Rob Hart, The Warehouse

Visionary Thriller Warns that Dystopia Looms Near

Rob Hart was already a successful author when he began work on his latest novel, The Warehouse. With a number of crime thrillers under his belt and another novel co-authored with mega-author James Patterson, Hart’s future looked bright. But when The Warehouse garnered a six-figure book deal and was optioned for film by Ron Howard, Hart proved that he had the elusive blend of talent, timing, and topic to create a true breakthrough novel.

The Warehouse takes the reader on a frightening tour of the near future, when global monopolies have devastated local economies. In this quietly desperate America, most people are left with no choice but to give away their freedom to become workers for those monopolies, living in corporate compounds and working under constant surveillance and exploitative conditions.

Even the first fifteen pages will raise the hair on your arms with a vision of abandoned towns and brutal “corporate efficiency.” The novel extends today’s workforce trends to their logical consequences to show what’s ahead for workers. Like the best futuristic satirists of the twentieth century—Bradbury, Orwell—Hart harnesses the power of truth to tell a tale that is more disturbing for its plausibility. It’s no surprise that The Warehouse sold in over 20 foreign markets and that Ron Howard optioned the film rights before the book even hit shelves in summer 2019.

The dangerous power of global monopolies

Hart’s passion for his subject was clear when he spoke with us about his inspiration for The Warehouse, which features a massive company called Cloud that is modeled on Amazon.

“I think the best way to explain what’s going on in our economy right now is that every single human being who reads this article is going to have paid more in income taxes than Amazon did all last year,” Hart said. “And if you look around at our crumbling infrastructure, schools, and services, that’s the reason why. I truly believe corporate welfare is more dangerous than anything else. We give everything away so they’ll give us jobs, but the jobs are never really good or well-paid. And I’d like to think that’s not a partisan issue, and that demanding that our workers be treated better ought to cross the divide.”
Hart, who grew up in a working-class family himself, was originally moved to explore working life in America by a real-life incident. “I read an article years ago about a woman who worked full time in a fulfillment center and how terrible the working conditions were,” he said. “The corporations were setting up these centers in depressed areas where the workers wouldn’t have a lot of other employment options. That was back in 2012, and I kept coming back to the research and seeing patterns and dropping notes in my files. Eventually I knew that if I didn’t write this novel, someone else would, and I had to write it.”

Folksy manner of novel’s CEO hides corporate ruthlessness

Hart frames the novel from the perspectives of three major characters. Paxton is an ordinary guy who ends up snagging a coveted job at the Cloud living/working campus, while Zinnia is a secret agent hired to infiltrate the same facility. Their viewpoints are opposed by the blog entries of Gibson Wells, the aging founder of Cloud who is now dying of pancreatic cancer but still runs his company with ruthless efficiency masked with folksy charm.

Though the most powerful aspect of the novel is its near-dystopian world, Hart is an accomplished writer of suspenseful thrillers, and his characters keep the pages turning with their interesting backstories as well as the mystery of Zinnia’s mission at Cloud.

“Paxton and Zinnia came to me fully formed,” Hart said. “It wasn’t really an analytical decision where I said, ‘I’m going to make Zinnia a really strong woman.’ I already knew who she was. And Paxton and Zinnia are, in a way, dueling aspects of my own personality. Each of us when placed in a situation like this has elements of Paxton, of not wanting to rock the boat. But each of us wishes we could also be like Zinnia, proactive, independent, and clever. Truthfully, I think most of us end up acting more like Paxton.”

“We give everything away so they’ll give us jobs, but the jobs are never really good or well-paid. And I’d like to think that’s not a partisan issue, and that demanding that our workers be treated better ought to cross the divide.”
Living every writer’s dream with book deal, film option offer from Ron Howard

Hart lived out every writer’s dream with the lucrative sale of his much-in-demand novel, followed by several film companies making offers for the film rights.

“We were getting offers from film and TV. I got a nice email from a CEO of a major cable company,” Hart explained. “But when Imagine came in with an offer, I just thought, wow, if Ron Howard wants it, how can I say no? There were 7-8 good offers, but Ron Howard made Apollo 13, so we said, let’s do it!”

Hart is grateful for the career freedom that his breakthrough novel has allowed him.

“It’s incredible—I’m going to get off the phone with you and go pick up my daughter because I’m at home instead of working another office job,” he said. “I still don’t really have downtime, so giving myself a few minutes to watch a movie can be hard, because I’m setting my own schedule. But it’s great that I now have the freedom to think about this idea I’ve had for a TV pilot, and maybe develop it. Before, when I was running a small publishing company, I had to do a lot of my work late at night or early in the morning. It’s nice to have the opportunity to write full time instead of squeezing it in around the edges of another job.”

Hart has more vibrant commentary about his novel, the writer’s life, and what we can do individually to help our society overcome negative economic trends and the rise of monopolies. Don’t miss the chance to hear him at the Six Bridges Book Festival in April!

Rob Hart is also the author of the Ash McKenna crime series and the short story collection Take-Out. He co-wrote Scott Free with James Patterson. He has worked as a book publisher, a political reporter, and a communications director for a politician, and was a commissioner for the city of New York. He lives in Staten Island, NY.
Afia Atakora, Conjure Women

A Spellbinding Novel of Midwives In Slavery and Reconstruction

Afia Atakora’s debut novel Conjure Women is a rich quilt-work of stories based on a large cast of characters who live through the end of slavery and into the Reconstruction period. An African American mother and daughter, both midwives and healers, face the pains and cruelties of enslavement followed by new but limited choices available to Black women in the post-Civil War South. A third woman, white and an heir to the plantation, becomes a complex figure of suffering and cruelty in turn as her neglected childhood and mental illness determine her fate in a patriarchal white society.

Throughout, Atakora’s storytelling moves through the alluring shadows of folklore. Readers see what happens to the characters, but must sift through oblique narrative and multiple perspectives to piece together the mystery of why these events occur. The cipher is enhanced by a non-linear narrative that flashes backward and forward through time to reveal different elements of the story. Like Charles Chesnutt’s 1899 masterpiece The Conjure Woman, Atakora’s novel frequently focuses on dialogue and the act of storytelling, but the narrative takes a distinct contemporary direction of its own with its focus on mother-daughter relationships and generational trauma.

Atakora was inspired in the theme of her novel by personal experience as well as her study of history.

“There’s influence from my own mother and my relationship with her,” Atakora said. “My mother is from Ghana, so she had a very different upbringing from mine. Also, my mother worked as a home health care aide, so by observing her experience I worked through who I wanted to be and who I didn’t want to be. The novel explores the question, what do you teach your child and pass on, particularly to your daughters? Similarly, the novel shows how women work through generational history and generational trauma.”

Atakora also felt that a woman-centered story could offer a different approach to time and action than many previous works.
“The canon of slavery literature is usually focused on men and runaways, with very propulsive stories,” she said. “I felt this female narrative would do something different and would instead show endurance.”

The author worked to create complex, multifaceted characters. “I think in crafting the novel what I wanted was nuance—not clear villains or clear victims. There is ugliness on many sides to be accessed. By telling more stories, I tried to get to the humanity of the conjure women.”

