

# Books

## Some good summer hammock reads set for July release

### EX LIBRIS

STEVE DONOGHUE

It's an old axiom in the publishing world that summer is a time for, shall we say, less demanding books, and this axiom is especially observed in the swelter of July, when every cool breeze is precious and the days stretch on forever. The axiom is mostly bunkum—passionate readers don't take summers off, of course (our hobby IS our vacation)—but even so, publishers make sure bookstores are full of action and adventure during the summer months.

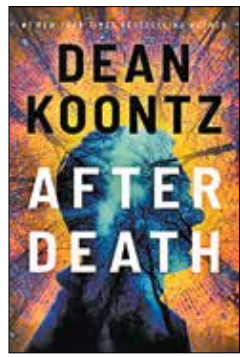
The "action and adventure" part can often be where the less demanding part comes in. It's certainly easy to write a two-fisted adventure tale in which the characters are all idiots, the dialogue is all cheesy, the plot twists are all predictable, and the heroes are all indestructible. Such books can be cheesy fun, but it's entirely possible to write action thrillers without writing such books. This month has plenty of new releases that just show up, punch things, and then take their bows and go straight to the library sale donation bin. But there are always pleasant exceptions, often crafted by old, experienced hands at putting some genuine fun and nuance into their international spy-craft or their crime-land shootouts.



Take, for instance, **The Collector** by Daniel Silva. This is the latest adventure in the author's long-running series starring art restorer (and spy, naturally) Gabriel Allon, and it hinges on a real-world event: the infamous 1990 theft of priceless works of art from the Isabella Stewart Gardner

Museum in Boston. Thieves disguised as cops entered the building after hours, and among the works of art they stole was "The Concert" by Vermeer.

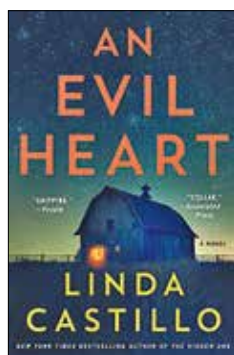
In this novel, the Italian police have discovered a dead millionaire—and an empty picture frame that may just have contained the Vermeer painting. They go to Gabriel Allon (he's an action-series main character, so he's got a lot more experience than they do, I guess), and he sets about jet-setting around the world to find the thieves. Silva has been writing Allon adventures for years now, and he does a very smooth, deceptively intelligent job at it. The last thing on Earth any publisher would want a summer book to claim is it's educational (although summer readers wouldn't mind it at all, I think), but even so, in addition to getting a good fast-paced adventure, you'll also learn quite a bit from "The Collector."



Not so much when it comes to **After Death**, the new summer novel from Dean Koontz. This one deals very firmly in the supernatural, although like so many of Koontz's books, it's grounded in a very well-portrayed

real world. This novel revolves around a character named Michael Mace, who's awakened in a morgue after his violent death only to discover not only is he still around—although maybe not technically alive—but also he's a kind of super-powered ghost, able to turn intangible and slip past any kind of surveillance or defense system. Because this is a Dean Koontz novel, he wants to use his new powers in the cause of good and, because this is a Koontz novel, there's a memorable villain—in this case a machine-efficient assassin catchily named Durand Calaphas—intent on stopping him at all costs. Given Michael Mace's origin story as one of Koontz's signature supernatural superheroes, longtime readers of this author will know quite a bit of what they can expect from this novel (which is, sure as the sunrise, the first in

what will be an ongoing series), but in the dog days of July, that's hardly a drawback, is it? Again, publishers are banking on the idea summertime readers will be looking with added longing for old fictional friends, for books that fit like soft, worn slippers.



This stays true even when those soft, worn slippers take the form of grim or grotesque proceedings. **An Evil Heart**, the new novel by Linda Castillo, for instance, certainly has nothing comforting or reas-

suring about it, and yet it's so obviously a "summer" book it practically comes with its own wine coolers. It's another adventure of stolid Police Chief Kate Burkholder, who this time is investigating the murder of a popular young Amish man whose body has been found, impaled on a crossbow bolt, on a lonely road in the middle of nowhere.

