

ROVING EYE

The Transgressive Power of Alba de Céspedes

A best-selling novelist and political activist in her native Italy, she was admired for her sensitive depictions of women and their predicaments. Recently rediscovered, her work has lost none of its subversive force.



By Joumana Khatib

Jan. 13, 2023

6 MIN READ

Rome, 1950: The diary begins innocently enough, with the name of its owner, Valeria Cossati, written in a neat script.

Valeria is buying cigarettes for her husband when she is entranced by the stacks of gleaming black notebooks at the tobacco shop. She's not permitted to buy one there on Sundays, she's told, but the tobacconist gives her one anyway, which she stashes under her coat. She doesn't yet know there's a devil hiding in its pages.

This deception begins the Cuban-Italian writer Alba de Céspedes's novel **FORBIDDEN NOTEBOOK** (Astra House, 259 pp., \$26), first published in 1952. Valeria is married with two adult children; the family is under financial strain, compelling her to work in an office and manage her household without the help of a maid. She has coped with these pressures handsomely, she believes. She is a "transparent" woman, simple, "a person who had no surprises either for myself or for others."

But from the moment Valeria brings the diary into her home, it changes her. She is terrified by the thought that her family might discover it, especially after they mock her for the mere suggestion she might like to keep a journal. "What would you write, mamma?" her husband, Michele, teases.

"Maybe I wanted this notebook in order to tell the tranquil story of our family: Maybe that's what impelled me to buy it," Valeria writes. "Instead, since I began writing, not everything that happens in our house seems to me pleasant to recall. ... Sometimes I think I'm wrong to write down everything that happens; fixed in writing, even what is, in essence, not bad seems bad."

What might have been a family story, with all its betrayals and unhappy detours forgotten, becomes an excruciating study of the diarist herself. The written record of Valeria's feelings and observations makes it impossible for her to ignore her discontent: the chill she feels in her marriage, her warring impulses toward her children, the guilt

and pleasure she finds in her work. Yet no transgression or admission feels as central as the fact of the diary — “an evil spirit,” she thinks. In the notebook she is simply Valeria; to her children and husband she is “mamma,” and her parents still call her, at age 43, “Bebe.”

Nowhere in the small apartment is safe from intrusion, driving her to move the diary from the linen closet to a suitcase to a heap of rags. Even her daughter, Mirella, who is studying law, has a drawer all to herself, and it locks.

Alba de Céspedes y Bertini (1911-97) was born in Rome, the daughter of a Cuban diplomat and his Italian wife. Her grandfather helped lead Cuba's fight for independence and served as its first president, and she kept alive her family's political commitment, often running afoul of Italy's Fascist regime.

The government banned two of her novels, including “Nessuno Torna Indietro,” or “There's No Turning Back,” which, published in 1938, became a best seller and was translated widely. De Céspedes was imprisoned twice for anti-Fascist activities, first in 1935 and again in 1943, after she had joined a resistance radio program, broadcasting from Bari under the pseudonym Clorinda.

By the 1950s, she was known throughout Italy. For years she wrote a popular advice column, tackling questions about marriage, infidelity and love with meditations on art and philosophy. These columns steered readers toward a modern, more secular morality, one that stressed women's equality. Her private life was the stuff of rumors — according to one she'd been married to a count as a teenager but had the marriage annulled. Which makes her virtual disappearance from the literary record today all the harder to fathom.

Until recently, it's been difficult to find her work, even in Italian. De Céspedes has been dismissed as a “romance writer,” perhaps owing to her subject and primary readership (women), her gender or all three.

The Italian publisher Mondadori reissued some of her books over the past few years, and this fresh translation of “Forbidden Notebook” promises a new cohort of readers, appetites whetted by the works of Elena Ferrante, Elsa Morante and Natalia Ginzburg. Ann Goldstein, who translates Ferrante's writing and has a particular skill for conveying the full power of a woman's emotional register, for locating an undertow of wrath or grief even in stated ambivalence, has reinvigorated the text, starting with the title: A 1958 English edition was called, rather flatly, “The Secret.” Still, The New York Times's reviewer called de Céspedes “one of the few distinguished women writers since Colette to grapple effectively with what it is to be a woman.”

De Céspedes found a lifetime of work in the question. After World War II ended, she returned to Rome and edited a literary journal, Mercurio, that published such writers as Jean-Paul Sartre, Ernest Hemingway and Alberto Moravia. In its final issue, which

appeared in 1948, she published an essay by Natalia Ginzburg called “On Women,” which explored whether women — with an innate tendency toward melancholy and despair — could ever achieve true freedom.

“I, too, like you and like all women, have a great and ancient experience with wells: I often fall in and I fall in with a crash,” de Céspedes wrote privately to Ginzburg. “But — unlike you — I think that these wells are our strength. Because every time we fall in the well we descend to the deepest roots of our being human, and in returning to the surface we carry inside us the kinds of experiences that allow us to understand everything that men — who never fall into the well — will never understand.”

In “Forbidden Notebook,” Valeria, too, finds comfort at the bottom of the well. Conflicts with Mirella often send her there, bitter fights about sexual propriety and autonomy that turn on existential, generational concerns. “If you love me, how can you hope I’ll have a life like yours?” Mirella asks.

Mirella sees poverty and exhaustion, but Valeria knows there’s more. As responsibilities — to her office, her family, the household — whirl around her, they also give her the cover she needs to burrow into herself. It’s intoxicating to look deeply within, even if she wounds herself in the process of discovery. “Something seems to have changed even in my physical appearance: I look younger, I would say,” Valeria writes, a few months in. “Yesterday I locked the bedroom door and looked at myself in the mirror. I haven’t done that for ages, because I’m always in a hurry. And yet now I find time to look at myself, to write in my diary. I wonder how it is that before I couldn’t.”

Before Valeria’s story was published as a novel, it was serialized in a magazine, *La Settimana Incom Illustrata*, with the diary entries appearing more or less in real time, from December 1950 through June 1951. I don’t know whether de Céspedes intended from the beginning for the narrative to coalesce into a novel, but I like to imagine the thrill of encountering Valeria’s story in its initial form, a prolonged confession seducing readers week after week. “I try to widen a problem so it becomes everyone’s,” de Céspedes once said of her writing. There might be notebooks darkly glimmering at the bottom of the laundry basket in your own home; your own mamma might be undergoing her own fission.

Again and again Valeria swears to destroy the journal, but the fate of the notebook matters little. She can’t excise the knowledge she’s obtained. “I know that my reactions to the facts I write down in detail lead me to know myself more intimately every day,” Valeria writes. “The better I know myself, the more lost I become. Besides, I don’t know what feelings could stand up to a ruthless, continuous analysis; or who among us, reflected in every action, could be satisfied with ourselves.”

And as she imagines the end to her diary, she recognizes, even hopes, that someone might perceive the change she's undergone; even if she burns the notebook, as she fantasizes, someone might still smell the smoke. Traces of the odor linger in the air, 70 years on.

Joumana Khatib is an editor at the Book Review.

EDITORS' CHOICE

9 New Books We Recommend This Week

Suggested reading from critics and editors at The New York Times.

Published Jan. 26, 2023 Updated Jan. 30, 2023

3 MIN READ

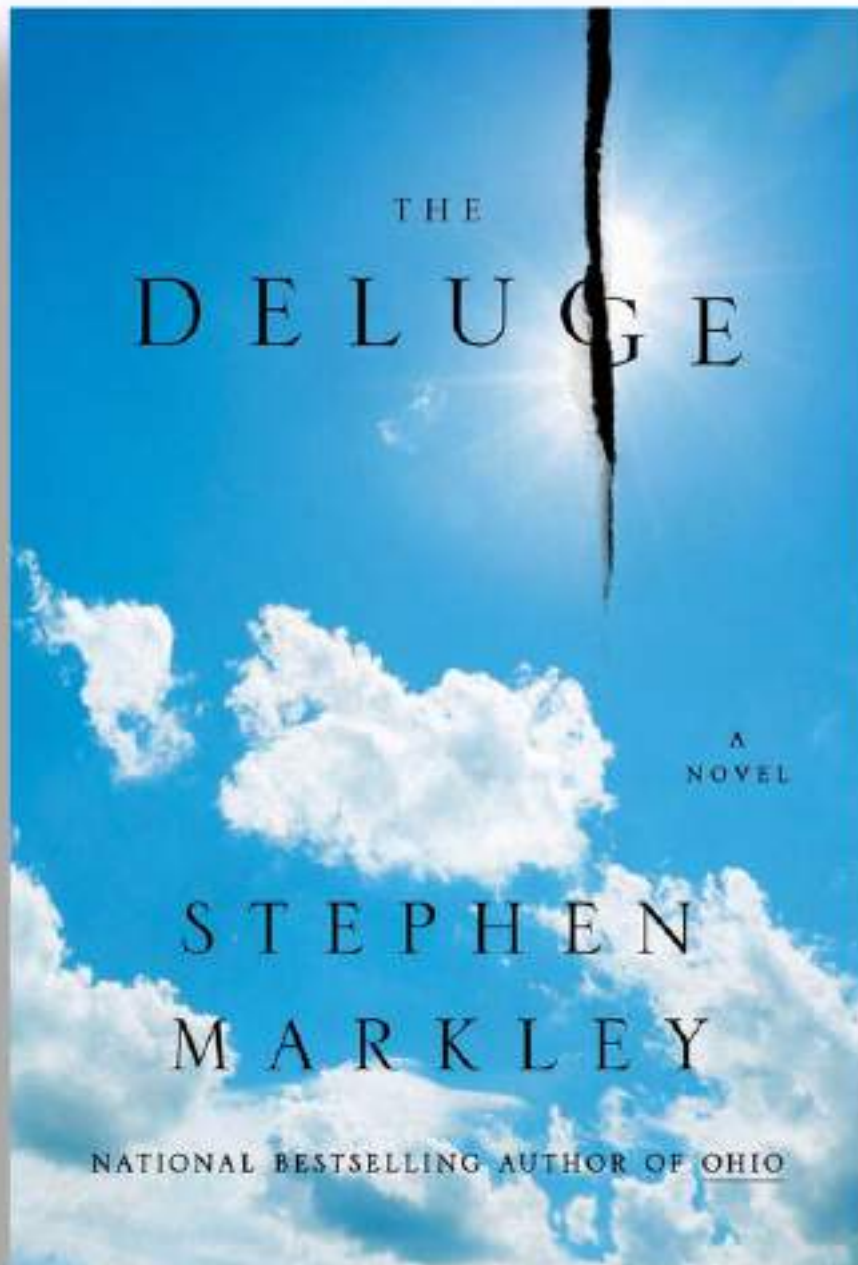
Doctors are more intimate than most of us are with mortality. But does that make it easier or harder for them to accept their own impending deaths when the time comes? The retired British neurosurgeon Henry Marsh (the author of two excellent memoirs about practicing medicine) faces that stark question in his new book, “And Finally,” in which he stares down a diagnosis of advanced prostate cancer and concludes, more equably than I might, “I have had my time in the sun, now it is the turn of the next generation.”

Other books we recommend this week include, in fiction, a couple of mysteries, a historical novel about the struggle for gay equality, a rediscovered Italian classic from the 1950s and a novel about climate change that calls into question just how palatable the next generation’s time in the sun will be anyway. In nonfiction, we like Edward J. Larson’s history of slavery at America’s founding, Costica Bradatan’s celebration of failure and Cheuk Kwan’s tour of Chinese restaurants around the world. Happy reading.

—Gregory Cowles

THE DELUGE *Stephen Markley*

Markley’s second novel confronts the scale and gravity of climate change, tracking a cadre of scientists and activists from the gathering storm of the Obama years to the super-typhoons of future decades. Immersive and ambitious, the book shows the range of its author’s gifts: polyphonic narration, silken sentences and elaborate world-building.



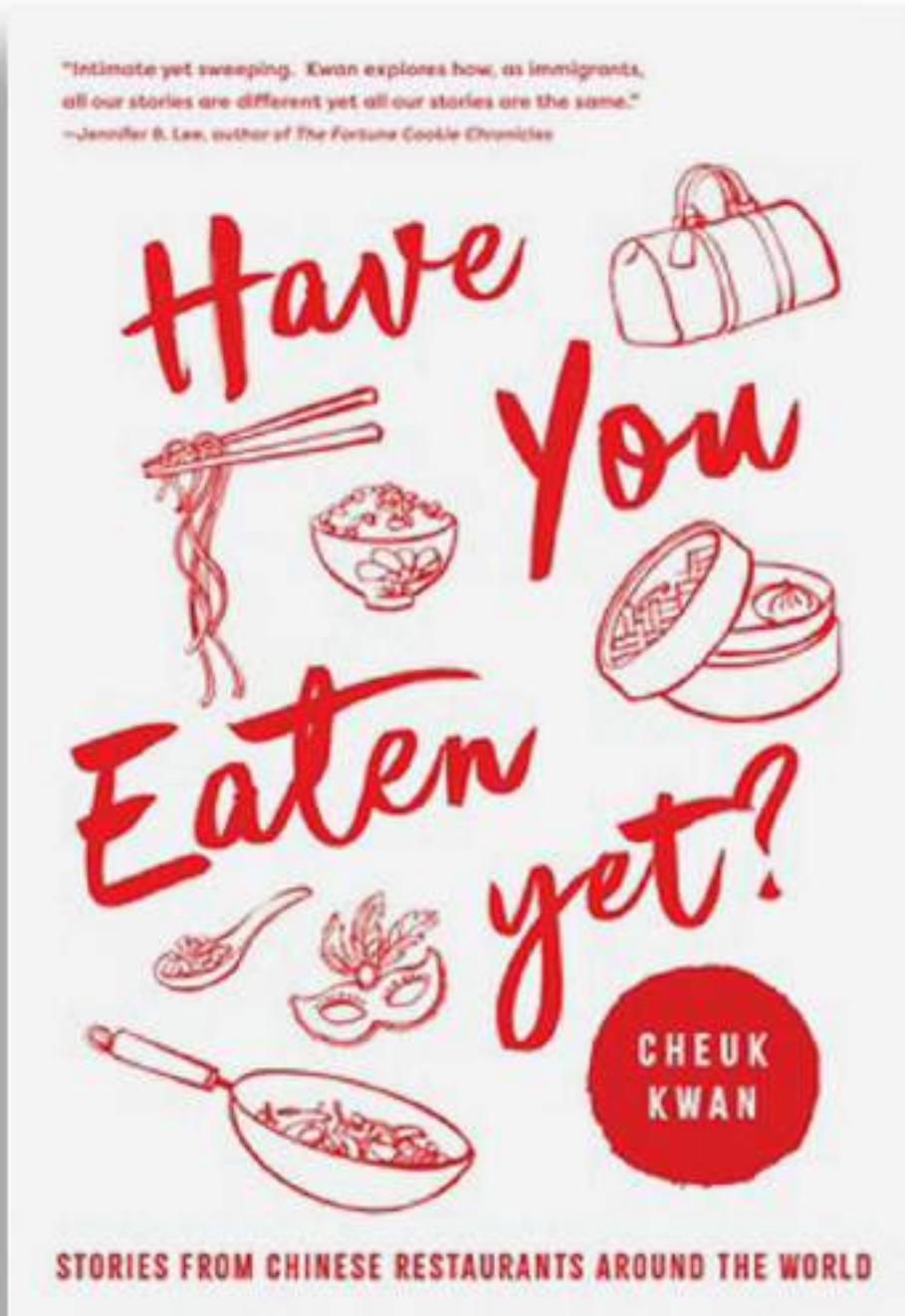
“Markley is right to peer forward...: defiant, Cassandra-like, screaming into the void. Novelists often preen as moralists, but he’s the genuine article.”

From Hamilton Cain’s review

Simon & Schuster | \$32.50

HAVE YOU EATEN YET?
Stories From Chinese Restaurants Around the World
Cheuk Kwan

Born in Hong Kong and raised in Singapore and Japan, the Canadian-based filmmaker embarks on a tour of Chinese restaurants across 15 countries and five continents, on the theory that “there’s no better way to tell the story of the Chinese diaspora.”



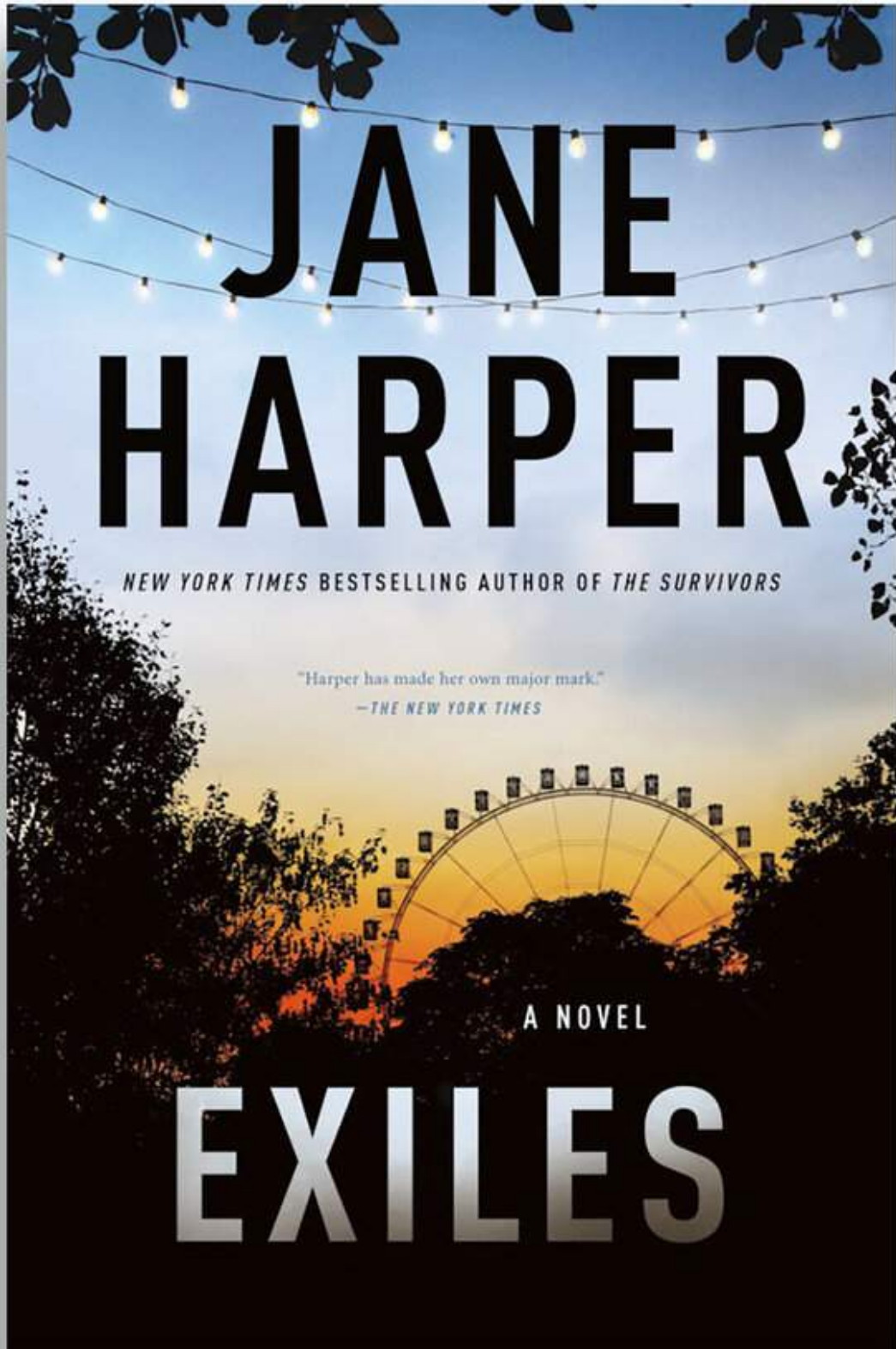
“Kwan’s book is a kind of love letter to his varied homes and a memorial to his journey through them, as refracted through the lives of far-flung strangers. ... The act of writing is also one of self-possession. The desire to take ownership of his identity and assess the nature of belonging is what drives this book.”

From Jiayang Fan's review

Pegasus | \$27.95

EXILES
Jane Harper

Harper brings back the federal investigator Aaron Falk, the hero of two previous novels, to probe what happened to a 39-year-old mother who vanished from a small-town festival in Australian wine country with her infant daughter left unharmed in a stroller beneath the Ferris wheel.



