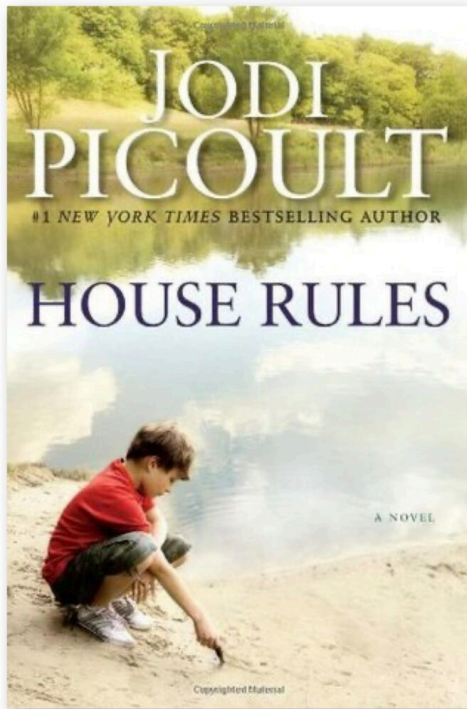


What Matters Most (Courtney Walsh)

Emma Woodson is hoping Nantucket will be the fresh start she needs to raise her son in the wake of her husband's death. She wants to renovate the apartment over the garage and rent it out to have regular income, but she can't bring herself to walk in and be surrounded by all her husband's belongings. Emma places an ad in the paper, and when Jameson Shaw shows up on her doorstep, she presumes he's answering the ad.

He's not, but Jameson figures it's the least he can do for Emma, considering the mess her life's in because of him. He agrees to empty the apartment and renovate it, but can't find the courage to tell Emma why he came to Nantucket. Now that they are sort of dating, Jamie's not sure how Emma will react when he spills his secret.

But when Jamie fails to disclose his secret before Emma discovers it, their worlds collide with devastating effects. Can they forgive each other, and themselves?



House Rules (Jodi Picoult)

In March, my writing was compared to Picoult's for the fifth time. I decided it was time to stop gaping at people and go read one of Jodi's books. I started with this one because it was readily available from my library.

Jacob Hunt has an addiction to crime scenes. He creates them at home for his mother, and occasionally sneaks out of the house and looks at real ones. At 430 pm, without fail, Jacob sits down to watch Crime Busters, even though he has already seen every episode and solved every crime.

Theo Hunt, the younger brother, learned at a young age he'd have to fill the role of big brother. He doesn't mind, but he wishes someone had asked him to take on the role, instead of expecting it.

Emma Hunt's entire life is devoted to Jacob. She had dreams and goals before her beautiful firstborn arrived, but she laid them aside when her happy, healthy boy went from normal to neurodivergent.

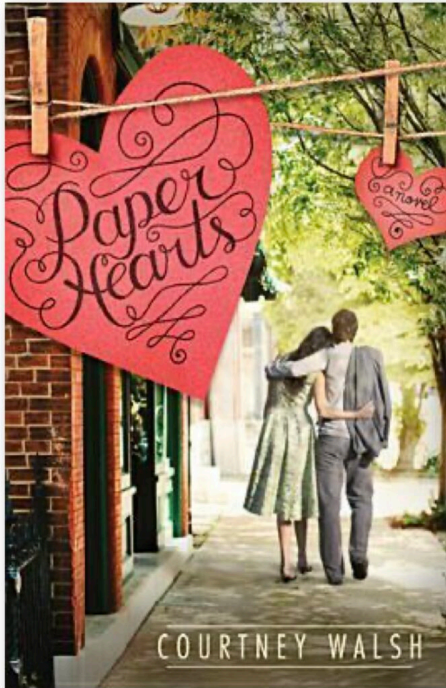
When Jacob's tutor is found dead, Jacob becomes the prime suspect. He's arrested and put on trial. The problem is, Jacob finds it hard to communicate like the average person, and his family wonders if he actually did it.