That nuance emerges in the tension surrounding religion and spirituality, seen in the novel as a clash between the older folk traditions of hoodoo/voodoo and the rising power of Black Christianity. As in many such cultural clashes, knowledge of healing in women inspires fear and accusations of witchcraft.

“The witch is that universal thing we keep coming back to when a male-dominated institution takes power away from women, over and over,” Atakora said. “For anyone in the African diaspora, religion is a complicated thing—a source of hope, but Christianity was also used to villainize our traditions. Voodoo rises out of protest. Especially among the women, there’s the idea that Christianity is correct and voodoo/hoodoo is wrong, but certain traditional practices are still relied on.”

The end of slavery brought more choice in belief, but not an end to the cultural tension.

“Still, the religious institution had the power and was marginalizing women,” Atakora said. “Midwives were deemed dangerous and unclean. It was a resonance that spoke to me. You can’t really talk about the Black experience without telling the story of religion and both the joy and hate that it brought with it.”

The novel took three years to write, including extensive research.

“The book started as my MFA thesis, so the first draft took about nine months, which was perfect for a book about giving birth. The first draft was dreamlike because I was creating all these stories about different people. Then for another two years, writing was a process of moving different stories around and figuring out how they related. I had an amazing editor from Random House who helped me work through it.”
The first scenes in the novel came from Atakora’s imagination. “The birth scene was one of the first things I wrote. I was interested in exploring a midwife during the Reconstruction era, which was ten years of hope and flux and change.”

Atakora based many of the stories in the novel on real people’s experiences drawn from the slave narratives gathered during the 1930s by an initiative of the WPA.

“As an undergrad, I had studied a lot of African American history, taking classes just out of interest because I felt I needed to know more. Once I had my midwife character, I went back to the slave narratives, especially those by Zora Neale Hurston, who did some amazing interviews.”

Since the novel’s publication, Atakora has enjoyed hearing differing reader responses depending on their perspectives. “Various people find different threads that are more personal. Some of them I expect, and some I don’t!”

For herself, the relationship of the present to history remains paramount. “The thread that most interested me was the examination of history, whether it’s the country’s history or personal history—what parts of history are we reflecting on? That’s the thread that’s the resonant part for me, and it stands out, especially nowadays.”

Atakora finds at this cultural moment that a universal need to engage with the past applies to her characters in Conjure Women and to today’s Americans confronting continuing racial inequality and injustice.

“Characters have to face ghosts—as we all have to do if we’re going to move forward in any formative way.”

Afia Atakora will appear at the Six Bridges Book Festival to discuss her debut novel Conjure Women, as she moves on with her next book project set in the Harlem Renaissance.

Afia Atakora was born in the United Kingdom and raised in New Jersey, where she now lives. She graduated from New York University and has an MFA from Columbia University, where she was the recipient of the De Alba Fellowship. Her fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and she was a finalist for the Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers.
Angela Garbacz, *Perfectly Golden*

Recipes Delight Dairy-Free, Gluten-Free, Vegan, and Traditional Bakers

To be praised as “one of the most innovative women in food and drink” by *Food & Wine* magazine would be high praise for any chef. But for Angela Garbacz, such critical acclaim was all the sweeter because it came after she fulfilled her lifelong dream by opening her own bakery in her hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska.

Now, her first cookbook, *Perfectly Golden*, makes her innovative recipes available to other bakers. And everyone is welcome at this baking table, because Garbacz’s bakery specializes in dairy-free, gluten-free, and vegan baking.

Necessity is the mother of invention, and thus it was Garbacz’s discovery of her own dairy allergy in 2013 that initially motivated her to reinvent her baking techniques. Baking had been her chief passion all her life. If she wanted to keep enjoying cakes, pastries, and cookies, her only alternative was to innovate. She started a blog called Goldenrod Pastries to chronicle her new adventures in baking, while still holding down her full-time job in marketing.

As word spread, people began to ask to buy her treats—people who had dairy allergies or needed cakes without gluten, or vegans who chose to avoid eggs. Garbacz spent nights and weekends baking constantly to fulfill the demand. And only a year after starting her blog, Garbacz was able to see her vision become reality, as Goldenrod Pastries opened and became a thriving brick-and-mortar bakery.

The mouthwatering photos in *Perfectly Golden* testify to the success of her methods. From Cinnamon Rolls to Zucchini Chocolate Cake, the creamy, crumby textures and velvety pastry evident in the photos of the process make it clear that these are desserts that keep you coming back for more. As Garbacz states, her goal is not just to produce pastries that are “good for gluten-free,” but instead create treats that can hold their own with the best of traditional baking. The recipes in her book often have several suggested variations to allow people to customize as necessary or bake with traditional ingredients.
Garbacz is dedicated to including as many people as possible in the act of baking and eating together, so no one has to feel marginalized.

“So many people feel left out of the food conversation if they have dietary restrictions,” Garbacz said. “It’s not fun to be the person who can’t have something at a restaurant. Food should bring people together, not make them feel left out. And that’s why I am interested in all the ways we can make food inclusive.”

Angela Garbacz inspires in other ways that go beyond food. Though she wanted to bake and cook from as early as she can remember, she did not always have the confidence to pursue that goal.

“Baking was always what I wanted to do, but I didn’t know other people who did it who could be an example for me,” Garbacz explained. “When I was growing up, my best friend loved to cook too, and we did a lot of cooking together, but she was also an artist and a cheerleader. So, she had other places where she fit in, but I never quite knew how I fit in. When I attended an arts school, for example, there was a final showcase and I didn’t really know what to do. The other students were singing or dancing, and I didn’t know what I could offer. Finally, a teacher suggested to me that I do a baking demo for the showcase, and that’s what I did.”

In 2014, Garbacz attended a blogging workshop that changed her life when a teacher encouraged all the attendees that it’s never too late to reinvent yourself and to be who you want to be.

“What happened at that workshop is that someone finally granted me permission to feel free to do what I really wanted to do,” Garbacz said.

Garbacz’s personal journey to empowerment has led her to encourage other women to find their own paths to happiness and self-determination.

“When I’m writing, I always think of who I’m talking to,” Garbacz said. “Some readers may just be there for the Cinnamon Rolls or other recipes. But there are also young women who have been following Goldenrod Pastries and have a deeper need to be part of something. And it has been great to hear from those young people that we have had an impact that goes beyond baking. That’s not to say that what we’re doing is perfect or
that my leadership style is perfect—I always try to improve. But what young girls want to know is that there’s a place for them out there in the world where they will fit in. And if I show them that by posting about a cookie covered in confetti, that’s still a big deal.”

Garbacz is so passionate about helping other women that in 2018, she founded Empower Through Flour, an all-female initiative to inspire the next generation of young women to step up, act, lead, and celebrate the successes and achievements of women, including their own.

In 2020, Garbacz joined forces with co-founder Caroline Schiff, executive pastry chef, to increase the reach of the campaign. Garbacz sees the collaboration between two women pastry chefs as an example of a team-oriented mentality that is much needed among women.

