Self-Published Books Showcase

These books are recommended by BlueInk Review, a fee-based review service devoted exclusively to self-published books. Every month, BlueInk compiles a list of their favorites for Booklist, as a service to librarians hoping to incorporate self-published work into their collections. BlueInk was founded by Patti Thorn, former book review editor of Denver’s Rocky Mountain News, and Patricia Moosbrugger, a literary agent who represents several best-selling authors. The company delivers professional, unbiased reviews of self-published books written by critics drawn largely from major mainstream publications and by editors from prominent publishing houses. Stars reflect the decisions of BlueInk reviewers and editors. Booklist is happy to bring this curated collection of the best in self-publishing for adults and youth to our audience.

Adult

By Robert E. Price.

Few music books capture the cultural and historical context—along with the sound of the music itself—as well as this one. Price’s prose deftly draws readers into the rich stories of musicians who flocked to Bakersfield, California, in the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s and developed a twangy, rockier stylistic counterpart to Nashville’s sweet, string-laden pop-country music. Price highlights the crossroads of commerce and culture that sparked this alternative country-music scene, beginning with the Dust Bowl migration of Okies to the West Coast and building to a history lesson about this new music’s influences, including western swing and UK folk ballads filtered through Appalachia, Mexican music, and more. His writing, though painstakingly researched, never bogs down in academic dullness. And he pays tribute not just to the music itself—as well as this one. Price’s writing style is lively and detail-oriented in all the right places, and the novel is meticulously researched. Two characters included to create a love-triangle subplot add unnecessary drama, but, that aside, the novel is gripping over time is fascinating. The author’s writing style is deemed to be generally well-written. The title refers to the time Techow joins the French Resistance but is forever haunted by his role in the assassination. Techow is a well-rounded character whose transformation over time is fascinating. The author’s writing style is lively and detail-oriented in all the right places, and the novel is meticulously researched. Two characters included to create a love-triangle subplot add unnecessary drama, but, that aside, the novel is gripping.

Before the Court of Heaven.
By Jack Mayer.

This enthralling historical novel is based on the true story of Ernst Techow, a German assassin turned French legionnaire. In this two-part story, the first half is recounted largely through flashbacks to Techow’s youth, from 1908 to 1922. At a nationalistic youth camp, he hears lectures about Jews being part of an ‘Evil Trinity,’ and such ideas eventually spur him to assist in the assassination of the Jewish Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau. The second half details his time in prison—where his cellmate changes Techow’s racist attitude—and his release into a divided Germany. As the Nazis rise to power, Techow joins the French Resistance but is forever haunted by his role in the assassination. Techow is a well-rounded character whose transformation over time is fascinating. The author’s writing style is lively and detail-oriented in all the right places, and the novel is meticulously researched. Two characters included to create a love-triangle subplot add unnecessary drama, but, that aside, the novel is gripping from the first line, offering an immersive, exciting, and often heartbreaking story.

Dreaming Forward: Latino Voices Enhance the Mosaic.
By Martha E Casazza.

Casazza, chair of the board of the Instituto Justice and Leadership Academy in Chicago, spearheaded a project to collect personal reminiscences in two Mexican American communities. This book compiles her interviews, which speak of loyalty to the old country against a backdrop of prejudice and opportunity in the new. Recounted in the interviewee’s own words (in English), each interview is reported separately and includes a short preface and wrap-up from the author. The subjects talk of struggle, determination, and hope. “Carmen” and “Angela” recall the start-up of a new high school geared to Latino youth. Problems included bias in the local, non-Latino community and a high dropout rate—“you start with six hundred and you end up with two hundred or less”—attributed to inadequate support services offered in Spanish. Jose recounts moving from state to state, often being put back a grade, sometimes allowed, sometimes forbidden, to speak Spanish. He worries about his children growing up among gangs in his Latino neighborhood. Casazza and the other interviewees gave participants full latitude to express their feelings. The result is a human-scale, readily comprehensible picture of Latino lives in flux.

