

People & Places

Books

Chef pens struggles, success

A new collection of tales by Murakami

By Ann Levin

'First Person Singular,' by Haruki Murakami (Alfred A. Knopf)

Haruki Murakami has a new collection of stories told in the first person by an unnamed older man obsessed with baseball, music, and the porous borders between memory, reality and dreams.

He may describe himself as a "bland, run-of-the-mill guy," as in the story "Cream" - about a young man's encounter with an aging mystic - but Murakami Man is more like a walking encyclopedia who has a problem with women - mainly, that he can't seem to get past their physical appearance.



Murakami

Thus, in "On a Stone Pillow," we have his memories of a melancholy poet and her "shapely round breasts"; in "With the Beatles," a first girlfriend with "small yet full lips" and a wire bra. (Both, by the way, are suicidal.) In "Carnaval," the one story where a woman has agency, we are told over and over how ugly she is.

The best story in the collection, translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel, is "Charlie Parker Plays Bossa Nova." It is built around the counterfactual premise that the legendary inventor of bebop jazz didn't die in 1955 at age 34 but lived into the 1960s, long enough to collaborate on a bossa nova album - a musical pairing as unlikely as that of the Carpenters and Cardi B.

At the end of the story, when Bird appears in a dream and performs "Corcovado" on his alto sax, the narrator is transported. It was music, he reflected, "that made you feel like something in the very structure of your body had been reconfigured, ever so slightly."

In "Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey," an unnamed narrator with the same flat affect as all the others befriends the titular monkey at a rural inn. After a long night of drinking beer and eating snacks - another favorite pastime of these loner men-the monkey tells him about the ruse he has used to satisfy his longing for female humans in a species-appropriate way.

At first, you are carried along in the slipstream of bizarre but plausible detail - a feat Murakami achieves through the use of banal, if not clichéd, language: "Honestly, it felt odd to be seated next to a monkey, sharing a beer, but I guess you get used to it."

But if you're not a fan of Murakami's dreamy vibe and magical realism, if you think that life is confounding and interesting enough without needing to add fairy dust, then this probably isn't the book for you. You might ask yourself, why a Shinagawa monkey and not a tiger or leopard? In Murakami World, the answer would seem to be, why not?

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"Finding Freedom," by Erin French (Celadon)

Erin French is a rising culinary star known for intimate gourmet dinners crafted from hyperlocal ingredients. Her magical restaurant, The Lost Kitchen, is located in an abandoned 19th century mill in her tiny hometown of Freedom, Maine. There's even a show about the restaurant on Chip and Joanna Gaines' Magnolia Network.

Sounds like a classic American success story, right? But as is so often the case, success did not come easy. French chronicles her struggles, failures and triumphs in a lyrically written new memoir, "Finding Freedom."

The book begins with her idyllic childhood in rural Maine. But climbing trees and chasing frogs soon gives way to working long hours in her father's diner. He's a callous man who grins as his dog tears a live rooster to bits, and he won't stop his drunk buddies from making sexual remarks about French's teenage body. Despite their fraught relationship, what French learns from her dad about cooking unlocks her destiny: "Feeding a complete stranger a plate of food that you had made with attention and care ... brought me more joy than I had ever felt."

Pregnancy derails her college plans and she ends up in a toxic marriage. She channels her energy into running a private supper club and eventually a restaurant until it all comes crashing down: She's sidelined by a pill addiction, her husband closes the restaurant and she loses custody of her son.

Slowly she rebuilds. She gets divorced, gets her son back, and turns an old Airstream into a portable kitchen for pop-up suppers. Then she opens The Lost Kitchen. When thousands of reservation requests pour in for her 40-seat dinners, her redemption is complete.

The book ends before the pandemic begins. But this compelling, authentic tale of grit and determination leaves no doubt that French will find her way through this challenge, just like she did all the others.

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"A Million Reasons Why" by Jessica Strawser (St. Martin's Press)

Jessica Strawser's "A Million Reasons Why" is a thrilling story of what happens when a long-held family secret comes to light.

