

dem are just that, the book soars. A late revelation, however, threatens to reduce each vignette, and the novel, into a stylistic exercise. *Agent: Grainne Fox, Fletcher & Co. (Mar.)*

### The End of the Point

Elizabeth Graver. Harper, \$25.95 (352p) ISBN 978-0-06-218484-9

It's 1942, and the Porters are coming back to Ashaunt, Mass., the piece of the New England coast they've always come back to, no matter that the Army is building barracks and viewing platforms there. Graver (*Awake*) opens her fourth novel with a beautifully evoked glimpse of the very first arrival at Ashaunt—that of the Europeans—and the native people's eventual sale (or, alternately, “bargain, theft, or gift”) of the land. She then moves omnisciently and believably through the minds of Bea, the Porters' Scottish nanny, and the wild Helen, the oldest daughter. As 1942 gives way to 1947, 1961, then 1970, and finally 1999, Graver also moves fluidly across time, all on this same beloved piece of land. Bea is a wonderful character, and Graver is incredibly good at evoking past, present, and future, and the ways in which they intersect.

Unfortunately, the latter sections of the book, which focus mostly on Helen, no longer a wild girl, and her adult son Charlie, aren't quite as strong, perhaps because the issues of generational strife, blowback from drug use, and land development are more familiar. That said, Graver's gifts—her control of time, her ability to evoke place and define character—are immense. *Agent: Richard Parks, the Richard Parks Agency. (Mar.)*

### Market Street

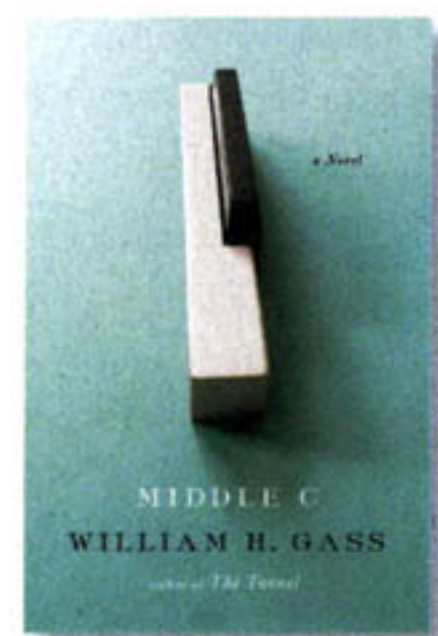
Anita Hughes. St. Martin's, \$14.99 trade paper (288p) ISBN 978-1-2500-2039-0

In Hughes's second trip to Northern California (after *Monarch Beach*), Cassie Fenton has grown up shadowing her mother through Fenton's, an exclusive San Francisco department store owned by the family. Raised to take the reins, Cassie instead chose marriage, to Aidan, a UC Berkeley professor. She spends her days tending her organic garden and volunteering at the Edible Schoolyard project. Around the time Aidan has an affair with one of his students, Cassie's mother pres-

## ★ Middle C

William H. Gass. Knopf, \$28.95 (464p) ISBN 978-0-307-70163-3

“The fear that the human race might not survive has been replaced by the fear that it will endure.” This sentence is the secret life's work of the Austrian émigré Joseph Skizzen, hero of Gass's first novel in nearly two decades. There are few minds as well-documented in letters as that of Gass, whose own life's work consists of eight well-regarded books of criticism and the legendary 1995 novel *The Tunnel*. But the storyline that emerges, after we learn how Joseph's absent scofflaw father Rudi disguised his family as Jews in Vienna and London during the Second World War (as though to buck the trend), is a comparatively innocuous brand of epic. Joseph grows up in Ohio, with his mother Miriam, and becomes a devoted music lover, amateur pianist, and eventual lecturer. His quiet life, “reasonably clear of complicity in human affairs,” consists of but the smallest intrigues at the local library, which becomes Joe's refuge, and, later, the school where he fears denunciation by the faculty. Only in his imagination is he the great Professor Skizzen, master of the Inhumanity Museum, a catalogue of the sinful human condition. And yet the novel is crazily rich with thought: there are lovingly observed descriptions of books by Thomas Hardy, Bruno Schultz, and Ruskin, remarkably detailed discourse on Miriam's gardening, and enough discussion of music for a course in classical composition. Excepting some choppiness in the novel's second half—and the decision to employ close third-person for material that seems naturally suited for first—Gass beautifully coaxes the unheard music from a seemingly muted life. “Middle C” was the realm of ordinary thought that Arnold Schoenberg abhorred. But for Gass, it is the model of a living, introverted mind and fodder for a symphonic anti-adventure story that is the unprecedented work of a master. *Agent: Lynn Nesbit, Janklow & Nesbit Associates. (Mar.)*



ents her with a project that promises even more turmoil: to oversee the opening of a food department in Fenton's, modeled after the one at Harrods in London. Cassie's passion for organic food serves her well as she reluctantly takes on the task, and she finds returning to Fenton's oddly comforting. The work, and a new friendship with James, the architect for the project, gives Cassie the space to decide whether or not to forgive her husband. With her best pal (and secret marketing genius) Alexis on board to help, and her relationship with James inevitably evolving into something more than friendship, Cassie finds herself carving out a new identity. Although Fenton's is an appealing setting and the banter between Cassie and Alexis is frivolously fun, stronger characters and a less predictable arc would have made the book more memorable. *Agent: Melissa Flashman, Trident Media Group. (Mar.)*

### Parnucklian For Chocolate

B.H. James. Red Hen (CDC, dist.), \$16.95 trade paper (266p) ISBN 978-1-59709-790-1

The gradual awakening of a teenager whose mom protects him with a fanciful story reveals an unnecessarily cruel world. Josiah grows up believing, as his mother tells him, that he is the product of an alien abduction from the planet Parnuckle, whose inhabitants eat chocolate, never sleep, and don't need to bathe. But when he and his mother move in with her new boyfriend, Johnson Davis, Johnson grows concerned about Josiah's abnormal development—particularly after his daughter Bree, a rebellious teenager, crawls into bed with Josiah and begins to figure in his fantasies, to the alarm of both parents. Josiah clings to the story of Parnuckle, now a place to which he and Bree plan to escape, even as his new stepfather tries to convince him that the plan-