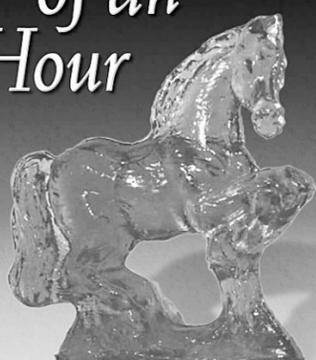


## Fair Creatures of an Hour



Poems by LYNN LEVIN

From the book jacket

## Poems of sparkling spontaneity

### Fair Creatures of an Hour

By Lynn Levin  
Loonfeather. 74 pp. \$12.95

Reviewed by Katie Haegele

In her third full-length collection, Lynn Levin has included three poems about time. In "To the Future," "To the Past," and "To the Present," she writes that she would "put up with almost anything" to keep moving toward her own future, but worries that she has rarely lived in the moment. But if this book is any evidence, Levin, a Philadelphia poet who teaches creative writing at the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University, seems pretty firmly rooted in the eternal now, alert and aware of her surroundings.

In *Fair Creatures* she collects the pop-cultural detritus swirling around her as if with a butterfly net, scooping up headlines, horoscopes, and twinkly objects from her domestic life to carry them back home where she, and we, can study them more closely. Cell phones, neon exit signs, and T.J. Maxx all come into view under her microscope.

Her affection for ephemera makes good sense given the book's title, taken from the Keats sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be," that fretful rumination on the brevity of life. To be fair, Levin also spends time on bigger ideas — Jewish religious tradition, the Crab Nebula — but she gives plenty of loving attention to the mac-and-cheese of our daily lives, the junk-store *memento moris* that remind us of our own temporariness.

In that vein, the most effective and pleasing element of the collection is probably the theme of astrology, which gives structure to at least nine of the poems and ruffles the edges of a few more. Star signs and planetary position act as jumping-off points for these poems in just the way newspaper horoscopes are meant to start your day.

"Passions run high from the 6th to the 10th," warns the horoscope-voice of "For Eric after Four Hours of Doom." The poem goes on to advise poor Eric (who we imagine — or at least hope — has been spending the evening playing the video game Doom rather than courting a more literal demise) not to date anyone from this codependency support group.

Anne Sexton began a sequence of horoscope poems but didn't finish it; perhaps this is Levin's attempt to complete the thought. These fortunes make for such appealing reading because they're about not us, but other people — like "Paula, File Clerk, Student, Receptionist, Student, Childcare Worker" and "Mr. Schaeffer, President of Schaeffer Title and Abstract." (Paula works for Mr. Schaeffer, and their poems sit side by side.) The poems' intimate details (a family emergency, an after-work martini) provide the voyeuristic pleasure of fiction or gossip. And really, the dour directives of newspaper horoscopes could use a more personal touch. I like Levin's fashion-magazine variation better: "Toss it: Those size 12 skirts. / Try it: A teal blouse with your red hair."

Most of the poems in this collection aren't difficult; they're not even deceptively simple, but they're sparkling and intelligent and sometimes wise. People who say they don't like poetry might well like this, with its warm tone and prose style.

Some of Levin's lines (some of her better ones, in fact) have an almost throwaway feeling of spontaneity — *throwaway* being a word the critic Clive James used to describe the poems of the peerless Stevie Smith, in other words, not a bad thing. She writes that she "botched" something and "can't get enough" of something else, and we feel as if she's speaking to us.

A few times Levin moves away from her conversational style and makes a poem that's tightly bound and swiftly moving. "I was a monster strange and wild / a walking tree with birdless boughs / and to the fox not food, not friend" begins one such poem, "The Fox and the Neighbors," in which the narrator describes an encounter with a fox looking for food the morning after an ice storm. It's one of the brightest, strongest poems in the collection.

Levin does take the occasional easy way out, though. Would the weak word *gorgeous* ever have found its way into one of her poems if "gorges" and "forges" hadn't pressed it into service as a rhyme? The real-life sky-diving accident that pro-

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Lynn Levin shows affection for ephemera in her poems.