One thing I loved about this book was how obvious it was that Picoult researched Aspergers. Having friends with children who struggle with autism disabilities, I appreciated the more authentic representation that was offered. Picoult uses one of her characters to explain how some people with a specific genetic makeup are susceptible to adverse side effects from vaccinations. As a parent who had a child break out in hives after a booster, and had a nurse laugh at me over my concern, I admire Picoult adding this information to her book.

In the book, Emmah Hunt claims that despite knowing what's at risk after Jacob fell victim, she still had Theo vaccinated. If I picked a hole in the story, this would be it. I know a friend who passionately advocates for choice in matters of the body. She had *both* children tested before accepting vaccinations for her children.

We follow all three characters and learn how Aspergers impacts their individual lives. I confess, I felt deeply for all three. As a mother of children with lifelong diagnoses, I empathized with Emma's pain and worries. When Theo confided about cleaning up after his brother, I wanted to hug him and whisper, "Me too, buddy, me too." When Jacob wanted people to understand and started speaking in numbers, I empathized with his desire to be understood.

This book now graces my bookshelf, along with a few more by [Picoult](#), because a local bookstore was having a buy 10 get 10.



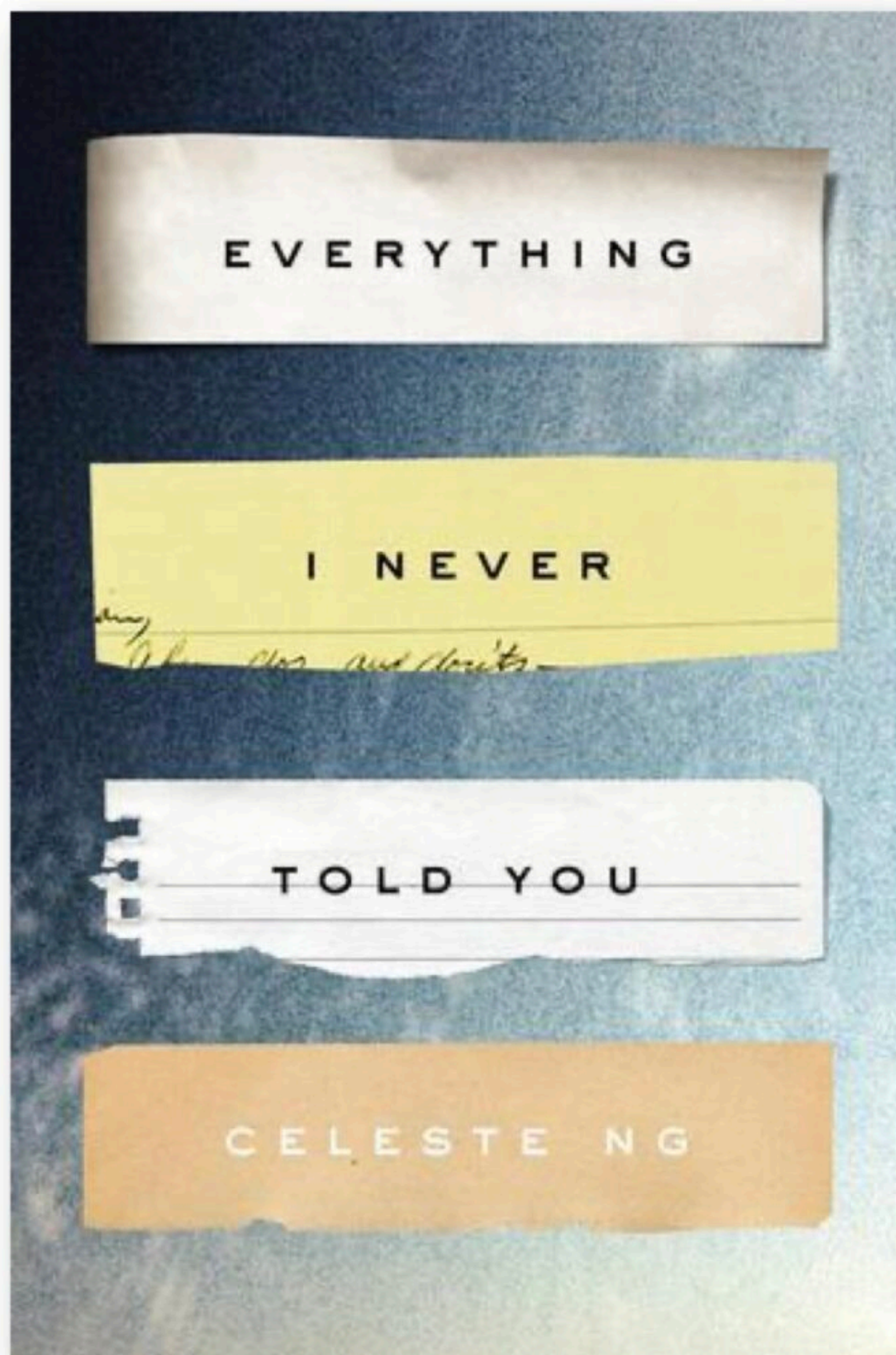
Paper Hearts (Courtney Walsh)

