

# Winter Reading

‘What really knocks me out is a book that, when you’re all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn’t happen much, though.’

— J.D. SALINGER, *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE*

**W**hether it’s escapism through fiction or a dive into a nonfiction tome because you want to learn more about the world, the digital age hasn’t stopped us from reading and loving books. Whether we’re on a plane reading history on a Kindle or dropping ketchup on the paper pages of a novel we can’t put down, even to eat, at the kitchen table, books let us live more lives than just our own. Books provide us with a mimesis — a representation of reality — a lifetime in 250 pages. Every year *Eugene Weekly* staff and writers read the books that we love, or hate, and present them to you in our Winter Reading issue in hopes you curl up, read us, then read some more books. — *Camilla Mortensen*

■ = OREGON AUTHOR OR OREGON-CENTRIC BOOK

## fiction



**Willful Disregard: A Novel About Love** by Lena Andersson, translated Sarah Death. Other Press, \$15.95.

Ester Nilsson falls in love with Hugo Rask, who introduces himself after she gives a lecture on his art and philosophy. Ester is blinded by her attraction to Hugo, to his fame and intellect. From there unravels a mostly one-sided relationship she

greatly fabricates, contradicting her normally circumspect, practical nature. Through the distorted lens of her yearning, she leaves her longtime partner, shifting her life to prepare for the romance she brushes so close to but fails to actualize. Overcome by her desire, Ester allows herself to be strung along, always trying to convince herself that each defeat and likely sign of his potentially lacking interest in her will somehow turn out to be the result of his being too busy or distracted to devote himself to her completely.

*Willful Disregard* is a fascinating meditation on the overwhelming force of love and potential for self-deception in the face of pursuing one’s object of desire. It also whispers of the often self-defeating nature of blind ambition and the reality that sometimes wanting something bad enough cannot actualize it. — *Paul Quillen*

■ **My Last Continent: A Novel** by Midge Raymond. Simon and Schuster, \$26.

Love, loss and the edge of the world: *My Last Continent* starts with tragedy — the sinking of the massive cruise ship the *Australis* and the 715 passengers who died — and then moves back and forth in time following the stories of Deb Gardner and Keller Sullivan and how they came to feel most at home with penguins and fall in love in the loneliness of Antarctica. Raymond intertwines birding and science with her tale of complicated relationships, switching from the close quarters of a ship in Antarctica to the heat of Columbia, Missouri. Scenes set in Eugene, when Deb takes a position at the University of Oregon, will resonate with local readers. Rather than confusing, the jumps in time and geography build to a climax, hinted at in the first paragraphs of the book. *My Last Continent* brings into focus the tragedy that tourism can bring to a pristine place, told through the lens of troubled relationships. — *Camilla Mortensen*



**The Book of Harlan** by Bernice L. McFadden. Akashic Books, \$26.

Can you draw a line from pre-Depression Macon, Georgia, to libertine Paris, to the Buchenwald concentration camp at the height of Nazi Germany? Bernice L. McFadden does an incredible job with jazz music as her guide. Following generations of one African-American family with

the prodigal son — the heavy-drinking, jazz-guitar-playing, womanizing Harlan — at its center, McFadden shows how enduring the human spirit is, carving out pockets of happiness and fulfillment even in the most oppressive corners of a racist, pre-Civil Rights-era United States and fascist Europe. It is a rare look at how non-Jewish minorities got sucked into the Nazi’s purge, whether they were black, gay or disabled.

This is not, however, a doom-and-gloom book. McFadden also fleshes out Harlan in its golden age as a safe pocket for black America to thrive, and the opulence, creativity and joy she conjures is intoxicating — all-night dance parties, collaborating musicians, fur coats, polished shoes and smoke-filled parlors where Louis Armstrong lounges.

In this work of historical fiction, many more real characters make appearances — writer Amiri Baraka, Bessie Smith and, most hauntingly, the “Bitch of Buchenwald” herself, Ilse Koch. McFadden weaves their lives together with ancestors from her family to create something wholly elegant and hypnotic, putting a new face on World War II. — *Alex V. Cipolle*

■ **I’m Thinking of Ending Things** by Iain Reid. Scout Press, \$22.95.



