

uncle to the parson, to his wife and, finally, to Alma's care—serves as a major focus, with ample space devoted to addiction, sexual violence, the color of Alma's scarf on the day the Alma and Adele first met and Adele's criticism of Alma for her treatment of the birds. That last inspires Alma to tell a face-saving lie: that a rare, stuffed swan resides in her family home. The tale feeds Adele's mad obsession and leads to a shocking final conflict between the parson's widow and her maid. With a masterful judiciousness of detail, Vartio manages to make the slight scenario take on a great deal of weight. The perpetual conflict is as affecting as it is absurd. (Jan.)

The Scent of Rosa's Oil

LINA SIMONI. Kensington, \$14 paper (272p) ISBN 978-0-7582-1924-4

Simoni's juicy debut is the story of Rosa, a young Genoan woman born to a prostitute and orphaned at birth in the late 19th century. Her guardian is Madam C, the proprietor of a much-loved brothel called the Luna, who shields Rosa from "the game" played on the second floor of her house. But for Rosa's 16th birthday party, she wears a special perfume distilled by her peculiar friend Isabel, and before the evening's over, the mayor, enchanted by the scent, ends up playing "the game" with Rosa. (Rosa, unbelievably, doesn't realize what's going on nor has she ever seen a naked man before.) When their tryst is discovered, Madame C, who has pined for the mayor for years, hurls Rosa onto the street. The orphan seeks refuge with Isabel and hides her born-in-a-brothel past from her new beau, longshoreman Renato (who is also susceptible to Isabel's perfume), but when Renato's life and their love are threatened, Rosa must decide what truths are worth the risk of losing him. Though parts of the story feel pat and the dialogue is often stiff, most of this light, whimsical romance's flaws are forgivable. (Jan.)

A Version of the Truth

JENNIFER KAUFMAN AND KAREN MACK. Delacorte, \$24 (336p) ISBN 978-0-385-34019-9

Cassie Shaw, the 30-year-old dyslexic high school dropout narrator of Kaufman and Mack's follow-up to *Literacy*

and *Longing in L.A.*, is devoid of self-esteem and, as the winsome novel opens, has just been widowed by a jerk who left her nothing but debt. Desperate for a job, Cassie fudges her education background on a job application and snags an entry-level university office job working under William Conner, a charismatic professor of animal behavior who ignites Cassie's desire for learning—and other things. As Cassie's lust for knowledge swells and she becomes more involved with Conner, the list of her deceptions lengthens, and it's only a matter of time until budding beau Conner finds out. Kaufman and Mack lace the narrative with light humor (the rats in California's Topanga Canyon are like "roaches in NY or liars in LA") and nods to Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Plato and Keats. Delightfully merging humor, philosophy and reflections on nature, this novel is a lot of fun and might give some readers freshman-year flashbacks. (Jan.)

Code of Conduct

RICH MERRITT. Kensington, \$15 paper (464p) ISBN 978-0-7582-2274-9

Memoirist Merritt (*Secrets of a Gay Marine Porn Star*) delivers a thought-provoking fiction on the problem of being gay in the military. As Clinton begins putting the "don't ask, don't tell" policy into place in the early 1990s, closeted and disturbed Naval Investigative Service Agent Jay Gareed goes on a mission to catch violators of Article 125 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice—i.e., the rule that states sodomy is a criminal act. Chief Petty Officer Eddie L. Johnson, who has been switching blood test vials for six years to get around the service's mandatory HIV test, gets into Jay's sights. When Eddie catches Jay snooping in his home, Jay shoots Eddie and fakes Eddie's suicide. Shocked friends and family know better, and for a group of close-knit gay and lesbian military personnel, the "suicide" is a call to arms. Marine Gunnery Sgt. Donald A. Hawkins, a gay rights advocate, vows to learn the truth. Merritt raises provocative questions and delivers a graphic crime tale. (Jan.)

★ Siege of Heaven

TOM HARPER. St. Martin's/Dunne, \$24.95 (304p) ISBN 978-0-312-33872-5

British author Harper brings to life the political and religious passions

of the 11th-century in his excellent conclusion to his First Crusade trilogy (after *The Mosaic of Shadows* and *Knights of the Cross*). While series hero Demetrios Askiates, a Greek in service to the Byzantine emperor, doesn't have a mystery to solve as he did in the previous two books, Harper's gifts as a writer are more than equal to the task of sustaining interest and suspense without that plot device. As various warlords compete to be the first to reach Jerusalem, Askiates attempts to free himself of his obligations to the emperor and return home to Constantinople. A diplomatic mission to gain the ruling Fatimids as allies against the Turks sends Askiates to Egypt instead, where he must endure a harrowing trek through the desert to survive. This first-rate historical makes accessible the prosaic details of everyday life in a distant era. (Dec.)

The Medium

NOËLLE SICKELS. Five Star, \$26.95 (427p) ISBN 978-1-59414-618-3

Set before and during WWII, this compelling paranormal love story from Sickels (*Walking West; The Shopkeeper's Wife*) will remind many of Jacqueline Winspear's Maisie Dobbs series (*Messenger of Truth*, etc.), with its deft historical detail and timeless characters. Helen Schneider, a 13-year-old school girl, discovers she has remarkable powers as a medium after she has a vision of a New Jersey neighbor caught in a fire. As Helen matures, her ability to communicate with the dead and see the future sets her at odds with her fiancé, Billy Mackey, and eventually arouses the interest of the U.S. military. Helen must decide whether to use her psychic gift to do what she thinks is right or to bow to the opposition of skeptics like Billy. Paranormal fans seeking a realistic change from the vampires and werewolves that dominate this popular subgenre will be well rewarded. (Dec.)

The Sound of Language

AMULYA MALLADI. Ballantine, \$13.95 paper (256p) ISBN 978-0-345-48316-4

Cold, wet Denmark is a strange land to Raihana, the widowed Afghan refugee at the center of Malladi's well-intentioned but wooden fifth novel. After