

Featuring 279 Industry-First Reviews of Fiction, Nonfiction, Children's and YA books

KIRKUS

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REVIEWS



**THE BEST
BOOKS OF 2020**

**SPECIAL
ISSUE**

The Best 100 Indie Books of the Year
+ Our Full December 15 Issue

BEST INDIE POETRY



AS IN OTHER YEARS, the best Indie poetry collections in 2020 varied widely in style and subject. A talking 19th-century automaton narrates brooding poems in one collection. In another, a poet devotes his entire book to examining one paradoxical idea—a moving river serving as a stationary boundary. There is verse depicting struggle and redemption, flora and fauna. Here are several standouts.

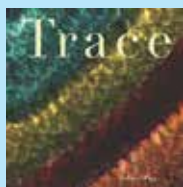
The Miracle Machine by Matthew Pennock: In Pennock's inventive poetry collection, exhibits owned by P.T. Barnum tell their stories. "Throughout the collection, winner of the Gival Press Poetry Award, beauty and the idea of beauty are corrupted by Barnum's huckster grotesquerie," notes the reviewer. "The mermaid is no lovely creature but a monstrous joining by someone who 'smells of linen passed between / unwashed hands, and—strangely—of buttered popcorn'....Uncanny, heart-wrenching, and beautifully crafted poems by an original voice." (Review on page 50)

The Liquid Border by Jonathan Reeve Price; illustrated by the author: Price's poems consider the nature of a real but invisible border in the middle of the Rio Grande. Our reviewer says, "Price's volume seeks to map that liminal space in imagery and verse. Roughly half the book is given over to digital images; in them, the artist stitches together cartographs, photographs, and satellite images, many of them altered, to evoke the strange space between the two countries.... A mournful, beautiful, and original synthesis of word and image." (Review on page 52)

Trace by Melanie Figg: In her debut collection, Figg juxtaposes disparate ideas and images, from the tragic to the euphoric. Our reviewer raves, "Figg's poetic timing is spot-on, and her lines, though often dark, remain powerfully musical....But there's light here, as well, as in an image of goddesses who chew laurel leaves for prophecy, and Figg's contemplative voice consistently casts a strong, soft glow." (Review on page 28)



Unearth [The Flowers] by Thea Matthews: In her debut collection, Matthews begins each poem with a flower's common and Latin names. The author exhumes and reworks painful experiences using "compact, powerful language, skillful technique, and striking images of sinewy beauty," says our reviewer. "A fine collection of works that are rooted in darkness but open in sunlight." (Review on page 45)—K.S.



ENGAGED *Designing for Behavior Change*

Bucher, Amy M.

Rosenfeld Media (320 pp.)

\$39.99 paper | \$12.99 e-book

Mar. 3, 2020

978-1-933820-42-2



A comprehensive debut book demonstrates the application of behavioral psychology to digital design.

"Behavior change designer" may well become a widely recognized job title thanks to this breakthrough work. Bucher, who describes herself as a psychologist applying her knowledge to the design of behaviorally based digital experiences, has created a volume that is absorbing, timely, and (not surprisingly) impeccably designed. This tightly organized book begins with an authoritative overview of behavior change design and then logically addresses how to "achieve desired outcomes." The rest of the book focuses not on design elements but design strategy as it relates to users. For example, one chapter discusses how to make choices easier while another covers how to help users overcome obstacles. Later chapters move into broader issues, such as how technology encourages connections and trust, how an organization benefits from behavior change design, and what the future holds for this emerging discipline. One especially strong aspect of the work is the author's use of numerous examples in the form of full-color screen images accompanied by pertinent captions and detailed descriptions. Every one of these examples is relevant and illustrative of the text. Another valuable addition to the book is a feature at the end of each chapter called "Perspective," in which the author introduces an expert and includes answers to questions that directly relate to the chapter. The insights of these individuals serve to further illuminate the author's own writing by providing a different yet supporting viewpoint. Bucher also intersperses intriguing "Notes" and "Tips," highlighted in color type to differentiate them. For example, in one tip, she provides a solid definition of the term *good decision* while a note reveals the importance of "Accessibility in Design," or "making your products usable to people with disabilities." Bucher's explanations and observations are cogent, incisive, and research-based; they are often in easily readable bulleted form, augmented by the occasional useful chart. By the end of this superb book, readers will get the feeling that no aspect of behavior change design has been neglected.