Abigail Pressman doesn't believe in love anymore, not after watching it fail herself and her parents. Owning a small bookstore in Lover's Park means she ignores all the love-based traditions of the town until the local volunteer committee enlists her help.

They are secretly playing matchmaker, but to keep Abigail from knowing they assign her a variety of tasks: replying to love notes sent to their town, delivering meals, and sorting through the paper hearts an unknown couple mail to the town each year.

When a new landlord takes over her building, Abigail is desperate to save her little bookstore. With the help of some unique paper hearts, she may have found a way, but it may mean falling in love.

I absolutely adored the idea of the paper heart tradition, and maybe someday I'll overcome my textural discomfort of construction paper and make my own.



Everything I Never Told You (Celeste NG)

The book opens with: *Lydia is dead. But they don't this yet...*

Marilyn Lee wanted nothing more than to be a doctor when she grew up, much to her mother's disapproval. Marilyn differs from most girls, and doesn't long to get married, settle down, and keep house. All that changed the day she met James Lee.

James Lee is Chinese and loves how Marilyn looks like everyone else, and doesn't care that he looks different. In fact, James is certain it is an aspect of himself she loves.

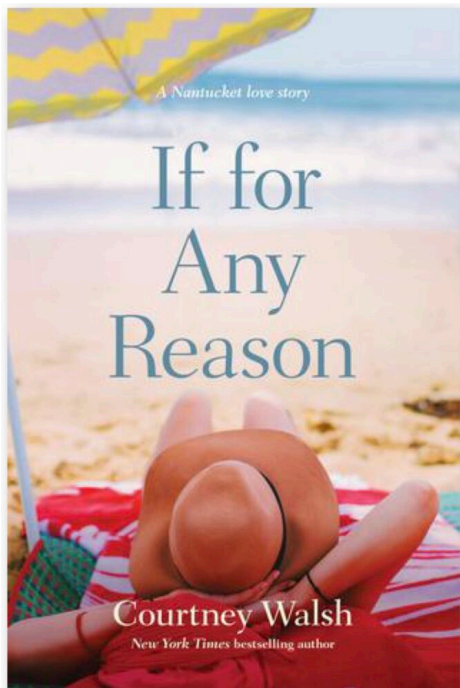
Years later, after Marilyn's estranged mother passes away, Marylin is shocked by the lack of achievements her mother has left behind, and it reignites her own dream of becoming a doctor. When she seeks a local science job, her husband is embarrassed. He remembers how hard his mother had to work to help his family, and he doesn't want that for his wife. Seeing no alternative, Marilyn runs away to fulfill her dream, abandoning her husband and two young children without so much as a goodbye.

