Books

6 of the Best New Books by Columbia Authors

From powerful memoir to page-turning fiction.

By
Rebecca Shapiro
|
Fall 2023



Foreign Bodies

By Simon Schama

In March 2020, as the COVID-19 virus spread, the world shut down in a way that felt unprecedented. In fact, that was far from the case. In his gripping new book, Columbia history and art-history professor Simon Schama chronicles some of the infectious diseases — from smallpox to cholera to the bubonic plague — that have crippled societies and the scientific advances that saved them. It's an inspiring collection, full of human ingenuity and courage, and a welcome reminder of the power of vaccines and of collective action.

The Guest

By Emma Cline '13SOA

We meet Alex — the protagonist of Emma Cline's new novel — as her latest boyfriend, Simon, is kicking her out of his prize Hamptons house, five days before his annual Labor Day party. Alex has nowhere to go — she's on the run from something or someone, relying on her youth, charm, and looks to get by. She thinks she can win Simon back at the party, but she has to make it until then, navigating the playground of the rich with nothing more than a backpack and the ability to con her way into food, shelter, and entertainment. It's a deceptively simple story, with not many people to root for, but the delicious tension that Cline is able to craft makes it a real page-turner.

Directions to Myself

By Heidi Julavits '96SOA

When Heidi Julavits was growing up, in rural Maine, her family often consulted an outdated nautical guide full of "cautious wisdom transferable to people, lost or not, without plans to ever leave land." It would come in handy again in 2014, when Julavits was in need of some direction. Campus sexual assault was at the forefront of the national conversation, and Julavits, a Columbia professor of writing, found herself thinking about her young son and how to responsibly steer him through "the end times of childhood." Toggling between her daily life in Manhattan and summers in Maine, she captures the ordinary, usually forgotten moments that make up a

particular season of life.

The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store

By James McBride ’80JRN

In the Chicken Hill neighborhood of Pottstown, Pennsylvania, Jews and African-Americans lived side by side for decades, working together to survive a world that was unkind to them. At the heart of James McBride’s latest novel are Moshe and Chona Ludlow, an Orthodox couple who run, respectively, the All-American Dance Hall and the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store, both havens for Blacks and Jews alike. But in June 1972, workers redeveloping the area find a skeleton at the bottom of a well, unearthing secrets long buried and providing the perfect setup for McBride’s rollicking, fast-paced, and sharp-as-ever storytelling.

Billionaires’ Row

By Katherine Clarke ’10JRN

Over the course of the last decade, the area just south of Central Park has transformed profoundly, with tourist-trap restaurants and schlocky souvenir shops giving way to a series of sleek, ultra-luxury high-rise condominium towers, built to “serve the richest people on earth.” In her fascinating new book, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Katherine Clarke tells the story behind these $100 million condos and the people who buy them. While it’s a small stretch of real estate, Clarke makes a compelling argument that Billionaires’ Row — erected in the wake of the Great Recession — illuminates the staggering wealth disparity now prevalent not just in New York City but in the country as a whole.

Pulling the Chariot of the Sun

By Shane McCrae

When Columbia writing professor Shane McCrae was three years old, his white-supremacist maternal grandparents kidnapped him from his Black father and took him to suburban Texas, where they raised him. It took years for McCrae to unravel the mystery of his upbringing and to understand his own Blackness, which his grandparents denied him. McCrae, a Guggenheim fellow, is the author of several poetry collections, one of which was a finalist for the National Book Award. This memoir, about the traumas of his childhood, is his first narrative work — and its powerful lyrical prose underscores McCrae's poetic soul.

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