

LOCAL LIT

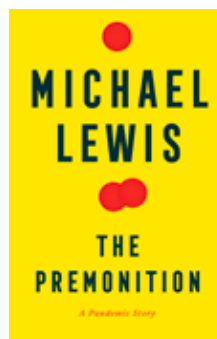
Story Time

Settle in with some exciting new books from local authors.

BY LINDA LENHOFF



From top: Berkeley author Michael Lewis scrutinizes the COVID-19 pandemic in *The Premonition*; personal politics take center stage in Joan Steinau Lester's moving memoir *Loving Before Loving: A Marriage in Black and White*.



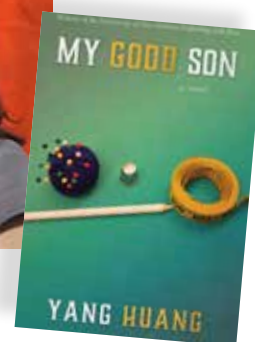
East Bay authors have certainly made good use of their time this past year, exploring their creative passions—both personal and political—with a host of new work. Here, *Diablo* looks at fresh and upcoming releases that are sure to captivate and surprise.

INQUIRING MIND

Leave it to Michael Lewis to uncover the people who were brave enough to call the then-developing COVID-19 crisis what it was—and who are working to save us from the next pandemic. The noted Berkeley writer, best known for *Moneyball* and *The Big Short*, has never been afraid to ask the hard questions, and that fearlessness shows in his latest work, *The Premonition* (W.W. Norton, May). Lewis turned to government researchers to ask not only what happened as COVID broke out, but also: How do we avert an even more detrimental viral outbreak in the future? “All of them saw [COVID-19] as a dry run for something much worse that is inevitable,” Lewis told *The New York Times*. Expect major press around *The Premonition*, given its enormous first print run of half a million copies and momentous subject matter. Lewis’s analysis of what went wrong when our government failed to face scientific facts and how to prevent the next pandemic could not be more timely.



My Good Son, by Yang Huang, looks at cultural connections.



FAMILY MATTERS

Hercules author Yang Huang delves into the richness of family relationships and culture in her new novel, *My Good Son* (University of New Orleans Press, May), winner of the University of New Orleans Publishing Lab Prize. With quiet beauty and unexpected power, her writing introduces us to Mr. Cai, a tailor in post-Tiananmen China, and his only son, Feng. Mr. Cai’s dreams of a successful future for his son lead him to hatch a scheme with a customer he barely knows, a handsome gay American ex-pat, and this partnership spotlights the contrast between American and Chinese cultures. *My Good Son* also examines such themes as father-son conflicts, familial expectations, sexuality, and privilege. Huang, who grew up in China and now raises her family in the East Bay, is adept in her investigations of the push and pull of the parent-child relationship; she has said she writes fiction to create a more tolerant and hopeful world. The author received the Nautilus Book

Award silver medal in fiction for her debut novel, *Living Treasures*; here, she fills her plot with tension, humor, and longing.

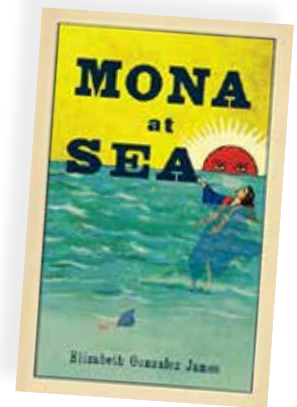
LOVE STORIES

Berkeley author Joan Steinau Lester’s compelling memoir, *Love Before Loving: A Marriage in Black and White* (University of Wisconsin Press, May) tells the story of a woman



determined to heal others—and herself. Lester protested for civil rights in the 1950s and married Black writer Julius Lester; here, she writes about her own struggles with race and gender politics interwoven with the Supreme Court’s 1967 decision in *Loving v. Virginia* (which struck down bans on interracial marriage). Lester’s tale follows her search for self from the women’s rights movements of the ’60s and ’70s through the ’90s to the present day, in which she is a proud member of the LGBTQ+ community. Lester is an award-winning national columnist and author of five previous books. As a member of a biracial family, she says she’s long been exploring how the concept of race began and how it continues to exist. With this memoir, she gives us riveting observations of turbulent political times seen through the lens of her own history, yielding a frank look at her journey to fulfillment.

Oakland’s Elizabeth Gonzalez James makes a delightful debut.

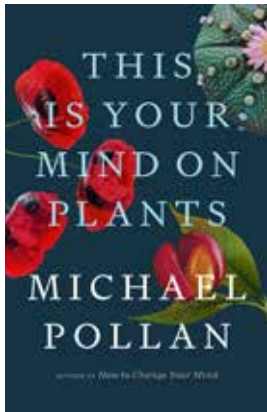


SEA CHANGE

Mona at Sea (Santa Fe Writers Project, June) is a powerhouse of a book that brims with amusement park-like fun and marks a strong debut by Oakland’s Elizabeth Gonzalez James. Readers will enjoy the title character’s roller-coaster ride as the highly educated recent grad faces the recession of 2008. Mona is overqualified, underemployed, living with her parents, and not too happy about any of it. Her love life isn’t great, either. James offers nonstop humor, though it’s still easy to empathize with the perfectionist protagonist. The comedy camouflages some fine writing—skillful sentences and lyrical language make this a joy to read and reread. James’s powerful voice is a clear indication that there’s more great writing ahead.

MIND GAMES

Famed Berkeley writer Michael Pollan takes readers beyond the dinner table in his latest book, *This Is Your Mind on Plants* (Penguin Press, July). Author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, *Cooked*, and *In Defense of Food*,



From top:
Michael Pollan's new book explores caffeine, opium, and mescaline; Allison Larkin's latest novel charms with its honesty.

Pollan now wonders: Why is it acceptable to use some plant-based drugs but taboo to use others? Based on an essay he wrote nearly 25 years ago, Pollan's new passion project looks at three drugs—caffeine, opium, and mescaline—along with the cultural expectations surrounding them and their psychoactive allure. Ever the investigative journalist, he illustrates the impact of these drugs on the mind, filling his book with personal tales that make for a readable yet informative odyssey. Named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2010, Pollan lives up to the accolade. Enjoy *This Is Your Mind on Plants* with a cup (or smidge) of whatever you like best, no judgment.

FACING THE MUSIC

Allison Larkin's engrossing, tender novels are made for lazy summer vacations. Fans of the Concord-based author's best sellers *Stay*, *Why Can't I Be You*, and *Swimming for Sunlight*, will delight in *The People*



We Keep (Gallery Books, August). The enthralling story focuses on April, a young woman in search of meaning, music, and an escape from her difficult life. To that end, she leaves her troubled beginnings with only her hopes, dreams,

and old guitar, creating a family from the people she meets along the way. The music she shares on her quest reflects a little about where she's been and a lot about where she's going. Larkin writes from the heart about yearning, giving readers characters to fall in love with, while grabbing them with her honest, believable prose. ■