

(FICTION)
**THE ELLE'S
 LETTRES 2015
 READERS' PRIZE**

15 ELLE readers choose their favorite among three promising new books—this month, novels about faith, family, and community

**1 WE NEVER ASKED
 FOR WINGS**

VANESSA
 DIFFENBAUGH
 (BALLANTINE)

In this elegantly composed novel, we follow Letty, a young single mother with a feisty six-year-old daughter and a precocious teenage son, as she attempts to build a consistent life after her hands-on parents leave the San Francisco Bay Area for their native Mexico. Readers rooted for the young family and delighted in what one calls the “subtle parallels between migratory birds, Letty’s wayward journey, and the challenges of both undocumented and legal immigrants who live on the fringes of society.”



**2 THE GIRL WHO
 SLEPT WITH GOD**

VAL BRELINSKI
 (VIKING)

It’s 1970 in Arco, Idaho, and Grace, an Evangelical Christian teen, has returned home pregnant after a mission trip to Mexico. As Grace, who believes the pregnancy to be a divine gift, is shunned by her skeptical family, the complex relationship between the young girl and her sisters is brought to the fore. And while the gift-from-God trope is certainly not untapped, Brelinski’s refreshing spin had readers hooked from page 1.



**3 COMING OF
 AGE AT THE END
 OF DAYS**

ALICE LAPLANTE
 (ATLANTIC MONTHLY)

For 16-year-old Anna, plagued by visions and an obsession with death, the arrival in her town of a doomsday cult offers surprising solace. While readers were captivated by the imaginative plot and cast of characters—each of whom, as one writes, “plays a crucial role as Anna wrestles with melancholy, faith, salvation, and whether or not love can possibly trump the end of days”—some found the novel predictable and an important epiphany too cleanly packaged.—*Keziah Weir*

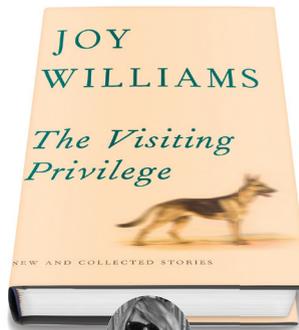


(FICTION)
ODES BY JOY

A long-awaited collection from a modern master *By Lisa Shea*

Joy Williams’s influential and long-revered body of work jubilantly defies the pigeonholing that can shadow artists, in particular women *di una certa età*. *The Visiting Privilege: New and Collected Stories* (Knopf), her first collection in 10 years, showcases 46 tales by a wizard of elegant economy, fearless wit, and sly surprise. Edgy, seductive concision is one key to her stories’ appeal; another is her uncanny ability to illuminate hidden pockets of the human heart.

The anthology draws from three earlier collections as well as new stories previously unavailable in book form. Near the opening of “Shepherd,” about the burden of love, a young girl muses on the recent loss of her dog. “He had a famous trick. When the girl said, ‘Do you love me?’ he would leap up, all fours, into her arms. And he was light, so light, containing his great weight deep within him-



self, like a dream of weight.” In “ACK,” a group of friends gather on Nantucket. The subject of children comes up, and one character painstakingly and hilariously describes each of her daughters. “My second daughter is the traveler of the family even though she seldom rises from her bed. One need only show her the

shell of a queen conch or a paperweight with its glass enclosing a Welsh thistle and she is swimming in the Bahamas or tramping through the British Isles....”

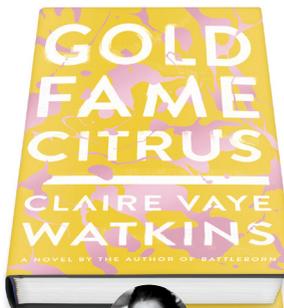
Williams’s radiant, gimlet vision (she is also the author of four novels and a book of essays) reaches back to masters like Flannery O’Connor and Raymond Carver, shares a literary sisterhood with Lydia Davis and Deborah Eisenberg, and stretches ahead to newer members of the storytelling pack, such as George Saunders and Mary-Beth Hughes. ●

(FICTION)
ROAD WARRIORS

Claire Vaye Watkins’s debut novel is a literary *Mad Max* *By Keziah Weir*

There’s nothing so frightening as a glimpse at a believable near-future, and Claire Vaye Watkins’s prescient *Gold Fame Citrus* (Riverhead) offers something that feels all too real. Watkins, herself a native of the Mojave Desert she appropriates for the novel, stirred up major buzz in 2012 with her prize-sweeping story collection *Battleborn*, and this debut novel brims with her intensity and unparalleled imagination.

Set in the nightmare sprawl of a rainless, dystopian Southern California, the story opens with former model Luz and her boyfriend Ray, a once-soldier, once-surfer, living in a mansion long abandoned by its last occupant—a starlet who left behind diamonds when even fistfuls of cash couldn’t reverse the unending drought. The land of citrus, gold, and fame has been sucked dry, and Luz and Ray are among the few who haven’t evacuated to government internment camps. They’re playing an extended, disjointed game of house together when they come into possession of a strange abandoned child who dubs



herself Ig. Their new ward, they decide, deserves better, and they set out for the east in an excruciating bid for a greener life.

The trio traverse a *Mad Max* world painted with a finer brush, Watkins’s strange imagery providing more sensory stimuli than a 3D IMAX: a shrieking crowd in an eerily dry canal; looters hurling trash cans through windows, “sending glass down like rain.”

At its core, *Gold Fame Citrus* is a story about love, though Watkins forgoes sticky-sweet clichés for the same gritty, visceral language she ascribes to Luz’s skin, cracked from the sun, “like the plates along the bottom of a dry ancient sea”—or the unyielding sky, “a pit above but somehow also aglow, the new horizon a shimmering smear and very far away.” When Ray thinks fondly of Luz and Ig, they are “two throbbing slabs of his heart outside his body, walking around.” And so Watkins’s masterful story, at once beautiful and profoundly unsettling, sears its way into the brain, burning hot through the devastating journey and lingering long after the last page is turned. ●