spectrum of flinty characters. This alluring collection of 10 ambient tales written between 1980 and the present begins with the piquant title story. Set in a nursing home for working-class Hollywood veterans, it’s a tale about glory days real and imagined, mortality, and succor. Caring for each other under difficult circumstances is a pivotal theme here, whether it takes the form of tending to abandoned babies or the camaraderie among women on a bus to visit their men in prison. Writing with as much artistry as conviction from the point of view of characters wholly unlike himself, Sayles expresses his compassion and concern for those who struggle with poverty and prejudice, seeking both to provoke and entertain.

— Donna Seaman


Everything changes and the very foundation of her life comes into question when Meg witnesses her husband having sex with another woman on her bed in her sub-urban Chicago home. In order to find her way to a new life, Meg, along with three friends who are like sisters, travel to Mexico that her favorite aunt took as a young woman. Her aunt’s influence is still visible in remote Mexican villages, and the journey becomes spiritual as well as geographical. As Meg finds out more details of her aunt’s life, she wonders why this wonderful woman’s influence on her never took hold before she went into crisis. Then, when she returns to Chicago, Meg finds kindred spirits who have felt lost and oppressed but who now may be willing to let go and even dance naked. Once again Radish, author of The Elegant Gathering of White Snows (2003), singes the promises of siblinghood by creating an entrancing world of women helping women to become the empowered individuals they were meant to be.

— Patty Engdahl


This novel, evocative of slave narratives, explores what life must have been like for Jim, the slave who escapes down the Mississippi River with Huck Finn. But Jim’s flight to freedom is only a backdrop to a story that is more about his wife, Sadie, and her transformation from a servant of the evils of slavery and to pass on the hopefulness of love to the next generation. When her granddaughter Marianne is frightened out of her family’s history as she makes a quilt for the young woman to take with her. Speaking in first-person dialect, Sadie recalls the loss of mother, children, and husband but also recalls the struggle to hold on to bits and pieces of family that she weaves into her story and the quilt. She recalls her talent for healing, her defiance of the master that eventually provoked her sale, and her abiding love for Jim, a slave she saw birth into the world. This is a moving novel of American slavery and enduring love.

— Vanessa Bush

YAC: This trenchant, slim novel is poised to become a fixture on high-school reading lists. JM.


Rushford’s debut novel, Kindergarten, made quite a stir when it was published in 1979, but readers had to wait until now for a follow-up. His new work is a large, sprawling stream-of-conscious novel set primarily in the head of Alice Pinkerton at the dawn of the twentieth century. Alice isn’t yet ready for the new age; she’s a vestige of Victorian times, a “madwoman” living on the third floor (not in the attic, she insists) of her family’s home. “No one was as close to her as words on a page,” Alice muses, and indeed, she relates more to characters from the novels of George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, and Charles Reade than to the people who surround her, especially the thoroughly modern socialite Mrs. Albert Comstock, who represents everything Alice hates. Alice’s doctor, who seeks to cure her of her “malady,” proclaims, “Imagination is an impediment to progress.” For Alice, there’s no more comforting sentiment. Though Victoriana and stream-of-conscious style is an odd mix, literary readers will want to take note of this ambitious, fascinating novel.

— Kristin H. Ueley


After six months of trying to make it as a professional historian in New York despite his lack of a bachelor’s degree, 28-year-old John Tolley heads south. He believes he might discover the lost scrapbook of Andrew Johnson, America’s seventeenth president (who never got a bachelor’s degree, either—or, for that matter, a grade-school degree). But John’s smoke-bellching car ends up breaking down in Pantherville, Tennessee, where he rents a rundown cottage from a fellow named Boo and begins to fall for Boo’s cousin, Dweena. Pantherville is populated entirely by comic eccentrics, and in that sense alone, John fits in. pompous, tactless, and yet oddly likable, John is something of a Yankee Ignatius J. Reilly—and while the first-person voice here doesn’t match a Confederacy of Dunces, John’s unreliable narration is frequently laugh-out-loud funny. A subplot involving a proposed state lottery and a tabloid-TV reporter falls flat compared to the charm of John’s quixotic search for Johnson’s scrapbook, but readers will forgive such missteps and heartily enjoy this comic romp through the great state of Tennessee.

— John Green


Chinese writer Yan is both revered and reviled for his blistering takes on modern China’s political landscape. (His acclaimed 1987 novel, Red Sorghum, was adapted into a major motion picture). This latest contro-

versial epic, spanning the country’s blood-splattered twentieth century, is set in fictional Northeast Gaomi County and narrated by fair-haired Jintong, the ninth child (and first son) of an indomitable woman known only as Mother. Jintong’s siblings all have different fathers, none of them Mother’s impotent blacksmith husband.) Favored by the town’s Swedish pastor, spoiled Jintong takes full advantage of his role as the family’s only male; at the age of seven, he still suckles at his mother’s breast. In Yan’s world, men are cowardly while women are admired for their courage and curves. His images run the gamut, from brutal renderings of war to a bizarre transformation of human to bird. The novel is, above all, a paean to the power of the female sex, but its voluptuous title scarcely reflects its tone. This is a haunting, daunt-

read ing that seldom loosens its gloomy grip.

— Allison Block

Mystery


Although retired from the police force, Naomi Blake, who lost her career when an accident left her blind, can’t stay away from crime solving. One sultry morning, she is in her bank in the Midlands of England when robbers burst through the door. Naomi figures if everyone stays calm, the robbers will take the money and run. But four police cars with sirens blaring and a policeman eager to be a hero put paid to that idea. Instead, the robbers take the bank’s customers, including Naomi, hostage. Naomi’s boyfriend, cop Alec Friedman, arrives on the scene and is shocked to learn that Naomi is one of the hostages—and has a past with one of the robbers. Starting off with a bang, Adams’ novel rockets along at high speed to a shocking ending. Good writing, a unique heroine, and an inventive plot add up to a very readable thriller.

— Emily Minton


A Macbeth utterly lacking in ambition and a tiny village in the Scottish Highlands that is murderously hard on outsiders form the witty premise of this series. Through 20 mysteries, Hamish Macbeth, police constable of tiny Lochdubh, has retained his stout common sense and disdain for those who scramble after power. Macbeth’s stoical character serves as perfect counterpart to both the scheming, sneering higher-ups in the police and his sometimes hysterical villagers. The virus that sets off the latest fever in Lochdubh is a visiting fiction writer who promises fame and fortune for those who enroll in his writing class. Writer John Heppe l, however, soon alienates everyone with his arrogance and condescension. After publicly humiliating several would-be authors in his writing circle, Heppe l is found dead in his cottage, his tongue symbolically blackened. Macbeth dexterously

— Kristine Huntley