By Pamela Capone.

In this engagingly written, faith-based essay collection, Capone finds humor and grace in ordinary—and sometimes extraordinary—situations. Capone has coined the term “mes-say” for her prose, a combination of “messy (informal, untidy, embarrassing, difficult)” and “essay.” The title refers to the time Capone shuffled out of bed, only to learn she had given herself a shiner with her own fist during a dream. The essays are poignant, thoughtful, and often funny—all handled with Capone’s appealingly light, conversational touch. Ad- opted at 18 months by her foster parents after her birth parents were charged with child neglect, Capone writes many pieces as reverent and often funny—all handled with Capone’s appealingly light, conversational touch. Ad- opted at 18 months by her foster parents after her birth parents were charged with child neglect, Capone writes many pieces as reverent and often funny—all handled with Capone’s appealingly light, conversational touch. Ad- opted at 18 months by her foster parents after her birth parents were charged with child neglect, Capone writes many pieces as reverent and often funny—all handled with Capone’s appealingly light, conversational touch. Ad- opted at 18 months by her foster parents after her birth parents were charged with child neglect, Capone writes many pieces as reverent and often funny—all handled with Capone’s appealingly light, conversational touch. Ad- opted at 18 months by her foster parents after her birth parents were charged with child neglect, Capone writes many pieces as reverent and often funny—all handled with Capone’s appealingly light, conversational touch.
Sex, Death, and the End of the World.
By Timothy Perper. Ed. by Martha Cornog. 2015. 139p. CreateSpace, paper, $10.95 (9781507780619).

This collection contains 14 entertaining fantasy and science-fiction pieces ranging from the surreal to the satirical to the just plain silly. Many have an existential element that allows readers to decide for themselves what happens after the story ends. In one story, the gods from multiple religions descend on 42nd Street in Manhattan. It’s the end of the world, but, as might be expected, New Yorkers take it in stride, and the gods, who don’t know each other, seem to hit it off. The world may not end after all. In another, General Culvershaw and his horse are allowed to return to life from their statue for one day each thousand years. But each time he comes to life, the general does a noble deed, and another statue is erected; after millennia, there are so many generals and horses running around that soon, no one knows what to do with them. These stories are, by turns, unique, thought provoking, and delightfully funny. Perper died in 2014, but his wife, editor and collaborator Cornog, compiled this collection from his copious notes. Here’s hoping she uncovers more of his husband’s work for a companion volume.

Sunborn Rising: Beneath the Fall.

Superlatives can’t aptly describe the immersive experience of reading Safronoff’s lively illustrated fantasy fable. The story is set on the world of Cerulean—essentially a star at the center of a vast ocean covered by a multileveled floating forest inhabited by diverse sentient creatures. Protagonist Barra Swiftspur is a Listespur (clawed, simianlike beings) whose life is turned upside down when he finds notes left by his adventurer father, Swiftspur, a Listespur (clawed, simianlike being). Many have an existential element that allows readers to decide for themselves what happens after the story ends. In one story, the gods from multiple religions descend on 42nd Street in Manhattan. It’s the end of the world, but, as might be expected, New Yorkers take it in stride, and the gods, who don’t know each other, seem to hit it off. The world may not end after all. In another, General Culvershaw and his horse are allowed to return to life from their statue for one day each thousand years. But each time he comes to life, the general does a noble deed, and another statue is erected; after millennia, there are so many generals and horses running around that soon, no one knows what to do with them. These stories are, by turns, unique, thought provoking, and delightfully funny. Perper died in 2014, but his wife, editor and collaborator Cornog, compiled this collection from his copious notes. Here’s hoping she uncovers more of his husband’s work for a companion volume.

To Any Soldier: A Novel of Vietnam Letters.

