

People & Places

Books

Soyinka writes unique tale

'Little Pieces of Hope' aims to uplift reader

By Molly Sprayregen

'Little Pieces of Hope: Happy-Making Things in a Difficult World,' by Todd Doughty (Penguin Life)

Todd Doughty's "Little Pieces of Hope: Happy-Making Things in a Difficult World" is a joyful compilation of lists meant to remind readers of all the little things in life that make us happy.

Doughty covers everything from a Sunday stroll beside the water to organizing the junk drawer to people who rescue dogs and cats to a good suit. Mingled among the lists are also short, pleasant essays in which Doughty offers his thoughts on things like small towns, summer reading and fall.



Doughty

The book is all about boiling life down to what really matters, and its simplicity is part of its bountiful charm. It's remarkable, really, that Doughty could come up with this many happy-making things. The book is not short and the font is not large, yet page after page, he continues to remind us how many reasons we have to smile.

Doughty's list-making project started on Instagram on March 11, 2020, the same day the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic. A year and a half later, his musings remain as relevant as ever. At a time when everything still feels scary, exhausting, and overwhelming, "Little Pieces of Hope" may just be the antidote we need.

But it's not necessarily a book that should be read from cover to cover. Despite the many happy-making moments, it can be a bit tedious to read a novel-length book of lists for a long period of time. Instead, this should be a book you keep around when you need a little jolt, something to lift you up if you're feeling down. As even Doughty suggests in the opening pages, you can read the book in order or flip to random pages. He even proposes crossing things out and adding in your own ideas. For him, this book is a living document, a way for each reader to reflect on their lives and live every day as happily as possible.

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"Chronicles From the Land of the Happiest People on Earth," by Wole Soyinka (Pantheon)

With "Chronicles From the Land of the Happiest People on Earth," Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka has created an exceedingly unique tale, one that feels as if it has a tone and genre all its own.

In this gruesome crime thriller meets political and religious satire, high-ranking leaders in a fictionalized Nigeria are part of a vast underground business selling human body parts, which are believed to hold supernatural qualities. Surgeon Kighare Menka is horrified when he is invited to join this grisly network. While there are many subplots, the story largely follows Menka as he clings desperately to his own morality while navigating a world filled with seemingly endless horrors and violence.

For those willing to work to untangle the dense language and complex storylines that weave their way through the novel, "Chronicles From the Land of the Happiest People on Earth" could very well be considered a great novel. It's sharp commentary on how corruption can infect a nation is powerful, and it is rich with humor, irony, and plot twists. Nevertheless, the style and language make it exceedingly difficult to grasp. It is easy to get lost in the multitude of characters and crisscrossing narratives. For those willing to ride the wave and who are seeking a story that challenges them, it could make a great choice. However, it isn't right for those looking for a light or easily digestible read.

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"The Lincoln Highway," by Amor Towles (Viking)

Home is different for 18-year-old Emmett Watson when he returns from a juvenile prison sentence for accidentally killing a bully in a fistfight.

It's the 1950s in Nebraska. Emmett's father has died and the family farm was foreclosed on. Emmett is now the caretaker for his little brother, Billy.

What the brothers do have, aside from each other, is Emmett's prize Studebaker and an envelope with \$3,000 cash their father left.

So begins Amor Towles' new novel, "The Lincoln Highway." This is Towles' third novel. He authored the celebrated "A Gentleman in Moscow" and "Rules of Civility." Before Towles started writing, he worked as a financier.

The Lincoln Highway was the first transcontinental highway in the United States, crossing 13 states.

"It was invented in 1912 and was named for Abraham Lincoln and was the very first road to stretch from one end of America to another," the book reads. "It starts in Times Square and it ends 3,390 miles away in Lincoln Park in San Francisco."

But the highway is only a peripheral setting for Emmett's story. Most of the book takes place in New York City.

Billy convinces Emmett to drive to San Francisco in hopes of finding their mother, who abandoned the family. The only word from her is a trail of postcards. Emmett agrees to the sojourn but he's surprised to learn two boys, friends from prison, had stowed away in the warden's car.

Dutchess and Woolley brazenly steal the car and head to New York City. Once Emmett realizes his only possession was taken, he and Billy hop a freight train to New York. They meet a cast of characters competing for different interests.

The story is told through the perspectives of the different characters. If you like history and adventure, "The Lincoln Highway" might be for you. It's nearly 600 pages but doesn't feel overdrawn. The pace is fast and writing concise, making it a digestible read whether in bed or at a loud coffee shop. (AP)

Variety

LOS ANGELES: A top Netflix executive said **Dave Chappelle's** special "The Closer" doesn't cross "the line on hate" and will remain on the streaming service despite fallout over the comedian's remarks about the transgender community.In an internal memo, co-CEO **Ted Sarandos** told managers that "some talent" may join third parties in calling for the show's removal, adding, "which we are not going to do."

