In the Margins

November 2021

table of contents.

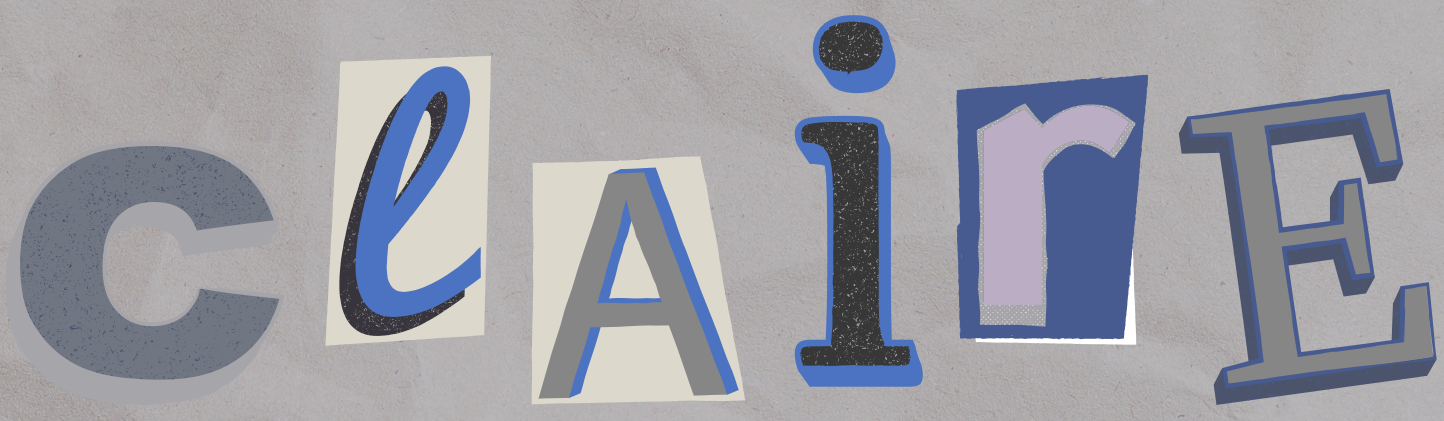
cover art by
Sofia Grosso

"Think Different": Tamara Shopsin's *LaserWriter II*

by Regan Mies

Nineteen-year-old Claire is a shy, aimless teen in search of a job. In the opening pages of Tamara Shopsin's *LaserWriter II*, we ride alongside her in a crowded elevator and feel her pull a thin, papery ticket with "29" inked across its surface after she arrives at the correct floor. When her number is called, we turn the page and enter into a folkloric origin story of the modern tech age.

It's no spoiler that Claire lands the job at one of Manhattan's first indie Mac repair stores, Tekserve, "a space that was as if Santa's workshop had made love to a Rube Goldberg machine," and, I learn after googling, actually a real (and deeply beloved) shop that existed on 23rd Street in the early '90s. What follows is a bright, endearing, and unexpectedly whimsy-filled journey through fragments of Claire's time repairing Quadra 700s, PowerBook 1400s, LC 4500s, Apple Silentypes, and the book's 45-pound namesake, the LaserWriter II. It takes Claire almost an hour to fix the printer, and there is nothing on earth she'd rather do. She has found her purpose: "a noble calling that helps people make poetry and do their taxes."



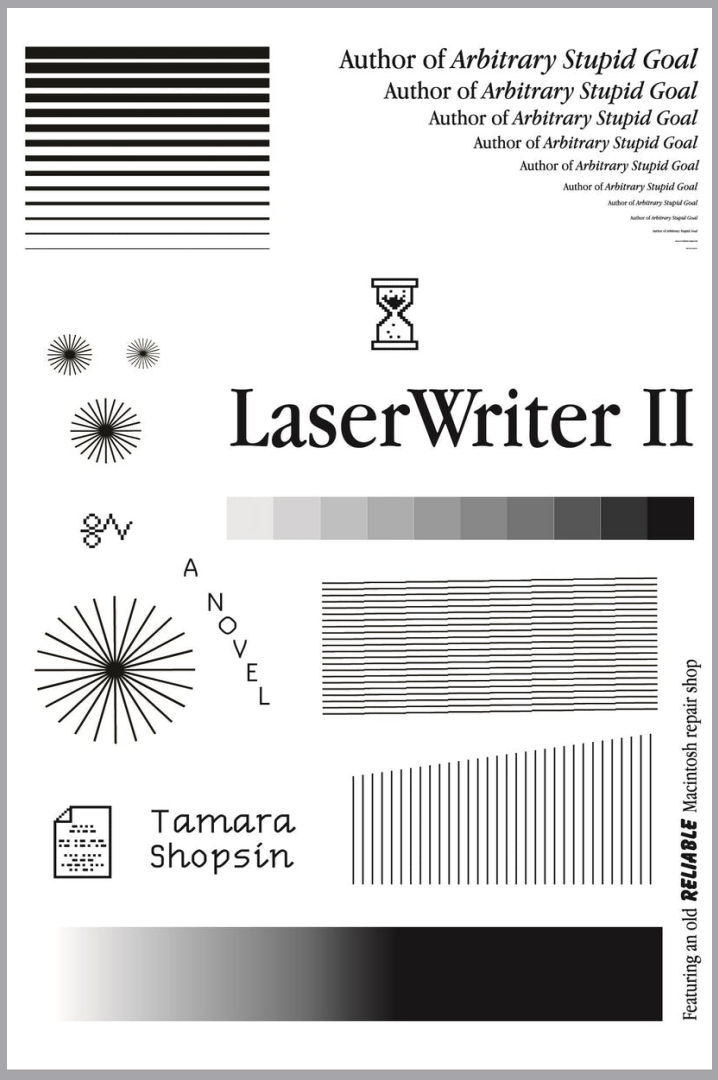
Interspersed between insights into Claire's oft-absurd 9-5 are mythic anecdotes about the genesis of Mac and the personal computer revolution. Readers are brought along as then-college-freshman Steve Wozniak and his seventeen-year-old pal Steve Jobs get their entrepreneurial start thanks to the whistle toy in a box of Cap'n Crunch. In another tidbit, I learn that there was once a time when weekly browser checks might display the three or four new sites that had been added to the internet. With each new story, I feel further indoctrinated into an oddball cult of early digital nerds and Mac fanatics.

With each new story, I feel further indoctrinated into an oddball cult of early digital nerds and Mac fanatics.

Among zapped P-rams and data recon dark arts, the tone of a Mac disk drive's whir is more than white noise, it's a magic elixir. Claire charms and amuses as she begins opening up to her coworkers and customers, a bumbling and wildly human cast: there's Patty and Deb; Derek, Dick, David and Joel; there's Steve Buscemi, Samuel L. Jackson, and Lisa the leopard bush fish. "This is after all New York City."

The human characters aren't the only outstanding features of the slim, 200-page tale. In Shopsin's strange and wonderful Tekserve, the computers' very parts are sentient.

During a vacuum cleaning, a gear is grief-stricken and petrified, a lower fan callous and cruel, and a hook the compassionate neighbor. They shake and quiver. Could they be hearing a theremin? It's the voice of the octagonal mirror, who encourages the parts to ponder Nietzsche's thoughts of eternal recurrence: "Do you want to be a coward immortal?" She tells of Herr Friedrich at the Cave of Mithras; she quotes Susan Sontag. In another repair, a transfer drum knob and fat drive belt are swept into ecstasy.



Imaginative, hilarious, and unexpectedly tender, Shopsin manages to carry the intertwining lives and histories of Claire, Tekserve, and Mac computers with masterful precision; I find myself looking at my laptop a little differently now.

Lemon by Kwon Yeo-Sun: A Murder Mystery that Breaks from the Genre

by Sarah Closser

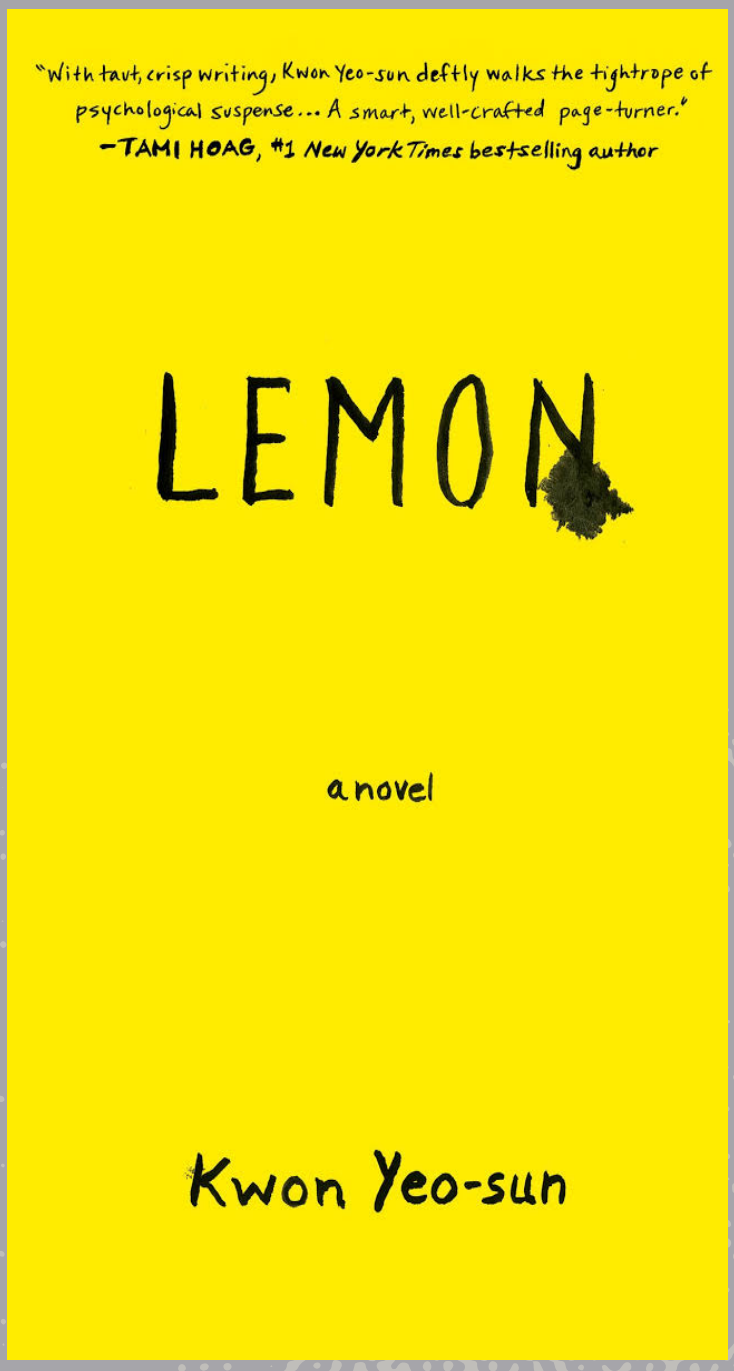
Kwon Yeo-sun's Lemon, translated from Korean by Janet Hong, feels like a literary experiment masquerading as a crime novel. Broken into eight vignettes, and full of psychological suspense, Lemon is a fascinating, albeit confusing, investigation into the motivations behind violence.

