landish, death-defying schemes through which Knottspeed drags his broken body. The object of his destructive search through Portland, Ore., and Los Angeles slowly comes to the forefront as he careens from bar to bar: a mysterious woman named Maria. Knottspeed is trying to find her with the aid of a paid friend named Fencepost Beckenshire, a slew of angry cab drivers, and a doctor who has lost his way. Bullets fly, knives are drawn, and death is waiting to join the fray as the characters cuss, fight, and drink their way out of the dull, uneventful lives they had led before Knottspeed arrived. Will they survive the chaos? Will they survive Knottspeed? All roads collide in Johnson’s irreverent, chaotic novel, with an ending that will leave readers stunned. (Feb.)

Painted Trillium


Brandt’s engaging first novel follows the life of a young woman living in Murfreesboro, Tenn., during the Civil War. Carrie Blaylock, her mother, and her little sister live under Union occupation along with a former slave and her son. The army consumes everything, leaving the family teetering on the edge of starvation. Life is worse for the Blaylocks because Carrie’s fiancé and brother fought and died for the Confederacy, making the family traitors. Carrie’s loneliness and fear threaten to consume her until Capt. John Lockridge comes to investigate the theft of the family’s pigs by fellow Union soldiers. A deep friendship blooms, but Carrie resists her increasingly strong feelings for John. Not only is he an enemy soldier, but she has decided to live a life independent of any man. Brandt explores the complexities of the Civil War, handling war, race, and gender with brutal honesty. Characters struggle to line up their political ideals, regardless of their views, with the reality of war and the human suffering of everyone involved. Brandt has published several nonfiction books on Tennessee history and culture and uses that background to paint the essence and struggles of the men and women of the Civil War into a rich novel. (BookLife)

Heavenly Khan


This fictional chronicle of the transition between the Sui and Tang dynasties in ancient China dwells on the minutiae of the court, producing a lackluster narrative. While there is some promise of excitement in the early struggles between the Li family (who eventually take power as the Tang) and the Sui forces, the description of these battles is supplanted by the details of daily life in the imperial Tang court. The pages are full of the quotidian edicts of the second Tang emperor, Li Shimin, many followed by reversals as advised by Wei Zheng and other counselors who continually recommend leniency and frugality. In addition there are some modern phrases in the dialogue (“I’ll go 50-50 with you”) that ring false in the historical context. The few maps included give this the feel of a dry historical text rather than a vibrant work of fiction. While overall this may be an accurate portrayal of imperial court life, it makes for rather dull reading. (BookLife)

The Lonely Hearts Hotel


In a love story of epic proportions, O’Neill’s (Daydreams of Angels) excellent historical novel plumbs the depths of happiness and despair for two orphans determined not to let the world get them down. Stepping into the minds of children, circus performers, prostitutes, gangsters, and into the dismal days of the Great Depression, the world on these pages is unforgettable and larger than the moon. Pierrot and Rose are abandoned to an orphanage in 1914 Montreal, where they grow up together and discover their talent for absurdist, Vaudevillian-style performances in front of the other orphan children, then later in front of rich patrons in the city. Pierrot, with his mesmerizing piano, and Rose, with her invisible dancing bear, make lavish plans for their artistic career, fall in love with each other, and are inseparable—until they are forced apart as teens. Through the ensuing years, each holds on to their dreams of extravagant circus shows and of finding each other again, while entering a dark world of drugs, sex, starvation, and survival. At the very end of the tunnel are floodlights to the stage, sad clowns, gigantic moon props, chorus girls, and the one thing that time and distance cannot diminish—true love grander than any circus act. This novel will cast a spell on readers from page one. (Feb.)

Mystery/Thriller

The Lost Order


In the 12th thriller featuring former Justice Department operative Cotton Malone (after 2016’s The 14th Colony), Berry delivers exactly what fans of this bestselling series have come to expect—an intricately plotted, action-paced story line that seamlessly blends history with provocative speculation. While on assignment for the Smithsonian in rural Arkansas, Malone becomes entangled with the “most powerful subversive organization in the history of the United States.” Founded in 1854, the Knights of the Golden Circle have allegedly been guarding billions in stolen gold and silver for more than a century. But the treasure can only be found by locating a series of invaluable artifacts that are encrypted with a seemingly unbreakable code. Malone’s quest becomes deadly when he discovers links to a conspiracy by the ambitious present-day speaker of the house, who wants to radically change the political power structure of the country. The fusion of contemporary and historical adventure makes this a page-turner of the highest order. Author tour: Agent: Simon Lipskar, Writers House. (Apr.)