

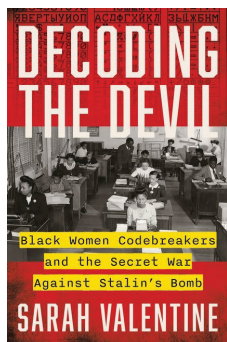
Having always loved the water, she hopes the 50 Dunks Project will be a way to reconnect with herself. “I was midstream in my life,” she writes, “and it was up to me what I did with the latter part of it; either I could keep pushing against the current, exhausting myself in the process, or I could find an easier, more satisfying flow.”

As she describes her various paths to the water, Washington sometimes focuses more on the emotional turmoil of considering a separation from her husband than on the underwater excursions themselves. But readers, especially those who have felt a similar pull as they ponder a life they didn’t fully choose for themselves, will relate, recognizing the undeniable force of that difficult decision and its ripple of consequences. The descriptions, when they come, are transporting, as in the cavern she explores with a few friends: “Inside lay a glorious underground swimming hole, with a series of arched spaces like chapels in an eerie cathedral stretching back to a faint light filtering in.” Self-indulgent in spots but ultimately empowering, **Midstream** is perfect for anyone at midlife asking themselves: “Is this all there is?”

—Sarah Beth West

Decoding the Devil

By Sarah Valentine



BLACK HISTORY

Ethel Just, a fluent German speaker, earned degrees from Ohio and Boston universities, then taught languages at Howard University and Washington, D.C., public schools for many years before

ultimately becoming a college administrator. But when she was laid off at 59 during an economic downturn, the U.S. government only grudgingly hired her into a job as a low-level data clerk, well below her skills and experience.

Why steer someone so overqualified to that position? Because Just was Black, it was 1944 and white officials forced to meet a tiny quota for Black hires made sure these workers would stay at the bottom in segregated units. But, hey, the job had retirement benefits. And, as it turned out, it was vital to U.S. national security: Just was among the first of more than 1,000 Black codebreakers who would be hired during World War II and the Cold War to fight Hitler and Stalin. They were readers and processors of global signals intelligence.

Decoding the Devil: Black Women Codebreakers and the Secret War Against Stalin's Bomb (Harper, \$30, 9780063305472) tells the little-known story of Just and other Black cryptologists, predominantly women, described by author Sarah Valentine (*When I Was White*) as “segregated, overworked and written out of the official histories.” They were employed by what has evolved through several stages into today’s National Security Agency. The Black employees, performing tedious but crucial skilled tasks that would now be computerized, were deliberately kept at the front end of the process, denied the opportunity to become more prestigious intelligence analysts despite their qualifications. This discrimination lasted well into the 1950s; change was slow even after then.

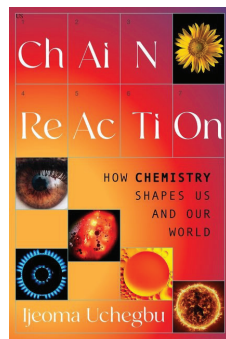
Valentine highlights the value of these workers against the backdrop of both the U.S. intelligence effort, often hampered by infighting and inefficiency, and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. The greatest strength of her book is her reconstruction of the otherwise obscure careers of remarkable Black women like Just, such as Naomi McElwaine, a Purdue graduate who went into biotech after the war, and Iris Carr, a Texas schoolteacher who ultimately clawed her way into an NSA position that allowed her to mentor a luckier generation.

These women, frustrated but tough, did vital work in what Valentine calls a system “that depended on Black labor while denying Black talent.” Struggling against prejudice at home, they helped win victories for democracy in the world.

—Anne Bartlett

Chain Reaction

By Ijeoma Uchegbu



SCIENCE

In her vivacious **Chain Reaction: How Chemistry Shapes Us and Our World** (Mariner, \$30, 9780063394629), research chemist Ijeoma Uchegbu celebrates the chemical bonds that dance—sometimes harmoniously, sometimes discordantly—among us and the world we live in.

