

## InReview

## A call for cancer prevention

Curing cancer is not enough for Kristina Marusic

By Carlo Wolff

“A New War on Cancer,” Pittsburgh’s Kristina Marusic’s deeply reported book about the environmental causes of cancer, is infuriating, sobering and challenging. Subtitled “The Unlikely Heroes Revolutionizing Prevention,” her passionate, advocacy journalism interweaves the stories of people on the front lines of environmental activism with facts that make you wonder how the fossil fuel industry continues to get away with making us sick.

Blame lobbyists. Blame dark money. Blame lack of political will. But blame ignorance no longer — Ms. Marusic’s book is remarkably informative. She goes into detail about the chemicals that cause cancer, but she does more. The appendix is a list of organizations engaged in getting rid of carcinogens. That list is a call to action, separated into categories from food and water, to campaign finance reform, to cosmetics and personal care products (some targeting women of color are more loaded with carcinogens — call it chemical redlining).

The focus of the book is Allegheny County, particularly the Pittsburgh area, where air pollution from heavy industry (especially the making of coke, a form of coal used in the steel industry) continues to spread carcinogens. Other industries have carcinogenic issues, too.

Take B. Braun, a medical supply company with headquarters in Bethlehem, Pa.

“Every day, plastic products like the ones manufactured by B. Braun help save people’s lives,” Ms. Marusic writes. “Plastics are used in everything from syringes and stents to hearing aids and prosthetics. They’re used to create IV bags that deliver chemotherapy drugs to cancer patients and tubing that delivers oxygen to premature babies.”

Trouble is, many such products are made with “potentially cancer-causing chemicals that can make their way into patients’ bodies during treatment.” These include phthalates like DEHP (this book schools you in acronyms), commonly used as a plasticizer in polyvinyl chloride IV bags, tubing and medical devices.

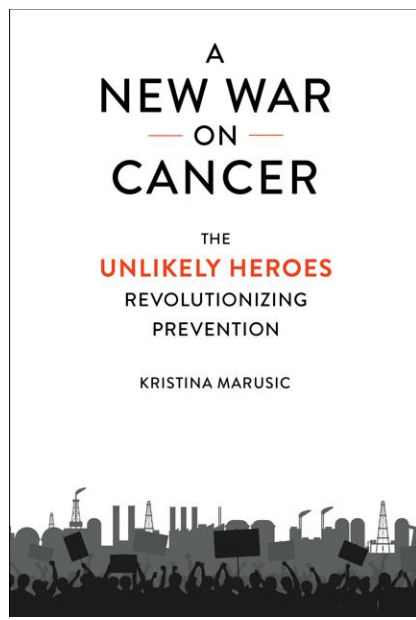
It’s hard to reconcile the positive purpose and use of such devices with the potential dangers their ingredients pose. Resolving that paradox, Ms. Marusic suggests, requires replacing those dangerous chemicals with benign ones. And that takes heavy lifting. The first step is getting such industries to acknowledge the problem, no easy task. An underfunded Environmental Protection Agency doesn’t help.

While the book is packed with ex-



Jen Barker Worley Photography

Author Kristina Marusic



## A NEW WAR ON CANCER

By Kristina Marusic  
Island Press (\$28)

stretch of notoriously dangerous land in Louisiana.

“While class is often a factor in environmental health, research has shown that Black Americans are exposed to more air pollution than white Americans regardless of where they live or their income level, and that Black Americans are exposed to 1.5 times more carcinogenic pollution than the population as a whole,” Ms. Marusic writes (page 156-7).

Curing cancer has become a brand, as in Race for the Cure, Ms. Marusic suggests, while cancer prevention hasn’t. Companies that don’t cure the problems they have caused often blame their consumers, claiming they’re the problem.

The companies are the problem, Ms. Marusic insists. Her advice? Donate to organizations on the front lines of environmental advocacy; talk up stories of environmental pollution; read the label, then apply economic pressure to companies using carcinogens in their products; and support efforts at campaign finance reform, curbing the influence of lobbyists.

At times dry but eloquent, “A New War on Cancer” is a necessary book.

*Carlo Wolff is a freelance writer from Cleveland. He just published “Invisible Soul,” a book about Cleveland’s soul music scene from doo-wop to disco.*

amples of environmental depredation, it humanizes such dire situations with profiles of activists who have found their purpose in combating the chemicals that suffuse our lives.

