BOOK BRIEFS

THE NEWS FROM DUBLIN: Stories
by Colm Tóibín
Scribner. 304 pages, $18.

Over the past 35 years, the Irish author Colm Tóibín has demonstrated his ability to write brilliant nonfiction, plays, poetry, novels, and, perhaps the most difficult form of all, short stories. *The News from Dublin* is Tóibín's third collection of short fiction, eight stories anchored by a marvelous novella not previously published, *The Catalan Girls*. Not all the tales are explicitly gay, but perhaps it's worth considering the queer eye on the rest of the world, the spy eye that many of us develop while growing up hiding in the margins of mainstream culture, where the view is always different, and often better.

Take, for example, the "gayest" of these wide-ranging stories, "Sleep," about an estranged older gay couple, one Jewish, the other Irish, told in the first person by the Irish character, who is devastated by the death of his brother. "I am old enough to remember when things were different," he observes. "But no one cares now, in this apartment building or in the world outside, that we are men and we wake often in the same bed. No one cares that when we touch each other's face we find we both need to shave."

"Sleep," as with many other Tóibín tales—which are sometimes historical, often international, and always absorbing—can change emotional pitch and character focus on a dime, recalling the bracing whip-crack effects of Isaac Babel or Hubert Selby Jr. It's also worth celebrating the eroticism Tóibín has woven into every story—"when I touch your body I find a body like mine, though in better shape and twenty and more years younger. ... We are cut and uncut, as they say in this country where we both live now, where you were born."

BRIAN BOULDREY

TRANSCENDENT: A Memoir
by Laverne Cox
Gallery Books. 256 pages, $30.

Some celebrity memoirs are more than tell-alls replete with backstage drama. Laverne Cox' *Transcendent* mixes confessions of trauma with therapy-speak, Southern vernacular, internet slang, and the scholarly heft of Black feminist theory. The *Orange Is the New Black* star's debut book is about surviving. Cox peels away the armor forged from childhood sexual abuse and near-daily beatings. She tells of a stint in an orphanage and, at eleven, an attempted suicide, all the while carrying the wounds left by an unloving mother. Now, her survival also means living through the violence of being a hyper-visible Black trans woman.

Especially with a celebrity memoir, I'm here for the tea, and Cox serves it. She reveals the pay gap on the Emmy-winning Netflix dramedy, the eviction notices she received even after her *Time* magazine cover, and entanglements with emotionally unavailable men, including a closeted cop who voted for Trump. What Cox does here feels fresh. She makes Foucault and bell hooks accessible, showing how theory saved her life without sounding pretentious. She examines depictions of trans people while examining her own flaws. Desired but not truly seen, she admits being complicit in the male gaze she critiques. She sets aside the "born in the wrong body" trope to rethink of her transness as a lifelong friction between inner knowing and external policing. She reflects on growing up Black and femme in post-segregation South while enduring street harassment, internalized racism, and respectability politics.

Despite the harrowing confessions and critique, Cox' wicked humor shapes the journey. But unlike most celebrity memoirists, Cox openly admits that she's still struggling, that she's still learning how to self-regulate. Expect no "it gets better" platitudes here.

SAM DAPANAS

A QUEER INHERITANCE
Alternative Histories in the National Trust
by Michael Hall
Bloomsbury Publishing. 432 pages, $35.

If your mental image of Britain hovers somewhere between Merchant Ivory and *Bridgerton*, chances are you'd love the National Trust, which stewards a substantial chunk of its historic heritage. Stately homes, parks, woodlands, even the odd castle—the National Trust maintains and opens them to the public, with all the attendant responsibilities for education, wildlife, and teashops that come with being a British institution.

Predictably, in recent years the Trust has become a cultural battleground, with a conservative faction battling to keep its sites free of awkward discussions about colonialism and oppression, and a progressive wing keen to emphasize that history includes everyone. Into that tension steps Michael Hall and *A Queer Inheritance*, arguing that whatever else the National Trust may be, queerness has always been a fundamental part of it. The book covers an impressive range of ground, both geographically and temporally, and Hall's definition of queer places is thoughtful and inclusive.