Destined to become a seminal work on innovative digital design.

Figg's contemplative voice consistently casts a strong, soft glow.

TRACE

Mary ("this was to be my catapult to greatness, the chance to realise my dream," Vives thinks when More arranges the position for him). Ellis' tale follows the adventures of young Vives as he leaves his native Spain and encounters the strange world of England, where he must become accustomed to his new, Anglicized name ("John Lewis of Oxford") and the shifting tensions between Henry and Queen Catherine of Aragon, whose turbulent marriage becomes the central topic of the land. Henry seeks to have his marriage to Catherine annulled, claiming that she'd previously had sex with his late brother, Arthur, which she adamantly denies—to Henry. However, she impulsively tells Vives that the claim is true and also that her baby boy, fathered by Arthur, was taken away from her on the pretext of it being stillborn. As the narrative moves forward, Vives must juggle his own domestic struggles with the possibility that he has "talked [himself] into treason."

Ellis writes all of this with marvelous gusto that's more reminiscent of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) than of a more traditional Tudor novel. Vives not only addresses his diary as though it were a person; it also sometimes seems to address him right back. As a confidant of the queen, Vives refused to accept the validity of the king's annulment and, as a result, he only narrowly escaped England with his life; in Ellis' telling, the danger was compounded by the fact that Vives was also secretly an adherent of Judaism. As the story goes on, Ellis can't resist the occasional bit of heavy-handed foreshadowing. When Vives visits the shrine of Thomas Becket with More, for instance, More says, "See how even the king's greatest friend, his most favoured subject, can fall? But if God is with me, whom should I fear?" Months later, of course, More himself would be executed on the orders of his friend the king. However, the boisterous vivacity of Vives as a character remains appealing throughout. Early on, he discovers that he is "human rather than humanist," and this canny emphasis is the guiding light of the book, allowing readers to avoid Vives' forbiddingly abstruse scholarly writing. With this novel, Ellis effectively allows readers to root for a person that many may only know as a footnote to the story of More.

A fast-paced and richly engaging story about an intriguing historical figure.



PROPELLED How Boredom, Frustration, and Anticipation Lead Us to the Good Life

Elpidorou, Andreas

Oxford University Press (224 pp.)

\$39.95 | \$26.99 e-book | Jun. 1, 2020

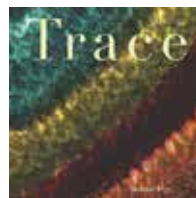
978-0-19-091296-3

A look at the possible upsides of negative emotional states.

University of Louisville associate philosophy professor Elpidorou's intriguing new book looks at not only the inevitability of so-called negative emotions—such as boredom, frustration, and anticipation—but also their worth and even the advantages that they can bestow. Human existence involves both ups and downs, he says, and temporary negative emotions are a

necessary part of leading a meaningful life: "Life requires failures and pains just as much as it demands successes and pleasures," he writes. Elpidorou takes readers through comprehensive breakdowns of what boredom and frustration truly are, using clear examples and an open, engaging prose style to show how they've been viewed by various philosophers, psychologists, and authors over the years. He also effectively addresses how such emotions alter how people experience the passage of time. This latter aspect turns out to be a key element of the book's analysis, because this time-warping effect also helps to foster a feeling of stagnation. Even so, the author argues, such states "contain the potential to liberate us." In every section of every chapter, Elpidorou is rigorously thoughtful and quotably readable as he discusses unpalatable emotions that most people want to avoid. At one point, for instance, he notes that "Boredom emphasizes what it disrupts or takes away. It forces us to see things anew." The cumulative effect is a strong and ultimately persuasive case that when life gives you lemons, you should simply value the lemons—a counterintuitive argument, to be sure, but one that the author convincingly backs up over the course of his book.

A smart and thought-provoking reassessment of the value of boredom and frustration.



TRACE

Figg, Melanie

New Rivers Press (104 pp.)

\$17.00 paper | Oct. 1, 2019

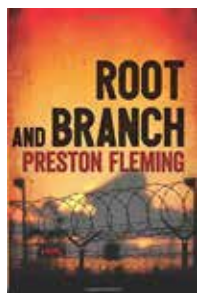
978-0-89823-385-8

In this debut poetry collection, Figg kindles broken, dying embers into a roaring memorial for the voiceless.

