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BOOKS



BOOKS

Novels with La. roots probe space oddities, climate chaos

BY RIEN FERTEL

Contributing writer

“The High Heaven” by Joshua Wheeler, Graywolf Press, 352 pages, and “Happy Bad” by Delaney Nolan, Astra House, 304 pages.

I’ve never been a fan of outer space. All those moons and stars — a bit much, don’t you think? I find astronauts uninteresting

Review

and the thought of Mars colonization just ... meh. (And don’t get me started on black holes).

But Joshua Wheeler’s debut novel has got me rethinking my stake in the universe.

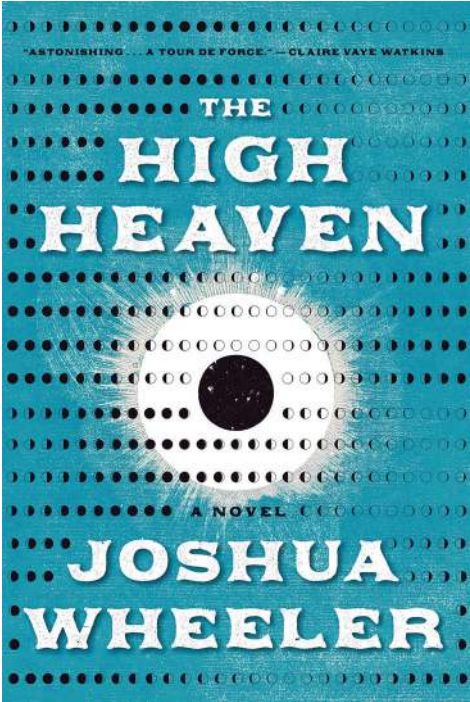
“The High Heaven” opens in southern New Mexico, arguably the spiciest place in the United States — home to the otherworldly White Sands National Park, flying saucer-mad Roswell and Alamogordo, the first atomic bomb-testing site.

Oliver Gently, a local cattle rancher, stumbles across a spooky-natured tween named Izzy on the day following the 1967 Apollo 1 pre-launch disaster in “The High Heaven.” She speaks in Biblical riddles, carries a radio apparently tuned to God and has eyes the color of Trinitite, the name for the greenish glass created from sand melted by the Trinity bomb test.

Is she a space oddity stranded on Earth? An escapee from the UFO-worshipping cult down the road? Just a weird young girl?

Oliver and Izzy’s buddy exploits are the most entrancing first 100 pages of a book I’ve read in some time. He is most interested in keeping her out of the clutches of the same authorities who are threatening to seize his farm to expand the military’s bombing range. Even when Izzy’s journey descends into dark territories, Wheeler — who lives in New Orleans and is the author of “Acid West,” a fantastically zany essay collection about growing up around Alamogordo — writes like he’s having a blast.

In the book’s second section, Wheeler takes a narrative swerve, trading the weird-western vibes for a picaresque tale of Izzy’s further, solo adventures. Rocketing eastward, she bounces around the Lone Star State, lonely and increasingly drawn to booze, drugs and lousy men. Adrift, she waits tables in a Lubbock diner, cleans rooms in “Odessa’s ninth-finest roach motel” and runs lights for the dolphin show at



SeaWorld San Antonio.

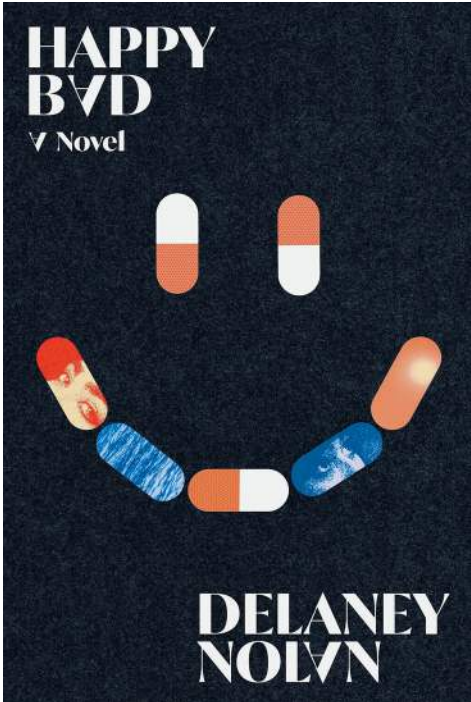
All the while, the cosmic continuum has a funny way of catching up with her.

Wheeler lets us witness a sequence of real-life tragedies — the crash of Delta flight 191 outside Dallas, the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion, the Hale-Bopp suicide cult — through Izzy’s sky-lifted gaze. When the Columbia shuttle turns to stardust over Nacogdoches, Izzy

decides she’s had enough and leaves Texas for good.

Wheeler picks up the story in 2024. Sober and slowed by age, Izzy now works as an intake coordinator in a New Orleans hospital. She’s recently discovered a dozen patients exhibiting signs of Moon blindness, the inability to see the Earth’s sole natural satellite.

