

his car is blown up, and someone nails a Barbie doll decorated with fake blood to Sandy's door, along with a message, "Die, Bitch!" The tongue-in-cheek approach jars with the otherwise realistic plot. Copperman has done better. *Agent: Josh Getzler, HG Agency. (Jan.)*

★ **New Jersey Noir: Cape May**

William Baer. Able Muse, \$22.95 (250p) ISBN 978-1-77349-033-5

Paterson, N.J., PI Jack Colt has an old and a new murder to solve in Baer's outstanding sequel to 2018's *New Jersey Noir*. Richard O'Brien, a judge at the Cape May County Courthouse, tells Jack that the investigator he recently hired to reexamine the murder 10 years earlier of his daughter Nikki, then 17, was murdered the day before. Coincidentally, the investigator's name was Edward Colt. "Never heard of him," says Jack, though he's definitely curious about the other Colt and what led to his death. Oddly, two days earlier, Edward visited Richard and said he'd just drawn up a will leaving all his money to the judge. Jack, who's familiar with the Nikki O'Brien case, wonders what the connection might be between it and Edward's murder. That Nikki had an identical twin adds another layer of intrigue. With a head for crime and his own set of scruples, Jack moves effortlessly through the seamy underbelly of the state he loves. Filled with local Jersey color, sardonic humor, and plenty of Colt lore (about both the gun Colt carries and the company that makes it), this is a can't-put-it-down thrill ride. *(Jan.)*

Death and the Singing Birds: A Nell Drury Mystery

Amy Myers. Severn, \$28.99 (224p) ISBN 978-0-7278-8994-2

Set in 1926 England, Myers's uneven third Nell Drury mystery (after 2019's *Death at the Wychbourne Follies*) finds Nell, the chef at Wychbourne Court, preparing a luncheon for two guests, Sir Gilbert and Lady Saddler, who recently moved into nearby Spitalfrith Manor. During the awkward meal, Sir Gilbert says he's hoping to hold an art festival at Spitalfrith in two weeks. The festival does take place, but it's marred by the discovery of a dead body. When the valet of Lord Ansley, Nell's employer, is arrested for murder, Nell does some sleuthing to try to exonerate the valet

before Scotland Yard Det. Chief Insp. Alexander Melbray arrives on the scene. Myers does a good job presenting the prevailing social mores and creating convincing characters, but she injects some jarring cozy elements into the plot, which involves shell-shocked WWI veterans and German collaborators, and the ending disappoints. Newcomers should start with the first in the series. *Agent: Sara Keane, Keane Kataria Literary (U.K.). (Jan.)*

The Opinion Page

David Ackley. Rain and Breeze, \$13.95 trade paper (296p) ISBN 978-1-950631-10-0

Set in Portland, Ore., this solid mystery from Ackley (*The Patent Clerk's Violin*) focuses on two baffling disappearances. After four-year-old Melissa Davidson vanishes from a mall while shopping with her mother, Det. Galen Young of the Portland PD gets the case, but he makes no real progress. Meanwhile, the *Oregon Sentinel's* Opinion Page editor, Robert Armlin, fails to return home, and his wife contacts the police. Young gets no leads on the Armlin case until he learns that a blond hair found in the editor's abandoned car matches Melissa's DNA. That discovery leads to the theory that Armlin abducted the child. Young pores through Armlin's left-leaning editorials for a clue as to what happened and why. Ackley effectively integrates into the main plot Young's family drama, which includes his raising his grandsons along with his wife after their eldest daughter was convicted for drug trafficking. Fans of intriguing puzzles populated by convincing characters will be pleased. *(Self-published)*

SF/Fantasy/Horror

Gunslinger: The Dragon of Yellowstone

Edward J. Knight. WordFire, \$24.99 (336p) ISBN 978-1-68057-168-4

Despite a fun concept, Knight's third novel set in his Mythic West (after *Sharpsbooter: The Tale of Billy the Kid and the Tennessee Raid*) underwhelms with half-baked worldbuilding and superficial characterization. In an alternate 1878 in which humans and monsters coexist, 13-year-old Beth Armstrong has a life-changing encounter with Western legends

Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane. The pair have come to Colorado to investigate the state's corrupt governor, who's been stealing money from the U.S. Army, but Calamity Jane also takes the time to teach Beth a few things about gun handling. When Jane is killed on her mission, her ghost revisits Beth and offers the teenager her revolver. Beth grows up to become an adept shot herself, deploying that skill against adversaries both human and otherwise. Eventually, she sets her sights on the dragon of the title, which arrived in the U.S. through a rift from the Norse world Jotunheim and which appears to be targeting a U.S. fort. Beth is a one-note action heroine who lacks interiority and there's no genuine suspense about the outcomes of her battles, as victory is all but assured. Readers may enjoy the fast-paced fire fights, but the plot falls flat. *(Apr.)*

★ **The Conductors**

Nicole Glover. HMH/Adams, \$15.99 trade paper (432p) ISBN 978-0-358-19705-8

Inventively mixing mystery, magic, and alternate history, Glover's nail-biting debut takes readers to Reconstruction era Philadelphia. Henrietta "Hetty" and Benjamin "Benjy" Rhodes—both adept at sigil magic that draws on the constellations—are famed conductors for the Vigilance Society, which shepherded enslaved Black people to freedom along the Underground Railroad. Stories of their trips into the South are legendary in their Philadelphia community even a decade after the Civil War. Now, Hetty and Benjy use their magical and analytical skills as detectives, dealing with missing person cases, murders, and other crimes the white police force chooses to overlook. But when one of their friends turns up dead and their suspicions fall close to home, they'll need to work out who in their community is

not who they say they are. The pace is relaxed but the tension steadily builds as Glover weaves each detail into a satisfying mystery. Frequent flashbacks to Hetty and Benjy's

