



SHOEBOX TRAIN WRECK

JOHN MANTOOTH

PRAISE FOR JOHN MANTOOTH

“John Mantooth writes with enviable grace, vigour, ease. These stories pulsate with the inevitable pain of familial love, and loss, and the horrors of the human condition while remaining peopled with unforgettable characters who move through their lives toward moments of personal realization and doom that can only come from the Southern experience. Mantooth has here collected a group of stories that exceeds the sum of its parts. You won’t regret picking up this collection and will think on these amazing and heartfelt stories long after you’ve closed the covers. Absolutely brilliant.”

—**John Hornor Jacobs, author of *Southern Gods, This Dark Earth, and The Twelve Fingered Boy***

“The stories in John Mantooth’s powerful debut collection turn a blazing spotlight on those living at—and beyond—society’s margins. In sinuous, elegant prose, Mantooth maps the journeys that have led his characters to dead-ends and disappointments. Mantooth spares his characters nothing, including sufficient self-awareness to understand their roles in their personal catastrophes. These characters grieve their griefs on universal bones, and when they stumble onto hope, it is a small, tough thing that promises no miracles, only the possibility that life tomorrow will be a little better than it was today. This is impressive, assured work, not to be missed.”

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“John Mantooth’s short stories crackle with intelligence and violence. He writes about desperate and simple lives gone not-so-simple, and those lives beat with a savvy and familiar broken heart. His down-and-out characters are ugly and beautiful, and most importantly, compelling. John is the real deal, and I think I hate him for it.”

—**Paul Tremblay, author of *The Little Sleep and In the Mean Time***

SHOEBOX TRAIN WRECK

JOHN MANTOOTH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
DANNY EVARTS



ChiZine Publications

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For Bill Mantooth (1945-1997)

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A LONG FALL INTO NOTHING

I met Larry Bryant on a cold morning during the spring of 1981. I was a senior and rode the school bus because we couldn't afford a car and my father had to be at work too early to take me. We lived pretty far out, near the Black Warrior River, in an area some people might have called poor—or if they were feeling less kind—rough.

The first time the driver, Mr. Jennings, stopped at Larry's trailer, I thought he must be having engine trouble. There was no way anyone could live in such a place. The trailer had been burned and the whole front side was gone. Someone had strung up shower curtains to keep out the elements, but most of that had been ripped and pieces were scattered about the yard. When I saw the flashing lights and the stop sign extend on the left side of the bus, I sat up, anxious to see who would emerge from the squalor. When no one came out, Jennings blew the horn two short blasts, shrugged, and released the handbrake. Just as he started to pull away, a tall, broad-shouldered kid appeared in the doorway of the trailer and strolled across the trash-strewn yard like it was a Sunday afternoon walk in the park.

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I pressed my forehead against the dirty glass, fascinated.

This guy was in no hurry. Normally, Jennings would have gone by now, but I knew he'd let this kid on because he was new and didn't know the rules. But then he'd chew him. Eat him alive like he had done Reggie Calhoun last year. Reggie had been so embarrassed by Jennings vitriolic attack that he'd played hooky for a week.

Except . . . I don't know what it was. This kid was pretty big. Jennings was bigger, though. That wasn't it. It was more the way he carried himself. The way he held his chin out, like he was proud of his greasy hair and ragged clothes. It was the way he looked out past the bus at something only he could see.

I don't know . . . To this day, I still don't know.

Whatever it was, Jennings saw it too. There was a moment of almost unbearable tension, as the new kid climbed onto the bus, when I thought Jennings might tear into him, but it passed with Jennings grumbling something under his breath. Larry took no notice of him. Instead, he scanned the bus, looking for a place to sit. His eyes fell on me, and he worked his way toward the back where I was seated in the very last row.

"So," he said, settling into the seat across from me, "what do you do around here to kill the goddamn time?"

Violence was something I learned about early on. My mother shot herself when I was eight, and although I was spared the sight of her body, I heard the door to her room slam just before she unloaded the 45 into her mouth. I heard that too. Dad, drunk on whiskey, still had enough sense to get me out of the house. It was a firecracker, he'd said. I must have looked at him like he was a fool because he shoved me hard toward the front door and told me to play, okay Jake, just go outside and play. I was still outside playing when they carried her off in the body bag.

