

# BOOKED & PRINTED

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LAUREL FLORES FANTAUZZO

Power struggles. Secrets kept. Divided destinies. Loyalties, longings, obligations, and betrayals. The epic rivalries and affections inherent between sisters are perhaps unlike any other relationship's, beginning at birth and continuing even beyond death. When criminal elements intervene into sisters' tensions and bonds, the love sisters bear for each other can grow into fearsome methods of protection, memory, and even vengeance.

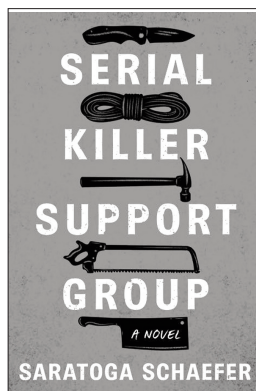
This month, Booked & Printed examines novels where women are striving and haunted after mysterious circumstances remove their beloved sisters from them. The changes they undergo in their respective quests for the truth will test even their firmest ideas about themselves and their own intentions.

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At the start of *Serial Killer Support Group* by Saratoga Schaefer, Cyra Griffin startles the officer she is interviewing. Cyra's beloved younger sister has been murdered in a Brooklyn park, and the officer has reason to believe the perpetrator was a serial killer. He won't say what the exact evidence is, both to protect the case and to protect what he assumes is Cyra's mourning. But Cyra's reaction is businesslike. She wants to know the most gruesome details. She shows no feeling. She subsumes whatever emotions of loss, grief, and shock she feels into a secret plan on behalf of her deceased sister.

Cyra acquires those confidential police details later from a friend who works in tech with law enforcement. Her informant tells her more: A group of serial killers meet regularly, starting from the dark web and insinuating their way together into the real world. The killers discuss their habits and movements at in-person gatherings, like members of sinister Narcotics Anonymous meetings. After entering into correspondence with the group on a secretive website, Cyra steepes herself in a world of unimaginably dangerous men. She soon discovers, and attempts to harness, the deeper hazards lingering inside herself.

Saratoga Schaefer's debut novel is a surprising, psychologically engrossing, and compelling read. The plot coils and strikes, moving to places and perpetrators readers will have never suspected. Cyra is a queer feminist



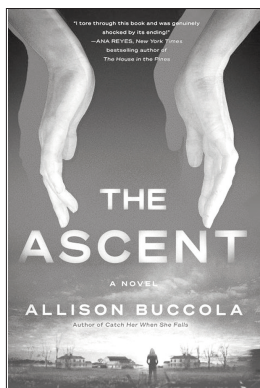
who self-trains, with her fists, feet, and a knife, in mixed martial arts. While she prefers solitude by nature, her ethics are bound to uplifting and protecting both the memory of her sister, and the members of her communities—ethics and choices that soon find the disquieting, less-than-ethical corners of her psyche.

The novel alternates from Cyra’s perspective into the disturbing backstories of the members of the titular support group. Her unexpected allies will, by turns, draw readers in and deliciously repel them. Her own unique, evolving mental and emotional states form an equally startling element of the novel. The secrets of her emotions, and her old and new personas, unfold alongside the storyline, calling into question her previous assumptions about herself.

Cyra may have begun her infiltration into a community of killers in service of her beloved younger sister’s memory, but her journey will end in a place that will linger in readers’ memories.

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In *The Ascent* by Allison Buccola, young mother Lee Burton struggles with postpartum paranoia. She has an infant, Lucy, who she will not let out of her sight, to the consternation of her public defender husband and her genteel mother-in-law, both of whom are sure they know better what Lee should do.



Lee’s inner struggles shroud a deeper secret. Lee is the only surviving member of a cult that disappeared when she was barely a teenager. Two of the disappeared were her mother and her younger sister, Mona, whom Lee doted on and protected while growing up in the high-control environment. After a name and location change, these dramatic facts are secrets of her personal history she keeps from her husband and everyone else in her life. Only a set of cousins and a distant uncle know the truth—until a new Netflix series about the cult’s disappearance intrudes on Lee’s life.

An irritatingly viral documentary series is not the only incursion from the past into Lee’s present. A woman approaches Lee and Lucy at a park. She is Lee’s younger sister Mona. She has survived and she has returned to Lee, finally. Lee ignores her husband’s reservations, and she invites Mona to live in the family home. For Lee, having an unexpected reunion with Mona is Lee’s chance to do what she could not do as a child: protect her younger sister and, in doing so, perhaps even find their lost mother and community.

*The Ascent*, Allison Buccola’s sophomore novel, offers an affecting, engrossing gaze at several phenomena. By alternating between Lee’s present and her childhood memories, readers learn the paradoxically memorable, warmly familial aspects of a high-control environment. Lee’s often painful,

interior terrors on behalf of her baby offer a realistic look at postpartum struggles. The ambient, unresolvable grief of having her sister go missing, along with the rest of a community, weighs on Lee's everyday moments, as much as she tries to flee her past and live in a normal present.

Readers will be inexorably drawn in to Lee's frustrated, frustrating inner world, sometimes doubting her decisions and perspective. But they will ultimately sympathetic to her motivations; the viral Netflix show offers, first, a near-satirical subplot, and then a surprising reversal of Lee's trajectory. The final moment of the otherwise skillfully drawn plot might leave logistical questions. The last chapter is, however, emotionally resonant, offering a satisfying catharsis in place of a sure resolution, for the sisters, and for us.

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