

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Pandemic-era publishers are packing big insights into bite-size reads

By LIZA MONROY

The notion that attention spans are narrowing isn't new, but the past year has brought even more reasons for shrinking mental bandwidth. *PW* suggests that readers seeking neural nourishment look away from their conspiracy-minded cousins' Twitter feeds and toward forthcoming essay and short fiction and collections, novellas, and quick-study nonfiction. We're not judging anyone swept up by the vertiginously rotating news cycle, but we hope these books can bring screen-bleary eyes back to the page.

In Good Company

These days, essayist Annabelle Gurwitch (*You're Leaving When?*, Counterpoint, Apr.) appreciates writing that offers closure. "With the pandemic, everything's taking so much longer," she says. "It seems harder to complete tasks, but reading essays and short stories, I get that beginning, middle, and end experience."

Personal essays in particular can offer a welcome sense of connection with the writer, say other practitioners of the form. "One of the things I miss most about having a social life is meeting a new friend, or reconnecting with an old one," says Melissa Febos (*Girlhood*, Bloomsbury, Mar.). "The best essays give me that feeling."

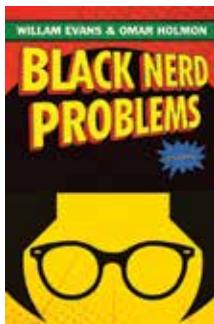
To Ben Philippe, essays have an advantage for readers feeling depleted. He says he hopes *Sure, I'll Be Your Black Friend* (Harper Perennial, May) "provides some of the benefits of a casual friendship with me, and the general shenanigans of life as a Black guy in 2020" without "the emotional exhaustion of maintaining a real face-to-face friendship."

These and other forthcoming collections present an array of friendly options to choose from.

Black Nerd Problems

William Evans and Omar Holmon. Gallery, July

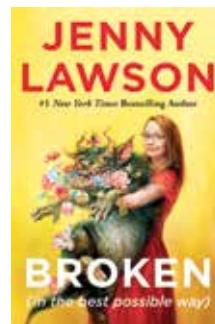
Assorted pop culture essays by the creators of the eponymous website address race, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, superhero authoritarianism, and, to take one title, how "Mario Kart Reveals the Inner Villain in All of Us." Prepub materials say the collection is intended "for an audience unafraid to admit that they love anime, comic books, and all things nerdy."



Broken (in the Best Possible Way)

Jenny Lawson. Holt, Apr.

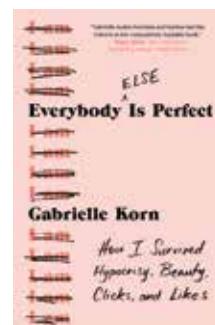
The writer behind the *Bloggess* website, who owns Nowhere Bookshop in San Antonio, Tex., tackles tough subjects, such as her decision to undergo experimental treatment for depression, with signature humor. Her previous confessionals, 2012's *Let's Pretend This Never Happened* and 2015's *Furiously Happy* have sold a combined 660,000 print copies, per NPD BookScan; of her latest, *PW*'s review said, "The beauty of these essays lies in Lawson's unflinching hopefulness amid her trials."



Everybody (Else) Is Perfect

Gabrielle Korn. Atria, Feb.

Korn transports readers just a few years back, yet to a different era: 2018 in the New York City magazine world. At age 28, Korn ascended to the position of youngest editor-in-chief of *Nylon*, becoming the only lesbian to helm a major fashion magazine at that time. Essays detail her coming-of-age, battles with disordered eating, feminism, burnout, and how she reframed the beauty industry's purpose: not to attract a mate, but for self-care.



Girlhood

Melissa Febos. Bloomsbury, Apr.

In her second essay collection, Febos grapples with female adolescence and everything after. The memorable "Thank You for Taking Care of Yourself," in which she attends a "cuddle party"—pre-Covid, of course—becomes a vehicle for delving into the concept of emotional labor. "The prose is restrained but lyrical throughout," *PW*'s review said. "Raw and unflinching, this dark coming-of-age story impresses at every turn."



Goodbye, Again

Jonny Sun. Harper Perennial, Apr.