"God save the devils, afflicted / and tumored. Speech stalled / in their cursed throats," writes Figg in her deeply insightful collection's first poem, "The Measure of Things." From there, readers are led into a world of remnants; in one poem, for instance, the ashes of insane asylum residents are kept in long-forgotten canisters. Figg is adept at combining contrasting images; for example, in "Stitching a World," the natural world intertwines with the highway, but it's unexpectedly revealed how nature's beauty—represented by kudzu blocking the sunlight—is deceptive. Throughout, the poems' speakers share the pain of the forgotten and the damned. In "Interview With Sister," a mentally ill woman interviews her sister, or perhaps she interviews herself; each line begins with the word "Sister," as if the two are one. Figg gently scatters themes of loss, loneliness, and rejection throughout her poems, and these sharp shards sparkle. Take, for example, "Refuse," a poem with an unsettling fireplace image in which "the birch / collapses into the fire's belly." That same poem also replaces birdsong with the shocking noise of birds hitting windows: "He mistakes / the sounds of their necks breaking / for visitors knocking." There's a fear of insignificance here, too; in "The Trace of Nothing," a woman steps away from a wall and simply vanishes. Figg's poetic timing is spot-on, and her lines, though often dark, remain powerfully musical. In "Once Was," the sound of words melts into a bluesy moan of a

woman “on the ground, the asphalt hot and soft / from the sun and slowly caving in to cover her edges and set her firm.” But there’s light here, as well, as in an image of goddesses who chew laurel leaves for prophecy, and Figg’s contemplative voice consistently casts a strong, soft glow.

Hauntingly beautiful pieces that will leave deep impressions.



ROOT AND BRANCH

Fleming, Preston

PF Press (423 pp.)

\$16.95 paper | \$4.99 e-book

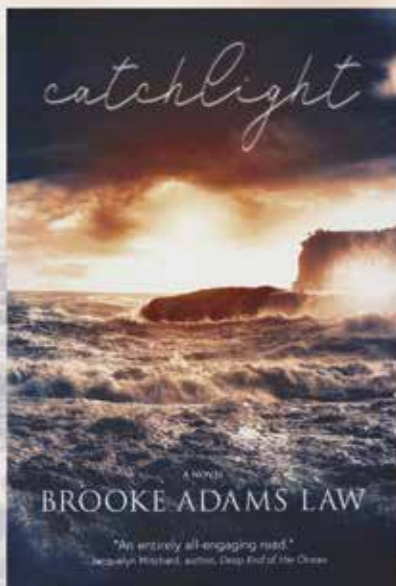
May 26, 2020

978-0-9994418-5-5

A security contractor learns that the U.S. government is using his company’s technology for sinister purposes in a new thriller from the author of *Maid of Baikal* (2017).



After electromagnetic pulse attacks cripple much of the U.S., the country endures an intifada—predominantly, jihadi bombings and shootings. The Department of Homeland Security implements emergency security measures (ESM), ultimately selecting Zorn Security as a contractor for its Triage system. This threat-assessment algorithm rates questionable citizens by category to determine a “propensity to commit political violence.” Unfortunately, Zorn Security CEO Roger Zorn spots trouble right away. DHS is essentially tweaking Triage so that myriad people, including non-Muslims who have protested the ESM, rank in a high category, marking them for deportation. After Roger, who formerly worked for the CIA, hears that an old agency friend’s teenage, Muslim-supporting daughter is missing, he’s determined to find out what’s happening to deportees. This entails hitching a plane ride to a detention facility on a Caribbean island and, later, checking on detainees on another continent. Seems the only thing more alarming than the detainees’ treatment is the government’s apparent plan for the ESM to be the new security standard. Readers familiar with Fleming’s prior work will likely anticipate keen characterization



ISBN: 978-1-949116-18-2



Who Would You Be Without Your Memory?

“...truly an impressive debut.”

“A trifecta of memorable players, convincing storytelling, and well-honed prose.”

—Kirkus Reviews
(starred review) ★

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brooke@brookeadamslaw.com • christopher@woodhallpress.com

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