

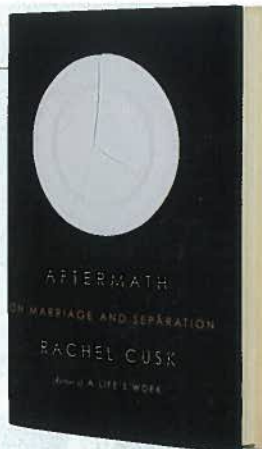
A GREAT DIVIDE

A failed marriage, a fractured family, and the grim slog of divorce, depicted with uncompromising and thought-provoking honesty. *By Lisa Shea*

Rachel Cusk's brilliant new memoir, *Aftermath* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), as slim and revealing as a microscope slide, boldly examines the debris field of her failed 10-year marriage, likening her new reality not to a progression but to a regression. "We had undone history itself. There was nothing left to be dismantled, except the children, and that would require the intervention of science. But we were before science: we had gone back to something like seventh-century Britain, before the advent of nationhood."

Cusk analyzes her collapsed union through the lens of feminist autobiography, finding that her primitive, maternal "flesh history" with her two daughters has been banished by the male-driven founding forces of civilization. "Call yourself a feminist, my husband would say to me, disgustedly, in the raw bitter weeks after we separated. He believed he had taken the part of woman in our marriage, and seemed to expect me to defend him against myself, the male oppressor. He felt it was womanly to shop and cook, to collect the children from school. Yet it was when I myself did those things that I often felt most unsexed."

Over eight echo-laden chapters, Cusk moves through her period of aftermath, from agitation to



"In the mirror my daughters and I look at ourselves. They are...getting bigger, and I am shrinking. I can't eat, like a lovesick girl. But I am not a girl and this is grief."

recrimination, to accommodation, to numbness, to new stirrings. She splits the parenting duties with her daughters' father, takes in a boarder to help cover expenses, watches how other couples interact, struggles with social phobias, takes a lover, sees a shrink.

In the book's final section, Cusk—whose previous works include the novels *Saving Agnes* and *Arlington Park* and the memoir of motherhood *A Life's Work*—tells the story of the girls' former au pair, who made a Christmas stollen at her new place of employment, cut it in two, and, in a gesture of exquisite egalitarianism, mailed half to Cusk and half to Cusk's ex.



Cusk

SLIPPERY SLOPE

Social send-up? Summer read! *By Cathi Hanauer*

Rebecca Rose, 36, has a secret: One of her children was conceived not with her sexually disinterested architect husband but with a celebrity she bedded after meeting him at the local food co-op. But in the familiar terrain of Amy Sohn's

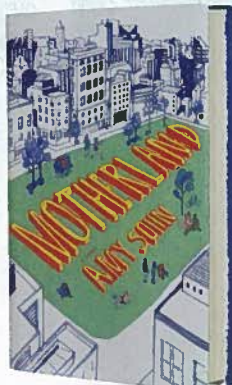
fourth novel, *Motherland* (Simon & Schuster)—Brooklyn's Park Slope—this hardly shocks. In fact, among the book's main characters—five parents (some returning from 2009's *Prospect Park West*), including a single mother, a gay married father, and a once-famous actress—there's drug dealing and addiction, kleptomania, alcoholism, two near-drownings, a masseur with a fetish that makes his clients orgasm, a phone app for

randy gay men ("Manhunt meets MapQuest"), a father who unwittingly has sex with his daughter, and a paunchy painter who arouses the aforementioned actress by making her scrub his bathroom. And that's just the yuppies.

From a lesser writer, this could all be just a gaudy soap opera. But while Sohn's sharp, hilarious tale satirizes these affluent, artsy Brooklyn archetypes and their fickle yet predictable Hollywood counterparts, it also explores the waning of passion, the angst of being housebound with kids, and the despair of watching your spouse morph from best friend to apathetic, angry, or needy adversary. And while the book could profitably have lost a few celebrity and movie references, it keeps you hooked—and cackling—until its surprisingly resonant final lines.



Sohn



TRUST US BOOKS

CONQUERING CAMBRIDGE

Rebecca Harrington's novel, *Penelope* (Vintage), follows its plucky, doe-eyed heroine through her tumultuous freshman year circa the 20-aughts at Harvard, where, "in her fantasies, Penelope [had] pictured herself advocating for Title IX while attractively tackling several men at once."

MITTELEUROPA MIND GAMES

The 22 stories in Swiss writer Peter Stamm's *We're Flying* (Other Press) intimately explore the peaks and valleys of his characters' often-solitary passions and obsessions. In "Years Later," a successful architect revisits the village of his childhood, which is also where his first marriage dissolved, and feels that "these people, whom he didn't know, had taken possession of his past."

A GREAT CHAIN OF BEINGS

UK media maestro Craig Brown's cheekily inspired *Hello Goodbye Hello* (Simon & Schuster) links 101 celebrated lives across time by relating their real-life encounters—Mark Twain with Helen Keller, Igor Stravinsky with Walt Disney, Janis Joplin with Patti Smith—in what might be the ultimate pocket guide to the modern history of noteworthy meet-ups. —L.S.