

BLL Book Reviews - November 2022

Brewster Ladies Library, 1822 Main Street, Brewster, MA 02631

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***I Want to Be a Vase* (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2022) Picture Book (4-8 year-olds)
by Julio Torres - illustrated Julian Glander**

reviewed by: Nori Morganstein, Youth Services Librarian/Assistant Director



I Want to Be a Vase is a humorous, light-hearted book about the important topic of choosing who you want to be, and not letting others dictate that choice. More importantly, what kid is not going to pick up the book with a toilet plunger on the cover, and the title “I want to be a vase?” As an adult, I saw it, and immediately reached for it. There’s something very appealing about a toilet plunger on the cover of a book, surrounded by a field of flowers. Right away, you empathize with the plunger. Flowers seem a lot more appealing than the typical background a plunger is used to.

The plunger starts a revolution of sorts in the home. Soon, the pot on the stove wants to be a trashcan. And the trash wants to be a pillow on the couch. The coffee mug wants to be a light, etc. The plunger encourages all this change. But, unfortunately along the way there is also the vacuum, who discourages it and says things like, “You are not a vase. You’re not the right shape to hold flowers. Where would they even go?”

Eventually, though thankfully, comes the hairdryer, who wants to be a vacuum. The upset vacuum gets so angry, it explodes mess everywhere, and the hairdryer is able to help the vacuum clean up quickly. The vacuum admits that it was afraid something bad would happen if the hairdryer got to be whatever it wanted, but actually everyone was happier. The hairdryer got to be a vacuum. And the vacuum got some help tidying up. The plunger says it all, “I know I wasn’t made to hold flowers –I was made for plunging. But that wasn’t my choice. I want to be a vase. And *you* want to be a vacuum. Isn’t it nice to see everyone happy?”

The positive messages in this book are tenfold. Don’t let anyone dictate who you are. You can always choose who you want to be. You can always change your mind. Dream big. Just because you have always done things one way, doesn’t mean you always have to continue them that way. Everyone deserves to be happy.

The pictures are bright, playful, and silly. All the objects have a whimsical, toy-like quality to them, almost like they belong in a doll house or Lego set. The way the plunger is illustrated as waddling out of the room is exaggerated and fun. The over-the-top elements will certainly bring smiles and laughs to any young readers sitting for this book. There’s also a funny note from the book at the very end. All in all, this is a gem of a picture book, loaded with positive messages, filled with humor, and packed with color. I highly recommend it.

Proving Ground

by Kathy Kleiman

reviewed by Doug Wilcock

Kay McNulty? Fran Bilas? Betty Snyder? Marlyn Wescoff? Ruth Lichterman? Jean Bartik? Who are these women? If we call them the ENIAC 6 is there a glimmer of recognition? There should be, for these women were the women who programmed the first computer, the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC), a massive structure housed at the Moore School of Electrical Engineering at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. In *Proving Ground*, Kathy Kleiman brings to light the story of these largely ignored and unheralded programmers whose work began the software side of computing.

There are three stories told in this book. The first story is how the women, starting with a few diagrams, taught themselves to write programs and do the wiring that would allow ENIAC to calculate ballistics trajectories. The second story tells about the interplay of the personalities within the group and with the male engineers who constructed the hardware of the computer. The third story, which brings the author into the book, is how Kathy Kleiman got interested in the story and the implications of what she found.

How the women programmed the computer begins with them doing ballistics calculations for artillery used in World War II. Their work was to calculate firing tables for the artillery in the North African campaign, work that followed construction of similar tables for use in Europe. In North Africa conditions differed greatly from Europe. Using hand calculators (prior to having ENIAC at their disposal) the women, computers as they were then called, spent thirty to forty minutes on each calculation and had to do hundreds of them to complete a ballistics trajectory, a slow, tedious process that could not keep up with the Army's demands. To assist in calculating the tables, by the spring of 1943 recruiters were canvassing the country looking for other women to complement the work of the ENIAC6. On June 14 a story appeared in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle that was typical of the time: ARMY NEEDS MATH MAJORS; ORDINANCE DEPARTMENT SEEKS COLLEGE WOMEN; MOORE SCHOOL WILL TRAIN NEW RECRUITS. The story described how the course would train women "to carry on the work of the Ordinance Unit" but would also offer "broad training in college mathematics." Earlier, it was to entreaties like this that the ENIAC6 responded. Of the six ENIAC programmers I thought that the most interesting story concerned Jean Bartik. She was raised on a family farm in tiny Alanthus Grove, Missouri and attended Northwest Missouri State Teachers College where she majored in math. When many of the men on campus answered the call for volunteers, her classes emptied out and she worried whether she would be able to complete her math major. She was rescued when the Navy decided to turn the campus into an officers' training program so there were officer candidates filling the math classes. Jean questioned whether to go to Philadelphia if she was hired. While her advisor advised against it and her father regularly showed her clippings seeking math teachers in local schools, Jean was determined to do her part in the war effort.

