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Opposite: Emma, the owner's black cat, sits in a room full of books at the Recycle Bookstore in San Jose in 2021.

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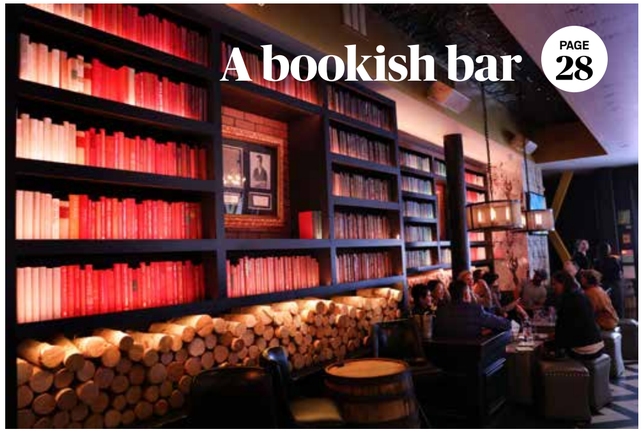


MURDER ON HIS MIND

Danville's ex-LAPD detective keeps busy consulting for cops and high-profile crime writers

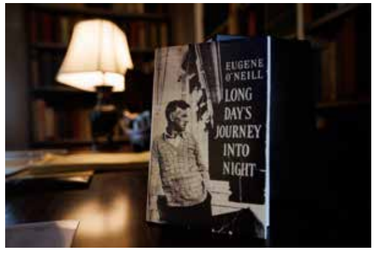
STORY BY MARTHA ROSS
PHOTOS BY DAI SUGANO

Retired Los Angeles Police Department detective Rick Jackson sits inside the Tao House at the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site in Danville.

For 28 years, Rick Jackson's mission in life was investigating murders for the Los Angeles Police Department. He worked cases involving everyone from gang members, street hustlers, sex criminals and other cops to the rich and famous, including Doris Duke and O.J. Simpson.

Jackson has become well known in the world of fiction, too, lending his expertise to elite crime novelists to such an extent, he's often called the "Godfather of L.A. Crime Writers." Notably, he helps best-selling author Michael Connelly portray police work authentically in his Harry Bosch and "Lincoln Lawyer" novels and served as a technical consultant for Connelly's "Bosch" Amazon Original series.

Since retiring in 2013, Jackson has lived a quiet but busy life in bucolic Danville with his second wife. During a recent visit to playwright Eugene O'Neill's Tao House estate, a national historic site in the hills west of downtown Danville, Jackson described all the ways he never really left murder — or crime fiction — behind when he left Los Angeles.



He and Connelly shared a stage this spring at Danville's Village Theatre, where their sold-out conversation — which touched, of course, on old crime cases — benefited the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, a nonprofit that hosts annual productions of O'Neill's works at Tao House.

Tao House has become a favorite hiking destination for Jackson. But on this particular day, Jackson is standing, rapt, in O'Neill's private, book-lined study.

"This is where it happens," he said about the Nobel Prize winner, whose early 20th-century plays revolutionized American theater for their realistic portrayals of human despair. "This is where the mind's rolling, right here where this stuff is created."

Jackson has become an author himself. "Black Tunnel, White Magic: A True Story of Murder and Betrayal in Los Angeles" will be published next spring. It's a nonfiction account of one of his most memorable cases: the 1990 summer-solstice killing of a UCLA student who had been exploring Wiccan practices. His body was found in an old railroad tunnel rumored to be a Manson family hang-out.

Moreover, Jackson has returned, at least part-time, to investigating murders, helping the San Mateo County Sheriff's department clear cold cases. This new phase of his career actually began in Danville several years after he first arrived. The police chief asked if he could help clear the 1985 killing of Virginia Vincent, a 57-year-old real estate agent who was found raped and strangled in her Diablo Road apartment.

Jackson couldn't say no. Like Connelly's LAPD Detective Hieronymus "Harry" Bosch, Jackson began by spreading out reports from the Vincent "murder book" — as the case file is known in detective circles — on a table in the Danville station to figure out next steps.

"To be honest, at that point, I missed working cases," he said.

Cold cases can be "time machines," Jackson said, transporting detectives back to a different time or place. Or, as Bosch once said, "In every murder is the tale of a city."

The Vincent investigation shocked the community because murder was — and continues to be — so rare here. Police initially explored links to other serial predators, such as the Golden State Killer, who terrorized the Bay Area in the 1970s and 1980s. With Jackson's help, police used a newer DNA technique, known as "family search," to identify the killer as a young plumber work-

A portrait of Eugene O'Neill and the script of his play, "Long Day's Journey into Night," are displayed inside Danville's Tao House, left, at the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site. The landmark is not only one of Jackson's favorites, it has ties to Michael Connelly as well.

READ, STREAM, LISTEN AND SEE IRL

Retired LAPD Detective Rick Jackson's first book, "Black Tunnel, White Magic," will be published in the spring of 2025.

Best-selling author Michael Connelly has written 39 novels, including last year's "Resurrection Walk," which features "Lincoln Lawyer" Mickey Haller and his half-brother, LAPD detective-turned-private investigator Harry Bosch. Connelly's 40th book, "The Waiting," featuring Bosch and LAPD Detective Renee Ballard, is due out Nov. 5. Find more details at www.michaelconnelly.com.

Stream "Bosch" and the first two seasons of its spinoff, "Bosch: Legacy," on Amazon Prime; a third season of the latter is in production. Stream the first two seasons of "The Lincoln Lawyer" (2022) on Netflix; a third season is on its way.

Prefer podcasts? Delve into the Wonderland story via Jackson and Connelly's podcast, "The Wonderland Murders and the Secret History of Hollywood,"on Audible. A four-part documentary based on the podcast is tentatively scheduled for streaming on MGM+ in the fall. Jackson and Connelly also revisit one of Jackson's most memorable cases, a 1987 killing outside a popular Hollywood nightclub, in "The Telltale Bullet," Season 1 of the podcast "Murder Book."

Channel Jackson's enthusiasm for Danville's famous playwright at the Eugene O'Neill Foundation's annual festival in September. The program will showcase a production of O'Neill's epic tragedy, "Mourning Becomes Electra," Sept. 14-29 in the courtyard of O'Neill's former home, Tao House, and in the Old Barn nearby. Find more details at https://eugeneoneill.org.

ing in the area. He died in 1997, so it will never be known how he crossed paths with Vincent or why he killed her. But even if Vincent's family didn't get answers to all their questions, Jackson said, they were happy to have some resolution and to know that police still cared.

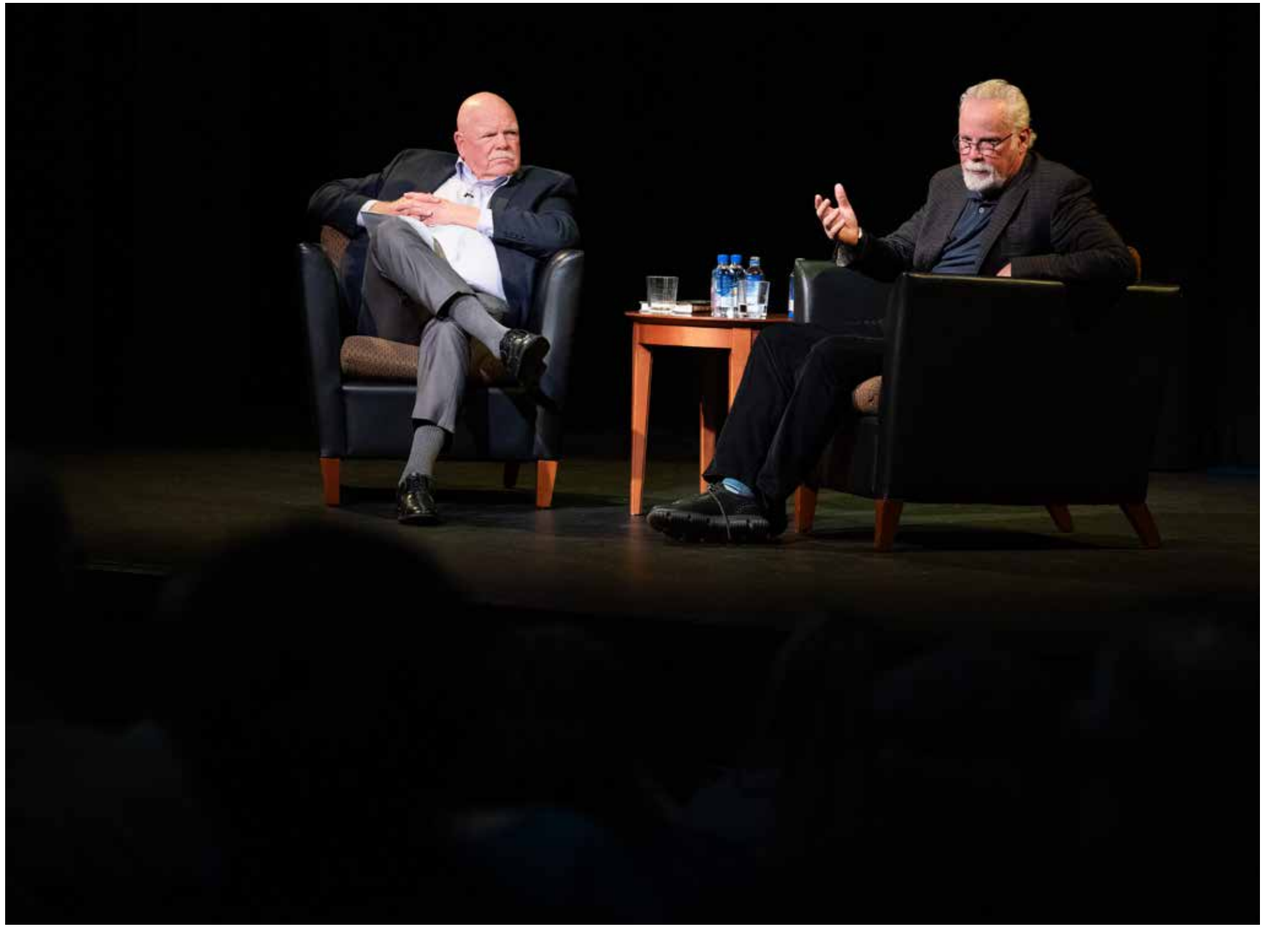
Connelly isn't surprised that Jackson has returned to investigations. "For some detectives, it's a job. For others, it's a real mission, and missions don't end usually," Connelly said. "I think, if they let him, he'll be doing this until his last day. I think he really is motivated by helping families recover. Part of that process is giving them answers."

Connelly's Bosch is mission-driven, too. Like Jackson, the fictional detective displays photos of victims at his desk to spur him to keep pushing for answers. But while Bosch is gruff and solitary, still nursing the pain of a traumatic childhood, Jackson is affable and enjoys connecting with different kinds of people.

"He's told me that the key to great detective work is getting people to talk to you," Connelly said.

Jackson's childhood in Lakewood, south of L.A., was a happy one. He loved reading mysteries of every kind, from Hardy Boys novels to news stories about local crimes. While working on his book, he said he came across his ninth-grade yearbook, in which a teacher wrote: "Best of luck in the detective field."

Jackson studied criminal justice at San Jose State University, but returned to L.A. to join its legendary police department in 1974. As a then-rookie detective, he was dispatched to the infamous drug house on Laurel Canyon's Wonderland Avenue in 1981, where four people had been savagely beaten to death. The investigation into the so-called Wonderland murders eventually ensnared a cast of colorful characters, including



Rick Jackson, left and author Michael Connelly did an "in conversation" event about police work and crime novels at Danville's Valley Theater on April 5. The sold-out event was a benefit for the Eugene O'Neill Foundation.

DON FERIA FOR BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

1970s porn star John Holmes, Liberace's boyfriend Scott Thorson and a Hollywood nightclub owner with organized crime connections.

Jackson's job was to secure the crime scene, so he didn't see the gory tableau there. But he saw many other crime scenes, as he worked his way up to LAPD's elite robbery homicide division and the major crimes unit. He helped with the investigation of four officers charged with beating Rodney King, worked on the killings of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman and interviewed Elizabeth Taylor after suspicions arose over the death of her friend, tobacco heiress Doris Duke. In 2001, Jackson was recruited to LAPD's newly formed cold case homicide unit, using DNA and other then-new forensic technologies to clear its backlog of thousands of unsolved murders.

Eugene O'Neill's book-lined office at Tao House is an inspiring space for writers, including Rick Jackson.

But in his off hours, Jackson became good friends with a who's who of crime writers, including Joseph Wambaugh and James Ellroy, who picked his brain for advice and ideas. Ellroy, of "L.A. Confidential" fame, even loosely based the protagonist of a novella in his "Destination: Morgue!" collection on Jackson's career.

Jackson and Connelly first encountered each other in L.A., when Connelly was a crime reporter for the Los Angeles Times pestering him for comment. Jackson didn't have time for reporters, but they reconnected in the mid-aughts, after Connelly had become a best-selling novelist and sought out Jackson for help with a Bosch book. A character named Det. Rick Jackson has made appearances in some of Connelly's Bosch mysteries, while the real-life Jackson vets his friend's books for accuracy and authenticity, suggesting, for example, that his LAPD detectives never refer to suspects as "perps."

"That's an East Coast thing," Jackson said.

After Jackson and his first wife divorced, a case brought him to the Bay Area — and a reconnection with Debbie Halliday, a friend from middle school. They fell in love, and after he retired, Jackson moved to her home in Danville.

The Tao House connection came later — through O'Neill Foundation co-president Dan McGovern, a UCLA law school friend of David Ogden, the late L.A. attorney who was one of Connelly's models for "Lincoln Lawyer" Mickey Haller.

The world of crime — and fiction — is all interconnected.

Dive into your Dionysian self at Bad Animal books, wine and food shop in Santa Cruz

BY JOHN METCALFE

There are people who like bookshops. Then there is Andrew Sivak, who once used a bookshop — Santa Cruz's now-shuttered Logos Books & Records — to run an underground and only one-year college he claims had a 100 percent success rate in placing people into graduate schools.

Yeah, Sivak is kind of into the whole "knowledge" thing. And as co-owner of Santa Cruz's Bad Animal, along with business partner Jess LoPrete, he has the opportunity to spread that illumination via the roughly 15,000 used books Bad Animal has for sale, including 3,000 rare editions worth up to $40,000.

Bad Animal's name is an oblique reference to "The Bacchae" by Euripides. The swollen collection veers toward wild, radical, design-minded and avant-garde books, with a heavy emphasis on poetry, art, Californiana, continental philosophy, the occult and the classics. Pair these with the bar's excellent "raw wines" — natural, low-intervention wines — and Thai food, and you've got everything you need (in the owners' words) to "travel the Dionysian path."

Peter Wright browses books at Bad Animal in Santa Cruz on May 17.

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One more bit of exciting news: This year, Bad Animal plans to expand into the space next door to sell art and vintage material, with a focus on print history and art such as broadsides, photographs and posters.

INTRODUCTION: Bar Animal opened in 2019 as a natural outgrowth of Sivak and LoPrete's interests. She had cheffed in San Francisco and had expertise in wine. He had a Ph.D from UC Santa Cruz in the history of consciousness and worked as a rare-book scout.

When Logos Books shut down, they grabbed up its massive collection and started winnowing it down in a process they took "way too seriously."

"For every one book we put on the shelf," Sivak says, "we've probably said no to a thousand."

Their website's FAQ clarifies how devoted they are to books. Question: "Why should I read a book?" Answer: "Anyone who doesn't read books is doomed." Question: "Is it okay to sleep with someone who doesn't read books?" Answer: "No."

Despite the serious mission, Bad Animal is a fun place — instead of a self-help section, for instance, it has a disco ball.

"If you were to go to the great used bookshops in the middle of the century, they were very stuffy places where you were going to be feeling at least a little uncomfortable to handle the rare volumes on the shelf," says Sivak. "They were sort of suffocating environments to be in, as beautiful as they were."

Bad Animal is going for the opposite kind of atmosphere, one pleasantly lubricated with good conversations and intoxicating wine.

"We're trying to operate in the same way that these antiquarian shops did in the middle of the 20th century, but in a radically different environment," he says.

Above: Santa Cruz diners pair wine and Thai cuisine with their favorite books at Bad Animal, a bookstore-meets-wine bar.

Left: A copy of "On the Nature of Things" by Lucretius, a Roman poet and philosopher in the first century B.C., awaits perusal at Santa Cruz's Bad Animal.

"We want to encourage people to see books not just as a form of self-improvement or intellectual bodybuilding but as actual pleasure experiences. It is pleasurable to walk around a used bookshop with a glass of wine in your hand in the same way it is pleasurable to read a novel and enjoy a bottle of wine."

TABLE OF CONTENTS: Unlike the special tomes that age well in Bad Animal's rare-book room — a signed copy of Camus' "The Stranger," a beautiful spread of lithographs by painter June Wayne — the raw wine is generally not aged and is meant to be drunk soon after bottling.

The lovingly curated wine selection hails heavily from California and Europe and on any given day, might include an orange Wavy Wines "Sunshine" Skin Contact from Sonoma, a sparkling Rodica "Col Fondo Malvasia" from Slovenia or a Farm Cottage Pinot Noir from right here in the Santa Cruz mountains.

The beer and cider list has both tap and bottle options and leans toward interesting local suds like a Pelayo apple cider from Watsonville or a "Socks and Sandals" from Humble Sea Brewing. Zero-proof options might include apple-cucumber kombucha, phony Negronis and Coke and Fanta from Mexico.

After the pandemic, Bad Animal's kitchen shifted to a residency program for up-and-coming restaurants. Right now it's Hanloh, which cooks Thai cuisine inspired by the seasons and California's local abundance. Recent appetizers have included Tomales Bay Hatsu oysters with bird's-eye chili and lime and mieng kham (wrapped-leaf snacks) with apples, shallots, toasted coconut and tamarind-caramel dressing, served over nasturtium leaves. On the heartier side: white-coconut curry with shrimp and oyster mushrooms and chili jam, and charcoal-grilled Boxing Chicken with Crying Tiger Sauce and cucumbers.

EPILOGUE: Sivak just finished Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy and found "Blood Meridian" to be, you know, kind of bloody. "I don't know how much of this is mythmaking, but (Yale literary critic) Harold Bloom famously said that he tried to read it, and stopped two times, like he couldn't get past page 80," Sivak says. "But then he considered it if not the great American novel, certainly in the top three and a definitive part of the Western canon, and you'd be hard-pressed to argue against him."

