

BEST OF

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Science Fiction & Fantasy: Kelly Link's 'The Book of Love'

Plus 'Gogmagog' by Jeff Noon and Steve Beard and 'Moon of the Turning Leaves' by Waubgeshig Rice.

By Liz Braswell

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Despite the infinite possibilities for invention, few fantasy novels—including those written by women—have an old woman as the hero. But in “Gogmagog,” by Jeff Noon and Steve Beard, we have Cady Meade, a salty old captain who has been around for centuries. She drinks, swears, smokes and can still navigate the river Nysis on her old steamboat if called upon. And she is: A young woman called Brin and her mechanical butler, Lek, need her to take them upriver to the capital, Ludwich, so the girl can take part in an important ritual. But the water is treacherous these days; the sickening ghost of the enormous dragon Haakenur lies along the entire course, its spectral and decaying body parts creating dangerous hazards. Cady must take her little crew through astonishing dangers

and diverse wonders, all while trying to figure out why her thousand years seem to be finally coming to an end.

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Gogmagog: The First Chronicle of Ludwich

By Jeff Noon and Steve Beard

Angry Robot

360 pages



More picaresque than epic quest, “Gogmagog” doesn’t deal much in battles or superpowers; instead, the authors introduce fascinating races like the Nebulim—souls who live as fires inside ceramic bodies—and explore places like the Clodium, where the dead dragon’s gallbladder makes chalky gallstones of everything that comes near.

Mr. Noon is justly well-remembered for his 1993 novel, “Vurt,” a trippy, genre-crushing cyberpunk

masterwork, and he and Mr. Beard previously teamed up in 2016 on the science-fiction novel “Mappalujo.” Perhaps the slightly awkward chapter transitions in this otherwise bewitching book are the result of this dual authorship. But its fabulous characters, unusual magic and intriguing world make “Gogmagog” a particularly good gift for younger readers, to be enjoyed alongside other classics like “The Neverending Story” and “The Last Unicorn.”

The literary world has been waiting years for Kelly Link to write a full-length novel. The MacArthur Fellowship recipient, known for her collections of award-nominated stories like “Magic for Beginners” (2005) and “White Cat, Black Dog” (2023) has at last produced “The Book of Love,” a novel that achieves an epic scale from within the confines of a town by the Massachusetts seaside.

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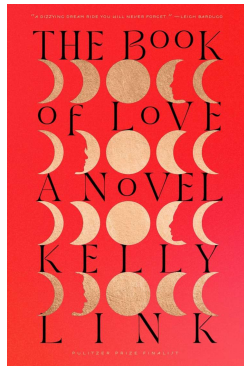
The Book of Love

Daniel, Mo and Laura have been dead for a year when they find themselves inexplicably brought back to life—in the music room of their high school. Their fate is now in the hands of Mr. Anabin, formerly their rather boring music teacher, and a creepy figure

By Kelly Link

Random House

640 pages



named Bogomil. The pair make the teens—and a mysterious fourth being called Bowie—solve puzzles in a kind of magical bargain that will allow some (though not all) of them to remain in the land of the living. But nothing is exactly what it seems in this story: not the people, the

magic or even death. “The Book of Love” expands infinitely inward, its “inside . . . larger than the outside,” as C.S. Lewis’s characters describe the afterlife in his Narnia books. There is an ancient, petty god; nearly sentient statues; and many sugary coffee drinks.

The undead teens at the heart of “The Book of Love” are fully realized, thoughtfully detailed individuals, and a large cast of secondary and tertiary characters adds depth and variety. Ms. Link’s writing is so poetic that chunks of text sometimes require second readings just to fully enjoy her style, especially when her richly imagined descriptions transform scenes from the ordinary world into something haunting, as when one overtired character finds herself troubled as she heads off for bed: “Sometimes after a long shift your mind plays tricks on you . . . she does not imagine something in the hall behind her. Nothing makes a sound as it lopes back down the stairs. She’s so very tired. And so she goes to her own bedroom and does not even take off her scrubs or brush her teeth or turn on the lights. Night nurse hurrying to catch the (white) (wolfish) tail of night.”

I would have loved to see such expertise and meticulous care devoted to a more grown-up plotline. “The Book of Love” comes across as a very smart YA novel, with lots of sexual exploration and newly fledged college students returning home for Christmas, filled with big thoughts. The relationships are very real but fundamentally immature. The book is alluring and heady, yet the author seems to have thrown its more nuanced elements into a blender with teens-with-powers TV shows like “Smallville” and the 1986 Jim Henson fantasy film “Labyrinth.”

There are many beautiful moments in this engrossing book, and it’s a pleasure to see a writer of Ms. Link’s manifest talents spin out a tale at length. I look forward

to the next novel—and hope she sets her sights on a story that lives up to her abilities.

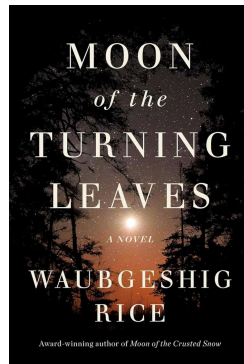
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Moon of the Turning Leaves

By Waubgeshig Rice

William Morrow

320 pages



One of the enduring charms of postapocalyptic fiction is the *post* bit: the idea that after calamity the world is remade into something dangerous and mysterious, a virgin land to explore. Waubgeshig Rice’s “Moon of the Turning Leaves” adds another element to this scenario: What if some sort of disaster mostly emptied North America of its colonizers, and the only people left who really knew how to survive were

indigenous people?

Evan Whitesky has lived with a surviving group of Anishinaabe people, who left the reservation when civilization collapsed a decade ago (the cause is never made entirely clear). But the fishing and hunting where they have made their home has grown thin, so Evan leads a scouting expedition south to investigate the lands where their people originally lived, nearer the Great Lakes. Much of the story is told from the point of view of Evan’s daughter, Nangohns, an expert archer beginning to suspect that the small community she grew up in might not be quite big enough for her anymore.

“Moon of the Turning Leaves” is the second novel Mr. Rice has set in this world, after 2018’s “Moon of the Crusted Snow,” but this book can be read on its own. It is a quiet, realistic story of a small band of people on a journey for their people’s survival; there are no mutants or monsters, though there is a real threat from a loosely affiliated association of aggressive white antagonists with a slowly diminishing stockpile of bullets.

The attention to the material culture of the future Anishinaabe people is particular and impressive; the carefully tended nylon nets left from the industrial world are slowly falling apart and must be mended with material they find in nature, like the roots of spruce trees. As postapocalyptic fiction goes,

“Moon of the Turning Leaves” is overall more “Alas, Babylon” than “Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome.” But its slow pace yields an immersive power, one that would translate well to the screen.

Appeared in the March 16, 2024, print edition as 'Back to School, And Back From the Dead'.