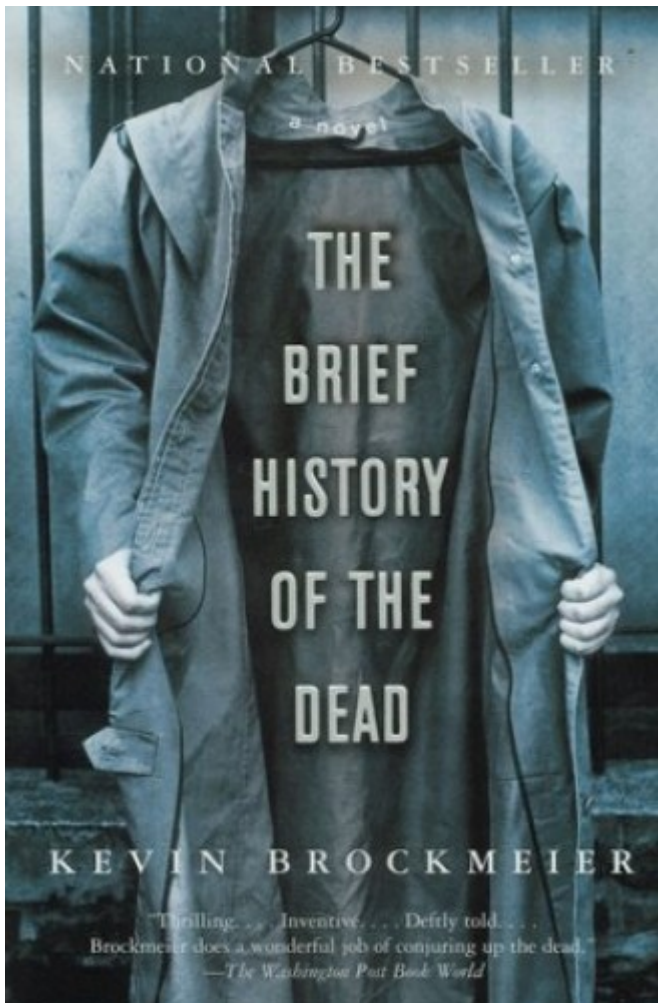


Fiction chronicle

by [Janet Potter](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue



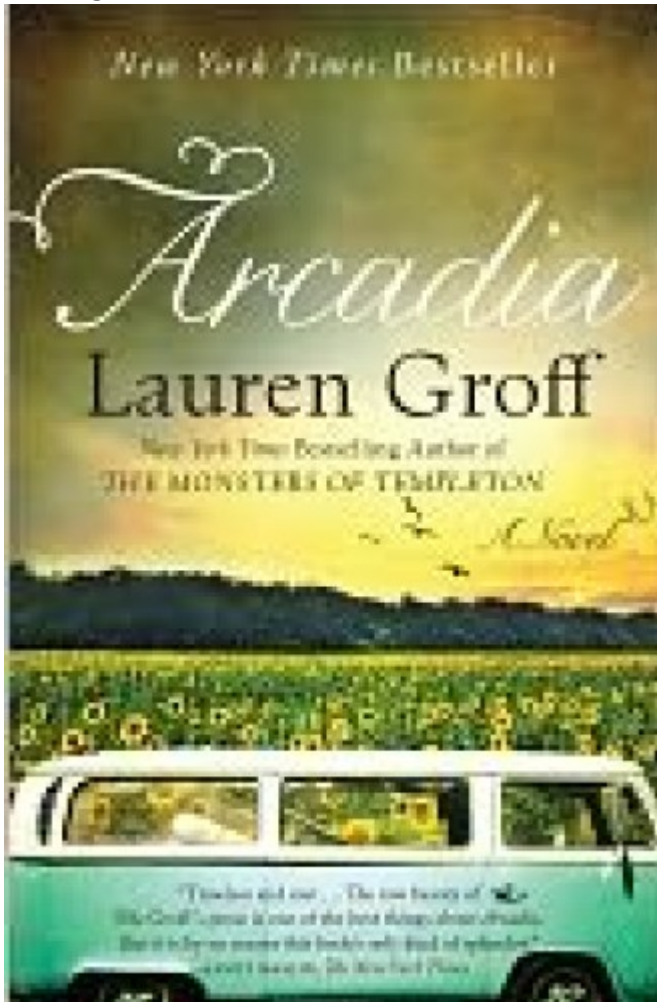
## In Review



# The Brief History of the Dead

By Kevin Brockmeier

Vintage

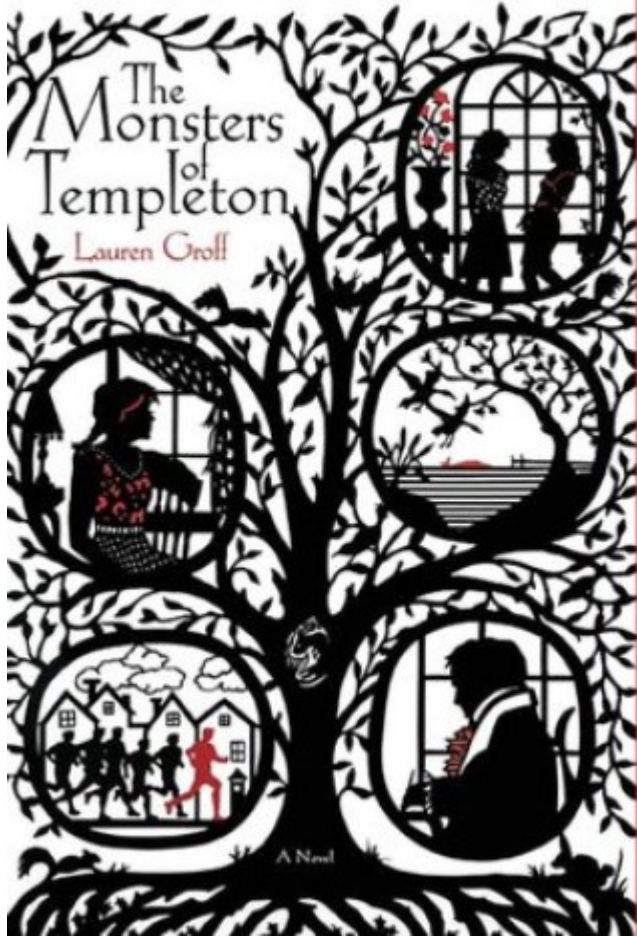


## Arcadia

By Lauren Groff

Voice

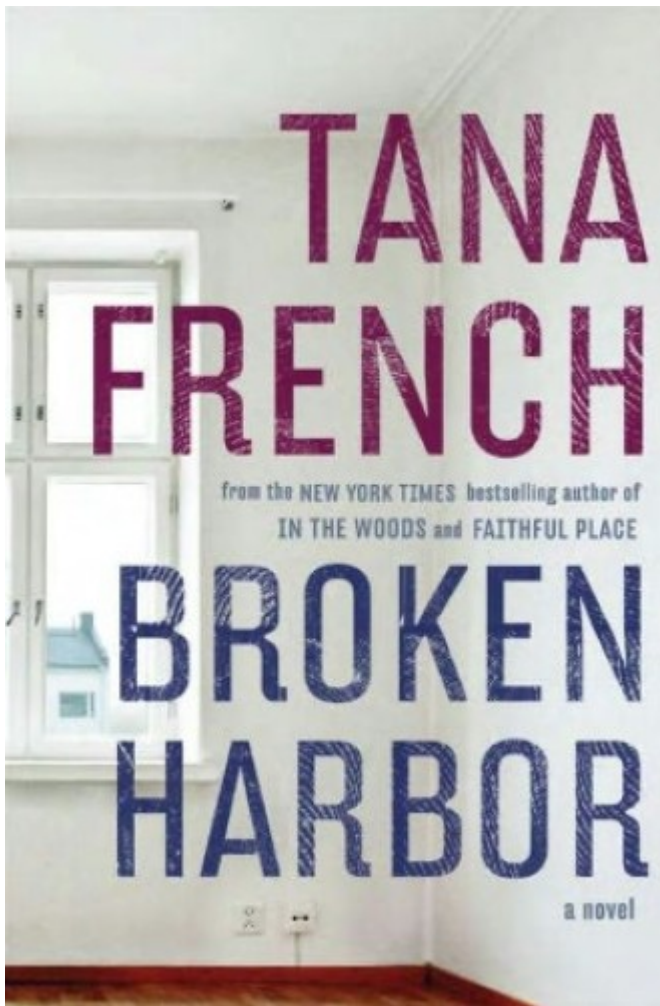
*The New York Times Bestseller*



## **The Monsters of Templeton**

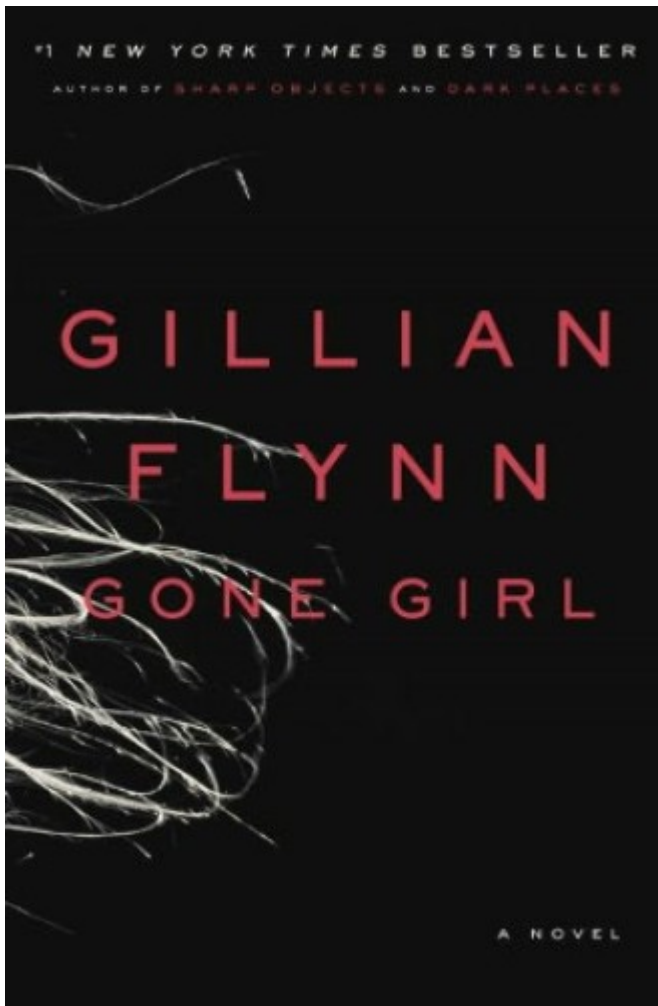
By Lauren Groff

Voice



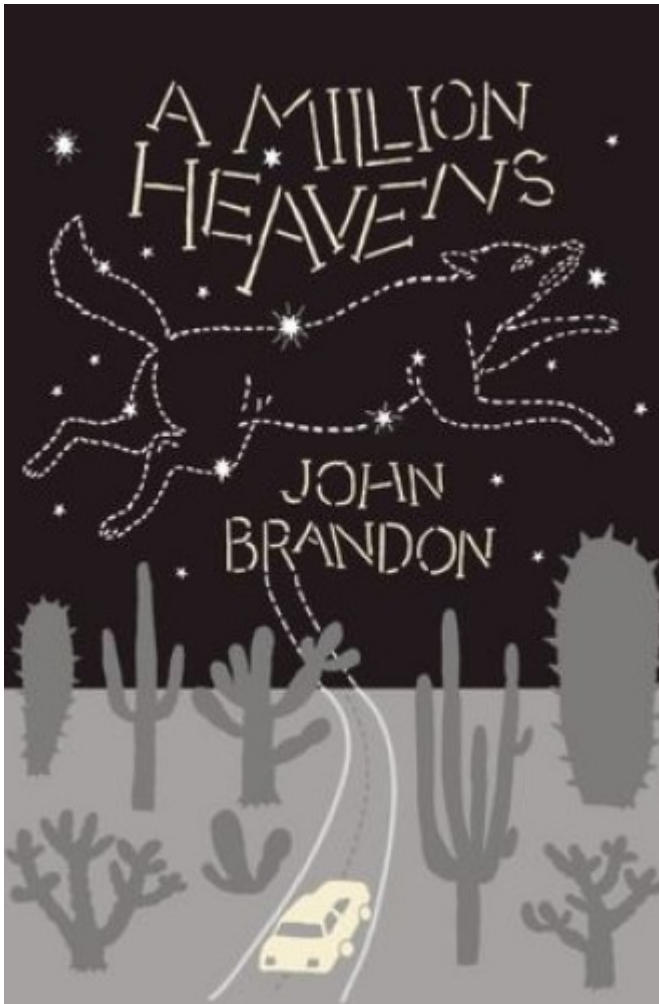
## **Broken Harbor**

By Tana French  
Viking Adult



## **Gone Girl**

By Gillian Flynn  
Crown



## **A Million Heavens**

By John Brandon  
McSweeney's

I recently turned to science fiction writer Kevin Brockmeier to pull me out of a fiction-reading slump. I had discovered him over a year ago when I read *The Illumination* (reviewed in the *Century* April 11, 2011), about a world in which any source of pain on a person's body—a cut, a bee sting, a toothache—glows with a white light. Brockmeier's first novel, *A Brief History of the Dead*, didn't disappoint me. It has the same delicate handling of the supernatural as *The Illumination*, but with a more forward-moving plot.

Most of the characters in *A Brief History* are residents of "the City," the first waystation of the afterlife. It's where you stay as long as someone alive on Earth remembers you. The City operates almost exactly like a city of the living: people

have apartments, jobs, go out to eat, fall in love. A man who was a journalism professor in his first life runs the City's newspaper, and a man who was a banker runs the diner, which had always been his dream. (If I found myself working in food service in the afterlife, I would have no question as to which eternal destiny I had earned.)

