

Storied Lands

A range of backdrops provide the grounding for spring's best fiction.

The follow-up to 2017's National Book Award finalist *The Leavers*, Lisa Ko's **Memory Piece** (Riverhead Books) is a moving, strikingly evocative exploration of New York's art, tech, and activism scenes across the decades. The novel follows three teens from mall-bound suburban New Jersey into adulthood as they forge their own paths in a rapidly changing world. Chafing against the assumptions projected onto them as Asian American women and resisting the stifling expectations of their immigrant parents, they yearn for freedom—from the demands of race, gender, and family—while grasping at the expansive futures they once imagined.—LISA WONG MACABASCO

A faded estate on Maryland's Chesapeake shore, packed with family members for a Fourth of July weekend and haunted by its history, provides the backdrop for Christopher Tilghman's elegant, boisterous, and moving new novel, **On the Tobacco Coast** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). Mason's Retreat is the name of this farm and ancestral seat, tumbledown in haute WASP fashion, a place of brackish marsh air, oyster shells, and drawers jammed with mismatched cutlery. Tilghman has now written four acclaimed novels located amid this landscape, exploring rich themes of race, class, and privilege along the way. *Tobacco Coast* is the first set in the present, and it teems with convincing characters: Kate and Harry, the owners grappling with mortality; their three grown children warring with respective partners; a pair of French cousins; a clutch of aged neighbors. Tilghman ranges through them—the inner life of a Vassar coed is as accessible to him as that of a 96-year-old Chesapeake matron—as they assemble for a gloriously described meal where buried conflict and sublimated pain inevitably intrude.—TAYLOR ANTRIM

A wry and winning debut from Vanessa Lawrence, **Ellipses** (Dutton) charts the course of a mentor-mentee relationship as toxic as it is intoxicating. Lily, a 30-something magazine writer grappling with her role in the endangered ecosystem of prestige print media, slips

into the thrall of a lopsided power dynamic with Billie, a cutthroat and self-assured beauty CEO who issues sharp adages from her lacquered thumbs. With the relationship conducted entirely over text, Lily's life becomes suspended in the digital limbo of an anticipated blue text bubble, the ellipsis of the novel's name. They meet when Lily is reporting on one of the "disease-oriented galas"—an Alzheimer's Unforgettable Evening—and we accompany Lily on a roller coaster of self-doubt and eventual self-actualization set against the backdrop of the rise of digital media. Lawrence, who wrote for *W* and *WWD* for the better

part of two decades, deploys her insider fluency with aplomb, describing the microaggressions of office politics as deftly as the nepotism of influencers turned vegan caterers.—CHLOE MALLE

Set in the not-so-remote past of the 1990s, **Ordinary Human Failings** (Little Brown and Company) feels just distant enough to offer a foreign landscape, devoid of cell phones and an immediate multicultural perspective that greater connectivity affords. The Green family is at the center of Megan Nolan's gripping new novel; they've settled into insular life on a London housing estate, having haphazardly fled Ireland after the daughter, Carmel, became pregnant. Circling this unfortunate family is a hungry young tabloid reporter, who senses in the Greens just the kind of mess that his readers love to disdain. With her careful and caring novel, Nolan shows how misfortune can start with a few bad decisions and how culpability is entangled in providence and privilege. Her prose is slicing and exacting; this is a book that smarts but also comforts with its precise generosity.—CHLOE SCHAMA

The events in Adelle Waldman's fleet-footed novel **Help Wanted** (Norton) take place at a box store of declining fortunes in upstate New York—a setting that in Waldman's steady hands proves to be a crucible of ambition and survival. We are with Team Movement, the corporatized name given to the employees who show up at 4 a.m. to unload trucks full of household goods and move them to the retail floor.

Waldman is unsentimental about her low-wage protagonists, investing them with foibles as well as everyday heroism, and she's mesmerizing on the details of their work, the mechanical belts, the "throwing" of boxes, the meticulous unpacking. A single paragraph on the difficulty of untangling bras has thrilling specificity. In their petty and casually unempathetic supervisor, Meredith, the novel finds its engine of suspense, a middle-management villain whose team comes to believe must be promoted to be vanquished.—T.A.