“Fallz’s investigation is a terrific one, but what makes the book

TAKE INVESTIGATION IS A TERRIFIC ONE, BUT WHAT MAKES THE BOOK memorable is Harper's skill at plumbing personal mysteries — for instance, why a friendship has ebbed, or how not knowing the fate of a loved one affects a family.”

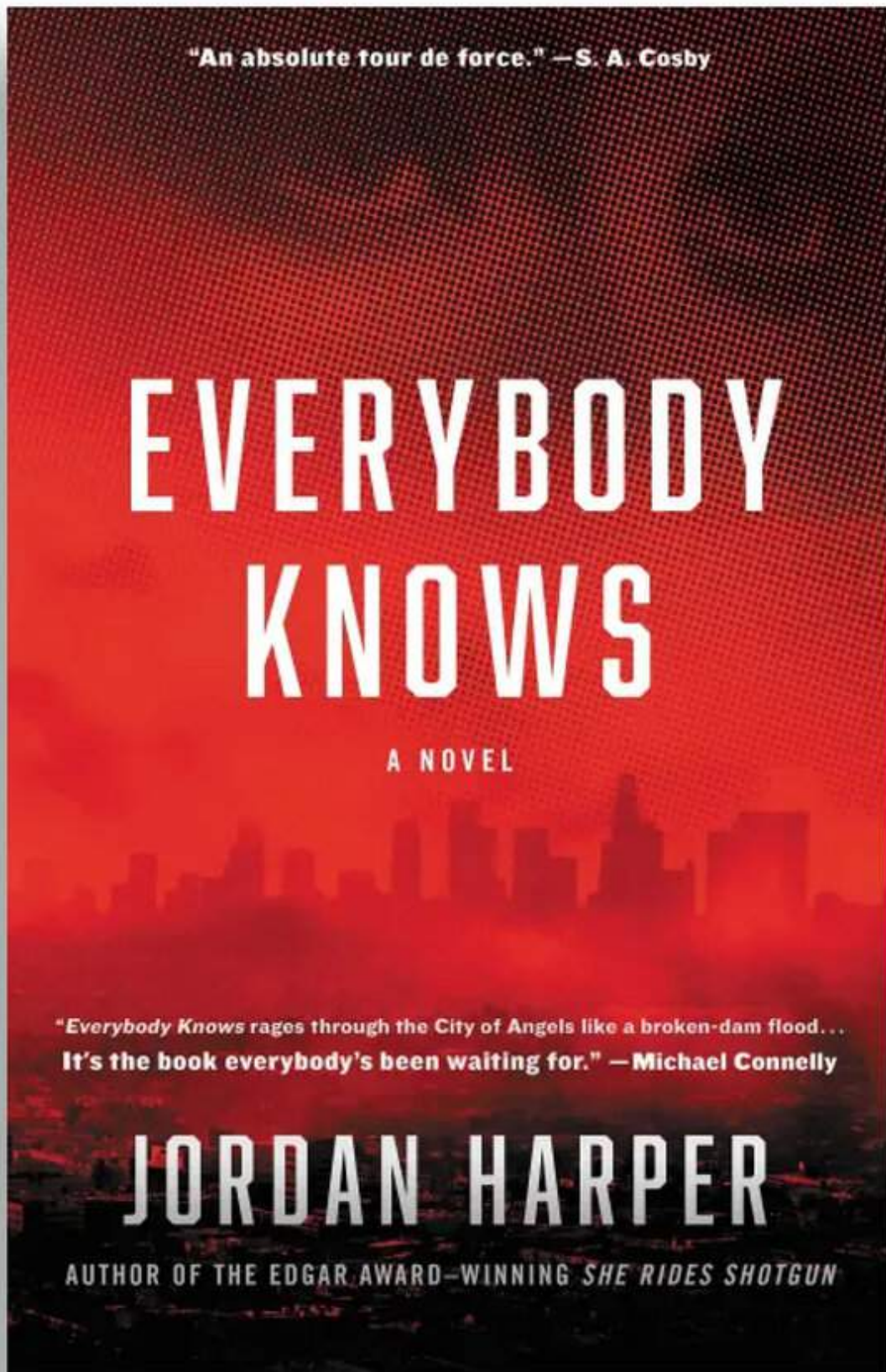
From Sarah Weinman's crime column

Flatiron | \$27.99

EVERYBODY KNOWS

Jordan Harper

This dazzling Hollywood crime novel centers on a “black bag” publicist, paid to mop up celebrities' messes and spin bad news into — well, if not gold, then at least something no longer resembling straw.



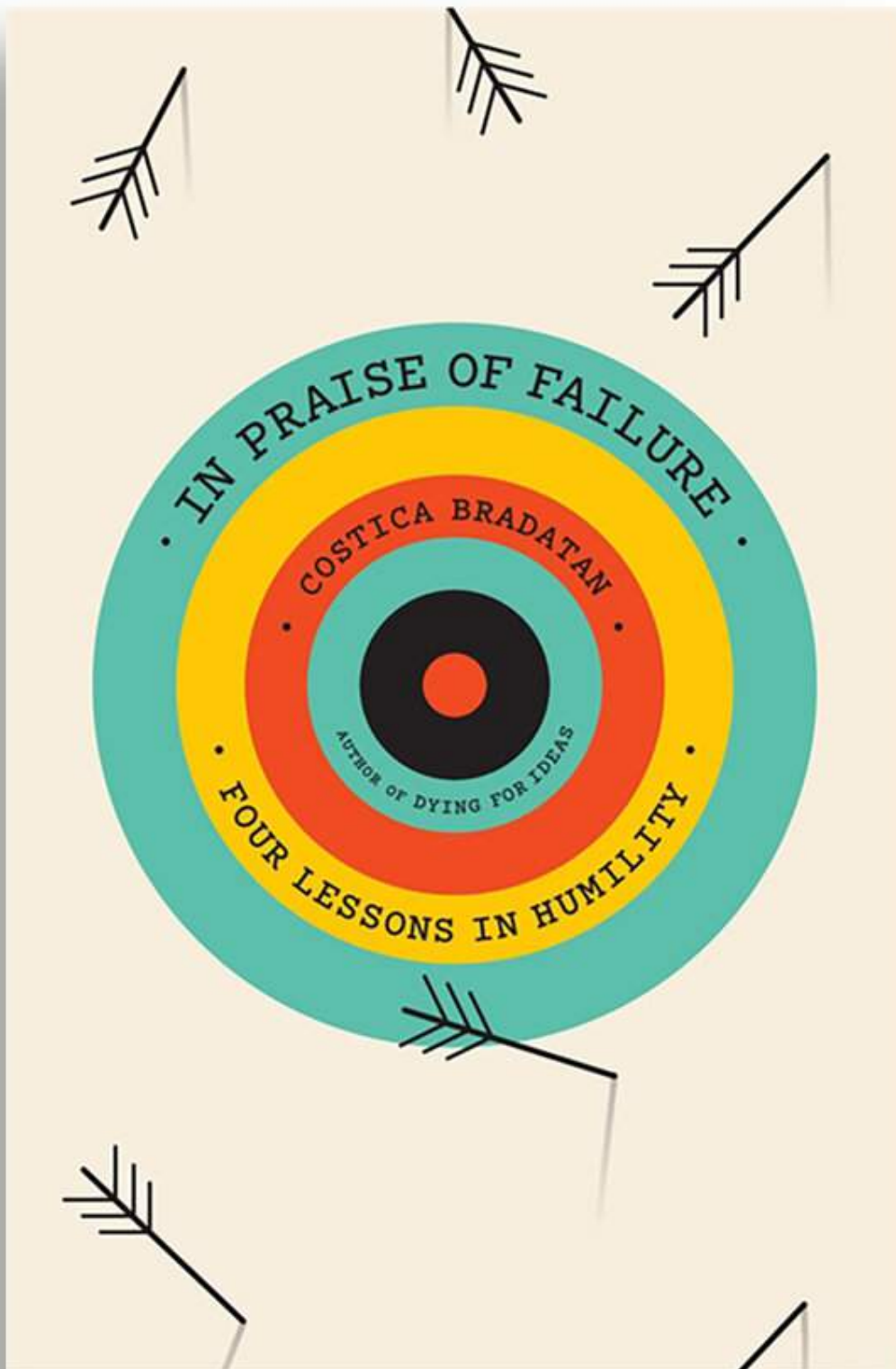
“Hollywood noir doesn’t get any darker ... cynicism is rewarded, romance thwarted and redemption narratives undercut at every turn.”

From Sarah Weinman’s crime column

Mulholland | \$28

IN PRAISE OF FAILURE:
Four Lessons in Humility
Costica Bradatan

This strange and bracing book recounts the stories of a handful of thinkers — Gandhi, Simone Weil, E.M. Cioran and Yukio Mishima — who rejected worldly success in favor of struggle. Against the emollient platitudes of self-help, Bradatan, a philosopher, encourages actual, painful humility.



“Failure is what seizes our attention, shakes us out of our complacency, makes us alert. I was absorbed by Bradatan’s book-

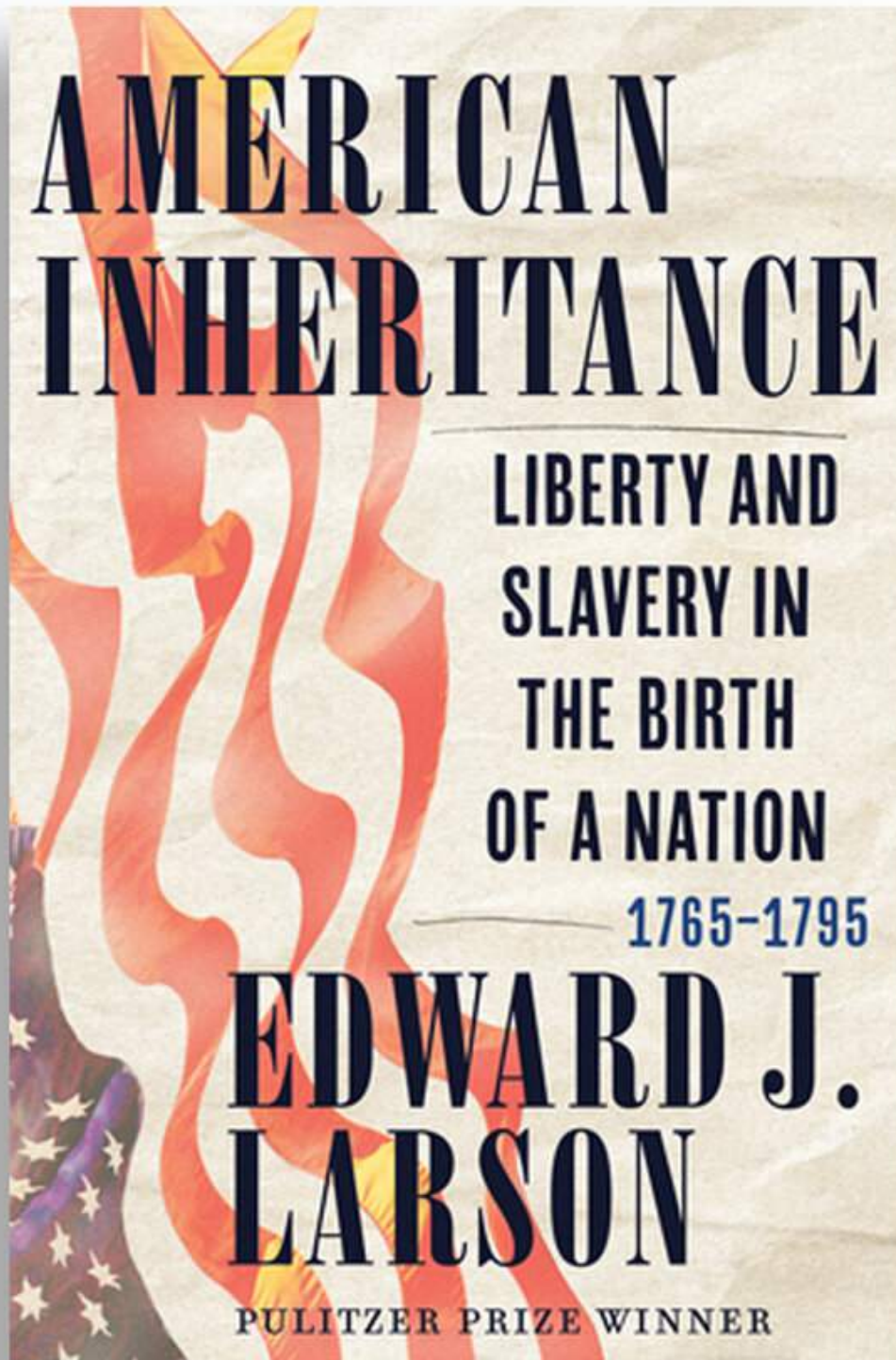
complacency, makes us alert. I was absorbed by DRAGANIS BOOK even — or especially — when I felt uncomfortable with its implications.”

From Jennifer Szalai’s review

Harvard University | \$29.95

AMERICAN INHERITANCE:
Liberty and Slavery in the Birth of a Nation, 1765-1795
Edward J. Larson

This thorough work by a Pulitzer-winning historian engages with one of the more divisive topics of our times: slavery and the country’s founding. Bringing a measured gravitas to a conversation often dominated by passions, Larson’s book is ambitious and his conclusions sobering.



“A key lesson from Larson’s narrative is that ages past were not benighted by a lack of knowledge of the immorality of race-based slavery. To me, Larson’s unemotional account of the Republic’s

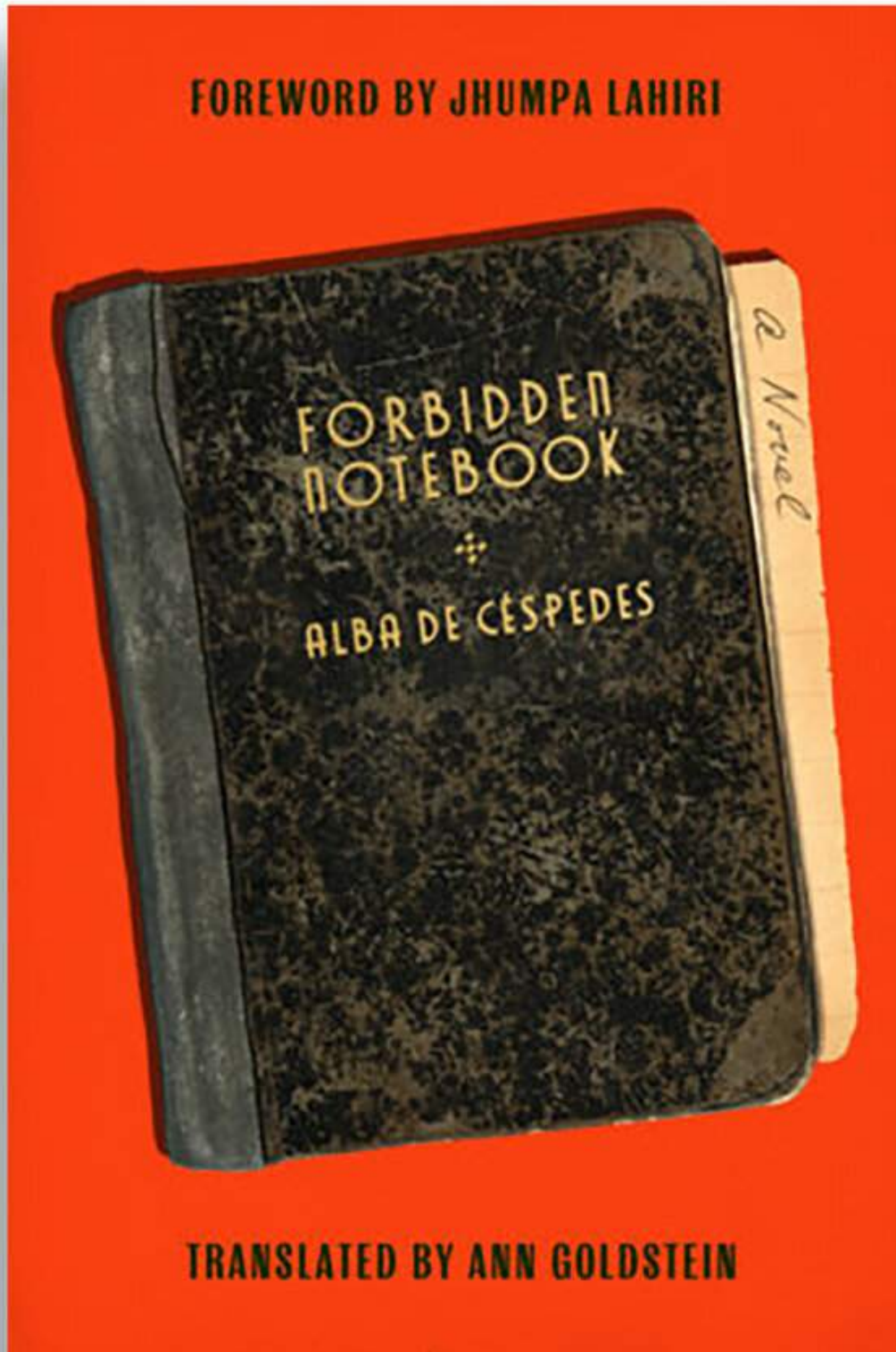
beginnings confirms a tragic truth: that influential white Americans knew — and understood — that slavery was wrong and liberty was precious, but chose not to act according to that knowledge and that understanding.”

From Jon Meacham’s review

Norton | \$32.50

FORBIDDEN NOTEBOOK *Alba de Céspedes*

A best-selling novelist and prominent anti-Fascist in her native Italy, de Céspedes has lately fallen into unjust obscurity. Translated by Ann Goldstein, this elegant novel from the 1950s tells the story of a married mother, Valeria, whose life is transformed when she begins keeping a secret diary.



“Before Valeria’s story was published as a novel, it was serialized in a magazine. ... I don’t know whether de Céspedes intended from the beginning for the narrative to coalesce into a novel, but I like to

beginning for the narrative to coalesce into a novel, but I like to imagine the thrill of encountering Valeria's story in its initial form, a prolonged confession seducing readers week after week."