While gone, their daughter, Lydia, promises if Mommy comes home she will do whatever Mamma asks of her, and she does because surely it means Mom will never leave again. But the weight of the burden Lydia has carried grows so heavy she can no longer balance it.

In Marilyn's & James' quest to fulfill their own dreams through Lydia, they forget their other children. When Hannah is born, she is given the attic room. "*Where things you don't want or need are tucked away.*" Hannah spends her whole life hiding in the shadows, taking everything in, and knowing the only way her family sees her is when she steals their belongings and they have to confront her. Nathan, their eldest, has a passion for the stars, but it doesn't matter to his parents. Only his acceptance into Harvard will capture their attention, albeit fleeting.

When they learn Lydia is dead, each family member faces questions about things they wished they had done had they known it would be their last time to see Lydia.

You know those reviews that claim a book is haunting? I cannot say I have always agreed, but with *Everything I Never Told You*, I do. My first thought when I finished it was: *how hauntingly beautiful*.



If For Any Reason (Courtney Walsh)

Emily Ackerman has traveled the world, her only companion a book of letters her mother wrote. Trust fund gone, dreams destroyed, and never able to let anyone close to her heart, Emily returns to Nantucket to fix up the cottage her grandfather left her so she can sell it and move on with life.

What Emily did not expect was to run into Hollis McGuire, the boy next door who was Emily's best friend before her mother died and her grandparents raced her off the island. Nor did she expect so many memories to be stirred upon her return, and she especially did not expect Hollis to have a twelve-year-old daughter.

Amongst the renovations on the cottage, she stumbles across news about her mother that

shows her grandparents may have lied to her, and Emily must decide if she's brave enough to face the truth. And then there's her feelings for Hollis, but her mother's letter warned her to never give her heart over to anyone. Was her mother bitter or should Emily follow the advice?



Yellowface (R F Kuang)

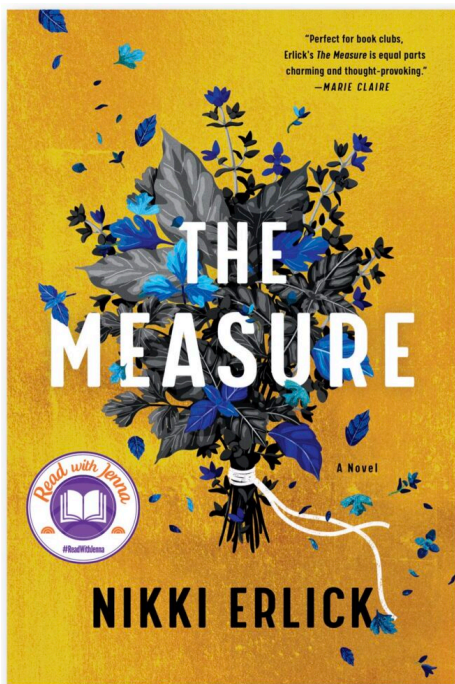
I had high hopes for this book. I don't categorize people by skin color, but I appreciate cultural customs, and it's clear that Asian culture is often underrepresented, or misrepresented, and I'd hoped this book would change that. While it addressed the situation, it didn't meet my expectations.

The story is about one Juniper Song Hayward who is present when a friend chokes to death on a pancake. On a whim, she grabs the friend's unfinished manuscript and decides she will finish it. Haunted by watching the friend die, Junie hopes this will bring closure, but when she submits the manuscript she leaves out the fact that the well known Athena Liu did the research and wrote the bones, while she, Juniper, revised and edited the life out of it. Soon

Junie's drowning in the chaos of her lie.

Where this book fell flat for me was with a lot of side comments characters offered. White men are racist. Anyone who voted for Trump is obviously a racist. If you're a democrat, you cannot possibly be racist. If you voted for Trump, you are a white supremacist. The author equally ripped into social media, specifically Twitter, and its ability to be judge, jury, and executioner within seconds just so people have something to complain about.

