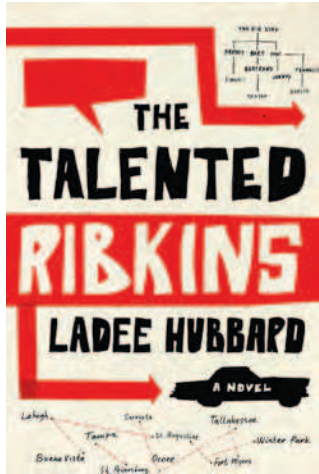




the Monkey House” hold up upon rereading as the flat-out dystopian masterpieces they are (and frighteningly timely these days), while others, such as “Who Am I This Time?” reveal Vonnegut, with equal parts generosity and dark humor, sounding out the melancholy mysteries of the human heart. For many of us, myself certainly included, Vonnegut was an initiation into the profound, life-altering magic of “serious” reading, and this exhaustive anthology of his short stories can now take its bittersweet roost on the top shelf — the one dedicated to our most important and beloved writers. So it goes.

— Rick Levin

The Talented Ribkins by Ladee Hubbard.
Melville House, \$25.99.

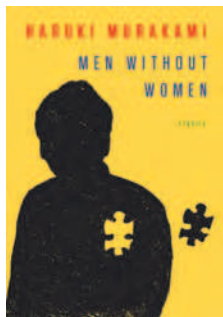


Full disclosure: I went to grad school with Ladee Hubbard at UCLA and sometimes we carpoled. On those mornings, I would stop by her apartment down the hall, and Hubbard would greet me, slightly weary after getting up early to write, but ready for the day. Those early mornings paid off. Toni Morrison calls Hubbard’s work “wildly inventive” and “in a class by itself.”

The Talented Ribkins is both a romp through Florida and a meditation on race, class and politics. It’s a little bit Marvel comics meets W.E.B. Dubois’ talented tenth. Johnny Ribkins at age 72 has a week to come up with the money, stashed around the state, that he stole from his mobster boss. Luckily, Johnny has a superpower. He uses his mapmaking skills, and with his niece Eloise in tow, begins a journey that tells the girl, who has a power of her own, the story of her family and their involvement with the civil rights era Justice Committee, wherein the Ribkins tried to use their powers against racism. Later, when the committee falls apart, Johnny and his brother, who could scale flat walls, use their powers for burglary. As the pair journeys forward, Eloise learns of her past and Johnny learns perhaps he has a different future.

— Camilla Mortensen

Men Without Women by Haruki Murakami.
Knopf, \$25.95.



Nothing noteworthy sets this short story collection apart from the earlier writings of Haruki Murakami, but nonetheless there is a refinement of form and well-established voice that I deeply enjoy. As a longtime Murakami fan, I found myself worrying, while reading *1Q84* in 2013, that he was losing the spark I had found compelling in his previous writing. This sense deepened in

2014, when he published a novella from 2005, *The Strange Library*, which was ultimately forgettable. Then Knopf published his first two novellas as *Wind/Pinball* in 2015, which I was excited to read, but felt was damning, like he was growing weary and perhaps taking an extended break. This collection feels like a return to his older style, but with a more polished, concise form. I was excited to think *Men Without Women* may contain seeds for future novels, as his earlier collections often had. His usual mix of oddball, marginal characters graces these pages, and this is a handsome, hardback volume that would make a great gift for a loved one who likes Murakami. But I would not recommend this as starting point for a first-time Murakami curioso. — Paul Quillen

Manhattan Beach by Jennifer Egan.
Charles Scribner’s Sons, \$25.



Jennifer Egan’s previous novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, was a postmodern pop opera that cast a Faulkner-like web of fate and circumstances over a group of interconnected people moving through New York’s music scene. It won the Pulitzer in 2010, and it should have; it’s a fantastic work of fiction. Seven years and, reportedly, many rewrites later, and here we are with

Egan’s latest, *Manhattan Beach*, a sprawling drama about a daughter’s tortuous search for her missing father during the Second World War. At the heart of the story are three characters brought together through the fickle movements of fate: Anna Kerrigan, a young single woman in wartime New York; her father, Eddie, a union man; and Dexter Styles, a mid-level mob boss who takes on Eddie as a sort of overseer of his far-flung operations. One day, Eddie simply disappears, leaving Anna, her invalid sister and her mother to fend for themselves. In subtle and mysterious ways, this absence becomes the driving force in Anna’s life, eventually leading her into service as a diver repairing battleships in New York Harbor.

Unfortunately, the book suffers from a failure to launch. Unlike Egan’s previous work, this one is addled by a certain narrative slackness; the plot would suggest there is much at stake, but it remains something of a slog to read, a bit waterlogged around the edges, strangely devoid of emotional oomph. Egan is one of our best novelists, and one of my favorites, but in *Manhattan Beach* she seems uncertain of herself, and it isn’t until the final passages of the book that her immense narrative skills kick in, evoking a heady excitement that the rest of the book sadly lacks. — Rick Levin

Lucky Supreme by Jeff Johnson.
Arcade Publishing, \$24.99.