In the summer of 2002, as Korea is hosting the FIFA World Cup, Kim Hae-on is found dead in a flower bed of a park in Seoul. Known for her unthinkable beauty, Hae-on's murder becomes a topic of intense speculation, and the local police push to charge a suspect. With limited evidence, however, no case can be made. Told by the victim's sister Da-on, and her two classmates Taerim and Sanghui, a story unfolds of their trauma, grief, and attempts at revenge.

From the beginning, we are made aware that Da-on is an unreliable narrator. She seems to know that she is the perpetrator of her own pain, by creating a dreamscape world in which she relives Hae-on's murder over and over. Plagued by the realization that she may never have loved her sister, Da-on adopts strange coping mechanisms that further isolate her from reality. As her mother attempts to posthumously change Hae-on's name, claiming that it was the reason for her premature demise, Da-on slides further into the bizarre.

She even goes so far as to change her entire appearance to mimic her sister's features, getting multiple plastic surgery procedures and losing extreme amounts of weight. These warped attempts to honor Hae-on are confusing and degrading. We never meet Hae-on, only learning about her through others' memories, but in their eyes she is reduced to a caricature praised for her beauty, youth, and otherworldliness.

Hae-on easily fits into multiple female stereotypes. Da-on knows her sister as the beautiful airhead who has hit her prime at the age of eighteen; Taerim paints her as the "other woman," viciously stealing away her man; and Sanghui views her as an unattainable ideal, detached from reality. But who is Hae-on really? And even more pressing, who is her murderer? Kwon has no urgency in answering these questions. Instead, she seems content to let her characters dissolve into grief and confusion, unable to find closure.



Lemon is a murder mystery that goes against type: The mystery is alive and well, but readers are never given the satisfaction of a tidy conclusion. However, if you look closely, the right clues are all there for you to find, along with a few red herrings to throw you off the trail. Consider the neutral observations made by Sanghui, and Da-on's conviction that her sister was wearing a yellow dress, despite all evidence to the contrary. Parse through Taerim's mad rants to her psychiatrist and a lifeline operator, which are as near to a confession as Kwon will yield. Wonder when Da-on admits she's known the murderer all along: "that's why I did what I did, and I know I'll never be free from this crime until the day I die."

. . . a literary experiment masquerading as a crime novel

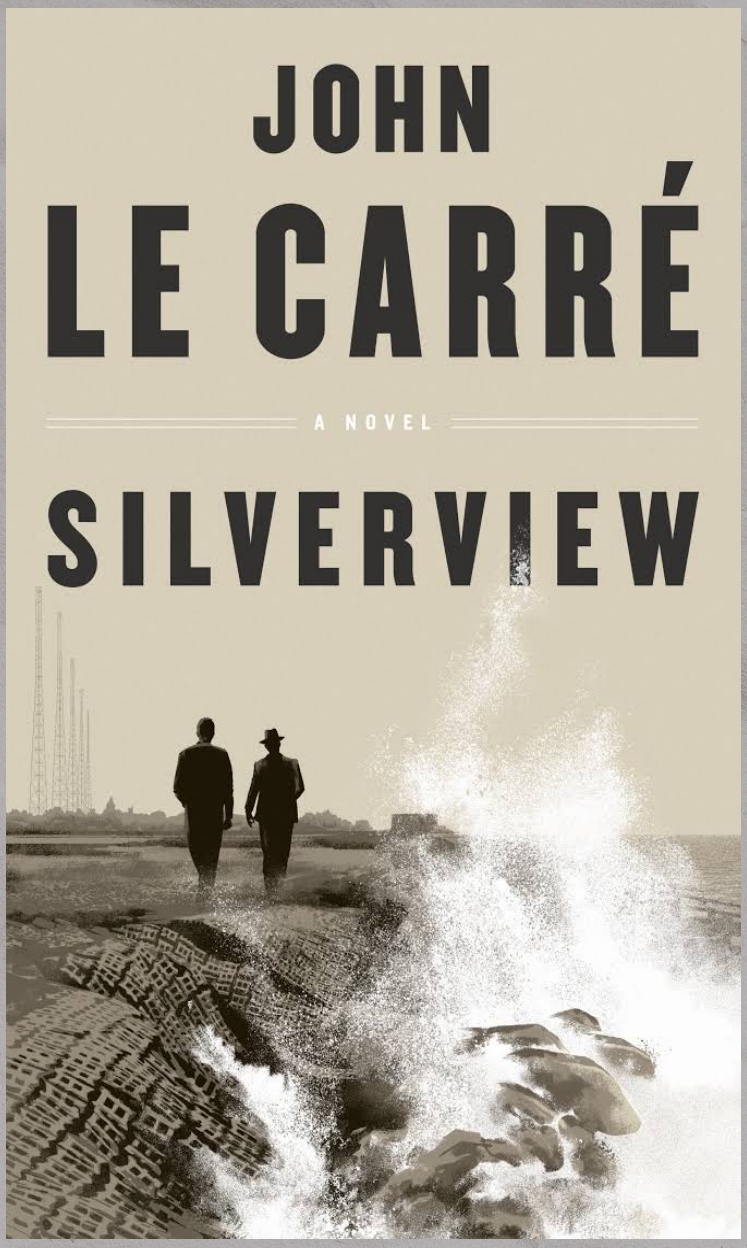
Kwon writes in a way that would enthrall my high school English teachers. In the span of less than 150 pages, she has created a multiperspective commentary full of symbolism and meaning. Kwon's nods to the power of poetry, Da-on's obsession with the color yellow, and the cancer and death of one of the initial murder suspects, Han Manu, all seem to glare with importance. However, understanding every element on the first read is an impossibility, all the more so because they serve as distractions from solving the mystery of Hae-on's murder. Despite Kwon's persistence with ambiguity, one clarity that emerges is how little she wishes us to prioritize the murder. Rather, Lemon is about the three women who have to survive it.

Review of Silverview by John le Carré

by James Yiu

John le Carré, author of renowned spy novels such as Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy, passed away in December 2020. Silverview was published as his last complete work and is a masterful study into the complex relations and characters involved during the investigation into a former secret service agent.

Julian Lawndsley is a former City trader who quit his job to open a bookshop in a seaside town in East Anglia. Meanwhile, we are introduced to Proctor who receives vital correspondence from an unlikely courier in Lily, a young single mother. In a classy spy-novel fashion, Proctor is spurred into a cat-and-mouse investigation, the subject of which is later revealed to involve a retired rogue agent and one of the contacts who Julian establishes in his new stint as a bookshop owner.



Owing to their covert and unpredictable nature, spies often resort to underhand or violent methods in their missions. But how often do civilians apply the same logic in career and life choices? For example, Julian thought that his salary would justify his soul-draining finance career until he learned it didn't; and Lily refused to accept her spy family background, only to be reluctantly recruited into a mission that involved lying to certain close family in order to protect others. Given that this is le Carré's last novel, this sense of crisis over one's vocation, belief and value has special resonance as we also consider le Carré's decision to quit the service and pursue a literary career.

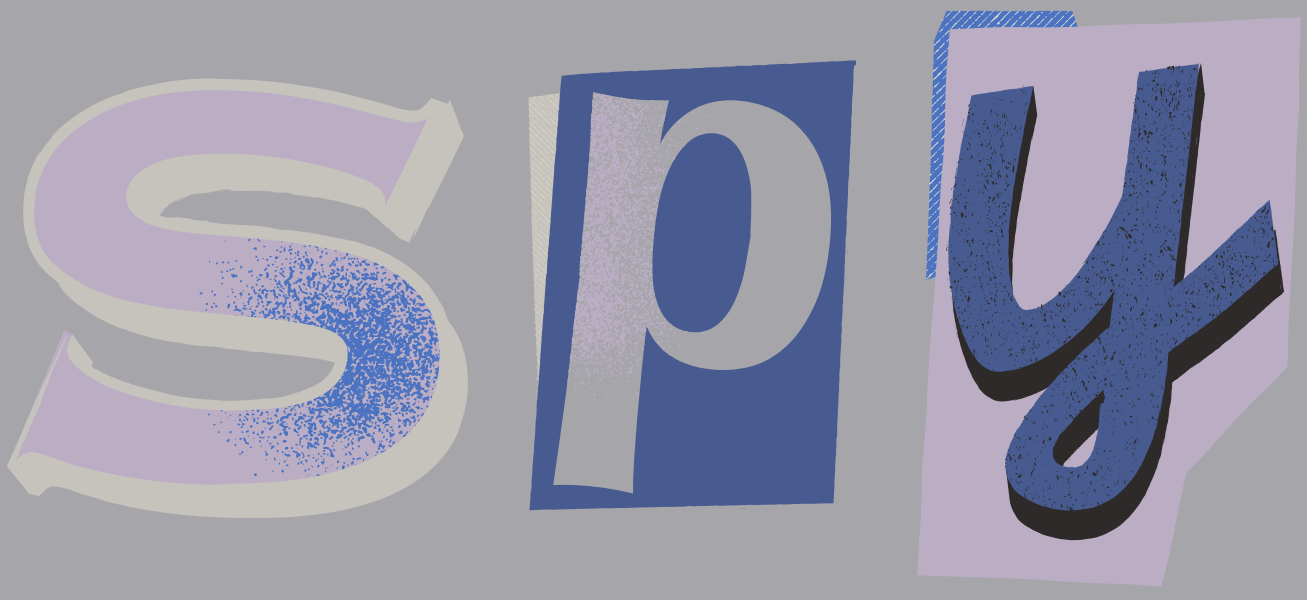
As well as ethics, personal emotions can compromise a spy's ability to carry out a public duty. While Proctor, a classy and seasoned veteran may seem fully accustomed to the compartmentalization of his private and professional life, internal dialogue suggest that this division is anything but natural. The cool and witty personalities of service members in fact reveal a cynicism that can only be the result of many lessons learned the hard way. While this struggle over one's sense of duty is also among the genre's more familiar tropes, it was especially relevant and well-placed here in light of Silverview's large cast of characters and the multiple perspectives they provide with regards to duty.

