Fiction and Poetry

Charming Gardeners

David Biespiel (CAS’86)

University of Washington Press

Biespiel’s fifth poetry collection takes its title from Proust (people who make us happy are “the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom”) and the inspiration for its format from author and essayist Edward Abbey’s remark that writing letters is much easier than writing books. And so each of the 27 poems in the volume is addressed to someone—“To Farnsworth from Bar Avignon,” for example—except for the opening verse, addressed “To ___ from the Jewish Cemetery in Williamstown, West Virginia.” The poem, like others in this incandescent collection, grabs hold of and portrays the ghosts of history, family, and place that captivate the poet and elicit lines like these:

The souls of birthplaces like the souls of wishes, Of sons, and sons of sons, who live to set a single stone on the earth.

The epistolary form enfolds the poems—“grounded in friendship,” as the jacket notes put it—in an added level of intimacy. Through them we learn not just about the poet’s sense of, and sensitivity to, morphing place and passing time, but about a relationship, or the hint of one. This description, in “To Plumly from Lummi Island,” reveals something loveable about the Stan to whom it’s addressed, as it assures him he’d “have a kick here with the flickers,” weighs in on the good gin, and shares this observation:

One bare-chested honcho The size of the Duke in a John Ford western, With an open-heart scar was petting a yellow three-legged kitten.

Biespiel is enamored of history on an epic as well as a personal scale. One of this collection’s most lyrical entries, “To C.D. from D.C.,” begins with an image of a “half-starved” protestor in the capital’s Lafayette Park, “ten steps” from where Walt Whitman (“Not in such great shape himself, the old coot”) used to stand. This contemporary snapshot of what the poet calls “a city of saviors,” pours forth, Whitman-like, into a meditation on what it means to be American and what it means to be a man, in love and out of love, drunk and sober, cascading its way toward a note of optimism. It is a poem studded with gems:

I wandered out and stood near The fistred hand of the 16th president As he sat in marble along the Potomac River, And I read his great American poems, And, what can I say, I felt at home. Though I know some anger is called for, Across the land...

And although the poem, with all senses engaged, catalogs American indignities, failures, and missed opportunities (”Half a million children gently swallow, Their antipsychotic pills”), Biespiel ends the poem with the words “we rejoiced.”—ss

Hit by Pitch: Ray Chapman, Carl Mays and the Fatal Fastball

Written and Illustrated by Molly Lawless (CAS’99)

McFarland & Company

The year was 1920, Cleveland was up by three runs. Hit by Pitch is the story of how, on the first pitch of the fifth inning, despised pitcher Carl Mays of the New York Yankees threw a fastball to Cleveland Indians shortstop Ray “Chappie” Chapman. But the beloved Chappie didn’t hit the ball—the ball hit him.

Many ballplayers have been hit by a pitched ball, but Chappie was the first, and last, to have died from one. In her first graphic novel, freelance illustrator Lawless uses realistic artistry and easy-to-follow text boxes to depict the saga of a fatal major league fastball.

Said to be friendless, Mays was seen as a villain long before he threw the fatal pitch. Chappie was a favorite among players and fans everywhere. The classic villain-hero standoff enters the baseball diamond in this real-life story of tragedy and loss. Lawless brings the opposing characters to life. The dark shading in the large black-and-white sketches lends a sense of the tragedy about to unfold. The book paints a portrait of sporting events’ heroes and villains and how these lines can blur with time.

The novel is framed in 20 small comic series, from the birth of both Mays and Chapman in 1881 to their legacies today. Lawless steps back and analyzes the event from several perspectives, like Wally Pipp’s view from first base and the postgame talk with Mays in the Yankee clubhouse.

Many amusing anecdotes, such as a pitcher being struck by lightning and going on to pitch a winning game, run through the novel, offering much-needed comic relief. Although Mays and Chapman are front and center in this pictorial sequence, the author includes a compelling cast of side characters, such as Tris Speaker, Babe Ruth, and Fred Lieb.—MADELINE ROSENBERGER (CAS’14, COM’14)

Muddy, Mud, Bud

Patricia Lakin (DGE’63, SED’65), illustrated by Cale Atkinson

Penguin Young Readers

Bruno & Lulu’s Playground Adventures

Patricia Lakin (DGE’63, SED’65), illustrated by Kirstie Edmunds

Penguin Young Readers

IN Muddy, Mud, Bud, AN INNOCENT and single-minded little orange sedan named Bud is constantly searching for more mud to throw on top of himself. After exhausting yet another puddle—he his roof resembling a peaked mountain of brown slime—he spies a line of dirty cars lined up outside what he believes to be a mud mecca. (Too bad the little
Guy can’t read the building’s marquee identifying it as a CAR WASH.)

