

THE LAKE

By Banana Yoshimoto.
Translated by Michael Emmerich.
Melville House, \$23.95.

Yoshimoto's 13th work of fiction attests to the power of emotional intimacy to help even the most "ridiculously fragile people" overcome trauma and grief. Chihiro, a mural artist, loses her mother and finds consolation staring out the window of her Tokyo apartment. Her neighbor, a lanky stranger named Nakajima, begins to wave at her. After a year of fond gazing and brief encounters, he starts spending the night. A withdrawn yet strangely candid genetics student, Nakajima helps Chihiro make peace with her upbringing in hierarchical small-town Japan, and she provides him relief from memories of his painful, mysterious past. He invites Chihiro to accompany him to a picturesque lake to confront two old friends, a "not normal" brother and sister. This gloomy but dignified pair possess paranormal abilities, and they provide insight into Nakajima's horrific childhood. Terse truisms occasionally bog down Yoshimoto's prose: "When there's a plus, there's always a minus. If there's a powerful light, the darkness that is its opposite will be just as strong." But much of the action unfolds through artful dialogue and a nimble fusion of romantic and existential reflection. The author is particularly astute about what it's like to be an artist in a world where people keep "their true opinions to themselves" while chasing "tiny profits."

KAMCHATKA

By Marcelo Figueras.
Translated by Frank Wynne.
Black Cat, paper, \$14.95.

Dark days descend on Buenos Aires, home to this novel's narrator, a sixth grader obsessed with comics and American television and films. He witnesses the gradual disappearance of his parents' colleagues, victims of the country's "Dirty War" (1976-83), in which a military junta, with the tacit support of high-ranking United States government officials, murdered tens of thousands of trade unionists, journalists and Perón sympathizers. The narrator and his activist parents abscond to the city's outskirts, where they assume false identities. The boy renames himself Harry, after his newfound idol, Houdini, and his areligious parents teach him the fundamentals of Catholicism to help keep their cover. Young Harry considers the politics of the time "something that got people all worked up about nothing, a sport that was as loud as it was pointless, a bit like football." He spends

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THE SUSPENSION OF TIME: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and 'The Fulbright Triptych.'

Edited by Daniel Slager. 335 pp. Milkweed Editions. Paper, \$35.

Essays by Jhumpa Lahiri, John Turturro, John Russell and others illuminate Dinnerstein's monumental, psychologically intricate conceptual painting (1971-74). Above, detail from right panel.

his days removing dead toads from the house's putrid swimming pool and reading up on being an escape artist. He and his father play countless games of Risk, during which Harry always takes possession of Kamchatka, a remote Russian region that comes to have metaphoric meaning. In tumultuous times, Kamchatka gives him the security of "being far from everything, unreachable, amid the eternal snows." The author, an Argentine screenwriter, vividly evokes a child's reaction to a world beleaguered by violence. But he hasn't devoted enough attention to plotting or the development of secondary characters, and the novel's whimsical tangents often distract from its hopeful message about the healing powers of imagination and love.

OIL ON WATER

By Helon Habila.
Norton, paper, \$14.95.

In this absorbing novel about the oil-rich Niger Delta, an insurgent group is believed to have kidnapped a British woman, the wife of a petroleum company executive. Rufus, a greenhorn reporter, and Zaq, a renowned but washed-out newsman, delve into a maze of rivers and swamps in pursuit of her. Voyaging through surreal, war-ravaged landscapes, they come across "dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil," and encounter characters who paint an indicting portrait of petroleum politics. A ruthless army major captures the men

and explains that "freedom fighters" are actually "crooks," asserting that "the best thing is to line them up and shoot them." The pair has several run-ins with the insurgents, who claim not to be "the barbarians the government propagandists say" they are, but rather "for the people," on a mission to save their communities and the environment. Right and wrong are ambiguous here, but what's clear is that the region's indigenous people, their waterways and farmlands poisoned, have "borne the brunt of the oil wars." The British hostage eludes the journalists, though they eventually unravel her complicated story. Despite its neat and tidy ending, this novel, Habila's third, reminds us how a mixture of poverty, frustration and greed can engender militancy, and illuminates the cruel, overlooked effects of globalization on the developing world.

THE SENTIMENTALISTS

By Johanna Skibsrud.
Norton, \$23.95.

Napoleon Haskell, a recovering alcoholic, lives alone in a Fargo, N.D., trailer park, chain-smoking in his "library" and using his computer to blow money on the stock market. His solitary days come to an end when his daughter, this first novel's narrator, re-enters his life. Concerned about her father's health, she and her sister pack his things and drive him to Casablanca, a small Canadian town near the New York border. The family used to spend summers there with Henry, a kindhearted paraplegic whose government house now represents Napoleon's "last and only option." It turns out Napoleon is dying, and he lives out his final months in Henry's lakeside home, returning to booze, completing crosswords and conversing with his daughter. She slowly uncovers the connection between her father's four-year disappearance during her childhood and his suppressed memories of the Vietnam War. Napoleon witnessed atrocities: his platoon massacred innocent civilians; his good friend, Henry's son, was mysteriously executed, perhaps by an American officer. Skibsrud, an accomplished poet, elucidates sorrow, hanging "as though it was a separate object," with admirable subtlety. Her metaphors can be blatant, but they're usually resonant. An entire town, for example, lies submerged beneath Henry's artificial lake, this sunken world a reminder of the enduring nature of supposedly bygone days. The narrator earnestly questions her ability to understand the "inexplicable presence" of the past, especially when the simplest events seem like "the most complicated puzzles." But this novel suggests she shouldn't doubt herself. A hypnotic meditation on memory, it reaffirms the potential for storytelling to offer clarity and redemption. □