Besides ethics and duty, the central plot of a current service agent going after a retiree also raises the question of legacy. What is to be the legacy of the British Intelligence Service? As we follow the story, we are hooked by the question: What is so egregious about what the retired agent that he needs to be chased after? In the words of another retired spy that Proctor interviews,

‘The thing is, old boy ... we didn’t do much to alter the course of human history, did we?’ said Philip. ‘As one old spy to another, I reckon I’d have been more use running a boys’ club.’

"‘The thing is, old boy ... we didn’t do much to alter the course of human history, did we?’ said Philip. ‘As one old spy to another, I reckon I’d have been more use running a boys’ club.’"

The Intelligence Services may carry a certain glamour and mystique, but it is particularly fitting that in his last published novel le Carré finally raises questions about an institution that he has devoted his whole life writing about. But we know, at the very least, that the merits of Silverview as an entertaining and charismatic literary work will solidify le Carré's legacy as one of the greatest writers of all time.



Planet Earth is Blue, The Apollo Murders Review

by Dion Ariestanto

Thousands of miles away from Earth is probably the last place you'd want to be when every single possible thing goes wrong. For Chris Hadfield's debut thriller, The Apollo Murders, I initially was skeptical about how well he'd be able to handle a story that promised complexities that included international tension during the Cold War era and space travel gone astray. If you haven't heard of Chris Hadfield before, you've probably at least by chance seen him play his guitar in space, with his video "Space Oddity" garnering over 50 million views. And if not that, perhaps you've seen his viral Ted Talk on fear or one of his many interviews that recount his treacherous experiences as a seasoned astronaut. If being an impactful speaker and inspiring astronaut wasn't enough, I was pleasantly surprised to find that Hadfield is a competent and talented author as well.

The story is a slow burn, abetted by the meticulous detailing of three astronauts, led by flight commander Kazimieras "Kaz" Zemeckis, as they train to go into space. While the initial mission consists of collecting geological samples from the Moon, things quickly take a turn when it's revealed that the Soviets plan to use a hyper-sophisticated satellite that would compromise the safety of all Americans. As tensions rise before the planned mission, the first glimpse of one of many terrors occurs when one of the astronauts

is involved in a fatal crash during training, a crash which is later confirmed to be a homicide. As the name of the title might suggest, this story is one of tension, motives, and murder.

Hadfield, who has logged over four thousand hours in space, delivers a truly unique thriller because of how genuine the experiences described are. This is where *The Apollo Murders* shines—at times, you forget that the story is even fiction, and it feels as though you are alongside the team, communicating with them through command center, running background checks on equipment, assessing solutions as each new problem arises. But it's not necessarily the peculiarity of detail that provides this authentic experience, as too much might overwhelm a reader. Instead, it is the depth and personal feeling that accompanies tense scenarios that create a truly intimate experience. Whether it's describing the shift in G-forces like a car crash, or chronicling nausea that arises when acclimating to zero gravity, Hadfield can describe these experiences in a perspective that truly places the reader in the shoes—or perhaps boots—of an astronaut.

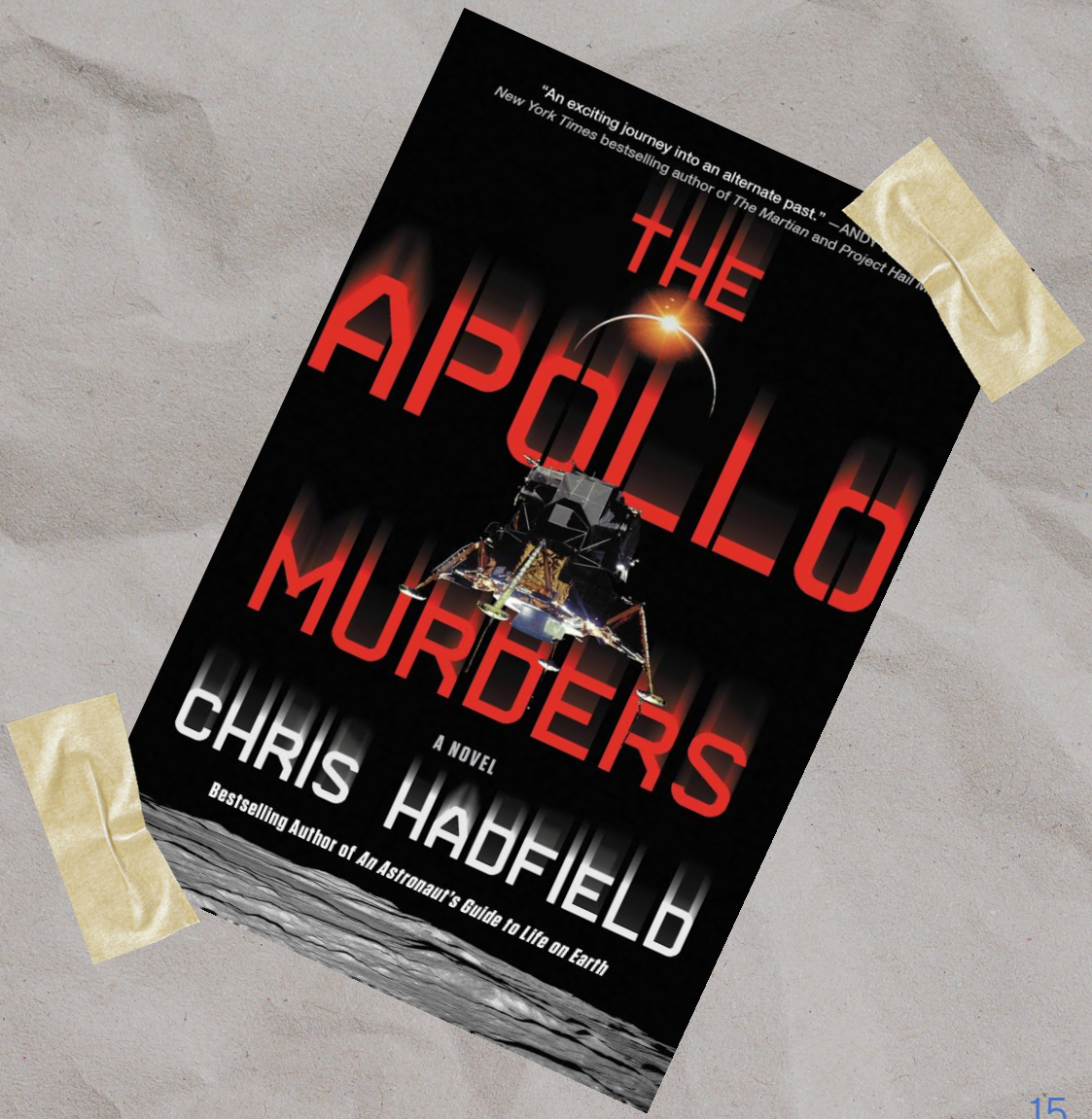
As great as Hadfield is in delivering an authentic experience to the reader when it comes to being an astronaut, the immersion falls short when it comes to the actual dialogue between characters outside of mission-related communication. Although it makes sense that wording should be succinct and to the point when receiving commands from Houston during an important mission in space, Hadfield seems to drag this sort of speech into other kinds of dialogue as well. There are moments where character development is traded with robotic, unfeeling moments of speech

Whether it's describing the shift in G-forces like a car crash, or chronicling nausea that arises when acclimating to zero gravity, Hadfield can describe these experiences in a perspective that truly places the reader in the shoes—or perhaps boots—of an astronaut.

that produce something more similar to quips and lectures than actual conversation. In a way, the characters become these flawless, inaccessible figures without a true exposition into more insecure feelings or doubts. This could have been avoided by developing each characters' thoughts as they interacted with others outside of the mission, especially during the mundanity of life before going into space.

Even still, it should be noted though that character development is not absent, and there are still many moments throughout the novel where the reader can understand what kinds of people the characters are. Furthermore, this "untouchable" quality is likely intentional. After all, the story calls for uniquely talented astronauts that undergo some of the greatest fears known to man in space. If this calls for flawless astronauts with impeccable decision-making skills and perfect responses to anything thrown at them, then perhaps these "superhuman" and untouchable qualities can slide.

Without delving into spoilers, every moment that goes wrong is heart-dropping to the point that, combined with Hadfield's credibility, is like hearing about a true and tragic event that you might find in the news; it's the kind of writing that makes you wonder what exactly happened or why it went wrong. In this sense, like any good mystery, it keeps you wanting more, and by combining his expertise as a real-life astronaut with his ability to harness and also simplify complex details to elevate the story, Hadfield delivers a rewarding experience when clues and motives, at the personal and international level, come together for a truly unique and intimate thriller debut. Just remember to eat light before you lift-off with this novel or you may be in for a nauseous ride yourself.



The Brides of Maracoor -- A Promising Start to a Maguire Trilogy

by Lilienne Kilgore Shore-Brown

Since the massively successful reception of the novel Wicked, now a Broadway musical lauded across the world, Gregory Maguire has cemented himself as a creative force to be reckoned with. The fourth and final book of the Wicked Years, Out of Oz, was published 10 years ago—but Maguire's new work, The Brides of Maracoor, reenters the beloved world as the promising first book of a trilogy, taking place two generations prior to the events of Wicked.