Exploring the bonds between some of the 118 known elements—including aluminum, hydrogen, carbon, helium, oxygen and zirconium—Uchegbu illuminates the chemistry that underlies every process from the making of medicines and cosmetics to the construction of buildings and the ways we produce food. In

a chapter devoted to “breaking down the stuff on our plates,” Uchegbu examines the complex interactions of carbohydrates, proteins, sugars and oils as they break down during the cooking process to produce smells and tastes that excite us, please us and, in effect, keep us alive. Satisfying our daily cravings serves a surprising number of functions. For example, most of us know that protein is broken down into amino acids essential to cell function; Uchegbu also reveals that amino acids “replenish compounds like dopamine, to make sure that pleasure still has a dominant place in our lives.” She also carefully considers the role chemicals play in food supply chains: Fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides are developed to raise crop yields to alleviate hunger, but the chemicals in them have also poisoned animals and humans. It’s the job of scientists to find a balance among safety, yield and sustainability.

Considering the human body, Uchegbu marvels that “we are all chemicals,” for every breath we take starts a chemical reaction in our cells and organs as they shuttle oxygen around, allowing us to take our next breath. Such chemical chains operate in good and ill health, as different sets of chemicals take over during the healing process. In her chapter on cosmetics, Uchegbu digs into the ways that “chemistry’s colours can change how we look and feel,” by explaining the emulsion structure of liquid foundation and how waterproof mascara works. She brings her own experiences as a layperson to the book, as when she describes chemically straightening her hair in her teens and 20s. This leads to a fascinating discussion of hair protein and melanin.

Uchegbu’s style is so approachable and her enthusiasm so contagious that even the most chemistry-averse reader will find their ears pricked up. **Chain Reaction** reveals that we are chemistry and chemistry is us.

—Henry L. Carrigan Jr.

Hotel Exile

By Jane Rogoyska



HISTORY

Shortlisted for the Women’s Prize for Non-Fiction, **Hotel Exile: Paris in the Shadow of War** (Norton, \$31.99, 9781324089902) examines the City of Light in a very dark time by focusing on

the different ways that Hotel Lutetia was used before, during and immediately after World War II. Since opening in 1910, the

only “grand hotel” on the Left Bank served as a meeting place for artists and politicians, including Joyce, Hemingway, Picasso and Matisse. As author Jane Rogoyska explains in her prologue, the hotel “is not an actor in a drama. It is simply the stage on which dramas are played out.”

In three informative, highly readable sections, Rogoyska takes the reader through the life of the hotel. The book unfolds in short snippets that profile a wide variety of people. Before the war, in 1933-1939, the Lutetia functions fairly normally, sometimes playing host to intellectuals and activists who hope to form an alternative government. Tensions rise and German exiles enter the city. During the war, it becomes the headquarters of the German military intelligence service, where champagne, wine and fine food are served to Nazi officers while the hotel staff secretly stores its finest bottles in a walled-up cellar, safe from the occupiers. In the book’s tightly focused second section, a variety of intriguing portraits emerge, including the horrifying tale of Robert Alesch, a Catholic priest and Nazi collaborator who lived a double life, betraying the plans of many trying to escape to safety.

In 1945, the Lutetia is transformed once again, this time into a reception center for refugees liberated from concentration camps. This final section of the book—is its strongest—is devastating and mesmerizing. Throngs of people search for lost relatives, and starving survivors are subjected to DDT fumigation and intense interrogations. As one observer notes, “We had to admit that skeletons could walk.”

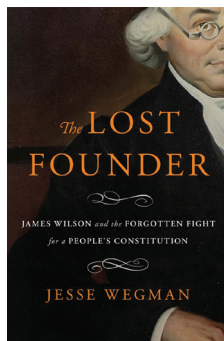
Rogoyska writes in present tense, no doubt to increase the subject’s immediacy, although some readers may find this a slightly distracting affectation. Telling the story of a place through profiles of the people who inhabited it is an effective narrative strategy, allowing the author to cover a wide cast of characters and events, but it takes some time to see this technique bear fruit and allow the hotel to come into focus. Nonetheless, these snapshots are fascinating.

Renovated in 2018, this modern luxury hotel now serves the global elite, many of whom may not have any idea of its complex history. **Hotel Exile**, however, constantly reminds us of the words of Michel Rocard, who as a 14-year-old scout helped tend to the concentration camp survivors. Commenting that Hitler came to power democratically, he notes: “I realised that politics is a very important and serious business. A lesson I have never forgotten.”

