





22 of the Funniest Novels Since 'Catch-22'

Because we could all use a laugh.

By Dwight Garner, Alexandra Jacobs and Jennifer Szalai Illustrations by Cari Vander Yacht

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When it comes to fiction, humor is serious business. If tragedy appeals to the emotions, wit appeals to the mind. “You have to know where the funny is,” the writer Sheila Heti says, “and if you know where the funny is, you know everything.” Humor is a bulwark against complacency and conformity, mediocrity and predictability.

With all this in mind, we’ve put together a list of 22 of the funniest novels written in English since Joseph Heller’s “Catch-22” (1961). That book presented a voice that was fresh, liberated, angry and also funny — about something American novels hadn’t been funny about before: war. Set during World War II and featuring Capt. John Yossarian, a B-25 bombardier, the novel presaged, in its black humor, its outraged intelligence, its blend of tragedy and farce, and its awareness of the corrupt values that got us into Vietnam, not just Bob Dylan but the counterculture writ large.

Heller gave writers permission to be irreverent about the most serious stuff — the stuff of life and death. The Czech novelist Milan Kundera, who went into exile in France after satirizing his country’s Communist regime, told Philip Roth: “I could always recognize a person who was not a Stalinist, a person whom I needn’t fear, by the way he smiled. A sense of humor was a trustworthy sign of recognition. Ever since, I have been terrified by a world that is losing its sense of humor.”

It's in the spirit of warding off that dire scenario that we offer this list: a resolutely idiosyncratic assemblage of novels — 22 in all, get it? — culled from the past six decades by three very different Times book critics.

Here, you will not find books stuffed with jokes. For the most part, our picks will not induce knee slapping. (“Any man who will not resist a pun will not lie up-pun me,” the great Eve Babitz wrote.) The humor these authors embrace traverses the gamut, from sardonic to screwball, mordant to madcap, droll to deranged. Writing in Heller’s shadow, but in an idiom all their own, these novelists apply his satirical tool kit — along with their own screwdrivers and shivs — to whole other categories of human experience, from race and gender to dating, aging, office cubicles and book publishing itself. The critic Albert Murray understood that wit is power, and that knowing where the funny is takes us closer to the nub of things. Best of all, it’s available to anyone. As Murray wrote, “It is always open season on the truth.”

SCATHING SATIRE

'The Wig,' by Charles Wright (1966)

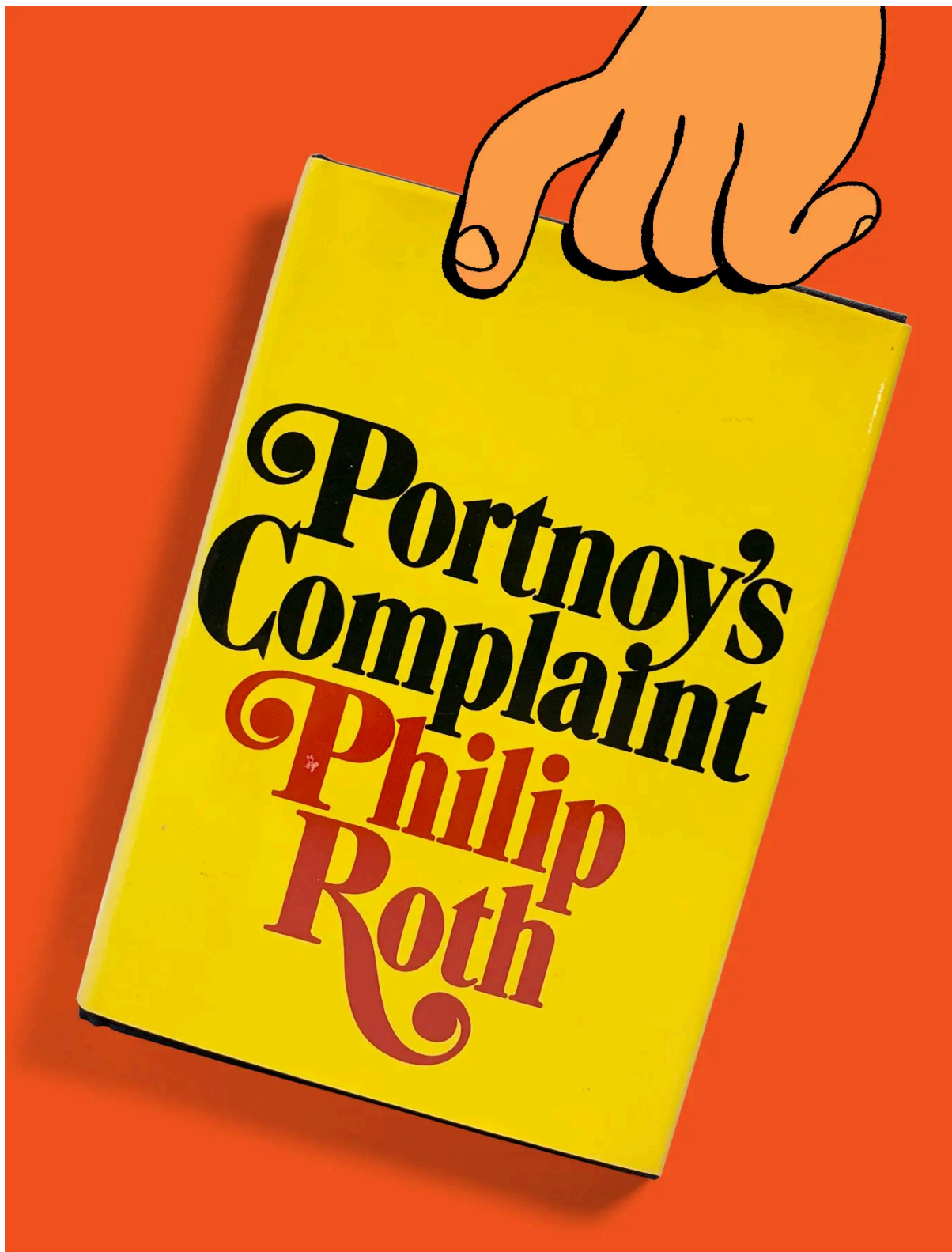


Charles Wright is not a name on many people's radar. Indeed, he is often confused with the Tennessee-born poet of the same name. But his potent novels deserve a resurgence. Wright wrote three between 1963 and 1973: "The Messenger," "The Wig" and "Absolutely Nothing to Get Excited About." Each is about a young and sensitive Black veteran of the Korean War who may or may not wish to become a writer and is trying to find a foothold in New York City. All are worth reading, but the prize is "The Wig." Wright's hero senses he needs a gimmick to succeed in the white world, and he decides, with the help of a jar of hair relaxer, to create a luminous mane that comes to be known as "the wig." His hair is so resplendent, and later so vividly red, that he wonders: "Would Time magazine review this phenomenon under Medicine, Milestones, The Nation, Art, Show Business or U.S. Business?" The hair takes his narrator only so far. But Wright's analysis of racial politics in America is an electric pleasure. —DG

READ IF YOU LIKE: Chris Rock's documentary "Good Hair," struggling writers, Bob Kaufman's poetry, the films of Charles Burnett, restaurant mascots, Eddie Murphy's "S.N.L." skit "White Like Me."

TALKY AND PARANOID

'Portnoy's Complaint,' by Philip Roth (1969)