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Though Dad never offered much in the way of an opinion about why Mom shot herself, I had some ideas of my own. She couldn't take living with her husband anymore. She couldn't take being passive. She couldn't take it anymore. Period.

My mother's suicide worked on me. Even when I wasn't thinking about it, I felt it there gnawing at me, whispering. And something else was there too. The adrenaline rush of violence. It was a side of me that only broke to the surface sporadically, like an unwelcomed guest. A fight at school that left the other kid bleeding and sobbing on the bathroom floor, the silk scars on my forearm that felt even better than I had imagined when I carved them with a straight razor. The blind surge of anger that ached to be released when I thought of my mother, and even more so, my dad. Even when I managed to keep the violence down, I could feel it deep inside me, a steady thrum of blood that felt like a birthright.

I suppose it might have all been different if Larry had chosen somewhere else to sit, but all the sleepless nights have taught me the futility of thinking like that. So I accept what happened even if I can't understand it, this puzzle of events that nearly thirty years later, I am still trying to assemble.

Larry was a senior like me, but he could have passed for a man in his twenties. He was long-haired, sullen, and utterly intimidating.

We'd ridden in amicable silence for three days when he leaned across the aisle and said, "What we need to find," he said, "is an easy target."

"Huh?"

"How about her?" he said, gesturing to a girl a few rows in front of us. Mae Duncan. Fat girl, extraordinaire.

"Mae?"

"Yeah. The fat bitch."

I shrugged. I didn't understand where this was going.

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“What’s your name,” he said, his tone changing, becoming friendlier. There was something ingratiating about him then. I wanted to like him. Lord knows why.

“Jake,” I said and stuck out my hand.

When he took it, his hand felt cold, lifeless.

“Little help!” Jennings called as he always did when he had to turn the bus around at the stop near Ben Self’s driveway. It was a hell of a turn for a bus, and I’d always felt proud he’d entrusted me to help him do it.

The tricky part was where Ben lived, on a bluff facing out over the Black Warrior River. Jennings had to nose into the Selfs’ driveway and then put the bus in reverse, while cutting the wheel hard. No problem there, Jennings could handle a bus. The problem was what he had to back into—a sheer forty-foot drop into fast moving water, riddled with jagged rocks. Jennings and the school administrators had been after the county for years to put up a guardrail so at least he’d have something to bump against before the bus plummeted out into nothingness, but the county didn’t give two shits for what the principal and a bus driver wanted, and Jennings was left having to rely on students to help him.

Anyway, I was supposed to call out to him when he got near the edge. The first few times he had me do it, I hollered stop too early, and he couldn’t make the turn. I learned from trial and error the back of the bus had to be practically hanging out over the bluff in order for him to avoid the pine trees in front.

Because of the danger of this manoeuvre, Jennings demanded absolute silence when he made the turn. Even the little kids who had never been close enough to the back to see what dizzying fates we were tempting, fell strangely silent, and when Jennings made the cut and put the bus in drive at last, there was a palpable sense of relief. It was a like

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a collective sigh, a hushed whisper that said, we did it, we pushed the limit, but we did not die today.

I opened the back door and leaned out, aware of Larry's eyes on me. He muttered something, but I ignored him, concentrating on the pavement below. It would turn to grass and then to nothingness. The grass came. I waited, leaning forward. The Black Warrior streaked past. A hawk skimmed the surface of the river, its beak grazing the silver current.

"Stop!" I shouted.

Jennings stopped.

He cut the wheel hard. Put the bus in drive. I shut the door. The tension was gone.

I turned to look at Larry, but he was standing, admiring the river through the window.

The bus stopped suddenly. "One more time!" Jennings shouted. I'd been too cautious. He'd have to back up again to make the turn.

He put it in reverse. I reached for door release, but Larry's hand was there first. "I got it," he said.

"But—"

"I got it," he repeated in an eager tone that made me feel like any argument would be silly.

I slid back into my seat. He opened the door, leaning way out. "Keep coming," he said.

