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## EDITORS' CHOICE

# 10 New Books We Recommend This Week

Dec. 19, 2019

Eccentrics, obsessives and big personalities dominate this week's nonfiction. We recommend the memoir of a professional foodie and the biography of a secretive investor who was determined to beat the market — he succeeded, phenomenally — as well as the life of an influential leftist congresswoman from the 1970s and the lives of three sisters who pushed their way to the center of modern Chinese history. We also have the biography of a German Jew who fled Nazism but returned as an American spy, and a dual biography of the ancient Romans Pliny the Elder and Pliny the Younger. (The elder was the obsessive one: As our review points out, he was so intrepid that he died “while trying to inspect an active volcano.”)

Our recommended fiction this week is quieter but no less eccentric, with a nightmarish fable about corporate life, a pointed Yugoslavian comedy about two blackmailers unwittingly targeting each other, a debut novel about gambling and forbidden love, and the story of a goat — it's titled “The Story of a Goat” — that manages to be just that, even as it's so much more.

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**THE BOOK OF EATING: Adventures in Professional Gluttony**, by Adam Platt. (Ecco, \$27.99.) This memoir, by the longtime food critic for New York magazine, is full of eloquence and wit about what being a professional glutton does to his body and to his family. It also surveys the changes he has watched roil the food world, like the toppling of the French-chef hegemony and the rise of egalitarian figures like Anthony Bourdain and David Chang. The best thing about Platt's memoir, our critic Dwight Garner writes, “is the way he dispenses with pretense in general. He does not pretend, even though he knows a great deal, to be a super-foodie. He's maniacally self-deprecating. He serves good stories because he doesn't over-batter them.”

**THE STORY OF A GOAT**, by Perumal Murugan. Translated by N. Kalyan Raman. (Black Cat, paper, \$16.) Murugan, one of India's most original novelists, has written this parable about village life with breathtaking and deceptive simplicity. It examines the oppressions of caste and colorism, government surveillance, the abuse of women — all cunningly folded into the biography of an unhappy little goat. “Why go to literature to encounter suffering?” our critic Parul Sehgal writes. “‘The Story of a Goat’ answers this question with more grace, wit and feeling than any book I've encountered in recent memory. We go to such stories for the relief of honesty; to see what is hidden brought to light; to acknowledge, if here alone, the pain routinely inflicted on lives normally considered too insignificant to be the subject of great literature.”

**THE MAN WHO SOLVED THE MARKET**, by Gregory Zuckerman. (Portfolio/Penguin, \$30.) The incredibly successful quantitative investor Jim Simons is a source of fascination to anyone looking to make money on the stock market, and Zuckerman, a Wall Street Journal reporter, does a fine job of unraveling the hard work and extraordinary intelligence that led to his success as the founder of Renaissance Technologies. This biography “tells a surprisingly captivating story,” Joe Nocera writes in his review. “It turns out that a firm like Renaissance, filled with nerdy academics trying to solve the market's secrets, is way more interesting than your typical greed-is-good hedge fund.”

**BIG SISTER, LITTLE SISTER, RED SISTER: Three Women at the Heart of Twentieth-Century China**, by Jung Chang. (Knopf, \$30.) Through strategic marriages and sheer strength of personality, the three Soong sisters had a direct hand in the making of modern China. Chang navigates the political intrigue and sibling feuds to create a revealing portrait of a country and a family. “Deeply researched, Chang's book is a riveting read,” Jiayang Fan writes in her review. “Cocooned in wealth and privilege, the sisters dreamed noble dreams but were buoyed by naïveté and sometimes led astray by

bourgeois idealism. Although the sisters had ample intelligence and irrepressible spirit, they had almost no contact with ordinary Chinese, and, at the most critical juncture of their country's modern history, found themselves to be baffled — foreigners in the place of their birth.”

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**BATTLING BELLA: The Protest Politics of Bella Abzug**, by Leandra Ruth Zarnow. (Harvard University, \$35.) Though she served only six years in the House of Representatives, Abzug was one of the most recognizable American politicians of the 1970s. This biography demonstrates why her pioneering, iconoclastic ideas still resonate. “Feel free to think of her as a middle-aged, Jewish, Vietnam-era version of Alexandria Ocasio Cortez,” Gail Collins writes in her review. “That would please Zarnow, who sees a whole lot of similarities between our era and the 1970s, when Democratic progressives were going head-to-head against establishment moderates for control of the party’s agenda.”

**ON SWIFT HORSES**, by Shannon Pufahl. (Riverhead, \$27.) This Odyssean debut novel tells two love stories on parallel tracks, neither quite romantic but both driven by passions that are discordant with their time. “It’s a book about the midcentury American West, gambling and queer love; but it doesn’t follow the plow of stories from any of these territories,” Lucie Shelly writes in her review. “Pufahl’s voice is strikingly solid, timeworn but not nostalgic, as she unravels a cinematic story that avoids genre clichés or sentimentality.”

**RETURN TO THE REICH: A Holocaust Refugee’s Secret Mission to Defeat the Nazis**, by Eric Lichtblau. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$28.) Frederick Mayer escaped Nazi Germany as a Jewish teenager and later returned as a spy, only to be caught and tortured. Lichtblau, who initially wrote about Mayer for his New York Times obituary in 2016, deftly pieces together the life of a man “born without a fear gene,” as one of his wartime colleagues put it. Mark Horowitz, our reviewer, says that Lichtblau has “given Mayer’s story the feature-length treatment it deserves, drawing on a rich trove of oral histories, letters, government archives, captured German records, and personal accounts from surviving witnesses and their families. ... The details are astonishing.”

**THE SHADOW OF VESUVIUS: A Life of Pliny**, by Daisy Dunn. (Liveright, \$29.95.) A British classicist’s lively dual biography of two eminent Romans: the polymath Pliny the Elder, author of the encyclopedic “Natural History,” and his nephew (and adopted son), Pliny the Younger. “Dunn is a good writer, with some of the easy erudition of Mary Beard, that great popularizer of Roman history, and her translations from both Plinys are graceful and precise,” Charles McGrath writes in his review. “Her enthusiasm, together with her eye for the odd, surprising detail, wins you over.”

**THE FACTORY**, by Hiroko Oyamada. Translated by David Boyd. (New Directions, paper, \$13.95.) Oyamada’s English-language debut imagines the Sisyphean labors of three Japanese factory employees whose world is entirely encompassed by their sometimes mystifying, always drudgelike jobs. Alison McCulloch, reviewing the book alongside other works in translation, calls it a “strangely chilling novella” about the demands of corporate life. “Unlike Sisyphus, these three are also expected to be grateful,” she writes, before quoting one character: “How could I complain? ... Having work beats not having work. That goes without saying.”

**THE PELICAN**, by Martin Michael Driessen. Translated by Jonathan Reeder. (Amazon Crossing, \$19.95.) The Dutch novelist derives both comedy and tragedy from this tale of two insignificant friends from an insignificant town in the former Yugoslavia. Striving for advancement, each becomes a blackmailer, yet each is unaware that the other is his Judas. Alison McCulloch, our reviewer, calls it a “funny, serious, clever novel” about “sympathetic if simple characters trying to get by in a complicated world” where “deeply held hatreds lie in wait.”