“I think it’s important for people to know that there’s room for more than one woman at the top, and the sooner we realize that, the better,” Garbacz said.

“When we started this campaign for National Women’s History Month, I reached out to several women I admired. In the past, I would have been reluctant to approach them, because I had looked up to them or even idolized them from afar. For example, I really admired Caroline Schiff and her work, and I just didn’t know if I was on the same level. And it was such a good example to me to learn that sometimes, when you idolize people, you may not realize that they’re also aware of what you’re doing. When women operate with the scarcity mindset, they don’t realize that two women can be doing similar things and create together.”

Garbacz sees collaboration among women as a central part of her focus at Goldenrod Pastries. “I hope all that trickles down to my staff too. The more women get past that scarcity mindset, the more creativity and support will flow and the more we can achieve together.”

See a professional baking demo and hear more about this chef’s inspirational journey at the Six Bridges Book Festival.

Angela Garbacz is the owner of Goldenrod Pastries. She has been featured in Forbes, Tasting Table, Food Republic, Martha Stewart Living, New York Magazine, Radio Cherry Bombe, and other outlets. She lives in Lincoln, Nebraska.
Bonnie Tsui, *Why We Swim*

*A Luxurious Dive into the Joy, Terror, and Pleasures of the Water*

What Bonnie Tsui missed most, when quarantine began, was swimming.

But that wouldn’t surprise anyone who has read her entrancing, elegant fusion of journalism and memoir, *Why We Swim*.

*Why We Swim* released in April 2020, one month after most of the United States entered an unprecedented shutdown that closed most public sites, including beaches and swimming pools. After several months, some swimming sites began to re-open around the nation. Some Americans are now able to swim safely, either in outdoor natural spaces or in outdoor pools made safe by distancing. Others find the call of the water so irresistible that they will swim even under unsafe conditions—crowded together at pool parties, thronging close on beaches and lakefronts.

Why do we feel the call to swim? What is so alluring about immersing the body in water for an act that humans are not naturally designed for?

A gripping blend of journalism and memoir

Bonnie Tsui’s exploration of that question is a world-travelling book that draws on her own life as a swimmer, but moves through crosscurrents of history, biology, folklore, psychology, comparative culture, and more. The result is an absorbing journey with rich rewards for anyone who enjoys looking beneath surfaces.

Tsui is a regular contributor to the *New York Times* who has also written for *The Atlantic* and *National Geographic*, and her strength as a writer shows in prose that ripples with the energy of an Olympic swimmer in one chapter before diving more lyrically into reflection in the next. Throughout, Tsui uses what she calls “participatory journalism,” a sensory immersion of both the journalist and the reader in vivid cultural settings and in the strenuous, pleasurable, or dangerous moments that happen when humans swim.

Tsui was drawn to her subject not only by her own life as a swimmer but by her awareness that there is hardly a human alive who doesn’t have an intense history with swimming in some way.
Everyone has a swimming story

“I started collecting stories, as people would tell me things about their relationship with swimming and the water,” Tsui said. “And what excites me so much about this subject is that whether you say, ‘I don’t swim much,’ or you swim every day, everyone has a passionate, gut feeling about it. Some people have near-drowning stories, and others were made to learn to swim even when they were afraid, and so swimming is visceral. People respond in very passionate ways, with either intense love or fear, and I really enjoyed tapping into the intensity of those emotions.”

Tsui knew from the beginning of the project that she did not want to write a memoir of her own experience with swimming, though her personal experience and stories enrich the narrative.

“Even though people who knew about my swimming said, ‘You have such a great personal story,’ it didn’t feel right because I’m a journalist. I didn’t want the book to be so much about my own life—I wanted to talk to other people and tell their stories,” Tsui said. “The reader’s experience is at once an immersive exploration of a world, but also very specifically situated in people’s stories.”

An adventure through distant waters

“Readers will encounter the experiences of people in faraway places that are different from their own experiences, but at the same time, there’s also universality to the human experience with the water,” Tsui said. “So whether we are in Iceland, or Japan, or with Coach Jay in Baghdad, I wanted the sensory reality to come through and be vibrant.”

Tsui’s writing is marked by the immediacy of that sensory experience of the water, whether in warm tropical climes or in the breathtaking cold of Scandinavia. “For this book, it was very important to be able to talk about sensory pleasures and fears because that is so much a part of the swimming experience. So, as a writer, I was able to be a conduit for other people’s experiences.”

In one memorable episode, Tsui narrates her trip to Iceland to track down a fisherman with a now-legendary, near-death swimming experience.

“I spent a year corresponding with him and much longer just hoping to meet him, because I felt there would be no substitute for a meeting,” Tsui said. “And through that journey, I came to realize that the story wasn’t just about him, but about the common culture of this collection of islands, and the starkness and beauty of this place. The story
is about the mythology that had grown up around one person, but it’s also about this place as a whole and its people.”

**Swimming as both light and dark experience**

Throughout the book, Tsui returns to the theme that the water for swimmers is a place of contradictions: life floats alongside the constant risk of death, and fear can turn to wonder.

“What’s so interesting about the water and our human relationship to it is that we have two sides of the same coin,” Tsui said. “We need it to survive, and we seek it out even though we’re not quite at home in it.”

But also inseparable from the swimming experience, Tsui pointed out, is the sense of play felt by adults as well as children when they enter the water.

“Sometimes, I would be swimming, and spot someone arriving who seemed quite serious and unsmiling,” she said. “But then that person would get in the water and start spiraling around and swimming like a dolphin, where no one could see it unless they were right there in the water too. They get out and go to the locker room and that’s that, and no one would ever know. Being in the water can coax that lightness out of anyone, which is life-affirming. But water can also be such a threat, and the dichotomy is a source of fascination for me.”

Tsui’s deep personal engagement with swimming and its cultural resonance makes her book full of pleasures for readers of all stripes, from competitive athletes to summer beach bums to those who fear and avoid the water. She will appear to discuss *Why We Swim* at the Six Bridges Book Festival on October 8-11, 2020. For more detail and a schedule, follow updates at sixbridgesbookfestival.org

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**Bonnie Tsui** lives, swims, and surfs in the Bay Area. A longtime contributor to the *New York Times* and *California Sunday Magazine*, she has been the recipient of the Jane Rainie Opel Young Alumna Award from Harvard University, the Lowell Thomas Gold Award, and a National Press Foundation Fellowship. Her last book, *American Chinatown: A People’s History of Five Neighborhoods*, won the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature and was a *San Francisco Chronicle* bestseller and Best of 2009 Notable Bay Area Books selection. Her website is bonnietsui.com.
Ernesto Cisneros, *Efrén Divided*

Middle-Grade Novel of Immigrant Family Separation Shows Wonder
Years Disrupted

When you’re in seventh grade, it’s a big deal when your best friend decides to run for student body president. Only eighth graders usually do that. Naturally, Efrén is going to stand behind his friend. And all the other stuff in life, well, that’s just something you’re used to. If your parents work too hard and it worries you sometimes, and your whole family lives in a small apartment, well, it’s going to be okay as long as there’s lots of love, your Amá makes great sopes and your little brother and sister are funny and happy.

