

# BOOKED & PRINTED

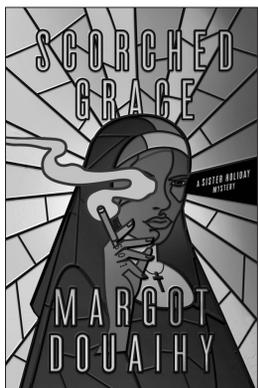
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LAUREL FLORES FANTAUZZO

Romance can linger long past the life of a relationship. When the time of togetherness ends, memories can propel a lover into endless internal investigations of what went right and what went wrong. Unexpected reunions can confirm, or overthrow, a searching heart's assumptions. This month, Booked and Printed finds two protagonists confronted by past partners, experiencing encounters that could yield new discoveries, awaken old hurts, or set new flames.

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In Margot Douaihy's contemporary hard-boiled novel, **SCORCHED GRACE**, Sister Holiday Walsh is a new nun at Saint Sebastian's School in New Orleans. She is none like the convent has ever seen: a former riot girl punk rocker, tattooed from neck to torso, given to impulsive bouts of temper and vengeance, and tempted by memories of Nina, the married woman with whom she carried on a torrid, years-long affair. Sister Holiday lives in the convent and teaches guitar lessons to Catholic high school students now, all the while tamping down smoldering regrets from her recent past. It's a peaceful life, one she's not sure she deserves—and then students and employees of the school begin falling victim to a murderous arson spree.



The rough, sarcastic, first-person voice of *Scorched Grace* seizes the reader in a headlock from the first page. Throughout Sister Holiday's obsessive search for the fire-starter, her narration takes its solid place in the lineage of classic, hard-boiled detectives filled with both self-effacing cynicism and dogged purpose. The backdrops of her memories and the setting are stark with realism. Her parents, strict Catholics themselves, rejected her and her queer younger brother, even when he was in terrible crisis. Her observations of past and present violence are uncompromising: She watches a half-burned janitor fall from a rooftop and helps students with a gory injury. Memories of her sex with Nina—in the bed the latter shared with her husband—are filled with virile passion and memorable dialogue, their love all the while hurtling toward near-unbearable destruction. Sister Holiday is prayerful, funny, cruel, and exhausted: in short, excellent company.

Douaihy surrounds Sister Holiday with a memorable crew of secondary characters, too: Bernard Pham is the eccentric, Vietnamese-American janitor in a band of his own. Jamie and Lamont are altar boys and closeted teen-aged lovers. Prince Dempsey is a rebellious, trash-talking teen, traumatized by Hurricane Katrina and always accompanied by his loyal pit bull service dog, BonTon. Investigator Riveaux is a New Orleans arson investigator with secrets of her own. And Sister Holiday's order of nuns, the evocatively named Sisters of the Sublime Blood, are by turns scolding and loving, awakening her instincts to prayer and to retaliation.

Sister Holiday views them all at different moments with affection and suspicion, obeying the hard-boiled tenet that no one can be trusted. All the while she keeps a dialogue with the Lord, her tenuous faith a realistic, psychological brawl through her own fear, rage, and unbearable guilt.

Though the history of hard-boiled detective novels skews undeniably toward one kind of identity, *Scorched Grace* blazes a queer path forward for the genre. Here's praying for a long series with Sister Holiday at the helm.

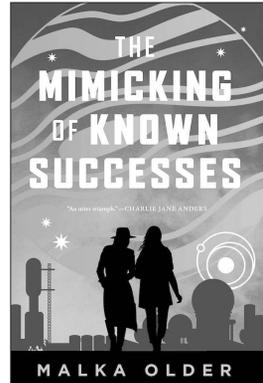
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Cozies often take place in past or present living rooms on planet Earth. But with **THE MIMICKING OF KNOWN SUCCESSES**, author Malka Older takes readers to human colonies on Jupiter, some endless years forward in the future.

Earth, by this era, has collapsed; our present day is known to future scholars as the Classical Era, during which overconsumption and unwarranted, insensible optimism heralded Earth's inevitable uninhabitability. On Jupiter, humans now wear atmoscarves to protect against the elements, and engineers have constructed efficient, modern transport stations to travel around the planet. From one of the platforms, on one of Jupiter's most isolated rings, a man, Bolien, falls and vanishes.

Mossa is the investigator on the missing man's case, her search for the truth leads her to the door of her ex-girlfriend. Pleiti is a scholar at Valdegeld University, Jupiter's elite, high-minded university. She is content to study alone in her university apartment, until Mossa's arrival, and the memories of their own romance, disrupts her day-to-day. Pleiti's research is committed to the study of Earth's ecosystems during the distant era when the planet still supported life. Though some audiences scoff at her aims, including grumbling administrators at the university, Pleiti believes her efforts will eventually fulfill the dream of humans' returning to a restored Earth. The missing man, Bolien, worked at the university too. Pleiti did not know him well. But the mystery of his disappearance may have more to do with Pleiti's research than either realize.

Though the future is filled with enough information to fill encyclopedias of history, *The Mimicking of Known Successes* wears its backstory lightly and



assuredly. Older's focus on Pleiti and Mossa's interactions form the warm heart of the narrative. Affectionate and Holmesian, complete with the tasty scones and soups of the future, the pair work through the knots of past and present conversations, turning up clues.

Pleiti is the book's narrator. Her sure-footed observations of Mossa, her charming attraction to her former paramour, and her own searching memories and self-interrogations make for good company. Mysterious attacks, tough interrogations, and near-death tumbles keep their journey buoyant and unpredictable. Mossa and Pleiti's companionable discoveries lead to surprising revelations about the dreams of the universe's humanity: the arrogance of some male academics, unfortunately, still persists into the distant future, threatening whole planets.

Though the end of the world, contempt for the humanities, and casual misogyny may be grim subjects, *The Mimicking of Known Successes* brings readers a warm and cozy world. As Mossa and Pleiti draw closer to the truth, and rebuild their own connection, readers will be happy to be taking railcars with them.

**ALL POINTS BULLETIN:** Mithran Somasundrum's latest novel from Joffe Books is entitled **THE CASE OF THE VANISHING CONMAN**. • "Coming Clean" by Leslie Budewitz (AHMM, 1-2/21) was a 2021 Western Writers of America Spur Award Finalist. • **HOW TO WRITE A MYSTERY: A HANDBOOK FROM THE MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA** (Scribner)—edited by Lee Child and Leslie S. Klinger and featuring pieces by Art Taylor, Dale W. Berry, Gary Phillips, and Rachel Howzell Hall—won the 2022 Anthony Award for Best Critical/Biographical. • **FROM THE SHADOWS**, James R. Benn's latest World War II Billy Boyle mystery, is available now from Soho Crime.