy” and “Show People,” both in 1928, that modernized her image and gave her personality a chance to shine.

But the 1930s brought challenges to the couple. With the advent of sound, Davies had to work hard to control her stutter on screen, Gabrielle said. Davies also was reaching her mid-30s, the age at which Hollywood starts to lose interest in its female stars. Meanwhile, Hearst suffered catastrophic financial setbacks during the Depression, contributing to Davies' decision to retire in 1937.

“If we were to ask Marion if Hearst was a help or hindrance to her career, I think she would say that the positives of Hearst outweighed the detriments,” Gabrielle said.

Hearst died in 1951 at age 88, but he kissed Davies good-bye before he slipped into a coma at their Beverly Hills estate. Davies was barred from his ornate funeral at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral Church in deference to his wife. Ten years later, Davies succumbed to cancer at age 64. ■

Marion Davies played hostess and mingled with some of the most fascinating people of the 20th century. But above all, she saw herself as an independent spirit who made her own choices.



Marks of genius

Architect Julia Morgan left her indelible impression on the California landscape

BY JOHN METCALFE

The 150th birthday of Julia Morgan, California's famous first licensed female architect and William Randolph Hearst's estate designer, seems the perfect excuse to get out and explore her signature works. But with more than 700 sites in her oeuvre — from Oakland's Mills College to the Saratoga Foothill Club and, of course, Hearst Castle — where to even begin?

As it turns out, you'll find plenty of advice in a trio of books published just in the last year. "Julia Morgan: The Road to San Simeon" (Rizzoli Electa, \$75) is a multidisciplinary exploration of her early Beaux-Arts designs by Gordon Fuglie and four other contributors, adorned with lavish photographs and architectural illustrations. Berkeley author Susan J. Austin's "Drawing Outside the Lines" (SparkPress, \$12.95) offers a historical fiction take on Morgan's Bay Area childhood aimed at kids ages 10 and up. And former Hearst Castle historian Victoria Kastner explores the architect's generosity as well as her health and family hardships in "Julia Morgan: An Intimate Biography of the Trailblazing Architect" (Chronicle Books, \$32.50).

Consider this a book-centric, architectural adventure into the past, one that starts at Preservation Park

The Roman pool at Hearst Castle brings the wow factor at the legendary home built by publishing tycoon William Randolph Hearst in San Simeon. DAN STEINBERG/ASSOCIATED PRESS



in downtown Oakland. Morgan grew up just blocks away, when it was a well-to-do Victorian neighborhood. Today, this small business and events district offers preserved turn-of-the-20th-century homes with impeccable lawns and historically representative benches and street lamps.

“You get a feel for what Oakland was like before the freeway came in and everything was torn down,” says Austin. “There were dirt roads with horses and buggies, picket fences and iron fences. San Franciscans would get on the ferry and come to Oakland to see the gardens and have a feel of the beautiful neighborhoods, which wasn’t the case for San Francisco at that time.”

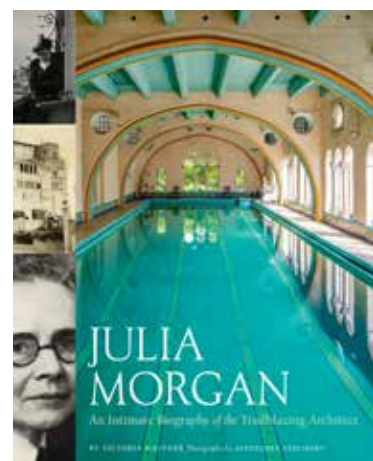
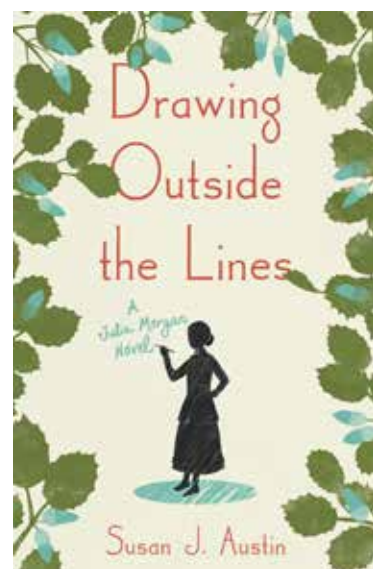
One of Morgan’s childhood friends recalls using the tops of those picket fences to walk from house to house. But while young Julia was reportedly scrappy and unafraid of heights, her body wasn’t always cooperative. She stumbled and even fell down stairs in her family house, leading her mother to grumble the “way she (uses) her legs is simply bewildering.”

She later lost her sense of equilibrium from inner-ear problems and a botched surgery, which would have been a setback for most architects, for whom clambering up partially built projects was part of the job. But she compensated by sticking a finger into the pocket of coworkers and having them lead her up scaffolding. On one occasion, while working on a job, she suddenly tumbled three stories down into a river.

“Witnesses had no idea how she survived, but she did and immediately wanted to get back on the scaffolding,” says Oakland-based historian Karen McNeill, who contributed a chapter to “The Road to San Simeon.” It only increased her reputation. “Guys who worked on Morgan’s buildings — and I say ‘guys’ because this was a hypermasculine world of all the building trades — commented on Morgan’s fearlessness, which was one way she

Julia Morgan designed more than 700 buildings during her career, including the spectacular Chapel of the Chimes in Oakland.

D. ROSS CAMERON



instilled respect for her authority.”

After getting her architecture degree in 1902 from the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts in Paris — where in fraternal tradition, she was pushed off benches and had water poured over her head — Morgan established an office in San Francisco. Impressive works soon sprouted around her, including the Morgan-designed reconstruction of the Fairmont Hotel after the 1906 earthquake and fire. (Stop by to admire her handiwork and stay for some tea.) She also designed the YWCA in Chinatown, a fantastically detailed building with red-and-green tiles, a stairway that curves like a dragon’s tail and a meditative fish pond.

Morgan took on many such jobs that carved out physical space for women. “The YWCA was an extremely important social movement, because in the first part of the century, young women were leaving their family farms, they were coming to cities and didn’t have anywhere safe they could live,” says Kastner. “The boarding houses were full of traveling salesmen. So each city that had a YWCA would be for these young women, who were becoming teachers or nurses or stenographers or whatever.”

Morgan unified more than a dozen women’s clubs in Berkeley by designing a grand edifice for gathering and recreation, now the Berkeley City Club. It’s an atmospheric lair that blends Gothic, Romanesque and Moorish influ-

Top: After the devastating 1906 earthquake and fire, architect Julia Morgan worked on the renovation of San Francisco’s iconic Fairmont Hotel atop Nob Hill.

RALPH ESPOSITO

Far left: Julia Morgan’s Berkeley City Club, which is also known as the “Little Castle,” was built in 1927.

LAURA A. ODA/ STAFF ARCHIVES

Left: The Campanile at Mills College was also designed by the legendary architect.

RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF

ences, with leaded windows and interior courtyards galore. The swimming pool is so stunning, it has a public viewing balcony. There's also a Morgan-themed bar and a history room with club newsletters dating back a century and explaining, for example, that due to World War II food shortages, menu-planning is canceled but something will be served for \$2 a plate.

"I always think of the Berkeley City Club as combining the cathedral, the castle and the skyscraper, because you have the central shaft which is six stories high and stands up very tall," says McNeill. "So you have women appropriating these symbols that are bastions of masculine power, historically, and turning them into their own."

Morgan designed the Asilomar Hotel and Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove for the YWCA, where after a hard year in the rat race, women would gather for a seaside retreat. "It was a tremendously important place for them, emotionally and restoratively," Kastner says. "It's also one of the largest compounds of Arts and Crafts, shingle-style buildings in the country."

A couple hours down the coast lies Morgan's eternal claim to fame, Hearst Castle. The newspaper tycoon asked her to design his country home, saying it would take six months. Morgan spent the next 28 years trying to maintain coherence, while her "fellow architect" (as Hearst took to calling himself) expanded his vision and shipped in warehouse loads of arts, antiques and European ceilings. By 1947, the residence had 165 rooms and 123 acres of gardens, pools and grassland, some of it still grazed by descendants of zebras from the old private zoo.

"He was competing with other



MAP BY DAVE JOHNSON

IF YOU GO

Preservation Park: This two-block expanse is bordered by 12th, 14th and Castro Streets and Martin Luther King, Jr. Way. Learn more at www.preservationpark.com.

Fairmont San Francisco: Explore this Nob Hill hotel at 950 Mason St.; www.fairmont.com/san-francisco/.

Chinatown YWCA: Find this Julia Morgan-designed building, which houses the Chinatown Historical Society of America, at 855 Sacramento St. in San Francisco; www.sanfranciscochinatown.com.

Berkeley City Club: This Morgan-designed "little castle" at 2315 Durant Ave. in Berkeley houses a historic hotel, swimming pool and two restaurants, Julia's Restaurant and Morgan's Bar and Lounge, both open Tuesday-Saturday; www.berkeleycityclub.com.

Asilomar Hotel and Conference Grounds: Stay at the historic lodge or take a self-guided tour of this Morgan-created property at 800 Asilomar Ave, Pacific Grove; www.visitasilomar.com.

Hearst Castle: William Randolph Hearst's palatial estate is now a museum, open daily at 750 Hearst Castle Road in San Simeon. Tickets for tours — options range from grand rooms to upstairs suites, cottages and kitchen tours — start at \$15 for children and \$30 for adults. Tickets for a two-hour Julia Morgan tour are \$100. Find details at <https://hearstcastle.org>.

Chapel of the Chimes: This columbarium is at 4499 Piedmont Ave. in Oakland; <https://oakland.chapelofthechimes.com>. The historic building is occasionally used for music events, including Garden of Memory performances typically held on the summer solstice. Julia Morgan is buried at the neighboring Mountain View Cemetery at 5000 Piedmont Ave; www.mountainviewcemetery.org.



magnates to dazzle," says Fuglie, an independent art historian and editor of "The Road to San Simeon." "It's just a very eclectic gathering of art and culture, like a cultural tidal wave washing over you."

Hearst also wanted Morgan to build him a medieval-style museum in Golden Gate Park to rival the Cloisters in New York. He went as far as purchasing part of a 12th-century monastery in Spain and having the stones shipped to San Francisco. The project foundered, but Morgan was able to experiment with monastic architecture nevertheless by redesign-

Morgan took on many jobs that carved out physical space for women.

ing the Chapel of the Chimes, a crematory and mausoleum in Oakland.

What few people realize is that while Morgan was building California for the 20th century, she was also dealing with immense family tragedy. Her brothers perished in quite terrible ways. One had neurosyphilis, another was mangled in a streetcar collision, and a third developed early-onset dementia and went missing from a care center. His body was found nine months later south of Oakland — he'd died from starvation and exposure.

Morgan is buried with her family at Oakland's Mountain View Cemetery. It's one of the most visited grave sites there, with excellent sightlines to the Chapel of the Chimes.

That structure is Julia Morgan "in a nutshell," says Kastner.

"On the surface, the idea of a columbarium for crematory urns doesn't sound like such a jolly spot. But if you've been, you know it is the most magnificent, reverent, lyrical structure," she says. "It is technologically modern but carved in an architectural language that references the past. And it shows how beauty can console us, comfort us." ■

One of the show-stopping elements at Hearst Castle is the main residence or La Casa Grande.

DAN STEINBERG/
ASSOCIATED PRESS

5 GREAT WINTER READS

Mrs. Dalloway's

STORY BY BRITTANY DELAY

ILLUSTRATION BY JANE MOUNT

Mrs. Dalloway's Literary & Garden Arts: This Elmwood shop's irresistible name was inspired by Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel, which opens with the charming line, "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself."

No wonder, then, that this cozy Berkeley neighborhood bookstore lined with well-curated shelves offering fiction, poetry and children's books includes an expansive Garden Arts section of books that combine literature with lifestyle. And owner Eric Green has ideas about what you should be reading on these cozy winter evenings.