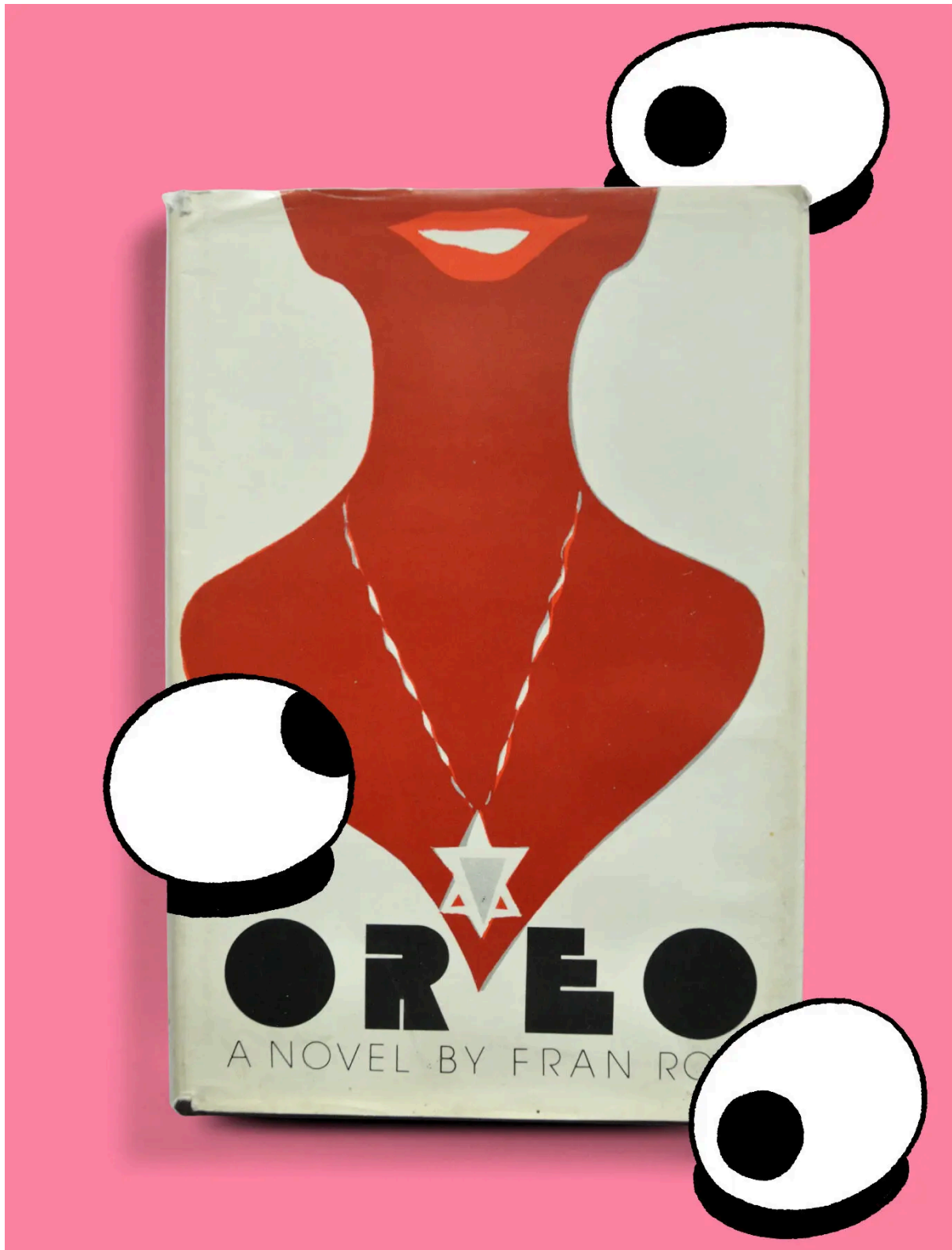


Upon its publication in 1969, Roth's novel caused 100,000 Jewish mothers to plotz. The book is one long, vivid monologue from a lust-ridden young New Jersey man named Alexander Portnoy, as delivered to his psychoanalyst, Dr. Spielvogel. Alexander has mother issues. Mrs. Portnoy worries about everything, including the health of his two primary orifices. ("Alex, I don't want you to flush the toilet," she cries. "I want to see what you've done in there.") This novel made headlines for its graphic scenes of self-pleasuring; Alexander makes use of a cored-out apple, an empty milk bottle and (infamously) a piece of liver bound for his family's dinner table. Beneath the antic comedy is a sophisticated coming-of-age novel that digs deeply not only into sex but into issues of assimilation and social class. It was the firecracker that augured a great career, and it still delivers a bang. —DG

READ IF YOU LIKE: "Shiva Baby," Lil Dicky, psychotherapy, "Curb Your Enthusiasm," the fiction of Joshua Cohen, liver cutlets, mom tattoos.

EARTHY AND EXASPERATED

‘Oreo,’ by Fran Ross (1974)

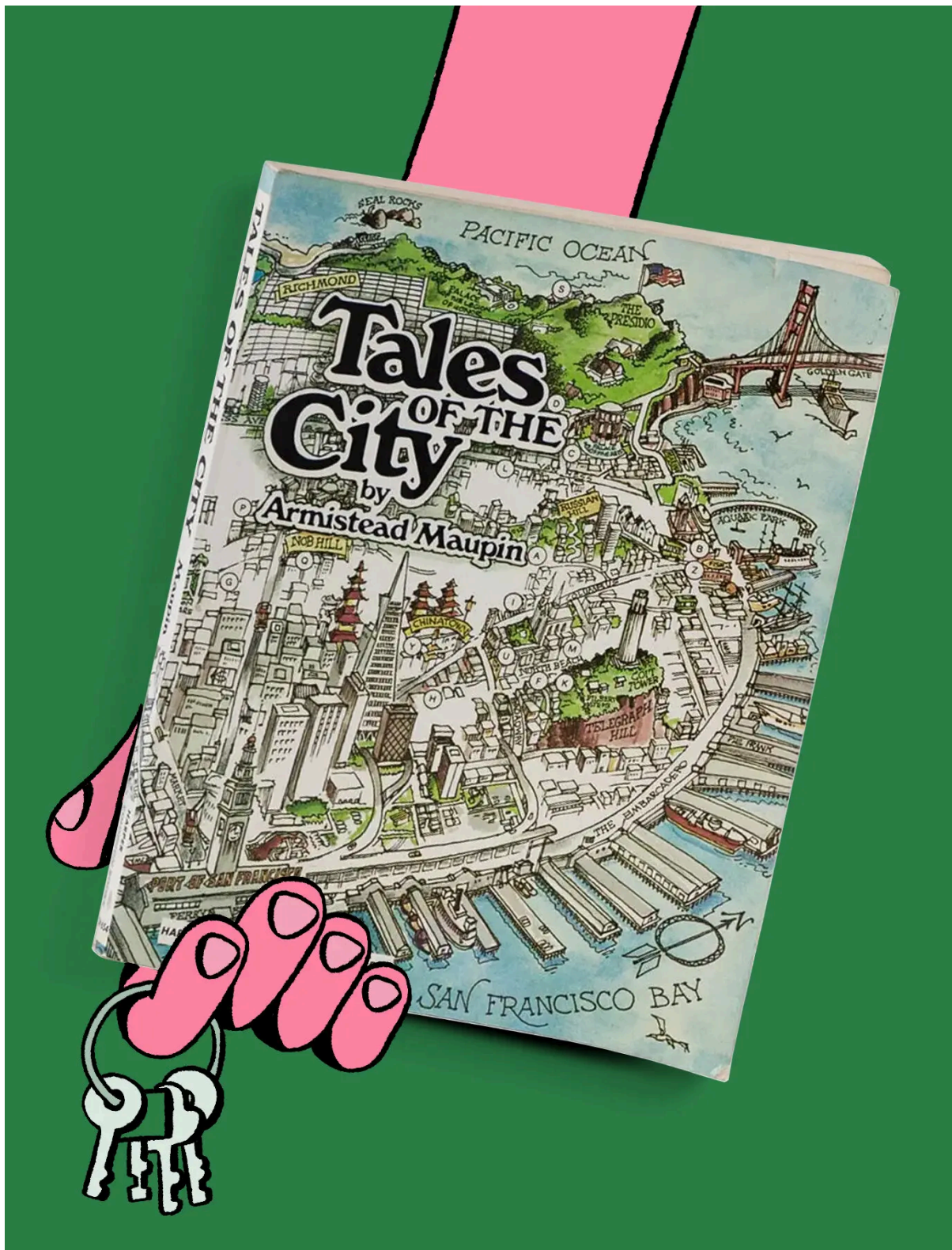


Ross's "Oreo," her first and only novel, was published in 1974 and sank with barely a trace. Frustrated, Ross abandoned fiction to write for Richard Pryor. It's time for the culture to catch up to "Oreo." It's about a young woman, half-Black, half-Jewish, on a quest to find her absent father, and the sexy humor flies freely from the first pages. Ross delights in language, mixing Yiddish with Black vernacular and turning words like "friedan" (as in Betty) and "kuklux" into verbs. In an introduction to a 2015 reissue, the novelist Danzy Senna got at why this book continues to resonate: "'Oreo' resists the unwritten conventions that still exist for novels written by Black women today. There's nothing redemptively uplifting about her work. The title doesn't refer to the Bible or the blues. The work does not refer to slavery. The character is never violated, sexually or otherwise." Ross's book is also among the great, joyful American food novels. One woman cooks so well that people are driven, quite literally, out of their minds. —DG

READ IF YOU LIKE: Pam Grier movies, Zabar's, Edna Lewis's cookbooks, Richard Pryor.

HUMANE AND BITTERSWEET

'Tales of the City,' by Armistead Maupin (1978)



Maupin's series of novels about San Francisco life begins in 1978 with "Tales of the City." You can dip into these warm, accessible, heavily peopled and sweet-and-sour novels almost anywhere, but for the purposes of this list we're going to stick with the first three, which have been collected under the title "28 Barbary Lane." The address is that of a large house, presided over by a pot-growing, free-spirited landlady, and occupied by diverse residents, gay, straight and otherwise. Has any other American writer loved his city so much and so well? San Francisco, under Maupin's gaze, becomes the setting for an elaborate comedy of manners, and the early novels were among the first mainstream works to put queer and straight characters on equal footing. Maupin's men and women came here to find themselves, and to find others like them. That they so often succeed makes these novels glow in your hands. "This city," one character says, "loosens people up." Maupin's novels are shaggy in spirit but shrewd in their observations. His prose brightens existence, and clarifies the things that matter. —DG

READ IF YOU LIKE: Sourdough bread, reruns of "Friends" and "Will & Grace," David Sedaris, the documentary "The Times of Harvey Milk."

