

(NONFICTION)  
THE ELLE'S  
LETTRES 2016  
READERS' PRIZE

Fifteen ELLE readers choose their favorite among three promising new books—this month, memoirs of great escape

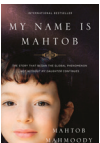
1 THE SOUND OF  
GRAVEL  
RUTH WARINER  
(FLATIRON)

Despite having been raised in a culture where questioning faith was discouraged, Wariner impressed readers with her candor in this poignant (and often chilling) memoir of what it was like to grow up in a doomsday, polygamist cult in Colonia LeBaron, just south of the Texas-Mexico border, the thirty-ninth of her father's 41 children. His violent death during her infancy, and the abuses she and her siblings suffered at the hands of her mother's new husband, were what one reader described as "almost surreal."



2 MY NAME IS  
MAHTOB  
MAHTOB  
MAHMOODY  
(NELSON)

Almost three decades after the release of *Not Without My Daughter* (1987), Betty Mahmood's harrowing account of escaping her violent, fundamentalist Shiite Muslim husband, we're given that story—and the emotional backlash in the years that followed—from the daughter's perspective. In recounting her experience of living in Michigan under an assumed name, and battling lupus, PTSD, and the looming fear of her father's return, Mahmood delivers, in the words of one reader, "the emotional and authentic sentiments of a most extraordinary experience."



3 KOOKOOLAND  
GLORIA NORRIS  
(REGAN ARTS)

In what readers called a "gritty" and "offbeat" coming-of-age story "faced with tension," Norris provides engaging insight into her life in a poor Greek-American family in 1960s New Hampshire, the unfortunate favorite of her volatile, gun-loving, hunting-enthusiast father, Jimmy. The book's great boon is the empathy Norris grants her father, portrayed not as a monstrous caricature but as a deeply flawed, very real person.—K.W.



(FICTION)  
IS SEX NECESSARY?

When written like this, yes By Kesiah Weir

"I was in love," declares the narrator of Hannah Tennant-Moore's debut novel, *Wreck and Order* (Hogarth), "meaning I was addicted to a specific body." Elsie Shore, a relentless self-examiner at age 16, 24, 30, has a complicated relationship with the men (and their bodies) in her life, for whom she feels a primal mix of jealousy, desire, and hostility. To Elsie, a man's orgasm is "perfect selfishness"; her own, a salve that "separated my longing from the man who had aroused it."

Being human, Elsie also has a complicated relationship with herself. When she is with a man, she's hyperaware that "my arousal came from knowing my body aroused him." Tennant-Moore—in this antidote to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Hollywood's beloved simultaneous orgasm, and those personal narratives that treat feminine sexuality like some exotic beast—has managed to do a difficult thing: write frankly about female desire, and unfussily capture the emotional and visceral confusion of pleasure being contingent upon another human. "I had been so certain the

night before that my life could not bear any more contact with him," Elsie says of the rough-edged, alcohol-fueled man she spends years trying to shake. "And then: We were making love and eating eggs."

Elsie cannot settle down, in every aspect of the phrase. After a year in Paris following high school, she lands in a California college town but never enrolls; she flees from heartache to a meditation retreat in Sri Lanka, then New York, and then Sri Lanka again. It's there, through meditation, that she learns a new kind of corporeal connectedness—dependent, for once, on only herself. Accordingly, the novel itself is deeply meditative, skewing toward the practice of someone whose mind is at odds with being calm. This is no typical, epiphanic single-woman journey story. In *Wreck and Order*, for once, we are given a female odyssey that is deeply satisfying without finding, at its end, the disappointing ease of a red satin bow. ●

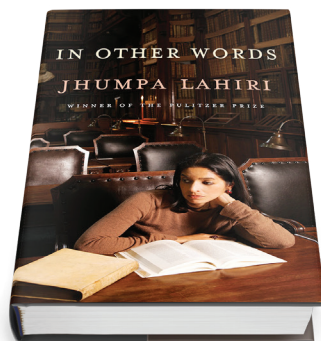


(NONFICTION)