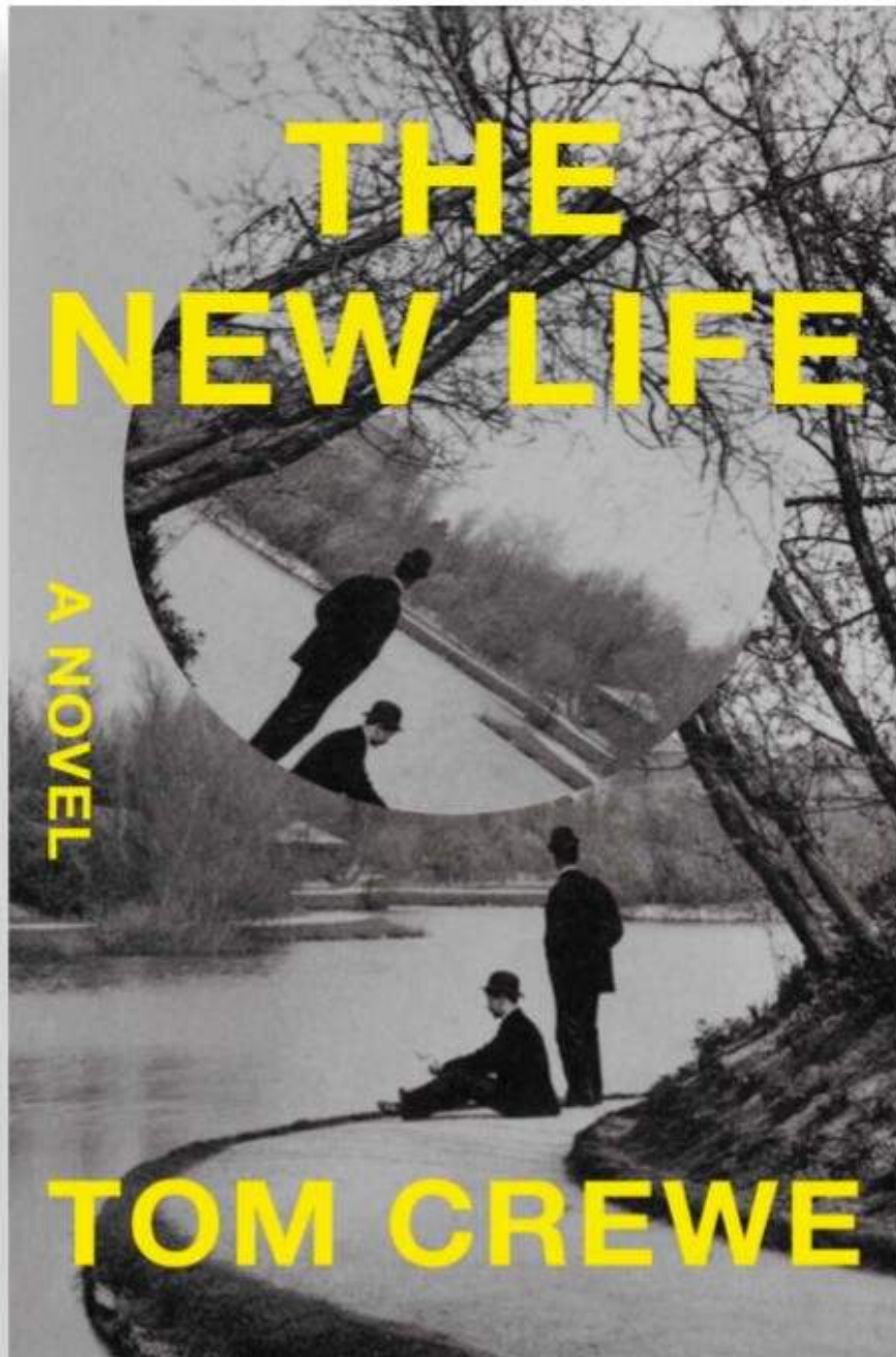
From Joumana Khatib's review

Astra House | \$26

THE NEW LIFE

Tom Crewe

This debut novel reimagines the real-life efforts of two researchers who advocated for acceptance of homosexuality in the 1800s, decades before the gay rights movement. In exploring their story, Crewe asks: What's worth jeopardizing in the name of progress?



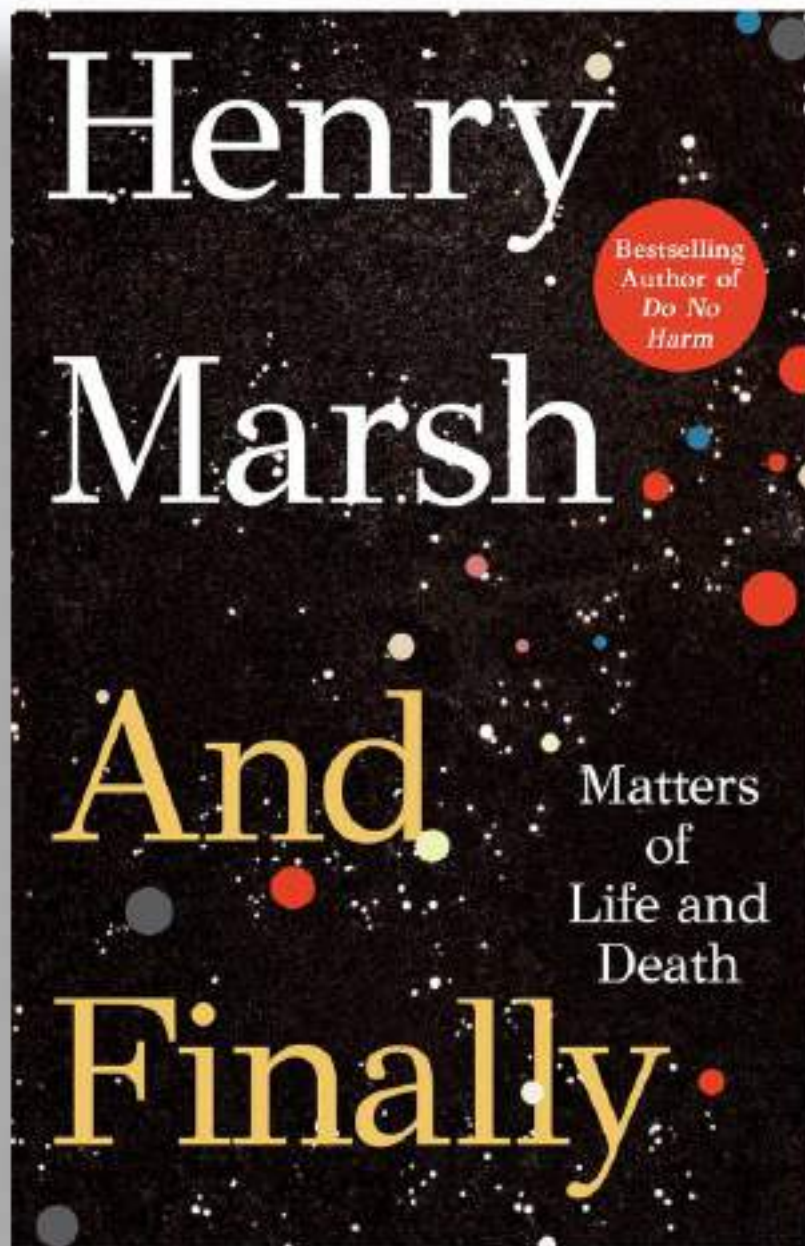
“The New Life’ brims with intelligence and insight, impressed with all the texture (and fog) of fin de siècle London. Crewe’s prose is stylish and precise.”

From Peter Kispert’s review

Scribner | \$28

AND FINALLY:
Matters of Life and Death
Henry Marsh

In this highly personal study of mortality, Marsh — a British doctor who has been called “the Boswell of neurosurgery” — receives a terminal diagnosis and confronts the end of his own life as a doctor and thinker.



“There’s no false comfort here. Instead, there’s prose that breaks in gentle waves, its undercurrents deep, the surface of an ocean vast enough to put our lives in moral perspective.”

From Kieran Setiya’s review

St. Martin’s | \$27.99

ROVING EYE

The Transgressive Power of Alba de Céspedes

A best-selling novelist and political activist in her native Italy, she was admired for her sensitive depictions of women and their predicaments. Recently rediscovered, her work has lost none of its subversive force.



By Joumana Khatib

Jan. 13, 2023

6 MIN READ

Rome, 1950: The diary begins innocently enough, with the name of its owner, Valeria Cossati, written in a neat script.

Valeria is buying cigarettes for her husband when she is entranced by the stacks of gleaming black notebooks at the tobacco shop. She's not permitted to buy one there on Sundays, she's told, but the tobacconist gives her one anyway, which she stashes under her coat. She doesn't yet know there's a devil hiding in its pages.

This deception begins the Cuban-Italian writer Alba de Céspedes's novel **FORBIDDEN NOTEBOOK** (Astra House, 259 pp., \$26), first published in 1952. Valeria is married with two adult children; the family is under financial strain, compelling her to work in an office and manage her household without the help of a maid. She has coped with these pressures handsomely, she believes. She is a "transparent" woman, simple, "a person who had no surprises either for myself or for others."

But from the moment Valeria brings the diary into her home, it changes her. She is terrified by the thought that her family might discover it, especially after they mock her for the mere suggestion she might like to keep a journal. "What would you write, mamma?" her husband, Michele, teases.

"Maybe I wanted this notebook in order to tell the tranquil story of our family: Maybe that's what impelled me to buy it," Valeria writes. "Instead, since I began writing, not everything that happens in our house seems to me pleasant to recall. ... Sometimes I think I'm wrong to write down everything that happens; fixed in writing, even what is, in essence, not bad seems bad."

What might have been a family story, with all its betrayals and unhappy detours forgotten, becomes an excruciating study of the diarist herself. The written record of Valeria's feelings and observations makes it impossible for her to ignore her discontent: the chill she feels in her marriage, her warring impulses toward her children, the guilt

and pleasure she finds in her work. Yet no transgression or admission feels as central as the fact of the diary — “an evil spirit,” she thinks. In the notebook she is simply Valeria; to her children and husband she is “mamma,” and her parents still call her, at age 43, “Bebe.”

Nowhere in the small apartment is safe from intrusion, driving her to move the diary from the linen closet to a suitcase to a heap of rags. Even her daughter, Mirella, who is studying law, has a drawer all to herself, and it locks.

Alba de Céspedes y Bertini (1911-97) was born in Rome, the daughter of a Cuban diplomat and his Italian wife. Her grandfather helped lead Cuba's fight for independence and served as its first president, and she kept alive her family's political commitment, often running afoul of Italy's Fascist regime.

The government banned two of her novels, including “Nessuno Torna Indietro,” or “There's No Turning Back,” which, published in 1938, became a best seller and was translated widely. De Céspedes was imprisoned twice for anti-Fascist activities, first in 1935 and again in 1943, after she had joined a resistance radio program, broadcasting from Bari under the pseudonym Clorinda.

By the 1950s, she was known throughout Italy. For years she wrote a popular advice column, tackling questions about marriage, infidelity and love with meditations on art and philosophy. These columns steered readers toward a modern, more secular morality, one that stressed women's equality. Her private life was the stuff of rumors — according to one she'd been married to a count as a teenager but had the marriage annulled. Which makes her virtual disappearance from the literary record today all the harder to fathom.

Until recently, it's been difficult to find her work, even in Italian. De Céspedes has been dismissed as a “romance writer,” perhaps owing to her subject and primary readership (women), her gender or all three.

The Italian publisher Mondadori reissued some of her books over the past few years, and this fresh translation of “Forbidden Notebook” promises a new cohort of readers, appetites whetted by the works of Elena Ferrante, Elsa Morante and Natalia Ginzburg. Ann Goldstein, who translates Ferrante's writing and has a particular skill for conveying the full power of a woman's emotional register, for locating an undertow of wrath or grief even in stated ambivalence, has reinvigorated the text, starting with the title: A 1958 English edition was called, rather flatly, “The Secret.” Still, The New York Times's reviewer called de Céspedes “one of the few distinguished women writers since Colette to grapple effectively with what it is to be a woman.”

De Céspedes found a lifetime of work in the question. After World War II ended, she returned to Rome and edited a literary journal, *Mercurio*, that published such writers as Jean-Paul Sartre, Ernest Hemingway and Alberto Moravia. In its final issue, which

appeared in 1948, she published an essay by Natalia Ginzburg called “On Women,” which explored whether women — with an innate tendency toward melancholy and despair — could ever achieve true freedom.

“I, too, like you and like all women, have a great and ancient experience with wells: I often fall in and I fall in with a crash,” de Céspedes wrote privately to Ginzburg. “But — unlike you — I think that these wells are our strength. Because every time we fall in the well we descend to the deepest roots of our being human, and in returning to the surface we carry inside us the kinds of experiences that allow us to understand everything that men — who never fall into the well — will never understand.”

In “Forbidden Notebook,” Valeria, too, finds comfort at the bottom of the well. Conflicts with Mirella often send her there, bitter fights about sexual propriety and autonomy that turn on existential, generational concerns. “If you love me, how can you hope I’ll have a life like yours?” Mirella asks.

Mirella sees poverty and exhaustion, but Valeria knows there’s more. As responsibilities — to her office, her family, the household — whirl around her, they also give her the cover she needs to burrow into herself. It’s intoxicating to look deeply within, even if she wounds herself in the process of discovery. “Something seems to have changed even in my physical appearance: I look younger, I would say,” Valeria writes, a few months in. “Yesterday I locked the bedroom door and looked at myself in the mirror. I haven’t done that for ages, because I’m always in a hurry. And yet now I find time to look at myself, to write in my diary. I wonder how it is that before I couldn’t.”

Before Valeria’s story was published as a novel, it was serialized in a magazine, *La Settimana Incom Illustrata*, with the diary entries appearing more or less in real time, from December 1950 through June 1951. I don’t know whether de Céspedes intended from the beginning for the narrative to coalesce into a novel, but I like to imagine the thrill of encountering Valeria’s story in its initial form, a prolonged confession seducing readers week after week. “I try to widen a problem so it becomes everyone’s,” de Céspedes once said of her writing. There might be notebooks darkly glimmering at the bottom of the laundry basket in your own home; your own mamma might be undergoing her own fission.

Again and again Valeria swears to destroy the journal, but the fate of the notebook matters little. She can’t excise the knowledge she’s obtained. “I know that my reactions to the facts I write down in detail lead me to know myself more intimately every day,” Valeria writes. “The better I know myself, the more lost I become. Besides, I don’t know what feelings could stand up to a ruthless, continuous analysis; or who among us, reflected in every action, could be satisfied with ourselves.”

And as she imagines the end to her diary, she recognizes, even hopes, that someone might perceive the change she's undergone; even if she burns the notebook, as she fantasizes, someone might still smell the smoke. Traces of the odor linger in the air, 70 years on.

Joumana Khatib is an editor at the Book Review.

A version of this article appears in print on , Page 14 of the Sunday Book Review

‘Forbidden Notebook’ is a slyly subversive novel by a writer once banned

Italian writer Alba de Céspedes’s “The Forbidden Notebook,” originally published in 1952, explores the mundanities of everyday life — and the desire to be free from them

Review by Roxana Robinson

February 2, 2023 at 7:00 a.m. EST

“I was wrong to buy this notebook, very wrong,” declares Valeria Cossati at the start of Alba de Céspedes’s brilliant 1952 novel, “[The Forbidden Notebook](#).” The voice seizes our attention at once: forceful, clear and morally engaged.

Céspedes was born in Rome in 1911 to an Italian mother and a Cuban diplomat. Moral engagement ran in her family: Her paternal grandfather led Cuba’s revolution against Spain. Two of Céspedes’s earlier novels, “Nessuno Torna Indietro” (1938) and “La Fuga” (1940), were banned by the Italian government; Céspedes herself was imprisoned for anti-fascist activism.

But her novel “The Forbidden Notebook,” now in a new English translation, isn’t about Italian fascism. It’s political in a wider sense, examining a form of suppression that women recognize as global: the suppression of their thoughts. The book is written as a diary, that paradoxical form that offers both privacy and exposure. Privacy produces candor, and the diarist may say things on paper she would never say aloud, but transcription itself is communication, creating text that can be read by anyone. The novel is translated by Ann Goldstein, who has become the English voice of Elena Ferrante, with a foreword by Jhumpa Lahiri, who has adopted Italian as a second language and who explores the meaning of the word “forbidden.”

The main character, Valeria, wants to set down her thoughts — itself an act of subversion. Written thoughts become real. The act of reporting creates distance between the writer and the observed, and the diarist becomes a kind of mole, reporting both on those around her and on herself. The result is a layered construct of awareness, reflection and understanding.

Valeria bought the notebook impulsively — on a Sunday, when the sale was illegal. She hid it under her coat. This illicit transaction, in which duplicity is employed in the service of candor, is the foundation of her venture: setting down her story.

Valeria is 43, happily married to Michele. Their children, Riccardo and Mirella, are university students living at home. Postwar Italy is poor, but Michele has a good job in a bank, and Valeria, unusually for her generation, also has a good office job. She runs the household, too — cooking, cleaning, shopping and mending.

Privacy allows one to think for oneself, but for two weeks Valeria daren't write, because she is never alone. Finally she buys three tickets for a soccer match, pretending they come from her boss, and sends her family to watch the game. Seeing them go, she is aware of what she has started: "They were already distant, and it seemed to me that they were running toward a dangerous trap I'd set rather than an innocuous soccer game."

Valeria wants to hide the notebook, but the family's apartment is small, and every closet and cupboard is common space. When she mentions that the children have locked drawers and she might want one, too, Michele asks, smiling, "For what?" Valeria answers, "I don't know, to keep my personal papers ... maybe a diary, like Mirella."

Everyone laughs at the idea. Riccardo takes hold of Valeria's chin and asks "tenderly, 'Tell me, what do you want to write in your diary?'" Valeria begins to cry. She can't hold out against the family, which will use mockery, tenderness and contempt to deny the idea of her existence as a separate person, an intellect.

And here is the question at the core of the book: Should a woman be permitted to take her own thoughts seriously? Or is the very idea transgressive, forbidden?

This question isn't new; Virginia Woolf famously declared the need for a room of one's own; so did Alice Munro, in her story "The Office," and Doris Lessing, in "To Room Nineteen." A woman's need for a safe place — a room or a notebook — in which to think is fundamental to feminist writers. Céspedes explores the subject in a new setting.

Valeria is immersed in family issues. Mirella is 20, diligently studying law, but she has an unknown, older boyfriend. Valeria, afraid she'll be morally compromised, tries to end the relationship. But Mirella is cool and aloof, opposing her mother in a way Valeria could never have imagined at her age. Riccardo is a mediocre student with a banal girlfriend; he wants to emigrate to Buenos Aires. Neither child seems aware of the effort their parents have made to achieve their tenuous financial stability. Michele is affectionate to Valeria but remote, bored by his job and excited by the possibility of a new career. They talk rarely. Valeria feels stifled and finds tranquility only at her office. She goes there one Saturday, when it's closed, and unexpectedly finds her boss. The two of them begin a relationship quite different from the one she shares with Michele.

The tensions within the family unfold in evocative vignettes. Riccardo asks to borrow his father's tuxedo for a party; they can't afford to buy him his own. But he's too plump to wear it, and, humiliated, he mocks his father. "Papa has narrow shoulders,' he said rudely." Valeria has lunch with old school friends who are wealthy and who boast about their deceptions of their husbands. Valeria plans an elaborate birthday tea for Mirella, who spurns the offer. Each of these incidents is set out in vivid detail: the grown children, the cramped apartment, the conflict between the generations. The parents struggled through the war, the children barely remember it. Valeria visits her mother, who sits in judgmental silence, crocheting doilies and coasters and place mats. Valeria doesn't use these things — her generation doesn't — but her mother never stops making them, nor judging.

The family dominates this fraught, powerful novel, which chronicles the frightening potency wielded by this collective over the individual. Valeria, who learns more about herself, and her family, with each passage she sets down, cannot overcome the juggernaut that overwhelms her life.

The voice of Céspedes, who died in 1997, recalls those of Natalia Ginzburg and Elena Ferrante, other Italian writers who created electrifying narratives from the mundane and the domestic. These women present the dramas that take place in the kitchen, the bedroom, the car trip, at meals, with each overheard conversation. The family is the crucible. It is where our greatest love and trust begin, and also our greatest fear and rage. In Céspedes's book, the family is insuperable. Her story is one from which no one may look away, told in words that stay ringing in the mind. The question of a woman's right to her own thoughts is answered with chilling resolution.

Roxana Robinson is the author of 10 books — six novels, three collections of short stories and a biography of Georgia O'Keeffe. Her most recent book is "[Dawson's Fall: A Novel](#)."

The Forbidden Notebook

By Alba de Céspedes. Translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein. Foreword by Jhumpa Lahiri.

Astra House. 259 pp. \$26

A NOTE TO OUR READERS

We are a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for us to earn fees by linking to Amazon.com and affiliated sites.

BOOKS JANUARY 30, 2023 ISSUE

BRIEFLY NOTED

“Forbidden Notebook,” “This Afterlife,” “Hatching,” and “The Lion House.”

January 23, 2023

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast’s [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.



Forbidden Notebook, by *Alba de Céspedes*, translated from the Italian by *Ann Goldstein* (Astra House). Published in Italy in 1952, this intimate, quietly subversive novel is told through the increasingly frantic secret diary entries of a woman named Valeria. Against a backdrop of postwar trauma and deprivation, Valeria struggles with her household's finances, a romance with her boss, her husband's professional dissatisfactions, and her grownup children's love affairs. Confiding these tensions to her diary—the only outlet for expression in her cramped life—she awakens to society's treatment of working wives and confronts a deep ambivalence toward her husband and children. She concludes that all women, to make sense of their world, “hide a black notebook, a forbidden diary. And they all have to destroy it.”



On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.



This Afterlife, by *A. E. Stallings* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In this volume of selected and uncollected poems, Stallings's formal ingenuity lends a music to her philosophically and narratively compelling verse. She draws inspiration from daily domestic life and from the mythology and history of Greece, where

she resides, crafting clever yet profound meditations on love, motherhood, language, and time. A particular pleasure is seeing certain personae—Persephone, Daphne, and Alice (of Wonderland)—recur throughout, accompanied by ever-deepening resonances. “Song for the Women Poets” ends, “And part of you leaves Tartarus, / But part stays there to dwell— / You who are both Orpheus / And She he left in Hell.”