DAMP, TENDER, WEIRD

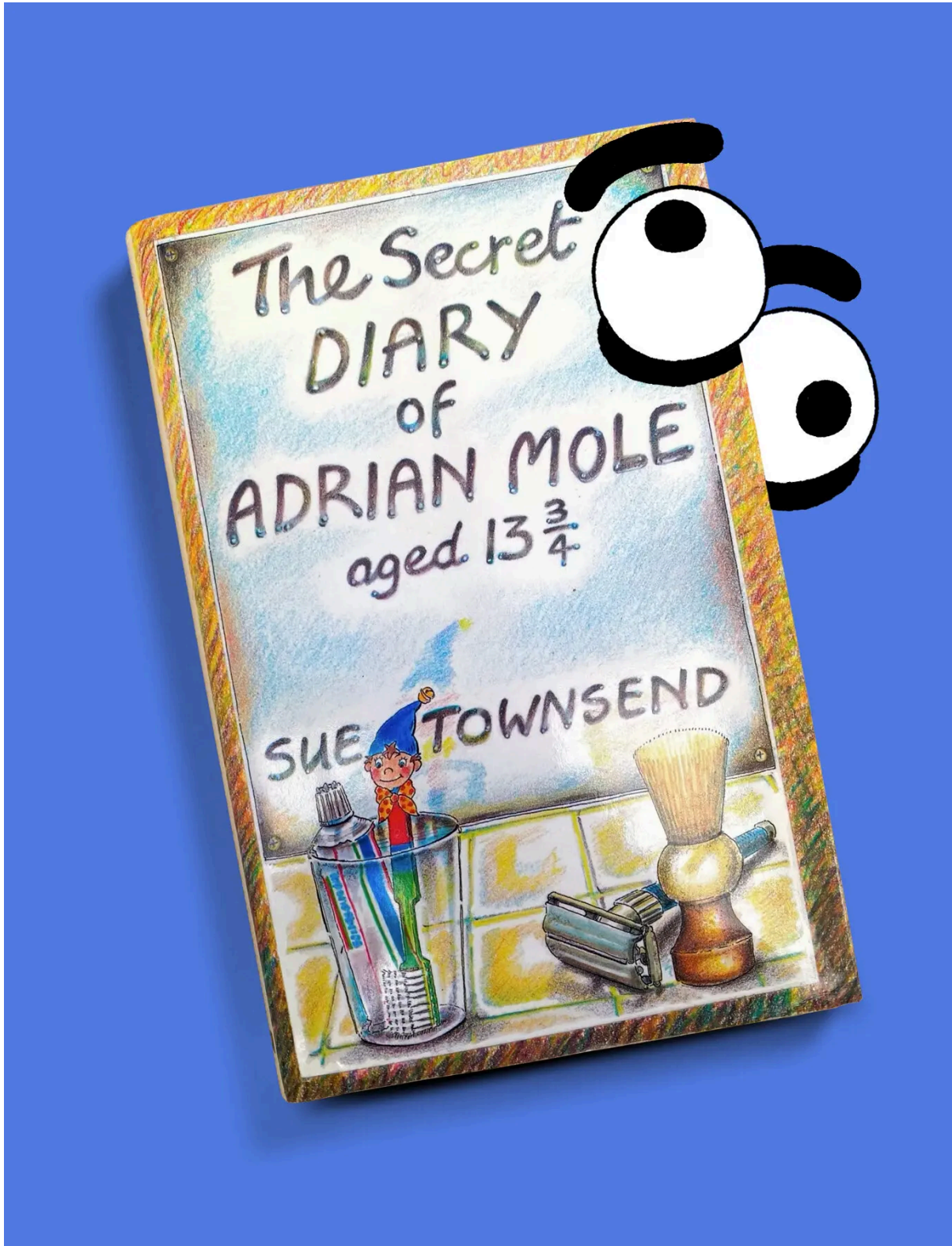
'Mrs. Caliban,' by Rachel Ingalls (1982)

Dorothy, a lonely housewife, falls in love with Larry, a giant sea creature who is open-minded and curious, eager to learn what he can about her and her world. Unlike Dorothy's inattentive, philandering husband, Larry can tell she's a marvel. Watching her closely as she clears up after breakfast, he asks if the "dress" she's wearing — a nightgown and a bathrobe — is "a garment of celebration." The premise might be over the top, but the comedy is gentle: a (literal!) fish-out-of-water tale tempered by suburban sadness. Before meeting Larry, Dorothy lost a son; she also had a miscarriage. She imagines having a baby with her merman beau. A half-monster? Maybe. But also: "Born on American soil to an American mother — such a child could become president." —JS

READ IF YOU LIKE: The novels of Richard Yates, Daryl Hannah in "Splash," herpetology, Guillermo del Toro's film "The Shape of Water."

CHEERY AND LADEN WITH DOUBLE ENTENDRE

‘The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾,’ by Sue Townsend
(1982)



You can write from the point of view of an adolescent boy very earnestly and sincerely, as Judy Blume does in “Then Again, Maybe I Won’t” — or you can hover over the young fella with a wink, as Townsend does in this book that started a national franchise (with Mole eventually aging to “the prostrate years” of 39¼). Adrian is an only child in Thatcher-era England with working-class parents who are not getting along: His father drinks; his mother is discovering feminism. He has pimples, wet dreams, a paper route, an elderly friend and a huge crush on a classmate named Pandora. Convinced he is an intellectual, with an impressive reading list, he submits poems to the BBC. He maybe uses the word “dead” a wee bit much, but his naïve observations of complicated adult affairs in brief journal entries are pure life. —AJ

READ IF YOU LIKE: Mike Leigh movies, “Diary of a Wimpy Kid,” “Fawlty Towers.”

OBSERVATIONAL, RAT-A-TAT, SECOND-WAVE FEMINIST

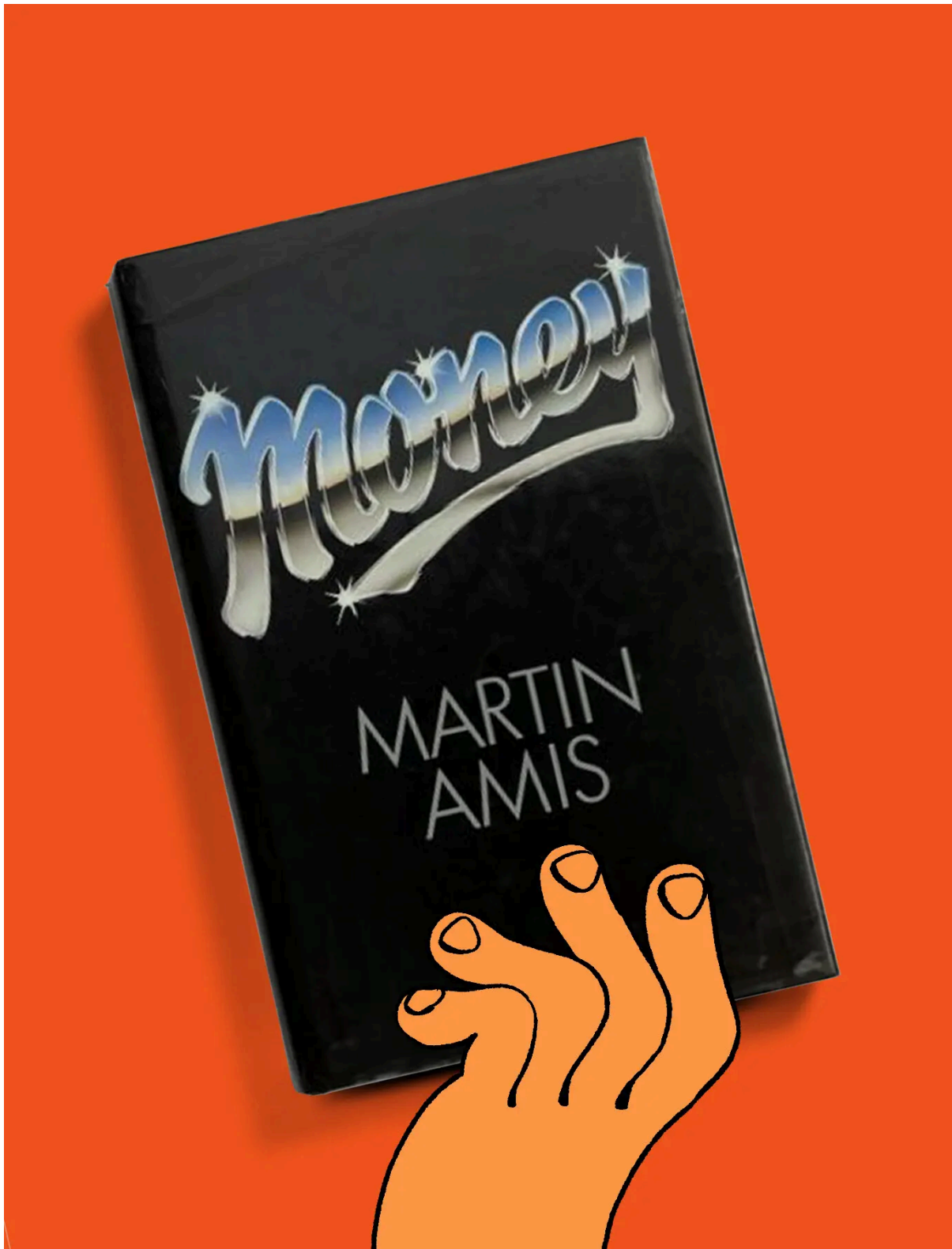
‘Heartburn,’ by Nora Ephron (1983)

Lemonade. You won’t find a recipe for it in Ephron’s novel (though there are excellent ones for sorrel soup and Lillian Hellman’s pot roast), but it’s what she made of her lemon of a marriage to the Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein with this short but perfectly tart roman à clef that set tongues flapping and booksellers’ cash registers a-chinging. Ephron had been a successful journalist herself; her only novel — at under 200 pages, really more of a novella — was a sort of palate cleanser before she made her name in Hollywood. And she brought her full show-business instincts to the character of Rachel Samstat (was that a play on *samizdat*?): a pregnant cookbook writer who attends group therapy, shops at Bloomingdale’s and flies the Eastern shuttle (R.I.P.). With the rat-a-tat pace of 1940s screwball comedies and one-liners flying like fake fur, “Heartburn” is the quintessence of getting the last laugh. —AJ

READ IF YOU LIKE: Shiv and Tom’s marriage in “Succession,” Stanley Tucci’s memoir “Taste,” Laurie Colwin.

