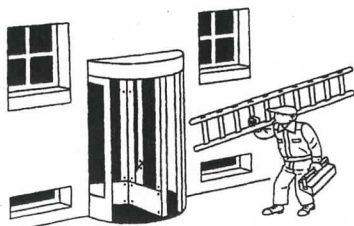


BRIEFLY NOTED

The Inheritance of Loss, by Kiran Desai (*Atlantic Monthly Press*; \$24). Desai's second novel is set in the nineteen-eighties in the northeast corner of India, where the borders of several Himalayan states—Bhutan and Sikkim, Nepal and Tibet—meet. At the head of the novel's teeming cast is Jemubhai Patel, a Cambridge-educated judge who has retired from serving a country he finds "too messy for justice." He lives in an isolated house with his cook, his orphaned seventeen-year-old granddaughter, and a red setter, whose company Jemubhai prefers to that of human beings. The tranquillity of his existence is contrasted with the life of the cook's son, working in grimy Manhattan restaurants, and with his granddaughter's affair with a Nepali tutor involved in an insurgency that irrevocably alters Jemubhai's life. Briskly paced and sumptuously written, the novel ponders questions of nationhood, modernity, and class, in ways both moving and revelatory.

The Thin Place, by Kathryn Davis (*Little, Brown*; \$23.95). In the opening pages of this brilliant, peculiar book, three small-town girls discover a man's corpse at the edge of a lake, and one of them, Mees Kipp, mysteriously brings him back to life. Davis writes hallucinatory, literate prose, and adopts a cosmic perspective: she is concerned with nothing less than describing the town's every waking moment. The experiences of Mees's dog, trotting through a clearing that smells of porcupine, stand alongside those of a minister's wife reading her morning paper and "confronting whatever form the devil had chosen to assume overnight." In any other book, a magical resurrection would be a central event; for Davis, it's just another moment in a particular place.



The Worst Hard Time, by Timothy Egan (*Houghton Mifflin*; \$28). On April 14, 1935, the biggest dust storm on record descended over five states, from the Dakotas to Amarillo, Texas. People standing a few feet apart could not see each other; if they touched, they risked being knocked over by the static electricity that the dust created in the air. The Dust Bowl was the product of reckless, market-driven farming that had so abused the land that, when dry weather came, the wind lifted up millions of acres of topsoil and whipped it around in "black blizzards," which blew as far east as New York. This ecological disaster rapidly disfigured whole communities. Egan's portraits of the families who stayed behind are sobering and far less familiar than those of the "exodusters" who staggered out of the High Plains. He tells of towns depopulated to this day, a mother who watched her baby die of "dust pneumonia," and farmers who gathered tumbleweed as food for their cattle and, eventually, for their children.

American Vertigo, by Bernard-Henri Lévy (*Random House*; \$24.95). When Tocqueville wrote "Democracy in America," in the eighteen-thirties, it seemed as if only a foreigner could identify the essence of American culture. Now Lévy, a new kind of French aristocrat, has retraced his steps, travelling through our malls and megachurches and prisons. Lévy's writing has always been an arms race between shrewd observation and rapt self-absorption, but that's not the only problem here. The outsider's advantage is to see things fresh; his disadvantage is that he doesn't know when his observations are anything but fresh. In recent decades, our national self-scrutiny has spawned a library of its own—Joan Didion, Christopher Lasch, Mike Davis, Richard Sennett, Thomas Frank—and the time is long past when extracting profundities from the Mall of America seemed daring, rather than trite. Lévy's hortatory prose seethes with provocation and paradox; the trouble is that so many of his observations are so stale and predictable.

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