THE BEST BOOKS OF 2022



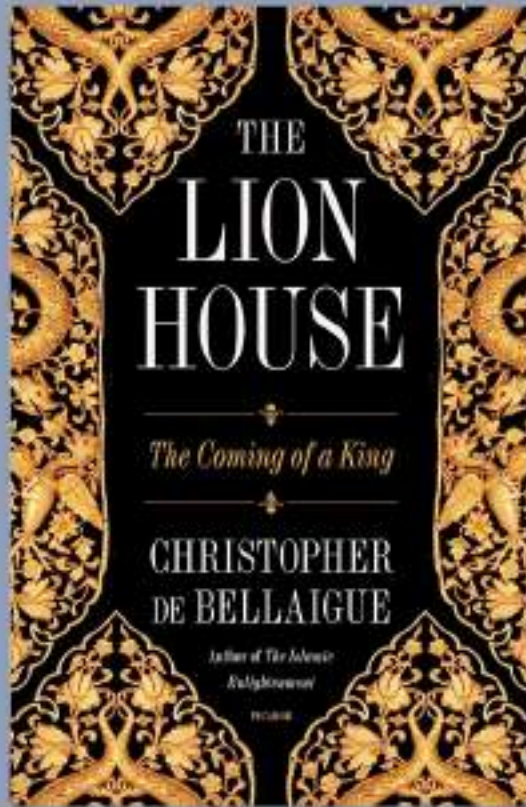
Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.



On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

desire to take a course of action that is hard enough to endure, let alone question at the same time,” she asks how much of the yearning for a child is personal and how much is historically and culturally conditioned. How do we rethink reproductive technologies so that they don’t reproduce conservative ideas of motherhood, class, and race? Quilter notes that I.V.F. “anticipates the general tone of motherhood before you are even pregnant because it anticipates, even mimics, the notion of justified pain.”



On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

history depicts a Machiavellian world in which Ottoman and European leaders bargained ruthlessly over land, ships, and people. With cinematic sweep and a dash of humor, de Bellaigue tracks fast-flowing shifts of power among the ambitious: illegitimate sons become diplomats, foreign consorts are crowned queens, pirates turn pashas, and slaves are promoted to grand viziers. De Bellaigue is alert to a fragility inherent in empires, where even the most influential ministers have “power to enact the will of God or violate it” only while royal favor lasts.

Published in the print edition of the [January 30, 2023](#), issue.

BOOKS & FICTION

Get book recommendations, fiction, poetry, and dispatches from the world of literature in your in-box. Sign up for the Books & Fiction newsletter.

E-mail address

Your e-mail address

Sign up

By signing up, you agree to our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy & Cookie Statement](#).

Read More

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

UNDER REVIEW

THE WRITER WHO BURNED HER OWN BOOKS

Rosemary Tonks achieved success among the bohemian literati of Swinging London—then spent the rest of her life destroying the evidence of her career.

By **Audrey Wollen**

THE FRONT ROW**“WOMEN TALKING,” REVIEWED: A SUBLIME SCRIPT, A MERELY VERY GOOD MOVIE**

Sarah Polley’s adaptation of Miriam Toews’s novel doesn’t entirely do justice to its powerful source material.

By Richard Brody

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast’s [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

UNDER REVIEW**MARGUERITE DURAS AND THE DOMESTICATION OF DESIRE**

In the celebrated French writer’s newly translated novel “The Easy Life,” keeping house is a defense against the shattering force of sexuality.

By Lili Owen Rowlands

BOOKS

BRIEFLY NOTED

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

Manage Preferences

Make sense of it all.

Become an FT subscriber

Subscribe now

The best books of the week

Fiction

Forbidden Notebook – a woman in search of agency and expression

Only now translated into English, Alba De Céspedes’s novel puts us inside the mind of a mother trapped in domestic discontent

Lucy Scholes FEBRUARY 23 2023

Receive free Fiction updates

We'll send you a *myFT Daily Digest* email rounding up the latest Fiction news every morning.

Sign up



© Mondadori / Getty Images

The Italian-Cuban anti-fascist novelist, poet and screenwriter Alba de Céspedes began her writing career after an early divorce when she was only 20. She published her first book in 1935, while also working as a journalist (and was twice jailed for her anti-fascist activities). After the war she founded the literary journal *Mercurio*, and in the 1950s she wrote a popular advice column.

Yet despite these notable achievements — including the fact that she was once one of Italy's most successful and widely translated authors — de Céspedes suffered the same fate as far too many mid-20th-century writers of her sex. Her significance was diminished because she wrote about women's lives and, as a consequence, her work slipped into obscurity.

Thankfully, her writing is now being reintroduced to English-language readers with a new translation by Ann Goldstein of *Forbidden Notebook*. First published in Italy in 1952 but out of print for decades, this electric novel in the form of diary entries probes the depths of one woman's domestic discontent in postwar Rome.

One Sunday, 43-year-old Valeria Cossati is struck by a sudden and desperate desire to buy a notebook. Smuggling it home — unnoticed by her husband Michele or her children (20-year-old Mirella and her brother Riccardo, who's studying to become a lawyer) — marks the beginning of a furtive liaison far more illicit and all-consuming than any love affair.

Sentence by sentence, Valeria writes herself into animation and agency after years subsumed by the roles of wife and mother

In snatched moments of solitude, Valeria writes about her life. She begins by confessing her frustrations with her children and her fears for them, and laying bare the faultlines in her marriage. But increasingly, her own sense of restlessness takes centre stage. “I’d always thought I was transparent, simple, a person who had no surprises either for myself or for others,” she writes, shocked by what she’s

discovering about her own needs and desires, intellectual, sexual and maternal.

Seventy years ago, this story must have been revelatory. Today it’s a familiar one. Nevertheless, the urgency of de Céspedes’s elegant but unadorned prose — beautifully translated by Goldstein — gives the text a vertiginous and unnerving verisimilitude.

Valeria is feeling her way forward, sentence by sentence, writing herself into animation and agency after years of being subsumed into the roles of wife and mother: “a figure that is now drowning and dragging me along with it.”

Torn between a “desire to confide” and “the fear of destroying something that I’ve been constructing day by day, for twenty years, the only thing I possess”, her story isn’t that of a young mother struggling to cope — but of a woman looking into the abyss of what awaits her after her children have flown the nest. “What I thought was solid in me loses substance,” she tries to explain.



An inheritor of Virginia Woolf — not only does Valeria explicitly yearn for “a room of my own” but there’s an echo of the opening line of *Mrs Dalloway* on the first page when she writes that she bought flowers “for myself” — de Céspedes’s novel anticipates the candid confessionals of writers such as Deborah Levy, Sheila Heti and Rachel Cusk.

But *Forbidden Notebook* should also be considered alongside other subversive novels from the 1950s. I’m thinking in particular of Penelope Mortimer’s *Daddy’s Gone A-Hunting* (1958), another searing portrait of the turmoil that ensues when a middle-aged wife and mother is forced to reckon with her young adult daughter’s coming of age. “If you love me, how can you hope I’ll have a life like yours?” Mirella asks Valeria with quiet and controlled devastation.

Formally precise, psychologically rich, and suffused in suspicion and suspense, *Forbidden Notebook* is an exquisite, tormented howl.

[Forbidden Notebook](#) by Alba de Céspedes, translated by Ann Goldstein, Pushkin Press £16.99, 256 pages

Join our online book group on Facebook at [FT Books Café](#)

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.

On Women: An Exchange

Natalia Ginzburg and Alba de Céspedes



Clara Adolphs: *Self Inside*, 2017

In September 1944, not long after the liberation of Rome, the first issue of *Mercurio* (“a monthly of politics, arts, sciences”) appeared. The editor was Alba de Céspedes y Bertini, a Cuban-Italian writer whose grandfather led Cuba’s revolt for independence from Spain and then served as its first president. She had newly returned from exile in Bari and Naples, where she had gone to escape the German occupation of Rome. *Mercurio*, in its years of existence (it did not have a strong financial backer and in 1948 ran out of money), published not only most of the great names in Italian culture and politics—Alberto Moravia, Giorgio Bassani, Sibilla Aleramo, Giacomo Debenedetti—but non-Italians, too, such as Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Mansfield, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

The closing issue of the first year was “dedicated to the resistance of the Italian people against the German oppression” and featured poems, stories, diaries, and drawings by some seventy contributors, including the writer Natalia Ginzburg and de Céspedes herself. *Mercurio*’s final issue ever, a quadruple number dated March–June 1948, contained the essay “On Women” by Ginzburg. When de Céspedes first read the essay she was inspired to write a letter to Ginzburg in response, which appeared in the issue alongside it. The essay and the letter have never appeared together in English.

Ginzburg’s essay was written in a political moment in which women were considered equal before the law (they had voted for the first time just two years earlier), but not always so by

their (male) fellow-citizens. In particular, whether women should be allowed to become judges was just being debated in parliament, and in the politics section of that same issue of *Mercurio* there was an essay by the lawyer Maria Bassino attacking the arguments of those who deemed them unfit. According to certain members of parliament, Bassino wrote, “women have a particular type of logic that does not coincide with ‘legal logic’ . . . and are to be feared because of the arbitrariness and groundlessness of their decisions.”

In this exchange, Ginzburg and de Céspedes are not themselves, obviously, addressing the question of whether women should become judges; for both it would have been a nonissue. Their subject, rather, is the interior life of women. In her essay Ginzburg writes that women have the bad habit of falling into a well, that they can let themselves be gripped by melancholy and flounder to get back to the surface, that this can prevent them from being truly free, active participants in history. It’s an emotional attitude, a psychological experience, that makes it hard for them to forget themselves and become free beings. In her view they have to fight “tooth and nail” to keep from falling into that well. De Céspedes, too, knows about falling into a well, but she believes that “these wells are our strength”: that women emerge with a greater knowledge and understanding of themselves and others that men will never have. In June of that year, Maria Bassino, in a letter to de Céspedes that could also have been

addressed to Ginzburg, wrote: “It’s not I who defend women but you who with your work defend me and women.”

—Ann Goldstein

On Women—by Natalia Ginzburg

The other day I happened upon an article I had written right after the liberation, and I was disappointed. It was rather stupid—for starters it was all dressed up: beautiful, well-crafted sentences and well-turned phrases. I don’t want to write like that anymore. Worse, I wrote with heat and conviction about obvious things. To be fair, this happened to everyone right after the liberation—getting all riled up only to say obvious things. In a way, it was the right thing to do, because in twenty years of fascism we had lost any sense of the most elementary values, and we had to start again, start again calling things by their name, and writing just for the sake of writing, to see if we were still alive.

That article of mine spoke of women in general, and said things we all know: that women are not much worse than men and can also accomplish something worthwhile if they try, if society helps them, and so on. But it was stupid because I didn’t bother to observe what women are truly like. The women I was writing about at the time were invented women, not at all like me or like the women I’ve met in my life; the way I spoke about them, it was really easy to lift them out of servitude and set them free. But I

neglected to say something very important: that women have the bad habit, now and then, of falling into a well, of letting themselves be gripped by a terrible melancholy and drown in it, and then floundering to get back to the surface—this is the real trouble with women. Women are often embarrassed that they have this problem and pretend they have no cares at all and are free and full of energy, and they walk with bold steps down the street with large hats and beautiful dresses and painted lips and a contemptuous and strong-willed air about them. But I’ve never met a woman without soon discovering in her something painful and pitiful that doesn’t exist in men—a constant danger of falling into a deep, dark well, a danger that comes precisely from the female temperament or maybe from an age-old condition of subjugation and servitude that won’t be so easy to overcome. I’ve always discovered, particularly in the most energetic and contemptuous women, something that caused me to pity them and that I understood well—because I, too, have suffered, for many years now, and only recently did I realize that my suffering comes from the fact that I am a woman and that it will be hard for me to ever free myself. The truth is two women will understand each other thoroughly when they start to talk about the dark well they fall into, and they can exchange many impressions about wells and the absolute impossibility of communicating with others, of accomplishing something worthwhile, no matter how hard they try, and about the floundering to get back to the surface.

I have met so many women. I have met women with children and women without children—I prefer the ones with children because I always know what to talk about: how long did you breastfeed, and then what did you feed them and what are you feeding them now. Two women can speak infinitely on this subject. I have met women who could take the train, leaving their children behind for a while, without feeling terrible anxiety or a sense of doing something against nature. They could live peacefully for many days away from their children and not feel that impetuous and visceral fear that something bad had befallen them—which is what happens to me every time. And it’s not that those women didn’t love their children, they loved them as much as I love mine, they were simply more spirited. I tried to be as spirited as possible and every time I got on a train without my children I said to myself: “This time I won’t be afraid.” But fear always rose in me and what I still don’t understand is whether it’ll pass when my children are adults—I certainly hope so. And I can’t even think calmly about traveling, as I’d like to. To tell the truth, I think about it all the time, but I know perfectly well that I just can’t do it. There are some kangaroo women and some women who are not kangaroos, but there are a lot more kangaroo women.

So I’ve met a lot of women, calm women and women who are not calm, but the calm women also fall into the

well: they all fall into the well now and then. I've met women who think they are very ugly and women who think they are very beautiful, women who travel and women who can't, women who, now and then, have a headache and women who never have a headache, women who wash their necks and women who don't wash their necks, women who have a large number of white linen handkerchiefs and women who never have a handkerchief or, if they do, they lose it, women who wear hats and women who don't wear hats, women who worry they are too fat and women who worry they are too thin, women who toil all day long in a field and women who break wood over their knee and light the fire and make polenta and rock the baby and nurse him and women who are bored to death and take a class in the history of religion and women who are bored to death and take the dog for a walk and women who are bored to death and torment whoever is at hand, their husbands or children or the maid, and women who go out in the morning their hands purple with cold and a little scarf around their necks and women who go out in the morning swaying their hips and looking at their reflection in shop windows and women who've lost their jobs and sit on a bench in the garden at the station to eat a sandwich and women who've been dumped by a man and sit on a bench in the garden at the station and dab a little powder on their faces.

I've met so many women I am now certain I'll soon discover in each of them something to commiserate—a large or small concern, kept more or less secret: the tendency to fall into the well and find in it the possibility of boundless suffering that men don't know. Maybe because men are healthier or more spirited and better at forgetting themselves and identifying themselves with their work, more sure of themselves and more masters of their own bodies and their own lives and more free. Women begin in adolescence to suffer and cry in secret, in their rooms—they cry because of their nose or their mouth or some part of their bodies that's not right or they cry because they think no one will ever love them or they cry because they're afraid they're stupid or because they're afraid they'll get bored on vacation or because they don't have the right clothes. These are the reasons they tell themselves, but these are all just pretexts, and they're really crying because they've fallen into the well and they understand that they will often fall into it all their lives and this will make it hard for them to accomplish anything worthwhile. Women think a lot about themselves and they do so in a painful and feverish way that is unknown to men. It's very difficult for them to identify with the work they do, it's difficult for them to rise out of the dark and painful waters of their melancholy and forget themselves.

Women have children, and when they have their first child a new kind of sadness begins, made of fatigue and fear, and it's always there, even in the healthiest and calmest women. It's the fear that their child will get sick or the fear of not having enough money to buy everything the child needs or the fear of having milk that's too fat or milk that's too liquid, it's the feeling of no longer being able

to travel if that's what they did before, or the feeling of no longer being able to engage in politics or the feeling of not being able to write or of not being able to paint as they used to or of not being able to hike in the mountains as before, because of the child, it's the feeling of not being able to make decisions about their own lives, it's the stress of having to defend themselves from illness and from death because a woman's health and life are necessary to her child.

And there are women who don't have children, and this is a misfortune, the worst misfortune for women, because at some point all the things they used to do with ardor—writing and painting and politics and sports—become wasteland and boredom and saturation, those things turn to ashes in their hands and, consciously or unconsciously, women are ashamed of not having had children and start to travel, but even traveling is difficult for women, because they're cold or because their shoes hurt or because they have a run in their stockings or because people are surprised to see a woman traveling and sticking her nose in everywhere. And all this can be overcome, but then there's the melancholy and the ashes in their hands and the jealousy of seeing lighted windows in foreign cities; and maybe for a long time they manage to overcome the melancholy and walk alone in the sun with bold steps and make love and earn money, and they feel strong and intelligent and beautiful, not too fat, not too thin, and buy themselves strange hats with a velvet knot and read books and write books, but then at some point they fall back into the well with fear and shame and self-disgust and can't write books, or read them, they aren't interested in anything other than their own troubles, which so often they can't explain and everyone gives them a different name, ugly nose, ugly mouth, ugly legs, boredom, ashes, children no children.

And then women start to age and they look for white hairs in order to tear them out and they look at the fine lines under their eyes, and they have to start wearing large corsets with two stays on the front and two on the rear and they feel squeezed and suffocated in them and every morning and every evening they observe how their faces and their bodies are slowly transforming into something new and pitiful that will soon be good for nothing, not for making love or traveling or playing sports, and which they instead will have to serve, with hot water and massages and creams, or allow to be devastated and withered by the rain and the sun, and forget the time when they were beautiful and young.

Women are of an unfortunate and unhappy stock with many centuries of servitude on their backs, and what they need to do is defend themselves tooth and nail from their unhealthy habit of falling into the well now and then, because free beings hardly ever fall into a well and don't always think about themselves but are occupied with important, serious things in the world and occupied with themselves only in an effort to be more free every day. I am the first who has to learn to do this because otherwise I won't be able to accomplish anything worthwhile and the world will never get better as long as it is populated by a group of beings who are not free.

To Natalia Ginzburg, from Alba de Céspedes

My dearest,

I wanted to write you a note as soon as I finished reading your article. It's so beautiful and sincere that every woman, seeing herself mirrored in it, will feel an icy tingling in her spine. Nevertheless, for a moment I thought I shouldn't publish it, fearing that revealing this secret would be indiscreet. Further, I thought men would read it distractedly, in an ironic vein, without intuiting the heartfelt desperation and the desperate vigor in your words, and they would have yet another reason not to understand women and to push them even more often into the well. But then I thought that, after all, men should try to understand women's problems, just as we, for centuries, have been willing to try to understand theirs. I'll tell you that in publishing your essay I had to overcome an instinctive sense of modesty: the same sense, surely, that you must have overcome in writing it. For I, too, like you and like all women, have a great and ancient experience with wells: I often fall in and I fall in with a crash, precisely because everyone thinks I'm a strong woman—as do I, the moment I'm back out of the well.

But—unlike you—I think that these wells are our strength. Because every time we fall in the well we descend to the deepest roots of our being human, and in returning to the surface we carry inside us the kinds of experiences that allow us to understand everything that men—who never fall into the well—will never understand. This is men's flaw, in my opinion: that they don't know how to abandon themselves completely, let themselves fall into the well. So at times I think with affectionate compassion of the fact that they don't have wells to fall into and therefore can never come into immediate contact with weakness, dreams, melancholy, aspirations, basically all those feelings that shape and improve the human spirit and that—unconsciously, however, owing to a series of ignored traps—weigh even on the man who conforms most closely to the manly model. All the painful and sublime truths about love are in the well, too; indeed, they're in the deepest depths of every well, but women, all the women you speak of, fall in so heavily that they can touch them. And we are often unhappy in love precisely because we would like to find a man who also, at times, falls into the well and, resurfacing, knows what we know. This is impossible, right, dear Natalia? And therefore it's impossible for us to be truly happy in love. But when we fall into the well we also know that being happy isn't that important: it's important to know everything we know when we come up from the well.

After all—you don't say this, but surely you think it—it's always men who push us into the well, unwittingly, perhaps. Did you ever fall into the well because of a woman? If you exclude women who might make us suffer because of a man, you'll see that, in all honesty, you have to say no. Women can make us fall into anger, meanness, jealousy, but they can never make us fall into the well. In fact, since in the well we receive all human suffering, which is made up, primarily, of the suffering of women, we are compassionate toward women, understanding, affectionate. Every woman is ready to welcome and comfort another

woman who has fallen into the well: even if she is an enemy. Because it's precisely at the cost of this pitiful understanding of human pain that we slowly lift ourselves up and manage to get out of the well. Yes, you have to admit, it's men who push us into the well. Because sons, too, become men, and brothers, fathers; and all of them, with their words, and even more with their silences, encourage us to fall into the forgotten well where they cannot reach us and where we can be alone with ourselves.