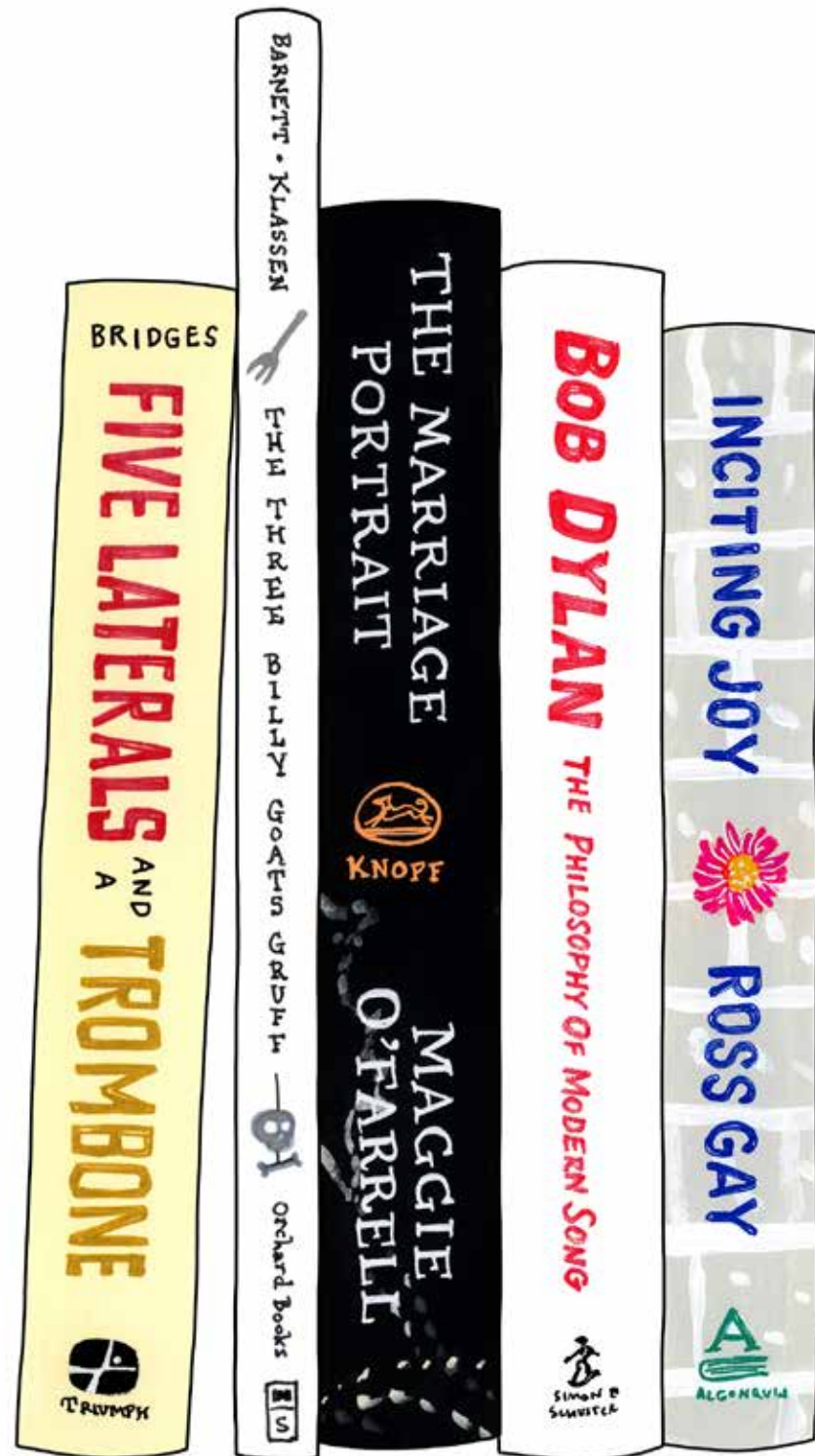
"The Marriage Portrait" by Maggie O'Farrell: "Set against the backdrop of Florence during the mid-16th century, this novel brings the world of Renaissance Italy and the House of Medici to life with a brilliant reimagining of the short and unhappy life of Lucrezia de Medici," Eric says. "It's a tragic story, but one beautifully rendered in a time and place known for its sumptuous art and power-hungry deceit."

"The Philosophy of Modern Song" by Bob Dylan: "A master class on the art and craft of songwriting, this work by iconic musician Bob Dylan presents over 60 personal essays on a range of musical artists, from Stephen Foster and Elvis Costello to Hank Williams and Nina Simone. Dylan analyzes what he calls 'the trap of easy rhymes,' breaks down how

the addition of a single syllable can diminish a song and even explains how bluegrass relates to heavy metal."

"Five Laterals and a Trombone" by Tyler Bridges: "The 85th Big Game between Cal and Stanford is still famous for the wackiest finish ever to a college football game, with 21 seconds that featured five laterals on the final kickoff and a sprint through the Stanford marching band for the winning touchdown. Journalist Tyler Bridges has reconstructed the pivotal moments and resulting lore of the game, offering a nostalgic play-by-play trip down memory lane, especially for Cal faithfuls."

"The Three Billy Goats Gruff" by Mac Barnett, illustrated by Jon Klassen: "A fabulous-



ly creative spin on the all-time children's cult-classic, this is Billy Goats Gruff like he's never been seen before. This risky read will have readers burning through pages with eager anticipation and anxious giddiness as they await the high-stakes meeting of beloved goat and hungry bridge troll. With arresting writing and mesmerizing illustrations, the book more than lives up to its legacy."

"Inciting Joy" by Ross Gay: "In a collection of personal essays, author Ross Gay prompts readers to find joy in their daily experiences, the small moments in life and notably, the times when we care for others. Gay's thoughtful, explorative reflections of his own experiences are the framework for his ideas on compassion, sharing and community. Written in a meandering, easily palatable conversational style, it's a gorgeous and provocative must-read."

BOOKSTORE EVENTS

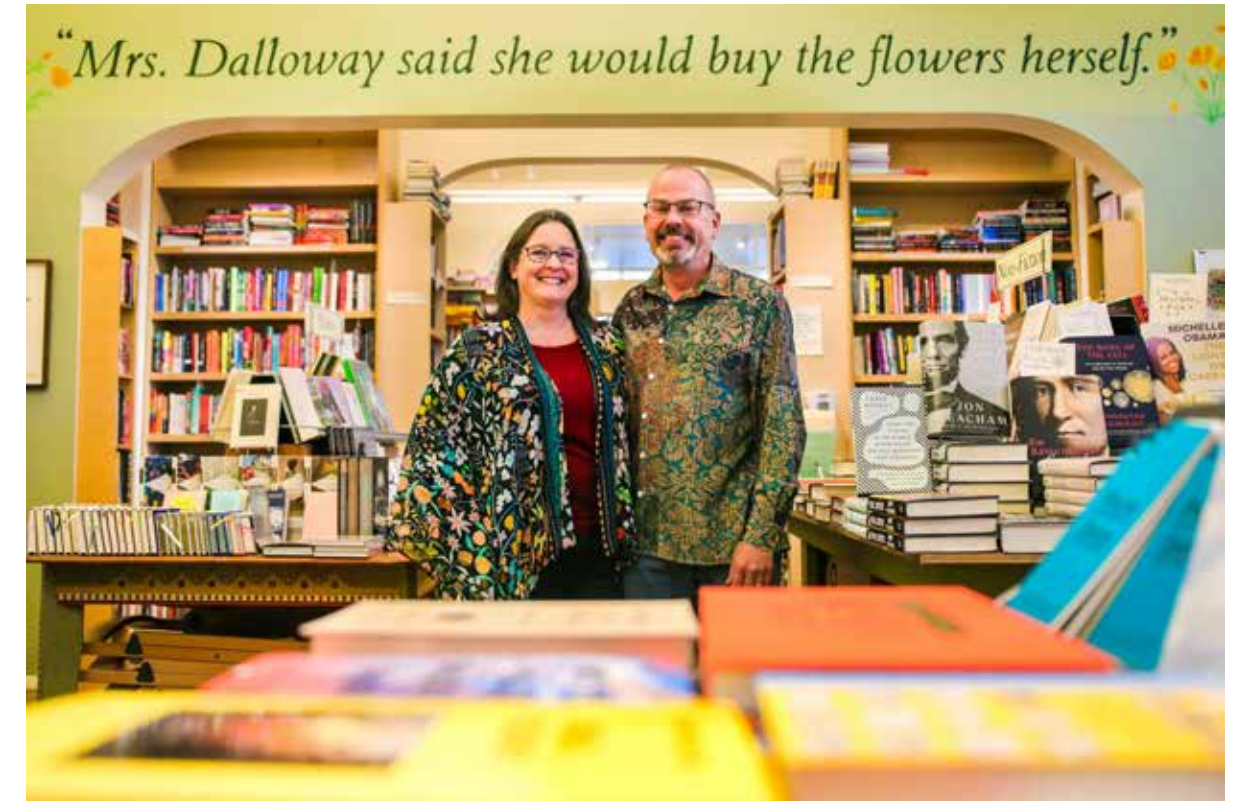
Want to take your book browsing out on the town? Mrs. Dalloway's is known for its author events, as well as its brimming bookshelves. Catch these authors in early 2023 for readings, book talks and signings:

7 p.m. Jan. 24: Peggy Orenstein, "Unraveling: What I Learned About Life While Shearing Sheep, Dyeing Wool, and Making the World's Ugliest Sweater"

6 p.m. Feb. 9: Grace Lin and Kate Messner, "Once Upon a Book"

3 p.m. Feb. 26: Monica Welosowska, "Elbert In the Air."

Details: Open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday-Saturday and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays at 2904 College Ave. in Berkeley; mrsdalloways.com. ■



Top left: Jessica Green and her husband, Eric Green, own Mrs. Dalloway's bookstore in Berkeley.



Bottom left: Customer Dan Calef, of Oakland, browses books.

RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF



Everybody's going clubbing

— and they're bringing books to talk about

BY MARISA KENDALL

ILLUSTRATION BY ALBERT ESPI

Forget the posh country club, the trendy night club or even the bargain-friendly Sam's Club. In this crazy, COVID-altered world, it's all about a different kind of club: the book club.

The age-old practice of gathering together to discuss literature, often over a beverage and some tasty snacks, is taking off as people recovering from the isolation of pandemic quarantines seek out human connection. But these aren't your grandma's book clubs. Bay Area readers are meeting at local breweries, discussing books in their living rooms via Zoom and debating plots and character development on Instagram, TikTok and book club apps. There are silent book clubs, where people meet up to read quietly together, and musical ones, where musicians perform pieces inspired by the same book. And there are clubs dedicated to nearly every niche interest you can imagine, from bicycling to Taylor Swift.

"A few years ago, if you talked about book clubs, you'd think about elderly women getting together and drinking tea," said Oakland librarian Erin Sanders, who co-hosts the library's "We Bike" book club, where readers meet online to discuss cycling memoirs and books about urban planning. "But it definitely has more cachet with younger readers, I think."



Karen Adamski, Lisa Beyersdoerfer and Vikki Bowes-Mok chat about books during the "Dangerous Creatures" book club lead by Giovanna Baldassarre at her home in San Jose on Dec. 8. NHAT V. MEYER/STAFF

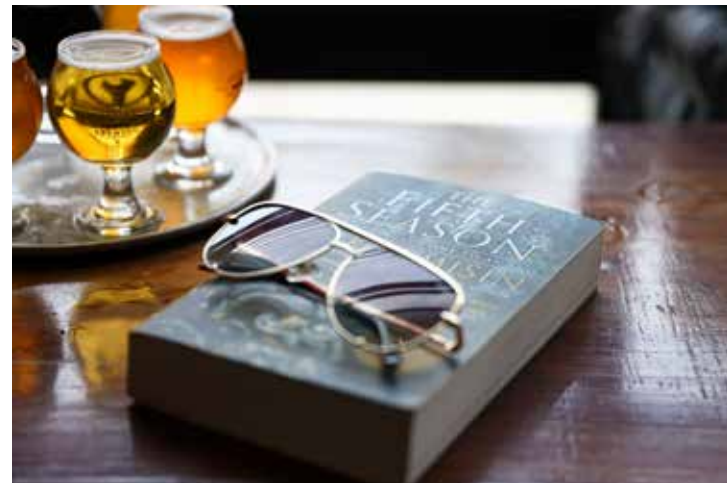


Searches for book clubs on Meetup.com, the global event platform, have skyrocketed in the past few years — jumping from 465 in 2019 to 1.7 million this year, according to the company. In the Bay Area, there are 65 active book groups on the platform.

