

KUROWSKI

Fiction

The Friend, by Sigrid Nunez.

This heartbreaking and gorgeous novel is a reflection on the nature of writing, friendship, and our relationship to dogs—all together in a novel that feels like a song. I flew through this book. The novel is told from the perspective of a female writer who inherits the Great Dane of a male novelist friend who took his own life. I have read few if any books that speak in the language of loss as well this one—but this is also about how Nunez captures the process of writing, of teaching, and of how we love and are loved by animals. The book recently won the National Book Award for Fiction.

Hope Never Dies, by Andrew Shaffer.

I found this novel in Everyone's Books, a fantastic bookstore in Brattleboro, VT. Its cover is what grabbed me. Labeled "An Obama Biden Mystery," the cover shows the former President and Vice President looking like a couple of James Cagneys in an old Pontiac Firebird, Obama standing out of the open T-top pointing an "engage" index finger forward. My daughter and I began reading the first pages aloud in the bookstore and couldn't stop laughing. The book is a mystery in the vein of Holmes and Watson, only starring instead this famous American executive office bromance. "Idealistic fan-fiction" is the genre my daughter came up with for the book, which seems—myself a registered Democrat who misses the previous president oh so dearly—spot on.

The Neapolitan Quartet, by Elena Ferrante.

These are four novels, really—Italian novels by the pseudonymous author Elena Ferrante and translated by Ann Goldstein—which took the world by storm since 2011, the final, fourth novel released in America back in 2015. The novels tell the story of the intense friendship between Lila and Lenù as they move through the decades of their lives, pushing and pulling their identities against one another and the Naples surrounding them. Now is the perfect time to begin the series, as HBO just began airing the stunning eight-episode miniseries, *My Brilliant Friend*, based on the first novel.

Poetry

American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin, by Terrance Hayes.

Terrance Hayes is the author of five previous, award-winning collections of poetry. This poems in this collection of American sonnets (a looser version than Shakespearean ones) were all written during the days immediately after the election of our current president. The book—poems of various styles and shapes and subjects, all share the same title ("American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin") and are reacting to the same political and cultural moment, told from a black male voice (a black male body, as the poems continually remind, resee, and rethink)—is an enthralling example of the power and purpose of art. I keep returning to it.

A Cruelty Special to Our Species, by Emily Yoon.

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I read this debut collection of poetry by Emily Yoon in a burst while standing in the aisle by the poetry section of the Lancaster Barnes & Noble. The poems in this book are about—and often told in the voice of—Korean “comfort women,” as they were historically called, women captured by the Japanese army during World War II and forced into prostitution. The poems vary in shape and voice, attacking the subject from a variety of angles: historical, contemporary, narrative, lyric. In her powerful book, Yoon is careful to say that (though Korean-born herself) she does not speak for these women in her poetry, but rather uses her writing to amplify their heartbroken voices, to show readers a history that still needs tending, and a sort of cruelty that yet endures.

Nonfiction

Heavy, by Kiese Laymon.

I haven't read this book yet, but it's up next on my list. (I've read excerpts and author interviews, and am really looking forward to it; the audiobook is read by the author, which I highly recommend checking out.) Laymon is a professor at Ole Miss and the author of two previous books, a novel and a collection of essays. His most recent book is a memoir about growing up black and heavy in the American South with a single. Laymon writes the book directly to his mother, and takes readers from his childhood growing up in Jackson, Mississippi, to teaching writing today as an adult.

G'morning G'night: Little Pep Talks For Me & You, by Lin-Manuel Miranda, illustrated Jonny Sun. This has got to be the perfect holiday gift. Besides being (among other things) the ridiculously talented creator and former star of the musical *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda is also very, very, very active on Twitter, where for years he has been writing these positive, brilliant messages announcing himself with a “g'morning” and later signing off with a “g'night” (along with his numerous tweets and retweets throughout the day). Like millions of others, I loved seeing these come across my feed, a light in the often cynical, shallow world of social media. Now many of the best of these have been put into a small book, accompanied by charming illustrations by Jonny Sun (author of the touchingly illustrated 2017 book, *everyone's a aliebn when ur a aliebn too*).

The Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume 2: 1956-1963, edited by Peter K. Steinberg and Karen Kukil. I just got this book. It is over 1,000 pages, and so I've only begun to go through it. Back in college, I read the entirety of poet Sylvia Plath's unabridged journals, which I think gave me greater insight into the mind of a writer than anything I've since come across. Like many writers, Plath was prolific in all aspects of her writing life, which included her letters. In late 2018, Harper released this, the second of Plath's collected letters, spanning the final seven years of the poet's life.