# Minds intertwining in Oslo

It's a triple mystery starring a favorite alcoholic detective and wild and superb writing.

### The Devil's Star

By Jo Nesbø  
Harper. 464 pp. \$25.99

Reviewed by John Timpane

When solving problems, on what do we train our attention? Where is the telling clue? Right in front of us? Or at the edges of attention?

And if that's where it is, at the edges, how can we bring it to consciousness? How do we force it up? So often, we realize later that we've been aware, all along, of a crucial piece of a puzzle, yet one part of the mind did not let the rest know. How can we get that awareness into the light, and so begin?

That's the drama beneath the drama of Jo Nesbø's new novel *The Devil's Star*. Nesbø is a celebrated Norwegian noir writer, a member of the current class of superlative Scandinavians showing the rest of the world how to write a proper mystery. This one, a very good one, stars his lead figure, detective inspector Harry Hole, alcoholic and existential agonizer.

Harry has starred in eight books to date. *The Devil's Star*, the fifth, appeared in Norwegian in 2003, and by my count, it is the third to be translated (stylishly here by Don Bartlett) into English. It is set in a sweltering, becalmed Oslo in high summer. A hot, airless city deserted beneath a merciless sun is a fitting backdrop for a wave of killings that hits the town.

Harry is a hunk of human wreckage, a severe alkie, ciggie fiend, loser, and saboteur of human relationships. He's also a fabulously effective detective, both a penetrating rationalist for whom "there are no paradoxes" and a soul torn wide open to paradoxes, contradictions, and absurd truths. He manages to harness these keenly tuned, and largely contradictory, senses to solve cases.

Actually, there are two mysteries, both of visceral urgency. First, the killings: A dead woman is found with a tiny red diamond, cut into a five-pointed star, beneath an eyelid. (Such perverse details permeate the

## 'The Surrendered' a tale of war and hope

### The Surrendered

By Chang-Rae Lee  
Riverhead. 480 pp. \$26.95.

Reviewed by Eunice Wong

An alluring, naked woman, in Chang-Rae Lee's haunting novel *The Surrendered*, appears in a nightmare. She scratches her shimmering skin and gracefully peels it off, "slowly skinning herself and revealing ... not blood and tissue but the charred ruins of her insides, all blackness and collapse."

It is a fitting symbol for the book, both exquisite and gruesome. Lee's writing, intimate and restrained, is a deceptively elegant vessel for atrocity. Horror hangs over the book.

The stream of calamity is constant: the privation and violence of war; freak accidents; rape; murder; small-town tragedies; terminal illness; addiction; and the slow grind of failure and thwarted hopes.

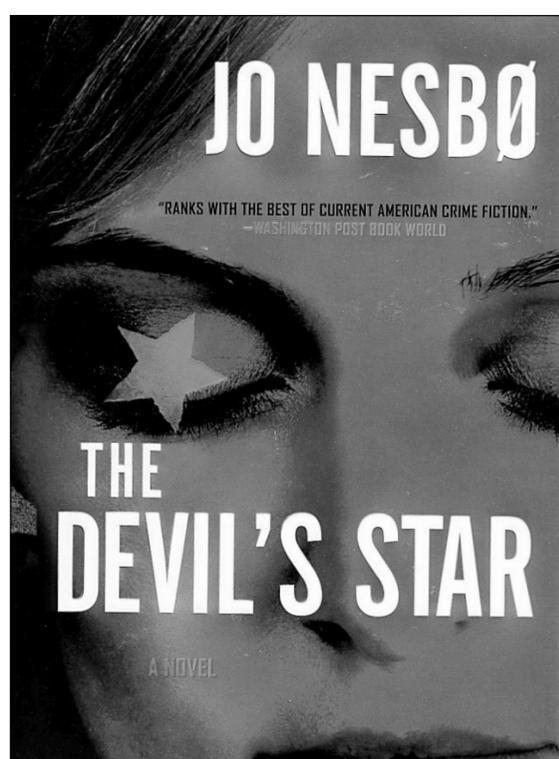
*The Surrendered* begins in Korea in the 1950s and moves back and forth between Manchuria in the 1930s and New York City, New Jersey, and Italy in the 1980s. It explores the lifelong imprint of war on three deeply damaged people: June Han, Hector Brennan, and Sylvie Tanner.