Jennings, who I had long suspected was hard of hearing, didn't notice the voice belonged to someone else.

"Got plenty," Larry said. "Come on."

I stood behind Larry to look out. What I saw made me grip the seatback with both hands. The bluff was gone. We were teetering on the brink of disaster.

"A little more."

"No," I said, but my voice wasn't strong enough.

"Good!" Larry called out and smiled at me.

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Jennings grunted and put it in drive. The back tires were poised on the very edge of the bluff. Any further and we'd have slid right off into the river.

The bus lurched forward and Jennings had no problem missing the trees.

Larry and I fell into an uneasy rhythm: mornings he spent in the seat beside Mae, chatting her up so well that in a week she was smiling at every word he said. In the afternoons he sat in the back and took over—without really ever asking—my responsibility helping Jennings. He seemed to have an innate sense about just how far to go without sending the bus plummeting into the Black Warrior, and he delighted in nudging us right up against that line. Once or twice, leaning against the side window, watching the lip of the bluff disappear, I was sure we were doomed, but just when I thought Jennings couldn't go further, Larry would call him off with an ecstatic, "Whoa there, Nellie!"

One day he told me he was going to be visiting Mae's house after school. "It's on," he said. "Parents out of town. Fat girl's going down." This little rhyme seemed to please him to no end.

I tried to imagine Mae on her knees, her heavy tits sagging almost to the floor, as she regarded Larry's dick with that stupid, wanton smile she always gave him. Something about this image both sickened me and turned me on.

"Hey," he said. "You should come."

"Nah, sounds like you two will need some privacy."

"Fuck that. I don't care about privacy. You can watch. Hell, you can participate if you want."

"What about Mae?"

"What about her? She's a fat whore. You know what fat whores are good for?"

I shook my head.

"Catching cum."

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“What?”

He punched my arm. “You a virgin or something?”

“Hell no.”

His eyes darted around my face, never meeting mine. I think, in all the time I knew Larry, I only locked eyes with him once.

“Well, shit. Come with me this afternoon. You’ll see how fun a fat girl can be.”

Just then Jennings shouted out for “a little help,” and Larry popped out of his seat to open the backdoor.

Mae’s house was worse than I ever imagined. I’d seen the place where she got off in the afternoon, but that was only her bus stop. I knew she had to walk a long dirt road to reach her home, and I’d assumed it was a dump, but dump didn’t quite do it justice.

The windows were broken. All of them. The siding had been ripped clean off the front of the house, and somehow the whole place leaned to the right. Her yard—if you could call it that—was littered with rusted bicycles and kitchen appliances. A stained sheet hung over one broken window, flapping in the wind.

Larry approached the window with the sheet. He caught it in his fist and ripped it down. We peered inside letting our eyes adjust to the darkness. She was on the couch wearing a pair of cut-off jeans and bikini top. When she saw us, she smiled, offering us that same “please pet me” smile I’d seen for weeks on the bus. I wanted to leave.

It wasn’t just that I felt sorry for her. I also felt sorry for myself. What was I doing? Why was I letting this new kid, this bully, pull me along in his wake? I didn’t have an answer. I still don’t, though the perspective of time has given me some ideas.

We went inside. Some things happened. They were all bad.

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When we left, Larry was laughing. He put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me to him, giving me one of those best friends forever hugs. I remember smiling, even though I felt sick inside.

I think about what happened next the most. It was a warm day, almost spring, the sky painted a double-coated shade of blue, the bare tree branches reaching out for something that was not there.

Larry sat down in the seat across from me. "I'm bored," he said.

"What about Mae?"

"She's used up. Too easy."

"I thought that's what you wanted."

He shrugged. "It's like there's no goal anymore. She just lays there and lets me do whatever the fuck I want."

The last couple students climbed aboard as Jennings cranked the bus. Mae was one of them, swivelling her hips to keep from getting stuck between the rows of seats. From the look on her face, I saw that Larry had already made his feelings clear to her. Still, she kept coming, until she sat down in the seat directly in front of Larry.

"Something you need?" Larry said.

She shook her head, her eyes flashing with an anger I didn't think she was capable of.

