

# Reviews

## Fiction

### Your Heart Is a Muscle the Size of a Fist

**Sunil Yapa.** Little, Brown/Boudreax, \$26 (320p) ISBN 978-0-316-38653-1

Yapa's chilling debut is set amid the real-life protests that disrupted the 1999 World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference in Seattle, which resulted in hundreds of arrests, police resignations, and an increased media spotlight on the WTO. The novel follows a fictional group of police officers, dissidents, and a diplomat as they struggle through the summit's first chaotic day, full of tear gas, epiphany, and violence. On one side are the activists and their hangers-on: Victor, a nomadic 19-year-old trying to sell weed to protesters; King and John Henry, veteran nonviolent advocates who arrive at the protests to act as medics; and Charles, a political representative from Sri Lanka who quickly finds himself a target of both protesters and police. Representing the law are Chief Bill Bishop, Victor's estranged stepfather, bent on protecting his city; and officers Tim and Julia, whose past run-ins with terrorism and riots influence their fierce approach to peace. Yapa shows great skill in juggling these seven narratives as he builds a combustible environment, offering brief glimpses of the past to round out each character—and in the case of King, to reveal a deadly secret. As the peaceful protests turn brutal, however, the author's firm grasp of his story loosens a bit. But by the novel's end, Yapa regains his stride, resulting in a memorable, pulse-pounding literary experience. *Agent: P.J. Mark, Janklow & Nesbit Associates. (Jan.)*

### American Housewife

**Helen Ellis.** Doubleday, \$23 (208p) ISBN 978-0-385-54103-9

Ellis, a professional poker player and author (*Eating the Cheshire Cat*), turns domesticity on its head in her darkly funny 12-story collection, featuring hausfraus in various stages of unraveling.



Professional poker player and author Helen Ellis's story collection, *American Housewife*, is sharp and funny (reviewed on this page).

These wives are not like the perfect 1970s-mom Carol Brady, the blue-collar Roseanne Conner, or even the tightly wound Claire Dunphy. Ellis immediately sets the tone in "What I Do All Day," about a modern Stepford Wife—she is "lucky enough to have a drawer just for glitter"—with bite. In the rest of the collection, women become involved in increasingly hostile epistolary e-fights over wainscoting in a shared hallway ("The Wainscoting War"), speak in codes that require translation ("Southern Lady Code"), and take their book club to a whole new level ("Hello! Welcome to Book Club"). One wife finds a fiendish way to contend with a domineering mother-in-law and the son she raised ("Dead Doormen"); another finds that having a significant following on social media doesn't save her from her book sponsor's ruthlessness in actually getting the thing written ("My Book Is Brought to You by the Good People at Tampax"). Ellis hits the satirical bull's-eye with a deliciously dry, smart voice that will have readers flipping the pages in delight. *Agent: Susanna Einstein, Einstein Literary Management. (Jan.)*

### The Expatriates

**Janice Y.K. Lee.** Viking, \$27.95 (336p) ISBN 978-0-525-42947-0

After her successful debut novel, *The Piano Teacher*, Lee returns with a captivating book about three American women living in an expatriate community in Hong Kong. She explores their experiences with

love, loss, and uncertainty about the future and the unexpected ways their lives intersect. Mercy, a recent Columbia graduate who relocated from New York to Hong Kong in search of new opportunities, struggles to move forward after her involvement in a disturbing incident. Margaret, who used to have a life that other people envied, with a happy marriage and three children, finds herself searching for a new identity after her family is shaken by a loss. And Hilary, a wealthy housewife wishing for a child and toying with the idea of adoption, feels stalled by indecision and a troubled marriage. Their international community, described vividly in this atmospheric narrative, is insular. That these women occupy different spaces in this world of privilege does not prevent them from altering one another's lives. Lee's women are complex and often flawed, which makes the stories of their strength all the more compelling in this tale of family, motherhood, and attempts at moving on. *(Jan.)*

### The Core of the Sun

**Johanna Sinisalo, trans. from Finnish by Lola Rogers.** Grove/Black Cat, \$16 trade paper (320p) ISBN 978-0-8021-2464-7

Finnish author Sinisalo (*Troll: A Love Story*) spins a dystopian tale in her latest. The novel opens in a cemetery, where an illegal transaction of capsaicin, the ingredient in chilies that gives them their heat, is underway; Vanna meets an unknown seller to get a sample of the product, which she tests by shoving it into her underwear. What kind of world bans spice? In a series of personal accounts, letters, dictionary entries, and excerpts from "historic" source materials, we learn that life in the Eusistocratic Republic of Finland is dictated and controlled by the Health Authority, which unlike the European Decadent states bans substances for the supposed health of its citizens. It also divides its citizens into sexual hierarchies. Elois (the terms are borrowed from H.G. Wells) are females who have been bred for their beauty and submissive traits; only they (as opposed to morlocks) are legally allowed to reproduce. Despite the various sources, the heart of the story belongs to Vanna. Born in Spain and raised on a farm along with her beloved sister, Manna, by Aulikki, their grandmother, after their