

GRAB BAG

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Debut novel, 'Atlas of Forgotten Places,' is a must-read

One of the original motives for founding this weekly column about Northwest books and authors was to trace how writers influenced and inspired one another throughout the region.

But there's been a gradual shift. Communications, geopolitics and transportation have diluted the regional focus over time. Authors seem to be writing less about rain and fish, mountains and clams. With the internet and air travel, writers no longer feel hemmed in by gray skies and flooded rivers. They may choose to live here, but now the world's their oyster.

Take Jenny D. Williams, for example. A recent arrival from California, who before that lived in New York, Uganda and Germa-

ny, Williams now lives in Seattle.

But her debut novel, "The Atlas of Forgotten Places," is set in central Africa. It revolves around the actions of three strong-minded women — one American, one German and one Ugandan — in December 2008.

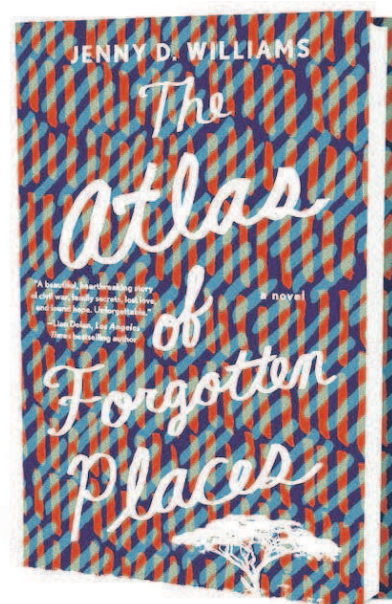
Lily Bennett is the American. She wants to get a taste of what her Aunt Sabine did as a long-term humanitarian worker in Africa. After graduating from college, Lily signs up for a six-month stint as an aid worker in Uganda. She plans to return home to Colorado for Christmas.

Sabine Hardt had worked for many years in a succession of countries — Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda. But she even-



tually succumbed to compassion fatigue and returned to her hometown in Germany. She is still trying to get used to the snowy winter when she gets a call from her widowed brother-in-law in the U.S. His daughter, Sabine's niece, has gone missing in Uganda.

At Christmastime, the embassies are operating with a skeleton staff and can't provide much help. So the only thing for Sabine to do is fly back to Africa to make inquiries and pin down Lily's whereabouts.



"The Atlas of Forgotten Places"

By Jenny D. Williams

Thomas Dunne Books

368 pp
\$26.99

In Uganda, Rose Akulu has been pulling her life back together after escaping the Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel group engaged in recurring conflict with the government. The LRA had kidnapped Rose and held her for several years. During captivity, she suffered many losses, but now that she has returned,

her community and even her family consider her damaged goods.

Fortunately, she has found work with Christoph, a Swiss academic who is researching local folklore. And until very recently, Rose had a sweetheart, Ocen. But a few weeks back they had a spat, and he hasn't come around

since then.

When Sabine arrives in search of Lily, she discovers that Christoph and Rose had known her niece. As the three of them start piecing together events, they realize that Lily and Ocen may have left together, and the trail of their missing loved ones appears to lead straight into the heart of a rebellion-racked region.

Williams has developed a solid storyline and created characters who feel utterly real. She will familiarize you with a place of profligate beauty, desperate politics and ruthless violence. But she also underscores the capacity of compassion.

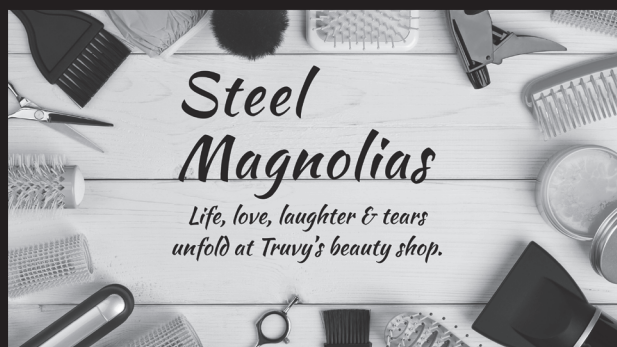
"The Atlas of Forgotten Places" is a must-read — an excellent debut.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com

Crossword Answer

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