While a machine called a differential analyzer, an analog device, was a step up from the hand calculators, the first suggestion for an electronic computer came from a Ursinus College professor, John Mauchly. He suggested an electronic version to Herman Goldstine who served as the Army's Ballistics Research Lab (BRL) liaison to the Moore School. Mauchly's paper, "The Use of High-Speed Vacuum Tube Devices for Calculating", laid the groundwork for ENIAC. Together Mauchly and "Pres" Eckert, an electrical engineer, designed the hardware of the computer.

The ENIAC6 entered the electronic computing world by being given three diagrams: a circuit diagram that showed energy flows in ENIAC; a block diagram showing how the components interrelated; and a logical diagram that included sketches of the front of the ENIAC unit that the programmers would plug and switch to get ENIAC running correctly. They were on their own to figure out how to make the computer run and do the required ballistics calculations. The ladies became so adept at programming and understanding how the various parts of the computer tied together that they did much of the debugging work that the engineers struggled to do. When a problem arose, the ENIAC6 could tell the engineers which vacuum tube out of the 18,000 in the machine was blown.

(continued on the next page)

The second story details how the women cooperated with each other, with the engineers who built and installed the hardware, and with the Army and engineering school brass and outside consultants. When John von Neumann, a famed mathematician at Princeton and one of the developers of the atomic bomb, proposed a modified instruction to add into ENIAC, Jean Bartik objected. Herman Goldstine, Jean's advisor at the meeting, in Jean's words "glared at me as if I had blasphemed God." But von Neumann realized his mistake, chuckled, and the meeting moved on. This same Goldstine might have advanced the story of the ENIAC6 had he, when meeting with reporters as ENIAC was unveiled, indicated that Betty Snyder and Kay McNulty were not hostesses pouring coffee for the males in attendance but the experts who had made ENIAC work.

The third story is the back story of how Kathy Kleiman wrote this book. It deserves top billing alongside the story of the remarkable work that the ENIAC6 did. How were they treated after ENIAC proved its mettle? What is the long story of women in computing? How did Kathy Kleiman uncover such an interesting previously untold story?

While this book could have used some careful editing, it is a story well worth reading. We need to know of the ENIAC6 and the role they played in both World War II and in the subsequent development of the computer industry. Kathy Kleiman has brought an important story to light.

Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood

by Trevor Noah

reviewed by Jim Mills

Trevor Noah is a South African comedian who became the host of Comedy Central's Daily Show in 2016. Noah was born in 1984 in apartheid South Africa to a white father and a black mother. According to South Africa's strict racial laws Trevor was classified as Colored. As Noah's book title points out, his birth, the result of an interracial marriage, was a crime in South Africa. His racial mix was a trial for Noah throughout his childhood. He found that he was not accepted by any of the four official racial groups: White, Black, Colored and Indian. These distinctions led Trevor to life as an outsider.

Noah has a pronounced mischievous nature. As did many of his contemporaries with so few opportunities, Trevor, searched for ways to survive, and became involved in questionable activities. His criminal behavior was less pronounced than that of many of his friends. He found that there was money to be made by creating bootleg copies of music CDs. His outgoing personality led him to promote social/entertainment activities where he could sell his CDs and act as a disk jockey for massive street parties.

Much of *Born a Crime* deals with his close attachment to his mother and the threatening behavior of his step-father. A few years after Noah left home his step-father shot his mother very nearly killing her. His ability to use violence through the years showed the indifference of the police. The tradition of always siding with the man over the woman explained the police not taking any action against the step-father. Dealing with all of these problems improved Trevor's social ability to respond to unexpected events. One situation that he was unable to master was developing romantic attachments with girls. Leading to his future career as a comedian, Noah, in writing *Born a Crime*, has dealt with his juvenile problems in a light hearted way. Life in South Africa, both before and after apartheid, was never easy for racial groups other than whites. Noah shows that in so many ways his life was always on the edge.