But that’s not all that’s wrong in this Southern gothic-tinged glimpse into New Orleans’s near future. Flooding occurs on the daily. Users of a popular party drug called ALN — pronounced “alien” — melt into zombified “cuddle puddles.” An attack



on NASA’s Michoud Assembly Facility has indefinitely delayed its next space mission.

Izzy takes comfort in an upcoming lunar eclipse — waiting, watching, eyes turned upward, tuned to the Moon. Wheeler appeals to readers to follow Izzy’s gaze — to shake our earthly confines, seek meaning in the infinite beyond and become one with the universe.

“Her fate,” he writes in the closing pages, “had always been totality.”

May we all live so fully.

If one good book deserves another, may I recommend Delaney Nolan’s “Happy Bad,” which reads at times like a star-crossed sibling to “The High Heaven.”

This debut novel set in the near future is narrated by Beatrice, a social service worker at Twin Bridges, a treatment center for teen girls in the northeast Texas town of Askewn. It doesn’t take long for the reader to deduce that life at Twin Bridges is, well, more than a touch askew. The center is jointly run by a private health care company and a pharmaceuti-



Nolan

cal conglomerate, who are testing a mind-melting miracle drug called BeZen on the girls.

A New Orleans transplant originally from Massachusetts, Nolan is a skillful satirist, and one whose aim is extensive, wickedly funny and true.

Outside the clinical halls of Twin Bridges, the “soft apocalypse” of the mid-stage climate crisis has rendered Texas a barely livable hellscape. There’s Earth-swallowing dust storms, rolling blackouts and jack-rabbit swarms.

Inside, though, BeZen appears to be working, so successfully in fact that the corporate overlords behind Twin Bridges want to relocate the patients to the calm confines of Atlanta. Beatrice shepherds seven girls into a stolen van and heads east. Before long, with the supply of BeZen running low, she must resort to pill rationing. The girls soon suffer withdrawal before turning feral. It’s here, in the book’s last 100 pages, that “Happy Bad” soars.

Louisiana has been carved up by one hurricane too many, its archipelagic remnants sold off to a consortium of tourism, real estate and petrochemical multinationals. The Twin Bridgers arrive to find closed checkpoints along the Mississippi border. They drive south to what remains of Houma, now a floating city adrift in an ever-expanding Gulf.

There, in a “world undeniably growing more sterile and violent, the land itself dissolving under our feet,” Beatrice and her young charges find some semblance of peace — finally discovering a pathway to be zen — helping each other and strangers survive the world’s literal and figurative end.

In this cautionary parable, tomorrow’s climate emergencies, gonzo pharmaceuticals and fractured America feel an awfully lot like today’s. Despite finding a whole world of bad out there, Nolan leaves her readers, in the end, feeling maybe just a little bit happy.

Joshua Wheeler will launch his novel, in conversation with Delaney Nolan, at Octavia Books on Oct. 7. Garden District Book Shop will hold an event for Delaney Nolan, in conversation with Jami Attenberg, on Oct. 14.

Rien Fertel is the author of four books, including, most recently, “Brown Pelican.”

Tulane professor dives into the origins of La. towns

BY JOY HOLDEN

Staff writer

“Crossroads, Cutoffs & Confluences: Origins of Louisiana Cities, Towns, and Villages” by Richard Campanella, LSU Press, 305 pages

In Richard Campanella’s newest book, “Crossroads, Cutoffs and Confluences: Origins of Louisiana Cities, Towns and Villages,” he analyzes each region of

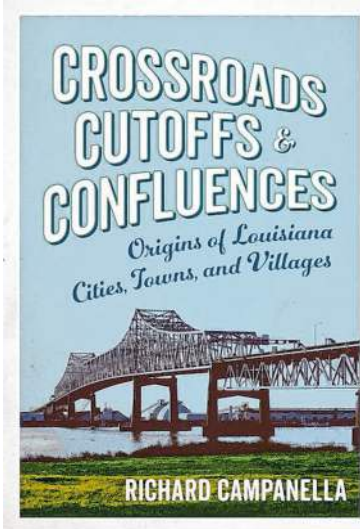
Louisiana and each town’s siting story.

Through a deft combination of geography, topography, history and some anthropology, Campanella inspects every part of the state and uncovers the origins of cities, towns and villages while also recording Louisiana residents’ impacts on the land and waters around them.

About Baton Rouge, he writes:

“Baton Rouge is a cultural Venn diagram. Originally straddling Houma and Bayougoula tribal hunting grounds, the city became more Anglo than the adjacent French Creole and Acadian regions, yet more French than the former British and Spanish colonies to which it once belonged — while also more African than the piney woods to the east.