“Book club popularity is definitely growing,” said Anna Ford, co-founder of Bookclubs.com. “I think COVID ... and the fact that we all have learned to live virtually and do more things online is fueling some of that growth. But I think the bigger thing is that COVID isolated a lot of us, and people are looking for authentic, meaningful connections.”

Ford launched her platform in 2019 as a tool to help people manage their book clubs. As the host of a large book club herself, she found herself drowning in emails from members asking what they were reading or when the next meeting was scheduled. Bookclubs.com, which is free, lets clubs manage their reading and membership lists, poll people on what to read next, add meetings to members’ calendars and post questions and discussions on a message board. There are more than 300 Bay Area clubs on the platform and 25,000 world-wide.

Demand for the service spiked during the pandemic — they now have



A book club meeting at Gilman Brewing Company in Berkeley discusses “The Fifth Season,” a novel by N. K. Jemisin on Sunday, Nov. 27.

SHAE HAMMOND/STAFF



more than 10 times as many clubs as they did pre-COVID.

And while book club members generally share a love of reading, many aren’t really doing it for the literary discussions. More than a quarter of Bookclubs.com users say they joined a club primarily to meet people and socialize, Ford said. Among younger users — ages 18 to 34 — that number jumps to more than half.

Jabril Rollins can relate. The 32-year-old moved to Oakland from Los Angeles in the middle of the pandemic, while everything was shut down, and was at a loss for how to make friends. So he logged onto Meetup.com and started “Books and Brew,” with the idea that people could join him at a different East Bay brewery each month to talk about a book.

“Really, this book club is just a way to trick people into coming to hang out with me,” Rollins said.

And it worked. Now, about 20 people come to each meeting, and some of the members have turned into friends. They even started a second off-shoot club where they read the entire Harry Potter series.

It’s the same with Giovanna Baldassarre’s San Jose-based book club, which has been meeting every six weeks for the last 15 years.

“We have developed a friendship and camaraderie that is hard to describe,” she said in an email.

In other book clubs, the point isn’t to socialize. Adobe Books, a used book store in San Francisco, hosts one of the Bay Area’s several “silent book clubs.” People meet there once a month, briefly introduce themselves and share the book they’re reading, and then shut up and read in each other’s company.

“It’s nice to just be around people without having to interact with them so much,” said Prasant Nukalapati, who runs the club. “Not everyone is so extroverted.”

Nukalapati started the club to encourage people to get together in-person. He also runs a more traditional book club, but it moved online during the pandemic and stayed there — leaving him hungry to see people in real life. Online meetings can get weird, he

Top: A stack of books is ready to be distributed during the book exchange at the “Dangerous Creatures” book club at the home of Giovanna Baldassarre in San Jose. These are some of the books Baldassarre read in the past year.

NHAT V. MEYER/STAFF

Bottom: Alyssa Byrkit, shows off a book she received during a white elephant gift exchange as Laura Nakashima, far left, both from San Jose, laughs, during the “Dangerous Creatures” book club.

NHAT V. MEYER/STAFF





Above: Mia Pixley, of Oakland, plays the cello to a group of audience members and musicians during a performance of the Oakland chapter of the Bushwick Book Club located in the backyard of the Mars Record Shop in Oakland on Nov. 20.

Left: Beti Masenqo, of Sacramento, plays the guitar during a performance of the Oakland chapter of the Bushwick Book Club. The musical book club read the book "The Bluest Eye" and then performed original songs inspired by the book.

JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/STAFF



said, especially when new people join and don't turn on their cameras or don't read the book.

Oakland's Bushwick Book Club is the polar opposite of a silent book club. The organizers pick a book and invite musicians to read it and then write and perform a piece inspired by the reading. November's book was Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye," as a belated celebration of Banned Books Week.

"It makes it really enjoyable to be part of the event, because you never know what someone else is going to have taken away from that book," said organizer Claire Calderon. "The musical conversation that comes out of it is so rich and so varied."

Book clubs have become so popular that several apps, websites and subscription services have popped up in recent years with the sole purpose of helping people talk about what they're reading. When Padmasree Warrior launched the Fable app two and a half years ago, she was hoping to promote reading as



Laura Nakashima photographs Giovanna Baldassarre, center, and Maria Girard-Smith during the "Dangerous Creatures" book club in San Jose. NHAT V. MEYER/STAFF

a way to ease anxiety, stress and loneliness.

"People are looking for fun solutions to take care of themselves. Meditation is hard," said Palo Alto-based Warrior. "Reading is a lot easier."

The app provides curated book recommendations and a range of virtual book clubs hosted by regular people, social media influencers and celebrities. Sean Astin, who played Samwise Gamgee in the "Lord of the Rings" movies, hosts a club — they're reading J.R.R. Tolkien. The "Bookish

Many aren't really doing it for the literary discussions. Some book club members say they joined a club primarily to meet people and socialize.

Swifties" club reads books that relate to Taylor Swift songs. The app's largest club — dedicated to "spicy romance" books — has 17,000 members.

Social media also has spawned giant book clubs, and celebrities from Reese Witherspoon to Emma Watson have launched virtual clubs with massive followings. When Watson chose the relatively obscure novel "Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars" by trans author Kai Cheng Thom, it caused chaos for the book's distributor — Berkeley-based Small

Press Distribution.

"They completely wiped us out super quickly, and that book was out of stock for months," said Grant Kerber, publicity and marketing manager.

But the upside is, essentially the whole world is now a book club.

"Books are getting cool again," Rollins said. "With TikTok and YouTube and Instagram, they have BookTok and BookTube and Bookstagram. It's easy to learn about books, and you just see them everywhere. And it's easier to read more." ■

Bay Area author Jasmine Guillory opens up the rom-com world for Black characters



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANDREA SCHER

BY BRITTANY DELAY

Take one Napa Valley winery owner, add an ill-advised McDreamy hook-up, and you've got either a very frothy rom-com or a very messy workplace relationship. Or in the case of Jasmine Guillory's newest novel, both.

The best-selling modern romance novelist — and former Oakland lawyer — has been praised by everyone from New York Times and Washington Post reviewers to Shondaland and Reese Witherspoon, via her Hello Sunshine book club.

Guillory, a Stanford University law school alum, was several years into her law career when she realized something was missing in her life. She decided to try writing and quickly fell in love with what was then simply a new hobby.

"I looked forward to working on my book every night," she says. "I thought about it all the time."

In 2015, Guillory submitted the first half of a draft for her first novel, "The Wedding Date," to NaNoWriMo — the annual National Novel Writing Month project for aspiring authors. With their support in hand, a book deal soon followed. She published that novel and two more while still working full time at her law firm.

Flash forward, and Guillory is now a full-time author who has just published her eighth book, "Drunk on Love," which offers



an intoxicating romance set at a Black-owned Napa Valley winery. Specific locations may vary from book to book, but every Guillory novel has been set in California.

"I grew up here," she says, "and I feel like so much of the media doesn't reflect the California that I know and love and that I've been a part of my whole life. We have such diverse communities, full of all different kinds of people. I started thinking about Napa Valley, and it all just clicked. It's such a beautiful and unique location, but it's also got this reputation about it. People often about talk it like a haven for rich people and tourists, but I wanted to think about what it would be like for the people who really live there and

The romance genre appealed to Guillory from the start, she says, both because of the mix of stories you can tell and the stories she never saw told.

work there on a day to day basis." The novel follows the story of winery owner Margot Noble, who goes out for drinks one night with a friend. She meets a charmer named Luke, and after hitting it off with great conversation, has a fabulous one-night stand with the suitor ... or so she thinks. Her world soon gets turned upside down when she goes in to work the next morning and meets the winery's newest hire. Of course, it's Luke.

The book offers up a fun and frothy story that poses a serious question: What's most important, doing what you love or being with the person you love?

The romance genre appealed to Guillory from the start, she says, both because of the mix of stories you can tell and the stories she never saw told.

"Romance novels at their core are really about character, really thinking about who these people are and how they came to find one another," she says. "Growing up, I didn't see a lot of Black women represented in those stories. When I was little, most of the books I read about Black women were about the struggle. Obviously, there's a place for those books, but I what I really love is seeing Black women get their happy ending."

As she redefines what Black literature can be, she's branching out, too. Her other projects include a "Southern Belle Insults" short story series with Keke Palmer, a "Black Love Matters" essay anthology, and a collaborative novel, "First Street," about four recent law school graduates clerking for the Supreme Court.

"Literature in general has really been dominated by whiteness," she says. "Over the past little while, publishing has started to be more diverse and pay more attention to communities of color, but these communities read all the time, and as those books sell more, publishing is opening its eyes." ■

Guillory's book recommendations

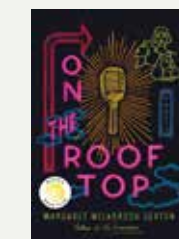


"Partners in Crime" by Alisha Rai: This whirlwind romance offers shady characters, sultry settings and a love story with a splash of danger.



"Counterfeit" by Kirstin Chen: Plotting meets Prada in this story of fashion, friendship and crime, centered on a pair of Asian American women who hatch

a scheme to make it big selling counterfeit handbags.

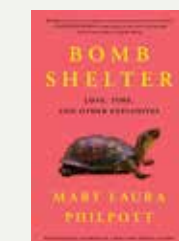


"On the Rooftop" by Margaret Wilkerson Sexton: This nostalgic novel tells the hopeful story of a struggling black family living in San Francisco's Fillmore

neighborhood during the 1950s.



"Yerba Buena" by Nina LaCour: This lesbian romance is a beautiful story of two star-crossed women circling in the same orbit but struggling to truly find one another.



"Bomb Shelter" by Mary Laura Philpott: Philpott's powerful memoir recounts the experiences of a woman who lost her teenage son.

