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Natasha Solomons' 'The House at Tyneford' is a novel to adore: New in Paperback

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By Donna Marchetti, Special to The Plain Dealer

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The cover blurb drew me to Natasha Solomons' **The House at Tyneford**. It promised that a fan of the PBS series "Downton Abbey" would adore this book.

In 1938, it is no longer safe to be a Jew in Vienna, so 19-year-old Elise Landau leaves her world of glittering parties to accept a post as a domestic servant on the English coast. Homesick and alone, she is miserable until Kit, the young master of the grand manor, returns home from school.

What happens between them -- eyebrow-raising for an heir and a housemaid -- will bring Elise the most intense joy and greatest sorrow she will ever know.

Halfway through, I was so invested in this gorgeously written story that I could barely read on, fearful that what I wished to happen would never come to pass. Permeated with an exquisite sadness, it reminded me more of "Atonement" than "Downton," but yes, the cover teaser was right: I adored this book.

Solomons, whose first novel was "Mr. Rosenblum Dreams in English," took the template of her great-aunt's life to write about Elise Landau.

For reviews of five more noteworthy new paperbacks:

India Calling

Anand Giridharadas

\$14.99

A newly minted college graduate, Giridharadas landed in Bombay in 2003 at age 21. "We're all trying to go that way," noted a fellow passenger, pointing to the rear of the plane, back toward the United States. "You're going this way?"

"The first thing I ever learned about India," writes Giridharadas in his absorbing memoir, "was that my parents had chosen to leave it." Born in the United States, Giridharadas spent his first seven years in Shaker Heights, "a sprawling neighborhood of brick and Tudor homes, set on vast yards, with the duck-straw ponds, meandering lanes, and ample sidewalks that had lured millions of Americans into suburbia."

But he was always aware of his Indian-ness, even if he didn't fully understand it.

Giridharadas, who writes for the International Herald Tribune and The New York Times, introduces his book readers to 21st-century India, so different from the country his parents left in the 1970s, and to the entrepreneurs, industrialists and powerful families who make it what it is today.

Writing for The Plain Dealer, critic Jo Gibson called Giridharadas "a marvelous journalist -- intrepid, easy to like, curious."

He now lives in Cambridge, Mass.

Territory

Emma Bull (Tor, 318 pp.)

\$14.99

In this novel, Bull puts a supernatural spin on an American legend. It's 1881 and the town of Tombstone, Ariz., is a powder keg waiting to blow. Wyatt Earp, his brothers and Doc Holliday are the closest thing to the law in a place terrorized by Ike Clanton and his gang of outlaws. Tensions culminate in the infamous shoot-out at the O.K. Corral.

Young widow Mildred Benjamin and drifter Jesse Fox suspect black magic behind the forces at work -- and it's up to them to decide what to do about it.

In its starred review, Publishers Weekly says Bull "takes huge chances and achieves something distinctively wonderful. . . . Readers will think about the story long after it ends, savoring the writing and imagining what the characters might do next."

Sleights of Mind

Stephen L. Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde with Sandra Blakeslee (Picador, 261 pp.)

\$16

In an article for The Scientist, Vanessa Schipani described this book, as "a tour through consciousness, attention, and deception via the marriage of professional magic and cognitive neuroscience."

The husband-and-wife authors are neuroscientists at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix, Ariz.; he specializing in behavioral neurophysiology and she in visual neuroscience. Sandra Blakeslee is a science writer who contributes frequently to The New York Times.

...The couple coined the term "neurogic" in part of a nation that came to their attention a trio to Las Vegas, where they were planning the 2007 annual conference of the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness. Surrounded by billboards and ads for magicians like David Copperfield and Penn & Teller, they hit upon a theme for the conference:

These "tricksters were like scientists from Bizarro World -- doppelgangers who had outpaced us real scientists in their understanding of attention and awareness and had flippantly applied it to the arts of entertainment, pickpocketing, mentalism, and bamboozlement," they write.

Like artists, who manipulate perception through form and color, magicians do so by altering attention and cognition. "Magic tricks work because humans have a hardwired process of attention and awareness that is hackable," the authors note. Insights from magicians give us a better understanding of cognitive dynamics as they play out in advertising, business deals and interpersonal relations.

"Why is this book so good?" asked critic William Leith in the London Evening Standard. "Partly because it explains magic tricks so well. Partly because the authors give you a guide to the ways in which you can be hoodwinked by ads and people trying to sell you things. But mostly because this is one of the best books I've read on how the brain actually works."

For me, "Sleights of Mind" ranks as the most entertaining book about the brain I've come across. To have a bit of fun with examples of how your brain can be tricked, go to illusionoftheyear.com, one of the authors' projects.

The Four Ms. Bradwells

Meg Waite Clayton (Ballantine, 317 pp.)

\$15

In 1979 at the University of Michigan School of Law, Mia, Laney, Betts and Ginger became best friends. The feminist movement was cresting, and the four were dubbed the Ms. Bradwells, a reference to the 1873 Supreme Court case of Bradwell v. Illinois. In that case, Justice Joseph P. Bradley ruled against the right of Mrs. Myra Bradwell to practice law, saying that it would run counter to the "law of the Creator."

The four have supported one another through marriages, divorces, births and deaths. As the novel opens, they are gathered in Washington, D.C., where Betts awaits confirmation of a Supreme Court appointment. But at the Senate hearings, a secret is exposed, a 30-year-old skeleton in the closet from their shared past.

They flee the media, retreating to a house on Chesapeake Bay owned by Ginger's mother. There, through each of their voices, they piece together what actually happened all those years ago.

In her review for the Chicago Examiner, Bonnie Jean Adams called this a "must read," saying, "This is not just a story about a group of women, but also a story about generations, about relationships, about the fluid motion of relationships over lifetimes. It's about a coming of age in middle age, and about facing the questions we all must eventually face: Who am I? Am I a success? Does it matter?"

Take Me Home

Brian Leung (Harper Perennial, 287 pp.)

\$14.99

Leung has built his novel out of the factual events of Sept. 2, 1885, in Rock Springs, Wyo. The Union Pacific Railroad employed Chinese immigrants in its coal mine, alongside about half as many white laborers. A dispute escalated into the beating of two Chinese miners, and later that evening a group of whites rampaged through the Chinese quarter, burning homes and killing 28 people. Though a dozen men were arrested, none was prosecuted.

Leung's novel centers on an unlikely friendship between Wing Lee, a cook in the Chinese section of a mining camp in Dire, Wyo., and Addie Maine, a headstrong young white woman who has traveled west from Kentucky to homestead with her brother, Tommy.

Addie, handy with a gun, wants to develop a business supplying rabbit meat and sage hens to the miners. When she seeks Wing's help, the two become fast friends under the disapproving eyes of the townspeople, leading to a violent confrontation.

Writing in the Dallas Morning News, critic Jenny Shank said, "Leung's writing is so clear and lovely and his characters are so well-realized that he convinces the reader that the improbable attraction between Wing and Addie wasn't impossible, and the character of Wing speaks eloquently for thousands of Chinese miners whose voices are lost to history."

Donna Marchetti is a critic in Cleveland Heights.

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