

WITF/Radio Smart Talk  
May 27, 2021  
Summer Books  
Travis Kurowski

## FICTION

**Detransition Baby, by Torrey Peters.** This novel has been the talk of the literary world in early 2021, and I've been looking forward to this summer giving me time to read it. So many of my friends and students have transitioned or are transitioning; thanks to them, I've learned so much about sex, gender, and identity that has inarguably made me a better friend, teacher, parent. Emily VanDerWerff writing in Vox about the novel: "Detransition, Baby is a terrific read...one that looks at the trans experience in modern America unflinchingly, in ways that made me feel seen and made me feel horrified to feel so seen. If you are a cis person seeking to empathize with trans women, this book wouldn't be a bad place to start." A book as much about the first word of the title, "detransition," as it is about the second, "baby," this "provocative debut is about what happens at the emotional, messy, vulnerable corners of womanhood that platitudes and good intentions can't reach. Torrey Peters brilliantly and fearlessly navigates the most dangerous taboos around gender, sex, and relationships."

**The Ninth Metal, by Benjamin Percy.** Ben Percy is one of the most exciting literary genre writers of the American 21<sup>st</sup> century. I just made that term up, "literary genre," by which I mean Percy is someone who writes as beautifully and rapturously about exploding helicopters as he does about love and loss. The author of half-a-dozen novels and much else, Percy is perhaps best known these days as a regular writer for Marvel and DC comics. Percy's novels tend to make great summer reads: fast, story rich, and resonant. From the publisher: "At first, people gazed in wonder at the radiant tear in the sky. A year later, the celestial marvel became a planetary crisis when Earth spun through the comet's debris field and the sky rained fire. The town of Northfall, Minnesota will never be the same. Meteors cratered hardwood forests and annihilated homes, and among the wreckage a new metal was discovered. This 'omnimetal' has properties that make it world-changing as an energy source...and a weapon. In this gut-punch of a novel, the first in his Comet Cycle, Ben Percy lays bare how a modern-day goldrush has turned the middle of nowhere into the center of everything, and how one family—the Frontiers—hopes to control it all."

**Whereabouts, by Jhumpa Lahiri.** I fell in love with the writing of Jhumpa Lahiri when her debut story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* came out in 1999. This subtle, heartbreaking book of Indian and Indian-American experiences went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Since then, Lahiri has written more stories, two novels in English, and one in Italian, a language she only learned in the last decade. *Whereabouts* is her English-language translation of that Italian novel, and reading it feels like reading language dissolving into light; it's literary art in the highest sense. From the publisher: "Lahiri's narrator, a woman questioning her place in the world, wavers between stasis and movement, between the need to belong and the refusal to

form lasting ties. The city she calls home acts as a companion and interlocutor: traversing the streets around her house, and in parks, piazzas, museums, stores, and coffee bars, she feels less alone. We follow her to the pool she frequents, and to the train station that leads to her mother, who is mired in her own solitude after her husband's untimely death. Among those who appear on this woman's path are colleagues with whom she feels ill at ease, casual acquaintances, and 'him,' a shadow who both consoles and unsettles her. Until one day at the sea, both overwhelmed and replenished by the sun's vital heat, her perspective will abruptly change."

**Klara and the Sun, by Kazuo Ishiguro.** From his 1989 Booker Prize winning novel *Remains of the Day* to every book since, Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro has demonstrated himself as one of the most powerful novelists working in English across any genre and time period that he turns his imagination towards. Telling the story of his latest novel *Klara and the Sun* from the point of view of an AI learning to...be, seems the most elegant solution to the problem of telling the story of now, and the future now. From the publisher: "Klara and the Sun, the first novel by Kazuo Ishiguro since he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, tells the story of Klara, an Artificial Friend with outstanding observational qualities, who, from her place in the store, watches carefully the behavior of those who come in to browse, and of those who pass on the street outside. She remains hopeful that a customer will soon choose her. *Klara and the Sun* is a thrilling book that offers a look at our changing world through the eyes of an unforgettable narrator, and one that explores the fundamental question: what does it mean to love?"