5 GREAT WINTER READS

Rakestraw Books

STORY BY BRITTANY DELAY

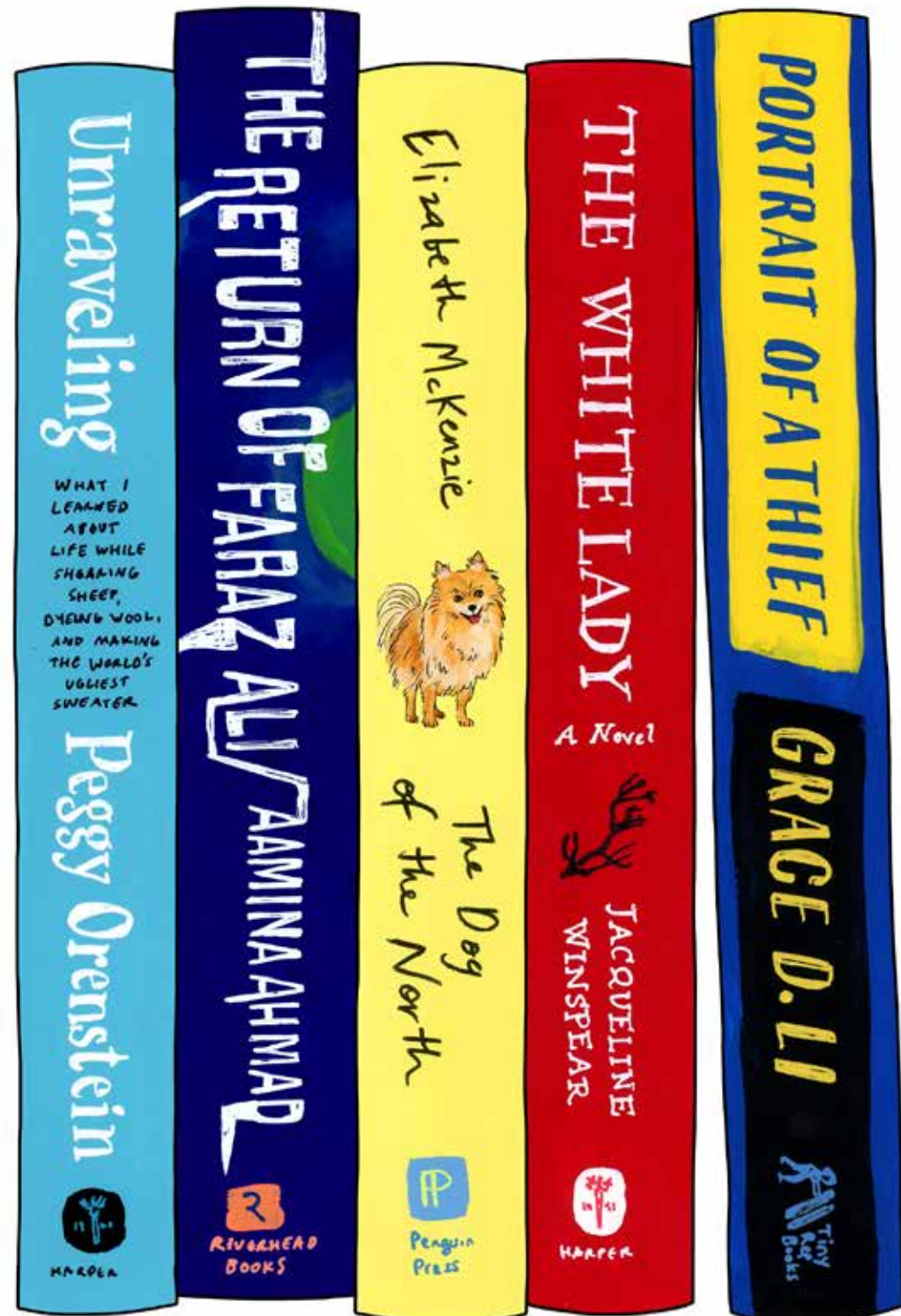
ILLUSTRATION BY JANE MOUNT

Founded in 1973, this charming Danville bookshop has a devoted Bay Area following, with book lovers from as far away as San Jose and Pleasant Hill detouring off Highway 680 for a browse. Rakestraw's bookshelves brim with volumes of all sorts, from biographies to children's books.

But what sets the store apart is the store's expansive curated contemporary fiction collection, its profusion of live and virtual author events, and owner Michael Barnard's impressive ability to not only pair reader and book, but remember a book lover's favorites even years later.

Naturally, he has some thoughts about what you should read next.

“Portrait of a Thief” by Grace D. Li: “This mind-bending crime novel centers on themes of colonization and reparation, following a Chinese-American college student who finds himself wrapped up in a museum heist,” Barnard says. “History is told by its conquerors, and the spoils of war often go with them. Artifacts are uprooted from their land and placed behind glass by those who looted them, but this straight-A student turned heist leader has a plan to steal them back and finally restore some justice to his heritage.”



“The Dog of the North” by Elizabeth McKenzie: “This smart, funny, heart-strong novel features Penny Rush, a woman leaving her Santa Cruz life behind — including her job and cheating husband — to go help her grandmother in Santa Barbara. There begins a madcap adventure, reminiscent of a Coen brothers movie, which includes a cast of quirky characters, each more eccentric than the next. But it’s Penny’s humor, outlook and compassion that’s the real heart of the story, and we root for her every step of the way.” (Publishes March 14)

“The White Lady” by Jacqueline Winspear: “This charming historical fiction tells the story of a former wartime operative and trained killer who is desperate to leave the past behind her. She hopes to live an unremarkable life in the quiet Kentish village of Shacklehurst, occupying a ‘grace and favor’ property granted to distinguished servants of the Crown. However, adventure soon comes calling, and she’s reluctantly dragged back into the world of deceit and violence she barely managed to escape the first time around.” (March 21)

“Unraveling: What I Learned about Life While Shearing Sheep, Dyeing Wool, and Making the World’s Ugliest Sweater” by Peggy Orenstein: “This humorous personal memoir begins with a woman who sets out to learn how to make a sweater from scratch, but her innocent interest soon blossoms into a journey of serious contemplation. She thought she was just picking up a hobby but winds up grappling with major modern issues, including climate anxiety, racial justice, women’s rights, the impact of technology, sustainability and ultimately, the meaning of home.” (Jan. 24)

“The Return of Faraz Ali” by Aamina Ahmad: “In this thrilling and enigmatic novel, a man is placed as head of the Mohalla police station in India and charged with the task of covering up the murder of a young call girl (while) hailing from Lahore’s notorious red-light district himself. This morally deplorable mission forces him to reckon with his past, uncovering not only the secrets of the city’s seedy labyrinth alleys, but those of his own hazy history as well.”

BOOKSTORE EVENTS

Rebecca Makkai, JoJo Moyes, Peggy Orenstein and Jacqueline Winspear are among the authors headed to Rakestraw in early 2023. This spring, Rakestraw Books will be celebrating its 50th anniversary with a season of special events, author appearances and parties. Look for details at rakestrawbooks.com.

Details: Open from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Saturday and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sundays at 3 Railroad Ave. in Danville. ■

Top left: Michael Barnard has owned Rakestraw Book in Danville for nearly three decades.

KARL MONDON/STAFF

Bottom left: Employee Susan Reckers organizes books at Rakestraw Books.

NHAT V. MEYER/STAFF



Why we crave

CALAMITY

Dystopian fiction
appeals for a reason,
and its popularity
continues to grow

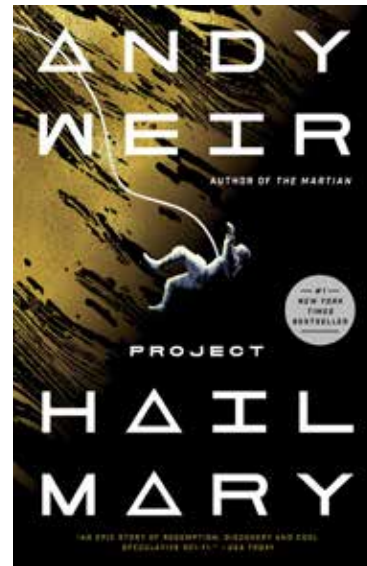
BY JOHN METCALFE

Andy Weir, author of “The Martian,” is a fan of apocalyptic stories. The genre offers so many opportunities for “cool plots, conflict and action,” he says. “A postnuclear-war wasteland with people fighting over a bunch of canned food — that’s visceral, you can understand and immediately get it. It mixes in a lot of survival which, you know, ‘The Martian’ is a survival story.”

And Weir’s latest sci-fi novel, “Project Hail Mary” (Ballantine Books, \$29), is very much an apocalyptic story. It deals with an imminent climate disaster that threatens all of humanity.

If that sounds familiar, you’ve either been reading the news or you’ve stepped into a bookshop. The past few years have seen an explosion of speculative fiction mirroring real-life emergencies, from the rise of fascism to environmental degradation to the toxic legacy of colonialism.

Why would authors want to dabble in apocalypse and dystopia, when the world is doom-filled as is? For Weir, a former Mountain View



Andy Weir is the author of "Project Hail Mary," "The Martian" and other popular works of science fiction.

AUBRIE PICK

PREVIOUS PAGE: STANLEY DULLEA/ADOBE STOCK

resident who lives in Chicago now, it boils down to the belief that society will eventually make things better.

"I'm a fairly optimistic person, at least when it comes to humanity. I think we're a fairly cool species," he says. "I think we can all agree that 2020 sucked, right? But I'd rather live through 2020 again than 1920. I don't know about you, but none of my friends has died of typhoid fever. My Black friends can go into any business they want. I would rather live through the peak of the pandemic than the routine year of 1920 — although they had a pandemic just finishing up then, too."

In "Project Hail Mary," scientists notice that the sun is dimming at an alarming rate. The culprit is a weird space organism that imbibes the star's energy in order to breed. Astronauts must venture forth and figure out what makes it tick. Fortunately, Weir has given his hero, Ryland Grace, some tools to battle Armageddon — he's a former microbiologist from San Francisco, albeit a goofy one

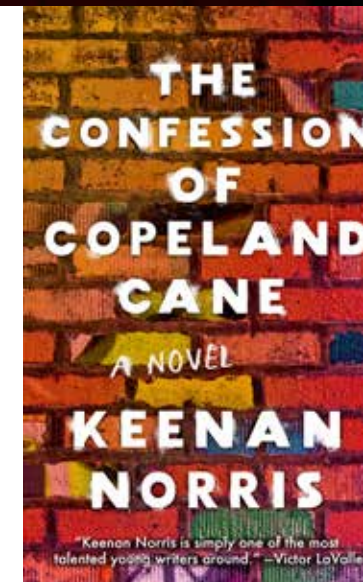
prone to making dad jokes. (Grace is partly based on the author himself; look for Ryan Gosling to play him in the movie version.)

The novel's enemy is reminiscent of blue-green algae blooms, which are caused by pollution and warming waters and can extinguish life from vast marine zones. Weir wasn't particularly inspired by such real-life concerns; he was more interested in structuring a book around a nifty, hypothetical space fuel. "I'm just a dork who for some

reason gets to write about science stuff, and people like it," he says. "For me, it's just like, 'Look at this cool science-y thing! Isn't that cool? This is so cool.'" Indeed, the novel has gotten the stamp of approval from science-y types the likes of Bill Gates who, in his typical expression of enthusiasm, dubbed it a "fun diversion."



Of course, not all speculative



fiction offers such a romp. "The Confession of Copeland Cane" by Keenan Norris presents a near-future Oakland that's a little too close to today's urban dystopia.

"What I wanted to do is imagine forward some trend lines that are already present," says Norris, who lives in San Leandro, "and think about their logical conclusions, particularly for those who are not so privileged, aren't receiving the best education and who live in places with environmental harms."

Author Keenan Norris, of San Leandro, wrote the book "The Confession of Copeland Cane."

JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/
STAFF

On his first birthday, the Black protagonist of “Confession” is automatically entered into California’s gang database. He spends time in the exclusive city-within-a-city known as Piedmont — sorry, “Piedmontagne” — which has its own private police force. After trying to sterilize black mold in his home with chemicals, he’s imprisoned for attempted arson and goes on the run. Tracking his movements is a powerful media corporation called the Sinclair Broadcast Group — whoops again, that’s “Soclear” — that was founded by Stephen Miller and signs off with “Sieg Heil.”

At one point, the hero falls into a sinkhole on Treasure Island and believes he’s irradiated. “It is left up to the reader to decide whether these are simply the maturations that a young man, given his circumstances, would go through,” says Norris, “or whether there’s something deeper related to the environment of Treasure Island, which both in the book and actual fact is a hazardous-waste site.”

“Confession” won the 2022 Northern California Book Award for fiction, putting it in a crowd of dystopian novels that have garnered critical acclaim this year — “Babel” by RF Kuang and “The City Inside” by Samit Basu among them. These works build upon a long literary tradition of imagining how much worse things could get. It’s a tradition some would argue dates back to the Bible or at least to Mary Shelley’s “The Last Man” and George Orwell’s “1984.” So why the genre’s enduring popularity?

There’s evidence that dystopian content triggers something powerful in the human brain. In a study published in 2018, researchers exposed people to “The Hunger Games” and



“Divergent,” two YA series that feature heroes who rebel against totalitarian regimes. Afterward, those people were “more likely to believe that radical and even violent political action against a government perceived as unjust would be justified,” says Calvert Jones, one of the authors at the University of Maryland.

Young people connected especially vigorously with dystopian narratives. “A strong attraction here may be a need for agency against powerful forces, which characters like Katniss in the ‘Hunger Games’ or Tris in the ‘Divergent’ series showed,” says Jones. “When people feel relatively helpless against forces beyond their control — wars, economic distress, natural disasters, for example — that feeling of efficacy can be very compelling.”



