

# REVIEWS

books // music // film

## EMBRACING LIFE

Peruse these picks from *S&H* to unearth the power and wisdom of your own humanity.

### The Language of Kindness

*A Nurse's Story*

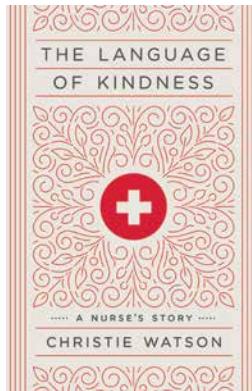
By Christie Watson

TIM DUGGAN BOOKS

AFTER FINISHING this book, I had to grab my daughter and hold her tight, tears running down my face. *The Language of Kindness* is an intense read, the story of a lost young woman who stumbles into a career. British novelist Christie Watson won international acclaim for her books *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* and *Where Women Are Kings*. But before becoming a full-time writer, she was a registered nurse for 20 years.

“Nursing people means doing for them what they would normally do, when they have no will to do it, until they have the will to do it,” Watson writes. It is far more than that, of course. In her memoir, she explores this healing art via her own journey and maturation, from a struggling teenage novice to a skilled and confident RN making life-or-death decisions. Throughout, she witnesses some of life’s more profound truths and has to develop coping skills. Much of the book is about caring for very sick and dying children, and, even encountered secondhand, these are gut-wrenching stories. Yet there’s also a sense of beauty, and the unfathomable. “Birth holds the hand of death,” another nurse tells an awestruck Watson, after she witnessed a patient delivering a baby. “We begin and we end at the same time.”

There’s been much discussion of health care, yet the vital role of nursing is seldom part of the conversation. This book is a timely reminder that in addition to the ever-increasing demands on nurses as medical professionals, they also have “soul skills”:



dignity, peace, compassion, humanity. After reading this book, you’ll feel there is no more awe-inspiring display of kindness than to be a nurse. —KATHRYN DRURY WAGNER

### Grateful

*The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*

By Diana Butler Bass

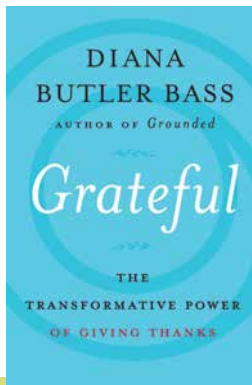
HARPERONE

IT HAD BEEN ONE of those weeks: yet another horrific school shooting on the news; two electricians ripping out wiring downstairs to figure out why our power kept conking out; and the cherry on top—a note home from the teacher, warning of lice. I sank, defeated, into a hot bath, clutching the new book *Grateful* like a life preserver. “Tell me something good, Diana Butler Bass,” I said aloud. “Because I need it.”

She delivered. Bass is the author of 10 books on religion, politics, and culture, and has a PhD in religious studies from Duke University. She is a historian and progressive Christian who has penned best-sellers such as *Grounded*. Her writing makes reference to Christian wisdom, as well as perspectives from many eras and faiths, while doing so a lively manner. She writes,

for example, that forced gratitude expression at Thanksgiving dinner “feels more like a turkey hostage situation than a spiritual exercise in grace.”

In her latest book, she examines gratitude, or “how to understand thanks and how to practice it,” as she puts it. But she isn’t



### FORCED GRATITUDE EXPRESSION

AT THANKSGIVING DINNER “FEELS MORE LIKE A TURKEY HOSTAGE SITUATION THAN A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE IN GRACE.”

offering shorter-term fixes or how-tos, such as starting a gratitude journal—though this can be helpful in changing a person’s habits. It’s about reflections on gratitude on many levels—the personal, the public, the political. It’s about how we can create a grateful society. “To choose gratitude is not an act of dogged determination,” Bass writes. “To choose gratitude is to hear an inner urging toward thanks, to see the grace in life, and to respond.”

If the world has you feeling a little down, I urge you to read this book and enjoy its invitation to a deeper, richer life. —KDW

## Chasing Hope

*A Patient’s Deep Dive into Stem Cells, Faith, and the Future*  
By Richard M. Cohen  
BLUE RIDER PRESS

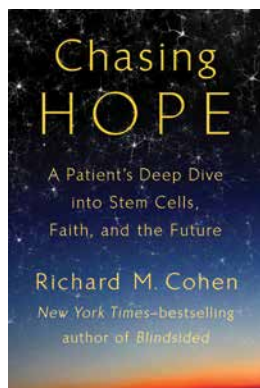
WHEN PANDORA OPENED her infamous box, all the evil spirits escaped into the world. But the last spirit to leave the box was Elpis, the goddess of hope. She was sent as a gift to comfort humanity.