The book opens with 11-year-old June, an orphan caught in the grip of the Korean War. The brutal deaths of her parents and older siblings have left her struggling to protect her younger brother and sister, fighting off famine and marauders. Close to starvation, she encounters Hector, an American soldier appalled by the senseless and sadistic violence of combat. He leads her to an orphanage run by the Reverend Ames Tanner and his wife, Sylvie.

Hector and June are both passionately drawn to Sylvie Tanner, "a mother and a lover and a kind of child, too." Sylvie is vibrant but profoundly traumatized by a horrific episode during her girlhood in Manchuria, where her parents were missionaries, during the Japanese invasion of the 1930s. Hector and June's attraction to Sylvie is that of the damaged seeking the damaged, those "who by the curse of war had been sentenced to be alone ... compelled to make [their way] back to life by the force of [their] own tireless will."

Thirty years later, June, a businesswoman in New York City, is dying of cancer. Her last

## Books



From the book jacket

book.) From this point on, the pentagram, the "devil's star," and the number 5 assume terrific, fatal significance. Hole sees it early on: The brilliant, twisted killer is toying with his pursuers, planning and executing insoluble crimes while deliberately trailing behind him a path of clues.

Left over from *Nemesis*, the previous book, which you needn't have read to enjoy *The Devil's Star*, is the death of colleagues while performing their duties. Harry believes a fellow member of the department, rising star Tom Waaler (and what a supremely nasty piece of work he is — he speaks with such poison suasion), is responsible. He has no idea what an abyss this will open up. Especially since Harry's boss assigns him to work these murders with Waaler.

Add a third mystery: Harry, a man who has never solved himself. Nesbø is good at the grinding spectacle of an alkie trying to kick his addictions, the hangovers, deliriums, nightmares, insomnias, rage storms, surreal dragons of pain and failure. He loves Raket and her son, Oleg, and he tries and falters throughout the novel to repair his fitful, failed bond with them.

Harry also is driven by a turgid, blurry need to find his man. Or men. And he tries everything, forcing himself to the nexus between rational and irrational, taking an overdose of flunitrazepam to induce a trance while concentrating on a pentagram. This brings on some of the wildest, most superb writing in the book:

*He heard the pained scream of the tram, a cat's footsteps on the roof, and an ominous rustling in the bursting green foliage in the yard. ... He heard the yard groan, the cracking of the putty in the window frames. ... He heard the piercing scraping sound of the sheets against his skin and the clatter of his impatient shoes in the hall.*

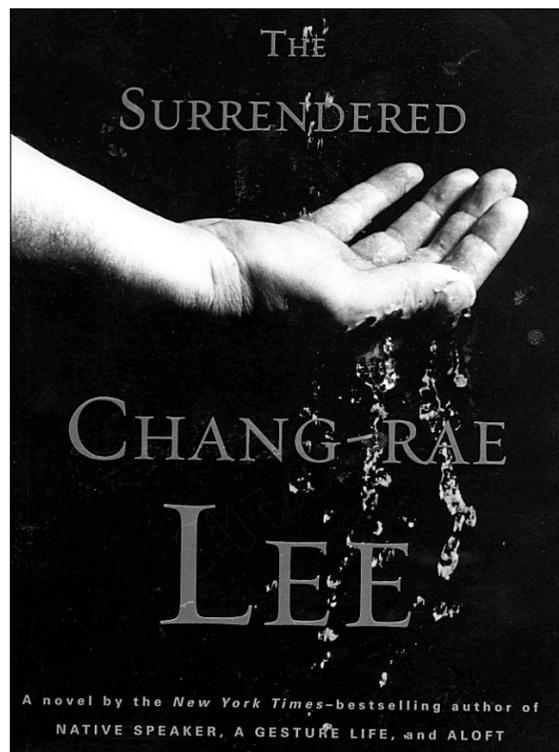
Insights emerge that touch off the mighty second half of *The Devil's Star*. He comes to see his revelation as "a gift, theft, an undeserved favor from an angel."

