

narratives through letters, field notes, digital transcripts, and fragments of a novel-within-a-novel. Extravagant and mesmerizing, Dodson's complex, evocative tale gradually reveals a mythos surrounding love, adventure, and the natural world. —Jonathan Fuller

★ **Beside Myself.**
By Ann Morgan.

Jan. 2016. 336p. Bloomsbury, \$26 (9781632864338);
e-book (9781632864352).

Identical twins Helen and Ellie have significant differences detectable by those who care to see. Helen is the favored one: pretty, obedient, smart; Ellie is dull, slow, shunned. After their father commits suicide and their mother remarries, mean-spirited Helen proposes a malicious prank: she and Ellie will swap personalities to get the adults' attention. Her gambit, however, works all too well, and when Ellie begins flourishing under all the adulation normally given her sister, she refused to switch back. As the girls grow up, the original Helen develops sociopathic tendencies, and the original Ellie blossoms into a poised and popular young woman. Totally estranged from her family, "Helen" teeters on the edges of society, while "Ellie" becomes a beloved TV celebrity. When a tragedy forces the sisters to confront and acknowledge their true selves, it may be too late to go back to the way things were. With ever-shifting points of view and evolving transitions in time and place, it will take careful reading to keep up with this intricate exploration of identity and family. This won't be a problem for fans of *Gone Girl* (2012) and a novel to which *Beside Myself* will inevitably be compared for good reasons, *The Girl on the Train* (2015). Morgan's stunning debut is a thrilling and thought-provoking psychological drama. —Carol Haggas

Bird.
By Noy Holland.

Nov. 2015. 176p. Counterpoint, \$24 (9781619025646).

Short-story writer Holland presents her first novel, a potent account of Bird, a physically and emotionally broken mother who, in the course of mundane daily life, revisits the raw and reckless love she once experienced with a man named Mickey. Their sexually charged and ultimately doomed relationship led them on a wild ride through the best and worst of each other. But Bird still misses Mickey and keeps tabs on him through a friend, seemingly unwilling to release him or the past. Though Holland's tale may not appeal to the average reader, it is remarkably innovative and astonishingly original, defying easy categorization as it daringly pushes boundaries with language and story structure. Along the way, Holland highlights the extreme feelings and actions possible between lovers, parents and chil-

TOP 10 FIRST NOVELS

The finest first novels reviewed in *Booklist* between October 15, 2014, and October 1, 2015, are works of remarkable wit and wisdom, emotional intricacy and keen social insights, exceptional tales set in places as diverse as Brazil, Canada, Iran, Yugoslavia, and the U.S., and dramatizing family trauma, war, and postapocalyptic upheaval. —Donna Seaman

Backlands. By Victoria Shorr. 2015. Norton, \$25.95 (9780393246025).

Shorr tells the dramatic story of legendary Brazilian outlaw lovers, the 1930s bandit leader, Lampião, a man of mysterious powers who is both worshipped and feared, and courageous Maria Bonita.

City on Fire. By Garth Risk Hallberg. 2015. Knopf, \$30 (9780385353779).

Set within an exquisitely grungy 1970s New York City, Hallberg's magnificent novel of mystery and longing interweaves the stories of a punk-rock fan, a musician and heroin addict, a teacher, and a reporter.

Did You Ever Have a Family. By Bill Clegg. 2015. Simon & Schuster/Scout, \$26 (9781476798172).

Memoirist Clegg's mesmerizing and deeply haunting first novel revolves around a tragedy—June Reid loses her entire family in a house fire—and examines how people make bearable what is unbearable.

Disgruntled. By Asali Solomon. 2015. Farrar, \$26 (9780374140342).

Solomon's deft, culturally saturated, intricate, and stingingly witty coming-of-age debut is narrated by young Kenya as she grows up in mid-1980s Philadelphia and copes with the extremes of her radical parents.

Etta and Otto and Russell and James. By Emma Hooper. 2015. Simon & Schuster, \$26 (9781476755670).

In Hooper's enchanting, perceptive debut, Etta, 83, walks away from her Saskatchewan home, heading across Canada to the ocean, befriending a coyote called James, while her husband, Otto, stays home, and his friend and rival, Russell, hurries after her.

Find Me. By Laura van den Berg. 2015. Farrar, \$26 (9780374154714).

After barely surviving foster care, Joy is subjected to extreme quarantine while a pandemic rages. Back out in the ravaged world, she embarks on a dark odyssey through decimated landscapes in search of the truth about her origins.

Girl at War. By Sara Novic. 2015. Random, \$26 (9780812996340).

In Novic's important and cathartic tale, Ana Juric is conscripted into the Yugoslav civil war at age 10, rescued by UN peacekeepers, and adopted by an American family. When she enters college, she realizes that she must return to her homeland and confront her violent past.

The Girl from the Garden. By Parnaz Foroutan. 2015. Ecco, \$26.99 (9780062388384); e-book (9780062388407).

In this stunning and suspenseful first novel about a prosperous Iranian family besieged by ambition, jealousy, sacrifice, passion, and betrayal, Foroutan draws on her own background to explore Iran's lore and traditions.

Gold, Fame, Citrus. By Claire Vaye Watkins. 2015. Riverhead, \$27.95 (9781594634239).

A catastrophic California drought has precipitated an exodus that Luz, a former model, and Ray, an AWOL soldier, reluctantly join after taking in a strange little girl, setting off on a perilous desert journey in this high-tension, caustically parodic, eco-crisis saga and elegiac tale of scrappy adaptation and epic loss.

My Sunshine Away. By M. O. Walsh. 2015. Putnam, \$26.95 (9780399169526).

In Walsh's distinctive and compassionate exploration of teenage self-absorption, insecurities, and bravado, the rape of 15-year-old Lindy near her suburban Baton Rouge home obsesses her young neighbor, who wants to solve the crime, deliver Lindy unscathed back in time, and win her heart.