You see, dear Natalia, it's exactly because of these wells that I was so insistent that Maria Bassino, one of the foremost Italian criminal lawyers, make her case for women's right to become judges in this same issue of the magazine. Because often it's at the bottom of the well that women kill, steal, carry out, in short, all those acts that are humiliating, especially because they go against the natural respect every woman owes herself. And not only do men ignore the existence of these wells, and everything we learn when we fall into them, they're also unaware that they're the ones who push women into them with such ruthless innocence. Judges are also unaware of all this—precisely because judges are men. And it's not fair for women to be judged by those who do not know what they're really like, and why they act one way rather than another, while men are always judged by those who, because they have the same nature, are most suited to understanding them.

Men and women, you say, aren't made of the same stock. But which of the two is better? Those who fall into the well—for instance—know mercy. And how can we live, act, govern justly without knowing mercy? Besides, women make up at least half the world's population. And it's not fair that at least half the beings who inhabit the earth live in a state of subjugation owing to the incomprehension of the other half, the very half that acts, decides, and governs. You say that women aren't free: and I think we have only to become aware of the virtues of that well and spread the light of the experiences gained at the bottom, which constitute the foundation of solidarity—secret and instinctive today, conscious and manifest tomorrow—among women who may not even know each other. After all, is being free from pain, from human misery, really a privilege? A woman's superiority lies precisely in the possibility of ending up on a bench, as you say, in a public garden, even if she's wealthy, even if she writes or paints, even if she has beautiful eyes, beautiful legs, a gorgeous mouth. Even if she's twenty years old. Because not even youth grants women the confidence that men so often possess, and that is only ignorance of the true human condition.

Sorry, my dear, for this long letter. But I wanted to tell you that, in my opinion, women are free. And, besides, they voluntarily let themselves be pushed into the well; I would like to speak to you at length about the suffering they experience in the well, because all suffering is in a woman's life; but then, to be perfectly honest, I should also talk to you about all the joy they find there.

But I can't talk to you about that today because I find myself—as is so often the case—in the well.

I hug you, my dear. ●

—Translated from the Italian
by Alessandra Bastagli

BOOKS

Review: 'Forbidden Notebook' by Alba de Céspedes, translated from Italian by Ann Goldstein

FICTION: Alba de Céspedes chronicles a 1950s Italian housewife's entry into disturbing self-awareness by way of a whim to begin keeping a diary.

By **Kathleen Rooney** Special to the Star Tribune | JANUARY 27, 2023 — 7:45AM

Writing down one's observations inevitably causes the observer to pay closer attention to the circumstances being observed, and often from this scrutiny comes a change in consciousness. Such is the simple yet powerful premise of Alba de Céspedes' novel "Forbidden Notebook," in which protagonist Valeria Cossati, a lower-middle-class housewife living in Rome after World War II, begins to do precisely that in a nondescript black diary she purchases illegally one Sunday morning at the tobacconist's.

Dutiful and self-effacing, Valeria had only intended to buy cigarettes for her husband and technically such shops are prohibited from selling stationery items on Sundays, but seeing the stack in the window, she can't help herself. "It was wrong to buy this notebook, very wrong," the first sentence of this gripping slow-burn of a book declares. "But it's too late now for regrets, the damage is done."

Valeria begins hiding her prohibited acquisition in the family home in Rome, "constantly moving it around" due to having "a hard time finding a place where it wouldn't immediately be discovered," so little privacy or autonomy does she have independent of her husband and two university age children. Over the course of the brief yet increasingly intense — thanks to her intensifying perceptions — six months that we see Valeria document, she begins to realize, among other things, that "if children can confess freely that they're bored with their parents, a mother who confesses that she's bored with her children seems unnatural."

Originally published in 1952, "Forbidden Notebook" is being reissued in an English translation by Ann Goldstein, renowned translator of Elena Ferrante, and with an introduction by Jhumpa Lahiri, who writes that the secret journal becomes its keeper's room-of-one's own where, "in lieu of walls and a door, pen and paper will suffice to allow Valeria, albeit furtively, to speak her mind."

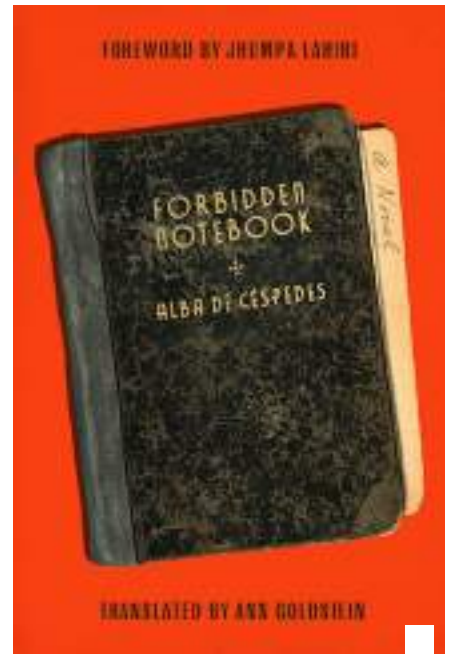
A Cuban-Italian feminist and bestselling author from a wealthy and diplomatically well-connected family, de Céspedes was born in 1911 and died in 1997 and led a life of art and political agitation. She was jailed in 1935 for anti-fascist activities, and two of her other books — the 1938 novel "Nessuno Torna Indietro" or "Nobody Comes Back" and the 1940 short story collection "La Fuga" or "Fuge" — were banned. She was jailed again for her work in support of the Resistance as Clorinda, a radio personality on Radio Partigiana in Bari. After the war, she moved to Paris, where she lived until her death.



MONDADORI VIA GETTY IMAGES

Alba de Cespedes

ADVERTISEMENT



Domestic mundanity and the impulse toward freedom combine in this critique of marriage, family and fascism, as Valeria comes to see that "all life passes in the anguished attempt to draw conclusions and not succeeding."

At 43 years old and after 22 years of marriage, Valeria arrives at innumerable clear-eyed epiphanies regarding gender, class and the passage of time, many of them rather unpleasant. But one of de Céspedes' points seems to be that real liberation is never comfortable or easy — a fact which, if anything, makes that state of being all the more worth pursuing.

Kathleen Rooney is the author, most recently, of the poetry collection "Where Are the Snows," winner of the X.J. Kennedy Prize. Her fourth novel, "From Dust to Stardust," will be published in the autumn.

Forbidden Notebook

ADVERTISEMENT

By: Alba de Céspedes, translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein.

Publisher: Astra House, 288 pages, \$26.

//



Fiction in translation





Resistance fighter, novelist - and Sartre's favourite agony aunt: rediscovering Alba Céspedes

Championed by Elena Ferrante, Céspedes's neo-realist classic *The Forbidden Notebook* is being reissued 70 years after it was

As 2023 unfolds, will you support us?



We're a reader-funded news organisation, with more than 1.5 million supporters in 180 countries. With this vital support, our reporting remains fiercely independent, and is never manipulated by commercial or political ties. And it's free, for everyone. **But if you can support us, we need you. Give just once from €1, or better yet, power us every month with a little more. Thank you.**

Single	Monthly	Annual
€2 per month	€4 per month	
Other		
Continue →    		

Frantumaglia, a collection of letters and reflections, she listed Céspedes's *The Best of Husbands* as one of the few novels - "books of encouragement" - she could read while writing. Publishers everywhere rushed to find a copy, and this agile, conversational translation of Céspedes's 1952 *Forbidden Notebook*, by Ferrante's own translator, Ann Goldstein, is the first in a series of novels to be republished.

"When I write in this notebook I feel I'm committing a serious sin, a sacrilege: it's as if I were talking to the devil." *Forbidden Notebook* is about a 43-year-old woman who, during a rare moment of freedom, wanders the streets of Rome on a sunny Sunday and buys a notebook from a wary shopkeeper (such items were prohibited on Sundays). Valeria returns to her husband and almost adult children only to realise she wants to hide the notebook but has nowhere to do so: "I no longer had a drawer, or any storage space, that was still mine." She then begins a period of secret diary writing that feels sinful but is also a vital, unstoppable source of defiant personal definition.

/// Her feminist writing and communism made Céspedes a fascist target, and in 1943 she spent a month hiding in the woods

Elements of the novel are autobiographical, but Céspedes was a more glamorous figure than Valeria and came from a more dangerous and powerful world. Her grandfather was the first president of Cuba, having helped lead the fight for independence. With typically passionate recklessness, she married an Italian count aged 15, had a son, and divorced soon after. She then lived publicly as the lover of Francesco Bounous, an Italian diplomat, working together in resisting fascism.

As 2023 unfolds, will you support us?



We're a reader-funded news organisation, with more than 1.5 million supporters in 180 countries. With this vital support, our reporting remains fiercely independent, and is never manipulated by commercial or political ties. And it's free, for everyone. **But if you can support us, we need you. Give just once from €1, or better yet, power us every month with a little more. Thank you.**

€2 per month

€4 per month

Other

Continue →



astonishing feat of gaining enormous popular success and the esteem of the highest-minded writers of her day. At one point Sartre wanted to publish the columns as a book in France and write a preface himself. What she did - here and in her novels - was to combine intimate revelation about women's bodily and emotional lives with a deep moral seriousness about the need for change within marriage as an institution and within women's lives.

Forbidden Notebook is in part a documentation of postwar changes in women's lives, observed with the meticulous detail of neorealism. Valeria's daughter has an open affair with a not-yet-divorced man that horrifies her mother, who then comes to see this horror as symptomatic of a dead set of moral values. But Valeria's diary also enables Céspedes to ask perennial questions about the value and dangers of an examined life.

Sign up to Bookmarks

 Free weekly newsletter

Discover new books with our expert reviews, author interviews and top 10s. Literary delights delivered direct you

Enter your email address

Sign up

Privacy Notice: Newsletters may contain info about charities, online ads, and content funded by outside parties. For more information see our [Privacy Policy](#). We use Google reCaptcha to protect our website and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

What's at stake emerges in a powerful exchange between Ginzburg

As 2023 unfolds, will you support us?



We're a reader-funded news organisation, with more than 1.5 million supporters in 180 countries. With this vital support, our reporting remains fiercely independent, and is never manipulated by commercial or political ties. And it's free, for everyone. **But if you can support us, we need you. Give just once from €1, or better yet, power us every month with a little more. Thank you.**

€2 per month

€4 per month

Other

Continue →



For the reader, the discoveries of the notebook emerge as discoveries of freedom. We share Valeria's pleasure and release when she manages secretly to write. Valeria is an unreliable narrator, though, and we see her cowardice and need to be loved more clearly than she does, and fear for her when she embarks on a love affair with her over-romanticised boss. The act of writing appears to have set off processes of change she can't control, yet the love affair seems incompatible with the clear-sightedness of her writerly vision; her willingness to enter the well and look around in the murky water with open eyes.

Céspedes herself remained in the well, despite her diplomat husband's growing disapproval of her writing, and emerged with confidence and elan to describe what she found there: "weakness, dreams, melancholy, aspirations, basically all those feelings that shape and improve the human spirit".

Lara Feigel is the author of [Look! We Have Come Through!](#) Living with DH Lawrence (Bloomsbury).

... as 2023 gathers pace, and you're joining us from Italy, we have a small favour to ask. A new year means new opportunities, and we're hoping this year gives rise to some much-needed stability and progress. Whatever happens, the Guardian will be there, providing clarity and fearless, independent reporting from around the world, 24/7.

Times are tough, and we know not everyone is in a position to pay for news. But as we're reader-funded, we rely on the ongoing generosity of those who can afford

As 2023 unfolds, will you support us?



We're a reader-funded news organisation, with more than 1.5 million supporters in 180 countries. With this vital support, our reporting remains fiercely independent, and is never manipulated by commercial or political ties. And it's free, for everyone. **But if you can support us, we need you. Give just once from €1, or better yet, power us every month with a little more. Thank you.**

€2 per month

€4 per month

Other

Continue →



big impact every single month in support of open, independent journalism.

Thank you.

Single	Monthly	Annual
€2 per month	€4 per month	Other

Continue →

Remind me in May



As 2023 unfolds, will you support us?



We're a reader-funded news organisation, with more than 1.5 million supporters in 180 countries. With this vital support, our reporting remains fiercely independent, and is never manipulated by commercial or political ties. And it's free, for everyone. **But if you can support us, we need you. Give just once from €1, or better yet, power us every month with a little more. Thank you.**

€2 per month	€4 per month
Other	

Continue →

Most viewed

As 2023 unfolds, will you support us?



We're a reader-funded news organisation, with more than 1.5 million supporters in 180 countries. With this vital support, our reporting remains fiercely independent, and is never manipulated by commercial or political ties. And it's free, for everyone. **But if you can support us, we need you. Give just once from €1, or better yet, power us every month with a little more. Thank you.**

€2 per month

€4 per month

Other

Continue →



As 2023 unfolds, will you support us?



We're a reader-funded news organisation, with more than 1.5 million supporters in 180 countries. With this vital support, our reporting remains fiercely independent, and is never manipulated by commercial or political ties. And it's free, for everyone. **But if you can support us, we need you. Give just once from €1, or better yet, power us every month with a little more. Thank you.**

€2 per month

€4 per month

Other

Continue →



As 2023 unfolds, will you support us?



We're a reader-funded news organisation, with more than 1.5 million supporters in 180 countries. With this vital support, our reporting remains fiercely independent, and is never manipulated by commercial or political ties. And it's free, for everyone. **But if you can support us, we need you. Give just once from €1, or better yet, power us every month with a little more. Thank you.**

€2 per month

€4 per month

Other

Continue →



You are reading this article for free.
Enjoy unlimited articles. £1 for 6 months.

[View offer](#)

BOOKS | REDISCOVERED

Forbidden Notebook by Alba de Céspedes review — a tour de force

This Italian classic by a twice-jailed writer reveals the
frustrations of domestic life

Lucy Atkins

Sunday March 19 2023, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times



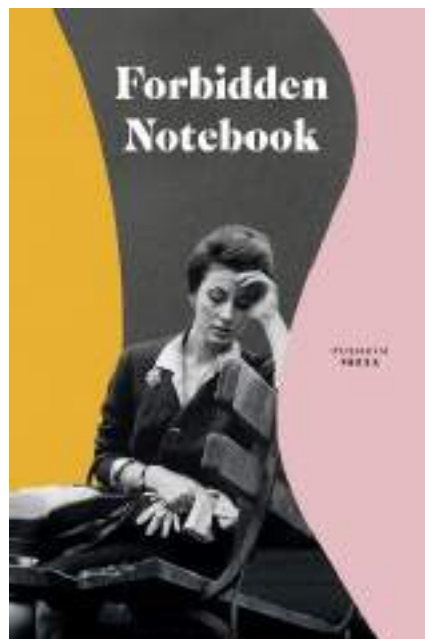
A woman's work: the Italian-Cuban Alba de Céspedes
EMILIO RONCHINI/GETTY IMAGES

Share    

“A woman writer,” the 20th-century Italian novelist and critic Anna Banti once said, “even if successful, is marginalised. They will say that she is great among women writers, but they will not equate her to male writers.” *Forbidden Notebook*, by the Italian-Cuban writer Alba de Céspedes, comes with impressively fervent praise from the Nobel prizewinner Annie Ernaux, as well as Elena Ferrante and Jhumpa Lahiri, but where are all the men?

Published in Italy in the early 1950s, this viscerally pent-up novel, structured as a middle-aged woman’s secret journal, is an evisceration not just of mid-century gender roles, but of the economic, class and cultural structures that form the prison bars around the domestic world. The narrative is powered by intellectual rigour and subtlety. Perhaps with this new edition by Ferrante’s clever translator, Ann Goldstein, the penny will finally drop: this is not women’s fiction. This is fiction.

Born in 1911, the granddaughter of Cuba’s first president, de Céspedes was married at 15, a mother by 16 and divorced by 20. She became a journalist and was jailed, twice, for her antifascist activities. She also became a bestselling novelist. *Forbidden Notebook* is the story of Valeria, 43, the mother of two almost grown-up children, married to Michele, who works in a bank. Money is tight, so Valeria has taken a clerical job, but when she comes home at night she must cook, clean and tend her family. Nobody questions this. Michele calls her “mamma”, the children patronise her and all demand her constant care. One day, on a furtive impulse, she buys a black notebook. She keeps it hidden, spilling out her thoughts late at night.



A crazed frustration builds with Valeria's growing self-awareness. She begins to reformulate her past, present and future. Her daughter, Mirella, 20, is ostensibly her opposite: liberated, confident, modern. As Mirella rejects her mother's choices of marriage and motherhood in favour of self-actualisation (a love affair, a stimulating career) relations between the women grow fraught. There is loyalty, intimacy and bitterness; misunderstanding, rejection and anxiety; self-sacrifice, love, loathing and need. I don't think I've read a finer unpicking of a complex mother-daughter relationship.

Valeria writes about sexual repression, shame and longing, slowly revealing the framework of lies on which family life is built. De Céspedes is interested in what all this lying does to the men too. An oblique picture of Michele's inner world emerges through carefully chosen details (his obsession with Wagner, his blank-eyed stare) and neat observations of his body language or the quality of his silences. He, too, is longing for escape. When Valeria's old friend Clara, a screenwriter, comes to lunch, Michele reveals that he has written a risqué screenplay. He has wild hopes for it.

ADVERTISEMENT

Through hints and nudges, a damning portrait emerges of the prisons on which modern family life is built. It is devastatingly effective, a tour de force.

Forbidden Notebook by Alba de Céspedes

Pushkin Press £16.99 pp256

Books

Italy

Related articles

BOOKS | LITERATURE

Looking for clues about the real Elena Ferrante

March 13 2022, 12.01am GMT

John Walsh

BOOKS | ESSAYS

The inner world of Italy’s great thinker Italo Calvino

January 08 2023, 12.01am GMT

Chris Power

BOOKS | FICTION

Elena Ferrante is back with a new Naples novel

August 16 2020, 12.01am BST

Review by Peter Kemp

Like what you have read?
Enjoy unlimited articles. £1 for 6 months.

[View offer](#)

Already a subscriber? [Login](#)

[BACK TO TOP](#)



Get in touch

[About us](#)

[Help](#)

[The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints](#)

[Classified advertising](#)

[The Times corrections](#)

[Careers](#)

[Contact us](#)

[The Times Edito](#)

[Place an announ](#)

[Display advertisi](#)

[The Sunday Tim](#)

More from The Times and The Sunday Times

[The Times e-paper](#)

[Times Currency Services](#)

[Times Print Gallery](#)

[Times Crossword Club](#)

[Times+](#)

[Times Expert Traveller](#)

[Schools Guide](#)

[Best Places to Live](#)

[Times Appointments](#)

[Times Money Mentor](#)

[Sportswomen of the Year Awards](#)

© Times Media Limited 2023.

Registered in England No. 894646.

Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

[Privacy & cookie policy](#)

[Licensing](#)

[Site map](#)

[Topics](#)

[Authors](#)

[Commissioning terms](#)

[Terms and conditions](#)



ADVERTISEMENT

SUBSCRIBE



EVENTS

DONATE ▾

NEWSLETTERS

STORE

SIGN
IN

THE DAILY ▾ THE QUARTERLY ▾ AUTHORSPODCASTABOUT ▾



SUBSCRIBE

Forbidden Notebooks: A Woman's Right to Write

By [Jhumpa Lahiri](#) December 2, 2022

THE REVIEW'S REVIEW

LAST / NEXT ARTICLE

SHARE



ALBA DE CÉSPEDES PICTURED IN THE ITALIAN MAGAZINE *EPOCA*, VOL. VII, NO. 86, MAY 31, 1952. PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA [WIKIMEDIA COMMONS](#).

Forbidden evokes, to my English-speaking ear, the biblical fruit whose consumption leads to shame and expulsion from Paradise. Eve's story is not irrelevant to a novel like Alba de Céspedes's *Forbidden Notebook*, in which a woman succumbs to a temptation: to record her thoughts and observations. Valeria Cossati's impulse to keep a diary leads not so much to the knowledge of good and evil as it does to the self-knowledge advocated by Socrates and serving as a cornerstone of philosophical inquiry ever since. In Valeria's case, it also leads to solitude, alienation, guilt, and painful lucidity.