Sun (*Everyone's a Liebn When Ur a Liebn Too*), an illustrator and TV writer with 577K Twitter followers, blends personal essays, poems, and stories, including a tearjerker in the form of egg recipes. Concluding an essay about dim sum, he writes, "You successfully escaped from the ordinary, constant, churning movement of the world, and the return to it is always disorienting, in the same way you come out of a movie theater

Books for Short Attention Spans

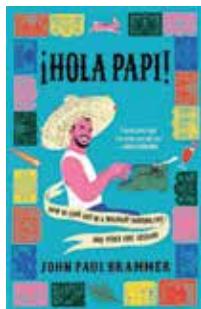
and are surprised that it is still daytime, or surprised that it is midnight, because while you were in there, days passed, years passed, a whole lifetime passed in front of your eyes.”



Hola Papi

John Paul Brammer. Simon & Schuster, June

Brammer's book takes its name from his Substack advice column, which was originally pitched as "a queer Latino 'Dear Abby.'" The collection covers coming of age, coming out, authority, and identity, as in this take on Grindr: "It was on this app that, for the first time ever, some white guy greeted me by saying, 'Hola papi.' I'd never really considered myself any kind of 'papi.' I was a mixed-race Mexican American with noodle arms who couldn't legally drink yet."



Spilt Milk

Courtney Zoffness. McSweeney's, Mar.

In what *PW*'s starred review called a "keenly perceptive" debut, Zoffness tackles anxiety, religious ambiguity, a sexual harassment case, and her four-year-old's obsession with playing cop:



"Officer Leo squints, shifts his lower jaw from side to side, mumbles something to headquarters on his faux walkie-talkie. His superiors are surprisingly flexible. I'm sorry, ma'am, he says finally, and unfastens my binds. It wasn't you. It was someone who looked like you. Which is to say, a woman whom the world sees as white."

Sure, I'll Be Your Black Friend

Ben Philippe. Harper Perennial, May.
The author of two YA novels, including

Not Your Mama's Cliff's Notes

Nicholas Dames, coeditor of the new Rereadings series from Columbia University Press, would like to counter the notion that academic presses don't publish appealing writing: "There's a wealth of great academic writers who get shut out because of default suspicion about academics and scholars as writers."

In fact, those who lack the time, resources, or inclination to matriculate can look to Columbia and other university presses for quick, immersive takes on various collegiate subjects intended to engage as well as educate.

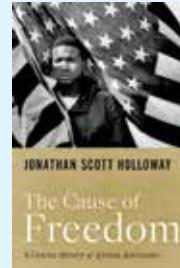
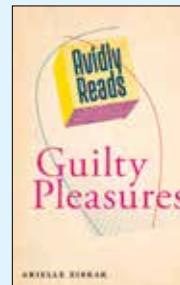
For the Rereadings series, contributors revisit personally meaningful, post-1970s novels. Inspired by Bloomsbury's 33 1/3 series, in which writers each obsess over a single album, Rereadings—which also reboots the Columbia Essays on Modern Writers series of the 1960s and '70s—launched in January with *Vineland Reread* by University of Illinois English professor Peter Coviello; *PW*'s review called it an "astute and passionate analysis" of what's often considered a lesser Thomas Pynchon work.

February brings *A Visit from the Goon Squad Reread*, in which Ivan Kreilkamp, an Indiana University English professor who has published pop-music criticism in *Rolling Stone*, the *Village Voice*, and elsewhere, delves into Jennifer Egan's 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. Rereadings coeditor Jenny M. Davidson says readers unfamiliar with the original books can approach series installments as they would *Fever Pitch* by Nick Hornby or Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage*—more heavily reliant on an author's obsession than the object of said obsession.

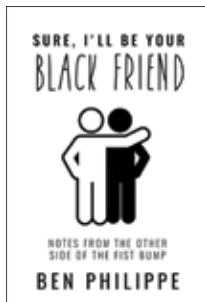
Avidly Reads, which NYU Press and online magazine *Avidly* launched in 2019, similarly centers on what its website calls the authors' "emotional relationship to a cultural artifact or experience." Titles top out at under 200 pages and include the forthcoming *Avidly Reads: Passages* (Feb.) by Michelle D. Commander, an associate director and curator at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York. She uses four modes of transportation—slave ship, train, bus, and car—and her personal experience to explore the question, "What is the value of Black life in America?" *Avidly Reads: Guilty Pleasures* by Arielle Zibrak, associate professor of English and gender and women's studies at the University of Wyoming, follows in May and ponders so-called women's culture, including teen magazines and rom-coms.