DAZZLING AND CRUEL

‘Money: A Suicide Note,’ by Martin Amis (1984)

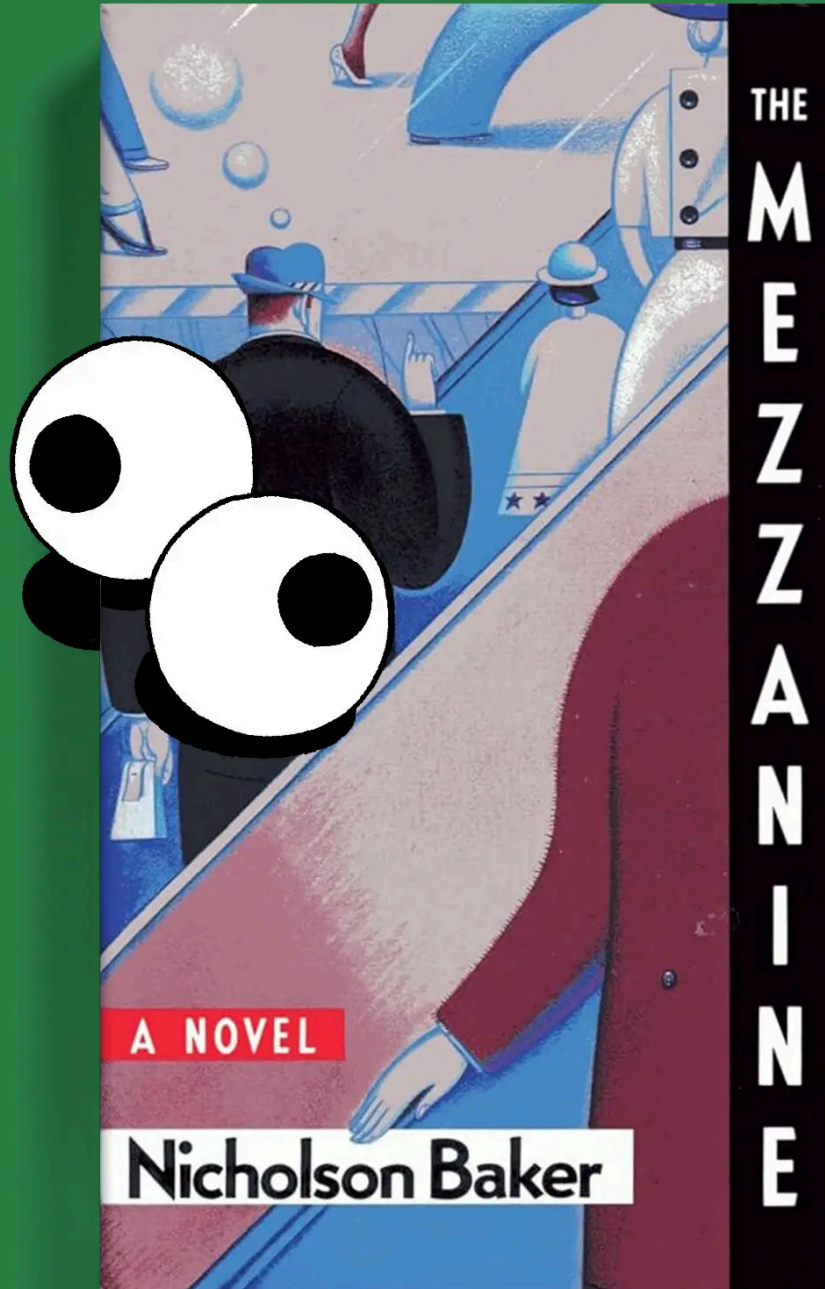


“Money” represents Amis, son of funny dad Kingsley, at the peak of his early Mick Jaggery powers, drawing from his experience working on the screenplay for the Stanley Donen sci-fi bomb “Saturn 3.” The novel — “novels ... they’re all long, aren’t they. I mean they’re all so *long*” is one of many arch lines — burrows into the debauched transcontinental life of one John Self, an ad man with base appetites and offensive thoughts who drives a Fiasco sports car and is making his first feature film, or so he thinks. Supporting characters include Lorne Guyland (get it?), an actor based on Kirk Douglas; Selina Street, Self’s unfaithful girlfriend; New York City in all its rich filth ... and Martin Amis. “Some people will do anything to get their names in print,” the narrator notes dryly. As a messy, bitter, split-open capsule of ’80s celebrity and consumption, “Money” is priceless. —AJ

READ IF YOU LIKE: “Othello,” Dudley Moore in “Arthur,” the Patrick Melrose novels, authorial intrusion.

CEREBRAL, DISCURSIVE

‘The Mezzanine,’ by Nicholson Baker (1988)



Baker is our master of the minute. The stream of consciousness in “The Mezzanine,” his first novel, is really more of a rivulet: the thoughts of an ordinary young man named Howie during a lunch hour spent contemplating the crazy variety of shampoo at a CVS (with once-glorious brands like Prell and Alberto V05 “now in sorry vassalage on the bottom shelf of Aisle 1B”); buying new shoelaces; eating lunch that includes popcorn and a carton of milk; sitting in the sun reading Aurelius’ “Meditations”; and taking a short escalator ride back to work. Digressive, deeply footnoted, listy and lyrical, this novel is a perfect postcard from a time before smartphones hijacked the imagination and “15-year cycles of journalistic excitement about one issue or another” shrank to maybe 15 months, if not minutes. It’s proof, in just under 150 pages, that the funniest things in life — peculiar *and* ha-ha — are those we wouldn’t dare say out loud. —AJ

READ IF YOU LIKE: “Seinfeld,” Target runs, Maurice Ravel, paper drinking straws, scene-stealing footnotes, Samuel Beckett.

RUTHLESS, ECONOMICAL, DEEPLY MORAL

'A Far Cry From Kensington,' by Muriel Spark (1988)



Leave it to Spark to keep a profusion of plots delightfully contained with her spare, wry style. Told from the point of view of one Mrs. Hawkins, who spends her sleepless nights looking back on her life as a young war widow and book editor in 1950s London, this slip of a novel includes, among other things, anonymous threats, a fraudulent book publisher, the pseudoscience of radionics, the metaphysics of evil, a love story and an endorsement of cats. Mrs. Hawkins is brisk, smart and plain-spoken; she gets herself into a load of trouble when she insists that a well-connected hack writer named Hector Bartlett is, as she (repeatedly and unapologetically) puts it, a “*pisseur de copie*.” The epithet is this book’s reliable refrain, always good for a laugh, but Spark’s sly wit is what shimmers throughout. —JS

READ IF YOU LIKE: Mysteries, nimble adverbs, Barbara Pym, unreliable women, extreme candor.

POKER-FACED OVERKILL

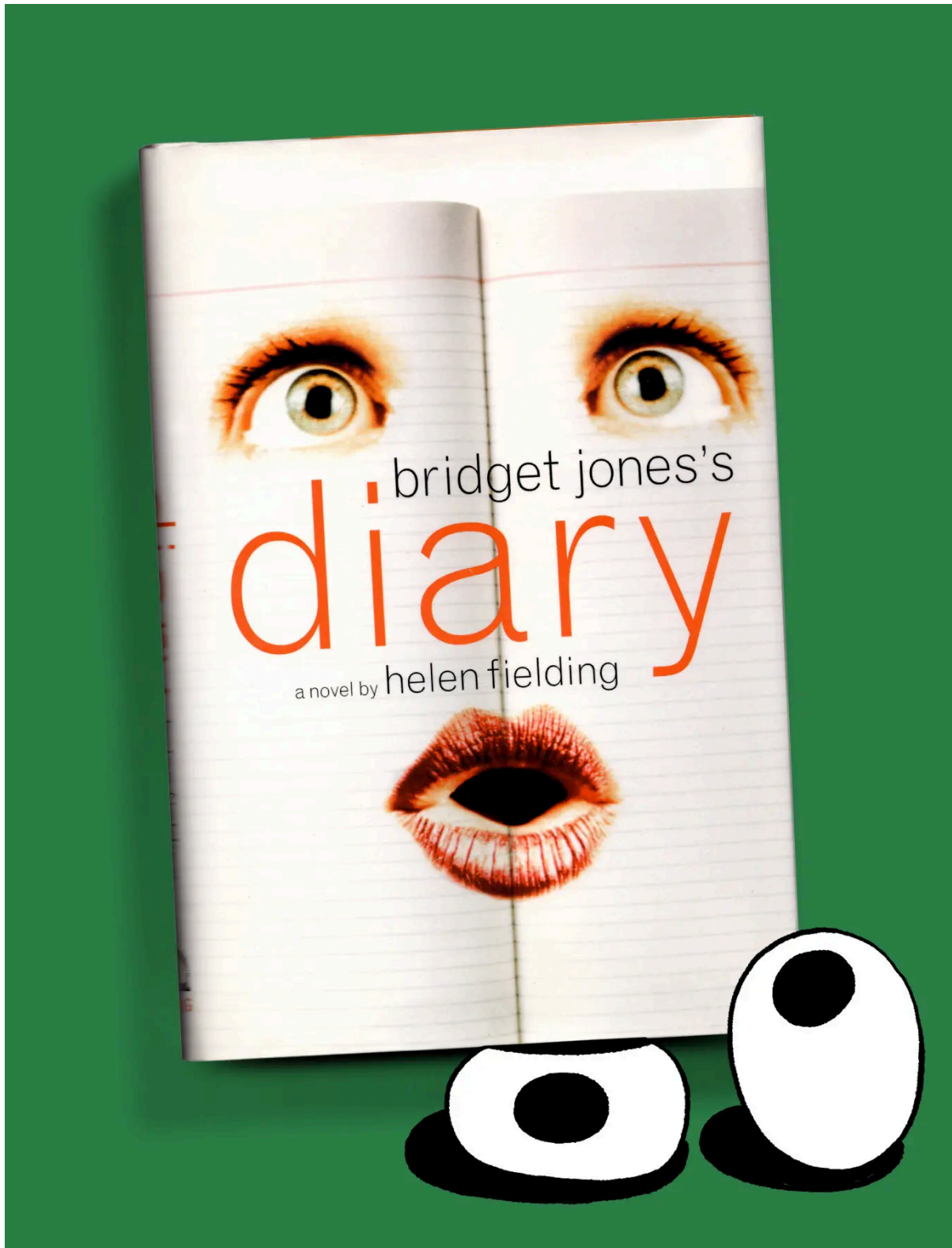
‘American Psycho,’ by Bret Easton Ellis (1991)