Larry ignored it and scanned the bus. "What about that girl up there?" he said, pointing at one of the younger girls, a sixth or seventh grader. I didn't know her name but she had an eye for the older boys and a body to match.

"She's a little young," I said.

"It must be boring being you," Larry shot back, a challenge in his eyes. Jennings pulled out onto County Road 22, and the tension in the back of the bus was palpable. "I mean, what the fuck do you get out of life?"

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Before I could answer, he turned and grabbed a handful of Mae's hair in his fist. She let out a low whimper and said, "Don't touch me."

Larry pulled her hair back even farther, so her neck was bent. Her face was flush and her eyes darted to me.

Since the day I joined Larry at her house, she'd ignored me. Even though she was compliant with Larry's every request that day, I could tell she wasn't comfortable with me being there. I thought she hated me, but maybe I was wrong.

"Let her go," I said, and was immediately disappointed in the lack of strength in my voice.

"Did you say something?"

"Let her go, Larry. Do you have to be so mean all the time?"

Larry let go of her hair and placed his palm on the back of her head and shoved hard. "Nah. You're right. I need to be a nicer person. I'm going to be nice to her." He pointed directly at the young girl in the front of the bus. Then he got up and brushed past Mae.

For the next several miles I tried not to think about anything.

"Little help!"

Larry rose and made his way to the rear of the bus. He threw open the emergency door and leaned way out into the opening, using both hands to brace himself on the doorframe. Over time, he'd become even more daring, and sometimes it seemed like he wanted to fall. Larry, I had come to realize, felt constrained by everything. He was always looking for the boundaries not because he wanted to stay behind them, but because he wanted to move past them. Me, on the other hand, I was looking for something absolute, some secret, some reason for why things stayed together and why they fell apart.

"Come on," he said, leaning out the back of the bus now with only one hand positioned on the doorframe to keep him

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from falling out into the river. The other hand was in the air, waving Jennings on.

“Whoa!” he shouted. “You’re good to go.”

I felt myself relax; I felt the bus relax, a general sigh of relief because once again we were back on track, certain disaster averted.

But disaster can never be completely averted. Like violence, it always lurks, waiting for the right moment to explode and make you wonder why it doesn’t happen more often.

I heard her before I saw her. When she rose from her seat, there was the sound of her blue jeans and her blouse scraping against the torn seats. I turned and saw Mae’s eyes locked in on Larry, both arms extended like some of those pictures you see of Frankenstein’s monster stumbling forward.

She hit him with all of her weight, and for an instant, I thought she was going to go with him. The momentum of the bus moving forward, combined with Mae’s heavy blow literally shot Larry through the opening. For one fascinating moment, I saw him frozen, his body arched like a diver setting up to bend and tuck and turn into a perfect needle nose descent. But none of that happened. Instead, something even more miraculous did.

He flailed his hands and one of them managed to catch the door release—a slender steel bar. Somehow, improbably, he held on. Somebody closer to the front screamed.

Jennings slammed on the brakes.

I leaned out and saw there was nothing between Larry’s dangling legs and the rocky rapids below. If his hand slipped, he’d plummet into the teeth of the river. He twisted his body around and reached out to me with his free hand. His other hand was already beginning to slide off the door release. I knew if I didn’t reach for him, he’d have to take a chance and lunge for the door opening. He’d probably get his hand back in and be able to climb back onboard. Probably.

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“What the hell is going on?” Jennings demanded.

I knew there was a window, however slight, that had opened. An almost imperceptible space in time when I could do something, something big, something important, something right. I reached one hand out for Larry, bracing myself against the door frame with the other. He took it. Even as I felt his rough hand cover mine, I knew Larry couldn't be as evil as he appeared. But at that moment, I didn't care. All I cared about was making sure he couldn't hurt anyone again.

“Come on,” I said reaching out my free hand. “Give me your other hand.”

He looked at me then, his eyes locking right on mine. I nodded, reassuring him. He looked afraid. Damn if that look doesn't still haunt me. Why is it some of us can feel pity when it is least deserved while there are others of us who cannot even fathom the sentiment?