When the award-winning journalist and author Richard M. Cohen shares this tale in his latest book, *Chasing Hope*, it comes off as slightly ironic. Given that Cohen has lived with multiple sclerosis for four decades, has survived two bouts of colon cancer and a near-fatal blood clot, and is legally blind, his hopes for wellness have been dashed time and time again.

But comfort is not the point of Cohen’s investigation into the nature of hope, and into himself. As Cohen chronicles the progression of his own illness, along with his encounters with various teachers of hope, what results is a clear-eyed look at the way hope rises, abates, and often shape-shifts as other emotions. With acerbic wit and clear affection for his three children and his wife, Meredith Vieira, Cohen explores how hope is tied up with love, anger, and shame.

For instance: “Anger and hope are improbable plate mates. They are never served in equal proportions or at the same temperatures. They do not mix well. Anger can be quite spicy; hope, bland. . . . Maybe hope is a glass of warm milk—drink it before bed and sleep well.”

Cohen’s story is a true roller coaster, and readers will feel hope swell as he describes various medical procedures, including a cutting-edge trial for stem cell research and the resulting relationship with a top-notch doctor. By lending a journalist’s jaundiced eye to hope, Cohen takes the mystique out of this seemingly abstract concept, revealing how



hope functions as a powerful tool linked to our very survival. For Cohen, hope isn’t a comfort. It’s a deeply held conviction. —ALIZAH SALARIO

## Mindful of Race

*Understanding and Transforming Habits of Harm*  
By Ruth King  
SOUNDS TRUE

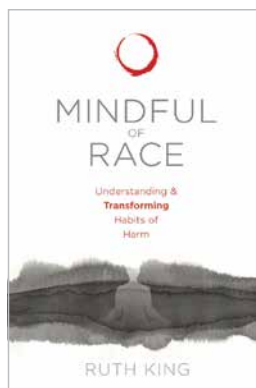
MEDITATION TEACHER, life coach, and diversity consultant Ruth King has been using mindfulness meditation as a catalyst for improved racial harmony for more than 20 years. The founder of the Mindful Members Practice Community and a core teacher at Tara Brach’s Insight Meditation Community and the Spirit Rock Meditation Center, she has taught a 3½-day Mindfulness of Race training program since 2010.

King begins her book *Mindful of Race* by guiding us through our conscious and unconscious narratives and habits around race. She explores the media’s portrayal of African Americans as criminals, the ways this contributes to racial violence, and the role that factors like early trauma, ancestry, and group identity play in racial unrest. In the process, we learn about the historical roots of divisive tactics still in use, such as how 16th-century British slave owner William Lynch—the namesake of the term *lynching*—deliberately sowed the seeds of fear, distrust, and envy to keep his slaves submissive.

In Part 2, we learn to deal with issues of racial distress without absorbing the negativity. Among the methods that King presents are sitting meditation, walking meditation, Metta (kindness) practice, and a means of dealing with difficult emotions known as RAIN: Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Nonidentification.

*Mindful of Race*’s third and final section offers suggestions for how to talk to our kids about race, form racial affinity groups, and have constructive conversations about hot-button topics. Using the Bodhisattva archetype as a reference point, King discusses the relationship between economics and racism, the use of art as cultural medicine, how to handle white privilege, and practices for cultivating compassion and equanimity.

As King writes, “Racism is a heart disease—and it’s curable!”  
—DAMON ORION



WE LEARN TO DEAL WITH ISSUES OF RACIAL DISTRESS WITHOUT ABSORBING THE NEGATIVITY.

