Off the Shelf
Recent books with Harvard connections

Civil Wars: A History in Ideas, by David R. Armitage, Blankfein professor of history (Knopf, $27.95). The planet has not been globally at war since 1945, but “The world is still a very violent place,” the author notes, as “Civil war has gradually become…the most characteristic form of organized human violence,” prompting this original history of the idea and its unfortunate metastasis.

As dynasts, the Bushes and Clintons fell far short of the standard-setting Boston Brahmins, covered in two new books. The Lowells of Massachusetts: An American Family, by Nina Sankovitch, J.D. ’87 (St. Martin’s, $27.99), chronicles the archetype, through and including Lawrence, whose accession to the Harvard presidency must have seemed preordained. Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire, by Kay Redfield Jamison (Knopf, $29.95), is a deep psychiatric perspective on the connection between bipolar illness and creativity, involving the great poet whose Crimson experience is remembered less for his incomplete undergraduate studies than for his subsequent teaching (see “The Brahmin Rebel,” May-June 2004, page 39).

William Wordsworth, The Prelude, edited by James Engell, Gurney professor of English literature and professor of comparative literature, and Michael D. Raymond, A.L.M. ’00 (Godine, $40). The great Romantic poem, newly edited from manuscripts, with critical commentaries, is lushly illustrated with contemporary, complementary paintings, drawings, and other artworks.

Thirtyfour Campgrounds, by Martin Hogue, M. Arch. ’93 (MIT, $34.95). A landscape architect meticulously depicts the intersection of Americans’ desire to commune with nature with their devotion to their stuff—and hence the rituals of parking trailers, service hook-ups (today including WiFi), setting out lawn chairs, and more. Forget about traveling light.

The Crisis of the Middle-Class Constitution: Why Economic Inequality Threatens Our Republic, by Ganesh Sitaraman ’04, J.D. ’08 (Knopf, $26.95), probes a different kind of threat to the American way. A former staffer to Senator Elizabeth Warren observes that the Constitution was drafted at a moment of unusual equality, and so is ill-suited to addressing the distortions of power caused by current levels of inequality. Whatever other problems loom, he argues, “It is much harder to have a functional constitutional republic without a strong middle class.”

Presidents’ Secrets: The Use and Abuse of Hidden Power, by Mary Graham ’66, co-director of the Transparency Policy Project at the Harvard Kennedy School (Yale, $30). In a time of uncertainty about a very different administration, Graham provides timely, if worrisome, historical context.

Casting astute eyes on a very different landscape, in Ecologies of Power (MIT, $39.95 paper), Pierre Bélanger, associate professor of Windermere, 1821, by Joseph M.W. Turner, in the spirit of Wordsworth landscape design, and Alexander Arroyo, M.L.A. ’13, assess U.S. military “logistical landscapes” and the “military geographies” of defense, conducted on a scale large enough to mark, and even remake, the planet.

American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present, by Philip Gorski ’86 (Princeton, $35). A Yale sociologist plumbs the apparent divide between conceptions of the United States as a Christian nation or a secular democracy, and finds a combined civic republicanism—a key to the “American project”—put at risk in today’s intense culture wars.

The Face of Water: A Translator on Beauty and Meaning in the Bible, by Sarah Ruden, Ph.D. ’93 (Pantheon, $26.95). A classical philologist with a vivid grasp of languages and imagery ancient and contemporary (how would you write up a Paul Simon/Ladysmith Black Mambazo apartheid concert?) tries to make the Bible “less a thing of paper and glue and ink and petrochemicals, and more a living thing.”

In the Heat of the Summer, by Michael W. Flamm ’86 (University of Pennsylvania, $34.95). An Ohio Wesleyan historian digs into the “Harlem Riot” of 1964 (a white policeman shoots a black teenager, a demonstration turns to protests, riots ensue) to illuminate the “wars” on poverty and on crime, national political polarization, and issues that resonate still: militarized policing, mass incarceration, and “law and order.”