The Italian title of *Forbidden Notebook* is *Quaderno proibito*—literally translated, “prohibited notebook.” *Forbidden* and *prohibited* may be interchangeable in English, but the latter lacks the romance that might soften the former (as in “forbidden love”), and connotes instead legal restrictions, interdictions, and punishment. The word *prohibited* comes from the Latin verb *prohibere* (its roots mean, essentially, “to hold away”), which was fundamental to legal terminology in Ancient Rome. It is the word de Céspedes chooses to describe Valeria's notebook, and to interrogate, more broadly, a woman's right, in postwar Italy, to express

herself in writing, to have a voice, and to hold opinions and secrets that distinguish herself from her family.

The act of purchasing the eponymous notebook, along with the ongoing dilemma of how to conceal it, drives the tension as the novel opens. Having purchased it illegally and smuggled it home, Valeria hides it in various locations—in a sack of rags, an old trunk, an empty biscuit tin. But she always runs the risk of it being discovered by her husband and grown children, all of whom laugh at the mere idea that she might want to keep a diary.

As soon as she buys the notebook, Valeria is anxious and afraid, but she is also armed—for although acquiring a diary throws her into crisis, the *quaderno* is both an object and a place, both a literary practice and a room of one's own. In lieu of walls and a door, pen and paper suffice to allow Valeria, albeit furtively, to speak her mind. Thematically, I would call this book a direct descendant of Virginia Woolf's groundbreaking treatise and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It's just that Valeria does not consider herself an author but rather a traditional homemaker. Her writing is surreptitious, and she must lie to tell the truth.

De Céspedes was herself a writer and a diarist; *Forbidden Notebook* fuses these forms and disciplines. The diary was for her (as it is for so many writers) preparatory ground not only for her artistry in general but for a series of searing first-person female protagonists who are at once invented and real. Melania Mazzucco quotes from de Céspedes's diaries in her introduction to the 2021 reissue of *Dalla parte di lei* (From her side). Already in that novel published in 1949—which is also concerned with women's rights and roles—de Céspedes is experimenting (as the title clearly suggests) with an intimate first-person female narrative. Three years later, in *Quaderno proibito*, the diary commands center stage.

The private becoming public, the individual subject dividing, and the writer becoming her own reader and vice versa—the diary, an elusive, elastic container, straddles all this and more. Diary writing may be the most private of forms, but when placed within the context of a novel or when it serves, as it does here, as the structure of the novel itself, this form of confession—dating back, at least in the Western tradition, to Augustine—contradicts its very nature.

From Petrarch to Gramsci to Woolf to Lessing, all diaries and notebooks, whether intended for publication or not, whether invented by their authors or not, whether framed as (or within) novels or not, are dialogues with the self. They are instances of self-doubling and self-fashioning. They are declarations of autonomy, counternarratives that contrast with and contradict reality. The form of the fictionalized diary has always been especially appealing in that we get to know the character not only as a person but also as a writer. This additional authorial persona is especially provocative in light of the fact that female consciousness has struggled to find its place in history and in the literary tradition.

In her diary de Céspedes confides, “I will never be a great writer.” Here I take her to task for not knowing something about herself—for she was a great writer, a subversive writer, a writer censored by fascists, a writer who refused to take part in literary prizes, a writer ahead of her time. In my view, she is one of Italy’s most cosmopolitan, incendiary, insightful, and overlooked.

Whether or not we choose to read *Forbidden Notebook* through a feminist lens, it is a radical novel. Freshly translated by Ann Goldstein with her signature energy, it blazes with significance. Women’s words are still laughed at, still silenced, still considered dangerous. De Céspedes vindicates, artfully and ardently, a woman’s right to write—a right that must never be taken for granted. Ironically, the harshest condemnation in *Forbidden Notebook* is generated by Valeria herself, who both speaks and threatens to cancel herself out at the same time.

I discovered de Céspedes when I was researching for and assembling *The Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories*, an anthology that featured forty Italian authors who were writing short fiction in the twentieth century. I included one of her short stories in that volume and was curious to read more of her work. An Italian friend suggested I read *Quaderno proibito*, and I was lucky enough to find a used paperback copy at my local flea market in Rome. Mondadori has recently reissued a few of her books, but even seven years ago it was hard to find her titles in Italian bookstores and very few people mentioned her work. She was one of those amazing authors and literary figures that most people had stopped reading and had largely forgotten about. I have kept a diary for decades, and I also teach a course on the diary as literary practice and form, so reading this novel was doubly exciting for me.

Jhumpa Lahiri teaches creative writing and literary translation at Barnard College. A writer in both English and Italian, she is the author of Interpreter of Maladies, which won the Pulitzer Prize. This is an adapted extract of the foreword to Ann Goldstein’s English translation of Forbidden Notebook by Alba de Céspedes, forthcoming from Astra House in January.



LAST / NEXT
ARTICLE





Forbidden Notebooks: A Woman's Right to Write

By Jhumpa Lahiri
December 2, 2022



Does It Have to Be That Way?: A Conversation with Elif Batuman

By Maria Dimitrova
December 1, 2022



Lil B Death-Ritual Potlatch: A Week in Austin, Texas

By Barrett Avner
November 29, 2022



Shopping Diary

By Adrienne Raphel
November 25, 2022

COLUMNS

LAST / NEXT ARTICLE

SHARE



By *The Paris Review* Contributors



The Review's Review

By The Staff of *The Paris Review*



Notes on Hoops

By Hanif Abdurraqib



Melting Clocks

By Eloghosa Osunde

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT



SUBSCRIBE

SUPPORT

CONTACT US

EVENTS

MEDIA KIT

SUBMISSIONS

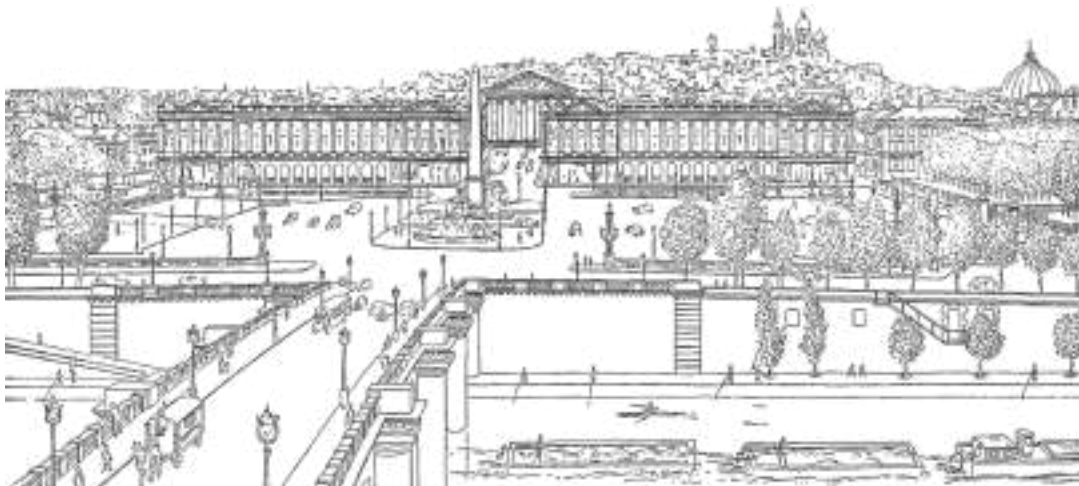
MASTHEAD

PRIZES

BOOKSTORES

OPPORTUNITIES

VIDEO



©2022 THE PARIS REVIEW. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

[PRIVACY POLICY](#) [TERMS & CONDITIONS](#)

[LAST / NEXT ARTICLE](#)

[SHARE](#)

BOOKS

The power of Forbidden Notebook's hidden diary entries



(Image credit: Emilio Ronchini/Mondadori via Getty Images)



By *Clare Thorp* 8th March 2023

The 1952 novel *Forbidden Notebook* reveals one woman's interior life with radical honesty.

Let us know you agree to cookies

We use **cookies** to give you the best online experience. Please let us know if you agree to all of these cookies.

Yes, I agree

T Alba de Céspedes' 1952 novel, *Forbidden Notebook*. From its opening line – "I was wrong to buy this notebook, very wrong" – the reader knows that what the book's protagonist is sharing with us is somehow dangerous. In this case, a 43-year-old married mother of two living in post-war Italy is, for the first time, daring to express her honest thoughts, feelings and desires – if only to herself, on the pages of a notebook.

More like this:

- [The radical books rewriting sex](#)
- [The most beloved French writer ever](#)
- [A Soviet novel 'too dangerous to read'](#)

If reading her diary entries feels like uncovering a secret, that feeling is only heightened by the fact that the novel itself has been out of print for decades. It has recently been reissued, first in Italy, and now in a new English language translation by Ann Goldstein. Goldstein is best known for translating Elena Ferrante's works, and it was Ferrante who first alerted her to Alba de Céspedes, with the author referencing her in her non-fiction 2003 book *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey*. "She mentions her twice in *Frantumaglia* actually," says Goldstein. "She has this list of writers who are encouraging, and De Céspedes is one of them." Goldstein then tried to track De Céspedes' work down but struggled to find it. "I was interested in her, but I couldn't find any of her books. It was crazy."



Let us know you agree to cookies

We use [cookies](#) to give you the best online experience.
Please let us know if you agree to all of these cookies.

In her day, Alba de Céspedes was one of the most popular authors in Italy, widely read not just in her own country, but many others too. "She was very well known in her day and then just kind of faded to almost obscurity with many other women writers too," says Goldstein.

When Goldstein finally got hold of a copy of Forbidden Notebook – published in Italian as *Quaderno Proibito* – she was enthralled. "It was just stunning in how modern it seems to me," she says. "The things that she discovers, she sees, it's what we all struggle with still, and that was a little alarming. Immediately you're just so pulled into it and engaged, it's just amazing. I just feel like everybody should read this book."

She's not the only person to be dazzled by De Céspedes' writing. Last year's Nobel Prize for Literature winner Annie Ernaux said: "Reading Alba de Céspedes was, for me, like breaking into an unknown universe." The author Jhumpa Lahari is also a fan, contributing a foreword to the new edition of Forbidden Notebook, in which she writes that it still "blazes with significance. Women's words are still laughed at, still silenced, still considered dangerous. De Céspedes vindicates, artfully and ardently, a woman's right to write – a right that must never be taken for granted."

Reading between the lines

The book takes the form of a series of diary entries made by 43-year-old Valeria Cossati in Rome in 1950. She is a wife to Michele and a mother of two grown-up children, Mirella and Riccardo. Somewhat unusually for her generation, she also has an office job.

One Sunday morning she goes to the tobacconist to buy cigarettes for her husband when she notices a pile of notebooks in the window – "black, shiny, thick, the type used in school". When she asks to buy one, the tobacconist tells her it is forbidden, as by law he is only allowed to sell tobacco on Sundays. She pleads and he gives in, insisting she "hide it under her coat" so the guard doesn't spot it.

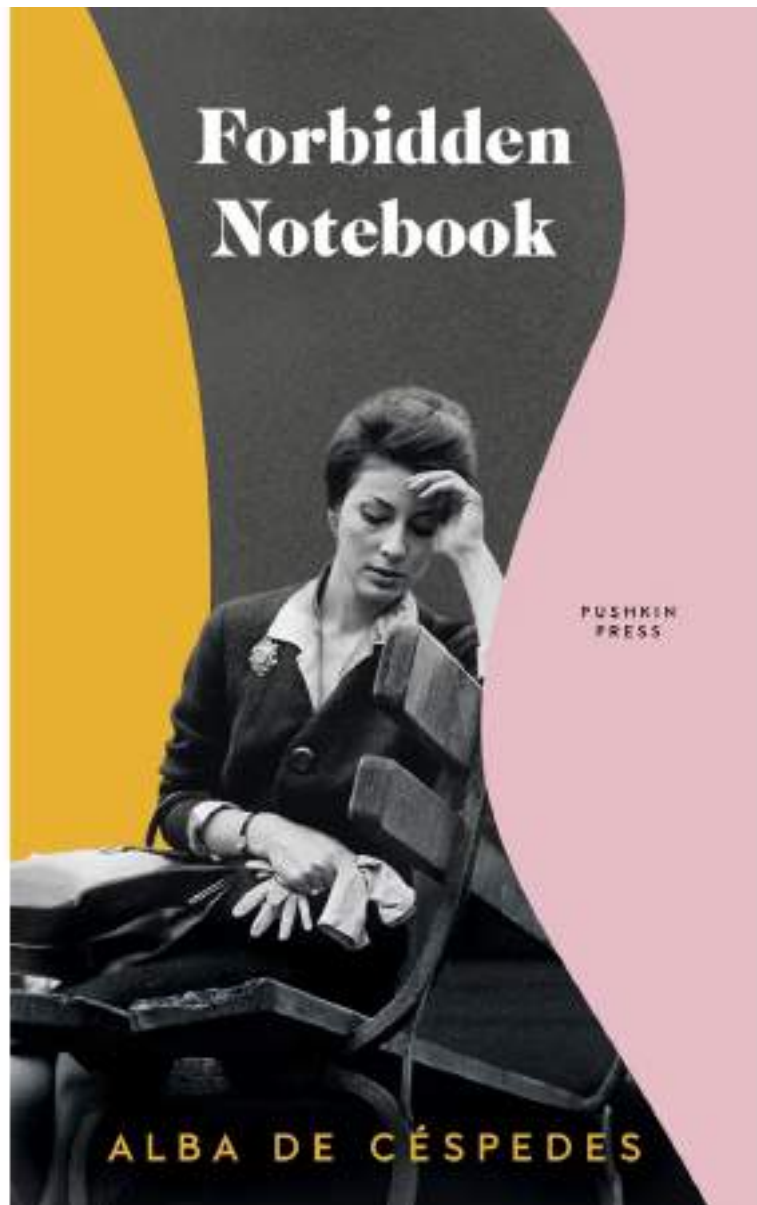
*She has no room of one's own, not even a drawer of one's own.
The notebook becomes her only private space*

Once home, it becomes no less clandestine, as she keeps it a secret from her family. She writes her name on it – a name that feels lost to her, as her husband calls her "mamma" like the children, and her parents call her "bebe". When, at dinner one night, she casually floats the idea of keeping a diary, her family laugh at her, incredulous at the idea she might have thoughts worth recording. "What would you write, mamma?" says her husband.

At first, she too feels she has nothing to write about aside from the "daily struggle" to hide the notebook – moving it from sewing basket to linen cupboard to suitcase. She has no room of one's own, not even a drawer of one's own. The notebook becomes her only private space.

Let us know you agree to cookies

We use [cookies](#) to give you the best online experience.
Please let us know if you agree to all of these cookies.



Forbidden Notebook, once a bestseller in Italy, has been rediscovered in recent years (Credit: Pushkin Press)

But soon she is sharing more details – her inability to connect to and understand her daughter, her disappointment at her son's choices, her stale marriage. She stays up into the early hours, feigning insomnia, to find the time and privacy to write.

In recording her thoughts and feelings, she starts to rediscover who she is outside of her family, uncovering needs and desires that had been overtaken by her domestic duties. "I'd always thought I was transparent, simple, a person who had no surprises either for myself or for others," she writes.

There is a growing chasm between the person she presents to her family and friends, and the self she reveals in the notebook. "I find time to look at myself, to write in my diary." As she starts to rediscover herself as something more than a wife and mother, so do others too – including her boss, who she starts to spend more and more time with.

But in examining her life so closely, she becomes increasingly restless. "The better I know

Let us know you agree to cookies

We use [cookies](#) to give you the best online experience.
Please let us know if you agree to all of these cookies.

The novel was originally published as a serial in a magazine, *La Settimana Incom Illustrata*, over the same six-month span as the diary entries in the book. Like her protagonist, De Céspedes also kept a diary – though her own life was far removed from that of Valeria's. Born in Rome in 1911 to a Cuban father and Italian mother, De Céspedes' grandfather was Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, who led Cuba's fight for independence from Spain and served as the country's first president. Her father also briefly served as president. Alba was married at 15, had a child at 16, and divorced by 20. She then began a writing career, initially as a journalist and later as a novelist and screenwriter. She was jailed twice for anti-fascist behaviour in 1935 and 1943, and in 1948 founded a literary magazine, *Mercurio*, that published writers including Ernest Hemingway and her contemporary Natalia Ginzburg. In the 1950s, she wrote a popular advice column. "Her life was quite different [from Valeria's]," says Goldstein. "But what is the same is the issues that she faced, like struggling between marriage and her career and what it meant to be a woman and whether women could or couldn't do certain things, and if not, why couldn't they?"

The personal is political

De Céspedes was writing at a time when women were pushing for change in Italy – only finally getting full voting rights in 1945. "Her first novel, *Nessuno torna indietro* [There's No Turning Back], is about a group of women all struggling with what their life is going to be, struggling against men and against all the restrictions that are put on them," says Goldstein. "The fascists tried to keep it from being published because this was not the idea of women that they wanted to be out there." The book was eventually published in 1938, to great success. "It sold incredibly. It was a bestseller, and the one after that was also a bestseller. So people really responded, women responded to her."

De Céspedes' writing may have described lives more mundane than her own, but in tackling domestic life – and the interior lives of women – with such radical honesty, she would go on to inspire other female writers to do the same, including Elena Ferrante.

Goldstein – who knows Ferrante's work better than anyone – instantly saw similarities between the two when she first read De Céspedes. "With Ferrante's characters, there's a huge difference in class and other details, but I think that they're still facing very similar issues of becoming yourself, of figuring out what is it that being a woman does for you and doesn't do for you, what particular struggles you have in society, in the family, and all those different ways."

Olivia Colman starred in the 2021 film adaptation of Elena Ferrante's 2006 novel The Lost Daughter (Credit: Yannis Drakoulidis/Netflix)

De Céspedes' success might not quite have matched that of Ferrante – whose quartet of Neapolitan novels alone have sold more than 15 million copies, been published in 45 different languages and spawned a critically acclaimed TV adaptation – but in the 1940s and 50s she was one of Italy's most popular and well-known writers. So what happened?

Adam Freudenheim, publisher and managing director of Pushkin Press, the UK publisher of De Céspedes, thinks her popularity – especially as a woman – may have worked against her with the literary establishment of the time. "There could be a sort of snootiness about things that are successful and popular," he says. "These were books that were printed and published and well enough received at the time and they often sold well, but they were often not valued as highly by the establishment, which was, of course, largely male. Often they were sort of seen as women's writing for women."

The concept of a hidden diary, a space for recording thoughts that you weren't allowed to share publicly, resonated for those living in a repressive society

Let us know you agree to cookies

We use cookies to give you the best online experience. Please let us know if you agree to all of these cookies.

Bahman Farzaneh, a highly regarded Iranian translator who has translated books from Spanish and Italian – including Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude – translated many of De Céspedes' works. "When you have someone like Bahman Farzaneh translating a book, you buy it just for the translator. They have the role of a cultural mediator," says Azizi. Several of De Céspedes' books were published in Persian, but Azizi says the one that stood out was Forbidden Notebook. "It was one of the most identifiable books of that era. Without fail, friends from Iran that are my age, they all remember the book."

He recalls it being especially popular among women – not only his peers, but women in their 30s, 40s and older. "I remember many of my female friends related to how the main character's husband calls her 'mamma', which she found very frustrating. They too wanted to be known as more than mothers."

The concept of a hidden diary, a space for recording thoughts that you weren't allowed to share publicly, resonated for those living in a repressive society. "What I really loved personally was this confessional tone," says Azizi. "This idea that you can reach a kind of emancipation by the power of words alone. For someone growing up in the repressive Islamic Republic, it was really powerful, because of all the things we couldn't do. We did live this double life."

Azizi is delighted more people will now discover the book. "I'm very excited that something that I grew up with can now be shared by my friends in the United States and around the world. The book is really a testament to that period of my youth, as well as a testament to the power of literature."

So, why is De Céspedes being rediscovered now? "I think Ferrante has a lot to do with it," says Goldstein, "Her popularity really led people to look for other Italian women writers." Freudenheim says there's been a resurgence of interest in women's writing from the late 1940s to 60s in general – and De Céspedes is part of that. Pushkin is planning to publish two more books by De Céspedes over the next two years – **Her Side of The Story** (1949) and her debut novel *Nessuno Torna Indietro* (There's No Turning Back).