Netflix declined comment on the memo, which was reported Monday by Variety.

But the company responded to news reports it had suspended three employees, including one, **Terra Field**, who'd criticized Chappelle's special in tweets. Field identifies herself on Twitter as a senior software engineer at Netflix and as trans.

"It is absolutely untrue to say that we have suspended any employees for tweeting about this show. Our employees are encouraged to disagree openly and we support their right to do so," Netflix said in a statement.

According to a person familiar with the matter, the three employees joined a quarterly meeting for company directors and vice presidents without gaining authorization. The person, who wasn't authorized to discuss the situation publicly, said one worker was suspended as a result of an investigation.

What if any action was or might be taken against the other two workers was unknown.

Field didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. In her posts, she said that Chappelle was being criticized not because his comments are offensive but for the harm they do to the trans community, especially Black women.

Field included a list of trans and nonbinary men and women of color who she said had been killed, adding in each case that the victim "is not offended."

A representative for Chappelle didn't respond to a request for comment. (AP)

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BATON ROUGE, La: Louisiana's statewide book festival will be held virtually because of the coronavirus pandemic, with programs planned each weekend from Oct 30 through Nov 14.

This year marks the 17th annual free event to celebrate readers and writers. The festival, which draws tens of thousands of people, usually takes place in and around the Louisiana State Capitol. But its 40 programs and more than 80 authors and presenters are moving online this year.

"While we look forward to the in-person return next year, we are excited to be able to bring the festival to you virtually this year," Lt. Gov. **Billy Nungesser**, whose office oversees the festival, said in a statement.

A full schedule of programs will be available online later this month at louisianabookfestival.org. (AP)

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Meek Mill performs at Global Citizen Live in Central Park in New York on Sept. 25, 2021. Mill is back with his fifth solo studio album, 'Expensive Pain.' The Philadelphia rapper is planning a concert on Oct. 23 at Madison Square Garden to celebrate the new album. (AP)

Music

Album explores balancing fame with mental scars

Mill's 'Pain' comes with heavy cost

NEW YORK, Oct. 12, (AP): Meek Mill is not behind prison bars. He's no longer required to check in with parole officers. But despite this freedom, the rapper has not fully rid himself of invisible shackles that still confine him.

"I just feel like I'm a pullover away from running into the wrong cop, getting into a wild situation," said the 34-year-old rapper and social activist, born Robert Williams. "My whole adult life, I was on probation the whole way. So, it's like a natural feeling. I would be lying if I said I felt totally free."

Feelings of uncertainty, along with fears of distrust and betrayal created from the ghosts of his past, have been seared into his new album, "Expensive Pain."

Staying true to his brand, Meek Mill's latest project explores balancing fame and wealth while carrying the mental scars from a rough Philadelphia upbringing. Like most things of value, his success has come with a cost.

"In the hood, I had 'poverty pain'... when I turned to the streets, I'm 15, 16 years old, not knowing what I'm going to eat at night, not knowing what you're going to wear tomorrow because we left the house. Your mom at work or dad dead," said the rapper, who was 5 when his father was murdered. "This pain I'm getting now, it's like I'm losing family members because I ain't letting people borrow money."

"Expensive Pain" is Meek Mill's first full-length project since 2018's Grammy-nominated "Championships" which came out seven months after his prison release following a controversial sentence in 2017 for technical probation violations involving a decade-old gun and drug possession case. The Pennsylvania trial judge sentenced him to two to four years in prison, but a court ordered his release in April 2018.

Credibility

On July 24, 2019, an appeals court tossed his conviction over doubts about the arresting officer's credibility. The next month, Meek Mill pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor gun charge in a deal that resolved the 2007 arrest, ending his legal limbo with the criminal justice system. He is now an activist for justice reform.

Meek Mill's 18-track "Expensive Pain," featuring production from Boi-1da, Cardo, in-house Dream Chasers producer Nick Papz and others, boasts some of hip-hop's brightest young stars such as Lil Baby, Lil Uzi Vert, Young Thug, Lil Durk and R&B star Kehlani. Meek Mill is planning an "Expensive Pain: Meek Mill & Friends" concert Oct. 23 at Madison Square Garden.

JACKSON, Miss: The Mississippi Book Festival is being shown online after the in-person event was canceled because of concerns about the coronavirus pandemic.

Organizers say videos of 31 panel discussions have been recorded in the past month. Those will be available Tuesday on the festival's website, msbookfestival.com.

"We've got an amazing group of authors and moderators who have rallied to record more than 35 hours of great conversations

While known for gritty lyrics and rapid, aggressive rhyme delivery, Meek Mill expands his repertoire this time around. He takes a page from his younger collaborators by experimenting with melodic rap — the sound that now dominates hip-hop — on songs like "On My Soul," "We Slide" featuring Young Thug and "Angels (RIP Lil Snupe)."