The Campus Rape Frenzy, by KC Johnson and Stuart Taylor Jr., J.D. ’77 (Encounter Books, $25.99). Historian Johnson and journalist Taylor (who was a petition candidate for the Board of Overseers last year, and has written critically about affirmative action), critiqued accounts of Duke’s infamous lacrosse case. Here, they join to attack “a powerful movement” that has made it unlikely that “colleges and universities—and their students—will judge sexual assault allegations fairly” because of what the authors perceive as violations of due process.
Building Old Cambridge, by Susan E. Maycock and Charles M. Sullivan, M.C.P. ’70 (MIT, $49.95). From the Cambridge Historical Commission’s survey director and executive director comes a massive, absorbing, and enthrallingly illustrated volume on the community’s evolution—full of enlightenments even before chapter 10, on the “Development of Harvard University.”

Matters strategic: The Imagineers of War, by Sharon Weinberger, RI ’16 (Knopf, $30), is a comprehensive account of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency—the folks who brought you the Internet, drones, and self-driving-car technology, plus some terrible ideas, some of them unfortunately implemented. The Chessboard and the Web, by Anne-Marie Slaughter, J.D. ’85 (Yale, $26), lays out the case for moving beyond a chess image of international relations (the United States vs. Iran, say) toward a “playbook for strategies of connection” (U.S. interest in Syria not as a strategic concern itself, but as a destabilizing source of refugees); it would be interesting to see that applied to coming trade confrontations with China. The U.S. negotiators might want to pack The Girl at the Baggage Claim: Explaining the East-West Culture Gap, by Gish Jen ’77, RI ’02 (Knopf, $26.95), who turns from fiction to cultural analysis to sort out the roots of “so much of what mystifies us”—needlessly—“about the East.”

ended with a performance of their finished musical works by a professional chorus, the Antioch Chamber Ensemble. (He is mentoring a new group this spring.) He also led a workshop for Radcliffe Choral Society and Harvard-Radcliffe Collegium Musicum members that culminated with the creation of “In the Name of Music,” which was premiered in November at Sanders Theatre. “I wanted to engage the singers in the process of writing the text, so that they would ultimately be singing about a theme that deeply concerns them,” Kyr says. When he asked them what issues concerned them most, their answers had a common thread: the transformative power of music.

It’s a common thread for him, too. He sees music as a form of storytelling. At the end of a long interview comes a reference to Bach’s “St. Matthew Passion,” a soaring, opera-like oratorio. “For me,” he says, “it expresses how each member of the human family experiences the suffering of the passion in his or her own way, regardless of one’s faith background.” The story Bach was telling was one with human resonance: suffering and loss, decisions that relate to our own life and death. “Bach takes us on the journey of the passion, which reflects our personal relationship to suffering, and ultimately, the triumph of life over death.”

Harvard Square as it was, 1962

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B y the time Elizabeth Bishop began to teach at Harvard, in 1970, she was nearing the end of an exceptionally brilliant career in American poetry. Though she published little—just four collections, a total of about 100 poems—her work earned the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. She was regarded as a professional poetry, as the school of Lowell and Moore, her early mentor, and Robert Lowell ’39, her close friend and longtime correspondent. It was Lowell who brought Bishop to Harvard, to take over his creative writing classes while he lived in England (see “The Brahmin Rebel,” May-June 2004, page 39). But while Bishop belonged to the first generation of American poets to make their living in the academy, she herself had spent almost no time in the classroom, and she didn’t feel at home there. Neither her reserved personality nor her extremely high standards made her a natural teacher, and the enrollment in her classes was usually small. Megan Marshall ’77, RI ’77, who took Bishop’s class in 1976, recalls that the great poet often wore “a pained look”: “Miss Bishop really did seem to wish she wasn’t there.”

If Bishop had known that, 40 years later, Marshall would write a biography—Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast—she would probably have been still less enthusiastic. Bishop belonged to a poetic generation that revealed more about itself in verse than any earlier poets had thought possible, or necessary. “Confessional” poetry, as the school of Lowell and Anne Sexton came to be known, delighted in putting as much fact as possible on the page, especially facts that were painful or shameful. “Yet why not say what happened?” Lowell asked in his poem “Epilogue,” and so he did—writing about his childhood,