DETAILS: The bookshop is open from noon to 9 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday; the bar and kitchen are open from 5 to 9 p.m. at 1011 Cedar St., Santa Cruz; badanimalbooks.com.

Mother and daughter team up to battle cancer — and a best-selling mystery emerges

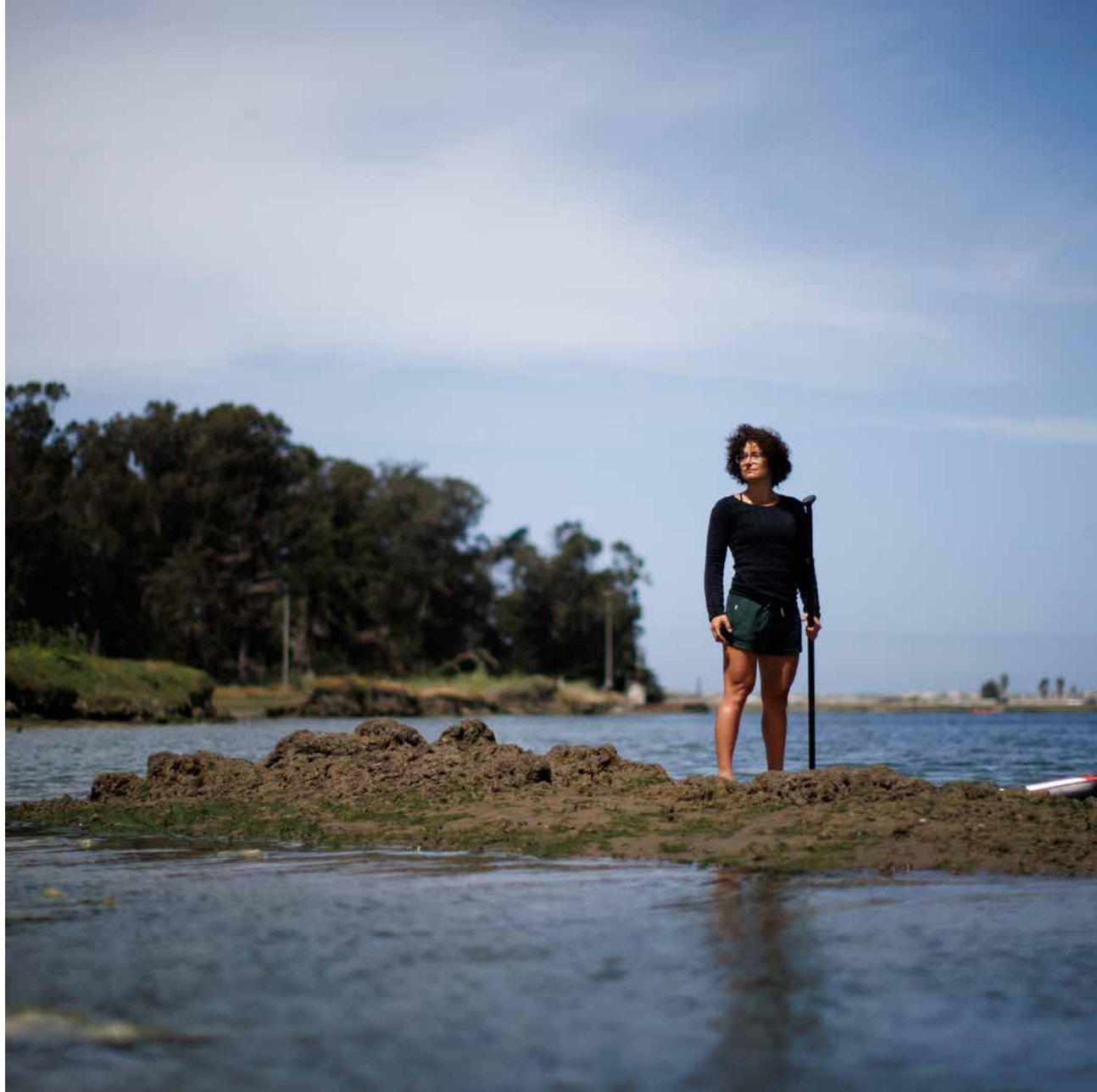
BY KATIE LAUER

Paddling out into Elkhorn Slough on a bright, brisk morning in May, Nina Simon pointed out brown pelicans gliding inches above the salty Pacific backwaters, harbor seals basking on the mudflats, Southern sea otters swimming among blades of kelp and the distant din of traffic trucking along Highway 1, which separates the Monterey Bay marine preserve from the ocean.

Simon absorbed all of these scenes for months atop her orange stand-up paddleboard — a pandemic purchase — while researching the backdrop for her debut novel, "Mother-Daughter Murder Night." But there's one key element at the core of the author's best-selling book that wasn't sourced directly from Elkhorn Slough's diverse flora and fauna: a dead body.

That twist was inspired by Simon's mother, Sarina, and her lifelong love of murder mysteries. Together, the duo dreamed up "Mother-Daughter Murder Night" after Sarina was diagnosed with cancer in August 2020 and temporarily moved into her daughter's home in Santa Cruz for months of healing.

Simon says she started jotting down ideas in the morning — her mother would read them over later — as a creative, literary escape from their taxing reality. That daily practice culminated in a 368-page murder mystery set in the slough, which is as



Nina Simon set her debut novel, "Mother-Daughter Murder Night," at Elkhorn Slough in Moss Landing.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

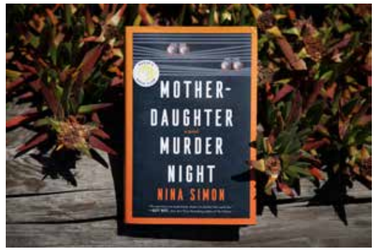
vivid a character as any protagonist — a place where beauty and serenity collide with menace and danger.

"Elkhorn Slough was a good place to play with imagery and the metaphors about life and death," Simon said, sitting in her kitchen-turned-writing nook where copious cups of tea fueled her early-morning writing hours before anyone else stirred. "Anytime you have a place that is on the border of many things, that causes a lot of friction. That friction can cause tension, and tension can mean murder and mayhem in a story.

"When my mom got sick, cancer kind of crashed our house like an uninvited guest, taking up all the oxygen in the room. (This project) didn't make cancer go away, but it did minimize it — allowing us to choose to talk about how to kill a guy in a wetland instead of being freaked out about what the next scan was going to show."

"Mother-Daughter Murder Night" hit bookshelves in September and claimed spots on the New York Times best-sellers list and Reese Witherspoon's book club shortly after. The story follows three generations of strong women: Beth and Jack Rubicon, a mother-daughter duo forced to acclimate to a new normal living with Lana Rubicon — a Los Angeles-based developer, mother, grandmother and "Prima" who was modeled as a rough-around-the-edges, "outrageous superhero version" of Simon's mother.

Simon narrates the vibrant relationships of these three women — a grandma, single mom and teenage girl — as they come together to solve a murder. This family drama also provides a rich backdrop for more personal investigations — what it means to be a strong woman, how dynamics of intersectional identities of age, gender



and race play out and how to interrogate independence within relationships.

"Especially since the pandemic, a lot of people have been talking very beautifully about mutual aid and this idea that we are stronger together. I think that I intellectually understood that, but it wasn't until my mom got sick that I really had to interrogate this question," Simon said. "I really wanted to write an arc that started with people who felt like they were better off being independent, moving in a different direction."

It's easy to miss Elkhorn Slough, as you drive along Highway 1. Simon lived just up the coast for more than a decade, but it was her mother who introduced her to its briny backwaters. Despite their being terrible kayak partners paddling in circles as they teased and got on each other's nerves — Simon was captivated by the birds, marine life and vegetation thriving along the ocean's currents.

On top of hours spent paddling the slough, Simon's research for the book included interviews about the day-to-day lives of folks living near Moss Landing, about the history of the area shared by the Elkhorn Slough Foundation and a UC Santa Cruz professor and

Scenes from Eklhorn Slough, the setting for Nina Simon's novel, "Mother-Daughter Murder Night."

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

Nina Simon was captivated by the birds, marine life and vegetation thriving along the briny currents of Elkhorn Slough, where the teen protagonist of "Mother-Daughter Murder Night" leads kayak tours.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

facets of tourism she learned from staff at Kayak Connection. None of the characters or places in "Mother-Daughter Murder Night" is based on reality. However, local readers may catch a few Easter eggs scattered throughout the novel, including slices from Pizza My Heart and the London Nelson Memorial Hospital, a fictitious medical center whose name is a nod to the 19th century man who came to Santa Cruz as a slave, bought his freedom and donated his land, which became the city's first public school after his death.

"Mother-Daughter Murder Night" evokes other warm and fuzzy murder mysteries that have increasingly captivated readers in recent years, ranging from Richard Osman's "Thursday Murder Club" to Elle Cosimano's "Finlay Donovan" series. Simon garnered a whirlwind of praise on a book tour, which included a syndicated webinar in May that connected roughly 3,000 people from 500 public libraries around the country.

While some readers have even drawn comparisons between Simon's novel and the beloved coming-of-age murder mystery, Delia Owens' "Where the Crawdads Sing," Simon said she had none of those titles in mind when she and her mom first started scribbling down scenes.

"I was just thinking, how can I make my mom smile? How can I find something to dive into, so we're not freaking out all the time?" Simon said. "While my mom was stuck in bed, Lana could be leaping out of bed to solve this murder mystery and kick butt."

Was Simon's mother a good editor? Not necessarily. But more importantly, she was always curious about what happened next — weighing in on details like characters' wardrobes or researching whether anyone could plausibly be killed by poisonous frogs, all while religiously scouring for typos.

"We'd spend the day just chatting — not necessarily about the pages, but about these characters in this world and what might happen next," Simon said. "I knew that I wanted to write a mystery that, while it would have some wild elements, it was plausible. I also knew that the murderer, however flawed, was going to be a real person, not some psychopath or serial killer that had some brilliant plan. They were going to be somebody who, in a very intense situation, ended up making a very bad choice."

Her mother's encouragement proved vital as Simon embarked on writing her first novel, which she said felt like a vulnerable and, at times, "ridiculous" endeavor after a decades-long career working in nonprofits, including serving as the former executive director of Santa Cruz's Museum of Art & History.

Beyond becoming a best-selling novel and ode to Elkhorn Slough, Simon said "Mother-Daughter Murder Night" transformed her family's challenging nightmare into a comforting, thrilling adventure.

"When I hear from people who love the book and characters, to have that joy returned to us, it's just been unreal and very special," Simon said. "Yes, there's murder. But there's also some humor, love and a beating heart."

Young Latina characters in Oakland face racism, sexism and economic challenges in no-holds-barred debut novel

BY SIERRA LOPEZ

Carolina Ixta's debut novel 'Shut Up, This Is Serious' is set in Oakland.

Carolina Ixta's debut novel, "Shut Up, This Is Serious," is a love letter to her hometown and Latino community that acknowledges their shortcomings while celebrating what makes them beautiful.

Nothing is off limits in this YA novel, whether it's sex and teen pregnancy, religion, prejudice among minority groups, classism, sexism or mental health. Ixta, a teacher by trade and a writer at heart, felt compelled to address them all in a way that would be digestible for teens and knew a narrative was the best avenue.

"It's all about story. I wanted readers to walk away with some form of education," Ixta said. "I wanted this book to be an entry point without being a lecture or slide show. I wanted to imbed the lesson through the way of story."

A coming-of-age story with a Latina protagonist is rare, said Ixta, who rarely saw herself reflected in the books she read growing up. "Shut Up, This Is Serious" revolves around two Latina teens growing up in East Oakland. Belén is a high school senior struggling with her mental health and trying to care about academics after being abandoned by her father and watching her mother grow more distant. Her best friend, Leti, is a star student determined to get into UC Berkeley while hiding an unexpected pregnancy.

Leti's story is a powerful one, Ixta said, one aimed at helping readers better understand how kids from socioeconomically challenged communities who want to pursue higher education are expected to sell their traumas in college admission essays and interviews, putting their academic success in the background, unlike their better-off peers.

Leti struggles to be the daughter her parents wanted, but her skin color is darker than her family's and she's unable to talk to them about her pregnancy. Most heart-wrenching of all, she grapples with the deep-seated racism her family feels toward Black people, a devastating reality for a teen whose boyfriend, the father of her unborn child, is Black.

"She has wisdom others don't possess," Ixta said. "Her story doesn't end at pregnancy. Her story begins with the pregnancy, and it ends with a transformational decision."

Ixta also uses the teens to flip the narrative of the Madonna-whore complex. Belén's womanly curves garner her unwanted attention, but she is a virgin who's interested in having sex but she's picky about who will be her partner. Slender Leti, on the other hand, always has her nose in a textbook — but she's the one who winds up pregnant. Ixta was intentional about making sure both characters have agency, that they choose when and with whom to have sex, but Leti serves as a cautionary tale for what can happen when kids are kept on too tight a leash.

"I wanted readers to understand the idea of promiscuity is a myth," she said. "When we don't allow children, and especially girls, to have safe conversations in teenage-hood, they're still going to do what they're going to do, but the consequences could be higher."

Carolina Ixta, author of 'Shut Up, This Is Serious,' stands at the defunct Griselda's salon façade in the Fruitvale district. Ixta's fictional story is set in Oakland, where she was born and raised.

RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF

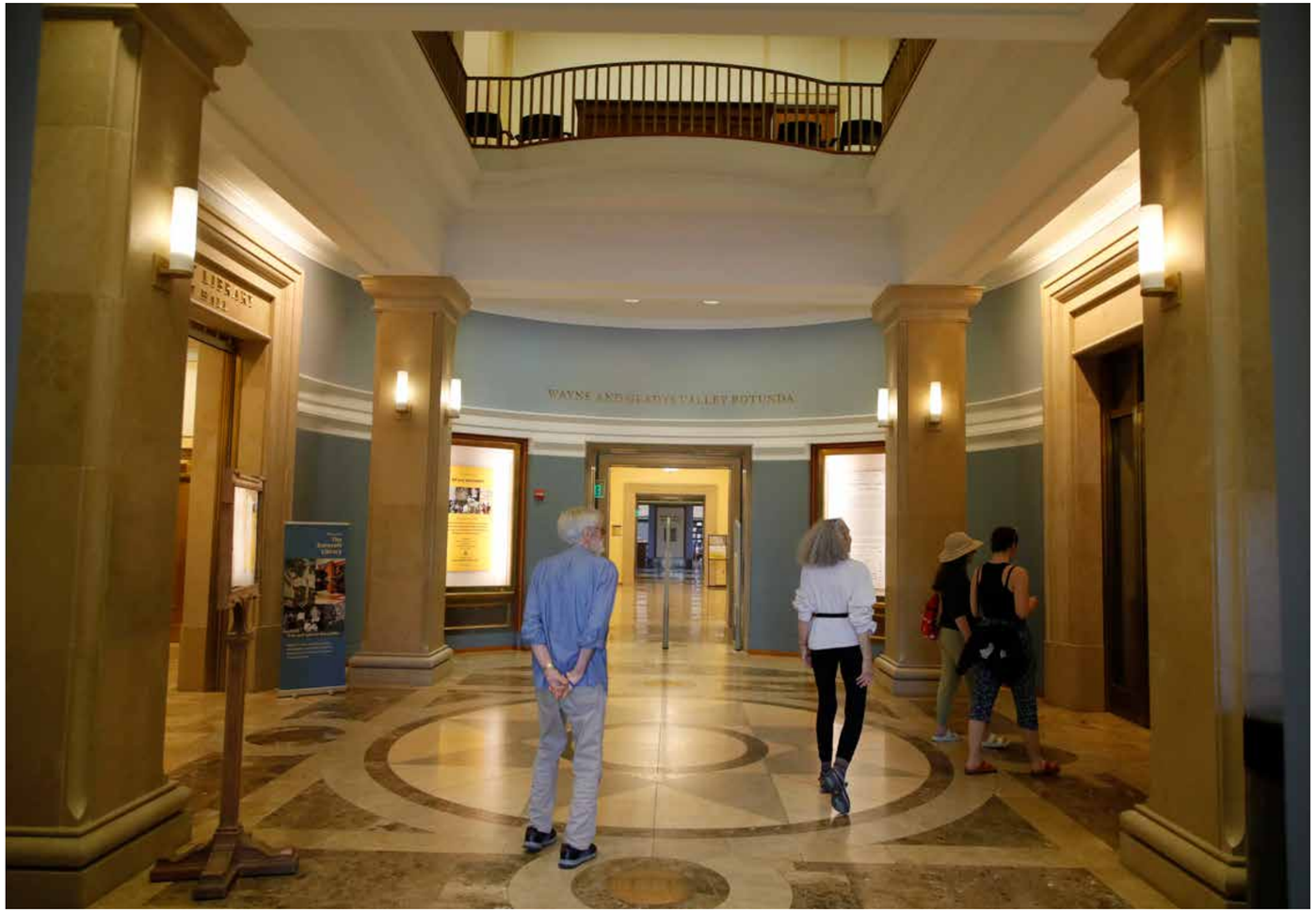
Thought and care were also put into scene setting. Ixta, a UC Santa Cruz alum who got her masters at Cal, was born and raised in Oakland. So the authenticity and specificity of her story's details extend from the setting — her main characters are from Fruitvale, not simply East Oakland — to the fruit stand and the Wendy's Belén frequents.

The book also pulls from Ixta's experience growing up in a Catholic family that immigrated from Mexico to Oakland in the 1970s. As a young Latina in the '90s, she was witness to the colorism and anti-Blackness that permeated the Latino community, the harassment women experienced on a daily basis and the limited teachings of the Catholic Church, especially regarding sex and the woman's place in the home.

She's also watched as an ever-changing Oakland has been reduced to its worst parts — gang violence, sex trafficking and waves of petty crime — and her peers have been priced out of the area. Public criticisms of her hometown are valid, she said, but don't paint a full picture. Recognizing that two truths can exist at once was important for Ixta.

"(The book) was a very careful balance between depicting Oakland as a place I love deeply and also saying we have these really blatant problems. Both can be true," Ixta said. Similarly, "being a young woman is beautiful. We have these wonderful friendships, coming of age experiences. Also, being a young woman, I would argue, is the most terrifying thing in the world."