“American Psycho,” Ellis’s novel about Patrick Bateman, a young Wall Street serial killer with an education from Exeter and Harvard, set off a moral panic when it was published in 1991. Feminist groups proposed boycotts; Ellis received death threats; his book tour was scuttled; a review in this newspaper was titled “Snuff This Book!” But over time — thanks in no small part to the director Mary Harron’s 2000 film adaptation — the deadpan humor and acid satire in Ellis’s novel became more apparent. Bateman, an ardent fan of Donald J. Trump, is a brazen sendup of a blank and soulless Wall Street generation. The skewering of New York City’s restaurant scene in the 1980s (eagle carpaccio, anyone?) is just one of this novel’s dark and uncommon delights. Like Tony Soprano and Walter White from “Breaking Bad,” Bateman has become a grinning all-American antihero. Who in recent literary fiction has created a more indelible villain? His blood-flecked smile contains American multitudes. —DG

READ IF YOU LIKE: “Bodies Bodies Bodies,” mud soup and charcoal arugula, “A Clockwork Orange,” very nice business cards, Huey Lewis and the News, “Stan” by Eminem, tarps.

CHEEKY, SELF-DEPRECATING, SLAPSTICK

'Bridget Jones's Diary,' by Helen Fielding (1996)

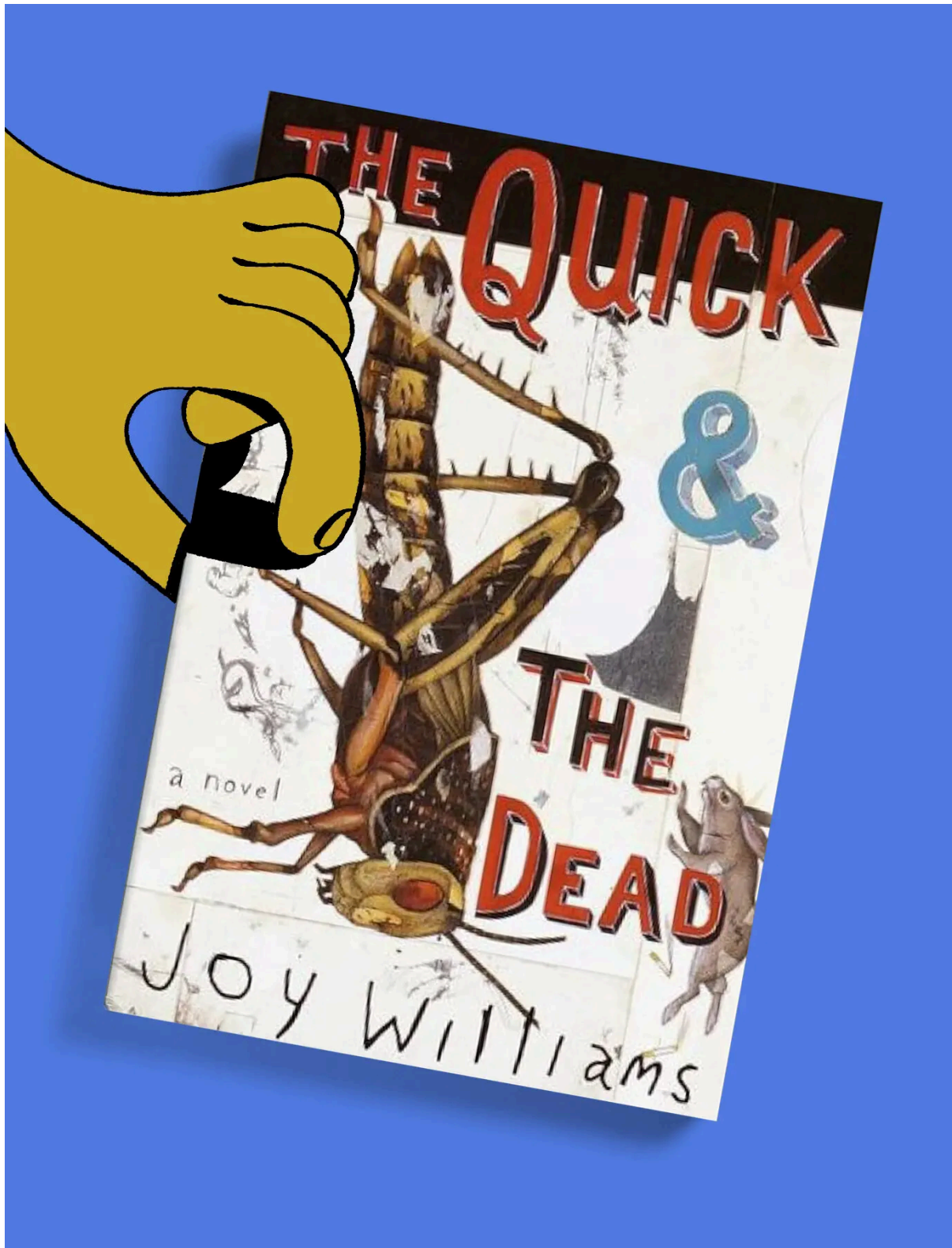


Fielding's what-the-hell sophomore novel — few remember her first, “Cause Celeb” — is a fizz-making time capsule of office flirtation before #MeToo (where else were pre-apps working people supposed to meet people?); weight anxiety before Ozempic (feminism hasn't conquered that either); and Cool Britannia overtaking a long reign of conservatism. And lest anyone dismiss the book as repackaged fish wrap (it started as a column in *The Independent* newspaper) or worse (shudder, “chick lit”), let me remind you that its classic love plot is adroitly borrowed from Jane Austen's “*Pride and Prejudice*,” with a male hero named Darcy, other characters resembling Mr. Wickham and Mrs. Bennet, and keen observation of English manners and mores. Intertextuality, baby. Fielding gets the inner dialogue of a 30-something female Londoner raised on women's magazines, potato crisps and telly exactly right. Reveling in life's pleasures and acknowledging its anxieties, replete with relatable humiliations, this novel was the original bullet journal — one that actually exploded onto the best-seller list. With good reason. —AJ

READ IF YOU LIKE: “Fleabag,” “I Hate Suzie,” chocolate, mini-breaks.