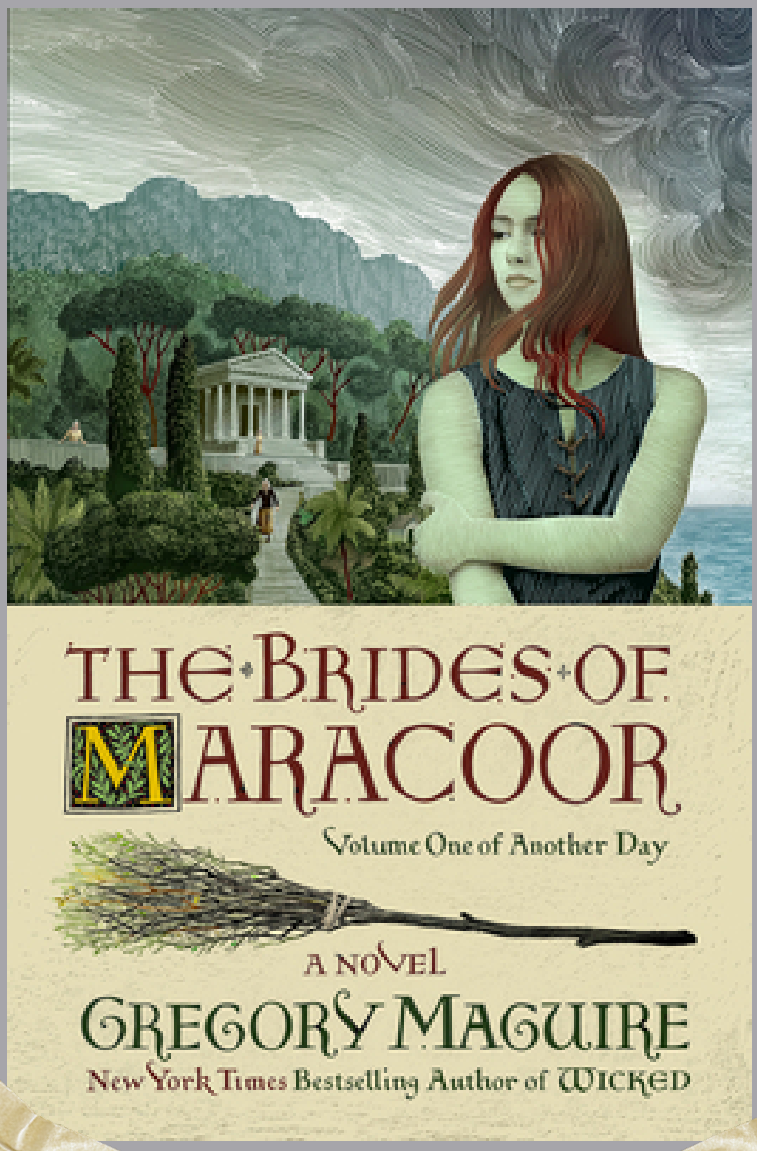
The Brides of Maracoor live in an isolated society on a remote island in the middle of the sea, only interacting with each other aside from the Overseer's yearly visit. They're traditionally seven in number, ranging just as many decades in age, their methodic and rhythmic style of living and ritualistic weaving single handedly holding together the concept of time—so everybody's been told. However, upon the bedraggled arrival of the young and green-skinned Rain (known to the reader to be the grandmother of Wicked's Elphaba), they become eight, potentially threatening the existence of the world as everyone knows it. Cossy, the youngest bride at age 10, and Helia, the eldest bride well into her 80s, are both intent on Rain's remaining on Maracoor, but Lucikles, the Overseer, is determined to remedy the situation so as to keep the brides seven, maintain his job, and ensure the stability of his family.

By writing from a myriad of perspectives in no regular order or cycle, Maguire situates the characters and their reactions as the most important driving force of the novel. The story doesn't have a consistent movement to it as a result—accelerating at times, decelerating at others, and occasionally stagnating entirely as the characters grapple with their own uncontrollable situations. Notably, most of these characters are women and girls, a demographic often misconstrued and under-represented in the fantasy genre by male authors, but Maguire writes them well, realistically, and respectfully. In their scuffles, the brides aren't deemed catty but instead as untangling genuine disparities in their beliefs. Cossy, a young and naive girl, is passionate, opinionated, and impactful. Rain arrives lost and confused but is simultaneously protective and smart. Maguire does all of this while also acknowledging that, in this world (and by extension, ours), their sex is significant and impacts how they're treated throughout their lives. They are impacted by prejudices, but not defined by them. This is indeed the bare minimum for representation in fantasy, but Maguire still exhibits significant skill in portraying a variety of identities he isn't or hasn't been for a long time.

Plotwise, as aforementioned, the novel does occasionally lag, the pacing sometimes halting to situate the reader among the characters or the setting. The novel also does not achieve an entire arc—the first two-thirds of the book feel exclusively like exposition, slow and thorough. However, Maguire only meant for The Brides of Maracoor to serve as the first third of the story, the first establishment in a trilogy titled Another Day.

It's logical, then, that the first chapters spend copious time and energy on meandering descriptions and character-building moments. It's only in the final section of the book that the story picks up energy, that the seemingly banal choices characters made earlier come back around. The last paragraphs of each perspective in particular hold most of the kinetic energy of the novel, leaving readers who might not have been enthralled by the majority of the story a promise—now, we begin, so you'd better keep an eye out for the second installment.

Maguire's language and imagery are what makes The Brides of Maracoor, even without the rest of the trilogy, worth reading—his style mirrors the salty gray skies that hang over his island-dwelling characters, writing plainly and elegantly of the "bruised world" and the "cloudless dawn that follows a downright shroud of a night."



He incorporates offbeat and complex words into simple sentences, granting even the most energetic sequences a sort of pondering melancholy. It's a book that's meant to be sat down with for a while, to be dwelled on underneath thick blankets, not read in the odd short spurt. There are moments when the hypnotic nature of the language is interrupted—a well-respected figure in the world balking "ew," or a sudden allusion to bawdy humor. It is jarring to come upon these passages, slamming the reader with a reminder that this is just a novel, but the passages do provide some grounding and reality to the world.

> It's a book that's meant to be sat down with for a while, to be dwelled on underneath thick blankets, not read in the odd short spurt

For a lover of Wicked as a novel, The Brides of Maracoor is a nostalgic read. It maintains a similar enough tone to that first book in this universe that they feel tied to one another, but it also demonstrates a significant evolution in Maguire's storytelling capabilities. The Brides of Maracoor is standalone from the previous books in the same universe, so those who have never read or decidedly didn't like Wicked can interact with it fantastically—Maguire does reward longtime fans by sprinkling references and tidbits throughout the pages, but not so much so that those without prior knowledge are missing an essential layer.

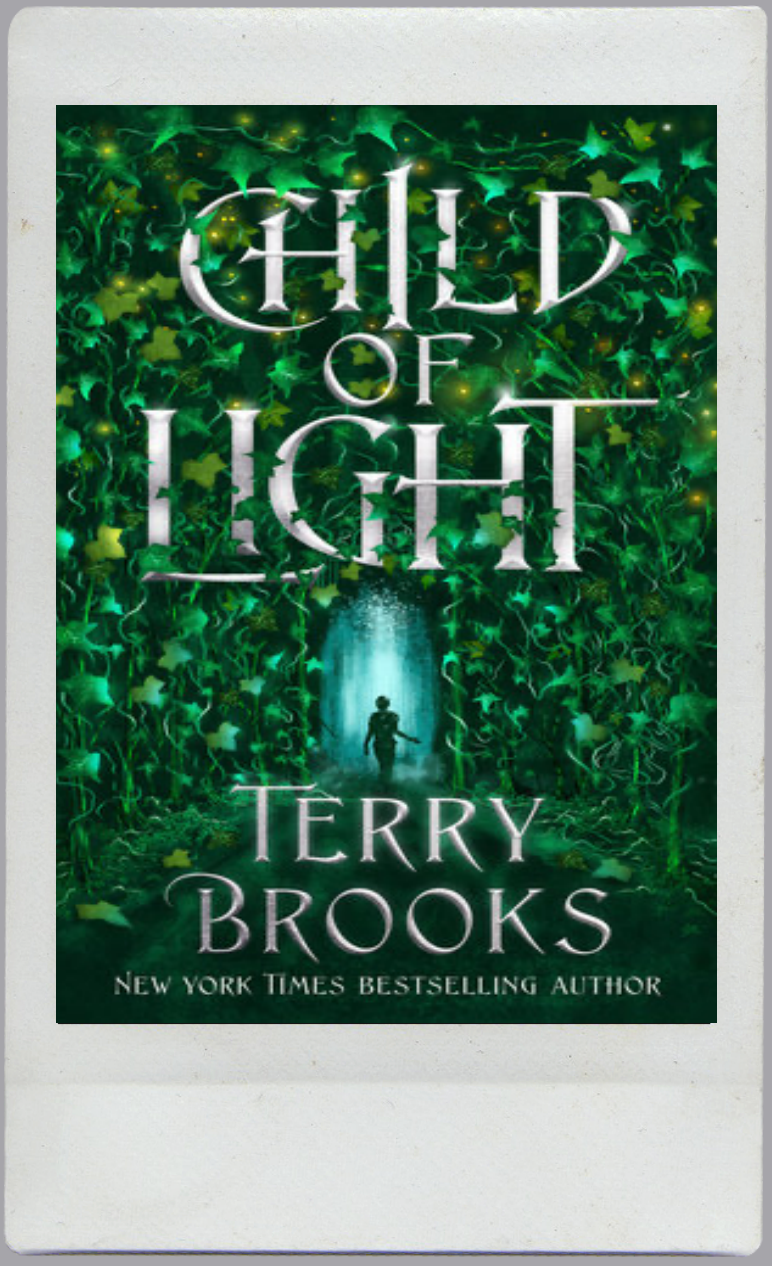
The Brides of Maracoor certainly isn't finished, but it doesn't pretend to be—Maguire's significant efforts toward world, conflict, and character development show that. Every page of description is constructed so as to set the audience up for a smooth entrance into the second book, where the story really starts and where looming mysteries might become unveiled. Ultimately, The Brides of Maracoor is worth reading for any fan of gentle, innovative fantasy and well-rewards the effort in the final culminating moments.