She hopes the story will resonate and act as a salve for other young Latina book nerds eager to see at least a portion of themselves reflected in writing: "The point of this book wasn't to mirror your life but to hopefully be an entry point to give Latina women the window we need. I hope this book gives (them) peace, and if it doesn't, I hope it pushes them to write their own."



Wash your hands and wander into the Bancroft Library to handle historic artifacts that will amaze you

STORY BY JASON MASTRODONATO
PHOTOS BY JANE TYSKA

As a postdoctoral scholar at UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, Giuliano Sidro is a serious expert on ancient writings, but his seriousness turns to silliness when he explains one of the findings in a nearly-4,000-year-old piece of papyrus.

"This right here," he says, giggling, "is the earliest ever mention we have of weed."

The ancient Egyptians were getting high! Well, using it for medicinal purposes, anyway.

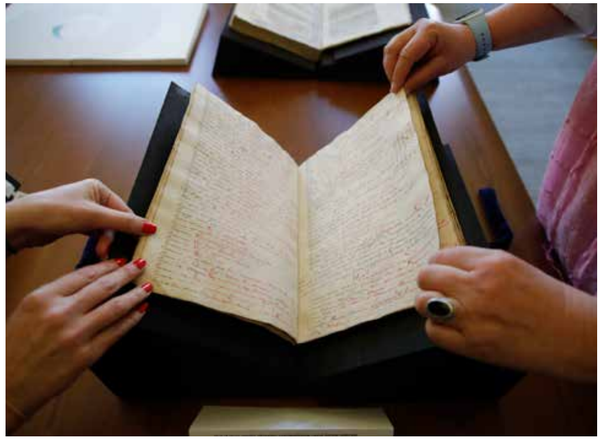
The experts in the library's Center for the Tebtunis Papyri agree there's enough evidence to verify the use of *shemshemet,* generally regarded as cannabis, which was used to treat ingrown toenails, among other ailments. It's all right there in writing, dated at about 1,800 BCE, the oldest known documentation indicating its use.

And while Berkeley's scholars are still sorting through more than 30,000 fragments uncovered during a dig in the late 1800s, they're happy to show you what they've found.

The folks at the Bancroft love visitors.

And while the Bancroft is primarily a rare book and manuscript library, it also houses all sorts of artifacts and one-of-a-kind materials.

Whatever your obsession — Julia Morgan's archi-



Pictorial curator Christine Hult-Lewis, right, and Bancroft Library director Kate Donovan look through a 19th-century book of vocabulary and grammar from the Monterey County Mutsun tribe. The book is being used now as part of an indigenous language revitalization effort.

tectural papers? 1906 earthquake recovery documents? The wit of 19th-century wags? — chances are good you'll find it represented here.

What began as Hubert Howe Bancroft's 19th-century bookshelf contents — 50 books on the American West — now holds more than 600,000 books, 55,000 feet of manuscript collections, eight million photographs, 20,000 historical maps and oh, so much more.

"I think we're one of the best kept secrets in the Bay Area, and I'm determined to change that," said Kate Donovan, Bancroft's director. "What's important to know is anyone can come in. We're free. You don't have to be a scholar. You don't have to be a student. The only requirement is you're curious and have a photo ID.

"And clean hands."

Yes, many of the Bancroft's oldest treasures can be held — and bare hands are encouraged to ensure the fingers have more dexterity, thus creating gentler contact.

"Unlike a museum, you can come in here and touch everything," Donovan said as she held up an antiphonary, a massive hymnal written in 1475 for an Italian cathedral. "You can feel the materiality, that it's wood. The metal here, you get a sense of how it would've been supported in the cathedral."

Nothing leaves the library once it enters, but new things are always coming in.

Well, they're usually old things coming in. Really, really old things.

On this particular morning, David Faulds, the curator of rare books and literary manuscripts, welcomes us to the Logan Room, where mahogany bookshelves line every wall. On a table in the center sit some of Faulds' favorite items, each with a story to tell. Take a look:

David Faulds, the Bancroft's curator of rare books and literary manuscripts, browses through an antiphonary written in 1475. The musical notation in this massive book would have been used by a choir standing across the room.

1. An antiphonary from Northern Italy, written in Latin in 1475, one of a set of 14

"This is our biggest one and the most beautiful," said the curator. "It was used for Mass. Every large monastery cathedral would've had a set of these."

The sturdy wooden covers help the pages maintain their original shape and form. The words are written on vellum, a parchment made from calfskin — "You can imagine how many cows they had to use to make 14 of these," Faulds said — and the 47 colorful illustrations scattered throughout the book remain in excellent condition.

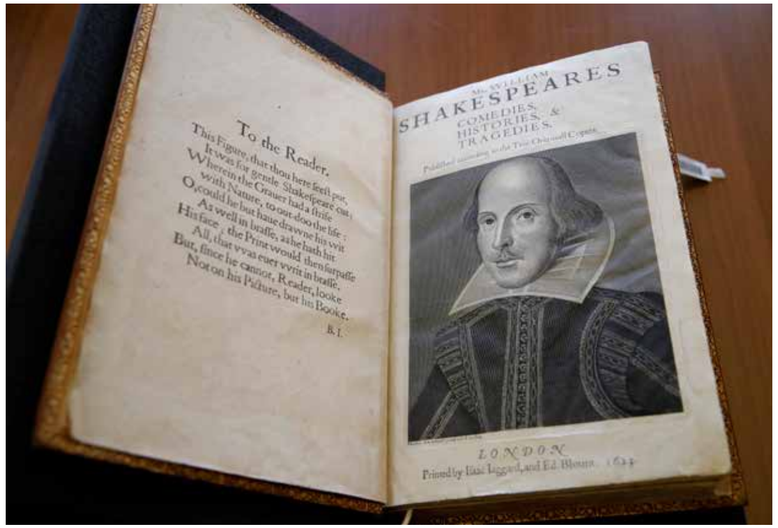
"The real money went into the illumination," Faulds said.

The enormous, 40-pound book could be read from the opposite side of the room — and that's the point. For 300 years, it was perched in a cathedral in Piacenza and read by a choir which stood in the distance and sang the notes to a Gregorian chant. That is, until Napoleon's army invaded the Italian city in 1803. A monk outsmarted the French army, which was known for looting cathedrals, and hid all 14 volumes in his family's home on the outskirts of town. They sat there for 50 years, until they were rediscovered and later sold multiple times, eventually to Berkeley philanthropist Phoebe Hearst.

2. A pre-Gutenberg Oriental printing from 1438

Long before Germany's Johannes Gutenberg invented the metal movable-type printing press that would drastically alter the world's ability to spread knowledge, Koreans were already printing books.

"In school, people in the United States and Europe learn that Gutenberg invented printing, but that's not the case," Faulds said. "He's not the first to print with movable type. That was done in Korea, hundreds of years before Gutenberg. This is an example of a book in Korea printed with movable type in 1438, 10 to 15 years before (Gutenberg) and his invention. We have another from the 1420s. The oldest (extant) printed book in the world is from 1377, and that's in Paris."



With movable type, tiny lead letters are assembled into words and sentences and entire pages of text, which can be inked and hand-pressed over and over, allowing for mass distribution.

"This is part of a project we're hoping to contribute to to publicize the fact that Korea was ahead of Europe," Faulds said. "Gutenberg's invention was open to everybody, so it caused the massive explosion of knowledge transfer across the world as one of the most defining events in the last thousand years. Whereas in Korea, it was controlled by the power structure, so very few items were printed, and printing was not available to the masses."

3. Doctrina Cristiana, printed in Mexico in 1546

Taking advantage of the new technology, the Spaniards sent a printing press from Seville to Mexico City so they could print books like this one in order to help spread Christianity in the New World.

The Doctrina Cristiana, which carries the seal of the bishop in Mexico, is written in Spanish, but it was expected to be shared with the Native and indigenous population by the Spanish colonizers. The doctrine includes the 10 commandments, the saints, the liturgical calendar, prayers, sacraments and moral and theological principles for Christian life.

"You see what colonization looks like in action," Donovan said. "What does it mean to try to convert people? This is one of the ways it happened. Printing enables that."

4. The First Folio by William Shakespeare, printed in 1623

"Folio" refers to an oversize volume, printed in a size primarily used for bibles, which makes the format of this book radical for the period. Printed by Shakespeare's friends seven years after

Top: Printed in 1546 in Mexico, the Doctrina Cristiana was part of Spain's efforts to conquer and convert the New World's indigenous population.

Bottom: The first folio of Willam Shakespeare's work was printed in London in 1623, seven years after the playwright's death.

his death, the folio included different editions of his plays. Of the 750 folios printed in 1632, only 235 survive today.

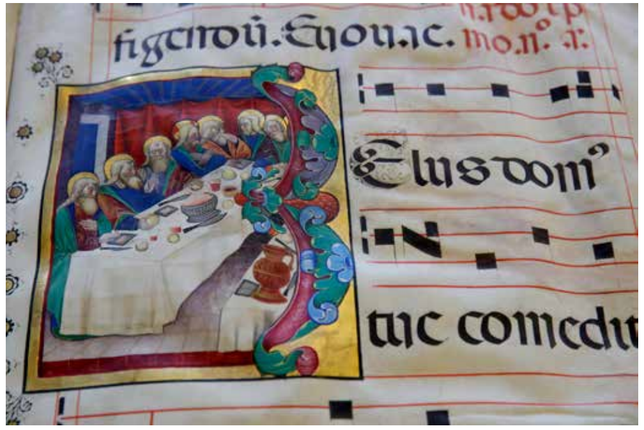
"These are the most famous works in English literature," Faulds said. "This preserved many of the plays that might otherwise have been lost. And (the timing) is close enough that people would remember acting in them, because he wasn't writing them down at the time."

5. Vocabulary and grammar of the Mutsun Tribes from Monterey County, 1815

A Spanish priest working within a native Mutsun Tribe in Monterey created this book of phrases written in Spanish, Latin and Mutsun with the intent to translate key phrases and spread Christianity, a popular theme within the world's oldest existing texts.

Originally made to convert Mutsun people, the book is used now for a very different purpose: Bancroft scholars are working on a language revitalization project that connects current indigenous tribal members to these centuries-old materials in an attempt to breathe new life into languages that are no longer spoken.

"There's a real effort to re-learn it so new generations can retrieve that which was lost," Donovan said. "These are very much living texts."



Above: The illuminations adorning this antiphonary remain just as vivid today as when they were created more than 500 years ago.

Right: Library director Kate Donovan flips through an antiphonary written in 1475 and saved from Napoleon's invading army in 1803 by a quick-witted monk.

For 50 years, folks at the Bancroft have been collecting and studying the works of Samuel Clemens, who is, of course, better known by his pen name.

Initially, they had a few letters written by Mark Twain to his friends. Then the library added all his master workbooks. Now the collection has expanded to include everything from book inscriptions addressed to specific people to Twain's working notes and preparatory manuscripts.

Walk inside the file room at the Mark Twain Papers and Project at the Bancroft, and you'll find 30,000 letters, many still being studied and digitized with the hope of making the entire collection available to the public. Now, not only can people get more insight into Twain's life, but folks have used the letters to study how people communicated linguistically in the mid- to late-19th century.

"We've gone big over the years," said Blake Bronson-Bartlett, associate editor of the project. "That's what a 50-year project tends to do."

These documents can be seen — and often touched — by the general public by appointment. Among Bronson-Bartlett's favorite items:

1. A hand-written note to author William Dean Howells

On a lined, yellow piece of paper about 8 inches long, Twain writes to his pal about all the things his young daughters have been learning in school — and the detail is remarkable. His girls were asked to name famous men and women of the era. Among them: Papa (Mark Twain) and Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and Twain's next-door neighbor in Hartford, Conn.

"We also have letters from Frederick Douglass, P.T. Barnum, Ulysses S. Grant and other 19th-century celebrities," Bronson-Bartlett said.

2. A chunk of Mark Twain's hair and accompanying documents from his secretary

Once you lay your eyes on this marvelous clump of moss, it cannot be unseen. While Twain's hair was naturally silver at the time, it appears red, likely due to the constant cigar smoke swirling around his head.

The hair was collected by his secretary, Isabel Lyon, who idolized him and referred to him as "the king" in her notebooks. On this day in 1905, she writes that a barber arrived to cut Twain's hair. She saved a handful of it and felt so strongly about it that she wrote two letters documenting her souvenir.

Bob Hirst, general editor of the Bancroft project, stumbled upon more hair in Twain's mother's bible, where she kept family artifacts. The hair is believed to be from his sister, Margaret, who died when she was 9. Hirst had DNA testing done on both locks that verified a common mother.

3. "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" with Twain's handwritten notes throughout

There's no audio recording of Twain, of course, so it's impossible to know what his voice sounded like. But Bronson-Bartlett believes this book can reveal the author's cadence.

Later in Twain's life, when he had gone bankrupt from poor business decisions, he hit the road for a series of speaking engagements he hoped would refill his wallet. While in Paris, he found a new European edition of his book and started planning his speaking tour, adding notes throughout the book about what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it.

"You can see things in the text here where he's underlining places he wants to emphasize," Bronson-Bartlett said. "It's 'HUCK,' it's a 'FREE' man. We learn things about his cadence, his rhythm. It's the closest thing we have to a photographic recording of Sam Clemens speaking and performing his text."

Back in the Center for the Tebtunis Papyri, Sidro and Leah Packard-Grams, a Ph.D. student, are explaining the magic behind their favorite objects, the 4,000-year-old papyri and the stories they've learned from the text.

"From marriage contracts, you can see what happens with women if there's divorce," Sidro said. "Egyptian women were well protected. They could sign contracts, own property, have their own business. Greek women did not. And a Roman woman who divorces loses her children, because that's how Roman law works. We can see differences playing out in these documents."

The value of artifacts like these is incalculable in every respect. It's important, scholars say, that they be preserved by public entities who can make them available to everyone, rather than selling them to private collections. And at the Bancroft Library, much of the papyri has yet to be combed through.

"We still don't know what's in there," said Packard-Grams. "Only a small percentage has been published. That's something we are all working on right now, papyrus by papyrus, seeing what's there, publishing it and digitizing it."

Feel free to check it out.

All you need is clean hands, curiosity and a photo ID.

Visit the Bancroft: The library is open from 10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on weekdays on the UC Berkeley campus. Explore the collections at www.lib.berkeley.edu/visit/bancroft.

A Peerless Press

ARION TURNS OUT THE WORLD'S MOST UNUSUAL BOOKS, ENTIRELY MADE BY HAND

BY JOHN METCALFE

All of the world's great print centers have been located in humid environments. Paper is often transported by sea, of course, but humidity also just helps things keep humming, says Arion Press' Blake Riley — the ink running smoothly, the machinery not becoming brittle and breaking down.

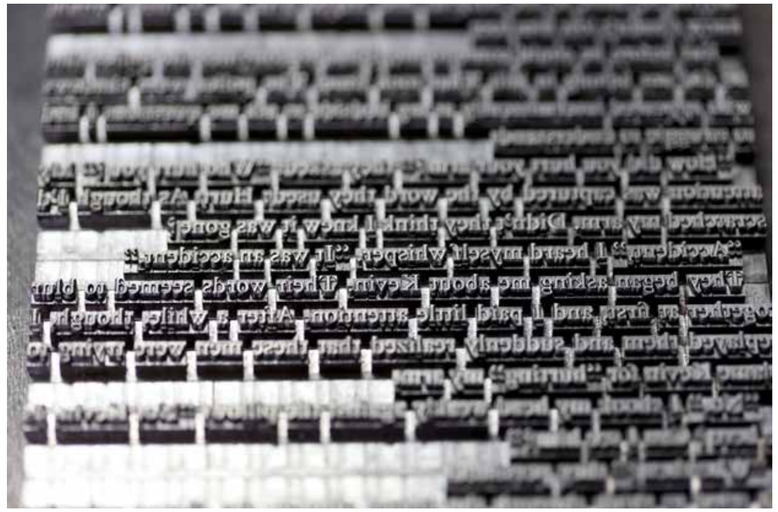
Arion Press is one of the world's great printing centers. Located in San Francisco's The Presidio, it is shrouded in chilly, drifting fog from the ocean. A towering smokestack testifies to its former use as a hospital boiler plant. Inside, multi-ton letterpresses clank and whir, fires roar, melting down metal, and bookbinders painstakingly fold pages upon pages upon pages. Some of the most exciting things in the rare-book universe are happening at Arion, a company with origins dating back a century and which still uses that century-old machinery.

"It is the last vertically integrated printing facility in the United States to make books entirely by hand, from start to finish, under one roof," says Ted Gioia, director of public programming.

Arion employs some of the last typecasters in the world — the people who make and melt the lead-alloy types (and get tested regularly for lead exposure) and sometimes lose sensation in their fingertips from the job's physicality. The press also has the largest standing collection of metal type outside the Smithsonian. "We have these elaborate machines that literally make a piece of lead alloy for every single space, letter, comma — everything that is printed in our books is a piece of metal we cast on site," says Gioia.

In a typical year, Arion makes three books, printed in editions of 250 that go out to subscribers who pay between $2,400 to $10,000 a year for the privilege. They're collector's treasures, resting on the intersection of literature and art. Among the famous artists who have illustrated Arion's editions are Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud, Kara Walker and William Kentridge.

That's just scratching the surface. Some volumes include historical materials relevant to the titles, literally ingrained in the books.



San Francisco's Arion Press casts its own monotype for the letterpresses that print their limited edition books.

JANE TYSKA/STAFF

"Last year, we incorporated the bricks from Edgar Allen Poe's house (in New York) in an edition of his stories and poems," says Riley, creative director and lead printer. "We ended up pulverizing those and making a pulp paper, and from that paper made labels for the book."

In 2020, Arion produced a special edition of John Steinbeck and biologist Ed Ricketts' "Sea of Cortez," which chronicled their scientific journey through the Gulf of California aboard a sardine trawler called the Western Flyer.

"It was the Holy Grail for Steinbeck fanatics. (The boat) had been submerged, but this guy found and raised it and had it restored in Port Townsend, Washington," says Riley. "The wood from the ship we managed to get ahold of. We trimmed it down to the heart and used some of it to create veneer labels and incorporate it into the box for the deluxe edition. So the boat that they wrote the story on is physically incorporated into the actual book."

Lead bookbinder Megan Gibes prepares pages for binding at San Francisco's century-old Arion Press.

JANE TYSKA/STAFF

This year, Arion is only making two books, because in October it will relocate, with all its heavy machinery, to Fort Mason, where it will resume public tours. The first volume is Octavia Butler's "Kindred," illustrated by Alison Saar, whose work focuses on the African diaspora. The second is Aesop's Fables, but with morals updated by Daniel Handler, aka Lemony Snicket.