One of the things England does best is eccentrics, and there are some fantastic examples here. Alongside the usual suspects (Lord Byron, the Ladies of Llangollen, Harold Nicolson, and Vita Sackville-West), there's also the enthusiastically bisexual James Lees-Milne (responsible for the acquisition of many houses by the Trust), the frustratingly chaste T. E. Lawrence, the "decadent, theatrical" Eddy Sackville-West, and the throuple of producer-director Edy Craig and her partners "Tony" Atwood and Chris St. John, known as "the boys." It's colorful, informative, and offers fascinating insights into an often minimized (and sometimes disproportionately influential) side of the British establishment—and the pictures are good, too.

SASHA GARWOOD

THE QUEER FACE OF WAR
Portraits and Stories from Ukraine
by J. Lester Feder
Verlag Kettler. 135 pages, $35.

J. Lester Feder, an American of Ukrainian ancestry, has spent more than a decade chronicling the struggles of queer people in Europe confronting authoritarianism and violence. Feder's beautifully produced *The Queer Face of War* surveys LGBTQ+ Ukrainians, who have been targets of harassment and bigotry, from the Euromaidan protests in 2013, to the war with Russia in 2014, to the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, which is this volume's primary focus.

Tenacity, pride, courage, and selflessness are on full display in Feder's sensitive, unsparing interviews and photos of people of all age groups and circumstances. Despite experiencing sustained, brutal, and heart-rending hardships perpetrated by the Russian invaders, an overriding quality shared by the book's subjects is a great love for their country. These are proud Ukrainians despite it all. Most often their last resort is to leave the country. Some have had no choice.

Also underscored is the continuing surge of LGBTQ+ support groups, Pride events, and efforts at inclusive legislation in Ukraine, despite attacks by far-right groups and setbacks due to the invasion. Many LGBTQ+ soldiers are serving on the front lines. A young gay medical student and combat medic is quoted as saying: "On the front lines, any day could be our last. So this is the time to start changing our lives for the better." The testimonies and photos provide a moving account of hope, love, activism, and defiance, a vivid snapshot of the ongoing struggle for democracy and respect.

BRUCE GOODRICH

LORCA IN VERMONT
The Spanish Poet and His American Lover
by Patricia A. Billingsley
High Road Books. 232 pages, $27.95

Philip Cummings, a Vermont native who had met Federico García Lorca a year earlier while studying in Madrid, invited the Spanish poet to visit his home state during a planned 1929 trip to the U.S. While the circumstances of this sojourn have long been shrouded in mystery, Patricia Billingsley's brief study nicely reconstructs their "10 Days in Eden (Mills)."

In this remote area, the pair hiked, toured the countryside, and translated Lorca's debut book into English, spending nights together on a "sleeping porch" conveniently isolated from the rest of the house. Lorca, wounded by a recent breakup and missing his friends and big-city nightlife, also longed for a discreet but long-term relationship. Eight years younger, the recent college graduate Cummings had no interest in anything long-term or socially unconventional. Lorca expresses his declining enthusiasm for his host in a letter home, writing that Cummings "gazes at me with the tenderness of a wounded cow."

After a brief reunion in Spain in 1930, Lorca abruptly ended their correspondence and never mentioned Cummings again. *Lorca in Vermont*'s epilogue details the years of official silence surrounding this brief but consequential time the men spent together. Living much of his life in a heterosexual marriage, Cummings was also reluctant to acknowledge the truth until the late 1960s. Through deep research and access to both Lorca's letters and Cummings' summer 1929 journal, Billingsley does what she can to separate fact from fiction and homophobic "discretion." Along with photos from Lorca's visit and occasionally minute details of the couple's summer tryst, Billingsley also connects real places and events to the often surreal images in Lorca's Vermont-based poems.