Until one day, your Amá doesn’t come home.

In *Efrén Divided*, a debut middle-grade novel by Ernesto Cisneros, Efrén Nava’s “wonder years” are suddenly derailed by the deportation of his mother to Mexico by ICE federal agents.

Throughout the narrative, Cisneros strikes a skillful and realistic balance between the humor and spontaneity of early adolescence and the heart-wrenching anxiety of losing one’s family. With 24 years of teaching behind him, Cisneros has plenty of experience to help him create convincing young characters. It’s easy to see why such a timely, poignant, and inspiring manuscript was snapped up by a major publisher.

Cisneros is humble about his achievement. After un unsuccessfully seeking publication for 14 years as an aspiring YA novelist writing about high school characters, he had all but given up. But writing a small story for his own children turned his publishing journey around.

“My kids wanted me to write something that they could read, because the YA fiction was too edgy for them at their younger age,” Cisneros said. “At that point, I had kind of given up on publishing, but I wanted them to see their culture in a book, so I wrote this story for them.”

His children surprised him with their reaction to *Efrén Divided*.

“They told me it was the best story they had ever read, and at first I thought that was just because I’m their dad. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized their
Still unsure of himself, Cisneros told his agent that he had a new middle-grade story he had written for his kids, not knowing if his agent would like it or not.

“But as soon as she read it, she said, ‘We have to pitch it!’” Cisneros related.

Two weeks later, Cisneros had an offer of a contract from Harper Collins.

“I still wake up and ask myself, did this really happen?” Cisneros said.

“It’s amazing how much support the book has been able to garner,” he said. “To me, this was just a quiet little story about Mexican Americans, but I have had messages from people across the country and from different backgrounds telling me how much the novel meant to them. I’m still astonished by it.”

The story strikes a chord with readers in a nation where many are hurt by the separation of immigrant families, especially the children involved. The plot grew out of Cisneros’s own experience with anti-immigrant rhetoric and a search to help young people learn to value themselves even during a storm of negative public debate.

“I started working on this novel during the 2016 elections, and the story developed with the events of the following years.” Cisneros said. “During the elections, some people felt empowered to speak negatively about immigrants. As a child, I grew up internalizing a lot of those negative feelings, and they had given me a sense of disentitlement. I felt I wasn’t worth as much as others around me. I wanted to write something for my children and my students that showed them the importance of our families and the value of our culture.”

His personal experience took an even more painful turn when he saw some of his students go through the deportation experience.

“In my classroom, I saw students who had parents deported in the middle of the year, and I saw the impact on the students and how they did in school,” Cisneros said. “And it made me think that as teachers, we need to do a better job of supporting our students when there’s something that big happening in their lives.”

Some of the novel’s most moving moments are those when Efrén is afraid to tell anyone that his mother is gone or what has happened to her.
“It took a long time to be able to figure out for myself that the problem is silence and feeling alone,” Cisneros said.

In Cisneros’s own classroom, he tried to encourage his students to reach out for help.

“I kept a Blue Box in the back of the classroom where a student who was feeling blue could stick a blue index card and write something on it.” Cisneros said. “One student left a note to ask to speak to me after school, and he then told me his dad had been deported.”

In the face of such a devastating event, Cisneros could not come up with an answer. “I didn’t know what to tell him. I didn’t know what help I could offer.”

“Afterward I couldn’t stop thinking about what I would want to tell students in that position,” Cisneros said. “I finally realized that I want those students to know that they do have people they can turn to, like the characters of Mrs. Solomon, or Mr. Garrett. I want the students to know that they are not alone—that they don’t have to struggle in silence—that there is support in the community.”

Cisneros’s “simple” little story turns out to be not simple at all, but instead unflinchingly honest—the most complex story a writer can tell. The unfiltered truth as seen by a young person is the reason why young characters have often anchored some of the most profound stories we know: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

True to his story to the finish, Cisneros does not wrap up the ends in a tidy and painless bow to make everyone feel better. Instead, he finds a stronger answer for his young readers—one that respects pain and a need for resilience that doesn’t stop when the pages of the book close.

Cisneros knew that his ending had to be the truthful one, not the tidy one.

“That’s how it is in the real world,” he said. “So I had to ask, how could I empower these students? And the answer was to show that they can be activists for their parents and help support their families and community.”

To hear more about author Ernesto Cisneros, his connection to his neighborhood, and the way his middle-grade students encouraged him in his writing efforts, catch him at the Six Bridges Book Festival.

*Ernesto Cisneros was born and raised in Santa Ana, California, where he still teaches. He holds an English degree from the University of California - Irvine, a teaching credential from California State University - Long Beach, and an MFA in creative writing from National University. As an author, he believes in providing today’s youth with an honest depiction of characters with whom they can identify. The real world is filled with amazing people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. His work strives to reflect that.*
R. Eric Thomas, *Here For It, Or, How to Save Your Soul in America*

Laugh-Out-Loud Humor Has Deep Spiritual Center in Memoir of Growing Up Gay, Black, and Christian

If you know R. Eric Thomas from his work as a daily humor columnist for *ELLE Magazine* online, you’re familiar with ebullient, hilarious flights of snark and fancy like his postmortem on the Democratic primary’s Iowa Caucus:

“Yes, the rumors that I started are true. I won Iowa, proving all the haters and naysayers and people who claimed that I am “not running for president” and “not even physically in the state” so wrong. How did I do it? Well, I’ll tell you, whether you want to hear it or not. Last night, the raucous caucus descended into fractious fracas…”

(ELLE.com 2/4/2020)

What’s not to love? The wordplay, the satire, the keen observation that informs all good comedy. You just want to get up in the morning and have your coffee over Thomas’s column as an antidote to darker realities—soak in the brave, gay flaunting of his insouciant wit in the face of all things that want to crush the spirit.

Yes, that is glitter-and-be-gay flaunting, as Thomas is an outspoken champion for the LGBTQ community and a shining example of a long tradition of razor-sharp satirical wit springing from gay culture in the vein of Oscar Wilde. His just-released memoir-in-essays, *Here For It: Or, How To Save Your Soul in America*, loses nothing in hilarity, but the longer form also gives him space for deeper resonance beneath the laughter. *Here For It* is one of those rare works that truly does move through both laughter and tears with equal aplomb as Thomas deftly tells of both the humor and the pain of growing up black, gay, and Christian in today’s America.

When asked what inspired him to write this book, Thomas characteristically started with a quip.

“My agent came across some of this work in my column and asked, ‘Do you have a book in you?’ And I said, ‘I’ll do anything for money!’”
Then he grew more serious. “But the thought coalesced that I did have a book in me, and the theme was that you can have a marginalized identity but not be marginalized in your life,” Thomas said. As he spoke, it was clear that thought and word flow easily and honestly for this quick-witted, brilliant man.

“Every life is an attempt to tell its own story,” he said. “And there are different ways to approach it: through art, through service, through community-making. I saw the book as a beautiful opportunity to acknowledge the people I’ve been throughout my life, as you see in the epilogue. The book is a little tent for people to gather who are either like me or totally not like me. I don’t really care about the idea of legacy, but I do care about community-making.”