"We decided the thing we could bring to it to make it interesting was a 21st-century spin," says Riley. "Like, for the Boy Who Cried Wolf, the moral might be, 'Don't live somewhere where wolves run free.' It's cheeky, but also a way for the edition to stand apart while still respecting the original work. After all, next to the Bible, the fables of Aesop is the most-published book in the Western canon."

Arion's subscribers range from bibliophiles to art collectors to Silicon Valley billionaires — Laurene Powell Jobs is one example — and the company's books rest in collections at the Getty Center, the British Library, Stanford University and the University of California.

With the growth of digitalization, one might think the number of collectors — as well as bookmakers — would be dwindling. But that's far from the case.

"There's been an uptick in the last decade of people who have begun to work in the book arts. Our interpretation of that is they are really responding to something that's been removed from their central aesthetic lives," says Riley. "People took such a quick and deep dive into technology, and then all of a sudden, they were caught out. And I think a lot of it has to do with that tactile, sensory, direct experience with the physical object."

Hoist a toast to your favorite literary giant at Novela, an elegant, book-lined bar

BY JASON MASTRODONATO

Look around this book-themed SoMa cocktail bar, aptly named Novela after the Spanish word for novel, and you'll see glasses of punch at almost every table.

Not the sugary-sweet mixture served at kids' birthday parties. Nor is it the Hawaiian Punch-plus-cheap vodka of frat house lore. This is an elegant punch, carefully crafted with high-end liquor, fresh fruit, housemade syrups and precise measurements from recipes swiped directly from an 1862 cocktail book written by Jerry Thomas, who is considered the father of American mixology.

"One of the original concepts of the bar was doing a lot of different punches, historically accurate punches and fun cocktails in large format," said Daniel McGee, the Novela bar manager for the last three years. "In the Hemingway era, there were a lot of punches, a lot of parties going on, so you'd make cocktails en masse for hundreds of people at a time."

Beverage director Daniel McGee, pictured right, serves a cocktail at Novela, a book-themed bar and restaurant in San Francisco.

JANE TYSKA/STAFF

This may be a literary bar, but historic cocktail compendiums are books, too.

INTRODUCTION: In 2013, the bar's then-owners, Alex Smith and Kate Bolton, discovered boxes of old books in the basement of the San Francisco building. They put the books on display, arranging them by the color of their spines in elegant bookshelves near the bar.

Customers drinking alone are encouraged to take one down and have a read, although even the most mischievous among them won't be able to reach the top shelves, where some rare, first-edition copies and vintage illustrated books are hidden.

Photos of author Ernest Hemingway adorn the walls at Novela.

JANE TYSKA/STAFF

From time to time, authors swing by Novela for book signings, then drop off a handful of their books to add to the shelves — and McGee often adds books from his own collection.

To keep the theme going, food is served on plates that look like books, while customers relax in leather reading chairs. In a private space near the back of the bar, giant pictures of Ernest Hemingway look down from the wall.

TABLE OF CONTENTS: Hemingway wasn't exactly known as a punch drinker, but there are several fancier cocktails on the menu that honor other authors and literary characters.

The Jay Gatsby: In F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," Nick Carraway often shares his observations on the beverages offered at Tom and Daisy Buchanan's extravagant parties. Novela's Jay Gatsby is basically the house Manhattan, a slightly sweet and savory whiskey cocktail that isn't too stiff, served in a glass sprayed with peaty scotch to give it a whiff of smokiness that tickles the nose. The bar often serves 100 of these a night, making it the most popular drink on the menu.

Saya Kuroki: The secret ingredient in this Negroni-style cocktail made with Japanese whiskey is Cocoa Puffs. McGee says the graininess of the cereal gives the drink a little bit of texture, while the chocolate leaks into the big-batch cocktail gently enough to flavor it without overpowering it. Novela buys Cocoa Puffs in bulk and uses a box in each batch, which makes about 110 cocktails. The trick? Leave the puffs in the mixture for only 30 minutes, then strain out the cereal before it gets too soggy and taste the magic left behind. It's a bitter drink, but the chocolate notes make it exciting. And it's named after a character in a series of comic books called "Deadly Class," which follows student assassins at a high school in 1980s San Francisco.

The Samwise Gamgee: "Lord of the Rings" fans will remember Samwise as Frodo's best friend and gardener. McGee uses the garden as inspiration for this Brazilian-influenced vodka and cachaca cocktail made with sugar snap peas. Brazilian rum is sweetened with snap pea juice which provides pectin, so when the drink is shaken, it creates a green foam. It's served with butterfly flowers.

And then there are the punches — this writer's favorite tipple on the menu. Novela's mixes them in large batches in the basement each morning, pressurizes them with nitrous gas, then shoots them upstairs to be poured from a tap into dainty glass chalices, served cold on a golden platter.

The house punch is a simple masterpiece that uses blueberry, apricot, grapefruit and lemon, all harmonizing with green tea to create a classic bourbon drink that makes it feel like early afternoon, no matter the actual time.

A vodka white peach punch will expand your palate while offering a mix of flavors you've almost certainly never encountered together. With cardamom tea, lemon and Italicus liqueur bringing out peppery and floral notes, this drink tastes like a cold toddy, but with a milky, white-peach flavor blast that makes it far too crushable for a weeknight beverage.

A strawberry mezcal punch, sweet and smoky all at once, is surprisingly potent. It's the perfect drink for a bonfire on the beach or, more literally, served at a bar that was once an old bookstore and hasn't lost its charm.

EPILOGUE: So what is McGee reading these days? The bar manager says he's a real fantasy nerd — many of the drinks are named after his favorite fantasy novels. His current obsession is "Rhythm of War," the fourth book in Brandon Sanderson's best-selling "Stormlight Archive" series.

DETAILS: Novela is open from 4 p.m. until midnight or later on weekdays and 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. on Saturdays at 662 Mission St. in San Francisco; www.novelasf.com.

Romance writers spin DIVERSE TALES of LOVE based in the beautiful Bay Area

STORY BY KATE BRADSHAW
PHOTOS BY KARL MONDON

It's no secret: Romance novels are having a 21st-century moment. Walk into any bookstore, and you'll see shelves upon shelves of brightly colored book covers promising meet-cutes, friends-to-lovers and summer beach-read fare. There's a new season of Bridgerton. And authors such as Sarah J. Maas and Rebecca Yarros are topping best-seller lists with their fantasy romance titles.

Set aside any thoughts of heaving bosoms and tired tropes. More than ever, authors from diverse backgrounds and all walks of life are coming to the genre, offering a wider array of narratives about romance and sexuality than ever before.

Here are some Bay Area-based authors whose romance writing is inspired by local landscapes — and their own unique identities.

Addie Woolridge

San Mateo

Addie Woolridge didn't follow a traditional route to publishing fame. The classically trained opera singer grew up with a learning disability and struggled to read until she hit middle school. Years later, while working at a Los Angeles nonprofit, friends invited her to join a writer's group. For months, she participated simply as a reader — and panicked when they asked her to share her writing. But that was the start.

Woolridge's "The Checklist" debuted in 2021, followed by "The Bounce Back," "Anatomy of a Meet Cute" and "The Homecoming War." The first two books were set in Seattle, her hometown. The third takes

Addie Woolridge visits Dolores Park in San Francisco, a location used in her novel, "Anatomy of a Meet Cute."

Author Addie Woolridge holds a copy of her romance novel, "Anatomy of a Meet Cute."

place in San Francisco, with scenes unfolding at a fictional Mission Bay hospital, Dolores Park and Potrero Hill — chosen for its relative sunniness in the land of Karl the Fog. It's a city that evokes romance.

"I absolutely see meet-cutes all over San Francisco," she says.

As romance writing has become more diverse, and publishing has embraced both traditional and independent models, it has become easier for everyone to see themselves in the genre, she says, "It's such a broad tent."

Woolridge, who is Black, writes under her great-great-grandmother's name, a nod to the first woman in her family emancipated from slavery.

"Her learning to read would have been criminalized, so when I became a writer, it felt like coming full circle," Woolridge says. "For me, reading and writing romance is as much an act of self-determination and rebellion as it is an act of joy. I love that people can turn to the romance genre at the end of a hard day and feel seen, loved and comforted and (know) that they're going to be okay."

Read: "Anatomy of a Meet Cute" (Montlake Publishing, $17) and "The Checklist" (Montlake, $13)

Connect: Woolridge co-hosts Kiss and Tell, a literary salon for romance readers and writers that meets at 6:30 p.m. on the third Tuesday of each month at Books, Inc. in Alameda. Learn more about Woolridge at https://addiewoolridge.com/.

Favorite romantic setting: Dolores Park, Potrero Hill and ice cream parlors around San Francisco. In "Anatomy of a Meet Cute," protagonist Sam goes on a movie-in-the-park date with her crush, and the two share a kiss at Dolores Park.

Evelyn Skye
Redwood City

Evelyn Skye has loved reading since she was a kid, staying up late turning pages under the covers. After studying Russian literature at Stanford, she headed to Harvard Law School. But during the six years she practiced as a mergers and acquisitions lawyer, she never quite felt like she fit in.

Skye was on maternity leave with her daughter when she started reading for fun again. The addictive pull of Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" books reminded her how much she had loved reading and writing in the first place. So she began writing again — at the library, while her parents babysat.

It wasn't until her ninth manuscript that she found a publisher; that novel became "The Crown's Game," a young adult fantasy romance. Seven more books have followed since then. Skye recently returned from a book tour in France to celebrate "Damsel," a fantasy adventure that upends romance tropes in its tale of a damsel who must rescue herself. Netflix released a film version of the book — starring Millie Bobby Brown, Robin Wright and Angela Bassett — in March.

Evelyn Skye, pictured left, holds copies of her romance novels, "The Hundred Loves of Juliet," top, and "One Year Ago in Spain," above.

The romance author felt a romantic spark of her own at Menlo Park's Cafe Borrone, where her now-husband, Tom, had arrived early for their first date. By the time Tom left her book talk at Kepler's next door, he was carrying a big bag of new purchases.

"I am an author, and I literally just had a meet cute in a bookstore where the guy's buying books," Skye recalls thinking. When the couple got engaged, Kepler's Books had roses and Champagne ready to celebrate.

Soon after they married, Tom developed an extremely rare illness that ended up requiring a lung transplant and a long stay at Stanford Hospital. The challenging experience spurred Skye to think about soulmates, second chances and reincarnation.

"How do you live when you feel like your time is short?" she says. "But also live in the present? And find joy in all of these moments and be optimistic and live with hope and love?"

The result was another book, "The Hundred Loves of Juliet."

Today, she says, the boundary between romance and fiction genres is narrower than ever. She credits popular author Emily Henry with driving a shift in the industry toward protagonists who are independent women in their 30s — characters who aren't just finding themselves but are reflecting on the people they've become and who they want to be, all while finding love.

"Romance is not just about the 'Fabio' covers anymore," Skye says. "And it's not just rom coms."

Read: "The Hundred Loves of Juliet" (Penguin Random House, $18) was released in paperback in May. "One Year Ago in Spain" (Penguin Random House, $18) lands in bookstores on July 30. Keep an eye out for a local connection: One of the characters is a Stanford professor. Learn more at https://evelynskye.com/.

Stream: "Damsel" is streaming on Netflix now.

Favorite romantic setting: You may not find romance at Kepler's Books, but you'll find books of every genre (including romance) at the Menlo Park bookshop, which opens daily at 10 a.m. at 1010 El Camino Real, Suite 100; www.keplers.com. Cafe Borrone, which opens at 7 a.m. Wednesday-Sunday, is next door; www.cafeborrone.com/.

Jasmine Guillory
Oakland

Jasmine Guillory credits the pandemic with pushing the resurgence of reading — and romance novels specifically.

"People needed happy stories," the former Oakland attorney-turned-best-selling novelist says. "We had so much stress and sadness and uncertainty, and romance novels were exactly what many of us needed. The thing about romance novels is that once you start reading them, you realize how much fun they are, and you never want to stop reading them."

Guillory grew up in the Bay Area, as did her parents, and a key part of her mission as a writer is to tell stories about the joy and happiness of Black characters in ways that highlight California's diverse communities.

Romance is a diverse genre in many ways, she says. "There are romance stories for and about everyone. And I don't just mean about different races and cultures and sexual orientations — though I do mean that! — but also the kinds of stories. There are romantic comedies, historical romance, literary romances, tearjerkers with happy endings, mysteries, thrillers and everything in between."

Guillory's best-selling novels have been praised by book reviewers, touted by celebrity book clubs and snatched up by book fans captivated by the strong, diverse characters, snappy dialogue and great plotting. Her California settings are part of the appeal, too, whether the action goes down at a Napa vineyard — where a Black winery owner discovers her McDreamy rendezvous of the night before is her newest hire — or a Dodgers baseball game, where a misguided bro somehow thinks proposing to his girlfriend of five months via scoreboard is a good idea.

Read: The Napa winery-set "Drunk on Love" (Penguin Random House, $17). Guillory's "Beauty and the Beast"-inspired YA novel, "By the Book" (Hyperion, $16), is set at a Santa Barbara mansion. Sneak a peek at "Drop, Cover and Hold On" (Amazon Original Stories, free), a Bay Area-set short story about a Valentine's Day earthquake, a bakery and a handsome but surly baker that launched in January; www.jasmineguillory.com.

Favorite romantic setting: San Francisco's Dolores Park, the Berkeley Rose Garden and Napa Valley.

Taleen Voskuni
San Francisco

Taleen Voskuni began writing as a youngster in Redwood City, taking sheets of paper out of her family's home printer so she could write stories on them. Writing, the UC Berkeley alum says, has always been a way to share aspects of her Armenian-American heritage and identity with readers, and both her books feature queer romances.

Published last year, her first novel, "Sorry, Bro," is set within the Bay Area's rich, colorful Armenian community, as readers follow the hilarious, heartfelt travails of Nar, Voskuni's not-quite-out bisexual protagonist, on the eve of a big cultural banquet that will bring together not only her entire extended family but her mother's best Facebook-stalked, matchmaking targets — and Nar's new wingwoman.

Much of the action is set in locations around the Bay Area, from the Peninsula to San Francisco's Ocean Beach and the Conservatory of Flowers, site of a romantic reconciliation. "I love infusing a sense of place into my books," she says. And the people and history of the Armenian diaspora come alive in its pages.

"'Sorry, Bro' is almost as much a history 101 crash course in Armenian history and culture as it is a romance, to be really honest," she says. "We don't have a lot of lighthearted Armenian books. I'm happy to be this voice of Armenian joy. Writing about my heritage through that lens has been really fulfilling."

Author Taleen Voskuni used San Francisco's Ocean Beach, pictured at left, as a location in her romance novel, "Sorry, Bro."

The book is joyful and fun, but it also addresses some of the more conservative attitudes toward queerness within the Armenian community. It's a story that aims to comfort, even if the story arc may not be true for everyone.

"You can be queer. You can be Armenian. You are valid. And maybe it can all work out — you could still have your family," she says. "I know that's not always the case, but I wanted to write a story where it was."

Read: "Sorry, Bro" (Berkley-Penguin Random House, $17). Voskuni's new novel, "Lavash at First Sight," (Berkley-Penguin Random House, $18) was released in May; www.taleenvoskuni.com

Favorite romantic setting: San Francisco's foggy Ocean Beach and the Conservatory of Flowers in Golden Gate Park.

From their hashtags to your ears

Five literate influencers recommend good books

BY KATE BRADSHAW

Scroll Instagram or TikTok on any given day, and you'll encounter the world of reading influencers — librarians, bookshop owners and book lovers who tout their favorites using literary hashtags like #Bookstagram and #BookTok. Now five Bay Area influencers — including Mychal Threets, the former Solano County librarian with 2 million followers — are sharing what they're reading and recommending.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY THE INTERVIEWW

Ciera Pasturel

Palo Alto

Instagram & TikTok: @sfbookgirl

Currently reading: I recently read "The Eyes and The Impossible" by Dave Eggers and absolutely loved it! While marketed for younger readers, it is appropriate for both children and adults. The book also includes beautiful illustrations by local illustrator Shawn Harris.

Recommendations: For adults: "The House in the Cerulean Sea" by TJ Klune (the sequel is being published this fall!), "Dark Matter" by Blake Crouch, "Disappearing Earth" by Julia Phillips and "The Girl with the Louding Voice" by Abi Daré. I am also a big fan of nonfiction, including "Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen" by Jose Antonio Vargas and "Every Day Is a Gift" by Tammy Duckworth. As a public librarian, I can't help but love the picture book, "No Cats in the Library," by Lauren Emmons. It's the perfect storytime book with heartwarming illustrations.

Why read? Reading cultivates creativity and exposes readers to new perspectives and ideas. Reading allows me to travel to a new point in time or place without ever needing to leave my house.

Sarah Vergese

Fremont

Instagram & Tiktok:@biblioversa

Currently reading: "Out on a Limb" by Hannah Bonam-Young. I just finished reading book 1 in the Sparrow Falls series, "Fragile Sanctuary," by Catherine Cowles and will be starting an exciting thriller, "One Perfect Couple," by Ruth Ware, next.

Recommendations: My favorite read this year is "The Women" by Kristin Hannah — exceptional historical fiction about women during the Vietnam War. I also loved "Listen for the Lie" by Amy Tintera, an excellent psychological thriller with a podcast setting. My all-time favorite fantasy romance authors are Sarah J. Maas and Jennifer L. Armentrout. For YA, the "Inheritance Games" series, "A Good Girl's Guide to Murder," "Hunger Games." For older kids, "Wings of Fire" series, "Keepers of the Lost City" series and Harry Potter.

Why read? Reading gives you insight into something you have not experienced and an escape into that world. A book can truly be your companion, philosopher, friend, guide.

Mychal Threets

Fairfield

Instagram & TikTok: @mychal3ts

Currently reading: This year, I launched a virtual book club through the Fable app, which helps you track your reading and create new bookish friends. It's been a lot of fun! We most recently read "Holes" by Louis Sachar, which is one of my all-time favorite books. I love it so much that I named my cat, Kissin' Kat Barlow, after one of the main characters.