He must have read the pity in my eyes because he let go of the door release bar and reached for me.

It was easy. Much easier than I thought. Just before I did it, I heard Jennings behind me, telling me to hang on, he'd pull the bus forward and goddamn why had we let him back up so far? I also heard the blast of a 45 and my father again: just go play, okay Jake, just go outside and play.

I let go.

His eyes stayed locked on mine as he fell. I'd like to believe I saw a kind of recognition in them, a flicker of insight that took most people years to obtain. I'd like to believe in the instant before his body broke on the rocks below that he thought about how cruel and pointless his life had been and how his actions had only brought pain to himself and those around him. I'd like to believe a lot of things. But in reality, I don't believe much of anything these days.

Jennings grabbed me from behind and pulled me back

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into the bus. It was only then I realized I was halfway to falling out myself.

I was sobbing. I'm not sure for whom.

Jennings heaved me into a seat. "It ain't your fault. You tried, son. You tried."

And I did try. In my own way, I tried to do the right thing, to turn the violence that needed to jump out of me like an ungrounded current into a kind of heroic act. Thirty years later, I'm not sure I succeeded. I'm not sure how to put together the pieces of my life. I turn the events over and sometimes try to force them into something like meaning, but those constructs are only temporary, as enlightening as learning truth isn't absolute and the world is a series of indecipherable paradoxes. In the end, I always come back to that long drop, the look in Larry's eyes as he fell, the rocks waiting beneath. This is absolute, I tell myself. Truth, I tell myself. Greater good. I did the right thing because there is a right thing.

But then I remember my own indiscretions, the fumbling, half-skewered world of my childhood without a mother. And I think maybe when I let go of Larry, I dropped someone else off a cliff as well, somebody who loved him. Somebody who needed him. I don't know.

I do know this: Larry wasn't the only one who fell. I've been falling too. The difference is he found what he was looking for: a hard line at the bottom that could not be crossed. My greatest fear is I'll fall forever and never find the bottom.

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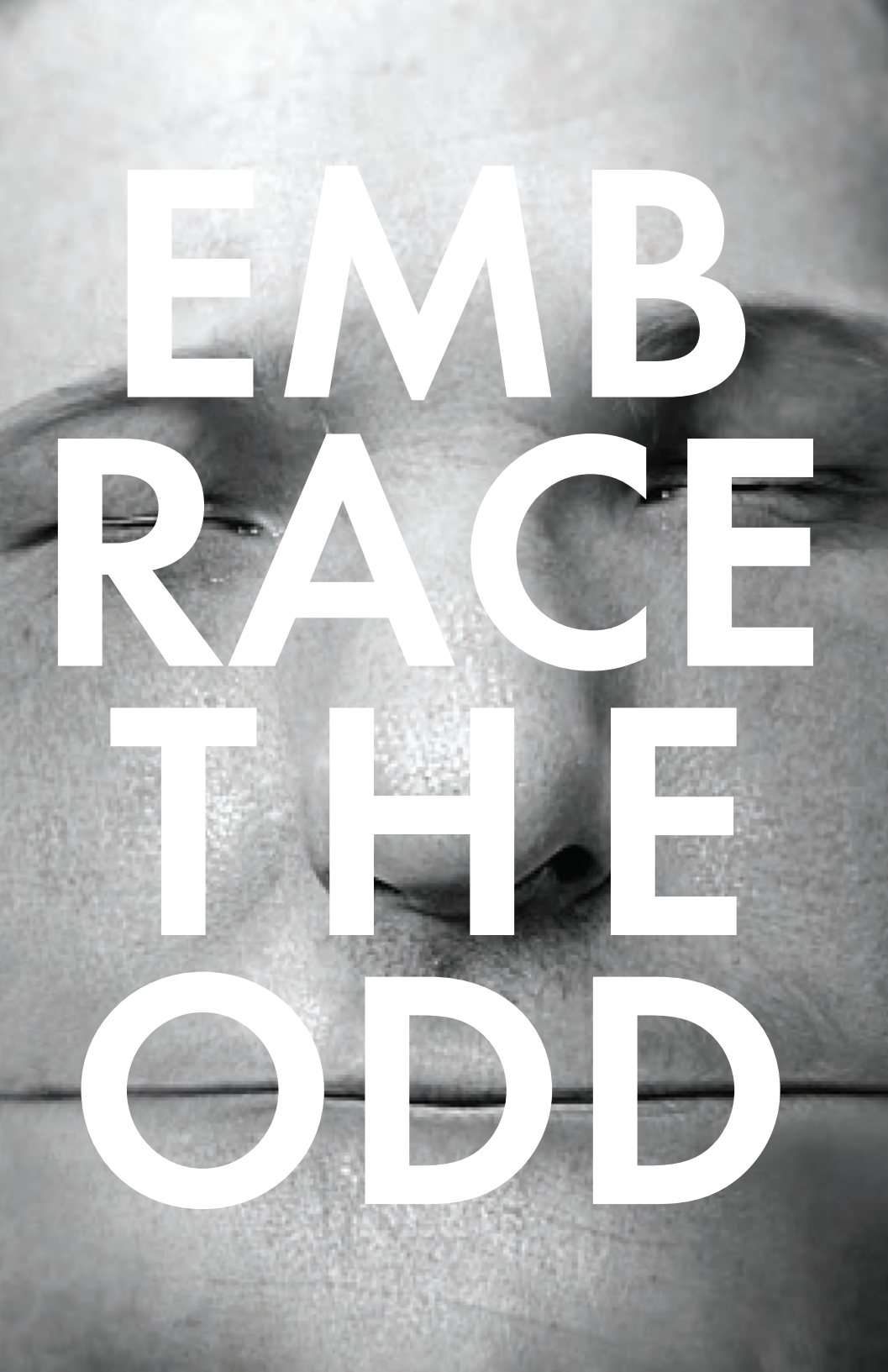
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John Mantooh is an award-winning author whose short stories have been recognized in numerous year's best anthologies. His short fiction has been published in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Crime Factory*, *Thuglit*, and the Bram Stoker Award-winning anthology, *Haunted Legends* (Tor, 2010), among others.