On the surface, this young man seems to have lived a perfect life, but the more Burkholder investigates, naturally, the more shadow and nuance she uncovers—and since the novel's underlying assumption is the Amish aren't big fans of shadow or nuance, suspicions begin to accumulate that this may have been some kind of religious execution. A great or abiding interest in all things Amish might be a bit much to ask of the beach-going crowd, but it hardly matters: The real draw of Castillo's novels is Chief Burkholder herself, who has terrier tenacity and instant likability in equal

proportions. If you're a murder-mystery reader and not already familiar with this terrific series, this sultry July might be just the time to fix that situation.



And, of course, the ranks of these summer books aren't filled only with old veterans. There's always room for something new. In the case of **Sleepless City**, for instance, the new part isn't the author—Reed

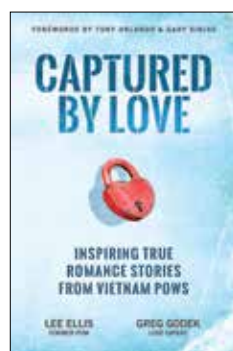
Farrel Coleman has been writing Robert Parker pastiche novels for years now—but rather the character and the series. This book starts the adventures of a character called Nick Ryan (a bit of a letdown after Durand Calaphas, but what can you do?), a kind of super-cop who usually works behind the scenes and outside the usual power-structures. Coleman is so skilled at this kind of gritty police-procedural novel readers will be pulled in right away, despite the somewhat silly premise. Aren't murderous gun-toting rogue cops bad enough? We really need the Extra-Strength variety?

But then, "somewhat silly premise" might work very well as a description of these friendly, easy going July releases just in general, right? These books—and plenty of their July counterparts—are designed for the hammock, the porch, and the AC-cooled living room couch. Plenty of time for Tolstoy in autumn.



STEVE DONOGHUE

## NEW BOOKS CORNER



"Captured by Love," by Lee Ellis and Greg Godek, Published May 30, 2023. Available at all book retailers and Amazon. Paperback, 352 pages.



Lee Ellis. PHOTO COURTESY OF LEE ELLIS

## Romance stories from 20 Top Gun POWs

In sharing how she first met her future husband, Everett Alvarez, then United Airlines VIP Host Tammy writes, "When the POWs were released, starting in February 1973, orders came from Mr. Ed Carlson, the president of United Airlines that we were to treat all returning Vietnam POWs as extra special VIPs. Once I saw his name on the list, I immediately asked the ticket counter agent to page the commander, and to bring him to my office. I then upgraded him to first class, I alerted the United captain and crew, and I ordered champagne for him on the flight."

Then Everett chimes in to reveal his side of the story, "I was surprised and pleased to be bumped up to first class, but I was dazzled by the charming and beautiful woman who escorted me! Before my flight, we spent a pleasant half hour together in Tammy's office that seemed like mere minutes. 'Nice girl,' I thought. At the gate she handed me her business card and said, 'Call me if you get back to Washington.' I gratefully tucked Miss Tammy Ilyas' card away in my wallet for future reference."

Seven months later they were married, and 49 years later they're still living happily ever after. This is just one brief example of the stories that you'll read in "Captured by Love: Inspiring True Romance Stories from Vietnam POWs."

Most Vietnam POWs who returned from the Vietnam War after five, six, seven and even eight years of incarceration and mistreatment in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" prison system had resilient relationships that withstood this test of separation. Can you imagine many long years isolated from your country, your family, and especially your wife? Those hardships are what make these successful romance stories so special. But they have never been told until now.

During our Nam POW reunions, I kept hearing our guys telling stories about how they met their wives, and how

great their marriages were. Many of these stories were so amazing even Hollywood screenwriters could not dream up—or dare make up—such incredible examples of romance, love and marriage success. How ironic that the POWs' physical and mental suffering and years of separation helped them create great romance and lasting love.

You'll be swept up into some extraordinary tales such as:

- Carole who boldly gave her husband's POW-MIA bracelet to John Wayne—he wore it for years.
- Pan Am stewardess Suzy wore a bracelet for POW Bill Bailey, whom she did not know. But she prayed for him daily and miraculously met and married him when he came home.
- After eight years in prison, one POW said to his wife in his first phone call upon his release, "Hi Jane. It's Tarzan." You will laugh and cry when you learn why.

