

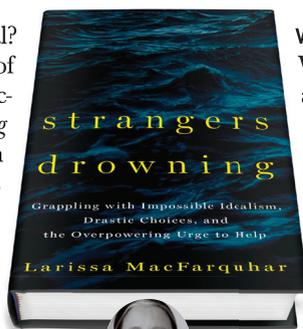
(NONFICTION)

TOO GOOD

What extreme altruists teach us about being better *By Molly Langmuir*

Is it possible to be too moral? That's the question at the center of *New Yorker* staff writer Larissa MacFarquhar's book *Strangers Drowning* (Penguin Press), which focuses on those who could be described as extreme do-gooders. MacFarquhar writes about a couple who've adopted 20 children, many of them troubled or disabled; a midwife who moves to Nicaragua to open a women's health clinic; a man who establishes a leper colony; and others—and intersperses their stories with chapters that put our perceptions about “moral extremists” into historical and philosophical context. Just a few pages in, we're wondering what drives these people and why we don't grapple with our own morality more often.

Why did you pick extreme altruists and not just people who help the elderly across intersections? Everybody already knows somebody who is particularly generous. Those people don't present a challenge; we just admire them. The people I wrote about force us to think more about what can morally be demanded of us, and partly because of this, they face extraordinary skepticism. They tend to prompt uneasiness or even hostility.



What do you think that's about? While I was working on the book, at least half the people I talked to about it would say, “Those people are mentally ill, aren't they?” While I came into this thinking it was a shame people assume that in order to be extremely principled, you must be mentally ill—and I certainly don't want to pathologize the people in my book, whom I hugely admire—it was striking how many had an alcoholic or mentally ill parent. There does seem to be something to one theory I read, which is that kids with a dysfunctional parent often grow up with a stronger-than-usual sense of responsibility.

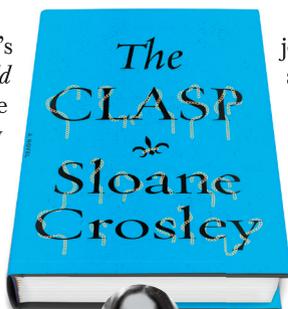
Has writing the book made you any more altruistic? I definitely feel guiltier. I read a study that looked at non-Jews who didn't save any Jews during World War II and compared them to those who did. It found that people who saved no one had been raised strictly and with the sense that they had very little power over their circumstances. Whereas those who did save people had been raised more leniently. It's important to believe you can do something, even though you're just one person. ●

(FICTION)

THE BLING MYSTERY

Oh, to be young in this witty, wacky debut novel *By Kesiah Weir*

Upon the advent of Sloane Crosley's debut essay collection, *I Was Told There'd Be Cake*, ELLE's Carlene Bauer praised her “sharp, fizzily old-fashioned sense of the madcap” and wondered, “now that she's updated the role of ingénue by concocting a bracing cocktail of credulity and crankiness, what she might be able to do with a novel.”



Seven years later, Crosley allays our curiosity with *The Clasp* (FSG), a rollicking story of three friends—Kezia, the right-hand woman to a mercurial Manhattan jewelry-design mogul; the recently fired, soon-to-be robbed Victor; and L.A.-based Nathaniel, the group's resident Casanova—hurtling to the end of their twenties with all the grace of charging baby elephants under the influence of Everclear.

Crosley's a pundit of the absurd, and in a delicious concatenation of events (a faulty

jewelry clasp, a dying woman's strange confession, multiple trips to France), the three find themselves embroiled in a *Pink Panther*-esque mystery centered around a priceless missing necklace, the key to the puzzle buried somehow in the classic Guy de Maupassant short story, “The Necklace.” There are star-crossed lusts, a botched mugging, a model drunkenly attempting seduction via a cellphone ill-advisedly inserted in her nether regions, and a photograph of a Frenchified *American Gothic*—“instead of a pitchfork, the man is holding a fistful of radishes.”

Those who love Crosley's essays for the way they straddle the line between slapstick humor and essential truths will love her fiction too. Each sentence builds upon the last, toward one big wink: Isn't life weird? And isn't that great? ●

(NONFICTION)

THE ELLE'S LETTRES 2015 READERS' PRIZE

15 ELLE readers choose their favorite among three promising new books—this month, memoirs by women who've been through darkness and back

1 GIRL IN THE WOODS
ASPEN MATIS
(WILLIAM MORROW)



In Aspen Matis's raw and complicated memoir, she recounts her five-month, 2,650-mile trek along the Pacific Crest Trail—a journey prompted by her devastation in the wake of being raped on her second night at college. When neither her school nor her family offered her the support that she needed, Matis, then 19, made her way into the wilderness in a triumphant journey that ELLE readers found “beautifully written,” “gripping,” and “brave.”

2 FURIOUSLY HAPPY
JENNY LAWSON
(FLATIRON BOOKS)



Readers likened this dark comedy to “a long phone call with your most hilarious, twisted friend.” Lawson's over-the-top humor saturates her series of vignettes, which includes what her father taught her (“you can't leave a donkey in the car”; “always shoot first”; “normal is boring”), the toll her deep bouts of depression take on her marriage, and an exploration of her loathing of airports. Never one to shy away from the more brutal aspects of human existence, Lawson, for all her crippling anxieties, still “enjoys the heck out of life,” wrote one reader. And we enjoyed the heck out of this book.

3 THE LOST LANDSCAPE
JOYCE CAROL OATES
(ECCO)



Oates perfectly captures the unique confusion of childhood, brought on by the unsatisfying explanations of adults. While some readers found the writing more opaque than they'd like, most reveled in her “honest account of her family's struggles with her much younger sister's autism, to the blissful early years of her marriage,” which, as one reader writes, “kept me turning each page eagerly until the end.”—K.W.