Review of Child of Light by Terry Brooks

by Tatiana Gnuva

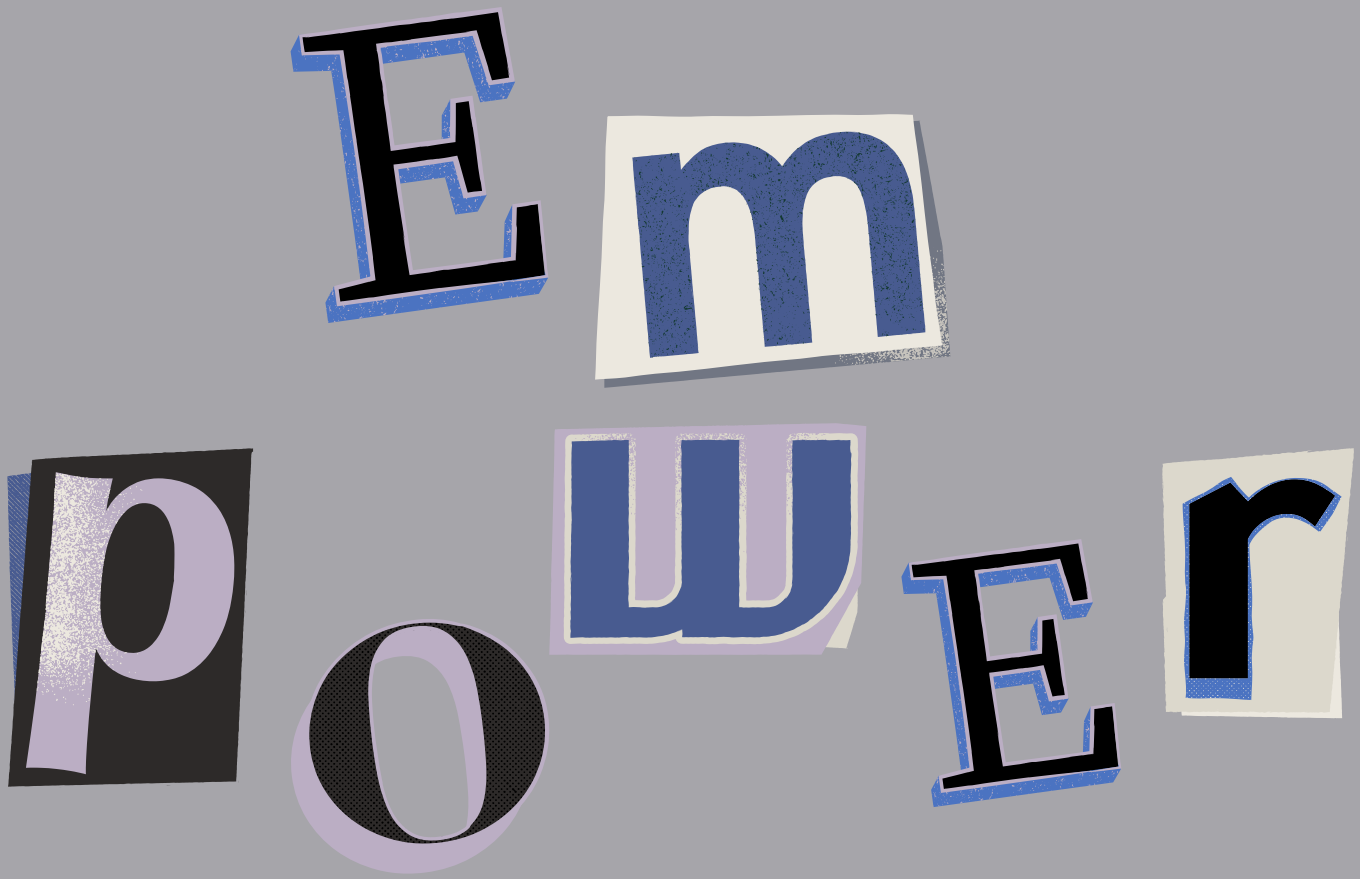
Child of Light, written by Terry Brooks, is a great piece of literature. The novel follows Auris, the main character, as she navigates her journey of self-discovery and overcomes different obstacles, uncovering secrets about her family and her identity. The text itself is full of mystery and suspense; for example, the story begins with Auris in prison with no recollection of why she is there. Brooks is also known as the author of the Shannarah Chronicles, a book series so popular and beloved by fantasy readers that it was adapted into a TV show. He began writing the Chronicles over forty years ago, having started in 1977, and Child of Light has been greatly awaited by his fans, as it is his first published book after concluding the Shannarah Chronicles. There was much speculation concerning the book and whether the writer would attempt something new, departing from the type of writing that characterized his previous work. In fact, Brooks stated in an interview that he did attempt to show that he can successfully do something different, for example, using the first person and writing directly from the perspective of the main character. The reader discovers the world through Auris' eyes; the story is not narrated through an omniscient perspective which I appreciated and made the reading more personal. We witness her emotional turmoil and struggle with her emotions, slowly learning about her past and identity.

The reader cannot help but assimilate Auris' perceptions of other characters and what she thinks about the world around her, which makes it a lot easier for subsequent narrative twists and turns. The novel is thrilling, and just as soon as we think that we are learning the whole truth about Auris, new information adds another twist to the story. She is deceived by those close to her and she has to fight to learn the truth about her past.



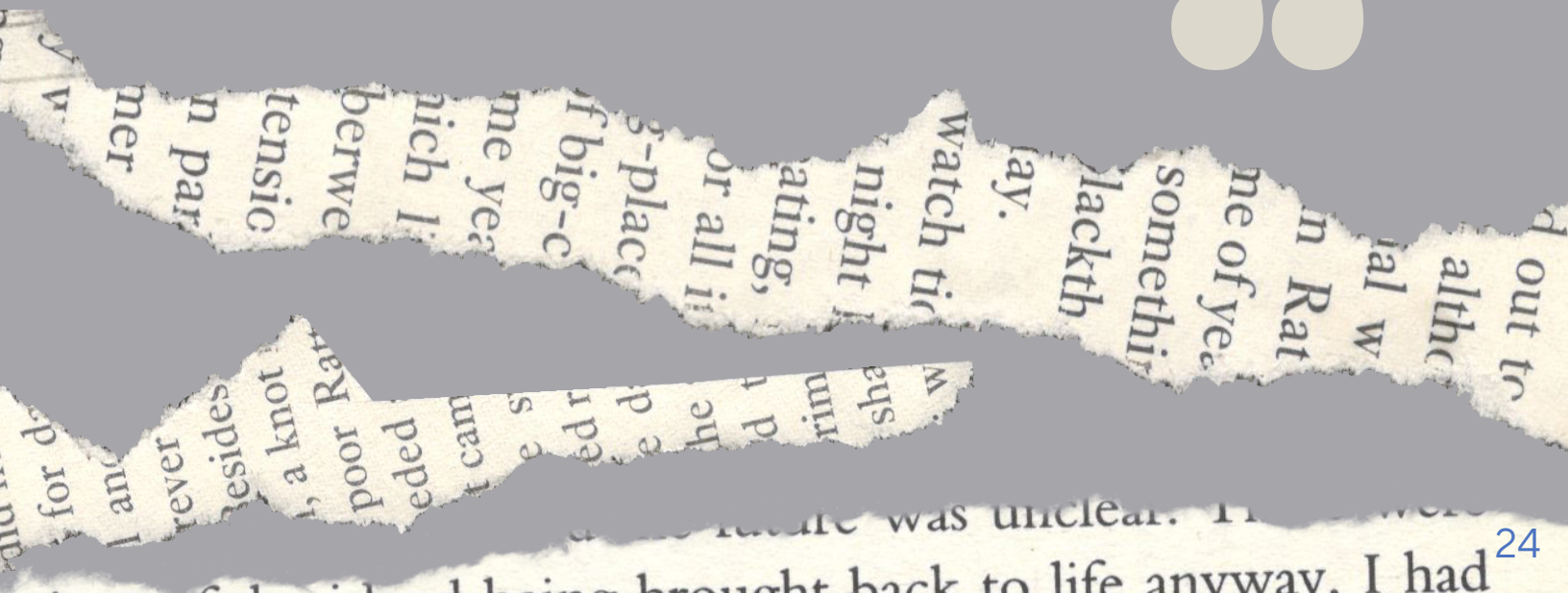
Brooks also revealed his objective to draw the reader in from the very first line with an incredibly dramatic beginning. The book immediately starts off with the character's prison break: "We break out at midnight, just as we agreed. Like ghosts risen from our graves to reclaim the lives that were stolen from us, we flee" (p. 3). The author does not give us the time to ease into the action and the narrative. We live through Auris' fear and anticipation

as she attempts the dangerous escape. Though, the plot slows after the prison break, allowing us to learn more about the main character and witness the development of her bond with her rescuer, Harrow. This portion is a bit slow, but once the plot picks up again, it is impossible to let go of the book. The storyline is romantic and emotional. It is also, however, a tale of empowerment, and I really enjoyed witnessing Auris' progressive mastery of her supernatural abilities. My favorite part of the book was the chapters towards the end when Auris' quest to discover her origins culminates in a monumental battle between the Fae and human world. Auris has to use all the skills she has developed since the beginning of the novel to protect the new Fae realm she has come to love.



All of the characters, especially Harrow's family, are very likeable. I loved the way the author went into detail about each character's personalities, articulating what makes all of them unique and special. Most of the main characters are female, which was refreshing and surprising. I liked the aspect of Auris as a strong female lead. She rescues Harrow from imprisonment and takes her fate into her own hands, choosing to sacrifice her freedom so that he may be safe. I also really enjoyed seeing the progression in the two characters' relationship. Terry Brooks is undoubtedly a master at storytelling and he successfully creates a complex world inhabited by Fae, goblins, and humans. The book was incredibly easy to read. One minor observation was that at rare points in the novel, certain sentences created somewhat rigid transitions from one paragraph to the next. This is perhaps an effort by the author to respect the formal language used by most characters even in his narration.

