



Author of the week

Jillian Medoff

Novelist Jillian Medoff might not ever choose to give up her day job, said Rachel Sugar in *KirkusReviews.com*. A Fortune 500 management consultant who sold her first novel more than 20 years ago, Medoff has just



published a workplace dramedy that couldn't have been written by anyone unfamiliar with the corporate world.

This Could Hurt, which took her seven years to write, centers on the employees of the human resources department at a floundering research firm not unlike one Medoff worked at more than a decade ago. Her dual professional identity, she says, allowed her to be a true member of that team yet keep her distance as an observer. And she can't imagine giving that up. "I just can't get too comfortable," she says. "Because I write from a place of rage and anger."

In truth, *This Could Hurt* is "far more tender than caustic," said Heller McAlpin in *NPR.org*. Its key figure is a boss in her 60s whose tyrannical ways are readily forgiven by the acolytes who cover for her after a stroke robs her of a few marbles. All of those underlings also turn out to be flawed but relatable individuals—another indication that Medoff really knows office life and that, at 54, she has good reason not to want to walk away. "As a workaday employee, I understand in my bones how valuable I am to an organization, which is to say: not at all," she wrote in a recent essay. "I am dispensable, replaceable, a cog in a soul-crushing machine. Therefore, my corporate career helps me define what's important: I work for time to write and money to live."

Best books... chosen by Will Self

Will Self's new novel, *Phone*, completes a modernist trilogy that he launched with 2012's *Umbrella*. Below, the acclaimed British novelist, journalist, and iconoclast recommends six books that prove truth can be stranger than fiction.

Land of Opportunity by William M. Adler (out of print). The story of the African-American family who brought crack cocaine to Detroit in the 1980s and made millions by running the business with McDonald's-like efficiency. It's a staggering portrayal of the ineluctable convergence between addiction and capitalism in Reagan's America.

The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst by Nicholas Tomalin and Ron Hall (Quercus, \$18). Crowhurst was the British yachtsman who faked his positions during a 1968 round-the-world yacht race and then, when discovery of his subterfuge became inevitable, threw himself into the sea. His abandoned boat was found drifting in the Atlantic, its logbook filled with monomaniacal metaphysical speculation.

In the Belly of the Beast by Jack Henry Abbott (Vintage, \$16). Abbott was the imprisoned murderer Norman Mailer befriended via mail correspondence and who murdered again after he'd won early release. Besides the Mailer-Abbott letters, this book contains an astonishing philosophical disquisition by the self-taught Abbott, who absorbed quantities of Marx, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche while serving time.

The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind by Julian Jaynes (Mariner, \$19). A contested theory, but I believe it. Jaynes' view is that sometime between the period described in *The Iliad* and the composition of *The Odyssey*, the human *corpus callosum* was formed and the mind became uni- rather than bicameral. This book will, among other things, make you look at all forms of religious enthusiasm in an altogether new light.

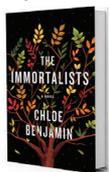
Island on the Edge of the World by Charles MacLean (Canongate, \$17). St. Kilda is a micro-archipelago 60 miles west of Scotland where, until a century ago, a community had lived in almost complete isolation for 700 years. MacLean tells its remarkable story exceptionally well and with considerable sensitivity.

The Mountain People by Colin M. Turnbull (Touchstone, \$22). The story of the Ik, a hill tribe in Uganda whose members, in the face of resource-depleting drought, resolved to starve rather than migrate. A compelling depiction of the skull beneath the skin of all human communities, and a kind of anthropological counterpoint to Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*.

Also of interest... in matters of life and death

The Immortalists

by Chloe Benjamin (Putnam, \$26)



Chloe Benjamin's new novel is "as fast and dizzying as a high-wire act," said *The Economist*. In 1969 New York, four young siblings visit a fortune-teller who predicts the dates of their deaths, and that knowledge haunts them as they take separate paths toward distant, possibly preordained fates. The rapid-fire plot "at times feels rushed and contrived," but Benjamin is "a novelist to watch." She has devised a page-turning puzzle whose deepest mystery "lingers long after the riddles are solved."

The Afterlives

by Thomas Pierce (Riverhead, \$27)



Thomas Pierce has a talent for "treating the otherworldly as matter-of-fact," said Michael Schaub in *NPR.org*. In his "richly imaginative" first novel, a 33-year-old heart attack victim is revived from clinical death to discover that life makes less sense than it did before. A haunted house, a new lover, and holograms of dead celebrities figure into Jim's post-death everyday, but *The Afterlives* remains a book grounded in a "nuanced understanding of why people believe what they do."

Heavens on Earth

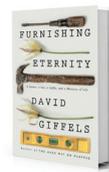
by Michael Shermer (Holt, \$30)



Michael Shermer's "fascinating" book begins with a simple notion, said Maria Konnikova in *The New York Times*. Because we can't know what death is like, argues the editor of *Skeptic* magazine, we are doomed to want to imagine ways around it. But after offering a "cavalier" dismissal of religion's answers, Shermer takes up techno-utopian ideas about conquering death, and "his explorations come to life." The imaginative journey he constructs proves "as boggling as it is engrossing."

Furnishing Eternity

by David Giffels (Scribner, \$24)



Coffin making isn't usually an activity that bonds a father and son, said Hamilton Cain in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. But when David Giffels' mother died and his father survived a cancer scare, the middle-aged professor decided to build a casket for himself and ask his dad to help. Though Giffels' memoir "occasionally goes slack," it's affecting when the two men are in the workshop, and it gains an "elegiac power" when a fast-moving cancer strikes the author's best friend.