In addition to their stories, these vibrant couples also share their personal "Love Lessons" on principles that have kept their relationships healthy and thriving. Though these lessons may seem fundamental and seemingly obvious, it doesn't mean implementing them is easy. We are all imperfect humans, and lasting love is usually the rewarding result of putting our mate on a pedestal and accepting ourselves as a work-in-progress. Read more at POWromance.com.

Lee Ellis is a retired Air Force colonel and former Vietnam POW who grew up on a farm near Commerce, Georgia. Since his military retirement, he's been a speaker, author and leadership coach for more than 25 years. His wife Mary is a licensed counselor, and they live in Dawsonville, Georgia. They're about to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

### BOOK REVIEW

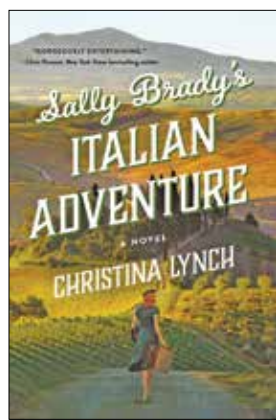
## Woman of the hour

BY ANNE GIRARDI

Christina Lynch's new book, "Sally Brady's Italian Adventure," is a historical novel set mostly in Fascist-era Italy in the years leading up to and during World War II. Its U.S. cover features a poorly produced composite photo of a smartly dressed young woman walking away from the viewer—in other words, on the surface it looks exactly like roughly 9,000 historical novels released in the last 14 hours. Readers who spend too much time reading such books will know what to expect: a flawless, borderline superhuman female protagonist, a gigantic cast of brutish, knuckle-dragging men, and a series of utterly unbelievable plot twists to get to the finale.

"Sally Brady's Italian Adventure" will present those jaded readers with a very pleasant surprise. It's an energetic, confidently smart, and wonderfully charismatic book, a picaresque tale with very hard edges, a cinema-ready blend of hairbreadth pacing, vivid, realistic dialogue and, most of all, a thoroughly cheer-worthy main character. Sally Brady, refugee from both the hard-luck American Midwest and the legendary Hollywood of the 1930s, finds herself in occupied Siena fighting for her life, the lives of her new friends and, of course, for good cause.

"I'm tired of wars," says a 93-year-old woman Sally meets. "I'm tired of men and their fighting." And her many tangles with the local carabinieri have certainly brought Sally around to the same way of thinking.



"Sally Brady's Italian Adventure," by Christina Lynch, St. Martin's Press 2023, 368 pgs., \$2.

Yet, although she never loses her moral compass, wartime circumstances do sometimes prompt her to misplace it. "I killed a man without hesitating," she agonizes at one point after many dark turns. "Did he have a wife, kids? Did he believe in what he was doing, or was he just following orders?"

And, in the course of those dark turns, Sally Brady does manage to meet some good men. Most prominent to the plot is Alessandro, who refers to her, quite accurately, as "one tough broad" but nonetheless touches her heart—as does flamboyant, charismatic Carabinieri officer Favagrossa, assistant to Siena's ogrish leader, who saves the day at a crucial moment in the book's climax. If a movie is ever made of this book, Favagrossa will be the instant audience favorite.

"Sally Brady's Italian Adventure" will thrill you and enchant you. It's a genuinely entertaining read.

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pounds ("if you can imagine a grand piano shaped like a nuclear weapon") and was terrifying even in death: "To stand beside a just-landed giant bluefin, still slick from salt water, feels akin to standing beside a natural marvel like Niagara Falls or an erupting volcano. There's beauty, but also danger."

Unfortunately, the main danger in these pages comes from the humans who are systematically overfishing bluefin tuna and driving the species to the brink of extinction. In pursuit of this story, Pinchin's investigations take her from naturalist Carl Safina, who's "aggrieved by [the tuna

population's] depletion and incensed by the negligent management and the greed that drove it" to, of all people, the religious leader Sun Myung Moon, whose Reunification Church held a "world tuna tournament" in Gloucester. There's even an individual star tuna, Amelia, whose globe-spanning travels were as epic as any international explorer's.

"Kings of Their Own Ocean" is an exuberant book in its bones, celebrating these magnificent creatures and the dedicated men and women who are trying to study and save them. And if the book serves also as a wake-up call, so much the better.