

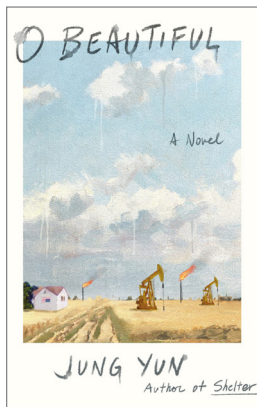
curiosity about him unwavering: “I wondered who William was. I have wondered this before. Many times I have wondered this.” Likewise, William turns to Lucy, rather than to his current wife, when his sleep is disrupted by night terrors involving his late mother. And it’s Lucy he seeks when he confronts a secret his mother kept from him.

Pulitzer Prize winner Strout is a master of quiet, reflective stories that are driven more by their characters than by events. Her fans will find plenty to love as Lucy and William set out to explore his family history. At each step, Lucy contemplates her relationships to the people around her. Though she often feels invisible, her ties to William, their daughters and the strangers they encounter remind her that she has a place in the world.

—Carla Jean Whitley

## ★ *O Beautiful*

By Jung Yun



### Literary Fiction

Jung Yun’s second novel is a riveting story of a Korean American woman claiming a country that has done its best to reject her.

After decades as a model, Elinor Hanson went back to school and reinvented herself as a journalist. Barely supporting herself

with freelance work, she is surprised when one of her graduate school professors offers her a plum assignment: covering North Dakota’s oil boom for a prominent magazine. Elinor, who grew up on a U.S. Air Force base in North Dakota, is curious about the changes this new gold rush has created, so she agrees to travel home.

Elinor barely recognizes the state she left behind. Its small towns burst with new arrivals seeking opportunities, and fracking has all but destroyed the land. But the anxiety expressed by longtime residents is dishearteningly familiar to Elinor, and her encounters with sexism and racism quickly bring back the trauma of life on the air base. Elinor is the daughter of an American airman and a Korean woman who met overseas, and on the base, other wives withheld their friendship from Elinor’s mother, while other husbands were all too willing to flirt.

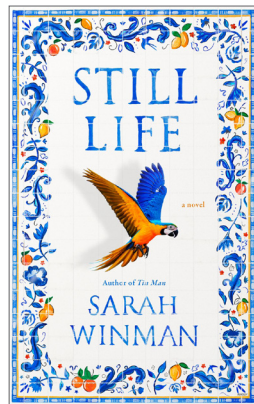
As Elinor grapples with the difficult assignment, she is drawn into an unsolved missing persons case: a white woman who disappeared while jogging eight years ago. But that story doesn’t allow her to forge fresh investigative paths or distract from the rage she realizes has been simmering since her teens. When some of her former classmates reach out about a harassment suit against her professor, she begins to question his motivations in passing on the assignment in the first place.

*O Beautiful* (St. Martin’s, \$27.99, 9781250274328) moves swiftly, with all the force of a finely honed thriller. As Elinor reckons with her past and the ways people have treated her, her mother and her sisters, she begins to examine the anger and love she feels for both her family and country. Open-ended and openhearted, *O Beautiful* may provide Elinor with more questions than answers, but it also instills in her a newfound determination to claim America as her own.

—Lauren Bufferd

## ★ *Still Life*

By Sarah Winman



### Historical Fiction

“I know by experience that the poets are right: love is eternal,” Mr. Emerson tells Lucy Honeychurch in E.M. Forster’s novel *A Room With a View*. It’s a beautiful sentiment, one that Sarah Winman incorporates into *Still*

*Life* (Putnam, \$27, 9780593330753), along with other enduring realities, such as the transcendence of art and the pain of war.

Winman’s fourth novel is a gambol through some of the major events of the mid-20th century, and much of the action occurs in Italy. It opens in 1944, as Ulysses Temper, a young private in the British army, is driving through Florence. Evelyn Skinner, a 64-year-old English art historian, waves down his jeep. She’s in Italy to “liaise with the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives officers” and locate artworks sequestered from museums and churches. He gives her a ride. From there, Winman takes the reader through 35 years of world history, from World War II to the moon landing to natural disasters in Florence, as seen through the eyes of her characters.

After the war, Ulysses returns to London, where he resumes work on the globe-manufacturing business he took over from his father. He spends time at a pub called the Stout and Parrot, where denizens include Col, the owner; piano player Pete; Ulysses’ unfaithful spouse, Peg; their daughter, Alys; and a blue parrot named Claude.

An unexpected inheritance prompts Ulysses to leave London and return to Florence. Winman’s plot at times relies too heavily on moments of serendipity like this one, but readers will nonetheless be charmed by Ulysses’ attempts to set up a pensione, as well as by Evelyn’s parallel story and her many lovers, and the ways in which her life and Ulysses’ become linked.

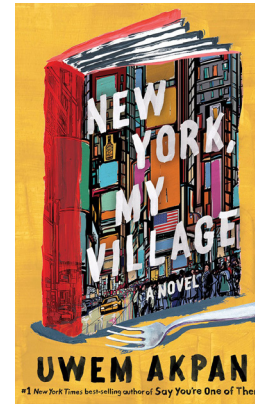
*Still Life* is, ultimately, a celebration of Italy, with loving descriptions of its buildings and countryside, of old women gossiping on stone benches, of Tuscany’s “thick forests of chestnut trees and fields

of sunflowers.” It’s light yet satisfying, like foamed milk atop a cappuccino.

—Michael Magras

## New York, My Village

By Uwem Akpan



### Literary Fiction

Literature and myth are full of tales of the naif who finds himself embroiled in circumstances so off-the-wall that only his innocence and good nature save him. Uwem Akpan’s first novel, *New York, My Village* (Norton, \$27.95, 9780393881424), is

almost one of these tales.

Nigerian editor Ekong Udousoro has been granted a fellowship to work on a book about the Biafran War at a boutique New York publishing house. But first, he has to get to the United States, and the novel’s opening chapters deal with the frustrations of acquiring a visa. Ekong experiences a foretaste of what he’ll find in New York City: people who are indifferent and reject him, and people who seem kind and still reject him. Finally, on his third try, Ekong gets his visa.

New York City is just as baffling. Ekong’s colleagues at the publishing house, every one of them white, welcome him effusively. They’re happy to treat him like a king as long as he keeps a low profile. When Ekong, his childhood friend Usen and Usen’s family go to church, they’re nearly thrown out, then embraced, then ushered into the sacristy where the priest tells them never to come back and suggests they worship at an African American church nearby. This nearly sparks an international incident. Worst of all, Ekong and his screwy neighbors in their Hell’s Kitchen walk-up have bedbugs.

But Ekong is no *Candide*, nor is he Xi from *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. Intelligent and sophisticated, he’s capable of a rage that would never occur to these characters. Even as he comes from a place roiling with strife, corruption and intertribal bigotry—his very name means “war”—he just can’t wrap his mind around the perfidy, hypocrisy and smarmy racism that he’s found in America.

Akpan, author of the award-winning story collection *Say You’re One of Them*, allows Ekong’s astonished anger, acerbic humor and, despite everything, love of New York and its people to anchor him. Of all the characters in *New York, My Village*, Ekong knows who he is. We are privileged to get to know him, too.

—Arlene McKanic



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