ODDBALL AND MORDANT

'The Quick and the Dead,' by Joy Williams (2000)

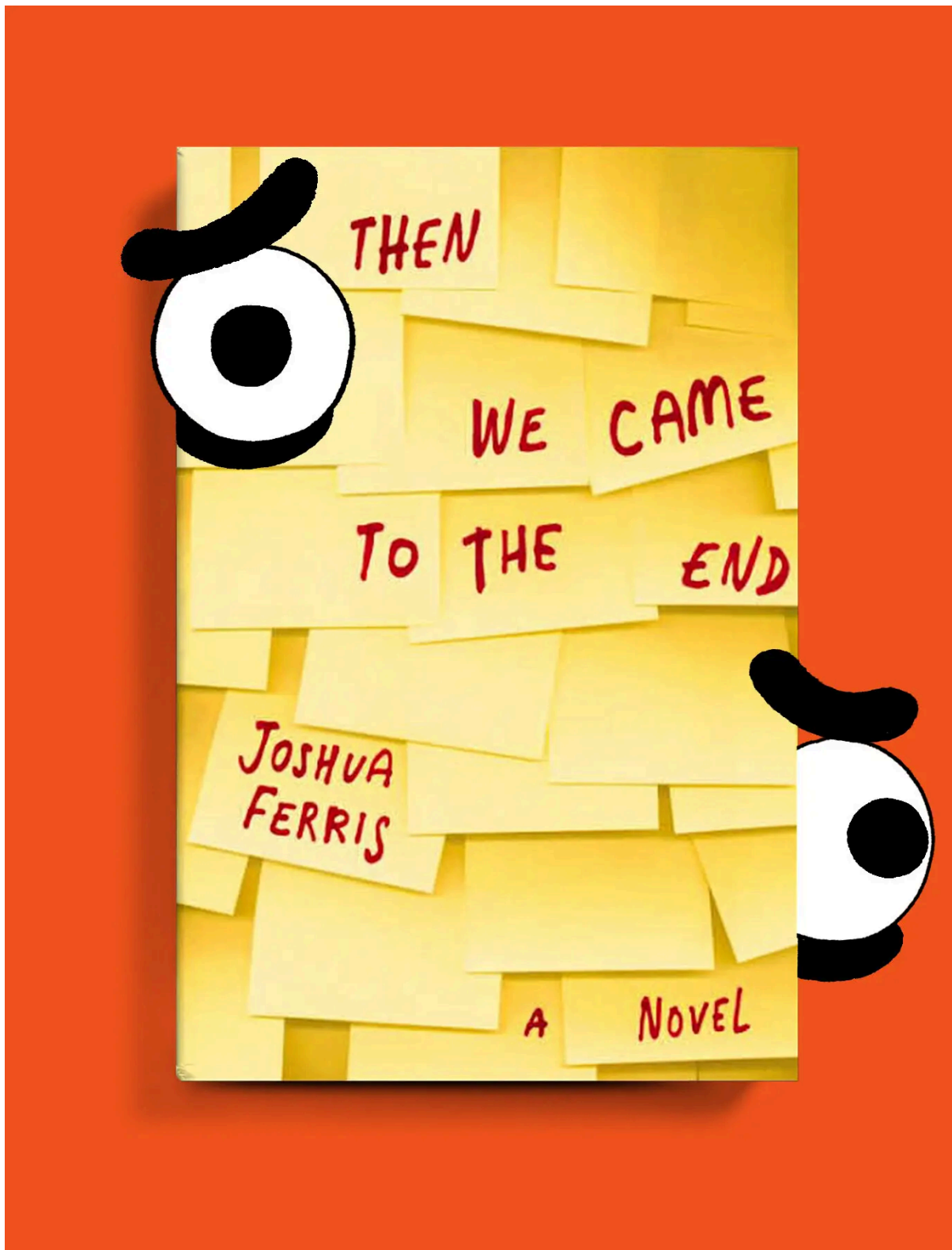


“All God’s critters got a place in the choir,” to quote the Bill Staines folk song, of which this thunderous novel, set in the desert Southwest, is like a minor-key version. There is taxidermy galore; a grim nursing home where ground greyhound meat might be on the menu; a trio of motherless teenage girls — one of whom really, really dislikes cats; cactuses that take bullets. Mortality, in its messiness and surprise, splatters almost every page. A dead wife’s ghost rears up to taunt her widower for lusting after his male gardener, and nobody says boo. Indignant about ecological injustice, unblinking toward ravages to the American West and quite violent, this book will make you cry until you laugh. —AJ

READ IF YOU LIKE: Noël Coward’s “Blithe Spirit,” “Eating Animals” by Jonathan Safran Foer, “Blazing Saddles,” Sam Shepard.

DARK, DEADPAN

‘Then We Came to the End,’ by Joshua Ferris (2007)



At least before the pandemic, many people spent more time at work than with their families. Like the television series “The Office,” whose American version came out around the same time as Ferris’s novel, “Then We Came to the End” explores the idea that one’s colleagues form — certainly not a family, everyone knows not to buy that idea! — some kind of misshapen collective, with interesting dynamics. The book, which takes its title from the first line of Don DeLillo’s first novel, “Americana,” and relies inventively on the first-person plural, is set at an ad agency in Chicago during the dot-com bust. The specter of layoffs looms over the employees, who are anxiously competing to succeed at an impossible-seeming pro bono campaign: making people with breast cancer laugh. From Aeron chairs to emails, free food and tedious meetings, Ferris invokes the most mundane accouterments of white-collar culture for satire so dry it crackles. —AJ

READ IF YOU LIKE: “Office Space,” “Severance,” quiet-quitting TikToks, “Bartleby the Scrivener.”

WORDY AND NERDY

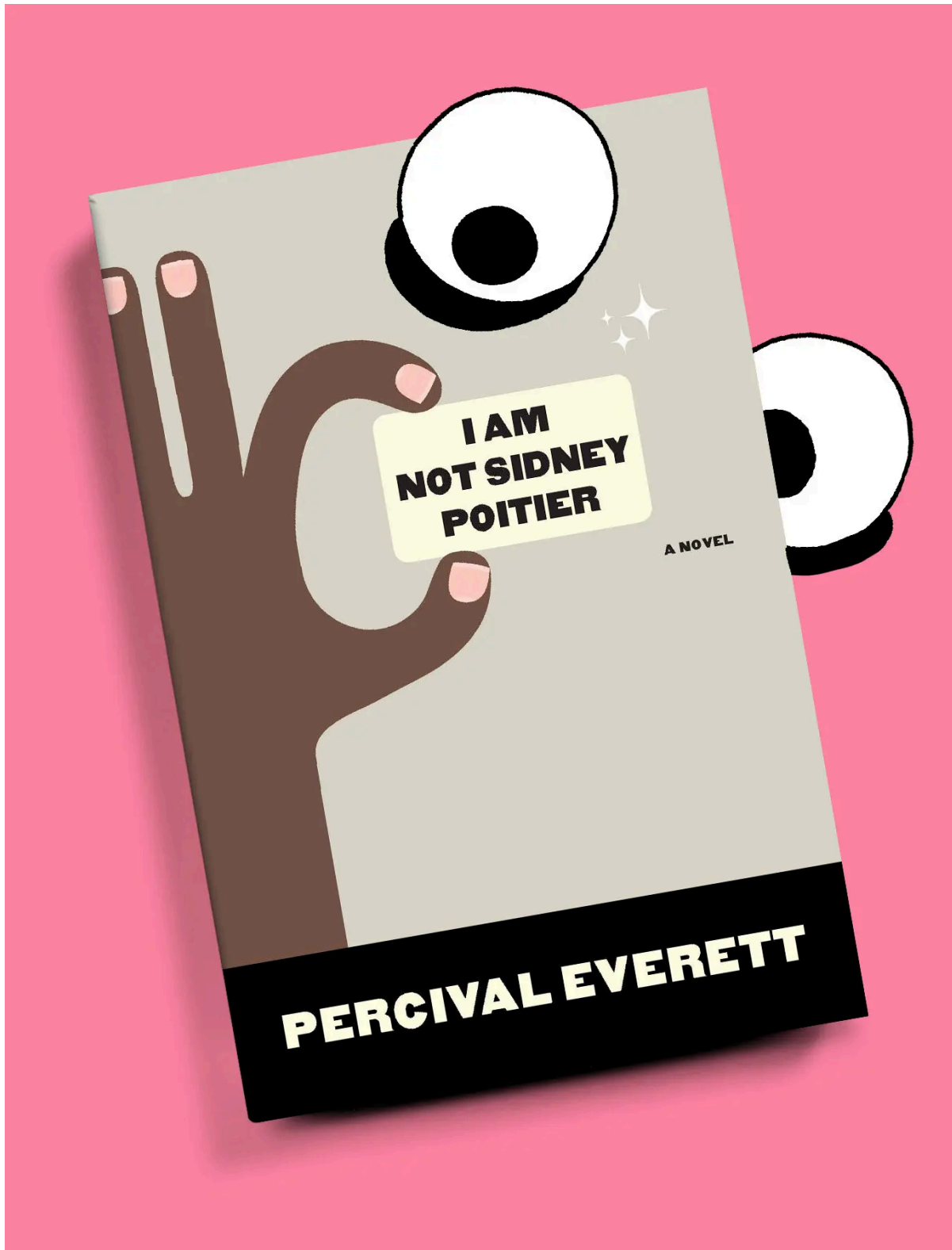
‘The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,’ by Junot Díaz (2007)

This book is so terribly dark, and yet light and laugh-inducing. It concerns the titular Oscar Wao, an overweight and nerdy young man — “I’m a Morlock,” he whispers, regarding himself in the mirror after a Dungeons & Dragons campaign — who desperately wants to lose his virginity. It’s also nothing less than the history of the Dominican Republic, specifically under the brutal rule of Rafael Trujillo, a.k.a. El Jefe, “the Dictatingest Dictator Who Ever Dictated.” The ultimate joke here is the “fukú,” the name for a curse of the New World, which can explain any misfortune or tragedy (and there is tragedy aplenty in these pages). Told in freewheeling, profane Spanglish by Yunior, Oscar’s rueful roommate from Rutgers, and laced with footnotes, the novel argues for writing as the thing that unjinxes, jolting and reordering old defeatist beliefs. —AJ

READ IF YOU LIKE: “Jojo Rabbit,” fast food, J.R.R. Tolkien, “Akira,” golden-age comic books, the Latin American Boom.

