

Simon's dreary tunes send him touring the Communist bloc. Tragic bass player Charlie fades quickly into obscurity, but nearly strikes it rich through other avenues. Flynn's role as manager is a wonderful balancing act, both for the protagonist and the author, and Flanagan, despite his tendency to leave absolutely nothing out (and, curiously, a missed opportunity with a devilish producer), pulls it all together into a complex, humorous and touching story. (Jan.)

★ **36 Arguments for the Existence of God**

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein. Pantheon, \$27.95 (416p) ISBN 978-0-307-37818-7

An "atheist with a soul" is in for a lot of soul-searching in MacArthur genius Goldstein's rollicking latest (*Mazel*). Cass Seltzer, a university professor specializing in "the psychology of religion," hits the big time with a bestselling book and an offer to teach at Harvard—quite a step up from his current position at Frankfurter University. While waiting for his girlfriend to return from a conference, Cass receives an unexpected visit from Roz Margolis, whom he dated 20 years earlier and who looks as good now as she ever did. Her secret: dedicating her substantial smarts to unlocking the secrets of immortality. Cass's recent success and Roz's sudden appearance send him into contemplation of the tumultuous events of his past, involving his former mentor, his failed first marriage and a young mathematical prodigy whose talent may go unrealized, culminating in a standing-room-only debate with a formidable opponent where Cass must reconcile his new, unfamiliar life with his experience of himself. Irreverent and witty, Goldstein seamlessly weaves philosophy into this lively and colorful chronicle of intellectual and emotional struggles. (Jan.)

The Bricklayer

Noah Boyd. Morrow, \$24.99 (400p) ISBN 978-0-06-182701-3

The pseudonymous Boyd, a former FBI agent, fails to bring much convincing insider information to his debut, a routine thriller. FBI deputy assistant director Kate Bannon tracks down Steve Vail, a maverick FBI agent who left the bureau for a new life as a Chicago bricklayer, be-

cause she needs Vail's help in apprehending a criminal gang, the Rubaco Pentad, with a grudge against the FBI. The Pentad follows up the murder of L.A. reporter Connie Lysander, who wrote a story critical of the FBI, with ever-increasing demands for money from the bureau to forestall future killings and the setting of sophisticated death traps. When an agent disappears while making a payoff to the gang, he becomes a prime suspect, despite Vail's reservations. Predictable plot elements include the hero's incredible escapes from peril and the growing romantic bond between the laconic Vail and the attractive Bannon. The identity of the person behind the Pentad will surprise few. (Feb.)

Gutshot Straight

Lou Berney. Morrow, \$24.99 (304p) ISBN 978-0-06-176604-6

Berney, author of the collection *The Road to Bobby Joe and Other Stories*, proves just as adept at longer fiction in this fast-moving caper novel, which smoothly blends humor, action and romantic frisson. Charles "Shake" Bouchon steps out of a California prison resolved to stay "free and clear"; 48 hours later he's effectively double-crossed powerful Armenian L.A. mob boss Alexandra Ilandryan, ripped off dangerous Las Vegas powerhouse Dick "the Whale" Moby and impulsively rescued exotic con woman Gina Clement, who may be the most dangerous of the three. Extremely rare, highly unusual religious artifacts play a key role as the 42-year-old Shake attempts to extricate himself from a situation that gets more complex and deadly by the hour. Shake is a quick-thinking fellow with dreams of owning a restaurant, but if fate is kind, he'll return for the same kinds of adventures as those Berney recounts in this engaging debut. (Jan.)

The Wolf at the Door

Jack Higgins. Putnam, \$26.95 (320p) ISBN 978-0-399-15612-0

In bestseller Higgins's exciting 17th Sean Dillon thriller (after *A Darker Place*), Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin is behind a plot to kill Dillon and other members of the British prime minister's private intelligence army as payback for their being such a thorn in his side over

the years. In London, Gen. Charles Ferguson, who's just left a late-night meeting of Commonwealth ministers, is walking toward his car when it explodes, killing his driver. In New York City, Maj. Harry Miller, who's in the U.S. to attend a U.N. meeting, goes for a stroll in Central Park, where he neatly turns the tables on a hired hit man. Extensive flashbacks explain how the attacks on each of the marked men evolved, with much space devoted to the chief assassin, Daniel Holley. Higgins provides a more cerebral story than usual, but he doesn't stint on action. Though most of the plot threads tie up nicely, the ending makes clear that readers will be seeing Holley again. (Jan.)

The Disappeared

Kim Echlin. Black Cat, \$14 paper (256p) ISBN 978-0-8021-7066-8

Canadian novelist Echlin (*Elephant Winter*) derives a powerful, transcendent love story from the Cambodian genocide. Anne Greves, a motherless 16-year-old student, meets a Cambodian refugee, Serey, working as a math instructor amid the heady music scene of late-1970s Montreal, and they fall irredeemably in love. Serey's family got him out of Pol Pot's Cambodia, although he is waiting to be able to return and find them; Anne's father, a successful engineer of prosthetics, does not approve of Anne's exotic, older boyfriend, and when, as her father predicted, Serey leaves her, disappearing for 11 years, Anne journeys to Phnom Penh to find him. There she comes face to face with the terrible fallout of the collapsed Khmer Rouge dictatorship. The beautifully spare narrative is daringly imaginative in the details, drawing the reader deep inside the wounded capital city. Anne's single-mindedness drives the action, although her insistence on Western values of accountability knocks hollowly against the machinery of a ruthless military state. Echlin employs some implausible romance plotting and spoils the suspense early on, yet she creates a sorrowfully compelling world. (Jan.)

Siamese

Stig Saeterbakken, trans. from the Norwegian by Stokes Schwartz. Dalkey Archive, \$13.95 paper (168p) ISBN 978-1-56478-325-7

A tenderly contentious marriage of