Winter 2025, Volume 58

***TBR* is a quarterly newsletter of the Women's Fiction Writers Association.**

Click here to learn more about WFWA.

BEYOND THE LABEL "WOMEN'S FICTION"

At *TBR*, we love celebrating women's fiction. But what, you may ask, *is* women's fiction? For some readers, the label raises more confusion than clarity.

Despite what the label suggests, women's fiction is not merely fiction written *by* women, nor is it fiction written exclusively *for* women. Women's fiction is for *all* authors and readers, regardless of gender, because at the heart of every women's fiction novel is, simply, a story of transformation.

WFWA characterizes it this way: "Women's fiction centers on a character's emotional journey—the inner growth that drives the story. These novels span every setting and subgenre, from contemporary realism and historical narratives to mystery, speculative, or even science fiction, united by a focus on transformation and human connection."

From whodunit mysteries to historical tales to cozy *happily ever afters*, the books in *TBR* are united by the emotional journeys and connections that stay with us long after the final page. In this issue, several WFWA authors weigh in on what women's fiction means to them. We invite you to read along and consider what women's fiction means to you.

BOOK TALK WITH...

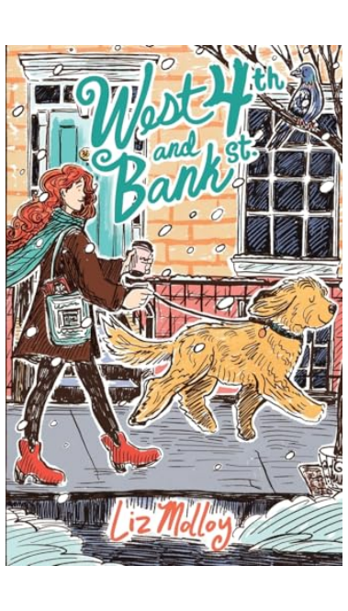
...Liz Molloy

Book with most inspiring women: *The Giver of Stars* by Jojo Moyes.

Have you always known you wanted to be a writer: Honestly, no. I've always loved books and reading, but I never thought I could create my own stories. I just didn't believe in myself enough to try for the longest time. Until one day I decided to try, and I'm forever grateful I did.

On your nightstand now: *If We Were Villains* by M.L. Rio.

Something you hope readers will take away from your writing: I hope readers know that no matter what they're struggling with, they are not alone. Everyone questions what they want out of life, and there's no rush to have it all figured out at a young age. And, for those who are in the older generations, I hope they take away that it's never too late to chase their dreams and make them a reality.



West 4th and Bank Street by Liz Malloy

West 4th and Bank Street follows the unlikely friendship of two intergenerational women as they unravel a decades-old publishing mystery and, in the process, reclaim the life and love they have always wanted.

Learn more on Liz's website.

...Suzanne Uttaro Samuels

Why do you write women's fiction: Because women's stories have too often been hidden or forgotten. I'm drawn to those quiet turning points when a woman chooses herself—her art, her freedom, her truth. Even the smallest act of defiance can be revolutionary.

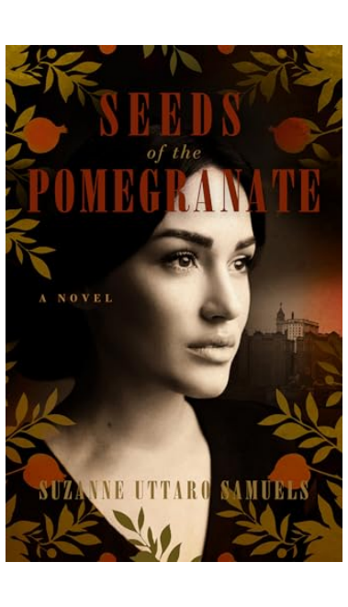
What sparked the idea for your latest novel: *Seeds of the Pomegranate* began with a family secret: my grandfather survived a tenement fire that killed his entire family and left terrible physical and emotional scars. Years later, I found the story in *The New York Times*. Dozens had died, among them, his great-grandmother, his little brothers, and someone no one had ever mentioned—his aunt Mimi, whose body was found in the cellar beside the boys. I began to wonder: had she saved my grandfather's life? Who was she?