It is more Protestant than south Louisiana, yet more Catholic than the north, and in recent decades, it has adopted the foodways and



traditions of the Acadian and Creole regions. Economically, Baton Rouge is an administrative and industrial center, yet also academic, agricultural, the ‘the nation’s most inland seaport,’ 253 river miles from the Gulf of Mexico... Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that the eminently liminal Baton Rouge has multiple siting stories spanning over a century, with no consensus on a foundation date or a *raison d’etre*.”

Brooklyn-born Campanella, a two-time winner of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Book of the Year Award and a professor of practice in architecture and geography at Tulane University, has lived in New Or-



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

Geographer Richard Campanella

leans for 25 years.

He divides “Crossroads, Cutoffs and Confluences” into 15 chapters, each a specific region of Louisiana.

In the introduction, he tells readers he chose a format of a flowing narrative instead of a cyclopedic one, starting with Greater New Orleans and the lower Mississippi to covering the intricacies of south Louisiana to extending along the Red River to the Ouachita River valley.

Campanella’s thorough description of each region includes the layout of the land, historic events and people and evolution

through the years. He captures these technical aspects in a clear and engaging voice packed with fascinating facts and historic tidbits.

When writing about Louisiana, authors often include the different influences on the state. Campanella does a superb job of acknowledging the Indigenous, French, British, Spanish, Acadian, African, and in some cases, German and Asian impacts on the formations, names and cultures of the regions. Through unpacking the etymology of the names of waterways and towns, Campanella elucidates the cul-

tural mélange of Louisiana.

At the end of each chapter, Campanella breaks down the numbers of the region and how they compare to the rest of the state. He considers the number of cities, towns and villages and compares the types of siting stories — whether the physical place was chosen or established by water, railroads, extraction sites or crossroads. He gives the time frame and designates if the town emerged organically or was ordained by a founder.

One of the neatest features of the book is in the Appendix, which is a clean table of 418 towns and their origins, separated into categories of region, status, era, type and primary or secondary siting rationales — a handy reference source.

“Crossroads, Cutoffs and Confluences” functions as a reference text as well as a detailed survey of Louisiana geography and history. Anyone writing about Louisiana should keep this book at the ready for a well-researched resource.

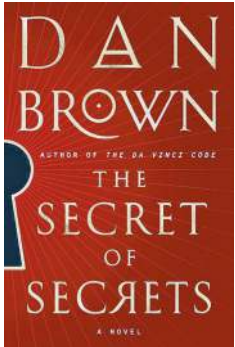
Campanella makes understanding a complicated state accessible through his writing, and this book is an extensive guide for the outdoorsy types, the history buffs and the imaginative creators who want to delve into the mysteries of the state.

Email Joy Holden at joy.holden@theadvocate.com.

THIS WEEK’S BESTSELLERS FROM PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

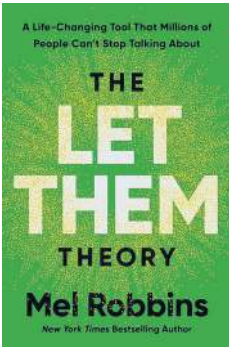
HARDCOVER FICTION

1. “The Secret of Secrets” by Dan Brown
2. “The Academy” by Hilderbrand/Cunningham
3. “The Last Letter ” by Rebecca Yarros
4. “Assistant to the Villain” by Hannah Nicole Maehrler
5. “Katabasis” by R.F. Kuang
6. “Among the Burning Flowers (deluxe ed.)” by Samantha Shannon
7. “Buckeye” by Patrick Ryan
8. “Atmosphere” by Taylor Jenkins Reid
9. “My Friends” by Fredrik Backman
10. “Among the Burning Flowers” by Samantha Shannon



HARDCOVER NONFICTION

1. “The Let Them Theory” by Mel Robbins
2. “Poems & Prayers” by Matthew McConaughey
3. “Good Things” by Samin Nosrat
4. “The Biblio Diet” by Jordan Rubin
5. “Confronting Evil” by O’Reilly/Hammer
6. “All the Way to the River” by Elizabeth Gilbert
7. “The Bradshaw Family Cookbook” by Terry Bradshaw et al
8. “The Book of Sheen” by Charlie Sheen
9. “History Matters” by David McCullough
10. “Complete America’s Test Kitchen TV Show Cookbook.”



TRADE PAPERBACK

1. “The Gingerbread Bakery” by Laurie Gilmore
2. “The Surrogate Mother” by Freida McFadden
3. “Wild Card” by Elsie Silver
4. “Called to Take a Bold Stand” by Jack Hibbs
5. “Cozy Nightmare Glow-in-the-Dark Coloring”
6. “Counting Miracles” by Nicholas Sparks
7. “Remarkably Bright Creatures” by Shelby Van Pelt
8. “Sorrow and Starlight” by Peckham/Valenti
9. “The Tenant” by Freida McFadden
10. “Do Not Disturb” by Freida McFadden