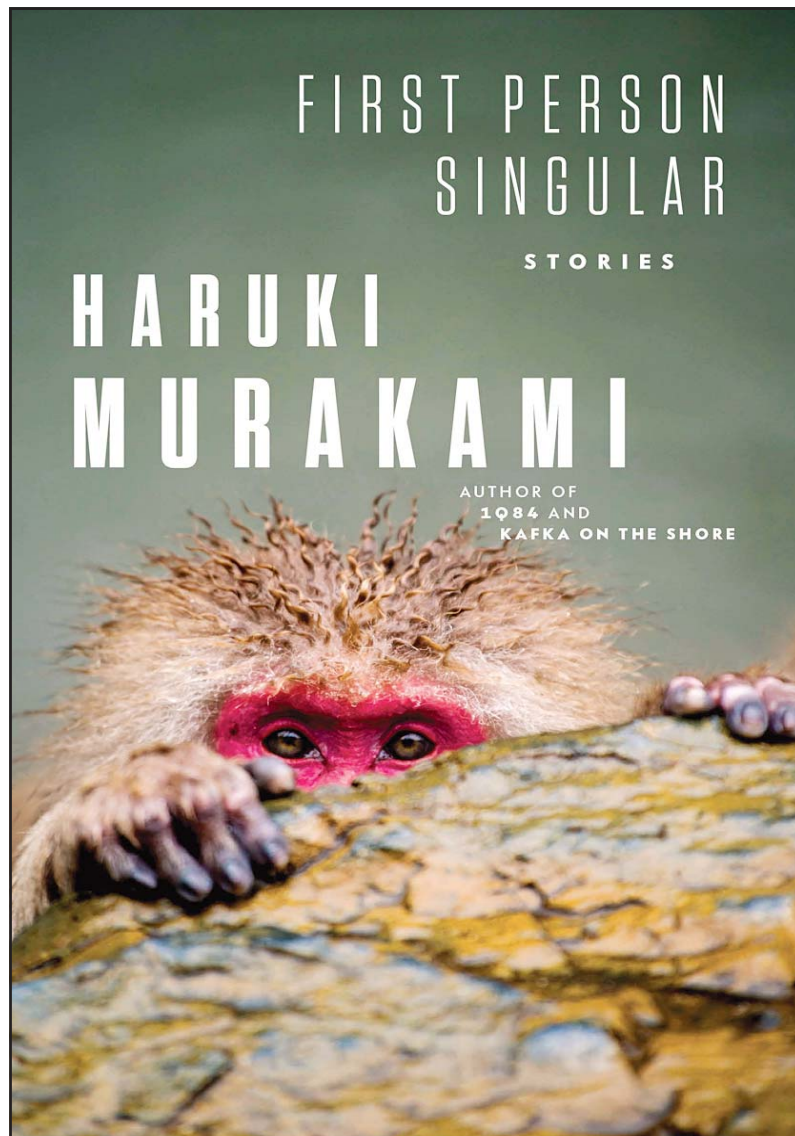
After her family receives DNA testing kits for Christmas, Caroline, a wife and mother of three, is stunned to discover she has a half-sister who is almost exactly her age, the product of a scandalous affair by her father. While the rest of her family wants nothing to do with Sela, Caroline is desperate to meet her.

The pair quickly form a friendship and bond over their mutual love of motherhood, but Caroline doesn't know that Sela is dying of kidney failure. And it turns out, Caroline may be her only hope for survival.

As Caroline and Sela continue to spend time together, they also begin to piece together the past. In doing so, even more family secrets are unveiled.

This is not your typical story of discovering a long-lost family member. The intricacies of the character's lives are fascinating, their secrets unpredictable, and the challenges they face infinitely complex.

With this story, Strawser reveals just how complicated life can be. Through these dynamic characters, she shows that no one is ever truly a villain or a hero, but instead, we are all a beautiful and messy mix of both. (AP)



This cover image released by Knopf shows 'First Person Singular' by Haruki Murakami. (AP)



This cover image released by Celadon shows 'Finding Freedom: A Cook's Story Remaking a Life from Scratch' by Erin French. (AP)



In this November 2019 file photo, renowned Japanese scriptwriter Sugako Hashida speaks during an interview in Atami, west of Tokyo. Hashida, best known for the internationally popular TV drama series "Oshin," has died of lymphoma. She was 95. (AP)



DMX



Trethewey

Variety

WHITE PLAINS, NY: Supporters and family of the rapper DMX chanted his name and offered up prayers Monday outside the New York hospital where he remained on life support.

The 50-year-old was admitted to the hospital on Friday, following a heart attack.

The crowd outside White Plains Hospital called "DMX! DMX!" and when urged to by the main speaker, crossed their arms in the shape of an X. A woman's sobs reverberated as those in the audience heard a recording of the rapper, whose birth name is Earl Simmons.

Simmons' longtime lawyer, Murray Richman, said Sunday that the rapper was admitted to the intensive care unit but he was not sure what caused the heart attack.