At the time, my children were the ages of those boys. I couldn't stop thinking about Mimi, an unmarried immigrant woman whose entire life was defined by a few official records: a birth certificate, a ship's manifest, and a death notice. I wanted to know what she wanted, what she was afraid of, what small joys filled her days. The life I gave her in *Seeds* was that of an artist, a woman who dares to create beauty and meaning in a world that denies her both. Writing her story became a way to bring her back into the light.

Something readers would be surprised to learn about you: Before turning to fiction, I taught law and wrote about justice. But what I really wanted to understand was how people live inside those systems and how love, loyalty, and survival play out in the shadows of rules and expectations. Fiction lets me move closer to that truth.

A book that changed your life: Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* reminded me that even in the darkest moments, there are glimmers of kindness, courage, and hope, small lights that guide us through. That belief—that beauty can coexist with sorrow—has shaped how I see the world and the stories I tell.

Favorite line from your book: "I should give up. Accept my fate. But that pencil always found its way back into my grasp."



Seeds of the Pomegranate by Suzanne Uttaro Samuels

From a crumbling Sicilian estate to the streets of Gangland New York, *Seeds of the Pomegranate* follows Mimi Inglese—a young artist forced to trade brushes for counterfeit bills when her father's crimes destroy their future. Caught between duty and desire, loss and survival, she must find her own truth in a world built on deception.

Learn more on Suzanne's website.

...Debra Borchert

What sparked the idea for your latest novel: Two years ago, when I traveled to the Christmas markets in Alsace, France, a few hoodlums attempted to mug me. I fought back, which was a really bad idea in retrospect, but the experience caused me to look at a normally joyous celebration in a different way. I wondered how a person who was grieving might experience the Christmas markets. The holidays can be bittersweet and difficult for many people, and I wanted to acknowledge that not everyone is happy. These wonderings fueled *His Last Christmas Gift* and, in the end, Claire's redemption.

Something you hope readers will take away from your writing: When fellow WFWA member Janice Robinson Daly's review mentioned Claire's quiet courage to move forward, I realized that Claire's journey, although difficult, was attainable only through her courage and determination. Claire is widowed, broke, and unemployed when she discovers her marriage was not what she thought it would be—all great reasons to hide under the bedcovers. But she realizes a little boy's life is at stake, so she flies across the world to save him. In doing so, she turns her life around and receives a second chance at love.

Favorite character in a novel: I don't know why, but zany members of the clergy show up in all my books. In *His Last Christmas Gift,* Sister Georgette, who shares her Fruit & Nut Holiday Cookie recipe with readers, stole my heart. She is a kind, gentle nun who listens with understanding and sips brandy from a teacup. "Brandy is the only good thing about fruitcake, so I borrowed that ingredient for my cookies!"

His Last Christmas Gift by Debra Borchert

Discovering a photograph in her late husband's coat pocket spurs Claire Didier on a quest to find a mysterious stranger. Amidst the magical Christmas markets of France, she finds herself unwrapping a flurry of secrets, betrayals, and intrigue—while facing the exhilarating possibility of a later-in-life romance. *His Last Christmas Gift* is a tender holiday story and moving exploration of how love endures.

Learn more on Debra's website.

...Kelly Marks

Why do you write women's fiction: I love stories about women. Strong women. Flawed women. Funny, angry, anxious, sad: we all contain a magnitude of various adjectives. I want to write relatable stories, and I think women's fiction does just that.

Something readers would be surprised to learn about you: I worked as a nurse in a major pediatric hospital for 10 years. I started in the Cardiac ICU and Heart Transplant, then worked on the Oncology and Bone Marrow Transplant floor. After leaving pediatrics, I worked as a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner. I truly feel like I've been able to walk with patients through some of the hardest moments of their lives.