FLEET, DREAMLIKE

'I Am Not Sidney Poitier,' by Percival Everett (2009)



Everett is in the news this year because of the success of the film “American Fiction,” based on his darkly comic 2001 novel, “Erasure.” That book is well worth attending to, as are many in this prolific writer’s oeuvre. But his flat-out funniest novel is “I Am Not Sidney Poitier,” from 2009. It’s about a young man, an orphan, whose name is Not Sidney Poitier. He resembles the actor, and he seems to tumble through Poitier’s entire filmography, sometimes in dream form. The effect is wild, extravagant and hysterical. One detail among many: Young Not Sidney lives for several years with Ted Turner, the CNN mogul, whose dialogue is pure bloviating inanity. He walks around asking questions like, “Can you get fat in a weightless environment?” As Not Sidney moves through the American South, contending with racist cops, Klan gatherings and a stint on a prison chain gang, the humor crackles and delivers visceral punches. —DG

READ IF YOU LIKE: Turner Classic Movies, media jokes, metafictional sentences like “Silence fell on the table like a bad simile,” Spike Lee films, critiques of trickle-down economics.

WILLFULLY PERVERSE

‘Lightning Rods,’ by Helen DeWitt (2011)

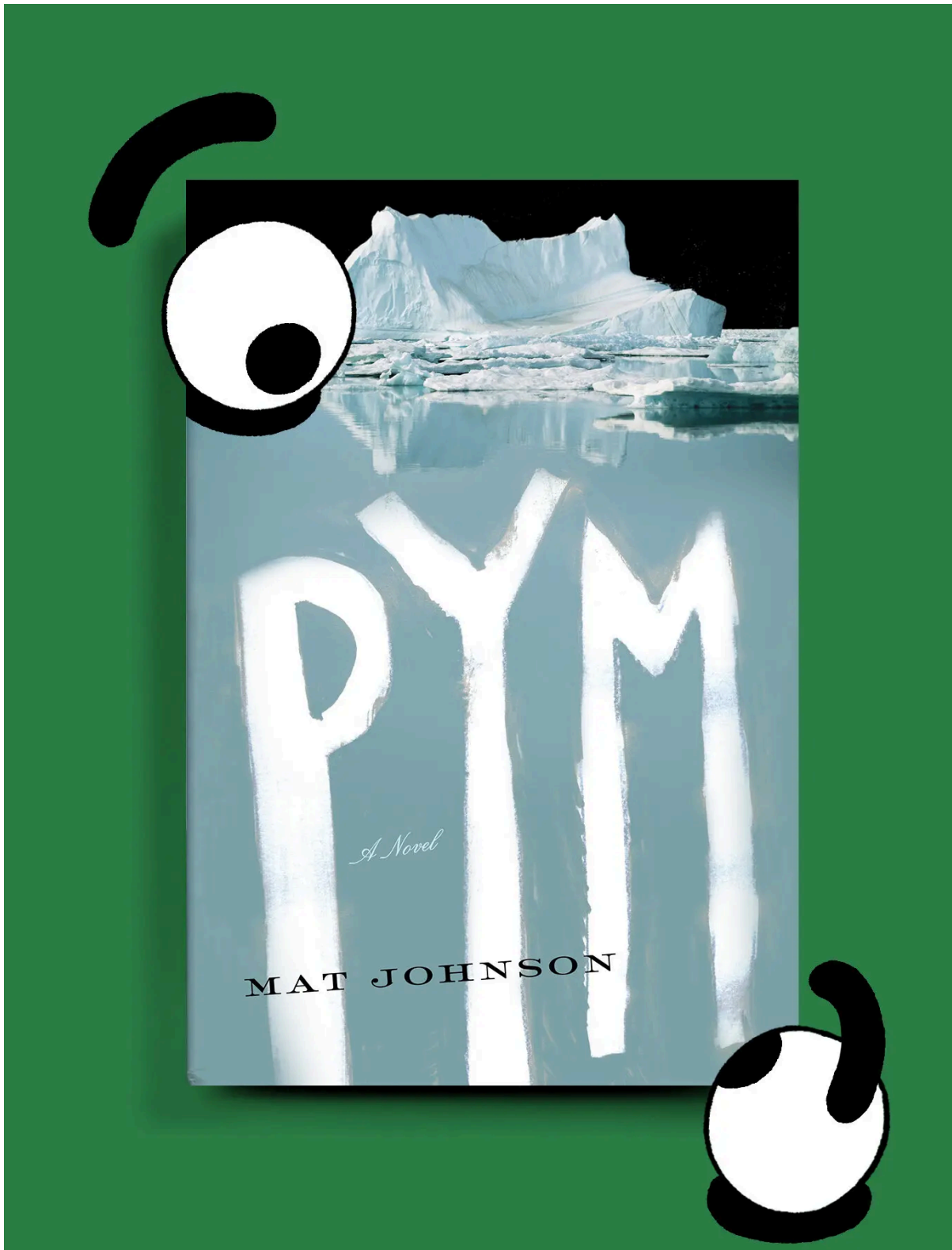


Did DeWitt really go there? Oh yes, she did. Joe, her sad sack of a hero, lands on a business plan to help corporate America boost productivity and reduce sexual harassment in one fell swoop: Women employed as “lightning rods” will supply office workers with anonymous, consensual sex on demand. A specially designed wall facilitates this “innovation.” The book’s language is upbeat and can-do, while the bawdy market it depicts is utterly depraved. But DeWitt refuses to hang back, pushing her satire as far as it will go. Productivity *does* go up; sexual harassment *does* go down. Some of the lightning rods parlay the money they make into fabulous law careers. Joe has found the back door to the American dream: Make it sleazy, but also briskly efficient. —JS

READ IF YOU LIKE: Entrepreneurship, “Secretary,” bathroom architecture, WFH.

FANTASTICAL, WORLD-WEARY

'Pym,' by Mat Johnson (2011)

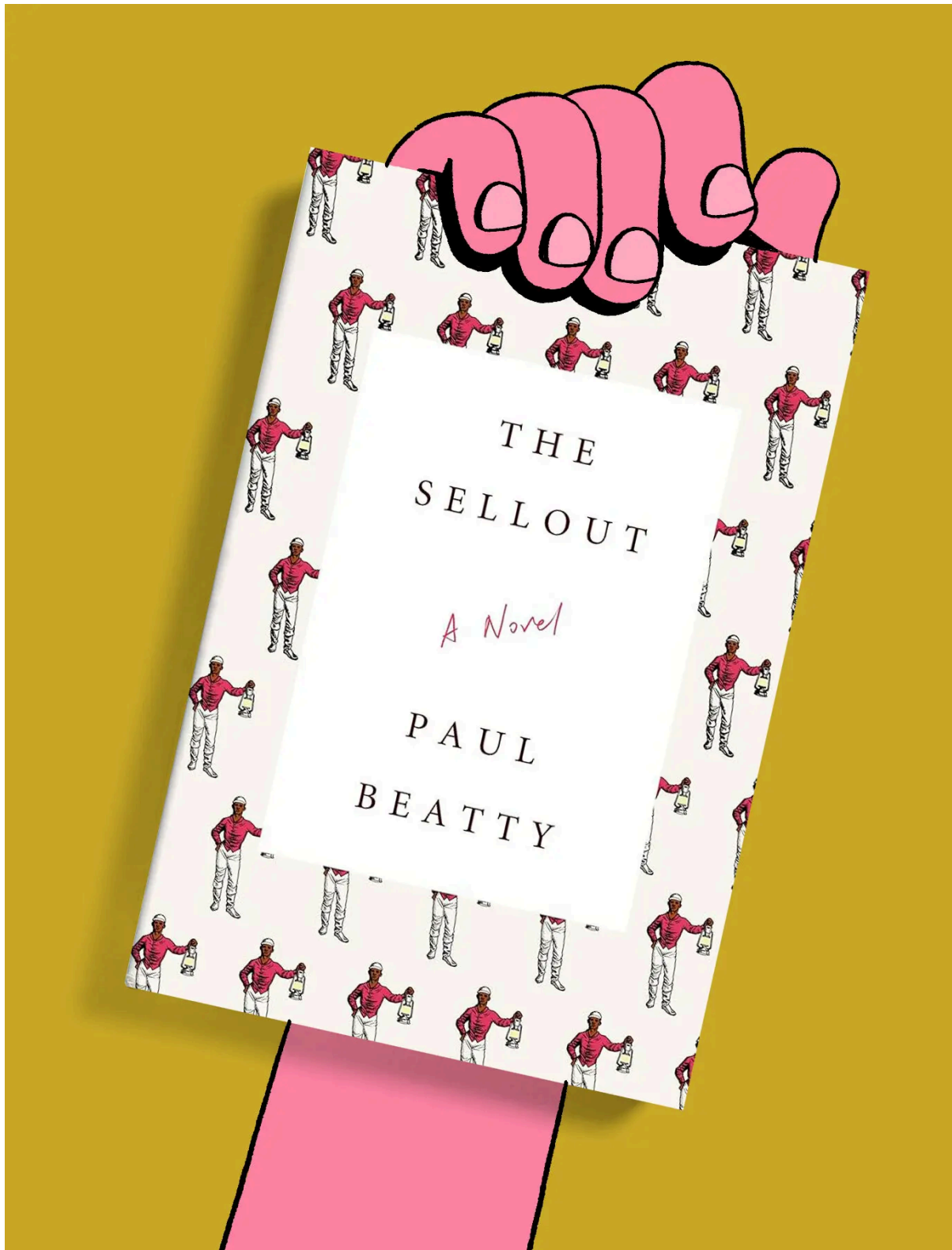


Chris Jaynes — a Black professor who has been sacked from his teaching job for refusing to serve on the campus diversity committee — learns that the mythical island in “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket,” Edgar Allan Poe’s only novel, might in fact be real. So Jaynes puts together an all-Black expedition to the South Pole, hoping to find the Black islanders from Poe’s book. What they find is Poe’s white protagonist, Arthur Pym, very much alive, his 200-year-old body and his 200-year-old racism spectacularly well preserved. They also find enormous, grunting white beings whom Pym calls “perfection incarnate.” These creatures enslave Jaynes and his crew, who must plot an escape. Riffing on an old-fashioned adventure tale, Johnson spins a satirical fantasy all his own. —*JS*

READ IF YOU LIKE: Antiquarian manuscripts, down parkas, MF Doom’s “Take Me to Your Leader,” Little Debbie snack cakes, the Abominable Snowman.

