

LOCUS



FORTHCOMING BOOKS
FALL TITLES
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GARTH NIX

a wild idea

JAMES ISLINGTON

all the way to the end



(1942–2026)

JOHN CROWLEY

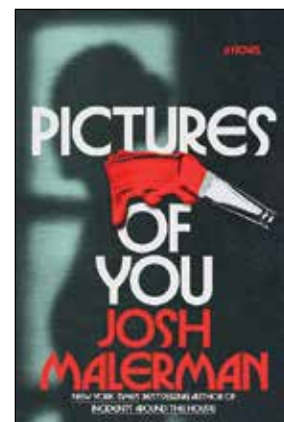
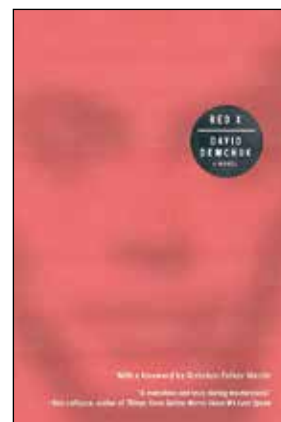
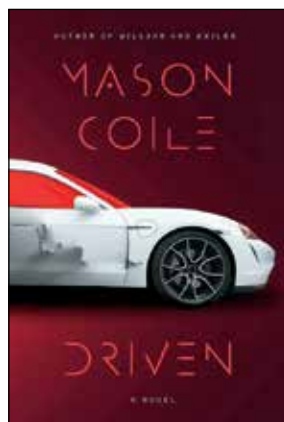
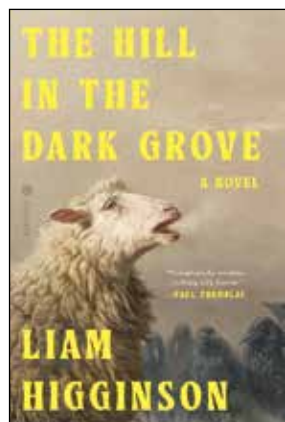
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Spotlight on TITHI LUADTHONG
AKA GRANDFAILURE



LOCUS LOOKS AT BOOKS: GABINO IGLESIAS



The Hill in the Dark Grove, Liam Higginson (Hogarth 979-8-21715-416-6, \$28.00, 304pp, hc) August 2026.

The Boatman, Alex Grecian (Bad Hand Books 978-0-06339-846-7, \$30.00, 336pp, hc) June 2026. Cover by Eileen Kai Hing Kwan.

Driven, Mason Coile (G.P. Putnam's Sons 979-8-21717-710-3, \$29.00, 224pp, hc) September 2026. Cover by Lorie Pagnozzi.

Red X, David Demchuk (Hell's Hundred 978-1-64129-847-6, \$19.95, 224pp, tp) June 2026. Cover by Matthew Flute.

Pictures of You, Josh Malerman (Del Rey 978-0-59372-315-9, \$28.00, 288pp, hc) September 2026. Cover by Fritz Metsch.

Perhaps the only downside of horror subgenres becoming popular is that the market soon floods with half-cooked narratives written to meet market demand. Recent examples include hardcore/extreme horror westerns, dark academia, and folk horror. That's why I was hesitant to read Liam Higginson's **The Hill in the Dark Grove**. The story called to me. A man excavating some old ruins and slowly losing his mind while everything falls apart around him with dash of Lovecraftian horror? Sign me up every time. And that's the thing. I've read many stories with "The Colour Out of Space" and archeological horror in their DNA and tons of tales about people slowly losing their minds, and finding a gem is harder and harder. Could Higginson's debut stand head and shoulders above most contemporary folk horror? One chapter and I had my answer: Yes, Higginson had the goods.

Carwyn and his wife Rhian live a harsh, quiet, isolated life up in a remote spot in the Welsh mountains. In the long months in which tourists don't invade their neck of the woods, the couple interacts more with their sheep than with other humans. And even with all their attention, the sheep aren't doing well, and they're definitely not bringing in enough money. But while there is plenty to worry about, Carwyn has a new obsession. He found a stone head in his land, which has belonged to his family longer than anyone can remember, and quickly realized there was much more to be discovered. Much more that was under the earth. Much more he has to dig out. And he does. Obsessively, while hiding from debt collectors, and to the detriment of his own

health, which isn't the only thing in clear decline.