Recommendations: Honestly, I believe that everyone should read "The Giver" by Lois Lowry at least once in their lives. I believe it is ideal for all ages, but kids especially, as they are navigating their love for literature. When I read it, it was one of the first times I can recall having true curiosity about what goes on in the world, what is reality and what not! It will definitely make you think. Regarding nonfiction, I believe that everyone should read "Letters to You" by Jazz Thornton. Jazz is one of the biggest mental health advocates in the world, and her latest book has wisdom and encouragement for us all on our best and worst days.

Why read? At every level of our reading journey, there is a book ready for us to fall in love with. There truly is a book for everyone, and that means many people are seeing themselves in books, on the pages, in the characters. That is beautiful!

If you're looking for your next book recommendation, visit your local library! Visit your local bookstore! To make a (book) suggestion for individuals, it takes conversation to see where people are at. That's why I love talking to librarians, to bookworms. Every one of them has different techniques, different ways to hype up books, to make you appreciate your incredible literate self.

Anabrenda Cervera Hall

San Francisco

Instagram & TikTok: @myloveforlibros

Currently reading: "Love and Gelato" by Jenna Evans Welch.

Recommendations: I would definitely recommend "In the Country We Love" by Diane Guerrero — nonfiction (about) a young girl who came home from school and found out her parents were deported — and "Love and Other Words" by Christina Lauren. It takes place in the Bay Area!

Why read? What I love most about reading is being able to live a thousand lives. (I know — so cheesy!) But it feels amazing to experience the story in my head as if I am really there.

Megan Epperson

Hayward

Instagram & TikTok: @bookedbymegs

Currently reading: An advanced reader copy of "Fear the Flames" by Olivia Rose Darling (publishing in September).

Recommendations: I am an avid fantasy and fantasy romance reader, (so) the Auran Chronicles series by Wendy Heiss, the Mortal Fates series by J. Bree, the Crowns of Nyaxia series by Carissa Broadbent and "The Hurricane Wars" by Thea Guanzon.

Why read? It allows you to see the world through someone else's perspective and develop empathy for people who may not look like you or come from the same background as you. That is so important.

Book it to the library to see some amazing art installations

BY JIM HARRINGTON

Museums and civic plazas aren't the only places you'll find public art installations. Book lovers and art enthusiasts will find dramatic — and often literary — art at libraries from Lafayette to San Jose.

So the next time you're looking to check out a book or enjoy some quiet time in a book-filled space, take the opportunity to check out some cool public art as well.

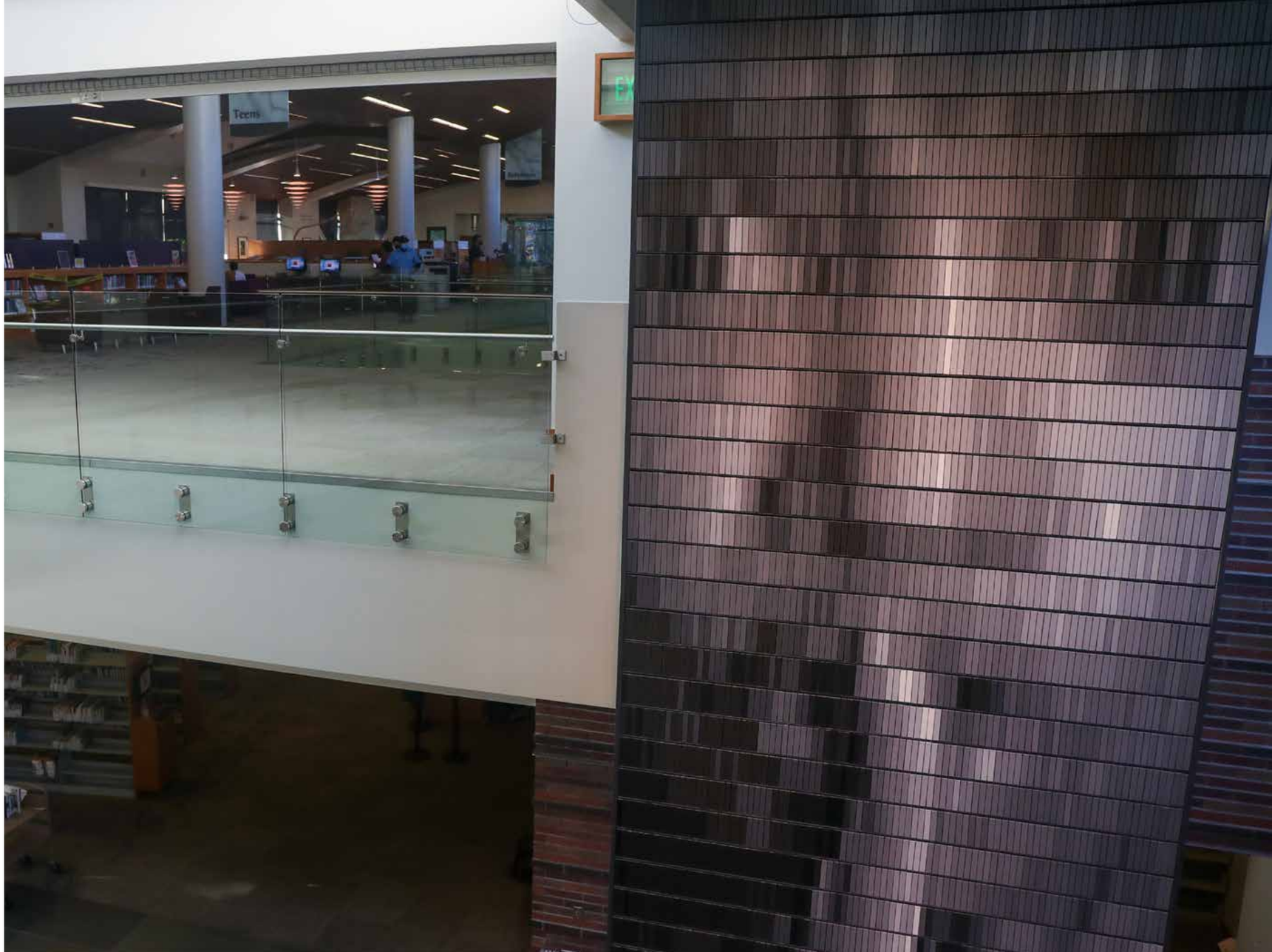
Here are five fascinating installations to get you started.

"Shh.....Portrait in 12 Volumes of Gray"
Walnut Creek Library

Librarians have been hushing loud chatterers since, well, as long as there have been libraries. At the Walnut Creek Library, however, they have some tongue-in-cheek assistance from Christian Moeller's "Shh....Portrait in 12 Volumes of Gray."

At first glance, the installation looks like a really big bookcase, 27 feet high and 8 feet wide and filled with nearly 4,000 sketchbooks in a dozen different shades of gray. But stand in the right spot, and the whimsical image snaps into focus: a two-story-tall librarian holding her finger to her lips in the shushing gesture familiar to noisy library-going kids everywhere.

"The art piece is very tall. In order to see it, you have to be standing in a particular spot in the library," says Brooke Converse, Contra Costa Library public information officer, who calls the installation "a conversation starter" that "represent(s) the changing nature of modern libraries."



The Walnut Creek Library was designed around Christian Moeller's witty, librarian-inspired "Portrait in 12 Volumes of Gray."

RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF ARCHIVES

Completed in 2010, the piece was intended to be interactive, with the artist inviting visitors to get sketchbooks from the library store, fill them in and exchange them for books in the sculpture. "Eventually, the sculpture becomes a container of the notes and memories of the community," Moeller explains on his website.

The German-born artist and chairman of UCLA's Department of Design Media Arts has done several other well-known installations in Northern California, including a massive "Hands" mural made from 400,000 white plastic chips in a wire mesh on display at San José Mineta International Airport.

Details: See "Shh" at the Walnut Creek Library, which is open Monday–Saturday at 1644 N. Broadway; https://ccclib.org/locations/26/

"Skeptacle"
Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, San Jose

Art installations can be found throughout the Martin Luther King, Jr. Library in downtown San Jose, where 34 pieces of various shapes and sizes form the "Recolecciones" collection by Mel Chin and other artists.

"It's sprinkled everywhere," says public information manager Elizabeth Castañeda. Art can be found in hallways, reading rooms and even the library's restrooms and elevator. "Some (pieces) are very in your face. Some, you have to look for."

"Skeptacle" belongs in the former camp.

"It's the largest piece in the collection," Castañeda says. And it's blue. Very, very blue.

The name "Skeptacle" is a portmanteau combining "skep" — a domed beehive typically made from straw — and "spectacle." You'll find this large beehive-shaped, cherry wood bookcase on the library's fifth floor, where it houses the master theses — bound in blue — of generations of San Jose State University students. It may be art, but you can thumb through it and learn more about, say, "Counseling the Alcoholic: A Christian Approach" by John R. Edrington or "Selective Influence of Authoritarianism in Children's Verbal Paired-Associate Learning" by David Lawrence Boyle. The books come courtesy of Milford Bookbinding, Inc. and the work of Charisse Antonopolous, David Murray and Peter Wilson.

"Everything that this building has is amazing," Castañeda says.

Details: The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library is open daily at 150 E. San Fernando St. on the San Jose State University campus; https://library.sjsu.edu/.

Above: The massive "Untitled" mural at the San Francisco Main Library includes nearly 50,000 annotated and adorned cards from the library's retired card catalog.

KARL MONDON/STAFF

Right: The beehive-inspired "Skeptacle" at San Jose's Martin Luther King, Jr. Library is one of 34 art installations there.

NHAT V. MEYER/STAFF

Untitled
San Francisco Main Library

Ann Hamilton and Ann Chamberlain's art installation will bring back fond memories for anyone who grew up visiting libraries in the pre-digital age.

It's also a great example of how art can reclaim and repurpose objects that have been deemed unnecessary. The piece utilizes the library's century-old card catalog, which had been supplanted by an online catalog system. So the two artists took nearly 50,000 of these well-thumbed cards and used them to create a massive mural that covers three levels of a principal wall in the library.

Amazingly, each of these cards has been annotated — by 200 people writing in a dozen different

languages — with a quote from its corresponding book, or another work associated with the title, or in some cases, tiny sketches. A tiny King Babar and Queen Celeste are drawn on a Jean de Brunhoff card. Music cascades across a card for composer Bernard Grun's Mozart-inspired novel.

The piece "is one of the most beloved artworks inside the Main Library and photographed often by our visitors," says Michelle Jeffers, the library's chief of community programs and partnerships.

"I was giving a tour of the Main Library (recently), and my tour group was totally bewitched by the card catalog walls," she says. "This happens all the time. People think they are walking by wallpaper, and then they take a closer look. As soon as visitors realize what it is, people cannot help but run up to the wall to run their hands across the beautiful, soft-paper surface of the cards. Then they begin a closer read of the 'annotations' on the cards, the little drawings and comments that correspond to the books and materials that are the subjects of the cards.

"Many are swept back into their old childhood, reminiscing about visiting a library as a child and looking through the card catalog for materials. I love that it conjures up so many warm memories of libraries."

Hamilton, a Ohio native, has had her work exhibited in numerous museums and galleries, including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Chamberlain, who died in 2008, was the program director for the Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin.

Details: San Francisco Main Library is open daily at 100 Larkin St.; sfpl.org.

Above: *Kate Dodd's "Free Verse" art installation hangs from the ceiling of the Family Place at the Downtown Library in Redwood City.*

KARL MONDON/STAFF

Left: Artist Brian Goggin's "Speechless," a towering bronze of stacked books and floating pages, dominates a plaza at the Lafayette Library.

JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/STAFF

"Speechless"

Lafayette Library and Learning Center

Brian Goggin's nearly 16-foot-tall work of art towers over visitors as they approach the Lafayette library through the plaza at First Street and Golden Gate Way. The finely crafted, cast-bronze piece evokes book pages flying off a large disheveled stack, which is leaning precariously and giving the distinct impression that it could fall at any moment. (Don't worry. It can't.)

"Movement emanates from a sculpted stack of bronze-cast paper, teetering as if stirred by a gentle breeze," Goggin explains. "Capturing the essence of fluidity and texture posed a formidable challenge. My goal was to create something reminiscent of the fluid strokes of a Japanese brush painting."

The bronze pages, which seem to defy gravity as they float gently into the sky, are etched with images and text borrowed from material in the library's own collection.

"Researching an eclectic array of literature, history, science, poetry, and nonfiction, my assistant, Rebeca Bollinger, and I meticulously scanned pages to etch onto bronze plates," Goggin says. "These plates form layered original compositions, echoing the fluidity of ideas flowing through the pages."

The San Francisco-based artist has several other notable art installations in the Bay Area, including "Language of Birds," the famous flying books you can see at the intersection of Broadway and Columbus Avenue in San Francisco's North Beach.

Details: The Lafayette Library and Learning Center is open Monday-Sunday at 3491 Mount Diablo Blvd.; https://ccclib.org/locations/14/

"Free Verse"

Redwood City Public Library

New Jersey artist Kate Dodd's wonderfully whimsical and captivating art installation should feel very familiar to anyone who has kids or who ever imagined themselves sailing off to the land of the wild things. The colorful images and vibrant text included in the swirling piece of art, installed in 2021 in the library's Family Place, are inspired by beloved children's books.

"I think people like the reinterpretation, and they like the familiarity — seeing the imagery from 'Where the Wild Things Are,' 'Go, Dog. Go!,' 'The Snowy Day' — just in a way they haven't thought about before," says Derek Wolfgram the interim director of Parks, Recreation and Community Services for Redwood City.

The images and text are printed on pieces of clear vinyl, then hung in a swirl, ascending toward the ceiling. Sun shines through the skylight above, transforming the piece as the hours slip by.

"It looks different at different times in the day," Wolfgram says. "Whether you are there in the daytime or the nighttime, you might get a different experience looking at it."

Dodd's work includes imagery from some of the library's most popular children's books, identified through library checkout records and by children's librarians. Those books include "A Bad Case of Stripes" by David Shannon, "Dreamers" by Yuyi Morales, "Freight Train" by Donald Crews, "Go, Dog. Go!," by P. D. Eastman, "Hooray for Birds!" by Lucy Cousins, "The Snowy Day" by Ezra Jack Keats, "The Ugly Vegetables" by Grace Lin and, of course, those wild things by Maurice Sendak.

Details: The Redwood City Public Library is open daily at 1044 Middlefield Road; www.redwood city.org.

‘Wandering Stars,’ Tommy Orange’s follow-up to ‘There There,’ shines bright light on the dogged survival of Native Americans

BY STUART MILLER

Tommy Orange’s debut novel, “There There,” was a Pulitzer Prize finalist, earning acclaim for telling the rarely heard story of Native Americans living in urban America.

“Wandering Stars” is Tommy Orange’s second novel.

The book followed residents of Oakland, where Orange was born and raised, as they struggled with life and their sense of their Native identity. And the tale, which sold more than a million copies, reverberated across the American literary scene, with the New York Times calling “There There” one of the 10 best books of 2018.

Orange’s hotly anticipated second novel, “Wandering Stars,” published in February, manages to be both prequel and sequel to “There There,” which ended with a robbery and a shocking shooting at a powwow.

But much has changed in our world during the years between when the first and second books came out. Native voices have finally started getting more attention, with television series such as “Reservation Dogs,” “Rutherford Falls” and “Dark Winds” and plays — “Between Two Knees” and “Manahatta” — changing the playing field for Orange’s follow-up. Martin Scorsese’s high profile 2023 film, “Killers of the Flower Moon,” focuses on a Native community, though the story is told from a White American perspective; in January, Lily Gladstone became the first Native American woman to score an Oscar nomination for her role in it.

“I do think it’s a completely different context than when ‘There There’ came out, which felt like it took the world by surprise,” Orange says. “For a large number of people, it was like there was some old software running the Native American program about who we are before that. With this book, that update will have already sort of been in place for six years. The new context lives with people, so I think the understanding deepens by the time they get to ‘Wandering Stars.’”

Most TV shows and plays about Indians are not about those living in urban areas. They’re set in rural areas or bygone eras — 1920s Oklahoma in the case of “Flower Moon,” and “Manahatta” moves the action between modern-day Oklahoma and 17th-century Manhattan Island.

The reality, Orange says, is that “for more than a decade, 80 percent of us have been living in cities. There are a lot of stories in that piece of data — years and years of lives and stories that are there to be told. I hope that the success of both books means that people are emboldened to tell those stories and that the industries are open to taking risks on those stories.”

“Wandering Stars” moves through time, with its last 200 pages picking up where “There There” left off, while the first third shows the family’s story from the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 through the years when Native Americans were shoved into boarding schools meant to rob them of culture and language.

Orange writes of the schools, “If they did not die of what they called consumption even while they regularly were starved; if they were not buried in duty, training for agricultural or industrial labor or indentured servitude; were they not buried in children’s cemeteries, or in unmarked graves, not lost somewhere between the school and home, having run away, unburied, unfound, lost to time, or lost between exile and refuge, between school, tribal homelands, reservation, and city; if they made it through routine beatings and rape, if they survived, made lives and families and homes, it was because of this and only this: Such Indian children were made to carry more than they were made to carry.”

Set in his hometown of Oakland, Tommy Orange’s debut novel, “There There,” was a Pulitzer finalist.

COURTESY MICHAEL LIONSTAR

But Orange, who is Cheyenne and Arapaho, was originally hesitant to write historical fiction.

“To only think of us in that historical context is damaging,” he says. “We have only just started getting contemporary depictions of us on TV, so there are still a lot of stories that haven’t been told. But I wanted to give context in a generational family line sense and give an idea of what these lives could have been like.”

It’s a complex context the new book conveys, one that grapples with identity, the repercussions of colonization and forced assimilation and the idea of authenticity in a world where pop culture embraces history in its most performative sense.

“In the Native world, authenticity is a charged word — historically, there’s a lot of competition between who’s the more real Native person,” he says. “We’ve been turned into caricatures and flattened images; we’ve been background characters vaguely wearing some kind of feathers...

“A big part of what I wanted to get across in ‘Wandering Stars’ is that it is truly epic what we have survived — decades and decades of this forced schooling and the erasure of our ways and languages. That we still have thriving communities all over the country who know who they are — that is not nothing. There are ever-growing ways that we can continue to cultivate Native culture, our tribal histories and our stories and ways, with music and different forms of art that also express who we are now.”

A diverse fan base gravitates to North Light to read, drink and share ideas

BY SHOMIK MUKHERJEE

In mid-2020, when swanky cocktail bar North Light was barely out of infancy in Oakland's Temescal neighborhood, co-owner Dan Stone decided to capture what it felt like to helm the business in the throes of the pandemic.