Book you wish you'd written: *Remarkably Bright Creatures* by Shelby Van Pelt. An octopus narrator? What! But it works, and you fall in love with him. Brilliant.

Book you wish you could read again for the first time: *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold. This book broke my heart as a reader and fascinated me as a writer. It is beautifully written. I read it in one or two sittings, and it stayed with me for a long, long time. Plus, it has one of the best openings of any book I've read: "My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973."

On your nightstand now: I've been watching a show on Peacock about the serial killer, John Wayne Gacy. I bought the book the show runner used as research: *Boys Enter the House: The Victims of John Wayne Gacy and the Lives They Left Behind* by David Nelson. An ocean away from women's fiction, but I'm also a bit of a true crime junkie!

The Past That Made Us by Kelly Marks

Millie Carpenter has built her life around control, but when a cancer diagnosis shatters her carefully ordered world, she's forced to accept help from the last person she ever expected: her mother. Returning to the seaside town of St. Bell, Maine, means confronting everything Millie thought she'd left behind—grief, buried memories, and the man who once held her heart. Now, with the biggest fight of her life ahead, Millie must choose: keep running from the past or embrace the messy, beautiful possibility of second chances.

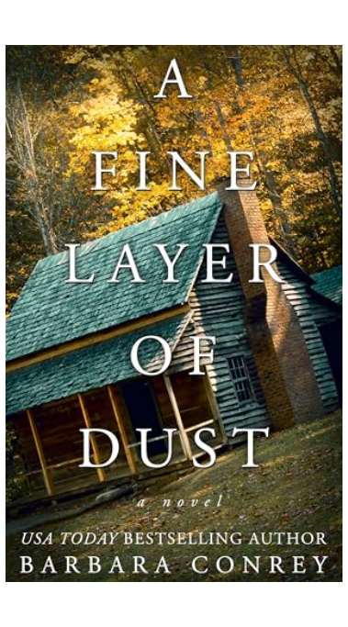
Learn more on Kelly's website.

...Barbara Conrey

On my nightstand now: *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara. I found this book on the bookcase in my bedroom. I don't know how it came to be there. At 800 pages, the book sat for years until I finally decided to read it. It became my bedtime book. Weeks later, it is still on my nightstand during the day and in my hands at night. Besides being a *New York Times* bestseller and a Man Booker Prize finalist, it is a book to savor. Released in 2015, it is the kind of book we don't often see anymore. Slow and delicious, it is the story of friendship and extreme cruelty. Dark, yet beautiful. I'd give my right arm—maybe my left, since I'm right-handed—to create a book so profound.

Book I love to cheerlead: *Peace Like A River* by Leif Enger. I didn't understand my attraction to this book, even though I'd read it three times, until I started writing. Simply told, filled with tragedy and hope, this book has a smattering of spirituality that I recognize in all my books.

Favorite line from my book: "Sophia wasn't usually enamored with someone so quickly. Her words settled like a fine layer of dust, and Jake feared they would occupy every future conversation about the Barclays until the mere mention of them rubbed him raw."



A Fine Layer of Dust by Barbara Conrey

With nightmares plaguing his sleep and rage consuming his days, Jake Trenton makes a devastating choice that will forever alter the lives of two families. Suddenly, he is the kind of man he never thought he would be. Jake must confront the darkest parts of himself and question everything he thought he knew about love, loss, and what it truly means to heal.

Learn more on Barbara's website.

...Wanda Penalver Bevan

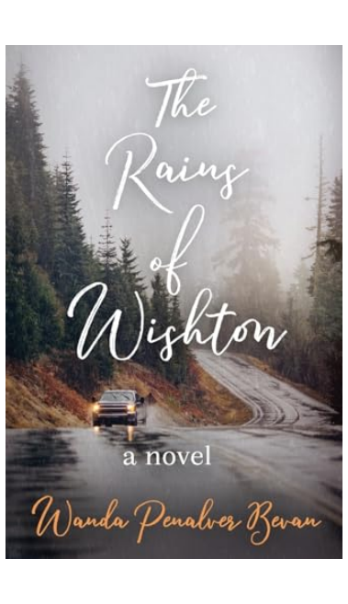
Favorite line from a book: "He's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same." (Catherine in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*.) The Bronte sisters were phenomenal writers. Here are two characters whose love for each other goes beyond even their own understanding, with class, gender, and family issues—and the dramatic backdrop of the moors of England! It's like a gut-wrenching poem.

