

GIFT IDEAS



Becoming Baba Yaga Trickster, Feminist, and Witch of the Woods

Kris Spisak, Hampton Roads Publishing (SEP 1) Softcover \$16.95 (224pp), 978-1-64297-051-7, BODY, MIND & SPIRIT

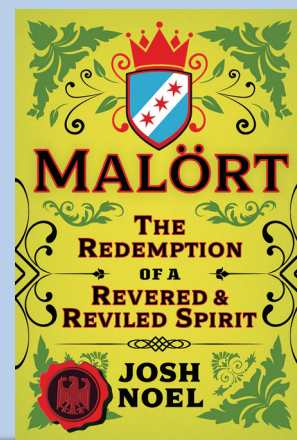
First a force within Eastern European oral traditions before flowing into popular culture as a frightening witch, Baba Yaga is a character whose many incarnations suggest fascinating depth. Stories about her are teased out and mined for models of empowerment in *Becoming Baba Yaga*, Kris Spisak’s nuanced work of feminist literary criticism.

Baba Yaga has been known by other names, but elements of the stories about her are consistent, Spisak shows. She is said to live in the woods in a house that moves about on long avian legs; she consumes some who seek her and rescues others. She is of the

earth, primordial and terrifying, life-giving and life-taking; “she gives us permission to scream into the void, cackle at the darkness, and vent our anxieties to the wind.” Stories of her were whispered by grandmothers to children as warnings and promises before being recorded by those prone to treat her powers as dangerous. Here, Spisak retells her shifting tales, parsing them for historical and cultural context and relocating within them the seeds of emancipation: “if given the chance to meet with a savage witch who could transform your world and your possibilities,” she asks, “would you do it?”

For those who reject polite obedience to gender norms, *Becoming Baba Yaga* is a freeing folkloric inquiry that celebrates an archetypal defiant woman.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER



Malört The Redemption of a Revered and Reviled Spirit

Josh Noel, Chicago Review Press (SEP 3) Softcover \$19.99 (272pp), 978-0-914091-67-7, CULTURE

While some bars in Chicago have served Jeppson’s Malört for nearly a century, in the past two decades, the bitter, wormwood-derived botanical spirit found new life as both a niche favorite and an ironic countercultural drink. That fascinating story is revealed in *Chicago Tribune* beverage writer Josh Noel’s enjoyable history book *Malört*.

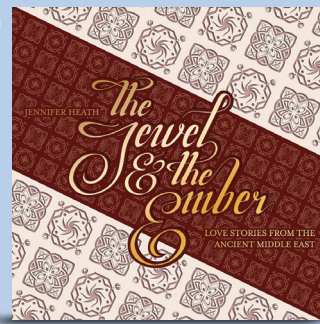
As Noel chronicles, Malört’s continued existence owes to a series of serendipitous events. Classified as medicinal, the liquor remained in production during Prohibition due to a legal loophole. When its distributor, George Brode, sold his portfolio in the 1950s, Malört was the sole brand he retained. Brode went to great lengths to market the bitter drink (as shown in sample ads) as a so-called “real man’s” beverage for those who “quittheirbellyachin’.” And in

recent decades, Brode’s former secretary and romantic partner, Pat Gabelick, who took over the brand after his death, learned that it had taken on a new audience, inspiring parody social media accounts and bootleg merchandise. Herein, interviews with Gabelick and the fans who made the drink popular expand the story.

A Chicago-specific cult favorite among bartenders meets a wider audience in *Malört*, an entertaining, well-reported, unlikely success tale.

JEFF FLEISCHER

Image above from *Becoming Baba Yaga: Trickster, Feminist, and Witch of the Woods* by Kris Spisak. © Davezilla/Hampton Roads Publishing.



The Jewel and the Ember Love Stories from the Ancient Middle East

Jennifer Heath, Interlink Books (AUG 20) Hardcover \$26 (244pp), 978-1-62371-753-7 SHORT STORIES

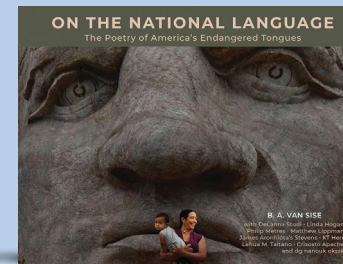
Jennifer Heath’s fabulistic short story collection *The Jewel and the Ember* celebrates love as it’s found in ancient texts.

Inspired by Golden Age cinema, including *Samson and Delilah*, and by the idea of love itself, Heath retells archetypal love stories throughout. Here, the biblical Joseph and Potiphar’s wife are renamed; their story departs from his classic flight from temptation and instead transforms into a late-stage fruition of long-held wishes. Elsewhere, lovers are warriors who test their skills on the battlefield, even fighting against each other. An ill-fated couple is deemed mad, resulting in their villages separating them. Princesses in sumptuous pavilions evoke Scheherazade with their own storytelling.

