

BOOKED & PRINTED

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The workplace is the site of so much of our lives, with its mundane tasks, interactions with strangers who become colleagues, and striving to meet the expectations of an institution and its higher-ups. When vengeance, lies, and scheming smolder, the workplace can become a tinderbox of crime. This month, Booked and Printed visits books with employees harboring destructive secrets and the lengths to which they'll go to preserve themselves.

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In *Something Bad Wrong*, by Eryk Pruitt, a mystery burns at two ends. We begin in the present day, when a woman in her forties enters citizen journalism and podcasting for the first time, obsessed by a crime others tell her to forget. We then jump back to 1972, where a police investigator is using a small green notebook to capture facts that keep slipping away from him. Both are investigating the same, frustrating, unsolved killings: the murder of a young couple found tied to a tree, the trail of the perpetrator long gone cold.



The jumps between decades follow several characters, slowly and skillfully revealing the relationship between Jess, the new podcaster, and Jim, the past investigator. In the scenes from 1972, Jim's secrecy and growing helplessness are especially engrossing. As Jim copes with his declining abilities, hamstrung by the denial of his boss and his colleagues, he explodes in ways that grow more and more dangerous at the workplace. The masculine codes of his fellow officers offer him little support.

In 2022, Jess combs through Jim's notes and seeks out interviewees, wondering what drove investigators in 1972. Like Jim, she gets closer and closer to the truth—and to the danger and errors that masked the truth.

Something Bad Wrong carries shocking scenes of ruthlessness, engrossing plot twists, and patient, brutal steps toward justice. The book's strongest portrayals are of its male characters, with their vulnerabilities and self-made myths masked by violence, reticence, and secrecy. Readers will be rewarded with the satisfaction of the story: an intricate, page-turning plot that will not let their attention go.

Few institutions remain as equalizing as America's public libraries. Members of the public, regardless of housing status or ability to pay, can enter to meet their basic needs for knowledge and community. Librarians need patience and curiosity to thrive in their workplace, since it presents with both the joy of new stories and the frustrations of American struggle. In *How Can I Help You*, Laura Sims describes the intersecting lives of two new librarians. One, Margo, is middle-aged, with a contemptuous air that she covers up with genial stories. Her past is checkered; she was once a nurse who fled from her hospital, though she keeps that knowledge from her new colleagues. The other librarian, Patricia, is a young, elegant newcomer frustrated by her failed novel.

Margo and Patricia soon grow to be friendly colleagues, and then, by degrees, become obsessed with each other. In chapters that alternate between their points of view, we see snippets of their past and present. They are both angry at those who were once close to them. Patricia feels disdain for the affections of her boyfriend; Margo feels annoyance at a fellow nurse who was once a friend. They begin to deride the quirks of the library patrons. They fixate on each others' physical characteristics. Margo lets slip a little too much about her own secrets, and Patricia finds herself inspired.

How Can I Help You is a quick, satisfying read, with the modern library as a pleasing setting. The book is not surprising: the final climax between the two women is a foreseeable one, and Margo's past as a nurse hews closely to the real-life, notorious male nurse of a new Netflix feature and documentary. But the book deserves to be checked out of your public library—perhaps with caution, as you interact with your mysterious local librarian.

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Bloodbath Nation by Paul Auster is brief, more monograph than collection. In it, the prolific American author meditates on the obdurate nature of gun violence in the United States. He remembers his own father growing up in the shadow of an intimate shooting and focuses on the details, though not the perpetrators' names, of several American massacres. Readers may have heard Auster's arguments before: that guns should be regulated as motor vehicles are, that a total ban will be as ineffective as Prohibition was, and that violence was part of the nation's founding and thus continues today.



BLOODBATH NATION

PAUL AUSTER

Photographs by
SPENCER OSTRANDER

EACH YEAR, APPROXIMATELY FORTY THOUSAND AMERICANS ARE KILLED BY GUNSHOT WOUNDS, which is roughly equivalent to the annual size of traffic deaths on American roads and highways. Of those forty thousand gun fatalities, more than half of them are suicides, which in turn account for half of all suicides per year. Add in the murders caused by guns, the accidental deaths caused by guns, the law enforcement killings caused by guns, and the average comes out to more than one hundred Americans killed by bullets every day. On this same average day, another two hundred plus are wounded by guns, which translates into eighty thousand a year. Eighty thousand wounded and forty thousand

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The photographs that accompany Auster's text are chilling, though they contain no overt violence. American photographer Spencer Ostrander photographed over thirty sites of mass shootings. They are utterly mundane, everyday settings: schools, churches, stores, parking lots, office buildings. The book is a frustrating reminder of the American contract: by choosing to live and remain in this country, we risk maiming, gruesome death, and traumatic witnessing in our workplaces, our institutions, our homes—in any arena, large or small, within our borders. Proceeds from the sales of *Bloodbath Nation* will go toward a nonprofit fighting gun deaths and injury; perhaps a future generation will accomplish what we have failed to do.

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In one of the most innovative and truly creepy fiction podcasts to date, *Quiet Part Loud*, Rick Egan is host of his own right-wing radio station in the New York City area. He boasts millions of listeners in 2001, a kind of Rush Limbaugh/Alex Jones mashup spreading nativist racism and inflammatory rumors about the disappearances of three Muslim teenagers on Staten Island. Egan soon falls into ruin by his own hand, though, until years later, when a flirtatious woman offers him a tape recorder and a return to power. Egan seeks out the Muslim family who was tormented by his lies, and discovers an old American evil, an entity larger than any he could ever think to summon for personal gain.



Quiet Part Loud is best listened to on headphones for the subtleties of the audio engineering—motion, echoes, possessions, changing voices—though listeners may be tempted to tear those headphones off at truly scary moments. It's an exciting show, one that shows both the promise of podcasting originality, and a satisfying throwback to classic audio storytelling. Hopefully a second season is ahead.

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: THE SHAPES OF WRATH by Melissa Yi will be released this month from Windtree Press. • James R. Benn's first short story collection, **THE REFUSAL CAMP**, is due out in March from Soho Crime.