

## BRIEFLY NOTED

**Heaven on Earth**, by *Sadakat Kadri* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This account of Sharia law relates that, in the early centuries of Islamic jurisprudence, it was conventional for scholars, when called upon to decide a case, to weep and refuse to pass judgment until they were dragged to the bench. Today, Muslim jurists tend to be much less reluctant to judge, and the past forty years have seen a troubling increase in the endorsement (although still rarely the application) of Sharia's harshest penalties. To understand this shift, Kadri travels from India to Istanbul to study Sharia as it is currently practiced. He also provides a vivid history of Islam, and shows that new developments in the field of God's law have nearly always been occasioned by political needs in the earthly realm. Kadri's writing is full of elegance and wit, but his conclusions are pessimistic.

**Memoir of a Debulked Woman**, by *Susan Gubar* (Norton). In 2008, Gubar, the co-author of a seminal feminist text, "The Madwoman in the Attic," received a diagnosis of ovarian cancer, a disease with an insidiously high mortality rate, whose symptoms are often mistaken for the typical discomforts of middle age. Here she chronicles, with a sense of genuine bafflement, how an early acceptance of her "death sentence" gave way to the "gutting, draining, bagging, and poisoning" of chemotherapy and a series of horrific operations, including debulking—the partial removal of a tumor that cannot be completely excised—and the removal of nearby organs that may have been affected. Gubar indicts current ovarian-cancer treatments as "deficient

and debasing." But despite her suffering she infuses her book with profound gratitude for family, friends, and colleagues, "realizing I will exist only once in my idiosyncrasy, no more and never again."

**Pure**, by *Andrew Miller* (Europa). In this enigmatic novel, set on the eve of the French Revolution, Jean-Baptiste Baratte, a provincial engineer, is tasked with removing "every last knucklebone" from the centuries-old cemetery of Les Innocents. He works at the behest of an imperious minister of Louis XVI who wants the graveyard free of stench and "poison." Miller deftly places the engineer's story against the backdrop of a country eagerly interrogating both its past and its present. "Is *this* modern?" Baratte asks himself. "And these people, are they the party of the future or of the past?" The mounting corridors of human remains that he collects can provide no answer, but their presence becomes an apt metaphor for the bones of history that the city and its occupants must pick through.

**The Kissing List**, by *Stephanie Reents* (Hogarth). In this debut collection of connected short stories, a character has sex in exchange for a BCBG dress, a male admirer turns out to be a perverted stalker, and temp work at an investment bank is likened to Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative. Reents's reality is bleak, as her protagonists, all female, navigate their way through early adulthood in a world cluttered with narcissistic men and discarded friendships. The stories are imaginative and skillfully written, but their quality varies widely and the links between them are often confusing. In the most moving story, the pedagogical "process of elimination" takes on a chilling new meaning for a writer of school exams whose brother was killed in Iraq. Reents seems most intent on capturing what one character calls "the incidental poetry of life," but her scale tends to tip more toward the incidental than the poetic.



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