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Fireside Chats

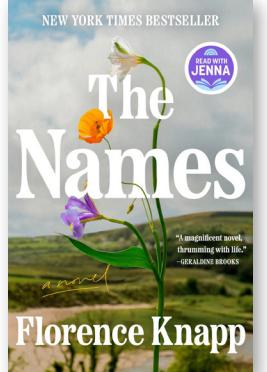
Compelling reads to get you through wintry weather

BY JANET REYNOLDS

While reading is an all-year, everyday delight for me, sitting by a burning fire wrapped in a cozy blanket is absolutely one of life's great joys. If getting away from the world at large — even just mentally — is something you need a little help doing, this month's trio of new books will absolutely take you there. Happy travels!!

The Names

by Florence Knapp, Penguin Random House, 316 pages



On the one hand, this compelling book is about names: Does the name we're given at birth somehow dictate the person we become and the lives we ultimately lead? And yet, that is just the beginning of the story. Florence Knapp's debut novel will begin to get you thinking, inviting readers to reflect on the profound power of words and how they can shape our destinies.

In the prologue, the author introduces the central idea and provides hints that Cora's life with her husband, Gordon, young daughter Maia, and as-yet unnamed infant son is far from perfect. The first three chapters revisit the same moment: Cora is going with Maia to the registrar's office to officially record her newborn son's name.

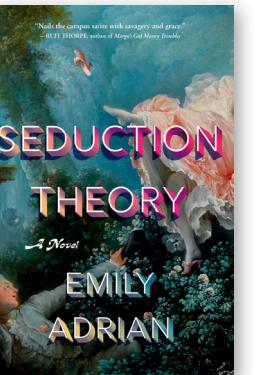
Her husband, who comes from a long line of Gordons, has made it clear: Gordon is the only option. Cora does

not agree. And so in each of the first three chapters — titled "Bear," "Julian" and "Gordon" — she travels to the registrar, chooses the name noted in the chapter title, and heads home to face the consequences. The book continues with the same chapter titles in seven-year increments, following the son, Cora, Maia and Gordon as they live out very different lives, each one unfolding from the moment the boy receives the particular name Cora chooses for him.

The result is a riveting story that will inevitably have the reader considering the meaning of names in all situations, the power of words, and how we craft our own stories. I can't recommend this book enough.

Seduction Theory

by Emily Adrian, Little, Brown, 212 pages



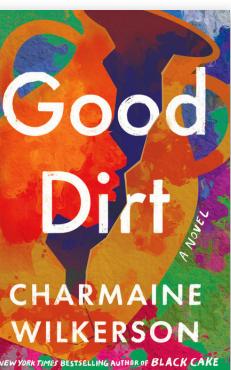
Ask a writer where they get their ideas and a common refrain is this: everywhere. Literally everything and anything that a writer observes, reads about or experiences can become fodder for their short stories.

Emily Adrian riffs off of that idea in her latest book, *Seduction Theory*, in which a graduate student writes a master's thesis that is eerily like the lives of a married couple who work in the creative writing department where she is studying and for which she is writing said thesis.

Roberta "Robbie" Green is an MFA student. She has a very close relationship with her adviser, Simone, who also happens to be the creative writing department's star scholar and married to a decidedly mediocre writing instructor. Everyone wants to be in this "it" couple's circle.

The cracks in this couple's relationship quickly become evident. While the stories they each tell themselves about their relationship initially seem evolved and contemporary, a different reality soon becomes clear. Ethan has an affair, while Simone and Robbie slip into an inappropriate relationship — one that ultimately drives Robbie's revenge and its fallout for Simone and Ethan.

While *Seduction Theory* could have fallen into cliché, this book has clever twists and a depth that will leave the reader saying "hmmm" for hours after the last page is turned.



Good Dirt

by Charmaine Wilkerson, Penguin Random House, 368 pages

Charmaine Wilkerson's newest book, *Good Dirt*, skillfully weaves the story of a modern, affluent Black family trying to deal with the aftermath of a childhood tragedy, with that of a family heirloom created by an enslaved ancestor.

The result is a gripping intergenerational saga that blends historical fiction with a contemporary crime narrative.

Ebby Freeman is playing hide-and-seek with her older brother when she hears a gunshot from downstairs. Everything in her family's life is measured from that moment forward, when she discovers her brother, Baz, dead on the floor, the treasured family heirloom jar shattered in pieces beside him, their lives as splintered as the pieces of glass.

Because the Freemans are affluent and accomplished, and living in a posh New England enclave where they are in a minority, the unsolved crime follows them everywhere, haunting Ebby in particular.

Ebby escapes to France to try to rebuild her life out of the limelight. She has just arrived at her friend's cottage, where she has agreed to oversee her friend's Airbnb visitors, when who shows up but her former fiancé and his new girlfriend. Things, as you can imagine, get complicated.

At the same time, Ebby has begun, as part of her self-discovery journey, to look into the history of the family's large pottery jar that was made by an enslaved ancestor and ultimately brought north.

Wilkerson masterfully links the two narratives, using "the dirt" as both metaphor and origin of the heirloom. She probes whether we can — or should — escape our past, and how the histories we live and inherit shape who we become. ■



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