California, where they learn that the theft is connected with shadowy criminal syndicate El Anillo. Back in 1909, Brentwood steels himself to propose to his beloved, Crook’s rest home attendant. Clichéd developments and lackluster prose (“A light scent of vanilla ice cream flavored her presence”) are a barrier to engagement with the unremarkable plot. (Jan.)

3 Women, 4 Towns, 5 Bodies & Other Stories

Walker’s moody story collection blends elements of noir, thriller, and romance. Many of the 12 entries focus on dominant and resourceful female protagonists who utilize their wits and sexuality to avenge the men who have harmed or underestimated them. Perhaps the best selection—and the most literary in tone—is “The Second Coming,” in which an underhanded reverend meets his match in a savvy young woman. Also notable is “Coming Home,” in which a soldier in 1839 Hungary is reunited with a past lover. Walker’s writing is at its finest in moments of descriptive storytelling. In contrast, repetitive erotic interludes often become more gratuitous than integral to the plot. For example, in the title novella, a female sniper, whose primary targets are violent and abusive men, silences a potential witness by the aliens, a terrible cycle of violent retribution begins, and Mera and Derrick must choose sides. Turnbull uses a beautifully drawn cast of black characters to convey the complexity of ordinary hardship in extraordinary times. This is an ideal story for fans of Emily St. John Mandel’s Station Eleven and other literary science fiction novels. Agent: Martha Millard, Sterling Lord Literistic. (June)

★ The Women’s War
Jenna Glass. Del Rey, $28 (560p) ISBN 978-1-984817-20-4

Glass’s substantial debut stands out as both social commentary on contemporary issues of bodily autonomy, gender, and social power and as feminist retribution fantasy, made manifest through an appealing epic fantasy setting and grounded in a carefully designed magic system. The kingdom of Aaltah’s disgraced women are exiled to the Abbey of the Unwanted, where they sell potions and sex. Three generations of a powerful bloodline—led by Alysoon Rai-Brynna, mother of two and the widowed, disinherited daughter of the aging king of Aaltah and the abbess—perform a ritual that transforms the world to give women the power to prevent all unwanted pregnancies and fatally retaliate against rapists. Alysoon becomes a target for the wrathful response of men in power, and a leader in exploring the uses of a secret new source of feminine magic. Palace intrigue clashes into open rebellion as the women decide they have had enough of being chattel. Though female leads take center stage, Glass gives real depth to her male characters as well. Personal and political aspects of the story blend gracefully together to provide a high-energy story with sweeping forward momentum toward the next installment. Agent: Miriam Kriss, Irene Goodman Literary. (Mar.)

★ A Memory Called Empire

Debut novelist Martine sets a careful course in this gorgeously crafted diplomatic space opera that strands its protagonist amid imperial politics and murder. Mahit Dzmare, summoned from tiny Lsel Station to replace the previous ambassador to the Teixcalaanli Empire, Yskandr, must negotiate both for Yskandr’s corpse and for the safety of her home world, an object of Imperial annexation. Her fluency in Teixcalaanli language and culture (“for a barbarian”) helps her decode the messages hidden in their poetry, even as it inclines her to the same starry-eyed admiration and involvement with the Imperial court that overcame her predecessor. Her secret implant of Yskandr’s memories should be aiding her, but it is 15 years out of date and, apparently, sabotaged. Mahit instead relies on her need to establish an identity of her own while juggling an aging Emperor’s desire for technological immortality and a threatened military uprising to his rule. The Teixcalaanli culture comes so fully to life that the glossary in the back of the book is unnecessary. Martine allows the backstory to unroll slowly, much as Mahit struggles with her intermittent memories, walking delicately upon the tightrope of intrigue and partisan battles in the streets to safely bring the tale to a poignantly true conclusion. Readers will eagerly await the planned sequels to this impressive debut. Agent: DongWon Song, Howard Morhaim Literary. (Mar.)

SF/Fantasy/ Horror

★ The Lesson

Several residents of St. Thomas weather the storms of life before and after the occupation of the alien species Ynna in Turnbull’s rich debut novel about family, love, and loyalty in turbulent times. The Turnbull’s rich debut novel about family, occupation of the alien species Ynaa in the storms of life before and after the awful men receive just retribution will be stereotypes. Still, those who like to see the characters feel interchangeable and the primary targets are violent and abusive men, silences a potential witness by the unremarkable plot.