In contrast with the newer series, Oxford University Press's Very Short Introductions is 25 years old and comprises almost 700 titles to date, including forthcoming hardcovers focused on Black history that eventually will be repackaged as paperbacks in the series. *The Movement* (Jan.) by Thomas C. Holt, professor emeritus of African American history at the University of Chicago, is a "concise and edifying account," *PW*'s review said, that "casts the civil rights struggle in a new light." Holt says the book draws on the stories of ordinary people to reveal principal motivations that sparked the civil rights movement.

The Cause of Freedom (Feb.) by Jonathan Scott Holloway, historian and Rutgers University president, surveys African American history from 1619 Jamestown through the Black Lives Matter movement. Distilling the African American experience to 160 pages "seemed daunting at first," he says. "But I could not pass up the chance to offer perspective on what has so often been left out of the grand American narrative." —L.M.



Books for Short Attention Spans

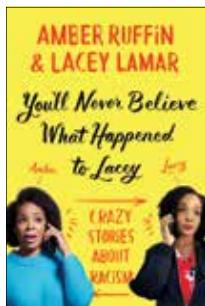


2020's *PW*-starred *Charming as a Verb*, writes a memoir-in-essays for adult readers that addresses topics of varying heft—BLM, Beyoncé—in an intimate, conversational way. He writes in the introduction, “What follows is more or less the written version of a few dozen beers grabbed at our local hangs, walks around the park, or subway rides heading the same direction after an afternoon movie.” In other words, everything we’ve been missing.

You'll Never Believe What Happened to Lacey

Amber Ruffin and Lacey Lamar. Grand Central, out now

Comedian and TV host Ruffin and her older sister dive into painful experiences with racism yet share these stories with Ruffin's signature optimistic sense of humor—displayed here to be a trait that runs in the family. Many of the anecdotes originated in journals Lamar kept about various incidents over the years. “Ruffin and Lamar show the necessity of embracing humor as a coping mechanism,” said *PW*'s starred review, which further praised the book as “an excellently executed account, rich with vivid insight.”



You're Leaving When?

Annabelle Gurwitch. Counterpoint, Mar. Subtitled *Adventures in Downward Mobility*, Gurwitch's book consists of voice-driven essays with an economic angle that, she says, was met with skepticism when she first pitched it, because the economy at the time was booming. Of her 2014 collection, *I See You Made an Effort*, *PW*'s review said, “Her witty writing allows for deft exploration of even the most sensitive and intimate subjects, while still finding the humor in her situation.”



Depts. of Speculation

Fantastical novellas and collections of short fiction can offer readers a brief respite from reality.

A Psalm for the Wild-Built (Tor.com, July), the slender first volume in Hugo Award-winner Becky Chambers's Monk & Robot series, is dedicated to “anybody who could use a break.” Set in a future in which, freed from work obligations, intelligent robots disappeared from cities into the wilderness, the story follows Sibling Dex, a tea monk (job description: “*listen to people, give tea*”), who stumbles upon Mosschap, a robot, traversing wild terrain. As much a philosophical journey as a speculative one, the book fits squarely into the burgeoning hopepunk subgenre.



Other forthcoming works of speculative short fiction contain moments of recognition for the isolated and overwhelmed that may hit close to home despite their fanciful settings. Momo, protagonist of *The Membranes* by Chi Ta-wei (trans. from the Chinese by Ari Larissa Heinrich; Columbia Univ., June), works as an aesthetician in an undersea dome. The novella was originally published in Taiwan in 1995 but has contemporary resonance; as one client chastises, “Momo, you're like a freak walled off by membranes

Hidden Narratives

PW talks with Lucy Ives

The stories in *Cosmogony* (Soft Skull, Mar.) grab scenarios from everyday life—say, running into a friend's husband at the grocery store—and render the familiar strange: said husband is an immortal demon, who knows everything from the narrator's credit score to the day she will die. *PW*'s review called the book an “inventive collection” whose entries “illuminate the trickier fringes of life right now.” Here, Ives discusses its timeliness.

How has the past year affected your view of these stories?

There's a side of me that used to be very opinionated and quick to move on that now lingers. As for the stories, I go back and forth between thinking they're a time capsule of ways of life previous to the pandemic, and that they seem already to function as a record of the ways in which certain imaginary people survived things that were supposedly normal.

What questions do the stories explore?