## NONFICTION

**Blow Your House Down, by Gina Frangello.** We often write a memoir because it is the book we need to write to move onto anything else in our life. This is why Gina Frangello, author of four novels, wrote this much talked about memoir about poverty, aging, parenting, teaching, illness, marriage, love, and the loss of love. From the publisher: "Blow Your House Down is a powerful testimony about the ways our culture seeks to cage women in traditional narratives of self-sacrifice and erasure. Frangello uses her personal story to examine the place of women in contemporary society: the violence they experience, the rage they suppress, the ways their bodies often reveal what they cannot say aloud, and finally, what it means to transgress 'being good' in order to reclaim your own life."

**My Time Will Come, by Ian Manuel.** Humans are kept in boxes in prison. Young people are tried as adults. Black people are incarcerated at five times the rate of white people in America. Poet Ian Manuel's memoir about his being sentenced as a 14-year-old to life in prison with no parole and his spending 18 consecutive—consecutive—years in solitary confinement is a heartbreaking expression of these urgent problems. From the publisher: "Capturing the fullness of his humanity, here is Manuel's powerful testimony of growing up homeless in a neighborhood riddled with poverty, gang violence, and drug abuse—and of his efforts to rise above his circumstances, only to find himself, partly through his own actions, imprisoned for

two-thirds of his life, eighteen years of which were spent in solitary confinement. Here is the story of how he endured the savagery of the United States prison system, and how his victim, an extraordinary woman, forgave him and bravely advocated for his freedom, which was achieved by an Equal Justice Initiative push to address the barbarism of our judicial system and bring about 'just mercy.'"

**Everybody: A Book About Freedom, by Olivia Laing.** I loved Laing's brilliant 2016 book, *The Lonely City*, about art, writing, cities, and loneliness. So as bodies and body politics are interwoven into our storytelling and political lives, I am much looking forward to reading Laing's new book on the subject. From the publisher: "The body is a source of pleasure and of pain, at once hopelessly vulnerable and radiant with power. In her ambitious, brilliant sixth book, Olivia Laing charts an electrifying course through the long struggle for bodily freedom, using the life of the renegade psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich to explore gay rights and sexual liberation, feminism, and the civil rights movement. Despite its many burdens, the body remains a source of power, even in an era as technologized and automated as our own. Arriving at a moment in which basic bodily rights are once again imperiled, *Everybody* is an investigation into the forces arranged against freedom and a celebration of how ordinary human bodies can resist oppression and reshape the world."

**The Anthropocene Reviewed, by John Green.** I didn't want to love John Green's podcast, *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, but I do, I do. The idea for John Green, best-selling novelist of *The Fault in Our Stars*, to "review" aspects of contemporary life for each podcast episode—the Anthropocene being the proposed geologic epoch we are currently in—seemed to me kitsch, sentimental. And they are sentimental, Green's reviews of soccer, vaccines, and much else, but only in the most communal and ennobling ways. Sentiment attaches us to this world, and Green's insights into our current age feels like medicine in a hard time. Listen to the podcast; if you love it like I do, pick up the book. All 250,000 copies are signed. From the publisher: "In this remarkable symphony of essays adapted and expanded from his groundbreaking podcast, bestselling author John Green reviews different facets of the human-centered planet on a five-star scale—from the QWERTY keyboard and sunsets to Canada geese and Penguins of Madagascar. Funny, complex, and rich with detail, the reviews chart the contradictions of contemporary humanity. As a species, we are both far too powerful and not nearly powerful enough, a paradox that came into sharp focus as we faced a global pandemic that both separated us and bound us together."

**Genius Makers, by Cade Metz.** More and more each day it feels like it's AI's world and we are all just working and shopping and scrolling social media in it. From the publisher: "What does it mean to be smart? To be human? What do we really want from life and the intelligence we have, or might create? With deep and exclusive reporting, across hundreds of interviews, New York Times Silicon Valley journalist Cade Metz brings you into the rooms where these questions are being answered. Where an extraordinarily powerful new artificial intelligence has been built into our biggest companies, our social discourse, and our daily lives, with few of us even noticing."

