

Books

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American Innovations

★★★★

By **Rivka Galchen**. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; \$24.

Imagine learning that your romantic interest is only visiting from the future, or waking to find that your body has grown a third breast overnight. These are just two of the unusual realities that Rivka Galchen's heroines contend with in *American Innovations*, a collection of uncanny short stories whose plots echo those of canonized tales from Jorge Luis Borges, Nikolai Gogol and others.

Deploying an all-female cast of narrators, Galchen examines anxieties that afflict women—motherhood, weight loss, foundering marriages—in tales brimming with symbolism, wit and the supernatural. What does it mean when a “pretty normal woman” sees her furniture march out of her apartment in “Once an Empire”? Or when a recluse has lunch with her deceased father in the humorous “Real Estate”? Are the characters dreaming, are they mad, or is the human experience



simply strange? Galchen doesn't offer any concrete explanations, just intriguing possibilities to puzzle over alongside the stories' protagonists. Readers might take a cue from the narrator of “The Region of Unlikeness.” Upon realizing that her crush may also be her unborn son, she has an unperturbed reaction that leaves all outcomes on the table: “Surely our world obeys rules still alien to our imaginations.”—*Helen Matatov*

THE BOTTOM LINE Protagonists' curious circumstances create happy head-scratching. Rivka Galchen reads at 192 Books Wed 7.

Part the Hawser, Limn the Sea

★★★★

By **Dan Lopez**. Chelsea Station Editions, \$14.

Loneliness and the sea act as recurring characters in former *Time Out New York* staffer Dan Lopez's debut collection. Common struggles link the disparate relationships that form the core of each story: A nameless narrator contrasts his former lover with a new, younger one while on a shark-fishing trip in “Andrew Barbee.” Accompanying his master's-candidate boyfriend, Peter, on a trip in “Coast of Indiana,” a young man must endure the coldness of Peter's friends, while making an important life decision.

Lopez's writing is sharp, and many of his characters are highly

relatable, but there's often little plot, and most of the stories come off as intriguing sketches rather than outright narratives. If Lopez had refrained from including “The Cruise,” a gaudy yarn about a lusted-after young man on a cruise ship, the otherwise focused collection would have gone from good to great.—*Josh Davis*

THE BOTTOM LINE A slender book's tales appeal, but lack action.

Critics' picks



PEN WORLD VOICES FESTIVAL

There's still lots of fun and intellectual stimulation to be had at this year's fest, including a long talk with novelist and NYC public defender Sergio De La Pava. ▶ Various venues; through Sat 3

THE WRITER'S LIFE AND THE MARRIED LIFE **FREE**

Sharp biographical writers Rebecca Mead and George Prochnik, also a married couple, talk about the parallels between their subjects' lives and their own. ▶ The powerHouse Arena; Wed 7

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM: THE SNOW QUEEN **FREE**

Enter into another of Cunningham's intimate and evocative visions of New York City with his latest, a book about brothers and faith. ▶ Greenlight Bookstore; Wed 7

MONKEY BUSINESS

The new volume in this series introduces the English-speaking world to more cutting-edge Japanese writers; meet many of them at these readings. ▶ Asia Society; Sat 3. BookCourt; Mon 5.

COLSON WHITEHEAD IN CONVERSATION WITH NATHAN ENGLANDER **FREE**

Whitehead's new treatise on poker (and beef jerky) is a work of pure joy, even if the author himself claims he represents the “Republic of Anhedonia.” ▶ St. Joseph's College; Tue 6

Thursday 1

FREE Bernard Malamud Tribute Center for Fiction, 17 E 47th St between Fifth and Madison Aves (212-755-6710, centerforfiction.org). Subway: 42nd St S, 4, 5, 6, 7 to 42nd St–Grand Central. 7pm. The National Book Award– and Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *The Fixer* and *The Tenants*, Bernard Malamud, would have turned 100 this year. A panel of writers—Alan Cheuse, Philip Davis, Clark Blaise, Liesl Schillinger, Kevin Baker, Téa Obreht and Bharati Mukherjee—revisit the life of this seminal 20th-century author.

*** FREE Michael Kupperman: Pirate Nightmare Vice Explosion** Desert Island, 540 Metropolitan Ave between Lorimer St and Union Ave, Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-388-5087, desertislandbrooklyn.com). Subway: L to Lorimer St, G to Metropolitan Ave. 7pm. Not long ago, cartoonist Michael Kupperman, who is responsible for *Tales Designed to Thrizzle* and a Sunday *New York Times* collaboration with David Rees, found a bizarrely mutilated stack of men's magazines from the '50s and '60s. Tonight he shares his finds in a funny new book, and offers up some racy films of the era to boot.

*** PEN World Voices Festival** Various locations (pen.org/worldvoices). 10am–11pm; Price, time and location vary. This massive festival, now in its tenth year, brings together writers from around the globe to contemplate change, international politics and the value of free speech. The fest's new chairman, Colm Tóibín, will deliver the annual “Arthur Miller Freedom to Write Lecture.”

Friday 2

FREE Jen Doll: Save the Date BookCourt, 163 Court St between Dean and Pacific Sts, Cobble Hill, Brooklyn (718-875-3677, bookcourt.com). Subway: F, G to Bergen St; R to Court St; 2, 3, 4, 5 to Borough Hall. 7pm. Journalist Doll, who has written for *The Atlantic*, *New York* mag and others, revisits the meaningful, fun, painful and ridiculous weddings of her life