I'm curious about why people do self-defeating, harmful things. How is it that we embark on paths that have tragic ends? Why is it sometimes so difficult to see that a given course of action is going to lead to the opposite result we had in mind? I'm very interested in unpacking questions about the hiddenness of narrative.

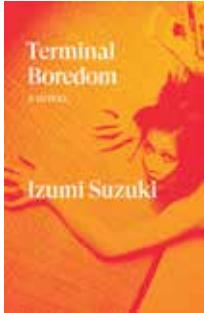
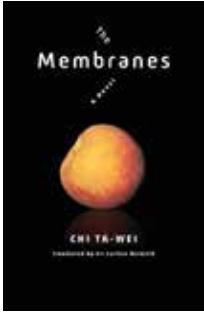
Why are you drawn to fantastical and experimental forms?

Certain elements of personal life are difficult to describe without making reference to outlandish and even impossible events. Of course in real life you don't meet an immortal demon. All the same, can you say with certainty that you've never met an immortal demon or, for that matter, time traveled? That tiny chance, that door left open, is something I'm interested in playing with.



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On Sale May 2021



and clinging desperately to your routines!”

In April, Verso is releasing the seven-story collection *Terminal Boredom*, the first English-language publication of work by Japanese counterculture figure Izumi Suzuki, who died in 1986.

The title story tackles short

attention spans overtly: “The youth of Tokyo have become unable to focus on anything for more than a moment,” Verso’s fiction editor, Cian McCourt, says, and the tale “treats short attention spans as treacherous things.”

In Lucy Ives’s speculative collection *Cosmogony*, which Soft Skull will release in March, one woman goes for a run and time-travels. Another, like Chi Ta-wei’s Momo, lives at the bottom

What differences arise in your approach when composing a story as opposed to longer work?

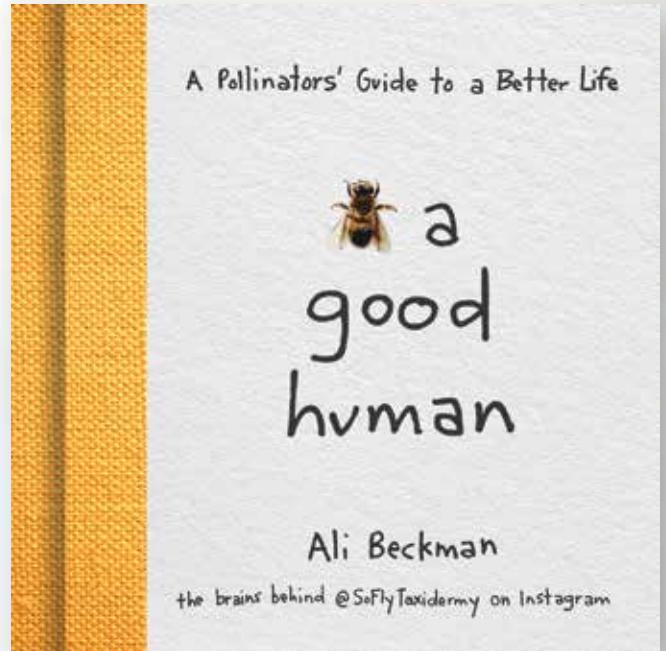
With short stories I feel I have a greater intimacy with the mechanics of human action and events. I have more permission to inhabit a voice that says, “And now *this* happens.” With novels, there’s a different kind of creative and emotional work going on. With longer forms my responsibility seems to be to listen and record and watch and maybe even to act as a sort of archeologist. A novel—and maybe this is obvious—requires a kind of patience and incremental attention that I do not have to sustain for a short story. For stories, the challenge is to remain open to the way in which things are transforming and to keep up.

At what stage do you decide or realize what a story is about, and how do you know when it’s finished?

It’s hard for me to see a story in its entirety or fuller meaning until many years after I’ve written it. Finishing writing the story is a different project and is more intuitive, more physical and felt. [In college] I worked closely with the poet Jorie Graham, who used



to talk about how a poem “snaps shut” when it’s finished. Although she was speaking about a different kind of writing, I’ve always found that idea helpful. For me, writing is a liberated act. When it starts to feel more like an idea or a shape or a thing, that means I’m starting to be done. The story seems to close on its own, and I know I need to develop a different sort of relationship to it. I’m no longer the person who was writing it. I’m someone else, then. —L.M.