I hoped the book would depict the feelings of cultural exclusion, but it mainly criticized people. I understand the desire for dignity and respect as a human, and know the pain caused by "well meaning" offensive remarks. Still, I polished the book off in 24 hours.



The Measure (Nikki Erlick)

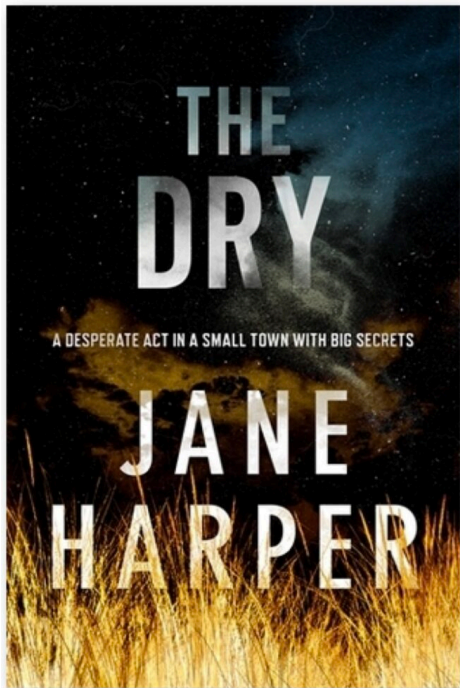
If a mysterious box showed up at your door tomorrow, would you open it? If someone told you the contents would determine how long you lived, would it change your mind? In *The Measure*, people wake up one day and discover mysterious boxes at their doors, and it

causes mass hysteria. Some open theirs and discover golden strings inside, some long, some incredibly short, and over time, people determine the strings indicate the quantity of life the owner holds.

The discovery sets off pandemonium. Those with short strings seek vengeance before their time runs out, and those with long strings are now taking wild risks because they know it won't kill them. Neither side took the time to consider having to live with their consequences.

The story intertwines the lives of eight people. Two are lovers, one with a short string, one with a long. Will they marry, knowing one will become a widow? A man with a short string wants to start a family, but people don't marry short stringers. Two are friends in the army, one a short stringer, the other a long. One banned from combat, the other doomed to face it. A hopeless romantic who decides not to look at her string writes letters with the mysterious B, a short stringer. Has she fallen in love with someone she can't grow old with? A midlife married couple, hell bent on presidency, will turn the strings into a political campaign if that's what it takes to secure their seat in the white house.

This book captivated me even though I knew the author would take me on an emotional journey, and it would crush my heart and leave me blubbering. As if I couldn't love this book enough, the author even worked one of my favorite songs into it: Sera sera. Such a fitting song for the story.



The Dry (Jane Harper)

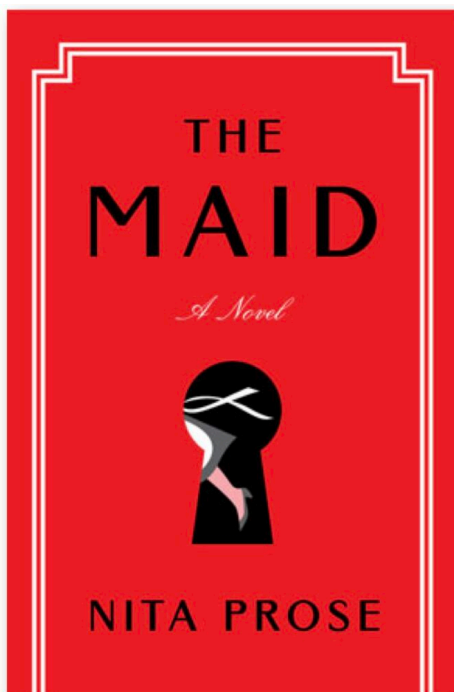
This book floated across my path while I was busy with research this week, and was excited to see my library had a copy. I knew what the premise was, but was surprised when I realized the book was taking place in Australia.