Bud speeds inside, singing at the top of his car lungs, as rotating sponges and piles of suds surround him. “Rub-a-dub-dub. Rub on the mud. Scrub-a-dub-dub. Scrub on the mud. I am Muddy, Mud, Bud.” He suffers a minor identity crisis after realizing his mistake. But like any good dog—or toddler—within seconds of being clean he’s once again drawn to the nearest mud puddle.

_Muddy, Mud, Bud_ is a delightful story for beginning readers, who will find the repetition, picture clues, and monosyllabic words easy to digest. Take it from a mother whose squailing six-year-old can identify with the joys and sorrows of finding—and being separated from—the perfect puddle.

_Bruno & Lulu’s Playground Adventures_ is for slightly more advanced readers, but still carries Lakin’s trademark playful style. The chapter book relates the stories of squirrel friends who couldn’t be more opposite, or inseparable. Lulu is chatty and imaginative, while practical Bruno struggles to keep pace in his friend’s pretend worlds.—_LESLIE FRIDAY_

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**A Star for Mrs. Blake**

_April Smith (CAS’71)_

_Alfred A. Knopf_

“Cora Blake was certainly not planning on going to Paris that spring. Or ever in her lifetime.” So begins Smith’s new novel, a riveting account of a largely forgotten footnote from World War I. In 1929, Congress passed legislation that funded expense-paid pilgrimages for women whose sons or husbands were killed in the Great War and buried in European cemeteries. Over the next several years, nearly 7,000 women made the pilgrimage.

Smith’s story follows five middle-aged women as they travel to France in 1931 to visit the graves of their sons—all of whom are buried at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery in Verdun. Strangers at the outset, these women, known as Gold Star Mothers, form deepening friendships and experience an array of emotions as they leave their homes to bid their sons a final farewell.

Set against the bleakness of the Depression, Smith’s novel is expertly paced. The trip will prove to be one of self-discovery for each of the women, who hail from different economic and ethnic backgrounds. Central character Cora Blake, a woman in her 50s from Stonington, Maine, has lost her only child. As the novel begins, she is raising three young nieces and working in a cannery to support them, while still trying to maintain her job as town librarian. She is put in charge of coordinating the trip, and it is largely through her eyes that we experience the women’s physical and emotional pilgrimage.

The author vividly captures the ruins of Verdun nearly a decade and a half after the war has ended. As they pass beneath St. Paul’s Gate and enter the city, the women immediately see that “monumental walls of salmon-colored limestone blocks were all that remained on a street of bombarded buildings, standing in a row like gargantuan books of stone with pages ripped from their spines.”

*A Star for Mrs. Blake* is an eloquent reminder of the devastating losses accrued during World War I—not only on the battlefield, but on the home front, years after the last rifles and cannons were fired.—_JOHN O’ROURKE_

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**Wave**

_Andrew Sofer (CFA’90)_

_Main Street Rag_:

_The soulful, stirring poems in Wave, Sofer’s first collection, are delivered with such economy and clarity they seem to have come to him whole. In free verse or in crisp stanzas with rhyming refrains, his poems bore into the reader’s mind and stay for a while, trailing along in shadow like the book’s cover image._

_In “Conkers,” the verse itself takes the shape of the fallen fruit of the horse chestnut—“O golden child the world will roast and eat”—without a hint of the artifice that had to be involved in crafting lines that swell and shrink to form a perfect sphere. In “Noughts and Crosses,” a child’s oblique reaction to profound loss is rendered with the gut-wrenching refrain: “the day I didn’t have to go to school.”_ A native of Cambridge, England, who studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Sofer is particularly adept at conjuring a sense of place in a few powerful strokes. Haunting and provocative, his poems about Jerusalem conflate the ancient and the immediate in a way that transports the reader to a place that seduces as it confounds.

And Sofer’s words make a strong case for poetry being the best way, ultimately, to convey those contradictions. “I’ve forgotten what I came here for,” the narrator repeats in the stanzas of “Old City,” which describes a beggar in a blind alley chanting a prayer whose words scatter like coins upon the floor.” In the poem “Via Dolorosa,” the narrator and a friend rush an injured acquaintance on a stretcher through crowds in the Christian Quarter:

*Blocked, the pilgrims halt, stare down at fractured elbows bound in splints.*

*Can someone lend a hand? They frown* then shuffle past us, at a loss,

*toward the next Station of the Cross._

It’s a poem that perfectly reflects the observation by Rosanna Warren, a former BU professor, that Sofer’s poems are “reconnaissance missions,” reimagining experiences to create an “emotionally believable world.”—_ss_

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**Nonfiction**

_HA! The Science of How We Laugh and Why_  
**Scott Weems (GRS’98)**

**Basic Books**

_The great New Yorker writer and Elements of Style coauthor E. B. White famously wrote that “humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but_
the pure scientific mind.” Although it would be selling him short to call his mind purely scientific, neuroscientist Weems plunges in HA! into a study of funniness that probes theories of relief and surprise, examines MRI scan evidence for the location of the “funny bone” (it is a lobe of the brain, actually), ponders the Norman Cousins laughter “cure,” and introduces terms like prosaprosdokia, a form of ironic surprise endemic to the likes of Stephen Colbert. Weems directs his scholarly eye toward Monty Python, Lenny Bruce, and The Big Lebowski.