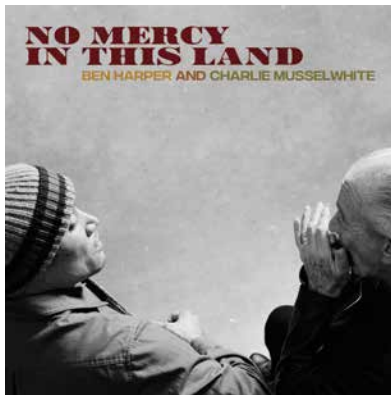
## No Mercy in This Land

Ben Harper and Charlie Musselwhite  
ANTI/EPIGRAPH

**BEN HARPER AND** Charlie Musselwhite are definitely on a roll. Their latest album—*No Mercy in This Land*—is a burst of hard-rocking classic blues. The duo previously earned a Grammy for Best Blues Album for their 2013 *Get Up!* and here again the combination is golden.

Harper was born three years after Musselwhite recorded his first album, in 1966, titled *Stand Back! Here Comes Charlie Musselwhite's Southside Band*. The Mississippi-born blues-harmonica virtuoso has since recorded over 20 albums

and worked with dozens of artists, including Tom Waits, Bonnie Raitt, and the Blind Boys of Alabama. Meanwhile, singer/multi-instrumentalist Harper hit off his first album in 1994—*Welcome to the Cruel World*—and never looked back, now listing over a dozen albums to his credit.



John Lee Hooker first introduced Harper to Musselwhite and invited them into the studio in 1998 to appear on the song “Burnin’ Hell” for the album *The Best of Friends*, which also featured contributions from the likes of Van Morrison, Ry Cooder, and Los Lobos.

*No Mercy in This Land* is gritty blues that shakes, rattles, and rolls. The beat is even and slow as Harper’s voice glides over Musselwhite’s electrified, hair-raising harmonica, sounding like an electric guitar swinging and churning up and down these tunes. “The Bottle Wins Again” has Harper crooning like Jimi Hendrix, and “I’ve Got a Bad Habit” is playful and up-tempo, with Harper lamenting his version of empathy overload: “I cry once a day / It’s a condition of the heart.” —JOHN MALKIN

## Landfall

Laurie Anderson and the Kronos Quartet  
NONESUCH

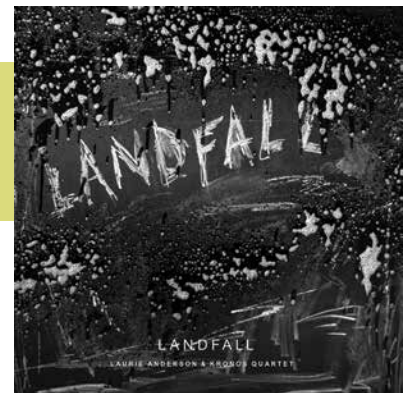
**LANDFALL** is an exquisite musical story of loss that’s been sumptuously crafted in this inaugural collaboration by two longtime forces in experimental contemporary music: Laurie Anderson and the Kronos Quartet. While David Harrington of Kronos proposed a joint project for years, Anderson was reluctant. “I have no chops for orchestration or part writing. I’m a studio composer and shape music with electronics,” she writes in the liner notes for *Landfall*. So Anderson relied on familiar techniques of improvisation and sound layering, and the result is an album of sweet and melancholy music and stories.

Anderson explains that she “prepared rhythmic and atmospheric loops made of violin phrases, sound effects, and passages,” and then asked Kronos to “. . . play these loops acoustically, breaking their elements into four parts.” Anderson also wanted to emphasize the overtones and harmonics of what she calls “close-up violin,” the sound details you hear when your head is right next to the instrument. Anderson also created (with Liubo Borissov) new software

THE RESULT IS AN ALBUM OF  
**SWEET AND MELANCHOLY**  
MUSIC AND STORIES.

for *Landfall* that delivers text through sound called ERST (electronic representation of spoken text).

Originally a multimedia performance in 2013, *Landfall* is a journey of 30 short, interconnected songs that weave together a portrait of loss, impermanence, and dreams. The song “Everything Is Floating” relays Anderson’s personal experience after Hurricane Sandy destroyed her Lower Manhattan studio on October 29, 2012: “After the storm I went down to the basement. Everything was floating. Lots of my old keyboards, thirty projectors, props from old performances. . . . I looked at them floating there in the shiny dark water. . . . And I thought, How beautiful! How magic! And how catastrophic.” Anderson dedicated *Landfall* to her late husband, “the fierce and tender Lou Reed, who never once gave up.” —JM



