

Startups for Spring

As usual, we highlight 10 promising fiction debuts for our seasonal announcement issue. Among the protagonists: a husband who can't live with—or without—his wife, a divorcée who finds happiness at 35,000 feet, a young man who struggles to explain the power of lightning, and other compelling characters. Vietnam vet Karl Marlantes starts us off talking about his own first novel's unusual evolution.

Why I Write..



BY KARL MARLANTES

Having read a galley of my novel, *Matterhorn*, about Marines in Vietnam, a somewhat embarrassed woman came up to me and said, "I didn't even know you guys slept outside." She was college educated and had been an active protester against the war. I felt that my novel had built a small bridge.

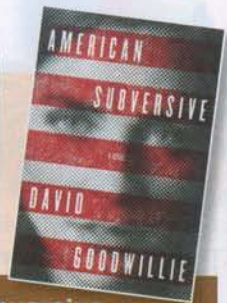
The chasm that small bridge crossed is still wide and deep in this country. I remember being in uniform in early 1970, delivering a document to the White House, when I was accosted by a group of students waving Vietcong and North Vietnamese flags. They shouted obscenities and jeered at me. I could only stand there stunned, thinking of my dead and maimed friends, wanting desperately to tell these students that my friends and I were just like them: their age, even younger, with the same feelings, yearnings, and passions. Later, I quite fell for a girl who was doing her master's thesis on D. H. Lawrence. Late one night we were sitting on the stairs to her apartment and I told her that I'd been a Marine in Vietnam. "They're the worst," she cried, and ran up the stairs, leaving me standing there in bewilderment.

After the war, I worked as a business consultant to international energy companies to support a family, eventually being blessed with five children. I began writing *Matterhorn* in 1975 and for more than 30 years, I kept working on my novel in my spare time, unable to get an agent or publisher to even read the manuscript. Certainly, writing the novel was a way of dealing with the wounds of combat, but why would I subject myself to the further wounds all writers receive trying to get published? I think it's because I've wanted to reach out to those people on the other side of the chasm who delivered the wound of misunderstanding. I wanted to be understood.

Ultimately, the only way we're ever going to bridge the chasms that divide us is by transcending our limited viewpoints. My realization of this came many years ago reading Eudora Welty's great novel *Delta Wedding*. I experienced what it would be like to be a married woman on a Mississippi Delta plantation who was responsible for orchestrating one of the great symbols of community and love. I entered her world and expanded beyond my own skin and became a bigger person.

I was given the ability to create stories and characters. That's my part of the long chain of writers, publishers, agents, booksellers, librarians, and a host of others who eventually deliver literature to the world. I want to do for others what Eudora Welty did for me.

Karl Marlantes received the Navy Cross for extraordinary heroism during combat in March 1969 while serving with the Third Marine Division. He is the author of Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War to be published in April by Atlantic Monthly Press and El Leon Literary Arts.



American Subversive

David Goodwillie, 37
(Scribner, Apr.)

Born: Paris, now lives in New York City.

Favorite authors: Pete Dexter, Junot Díaz, Jonathan Franzen, Ian Frazier, David Gates, Amy Hempel, Richard Price, Philip Roth, Zadie Smith.

Career arc: From baseball player to PI, Sotheby's auction house expert, Internet entrepreneur, debut novelist. "An arc may be too smooth a shape."

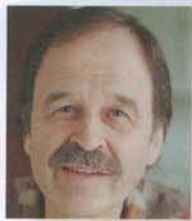
Plot: In the frenzy following the failed terrorist bombing of a private equity firm in Manhattan, two lives collide: Paige, an idealist radicalized by her brother's death in Iraq, and Aidan, a jaded media blogger. When Aidan receives a mysterious e-mail implicating Paige in the bombing, he is drawn—romantically and politically—into her orbit.

Author's toughest challenge: "The down time, between books—for me, that's when the doubts creep in. Writing must be the only profession that doesn't get easier with experience. But when an idea takes shape and the words (finally) start to flow, there's no better—or more worthwhile—job on earth."

Publisher's pitch: Says assistant editor Paul Whitlatch, "In his exhilarating debut, David imagines a Weather Underground for today. In this age of Tea Party anger and environmental scapegoating, his premise seems all too plausible. The story is as explosive as the prose is good." Historical espionage writer Alan Furst calls Goodwillie "an exceptional and fine young talent."

Opening lines: "I am in hiding, someplace cold. Someplace they won't find me, or haven't yet. Weeks have passed, weeks spent watching weather through windows, flash storms, incessant rains. And now the first snow."