Many of the essays touch on the painful divisions of the spirit that resulted from Thomas’s youth in a church that simply pretended homosexuals did not exist, and as Thomas puts it so devastatingly well, if you were discovered to be gay, you also simply ceased to exist for the people of that church. No fighting, no sermons. Just nothingness and being cast out from everything you had known.

Thomas has attempted to look back on that time in his life with perspective, despite the pain of his spiritual journey. “I’ve tried to look back at the leadership of the church I grew up in with compassion,” he said. “They were trying to do something they thought was right. But I will never have a conversation with them about it because I don’t think it’s healthy.”

“To think you can just separate from the parts of society you’re afraid of or don’t agree with because you think they harm your moral fiber, and that’s enough...It’s strange to say that people in power need to be protected from the people they’re oppressing, and it’s never going to work,” Thomas mused. “There are stories in the Bible about people sticking their heads in the sand and refusing to deal with the reality in front of them. Jonah, for example. He tried to turn away from the people around him—well, here’s a whale and into its digestive tract he goes. And the point is that if you don’t want to be in community with the LGBTQ people, you’re going to end up in a whale’s colon. Everyone knows LGBTQ people walk among us. It’s silly to deny that reality. I have no interest in being a missionary. My approach is that I’m gay and you have to deal with me—throwing glitter and leaving. But I can put these things in print for others to read because that’s how I learned that there was a much larger world outside the one I
grew up in. I didn’t know any other queer Christian people in the world when I was growing up. So, if some pre-teen or teen finds my book in the bargain bin one day, they can read it and know this larger world exists.”

One of the book’s most touching essays is “Dinner Guests,” which shows the tender and moving effort of family members to cross over society’s prejudices and build bridges of love. Thomas regards with warmth that memory of a moment of family generosity.

“That was a really stunning moment –there are deep dynamics that guide when and with whom you can share your family stories and places of pain –who you can trust,” he said. “I just recently finished recording the audiobook version of *Here For It*, and it was taxing: now I feel like Patti Lupone on vocal rest! But when we got to recording “Dinner Guests,” I had forgotten until my re-reading that this particular essay isn’t funny—it’s people figuring out how to be a family.”

Thomas is looking forward to the opportunity to bring his witty and touching reflections to Arkansas soon, and to engage with the community here through his time at the festival.

“I was supposed to come to Arkansas to do a Moth Mainstage, but the date changed and I couldn’t do it,” he said. “My heart was broken because I have friends from Arkansas, and I was looking forward to seeing the Clinton Presidential Library and Central High School. So now I have a great opportunity to see Little Rock for the first time at the Six Bridges Book Festival.”

*Eric Thomas is a playwright, the long-running host of The Moth StorySlam., and a Senior Staff Writer for Elle.com where he writes “Eric Reads the News,” a daily current events and culture column. His debut memoir-in-essays, *Here For It, or How to Save Your Soul in America* (Ballantine, Feb. 2020) was hailed as “laugh-out-loud funny” by Lin-Manuel Miranda in *Entertainment Weekly*.***
Dan Piepenbring with Prince, *The Beautiful Ones*

**The Mystery Remains: Co-Writing Prince’s Memoir in His Last Days**

As one of the most influential musicians of our time, Prince spread the funky gospel of love in all its forms. His frankness about sexual desire and experience was shocking to the 1980s world that saw him rise to mega-stardom. Self-appointed guardians of morality railed against his music even as his work shaped a young generation who learned through his funk fusions to love their physical bodies and to dance like the world was ending. Prince’s mystical vision of sex as an avenue to the divine as well as his attachment to Christian spirituality baffled critics, especially as his constantly evolving artistic perspective eluded easy definitions.

The intense, raw power of Prince’s music continues to make new fans with every generation. In late 2015, Dan Piepenbring was one of those zealous Prince fans. As a young writer and editor at the beginning of his career, he never would have dreamed that a stroke of fortune was about bring him into a close working relationship as a co-writer with Prince. But in only a few short months, that relationship would be tragically cut short by the artist’s unexpected death, and the memoir project would face an unknown future.

**An unexpected honor for a young writer**

Piepenbring is still grateful for the unlikely series of connections that led Prince to choose him as a collaborator over a number of better-known authors. Piepenbring’s literary agent knew of his diehard devotion to Prince’s music, so when it became known that Prince was looking for a collaborator to help write his memoir, the agent passed on the news.

“As soon as my agent let it slip to me that Prince was looking for a co-writer, he knew he had made a mistake!” Piepenbring said, smiling. “My agent told me, “I’ll put you on the list of potential collaborators, but I will point out that you haven’t published a book yet, and that reduces your chances to basically zero given the competition.”

But Prince didn’t play by everybody else’s rules.

“When Prince saw the list, which included some very well-known and experienced writers, he crossed off the names of everyone who had already written a book, leaving
just two of us who had not,” Piepenbring said. “So, one cold night in January 2016, I sent in a statement about why I wanted to work on the memoir, and 48 hours later I was on a plane on my way to meet him. We started to work together immediately and continued until his death in April.”

A musical genius gone too soon

Prince’s untimely death caused shock and deep grief for people around the world, but for Piepenbring brought even more complications as well. For a time, there was no certainty that the project could even continue, as Prince left no will and an executor had to be appointed by the banks and courts. But even after the executor had given the go-ahead, Piepenbring still had to consider how to complete the project in a way that honored Prince’s artistic voice and his fans.

“When a lot of people heard this book was coming,” Piepenbring said, “their reaction was, ‘What? How could this even happen?’ Some were worried I was going to put words in his mouth. But we were able to structure it in a way to avoid that risk.”

The structure of the memoir works perfectly to convey Prince’s life through his own words about his youth, his own handwriting in lyrics and movie treatments, and photos and ephemera from his personal archives. The only section from Piepenbring’s perspective is an introduction and explanation of how the project developed.

Why Prince chose “The Beautiful Ones”

The title of the memoir was chosen by Prince himself based on one of his songs.

“He came up with “The Beautiful Ones” as his title long before I ever met him, but it took on new dimensions as we worked together,” Piepenbring said. “He felt that particular song had been so frequently misinterpreted when people had claimed the lyrics were about them and started the rumor mill. To Prince, that public reaction to the song was an emblem of everything people had wrong about him. “The Beautiful Ones” occupied a special and profound place in his catalog because it was about his parents. So at first, his use of that title was a reference to the world of his youth in Minneapolis that opens the book. But as he became interested later in addressing the music industry, “The Beautiful Ones” became a reference to his vision of a community of black artists who would be able to create their work without the industry getting in the way.”

Changing artistic perspective on spirituality and sexuality

Piepenbring knew that working with an artist legendary for his eccentricity and strong artistic convictions would be challenging.

“Capturing the balance between the sacred and the profane that always characterized Prince’s work was going to be one of the central challenges, especially because over the course of his career, he himself had been through so many evolutions in that balance,” Piepenbring said. “At the point when I met him, he had become very religious and would
no longer play songs like “Darling Nikki” or “Head,” but I think there was a part of him that still retained pride in that part of his work. And he would still talk about sex when the subject came up as part of his past, and took a cheeky joy in relating episodes of discovery like his first childhood kiss with a white girl.”