"Literary rediscoveries are really exciting, full stop, but sometimes you can't actually imagine very many people reading them, because they're quite difficult or abstruse or dated in a way that doesn't resonate," says Freudenheim. "What's so exciting to me about this novel is that it is just an incredibly readable book, which is heartbreaking at the same time and very moving. It's a page-turner that has a lot to say. Everyone I know who has read it is struck by that."

Forbidden Notebook by Alba de Céspedes (translated by Ann Goldstein) has just been reissued by Pushkin Press.

Love books? Join **BBC Culture Book Club** on Facebook, a community for literature fanatics all over the world.

FUTURE

If you would like to comment on this story or anything else you have seen on BBC Culture, head over to our **Facebook** page or message us on **Twitter**.

And if you liked this story, **sign up for the weekly bbc.com features newsletter**, called *The Essential List*. A handpicked selection of stories from BBC Future, Culture, Worklife and Travel, delivered to your inbox every Friday.



Let us know you agree to cookies

We use **cookies** to give you the best online experience. Please let us know if you agree to all of these cookies.

TRAVEL

The untold story of the Grand Canyon

Explore the BBC

Home	News
Sport	Reel
Worklife	Travel
Future	Culture
TV	Weather
Sounds	

Terms of Use	About the BBC
Privacy Policy	Cookies
Accessibility Help	Parental Guidance
Contact the BBC	BBC emails for you
Advertise with us	AdChoices / Do Not Sell My Info

Copyright © 2023 BBC. The BBC is not responsible for the content of external sites. [Read about our approach to external linking.](#)

Let us know you agree to cookies

We use [cookies](#) to give you the best online experience. Please let us know if you agree to all of these cookies.

[No, take me to settings](#)

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/forbidden-notebook-review-a-journal-of-her-own-11674843639>

BOOKSHELF

'Forbidden Notebook' Review: A Journal of Her Own

An Italian woman's impulsive decision to begin a diary kicks off a transformation that isn't confined to the page.



Alba De Céspedes ca. 1950.

PHOTO: MONDADORI PORTFOLIO/GETTY IMAGES

By Toby Lichtig

Jan. 27, 2023 1:20 pm ET

In 1928, Virginia Woolf declared to the young women of Cambridge University that the aspiring female writer required “a room of one’s own.” Valeria, the protagonist of Alba de Céspedes’s “Forbidden Notebook,” doesn’t even have a drawer.

GRAB A COPY

Forbidden Notebook: A Novel

By Alba de Céspedes

Astra House

288 pages

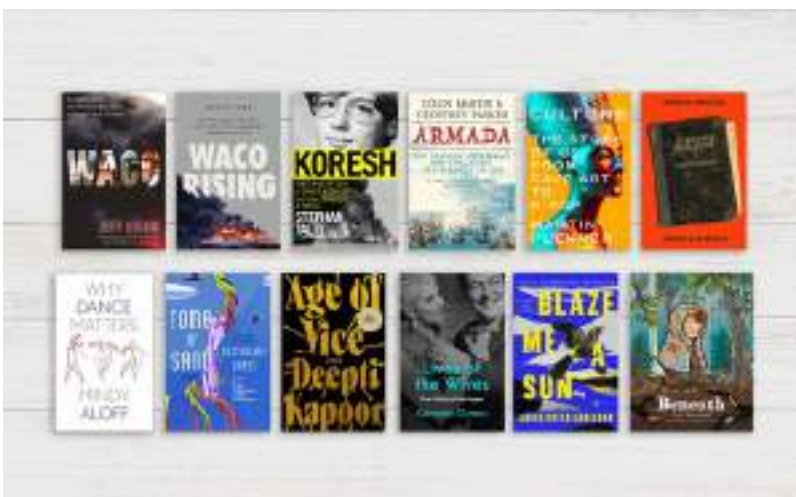


It is the early 1950s. Valeria is 43 and lives with her husband (Michele) and her two almost-grown-up children (Riccardo and Mirella) in a too-small apartment in an unnamed and barely described quarter of Rome (this is not a novel of place). The family is solidly middle-class—Michele works in a bank, Valeria is descended from people who once owned land—but the scars of war are fresh, and times are hardscrabble. Valeria has been working in an office for several years to supplement the family income, much to the disdain of her haughty mother. The domestic help has been dispensed with. The dirty dishes pile up.

What we are reading is Valeria's diary, which she bought, we learn on the opening page, in a moment of compulsion ("pure chance") while out on a Sunday errand to the tobacconist for her husband. The notebook is "forbidden" ("proibito") because of Italy's ban on Sunday commerce (tobacco being exempt). But the word carries a more moral, metaphysical valence.

The very idea that Valeria might want to keep a diary causes great amusement to her family. "What would you write?" her husband asks when the subject is hypothetically proposed. "What secrets would we have at our age?" Interest piqued, we watch on as Valeria hides the clandestine chronicle—in the ragbag, the biscuit tin, the trunk with the old ski clothes—endlessly, almost farcically, shifting it around, away from prying eyes. As for her Woolfian scriptorium: She writes after dark, or on the rare occasions when the flat is empty, on "a small table in the bathroom, the way I did when I was a girl."

15 BOOKS WE READ THIS WEEK »



The calamity at Waco, the shipwrecks of the Spanish Armada, unquiet literary unions, a new thriller from Sweden and more.

The Italian-Cuban author Alba de Céspedes (1911–1997) published "Quaderno proibito" in weekly installments and "real time," releasing the entries into "La Settimana Incom Illustrata" between the late winter of 1950 and the high summer of 1951, precisely following the chronology of her novel. At the time, the serial caused something of a sensation, and 70 years have scarcely dulled it. The book has been newly revived by Ann

Goldstein, following an earlier English translation as “The Secret” (1957). Its voice remains lively and compelling (despite some jarringly odd decisions by Ms. Goldstein), and the subjects depressingly perennial: the battle between motherhood and self-actualization; social control over women’s bodies; unpaid emotional and domestic labor; the forces of progress pressing up against the ceiling of convention. Premarital sex may no longer be a scandal, and a woman’s right to work no longer in question, but in many ways this world will seem all too familiar to readers.

Readers of Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Quartet and other fiction will doubtless notice correspondences in tone and theme. This is unsurprising. Not only is Ms. Goldstein also Ms. Ferrante’s translator but de Céspedes has been a key influence on the later author: Ms. Ferrante lists de Céspedes’s “Dalla parte di lei” (1949) as a novel of “encouragement.” This source of influence is palpable throughout “Forbidden Notebook”—in the gaps between the first-person narrator’s acute observations and flashes of self-delusion; in the comparable gaps between what she thinks, says and does; in the tight focus on the sociopolitical resonance of small domestic dramas; even in the protagonist’s moments of unlikability. Valeria can be hard, cold-eyed; this is what life has taught her. She delivers her worldview in a series of memorable aphorisms. “One of the strengths of the family is that it keeps its members in continuous competition with one another.” Or: “At a certain point we no longer understand what is kindness and what is ruthlessness in the life of a family.”

Over half a year, the story unfolds with smoldering intensity as we come to realize that each of the four family members nurtures his or her own illicit secret. The industrious Valeria begins to drop in to the office on Saturdays in search of peace, and here she attracts the attention of her lugubrious boss, similarly in retreat from domestic pressures. They converse with increasing informality. There is even talk of the pair going to Venice. Woolf’s lighthouse comes to mind.

Michele, who has been working on a film script in his spare time, seeks counsel from his wife’s glamorous friend Clara, an unmarried screenwriter. Whether the script actually exists remains deliciously open. Placid, complacent, avoidant, Michele has long since stopped looking at his wife sexually; he now affectionately calls her “Mamma”—an appellation she detests. Yet, Clara tells Valeria, the character Michele has written is rather more licentious: he’s “really in that fever, that sexual obsession.”

As for the kids: The egotistical, conservative Riccardo is getting close to a young woman whom Valeria instinctively dislikes—perhaps because she recalls her unthinking younger self. And the unillusioned Mirella is frequently out late with an older, wealthy man. “I have a single card to play,” she tells her mother. Mirella, more than anyone, has the best

chance of escape from the bleached out “cold happiness” of this drearily functional world —yet it is she Valeria judges the most harshly: “I had the impression that Mirella was the stronger; and for that reason alone, I would have liked to hit her.”

The bonds that bind are shown to be peculiarly stubborn, and freedom double-edged. In another of this novel’s telling little phrases, we see how the pressure builds, “and then it goes away.” This tension is symbolized by the diary itself. A site of release, autonomy, self-knowledge, it is also a burden, a “bloodsucker,” a saboteur. “I haven’t had a moment’s peace since I got this notebook,” Valeria complains.

This is a brilliant, quietly tumultuous book and a welcome revival of an author too little known in the anglophone world. “Dalla parte di lei” received an English translation as “The Best of Husbands” in 1952. Surely that, too, is now ripe for resurrection.

—*Mr. Lichtig is the fiction and politics editor of the Times Literary Supplement.*

Appeared in the January 28, 2023, print edition as 'Hiding Her Words Away.'

Copyright © 2023 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.



Writing Like a Partisan

A review of *Forbidden Notebook* by Alba De Céspedes

By ELEANOR CARELESS JULY 20, 2023



IN October 2022, the far-right politician Giorgia Meloni became Italy's first female prime minister. Her party, Fratelli d'Italia, campaigned under the same logo—a red, white and green flame—as the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI) and the fascist motto “God, family, fatherland.” She heads Italy's most far-right government since World War II. Shortly after her election, Meloni made an inflammatory speech in which she claimed to have been reduced to “citizen x, gender x, parent 1, parent 2”, an increasingly familiar refrain of “[anti-gender](#)” mobilizations around the world (as in [Russia](#) and [Brazil](#)). Her self-positioning as the protector of the (heteronormative,

gender-conforming, nuclear) family from supposedly menacing left-wing forces is central to her politics. This position is part and parcel of a global wave of anti-gender, anti-immigrant nationalism that sees an “attack” on the family as an “attack” on the nation.

Alba De Céspedes’ intimate account of the “inescapable, tremendous force of the family” links Italy’s past with its present. In 1952, when *Forbidden Notebook* was first published, Italy was rebuilding itself as a newly democratic nation; however, while fascism had fallen, the power of the Church—and, consequently the ideal of the indissoluble family—remained strong. Paul Ginsborg [writes](#) of how, “in the Catholic world of the 1950s, no social message was preached with more fervour than that of the sanctity of the Christian family.” The formidable force of the family is the governing matrix of De Céspedes’ novel, which captures the tectonic intergenerational shifts, class dynamics and daily textures of postwar Rome in the form of a fictionalized diary. *Forbidden Notebook* takes the ordinary feelings which might fill the pages of a diary—conjugal discontent, maternal anxiety, shameful disclosure, everyday ennui—very seriously. Without sentimentalism, De Céspedes makes us feel the chronic, dull ache of the suppressed inner life.

A Cuban-Italian writer from a political family, De Céspedes’ grandfather Carlos Manuel De Céspedes was Cuba’s first president and the leader of its first war of independence. Twice detained for her involvement with the Italian Resistance, De Céspedes’ bestselling first novel *Nessuno Torna Indietro*, or *There’s No Turning Back* (1938) was censored by Fascist authorities on the grounds that her depiction of young female students living in 1930s Rome did not conform to a “Fascist ethic.” A collection of short stories, *La Fuga*, or *The Escape* (1940) was also censored. In 1943, De Céspedes escaped occupied Rome to join the Allies in the South, where she worked as a Resistance radio personality known as Clorinda. De Céspedes was a diarist as well as a novelist, and, [as Jhumpa Lahiri observes](#), “*Forbidden Notebook* fuses these forms and disciplines.” An entry written in 1943 while De Céspedes was a fugitive in the Abruzzi mountains speaks of the guilt of knowing she would not be shot, like her male comrades, if caught by the occupying German forces—her political solidarity dented by virtue of her gender. After the liberation of Rome in 1944, she founded the literary journal *Il Mercurio*, which became a forum for anti-Fascist intellectuals and published writers including Natalia Ginzburg and Ernest Hemingway.

In the 1940s and 50s, De Céspedes was one of Italy's most popular and best-known writers, but in subsequent decades, her novels have been forgotten. *Forbidden Notebook* fell out of print and has only recently been reissued, first in Italy and now, as part of a wave of new editions (Spanish, 2017; German, 2021; Brazilian Portuguese, 2022), in Astra House's/Pushkin Press' new English translation by Ann Goldstein, known for her translations of Elena Ferrante. Its use of the diary as a novelistic device places De Céspedes' *Notebook* within a feminist literary genealogy that can be traced at least as far back as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). It is a forerunner of Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook* (1962), a hugely ambitious work of political commitment, and even of Annie Ernaux's non-fictional diary *Se perdre* (*Getting Lost*, 2001), which writes through, with and around a blaze of female desire.

Originally serialized in the illustrated magazine *La Settimana Incom Illustrata* during the same six months (December 1950-June 1951) that it fictionalized, the *Forbidden Notebook*'s entries would have been drip-fed to its first readers week by week. The early 1950s were a time of economic hardship, high unemployment and social deprivation: *gli anni duri*, the hard years. By the end of that decade, rapid urbanization, mass consumerism, and the "economic miracle" had transformed Italian society. This period of rapid change was particularly acute for women, who gained the vote in 1945 and joined the workforce in greater numbers than ever before—even as the Catholic Church continued to exert enormous pressure on men and women to fulfil conventional gender roles. Simonetta Piccone Stella has written of the "double front" faced by women at this time, caught between traditional and modern roles, an old and a new conformism.

Forbidden Notebook thus takes place at the precipice of great social change, and its *petit bourgeois* protagonist, Valeria, is similarly wrenched between "two different worlds." Absorbed in a daily struggle to make ends meet, she lives in a cramped apartment in an unnamed Roman suburb with her husband and two adult children, Mirella and Riccardo. She works as a secretary to supplement her husband Michele's meagre income as a bank clerk, but, unlike Michele, works a double shift: when she comes home at night, the work of cooking and cleaning begins. Acquiring and keeping a diary—the eponymous forbidden notebook, or *quaderno proibito*—involves subterfuge from the start. On a whim, Valeria buys the notebook from a tobacconist on a

sunny Sunday, a day on which the vendor is not allowed to sell anything except tobacco. She persuades him to sell her the notebook under the counter, hides it beneath her coat, and then conceals it among some rags—the only storage space she can call her own—when she returns home. From then on, the ruses and concealments thicken and multiply. She buys football tickets with money from the shopping budget to get her family out of the house; writes in the bathroom at night, forgoing sleep; hides the notebook in old biscuit tins and trunks.

Why is the notebook “forbidden”? Initially, Valeria is afraid of her family’s scorn: what use has she for a diary? What could she, subsumed by her roles as mother and wife, possibly have to write about? She keeps it hidden without writing in it for two weeks, the tobacconist’s words re-echoing in her ears: “it’s forbidden.”

But the prohibitions that surround the notebook are a vast zone, larger than embarrassment. The diary threatens household neglect and domestic disorder: “In order to write, I didn’t iron.” It is a cipher for the woman writing, of a disruptive inner life, and the vehicle of an emergent feminist and class consciousness. It is an “exorbitant account book,” a tally of reproductive labor, personified at various points as the devil, a vampire, a lover. Its empty pages promise the “freedom of the street,” a virtual room of her own, and the agony of self-knowledge. The more Valeria writes, the more she has to conceal: the thoughts and feelings she writes down are explosive, incendiary, and their discovery would split her world apart. Increasingly, the notebook does not simply bear witness to a woman’s hidden dissatisfactions and desires. As the vehicle of her slowly, painfully raising consciousness, the diary becomes a powerful engine of the plot, modulating her moods and behaviour and corroding the assumptions that bind Valeria to her roles as wife and mother. “Now under everything I do or say, there’s the presence of this notebook.” Valeria’s journal gives expressive form to that which seethes beneath the surface of everyday life.

The narrator of *Forbidden Notebook*, though, is no revolutionary. Valeria speaks with the anguished voice of a “bridge” generation, torn between her parents’ conservative, prewar worldview and the new, progressive horizons that her daughter Mirella moves towards.

Mother-daughter relations are one of the diary's most charged and contradictory sites. Valeria is intensely preoccupied with Mirella, to the extent that at times the diary becomes a record of daughterly disobedience. De Céspedes writes with excruciatingly observed detail about the relationship between mother and daughter: as when Mirella, following a tense conversation with Valeria about her older lover, rests her forehead on her hands and starts to cry, keeping her fingers lifted to allow the freshly applied polish on her nails to dry. Mirella's refusal to conform brings out a stubborn conservatism in her mother. But Valeria confesses to her diary the internal dissonance that underlies her attempts to control her daughter: "what I thought was solid in me loses substance as well." The fictionalized diary is a sustained exercise in dramatic irony. And then there is Valeria's formal, reserved relationship with her own mother, a woman not just of another generation but of another, more aristocratic class. Valeria's mother represents rigid, traditional values, down to her very posture: "I don't know how to hold myself like her," Valeria writes, "maybe because I didn't wear a corset." The most marked difference between mother and daughter is the fact that Valeria must work for a living. Valeria's mother disapproves deeply of this situation; and Valeria's own daughter is contemptuous of her grandmother's attitude. As Valeria writes: "In me these two worlds clash, making me groan... Maybe I am only this passage, this clash." At moments like this, De Céspedes' writing can turn you inside out.

The beautifully sustained ambivalence of characters like Valeria is the more surprising given De Céspedes' own history of bold political commitment. The political contexts that so deeply shaped its author's life are only fleetingly present in *Forbidden Notebook*. In one entry, Valeria recalls fascists passing by in the street with "skulls drawn on their black shirts," and we learn only in passing that her husband Michele fought under Mussolini during Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and in World War II. But even on the small domestic stage on which *Forbidden Notebook* is set, De Céspedes wrote as a partisan. In the space of a few years, women like De Céspedes had gone from being protagonists of the partisan struggle to traditional gender roles reinforced by the Italian Church and state—a reversal painfully relevant to our own revanchist, post-Roe present.

This tremendous reversal is traceable in De Céspedes' literary life. In 1948, her radical journal *Mercurio* folded for want of funds, and in the 1950s (a

decade which saw a surge in the consumption and popularity of the weekly magazine), she turned instead to writing an advice column for the weekly magazine *Epoca*. In this column, titled “*Dalla parte di lei*,” or “From Her Point of View,” De Céspedes would respond to letters from troubled readers—men as well as women—on issues personal, moral and often controversial. Here, as in the *Forbidden Notebook*, De Céspedes wrote as a partisan—not fighting on open terrain, but forcing her enemy into another space. Through the medium of the popular magazine, she exposed the contradictions and constraints of Italian sexual morality and social customs, as [Penny Morris has discussed](#). De Céspedes’ choice to serialize her novel in a weekly newspaper column signals her intended audience—stars such as Sophia Loren and Grace Kelly often featured on *La Settimana*’s covers. Yet it seems likely that this very political astuteness was responsible for the subsequent dismissal of De Céspedes as a popular “romance” writer.

It's true that *Forbidden Notebook* is a novel of parallel love affairs: between Valeria and her boss, Mirella and an older man, and, perhaps, between Michele and Valeria’s emancipated friend, Clara. But the central love affair is that between Valeria and her diary. On February 6, 1951 Michele catches his wife writing late at night and immediately suspects an affair, and he is not wrong. Recalling the whim that led her to buy the notebook on a sunny late autumn day, Valeria describes how “I was alone and it didn’t seem to be right to be alone on such a day, so I went home in the arms of the notebook.” The diary provides solace against a spiritual loneliness and fulfils her “secret desire” to be fully known, not only as “Mamma” but as Valeria. The affair with the diary is more profound than her real-life affair, and she finds that her most “intimate meetings” with her boss, Guido, are “when I open this notebook at night.” Similarly, “the only remorse I suffer, when I’m with [Guido], is that I’m stealing time from the family, from the house, the same I feel writing in this diary.” The remorse Valeria associates with writing, the realization of a suppressed inner life, of transgressive, overflowing desire, is the remorse of the affair.