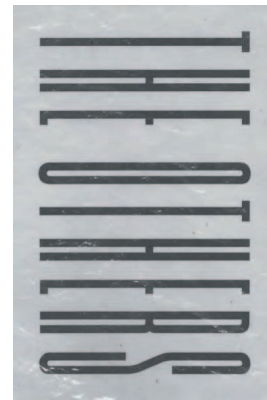
Jeff Johnson’s *Lucky Supreme* is a pulp elegy that offers escape from the monotony of workaday life. It’s meant to be read in low light, preferably at night, so that the protagonist’s saw-toothed warble might be heard in the proper context. Darby Holland is a tattoo shop owner who’s carved out a hardscrabble niche from a destitute background. The plot arises from the tattoo artist’s ethos: Do not let others take a bite out of

you, lest you want to be eaten whole. Necessary revenge and bloody affairs follow Holland from the seedy underbelly of Old Town Portland to the zombieland of Southern Oregon to San Francisco’s decrepit industrial warehouses and then back home again. Indigent paupers under the Burnside Bridge stand defiant against two encroaching worlds: the insatiable appetites of kingpins and the ineffable seep of gentrifying urbanites.

In the tumbledown setting, Johnson draws a sentimental context — a neon fever dream, a decrepit labyrinth that only the down-and-out know profoundly. In Holland, Johnson carves a compassionate character — damaged yet caring, gentle yet vicious about protecting the kin that populate his world. He wields the lurid pen of 20th-century crime novelists like Raymond Chandler and Mickey Spillane, and stands with contemporaries like Michael Connelly and Walter Mosley to grace the grit of

dark streets. Whether readers can relate or not, they won’t be able to resist rooting for the charismatic Holland and empathizing with a man fighting to save his own hide and the singular denizens of a grimy world. — Matthew Denis

The Others by Matthew Rohrer. Wave Books, \$18.



What appears to be a rather mundane prose poem quickly reveals itself a matryoshka doll masterpiece: wacky, crafty, riveting and, at times, dark. Matthew Rohrer is a confident enough writer to be funny without humor displacing style or minimizing complexity. There is also an extended list of references to hunt down — if you like such things — though, as one who

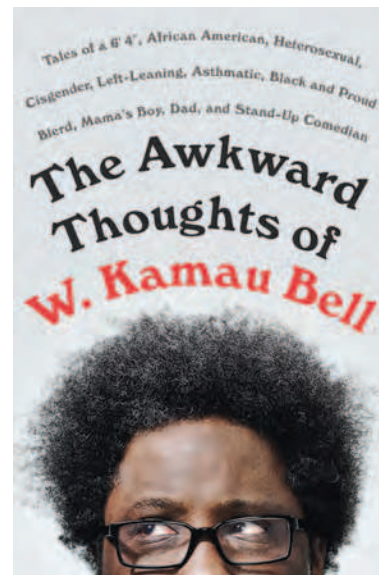
does not, I still enjoyed myself thoroughly. The narrator is a publishing lackey who fooled me into believing this would be an extended meditation on the existential struggles of living in New York, but quickly announces a bizarre whirlwind through a splintering narrative psychedelia, which continuously fragmented around me and made me feel I was taking a visual tour through a brilliant mind.

It is weirdly beautiful while being hilarious, with some disgusting moments. It almost seems like a catalog of literary time and narrative, relishing in the fun and profundity of language and storytelling. This is not a poem, but it is also not quite a novel. It is readable and enjoyably original and is easily my favorite work of creative writing for 2017. — Paul Quillen

essays

The Awkward Thoughts of W. Kamau Bell by W. Kamau Bell.

Penguin Random House, \$28.



Comedian W. Kamau Bell is a lot of things — African-American, heterosexual, cisgender, left-leaning, asthmatic, a blerd (black nerd), a dad ... and those are just half the descriptors he offers on the cover of his memoir, *The Awkward Thoughts of W. Kamau Bell*. Bell’s identity is a mishmash, and that’s a big theme in his book — the intersectionality of

identity that makes us, us. Bell isn’t just a black comedian; he’s a multi-faceted person with a whole load of other things going on. *Awkward Thoughts* is a collection of essays in which Bell explores different personal topics such as his love of superheroes and comic books, his parents and struggling to kick-start a stand-up comedy career. The book functions as a memoir, and yet Bell finds ways to relate his own stories back to the world-at-large — politics, race relations, parenthood, etc. Although he has lived a life specifically his own, Bell’s storytelling is so layered and genuine that it becomes universal. In that way, this collection of essays offers a little something for everyone, and you’ll definitely be laughing along the way. — Meerah Powell