\$16.00

ISBN 9781684351329

With nearly 200K followers, Instagram artist Ali Beckman (@SoFlyTaxidermy) is the internet’s go-to gal for bug-related content that makes you a happier human.



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of the ocean. Soft Skull editor-in-chief Yuka Igarashi says the use of varied genres and styles form a picture of “Lucy’s particular soul and mind but also of what it’s like to be alive, as a woman, today,” while diverting readers from everyday concerns. (See our q&a with Ives, “Hidden Narratives,” p. 26.)

Stories in the debut fiction collections by Brenda Peynado and Whitney Collins share an element of offbeat, high-concept worldbuilding. In the title story of Collins’s *Big Bad* (Sarabande, Mar.), a young woman experiences the strangest sort of Groundhog Day, by giving birth to future versions of herself.

Margaux Weisman, editor at Penguin Books, says each story in Peynado’s *The Rock Eaters* (May) takes readers to “a completely different, fractured, glittering world,” whether set in a virtual reality or a surreal, sweltering Florida.

Haruki Murakami is a master of rendering “abnormal things happening to normal people,” as he put it in a publicity interview with his publisher. The eight short stories in *First Person Singular* (trans. from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel; Knopf, Apr.) are linked by their use, as the title implies, of first-person singular voice, sometimes toeing the line between fiction and memoir and leaving it to readers to decide. The collection provides “a crash course in his style and vision, blending passion for music and baseball and nostalgia for youth with portrayals of young love and moments of magical realism,” *PW*’s starred review said, offering “testament to Murakami’s talent and enduring creativity.”

At its most direct, speculative fiction offers glimpses of what life might be like in the future, an activity that can comfort as well as unsettle. For *Flash Forward* (Abrams ComicArts, Apr.), Rose Eveleth tasked graphic artists with answering, in comics form, the kinds of questions she poses in her *Flash Forward Presents* podcast:

Will pop stars be avatars? Will

future algorithms be able to detect truths from lies or will fake news reshape reality? Some scenarios are more possible than others, but all, as with other fictional works discussed here, offer readers fed up with sheltering in place a quick, and welcome, change of scenery. ■

Liza Monroy’s books include the essay collection Seeing as Your Shoes Are Soon to Be on Fire (Soft Skull).

Quick Studies

What’s on the syllabus for distracted lifelong learners? Takes on food, feminism, philosophy, and more.

50 Things to Do at the Beach

Easkey Britton, illus. by Maria Nilsson.

Princeton Architectural Press, May

Big-wave surfer Britton, who has a PhD in environment and society, offers a concise, illustrated primer based on years of research and activism: she rides a surfboard made from cigarette butts to raise awareness about environmental conservation, and is the first woman known to have surfed Iran’s Baluchistan Coast. See our q&a with Easkey, “Reading the Sea,” below.

The Three-Minute Philosopher

Fabrice Midal.

Running Press, May

Midal, whose books include *The French Art of Not Giving a Sh*t*, is a philosopher who lectures frequently on meditation and mindfulness. Here, he distills inspiration from 40 writers and thinkers including James Baldwin, Charles Baudelaire, and Simone de Beauvoir. Each essay can be read in three minutes, serving up deep thoughts on a fast-food timeline.



Reading the Sea

PW talks with Easkey Britton



The science- and mindfulness-based activities suggested in Easkey Britton’s *50 Things to Do at the Beach* (illus. by Maria Nilsson; Princeton Architectural Press, May)—think seabird watching or rock pooling—come in an accessible format conducive to quick dips. *PW* caught up with the scientist and big-wave surfer, who grew up on Ireland’s North Atlantic coast, at the end of a cold day in her homeland, when she’d already been out in the water.

Why did you choose an illustrated format for *50 Things*?

As a marine social scientist, I’ve experienced the challenge of not being able to communicate to a much wider audience the wonder of the ocean and how it’s linked

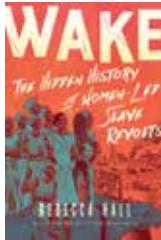
Books for Short Attention Spans

Wake

Rebecca Hall, illus. by Hugo Martínez.

Simon & Schuster, June

In this graphic novel, PhD historian Hall tells the little-known stories of New York's women-led slave revolts. She locates these women in old letters, court documents, slave ship captains' logs, and "the forensic evidence from the bones of enslaved women from the 'negro burying ground' uncovered in Manhattan," according to the publisher. Hall unites the disparate pieces to construct the imagined saga of Adono and Alele, two Black women freedom fighters on the slave ship *The Unity*.