Take Melanie Meade, a native of Clairton, home to “the mill,” the Clairton Coke Works. Owner US Steel has been fined more than \$9 million for air pollution violations at CCW since 2004 — a micro-drop in the bucket for a \$5.25 billion company. Ms. Meade is a clean air advocate with deep roots in the community. Her home overlooks the coke plant. A Black woman, she calls the Monongahela Valley “cancer valley,” a riff on “cancer alley,” a

## Remembering life before the plague

Claire Fuller’s new novel takes us into the depths of memory

By Fred Shaw

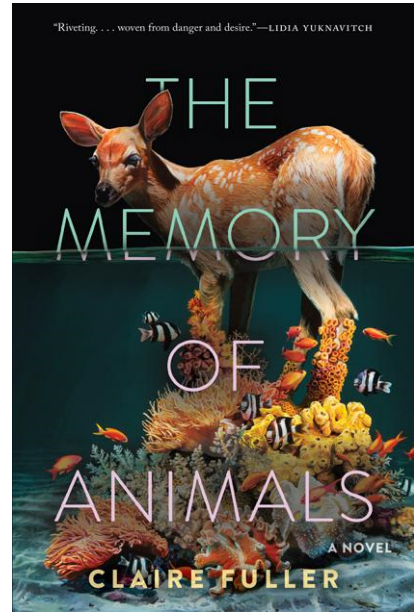
Cicero said, “The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living.” It’s a statement befitting Neffy, Claire Fuller’s reflective narrator and protagonist of her latest novel, “The Memory of Animals.”

By continually upping the ante, Ms. Fuller leans on a plot that churns after Neffy is locked in a research hospital somewhere in a near-future London while a killer plague begins to spread. Ms. Fuller surrounds Neffy with other twenty-something volunteers to be guinea pigs for a vaccine trial, and it feels like a generational statement — “sink or swim” becomes both motto and mantra.

The U.K.-based Ms. Fuller has gained both acclaim and a following with previous novels like “Our Endless Numbered Days” and “Unsettled Ground.” It’s easy to understand the allure of her writing as she imbues Neffy with a depth that’s relatable in her search for direction, deepening her character’s likability by relying on quirky anecdotes of past missteps.

In one of a series of letters to “H,” whose identity is later revealed, Neffy writes of how noise pollution affects underwater creatures by relating how she broke up with a college boyfriend, Ed, who “liked to sing to himself, tunelessly, in a piercing voice that went through me like a harpoon.” The epistolary works to great effect throughout, allowing the technique’s confessional nature to reveal her rich inner life.

Neffy’s feelings run deep, especially for Baba, her eccentric, lovable father who once owned a ramshackle hotel on the Greek island of Paxos. It’s through him that readers can see Neffy as a born risk-taker, one whose



## THE MEMORY OF ANIMALS

By Claire Fuller  
Tin House (\$27.95)

weren’t allowed to do it anymore.”

Ms. Fuller creates vivid scenes of Neffy at different times in her life during these sessions, giving readers access into what makes her tick, and the author’s use of a first-person point-of-view also keeps the story taut.

Her quarantine in the hospital, while decisions are made by other patients while she lay unconscious for days, will leave the audience searching for answers that Neffy doesn’t yet have. Conflicts abound among the characters, and the limited point-of-view adds uncertainty to a world where outside information, and hope, have dwindled to zero. While things never get quite as bleak as in Jose Saramago’s classic, “Blindness,” Ms. Fuller wisely foreshadows while also leaving readers guessing when the other shoe will drop.

Readers will come to embrace dual meanings of the word “trial” by the novel’s end, as scientific experimentation runs through “The Memory of Animals.” From the uncertainty of the vaccine’s effects to Neffy’s obsessive use of “Revisiting” to the tests she once performed on octopi as a budding marine biologist, one hopes for answers. But, as Neffy learns and grows, it seems there’s answers to be gained by overcoming fear in the face of human extinction.

“The life of the dead,” indeed.

*Fred Shaw is the author of the poetry collection “Scraping Away” (CavanKerry Press).*

## LET’S GO TO THE MALL

Karin Lin-Greenberg’s novel explores community in suburbia

By Jeffrey Condran

Critics often describe shopping malls as air-conditioned nightmares, where the ugliest aspects of retail capitalism are herded in one place. And so there is a fascinating irony to recent nostalgia for the mall experience as these buildings begin to disappear in favor of internet shopping and other digital adventures, leaving some feeling ambivalent. Maybe the mall sucks, but it is better than what we’ve chosen now.

It is an interesting move then for Karin Lin-Greenberg to set her debut novel, “You Are Here,” in a failing suburban shopping mall. The characters we follow all live in the same neighborhood, but most often develop relationships with each other only through their shared connection to the mall.