First Fiction



The First Thing and the Last

Allan G. Johnson, 63
(Plain View Press, Mar.)

Born: Washington, D.C.; now lives in Collinsville, Conn.

Favorite authors: Louise Erdrich, William Styron, Evelyn Waugh, Barbara Kingsolver, John Steinbeck, Jane Kenyon.

Career arc: Writer of short fiction and poetry, sociologist and teacher, author and speaker on issues of gender and race, debut novelist.

Plot: Katherine Stuart, her life shattered by domestic violence, is sought out by the elderly Lucy Dudley, setting in motion a deepening relationship around a universal struggle to reclaim what severe trauma takes from people's lives.

Author's toughest challenge: "Living through almost 60 publisher rejections in seven years with three editors who wanted to publish the novel but were overruled by publishers who thought the public wasn't ready for a novel that realistically portrays domestic violence. Keeping the embers burning while waiting for the right moment and the right publisher willing to take this on."

Publisher's pitch: Says publisher Susan Bright, "The lifelong effects of violent abuse and the healing they necessitate are told with delicacy, suspense, and a veracity rarely understood well enough to clearly tell. This is an important book, inspiring and beautifully written."

Opening lines: "For an instant, Katherine forgets what is happening and feels as if she is flying. Like an object hurled into the air and weightless as the apogee of flight, she is aloft, unbound in the vast and timeless space between one heartbeat and another, before the gravity of being draws her back to who and where she is and what is what."



The Handbook for Lightning Strike Survivors

Michele Young-Stone, 38
(Crown/Shaye Areheart Books, Apr.)

Born: Norfolk, Va.; now lives in Richmond.

Favorite authors: Wally Lamb, John Irving, Toni Morrison, William Faulkner.

Career arc: From cashier, nanny, receptionist, and public school teacher to novelist.

Plot: In this coming-of-age story that spans 20 years, Becca and Buckley are two lost souls whose lives were dramatically altered by lightning strikes. Separated by time and place, they find each other in unusual circumstances after one of them writes a handbook for survivors. The novel is interspersed with excerpts from the handbook.

Author's toughest challenge: "Continuing to write every day after starting a family. As a new stay-at-home mom, I didn't have contact with other writers, and I'd just finished my M.F.A. in fiction writing. My world totally changed, and I didn't know if I'd be able to keep writing like I had been."

Publisher's pitch: Says editor Sarah Knight, "I was won over by the title and thrilled when the novel was every bit as vibrant, moving, and magical as it sounded. Michele's writing reminded me of Wally Lamb—the way she makes every little piece mean something in the end."

Opening lines: "She was a girl like you or like someone you knew—from a cracked home, a fault line between her parents, for which she felt responsible. A pretty girl with red hair: too curly to contain in barrettes or under headbands, twisting free, needing to spiral and curl like the ocean waves to her right. The sun was hot, turning her back pink."



Ilustrado

Miguel Syjuco, 33
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, May)

Born: Manila, now lives in Montreal.

Favorite authors: Saul Bellow, Jorge Luis Borges, Ernest Hemingway, Vladimir Nabokov, Susan Sontag, Roberto Bolaño, José Rizal.

Career arc: From dot-commer and journalist in Asia, to Columbia M.F.A., New York City intern, medical guinea pig, newspaper copyeditor, award winner for unpublished novel.

Plot: *Ilustrado* opens with Crispin Salvador, lion of Philippine letters, dead in the Hudson River. His acolyte sets out to investigate the suspicious death and the disappearance of an unfinished manuscript—a work that was to return the author to fame and expose the corruption behind the rich families who have ruled the Philippines for generations.

Author's toughest challenge: "It was difficult to make sense of a society that often doesn't make sense; the Philippines is a complicated place. Harder still was spinning its complexities into the many narratives that make my novel whole, readable, and hopefully worthwhile. Hardest of all is summarizing what it's really about."

Publisher's pitch: Says executive editor Eric Chinski, "I know I love a novel when I can't stop walking around the office insisting my colleagues read passages from the manuscript. *Ilustrado* just has so much energy and life, and the writing is so smart and funny. I couldn't resist."

Opening lines: "When the author's life of literature and exile reached its unscheduled terminus that anonymous February morning, he was close to completing the controversial book we'd all been waiting for. His body, floating in the Hudson, had been hooked by a Chinese fisherman."

