

BRIEFLY NOTED

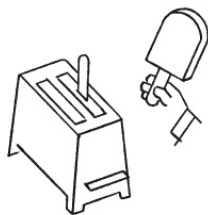
The Hunger Angel, by Herta Müller, translated from the German by Philip Boehm (Metropolitan). Written in terse, hypnotic prose, this moving novel by a recent Noble laureate is set in a Russian Gulag at the end of the Second World War. The narrator, Leo Auberg, a member of Romania's German-speaking minority, arrives at the age of seventeen and remains for five years. Surviving on bread and cabbage soup, the internees are maddened by starvation; in Leo's mind, they are controlled by a "hunger angel," who drives them to steal food from one another and clothes from still warm corpses. Leo, who is further alienated by his nascent homosexuality, takes comfort in the objects and materials that surround him—the shape of his shovel, the texture of wet cement—and his lengthy depictions, as exquisite as they are bleak, make up much of the novel. "I wanted to work out a trade with things that aren't alive but aren't dead either," he says.

The Reeducation of Cherry Truong, by Aimee Phan (St. Martin's). Propelled by the need to understand her splintering, sprawling Vietnamese family, the eponymous protagonist of this debut novel stitches together a multigenerational account drawn from the clandestine correspondence among her parents and grandparents. The journey of the Truongs from war-torn Vietnam to the West is beset by betrayals and sacrifices that threaten to undo the family long after they have escaped. Although the story belongs primarily to Cherry, various family members take turns unspooling the narrative, contributing their own tales of unhappy love and unfulfilled ambition. Ultimately, the stories flow a little too readily into one another, as the novel presses home its thesis: "Everyone has choices taken away from them. Despair is pushed into our lives. We can only control how we recover."

The Spanish Holocaust, by Paul Preston (Norton). Barely a month into the

military coup that sparked the Spanish Civil War, in 1936, the caretaker of a Granada cemetery was driven mad by the executions being carried out there. His replacement soon had to move away from the site, "because the shots and the cries and screams of the dying had made it unbearable." Unflinchingly, Preston sifts through the pillage, torture, and mass executions of this bleak chapter in Spanish history. The prose generally moves briskly, though the welter of material sometimes overwhelms. Buried but discernible under the documentary heap is Preston's persuasive distinction between right-wing and left-wing violence; the former was systematic and premeditated, its perpetrators bent on annihilation and "education through terror," while the latter was disordered, random, and decentralized. He also touches on the fascinating concept of "sociological Francoism"—the legacy of these events in the enduring polarization of Spanish life.

Lives of the Novelists, by John Sutherland (Yale). Billed as "A history of fiction in 294 lives," this chatty, companionable, undogmatic tome of capsule biographies is arranged chronologically, from John Bunyan (1628-88) to Rana Dasgupta (1971-). Like David Thomson's "Biographical Dictionary of Film," this prose brick is designed to be skimmed, dipped into, passed around, and argued over. Sutherland is almost comically erudite. Not only is he aware of Sylvanus Cobb, Jr. (1823-1887); he even seems to have read his books (which apparently "helped lay the foundations of mass readership for American fiction") and to have measured opinions of them. There is a certain amount of biographical boilerplate, but sustained browsing leaves one with the happy feeling that there are no human activities more worthwhile than writing and reading novels.

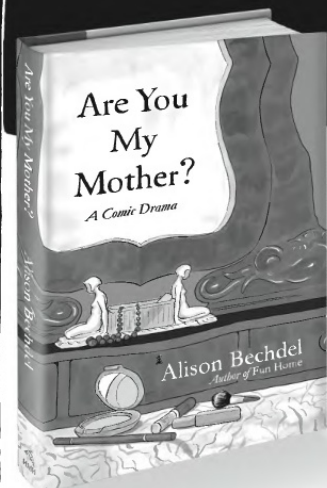


The new book from the best-selling author of *Fun Home*



Photo © Brian Scher

Alison Bechdel



"*Are You My Mother* is a work of the most humane kind of genius, bravely going right to the heart of things: why we are who we are. It's also incredibly funny. And visually stunning. And page-turningly addictive. And heartbreaking."

—JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

"Many of us are living out the unlived lives of our mothers. Alison Bechdel has written a graphic novel about this; sort of like a comic book by Virginia Woolf.

You won't believe it until you read it—and you must!"

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