Have you always known you wanted to be a writer: I'm not sure I always wanted to be a writer as much as I know I've always been writing. Growing up, I was always involved in activities that focused on writing. From winning the "Very Best Writing" award in the first grade to being editor of the school newspaper in the twelfth grade, I was always writing something—stories, poems, articles, and speeches for competition. When I was in middle school, my English teacher asked me to write a simple stage adaptation of the Christmas story "Gift of the Magi" for our class. To my surprise, it was chosen as the school play that year. Around then I started to think, *Hmmm, maybe I have a knack for this*.

Book on my nightstand now: *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett. It's about twin sisters, one light-skinned, one dark, who grow up in a small community of Black people in Louisiana. Bennett's story illuminates the historical influence racism and skin color have in this country and within the African-American community.

Favorite book as a child: *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss.

Themes I'm drawn to in books I read: I enjoy stories about strong women who overcome major obstacles to achieve their goals. I like a good love story, but I'm also a murder mystery fan—and anything with a dual timeline!



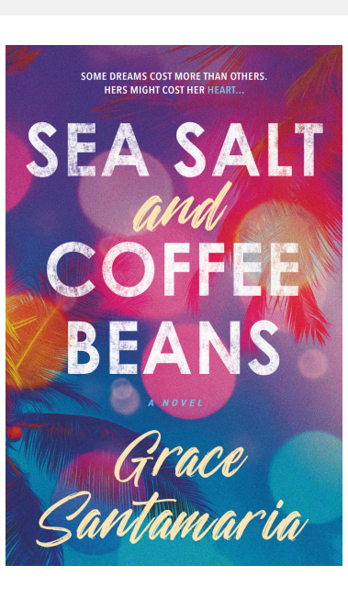
The Rains of Wishton by Wanda Penalver Bevan

Faced with the challenges of midlife and a desire to leave the past behind her, Miranda Peterson is on a quest for renewal that beckons her to follow the road wherever it leads. While she strives to protect her heart from falling in love again, Miranda writes the story of Nicole and Garrett, young lovers determined to build a life together at any cost. Among their challenges is a blackmail scheme to ruin Nicole's acting career and a race against time to find the whereabouts of Garrett's infant son.

Learn more on Wanda's website.

NEW & NOTEWORTHY

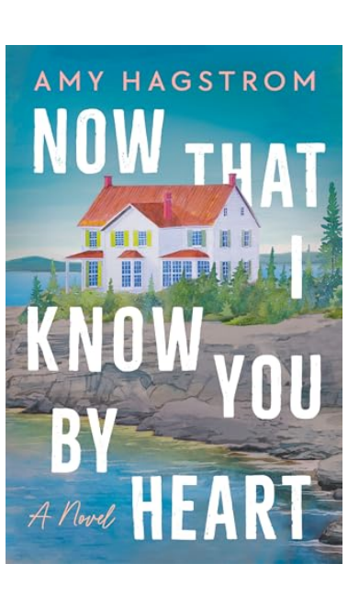
Looking to cozy up with a new book this winter? Here are 12 women's fiction titles to warm your spirits and brighten the season.



Sea Salt and Coffee Beans by Grace Santamaria

Sea Salt and Coffee Beans follows Sofia, a young woman who loses her job—and with it, her shot at the American Dream. When a new position opens at a Miami marketing firm, it's her last chance to stay in the country and keep the life she's fought so hard to build. Between family pressures, an annoyingly attractive rival for the same job, and a few existential crises, Sofia discovers that rebuilding her life means redefining what "making it" really looks like.