He wrote a 4,000-word essay for the California Sunday Magazine — where his wife is an editor — about the gargantuan task of keeping the bar afloat and his understanding that any day could be North Light's last.

The piece, now something of a time capsule, gives Stone another reason to smile about the steady resilience of the Telegraph Avenue bar, which on a recent Tuesday bustled jovially as its regulars settled in for the evening.

There was no stress in sight at North Light, which is nearing its fifth anniversary this month. Bartender John McKenna poured the special craft cocktail of the day, a stiff tequila and mezcal-based concoction of his own creation dubbed the Monarca.

Then he rummaged through a tote bag, carefully pulling out a new record to shift onto the bar's turntable: Frank Ocean's "Blonde," an album drenched in melodic themes of heartbreak and nostalgia. Next to the record player sat a tall set of crammed bookshelves with a library ladder. A patron at the bar flipped through a novel she'd brought along with her.

An upscale but accessible vibe permeates Oakland's North Light, an LGBTQ-friendly bar known for its sophisticated bookshelves and popular cocktails and small bites.

DON FERIA FOR BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

This is the kind of sophisticated, hip-but-not-hipster atmosphere that has taken off as bars enter a post-pandemic chapter of catering social experiences.

"People can drink a cocktail in the comfort of their own home for way cheaper than at a bar," Stone explained. "It's not about what you can mix up — it's about how you make people feel when they're in your space."

INTRODUCTION: North Light is among a crop of "book bars" that have popped up in the Bay Area over the past several years; the shelves, specially installed into the bar's 11-foot wide interior, are stacked with books recommended by Stone's friends in the literary world.

Stone's favorite book from North Light's numerous offerings is a rare cookbook, "Wild Raspberries," produced by Andy Warhol and selected for the bar by chef and food writer Samin Nosrat.

"There's a wealth of knowledge in Oakland, and people want to be around other people interested in learning about the world and figuring out more," said Lukas Dellios, the bar's assistant general manager. "What better way to physically represent that than books?"

Out on the back patio, patrons huddle in reserved booths over plates of potato tots, absorbing the evening. There are burgers and ribs and salads, too, but the tots, Stone said, are "emblematic of the place — they're comfort food from everyone's childhood."

Finding an identity was the key to North Light's survival. The bar ran through a number of short-lived experiments — serving breakfast, being open all day — before settling into a business model that works.

Co-owner Lee Smith gradually honed the bar's financial end while Stone focused on establishing a laid-back environment where a visitor can ease out of the workday with a drink and some down-tempo tunes or simply find a corner to read.

Through it all, it is North Light's appeal to intellectual stimulation that Stone believes sets it apart from other, more traditional Temescal offerings such as the historic Kingfish Pub and Cafe or The Avenue, a popular dive bar.

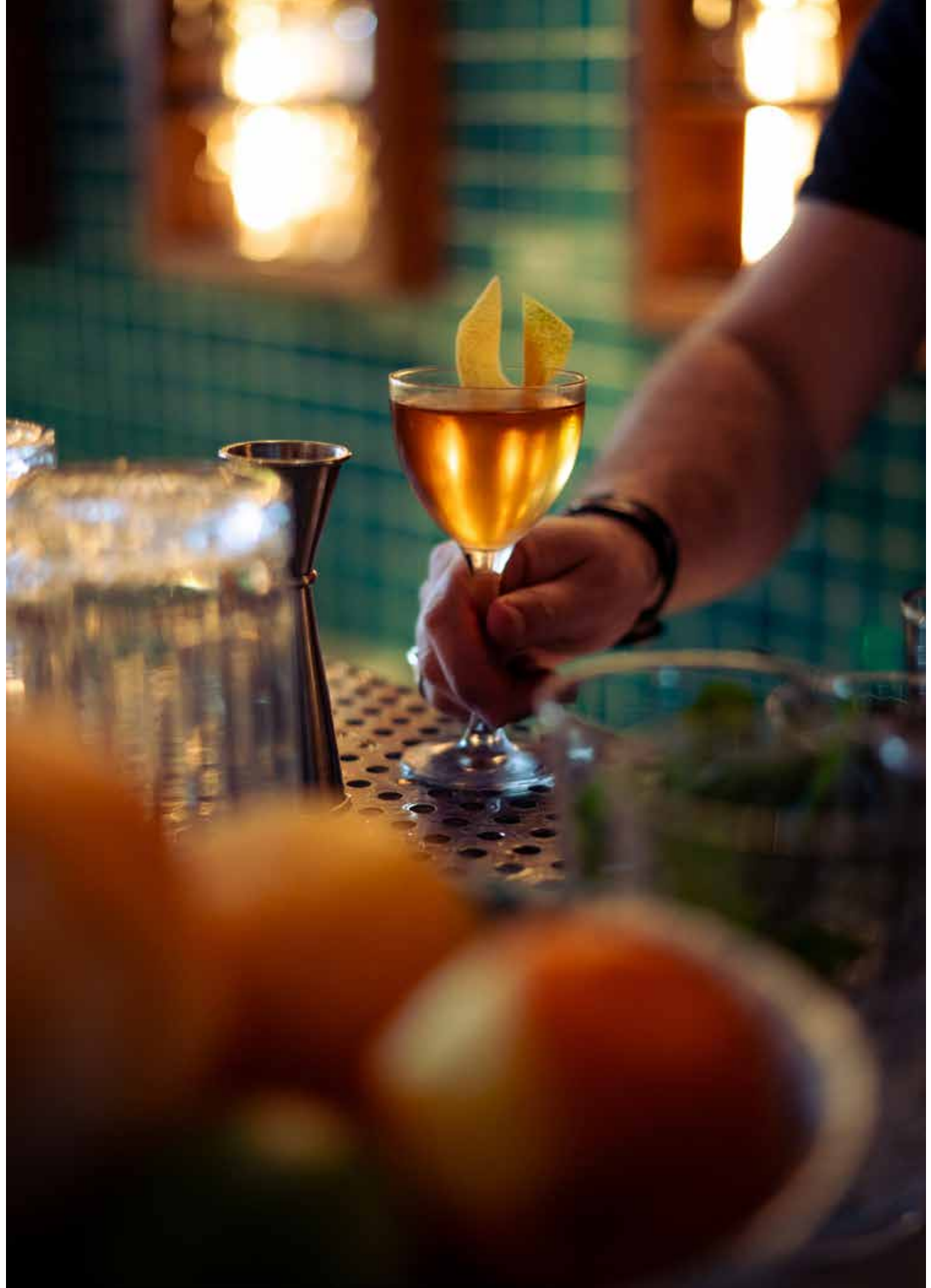


TABLE OF CONTENTS: North Light's cocktail list tends toward clearer liquors like tequila, mezcal and gin, though there is also a house old-fashioned with bourbon, plus a growing list of non-alcoholic offerings.

Much of the bar's record collection was left to Stone by a veteran of the Bay Area's hospitality industry, Daniel Hyatt, who died in 2018.

Quietly, North Light has also become known as a prime spot for inclusivity, particularly of queer identity. Dellios, who uses they/them pronouns, has played a significant role in that natural evolution, launching a regular drag show that has won the bar a swath of loyal customers.

"It's been wildly successful," they said. "Personally, what I did — I worked in plenty of bars where pronouns were not expected or there were small microcosms of hate. I'd always take note of 'How would I create environments where this didn't happen?' And I tried to bring that here."

Under warmly lit lamps hanging from the ceiling, the crowd on this evening was starting to grow a bit louder. But the Frank Ocean vinyl hummed audibly over the chatter.

"Keep a place for me," Ocean crooned to an ex-lover on the track "Self Control."

Stone hopes North Light can do exactly that.

DETAILS: Open from 4 to 11 p.m. or later on weekdays and 2 p.m. until late on weekends at 4915 Telegraph Ave. in Oakland; https://northlight.bar.

North Light bartender John McKenna serves a Monarca cocktail, made with reposado tequila, mezcal, vermouth, dry curacao and mole bitters.

DON FERIA FOR BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

An astonishing alternate outcome to an infamous breakout story takes credible shape in ‘Alcatraz: The Last Escape’

STORY BY JOHN METCALFE
PHOTOS BY SHAE HAMMOND

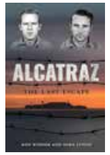
Everyone knows the story of the famous 1962 Alcatraz escape: How three inmates led by bank robber Frank Morris — handsomely played by Clint Eastwood in the 1979 movie — used dummy heads to fool guards and flee in a homemade raft across the Bay, either to freedom or death in the briny deep.

The FBI closed the case in 1979 and today maintains that “with the strong currents and frigid Bay water, the odds were clearly against these men.” But now comes a bombshell from Ken Widner and Mike Lynch, who use historical documents, expert-analyzed photo evidence and family interviews in the new book “Alcatraz: The Last Escape” (Lyons Press, 2024).

It wasn’t the high-IQ Morris who led the escape, they say, but John Anglin, the son of poor farmworkers and brother of third escapee, Clarence Anglin. And instead of the men drowning or — as one theory has it — getting murdered after a double-cross near Seattle, they supposedly flew

Above: A rogue’s gallery of famous inmates lines a wall at the Alcatraz gift shop.

Left: Mike Lynch, co-author of “Alcatraz: The Last Escape,” rides the ferry to Alcatraz for a cellblock tour.



Mike Lynch wrote "Alcatraz: The Last Escape" with Ken Widner, the nephew of the infamous Anglin brothers.

to South America, where they married the locals, raised children and tended a farm in the mountains.

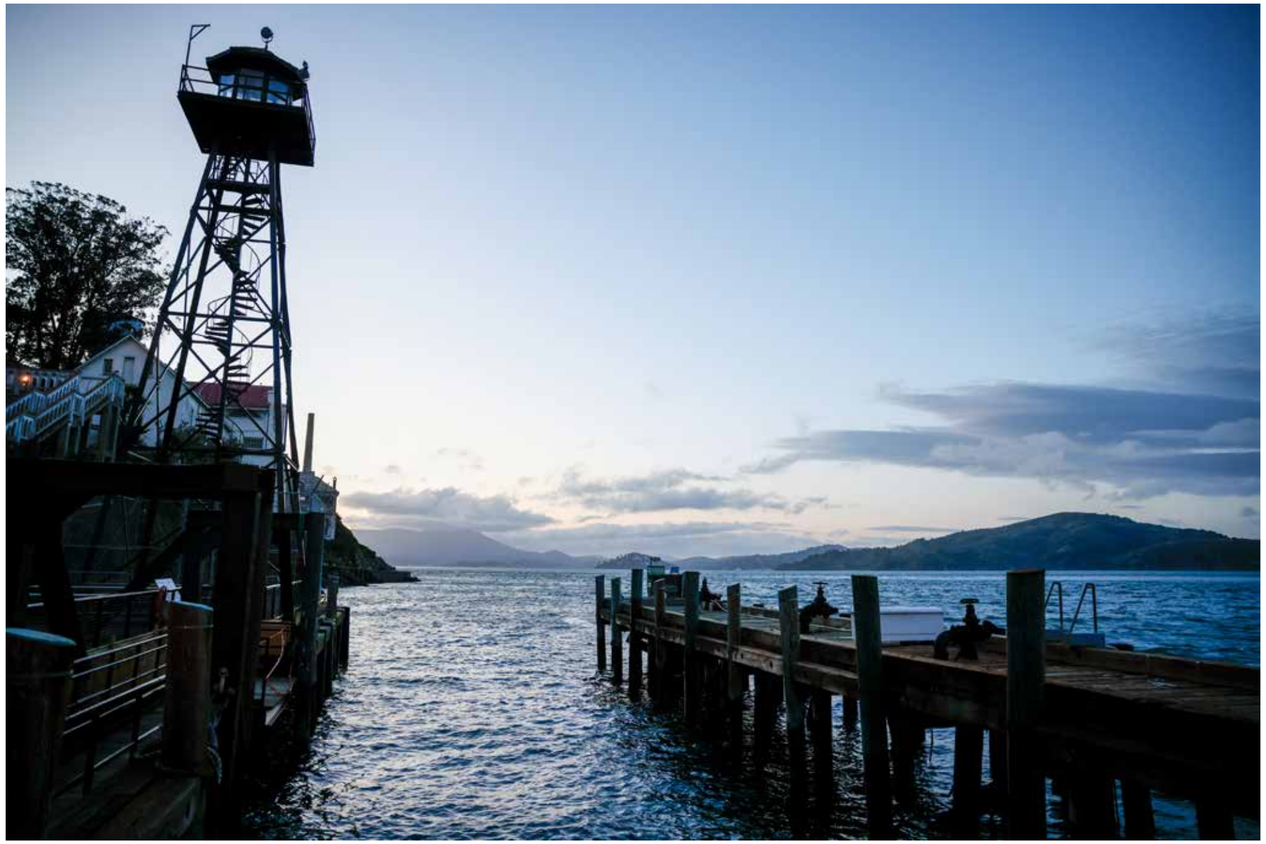
Wait, what? To believe this narrative, it helps that the authors aren't crackpots. Lynch is a seasoned writer from San Jose who helped re-create the presumed escape across the Bay for a 2022 episode of Discovery Channel's "Expedition Unknown." Widner is the Florida-based nephew of the Anglin brothers with intimate knowledge of their upbringing and prison connections, which he gleaned partly through a pen-pal relationship with crime lord and former Alcatraz inmate James "Whitey" Bulger.

Widner hopes to correct the record about his uncles, who are portrayed in popular culture (especially in Eastwood's "Escape From Alcatraz") as country hicks along for the ride.

"Although I love the movie, it's not accurate at all," says Widner, a retired I.T. professional who lives in Panama City Beach, Florida. "Nobody from Paramount or Clint Eastwood ever contacted any of the (Anglin) family members. I'm not going to try to glorify them — they were bank robbers, just like Frank Morris was — but if you're going to give credit, then give it to the person who actually constructed the escape and did most of the planning."

To humanize the brothers, the book kicks off with their childhood in Ruskin, Florida, with parents who were seasonal farmworkers.

"You think of poor today, multiply that by a hundred," says Widner. "The house they lived in they built themselves, and it was a four-room house — not four bedrooms, just four rooms — with no plumbing, no electricity and a wood-burning stove they cooked off of. There were 14 kids who lived there, and they took baths on the back porch in a wash tub with water leftover from when their mom washed clothes."



"John and Clarence were sort of viewed as the white trash of their community, because they were so poor, and were looked down on and made fun of," says Lynch. "They wanted to be respected in their culture and looked up to — but for them, it was through crime. It was through instant wealth, like, 'If we steal stuff and have money, people are going to respect us.'"

In 1958, John and Clarence and a third brother, Alfred, robbed a bank in Alabama using a toy gun and were sent to prison. After attempting to escape, they wound up in the place reserved for those who wouldn't follow prison rules, Alcatraz. There they met Morris and began scheming how to get out.

The immediate challenge was cracking through the building's infrastructure. They fashioned an arsenal of tools, including sharpened spoons to dig through their cell walls, a periscope to peep around corners and even a homemade flashlight to illuminate crawlspaces. Growing up poor and unable to buy stuff from the store, it turned out, had its advantages.

Above: Notorious Alcatraz inmates John Anglin, Clarence Anglin and Frank Morris escaped from this dock in 1962.

"I like to say that John and Clarence were the MacGyvers of the 1940s and '50s. It didn't matter what it was, they knew how to take nothing and make something out of it," says Widner. "My mom said one time, they created their own bicycles. And I remember she told me how they built this car and took the tires and filled them full of moss off the trees, so the tires could roll."

The escapees crafted dummy heads, using paint and real hair smuggled from the prison barbershop, to prop on their pillows and make it seem like their cells were occupied. What's not commonly known is that this was a favorite ploy of the Anglins, who made fake heads as youngsters to help break out of a Florida reform school.

"The first time they actually used them was when they would sneak out of the house as kids," says Widner. "Their older sister had one of those Styrofoam heads you'd put a wig on, and they would take it and stick it in the bed and sneak out."

One of the most daunting challenges was dealing with the icy waters of the Bay. The showers at Alcatraz poured hot water, so inmates wouldn't get used to the cold and get ideas about taking a swim to freedom. But the Anglins had an ace in the hole — Whitey Bulger, who was interested in SCUBA diving and had some helpful advice.

The chilly halls of the former federal prison on Alcatraz Island provided plenty of atmosphere for Mike Lynch's book, "Alcatraz: The Last Escape."

"Whitey was the one who told them that in your cells, you have a sink and toilet, and that water is cold," says Lynch. "So get some towels and soak them with cold water and wrap yourselves in them, then lay on the cement floor, and that'll get you used to the cold water when you pull off your escape."

Bulger also reportedly instructed them on how to fashion rudimentary wetsuits from prison clothing. These details come from Widner's years-long correspondence with Bulger, which began when the crime boss reached out to Widner's mother to reminisce about life with her brothers at Alcatraz.

And what was it like being pen pals with a ruthless murderer?

"I didn't share my actual home address — I always used a P.O. box," says Widner. "But it

Visitors to Alcatraz Island, a National Park Service site in the middle of San Francisco Bay, can take self-guided audio tours of the cellblock.

was cool. I learned a lot about him. I learned the old mobsters — they were killers, I don't want to glorify that in any way — but they were dedicated, loyal-type people. The thing he hated more than anything was a snitch. And he told me, 'The FBI didn't use me, I used them.'"

Once the convicts had made holes in their cell walls — obscuring them with fake vent covers they'd carved from cardboard — they climbed to the roof and then down to shore. They whipped out a life raft they'd built with rain coats donated by other inmates and blew it up with a concertina. Here, the conventional narrative has them sailing off the island to an unknown fate.

But the authors get very specific about what happened next.

"They stole electrical cords and tied one to a transport boat, let it out a hundred feet and were towed into the middle of the Bay," says Lynch. "When the brothers were young boys, they used to do that for fun. They lived near the Little Manatee River (in Florida), and there were a lot of power boats there, because it was a tourist area. The boys used to tie themselves to the back of these boats and get towed down the river."

The authors reconstructed this story from conversations shared to Anglin relatives by a drug smuggler called Fred Brizzi, who was known as "Waterbed Fred," because he had a fuel bladder on his plane so he could fly farther distances. According to Brizzi, after getting towed into the middle of the Bay, the trio met a boat that was in on the escape, made their way to a small airport in Marin County and were in Mexico by the very next morning.

There, they supposedly worked on a marijuana farm operated by Mickey Cohen for a couple of years — they'd worked together in Alcatraz's clothing issue room — before fleeing to Brazil in 1964. What spooked them was the death of their brother Alfred, who they feared might have shared their whereabouts.

