

gotiators and soon finds herself falling for Bruno. Absurd embroilments, sibling rivalries, and ethical quandaries skitter in and out of the plot expeditiously, quickly replaced by another sharp observation or anecdote. Insightful and challenging, this oddball story is unforgettable. Julavits succeeds admirably in making the transition from her prior dramatic novel, *The Mineral Palace*, to this quick-witted black comedy. Recommended for public libraries.—*Colleen Lougen, Mt. St. Mary Coll., Newburgh, NY*

★**Kellogg, Marne Davis. Brilliant.**

St. Martin's. May 2003. c.352p. ISBN 0-312-30347-5. \$24.95. F
Kick Keswick proves a strong, delightful and intelligent antiheroine as she leads the reader on a marvelous romp through London auction houses, the homes of the rich and famous, and the Provence countryside. Her early rough edges as an Oklahoma juvenile delinquent have been considerably smoothed under the 30-year tutelage of the elegant, now deceased Sir Cramner Ballantine, owner of Ballantine & Company Auctioneers. Remade as a lady of impeccable taste, Kick still has larceny in her soul and has made a successful secret career as jeweler and gem thief. Despite her lack of morals, she has her standards and thus deplores the takeover of the company by brash American businessman, philistine, and womanizer Owen Brace. As a woman of further contradiction, Kick also finds herself sexually drawn to Owen while flattered and intrigued by the attentions of detective Thomas Curtis. Full of fun and flare, Kick is indeed a kick, and *Brilliant* proves to be a gem of summer reading. Kellogg is the author of the Marshall Lily Bennett series (*Nothing but Gossip*). Highly recommended for popular fiction collections everywhere.—*Sheila Riley, Smithsonian Inst. Libs., Washington, DC*

King, Ruchama. Seven Blessings.

St. Martin's. Aug. 2003. c.256p. ISBN 0-312-30915-5. \$23.95. F
While the machinations of matchmakers have long been a staple of fiction, King's debut novel puts a fresh spin on the subject. Matchmakers Judy and Tsippi, members of the ultraorthodox Jewish community in Jerusalem, are both looking for the right mate for their skittish friend Beth while also trying to find meaning in their own lives. Judy seeks a depth that being a wife, mother, and matchmaker have not conferred upon her. Tsippi dreams of a relationship with her husband as romantic as those in her successful matches. As Beth reluctantly moves toward marriage with a fine but imperfect young man, Judy and Tsippi begin to realize their potential through Torah study, finding scriptural wisdom that nourishes both mind and body. King's portrayal of a religious community

is as warm and engaging as any in contemporary literature. Her characters jump off the page and into the hearts of her audience. Some readers may find the amount of Yiddish challenging, but the rewards of this charming spiritual tale should overcome the obstacles. For public libraries, particularly those serving Jewish communities.—*Andrea Kempf, Johnson Cty. Community Coll. Lib., Overland Park, KS*

Kitakata, Kenzo. Ashes.

Vertical. Jun. 2003. c.224p. tr. from Japanese by Emi Shimokawa. ISBN 1-932234-02-0. \$23.95. F
Japanese crime novelist Kitakata makes his U.S. debut with this dark, hard-boiled mob story, set in modern-day Japan. Tanaka is a *yakuza* standing on the edge of a big family transition. With the mob boss in the hospital dying of old age (a rare thing in his line of work), Tanaka fortifies his branch of the organization with more men and strong business ventures in prostitution and drug trafficking. As everyone waits for a change in command, his branch gains respect and importance through a mob war and shrewd business transactions. Tanaka must choose between ruling the family or crushing it with his new syndicate. Unfortunately, this novel is caught between being a convincing, character-driven tale and a low-octane mob story that never seems to come out with guns blazing. After an abrupt shift in perspective midway through the novel, it finally settles into Tanaka's insightful voice. With over 100 novels in print in Japan, Kitakata's first English-language release will garner a following of diehard mob and pulp readers, but it still leaves a stone in this reviewer's shoe. Recommended for large fiction collections.—*Ron Samul, New London, CT*

Langley, Lee. Distant Music.

Milkweed. Jun. 2003. c.332p. LC 2002151111. ISBN 1-57131-040-1. \$22. F
In this well-crafted novel by the award-winning author of *Persistent Rumours*, a Jewish/Christian love story set largely in Portugal plays itself out over different time periods from 1429 to the present. In each version, a girl named Esperança (or, in the last section, Hope) and a boy named Manuel (later Mel) meet by the sea and fall in love. In the first, Esperança is a peasant girl who meets a beguiling sailor. After Manuel disappears at sea, Esperança cannily trades sexual favors for grapevines and ends up a rich vineyard owner, last seen discussing exploration with a young man named Columbus. Later, a bookish Esperança, who comes from an affluent home, is taken with Manuel, a bookseller. Abandoning a life of ease to convert to Judaism and marry him, she finds herself fleeing Portugal at the time of the expulsion of the Jews. In the final chapter, set in

the present, Hope is a one-time artist and homemaker, and Mel is a twin—the one she didn't marry. The circumstances keep changing, but what remains is the story of a love harshly tested by opposing faiths and turbulent political times. Moving artfully through a wide swath of history, this original novel is recommended for all public libraries.—*Barbara Love, Kingston Frontenac P.L., Ont.*

Lowell, Elizabeth.

Die in Plain Sight.

Morrow. Jul. 2003. c.385p. ISBN 0-06-050412-9. \$24.95. F
The third title in Lowell's "Rarities Unlimited" series (which includes *Moving Target* and *Running Scared*) finds a mix of old and new characters embroiled in the California art scene. Artist Susa Donovan, matriarch of the Seattle Donovans (introduced in another Lowell series that includes *Amber Beach* and *Midnight in Ruby Bayou*), comes to Southern California for an exhibit and art auction to benefit a local museum. Her "escort" (read: bodyguard) is Rarities security specialist Ian Lapstrake. Having had a peripheral role in the previous titles, here Ian takes center stage when young artist Lacey Quinn presents her grandfather's plein-air landscapes anonymously for La Susa's evaluation as part of the auction. The next thing we know, arson, art theft, and old murders combine with Ian and Lacey's budding romance. *Die* isn't one of the author's better novels, though her avid fans won't care. Perhaps La Lowell is growing weary; most of these educated rich folks come off as smarmy and too slick for this reviewer's taste. In the past, her relationships would develop over time, but here our lovers are pretty much picking out China patterns within the first week of meeting. Also, the denouement is too pat and barely explained. Sigh. Maybe Lowell needs to return to her historical tales. Now that's romance. [Previewed in *Prepub Alert, LJ 3/15/03*.]—*Bette-Lee Fox, "Library Journal"*

McCouch, Hannah. **Girl Cook.**

Villard. Jul. 2003. c.228p. LC 2002033196. ISBN 1-4000-6042-7. \$22.95. F
Anthony Bourdain plus Bridget Jones equals Layla Mitchner, a 28-year-old "girl cook" working as a salad specialist in a hip New York restaurant. Her culinary education at Le Cordon Bleu has not prepared her for the glass ceiling in the male-dominated world of professional cooking. She works hard and wants a shot at the sauté station, but her patronizing boss won't give her a chance. The kitchen scenes are raucous fun, peppered with kitchen lingo and spicy language in Spanish and English. But Layla's blah romance suffers by comparison—which is partly the point as she tries to balance work and love and isn't very happy with either. A few errant plot