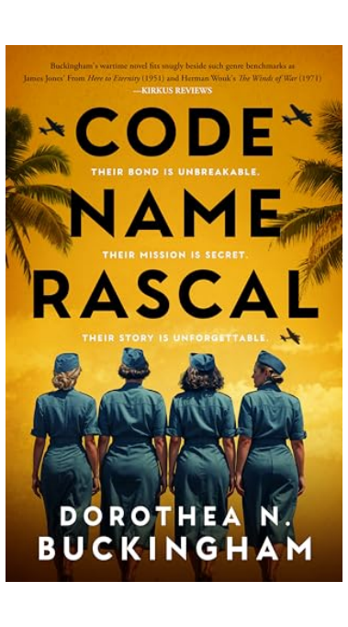
Visit Grace's website to find out more!



Now That I Know You by Heart by Amy Hagstrom

Shelby has moved to San Juan Island to fulfill her late husband's dying wish of running the shuttered Captain Merrick Inn. As she renovates the inn, she meets Holly, a charismatic winemaker. Their fast connection challenges Shelby to confront her emerging identity and lingering attachment to her husband. Miles from home, Shelby is ready to finally acknowledge to herself that she is gay. With the support of local queer women, Shelby is making a professional venture—and a long-awaited personal quest—come true.

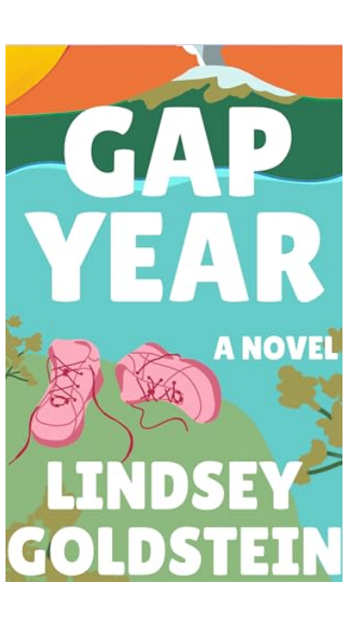
Visit Amy's website to find out more!



Code Name Rascal by Dorothea N. Buckingham

Within days of the attack on Pearl Harbor, four diverse women volunteer for a secret Army Air Corps radar unit. Through long shifts, blackouts, and the imminent possibility of enemy invasion, the women of this "Rascal" radar unit forge unlikely bonds that force them to question, confront, and seize the power to change their lives. A gripping story inspired by real women of the Women's Air Raid Defense, *Code Name Rascal* offers a glimpse of a seldom-seen part of WWII-era military history.

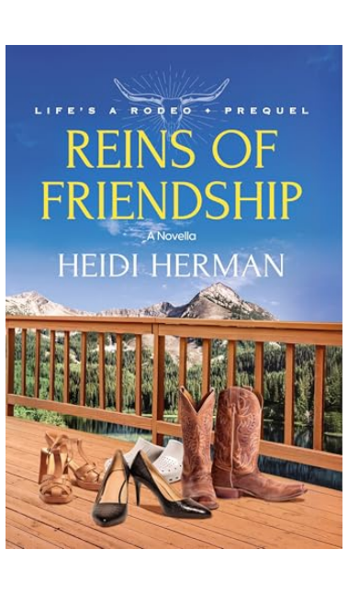
Visit Dorothea's website to find out more!



Gap Year by Lindsey Goldstein

Jane's life is turned upside down within 48 hours: her only child leaves for a year abroad, her husband abandons her for another woman, and her boss issues her an ultimatum. She makes a bold, impulsive choice—she's leaving it all behind for an adult version of her daughter's "gap year." Once a hopeful young ecologist, Jane had dreamt of climbing a volcano and working in the Galapagos—but life got in the way. Now, nothing stands between her and the adventure she abandoned years ago.