★ The Psychology of Time Travel

Mascarenhas’s intricately plotted debut dizzies the mind with its exciting concept but fails to follow through. Margaret, Lucille, Grace, and Barbara are all at the tops of their scientific fields, and together, they invent the first time machine, an accomplishment that ensures even the most biased men have to acknowledge their talents. However, when tragedy strikes, Barbara is pushed out of her career, and a complex series of events is catalyzed into motion. Some of the ensuing complications

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go far beyond the lives of the pioneers themselves. The story unfolds in a captivating way, and fascinating suggestions are made about the effects of time travel; Mascarénhas even hints that free will ceases to exist. Unfortunately, the plot can’t make up for the lack of depth in many of the characters. Readers who value plotting and tightness of story will enjoy this novel more than those who value empathy and characterization. Most unfortunately, the women whose accomplishments are at the center of the story won’t be remembered when the book is closed. Agent: Oli Munson, A.M. Heath. (Feb.)

Romance/Erotica

The Fearless King

In the tense second King contemporary romantic thriller, Robert threatens the peace brokered in The Last King by plunging the King siblings into danger. Journey King’s role in Kingdom Corp keeps her centered. When her sadistic father, Elliot, returns from a long absence, intent on seizing control of the company by terrorizing his children, a shaken Journey turns to Frank Evans, a powerful frenemy, for help. Frank desires Journey but doesn’t trust the Kings. However, when an emotionally battered Journey asks him to dig up Elliot’s secrets to protect her family, Frank agrees to wade in. It quickly becomes apparent that the danger Elliot poses is very real. Robert uses the gripping passion between Frank and Journey to force them to confront their fears and admit they need each other. There’s nothing typical about this damsel-/knight romance, and watching Journey learn to trust herself and Frank choose to let down his guard when each has so much at stake is deeply satisfying. This suspenseful installment stands alone, but new readers will definitely want to read the first book in the series. Agent: Laura Bradford, Bradford Literary. (Feb.)

Escaping His Grace

This tepid follow-up to Falling from His Grace, set in Regency-era Edinburgh, lacks the luster of its predecessor, and the romance is so thin, it’s almost nonexistent. Lady Samantha Chatterworth uses a false identity to shield herself from being found by her overbearing father, a duke who’s determined to force her into a loveless marriage. She becomes governess to the ward of Heathcliff Marston, Viscount Kilpatrick, and immediately charms Heathcliff with her intellect and beauty. Heathcliff has been deceived by a woman he loves, and he’s also pleased about a new start for Ace and Finn, rough-looking guys with hearts of gold, come to her rescue after a mugging, they’re all in for some big changes—and life lessons that open their eyes to new possibilities and the importance of support networks. Packed with an enticing mix of heartening emotional engagement and inspirational sweetness, the light, joyous plot has just enough substance to provide ample food for thought. Agent: Nicole Resciniti, Seymour Agency (Feb.)

Mystic

This latest addition to Brooks’s Cat Star Legacy futuristic romance series will suit lovers of fated pairings and intergalactic incidents. Aiden Banadänsk lives on a world called Rhylos, haunted by visions of his people’s future, a power he has denied all his life. When he meets Sula, an anthropology student on the run, his whole world is turned upside down. As Aiden and Sula grow closer, they must also concern themselves with the danger chasing Sula: a cloaked villain is wiping whole worlds clean of life, and Sula is the only living witness to this terrible act. This book has romance; some explicit, sometimes technical, sex scenes; and just enough espionage to move the story forward. It also makes some attempts to talk about prejudice and acceptance, but these pieces are not as well handled. Those who have followed the series will likely enjoy references to familiar characters, and new readers will be able to join in on the fun without feeling like they’ve missed too much. (Feb.)

After the Gold

McRae and Maltese (A Queen from the North) falter slightly with the tale of figure skaters Katie Nowacki and Brendan Reid, who win Olympic gold and then try to figure out what comes next in their lives. After a failed attempt at a romance years earlier, the skaters try to limit their sexual chemistry to the ice. Brendan’s game for another relationship...