Then I groaned. Not because it was Australia, but because I've lived in Australia and I really struggle when authors try to promote the location over the story. Or, as is often the case, misrepresent the location so badly I wonder if they've ever actually been to Australia. Either way, Jane Harper didn't do either. Instead, I felt like I was back in Australia, enduring the hot summer, and wondering if the threatening clouds would open up on the cracked, parched land.

Federal Agent Aaron Falk lives in Melbourne... Wait, let me interrupt myself hear and say that I was downright giddy the narrator was Australian and knew how to say the Australian towns and cities, specifically Melbourne, correctly. Okay, back to what I was saying. Aaron receives a note that someone knows he lied and he'd better be at the funeral.

Luke, Aaron's childhood friend, is dead. He's accused of killing his wife, his son, and then himself. For some unknown reason, Luke let his baby girl live. When Aaron returns for the funeral, his past comes back to haunt him. Both literally and figuratively. The small farming community chased him and his father out years ago when they were both suspects in a murder investigation.

At the request of his late friend's parents, Aaron helps the small town constable investigate the deaths. But, by sticking around, he's outraged some of the local townsfolk who remember the accusations and unanswered questions. Can Aaron clear Luke's name, solve the mystery of the past, and escape back to the big city unscathed?

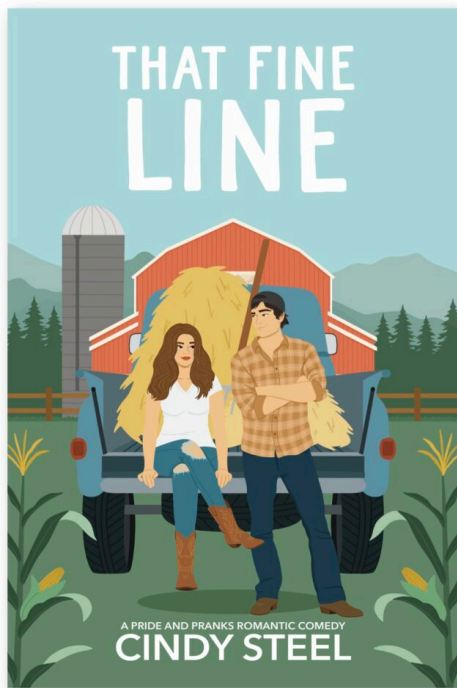


The Maid (Nita Prose)

In *The Maid*, Molly, who has Aspergers, likes order and routine, and struggles with emotions. Both understanding other people's and responding with the emotions people expect of her in social situations.

When Molly discovers the prestigious Mr. Black dead in his suite, she becomes the prime suspect and reaches out to the wrong people for help. Arrested for murder, she wonders who her real friends are.

I scarfed this book down pretty quickly, but the whole time I was reading it I kept wondering why it felt familiar, and why I thought it was missing something. Two days after finishing the book, it came to me. This book holds a similar premise as *Someone Else's Shoes*. It's not exact, but they both share the same location, making the wrong friends, not being seen when you work in housekeeping, and righting wrongs. That's not to say *The Maid* was bad, it wasn't. Rather, the previous story I'd read was overshadowing it for some reason.



That Fine Line (Cindy Steel)

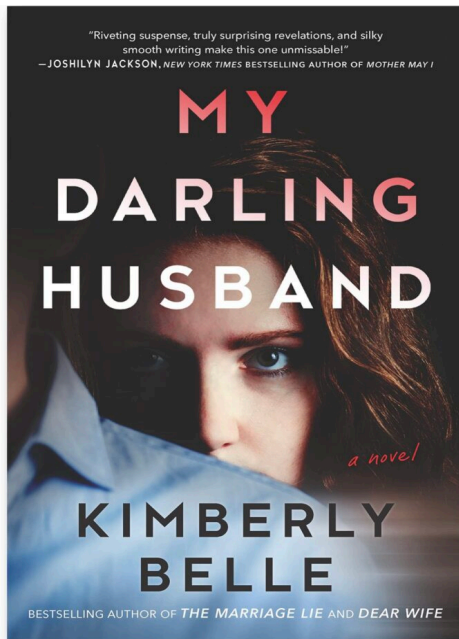
During an Audible sale, I stocked up on some books by authors I enjoy. Steel wrote my favorite Christmas read of 2023, so when I saw other books by her in the sale, I jumped. I have a confession to make. I thought this book was a hockey romance. Don't ask, I don't know. Imagine my confusion when the story opened on a ranch in Idaho. All that aside, I