ROMAN HOLIDAY

Yet again, words transform Jhumpa Lahiri's world By Lisa Shea

In 2012, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Jhumpa Lahiri moved with her family to Rome, where for a year she spoke and wrote only in Italian, a language that had bewitched her since she first visited Italy in 1994. The result of Lahiri's adventurous, obsessively disciplined, and discovery-laden exercise in linguistic ardor is *In Other Words* (Knopf), an unconventional autobiography



that has the Dionysian drama of a quest saga and the Apollonian tidiness of a primer. It allows you to witness a beloved, hugely successful scribe—her four books include *The Lowland* and *Interpreter of Maladies*—give birth to a new, untested, uncertain yet determined authorial self. Writes Lahiri, "*In Other Words* is different. Almost everything in it happened to me." The book "began as a sort of diary, a personal text," she adds. "It remains my most intimate book but also the most open."

Published last year in Italy as *In Altre Parole*, where it won the prestigious culture prize the Premio Internazionale Viareggio-Versilia, the book features the author's original Italian text on the verso (left) pages and translator Ann

Goldstein's English translation on the recto (right) sides.

The book's chapters unfold as a series of thoughtful, incantatory reflections: her long courtship of Italian and her solidarity with other authors, like Samuel Beckett, who wrote in an adopted language; the discoveries she makes and discomforts she feels during her self-imposed exile; and her challenging bilingual Rhode

Island upbringing (at home, her Bengali-speaking parents, who were from East India, scolded her if she spoke English, which she learned at school). In one section, Lahiri confesses, "I've never tried to do anything this demanding as a writer.... I have to start again from the beginning, as if I had never written anything in my life." She perseveres, and discovers that "buried under all the mistakes, all the rough spots, is something precious. A new voice, crude but alive, to improve, to elaborate." For Lahiri, her immersion in Italian constitutes a self-chosen "independent path"... "a flight from the long clash in my life between English and Bengali." And it has reaped this intricately structured and gorgeously spun whirligig of a memoir. ●

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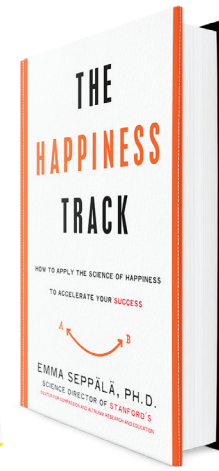
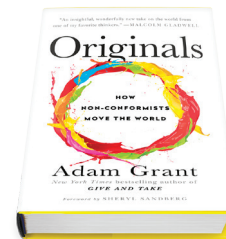
FUN AT WORK

Two new books argue for an Organization Woman 2.0: one who knows the value of friendship in the office By Louisa Kamps

Ever longed to lob a coffee cup at your coworker who invariably passes meetings with eyes locked on her phone? If so, you're not alone. We live in an age when it feels imperative to always appear intensely industrious at work—and this misguided belief stifles the cooperative, caring human interactions that help us (and our truly good ideas) thrive. This is the resounding message of two insightful new books—*The Happiness Track: How to Apply the Science of Happiness to Accelerate Your Success* (HarperOne), by Emma Seppälä, and *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World* (Viking), by Adam Grant—that also kindly show us how to reclaim the joy and power of genuine connection on the job.

According to Seppälä, science director of Stanford University's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research, burnout and cut-throat behavior are common in many fields because economists (and teachers barking "Focus!" at us from kindergarten on) have hammered in the idea that survival and success depend on putting our own needs first. Organizational psychologists have even found that people who are naturally more inclined to help others resist doing so because, she explains, the so-called "norm of self-interest" makes them worry that others will interpret their kindness as a ploy to get something in return. And while operating with impenetrable discipline can be effective in the short term, it eventually backfires: Seppälä presents data showing that hard-charging, socially isolated workers who've "simply accepted overextension as a way of life" are not only more prone to anxiety and depression but also likelier to struggle with focus (stress impairs cognition) and stop caring about their work completely.