> "The storyline is romantic and emotional. It is also, however, a tale of empowerment."



In any case, Child of Light could certainly be the start of another staple series. The author leaves the characters on an optimistic note, yet, there also remains many unresolved questions; for example, we still do not know why Auris was in prison in the first place. I also think there is a lot of potential for a sequel, as we still have much to learn about Harrow's identity. The book very rarely discusses his past and omits any information about his biological family. Furthermore, there is also the opportunity to explore the plotlines of the many different characters. I would recommend this novel to any lover of fantasy and admirer of Brooks' previous work. The quality of his writing is consistent and unparalleled, and I hope you will fall in love with Child of Light's characters just as I have.

Cathy Yardley's *Love Comment Subscribe* Creates a World of its Own and a Rich Cast of Characters

by Ruby Zeidman

Tobin Bui and Lily Wang couldn't be more different. He's rambunctious, confident, and goes with the flow. She's organized, slightly insecure, and type A. They often butt heads and argue, but they've grown up together and are part of the same friend group, the Nerd Herd. Their group is for anyone who doesn't have friends or anywhere else to go. In other words, they're outcasts who decide to band together and ignore everyone else.

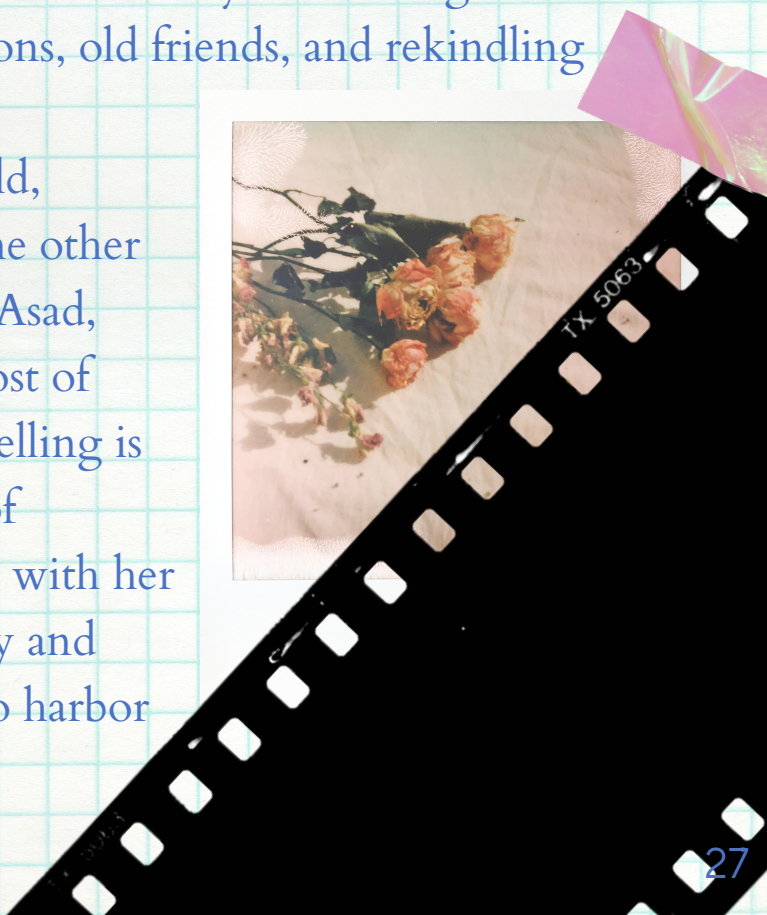
Still, ignoring high school social orders and the allure of popularity is easier said than done. We see Lily pull away from the Nerd Herd only to get rejected from the "cool kid" table. This moment feels a little childish and elementary school rather than high school, but this rejection sets in motion elements that persist throughout the story: Lily's need to be well-liked and accepted, and her rejection of her Nerd Herd friendships.

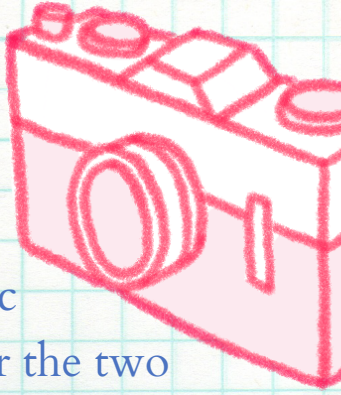
Fast forward twenty-some years, and Tobin and Lily have completely lost touch. He's stayed in Ponto Beach, while she's gone to LA. The only thing they have in common? YouTube. Lily, or EverLily, is a beauty YouTuber hoping to gain more followers;

Tobin, now known as GoofyBui, makes gaming videos and large-scale sketches. As Lily aims to grow her channel and Tobin reaches a point of burnout, they're forced to collaborate. But with their different, often at odds, personalities, pulling off the collaboration isn't an easy feat. In collaborating and re-entering each other's lives, their underlying issues surface, and they are forced to confront old feelings. Can their contrasting personalities clash, or can they come together?

Maybe it's the fact that we live in a world dominated by social media, but the YouTuber scenes and influencer parties felt a little overdone. Luckily, Yardley doesn't focus too long on these points. In fact, although she sets the story up in the world of LA influencers, she takes us back to the comfortable and dreamy Ponto for the main duration of the story. Even if it's not LA, Ponto's just as captivating—trendy cafes, beaches, and people wearing athleisure all the time. Yardley's focus on Ponto shifts the story from being about influencers and networking to reunions, old friends, and rekindling feelings.

While creating this beautiful world, Yardley also takes the time to craft the other members of the Nerd Herd. There's Asad, Tam, Hayden, Vinh, Emily, and a host of other characters. Perhaps most compelling is Emily, who was forced to drop out of Stanford and move home to help out with her family. She lives seemingly unhappily and unfulfilled in Ponto, and she seems to harbor

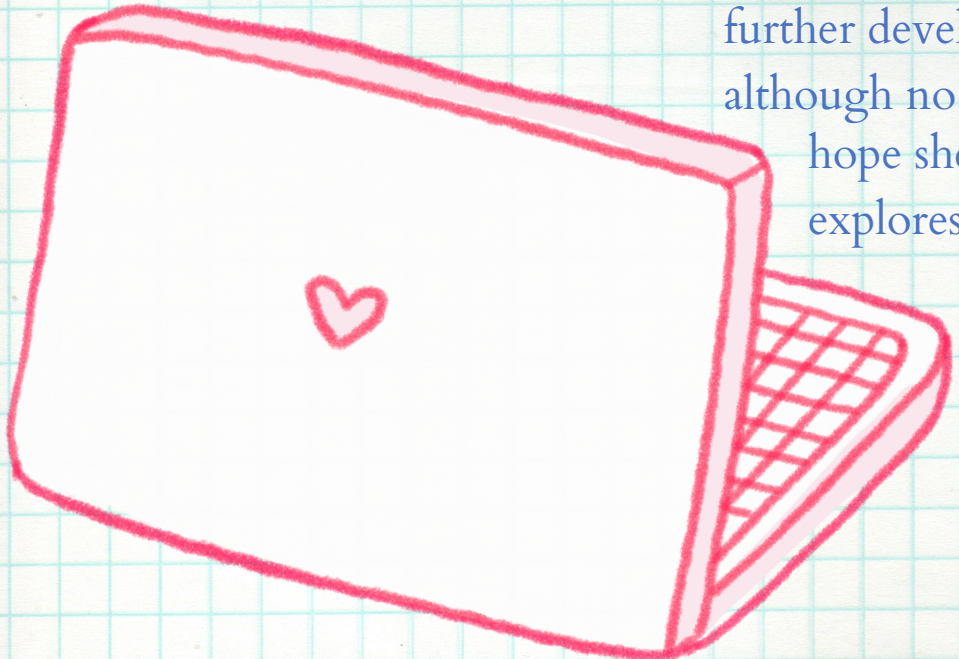




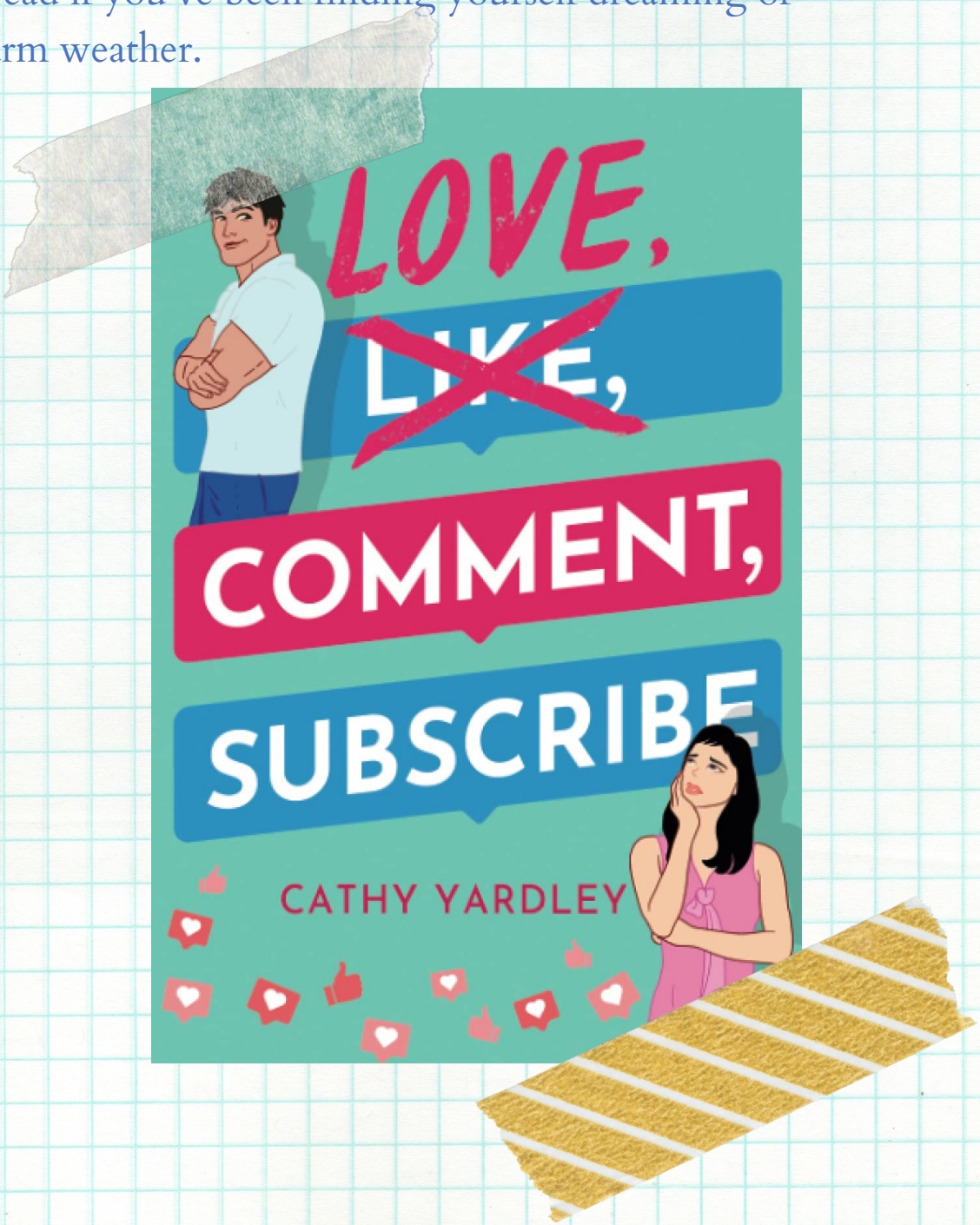
resentment for Vinh, her now ex-boyfriend. In developing all the side characters, Yardley subverts the typical formulaic romance novel whereside characters are just plot devices for the two main characters to get together. These well-developed characters further pull readers into the story's world.