## COMICS

**I Never Promised You a Rose Garden, by Mannie Murphy.** I grew up in Oregon and I have realized since I left that I never thought enough (or did enough) about the violence of race associated with the place and its history there. I also grew up admiring Gus Van Sant and River Phoenix movies there in the 1980s and 90s. Mannie Murphy's graphic memoir and reportage explores the racial and queer culture of Portland and Oregon in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and their overlap with and sifting through via Van Sant and Phoenix. This book is powerful and unnerving, and I plan to read multiple more times this summer. Like the best comics, it is both an art experience and a reading experience at once, each page a watercolor image above handwritten text. From the publisher: "This work of graphic nonfiction, told in the style of an illustrated diary, begins as an affectionate reminiscence of the author's 1990s teenage infatuation with the late actor River Phoenix but morphs into a remarkable, sprawling account of the city of Portland and state of Oregon's dark history of white nationalism."

**The Secret to Superhuman Strength, by Alison Bechdel.** I recommend Bechdel's graphic memoirs and comics to everyone all the time. Her debut book, *Fun Home*, I've taught in the classroom more than any other work, as it's as insightful about the human experience and the human need for art and storytelling as anything I've ever read or seen. So her latest book, *The Secret to Superhuman Strength*, I'm much looking forward to. It should be of interest to readers, artists, and, well, anyone who has considered setting foot in a Crossfit gym. From the publisher: "Comics and cultural superstar Alison Bechdel delivers a deeply layered story of her fascination, from childhood to adulthood, with every fitness craze to come down the pike: from Jack LaLanne in the 60s...to the existential oddness of present-day spin class. Readers will see their athletic or semi-active pasts flash before their eyes through an ever-evolving panoply of running shoes, bicycles, skis, and sundry other gear. But the more Bechdel tries to improve herself, the more her self appears to be the thing in her way. She turns for enlightenment to Eastern philosophers and literary figures, including Beat writer Jack Kerouac, whose search for self-transcendence in the great outdoors appears in moving conversation with the author's own. This gifted artist and not-getting-any-younger exerciser comes to a soulful conclusion. The secret to superhuman strength lies not in six-pack abs, but in something much less clearly defined: facing her own non-transcendent but all-important interdependence with others."

**Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness, by Kristen Radtke.** I've been lonely. And I love art and books, and have been impressed by the delicate beauty of Radtke's work over the years, so I'm much looking forward to this one. From the publisher: "There is a silent epidemic in America: loneliness. Shameful to talk about and often misunderstood, loneliness is everywhere, from the most major of metropolises to the smallest of towns. In *Seek You*, Kristen Radtke's wide-ranging exploration of our inner lives and public selves, Radtke digs into the ways in which we attempt to feel closer to one another, and the distance that remains. Through the lenses of gender and violence, technology and art, Radtke ushers us through a history of loneliness and longing, and shares what feels impossible to share."

## POETRY

**If God Is a Virus, by Seema Yasmin.** This new book of documentary poetry from acclaimed writer Seema Yasmin argues for art that can, and does, change the world—not to mention it is disturbingly timely. From the publisher: “Based on original reporting from West Africa and the United States, and the poet's experiences as a doctor and journalist, *If God Is A Virus* charts the course of the largest and deadliest Ebola epidemic in history, telling the stories of Ebola survivors, outbreak responders, journalists and the virus itself. Documentary poems explore which human lives are valued, how editorial decisions are weighed, what role the aid industrial complex plays in crises, and how medical myths and rumor can travel faster than microbes. These poems also give voice to the virus. Eight percent of the human genome is inherited from viruses and the human placenta would not exist without a gene descended from a virus. *If God Is A Virus* reimagines viruses as givers of life and even authors of a viral-human self-help book.”

## CHILDREN

**Life Doesn't Frighten Me, by Maya Angelou and Jean-Michel Basquiat.** A book for children that combines the poetry of Angelou with the art of Basquiat...I can't imagine that I need to say more to entice anyone. (But then I've got a Basquiat tattoo on my arm and teach Angelou's poetry.) I want to un-age my own children just to read this book with them. Luckily, none of us ever stop being young, and there are plenty of children I imagine I will gift this book to for years to come. From the publisher: “Maya Angelou's brave, defiant poem celebrates the courage within each of us, young and old. From the scary thought of panthers in the park to the unsettling scene of a new classroom, fearsome images are summoned and dispelled by the power of faith in ourselves. Angelou's strong words are matched by the daring vision of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose childlike style reveals the powerful emotions and fanciful imaginings of childhood. Together, Angelou's words and Basquiat's paintings create a place where every child, indeed every person, may experience his or her own fearlessness.”