There's much such writing in a book marvelously structured, each joint in place as true carpentry. Narration moves among minds, giving us unforgettable pictures of a variety of human lives. In the last seconds of her life, a bored, airheaded secretary looks in a mirror, rattling on to herself: "Again time seemed to pass slowly. Unendingly slowly. Once more she caught herself thinking that time was ticking away." An old lady reminisces about her affair with a Nazi officer. We pass from daydream to daydream, from cop to journalist to actor to guy at the counter. What results is a weave of human lives and consciousness.

It's a memorable cast of characters, as well, from Harry and Waaler to their long-suffering boss Bjarne Møller, to Harry's cabbie, drug connection, and fellow classic-rock fan, Øystein, to Beate Lønn, genius and victim. Remorseless, horrified suspense marks the final third of the book, which opens out to post-Communist Europe, the unruly subconscious of the Scandinavian novel.

And everywhere, the incredible, devilish grapple with the edges of (sub)consciousness, the tricks we play to get it to spill the beans, the lengths we'll go to discover what the hidden part of us already knows — that's Harry Hole's constant ordeal, and what has made him, deservedly, one of Europe's best-known, best-read detective heroes.

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From the book jacket

wish is to find her enigmatic son, who has disappeared in Europe. She locates Hector, now living in a working-class New Jersey town, his life a bog of apathy and self-loathing. The dying June persuades Hector, although they have not spoken in three decades, to join her on her final quest in Italy.

The darkness of *The Surrendered* is unrelenting. But Lee also creates subtle filaments of light that glow more brightly in the black that surrounds them. Mercy, hope, the desire for "the haven of a simple, decent love," and survival — these are the inner frame of the novel.

[Sylvie] remembered her father telling her in Manchuria how this world was littered with those cut off in mid-bloom, all this wasted beauty and grace, and that it was their humble task to gather as many as they could and replant them. It didn't matter that they were stomped and torn. That the soil was rocky and poor. She must be the sun and rain. As long as she kept vigilant, as long as they never gave up, the blooms could thrive

again.

June, her capacity to love stunted forever by the war, is one of the blighted. She claims, at the end of her life, "I've never taken care of anyone." But as a girl she would have given her life to protect her younger siblings, even as she struggled with involuntary fantasies of their death: the end of her burden.

Endurance, running alongside the yearning for oblivion, is the core of *The Surrendered*. The vivacious, high-spirited Sylvie is addicted to the floating void of morphine. Hector, a marvel of physical resilience, has one wish: to go bury himself "for good."

June is the spiky embodiment of the dogged, weary will to live. On the eve of the Korean War she is a "too-tall, soft-spoken girl ... content to play with much younger children." She is forged by hunger, terror, and violence into "that orphan girl, cast in iron," whose purpose is "to survive, always survive." The mutations of war leave her a cold, unkind woman, deformed by the cruelty she witnessed and endured, and determined not to surrender to her ravaging illness:

*Her legs were quivering and the pains from her belly and up her back and neck jolted her with each measured step, but she clenched her teeth and told herself as she had throughout her life whenever she needed to persevere that it was wartime again ... when every last cell of her was besieged by hunger and fear but was utterly resolved not to flag, and never did.*

And June, like all these characters maimed by war, finally yearns for oblivion: ... to shed the tyranny of this body always aching and yearning, always prickly and too aware. Even more than death, she was sure, she hated this enduring. This awful striving that was not truly living.

The cost of the "ceaseless, spearing will to persist," Lee understands, is a terrible weariness that, in its unguarded moments, longs to succumb to death, to be extinguished. But it is the persistence to live that *The Surrendered* honors — annihilation's opposite, and yet also its twin. The scorching hunger for more life is carved from the contours of devastation, loss and the mute, dragging untoward of too much brutality lived through.

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