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Danny Evarts is an illustrator, editor and graphic designer, and currently holds down the role of Art Director and Technical Editor for Shroud Publishing. He has been attempting to perfect his obsession with layout and design since the mid-1980s. Danny abandoned a career in journalistic and fiction writing in the early '90s as he came to realize that his visions were better suited to illustration, first for underground magazines and mini-comics. He soon fell in love with relief printmaking, and after a brief stint as a designer in the music industry, his works—most often original prints made through carving into wood or linoleum—now pepper the pages of books and magazines. He is also the illustrator of the Unchildren's Book *It's Okay to be a Zombie*, and is fomenting further adventures in this series alongside many other projects. Danny lives with his partner in the Maine woods, where they spend most of their time working on their property and fleeing from irate wildlife.

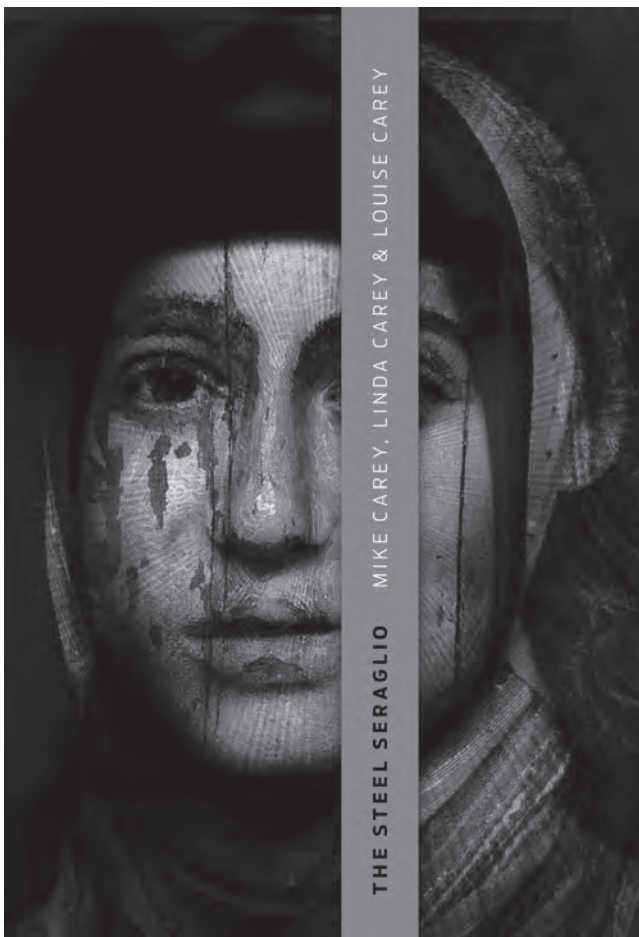


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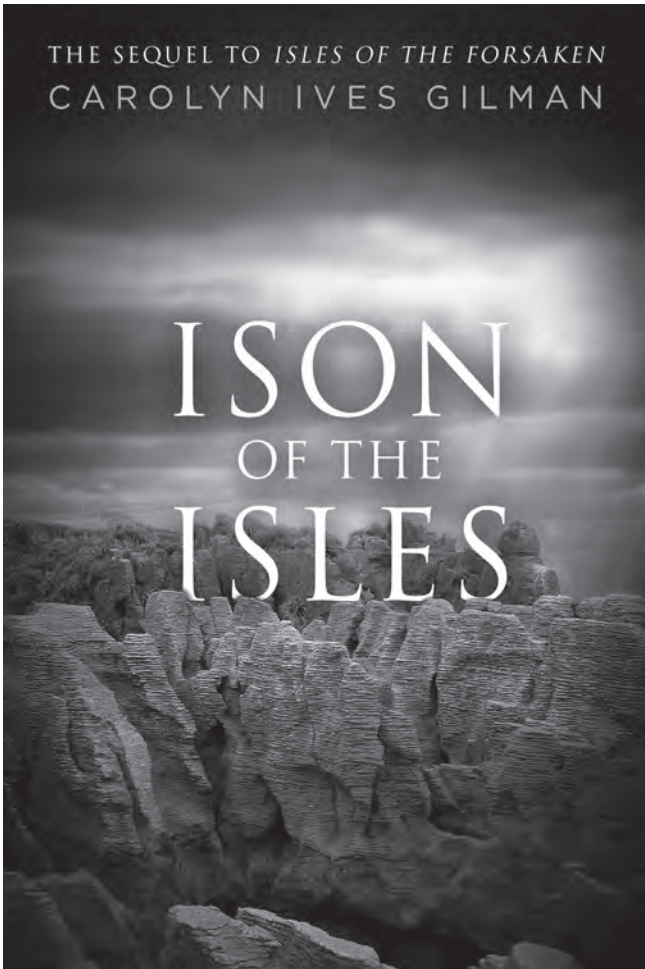