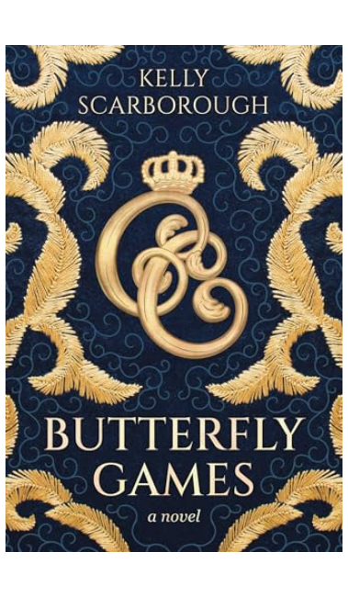
Visit Lindsey's website to find out more!



Reins of Friendship by Heidi Herman

In a small Colorado town, the sparks of possibility ignite a weekend that will forever alter Moirin, Jo, Heather, and Leslie. Each woman carries her own secret burdens—Moirin's insistence on control despite corporate chaos and failed romance, Jo's struggle to honor family obligations, Heather's quiet longing for life beyond routine, and Leslie's battle with inner insecurities. As the friends face the unexpected twists of a journey, they are challenged to ask: Can the courage to let go rewrite their futures?

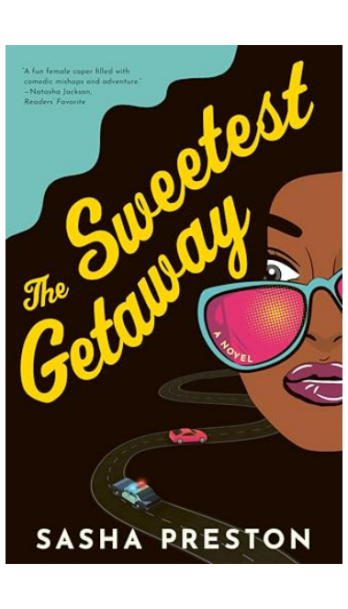
Visit Heidi's website to find out more!



Butterfly Games by Kelly Scarborough

Reminiscent of novels by Philippa Gregory and Allison Pataki, *Butterfly Games* reimagines the life of Jacquette, a young Swedish countess whose youthful love affair with the heir to her country's throne has profound personal and political repercussions. Based on a true story and set in stormy early-1800s Europe, *Butterfly Games* is a sweeping tale of forbidden love, fierce duty, and the cost of ambition.

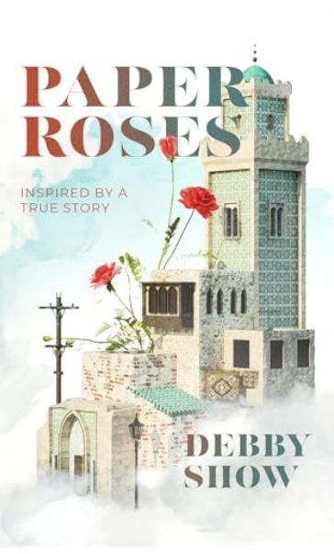
Visit Kelly's website to find out more!



The Sweetest Getaway by Sasha Preston

Jennifer has never broken a law in her life until her roommate, Nari, ropes her into a money-making scheme that isn't exactly…legal. When someone tips off the cops, Jennifer and Nari team up with a crew of seasoned criminals for one daring heist. Add in a charming stranger who tempts Jennifer's heart and suddenly her double life is more complicated than ever. Can she find a happily-ever-after that doesn't include an orange jumpsuit?

Visit Sasha's website to find out more!



Paper Roses by Debby Show

When Abigail learns of her sister's arrest for swindling an NFL ex-wife, she's thrown into a spin. How? Why? To piece it together, Abi traverses a trail stretching continents and generations. From 1940s Morocco, where a young maid bears witness to the family's wounds, to the suburbs of 1970s California to present-day Morocco, her quest for answers uncovers a legacy no one can escape. As the sister of infamous con artist, Tracii Hutsona, Debby Show's *Paper Roses* is based on a true story of betrayal, secrets, and reinvention.

Visit Debby's website to find out more!