In an engaging first-person narrative, Weems deconstructs jokes, even the simplest of which, if we are to get them, require elements of surprise, conflict, and resolution. The human brain, he writes, is a “pattern detector,” and remains much better at this than computers, which, refreshingly, still have trouble generating jokes that make sentient humans laugh.

Considering the “elusive concept of mirth,” Weems juxtaposes three case studies: the 1962 laughing epidemic in Tanzania that raged through a girls’ boarding school, forcing it to close, and spread to the entire village; Gilbert Gottfried’s “too soon?” post–September 11 one-liner that spilled into the world’s dirtiest joke at a Friars Club roast; and an instance where the author’s wife, a habitual weeper at such moments, broke into uncontrollable hysterics at the dramatic climax of what movie Titanic. These propel the book into a meandering consideration of what humor is and how it affects us.

Humor is a social act, Weems writes. “Skilled joke-tellers realize that what’s being communicated isn’t just a joke but a message about the relationship between teller and receiver. The receiver contributes to the humor just as much as the teller does.” Humor is about language and about discourse, but it is also part of what a neuroscientist friend of Weems’ calls “evolution’s greatest gift to living creatures”—the fact that faced with extreme damage, pain, and alarm the brain releases endorphins, nature’s equivalent of morphine.

At the book’s conclusion Weems decides to do a stand-up routine at a local comedy club’s amateur night. He manages to get a few laughs, but not at the points where he expects them. His ultimate advice to readers is that we should laugh even at bad jokes. “Not only will you enjoy a happier, healthier life, but others will likely laugh along with you,” he writes. “And it’s hard to be in a bad mood when you’re laughing.”—ss

Mermaid
Eileen Cronin (SAR’84)
W. W. Norton & Company
AS A MEMOIR OF GROWING UP IN
an unwieldy Irish Catholic family with a troubled mother and repressed father, Cronin’s Mermaid deserves a place among the best of the genre, from Frank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes to Edna O’Brien’s Country Girl. That it is also the story of the confusing childhood and sexual awakening of a girl born without legs adds to its richness and searing honesty.

One of 11 children born in the 1960s to a Cincinnati foreign car salesman and his fiercely religious wife, Cronin, now a clinical psychologist, was born with deformities bearing the trademark of the drug thalidomide, then administered widely to pregnant women to treat morning sickness.

Laced with tart humor and unforgettable anecdotes—a prosthetic wooden leg flying off during a spin at a fraternity dance—the book is propelled by unanswered questions. First, was thalidomide actually to blame? In a family resigned to the mysterious vagaries of “God’s will,” the possibility was never discussed. When as a child Cronin asks her mother, “But why was I born without legs?” her mother replies, “You don’t have legs...because baby Jesus chose you to carry the cross!” Second, would the writer, whose chronicle of her failed first marriage is riveting in its frankness, be able to bear a healthy child of her own?

As she matures, Cronin faces her mermaid state with a range of emotions, the most powerful being determination. Treated no differently from her siblings, she manages by “squiddling” before being fitted with prosthetics and hobbling awkwardly off to school. Managing for the first time to lurch forth in the excruciating corset and stiff substitute extremities, she catches a glimpse of herself in a mirror. “I still couldn’t believe it was me and yet it was the way I’d always imagined myself: a whole girl. And even better, I would no longer have to squiddle. I would be one who walked.”

Walk she does, with increasing ease, long chaste skirts, and ultimately nothing more than a distinct limp, through college and a string of poignant social encounters tinged with slapstick. Along the way her parents split up, her father dies, her manic mother suffers a debilitating emotional collapse, her marriage fizzes. Yet Cronin doesn’t squander even a paragraph on self-pity. She fights for a driver’s license, she balks when her college sends her information about services for students with disabilities.

One June years later, she spots a Washington Post article revisiting the ravages of thalidomide; in it the reporter argues that legalized abortion spared women the birth of babies with physical deformities. Cronin, who is resolutely pro-choice, writes that she “clasped a hand over my mouth to stifle an anguished cry.” The article irks her to the point where she writes an essay that appears in the Post “Outlook” section under the headline “I Would Choose My Life.” The column propels her into the national spotlight and triggers a feeding frenzy to promote alarmist agendas in what remains a raging, often ugly public debate. The experience robs Cronin of her sleep and her clarity, and fuels suicidal urges.

The book’s remaining 60-or-so pages detail how she reclaims her sobriety and her joyful resilience, and forges a fresh path. The ending is welcome, if predictable. It’s what the reader wishes for this remarkable woman from page one.—ss