INCISIVE AND WILD

'The Sellout,' by Paul Beatty (2015)



Beatty's "The Sellout" might be this critic's favorite novel published this century. It's certainly the funniest. It's about a young Black man, born on the outskirts of Los Angeles, who becomes a seller of artisanal watermelon and weed. (One strain is called Anglophobia.) From this cannabis seed of a plot, Beatty takes aim at the American experiment. Real blood is spilled: The narrator's father is shot dead by police officers, basically for driving while Black. After a series of increasingly outrageous events, the narrator revives some of history's most shameful racial injustices and ends up defending himself in front of the Supreme Court. "After a long pause," Beatty writes, "I finally faced the bench and said, 'Your Honor, I plead human.'" Beatty's prose is ardent: He will put you in mind of the most esteemed Black comics of the past half-century (and of another author on this list, Charles Wright), but the humor bubbles up organically from his own literary sensibility. "Bugs Bunny," Beatty points out, "wasn't nothing but Br'er Rabbit with a better agent." —DG

READ IF YOU LIKE: Craft cannabis, Donald Glover, Los Angeles, the films "Get Out" and "American Fiction."

SHREWDLY REALIST

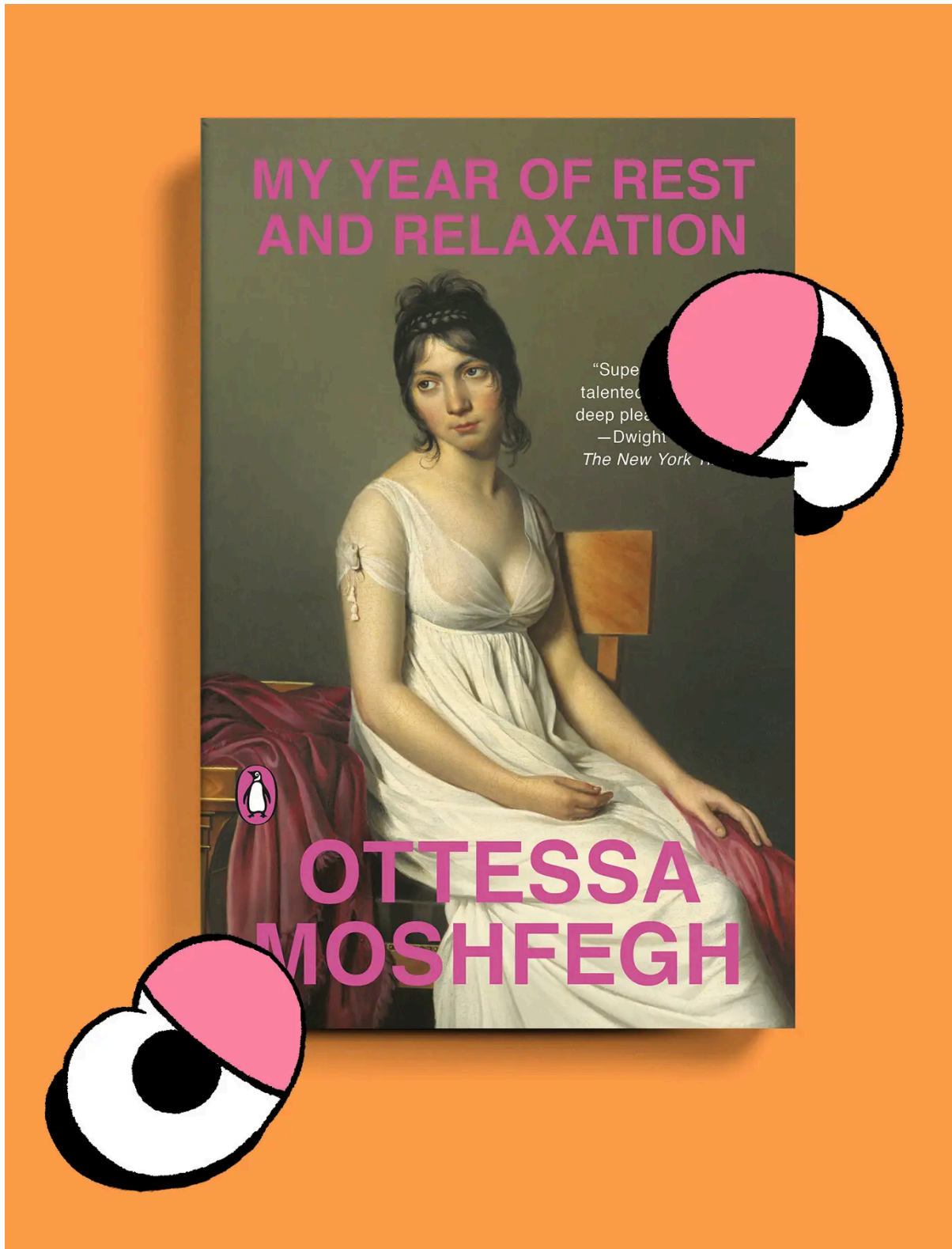
'Private Citizens,' by Tony Tulathimutte (2016)

Scathing, upsetting and generous all at once, this novel, about millennial friends in pre-2008-crash San Francisco, thrums with Tulathimutte's sly intelligence and unerring comic timing. Do-gooder Cory, cynical Linda, porn-addicted Will and passive Henrik start out like sitting ducks: self-regarding, irritating, easy to lampoon. Linda can't get past the "two-week mark" of a relationship before she starts feeling repulsed; Cory's bookshelf includes a copy of "Atlas Shrugged," "which she'd read just to hate it better." The book then takes a turn, getting simultaneously darker — much darker — and lighter. The characters become weirder and friendlier. The warm flashes make the satire cut deeper: Tulathimutte loves these imperfect young humans while seeing them for who they are. —JS

READ IF YOU LIKE: Exhibitionism, eavesdropping, David Foster Wallace, "The Big Chill."

GLITTER AND SQUALOR

'My Year of Rest and Relaxation,' by Ottessa Moshfegh (2018)



Moshfegh writes with a misanthropic aplomb that spills over into acid comedy. “My Year of Rest and Relaxation,” set in the year or so before 9/11, is about a young woman who becomes joyfully addicted to antidepressants and other meds, and to the sleep that results. Like Ivan Goncharov’s Oblomov, she finds it hard to get out of bed. A practiced lotus-eater, she finds a drug that will help her realize her ambition to sleep nearly all the time. One problem: She begins to sleepwalk. (Once, she awakens to find that she has gone out and had her pubic hair waxed.) Moshfegh tugs at the political ramifications of her story; the impulse to sleep through a troubled period of history is not uncommon. Vastly more uncommon are the probity and wit she extracts from this dream of a story. —DG

READ IF YOU LIKE: “Chaise Longue” by Wet Leg, Trazodone, Fran Lebowitz, clean sheets, Aubrey Plaza.

PROFANE AND SURREAL

‘Lake of Urine: A Love Story,’ by Guillermo Stitch (2020)

Fans of offbeat writers such as Flann O'Brien, Stella Gibbons and J.P. Donleavy, and admirers of the off-color puns in "Finnegans Wake," here is a book for you. Stitch's "Lake of Urine" is a strange, warty, high-flying satire about love, lust and demented varieties of female empowerment. More specifically, it's about Urine and Noranbole Wakeling, sisters around whom young men lurk. Urine is sensitive and lovely — and of gladiatorial disposition. Woe to men who aim to woo her. One arrives for a date to find that she has erected a huge wicker structure on a hilltop spelling out his name alongside an obscenity. Then she sets it, and his effigy, alight. We learn about "the time she garroted Timothy Spencer's pony because he had been sitting on it when he had glanced at the hem of her frock." This novel appears to be set in the distant past, yet characters have USB ports. Urine winds up running an international conglomerate with an exorcist on the board of directors. I'm not sure I've ever read a book quite like this. Every character who wanders through it is, to use Primo Levi's words, "as disheveled and bristly as a cat returning from a rooftop jamboree." —*DG*

READ IF YOU LIKE: Mud, Emma Stone in "Poor Things," anecdotes about pickles, Monty Python, the droll music of David Berman.

Special thanks to Heritage Auctions.

Dwight Garner has been a book critic for The Times since 2008, and before that was an editor at the Book Review for a decade.

Alexandra Jacobs is a Times book critic and occasional features writer. She joined The Times in 2010.

Jennifer Szalai is the nonfiction book critic for The Times.

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