

Of Blood and Lightning

Micki Janae, Three Rooms Press (OCT 8)
Softcover \$17 (400pp), 978-1-953103-44-4
FANTASY

Micki Janae's novel *Of Blood and Lightning* sizzles with excitement as a diverse group of high schoolers are swept into a world of myths.

Seventeen-year-old Ophelia is a recent orphan following the death of her father. She moves to North Dakota with her aunt and uncle. There, Ophelia is embraced by a group of friends who enjoy cliff-diving into a river, climbing water towers, and seeking adventures. Despite their friendship, Ophelia struggles to process the loss of her father. She is plagued by vivid dreams of mythical figures who feel too real.

As Ophelia's mysterious dreams increase in intensity and her friends experience similar nightmares, Ophelia realizes that her aunt and uncle are withholding information about her father. Ophelia demands to learn the truth. After another dream, she gains the ability to generate lightning from her skin and storms in the sky, having inherited the powers of the Greek god of lightning, Zeus. Her friends also inherit strange new powers, together forming a pantheon and assuming the responsibilities of the Greek and Roman gods: they have access to Artemis's arrows and Hades's bident and connection to the underworld, for example. And even as Ophelia is pushed to save the world with magic, she discovers that her father's death was far from an accident.

"Holy shit," mutters Ophelia when a sword of lightning appears in her hands for the first time. Such earthiness is characteristic of the prose, whose levity contrasts well with the novel's dark backdrop. And while the book doesn't directly deal with contemporary issues of racial equity, its centering of not heretofore diverse stories on a BIPOC cast is fresh.

Recasting ideas from Greek mythology, *Of Blood and Lightning* is an engrossing epic novel in which teenagers battle an older generation of deities and monsters.

MIKE GOOD



The Civilization

K.M. McKenzie, Iskanchi Press (OCT 11)
Hardcover \$30 (250pp), 978-1-957810-22-5
FANTASY

In K. M. McKenzie's spirited fantasy novel *The Civilization*, a skeptical girl with a heroic destiny learns about dark magic threats to the enchanted, hidden world of her ancestors.

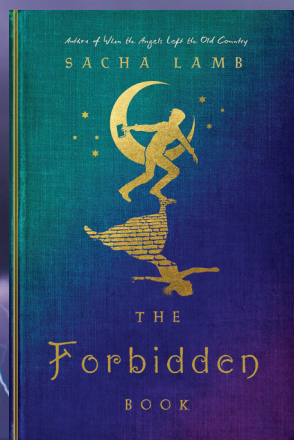
Raised by her rambling, nomadic grandfather in North Africa, seventeen-year-old Kadsa is fed crazy-sounding stories: she hails from the land of Marut, to where her grandfather yearns to return, and she is the god Abnr's gift, destined to bring back light to a land encased in darkness. When Kadsa's grandfather goes missing, the glowing pendant he gave her transports her to the haunted forests of Marut. With the help of a wolveren creature trapped in the forest and Marut's desperate leaders, Kadsa seeks to rescue Marut from the dark goddess's grasp, find her grandfather, and return to Earth.

At first, the Maruti language barrier is Kadsa's greatest obstacle. Her struggles with the lessons the kind royals offer to prepare her for her destiny mirror her reconciliation with her ancestral identity. Her frustrations delay the start of the mission, but her determination and renewed faith in her grandfather's stories propel her creative problem-solving.

The worldbuilding is lush and robust. There are plenty of revelations about what Marut's transformative magic can do, including enhancing mental abilities and shape-shifting. But there are no cure-alls for Kadsa's problems. To succeed, she uses her wits and mistrustful attitude to connive against the king's wily advisor, shelter the virtuous queen when the king succumbs to his ill health, and partner with the cursed prince to destroy the dark goddess. The large cast of Maruti nobles, subjects, and magical creatures enhances Maruti's cultural lore.

A riveting fantasy novel, *The Civilization* incorporates African mythology into its story of a whip-smart heroine who learns to claim her destiny and newfound ancestry with pride.

AIMEE JODOIN



The Forbidden Book

Sacha Lamb, Levine Querido (OCT 1)
Hardcover \$19.99 (256pp)
978-1-64614-456-3, FANTASY

A girl resists the limits imposed by her class and gender, daring to seek a new kind of life (with some supernatural help), in Sacha Lamb's wonder-filled historical novel *The Forbidden Book*.

In a shtetl whose rabbi possesses a text written by an angel, Sorel is a rich man's daughter who is promised to a boy she does not love. But on the night before her wedding, compelled by impulses somewhat beyond herself, she escapes through her window instead, venturing into town in disguised as a boy. She tells those she meets that her name is Isser, not knowing that her assumed identity is a beleaguered one: the true Isser is known for printing and selling illegal pamphlets about Jewish emancipation. Soon, Sorel is swept into a mystery involving stolen magic and a probable murder.