Yes, you've read a version of this one before: a person finds something shady/bad/haunted/The One Ring to Rule Them All, they become obsessed with it and ignore the warnings, they hide it from their loved ones, etc. However, you haven't read Higginson's version of this, and his version is amazing.

For starters, the writing here is great. Higginson has a knack for mixing atmosphere and lyricism in precisely the right way to make his folk horror a standout. There are scenes here that get as gory as anything else out there, but the author's elegant prose never wavers. In fact, the writing is so lush and rich with description that it eventually becomes one of the novel's few drawbacks. Higginson is an amazing writer who needs an editor who will teach him when to pull back, when to cut sumptuous, page-long descriptions of things that ultimately don't push the story forward or contribute in any significant way.

While the writing is enough to stay, there's another element here that deserves a moment in the spotlight: the archaeological stuff and all related weirdness and darkness. Sick animals. Crumbling health. Agitated minds. Carwyn's growing fixation. Mysteries and people older than memory. Things covered by earth but unaffected by time. All of it is great, and I was left wanting much more of that.

The Hill in the Dark Grove is a spooky, unexpectedly gruesome (and I mean that in the best way possible), and deliciously atmospheric read. There are some slow parts and a few passages, but Higginson is an impressive new voice who made folk horror feel fresh, Lovecraftian, and academic all at once. I can't wait to see what he does next.

Short. Punchy. Twisty. Smart. I could keep going, but I won't. You get the point. **The Boatman**, Alex Grecian's latest, is all the good things he delivers in his novels but crammed into 150 pages.

The *Maria Calypso* is a cruise ship with all that entails as well as a robust cast of characters on board, including a writer. While on their latest journey, some of the passengers and crew notice someone is following them. A man in a suit in a small rowboat. If they go faster, the man goes faster. If they slow down, he slows down. Who is he? What does he want? Their options are limited, and **The Boatman** keeps coming, so despite a few deaths and some other mysterious events, the *Maria Calypso* keeps going. For a very long time.

I could say this is an entertaining story about death following some people around for decades,

but that would barely scratch the surface here. This is a story about that, sure, but also an exploration of the collapse of democracies, a study in human self-preservation, a tale of devotion, and a story about retaining our humanity no matter what and trying to do the right thing no matter the consequences. That Grecian managed to do all this and more in such a short, fast-paced book is a testament to his talent.

I could talk at length about how unexpected some conversations were or how there's just enough of each character to paint a picture of them through the years and little more and yet that still works somehow, but I also won't do that. This is a short book packed with surprises that readers deserve to discover themselves, so I won't go into any details, but one of my favorite elements of this story was how I never knew what would come next. Oh, I thought I knew, but Grecian always manages to swerve into an entirely new direction each and every time. That, honestly, is worth the price of admission.

The Boatman is eerie and relentless. Grecian is a master at keeping our attention as he plays with time, jumps across years, focuses on people we don't know that well. Two things are sure: There's always a price to pay for everything and **The Boatman** is always coming, and this tale has plenty of both. Another win for Grecian and another solid addition to the Bad Hand Books catalog, which is already quite impressive.

Mason Coile's (a pseudonym for the late, great Andrew Pyper) **Driven** is a fast, eerie, violent ride in a smart car with a haunted man who can't escape the ghosts no matter what he does. Wonderfully written and twisty, this short novel is a bittersweet reminder of Coile's talent and a great addition to Pyper's impressive, award-winning catalog.