The brief tales cover passion, courtliness, and sometimes furious loves. Whether lovers quarrel or quest through riddles and challenges, seek pleasure, encounter fairies and sages, or discover that their love is ephemeral, their stories evoke timeless reverence for women’s sensuous beauty. The stories further teem with Persian palatial splendors and rugged wildernesses; floral and other Middle Eastern decorative motifs enliven the ancient setting. A few stories include uses of witchcraft in the form of manipulative spells, and some lovers are motivated to murder; these moments reveal possessiveness and jealousy too.

Love is covered in startling breadth in *The Jewel and the Ember*, a shimmering anthology that gathers tales of devotion and treachery.

KAREN RIGBY



On the National Language The Poetry of America’s Endangered Tongues

B.A. Van Sise, Schiffer Publishing (SEP 28) Hardcover \$50 (176pp), 978-0-7643-6814-1 PHOTOGRAPHY

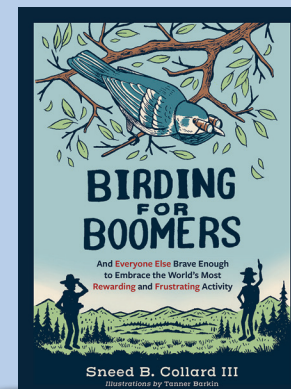
In a dazzling interplay of words and images, B. A. Van Sise’s *On the National Language* conjures the richness of North America’s endangered languages, some of which are spoken by only a handful of elders. There are cultural

summaries, representative words, and evocative photographs of the one hundred speakers, as well as poetry and bits of memoir.

Some examples are from diaspora communities, but most are Indigenous, revitalized after colonial censure and residential school policies. They survived after being “tucked up in corners, hidden under blankets, rolled up in tongues.” Van Sise describes an exciting cultural programming renaissance that’s reaching new speakers and some tricky linguistics detective work that resurrects languages that went generations without being spoken. The book shimmies from Alaskan Russian to South Californian Tongva to Georgia’s Afro-Seminole Creole, showcasing the diversity of amazing words and concepts among different traditions. And the accompanying portraits reflect cultural pride and evoke multiple meanings for the selected terms. Most striking is the shoreside portrait depicting *et’uqitur* (“he reached a deep spot in the water”) with a mighty whale fluke piercing the water just behind the Cup’ig speaker.

This creative and important collection of words you never knew you really needed is best summed up by the Bukhari word *amonati*—“something you hold and keep safe for someone else.”

RACHEL JAGARESKI



Birding for Boomers And Everyone Else Brave Enough to Embrace the World’s Most Rewarding and Frustrating Activity

Sneed B. Collard III, Mountaineers Books (SEP 1) Softcover \$21.95 (232pp), 978-1-68051-670-8, NATURE

Sneed B. Collard III took up birdwatching in his adulthood, when his son developed an interest in birds. He records his own experiences and shares plenty of tips for fellow late bloomers in *Birding for Boomers*, extolling the variety of birds there are to see, recommending kinds of habitats to check out, and going over some of the challenges with identifying specific birds with common traits.

Because the book is aimed at new birders, it includes advice about what kinds of binoculars to consider, what

clothing and equipment to use, the value of a good field guidebook, and useful online resources. Its guidance is casual, often relayed with light humor and embellished by personal anecdotes. Challenges specific to boomers factor into its advice on birding with hearing, eyesight, and mobility challenges, and into its considerations for those on fixed incomes. It also makes important points about safety for nonwhite and LGBTQ+ birders.

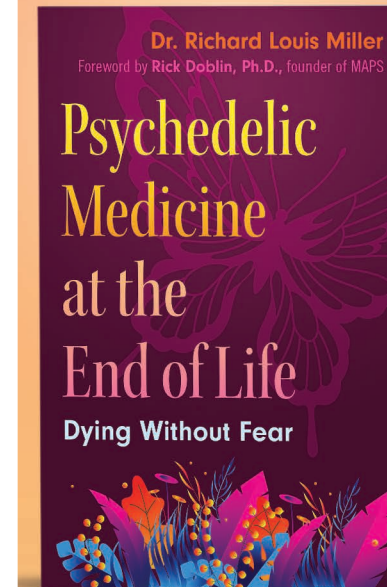
With its ranging approach and easy-to-follow advice, *Birding for Boomers* is a handy guide for all those—boomer or otherwise—who are looking to pick up an ornithological hobby.

JEFF FLEISCHER ♥

Image right from *Birding for Boomers: And Everyone Else Brave Enough to Embrace the World’s Most Rewarding and Frustrating Activity*, by Sneed B. Collard III. Illustrations by Tanner Barkin. Used with permission from Mountaineers Books.



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