"Alfred was at Kilby State Prison (in Alabama), and they had a yellow electric chair there called Yellow Mama," says Lynch. "Sometimes, they would use it for interrogation purposes. If they wanted information, they would strap them in the chair and start to turn it on to let them feel the electricity and then ratchet it up a little more and more. That's what Ken believes happened to his uncle Alfred — that after the escape they were interrogating him, and he died."

Top: Author Mike Lynch takes in the scene in the prison's D-Block. Prisoners with behavioral problems were sent to solitary confinement in this part of the prison.

Above: Between 1934 and 1963, more than 1,500 convicts did time in this maximum-security federal penitentiary in the middle of the Bay.

Widner maintains his family was in contact with the brothers in Brazil at least up until the early '90s. And he has a unique bit of photographic evidence to support the claim: a picture of two '70s-kitted-out men who look very much like John and Clarence, standing among termite mounds in a jungle.

"To me, that photo is probably the biggest game-changer in the history of the Alcatraz escape," says Widner. "It's been analyzed by five independent facial-recognition software companies, and they all come back for an exact match on John Anglin. With Clarence, it came back close, because (his face) wasn't turned in a certain way."

Widner and Lynch have traveled to the Brazilian town of Monteiro Lobato, where they believe the brothers and Frank Morris wound up. (Morris would later disappear from the narrative: "He kind of just ghosted out at some point," says Lynch.) They interviewed elders who recalled Americans being in the area in the 1970s. High up on a mountain deep in the forest, they found remnants of a structure, some tools, a shell casing, a lighter and a 1950s penny.

"That trek up that mountain was so hard, like a mile up, literally a teeny path cut out of jungle like a Tarzan thing," says Lynch. "No one's going to find you up there."

Widner doesn't think his uncles, who would be in their 90s now, still are alive. "Clarence was a very heavy smoker," he says. "And none of the Anglin boys lived past their mid-80s."

But for a time, the authors believe, they had a decent life after their escape from the Rock.

"Fred Brizzi talked about them having a large farm with animals, cows and orchards," says Lynch. "They would sell their fruit in the local market, hired about 20 employees and were just living very peacefully and quietly — kind of the life they always wanted."

Details: Find Ken Widner and Mike Lynch's "Alcatraz: The Last Escape" (Lyons Press, $30) at local bookshops via Indiebound.org and other online sources.

Explore Alcatraz for yourself by taking an Alcatraz City Cruises ferry from San Francisco's Pier 33 to the island, followed by a cellhouse audio tour. Make reservations and buy tickets for a day tour ($27.55 to $45.25), night tour ($33-$56.30) or guided behind-the-scenes tour ($94.25-$101.30) up to 90 days ahead at www.alcatrazcitycruises.com.

LESSONS FROM THE LAND

Greg Sarris' new stories connect the natural world with Native American identity

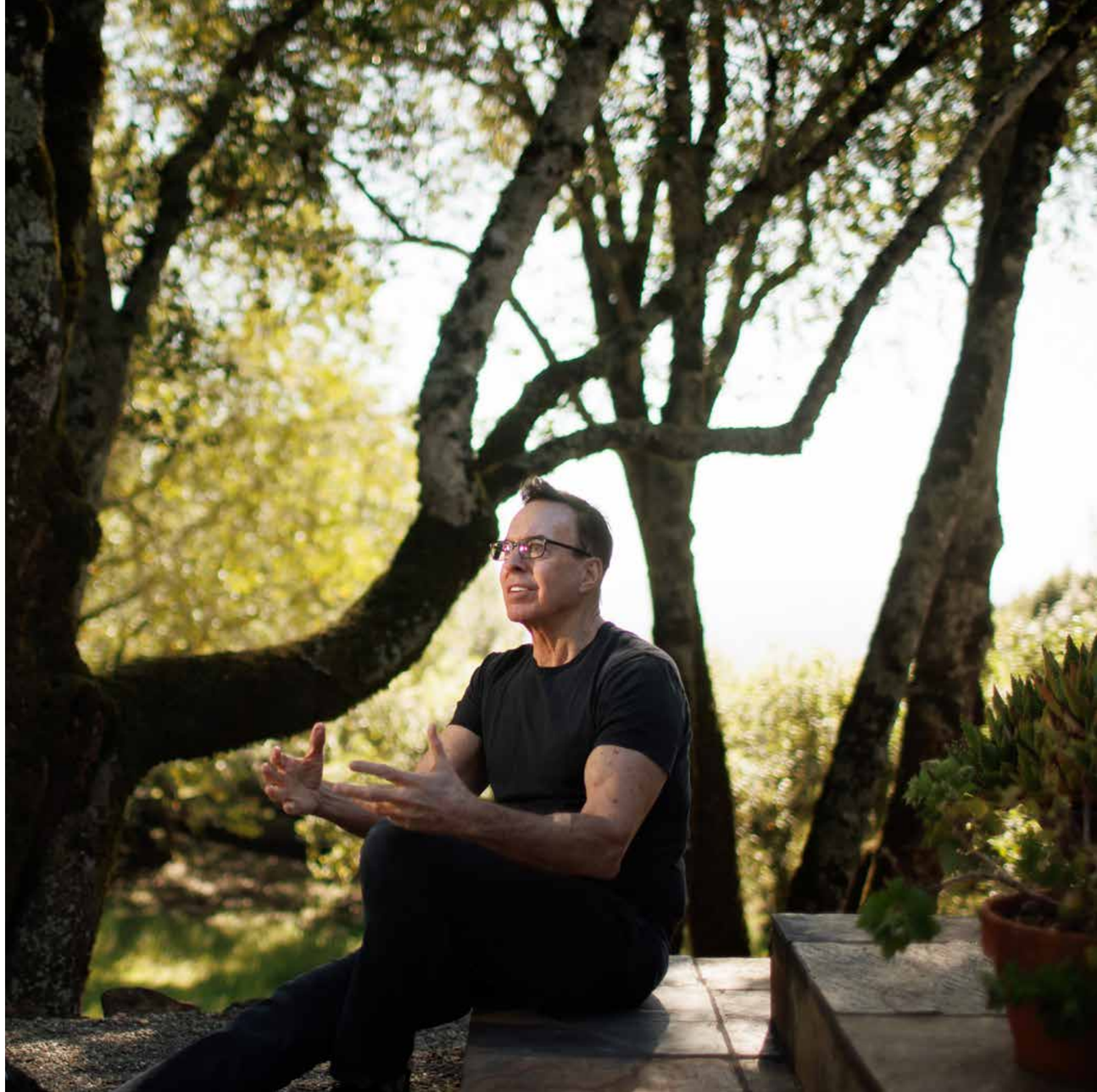
BY MARTHA ROSS

There is a patch of land where nothing grows," Greg Sarris writes in "A Man Learns to Smell Flowers," one of the stories in his new book, "The Forgetters."

The Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo Indians believe this flat, dry expanse along the road between Freestone and Bodega Bay was once was covered by a lush meadow of clover. They called it "a beautiful place."

In this story and others, the Santa Rosa-born writer, academic and tribal leader explores familiar themes: the Native American experience in Sonoma and Marin counties, centering on characters who struggle with losing their connection to the land of their ancestors. As Sarris says, the land is the "sacred text" through which Native Americans find their sense of history, community and personal identity.

As a writer, Sarris is best known for fiction and nonfiction set in the North Bay, including a 1994 story collection, "Grand Avenue," that was adapted into an HBO miniseries.



Right: Author Greg Sarris expounds on Native legends from his Penngrove home.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

He retired in 2022 from Sonoma State University, where he taught creative writing and American Indian studies. But he's also kept busy over the past 30 years leading the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, who operate the luxury Graton Resort and Casino in Rohnert Park, one of the largest Indian casinos in California.

There are aspects of "The Forgetters," told in the classic style of Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo creation stories, that also resonate with Sarris' dramatic personal journey to reconnect with family and community. He grew up in Santa Rosa and never knew his birth parents. Years later, he embarked on a search for his heritage, discovering the tragic circumstances of his 1952 birth but also finding a sense of home with the Native American people he befriended during his youth in Sonoma County.

"It's like a Moses story," Sarris said half-jokingly about how he, too, was set adrift as a baby, but found his way back to his people. And, like Moses, Sarris became his people's leader.

The 72-year-old Sarris lives on Sonoma Mountain, where Coyote decided to create the world, with a view towards the Pacific Ocean and territory that was once home to some 20,000 Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo people.

Sitting on his deck in the shade of bay laurels, Sarris explained that each story

MAP BY DAVE JOHNSON

in "The Forgetters" opens with descriptions of specific places in Sonoma and Marin counties and Indian villages and other landmarks wiped out by European and American colonization or 20th-century development.

"An outcropping of rocks or a grove of trees, a creek or a small pond or lake, they all had stories associated with them," he said. "We knew ourselves and how we were home from our stories."

In "The Forgetters," a pair of crows, said to be Coyote's twin granddaughters, introduce each timeless story from their perch atop Gravity Hill. In one, a troubled man hopes an osprey will lead him to gold at the mouth of the Russian River. In another, a woman loses her lover but reconnects with her family as she performs fairy tale-like tasks in the Laguna de Santa Rosa wetlands near Sebastopol.

"A Man Learns to Smell Flowers" is set in the 1870s, after tribal populations have been decimated. The remaining Indians, "long separated from their ancient villages ... (are) at the mercy of American landowners for work and a place to live." The protagonist, Kaloopis — Coast Miwok for hummingbird — works for one of these landowners on that patch of land near Freestone, tending the garden next to their magnificent Victorian. Like Sarris, Kaloopis is a gifted storyteller, entertaining the children of one of the other Indian workers — one way he helps create a sense of community among this small band of displaced people.

But this community is fragile. Kaloopis' favored status at the farm breeds resentment, and suspicions grow over his origins. Maybe he's a "walepú," a shape-shifter who will put a curse on them. Kaloopis is eventually shunned, and the garden and surrounding land become "gray and lifeless."

Sarris said the story is about "the dangers of people speculating about things they don't know." Given Sarris' prominent position in his tribe, he has also been the target of speculation, including about his heritage. He said the "confusion" about his adoption and Native American identity grew heated when the tribe was seeking support to build its casino, which opened in 2013. One critic was a relative who denied the family was Native American.

As he talked, Sarris shared photos of his Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo relatives and referred to tribal genealogical records that show he's descended from Tom Smith, a Miwok medicine man who was born near Fort Ross in 1838 and fathered as many as 20 children, including Sarris' great-great grandmother.

"My blood family comprises a third of this tribe, for which I've served as the chairman for over 30 years," he said.

Sarris didn't know about these blood ties when he grew up, feeling alienated in the Santa Rosa home of his white adoptive parents. At around age 12, he found refuge with Mexican and Native American friends in the poorer parts of Santa Rosa and met two women who were traditional Native American healers and renowned basket weavers. One was Mabel McKay, who delighted him with her "old-time" Native stories about Coyote and creation.

"Because I didn't quite know where I belonged, I would always listen, especially to old people as they told their stories," Sarris said.

With their support, Sarris focused on school, attending Santa Rosa Junior College before transferring to UCLA as an English major. As McKay's stories continued to play in his head, he began writing them down and then launched an academic career that took him to UC Santa Cruz and professorships at UCLA and Loyola Marymount.

Even as his career flourished, Sarris felt adrift over his origins. He eventually learned that his birth mother was Bunny Hartman, a 16-year-old high school junior from Laguna Beach, whose father was a department store executive. Bunny's mother brought her daughter to Santa Rosa to give birth and relinquish her baby in a closed adoption. Tragically, Bunny died several days after Sarris' birth from a botched blood transfusion.

> "This is one of the many important lessons the stories teach: that since the beginning of time, all of life is one family."
>
> **Greg Sarris, in "The Forgetters"**

Sarris interviewed Bunny's brother and girlfriends and finally concluded that his birth father was Emilio Hilario, a former Laguna Beach High School football star and a professional boxer. Sarris never got the chance to meet Emilio, who died in 1983 at age 52, but Sarris was welcomed into the Hilario family. In a fantastical coincidence, Sarris learned that Emilio's mother came from a Native American family near Santa Rosa, so Sarris was potentially related to people who already felt like kin.

After Sarris reconnected with the Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo in Sonoma County, the tribal elders invited the then-UCLA professor to help unite the scattered families. In 2000, President Bill Clinton signed a bill restoring federal recognition to the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria and provided a way for the long-landless tribe to eventually have a reservation. Since then, the casino has opened, and the tribe's numbers have rebounded to more than 1,500.

In April, Sarris published "The Forgetters," whose tales remind us of what is lost when people are disconnected from the land or each other. "The stories connect with one another, just as the animals and plants and all other things on Sonoma Mountain do," Sarris writes. "This is one of the many important lessons the stories teach: that since the beginning of time, all of life is one family."

Sarris' latest book, "The Forgetters," explores the Native American experience in Sonoma and Marin counties.

WHAT TO TELL AND HOW

Memoirists wrestle with privacy issues

STORY BY MARTHA ROSS
ILLUSTRATION BY DONGO

East Bay writer Kirsten Mickelwait had to wait until her ex-husband was dead to feel comfortable writing "The Ghost Marriage," her memoir about surviving their catastrophic, 22-year marriage.

Writing a memoir can be grueling enough, as an author excavates painful memories and exposes secrets, character flaws or regrettable choices. It's another thing when those secrets belong to the other people involved in your story. Writing about other people goes with memoir territory, of course, but for authors, it can raise a host of concerns that range from relationship betrayal to potential lawsuits.

San Jose-reared Stephanie Foo, a former producer for the "This American Life" podcast, said one benefit of being painfully estranged from her parents is that she didn't have to fear their reactions when she wrote about their abuse and abandonment in "What My Bones Knew," her chronicle about learning to heal from complex PTSD.

But estrangement was the result for East Bay writer Julia Scheeres, who portrayed her parents' cruel form of Christian fundamentalism in her 2005 memoir, "Jesus Land." "I haven't spoken to them since it was published, and they refuse to read it," she said, adding that they cut her out of their will.

Those are extreme situations, of course. But it's a rare memoirist who hasn't grappled with how to depict family, friends, children or others they care about. It's a familiar issue for Brooke Warner, the publisher of She Writes Press and a long-time memoir-writing coach, who is writing a book that includes her relationship with her ex-wife, with whom she's raising a child.

"It's scary," Warner says. "You're just like, what am I going to put out there? What are they going to think is OK? What is their story versus your story?"

With the growing popularity of memoir as a genre of literature and popular entertainment, debates have followed about what writers can or should disclose about ex-partners, family or friends, especially when those individuals are not public figures and may not appreciate being mentioned in a best-seller. Some writers feel especially protective of children. Memoirists can change names and identifying details, as Tara Westover did in her best-selling memoir, "Educated." But people may

still come forward, Warner says, to say that scenes involving them are exaggerated, wrong or nothing like they remember. Westover's family went public with its rebuttal, when her mother, LaRee, published a memoir of her own, "Educating."

Cries about invading other people's privacy followed Prince Harry's "Spare," a ghost-written memoir that offered an insider's critique of his royal relatives. Harry was writing about very public people, but the New York Times review described his "punishing invasions," while CNN anchor Don Lemon reacted with visible discomfort over Harry's claim that Prince William pushed him to the floor during a fight about Meghan Markle.

"Everyone has a family," Lemon said. "I have arguments in my family. Am I going to put that out there for the whole world to see?

Of course, many acclaimed memoirs involve writers putting things "out there" and creating compelling narratives around people who have done them wrong. When it comes to turning a loved one into an antagonist, Marin County-based writer Anne Lamott offers this dictum: "You own everything that happened to you. ... If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better."

The idea that writers own their experiences is core to the memoir ethos. Memoirs are not autobiographies. They represent one person's subjective, "emotional truth" — about what they've lived through and "what they know" about others, Warner explains. Memoirs re-create scenes and dialogue, fill in memory gaps and interpret what happened.

"It's about telling a story that is full of your reactive elements, your emotional connection to the story you're telling," says journalist Terry Winckler, whose wife works for the Bay Area News Group. His 2023 memoir, "Tule Town," describes the unique people he met while working at a small-town newspaper after a fall from grace.

"I think you develop some sense about the stories that belong to others, but if their story happens to coincide with the story you're trying to tell, then I think it's fair game," he says. "But you need to be careful in how you use it, because you don't want to take advantage of somebody in a terrible position that maybe they don't deserve."

Journalist Meredith May, author of "The Honey Bus," said writers should have a "greater good" in mind if they are going to reveal the "ugliness" of other people. May's book recounts growing up in Carmel Valley in the 1970s with a loving beekeeper grandfather who provided emotional ballast after her troubled mother checked out mentally. In initial drafts, May poured out her complaints about her mother, who died in 2017, but realized another "monster mom" memoir probably wouldn't be interesting, so she shifted focus to her empowering relationship with her grandfather.

"There's a difference between telling your story and then taking pot shots," May said. "It has to be in the service to the story, and you have to make those judgment calls carefully, because you have all the power as a writer."

Top: Memoir author Kirsten Mickelwait in her home in Richmond. Mickelwait's memoir "The Ghost Marriage" explores her catastrophic marriage to a controlling man

ARIC CRABB/STAFF

Above: Author Terry Winckler, from Alameda, on a trip to Death Valley. Winckler wrote a memoir titled "Tule Town, A memoir of hell raising redemption."

PHOTO BY CHRIS FRECK

"Funny in Farsi" author Firoozeh Dumas took the same approach when writing her new short nonfiction piece, "Sob," about her devastating 2022 divorce. The Palo Alto author tried not to focus on her estranged husband's "vitriol," she says, and more on describing the shock and grief she lived through after suddenly finding herself alone after more than 30 years of marriage.

"Nobody wants to read you ranting for a whole book, and you don't really want to hurt someone you've had a profound relationship with," she says. "What it comes down to is that I feel like it's a real privilege to have this platform as a writer, so I'm very mindful about what I put there. I try to put my highest self in my words."

Indeed, fans of the genre say the best memoirs don't voyeuristically dwell on personal pain and trauma. They offer one person's real-life insight into the complexities of a universal human experience. Mickelwait's book, for example, is a page-turner for anyone who has discovered that their great love isn't the person they thought or who decides to forgive their tormenter as a way to move on in life.