Despite the disadvantages of his early life, Trevor Noah was able to succeed professionally and extract himself from the misery of his situation. Around the world, hundred of millions of individuals live a continually repressed life, offering little opportunity, with a venturous few escaping its grasp. Noah's story of his early life in South Africa is a fascinating read and a story of hope and one's ability to achieve personal goals against overwhelming odds.

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The BLL Book Reviews

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Thanks to JoAnn Phillips for her skill in editing these reviews.

Bad City: Peril and Power in the City of Angels

by Paul Pringle

reviewed by Doug Wilcock

On the surface *Bad City: Peril and Power in the City of Angels* is the story of a Los Angeles Times reporter, Paul Pringle, tracking an overdose incident involving a well-known member of the Los Angeles community, Dean of the University of Southern California (USC) Keck School of Medicine, Carmen Puliafito. That there were no arrests- a tipster had told Pringle that the room where the young woman overdosed was full of drugs and drug paraphernalia- puzzled Pringle. As he dug further into the story Pringle found that reports of the incident, especially the Pasadena Police Department reports, obfuscated what went on and what Puliafito's role might have been in the overdose. If the tipster's story was correct, why were there no charges?

The trail that Pringle, and the team he assembled at the Times, followed to uncover the Puliafito story is but one aspect of the book. Coupled with that was a second story, also out of USC, that involved a doctor accused of sexual abuse. While shorter than what Pringle writes about Puliafito, the second story, involving a doctor named George Tyndall, was an equally disgusting tale of abuse. What was happening at USC, and why did no one appear to be doing anything about it? That gives the reader a third story line to follow, what actions the USC administration did or did not take in response to these incidents. At almost the same time that the Puliafito and Tyndall stories broke, USC was attempting to deflect reporting on Varsity Blues, the scandal involving coaches of minor sports who were the venue by which parents could bribe their child's way into a prestigious university. The USC athletic department was one of the leading culprits in that scandal. Finally, there is yet another story line about what was happening at the LA Times in 2016 as Pringle and his team were attempting to get these stories, beginning with the Puliafito drug overdose story, into the paper. There is a lot going on in this very fine book.

That any of the stories ever saw the light of day is a credit to individuals who were willing to speak up and who had the moral clarity to understand how wrong these powerful individuals and their associated institutions were. The original tipster saw Carmen Puliafito as "dissipated and desperate, a fool of an old man, a creep hollowed out by baser instincts." But he was "an important person doing important work for an important university." He was Harvard trained, rich, and white. The tipster was none of those. He recognized that if he spoke out, Puliafito could crush him. And yet, despite his and his wife's fears, he spoke up. Similarly, a nurse at the University Health Services spoke out about the Tyndall case, despite knowing how she would then be treated by her supervisors. The treatment she received was harsh. She was stripped of her supervisory duties and written up for "communicating poorly" with her colleagues and underlings. Ultimately, she resigned.

The book reads quickly as we accompany Pringle following the leads he and his colleagues uncover. In that regard it is a thriller. I found that as I got to the end of a chapter- they're all fairly short- I'd say to myself that I'd read just one more. What is going to happen next and who or what will it lead to? But it is far more than just a thriller. Pringle is telling a serious story about the power structure of a major city and how the abuse of that power can ruin lives and taint the city's leading institutions. It is a story that needs to be told, and of course that telling is the role of the press. During the time that Pringle was investigating these stories the LA Times was a shell of its former self, passing through the hands of a series of owners. The staff was demoralized by editorial decisions that often kept actions by powerful actors within the city out of the paper. But they remained hopeful that someone would rescue the paper before it sank into irrelevancy or bankruptcy. What Pringle describes about Los Angeles could be any city in the country. The hubris, the cover-ups, the negligent police work, and the protection of the powerful are not just problems in Los Angeles, and the problems he describes at the LA Times are a microcosm of what is happening to newspapers throughout the country. By writing this, he has advanced a strong argument for the importance of journalism, journalistic integrity, and how crucial a free press is in an open society.

Paul Pringle



Life on the Mississippi: An Epic American Adventure

By Rinker Buck

reviewed by Jim Mills

When we think of the settling of the West, most of us think of the period after the Civil War with cowboys and farmers populating the vast area extending from the prairies to the Pacific. From the Revolutionary War to the Civil War a similar colonization took place between the Appalachians and the Mississippi. Land travel, due to the lack of decent roads, was primitive, difficult and very expensive. The extensive system of rivers, in the mid-west, became the natural routes for immigrants and commerce. Prior to the age of steamboats, a much smaller craft known as the flatboat was the prime river carrier. These craft could start on tributaries of the Ohio and the Mississippi bringing cargo downstream with many reaching as far as the Gulf of Mexico at New Orleans. Due to the lack of steam power, the return trip was seldom made. Most of these craft were built at the trip's origin and disassembled at the destination.

With this history in mind, Rinker Buck decided to recreate a flatboat trip starting on the Ohio's tributary, the Monongahela, near Pittsburg, following the Ohio and Mississippi downstream to New Orleans. The river system had greatly changed since the early 1800's and Buck was warned repeatedly about the dangers involved. Many locks had been added to the system removing many series of rapids. The rivers were narrowed and for much of their extent bordered by levees. Much of the traffic these days, immense chains of barges controlled by tugs, dwarfed a primitive flatboat. Navigating the rapid currents while avoiding the immense barges plying the river both upstream and downstream required experience and skill. Buck, a neophyte in this area turned out to be a quick learner. A major advantage that he had over the original flat boaters was an outboard motor and communications allowing severe weather warnings. The outboard enhanced the steering necessary to avoid the dense pattern of obstacles, both stationary and moving that were frequently encountered. The river's continual bending reduced the line of sight any pilot needed to avoid oncoming traffic. Listening to river radio communications would frequently provide some warning of potential conflicts.

Buck had a number of helpers over the many months of his voyage with some taking shifts on the river for only a few weeks. Many of his assistants became quite skilled in river piloting and navigation. One of Buck's pleasures was his contact with many locals he encountered on the trip with their experiences on the river and ties to the flatboat era. As the trip progressed, he realized that the grim predictions made by his friends prior to the trip were not going to occur. Despite a few close calls, Buck did manage to complete his voyage unharmed. In 2015 Buck wrote *The Oregon Trail*, telling the story of his adventures taking a covered wagon on the trail from Missouri to the Pacific Coast following the route of early pioneers on their way to Oregon. Both of these works provide fascinating reading, providing a view of early American life and the perils encountered in forming the world that we know today.

Nineteenth Century Flatboat Commerce



The Last Mona Lisa

by Jonathan Santlofer

reviewed by Doug Wilcock

If you are a fan of Lee Childs and the Jack Reacher stories, you are sure to like *The Last Mona Lisa* by Jonathan Santlofer. The story moves quickly- it really is a page turner- as Santlofer follows two parallel tracks, the 1911 theft of the Mona Lisa from the Louvre by Vincent Peruggia and the contemporary story of Luke Perrone, great grandson of Peruggia who tries to unravel the mysteries of what exactly happened after Peruggia walked out of the Louvre with the painting tucked under his jacket.

Santlofer casts Perrone as some combination of Jack Reacher, a reformed alcoholic, and a grown-up neighborhood tough guy. The reader is never quite sure which Perrone we are dealing with, a studious art history researcher or a down on his luck loser destined to mess up the life that he has constructed post-alcoholism. Of course, as he seems to be straightening his life out and uncovering the family past via Peruggia, his life is complicated by meeting a woman who would ordinarily be out of reach to him, a high society New Yorker.

There is a cast of dubious supporting characters who help to advance the story. They range from shady Interpol detectives to dodgy art dealers, collectors, and forgers, with various thugs hired on to complicate matters. All come with shady motives for their involvement with Perrone. He is never sure who is on his side or who is out to get him to prevent the story of possible forgeries of the painting ever coming to light. Santlofer does use a real art forger, well known at the beginning of the twentieth century, to play a major part in advancing both the early part of the story and to set the stage for the contemporary one.

I chose this novel because I have a weakness for stories that build from historical fact. Couple that with the three settings for the novel- Paris, New York, and Florence (with a major part of the Florence action taking place in the beautiful Laurentian library), and it seemed as though the elements were in place for an interesting story. That the book ended up as a thriller, while somewhat disappointing to me, did not completely take away the fun of the read.

You should definitely visit the Louvre, a world-famous art museum where you can view, at close range, the backs of thousands of other tourists trying to see the Mona Lisa.

Dave Barry

Owning the Yankees is like owning the Mona Lisa.

George Steinbrenner

**Vincent Peruggia
with Mona**



An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us

by Ed Yong

reviewed by Jim Mills

In the 25 years that I have been reviewing books there are four landmark efforts that have significantly changed my view of the world. In 1997 Jared Diamond in *Guns Germs and Steel* pointed out that the relative social and technical progress of various peoples around the world can be explained by the environment in which they found themselves and not by their relative abilities. In 2011 Steven Pinker wrote *The Better Angels of Our Nature* showing in explicit detail how violence around the world has been in a steady decline going back to the hunter-gatherer era. Ed Yong in 2016 wrote *I Contain Multitudes* explaining how our and other animal bodies contain immense multitudes of microbial life that for better or worse have a significant impact on our well-being and our very survival. This year Ed Yong, in just his second book, *An Immense World*, has once more created a significant work, revealed to us the diverse sensory capabilities of various life forms around the globe and how these capabilities influence their view of the world and are finely attuned to their needs and support their survival.

Our natural tendency in viewing other life forms to assume that these creatures view the world as we do. Ed Yong points out that nothing could be farther from the truth. Even creatures close to us in an evolutionary sense such as other mammals have sharply different perspectives on the world. We are aware of the five, standard, for us, senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. Other creatures have additional capabilities such as the sensing of magnetic and electrical fields and the expansion of existing senses such as echo-location, sight into the ultra violet and infrared regimes and the use of touch, particularly in a water environment to view the external world. Hearing for many creatures extends well beyond human capabilities or detection both in the ultra-sonic region and very low frequency sounds generated by elephants and whales. Ground vibrations and even those felt close up on leaves, undetectable to humans, can trigger responses by both predators and prey. Another sense that, we don't really think much about, that we share with most other creatures, is kinesthesia, the knowledge of the position and motion of various parts of our body. We know when our head or eyes are in motion that what we see is not moving. All creatures have varying abilities to interpret their raw sensory input and create an accurate picture of the external world.

A creature's senses are attuned to its basic needs to find food, locate mates, and avoid predation. These evolutionary pressures drive an on-going competition between predators and prey, each becoming better able to deal with the other. Over time this competition determines just which species survive in future generations. Close observation of various species provides evidence of which senses are employed and how this capability serves to enhance the creature's survivability. The ability of bats to use echolocation to locate and prey on insects is a very complex capability whose execution is hard for us to comprehend. Yong goes into detail into just what is required for the bat to pull off this feat. These senses and reflexes are a marvel to comprehend being so far from humans capabilities. One of the most unusual creatures is the octopus which seems to have a separate brain for each of its eight tentacles. Apparently smaller creatures such as birds and insects due to their compact size have much quicker functioning nervous systems providing the rapid responses observed.

Ed Yong describes very complex and involved subjects in a clear and fascinating manner. His first two books demonstrate a unique ability to bring to our attention compelling aspects of our world. This ability to thoroughly investigate broad fields of study and communicate his findings to the reader bode well for his future career as an outstanding non-fiction writer.

Ed Yong



Thank You For Your Servitude

by Mark Leibovich

reviewed by Don Boink

This book is not for a Trump advocate. That goes for Lindsey Graham, Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz. “They were united and loud in their scorn and contempt for Trump” Even more in their outrage: Trump was a menace and an affront to our democracy. Then, awkwardly, Trump won. This book is an unbridled castigation of them and many other Republicans who became Trump’s chief enablers. “ What would these and others of the swamp’s lesser lights do as chasers of the grift do to preserve their place in the sun, or at least in the orbit of the spray tan?

Mark Leibowich is a journalist who makes it his business to closely follow the behavior of the political crowd and note who sucks up to whom. One of his favorite politicians is Lindsey Graham. This pol was a close associate of John McCain, a notable real American hero and very influential conservative Senator. The relationship was obviously hero worship on Graham’s part. Unfortunately McCain suffered from brain cancer of an incurable type. McCain also had a great dislike for Trump. For what ever reason Graham was impressed by Trump. McCain couldn’t understand that. Nonetheless he could see political reasons in Graham’s attraction to him. Today after the, to me, disastrous Trump presidency we see how insidious the Trump virus has taken over the mentality of so many Republicans. The old GOP is no more, it has become a Trump cult.

It is patently obvious that Kevin McCarthy, despite his initial reaction to the January 6th Capitol Insurrection wasted no time in recalculating his ambition to become the Speaker of the House and the necessity to be on the good side of Trump. It becomes painful to see the toadying that elected officials exhibit regarding their fear of being the brunt of Trump’s displeasure.

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