

how American culture has infiltrated the island nation, from Kentucky Fried Chicken joints to movies and TV. And then there are the Deyalings themselves, their neighbors and their somewhat nutty extended family. They are good and generous people—but the Deyalings, especially Clyde, believe what they believe, and they're sticking to it.

Golden Child is one of those uncommon debut novels that makes you eager to see what its author does next.

—Arlene McKanic

★ The Weight of a Piano



By **Chris Cander**

Knopf
\$26.95, 336 pages
9780525654674
Audio, eBook available

Popular Fiction

Decades and continents apart, two young girls are each unexpectedly gifted a piano. In the Soviet Union during the 1960s, Katya's piano comes to her from the mysterious German tenant who lives down the hall. In 1990s California, Clara receives hers as a surprise from her father. Katya excels at playing the piano, to which she feels extremely attached, and she centers her education and her self-expression on her musical talent. Clara is similarly attached to hers—not for her talent (of which there is little) but because she received it shortly before her father and mother died in a mysterious house fire.

When Clara, now in her mid-20s, decides to sell the piano, she realizes that she isn't ready to part with her past. But she has already found a buyer, and he is extremely determined. The twisting mysteries of Chris Cander's third novel are set into motion, and the result is a charming, puzzling plot that gets more exciting and addictive the deeper you sink into it.

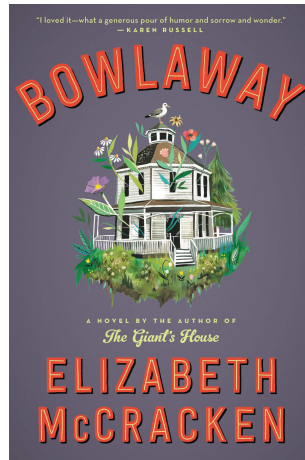
The Weight of a Piano ruminates on the gravity held by the objects in our lives. Both Katya and Clara are heavily fixated on their pianos; they feel that it is an extension of themselves in certain ways. For Katya, losing the piano means losing everything, but Clara has a chance to come to terms with her painful attachment through a series of unraveling secrets.

Short chapters help the braided plot to avoid becoming overwhelming, and the novel is well-researched, from the Cyrillic script to the

exquisitely bleak "sailing stones" in Death Valley. This reviewer just happened to be, in a past life, a piano tuner, and Cander's unadorned prose composes some truly beautiful descriptions of the joy of music.

—Leslie Hinson

★ Bowlaway



By **Elizabeth McCracken**

Ecco
\$27.99, 369 pages
9780062862853
Audio, eBook available

Historical Fiction

To tell a good tale, you need drama—and in this area, **Bowlaway** spares no expense. A turn-of-the-20th-century candlepin bowling alley works its way into people's lives and under their skin in Elizabeth McCracken's sixth book.

After she seems to materialize in a cemetery in Salford, Massachusetts, Bertha Truitt opens Truitt's Alleys (later rechristened Bowlaway), which takes on a life as mysterious as her own. Bertha's oddities are numerous: bicycling in a split skirt, building an octagonal house named Superba high on a hill, marrying a black doctor named Leviticus Sprague and then letting women bowl in full view of spectators. The whole being of Bertha scandalizes and perplexes. When Bertha is struck down in a bewildering accident that evokes (for this reader, anyhow) a scene from the fantastic but short-lived sitcom "Pushing Daisies," her death sets the lives of those in her orbit spinning.

"Our subject is love because our subject is bowling," McCracken's narrator opines early in the novel. The love in **Bowlaway** takes many forms: love of a spouse, love of a child, love of self and love of a capricious game. People love the alleys; they hate the alleys; they keep coming back to the alleys. Bowlaway forms the linchpin in the lives of an eccentric cast, from Bertha's disconsolate widower to Joe Wear, the young watchman who first found Bertha in the cemetery. Joe becomes manager before an unexplained disappearance, but his fate is intertwined with Bertha's and the bowling alley, no matter how long he stays away from the lanes.

In **Bowlaway**, McCracken's prose is well-tooled, hilarious and tender, thoughtful and jocular. Her characters inhabit their world so completely, so bodily, that they could've truly existed. Her detailed observations make the bi-

zarre seem plausible, and always enjoyable.

—Melissa Brown

American Spy



By **Lauren Wilkinson**

Random House
\$27, 304 pages
9780812998955
eBook available

Debut Fiction

After a break-in at her home in which she is forced to defend herself from an assassin, Marie Mitchell decides to document her life for the benefit of her children in case she is one day killed. So begins Lauren Wilkinson's debut novel, **American Spy**, which chronicles the life of a black woman recruited to the CIA during the height of the Cold War.

In the ensuing pages, Marie recounts her early childhood infatuation with spies, such as James Bond in *Goldfinger*, and her own family's role in law enforcement, from her father's position in the Harlem police department to her sister Helene's work as an Army intelligence officer. Even though she proves more than adept at both physical combat techniques and mental manipulation of her own "recruits"—the kind of stuff that only the best spies are capable of—Marie is consigned to being a paper pusher for much of her career in the FBI. So she is more than surprised when she is approached to work undercover for the CIA in a high-profile case.

The CIA needs Marie to get close to and undermine Robert Sankara, the revolutionary president of the tiny West African nation of Burkina Faso. At first, Marie is reluctant to accept the job, but her desire to make something more of her life—and perhaps her despair over the mysterious death of her sister—convinces her otherwise. Taking on the task becomes more than complicated, however, when she develops a real affection for Sankara, who will eventually father her two boys, thereby causing her to question her loyalty to the U.S. and its policies.

While not as complex as a John le Carré spy thriller, Wilkinson's debut is both emotional and poignant, and one that readers can easily get caught up in.

—G. Robert Frazier



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