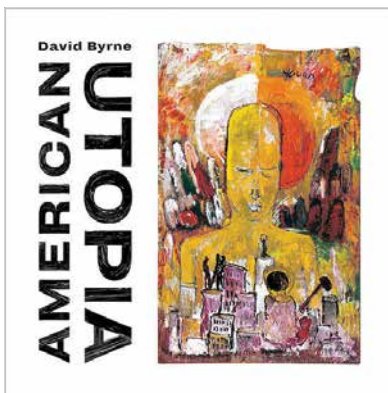
## American Utopia

David Byrne  
NONESUCH

IN CONTRAST TO the stripped-down sound of his last solo outing, 2004's *Grown Backwards*, former Talking Heads front man David Byrne's newest album is a stir-fry of acoustic, electric, and electronic instrumentation.

As if to shoo away electronically averse listeners, *American Utopia*'s opening cut, "I Dance Like This," toggles between subdued, piano-based verses and mechanical, synth-driven choruses. The effect is delightfully jarring, welcoming us to an album that finds Byrne and his myriad collaborators, including producers Brian Eno and Rodaidh McDonald, tastefully ornamenting their songs with samples, effects, and programmed drums.

As exemplified by track 2, "Every Day Is a Miracle," *American Utopia* is an extension of Byrne's multimedia project "Reasons to Be Cheerful," in which he seeks out causes for optimism. Insightful and often hilariously blunt, "Miracle" finds its singer pointing to the miraculous in the everyday, pondering the limitations of the human



DAVID BYRNE'S NEWEST ALBUM IS A STIR-FRY OF **ACOUSTIC, ELECTRIC, AND ELECTRONIC** INSTRUMENTATION.

perspective, and putting our anthropocentric theology into perspective: "The chicken imagines a heaven full of roosters and plenty of corn, and God

is a very old rooster, and eggs are like Jesus, His son. . . . A cockroach might eat Mona Lisa; the Pope don't mean shit to a dog."

Musically, "Everybody's Coming to My House" is one of this album's most upbeat offerings. Cowritten with Eno, it features a spiffy synth solo from Onyx Collective's Happa Isaiah Barr, as well as one of the most memorable lines in an album rich with pithy lyrics: "We're only tourists in this life. . . . Only tourists, but the view is nice."

Intriguing both musically and lyrically, *American Utopia* invites repeated listens. At a time when American life is growing increasingly distant from the utopian vision upon which this nation was founded, this music offers a complex, odd, and entertaining search for positivity. —DO

## REVIEWS // film

### Mantra

Sounds into Silence

Directed by Georgia Wyss and Wari OM  
TENGTWO FILMS

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN EASY for Georgia Wyss's film about the spreading global phenomenon of mantra chanting and call-and-response *kirtan* singing to be the kind of blandly inspirational documentary that appeals primarily to serious yoga enthusiasts. But this absorbing, informative, and lovely film is filled with moving performances and a sense of urgency about the role of mantra, yoga, and meditation in an increasingly busy, disconnected world.

Here we get to hear from some of the world's foremost *kirtan* singers and mantra performers about their approach to the art. The diversity of the performers onscreen—there are rappers, folk artists, pop singers—demonstrates mantra's versatility, and helps explain its global appeal. We hear from ordinary people about what drew them to this world and the power of the participatory approach of *kirtan* singing. The film makes the point that this isn't about religion or prefab notions of Enlightenment, but about a very personal sense of inner peace. Meanwhile, scientists explain the



Deva Premal, Mitten, and Manose

WARI OM

brain activity that they observe around mantras—how the repetition and rhythm help us both to focus and to let down our defensive mechanisms.

But perhaps the biggest selling point of *Mantra* is that it looks and sounds fantastic. It offers a wealth of footage of performers who deserve to be better known—from Mirabai Ceiba to Krishna Das to MC Yogi. The film doesn't just explain the appeal and beauty of mantra; it embodies it. —BILGE EBIRI



**Itzhak**

Directed by Alison Chernick  
VOYEUR FILMS

**THE GREAT** Israeli-American violinist Itzhak Perlman makes for a lively guide to his own life and career in this charming documentary. Alison Chernick’s film follows the 72-year-old legend through his surprisingly busy days teaching, performing, gabbing, and receiving accolades. Left disabled due to a childhood bout with polio, Perlman has to get around on crutches or a motorized scooter, but that doesn’t seem to slow him down much—even when the streets of Manhattan are piled high with snow.

