

Some of the best books of 2021

By **Colette Bancroft**

Tampa Bay Times

Every year I review at least 50 books in the Tampa Bay Times, but I read many more than I review. Here are some of the books that I didn't review this year but that stuck with me.

'ORWELL'S ROSES'

by **Rebecca Solnit**

If all you know about George Orwell is that he wrote "1984," allow Solnit to bring her astonishing capacity for connecting things you did not think were connected to his biography, and beyond. Moved by her discovery that Orwell was a passionate gardener with a special love for flowers, Solnit uses that lens to examine his life, writing and antifascist politics, swings wide to look at the relationship between flower gardens and colonialism, and finally offers a new perspective on "1984."

'FORGET THE ALAMO: THE RISE AND FALL OF AN AMERICAN MYTH'

by **Bryan Burrough, Chris Tomlinson and Jason Stanford**

Three Texas writers take on their state's creation myth and find that,



Penguin Random House

even before the gunsmoke cleared, the battle's history was being twisted. (For starters, the Americans who died there weren't fighting for freedom, they were fighting to preserve slavery.) Deeply researched and brightly written, this book examines not only what happened at the Alamo in 1836 but the fascinating revisions and re-revisions of that story right up to the present, when the issue of who writes history is hotter than ever.

'THE MADNESS OF CROWDS'

by **Louise Penny**

Penny co-wrote a bestselling thriller, "State of Terror," with former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton this year, but the bestselling Canadian author also published the 17th in her series of novels about Chief Inspector Armand Gamache. Penny imagines a world after the pandemic, but one where dangers it has provoked linger — and have murderous results in Gamache's beloved hometown, Three Pines. The mystery wraps around a thoughtful and disturbing look at how societies respond to mass trauma.

'DAUGHTER OF THE MORNING STAR'

by **Craig Johnson**

This is the 17th novel in Johnson's reliably excellent crime fiction series about Wyoming Sheriff Walt Longmire (inspiration for the namesake Netflix series). This time Johnson takes on an all too real issue: the epidemic of violence against Indigenous women. Longmire is called on to protect Jaya "Longshot" Long, a basketball phenom at her high school on the Cheyenne reservation. Her sister disappeared a year ago, and now she's getting threats — but she's so tough she doesn't want to admit she needs help.

'THE SPECKLED BEAUTY: A DOG AND HIS PEOPLE'

by **Rick Bragg**

Journalist and memoirist Bragg has written with humor, pain and love about his human family in books like "Ava's Man" and "All Over But the Shoutin'." Here his main character is Speck, a one-eyed stray dog who shows up at the family farm nearly dead of starvation, infection and who knows what else. Bragg (and his mother's legendary cooking) bring the dog back to health, but he does not emerge as a good boy: His idea of fun is picking a fight with the mule, rolling in a decayed deer carcass or trying to herd the farm cats (he's mostly Australian shepherd), who are having none of it. And yet Speck is clearly the dog of Bragg's life, the dog who shows up just when he should and does what needs to be done.

'A CARNIVAL OF SNACKERY (DIARIES: 2003-2020)'

by **David Sedaris**

If you've ever wondered where Sedaris' uniquely hilarious stories come from, the answer is the diaries he's kept all his life. He published "Theft by Finding: Diaries (1977-2002)" in 2017, and it was a fascinating look at his creative process.

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