

Featuring 221 Industry-First Reviews of Fiction, Nonfiction, Children's and YA books

KIRKUS

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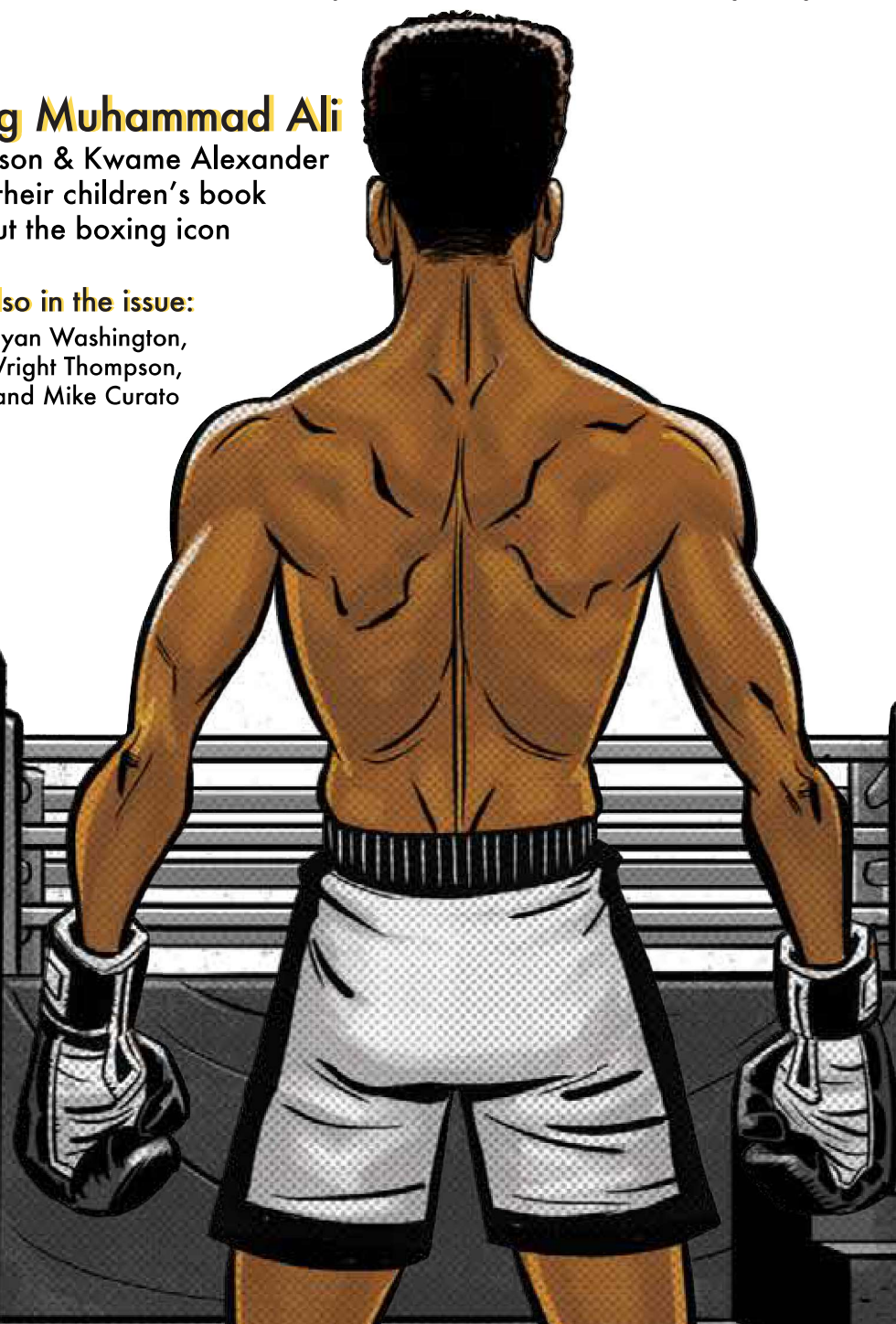
REVIEWS

Becoming Muhammad Ali

James Patterson & Kwame Alexander
discuss their children's book
about the boxing icon

Also in the issue:

Bryan Washington,
Wright Thompson,
and Mike Curato





QUEEN'S GAMBIT

Harper, Bradley

Seventh Street Books (288 pp.)

\$10.99 paper | \$9.99 e-book

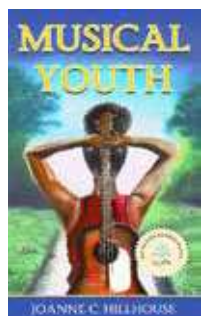
Sep. 17, 2019

978-1-64506-001-7

A 19th-century journalist becomes a potential target in a mission to kill the queen in this thriller.

