

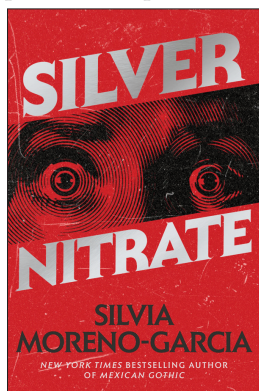
BOOKED & PRINTED

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Few relationships have the time-traveling, gravitational pull that childhood friendships do. The bonds formed during those vulnerable young years of discovery imprint on friends' futures, foretelling joy or sorrow, lifelong connections, or combustible ruptures. This issue Booked and Printed examines novels with childhood friends who encounter corruption and criminality in places they least expect. Crime and horror lurk in seemingly innocent environments, challenging children with far-reaching consequences and hair-raising stakes long into adulthood.

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In Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Silver Nitrate*, Montserrat is one of the few women sound designers in the Mexican film industry. Montserrat's best friend from childhood is Tristán, a charming actor haunted and scarred by a recent tragedy. Both are struggling in their careers, disappointed at their precarious positions in their late thirties. When Tristán moves into an



older apartment building, he encounters Abel Urueta, a cult horror filmmaker who fell into back into obscurity. Montserrat, an inveterate film enthusiast, knows Urueta's catalogue by heart. At dinner one night, the auteur presents them with an intriguing offer: With Montserrat's editing expertise and Tristán's voice acting ability, they should finish one of Urueta's oldest unfinished films. It is a cultist horror short infused with a visually beautiful, but dangerous, rare element: silver nitrate. Urueta claims the film also carries powerful magic that can alter their futures for the better. Part curious, part amused, Montserrat and Tristán agree to

help finish the film. When they do, strange blessings and otherworldly horrors begin their visitations. The mystic element that muscles forth becomes seductive, then terrifying.

Traversing the vivid restaurants, apartment buildings, film studios, and commerce of 1994 Mexico City, Montserrat and Tristán have a brilliant and captivating bond. The pair grew up as misfits in a working-class neighborhood: Montserrat disabled by a childhood limp, and Tristán a member of the Lebanese diaspora. They are both bisexual with long-term and short-term relationships in their pasts. Despite who they encounter, and with their clashing personalities, they are inescapably drawn back to each other.

Together, Tristán and Montserrat become investigators, learning the presence and history of a sinister, magic-wielding cult that favors pale skin and power above all. Through long, intellectual stretches of dialogue with a memorable cast of society eccentrics, the pair learn what they've unleashed through the completion of the mysterious film. The visions Tristán experiences are especially chilling, the scenes in text as vivid as any horror scene set to a terrifying soundtrack. The novel's page-turning, frightening climax takes place during Mexico's Christmas season. During the holiday, the restored film's powers come to the fore, and Tristán and Montserrat face the meaning of their lifelong bond.

The novel shows intriguing themes of power-tripping, coping, and spiritual practices in Mexico City. Tristán's career as an actor was cut short, in part, because of a vengeful oligarch. Montserrat's bosses exploit her labor, keeping her on a part-time basis while promoting less experienced men colleagues. She lashes out at them, not caring to make herself likable. Their communities use prayer, spiritual cleansings, and amulets to cope with the unknown. Montserrat's sister enacts rituals and carries totems to pray through her own cancer treatment. Tristán begins with skepticism of the spirit world, but he eventually rushes to purchase protective candles and flowers for himself.

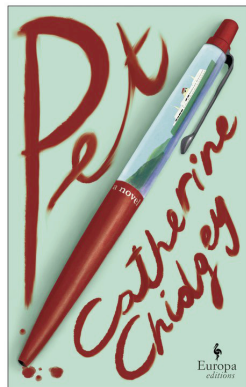
Through Montserrat's and Tristán's memorable attachment, and the ways they and their loved ones try to protect themselves against the most corrupt conjurors, Moreno-Garcia draws an unforgettable portrait of a city, its people, and its spiritual inner worlds.

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In 1984 New Zealand, Justine is twelve years old and reeling. Her mother has died from cancer, her father is coping with the loss using alcohol, and Justine's chronic seizures have begun again. Her respites from stress come from two sources: her best friend, Amy, and their beloved, charismatic new teacher, Mrs. Price. Justine and her classmates vie to become Mrs. Price's latest "darling." Drawn in by Mrs. Price's youth, beauty, and alternating generousities, the students compete to please her. Mrs. Price's colleagues and students' parents adore her too. And in a space that should be safe, school soon becomes host to sinister power plays, manipulations, and missing, precious objects.

With *PET*, prolific New Zealand novelist Catherine Chidgey offers a psychological thriller set in primary school. The story builds on cumulative dread, carried by the vulnerability and growing awareness of a child narrator in Catholic school.

The novel has several stomach-dropping moments of foreshadowing, with naïve children's actions veering into unintended consequences and irreversible damage. The reactions of the adult characters, when Justine and



Amy try to tell them something is wrong, are maddening and believable. Adult neglect, in the novel, is a crime in itself, disrespecting the defenselessness of children.

Other disturbing wrongs are perpetrated by children. Justine's best friend Amy is part of the Asian diaspora to New Zealand. Readers will wince at the racist mockery students use against Amy and her family. Amy's own attempts to laugh off or disregard the xenophobic cruelty is heartrending. Elsewhere in the classroom, dehumanizing rhetoric about aboriginal peoples is passed off as education. Bullying flourishes with little interference or intervention by adults—some authorities use physical assault against the children themselves. Worried, wounded children are punished or mocked. In the worst cases, the supposedly religious leaders of the school overlook the abusive behavior—a series of decisions that prove catastrophic, too late.

Trapped in her context, Justine grows into the position of lonely, determined child sleuth, entering into Mrs. Price's secret spaces. Clever twists of plot carry readers to a distressing climax, and each character is drawn with fine psychological precision. Even the concrete objects mentioned in the book are pivotal and carefully detailed—a pen, a piece of notebook paper, a seashell. Each object is a clue propelling Justine to the truth of who Mrs. Price really is.

If the final chapter of the novel feels perhaps too coincidental, that is a small matter. The scenes of the book will linger. Its final ambiguities and conclusions are satisfying, and readers will, like the novel's adult Justine, look back on them for some time after the story is over.

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: Josh Pachter's debut novel, **DUTCH THREAT**, is out now from Genius Book Publishing. • **WHAT NEVER HAPPENED** by Rachel Howzell Hall is in bookstores now (Thomas & Mercer). • James R. Benn's newest Billy Boyle Mystery, **PROUD SORROWS**, is available now from Soho Crime. • **THE TURNBULL MURDERS** by R. J. Koreto was published in September by Level Best Books.