REGINALD HARRIS

THE LESBIAN BAR CHRONICLES
The Living History and Hopeful Future of America's Dyke Dives and Sapphic Spaces
by Rachel Karp
Beacon Press. 280 pages, $19.95

In the roaring 1980s, there were more than 200 lesbian bars in the U.S. By 2021, that number was down to twenty. There's since been a resurgence, with more opening every year. Why did so many close? What's the need for them today? Rachel Karp, with help from Sarah Gabrielli, seeks to answer these questions in this compendium of oral histories of 34 lesbian bars across the U.S..

The book grew out of Karp and Gabrielli's podcast, *Cruising*. In 2021 they set out on a road trip to visit these bars and discover what made them tick. For those that were defunct, they interviewed denizens and, when possible, past owners. The book's historical sections capture a time when patrons were told where the exits were in case of a police raid. For newer bars, owners are interviewed and asked about their motives for opening a bar and the challenges they face. The question of inclusivity seems to separate the two eras. Historic bars were lesbian-only spaces, while today's bars emphasize that all are welcome—trans, nonbinary, even straight.

Perhaps this interview format works better in the podcast than in a book. Taking a tour of lesbian bars is best done in small, episode-sized doses. Assembled into one volume, the stories become repetitive. While each story has archival value, this is not a book that needs to be read from cover to cover.

ANNE LAUGHLIN

THE BEVERLY HILLS HOUSEWIFE
Hockney's Californian Muse and The World Beyond the Pool
by James Cahill
Thames & Hudson. 272 pages, $34.95

When was the last time you really peered into a picture, absorbing its details? In *The Beverly Hills Housewife*, art critic and novelist James Cahill invites readers to linger before a single painting, *Beverly Hills Housewife* (1966–67), by British artist David Hockney. Each chapter offers fresh insights and tools with which to contextualize the painting, creating a compelling narrative that persuades us that this specific image merits such considerable attention.

The book opens with key details about the young Hockney, who died last June. We learn how fascinated he was with California as both idea and place (even going so far as to dye his hair blond to look like a surfer), and how John Rechy's novel *City of Night* provided his initial guidebook to the American homosexual underground. We're introduced to Betty Freeman, the painting's subject, who seems to be looking at herself at a slight remove, as if conscious that she's playing a specific role. Freeman, a former pianist who would go on to support experimental composers such as John Cage and Philip Glass and to befriend numerous artists in addition to Hockney, became an important philanthropist and advocate for American contemporary art during the last decades of the 20th century.

Just as *Beverly Hills Housewife* set Hockney onto a dramatically new course, Freeman was just beginning to disentangle herself from an unsatisfying marriage. The painting captured both artist and subject at a key moment and began a friendship that would last four decades.

BRENDAN MCCALL

Below: The Beverly Hills Housewife.



ROMANTIC SENSATION
The Queer Lives of Leon A. Belmont, 1853–1927
by Lizzie Ehrenhalt
Univ. of Minnesota Press. 296 pages, $24.95

In her second book, historian Lizzie Ehrenhalt provides an absorbing account of a mysterious, extraordinary person who was in some ways rather ordinary. Born female into a working-class family in Massachusetts in 1853, Addie Liona Walker lived 25 years as a girl and a woman, 25 years as a man (Leon A. Belmont), and her last 25 years as a woman. There were romances with a man and several women, including one who was married to Belmont for twenty years. In Minneapolis for less than a year as the churchgoing Belmont, he became engaged to a woman and was then arrested and jailed for theft by swindle and cross-dressing. The resulting trial sparked a media frenzy among competing newspapers, which ran more than sixty stories about Belmont in 1880.

Throughout the scrupulously researched book, Ehrenhalt places seemingly bizarre behaviors in a cultural context that makes them seem less odd. Female-to-male cross-dressing emerged as a popular theme in dime novels and entertainments during and after the Civil War. The great westward expansion of Belmont's era was a chance for him to exploit new opportunities along with his gender transitions. Even Belmont's penchant for embezzlement and con artistry were part of a larger trend sparked by growing wealth and new banking practices. Belmont was determined to live according to his (or her) own rules, no matter how unusual, and did so more than a century before the emergence of a broader understanding of gender.

CLAUDE PECK