That remorse is deeply connected, in Valeria’s mind, to the neglect of her reproductive work. This powerful feeling constitutes a kind of remorseful resistance to the naturalization of gender roles. At one point, Valeria writes of her “violent, greedy desire” for domestic disorder: dirty plates, unwashed laundry, unmade beds, a home in disarray. At other times, she is in

Stockholm-Syndrome-like thrall to her orderly drawers. In Fascist Italy, as [Victoria de Grazia tells us](#), little girls like Valeria were taught that “the Nation is served by keeping the house swept, civic discipline commences with family discipline.”

In its overlaying of productive and reproductive labour, *Forbidden Notebook* anticipates feminist critiques of domestic labour that gained international traction in the 1970s. Valeria divides her time between duties to two men, her boss and her husband, and two spaces, the office and the kitchen. The space of the office is liberating compared to the cage of domesticity, but Valeria recognizes, if only glancingly, that she bears a double burden: “I belonged to those two men and had to obey both, even if for different reasons.” As Silvia Federici would write, twenty years later: “They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.” Thanks to her affair with the boss, even Valeria’s waged work becomes engulfed in love that masks oppression.

Set as it is on the verge of Italy’s economic miracle, the temptation of luxury commodities threads through the notebook, and women are the primary targets of this new consumerism. Feminine capital is bound up with consumption, with buying, spending, being looked at, and desired. In one of the diary’s more political passages, out shopping in central Rome, Valeria is tempted by a display of purses. The desires the purses provoke in her are conflicting, but their cost is prohibitive. “A purse can’t cost what a man earns in a month; no one should have the guts to carry it.” This intense feeling of alienation reaches its height outside a jeweller’s, where Valeria looks at precious stones laid out on brown velvet, objects of capital that are worth “years of work,” hers and her husband’s. “[M]y whole life,” she writes, “could be enclosed in one of those stones.”

The *Notebook*’s distinctive [interweaving](#) of class and gender understands that you can’t change one without toppling the other. A red coat, which Mirella wants and Valeria buys for her daughter’s birthday, takes on particular significance. It is an object of desire, a symbol of wealth, of possibility, and youth. It also becomes an instrument of surveillance and a sign of promiscuity: leaving her lover’s house early one Sunday morning, Mirella is identified by her bright red coat. Clothes function as markers of social strata and belonging. When Valeria meets with her old school friends one afternoon, she becomes acutely conscious of her drab dress and the gulf that

has opened up between them, now that she is a waged worker rather than a supported wife. The others assess their friend Margherita's fur coat "as they would have assessed the husband's physical power: the jewelry he gave Margherita, the expensive dresses, were equal proofs of virility." Femininity, adorned and at leisure, affirms masculine status and power. And then there is a new blue slip that Valeria buys, tries on, feels sexy, and then--in the face of her husband's indifference-- returns as a needless extravagance. Valeria's slip is denoted as an indulgence, an indulgent slip, which reminds me of a recent meme in which Freud's face is printed onto a slip dress, a Freudian slip commodified. I want one, too.

Through the unsteady lens of Valeria's emergent consciousness, the diary moves from the granularity of the everyday to shuddering--if veiled-- revelations. In its pages, we encounter the (extortionate) price of artichokes, the "bleak click" of cinema seats, and the impossibility of having sex without being overheard in a tiny apartment. These objects and details are more than the sum of their parts. Goldstein's translation of De Céspedes' prose is full of the power of the unsaid, heavy with invisible, socialized prohibitions. When Valeria and Michele go to the cinema to see an American film which shows a husband helping his wife to wash the dishes, the audience erupts with laughter and, Valeria confesses, "I felt like laughing too." The laughter of the group consolidates conventional gender roles, and, against her better judgement, Valeria is drawn in by the crowd.

Transparencies and obscurities--a kind of literary chiaroscuro--are one of the novel's organizing motifs. Valeria initially thinks of herself as "transparent, simple, a person who had no surprises either for myself or for others." When she looks for a place to conceal her diary from her family, the furniture in their tiny apartment suddenly seems transparent, made of glass. And when, through writing, a new self-knowledge emerges, the revelations it brings are often veiled, seen through a glass darkly, too bright to be looked at directly. As Valeria writes, on March 16, 1951, "I flee every precise thought." These off-kilter perceptions and obfuscations concentrate around the family and culminate in one of the diary's final revelations that "when [the family] sit at the table together, we seem transparent and loyal, without intrigues, but I know now that none of us show what we truly are, we hide, we all camouflage ourselves." De Céspedes draws masculinity into the frame: the suppressed inner life is not uniquely feminine. Michele, too, writes feverishly in secret,

although the medium in which he writes—a film script—is directly commodifiable.

The critical consciousness fostered by the diary gives *Forbidden Notebook* its thick undertow of latent feminine power. There is something undeniably femme about the diary, an emotional, confessional, intimate form of writing. [Anaïs Nin has written](#) of the impact of her own diaries on the burgeoning women's movement of the late 1960s, and the diary's capacity to help the subaltern find their own expressive language. We may think of "the personal is political" as a 1970s slogan, but it was key to this generation of Italian women writers and their literary experiments. The 1950s, [as Molly Tambor has shown](#), were not just one long snooze before the revolutions of the late 1960s. In 1959, Gabriele Parca's bestselling *Le Italiane si confessano* (*Italian Women Confess*) was published, a collection of hundreds of letters sent by women to advice columns. Parca concluded that women's sex lives remained hidden, unknowable, characterised by taboo. Towards the end of *Forbidden Notebook*, writing by now in a more baroque style, Valeria tells us that she writes to "let a rich stream that runs in me and pains me flow freely, as when I had too much milk." This is a line that could have come straight out of Hélène Cixous ("she writes in white ink"). But Valeria's is only a partial awakening.

It is the relentless "authority of the family" that finally perpetuates Valeria's entrapment in the home and re-commits her to "a life spent for others." The profound feelings of familial obligation that marshal the novel's denouement are not flimsy, even if they seem strangely insubstantial across historical and geographical distances: they are the fabric of which a conservative cultural politics is made. In an escalating state of paranoia reminiscent of the spiralling narration of the "Yellow Wallpaper," Valeria destroys her diary. In twenty years' time, the consciousness-raising groups of the early feminist movement would enable women to understand their emotional distress as political. At the start of the 1950s, disconnected from the organised women's movements of the time, Valeria's distress cannot be translated into concrete political claims, such as demands for free childcare. Instead, "that awareness turned to acid in me."

Forbidden Notebook is really about the ways a diary—the act of keeping it—acts upon the keeper. It is an experiment in what the thoughts and feelings given form by the diary make possible, or impossible. The time a diary keeps

is ostensibly linear, but realizations and causations loop back and around in echoes and repetitions. Diarizing offers an alternative to daily life by articulating an independent self among the debris of the quotidian, and these reconstructions of the self—provisional and interrupted as they are—cannot be destroyed along with the paper record.

The state of sustained deep reflection fostered by the diary is de-incentivised within our own fragmented “attention economy,” and for good reason: it is less easy to monetize and manipulate. The cultivation of profound self-knowledge is a subversive act. The documentation of our everyday lives on social media platforms shares some common ground with the diary, but with a social, public form of the diary rather than the private, prohibited *journal intime* of the *Forbidden Notebook*.

I am an obsessive diarist, and when I read *Forbidden Notebook* for the first time, Valeria’s compulsion to write and her fear of that writing’s transgressive power were instantly recognizable. A frisson of transgression surrounds the diary; even reading a fictionalized diary has a transgressive flavour to it. Diaries are dangerous objects, and not only if they are discovered. As De Céspedes’ astute study of the introspective knowledge gained through writing shows us again and again, in Valeria’s words,

We’re always inclined to forget what we’ve done in the past, partly in order not to have the tremendous obligation to remain faithful to it. Otherwise, it seems to me, we would all discover that we’re full of mistakes and, above all, contradictions, between what we intended to do and what we have done, between what we would desire to be and what we are content to be.

When everything that happens is fixed down in writing, made more lucid but also more obscure, it becomes harder to live the life you did before.

Seventy years after the publication of *Forbidden Notebook*, the family retains its near-sacred status, as its susceptibility to a fascist politics shows. To question the priority accorded to the family remains virtually unthinkable (with some bold exceptions). What we find in *Forbidden Notebook* is an attempt to explode the ideal of the family from within: a forerunner of the ‘Dreamers, awake!’ mode that rose to prominence in the art and music of the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

In the novel-diary, as in her advice column, De Céspedes undoes commonplace assumptions and evokes a sense of radical possibility within a conventional format, and through familiar themes: the family, love, sex, relationships. At a time when the family is either weaponised by the far-right, or the final bastion of survival against social and economic precarity in our own *anni duri*, Valeria’s recommittal to the family reminds us of the difficulty of escaping such deeply rooted structures, but also leaves us longing for a different ending — for the possibility of emancipation from the family’s formidable force. Perhaps stories of failed awakenings are what we need most – reminders of what is at stake, when we undergo a paradigm shift but do not act; when we betray our emergent desires by clinging to what is known, despite the many ways in which it fails us; when the awakened slip back into social and intellectual torpor.

The final conceit of *Forbidden Notebook* — that Valeria’s diary is destroyed, its near-unthinkable critique of the family suppressed — is a sign of its power. But De Céspedes’ account of the alienating, confining, tenacious force of the family endures.



SUBSCRIBE \$2 PER MONTH

ENTER YOUR EMAIL

CONTINUE

The New Inquiry is a 501(c)3 organization.

**CONTACT
SUBMIT
DONATE**

**ABOUT
SUBSCRIBE
MANAGE SUBSCRIPTION**

BROWSE THE ARCHIVE

TERMS OF USE



SUBSCRIBE TO NEWSLETTER

SIGN UP

PAGE-TURNER

A DIARY'S UNWANTED INSIGHTS

In "Forbidden Notebook," Alba de Céspedes upends the familiar story of self-liberation through writing.

By Sarah Chihaya

January 31, 2023

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.





On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

Illustration by Karlotta Freier

It all starts so simply: an unseasonably warm Sunday morning in November, errands to run, a waking family to get home to. On the first page of Alba de Céspedes's novel "[Forbidden Notebook](#)" (Astra House)—published in 1952 and newly translated by [Ann Goldstein](#)—we meet Valeria Cossati as she strolls through the streets of Rome, feeling a "childish pleasure" that's rare in her busy life as a wife, mother, and office worker. She stops in a tobacconist's shop to pick up some cigarettes for her husband, Michele. Waiting in line, her eyes fall on "a stack of notebooks in the window. They were black, shiny, thick, the type

used in school, in which—before even starting it—I would immediately write my name excitedly on the first page: Valeria.” She is immediately seized with the certainty that she must buy one, “impelled” by some unrecognizable craving.

What makes Valeria do it? Is it the freedom of walking down the street on a beautiful morning, mercifully alone, having bought flowers solely for her own pleasure? (The first of many shades of Virginia Woolf.) Is it the childhood recollection of writing her name on the first page and the anticipation that she might do it again, reclaiming herself as “Valeria” rather than “mamma” or “Signora Cossati” for the first time in more than twenty years? Whatever it is, the compulsion is so strong that she insists that she must have the notebook, even when the tobacconist tells her that it’s illegal for him to sell anything but cigarettes on Sunday. From the novel’s first line—“I was wrong to buy this notebook, very wrong”—the notebook is equally freighted with self-flagellating judgment and a burning, mysterious desire. Unbeknownst to her husband and

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast’s [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

with the person she is—or could be—outside the restrictive role she plays in the family.

And yet the object that carries all this meaning is such a modest one: a plain composition book, like the one a schoolchild would use. The novel’s 1957 English edition—translated by Isabel Quigly and titled “The Secret”—often replaces “notebook” with “diary,” or sometimes with the more sensational “secret diary.” But Goldstein, like de Céspedes herself, uses the word “diary” only occasionally, relying most often on *quaderno*, or “notebook”: an unromantic, quotidian word. This makes a kind of pragmatic sense. In the novel’s breathless first pages, and throughout, Valeria is preoccupied by the problem of where to hide the book from Michele and their college-age children, Riccardo and Mirella, as she stashes it desperately in all the places that they’re least likely to

investigate—the kitchen ragbag, a basket of mending, the linen cupboard—realizing that she alone has no private space in their home.

While reading a published diary, either real or fictional, it can be easy to focus on its content: a diary offers the illusion of pure internality, a glimpse directly into the writer's soul. To this end, "Forbidden Notebook" is a tragic romance, on one level between Valeria and a potential lover, but, on a deeper level, between the persona she presents to her family, friends, and co-workers and the private self that she discovers as she writes—that is, between Valeria and the notebook itself. We can never forget, however, that Valeria's notebook is a *thing*, a foreign body in the limited space afforded by her small apartment, and its thingness is an inescapable problem. Valeria's inner life isn't the novel's only concern; the family's financial struggles amid the political uncertainty of postwar Italy can never be fully eclipsed by her personal development. Much as we might long for her to run away from familial servitude, taking only her notebook and her aspirations, she's confronted constantly by her loving but torturous family

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

This emphasis on materiality is not the only reason that I'm so fixated on the word "notebook." There's also its association with the classroom, the first thing Valeria thinks of when she encounters it. It doesn't begin as a "secret diary"; in fact, when she first sits down to write, she struggles to summon anything personal. ("I find I have nothing to say except to report on the daily struggle I endure to hide it," she writes.) The notebook becomes a kind of exercise book, devoted to the painstaking practice of daily observation. Like the black *quaderni* of Valeria's schooldays, it's a pedagogical tool, and writing in it becomes a new education—in how to read herself and, consequently, in how to read the world.

The first lesson in Valeria's education is realizing how far she has receded from a clear sense of herself after twenty-two years of being a wife and mother. She

is so wholly contained by these roles that her family finds the idea of her keeping a diary laughable; as far as they're concerned, she couldn't possibly have anything to write about. When we first meet her, Valeria is complicit in this myth. One of the reasons she can't tell anyone that she's writing is "the regret that I spend so much time doing it. I often complain that I have too many things to do, that I'm the family servant, the household slave—that I never have a moment to read a book, for example . . . in a certain sense that servitude has also become my strength, the halo of my martyrdom." She feels like the only adult in a world of children, both at home and with her old schoolmates, a group of women whose relative wealth and leisure—Valeria is the only one who works outside the home—mark just how much she and Michele have failed to meet their families' prewar standard of living. Her only joy, she states with a terrible sense of false contentment, is in "tiredness." At forty-three, she feels old, yet the act of sneaking around to write also makes her feel embarrassingly childish.

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

think about what she might want or need, by the spring she has cultivated the skill of self-regard: "I find time to look at myself, to write in my diary. I wonder how it is that before I couldn't. I looked at my face for a long time, at my eyes, and my image conveyed to me a sense of joy." The exhaustion of sacrifice is no longer her only happiness.

This education in perception also refines Valeria's attunement to the people who share her life. As she engages in the daily exercise of observation, she becomes both a more precise writer and a skilled, though sometimes unwilling, close reader—not of books, but of experiences. Where she used to glide through the world blithely, letting comments or minor difficulties slip away, she now finds everything dense with meaning. "Ever since I happened to start keeping a diary," she writes, "I seem to have discovered that a word or an

intonation can be just as important, or even more, than the facts we're accustomed to consider important." A new critical faculty emerges in her, though its presence is often unwelcome; it turns out that knowledge, when cultivated with honesty and clarity, cannot be limited to the self. Valeria soon begins to discern the many necessary elisions and assumptions that have shaped her relationships with those she loves, and realizes that none of them—Michele, or the children, or her mother—are transparent to one another, despite the smallness of the family sphere. Proximity, she realizes, cannot be confused with intimacy.

Valeria's burgeoning ability to parse the world around her extends beyond the home, as she unwittingly begins to give voice to a whisper of political consciousness. She draws connections between her small life and the larger world, connections that Michele and her friends refuse to dwell on. Comparing her family's economic plight with the success of their peers, she reflects, "If I think about it carefully, I sense that that happened because, during the war,

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

understand the secret meaning of life," she writes. "But," she continues, "I don't know if it's a good thing, I'm afraid not."

This fear—of examining the life you're trapped in too closely—begins to work its way through the book. Early on, Valeria expresses discomfort at how writing something down in the journal makes her accountable. "We're always inclined to forget what we've said or done in the past, partly in order not to have the tremendous obligation to remain faithful to it," she writes. "Otherwise, it seems to me, we would all discover that we're full of mistakes and, above all, contradictions, between what we intended to do and what we have done, between what we would desire to be and what we are content to be." That night, she hides the notebook with extra caution. Reading this, I felt a budding anticipation; surely our heroine would overcome this anxiety and learn

to look directly at what she intends to do and what she desires. Surely she would act out the triumphant narrative of self-actualization that contemporary readers have come to demand from sympathetic but thwarted characters.

For a short time, Valeria does just this, allowing herself to wonder what it would be like to act on her fantasies. Ultimately, though, the heightened perception developed by the notebook makes any kind of life—the one she lives or the one she dreams of living—equally impossible. Looking at her husband and son, she cannot stop herself from seeing their insecurities and weaknesses. Looking at the wealthy man who would be her lover, she sees a man rendered vulnerable by his reliance upon money. Looking at her daughter, she perceives her own limitations; looking at anything, she sees so much that she wants to change, yet the hard facts of her life make change inaccessible. “All my feelings, thus dissected, rot, become poison,” she laments. “At night, when we sit at the table together, we seem transparent and loyal, without intrigues, but I know now that none of us show what we truly are, we hide, we all

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

like her salvation, ends up being her doom. At the end, she acknowledges the notebook's revelations but also its fatal violence, writing that “all women hide a black notebook, a forbidden diary. And they all have to destroy it.”

Alba de Céspedes lived a life quite different from Valeria's. The granddaughter of the first president of Cuba, the daughter of an ambassador, and the wife of a diplomat, de Céspedes was born in Rome but eventually settled in Paris, and one wonders how familiar she could have been with the lives of “all women.” She was twice jailed for antifascist activities, before and during the Second World War; founded a short-lived but influential literary journal; and was a hugely successful writer of fiction, screenplays, journalism, and poetry. Yet it is the very smallness of “Forbidden Notebook”'s scope that makes it so powerful. It was originally published as a serial in the weekly magazine *La Settimana Incom Illustrata*, over roughly the same six-month span in which the notebook's

entries unfold: between December, 1950, and June, 1951. Reading it, I often imagined what it would have been like to encounter these installments in real time, perhaps reading them at a kitchen table, in a cramped apartment, after the rest of the household had gone to bed—in the very same kind of moments that Valeria spends writing in the notebook. Valeria is not a writer, and her notebook is not an exercise in artistic development. She is simply a woman expressing her desperate longing to finally be seen and to see herself, and one wonders how many of her readers, then and now, have been the same. ♦

NEW YORKER FAVORITES

- The repressive, authoritarian soul of “[Thomas the Tank Engine](#).”
- Why the last snow on Earth [may be red](#).
- Harper Lee’s [abandoned true-crime novel](#).

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast’s [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

- Five *New Yorker* films have received nominations for the 2023 Oscars. [Watch them](#).

[Sign up](#) for our daily newsletter to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Sarah Chihaya is the author of the forthcoming book “[Bibliophobia](#)” and a co-author of “[The Ferrante Letters: An Experiment in Collective Criticism](#).”

More: [Literature](#) [Fiction](#) [Novels](#) [Italian Literature](#) [Diaries](#)

BOOKS & FICTION

Get book recommendations, fiction, poetry, and dispatches from the world of literature in your in-box. Sign up for the Books & Fiction newsletter.

E-mail address

Sign up

By signing up, you agree to our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy & Cookie Statement](#).

Read More

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.

By Patti Smith

SKETCHBOOK

A GEORGE SANTOS GUIDE TO LYING

Learning to fib with the New York congressman.

By Barry Blitt

CROSSWORD

THE CROSSWORD: TUESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2023

Start of many a rap moniker: three letters.

By Anna Shechtman

NAME DROP

NAME DROP: TUESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2023

Can you guess the notable person in six clues or fewer?

By **Will Nediger**

Manage Preferences

On January 17, 2023, Condé Nast's [Privacy Policy](#) was updated to clarify existing disclosures about our processing of personal information, and to include rights available to some users under applicable local law. By using our products and services, you agree to the updated [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#), which can be found in the website footer.