It's 1897, and Margaret Harkness is a 40-year-old writer who describes herself as a suffragette and Christian socialist. She's working on freelance pieces for newspapers when she's diagnosed with "something resembling lupus." Her illness and age make her consider retirement to Australia, but she's doesn't have the money necessary for the journey. As a result, she accepts a job with her old friend professor Joseph Bell—a real-life figure who provided author Arthur Conan Doyle with the inspiration for his famed fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes. Bell's latest spy-hunting assignment takes the two to Germany, where Harkness works as Bell's translator. However, their mission coincides with that of Herman Ott, a man with a connection to the Russian revolutionary group Narodnaya Volya ("People's Will"), who's on a mission of revenge against Queen Victoria. Soon, Harkness discovers that she, herself, is in danger, as well. Harper, the author of *A Knife in the Fog* (2018), offers an excellent continuation of Harkness' adventures. All of the characters are vivid creations, but the middle-aged Harkness is a standout as a middle-aged female protagonist—a demographic that's unfortunately rare in thriller fiction. Harper's prose is often as humorous as it is well researched; an early scene in which Harkness meets Queen Victoria and deals with a snobbish chamberlain is but one of many fine examples of his skill. Harper seamlessly and enjoyably blends elements of historical fact with a thrilling story of political intrigue and anarchy. There are some slightly slow moments, but they're few and far between, and Harkness' sharp intellect and delightful personality more than make up for them.

A marvelous tale that will satisfy historical fiction enthusiasts.



MUSICAL YOUTH

Hillhouse, Joanne C.

Caribbean Reads Publishing (280 pp.)

\$16.99 | \$10.99 paper | Sep. 15, 2019

978-1-73382-996-0

978-1-73382-995-3 paper

Two very different teenagers with a shared gift for music fall in love over a summer in this YA novel by Antiguan and Barbudan author Hillhouse.

In Antigua, painfully shy Zahara can play guitar and has an encyclopedic knowledge of famous musicians, but she just can't work up the courage to perform in front of people—and her strict grandmother likely wouldn't allow it, anyway. Then she meets a cute,

confident boy who calls himself Shaka; he's not only her match in musical knowledge, he also writes his own rap verses with a schoolboy hip-hop crew. Shaka finds himself smitten by Zahara and tries to bring the anxious girl out of her shell. However, he has his own doubts and insecurities underneath his showman persona. Unlike the private-schooled, light-complexioned Zahara, public-schooled Shaka comes from the poor part of town and has been ridiculed all his life for his dark skin. As summer starts, the two teens grow closer, and a tender romance begins to blossom. Soon, Zahara and Shaka are caught in a whirlwind of creative collaboration, self-discovery, and family revelations that will leave them forever changed. In the tradition of the best YA stories, Hillhouse's characters are convincing because they're unfailingly realistic in their interactions, interests, and struggles. Her players sound like actual people, and specifically like Antiguan teens. Through their personal journeys, readers learn about issues that affect young people in Antigua and across the globe, including internalized racism, colorism, economic inequality, generational trauma, and old-fashioned teenage angst. This is not to say that the book is heavy or maudlin in tone; on the contrary, Hillhouse's writing is overwhelmingly joyful and explicitly invested in the power of Black joy, Black excellence, and Black self-love.

A charming and edifying work with a romance that will make YA fans swoon.



WEST OF IRELAND

Hoff, C.P.

Black Crow Books (346 pp.)

\$15.00 paper | \$4.99 e-book

Oct. 1, 2019

978-0-9812215-0-2

An Irish family in Canada faces a stark generational choice.

Hoff's impressive fiction debut centers on the O'Brien family in New Brunswick, Canada. Mr. O'Brien is garrulous and tries to be optimistic, holding court at The Donnybrook, the local pub, every day, and Mrs. O'Brien is sharp and forceful, haunted by the fact that all of her many children but one died very early ("Three boys and five girls buried one after the other in the churchyard, none living long enough to open their eyes to see, or their mouths to cry"). Tended by servants, the couple lives in a fine house with their only daughter, Mary-Kate, a high-spirited, bookish young woman who's continuously being proffered by her father to all the eligible or semi-eligible men in the town of Tnúth. Mary-Kate is the book's most complex dramatic creation, and the subject of her matrimonial future is a contentious one. Years ago, Mrs. O'Brien made a rash promise to her sister-in-law, Sister Mary-Frances, pledging one of her children to religious orders, and Sister Mary-Frances is determined to collect ("The long line of O'Briens was coming to an end," we're told, "and she wanted to make sure it finished with some dignity"). Hoff adds to these charged premises a third storyline that's customarily a staple of comedy rather than drama: Mrs.