And yet, going the other way—giving more to your coworkers, taking time from a looming deadline to just *talk* to them—generates calming, positive emotions that help us "bounce back from stress much more quickly"; this also buffers against the sting of negative encounters with hostile managers. Bosses who treat employees with interest and respect inspire great job loyalty (surveys show most of us "prefer companionship and recognition" over fat paychecks). Workers who hang out and play together tend to be more creative; we're more productive when compassion flows through a company's culture and ripples out in waves. Researchers at Harvard and the University of California-San Diego have discovered, beautifully, that one act of kindness can inspire dozens of others to pay kindness forward.



The pleasure of *Originals* lies in how handily Grant, a professor of management at the Wharton School and a *New York Times* columnist, upends notions about how we're supposed to behave. Many of us crave unshakable confidence. But in Grant's observation, doing business with a certain marked softness—open to the ideas (including constructive criticisms) of others—is profound. In one case study, he describes a tech entrepreneur who went into a pitch meeting doing everything wrong—that is, if you believe that to be persuasive "we ought to emphasize our strengths and minimize our weaknesses." The entrepreneur pointed out that his website's content was out of sync with its broader mission, its design sorely in "need of retooling," and its traffic lower than expected. And...Disney ended up buying his company for \$40 million. We actually experience "rampant enthusiasm" from salespeople as a red flag that something's really off with the product, Grant writes.

These books offer much sage advice on how to listen respectfully (an undersung form of natural charisma, Seppälä says) and form strong alliances with colleagues who may not be, Grant notes, cheerleader types. Often our strongest workplace advocates are gruffly passionate tough-love types with "a bad user interface but a great operating system," as one Google employee put it. This can feel rudimentary—like things we should have known, and did know before the digital age. Nonetheless, they're exactly right for now. Seppälä describes the psychological uplift she gets each time she bumps into Nobel Prize-winning economist Myron Scholes, her Stanford colleague. His brilliant, free-floating insights, which often spring from the many things he loves alongside economics—golf, music, and meditation among them—make Seppälä feel better and brighter in her own thinking. One of Scholes's "most charming qualities" is "the lightness" of his personality. He has "an easy sense of humor. There is a childlike (though not childish) quality" to his contagious curiosity. And that's the magic of our best work buds. They make us laugh—and see the world more clearly. ●



(BOOKS)

TRUST US By Lisa Shea  
IN THE HEART OF HER DARKNESS  
In Zimbabwean writer and lawyer Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory* (FSG), the gripping follow-up to her much-lauded *An Elegy for Easterly*, a young albino woman named Memory sits on death row. She's awaiting an appeal of her conviction for murdering the white man who adopted her as a child. Memory's sly, smart, and intriguingly mutable diary becomes her sanctuary and salvation in a darkling place where "your emotions are the only thing you can call your own."

BRAND-NEW ANCIENTS

*The Creative Tarot: A Modern Guide to an Inspired Life* (Touchstone) playfully reinvents the arcane, Renaissance-inspired cards. Author Jessa Crispin, founder of Bookslut.com, offers a history of tarot cards, which depict the whole realm of human experience and are arrayed to solve problems of love, friendship, loneliness, and loss. She shares how the tarot helped her "find the narrative inside all the muddle" of her own life. Fun fact: Virginia Woolf, Salvador Dalí, and David Bowie all turned to the tarot to break creative impasses.



TEXAS MAGICAL REALISM

Amy Parker's knife-edge debut collection, *Beasts & Children* (Mariner), ingeniously links the fates of three clans—the dynastic Texas Bowmans, the striving Colombian American Guzmans, and the worldly Fosters—through the intimately observed lives of the young progeny (and pets) on whom the families' messy and magical legacies are not lost.