The book opens with the Huangs. Jackson has the bus driver drop him off at Sunshine Clips where his mother, Tina, is the only stylist left. She isn’t sure what to make of the impending mall closure. Is it a devastating economic setback that will make her search for new work, or an unexpected opportunity? Tina has always wanted to be an artist but feared to completely defy the expectations of her immigrant parents. At 40, maybe it’s time to pursue the dream.

Jackson is the catalyst for this potential change. He’s a precocious nine-year-old who sees and understands far more about his mother — and the world — than anyone might imagine. Despite his surprising insights, he, like so many in the novel, feels like an “outsider.” He wants so much for people to be good to themselves and each other, but he ponders “how everyone he knows is so completely disappointing.” This is Jackson’s line, but it could hold true for any of the characters.

The novel then moves to Tina’s client, Ro Goodson, a 90-year-old woman who comes to the mall simply to be near other people. It’s difficult — at first — to sympathize with Ro: She’s cantankerous, racist and more than a touch homophobic. Never particularly social or especially empathetic, she let her life revolve around the genuine love she felt for her husband. Since his death, however, she has been compelled to reencounter the world — and on new terms. The very real development of this character is one of Ms. Lin-Greenberg’s triumphs.

Then “You Are Here” pivots to Kevin, the kind-hearted manager of the mall bookstore, Book Nook, who is trying to help support his family of four on a retail salary. They are living in a “tiny house” in his mother-in-law’s backyard, where he subjects them to his zany money-making schemes, which include beekeeping and raising Border Collies —



## YOU ARE HERE: A NOVEL

By Karin Lin-Greenberg  
Counterpoint Press (\$27)

anything to avoid finishing his dissertation in English literature. The reader will recognize Kevin immediately. He’s lost, casting about for a way to live in the world that satisfies his responsibilities both to his family and to himself.

Finally there is Maria, a teenager who dreams of becoming an actress, but who has to get through her senior year of high school while also working at Chickity Chix in the food court. (Her work uniform is even worse than you might imagine.) However, her troubles extend beyond retail humiliation, the stresses of college applications and the disappointment of not getting the lead in the school’s production of “West Side Story.” She has an unwanted admirer at school, a classmate the kids call “Creepy Chester” whose behavior becomes more and more dangerous throughout the novel.

“You Are Here” is described as a being about “regular people.” People looking for satisfying work, for feelings of genuine connection with others. For safety. For love.

And because this is true, the novel also feels like an invitation to examine our own lives, to find moments of connection with these characters, but also to test ourselves. Are we being good spouses, parents, friends — neighbors? The answer will surely be complicated, embedded in myriad variables, not all of which show people at their best.

Nevertheless, Ms. Lin-Greenberg’s beautifully written and radically sympathetic novel compels the reader to this kind of self-reflection. Among its achievements, “You Are Here” is a breathtaking depiction of a community — even one at the mall.

*Jeffrey Condran is the author of the story collection “Claire, Wading into the Danube By Night” and is the co-founder/publisher of the independent literary press, Braddock Avenue Books.*

## Best-sellers

## HARDCOVER FICTION

1. **Fourth Wing**, Rebecca Yarros, Entangled: Red Tower Books, \$29.99
2. **Demon Copperhead**, Barbara Kingsolver, Harper, \$32.50
3. **The Covenant of Water**, braham Verghese, Grove Press, \$32
4. **Lessons in Chemistry**, Bonnie Garmus, Doubleday, \$29
5. **Crook Manifesto**, Colson Whitehead, Doubleday, \$29
6. **Happy Place**, Emily Henry, Berkley, \$27
7. **Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow**, Gabrielle Charbonnet, Knopf, \$28
8. **Yellowface**, R. F. Kuang, Morrow, \$30

## HARDCOVER NONFICTION

1. **The Wager: A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny and Murder**, David Grann, Doubleday, \$30
2. **The Creative Act: A Way of Being**, Rick Rubin, Penguin Press, \$32
3. **Baking Yesteryear: The Best Recipes from the 1900s to the 1980s—Debut**, B. Dylan Hollis, DK, \$32
4. **The Art Thief: A True Story of Love, Crime, and a Dangerous Obsession**, Michael Finkel, Knopf, \$28
5. **Poverty, by America**, Matthew Desmond, Crown, \$28
6. **I’m Glad My Mom Died**, Jennette McCurdy, Simon & Schuster, \$27.99