Every Opportunity by Angela Rivard

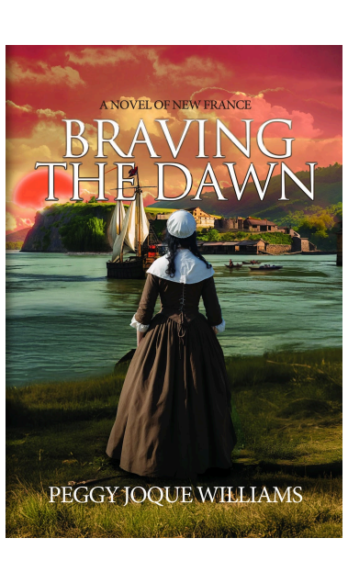
Armed with two thousand dollars, two bags, and a fierce determination to never be powerless again, 25-year-old Samantha flees to Boston and begins the painstaking work of reinventing herself. She meets charming and successful Joshua, but when their relationship deepens into something that challenges her timeline and independence, Samantha faces a crucial question: Can you plan your way to happiness, or do the best things in life happen when you're brave enough to deviate from the script?

Visit Angela's Goodreads page to find out more!

The Secret Orphanage by Barbara Josselsohn

In a quiet village in German-occupied France, schoolteacher Celina ushers young Jewish children into her classroom. Every afternoon, she pretends to send them home, as instead they sneak upstairs to hide. But today, Celina can't stop thinking about the note left on her bedside table. Written in code, it said that a baby she's sheltering could be reunited with its mother. Should she attempt to take the baby home? If she's caught, the truth about the school could be discovered.

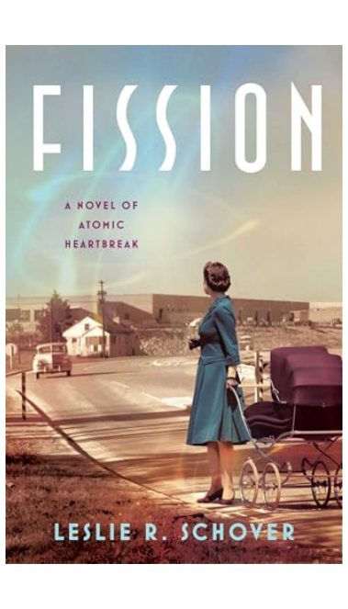
Visit Barbara's website to find out more!



Braving the Dawn by Peggy Joque Williams

Banished from France by King Louis XIV, Sylvienne d'Aubert is determined to one day return to her beloved homeland. However, she must first rebuild her life in a young Canadian colony that is at once welcoming and dangerous. She finds new friendships in unexpected places and allies among the Native people; but the king's reach is long, and her past haunts her at every turn in this saga of new beginnings, survival, and determination of the heart.

Visit Peggy's website to find out more!



Fission: A Novel of Atomic Heartbreak by Leslie R. Schover

When Doris marries Rob and has a premature baby, she abandons her career aspirations to become the ideal wife. However, when Rob is recruited to the Manhattan Project and the young family moves to Oak Ridge, his demanding job and Doris's struggle with motherhood threaten her happiness. Like fission splits an atom's nucleus, Doris's unhappy marriage threatens to break her heart. She finds solace in the arms of an army engineer but soon suspects he is a Soviet spy. Will Doris reveal her affair to protect the secret of the atomic bomb?

Visit Leslie's website to find out more!

If you are a WFWA member and want to be considered for *TBR,* please fill out a book submission form here.

Enjoyed this newsletter? Forward it to your friends!

Received this newsletter from a friend and want your own copy? Sign up here to receive TBR, a quarterly newsletter from WFWA.

EDITORIAL STAFF

Rachel MacDonald, Editor | tbreditor@womensfictionwriters.org

Caraline Bullen, Assistant Editor

Doretta Martelli, Proofreader

WFWA Online Community on Mighty Networks (private)
The place for Workshops, Live Events, a massive Learning Library, making connections, and more!

Connect with us:
WFWA Home | Goodreads | Instagram | Facebook | Pinterest