



Author of the week

Justin Schmidt

Justin Schmidt "has a way with words when it comes to pain," said the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. The Pennsylvania-born entomologist is famous for developing a rating system for the agony inflicted by various stinging insects



and for adding descriptions that would make a wine critic proud. Here he is on the bald-faced hornet's particular brand of pain: "Rich, hearty, slightly crunchy. Similar to getting your hand smashed in a revolving door." And on the sting of the Eastern yellow jacket: "Hot and smoky, almost irreverent. Imagine W. C. Fields extinguishing a cigar on your tongue." Schmidt, who has finally published the complete Schmidt Sting Pain Index in a new book, *The Sting of the Wild*, turns out to be a tough grader—awarding only a few insects the highest score on a scale of 0 to 4.

Even his favorite biting insect—the harvester ant—doesn't make the grade, said Linda Wertheimer in *NPR.org*. The insect's venom is roughly 40 times more potent than a rattlesnake's and causes extreme long-lasting pain. But it can't match the tortures inflicted by a bullet ant or the tarantula hawk, which is a large spider wasp. Though Schmidt says honeybees can be deadlier, because they can attack in swarms of several thousand, the tarantula hawk delivers the most excruciating short-term suffering. "It's like getting a 25,000-volt electric shock—it short-circuits your normal neurological system," he says. "It's a pure, immediate, debilitating pain." But because it wears off quickly, Schmidt doesn't suggest seeking medical attention. "I tell people to lie down and scream," he says.

Best books...chosen by Sherman Alexie

Novelist, poet, and short-story writer Sherman Alexie is the award-winning author of *Reservation Blues*, *War Dances*, and *The Absolutely True Story of a Part-Time Indian*. His first picture book, *Thunder Boy Jr.*, has just been published by Little, Brown.

Where Did You Sleep Last Night? by Danzy Senna (Picador, \$19). This is a memoir about a diverse, artistically accomplished, and incredibly mysterious family. Senna, who was abandoned in childhood by her black father and raised by her white mother, tells the story of her father and his unknown, unknowable origins. I am amazed by her empathy for him.

Wild Hundreds by Nate Marshall (Univ. of Pittsburgh, \$16). Funny, violent, beautiful, and aching for redemption: These are the poems of a 21st-century African-American man who's immersed equally in academic poetry and hip-hop. Beautiful rhymes and rhythms abound. There's tragedy, too. This is probably my favorite poetry book of the past few years.

Wondering Who You Are by Sonya Lea (Tin House, \$16). After her husband sustains a memory-erasing traumatic brain injury, Lea has to rebuild her entire life with him, from the beginning of their courtship to their becoming parents, and learn, in middle age, to fall in love again. What happens to a person whose identity is completely erased? How does one start over?

Monstress by Lysley Tenorio (Ecco, \$14). These stories about Filipino-Americans are hilarious, strange, and pop-culture-obsessed. They remind me that the first-generation immigrant experience is very similar to the Native American experience: Lost in the culture but also in love with the culture. And it's vitally important that we read American immigrant stories. Empathy wins!

Bird Box by Josh Malerman (Ecco, \$16). This is the scariest novel I have read in years and years. Its monsters can only see you if you open your eyes, so our heroes must keep theirs closed at all times. The book begins with an escape down a garden path that leads into a haunted house—and then our heroes continue their escape by taking a sightless journey down a river by raft. A highly original horror novel.

My Emily Dickinson by Susan Howe (New Directions, \$16). This is quite simply the best scholarship on Emily Dickinson's poems. But it's also a spiritual biography and autobiography. I return to it as often as I return to Dickinson's poems. How much do you love Dickinson? Not as much as Susan Howe.

Also of interest...in strivers

My Struggle: Book Five

by Karl Ove Knausgaard (Archipelago, \$27)



Karl Ove Knausgaard has "an astonishing knack for insinuating you into the minutiae of his daily affairs," said Kevin Canfield in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The fifth book in his celebrated six-volume autobiographical novel focuses on the years when he pushed past failure to become a published author, and "it does a remarkably good job of depicting the single-mindedness required to make real artistic progress." At times, he's pretentious, at times thin-skinned. "You'd expect this to be boring. It isn't."

Shoe Dog

by Phil Knight (Scribner, \$29)



The story of Nike's rise is a great business story, and this memoir represents the first time its protagonist "has truly opened up," said Allan Brettman in the *Portland Oregonian*. Company founder Phil Knight confesses to a variety of sins, including failing to share credit with employees and being slow to embrace the brand's iconic "swoosh" logo. The story ends in 1980—before Michael Jordan and before Nike's offshore manufacturing drew heavy fire. "Here's hoping the author takes a crack at another book."

The Adventurist

by J. Bradford Hipps (St. Martin's, \$26)



"*The Adventurist* is that relative rarity, a business novel that's interested in what people get out of their work lives," said Dwight Garner in *The New York Times*. Its protagonist, a mid-level executive at a software company in the New South, finds satisfaction in his work even as he fights daily with ennui. Nothing more dramatic befalls this droll young man than a family death, an office crush, and potential business collapse, but J. Bradford Hipps makes it sting. He shows "grace and insight to spare."

Tuesday Nights in 1980

by Molly Prentiss (Gallery, \$26)



Grand ambition unites the creative types who populate this spirited debut novel, said Lydia Kiesling in *The Guardian* (U.K.). Set mostly in a pre-gentrified New York, the book follows an art critic with synesthesia, an Argentine painter, and a wide-eyed newcomer from Idaho. *Tuesday Nights* "has a breathless quality that can veer into melodrama," but author Molly Prentiss "has the imagination and humor" to salvage even moments so sentimental that they "might have doomed another novel."