Piepenbring followed Prince’s lead as they worked together. “I took his attitude as my beacon and let him set the tone. In the end, I found it easier than I had expected. He was willing to take in the total picture of his life.”

Though by 2016 Prince no longer approved of the most graphic sexual lyrics of his past work, he never rejected his more mainstream odes to desire and sex.

“His attitude toward a song like ‘Little Red Corvette’ was more accepting,” Piepenbring said. “With those songs that became his iconic hits, he knew they had entered the firmament of great pop songs. He understood that achievement and was proud of it. And because he did every track himself, those songs never grew stale over the years. He was a talented reinventor of his own music.”

Publishing in the aftermath of loss

Piepenbring can now reflect on the entire process of working with Prince, the shock of his death, and the aftermath of a publishing process that allowed not just Piepenbring but other fans to mourn the loss of an important figure in their lives.

“It’s been something of a rollercoaster. Predominantly it has been humbling,” Piepenbring said. “I’ve been very grateful to go through the whole process. At times I struggled with some fear—that the book would never happen, that we wouldn’t do him justice, or that the fans wouldn’t like it. But I’ve also felt deep and abiding joy—I thought it would be tragic to go through his archives, but discovering, say, the photo album he kept in 1978, after getting his first record deal, brought me to tears. The way that the album continued our discussions of his past brought me a feeling of being in dialogue with him, even after his death. It was an unsettling but very nourishing feeling – the blending of research with emotion.”

Meeting with fans on a multi-city tour after the book’s launch in October 2019 gave Piepenbring insight on the book’s reception by those who had loved Prince and his music.

“When the book came out, I did a tour including Toronto, New York, and London. I was a little nervous because Prince fans are very proprietary—everyone forms a unique bond with Prince because his work is so intimate for so many, and I didn’t want them to feel like I was dictating anything about him that would interfere with their own thoughts. But what I found was that people were still mourning, and to feel that the book helped in that process was amazing. I’ve made lots of new friends. It’s a very supportive group and
my worries were unfounded. We’re all still trying to work through the puzzle of who and what he was as best we can.”

The mystery at the heart of Prince’s life and work

Piepenbrinck was careful in his work with Prince’s writing and his archives not to attempt to “explain” Prince or solve the enigma that the artist had always preserved at the center of his identity. That mystery was never intended to be solved by the memoir, as Prince had always protected the cipher of his mind and spirit as the source of his own artistic inspiration. “He could not help but be that way,” Piepenbrinck said. “If he had sat down and written a multi-volume autobiography of thousands of pages, you would close it and still have so many unanswered questions. A lot of the greatest artists are that way: no matter how much light surrounds them, the shadows always remain.”

Because of Piepenbrinck’s respect for those unsolved mysteries in Prince’s nature, he does not give standard critical evaluations of Prince’s place in musical history. “The more I listen to him the less certain in my answer I would get,” Piepenbrinck said. “All the shorthand critical summaries of the Beatles, for example, are true, and yet also totally insufficient. It’s tough to articulate where Prince’s wellspring of originality came from. Prince was such a quick learner that he was able to take new developments, like the complex synthesizers of the 80s, and understand how to use them. He fused synthesizers with the R&B sounds he grew up with and created a whole new sound.”

In the end, Piepenbrinck chooses to respect Prince’s protean and multifaceted vision by avoiding musical categorization and speaking instead about what he did for us through his music. “He was fearless in his way,” Piepenbrinck reflects. “He wrote of love and intimacy with such candor that he made people feel less alone.”

Join Dan Piepenbrinck at the Six Bridges Book Festival, where he will share more insight from his brush with the genius and mystery of Prince in his final months.

Dan Piepenbrinck is the coauthor and editor of The Beautiful Ones (2019), Prince’s unfinished memoir. He is also the coauthor, with Tom O’Neill, of Chaos: Charles Manson, the CIA, and the Secret History of the Sixties (2019). An advisory editor of The Paris Review, he has written for The New Yorker, The Intercept, 1843 Magazine, Bon Appétit, and other publications. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.
Virginia Walden Ford, School Choice: A Legacy to Keep

Little Rock Family Taught This Education Activist to Stand Up for a Cause

Virginia Walden Ford is one of the few people who actually knows the answer to the question, “What actress would play you in the Hollywood version of your life?”

Ford made national news in the 1990s as leader of a grassroots effort to broaden school choice for public school students in Washington DC. That struggle has now been featured in the film Miss Virginia, which was released in October 2019 and stars Uzo Aduba in the title role.

For those who want to know the full story with all the details and complexity that won’t fit in the two-hour film version, Ford has now released her memoir, School Choice: A Legacy to Keep. Most fascinating, especially for Arkansans, is the major role that Ford’s youth in Little Rock played in the formation of this strong woman’s character.

A young life shaped by the civil rights struggle

Born in 1951 as Virginia Fowler, the real “Miss Virginia” grew up in the thick of the intense civil rights struggle that followed the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School. A cross burned on her family’s lawn in 1967 when her father, William Harry Fowler, was selected as the first black administrator for the Little Rock School District. Both Fowler and his wife, Marion Johnson Fowler, had graduated from Philander Smith College and earned masters’ degrees from the University of Arkansas. The Fowler family was deeply invested in education and in the Little Rock community, frequently hosting many of the people whose names have now gone down in history for civil rights activism such as Thurgood Marshall and Daisy Gatson Bates. But most importantly, as Ford now testifies, growing up in her family taught her to raise her voice on behalf of others.

“I came from a family that always fought for the right thing,” Ford said. “So it made sense that I would follow in their footsteps.”

After graduating from college and working for a short time in Little Rock, Ford felt the urge to spread her wings and find her own identity as a young adult, which led to her accepting a job in Washington DC. Little did she know that she would live there for
thirty-four years before returning to Little Rock, and during that time would become an icon of community activism.

**Fighting for a child’s education led to a national movement**

When her third child struggled in school and was at risk of failure or joining street life, Ford began an epic effort to gather enough community voices to make politicians listen to parents. She and many others were convinced that the problems in the public schools were jeopardizing their children’s futures. And these parents fighting to save their children wanted choices for better schools.

“The school choice effort is so much bigger than kids going to schools,” Ford said. “It changes lives, and changes communities that have not always seen themselves well. In this movement, I was working with parents, often people in poverty. They need to know who they are, and their history, otherwise their kids won’t know who they are. So I’d ask them, what is your story? Let’s talk about who you are and what you want.”

Ford has seen the lives of parents as well as students change when the parents get involved with their children’s education. “For one mother, after her daughter went to a better school, the mother was then inspired to get her GED and find a better job,” Ford said. “She wanted a story and a legacy to leave her daughter.”

“It’s our responsibility as activists and parents to pass on what we’ve learned,” Ford said. “And what parents often discover is this realization: ‘the more involved I am with my children, the more excited I am about my own life and accomplishments.’”

