

Featuring 347 Industry-First Reviews of Fiction, Nonfiction, Children's and YA books

KIRKUS

VOL. XC, NO. 6 | 15 MARCH 2022

REVIEWS

Harvey Fierstein

The theater legend and fabulous queer pioneer looks back on every era of a remarkable life

Also in the issue:

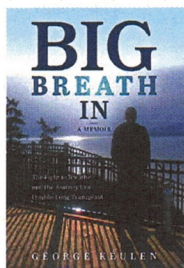
Dolly Parton & James Patterson,
Kelly Barnhill, Gary Lonesborough

Plus: Our inaugural audiobooks column



“The book does an excellent job of presenting Pauli Murray’s story in rich detail, and it is both entertaining and informative.”

PAULI MURRAY’S REVOLUTIONARY LIFE



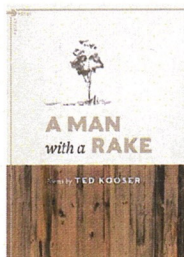
BIG BREATH IN
The Fight To Breathe and the Journey to a Double-Lung Transplant

Keulen, George
 FriesenPress (294 pp.)
 \$32.99 | \$19.99 paper | \$5.99 e-book
 Oct. 20, 2021
 978-1-03-911147-9
 978-1-03-911146-2 paper

A double-lung transplant patient describes the operation and living with cystic fibrosis in this debut memoir.

Keulen was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis soon after his birth in 1982 to dairy farmer parents in southwest Canada. His older brother, Warren, suffered from spinal muscular atrophy, also a fatal genetic disease. The author’s disorder was mild when he was a child, and he enjoyed playing hockey and riding around the farm. In these pages, he goes on to explain how cystic fibrosis affects the respiratory system, and he describes in detail how his own lungs deteriorated as he aged and how he came to terms with having the disease. He also relates how he strove to maintain a sense of normalcy as he worked on the farm and how he met his future wife, Kim. Keulen was wait-listed for a lung transplant in 2008, and the memoir records his emotions when he was called in for surgery more than 18 months later as well as the details of the operation itself and the immediate recovery process. He also reflects on how other events shaped his worldview, such as the death of his brother in 1991. Overall, Keulen’s writing is direct and avoids excessive medical jargon, as when he tells of cystic fibrosis’s effects in a concise paragraph: “Each infection causes scarring to the lung tissue, thus hardening and killing it, reducing lung capacity and airflow. Over time...there is essentially not enough good lung tissue left to survive.” He takes a similar approach to showing how the disorder shaped his psychology, and although his language is straightforward, it offers readers a profound celebration of the joy of living: “In the ineffable beauty of the nature around us, it felt like all the concerns were momentarily suspended.” The book includes diarylike entries throughout, which some may consider an interruption to the narrative flow but others will feel that they heighten the sense of intimacy. Readers facing similar transplant operations will particularly appreciate the work’s informative and hopeful tone.

A frank and enlightening remembrance that raises understanding of a disorder and its impact.



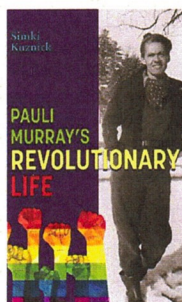
A MAN WITH A RAKE
Poems

Kooser, Ted
 Clyde Hill Publishing (32 pp.)
 \$14.00 paper | \$5.99 e-book
 March 15, 2022
 978-1-73497-917-6

Kooser, a former U.S. poet laureate, finds moral drama in rural stillness over the course of his latest poetry chapbook.

In these 18 poems, people watch and are watched; a woman crosses a highway to pick up her mail, a bull guards a field of cows, and the eponymous rake takes a break from work: “he’d been watching the rake / tick around clockwise, minute to minute, / a fine afternoon passing forever away, / but he’s figured out now how to slow it / all down....” Slowing it all down is often just what these poems are after. The works find inspiration in tiny happenings: “I watched a glint of morning sunlight / climbing a thread of spider’s silk / in a gentle breeze” begins “A Glint.” Another, about a farmer at a titular “Farm Sale,” ends, “He’s got / his cap on square, nothing better / to do on a warm Saturday morning / than to park at the far end of / where all of the others have parked, / and to walk up the road, in no hurry / to see what’s for sale at the sale.” In these quiet rhythms of American rural life—the moments between work and whatever comes next—Kooser, a Pulitzer Prize winner, seeks the sublime, and he crafts lyrics out of accessible, everyday language. He finds music in the creaking of old farmhouses, the pump of well water, and the squealing of piglets in a cardboard box. It’s a slim collection, but every poem leaves a mark. The highlight is perhaps “A Mouse Nest,” which reimagines Robert Burns’ famous discovery of a mouse’s hovel. In Kooser’s work, the nest is in the steel housing of a basement band saw. After the speaker dismantles the nest, he returns later to see if the mouse and its young are still present: “every trace of what had happened to us there / was gone, except for a little red fiberboard sawdust.” These poems, too, are like this sawdust—what remains of a happening experienced and then gone.

A quick series of precise poems by an American master.



PAULI MURRAY’S
REVOLUTIONARY LIFE

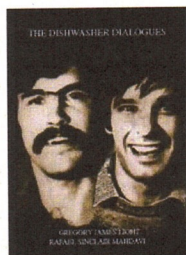
Kuznick, Simki
 Rootstock Publishing (220 pp.)
 \$24.99 | \$15.99 paper | \$6.99 e-book
 March 1, 2022
 978-1-57869-077-0

A debut biography focuses on a civil rights activist, lawyer, and Episcopal priest.