First Fiction



The Lotus Eaters

Tatjana Soli, 46
(St. Martin's, Apr.)

Born: Salzburg, Austria; now lives in Southern California.

Favorite authors: Ernest Hemingway, Tim O'Brien, Joy Williams, Robert Stone, J.M. Coetzee.

Career arc: From model to theater actress, stock trader, art publisher, short story writer, and novelist.

Plot: An American female combat photographer, Helen Adams, goes to Vietnam to cover the war. An adventure story and a love story, Helen discovers the devastations of battle and the cost of courage as she comes to love two different men.

Author's toughest challenge: "Although I was haunted by this image of a female photographer in Vietnam, it was scary to tackle the sacred territory of the war. It felt like literally creating a world from scratch around the character. My biggest challenge storywise was to get the dark places of war right, but still find truthful moments of light."

Publisher's pitch: Says editor Hilary Teeman, "It's a searing portrait of an American woman's struggle and triumph against the impossibly chaotic backdrop of Vietnam. Soli's created an incredible character in Helen Adams—tough, terrified, unscrupulous, and vulnerable. The writing is stunning, expressing perfectly both the wrenching horror of war and the redemptive power of love."

Opening lines: "The city teetered in a dream state. Helen walked down the deserted street. The quiet was eerie. Time running out. A long-handled barber's razor, cradled in the nest of its strop, lay on the ground, the blade's metal grabbing the sun. Unable to resist, she leaned down to pick it up, afraid someone would split his foot open running across it."



Love in Mid Air

Kim Wright, 54
(Grand Central Publishing, Mar.)

Born: Charlotte, N.C.

Favorite authors: Tom Perrotta, Joseph Conrad, Jane Austen, Alice Munro.

Career arc: From food, wine, and travel journalist to first-time novelist.

Plot: Approaching 40, a woman contemplating divorce meets a stranger on an airplane and decides to change the course of her life to be happy again. Along the way, she deals with the consequences for her family and friends, who just want her to continue life as normal, even though that may not be what she wants.

Author's toughest challenge: "When I got divorced, women started flagging me down in the supermarket and darkly muttering about their own discontents. I became the person it was okay to confess to. The challenge was to write about topics like affairs, divorce, midlife questioning, and suburban angst without slipping into clichés."

Publisher's pitch: Executive editor Karen Kosztołnyk calls *Love in Mid Air* "a funny, wise look at modern-day marriage and of a woman choosing something more for her life. Think of Kim's writing as a cross between Tom Perrotta and Allison Pearson. Her characters are so realistically depicted that it makes for addictive reading."

Opening lines: "I wasn't meant to sit beside him. It was a fluke. It's the last Sunday in August and I'm in Phoenix for a pottery show. I won a prize for my glazing and sold seventeen pieces, so I'm feeling good. On the morning I'm due to fly out, I go for an early hike in a canyon behind my hotel."



Mr. Peanut

Adam Ross, 42
(Knopf, June)

Born: New York City, now lives in Nashville.

Favorite authors: Saul Bellow, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Conrad, Italo Calvino, Haruki Murakami, Alice Munro.

Career arc: From child actor to journalist, teacher, debut novelist.

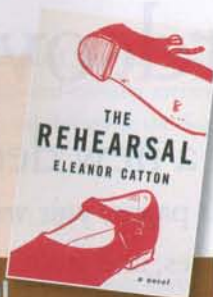
Plot: David Pepin has loved his wife since the moment they met, and after 13 years of marriage he can't imagine a day without her—yet he obsessively contemplates her demise. Soon she is dead, and he's deeply distraught, but also the prime suspect, his case relentlessly investigated by detectives unusually sensitive to the intricacies of marital guilt.

Author's toughest challenge: "It's pretty simple: I decided I wanted my novel's structure to be a Möbius strip. Then things got complicated."

Publisher's pitch: Says editor Gary Fisketjon, "Aside from being the most ambitious and accomplished first novel in recent memory, *Mr. Peanut* is as intense emotionally as it is structurally: a set of interlocking dramas that explore the twinned impulses of love and hate, murder and marriage. Audacious, intriguing, and surprising, it's a police procedural of the soul, about the most important and elusive part of our lives."

Opening lines: "When David Pepin first dreamed of killing his wife, he didn't kill her himself. He dreamed convenient acts of God. At a picnic on the beach, a storm front moved in. David and Alice collected their chairs, blankets, and booze, and when the lightning flashed David imagined his wife lit up, her skeleton distinctly visible as in a children's cartoon, Alice then collapsing into a smoking pile of ash."