Charlie Jane Anders is a sci-fi author in San Francisco who’s won the Hugo, Nebula and Theodore Sturgeon awards. Her latest trilogy Unstoppable is geared directly at this demographic. It’s a space opera about exploring far reaches and fighting quasi-fascists. (It’s been picked up for TV by Amazon



Sci-fi author Charlie Jane Anders, left, has a new trilogy coming out about space, teens and fascist regimes.

RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF

and Michael B. Jordan’s Outlier Society.) The middle book, 2022’s “Dreams Bigger Than Heartbreak,” opens in the “Age of Despair,” something kids today can probably relate to.

“I think young people are painfully aware at this point we’re living in a slow-motion

The past few years have seen an explosion of speculative fiction mirroring real-life emergencies, from the rise of fascism to environmental degradation to the toxic legacy of colonialism.

compound apocalypse in which climate change, the collapse of unsustainable systems and our political dysfunction are leading to problems that will eventually cause damage on a scale that’s hard to comprehend,” Anders says.

The series’ universe has many clever technologies you can imagine breaking into our own world. Because it’s an advanced space community, home to many LGBTQ characters, people use an automatic translator to ensure they use correct gender pronouns. There’s a popular game called “WorstBestFriend” that pits the player against a virtual frenemy who passively-aggressively bullies them — self-destructive fun at its best.

The bad guys are called the Compassion, cynical doublespeak that could have been torn from today’s political playbook. They believe in the innate superiority of humanoids with two arms and legs over, say, a species with tentacles or a head in a different place.

“They don’t just go around trying to motivate people on anger. They really play on fear and uncertainty and chaos,” says Anders. “I think for a story for kids and teens about saving the galaxy, it’s good to explore the fact that the adults around you don’t always know what they’re doing.”

Anders hopes her books might inspire action for a future not so far, far away.

“People who grew up on stories like ‘The Hunger Games,’ we’re starting to see them believe they can fight against unfair regimes in real life,” she says. “And I really hope that they do. I hope everyone who grew up reading those books — and that’s a lot of people — all become adults who want to tear down oppressive systems.” ■

Visits to a distant grandmother inspire a universal story about connection



SHAE HAMMOND/STAFF

BY JIM HARRINGTON

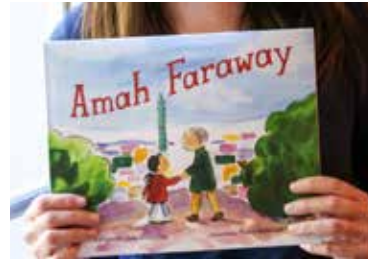
Margaret Chiu Greanias grew up in San Jose, thousands of miles from where her grandmother lived in Taiwan.

“It wasn’t often that we saw each other,” Greanias recalls. “So, whenever we did see each other, I was always a little bit shy around her in the beginning. It took some time to get to the point where I really didn’t want to be separated from her. By the end of our visit, I was always really sad for us to be apart.”

Memories of those visits remained so vivid for Greanias, they eventually became the foundation for the Los Altos-based author’s newest book, “Amah Faraway” (Bloomsbury Children’s Books, \$19), which was released last year.

“When I first started writing picture books, one idea that always came up as one I wanted to write was the story of my relationship with my amah,” she says.

The picture book, which features illustrations by Tracy Subisak, tells the story of Kylie, a young girl who is nervous about taking a trip to see her “amah” in



Taiwan. Kylie’s trip turns out so much better than she could have dreamed, as the two have a great time checking out the night market, visiting the hot springs and eating with relatives. As the trip comes to a close, the youngster can’t wait to return to Taiwan and her amah again.

“Kylie is inspired by my child self,” Greanias says. “In writing, I also used my kids as inspiration, because I took them to visit Taiwan, and my mom was there — just their reactions to a new place.”

“Amah Faraway” is Greanias’ second picture book, following her 2018 “Maximillian Villainous,” which is about a young monster who just doesn’t have the heart to be evil.

“Like a lot of picture book writers, I started out after I had kids,” she says. “I had been reading lots

and lots of picture books to them and remembering my childhood and how much I loved picture books. When they were napping or sleeping at night, I was awake and reading all of their books. One day, I had my own idea for a book, and I wrote it. Of course, it wasn’t very good. But it was a start.”

She was thrilled to partner on this latest project with Subisak, a Portland-based illustrator and San Francisco ex-pat, who is also of Taiwanese ancestry. Subisak wrote and illustrated “Jenny Mei Is Sad” and provided artwork for Curtis Manley’s “Shawn Loves Sharks” and Kirsten W. Larson’s “Wood, Wire, Wings: Emma Lilian Todd Invents an Airplane.”

“When I saw the illustrations for the first time, I felt like Tracy had been with me on this journey,” Greanias says. “Her illustrations were so perfect. She just added so much to the story.”

One concern Greanias had during the process was whether people would be able to relate to such a distinct storyline, a child going to Taiwan to visit a grandmother.

“I’m writing the story that I want to tell from my heart,” she says. “(But) I was afraid, because it was so specific. Then I realized, it is a universal story for anyone who has family or friends that they don’t see very often because they are away. I feel like — especially for kids — there is this period of getting reacquainted that I think is pretty common.”

“Also, this story is about trying new things and being open to new things. That feels very universal, too.” ■

Greanias always had an idea to create a picture book about the story of her relationship with her grandmother.

Margaret Chiu Greanias’ book recommendations



“The Day You Begin,” by Jacqueline Woodson, illustrated by Rafael Lopez: “Lyrical story set in a classroom where many of the children feel like outsiders in one way or another until the day they begin to share their stories.”



“The Book of Mistakes,” by Corinna Luyken: “A book about the inevitable making of mistakes and the wonderful and surprising things that can be made from them.”



“The Longest Letsgoboy,” by Derick Wilder, illustrated by Catia Chien: “A beautiful and hopeful story told from an old dog’s perspective, as he prepares to pass on, and what happens to the little person he leaves behind. This one is a tearjerker.”



“How to Wear a Sari,” by Darshana Khiani, illustrated by Joanne Lew-Vriethoff: “A lighthearted, fun story about a spunky girl who wants to be treated like a grownup and decides to wear her mom’s sari.”



“I Dream of Popo,” by Livia Blackburne, illustrated by Julia Kuo: “A touching story about a girl who immigrates from Taiwan to the United States and the special bond she shares with her Popo, whom she left behind.”

The John Steinbeck you don't know



Experts help uncover fascinating facts about the iconic author from Salinas

BY LINDA ZAVORAL

There's the John Steinbeck most Californians know, the bard of the Salinas Valley and Cannery Row, the chronicler of the common man's plight, the acclaimed author of such towering works as "The Grapes of Wrath" and "East of Eden."

And then there's the Steinbeck you may not know — the one who is revered by Norwegians, was influenced by the tales of King Arthur and who wrote his greatest novel in Los Gatos.

Here's a look at *that* Steinbeck, with insight from experts including author-professor Susan Shillinglaw of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University and the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas; archivist Peter Van Coutren and director Daniel Rivers of the SJSU center; Gavin Jones, professor at Stanford University; South Bay author-educator Audry Lynch; and other Steinbeck scholars and biographers.

Left: Author John Steinbeck takes a break from writing in this historic photo taken around the time "Grapes of Wrath" won the Pulitzer Prize.

AP PHOTO

Top: The Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University houses hundreds of books by and about author John Steinbeck.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

THE IMPACT OF KING ARTHUR

Yes, one of the American West's most celebrated authors was influenced by tales from across the pond. Steinbeck didn't like reading as a child, Lynch said, until age 9, when he received a gift that changed everything, a copy of "King Arthur and His Knights of the Roundtable." Scholars say his interest in Arthurian adventures can be seen in "Tortilla Flat" and "Sweet Thursday." In the 1950s, Steinbeck sought to reinterpret the legend, but the resulting book remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1968. "The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights" was published posthumously in 1976.

THE STANFORD YEARS (DIPLOMA NOT INCLUDED)

To please his parents, Steinbeck enrolled at Stanford in 1919. He dropped out, returned and then left for New York in 1925 — without a diploma, having taken only classes that interested him, ignoring the core curriculum and amassing only 93 credits.

He did, however, find inspiration from two English professors, Margery Bailey and Edith Mirrielees, according to a 2013 Stanford Daily article. And he met two of his best friends at Stanford. One was Carlton "Dook" Sheffield, a lifelong buddy who served as best man at Steinbeck's first wedding. The other was marine biologist and ecologist Ed "Doc" Ricketts, whom Steinbeck met at Stanford's Hopkins Marine Lab in Pacific Grove and famously featured in "Cannery Row."

Steinbeck wrote to Dook in 1964: "Do you ever go near Stanford? I don't think I would like to go. It would be kind of embarrassing, because I was such a lousy student, I suppose. Anyway, I have no call for the Groves of Academe."



Visitors to the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies can see the cross-country route John Steinbeck took in 1960 that inspired his "Travels With Charley: In Search of America," says archivist Peter Van Coutren.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

Yet the Daily reported that he'd expressed appreciation to Mirrielees in a 1962 letter: "Although it must be a thousand years ago that I sat in your class in story writing at Stanford, I remember the experience very clearly. I was bright-eyed and bushy-brained and prepared to absorb from you the secret formula for writing good short stories, even great short stories."

"You canceled this illusion very quickly. The only way to write a good short story, you said, was to write a good short story. Only after it is written can it be taken apart to see how it was done."

HIS UNPUBLISHED WEREWOLF NOVEL

Cue the Warren Zevon song. Before his first literary successes, Steinbeck — under the pen name Peter Pym — wrote a novel about a series of grisly werewolf attacks in an unnamed coastal California town. (Werewolves of Seaside?)

Scholars have been able to read and study the 1930 manuscript for years, yet it's never been published.

Titled "Murder at Full Moon," the work is a far cry from the author's signature realism during the Great Depression — or is it?

"Even though it is very different from Steinbeck's other work, in a totally different genre, it actually relates to his interest in violent human transformation," Stanford's Jones, author of "Reclaiming Steinbeck," told The Guardian in 2021. Jones encouraged Steinbeck's estate to publish the book, but the literary agents have demurred, saying they have no evidence Steinbeck wanted that to happen.

Scholar Shillinglaw said, "Steinbeck wrote the werewolf quickly, for quick money. He didn't really want it published. He was writing other things more seriously in the early 1930s."

If you want to weigh in on the debate, San Jose State's Center for

Steinbeck Studies has a non-circulating copy of the "Murder at Full Moon" manuscript that may be read onsite.