**Ford’s life translated to the silver screen in Miss Virginia**

It was the *Miss Virginia* film itself that prompted Ford to write her memoir. At first, the idea of having her life put in the spotlight was intimidating. “Initially, it was surreal and scary. I thought, ‘Am I really ready for people to know this much about me or my son?’ And then I thought, ‘I may not be ready, but it’s necessary.’ It took about a year to make the movie, and it was fun to meet the actors. There are times when watching it, I was moved to tears. They did a great job and were very respectful.”

The filmmaking process itself inspired deep reflection and eventually, her writing.

“The production staff was asking me all these questions that brought back a lot of memories,” Ford said. “The movie shows one aspect of my life, so, people may see the movie and wonder about the rest of the story or what I’m doing now. Surrounded by all those memories, it made sense to put the book out there, and I was blessed to have a publisher. And once I started writing, I could not put it down.”
Virginia Walden Ford will share more stories about her work, school choice, and her ties to Little Rock at the Six Bridges Book Festival. She could not be happier to appear for an author talk in her own hometown, given her roots here. “At my party when I was leaving DC, I told them that Arkansas is the South’s best-kept secret. And visitors who had come to see me over the last ten years always say that it’s beautiful. I am an Arkansan first—Little Rock impacted me greatly and made me who I am.”

Virginia Walden Ford is one of America’s leading advocates for parent empowerment. As a student, a mother, an advocate, and a grandmother, Virginia has spent her lifetime fighting to create new educational opportunities for children and families. A native of Little Rock, Arkansas and the daughter of two public school educators, Virginia and her twin sister, Harrietta, were among the first 130 students chosen to desegregate Little Rock’s high schools in the mid-1960s. In 1998, she formed a grassroots organization, D.C. Parents for School Choice. With the support of national education organizations and lawmakers, Virginia and her courageous group of parent advocates succeeded in convincing Congress and President George W. Bush to enact the nation’s first-ever Opportunity Scholarship Program for low-income children.
William C. Davis, *The Greatest Fury*

**Adept Storytelling Shows Why Battle of New Orleans Still Matters for Today’s America**

William C. Davis believes in the power of a well-told tale, especially when writing history. His dedication to narrative comes through in his absorbing recent work, *The Greatest Fury: The Battle of New Orleans and the Rebirth of America*.

“Using human interest and a lively style keeps the ‘story’ in history,” Davis said. “It’s like the proverbial tree that falls in the forest – if you write a book and it’s so dull that no one can read it, you haven’t really written a book.”

*The Greatest Fury* deploys sensory, immediate imagery to help place the reader in the scene, and this style is very effective in the descriptions of battles. But the book is about far more than military history – it’s about complicated, ornery, infuriating people like General Andrew Jackson, who would spawn his own mythology and forever change the idea of what it meant to be American. The story also highlights ordinary people who wrote letters and newspaper columns about the conflict, and thereby revealed how the public experienced the war.

**Highlighting individual voices**

Davis took this personal, detailed approach because of his faith in the power of individual voices. “People are interested in people – they always have been, which explains the success of *People* magazine. It’s no accident that in nonfiction, biography is always the bestselling genre. If we let people speak for themselves, they’re always interesting. And that’s where letters come in, because we see people speaking for themselves in their letters.”

Davis, a noted historian and scholar, was able to use his extensive research in newspapers and letters in a powerful way thanks to advances in digital technology. “There hadn’t been a comprehensive book on this subject for thirty or forty years, which meant that no one had yet used some of the primary sources that are now much more accessible that they were thirty years ago,” he said. “I knew I would be able to take those sources and show the impact of the Battle of New Orleans on the country as it unfolded, as well as the aftermath and its effect on the American character.”
Technological advances aid research

Even fifteen years ago, writing a book of this scope would have been a decade-long project accomplished only by paging through one newspaper page at a time in archives or on microfilm. But now, with scores of digitized and searchable newspapers, an author can do it in months or weeks. In the newspapers of 1814-1815, letters were constantly appearing from soldiers, civilians, and local merchants to give their perceptions of what was happening.

“A lot of it was hearsay,” Davis said. “But even hearsay is important. What those people thought was happening around them could affect their morale and their decisions, whether or not it was completely accurate.” Davis found 300 to 400 letters from observers just in those newspaper sources, thanks to the speed of research made possible by digital archiving.

In our current cultural moment, when many don’t connect the relevance of history to today’s events, the legacy of Andrew Jackson’s personality both as military general and later as American president is both sobering and timely.

“Andrew Jackson’s character is still a part of many Americans’ identity, but I would say that many who include some of his character traits in their identity don’t know that Jackson was the origin of those ideas,” Davis said. “He was thought of as ‘Champion of the Common Man’ (which in fact he wasn’t), and known for his cockiness, refusal to back down, and America First rhetoric. And he was absolutely fearless. I think you can draw a throughline directly from the public perception of Andrew Jackson to the public perception of John Wayne, and that’s how they were perceived in their time: big, bold, fearless, and fair. Though this perception was not the reality of Jackson’s entire character, the perception affected the future of the nation, because as Americans, we based our decisions on our expectations of who we think Americans are, and who we would like to be.”

Andrew Jackson: legend and reality

The reality of Jackson was more complicated, as revealed by Davis’s expert synthesis of research and storytelling. Davis understands the challenges that faced Jackson in the complex scenario of his time. “Yes, the Louisiana legislature was hopelessly inefficient. Jackson was entitled to be frustrated with the fractured and divided state of it, as he worked with Creoles, native Spaniards, native French, and Americans who had newly moved to Louisiana from elsewhere. But the situation called for diplomatic resources that Jackson did not possess.”
William C. Davis will bring more of his well-researched insight into both historical and contemporary American culture to the Six Bridges Book Festival. Attendees of all ages will enjoy his lively, down-to-earth conversational style and ability to bridge past and present historical moments to show what the lessons of the past are still teaching us about American identity and today’s political challenges.

William C. Davis spent 21 years in the book and magazine publishing industry, and until 2013 was professor of history and executive director of the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech. *The Greatest Fury: The Battle of New Orleans and the Rebirth of America* is the latest of his more than 60 books on Southern history and the Civil War.
Mayra Cuevas, *Salty, Bitter, Sweet*

**Romance Smolders for Latina Aspiring Chef in YA debut**

Author Mayra Cuevas believes in the power of joyful stories.

As a teenager in Puerto Rico, she found solace from the turbulence of her parents’ divorce in great Latin American writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende. Puerto Rican poets Lola Rodríguez de Tió and Julia de Burgos inspired Cuevas to write down her own thoughts and feelings. Now, she wants to reach out to teens with her own work.

“I love writing YA because at that age, teens are going through a lot of confusion and angst,” Cuevas said. “It’s a time when you can use stories to work through emotions and make sense of what’s going on in your life.”

But she doesn’t believe all stories should focus on grim subjects for teens of color. Cuevas belongs to a collective of Latina artists who are all writing works for young people. “We’re all promoting this idea of having more Latina characters and stories that are about joy and life and not about suffering,” Cuevas explained. “Because not every Latina story should be about the dark side of immigration. I want Latina girls to be able to see themselves in a story about love and joy, like this one.”