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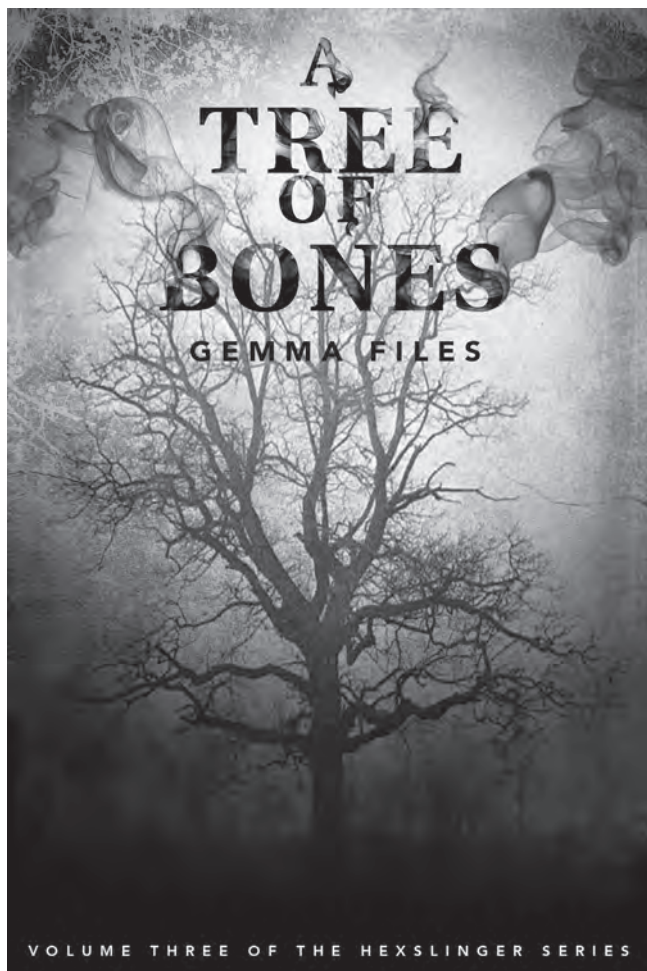
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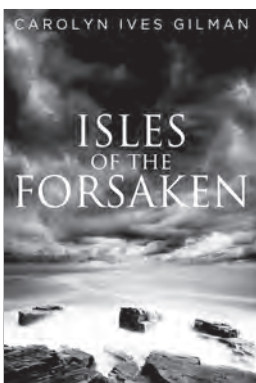
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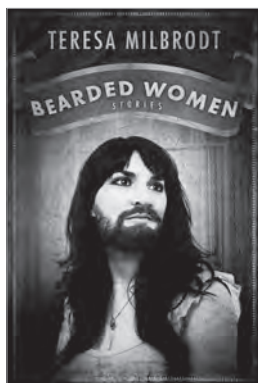
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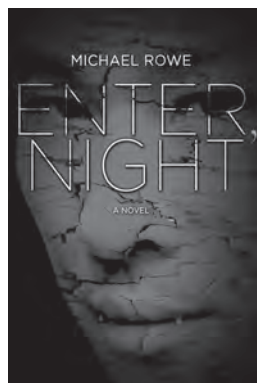
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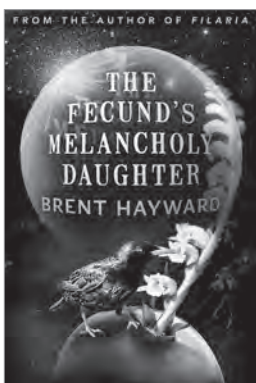
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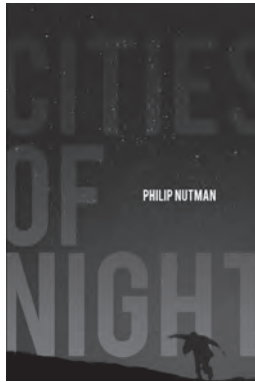
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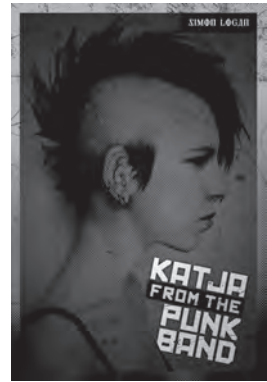
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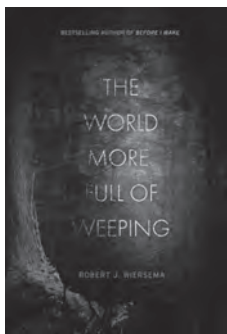
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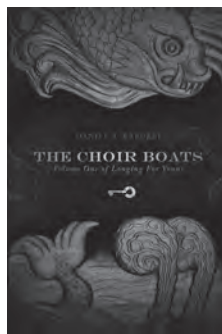
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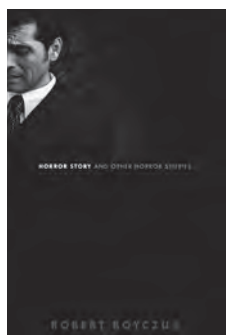
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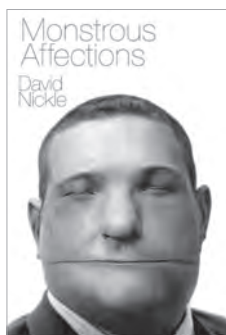
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