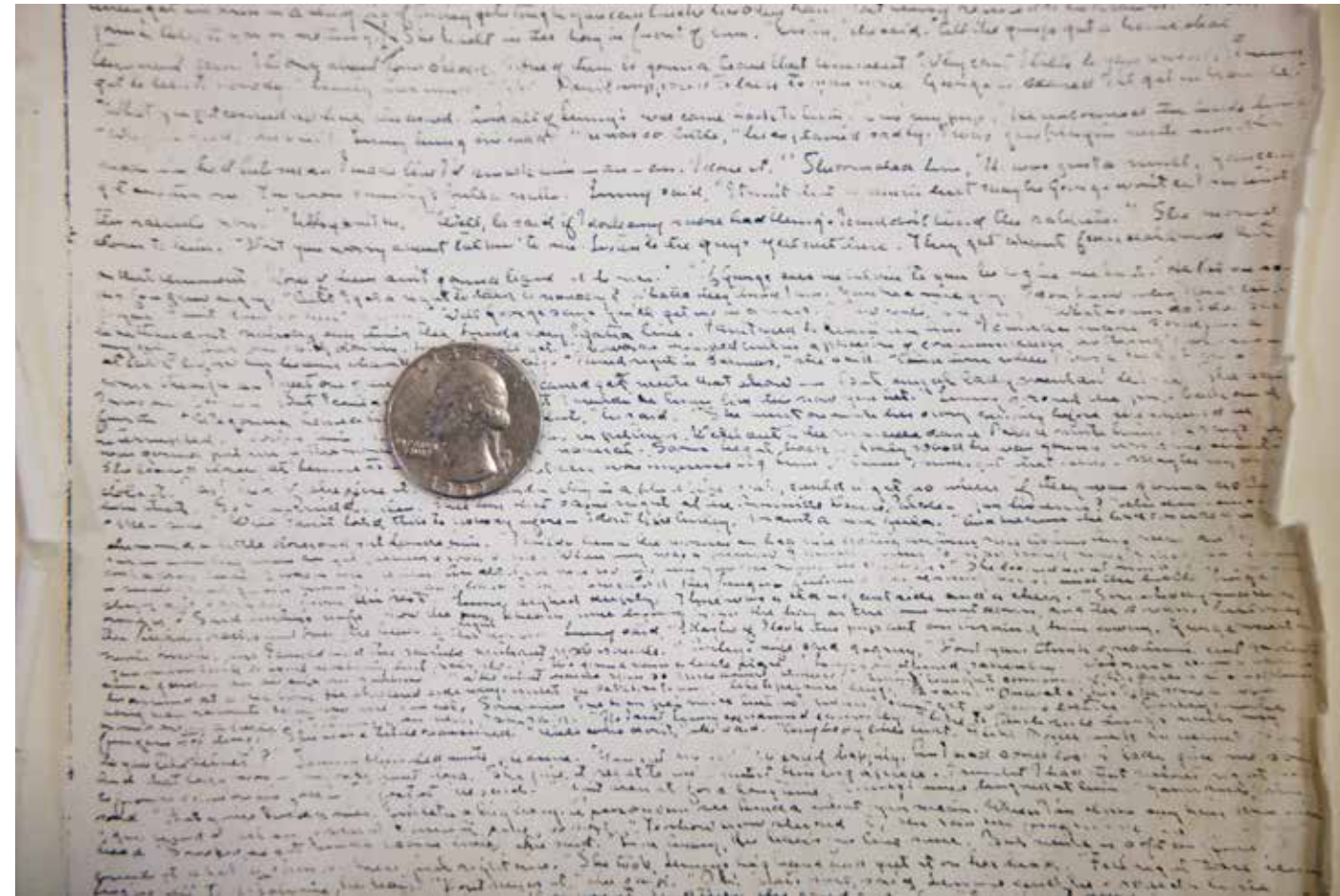
OF TYPEWRITER AND PEN

When it comes to itty-bitty handwriting, Steinbeck may have no peer.

He typically wrote his journals and manuscripts in long hand, cramming as many as 50 or 100 lines on each ledger sheet to save paper. Saving his poor fingers was another matter. To avoid calluses, he would switch his Blackwing No. 2 pencil between different fingers.

At Stanford, he once bet a roommate that he could get 500 words on the back of a postcard. He won. And while working as a caretaker for a house in Tahoe (and writing "Cup of Gold"), he got snowed in and ran out of paper. He improvised by writing on matchbooks and in the margins of magazines, archivist Van Coutren said.

Steinbeck did use a typewriter



— San Jose has his Hermes Baby portable from the 1950s on display — but mainly for writing letters.

LOS GATOS' CLAIM TO STEINBECK FAME

Steinbeck created two of his most impressive stories in Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties.

While living in a house that he and first wife Carol had built in Los Gatos (now part of Monte Sereno) in 1936, he completed "Of Mice and Men" and wrote much of "The Grapes of Wrath." In the summer of 1938, seeking more solitude, they settled in the Santa Cruz Mountains near Moody Gulch, where he finished his epic about the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s.

THE STEINBECK HOUSE YOU CAN VISIT

The author's birthplace and boyhood home is a circa 1897 Queen Anne Victorian in Salinas

that now serves as a restaurant, museum and gift shop. Steinbeck was born there on Feb. 27, 1902, and lived there until he went away to college.

Renovated in the 1960s, the Central Avenue building was sold in 1971 to the Valley Guild of Salinas, which owns and runs it to this day. Staffed by Guild volunteers, the Steinbeck House serves lunch Tuesday through Saturday and holds a monthly high tea.

THE BOOK THAT'S MORE FAMOUS IN EUROPE THAN IN THE U.S.

The National Steinbeck Center in Salinas calls this novel "John Steinbeck's beacon of light in a darkened world."

"The Moon Is Down" is a slender volume borne of Steinbeck's war correspondent time in World War II Europe. Published in 1942, it tells the story of a town in "northern Europe" conquered by invading forces. He never says

Steinbeck typically wrote his manuscripts in long hand, cramming as many as 50 or 100 lines on each ledger sheet to save paper. The Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University has a copy of a "Grapes of Wrath" page on display.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

where or who, but it's believed to be set in Norway during Nazi Germany's takeover of that country.

In this universal tale, "the people work to find their heroism within each other," Van Coutren said.

Nazis banned the book. In acts of resistance, Europeans secretly shared mimeographed copies that had been translated into French, Norwegian, Dutch, Swedish, German, Italian and Russian. "You could get executed if you got caught with one of those," he said. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of copies circulated throughout Europe, making it by far the most popular piece of propaganda under the occupation, according to Penguin Classics.

In appreciation, Norway bestowed its highest civilian honor, the King Haakon Liberty Cross, on Steinbeck.

THE MONTEREY PETITION

In 1945, Steinbeck signed a petition called "A Democratic

Way of Life for All" that sought to welcome back Monterey County's Japanese-American residents from their wartime internment and demanded the return of their civil rights. The 440-plus signatures, along with the bold document, ran as a full-page ad in the Monterey County Herald to counter an anti-Japanese hate campaign that also had been advertised in print.

The crusade, credited to female activists led by Toni Jackson, was largely forgotten until local historian Tim Thomas unearthed the petition in 2013. A documentary, "Enduring Democracy: The Monterey Petition," was made by writer-director David Schendel and released in 2022.

Besides Steinbeck, other prominent signatories included photographer Edward Weston and his wife, model-writer Charis Wilson Weston; artists Barbara and Ellwood Graham; and Big Sur poet Robinson Jeffers and his wife, Una, according to a 2013 Herald article.

"The wounds of war are not easily healed," historian David Yamada said in the article. "Yet the post-war return of Japanese Americans to the Monterey Peninsula eventually resurrected their shattered dreams."

"OF MICE AND MEN" — AND A DOG

While Steinbeck was out celebrating the completion of "Of Mice and Men," his new puppy chewed up part of the manuscript. Steinbeck described the incident in a May 27, 1936, journal entry: "Minor tragedy stalked. My setter pup, left alone one night, made confetti of about half of my manuscript book. Two months work to do over again. It set me back. There was no other draft. I was pretty mad, but the poor little fellow may have been acting critically."

Steinbeck

ILLUSTRATION
BY JEFF DURHAM

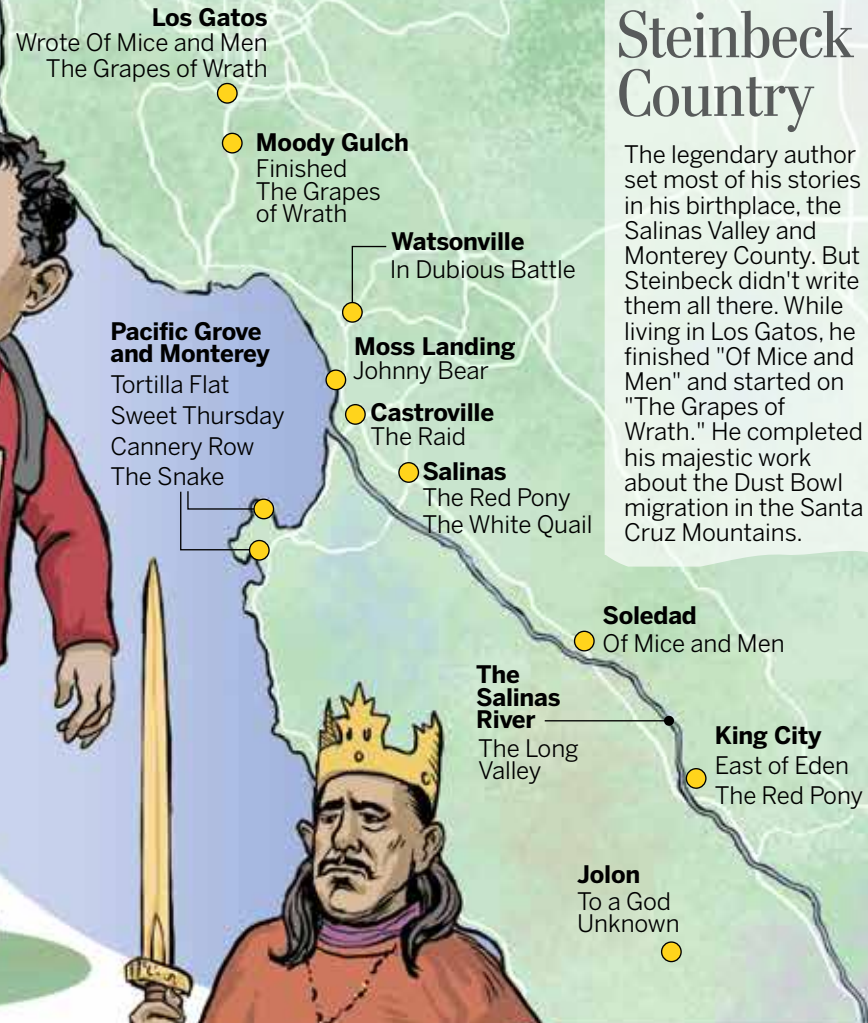
Sure, you think you know John Steinbeck. You've read the books, seen the movies. Want to delve a little deeper? This fascinating author packed a lot into his 66 years.

Stanford University

Steinbeck enrolled at Stanford in 1919, later dropped out, then came back. He left in 1925 – without a diploma.

What's he drinking?

Steinbeck's cocktail of choice was the Jack Rose. For five years, until 2019, a Los Gatos bar called the Jack Rose Libation House paid tribute to the man and the pre-Prohibition drink.



Steinbeck Country

The legendary author set most of his stories in his birthplace, the Salinas Valley and Monterey County. But Steinbeck didn't write them all there. While living in Los Gatos, he finished "Of Mice and Men" and started on "The Grapes of Wrath." He completed his majestic work about the Dust Bowl migration in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

In the beginning and after the end

Steinbeck wasn't much of a reader as a kid until he was gifted a copy of "King Arthur and His Knights of the Roundtable." His own interpretation of the Arthurian adventures was published posthumously.

BOOKS OUTSIDE STEINBECK COUNTRY

The majority of Steinbeck's stories take place in Monterey County, but he was also a citizen of the world who traveled extensively. Notable works in this global array include "Cup of Gold" (1929), tales of the Caribbean; "The Moon Is Down" (1942), set in "northern Europe" but widely believed to be Norway; "The Pearl" (1947), a novella set in La Paz, Mexico; "The Short Reign of Pippin IV" (1957), France; "The Winter of Our Discontent" (1961, his final novel), on the East Coast of the United States; and "The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights" (left unfinished, published in 1976), set in England.

THE ROLE OF HIS FIRST WIFE

San Jose native Carol Henning, who became Steinbeck's first wife, had a major impact on both his writing style and his social consciousness, according to expert Shillinglaw, the author of "Carol and John Steinbeck: Portrait of a Marriage."

"In many ways, Carol's story is all too familiar: a creative and intelligent woman subsumes her own life and work into that of her husband. Together, they brought forth one of the enduring novels of the 20th century," she writes, referring to "Grapes of Wrath." Carol "helped edit his prose, urged him to cut the Latinate phrases, typed his manuscripts, suggested titles and offered ways to restructure."

THE COCKTAIL HE LOVED

There's no scholarly debate on this point. Steinbeck's drink of choice – "bar none," according to the Drunkard's Almanac – was the Jack Rose, a pre-Prohibition cocktail with muddled origins. This "slightly fancy apple brandy sour" consists of 2 ounces of Laird's Apple Brandy, 1 ounce freshly squeezed lemon juice and ½ to 1 ounce of grenadine shaken



The memorabilia filled walls at the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State feature paintings and movie posters – including for French versions of "Grapes of Wrath" and "Of Mice and Men" – as well as historic photos of Steinbeck and his family and more recent images of Steinbeck Award recipients Ruby Bridges and Rachel Maddow.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

with ice, strained and served in a coupe.