DMX made his rap debut in 1998, and has released seven albums in a career that has included three Grammy nominations. He also acted in several movies.

But substance abuse has been a struggle for him over the years, including in 2019 when he canceled shows to go to a rehabilitation facility. (AP)

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NEW YORK: Novelist James McBride, former US poet laureate Natasha Trethewey and science fiction great Samuel R. Delaney are among this year's winners of Anisfield-Wolf awards for books that confront racism and help promote diversity.

McBride's "Deacon King Kong" won for fiction and Trethewey's memoir "Memorial Drive" was a co-winner for nonfiction, along with Vincent Brown's "Tacky's Revolt." Delaney, known for such influential novels as "Babel-17" and "Dahlgren," received a lifetime achievement prize. Victoria Chang's "Obit" was honored for the best work of poetry.

The winners were announced Monday. The new Anisfield-Wolf winners bring us fresh insights on race and the human condition," jury chair Henry Louis Gates Jr said in a statement.

"This year, we honor a brilliant military history ('Tacky's Revolt'), a breakout poetry collection that wrestles with mortality ('Obit'), a novel bursting with love and trouble centered around a Brooklyn church ('Deacon King Kong'), and a memoir by a daughter reclaiming her mother's story ('Memorial Drive'). (AP)

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NEW YORK: Paul Simon is the latest icon to sell his rich catalog of songs.

Obituaries

Cohen, much-honored AP national writer, dead

Hashida, who wrote 'Oshin,' dies at 95

TOKYO, April 6, (AP): Renowned Japanese scriptwriter Sugako Hashida, best known for the internationally popular TV drama series "Oshin," has died of lymphoma. She was 95.

Hashida had been treated for the illness since earlier this year. She died Sunday at her home in Atami, west of Tokyo, according to Pinko Izumi, an actress who appeared in many of the dramas Hashida wrote, including "Oshin."

Born in Korea in 1925 during the Japanese colonization of the Korean Peninsula, Hashida moved to Japan in the late 1930s and lived those early years in Osaka.

She joined the Shochiku film studio in 1949 before becoming a freelance scriptwriter for television dramas, including the hugely popular morning drama series "Oshin" broadcast in 1983-1984 on NHK public television.

The fictionalized drama is based on the biography of a Japanese woman who co-founded a famous supermarket chain and her multiple hardships from her childhood until her final days in the 1980s.

"Oshin" was broadcast in more than 60 countries and gained high acclaim.

Her other popular dramas included "Wataru Seken wa Oni Bakari," or "Making it Through," a family drama series that started in 1990 and aired more than 500 episodes.

Actress Izumi, who was in both "Oshin" and "Wataru Seken wa Oni Bakari," said she was at Hashida's bedside when she died.

"I said to her 'Mama,' then she briefly opened her eyes, then it was as if she went back to sleep," Izumi said in an interview with Japanese media.

Hashida wrote a book asking for the right to die in dignity. According to her request, there will be no funeral.

Hashida received the Japan Order of Culture last year.

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Sharon Cohen, a matchless reporter who told American stories with great skill and compassion over more than four decades at The Associated Press, died Monday at her Chicago home. She was 68.

At her death, more than a year after

she was diagnosed with brain cancer, Cohen was a national writer, a prestigious position she had held for 20 years. From her base in Chicago, she unreeled an array of stories about the triumphs and tragedies of people both ordinary and extraordinary.

There was the story of Vashti Risdall, the foster mother of 162 children who retired at age 96 only because her 74-year-old daughter insisted. Of Marine Sgt. Merlin German, the "Miracle Man" who survived a bomb blast in Iraq, dancing with his mom after 100 surgeries. Of barber Gilbert Peppin, who lived under a shadow for 30 years, unjustly suspected of his wife's murder.

Every story got the Sharon Cohen treatment: determined reporting, zealous fact-checking, direct and evocative writing. She knew no other way.

"Sharon's genius was in capturing the stories of Americans as they lived out the intense changes and disruptions of the last 40 years - struggling when their town's factory closed, trying to pull away from drugs or violence, bewildered when they came back from war," said Sally Buzbee, the AP's senior vice president and executive editor.

Compassionate

"Her stories often made me cry. They always opened our minds. As a reporter and writer, she was a dream - both utterly precise and dogged and also hugely compassionate."

Cohen was an idea machine, never comfortable unless she had one story she was working on, another on deck and others in line. In the days before the internet, when she was a regional reporter covering the Midwest, Cohen subscribed to a score of small newspapers; she was always looking for that three-paragraph brief on page 38 that might turn into something special.