Iain Reid’s debut novel is a breathtaking bolt of pure literary adrenaline shot through a wormhole of paranoia and violent psychic suspense. In it, a young woman takes a wintery road trip with her boyfriend to his parent’s house in the country, with a few surreal detours along the way (what *really* happens at that fast-food restaurant, anyway?).

The outlines of the plot are simple enough, but this story is never what it seems. From the opening pages, Reid relentlessly, and very cleverly, ratchets up the intensity, with foreboding and dark mysteries lurking around every corner, until all reference to reality is questioned. Is this a hostage situation? Is he insane? Is she? And what, exactly, is she thinking of ending? The effect of Reid’s whiplash pacing and the sense of existential dislocation he concocts are intoxicating and, in the end, addictive; the book is truly un-put-downable. Whether the shocking conclusion of this shaggy dog tale — part David Lynch and part *Twilight Zone* — ties up all the loose ends is debatable, but one thing is certain: It sure is fun getting there. — *Rick Levin*

■ **The Road We Traveled** by Jane Kirkpatrick. Revell, \$14.99.

I admit it. I never played that Oregon Trail game half the people I know seem to have grown up with. But I am fascinated by the Oregon Trail and the trials and tribulations of those who ventured westward upon it. *The Road We Traveled* follows the indomitable Tabitha Brown as she refuses to be left behind when her family moves to Oregon. Tabitha limps badly due to an old injury and, as a grandmother, her family sees her as too old and weak. Tabitha sees it otherwise; she gets herself a wagon and hits the road. Author Jane Kirkpatrick uses a period style in

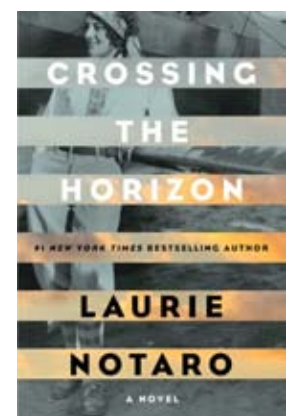
keeping with how her characters would have spoken in the 1800s and Tabitha herself provides a rare chance to enjoy a book in which the main character is an older woman. — *Camilla Mortensen*



**Universal Harvester** by John Darnielle. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$25.

*Universal Harvester*, due out Feb. 7, 2017, is the second novel from John Darnielle, better known as vocalist and primary songwriter for acclaimed music group Mountain Goats. The book is a peculiar tale, sniffing around mystery-thriller tropes, but, appropriate to

Darnielle’s iconoclastic style, it ends up not quite belonging to any category. The setting is rural Iowa and the time is the late ’90s and early-2000s. Jeremy works at Video Hut, an independent movie rental business. Looking back on this era, infused by Darnielle with sinister normalcy, there was no monumental change but creeping, incremental shifting, shaking up once-thought fundamental community institutions (little things from the local hardware store to video stores and record shops). What replaced this was online interconnectedness, leading to the empty intimacy of social media and a nagging sense we’ve all been duped. In the book, store patrons inexplicably notice dark and morbid home movies spliced into Video Hut’s VHS tapes. This leads Jeremy and his coworkers into a mystery that spans decades, raising questions about spirituality as well as what we see and what we choose to overlook at a time when what’s public and personal becomes increasingly blurred. — *William Kennedy*



■ **Crossing the Horizon: A Novel** by Laurie Notaro. Gallery Books, \$26.

Eugene-based author Laurie Notaro calls *Crossing the Horizon* “creative historical nonfiction,” and she tells *EW* that 95 percent of what she wrote about aviatrixes Elsie Mackay, Mabel Boll and Ruth Elder was purely based on historical research. Notaro corrects the

record for those of us who think Amelia Earhart was the darling of flying’s early years as she delves into the lives of Boll, Mackay and Elder. Five women tried to fly across the Atlantic before Earhart’s attempt, and three of them died trying. You might not like all the characters (Boll is simply not very nice) but readers will be drawn to their stories. And warning: Stay away from the Google. Notaro’s deftly written story depicts the real lives of these women, and one web search could easily spoil the ending. — *Camilla Mortensen*