enjoyed the story.

Kelsey returns home for the summer and has three months to plan her wedding. Or, at least, the parts her future mother-in-law isn't. What she didn't expect was her father to hire her childhood tormentor: Cade. After an incident in second grade where she vomited on him, he declared war. Throughout their school years, they constantly tried to out-prank each other. Frogs in lockers and open cans of tuna in hot cars. Overwhelmed by the big wedding her fiancé's mother wants them to have, she agrees to one final summer of pranks with Cade, and soaks up every minute of being back on the family ranch.

Over the summer, Kelsey learns a lot about herself and her fiancé. The question is, are either of them willing to budge on the life they envision? And who will win the prank war, Cade or Kelsey?

I was sitting in the car when I started this book, the prologue blasting through the speakers as I kept an eye out for the person I was picking up. Until I heard, "My stomach was feeling off, and before I knew it, I was vomiting lunch all over the second and third-grade class." I don't do vomit. As in, I don't read about it, talk about it, and I especially dislike having it happen to me. BUT, I burst into hysterics, because that scenario actually happened to me, too. Yep, the second and third-grade class of the private school I was enrolled in gathered in the third grade class, and without warning, I threw up all over them.



My Darling Husband (Kimberly Belle)

Jade Lasky is certain she's being stalked, but her husband won't take her complaint seriously, insisting she report the creepy guy to store security. Instead, Jade picks up her nine-year-old daughter from school and sets off for home. Distracted by her children, Beatrice and Baxter, arguing in the backseat, Jade didn't notice the creepy guy in her garage until she's closed the door and gotten everyone out of the car. By then, it's too late.

The masked stranger escorts them in the house with such familiarity Jade suspects he's a little too acquainted with her family and her home. She sets out to collect every drop of information about him she can. But when he ties her to a chair and demands she call her husband, for an oddly specific amount of cash, Jade panics.

She's not concerned about Cam coming up with the cash. She's worried because the gunman has separated her from the children. Jade soon learns her children are more resilient, and perhaps smarter, than she gave them credit for. The gunman's been planning this stunt long enough he knows more about Jade and Cam than they know about themselves, and he's willing to go to any length to get what he wants.



The Wishing Game (Meg Schaffer)

Fun story about this book... I'd had it on hold at my local library, and the day it came in I saw an advertisement that our local Indie Bookshop was going to be having a book signing and Q & A with Meg.

The Wishing Game, in Meg's own words, is Charlie & The Chocolate Factory for grownups. Which might be why I struggled with it at first. Don't freak out, but I've never been a huge fan of Charlie & The Chocolate Factory. If you're struggling to understand that tidbit, you're not alone. My husband loves the book and was aghast to learn I wasn't a fan.

Lucy is a teacher's assistant hiding out in California. She's fallen in love with a little boy who used to be in her classroom, and wants to adopt him. Christopher was placed in the foster system after his parents died from an overdose. He still has nightmares about finding his parents, and he's terrified of phones.