Jamie Newcross's life is in shambles. His wife and baby daughter have abandoned him, he constantly feels broken, and every single place he moves to is haunted, which means he hasn't had a decent night of sleep in weeks. Given the state of things, Jamie's biggest focus is on disappearing, on finding a place where he will be left alone. To do that, he has a plan. Since no place is safe and they're all full of ghosts, Jamie thinks the way out is by buying a Lion, an AI-operated self-driving car. That can be his home, his safe place. And he finds one. One he can actually afford, which is the first red flag. The second? The smart car has a defect and will listen and follow orders, but it won't talk back to the driver. After the purchase, however, Jamie doesn't get any rest. In

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not happened; see Melissa Harrison's **The Given World** a few months ago, and now see **Alston Moor**. Told in a patient, attentive voice, Charnock's novel takes place on the titular moor, in the North of England, in 1548 and 2022. In 1548, England's transition from Catholicism to Protestantism is underway, an event which, if you buy Adam Roberts's history, marks a birth of science fiction, and which can therefore be read, like climate change, as an event that makes the world feel science-fiction-like. In the village where Isabel lives with

her church-warden father William, the reformation has arrived slowly, but now there is a new sense of urgency: Rituals must be changed, icons melted and sold, or burned, patterns of thought updated. In 2022, Elizabeth is working on restoration of the local peat bogs, and has to handle Christopher, a local lad who started a fire on the moor and has received a conditional caution with a requirement for community service; she is also grieving her husband, and wary of her son's apparent discovery of Catholicism as a way of coping with the world.

The link between the two strands is not particularly surprising, but is well-handled and moving when it comes. What I liked best about the novel was the portrayal of Elizabeth as a middle-aged working female scientist, her thought processes about the gender and age dynamics that infect her working days, and the examination in both strands of how to maintain community in times of change, the balance of restoration and adaptation. It's not SF, but I think SF readers might like it.

—Niall Harrison ■

Joanne Anderton

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But then the book got me thinking. You see, **Incarnate** is concerned with gender and beauty not only in the digital age, but also in the age of AI and hyperrealism, where the line between online and real life is fraying. At one point Dorothy muses, "nothing's real unless you see it on social media", and Katsu says in the afterword that for deepfakes, avatars and AI to take off the way they have, "society had to be in a space where reality was valued less." So maybe that's what I was tripping on when I struggled to suspend my disbelief, and maybe that's the point. A world where "real" has been undermined, and what happens online matters increasingly more, *feels* unstable. Difficult to get a grip on.

Incarnate is thick with intertextual references and metaphor. **The Wizard of Oz**, **Frankenstein**, and **Rumpelstiltskin** all vie for attention in the background, but front and centre is, of course, **The Picture of Dorian Gray**. What, then, is the moral decay that consumes its protagonists? It could be vanity and the desire for fame, but for my money, it's more about technology. The digitisation of our lives, now escalated by the unprecedented growth of AI, looms over this novel like a demon itself. It is, I think, the core of this entertaining, thoughtful, and genuinely disturbing story. When we can no longer tell what's real, or when that ceases to matter, what are we left with? And what deals are we willing to make, just how much of ourselves are we willing to give up, to get ahead.

You know this story. Agnes, a sickly girl trapped in a manor (or was it a convent? And didn't it burn down?), may or may not have been murdered by her awful brother. She's pining, wasting away, longing for Mary, who roams the gardens, bloodstained and dressed in fur. Theirs is a yearning that transcends space and time, life and death. They're not alone. There are undomesticated servants, a blushing

Stable Boy, a forgetful General, a sinister Doctor with his haughty mistress and her wild daughter (not his). Fog-draped Inns and haunted Abbeys. Bizarre illnesses. A portrait of a woman, possibly a Countess, possibly Catherine, probably Mary, that seems to wander building to building almost like it has a mind of its own.

Maybe that sounds familiar, maybe it doesn't, but it doesn't really matter because the plot of **Agnes, We're Not Murderers!** by Jessica Alexander isn't the point. Stories, as she says, are tricks after all. Yes, it's a queer, gothic, vampire-inspired take on love and longing. But the love story at its core is not the one between Agnes and Mary. Rather, it's a visceral obsession with the gothic, with the act of writing itself, with what it means to tell stories within genre conventions and how to break free of their confines. Told across footnotes and interwoven with red text, it's a metafictional layering of tropes, archetypes and reoccurring imagery. This isn't out of the ordinary for Jessica Alexander, whose previous works – **None of This Is an Invitation** (coauthored with Katie Jean Shinkle), **That Woman Could Be You** (coauthored with Vi Khi Nao), and the short story collection **Dear Enemy** – all experiment with unusual narrative forms and view the world through haunted, sapphic lenses.