The film also shows highlights from Perlman’s past, including his legendary 1958 appearance on the Ed Sullivan show, where, at the age of 13, he wowed the audience with a brilliant, rapid-fire performance of a movement from the Mendelssohn violin concerto. (As Perlman notes, Sullivan probably saw him at the time as a sad, disabled child—but the performance soon set the talk show host straight.) The film also delves into his



COURTESY OF GREENWICH ENTERTAINMENT

decades-long partnership with his wife, Toby, whose personality seems to be just as bubbly and outgoing as his.

But *Itzhak* perhaps achieves the greatest poignancy when Perlman tries to get at the mysterious beauty of the music he loves and plays. In his classes, he doesn’t seem interested in perfection or precision, but in

opening his students up to a greater variety of experience, helping them to hear and see and live better. It is in that openness that one finds the ineffable, transcendent beauty of art. *Itzhak*—both the film and the person—is a testament to that. —BE

**Quest**

Directed by Jonathan Olshefski  
VESPERTINE FILMS

**SHOT OVER** the course of nearly a decade, Jonathan Olshefski’s absorbing, often heartbreaking documentary looks at the life of one North Philadelphia family, their challenges and joys, and the struggle to maintain hope and love in the face of an unpredictable, often cruel world. Christopher “Quest” Rainey is a local music producer who helps support the careers of struggling and up-and-coming rappers; his wife, Christine’s (also called “Ma Quest”), works at a women’s shelter. The Raineys gave remarkable access to Olshefski—not just physically, but also emotionally. As a result, the film portrays the quotidian rhythms of life with great beauty, detail, and compassion. Deeply in love but also clear-eyed



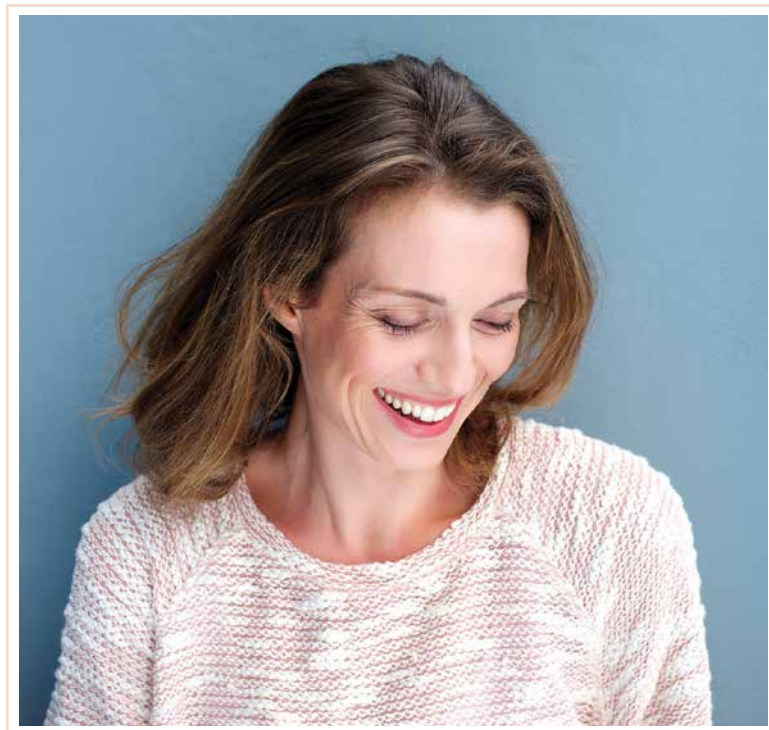
about life’s difficulties, the duo—along with their kids—are quite candid and eloquent about the world around them, and their feelings.

*Quest* avoids cheap clichés about black and inner-city life. There’s plenty of drama in this film—illness, injury, crime, alcoholism, family strife—but what shines throughout is the sense of love and community surrounding the Raineys, even in times of tremendous difficulty. *Quest* also avoids making easy categorizations or totalizing statements about The Way We Live Now. The filmmakers are content to allow us to spend time with these people; they recognize the power of connection and compassion. —BE

THE FILM PORTRAYS THE QUOTIDIAN RHYTHMS OF LIFE WITH GREAT BEAUTY, DETAIL, AND COMPASSION.

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