She gathered far more research than she could ever use, filling file cabinets throughout the Chicago bureau.

"You know the iceberg principle of writing, where most of the writer's research and knowledge is below the surface?" said former AP editor John Dowling, a longtime friend and colleague. "The bottom of Sharon's story-iceberg was

more like an Antarctic ice shelf."

She wrote just about every kind of story imaginable in the course of her career, but patterns emerged. She wrote true crime stories - a ring that used babies to smuggle drugs, for example - but also larger pieces about women jailed because of opioids, about juveniles in prison, about the failure to investigate the disappearances of Native American women.

She wrote about American workers: struggling farms, the lives of meatpackers 100 years after Upton Sinclair wrote "The Jungle," auto workers forced to commute 500 miles to new jobs when their plants closed.

She wrote about America's fighting men and women. In 2008, she told the story of "The Long Haul" - a 15,000-word, seven-part serial that won smashing front-page displays in newspapers across the country.

"This is the story," she wrote, "of a very long deployment of a very long war, of how members of the 1st Brigade Combat Team/34th Infantry Division lived and died in Iraq, how their families endured while they were gone, and how what happened in a far distant land still resonates today."

And she wrote about her native city. Cohen was a devoted daughter of Chicago. She never left it, aside from attending the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She worked for community newspapers, the suburban edition of the Chicago Tribune and United Press International before joining the AP in 1979.

She knew Chicago's history and its neighborhoods, loved its rambunctious politics, railed against its corruption and greatly admired its hard-working people. She also felt that it was too often stereotyped.

And so she wrote about Urban Prep, an inner-city school that had the audacious goal of sending every member of the Class of 2010 to college - and succeeded. And one of her final stories, published last fall, was about Auburn Gresham, a Black neighborhood where people found hope despite their struggles with COVID-19, violent protests, gun violence and economic misery.

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Over Troubled Water," "The Boxer," "The Sound of Silence," "Mrs. Robinson," "Homeward Bound," "I Am a Rock" and "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover," among others. (AP)

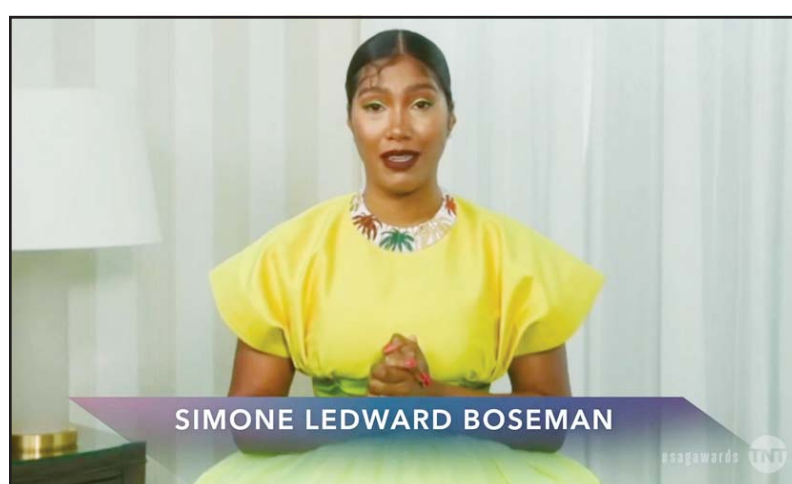
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CLEVELAND: Patrick Carney wasn't nervous before his first live drumming gig in more than a year, just honored. A lifelong Indians fan and one half of The Black Keys, the Grammy Award-winning rock duo from Akron, Ohio, Carney filled in Monday at Cleveland's home opener for drummer John Adams, who is recovering from heart surgery.

Adams missed his first home opener since 1973, ending a run that has featured him sitting high in the left-field bleachers and pounding a steady beat whenever the Indians are hitting.

Carney was thrilled to be able to sit in for Adams.

"I'm stoked to be here for John," Carney told the Associated Press about two hours before the Indians hosted the Kansas City Royals at Progressive Field. "It's the best seat in the house and I wish John could be here, obviously. When I heard he wasn't healthy enough to make it, I thought it was good way to pay some respect to him and show him some love." (AP)



SIMONE LEDWARD BOSEMAN

In this video grab provided by the SAG Awards, Simone Ledward Boseman, wife of the late Chadwick Boseman, accepts the award for outstanding performance by a male actor in a leading role for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" on his behalf during the 27th annual Screen Actors Guild Awards on April 4. (AP)