In recent years, a bar in Los Gatos near where Steinbeck lived paid tribute to his legend and the cocktail. "We like to think that the writer used to stroll down to the bar for a drink or two before going home to compose on his Hermes Baby typewriter," the Jack Rose Libation House website said. The building was torn down in 2019 to make way for a housing project.

THREE ENDINGS FOR 'THE GRAPES OF WRATH'

Between the book and the movie, the iconic work has three endings.

Steinbeck's masterpiece depicts Rose of Sharon, whose baby was stillborn, nursing a half-starved man with her breast milk – a striking, memorable image, to be sure, but one that wasn't going to fly in Hollywood.

At Stanford, Steinbeck once bet a roommate that he could get 500 words on the back of a postcard. He won.

Director John Ford wanted to end the 1940 movie with the words Tom Joad (actor Henry Fonda) utters, words that never fail to evoke tears: "I'll be all around in the dark. I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look – wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready, and when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise and livin' in the houses they build, I'll be there, too."

But producer Darryl F. Zanuck sought a slightly more uplifting ending for filmgoers, and he reshot the final scene himself. He shifted the monologue by Ma Joad (actress Jane Darwell) from elsewhere in the book and made her words the end of the film: "We keep on coming. We're the people that live. They can't wipe us out, they can't lick us. We'll go on forever, Pa, cause we're the people."

THE BIGGEST AWARDS

Not surprisingly, this California native son was first recognized by the Bay Area's own Commonwealth Club for his literature. In 1936, he was honored with that group's gold medal for best novel by a Californian for "Tortilla Flat." He won the same award in 1937 for "In Dubious Battle." The following year brought the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for "Of Mice and Men."

In 1940, Steinbeck won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for "The Grapes of Wrath." In 1946, he was honored with Norway's prestigious King Haakon Liberty Cross for his novel "The Moon Is Down" (1942).

And in 1962, Steinbeck traveled to Stockholm to accept the Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humor and keen social perception." He is the only native Californian author to have

received this award.

THOSE WHO FOLLOW IN HIS FOOTSTEPS

The SJSU center honors "writers, artists, thinkers and activists whose work captures Steinbeck's empathy, commitment to democratic values and belief in the dignity of people who by circumstance are pushed to the fringes." Subtitled "In the Souls of the People," the Steinbeck Award has been presented 21 times since 1996, when songwriter-singer Bruce Springsteen was the first honoree. The most recent honorees were humanitarian chef Jose Andres in 2021 and acclaimed author Jacqueline Woodson in 2022.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT STEINBECK

At SJSU: The Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies at the Martin Luther King Jr. Library, houses a massive Steinbeck archive, including manuscripts, first editions, letters, films and memorabilia, plus a searchable database of 2,300 photos related to Steinbeck. In March, the center will host the International Steinbeck Conference in partnership with the International Society of Steinbeck Scholars and the Steinbeck Review.

Details: 150 E. San Fernando St., San Jose; www.sjsu.edu/steinbeck

In Salinas: The National Steinbeck Center, which opened in 1998 and is now owned by Cal State Monterey, offers a window into native son Steinbeck and the history and agriculture of Steinbeck Country via interactive, multi-sensory experiences. There are seven themed areas showcasing "East of Eden," "Cannery Row," "Of Mice and Men," "The Grapes of Wrath" and more with films, rare photos and exhibits.

Details: One Main St., Salinas; www.steinbeck.org

Sources: The Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, San Jose State University; Bay Area News Group reporting



Take the twisted title challenge

Guess which letter transforms the famed book's plot — er, plot!

BY JOAN MORRIS

Writers know that a single word has the power to influence readers, leading them down paths of persuasion, through gales of laughter or floods of tears. But a single letter might be even more potent.

We've taken some classic books and changed one letter in the title to put an entirely different spin on the original. We'll give you the synopsis, the number of words and the blanks in the name. Can you guess the new title?

1. An amphibious vehicle captain, driven by a single-minded need for vengeance on the large white Aylesbury that ate his lobster roll, risks his life and those of his crew and passengers during a sight-seeing trip on the Charles River.

Two words: _ _ _ _ - _ _ _ _

2. A poor but hard-working family seeks to escape the poverty of Oklahoma's Dust Bowl in the Great Depression, heading to California as migrant farmworkers. They find nothing but heartache and bitter disappointment, leading them to whine and complain endlessly.

Four words: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

3. A pretty doe falls in love with a handsome buck, but the buck's eyes are set on a less glamorous deer. Meanwhile, another buck takes an interest in the winsome doe, who doesn't seem to know when she's got it good. As a firestorm sweeps through the forest and destroys the doe's ancestral home, she realizes what she has lost, but it's too late. The buck has had enough, leaving the doe for good and saying, "Frankly, my deer, I don't give a damn."

Four words: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

4. It was the best of times and the worst of salads. Set in a French restaurant in London, this tale tells of a chef wrongly accused of stealing a salad recipe from a Yorkshire restaurant who seeks to clear his name and later, that of his son-in-law.

Five words: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

5. A tragic tale of love gone wrong and the complicated family lives of Heathcliff, who becomes heir to a gym for body builders, and his love, Catherine, who marries the owner of a competing gym.

Two words: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

6. A 16-year-old boy is expelled from prep school and spends two chaotic and confusing days hiding in a nearby field, spying on his friends and teachers.

Fours words: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

7. An impoverished young Russian student believes he is part of a select group of super men who are above the laws of mankind. He plots against the owner of an unethical laundry service, who deliberately refuses to remove the gravy stains from his linens.

Three words: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

8. Hester goes crazy for her neighbor's Irish dog, stealing it and then dying its coat a brilliant crimson to disguise it from its rightful owner and the small village where she lives.

Three words: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

9. A coming-of-age story about a young man who goes to Paris to become an artist, but switches to medical school after realizing he has no talent for art. He falls madly in love with a waitress, whose cruelty requires the young man to continually suffer cuts and bruises, which he hides with flesh-colored gauze.

Three words: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

10. A scientist who devoted himself to optic research discovers a method of altering the refractive index of packaged foods, making it impossible for people to see them. He tests it in his local grocery store. Chaos ensues.

Three words: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

- ANSWERS**
- 1. Moby-Duck
 - 2. The Gripes of Wrath
 - 3. Gone with the Hind
 - 4. Kale of Two Cities
 - 5. Weathering Weights
 - 6. Watcher in the Rye
 - 7. Grime and Punishment
 - 8. The Scarlet Setter
 - 9. Of Human Bandage
 - 10. The Invisible Can

Artists of the book

Meet three creative talents who transform paper and print

BY JESSICA YADEGARAN

A book artist is someone who elevates bookmaking to an art form using little more than ink, paper and a wildly creative imagination.

The Bay Area is known internationally as a hub for these handmade, architectural artist books. In addition to the region's long history of printmaking and its thriving academic book arts programs, we are home to CODEX, one of the world's largest biennial exhibitions of artists' books, fine press books and other handmade publications.

Each spring, book artists from Santa Cruz to Sebastopol and around the world gather at the Craneway Pavilion in Richmond to display their work for the public. CODEX may look like aisle upon endless aisle of exhibitor tables — a whopping 203 in 2022 — but once you stop, chat with a book artist and spend some time with their work, a whole world opens up.

We caught up with three Bay Area book artists who exhibited at the most recent CODEX to talk about their materials, inspiration and often fascinating processes. Here are their stories.



Artist Bryan Kring, pictured at left, at his studio in Oakland.

ARIC CRABB/STAFF

Bryan Kring

OAKLAND

Bugs. Warts. An all-seeing eye. East Bay book artist Bryan Kring starts with a simple object or idea and unleashes stories and pictures that are at once playful and profound, often with moving parts, windows and other surprises.

Kring, a printmaker and graphic designer, found his way to paper art-making via painting and drawing — he holds a BFA in both from the San Francisco Art Institute — and creative writing.

“I had a hard time parting with my paintings,” says Kring, who lives in Alameda and works in a West Oakland studio, where he has tinkered with laser-printed text for nearly 20 years. “With paper, you don’t have that problem. You can always have multiples. And there is a certain intimacy that is created with the object when you can hold it in your hand.”

Darkly humorous stories about transformation are his specialty. “Peephole,” for example, is a “Twilight Zone”-like tale told from the vantage point of a door’s peephole about how simple obsessions can have horrible consequences. In “Wart,” a 4- by 4-inch compressed booklet, Kring befriends a wart on his finger which turns into an eye,



The art book "Peephole" is one of Bryan Kring's best-sellers. ARIC CRABB/STAFF

becomes his drinking buddy and then his mortal enemy. And battery-operated "Lunae Secutor" is about a fictional caterpillar, which upon realizing it can't metamorphose into a butterfly, becomes depressed and seeks solace in the moon.

"I like giving personalities to everything," says Kring, who hand-painted the boxlike book's fuzzy purple caterpillar. Turn a wooden handle, and the caterpillar walks toward a paper moon illuminated by a hidden LED light.

"Peephole" and "Wart" are among his best sellers — Kring's books sell on Etsy for \$10 and up. Along with "Bug," which is as much about an internal change as it is "the natural desire to kill anything with six legs," these books connect with people, he says.

Currently, he's working on a series about a research scientist stranded in the Arctic Circle. By story's end, he'll discover his role in the universe and maybe the meaning of life. "Or he's going to make peace with the fact that there is none," Kring says. "By doing these books, I sort of answer these questions for myself, too."

Paloma Lucas

SAN FRANCISCO



Paloma Lucas, right, holds a micro book version of "Goodnight Menopause," a parody and adaptation of "Goodnight Moon" by Margaret Wise Brown, at her studio at Cubberley Community Center in Palo Alto.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF



Book artist Paloma Lucas is dedicated to making these teeny micro books at her studio at the Cubberley Community Center in Palo Alto. DAI SUGANO/STAFF

Ever held a micro book in your hand? There is a whole society of book artists dedicated to making these teeny, 1½-inch books. Paloma Lucas of San Francisco is among them.

After a career in finance, the Spanish-born artist found her medium while taking a book-binding class at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills. She discovered micro books and miniature books — those can be a tad larger — not long after. The process for making these minute readers is tedious: Lucas wears magnifying glasses, uses a miniature book press and sews the little pages together by hand.

"I like it, because it's something you can bring in your pocket and share with people," she says. "It's kind of sculptural."

Her first book, "Goodnight Menopause," is a parodic adaptation of the Margaret Wise Brown classic, "Goodnight Moon." Instead of bidding goodnight to the moon and mittens, the narrator addresses a fan, a scale and "a little nip of wine." The poem is by Barbara Younger; the illustrations and bookbinding are Lucas' work.

"I try to find topics that make me happy and make me laugh," she says.

Her larger pieces are playful, too. "Let's Play Pool," an experiment in triangular box making, offers billiards in a box. Inside a green felt-lined box that resembles a billiards rack, there are nine 2-inch mini books, each colored like billiard balls. Those accordion-style books are inscribed with facts about the game and can be read by turning the pages and rotating their sides. The project was inspired by Lucas' memories of playing pool in Spain.

"Artist books represent a bridge back to the past when books were unique items cherished by their owners," she says. "They also represent a connection to the future where common books are gradually phased out, and these unique creations again become cherished keepsakes."



Nanette Wylde

REDWOOD CITY

Retired art professor and interdisciplinary artist Nanette Wylde always included artist books in her coursework — even for students in her digital media courses.

“People like to have something in their hands,” says Wylde, an educator for 26 years. “There’s so much screen, and it’s ephemeral. Digital doesn’t have the same richness as something that’s handbound.”

Wylde should know. The Redwood City book artist and writer has combined the two pursuits into socially reflective pieces for 30 years. “Redacted Babar: ABC Free” is a meditation on the endangered populations of African and Asian elephants. The 13 landscape images in “From This Earth,” a collaboration with her husband and book artist Kent Manske, are photographs of a tree stumplike paper-pulp sculpture the duo created from local craft industry byproducts such as glass, flower petals, hair, denim, grape skins and oyster shells.