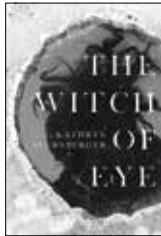


The Witch of Eye

Kathryn Nuernberger.

Sarabande, Feb.

Drawing connections to contemporary social justice issues, philosophy, and feminism, poet and essayist Nuernberger relates a social history of so-called witches across centuries and the globe. In brief, lyrical retellings, she profiles women including Walpurga Hausmännin, a midwife executed for witchcraft in 16th-century Bavaria, and Maria Gonçalves Cajada, convicted of sorcery in 17th-century colonial Brazil. Their stories become a lens on Nuernberger's own experiences, whether as simple as a walk in the forest, as disturbing as a visit to the Prague



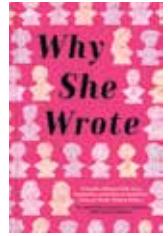
Museum of Torture, or as personal as her wedding.

Why She Wrote

Lauren Burke and Hannah K. Chapman, illus. by Kaley Bales.

Chronicle, Apr.

Bonnets at Dawn cohosts Burke and Chapman offer a graphic anthology that shares a subject with their literary podcast: women writers of the 18th–20th centuries, well-known and otherwise. Each of the 18 mini-profiles highlights a single significant moment in each subject's life to answer questions of, in the words of the introduction, "who she was, what she wanted, and why she wrote."

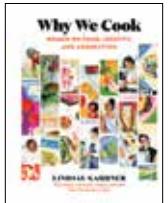


Why We Cook

Lindsay Gardner.

Workman, Mar.

More than 100 women in the intersecting worlds of food and social justice—among them Carla Hall, Cristina Martinez, Bonnie Tsui, and Julia Turshen—discuss representation in the culinary community, erasure of women chefs, and comfort foods to get readers through hard times, in an easily digestible volume rich with recipes and Gardner's illustrations. The book aims to offer "hope for all that is possible, for learning, empathy, change, equity, and growth," Gardner writes, "in and out of the kitchen." —L.M.



to our well-being, so it's to broaden that reach. Each piece is stand-alone, but there's a flow throughout. Visually, it's a lovely way to break it down and create a softer entry point. The illustrations bring the text to life, it's less word-heavy, and has a playful quality even as it addresses the research I've been doing.

What led you to become an ocean conservationist?

I've been lucky as someone who was born into a family with a sea connection through surfing. It's been a really powerful force in my life. The northwest part of Ireland has these amazing beaches, and when I was a child it was a wild, unfamiliar place. I developed a wider awareness of tides and weather. The more people who have a direct emotional connection to the sea, the more will value it. It's been a lifeline for so many people during a time like this.

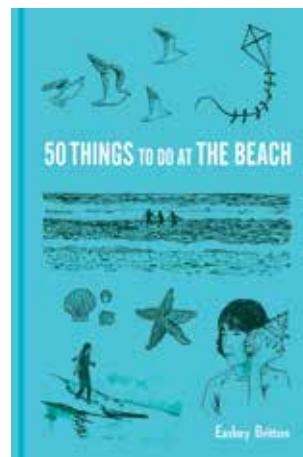
How can the ocean give a sense of wellness and focus?

There are so many tools on mindfulness and meditating, yet it's hard to create that state. The ocean starts to soothe and regulate our nervous system without us even having to try. If you do some of the activities in the book around mindfulness, it has an even more profound effect. The ocean is multisensory in a way that makes us feel more alive, helps restore our attention, soothes our nervous system, calms the heart rate, and lowers stress. It makes it easy to self-connect and be more mindful. Our health is directly

affected by how the ocean is doing, and its capacity to heal and restore us. But how do you make accessible its transformative healing power for those who need it most? It would be great for that to be more mainstream.

How can the ideas in your book benefit readers not near a beach?

We live on an ocean planet, and every action we take anywhere we are on the planet has an impact on the ocean.



Our bodies are 70% water. A type of phytoplankton releases tons of oxygen responsible for our breath.

The warmer the planet gets, the worse it will be for the ocean. You can reduce your use of plastics or do a litter pickup in a city—cigarette butts go down the gutters and end up in the sea. There's a lot you can do without having to physically be there.

—L.M.