Though there was nothing I actively disliked about the book, I wish there were components Yardley explored a bit more. I would have liked to see her play with time a bit more. She sets the story up with Tobin and Lily in high school, offering sort of a prologue, but from that point on, she launches us into the current day, when they are twenty-eight. Although this is a sensible choice, Yardley misses an opportunity to explore the dynamics of Tobin and Lily back in high school. Maybe it's because I liked this book so much, but I could definitely have done with a hundred more pages just detailing their high school antics.

Perhaps Yardley will play around with time and other storytelling formats in her next book, *Gouda Friends*. According to Yardley's website, this will be the second book in what she's calling the "Ponto Beach Reunion" series. I cannot wait to see how Yardley further develops this rich world, and, although no one has yet asked for it, I hope she writes a third book that explores Emily and Vinh's relationship because I just need to know what happened there.



If you haven't read Love, Comment, Subscribe, make sure to check it out as soon as possible, so that you, too, can become immersed in the world of Ponto Beach. I'd recommend this book to anyone who's a fan of the friends-to-lovers trope. Even if friends-to-lovers isn't your thing, give this book a shot, especially if you like stellar worldbuilding and an intriguing cast of characters. This is also the perfect winter read if you've been finding yourself dreaming of beaches and warm weather.



The Failure of *Aristotle and Dante Dive into the Waters of the World*

by Frankie DeGiorgio

I like to believe that all stories can have a compelling sequel, but Aristotle and Dante Dive into the Waters of the World, Benjamin Alire Sáenz's follow-up to his incredibly popular and beloved Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the World, is not one such compelling sequel. I will admit, I was hesitant about this sequel since its announcement. Secrets of the World was not a book that I thought needed a follow up, but I went into Waters of the World with an open mind, hoping that Sáenz's prose and characterization would prove me wrong. I was sorely disappointed. Waters cracks under the pressure of its extremely high expectations. There are echoes of what made Secrets so special, but these echoes are nowhere near enough to sustain the book. The characters are flat versions of their former selves, the writing style feels like that of a ghostwriter only slightly familiar with Sáenz's previous work, and the pacing is an egregious crime. But worst of all, the novel fails to understand what made its previous installment so successful: Ari and Dante themselves.

Aristotle and Dante are easily the strongest parts of the original novel; their unique personalities and their love story are at the center of Secrets. The first half of Waters is the strongest part of the sequel because it returns to their interactions and relationship, building on where the last book left off. Although the development of Ari felt a little fast, the first half is still carried by the couple's navigation of new

questions about their relationship and place in the world. If the entire book were this, I would not be so disappointed. But after the first half, the novel quickly overwhelms itself with new characters and new situations, leaving Dante in the dust and refusing to fall back on the emotional core of the previous novel. The novel flirts with developing the relationship between the two characters by introducing conflicts, but this conflict is always shallow and irrelevant (with one notable exception at the end that we will get to), never giving the characters any genuine opportunity to grow in themselves and their relationship.

The unsuccessful new characters and the storyline are symptoms of the novel's bigger problem with pacing. Everything happens much too quickly and suddenly, with no single thread to hold all of the vignettes together. Secrets was written in a somewhat vignette style as well, but in that instance the backbone that held the vignettes together was Ari and Dante falling in love. There are two events in Waters that had the potential to be its backbone, but because of the pacing, the characters never get the chance to develop through these events. (A final warning about major spoilers, we're about to get into them.) First, in the last quarter of the book, Ari's dad passes away very suddenly and very tragically. The timing of this death felt incredibly off; it was so close to the end that we do not get to see Ari or his mom reflect and move on from the death, feeling more like a cheap twist than an emotional growth moment. I think if this death was the inciting incident of the book, giving Ari the rest of the novel to grow and change as a result of it, it would be much more effective.

The same could be said for Ari and Dante's "breakup"— the second event. As mentioned before, throughout the novel there are various small incidents between the two boys, mostly insignificant and ineffective attempts at conflict that are resolved quickly. This "breakup" happens––even more egregious than the death of Ari's father––in the last 50 pages of the book. It came out of nowhere and was such a shock that I had to resist the urge to genuinely scoff out loud. Again, there is no growth from this moment, there can't be, with only 50 pages left. It is resolved almost immediately because Sáenz clearly didn't want to end the series with Ari and Dante separated, leaving the reader to wonder why the breakup happened in the first place. As with so many other moments in this book, I had to think to myself: What was the point?

> The novel fails to understand what made its previous installment so successful: Ari and Dante themselves.

I've digressed from the new characters and storyline that I mentioned above, but for good reason. In fact, it is because of the unnecessary introduction of these characters and storyline that these two huge moments were confined to the last few parts of the novel and not given room to breathe. That room was instead allocated to the overwhelmingly large additions to the cast: three new notable classmates and friends to Ari, at least four significant new teachers,

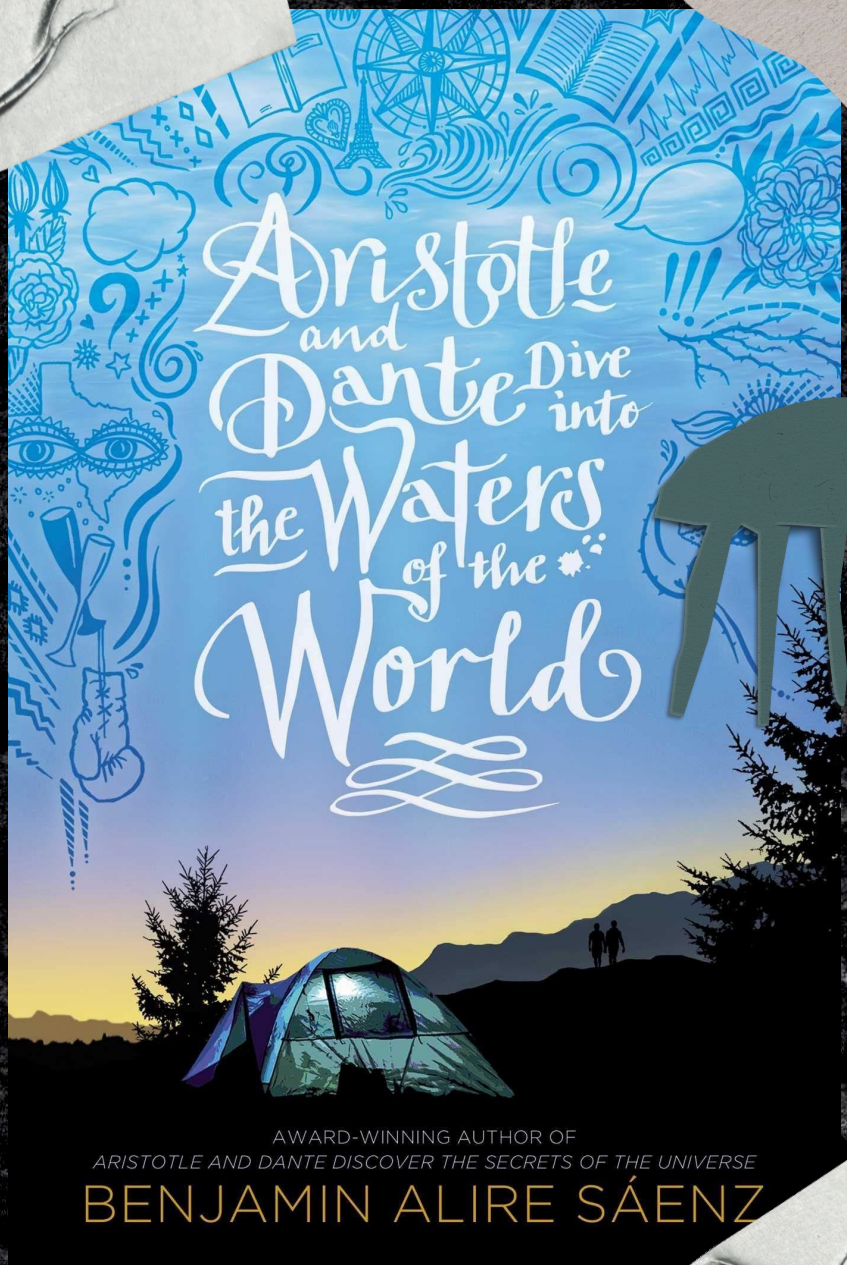
and an even larger cast of minor classmate characters that almost all end up being irrelevant; all of which are enveloped in Ari's "senior year of high school" storyline that takes up the second half of the book. This is where the split from Dante is so apparent, as he is replaced with numerous side characters who aren't given enough care and attention to form their own personalities. Ari's new friends all become echoes of each other, with the same voices and same roles. I am not against introducing new characters in sequels, I think many sequels necessitate it, but frankly all of these new characters could have been condensed into one–– preferably Cassandra because she was the most complicated and nuanced of them all. Nearly half of the scenes at school could have been cut and the same message could have been delivered.. It seems like the main reason for these school scenes was to separate Ari from Dante but nothing comes of this, either. Other than lamenting occasionally about how much they miss each other, they never grow from being apart. It doesn't change anything about them or their relationship.