"Through quarantine, I had like a vicious writer's block because every time I try to go to a next level, I get real uncomfortable in trying new things. And melody is a lane where all the younger guys been in," said Meek Mill, who revealed that he practiced harmonizing for nearly a year. "I just got in there and just tried my own thing and stuck to it, and I kind of created an extra lane for my style."

Roc Nation executive Mike Brinkley says Meek Mill is part of a handful of current artists respected enough to bridge between older generations of rap fans who place emphasis on lyrics and writing and younger fans who tend to fixate on the overall vibe of the music.

"He can still get the respect of the older hip-hop generation — the Jays (Jay-Z), the Nases with his lyrical ability — but also will still relate and still appeal to these younger artists," said Brinkley.

Expertise

While Meek Mill holds his own with melodic rap, he didn't abandon his expertise.

On "Halo," which features rising R&B singer Brent Faiyaz, Meek Mill illustrates the juxtaposition of making it out of an impoverished community while family and friends remain: "I just wanna go to my hood, wheelee a dirt bike, and post up on the block with the ones that think that I forgot, how we was standin' on the corner with them Glocks. But I know if I go back to that corner, I'll get shot, or get robbed, in a box to make me fade away," he rhymes.

"You're living in so much trauma and buried in trauma, you never even get a chance to really develop and become the person you're supposed to be," said Meek Mill about his hometown Philadelphia, which had 499 murders in 2020. "You see somebody get murdered yesterday, you ain't going to be thinking about that for a week... You're gonna be thinking about that for like 12 years on a daily basis. And if something else happens next week in your neighborhood, it's gonna pile up."

But this fifth solo studio project is not all tales of street life — this is Meek Mill after all. There are plenty of tracks like "Outside (100 MPH)" and "Sharing Locations" featuring Lil Baby and Lil Durk, which has

charted on the Billboard Global 200, that celebrate the pleasures that come with being one of the world's biggest rap stars.

Both "Hot" with Moneybagg Yo and "Me (FWM)," which samples Lil Jon's "Bia Bia" featuring a standout verse from ASAP Ferg are club-ready bounce tracks, and "Ride for You" with Kehlani is a feel-good record showcasing the lost art of the hip-hop and R&B duet.

Meek Mill, who politely requested an earlier interview so he could make the two-hour trek from New York to the South Jersey area to attend his 10-year-old's first football game, also reveals small glimpses of life as a dad. He also has a 1-year-old son.

Experience

On the album's title track, he says: "I keep my dreams for the fame and all the spoiled lil' (expletive), 'cause I got two sons that's kings and they like spoiled lil' bros, and they want everything — they call, I buy — I order them clothes."

Speaking on fatherhood, Meek said "I grew up in a bad environment, but my son won't have to experience that. And, you know, just (teaching) him to become better than me is a responsibility that I took on... For my son, his dad is on the road more, me and his mom not together — we're not in the same household. He doesn't get the luxury of a full family, but he's not going to live the way I came up. He's going to live probably 100 times better."

In August, the "Dreams and Nightmares" rapper received the Nelson Mandela Changemaker Award for his work as co-chair with the REFORM Alliance. Jay-Z, Meek Mill and others formed the coalition to lobby for changes to state probation and parole laws.

He may not have envisioned his own legal woes would spur him to social activism or seek changes in the same type of neighborhoods that he grew up in, but he's not running from that work.

"He tries to be as positive as he can and be a positive influence without being preachy," said Brinkley. "He's open about, 'Look, I make mistakes every day. But try to look at what I do and try another way.'"

If Meek Mill had known that he'd experience prison, poverty — and the trauma that comes with them — as a gateway to the success he has now, would he pay those costs?

"Seeing people die and to have PTSD from that, it ain't worth it to get no money," explained Meek. "It just happened to be the situation. I appreciate it, and it's my life that built me into who I am. But it ain't never worth it."

about books and writing," executive director **Ellen Daniels** said in a news release. "Honoring these writers and continuing to engage our loyal and growing community of book lovers is what the festival is all about."Among the authors speaking are **Curtis Wilkie, Kiese Laymon, Nic Stone, W. Ralph Eubanks, Jerry Mitchell, Catherine Pierce, Beth Ann Fennelly, Mitch Landrieu, William Ferris, Angie Thomas, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Robert Khayat and Kai Bird.** (AP)

Kirsten Dunst, (left), and Benedict Cumberbatch pose for photographers upon arrival at the premiere of the film "The Power of the Dog" during the 2021 BFI London Film Festival in London, Monday, Oct. 11. (AP)



Sarandos



Chappelle