Meanwhile, Scheeres' book continues to win praise for telling a story about resilience in the face of harsh parenting and for describing her deep bond with her adopted brother, David, who was the target of beatings by their father and faced racism in their rural Indiana community. Scheeres also is proud that her book helped lead to the closure of Escuela Caribe, a notorious, prisonlike Christian reform school in the Dominican Republic where she and her brother were sent to break their "rebellious teenage spirit."

When teaching memoir writing, Warner urges students to just write their first drafts without worrying about others' reactions or "getting things right." Other writers agree, saying that first drafts almost never get published and subsequent drafts allow them to refine their portraits of others, change names or purge them entirely.

But writers still describe their concern about getting things "as factually accurate" as possible, especially when writing about other people, Winckler said. Writer James Frey provides an infamous example of why writers should consult the public record before describing someone's involvement in crime or controversy, Scheeres explains. Frey was shamed by Oprah Winfrey when he admitted to fabricating crucial parts of his addiction-and-recovery memoir, "A Million Little Pieces," including a lengthy jail stint that records show never happened.

In "What My Bones Know," Foo says that she had to "fact check" her abuse, in part because her trauma left her questioning the reliability of her memory. She knew she couldn't ask her parents, who long denied inflicting violence, but said she interviewed scientists and psychologists to better understand complex PTSD and returned to San Jose to interview former classmates, teachers and mental health experts to investigate the effects of trauma in Asian immigrant communities. When writing about an entire community, Foo "was really terrified about getting it wrong. ... That's why it was important to do my due diligence and to ground it all in my personal experiences."

But, as Foo found, there's no hard rule on seeking input from people one writes about. Depending on the situation, writers can derail their process if they share their work with loved ones who are prone to contradicting their memories. They also can put themselves in jeopardy, if they try to engage their abuser, Warner says. But in less fraught situations, writers can allay others' concerns by showing them portions of a final draft.

May found it helpful to interview people from her past, with friends remembering "wonderful" details that enriched scenes in her story. She also sought input from her father but was nervous about what he would think of her final draft. She wrote about him not being a regular presence during her childhood because he lived on the East Coast. But she said he was surprisingly OK with everything — except one detail. He told her he didn't have a particular cat at the time of one of her summer visits. But when May offered to take the cat out, he said, "No, leave it in. It's kind of funny."

Left: Meredith May, author of "The Honey Bus," a memoir about growing up in Carmel Valley, wears the overalls of her beekeeper grandfather while relaxing at Olivia & Daisy Books in Carmel Valley.

KARL MONDON/STAFF

Lessons from the Mah Jong

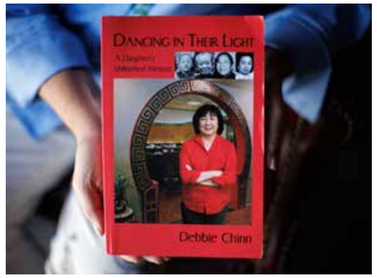
Daughter's restaurant memoir forms a moving tribute to the resilience and triumphs of her immigrant family

BY MARTHA ROSS

Debbie Chinn always knew she had material for an engaging memoir about her family's immigrant experience. The veteran Bay Area arts leader and executive director for TheatreWorks SiliconValley grew up working at the House of Mah Jong, her parent's popular Chinese restaurant on Long Island in the 1960s and '70s.

As Chinn recounts in "Dancing in Their Light: A Daughter's Unfinished Memoir," her first job was selling cigarettes from a glass case — when she was 3. Pretty soon, Chinn was helping the bartender prep garnishes for "Mad Men"-era cocktails and working with kitchen staff to prep snow peas and wrap seasoned ground pork into wontons. At age 6, she escorted diners to their tables, and as a teenager, she danced hula and even performed in a Samoan knife routine, after her entrepreneurial father introduced a Polynesian-themed floor show to keep up with the tiki bar trend.

Now, Chinn is adapting her 2022 memoir into a streaming series, and it's easy to imagine a director like Jon M. Chu, of "Crazy Rich Asians" fame, perhaps, finding rich source material for sweet cinematic moments of a young girl swept up in the hustle and bustle of restaurant life in a bygone era.



Author Debbie Chinn's memoir "Dancing in Their Light" recounts her experiences growing up as a "restaurant kid" in her family's Long Island eatery.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

Plenty of colorful characters dined at the restaurant: New York-area politicos, church officials and union leaders, as well as the occasional mobster and celebrities, including Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton stopping in for "refreshments" on their way to the Hamptons. Chinn's descriptions of the Cantonese dishes served at the restaurant also are worthy of food-movie treatment.

But Chinn says she had a larger purpose in writing her memoir and in hoping her story makes it to the small screen. Starting in 2017, she grew disturbed by the surge in anti-immigration and anti-Asian discourse in America. She was spat upon in downtown San Francisco during the pandemic and told to "go back where you came from."

She wants to illuminate the resilience of immigrants like her parents, who experienced "unimaginable horror and tragedy" before and during their journey to the United States.

"I wanted to talk about my family of immigrants who came to this country and who contributed so much to the United States," she said. "There was a time when we were not the enemy."

"Dancing in the Light" actually starts in China, where Chinn delves into her maternal lineage. Her great-great grandmother, Mary, was adopted by American Baptist missionaries as a young child, after her mother died during the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-1800s. Mary's descendants prospered in business, with Chinn's maternal grandparents, Frank and Kate Kwoh, settling in the coastal city of Qingdao in the 1930s to rear their eight children.

But their good life fell apart with the brutal Japanese invasion in 1937. The family was scattered, with some of Chinn's mother Nellie's siblings making their way to America. During her teen years, Nellie and her younger sisters endured near-starvation and the constant fear of rape, arrest or even worse by hiding out in a local Catholic school run by nuns. They kept up their morale by singing and telling each other stories, and hearing about that experience taught Chinn the power of art.

"All they had was what was in their hearts," Chinn said. "Art is healing. It takes you into another space, out of misery, of war and fear and into a psychological place that's safe."

Chinn's father was 15 when he came to the United States in 1930, entering the United States "at great risk," she said. At the time, the Chinese Exclusion Act was in full force, the result of backlash against immigrants accused of taking jobs from white workers. Peter Chinn eventually earned a degree in chemistry from New York University and an MBA from Harvard and became a proud U.S. citizen, volunteering for the Marines and assigned to intelligence in China following the Japanese surrender. That's where he met and married Nellie and helped her, her mother and sisters leave China before the Communist takeover.

Over the next decade, Peter and Nellie Chinn joined the ranks of upwardly mobile, postwar American couples. They started a family and made their way to Long Island, where Peter found an old potato barn in the rapidly growing suburb of Syosset, transforming it into the House of Mah Jong.

Peter and Nellie Chinn became one of the first Asian couples to buy a home in the area, wanting their children to attend its excellent schools. But Chinn admits she didn't enjoy the typical childhood, as she and her two siblings "lived" at the restaurant.

"I'd come in after school and sit at the bar," Chinn said. "Customers would ask, 'How was your day?' I'd ask back, 'How was your day? What do you do?' I learned the art of small talk and listening, essential skills which I have used when developing business and community relationships."

Chinn also witnessed the "deep sense of empathy and compassion" her parents brought to running their restaurant and managing employees. They inspired loyalty by sponsoring cooks from China and providing staff with good salaries, so they could send money back home. "They remember what it was like to be ostracized and left out or starving and being erased," Chinn said.

Chinn also emphasized the ways her parents gave back to their community, having food delivered to the local hospital and inviting customers to join in a Chinese New Year's celebration at the restaurant. With its red and gold decor and white tablecloths, the House of Mah Jong became a special-occasion restaurant for locals. Before Chinn even thought about writing a memoir, she learned about the imprint the restaurant left on Syosset's cultural memory. After she shared photos of the restaurant in Facebook groups focused on her hometown, scores of people jumped online to share memories about the dishes they ate, waiters they liked, birthdays they celebrated.

Chinn also heard from others who said she had a "universal story" to tell about immigrants and why hostility to them is counterproductive. "Immigrants really do wonderful things for this country," she said. "They always have."

Books and beyond

You can check out cool stuff to use as well as gems to read at many Bay Area libraries

STORY BY STEPHANIE LAM
ILLUSTRATION BY DAVIDE BARCO

Bay Area libraries draw book lovers, of course, who frequent those literary spaces to read and borrow novels, nonfiction volumes and picture books. But those halls hold so much more. They are bestowers of free lending programs, supplied with everything from Wi-Fi hotspots to vegetable seeds, hammers and hiking backpacks for library-card holding locals to use.

Whether you're looking for gear for a new hobby or pursuit or to expand upon an existing one, here are some possibilities, from tool libraries to seed collections, outdoor equipment, park passes and more.

TOOL LENDING

If Home Depot is your go-to spot for testing out home, carpentry or electrical equipment, then consider adding this library service to your toolbox.

Intended to reduce cost-related barriers associated with home improvement projects, tool lending libraries offer the community no- or low-cost access to tools and appliances. Some libraries, such as the Oakland Public Library, offer workshops on

George McCord, of Berkeley, borrows a weed wacker from the Tool Lending Library while being assisted by tool specialist Robert Young at the Tarea Hall Pittman South Branch Berkeley Public Library.

JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/STAFF

plumbing repairs 101 and power tool safety, too. And others, such as Fremont's Irvington Library, have "makerspaces" where guests can tinker and build.

"Tool lending libraries spark the public's imagination and push the boundaries of what public libraries can be for our communities," said Jill Tokutomi, supervising librarian for the south branch of the Berkeley Public Library.

Tool lending libraries like Berkeley's, which includes mechanical, power and cooking tools, have been around since the late 1970s.

"After 45 years, it still blows people's minds when they find out they can check out tools — both home repair and culinary tools — with their library card," Tokutomi said.

Where to go: You'll find tool collections at many Bay Area libraries, including the Santa Clara City Library, Oakland Public Library, Berkeley Public Library and Alameda County Library branches.

What's available: Everything from caulking guns and heat guns to thermal cameras, extension cords, drills, chain saws, sledge hammers, ladders, baking pans and more.

SEED LIBRARIES

Got a green thumb? There are drawers filled with free flower, fruit and vegetable seeds tucked away inside libraries in Moraga, Mountain View and beyond.

With more than 500 seed lending libraries worldwide, it's a popular way to get people excited about gardening. Local gardens can help combat climate change and preserve genetic diversity, according to librarians at the San Jose Public Library, which has stations at six branches.

In addition to distributing seeds, some libraries — in Clayton, for example, and Mountain View — welcome seed donations from personal or public gardens to help keep the collection growing. Those seeds will often do better than store-bought varieties, since locally harvested seeds have acclimated to the Bay Area's microclimates and soils, according to librarians at the Contra Costa County Library, where 16 branches boast seed lending collections.

Where to go: Check out seeds at the San Jose Public Library, Santa Clara City Library, Oakland Public Library, Hayward Public Library, Menlo Park Public Library, Mountain View Public Library, Palo Alto Public Library, Contra Costa County Library, San Mateo County Public Library and more.

What's available: Seeds for California native wildflowers, vegetables, fruit, heirloom varieties and hybrids

Various seeds are available at the Seed Library, above, at the Almaden branch of the San Jose Public Library, including yellow watermelon seeds, left.

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

LIBRARY OF THINGS

Browsing through a Library of Things collection is like shopping at an eclectic mall — except everything is free.

The term was popularized by a grassroots experiment that started in London in 2014 and was inspired by the concept of tool lending libraries. Over the last decade, these collections have sprung up in Palo Alto, for example, Berkeley and Brentwood.

Instead of appliances or tools, these libraries offer more unexpected items. At the Milpitas Library, which launched its Library of Things in November, card holders can borrow medical devices, karaoke gear, specialty cake pans, telescopes and sewing machines, among other things. Fremont resident Elizabeth Leong, for example, borrowed a blood pressure monitor, sous vide equipment and a hot pot and grill at that library this spring.

The Milpitas Library recently launched a new Library of Things program with home gadgets to borrow. Fremont resident Elizabeth Leong, for example, checked out a hotpot for a party this spring.

SHAE HAMMOND/STAFF

Where to go: Milpitas Library, Palo Alto Library, Berkeley Public Library and several Contra Costa County Library branches

Berkeley librarian Jill Tokutomi checks over the inventory at the Tool Lending Library at the Tarea Hall Pittman South Branch.

JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/STAFF

What's available: Sewing machines, Go Pros, Raspberry Pis, ukuleles, children's toys, storytime kits, bike locks, bocce kits, Wi-Fi hotspots, Chromebooks and more

HIKING KITS AND PARK PASSES

If the great outdoors is where you learn best, then the library's got you covered.

Several library districts, including San Mateo and Contra Costa County, offer California State Park day-use passes, which allow visitors to park for free at more than 200 participating parks — although the state funding for that was on shaky ground for 2024-25. The Santa Clara County Library offers free vehicle-entry passes for 28 regional parks, and locals can check the passes out for a three-week period.

"It's really to make sure folks who want to enjoy hiking and going outdoors can," said Santa Clara City librarian Rachel Hughes. "They don't have to worry about the money. It's not going to be a barrier to their access."

Like many other libraries in the Bay Area, Santa Clara City also offers hiking backpacks, which hold fun and practical items such as binoculars, bird and wildflower field guides, a compass, magnifying lenses and more. But the fuzzy bear-shaped food storage canister is unique to that library — and it's surprisingly popular, according to Hughes.

"You put all your scented stuff into it, and then bears can't open it," she said. "Sometimes, people can't open it, too."

Where to go: Santa Clara City Library, Santa Clara County Library District, San Jose Public Library, San Mateo County Library, Alameda County Library, Contra County Library and more.

What's available: Binoculars, field guides, hiking poles, magnifying glasses, compasses, backpacks and California state and regional parking passes

Author Ying Chang Compestine dips into her own harrowing experiences to show young readers the harsh realities of Mao's Cultural Revolution

BY MARTHA ROSS

Lafayette author Ying Chang Compestine understands that China's Cultural Revolution might not be an obvious topic for an illustrated children's book.

But Compestine isn't the first writer to use a children's book to introduce young readers to an important time in history or to help them understand a sensitive topic. And the prolific author has written about this dark time in China's history before. Her award-winning, 2007 young adult novel, "Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party," is a fictionalized account of a girl growing up during the Cultural Revolution.

What makes Compestine's new book, "Growing Up Under a Red Flag," especially compelling is that it's a personal account of what actually happened to her family during Mao Zedong's violent, 10-year "class struggle." Between 1966 and 1976, Compestine and her family faced starvation, fear and repression, and her beloved father, a surgeon, was imprisoned after being falsely accused as an American spy.

The book's illustrations, by acclaimed Shanghai-born artist Xinmei Liu, bring Compestine's story to life in vivid detail. Images of a little girl's happy family moments, before the launch of the Cultural Revolution, contrast with stark visuals of her family trying to survive, as their hometown of Wuhan is overrun with Mao propaganda and the violent youth militias known as Red Guards.

Compestine believes it's important to share this history with young audiences. Among many things, the Cultural Revolution demonstrated what happens when a society loses its humanity.

"When I was writing the book, I just kept thinking, is history going to repeat itself?" Compestine said, referring to the recent rise in authoritarianism here and abroad.

"I see what's happening in China, what's happening around the world right now, and I feel like it's very important to understand what it's like when you lose freedom, when you live under a dictatorship, and you have books being banned," Compestine said. "We have banned books now, and I wonder, how can that be? I mean, are we losing

Right: Ying Chang Compestine met young fans of her new book, "Growing Up under a Red Flag," at an event at Los Altos' Linden Tree Books in May.

SHAE HAMMOND/STAFF

Above: Illustrations by Xinmei Liu bring Compestine's book to life.

COURTESY OF PENGUIN YOUNG READERS

that (freedom) now?"

Compestine said she tried to present the terror of the Cultural Revolution in ways that are suitable for young readers, using language and images that are simple, straightforward and not too explicit. But the book could also read like a graphic novel for older readers, depicting a historical moment that she says is being "erased."

In the U.S., many young people of Chinese descent don't know much about the Cultural Revolution, perhaps because it's a deeply painful topic for their immigrant parents, she said. In China itself, the Communist Party under Xi Jinping has sought to tighten ideological control by cracking down on teachings that are critical of the government.

But Compestine hasn't erased that time from her memory. She was 3 when the Cultural Revolution started, and the book opens on a scene before things got bad. The illustrations depict a smiling little girl in a yellow, chrysanthemum-flower dress and evenings spent with her doting parents, her father teaching her English or reading classic Western fairy tales.

But soon, Western books are banned, and Mao's policies lead to food and power shortages. For a while, Compestine and her father continue her English lessons in secret. Outside their apartment, the Red Guards are seen singing revolutionary songs, dragging away anyone not wearing Mao uniforms and destroying anything considered Western or frivolous, including the flowers in their courtyard garden.

For the last half of the book, the young girl's yellow dress is replaced with a drab Mao uniform and a copy of the leader's "The Little Red Book." Her parents burn their books, letters and family photos, so they won't be arrested for bourgeois sympathies. And when a local Red Guard leader, who had taken up residence in her father's study, publicly denounces her father, Red Guards take him into custody.

Things get worse, as the family worries about her father's safety. Her mother, a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, is forced to work long hours, becoming quiet and sad. Young Compestine is tasked with going out every day to find whatever food is at the market.

Compestine manages to keep up her spirits by sneaking peeks at a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge, given to the family by an American friend, a doctor, and hidden behind a picture of Mao. When her father was being taken into custody, he whispered to her to always "remember the GGB."

It's no spoiler to say that Compestine and her family survived the Cultural Revolution. Just before she turned 23, she came to the U.S. for graduate school in sociology and to teach. She married a software engineer, started a family and settled in the Bay Area.

Compestine eventually focused on writing books — YA novels , picture books and cookbooks inspired by Chinese culture and food, a passion spurred by being hungry for much of her childhood. The beautiful garden at her Lafayette home, she said, is a response to the ugliness her family endured more than 50 years ago. With "Growing Up Under a Red Flag," she hopes that other people won't forget that time, either.

"I believe these events must be taught and remembered," she said, "so the younger generation can understand the dangers of extremism and fight for freedom."

Ying Chang Compestine read from her new book "Growing Up Under a Red Flag: A Memoir of Surviving the Chinese Cultural Revolution" during an event at Linden Tree Books this spring.

SHAE HAMMOND/ STAFF

DAI SUGANO/STAFF

Whether you're looking for outdoorsy weekend fun, day trip adventures or the latest restaurant news, these free newsletters offer plenty of inspiration.

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