This compelling epistolary novel is made up of the late-1960s correspondence between a teenage girl and a marine attack pilot stationed in Vietnam. The first letter is addressed “To Any Soldier” and is written by Ashley Beth Justice, a college freshman who has heard that soldiers don’t get much mail. Finding the letter on a bulletin board at marine quarters in Da Nang, Jay Fox writes back, and so the correspondence begins. The two share a common background, both having been raised in nearby southern communities. She’s a naive 19-year-old, curious but troubled by the war; he’s a seasoned 23-year-old given to using words like gook and faggot, and unconflicted about his mission to kill. While they spar about the war, they bond over commonalities. This is a finely written, illuminating tale about an era when veterans were often seen as villains, not heroes. The characters are likable but imperfect, and their correspondence is realistic, humorous, direct, and enlightening. Such a tale could turn predictable, but To Any Soldier does not take the easy path, and the outcome remains uncertain to the very poignant end.

When We Were Invincible.

Harnisch often writes about alter egos who share his mental illnesses, including schizophrenia and Tourette’s syndrome. In this coming-of-age novel, protagonist Georgie Gust, a character featured in other Harnisch novels in various incarnations, appears as an angry young man akin to Salinger’s Holden Caulfield. He’s been banished by his alcoholic mother to a Connecticut boarding school, and we meet him during a suicidal episode in a graveyard. The prose is as electrifying as it is terrifying, with Georgie experiencing his mental illness as a literal monkey on his back: “Out of the wild jungle one day... the horn-headed monkey returns to its residence in me,” Georgie says. “This time, it was going to try and kill me, the son-of-a-bitch.” The majority of the novel concerns Georgie’s relationships with classmate Claudia Nesbitt and buddy “Fitz.” Georgie has thoughtful debates with his Catholic girlfriend about the nature of God, and she encourages him to embrace his mental illness, even as his self-destructive nature threatens to destroy him. The character’s voice is utterly compelling, and Harnisch imbues his troubled young hero with compassion and grace. The author’s personal experience elevates his writing, creating a story deserving of an admiring audience.

YA: A good choice for teens who connect with Holden Caulfield-types. SH.

The Betrayal.

This action-packed YA novel revolves around 15-year-old Will Conlan, whose life not only includes the normal teenage angst but also, his secret work for a CIA group that brainstorms possible terrorist scenarios. His double life begins to unravel when a terrorist threatens to destroy him for a fellow radical’s death, first hacking into Will’s computer, then mounting more serious attacks. The stakes rise further when Will’s girlfriend is kidnapped and he becomes the one who is “played”; not only does he unwittingly help the terrorist carry out his plan, he also loses all credibility with the CIA and must work to clear his name. Although the opening chapter might be a bit disturbing, any unease is quickly deflected in a neat twist. And while there are a few moments that are a stretch to believe, the book—the second in the series—is engaging overall, and Will is a likable hero. Given its fast-paced plot, the novel is particularly well suited for teens who like the action of video games brought to the printed page.

A Pigeon’s Tale.

This endearing, quasi–science fiction book for middle-graders is told from the point of view of Walter, an 800-year-old pigeon pecking out his life’s story, from his early years in a pigeon coop to his role in saving the world during a natural disaster. Remarkably intelligent and descended from a noble line, Walter can communicate with humans and birds alike. Mahan delivers memorable characters, including Old Dude, a funny, eccentric pigeon who takes Walter under his wing; Margie, a tough-talking bird from New York; and humans, such as Grandpa, who had the foresight to build a space capsule able to withstand the cosmic shift of the planet. The smoothly written story, divided into short chapters, is permeated with humor, as well as many poignant moments. Readers will be amused, for example, when Old Dude teaches Walter to scrounge for food by following the “little-uns” at a fast-food restaurant’s play area because they inevitably drop their food. A thin veneer of religion overlays the plot, but even the most somber moments are infused with hope and humor that goes beyond doctrine. Young readers seeking more-challenging chapter books, or parents who want an engaging bedtime story, will find this a good choice.