Age of innocence

TEN-YEAR-OLD Helen has a lot to moan about. Lisbeth, her not-terrribly-nurturing mother, died when Helen was three. She has just lost Nione, her loving but secretive grandmother (survive yet, in a way the child feels unrecognizable for). And now, in the fall of autumn of 1944, Harry, her alcoholic father, has taken a mysterious assignment in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, leaving Helen in the care of Flora, a sweet, weepy, abjectly admitting and embarrassingly ungarded cousin from the despised poor relation side of the family. As the narrator ticks along toward its explosive ending (friends depart; a polio scare keeps the cousins quarantined; a adolescent crush turns into a triangle; tempers simmer), long-buried stories emerge that explain Lisbeth's chilliness, Harry's cynicism ("I look forward to the day"), his total daughter, "when you can spot the unawarenessness about human nature for yourself") and Nione's code of secretive silence. In a coming-of-age novel as expertly layered and metaphorical as a good poem, Godwin explores the long-term fallout from abandonment and betrayal, the persistence of remorse see the possibility of redemption. —AMANDA LOYD

ON A SINGLE STREET In Sri Lanka, the rumblings of far-off civil war grow louder while a group of children—an ethnic mix that mirrors the region's straining cultural diversity—play cricket, fly kites and otherwise sparkle with innocence. This is a brilliant, beautiful and crushing story about childhood, its kindnesses, comforts, misunderstandings and shifting allegiances, and also about the end of childhood. It's not a spoiler to say the book is epiocally tragic (you'll cry straight through the last 50 pages), because persistence is one of its themes. A young boy, pierced through with foreboding, senses what will happen to his cherised sister, while an omniscient narrator reminds us that we are hurtling toward certain grief. When the war finally comes to Sal Mal Lane, you'll understand exactly what's been lost. And you'll mourn it. —CATHARINE NEWMAN

ON SAL MAL LANE by Lea Freeman (SEAFIELD PRESS)

MICHAEL POLLAN'S NEWEST should come with a warning label: Don't read this book if you're hungry. And definitely don't read it if you're in the middle of a juice cleanse. Cooked (Penguin Press) is a detectable de oeur, a "protest against specialization...against the infiltration of commercial interests into every last cranny of our lives." A "part-gourmets whose idea of culinary inventiveness had been bolting store-bought cocktails with a good store-bought sauce ("No one has to chop onions anymore...corporations are more than happy to chop them for us"), Pollan travels the world—from the barbeque pits of North Carolina to the Basque country of Spain to his very own Berkeley, California, kitchen—to tackle the question, Why does cooking matter? His penetrating insights weave together sources as disparate as French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, Heidegger's Theory and formative stories from his childhood (as a teenager, Pollan briefly had a pet pig named Kosher). The result is a highly entertaining book that illuminates the act of cooking—and of living a conscious, passionate life. —JAMIE SHAPIRO

MICHAEL POLLAN'S NEWEST

Real Time

IN THE BODY OF THE WORLD

EVE ENSLER

METROPOLITAN BOOKS

Getting physical

WRITER AND ACTIVIST Eve Ensler went mano a mano with mortality and emerged healed and whole, her powerful and startling memoir tells us how. Diagnosed with advanced uterine cancer in 2010, the creator of The Vagina Monologues found that grueling treatments and a brutal recovery brought unexpected transformation. "I was forced to...release the past and be burned down to essential matter," Ensler says. Confronting a lifelong addiction from her body and the world, she's able to inhabit both fully for the first time. That may seem a startling arc for a pioneer celebrator of female sexuality who's also an astonishingly effective global reformer V-Day, the nonprofit she founded, has raised $100 mil for groups working to end violence against women. But a history of abuse by her alcoholic father explains the disjunction. Ensler writes with verve and urgency about dealing with disease, facing her demons and repairing relationships, an account as entertaini as it is harrowing. Ultimately, she reeducates herself to fix-ing a mighty screwed-up planet, and she expects us to help. How could we not? —JUDITH STONE

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