There are multiple stories going on in this book. On the surface, it ostensibly follows Agnes, Mary, and the cast of characters caught in their orbit. But then there are the footnotes. They deepen the events of the main text by offering insights and commentary. They break the fourth wall to discuss all things gothic, from an analysis of the uncanny to notes on **The Yellow Wallpaper**. And sometimes they appear to be written about the author herself, small snippets of memoir recounting deaths in the family, memories of ex-partners, even her thoughts on **Lolita**. The stories and substories in the footnotes unfold out of sequence. The real experience of reading this book is not necessarily following the main, surface-level narrative. It's more about working out what story the interplay between narrative

and footnotes is creating, and where it exists. How much takes place in the story world, what belongs in the real world, and where they intersect.

Does it work? I'm still not sure. The footnotes also do a kind of "choose your own adventure" thing, prompting you to turn to page X to follow a particular thread, or Y to revisit an event in the light of new information. This is a conceit I usually enjoy, and I'm always a fan of a meta narrative, but this time I unfortunately found it frustrating. To be honest, and to give Alexander her due, I think this was because I read it as a PDF. I'm certain a physical book, or even better an ebook utilising hypertext links, would have made the footnotes and their Russian doll of stories easier and more enjoyable to navigate.

Alexander's writing is lyrical, but has a tangible, physical weight to it. This means that despite the metafictional and metaphorical nature of the book, we remain grounded in its people and its places. My absolute favourite line is, I think, a wonderful example of this: "It occurred to her, as a knife's edge might occur to flesh, that she would not be ready to see Mary." There are also some welcome and surprising moments of humour that cut through all the gothic longing like salt in an otherwise too-sweet dessert. That being said, it's not always easy to find your place in the narrative's labyrinth, as these characters and places seem to blend into each other, and events are questioned or rewritten, both in the footnotes and the main text. I say narrative labyrinth rather than narrative arc, because I think that's a better description of its shape. Rather than a beginning, middle, and end, it meanders, weaving between the main story and the footnotes, the black text and the red text.

Agnes, We're Not Murderers! doesn't hold the reader's hand. Instead, it's up to us to make our way through the stories, patterns, tropes, and characters and generate meaning for ourselves. Despite my occasional confusion and increasing frustration with the format, I think it's worth the effort.

—Joanne Anderton ■

Gabino Iglesias

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the blink of an eye, he finds himself trapped in the car with a mind of its own and obvious signs of a murder all around him.

Other than King's **Christine**, I have a hard time finding anything that compares to **Driven**, and the two are very, very different. That's a great thing. This novel starts like a desperate mix of noir and horror; a depressed, broken man being haunted by ghosts wherever he goes. Then it morphs into a mysterious race to find out what happened, a whodunit with the complications of a smart, weird thriller. Lastly, the tale becomes a race for survival, a mad dash to make

things right. Throughout all of it, Coile maintains full control of the narrative and, pardon the pun, the pedal to the metal.

Strangely plausible, always moving forward, and wonderfully creepy (there's a scene with a ghost in a bathroom that is worth the price of entry), **Driven** delivers a wonderful mix of violence, ghosts, mystery, crime, science fiction, and top-notch psychological horror. Don't skip this one.

As a book nerd, I read everything; prologues, introductions, author's notes, acknowledgements, etc. I tell you that because I had high hopes for David Demchuk's **Red X**, but the powerful introduction Gretchen Felker-Martin wrote for this edition, pub-

lished half a decade after the novel's original release, made me even more excited to read it. The book delivered everything I wanted and more.

This is a hard novel to summarize because its format is fragmented and because it more or less packs 200 years of history of the city of Toronto and its LG-BTQ+ community. Most of the story takes place in the 1980s, following the mysterious disappearance of a young gay man as his friends and lovers look for answers. But one disappearance is just the start. Men have and continue to go missing. Gay men. A story of prejudice, loneliness, history, fear of AIDS, erasure, and survival, the novel covers decades of life, of pain, and of disappearances and the old, evil

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