

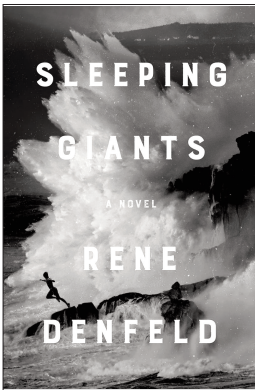
BOOKED & PRINTED

LAUREL FLORES FANTAUZZO

Perhaps one of the most uncomfortable, defining attributes and inevitabilities of childhood is helplessness. In early development, children can rarely escape the intentions, machinations, and decisions of adults. When children suffer evil abuses, the aftereffects map themselves on adulthood in a myriad of formative ways. The trauma of violence in childhood can be chaotic, strengthening, or corrupting. Children can encounter rescue, too, in the form of safe adults who respect their needs, modeling a world in which the pain of victimhood is not absolute, and healing and empowerment stay possible. This issue, *Booked and Printed* examines protagonists whose childhood wounds extend far into the future, pulling them between poles of safety and criminality, restoration and perpetration.

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In *SLEEPING GIANTS* by Rene Denfeld, a lonely plaque at the Oregon seaside memorializes the drowning of a nine-year-old boy years ago. He came from a group home, now shuttered, with a decorated therapist at its helm.



The small town is buffeted by powerful, inhospitable waves, often overlooked by tourists. But when an isolated young woman, Amanda Dufresne, visits the plaque, searching for her lost brother, willing allies and unseen foes gather around her. A retired, widowed officer, himself burdened by grief, takes a parental interest in Amanda's quest and agrees to help her. So begins an odyssey that reveals new truths of the young woman's difficult upbringing, and the adults who tried to harm, and help, her younger brother, Dennis Owens, during their difficult childhoods apart.

With atmospheric and psychological intensity, Denfeld's thriller brings to new, grim light the cruel, real-life practice of "holding therapy." In recent years, the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children found that holding therapy lacked any peer-reviewed, methodologically sound evidence for its effectiveness. Nonetheless, a group of child therapists practiced a method of physically subduing traumatized children, many of them already having suffered from unimaginably abusive parents, groups, and foster homes. Holding therapy instructs parents and caretakers to place their full weight on top of a child, or wrap the child

tightly in fabric, to supposedly evoke a “rebirthing.” Once all resistance left the child’s body and soul, the theory went, a final physical and emotional catharsis would render them obedient to parents’ demands. In practice, holding time injured, retraumatized, and even killed several children.

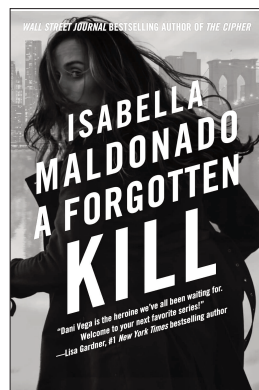
The exercise in physical domination goes against scientific consensus on the needs of traumatized children, which instructs parents to respect children’s bodily autonomy, validate their emotions, and establish a sense of safety, routine, and connection. In some of the most chilling scenes of Denfeld’s novel, a child therapist with prestigious credentials tortures the boys in her care with holding therapy. She wraps them in carpet as they beg to be released, or enlists a large man to drape his body over them. In the novel, adults who report concerns with the practice are turned away by law enforcement, since the doctor’s training and reputation are supposedly sparkling. In chapters that flash back and flash forward, a custodian with a sad childhood history of his own seeks to rescue one boy undergoing the horror of daily holding time.

Sleeping Giants’s compelling, time-weaving, setting-jumping plot structure keeps readers guessing. A sympathetic, finely drawn cast of characters rounds out the central mystery of the drowned boy and the institution from which he ran. An intriguing mystery subplot involving lonely polar bears—yes, polar bears—brings readers to an Arctic tundra, threading through the novel’s themes of childhood trauma, reconnection, and recovery. Denfeld has crafted a memorable mystery, critiquing a psychological practice still inflicted on children today.

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In Isabella Maldonado’s thriller *A FORGOTTEN KILL*, Daniela Vega quietly struggles with traumatic memories. As a teenager, Vega encountered a horrific scene: her father bloodied and deceased, and her psychologically fragile mother holding the kitchen knife that murdered him. Vega told investigators that her mother had always struggled with her mental health; few doubted the mother’s responsibility in having murdered her husband.

Rejected by her emotionally abusive aunt, and wanting to protect her siblings from what she witnessed, Vega fled into the military, following in her father’s footsteps to become an Army Ranger. As a Ranger, Vega gained expertise in pattern recognition, code breaking, and hand-to-hand combat. After serving in conflicts abroad, Vega returned to New York City as an FBI agent, working under a



supportive supervisor who appreciated her specialized military skills. When Vega offers her mother a rare visit at the mental institution where she is confined, the former Ranger comes closer to both old and new crimes.

Soon, Vega will be forced to face her most formidable, brilliant, and ruthless opponent yet.

A Forgotten Kill is an unapologetically traditional procedural from the point of view of law enforcement. Officers chafe at the bureaucratic mechanisms preventing them from nabbing the bad guys quick. A wealthy defense attorney who works with violent suspects rankles law enforcement, and she receives a ridiculous, near-satirical comeuppance. A methodical judge ensuring a warrant is constitutional earns Vega's violent ire. For the most part, Vega takes care to mask her own emotions, relying on Army Ranger aphorisms to carry her through complex feelings.

A Forgotten Kill is also a page-turner with satisfying, surprising turns of plot, shock, and riddles. Maldonado's precision in describing Vega's fight scenes forms some of the most enjoyable, vivid asskicking in contemporary mystery. Vega's speed, logic, and mental acuity in code breaking and pattern finding is cinematic and great fun. Sometimes the clarity of pursuing clearly irredeemable criminals has its own, entertaining satisfaction. If a child eventually seeks righteous vengeance as an adult, who are we to interfere with such justice?

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: SUGAR AND VICE by Melissa Yi is out this February from Windtree Press. • **BRUTAL AND STRANGE: STORIES INSPIRED BY THE SONGS OF ELVIS COSTELLO** (Down and Out Books), edited by Jim Fusilli and featuring stories by Gar Anthony Haywood, Rob Osler, and Gary Phillips, is available now. • In early December 2023, Frederick Weisel was presented The Nero Award for Best American Mystery from The Wolfe Pack for *The Day He Left* (Poisoned Pen Press).