**A young woman learning to stay true to herself**

*Salty, Bitter, Sweet* focuses on Isabella “Isa” Fields, a trilingual Latina teenager who moves to Paris after the death of her grandmother and divorce of her parents. Disoriented by family dysfunction and loss, she seizes on her passion: cooking. By winning an apprenticeship competition in France, she hopes to find her place in the world by landing a job at a renowned restaurant. The plot and the sauces thicken together when suave, attractive Diego shows up to annoy Isa and distract her at exactly the wrong time.

Cuevas believes that romance is a genre with much to offer young adults.

“I remember at that age reading a lot of books that had love as a theme,” she said. “The idea is all very new and everything’s happening for the first time. Now, as an adult writer, I have the gift of perspective and I can give that perspective to readers to show them ‘This is what a healthy relationship looks like.’ I want to help them explore the
question: ‘How do you not lose yourself in a romance when it’s so exciting, new, and full of possibility?’

Cuevas thinks the romance genre has unique power to pass on helpful life advice to teens in a way that is appealing and enjoyable. “I stumbled a lot through romantic relationships growing up, and now I can give that wisdom I earned back in a story form, instead of handing it down like an adult telling a teenager what to do.”

Creativity and giving to others through cooking

Romance is only half the pleasure of the novel—the other half is the sensory appeal of the food. The descriptions are mouthwatering and the culinary techniques convincing: it’s clear that Cuevas herself knows her way around a kitchen.

“I’m very passionate about food,” she said. “My mother hates to cook, so there were many nights of microwaved burritos in our house. But we had cable TV and I watched the Food Network, so if I wanted something like that I had to learn to cook it myself. I even got in trouble for using my aunt’s stove one time!”

Cuevas appreciates the deeper power and meaning of sharing food as well. “Cooking is very creative, and there’s a giving of oneself to others through food, caring for others, and healing. People feel cared for when they get a plate with a warm meal. And food also unites us with meals that are traditional in certain cultures. Meals also become markers for life events, when we remember certain meals we had at special occasions or with a mother, sister, or grandmother.”

The connection of food with family tied all the thematic elements of Salty, Bitter, Sweet together, inspired by Cuevas’s own life.

“The family story did come about first. For me, it’s important to write from my own experience. And I’m very familiar with dysfunctional family dynamics because that was my upbringing. For Isa, her life is falling apart, she’s lost almost everything and she is clinging to the things she’s most passionate about like a life raft. She has to rebuild her life and learn how to love in a healthy way without losing herself by establishing a healthy give-and-take with someone who accepts her fully for who she is.”

For Cuevas, the love in her debut novel doesn’t end with a romantic relationship, but extends to a young woman’s capacity to love and forgive in general. “To be seen for who you are and understood is very important. Isa has lived kind of a lonely life. She finds a group of friends all passionate about the same thing—cooking—and then once she feels loved and accepted she has room to love and accept others.”
Mayra Cuevas will appear at the Six Bridges Book Festival to speak about her debut novel, writing fiction featuring women of color, and her passion for the young adult genre.

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Mayra Cuevas is a professional journalist and fiction writer who prefers love stories with a happy ending. Her debut novel, YA contemporary *Salty, Bitter, Sweet*, was published in March 2020. Her debut fiction short story was selected by best-selling author Becky Albertalli to appear in the *Foreshadow* YA serial anthology. She is currently a producer and writer for CNN. She keeps her sanity by practicing Buddhist meditation and serving on the Board of Directors of Kadampa Meditation Center Georgia. She lives with her husband, also a CNN journalist, and their cat, in the charming town of Norcross, Georgia. She is the stepmom to two amazing young men who provide plenty of inspiration for her stories. Follow her journey on Twitter @MayraECuevas, on Instagram @Mayra.Cuevas and her website MayraCuevas.com.
Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*

Author of Acclaimed Vietnam War Novel to Appear at Virtual Book Festival

Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* has earned high critical acclaim since its publication in 1990. A haunting blend of fiction and memoir usually called a “novel of the Vietnam War,” the book captures the cruelty and violence of war and the humanity of the soldiers caught up in it. O’Brien prefers to be thought of as a peace writer rather than a war writer, and that drive for peace in his narrative may be why *The Things They Carried* has left its mark in the hearts of so many readers. In conjunction with the NEA Big Read, CALS is delighted to host Tim O’Brien at this year’s virtual Six Bridges Book Festival.

Named as a *New York Times* Book of the Century and a finalist for some of the most prestigious prizes in literature, including the Pulitzer Prize, *The Things They Carried* is a watershed work for countless readers. Some of those readers lived through the Vietnam War era themselves and find that the work gives a voice to their pain and frustration. Younger readers have found a window into the war that shows them in 200 elegant, beautifully crafted pages that there is good reason to question why human beings take up guns and kill each other at the order of politicians.

“The average age in our platoon, I guess, was nineteen or twenty,” says the novel’s narrator. Part of the horror of the war is the youth of those who are drafted into the military by forces beyond their control. Musings on a virginal girl at home, firm belief in the Bible, raunchy conversations, and even bursts of cruelty and violence—all bear the telltale marks of youth and inexperience. These young lives end without ceremony, vanishing beneath the muck of the swamp. There is no noble meaning to these deaths. This is war. The young Vietnamese man who dies at the hands of American forces suffers a death that is as much a violation and a theft as the death of any of the young Americans. O’Brien illuminates these truths through spare, powerful scenes that skillfully walk the line between what can be told and what was too awful to tell.

Any work that struggled with the realities of the Vietnam War would cause controversy for many reasons, just as the war did, and *The Things They Carried* can still spark intense debate. *Is it too harsh? Not harsh enough?*
Why is any of the novel fictionalized? Shouldn’t it all be a factual chronicle, to be “truthful?”

The questions at the heart of the novel lie at the very center of what it means to remember, to reconstruct, and to examine painful realities. Asking why fiction may sometimes represent truth more accurately than a factual chronicle has taught thousands of students why human beings have been telling stories for thousands of years, and why the art of storytelling is deeply entwined with learning honesty and empathy.

O’Brien still finds it rewarding to talk about the book and the war with a new generation of readers.

“Most rewarding is engaging with a generation of younger people who did not live through America’s war in Vietnam and who often know very little about the war,” O’Brien said. “The curiosity of young people in regard to that era has always amazed me. Their questions are challenging and sometimes brilliant!”

The celebrated author looks forward to returning to Arkansas.

“Years ago—in fact, decades ago—I visited Little Rock as the guest of Gene Lyons, and thoroughly enjoyed my time in the city,” O’Brien said. “Maybe a decade ago, I visited Hendrix College as the guest of Professor Alex Vernon and once again had a great time. On this upcoming occasion, I look forward to engaging in discussions about The Things They Carried and taking part in Little Rock’s Big Read programs.”

Tim O’Brien received the 1979 National Book Award for Going After Cacciato. Among his other books are In the Lake of the Woods, Tomcat in Love, If I Die in a Combat Zone, July, July and his most recent, Dad’s Maybe Book.

Author profiles and interviews by Rosslyn Elliott

Cover art by Phillip Huddleston
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