As she travels, Sorel encounters a cemetery keeper who speaks in near riddles, a peddler who's fast to offer assistance, and Adela, the tough, enchanting friend of the dybbuk who sometimes rises to guide her. They face off against smugglers, Sorel's scheming father, and Agrat, an angel who resents a contract forged long ago with the Jewish citizens of their town. Still, though they contend with formidable historical and supernatural forces, they prove unflappable: "all three of them were used to wishing the world looked different," and vicious black dogs and lookalike corpses cannot deter them.

Set against the backdrop of a changing world, *The Forbidden Book* is captivating. In a matter of days, Sorel goes from feeling trapped by her status and father's promises to being free of outside expectations and even perhaps able to pursue a different kind of love. Her growing affection for Adela is an electric undercurrent to her story of defiance, bravery, and unexpected friendships.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER



★ **The Maid and the Crocodile**

A Novel in the World of Raybearer

Jordan Ifueko, Amulet Books (AUG 13)
Hardcover \$19.99 (304pp)
978-1-4197-6435-6. FANTASY

In Jordan Ifueko's novel *The Maid and the Crocodile*, an orphaned girl fights to make a home for herself while contending with a cursed god.

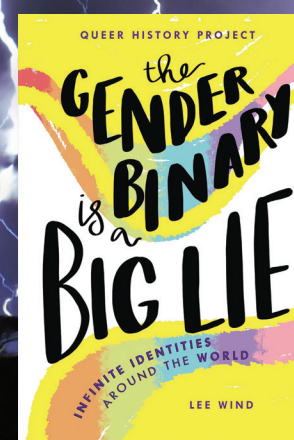
In Oluwan, while trying to find employment as a maid, Sade accidentally binds herself to the Crocodile, a god rumored to eat unwanted girls and women brought to his doorstep. While dodging his charming overtures, she is hired as a curse eater by Mamadele at the Balogun Inn. There, she undertakes the unforgiving task of clearing spirit silt, the magical manifestation of people's hopes and disappointments. As she builds a home, Sade faces her past and the Crocodile's curse.

Narrating her own story, Sade is a remarkable heroine who often prefers to go unnoticed. Though she's self-effacing and humble, she has a clear voice. Her curse eating is powerful because of the beautiful, emotive songs that she improvises while cleaning. Honoring the erased but essential working class, Sade asserts her fulfillment in serving as a maid and enjoys laughter, friendship, and solidarity with other laborers and servants. She expresses understandable dismay at the discrimination she faces for her vitiligo and crushed foot but remains persistent against these projected limitations, mobilizing herself up and down stairs, across rooms and hallways, and around Oluwan.

Descriptions of cosmopolitan Oluwan place its bustle against a complex history of god-sanctioned leadership under Raybearers and Anointed Ones. There are real-world parallels to underdressed systemic abuses, too, including child labor, class-based oppression, and violence against women. Social-climbing Mamadele is greedy and ruthless, using maternal warmth and threats to force Sade's gratitude and compliance. Each triumph that Sade, the Crocodile, and their allies experience is exhilarating and consequential.

A magical and imaginative novel, *The Maid and the Crocodile* embeds social commentary into its fantasy world, wherein a maid faces discrimination alongside the gods.

ISABELLA ZHOU



The Gender Binary Is a Big Lie

Infinite Identities around the World
Lee Wind, Zest Books (AUG 6) Softcover
\$19.99, 978-1-72841-454-6, LGBTQ+

Gender is examined throughout diverse histories and cultures in Lee Wind's edifying book *The Gender Binary Is a Big Lie*.

Beginning by introducing the nuances of gender and sexuality as they're now understood, each chapter is devoted to a specific location, period, and group of people who lived outside of the gender binary. From eunuchs in ancient Greek, Roman, and Byzantine empires to the third-gender Māhū people in Hawai'i and Tahiti, the roles and expectations of gender are examined from the earliest recorded history onward, celebrating each identity and illuminating how gender nonconformity existed throughout time. Along with profiles of specific gender nonconforming icons throughout history, the book also relays general information about biology, the social expectations of gender, and what it means to be an ally.

Making use of abundant historical sources and references, the book analyzes all types of gender nonconforming people. Wind, a prevalent voice in queer spaces, amplifies gender nonconforming voices from all corners of the world, including Roman emperors in 222 CE and zishu nū—"self-combed women"—in 1950s China. Each chapter also features a profile on a person or group—including castrati from 1500s Italy, brotherboys and sistergirls from modern Australia, and women warriors of 1700s Dahomey—leaving tangible examples of variant gender roles throughout history.

Furthering its educational aspects, the book includes pop-out boxes where complex or uncommon words and phrases need added explanations. Black-and-white photographs of gender nonconforming people and their communities bear evidence of real cultures living outside of gender expectations. And each chapter ends with poignant questions about stereotypes, gender diversity, and gender expectations relevant to its section.

Using examples from various cultural perspectives spanning continents and centuries, *The Gender Binary Is a Big Lie* reveals worlds in which gender nonconformity is celebrated.

ALLISON JANICKI ♥

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