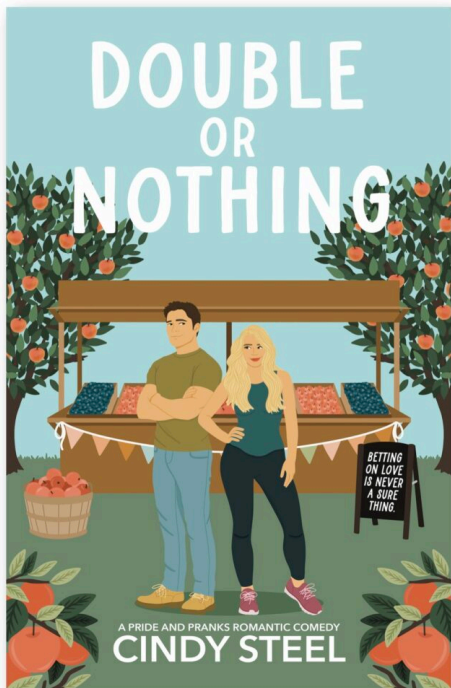
The problem is, Lucy's not considered fostering material. Her job doesn't pay enough. She lives in a tiny apartment with college kids who are either drunk or high, and she doesn't have a car.

Things change when Lucy is one of five people invited to Clock Island, the mysterious home of Jack Masterson, prolific children's writer. He's also Lucy's favorite author, and once, she ran away to live with him when she was thirteen. Her own parents had long since passed her off to her grandmother, but the push to run came when Lucy went home for her older sister's sixteenth birthday. Excited to be included, Lucy was crushed when her sister loudly declared Lucy was an overpriced expense their parents couldn't return.

Jack has summoned Lucy back to Clock Island, along with four other adults, to play a game. The first to win gets the only existing copy of the last book in the Clock Island series. It will be theirs to do with as they please. The rules are simple: no teaming up, no using your phone or internet, solve the riddles, and you win.

Except, Jack's game is a lot like his books. Children who visited Clock Island in the books

often found what they'd originally wished for wasn't what they wanted in the end. Will the winner really get what they wished for?



Double Or Nothing (Cindy Steel)

Yep, this is book two by Steel this month, and book two in the series. I was excited to see Tess and Logan had their own story. Having one last square to fill in on my reading sheet for the month, I pulled one of Cindy's books up. The only downer is, she leaves you hanging so much at the end of each chapter I have no choice but to stay up well past my bedtime to finish reading the story. Every. Single. Time.

Tess has locked her heart away and has no intention of ever falling in love again. Not after her disastrous almost marriage, the one where her fiancée left her at the apple tree in front of friends and family. So, when she's sitting in a restaurant in her hometown and a group of construction guys start hitting on her, she takes great pleasure in watching each one find the courage to ask her out just so she can turn them down. Until her childhood crush, Logan, shows up.

Saying no just got a lot harder, but everyone knows Logan's a player. He never dates anyone for more than a week. Everyone also knows Tess has been in love with Logan since she was nine. When a mutual friend offers Tess and Logan a bet, they can't turn down: fake date, don't fall in love, and win my eighty thousand dollar truck. Tess figures she can't lose. That is until her heart betrays her.

Author's Note:

I had two fun things happen this month with books I read. Not only did [Meg Schaffer](#) come to our town for a book signing, we also got to learn some behind-the-scenes details about her book. For instance, Hugo, in the story, is based on her [husband](#), who is also a moody artist. Or so she told us, and he promptly scowled at everyone.

After meeting Meg and hearing her inspiration behind the story, and a few other fun facts, it made me want to reread the story again. In fact, the book signing line was so long, I hunkered in a corner, working my way back through the book and reading some of my favorite scenes. I can't share my absolute favorite one, as it will give a bit of the story away. Her next book is coming out in July and she advertised it as Narnia for grownups.

The second fun thing is that I purchased some goodies from [Courtney Walsh's Etsy shop](#). That's not earth shattering news, although my husband asked why a cricketer had an Etsy shop. My items didn't ship very quickly, which didn't bother me, but one morning I had a message from Courtney apologizing for the delay. The person responsible for shipping orders was sick, and Courtney was unaware orders needed filling. When my order arrived, she'd included some extras along with a handwritten note, which totally made my day.

The Reluctant Author: