

Casters and Crowns

Elizabeth Lowham, Shadow Mountain (OCT 1) Hardcover \$19.99 (272pp) 978-1-63993-320-4, FANTASY

In Elizabeth Lowham’s enthralling fantasy novel *Casters and Crowns*, a reverse Sleeping Beauty curse forces a princess to confront the truth about magic in her kingdom.

Aria will inherit her father’s crown—if she can survive the curse that a rogue caster placed on her. Magic forces Aria to stay awake while everyone in the castle slumbers each night, and the lethal curse will spread to her younger sister if she does not figure out how to reverse it.

Despite the distrust most casters are met with, Aria consults a handsome young magic-user, Baron, who has secrets of his own. Their tentative attempts at communication lead to a deeper connection, one that may help them navigate the treacherous politics and grudges that threaten to condemn the entire kingdom to an all-out war: “With magic, he focused every memory into light until it was no longer brief flashes but a blazing sun, until it cut the storm and began stretching the shadow, driving it back.”

Writing forms a bridge between Aria and Baron, their letters leading to increasing intimacy between them. Each of them is lonely—Aria as a result of the curse and her father’s unrealistic expectations for her, and Baron as a result of needing to protect his mischievous younger brothers, who also have forbidden magical abilities. Navigating misunderstandings resulting not just from stereotypes about magic but also from generational conflict, Aria and Baron have the opportunity to unite the kingdom in peace, though many stand in their way. The ethical dilemmas they face revolve around abuses of power and fear of change and difference, resulting in resonance throughout.

Casters and Crowns is an enchanting fantasy novel in which teenagers navigate grief and discord to find love and acceptance.

JEANA JORGENSEN



Keep It in the Dark

Justin Arnold, Tiny Ghost Press (DEC 3) Hardcover \$21.99 (284pp) 978-1-915585-22-6, FANTASY

In Justin Arnold’s steamy fantasy novel *Keep It in the Dark*, young men at a boarding school navigate a tumultuous romance that’s threatened by supernatural forces.

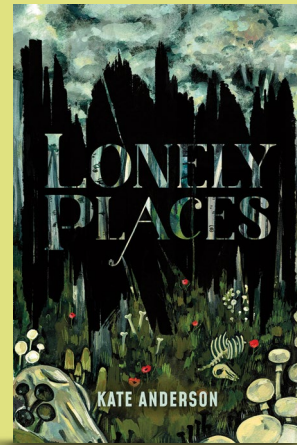
Seventeen-year-old Rowan is the unofficial king of Mockingbird Prep. Though his senior year promises to be extraordinary, he is thrown by his new roommate, Casper. Casper’s family enrolled him at Mockingbird Prep in order to help him harness his new vampire powers. Should Casper be able to last the year without anyone learning that he’s a vampire, he’ll be ushered in as the prince of the Belamy vampire clan and whisked away on a debauchery-laden tour of Europe. All is complicated when the boys fall madly in love with each other, despite the challenges of Casper’s immortality and the murderous group after him.

These hefty themes are leavened by the fact that both Casper and Rowan lean into humor when they talk. Sometimes, this is used to cover their true feelings for each other. The book’s intense and dramatic moments become heartfelt, though, when the boys lower their guards, speak honestly, and are tender with each other.

Beyond its supernatural intrigue, the novel’s emotional core rests in Rowan’s first forays into understanding his sexual orientation. Herein, vampirism functions as an allegory for LGBTQ+ orientation: Rowan’s attraction to Casper confuses him. Still, the two cannot stand to be apart. Their romance is beset by slayers—bigoted individuals who are mired in the past, even though modern vampires don’t feed on humans without consent. Still, though a showdown between the slayers and Rowan is inevitable, the story still ends on a satisfying and optimistic note.

Keep It in the Dark is a hopeful fantasy novel that uses sensuality and vampirism to chronicle an LGBTQ+ coming-of-age.

JOHN M. MURRAY



Lonely Places

Kate Anderson, Flux (OCT 29) Softcover \$14.99 (304pp), 978-1-63583-101-6 HORROR

A teenager confronts her haunted past to save her family in Kate Anderson’s slow-burn psychological thriller *Lonely Places*.

Chase has yearned for stability ever since her family left their home when she was just a child. Since then, they’ve lived a nomadic life, never staying in one place for long. When her father takes a job as a fire lookout in a remote town, they settle into an old tower nestled among aspen trees.

While her family revels in nature, Chase can’t shake the unsettling feeling that something sinister lurks in the forest. She soon learns the lookout’s dark history: the bones of a missing girl were discovered years ago, tangled in the roots of the trees. Fearful for her mute little sister, Guthrie—who has been silent since her own harrowing disappearance in the woods the previous year—Chase’s sense of dread deepens.

At its core, this is a story about confronting trauma and the lengths people will go to avoid it. Its characters exhibit quirks, defenses, and flaws: Chase shoulders too much responsibility, using it as a way to deflect from her own inner struggles; her family members deflecting in their own ways too.

The story’s imagery is both visceral and striking, as is the colorful opening image of the woods against the sky. The forest itself is vivified with eerie descriptors throughout, as though there is a presence within the woods observing Chase and her family. And the pace is rhythmic, with the mystery of the forest and the family’s history emerging in a gradual way.

Some questions are answered, but others remain, including in regard to the missing girl and the mysterious nature of the forest, in the atmospheric horror novel *Lonely Places*, in which a family faces their trauma.

LEAH WEBSTER

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● \$23.00 ● 376 pages ● 9781957810225

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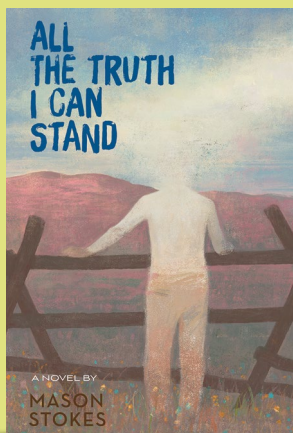
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All the Truth I Can Stand

Mason Stokes, Calkins Creek (NOV 5)
Hardcover \$18.99 (256pp)
978-1-66268-088-5, LGBTQ+

A gay high school senior confronts the tragic murder of his beloved in Mason Stokes's novel *All the Truth I Can Stand*.

Ash, still grieving his deceased mother, joins the backstage of his local college's *Oklahoma!* production. He befriends straight-talking Jenna and falls in love with her best friend, vivacious starring actor Shane. When Shane is beaten and killed during the last of his mysterious disappearances from town, sorrowful Ash and Jenna seek the truth behind his death.

Ash is a heartfelt narrator whose voice is aggrieved and deadpan: "when you smell something, you're literally taking the particles of that thing—a flower, a dead squirrel, shit—into your nostrils. I wanted to [take] whatever pieces of Shane remained ... inside me." With less focus and detail, he also chronicles his estrangement from family and former friends while venturing into brief encounters with the drug-dealing underworld of Shane's troubled past. As a student journalist, Jenna's role enlarges in the story's investigative second half.

The novel connects personal identity with cultural and national concerns. In an environment filled with the casual use of homophobic slurs, Ash is careful to mask behaviors that he believes will mark him as gay. In death, Shane becomes the nation's idealized symbol of the gay community's necessary fight for civil rights, yet Ash wishes to remember the messy reality of who he was as a person. Jenna's inclination to reveal Shane's truth underscores the disproportionate effect of the drug epidemic on gay men and dispels the myth of the perfect victim: "it was hard not to sense him becoming, if only slightly, [the story's] villain as well."

Personal loss becomes entangled in the gay community's historical fight for recognition and equality in the novel *All the Truth I Can Stand*.

ISABELLA ZHOU



When Mimi Went Missing

Suja Sukumar, SohoTeen (NOV 19)
Hardcover \$19.99 (288pp)
978-1-64129-536-9, THRILLER

In Suja Sukumar's thriller *When Mimi Went Missing*, a teenager whose cousin disappeared grieves for their seemingly lost sisterhood.

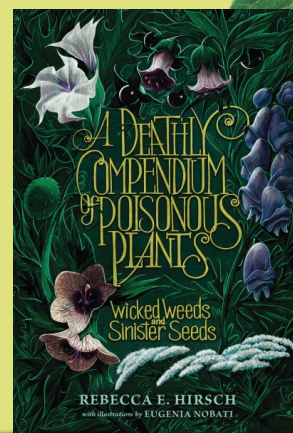
When she was eight, Tanvi moved in with her aunt and cousin after her mother murdered her father. Mimi, Tanvi's older cousin, protected her from the bullies who taunted her, insinuating that she'd become like her mother. But then Mimi befriended the school's it girl and became another of Tanvi's tormentors. The wound was deep.

Now, Tanvi faces memory gaps from the night Mimi vanished, struggling to remember whether Mimi's earlier betrayal did indeed make her become like her mother, as almost everyone seems to think. Her fragmented recollections surface following triggers like the sound of rain, the clacking of heels, and the rush of a waterfall. Her confusion dominates her search as she races to uncover what happened to her cousin: Mimi had refused to speak to her for months, but Tanvi believes Mimi told her something important before she vanished. Meanwhile, she receives suspicious looks from those knowledgeable about the night Mimi went missing.

There are disclosures from guilt-ridden people, malicious taunts, and fame-hungry social media coverage of the tragedy. These influences pull Tanvi's investigation in gripping directions as she tries to get answers while being eyed with increasing suspicion by the police officers investigating the case, who pick at holes in her statement. The characters maintain the game of whodunnit, displaying layers, revealing scraps of information as needed, and arousing wariness, as with Mimi's boyfriend's cryptic phone conversations and her former best friend's stalking activities. Outright revelations are delayed; the suspense heightens.

When Mimi Went Missing is an immersive novel about a chase after a killer who is too close for comfort.

GABRIELLA HARRISON



A Deathly Compendium of Poisonous Plants

Wicked Weeds and Sinister Seeds

Rebecca E. Hirsch, Zest Books (OCT 22)
Softcover \$18.99 (200pp)
979-876562524-8, NONFICTION

Plant physiologist Rebecca E. Hirsch's botanical reference text *A Deathly Compendium of Poisonous Plants* explores the fascinating, often grisly world of dangerous plants.

Clear and precise, the twenty-three chapters each cover a different species, including mandrake, belladonna, and henbane. Each plant's appearance, where it is most often found, and how its poisons work within a body are detailed. For instance, the book explains that strychnine is absorbed through the nose and digestive tract and affects the nervous system, leading to protracted muscle contractions until the respiratory system shuts down.

Most entries also include an enthralling story of how or when a particular plant was used in a real-life incident. A timber tycoon in China was poisoned by heartbreak grass, a plant containing gelsemine, by a forest official who had been caught embezzling money from him. And a fungus called ergot, which can grow on rye, is theorized to have led to the Salem witch scare. It has been postulated that infected rye was milled, turned into bread, and consumed. The resulting symptoms, including convulsions, delusions, and an intense burning sensation, were easy to connect to dealings with the devil.

Symptoms of plant poisons are shared in graphic detail and several stories conclude with fully conscious victims struggling for breath and experiencing excruciating pain right up until the moment of death. Beautiful color photographs and drawings throughout the book make the plants easy to identify and bring their use throughout history into vivid focus.

A memorable, enjoyable reference book, *A Deathly Compendium of Poisonous Plants* combines often gruesome historical anecdotes with edifying botany lessons.

CATHERINE THURESON

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