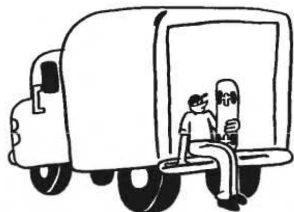
BRIEFLY NOTED

By Nightfall, *by Michael Cunningham (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $25).* Cunningham's latest novel seems almost like a dare: can Auguste Rodin, Daisy Buchanan, Damien Hirst, Gustav von Aschenbach, and the rock band Styx all fit in a slim novel that spans only five days and unfolds almost entirely in Manhattan? As it turns out, absolutely. Peter, a downtown art dealer, and his wife, Rebecca, are gamely negotiating middle age with enviable jobs, a Mercer Street loft, and a sullen daughter who has dropped out of Tufts. When Rebecca's younger brother arrives for a visit, Peter is both exasperated and smug. Who better to put midlife dissatisfactions into perspective than a precocious yet aimless ex-addict? Instead, the young man's doomed beauty threatens to destroy all Peter's carefully rehearsed compromises. The novel is less a snapshot of the way we live now than a consideration of the timeless consolations of love and art in the shadow of death, and its resolution—inevitable yet startling, like the slap of a wave—is a triumph.

Foreign Bodies, *by Cynthia Ozick (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; $26).* Bea Nightingale, a teacher in the Bronx in the nineteen-fifties, is in a rut when her peevish brother entreats her to retrieve his son and daughter from Paris, where they sought refuge from his oppressive ways. Ozick's taut, sparkling novel is billed as a retelling of Henry James's "The Ambassadors," and she transforms James's cultivated Europe into a "scarred and exhausted" landscape teeming with the ghosts of war. Bea is a reluctant ambassador: at first she strives to do her brother's bidding, but soon the "romantic agony" of Paris awakens feelings she has long kept subdued. Embroiled in a family drama, careful Bea meddles where once she stood idle, and she confronts a vexing paradox: "how hard it is to change one's life" and "how terrifyingly simple to change the lives of others."



The Killer of Little Shepherds, *by Douglas Starr (Knopf; $26.95).* On October 26, 1898, Joseph Vacher, a vagabond with a history of mental illness, was brought to trial for the gruesome murder of a young shepherd in Bénonces, France. Vacher had previously admitted to killing at least ten other people in what he called a "rage" of insanity—which, he argued, meant that he could not be held accountable for his actions. In an engrossing and carefully researched narrative, Starr profiles the killer, who was once called "probably the greatest criminal in history," and shows his killing spree against a historical background of rural poverty, the rise of a sensationalist press, and the late nineteenth century's fascination with criminal psychology and new methods of detection. In particular, he illuminates the remarkable career of Jean-Alexandre-Eugène Lacassagne, who was largely responsible for the foundation of modern forensics and who testified in court to Vacher's sanity.

How to Live, *by Sarah Bakewell (Other Press; $25).* This charming biography shuffles incidents from Montaigne's life and essays into twenty thematic chapters, each offering a tentative answer to the title's implied question ("Give up control"; "Question everything"). Taken together, they capture the wry, curious, humane spirit of one who wrote like a "naturalist on a field trip into the human soul." Though Montaigne was born in 1533, Bakewell stresses his modernity; he was the first to attempt to record a "sequence of sensations as they felt from the inside." This self-scrutiny was as self-effacing as it was intense: he tried to "create a mirror in which other people recognize their own humanity." Bakewell clearly relishes the anthropological anecdotes that enliven Montaigne's work, but she handles equally well both his philosophical influences and the readers and interpreters who have guided the reception of the essays.

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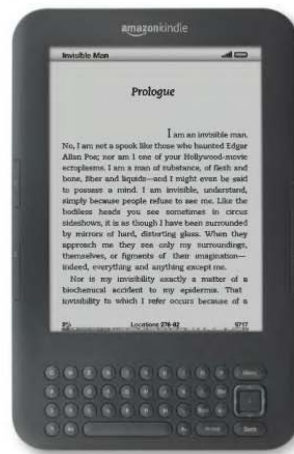

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