In this book, Kuznick tells the story of Pauli Murray (1910-1985), a Black trailblazer who graduated first in her class from Howard University Law School, helped found the National Organization for Women, and became an Episcopal priest as soon as the church approved the ordination of women. The work opens with Murray’s childhood, spent largely in the care of her aunts after her mother’s death, and explores how her family’s Black, White, and Native American roots and their experiences of slavery and freedom shaped her world. The author follows Murray as she traveled to New York City to finish high school and attend college, toured the country to find work and organize for civil rights, and distinguished herself in legal circles despite the constant opposition she faced as a Black woman. The book does an excellent job of presenting Murray’s story in rich detail, and it is both entertaining and informative.

It is clear that Kuznick has done substantial research for the biography, but there are no citations or sources listed, making it difficult to determine how much of the volume's dialogue ("Do you have bullets for that gun, Grandmother?" young Pauli asked warily) is drawn from primary sources and how much is invented. With its close narration of the events of Murray's life, the volume is more focused on telling her tale than on analyzing her work and placing it in historical and sociological contexts. For instance, Kuznick writes about Murray's relationships with women and her struggle to understand her gender identity but does not go into what it meant to be a lesbian or gender-nonconforming in the mid-20th century. Readers interested in researching Murray's life and career may want to inspect the several scholarly books about her published in recent years. But those looking for an introduction to Murray that is well written and touches on the many intersecting aspects of her activism and identity will find Kuznick's work a satisfying read.

A compelling life story told in an engaging style.



THE DISHWASHER DIALOGUES

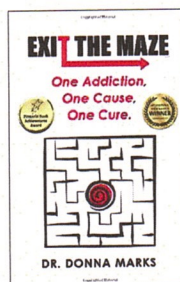
Light, Gregory James & Rafael Sinclair Mahdavi
Manuscript (249 pp.)

In this debut memoir, two former restaurant employees dish about life in 1970s Paris.

American-born Mahdavi and Canadian-born Light got to the City of Light in different ways. Both had done some world traveling by that point, and both were looking to make art in what was undoubtedly one of the coolest cities to be in 1976. Both found work at Chez Haynes, the popular tiki-themed soul-food restaurant, operated by American chef and former U.S. Army intelligence officer Leroy Haynes. The restaurant was a place where expatriates, cops, gamblers, and French movie stars converged. After Jacques Chirac became mayor of Paris in 1977, he would sometimes give press conferences in the eatery. Suffice it to say, it was a thrilling place to work: "When I began that first one day a week as a dishwasher," recalls the typically enthusiastic Light, now a retired professor, "I was over the moon—actually I was over a large industrial tin sink with sludgy brown water dotted by bits of half-chewed lettuce floating on top." As he and Mahdavi trade memories, it's not only a portrait of a workplace that emerges, but of a time and place filled with big personalities, strange happenings, and, of course, excellent food. The authors composed the book via email, and the text switches perspectives after nearly every paragraph. Topics include relationships, philosophy, art, and many curious figures who populated their working lives. "Don, the cook, was a rather strange and inscrutable man," recounts Mahdavi, a writer and artist who seems to be the more analytical of the co-authors. "I never knew much about him except that he pined for the blond manageress." There's a *My Dinner With Andre* quality to the book, as readers listen in on the reminiscences of two aging artists about their

wilder days in a foreign city. It works, however, and will appeal to those who have little interest in Paris or the restaurant industry. Both authors skillfully build on each other's recollections to bring a vanished world to vibrant life.

A vivid, nostalgia-laced evocation of a restaurant-anchored scene.



EXIT THE MAZE *One Addiction, One Cause, One Cure.*

Marks, Donna

Westward Publishing (210 pp.)

\$15.95 paper

Jan. 14, 2020

978-0-578-59545-0

A psychotherapist and educator reframes addiction and discusses treatment.

In this self-help book, Marks draws on both her work in therapy and counseling and her own experiences of addiction to offer a new perspective on the causes and treatments of the condition. The work takes its title from the iconic maze used in lab experiments with rodents, and it contends that all people dealing with addiction are stuck in it. The author's central argument is that all forms of addiction are essentially the same, although they are often considered different for diagnostic purposes, and that a fragmented system of mental and physical health care often does more harm than good. This system treats symptoms without curing the underlying problems, leaving patients unable to ultimately overcome their addictions. Marks writes that addiction is a response to an underlying trauma that has not been dealt with—for instance, abuse or neglect in childhood. In order to be cured, patients need to work through the initial trauma and establish healthy emotional patterns that allow them to stop reacting in harmful ways, breaking the cycle of addictive behavior. The author's framework for recovery draws heavily on Helen Schuman's *A Course in Miracles* (1975), which Marks credits with helping her manage her own marijuana and alcohol addictions. Each chapter of Marks' manual includes a series of questions designed to guide readers through the process of understanding their addictive behaviors, analyzing the fundamental causes, and developing strategies for healing and recovery. The author is a solid writer whose narrative is simple and easy to follow ("I want to change your perception of addiction from something wrong with you to something that's wrong with our conditioning"), and her key argument is a convincing one. She addresses the use of medication in treating addiction along with the challenges presented by mood disorders, which complicate the recovery plan. The book makes a plausible case for bringing structural changes to the treatment of addiction, with specific recommendations on a policy level that complement the primary focus on individual recovery and healing.

A valuable, holistic approach to treating addiction by addressing trauma.