First Fiction



The Rehearsal
Eleanor Catton, 24
(Little, Brown/Reagan Arthur Books, May)

Born: Canada, now lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

Favorite authors: Alan Moore, Iris Murdoch, Philip Pullman, Janet Frame.

Career arc: Master's candidate to debut novelist.

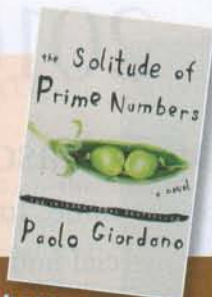
Plot: A high school sex scandal sends students spinning into action, using the affair to explore their own longings and artistic ambitions in classic teenage style. When the local drama school turns the story into a play, boundaries merge between the real and imagined, private and public, with startling results.

Author's toughest challenge: "Because so much of the novel behaves like a play, occurring in the same location and using the same prop (the saxophone), I occasionally had a hard time dreaming up new ways to imaginatively transform the space and the action. I knew I had to keep trumping myself—if I started out weird I had to get weirder."

Publisher's pitch: Says editorial director Reagan Arthur, "You can't read even the first page of this novel without realizing you're in the hands of someone bold and original. This novel is funny, surprising, and uncommonly wise about the workings of the human heart, in both its teenage and older incarnations."

Opening lines: " 'I can't do it,' is what she says. 'I simply can't admit students without prior musical training. My teaching methods, Mrs. Henderson, are rather more specific than I think you understand.' A jazzy pulse begins, just drums and double bass. She swirls her spoon and taps it once. 'The clarinet is tadpole to the sax, can you see that?'"

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The Solitude of Prime Numbers
Paolo Giordano, 27
(Viking/Pamela Dorman Books, Mar.)

Born: Turin, Italy; now lives in San Mauro, Italy.

Favorite authors: Philip Roth, David Foster Wallace, Joyce Carol Oates, Ian McEwan.

Career arc: Degree in particle physics, Ph.D. in theoretical physics, journalist from time to time.

Plot: When main characters Alice and Mattia meet as teenagers, each recognizes in the other a kindred, damaged spirit. But just as they achieve a closeness that promises to dissipate their solitude, the two are forced to separate until a chance occurrence reunites them and brings a lifetime of concealed emotion to the surface.

Author's toughest challenge: "Combining a pure literary aspiration with a simple, direct language that could be comfortably read by anyone has been my biggest challenge from the beginning. The tough part is to preserve simplicity without betraying the complexity of the original thought."

Publisher's pitch: Publisher Pamela Dorman says, "It was Giordano's metaphor of the 'prime number' that captured my imagination, but it was the exquisitely nuanced emotional pull between these two adolescent misfits that left its imprint on me. This is a classic destined to be read and remembered by readers of all ages."

Opening lines: "Alice Della Rocca hated ski school. She hated getting up at seven-thirty, even during Christmas vacation. She hated her father staring at her over breakfast, his leg dancing nervously under the table as if to say hurry up, get a move on."

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Touch
Adania Shibli, 35
(Interlink/Clockroot Books, Mar.)

Born: Palestine, now divides her time between England and Palestine.

Favorite authors: James Joyce, Kenzaburo Oe, Thomas Bernhard, Yasunari Kawabata, Ibrahim Aslan.

Career arc: From shepherd to farmer to writer.

Plot: A singular young Palestinian girl touches, sees, and listens to try to make sense of her mysterious world, where sisters fight, brothers die, mothers mourn, and girls turn into brides.

Author's toughest challenge: "Language. Sometimes it disappears and I can't find the exact word for a thing I vaguely see, feel, and hear, but do not know how to write. The novel as a whole is a manifestation of this challenge."

Publisher's pitch: Hailed as "the most talked-about writer in the West Bank," Shibli has an original, stripped-down style that has already made her a name in Arabic literature. Says publisher Pamela Thompson, "In the Palestine of *Touch*, everyday sensations are vivid and devastating, while politics casts only distant shadows."

Opening Lines: "The big water tank stood on four legs, appearing from a distance like an ant standing perfectly still. Once it had another color, which had lasted until a tiny spot of rust came, and grew and grew until it took over the whole tank and turned it brown. Behind one of the legs of the tank stood a little girl. The brown color covering her, though, was not caused by that spot of rust, but by the tailor who, in making a dress for the mother, did not use up all of the heavy, brown wool laced every so often with golden threads."