They conceived and created the project during the 2020 shelter-in-place, when wildfires were raging across California.

“It’s about a person moving through a decimated landscape to find a place that is livable again,” Wylde says.

“You Are the Tree,” the 7-foot diameter replica of an old growth, coast redwood stump, is on display at the glass-encased Redwood City Art Kiosk on Broadway.

And “Over It,” a relief-printed folderlike book, features 13 ways to help actualize one’s agency in turbulent times. Wylde created the book as a response to the political events following the 2016 election. It includes a button that says “create,” poems by Rumi and Rilke and reminders to read, eat healthy and make someone laugh.

The Bay Area is known internationally as a hub for handmade, architectural artist books.

“It’s something to help people remember how to take care of themselves,” says Wylde, whose artist books and electronic works are included in collections from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco to the University of Oxford.

Now celebrating its 10th anniversary with a new edition, Wylde’s most successful artist book to date, “Gray Matter Gardening: How to Weed Your Mind,” is also a self-help. Letterpress printed on Kozo paper, which has

fuzzy, weedlike embellishments, and hand sewn with a French link stitch, the self-reflection how-to invites readers to create an environment conducive to weeding, determine what is and is not a weed, understand and remove the weeds and repeat as needed.

“I’m a gardener, and I’m a thinker,” Wylde says. “The reason I make books is because books have made me who I am. I really appreciate the exploratory experience of them.” ■

“Between Us Two,” by book artist Nanette Wylde, right, holds art at her home studio in Redwood City.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF



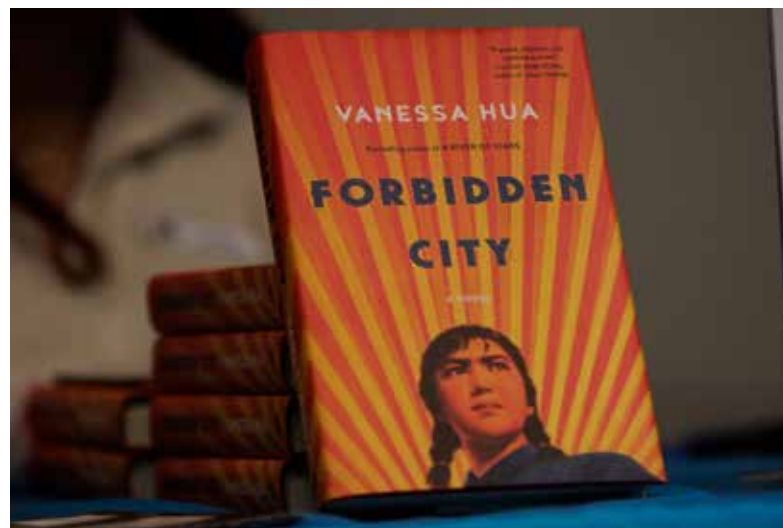
Hua's 'Forbidden City' heroine navigates seduction, treachery and escape in Mao's Communist China

BY MARTHA ROSS

In the whirlwind flashback of Vanessa Hua's novel "Forbidden City" (Ballantine Books, \$28), 15-year-old Mei is whisked away from her rural village to Mao Zedong's sumptuous residence in Beijing in 1965, taught some of the revolutionary leader's favorite ballroom dance moves and submits to becoming his lover.

The novel follows the quick-witted Mei as she also becomes the 72-year-old dictator's confidante, then grows disillusioned after he launches his final bid to stay in power, the violent, 10-year "class struggle" that was known as the Cultural Revolution.

While Mei's first sexual encounter with Mao, only known in the book as The Chairman, leaves her shocked and confused, she's also



"Forbidden City," a new book by Vanessa Hua, right, follows the quick-witted Mei as she becomes the confidante to Mao Zedong. DAI SUGANO/STAFF

an idealistic young revolutionary devoted to the cult of Mao. She's mostly flattered that he's singled her out, above all the other peasant girls who've been brought to entertain him at the Lake Palaces, the former imperial garden adjacent to the Forbidden City.

In "Forbidden City," Hua excavates a little-known side of Mao's personal life that doesn't square with the godlike image Communist Party propagandists have long projected of him. He is portrayed, instead, like other famously brutal men in history who included their intimate partners in their cruelty. However, the focus in "Forbidden City" isn't on Mao. It's on the difficult lives of the young women, embodied by the resourceful Mei, who are seduced into believing it's their highest duty to serve him.

"I think of Mei as a survivor, someone who finds her way through," Hua said. "That's not saying it's easy. Her survival comes at enormous cost that she contemplates through the novel."

By examining these women's choices, Hua offers a view of 20th-century history and humanity that's not often examined. Hua comes to her story as the East Bay-reared daughter of immigrants, one who wrote about the survivors of Mao's Cultural Revolution and the Chinese diaspora for the San Francisco Chronicle.

During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 until his death in 1976, Mao pushed to preserve communism and his own power by purging society of capitalism and traditional elements. Millions were killed, exiled, imprisoned or tortured — including Mao's enemies — for representing values seen as falling short. Chaos



reigned as “students turned on their teachers, or neighbors turned on neighbors, because if you could turn someone in, you could prove that you were doing something for the revolution,” Hua said.

When the novel opens in 1976, Mei is trying to live anonymously in San Francisco’s Chinatown, working as a waitress and privately nursing her trauma and guilt. News that Mao has died prompts celebrations in the streets, while Mei reckons with her past.

Hua was inspired to create Mei after seeing a photo of Mao surrounded by giggling teenage girls in tight sweaters, although not much information was available about them. Mao’s personal physician called the leader “a monstrous lecher” and wrote that for most Chinese, “a mere glimpse of Mao standing atop Tiananmen was a coveted opportunity Imagine, then, what it meant for a girl to be called in Mao’s chambers to serve his pleasure.”

Hua said these girls became his clerks and secretaries, handling his reams of official correspondence or even translating what he said, after his speech became garbled by illness. While they became at best footnotes in history, Hua wondered if they also influenced Mao to engage China’s youth in his Cultural Revolution.

“I believe that fiction flourishes when the official records end,” Hua said.

To the Chinese under Mao’s leadership, he was a muscular, heroic visionary who united their vast country under Communist rule in 1949 and kept promising to bring happiness and prosperity. While still in her village, Mei recalls a story about his ascetic commitment to the class struggle



— that he no longer needed to eat, drink or defecate, because he’s actually as “pure as jade.”

Born the same year that the Communists came to power, Mei gladly travels to Beijing to serve Mao. “She reflects teenagers everywhere, who want to leave home and be a part of changing the world,” Hua said.

For Mei, the “bad old days” include the Great Leap Forward, Mao’s disastrous program to quickly industrialize the country,

Vanessa Hua, the author of “Forbidden City,” reads her book at an event at Hammer Theater Center in San Jose.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

which instead led to widespread famine and the deaths of up to 15 million people. In sticking to Mei’s perspective, the novel reflects how party propaganda insulates her from any information that could connect Mao’s policies to the people she remembers dying in her village.

Mei’s first whisper of disillusionment comes when she meets the Chairman in person, his “leathery” hand guiding her to the dance floor as he takes her in his arms. One of the few things known about Mao’s private life during his lifetime was that he was a fan of ballroom dance. But Mei, herself not the best dancer or the prettiest girl in the room, finds he’s “terrible” and keeps stepping on her toes.

The man “who ruled over all but the sun and stars” also wasn’t the gentlest of lovers. During Mei’s months with him, she remains devoted even as he’s revealed to be a moody insomniac with mysterious tremors and

an aversion to work. He instead swims, listens to jazz records and hatches plots to stay in power.

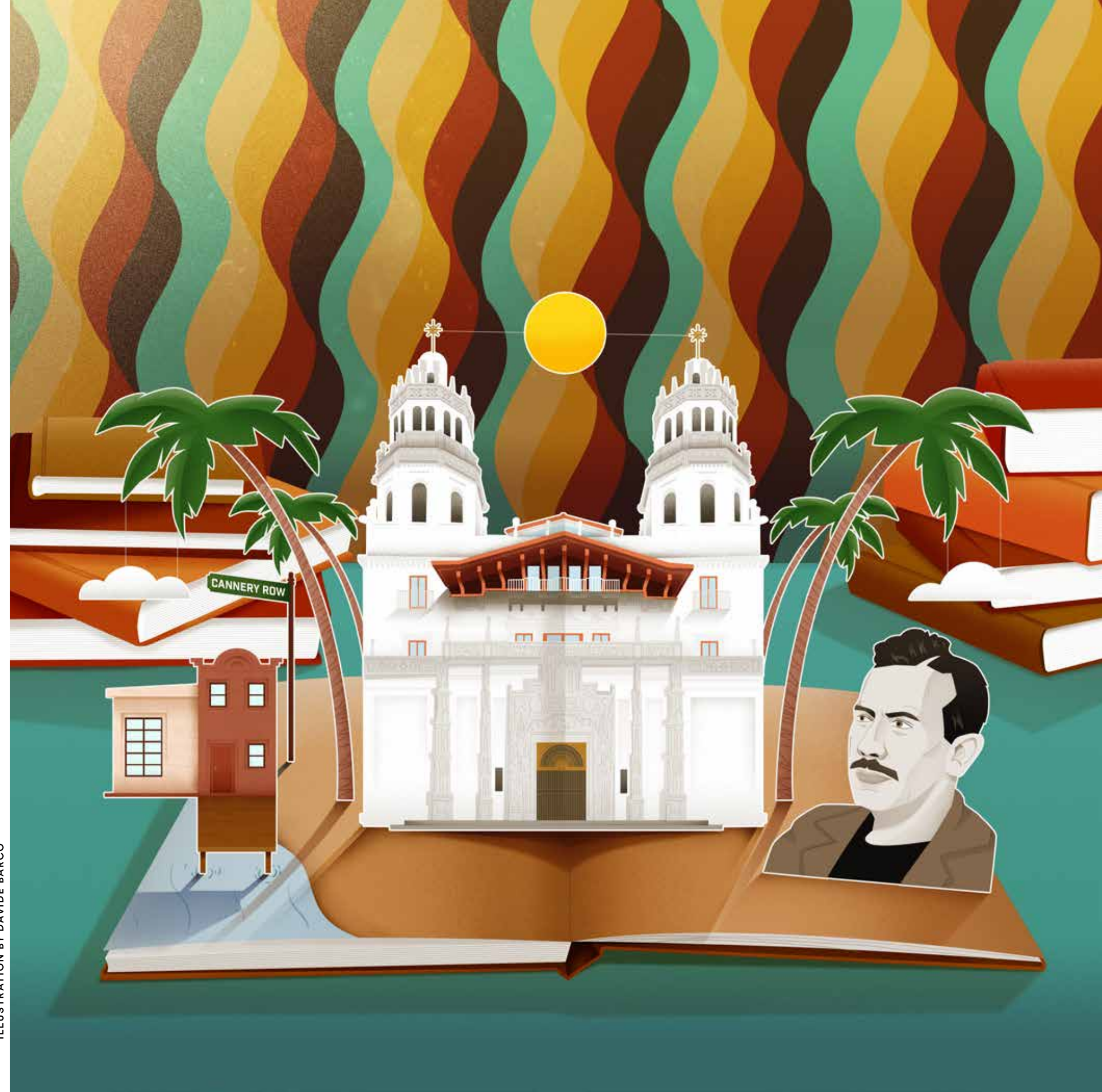
Mei’s disillusionment flowers amid the Cultural Revolution, as she witnesses youthful Red Guards publicly torture and humiliate people, including a former dance teacher who at one time was in Mao’s inner circle.

If Mei’s disillusionment stands as an allegory for how the Chinese people distanced themselves from Mao after his death, current events show that Mao worship is back, according to Hua and news accounts. It’s encouraged by President Xi Jinping, China’s current strongman, and by Generation Zers, who feel left behind by widening social inequality.

“We have a bit of that in our own country as well,” Hua said. “It has to do with circumstances. If there is great uncertainty somewhere, people will look towards someone who claims to have the answers and promises something better.” ■

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