Ari does have some character development during the time that we see at school, but again this could have been communicated as effectively, if not more so, with half of the existing school scenes. And this character development, by the way, does not end up meaning anything for Ari and Dante's relationship. There is nothing wrong with focusing on one character in a relationship––the book is in Ari's

after all, so by definition it will center on him––but not developing Dante at all in a book supposedly about Ari and Dante makes him feel more like a prop than his own character.

I would be remiss if I didn't bring up the writing style at the end here. Ari and Dante's relationship might have been what enticed readers to Secrets, but Sáenz's writing style was what kept them hooked. And I am no exception. I had faith that Waters, even if the storyline wasn't that good, would carry itself with this same writing style. But, like with every other aspect of the book, I was again disappointed. The writing of this novel truly feels like that of a ghostwriter, and one only mildly familiar with Sáenz's work, at that. Where there were elegant and mature metaphors in Secrets, there were cheesy and bizarre comparisons in Waters. The dialogue and Ari's inner monologue was so childish if felt like the characters were in middle school, making it weirdly uncomfortable when they started talking about sex. It felt like an infantilization not just of the characters, but of the reader, like Sáenz didn't believe we could handle the mature tone and themes of the previous book. It frustrated me to no end, and I truly think if I wasn't planning to write this review, the writing style would have made me put the book down within the first 100 pages.

Reading the goodreads reviews, it appears that there are a lot of people who connected with this novel, and I'm glad they were able to. Hopefully that means you might pick it up as well and find something you connect with, despite everything I've said. But for me, coming off of the life-changing experience of reading Secrets, this sequel is an utter and complete disappointment that disregards everything that made the first book special.



Review of A Dark and Starless Forest by Sarah Hollowell

by Krystle DiCristofalo

Why didn't any of the girls get their periods in The Hunger Games? If this question ever crossed your mind, or you aren't a fan of how the realities of life as a female- or femme-presenting person tend to be brushed under the rug in most novels—for children or adults—A Dark and Starless Forest was written for you.

Written by Sarah Hollowell, A Dark and Starless Forest is an urban fantasy that tells the story of Derry, a teenage Alchemist—code for "witch" in their world, which is ours with a few magical people scattered here and there and generally persecuted a la X-Men—and the eight unrelated siblings (seven sisters and nonbinary sibling Violet) that make up her found family. When eldest sister Jane goes missing and only Derry can hear her voice begging to be found, the siblings must defy their overcautious caretaker Frank, i.e. this book's Professor X, and venture into the titular woods to find her. The journey to do so will take them out of the woods and into a world populated by spirits and sorcery—a place where they just might belong.

Traditional writing wisdom tends towards the aphorism that good writing is life with the boring bits taken out. This advice usually means readers don't see the 'um's and 'uh's,' the stuttering and pit stops. Sarah Hollowell incorporates them without the word boring appearing anywhere in the reader's mind. Irene, as a young trans woman, takes hormone blockers, and comes from a family who could accept a transgender daughter but not a magical one. The siblings' struggles with anxiety and depression are deftly woven into their various supernatural powers, which range from Derry's abilities to grow flowers from the world around her, including her own skin, to Irene's telepathy, to the invisible poltergeist that follows the intractable Winnie around. In addition to the LGBTQ+ characters—including Brooke, who is Deaf and sapphic, alongside Violet and Irene—A Dark and Starless Forest features Black and Mexican-American characters as well as fat characters, including the protagonist herself.

Hollowell's story is not strictly about any one of these markers of identity, but they inform and imbue their characters' lives with realism in a way wholly without judgement. In a literary landscape that is moving at a snail's pace away from using marginalized characters' identities as constant sources of trauma and conflict, many young readers who see themselves in the nine siblings will be able to breathe a sigh of relief. Derry and co.'s troubles come not from what they look like, but rather the magic they can perform—and the authority figures in their lives who seek to tamp down their power. It is in that last bit that Hollowell's writing strays from subtlety. Her introduction of the main cast is a touch The Baby-Sitters Club, and the foreshadowing she invokes will be heavy-handed for older readers from the start.

It is the Hogwarts letter half the population never got to receive until now.

Yet, in a world where critics may condone seeing a Deaf character, a fat character, a same-sex attracted character, and a Latina character in books, but balk at seeing all those traits exist in one person, citing, of all things, lack of realism, heavy-handedness may be exactly what we need. For the 8-13 age range, A Dark and Starless Forest may be the first book they encounter that welcomes people of color, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ community into the world of magic. It is the Hogwarts letter half the population never got to receive until now.

Review of *Machete* by Tomas Q. Morin

by Henry Zhu

After finishing Machete by Tomas Q. Morin, I struggled to collect my thoughts: this is not usually the case for me as an avid reader, as I would usually know how and what I feel even while reading. Yet, I was uncertain of what to make of this collection and of Morin himself because there is so much packed into Machete that it became discombobulating at times. But was this bewildering and perplexing reading experience intentional?

A quick Google search led me to some critical context of who Morin is as a poet. Prior to writing Machete, Morin translated Pablo Neruda's magnum opus The Heights of Machu Picchu. For those who are unfamiliar with Neruda's work, the epic poem portrays separate phases of the unnamed narrator's journey. After traveling around the country, he climbs to and views the lost Inca City of Machu Picchu. He contemplates the ancients who built the city and concludes that their lives were as meaningless and also as noble as those of his contemporaries. While Machete is neither similar nor attempts to emulate Neruda, readers can find traces of Neruda in Morin's writing not only in his craft but in the thematic ideas of loneliness and the transient nature of humanity.

To start, Morin writes with an excellent and ornate style that is purposefully ambiguous. In his intentional ambiguity, Morin successfully constructs multiple interpretations and meanings to his poems. A poem titled *New Year's Eve* epitomizes this, beginning with the images that the title alone can conjure: those of parties, celebrations, and festivity. However, the speaker deviates from this expectation, instead delineating the racial segregation of America by visually representing racial geographies across the country as “dots.”

> “Readers can find traces of Neruda in Morin’s writing not only in his craft but in the thematic ideas of loneliness and the transient nature of humanity.”

The White population dominates the map—compared to the minuscule space occupied by non-White communities—and is perennially expanding, an acknowledgment of the bitter history of manifest destiny. How this is relevant to "New Year's Eve" is not explicit, but there are unequivocally dense themes present in this poem. Morin encourages his audience to explore the subtext and develop their own interpretations while reading between the lines.

After reading New Year's Eve, one expects Morin to not shy away from tackling uncomfortable topics and issues. In Extraordinary Rendition, the speaker references drone warfare in the Middle East, elucidating the hallowing effects of neocolonialism. Through this poem, Morin speaks to the recent events in Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban. The title refers to the practice by the CIA or other United States-backed intelligence and defense programs of kidnapping people (usually refugees or "illegal combatants" from the Middle East during the War on Terror) and sending them to countries with high risk of torture. However, Morin twists this interpretation and cleverly adds another layer about an imagined "extraordinary rendition" of Billie Holiday's music, something so pleasant that can never reach the citizens, specifically the children of Palestine. Another poem, Whiteface, takes structure as a numbered list, presenting successive questions stemming from the single moment a Black person is pulled over by the cops. In this poem, Morin highlights the absurdity and the devastating impact of this unfortunately all-too-familiar experience.

As a reader, I can only wish there were more poems like those. As I read throughout the entire collection, I found its main flaw to be the lack of argumentative cohesion. Morin invites readers to his page with his introduction of compelling topics, which I then felt were not fully realized. This pattern resulted in a few poems seeming just a bit too bizarre and out-of-place to be included in Morin's collection. In Vallejo, Morin describes the ongoing pandemic, wherein people have become unreasonably aloof or xenophobic. The speaker yearns for more "human poems" and his desire to turn back time, much like Superman did in the 1978 film. While this poem is sincere and heartfelt, I was left wondering: "how does this fit into his overall collection?"

Yet another strikingly out-of-place poem is *Duct Tape,* which is written from the perspective of a roll of duct tape. The tape endures wear and tear, but it also witnesses the comings and goings of humans and the blossoming and deteriorating relationships. It is surely a clever poem that reflects on the brevity of human life as opposed to something as inorganic as a duct tape, but then again, I think it did not fit in well with the rest of the poems. This is not to say that the poems are poorly written (in fact they were very exceptional), but that the fresh perspectives tend to detract from, rather than supplement, the collection's tone and themes. Perhaps if Morin had established a stronger connection to the themes, his messages would not be so easily lost in his words.

To me, the poem that best balances Morin's risk-taking writing approach and the thematic ideas is Sartana and Machete in Outer Space. As the title suggests, it contains elements of science-fiction, which might puzzle some readers. It even pays homage to pop-culture icons Jessica Alba and Danny Trejo (a fun nod to the "Machete" character he plays). What appears to be a refreshing break from the heavy thematic ideas, however, quickly subverts the reader's expectations: it becomes a distressing tale of refugees, immigrants, and the atrocious conditions they face in 'outer space planets.'

Perhaps the connecting thread that binds these poems together is the idea of what it means to be a human (or more specifically, a person from a marginalized community), living in the past or present. Yet, I felt the scope of this overarching theme is too broad, so the lack of focus undermines the power of his poems especially since the poems seem so disparate. Still, Machete is very well-written and is worth checking out. It may not reach "The Heights" of Machu Picchu, but it is still an ambitious modern work that Neruda would likely be proud of.

see you *in the margins* again next month!

follow us on instagram

@cuinthemargins

visit our website

cuinthemargins.wixsite.com/mysite