—Alice Cary

★ The Lost Founder

By Jesse Wegman



AMERICAN HISTORY

James Wilson was the most democratic of all the Founding Fathers and fervently promoted the philosophy that all power rests with the people. He wrote the first draft of the Constitution and was one of only six men who signed both the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence; he coined the phrase “We the people”; in 1790, he gave a series of lectures that shaped the country’s legal principles for decades. Legal historian and former *New York Times* editorial board member Jesse Wegman explores Wilson’s crucial contributions to the development of the nation and why few know of him in his gripping, deeply researched and elegantly written **The Lost Founder: James Wilson and the Forgotten Fight for a People’s Constitution** (Celadon, \$30, 9781250851079).

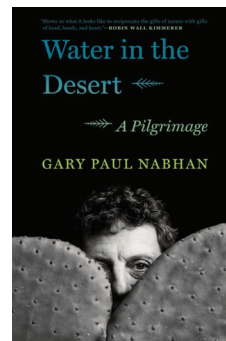
A native of Scotland, Wilson came to the North American colonies in 1765 at age 23. He was very well educated and strongly influenced by the scholars of the Scottish Enlightenment. When he had lived here for only three years he wrote a long essay, not published until 1774, arguing that the British Parliament had no authority over the colonies and providing the legal justification for the American Revolution. “All men are, by nature, equal and free,” he wrote, “no one has a right to any authority over another without his consent.” This very influential essay brought Wilson to the attention of the public as a leading political thinker. It also helped him gain a reputation as the best lawyer in the colonies; he was also one the wealthiest.

Despite earning high praise from the likes of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Benjamin Rush, Wilson’s obsession with complex land speculation meant he was always looking for sources of money; scandal and debtors’ prison ensued. He died of malaria while hiding from his creditors, impoverished and disgraced. But he was ahead of his time in his belief in the power of the common people, and Wegman shows that he was as important in designing the Constitution as James Madison. This absorbing and enlightening work offers abundant riches as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of our nation’s founding and reflect on the people instrumental to its success.

—Roger Bishop

Water in the Desert

By Gary Paul Nabhan



MEMOIR

From an early age, Gary Paul Nabhan would fall into what ecologist E.O. Wilson called “the naturalist’s trance.” Intensely absorbed by the sand dunes and wildlife of the shores of Lake Michigan, young Nabhan was called the “Dune Detective” by his loving Lebanese American family. He was much less comfortable in school, where his preference for solitude and frustration with authority figures made fitting in difficult. Nabhan escaped into nature: “I cherished playing hooky in wetlands, disappearing into dense patches of tule, river cane, and reed.”

Now in his 70s, Nabhan has led an extraordinary life as an ethnobotanist, field biologist and fierce advocate for environmental justice. In **Water in the Desert: A Pilgrimage** (Milkweed, \$30, 9781571311696), he charts his journey from his Midwestern childhood to a life in the Southwest as a scientist and activist dedicated to the health of entwined ecosystems among the region’s peoples, creatures, rivers and deserts. Nabhan traces his love for the “edges and boundaries” of the Sonoran desert to his ancestral roots in the Bekaa Valley on the border between present-day Lebanon and Syria. Nabhan calls these border places the “ecotone:” “a place rife with ecological edge effects . . . exactly the kind of place where I felt most at home.”

When ecotones are at risk of ecological collapse, whether from pollution, climate crisis or, as at the time of this writing in the Bekaa Valley, war, Nabhan calls on the powers of the paraecologists: emergency medical technicians for the environment. Nabhan’s work organizing restorative ventures among desert communities equates the health of the land and water with the health of the people dwelling there. Much of this work has focused on the springs and rivers that emerge in otherwise arid landscapes, sacred meeting places between water and desert, where 20% of the endangered species in the U.S. reside.

In this memoir, Nabhan spins an immersive yarn about a child who loved sand dunes and lake water, who grew up to witness both environmental triumphs, such as the establishment of Earth Day in 1970, and ecological tragedy. **Water in the Desert** is an inspiring call to action and a contemplative read.

—Catherine Hollis