No one knows if there is a second stage to the afterlife. Perhaps, once you leave the City, you become nothing. As residents of the City begin to disappear at an alarming rate, they realize that there is only one person left alive on Earth—Laura Byrd, a researcher who went to the South Pole and who is the sole survivor of a deadly virus that wiped out the planet. It's Byrd's memories that are sustaining all the residents of the City.

Brockmeier plays with the idea that our simplest actions have an otherworldly power. In *The Illumination*, a stubbed toe produces an ethereal light. In *A Brief History*, noticing and remembering a girl with a red balloon on the sidewalk will keep that girl's place in the afterlife.

What's striking about both Brockmeier novels is that the tangible and visible presence of the supernatural changes people so little. Though wounds shine with light, the characters in *The Illumination* go on causing and ignoring pain. The residents of the City have little to show for surviving beyond the grave other than a lower level of worry. In Brockmeier's worlds, people ignore the divine fabric of the universe even when their most trivial interactions are shaping it.

Lauren Groff takes an opposite tack in *Arcadia*. Her characters don't see any evidence of the divine, as Brockmeier's do, but they believe they see divinity in each other and holiness in everyday life.

Groff's novel is about a 1970s hippie commune in upstate New York called Arcadia. The main character, Bit, is the first child born in the commune and therefore holds a special place in all the residents' hearts. As a boy he watches his idealistic parents and their friends build their shelters and farm the land. As he grows up, the values of the commune become muddied. Arcadia becomes overpopulated, overdrugged and unfairly hierarchical. Most of the original members, who make up Bit's surrogate family, become disenchanted with Arcadia and its lazy, no longer charismatic leader and decide to leave.

Most of them are perfectly happy to make the transition to modern life, but Bit always mourns the failure of Arcadia. Having experienced the best years of the commune at a pure stage of childhood, he can't get over the loss.

In the poem "Angel," by Mikhail Lermontov, an angel flies down from heaven carrying an infant soul and singing a holy song of praise. The infant is left in a world "of sadness and tears," but the angel's song remains in the young soul, "wordless, but alive." I love the idea that each person is embedded with a longing for the divine.

The poem came to mind while reading *Arcadia*, for Bit's experience of the commune as a child is a song that nothing else can ever compete with. Even when he's reminded that his memory of Arcadia is overly rosy—the family was poor, hungry, dirty and uneducated—all he remembers is the clear blue lakes and people working together. He never stops believing that Arcadia was a perfect place. Groff explores how resilient this belief is—and how disconnected from reason. Bit can name all the problems with Arcadia and how it went wrong but still yearn for it.

Groff's first novel, *The Monsters of Templeton*, explored the same theme: the place you are from stays with you forever. The place in this case is Templeton, New York, a town modeled after Cooperstown, Groff's own hometown.

Like Cooperstown, Templeton is home to a baseball museum and a notable American novelist, Marmaduke Temple, modeled after James Fenimore Cooper. It also is known for passing on the legend of a local lake monster, a beast considered mythical until its corpse floats to the surface one morning, the same day that Willie Upton, the book's heroine, grudgingly returns home to Templeton after a disastrous affair with a professor.

Templeton is a town with a rich history, one intertwined with the lives of Marmaduke Temple's legitimate and illegitimate descendants. Suspecting that she might be one of those descendants, Willie delves into the history of Templeton and her family's life there. Almost everyone in the town claims to descend from the town's namesake, giving Templeton more than just a small-town feel. The town is like a collective possession. To be part of Templeton—like being part of Arcadia for Bit—is to be part of something meaningful. For Groff, hometowns are alive and magical.

Place plays a much darker role for the Irish mystery writer Tana French. She has written a series of murder mysteries set in and around Dublin, the most recent of



which is *Broken Harbor*. Her characters are resentful of the place they grew up in and yet, in that most Irish of ways, are unable to leave it.

Pat and Jenny Spain are high school sweethearts who bought into a housing development in a Dublin suburb, Broken Harbor, during the economic boom that ended in 2008. Pat lost his job in the recession, and the family slid quickly into debt. With no one else able to buy a house in Broken Harbor, the Spains and their two children lived surrounded by half-built or empty houses, the vestiges of a foolish optimism. When tragedy strikes the Spain family and the detectives rush in, the question that keeps being asked by the victims' friends and the detectives is: What were they doing in Broken Harbor?

Broken Harbor begins to seem a malevolent place that lured them away from their rightful path and stole their prosperity and their lives. If they had only stayed in Dublin, one starts to feel, and if only they hadn't tried to change the story of their lives.

Broken Harbor is not the culprit, obviously. A real murderer is loose. But even once that murderer is revealed, Broken Harbor feels like the real tragedy. If Groff writes about how being in the right place can make you feel whole, French writes about how being in the wrong place can destroy you: once you step off the ordained path of your life, you can't get back on it.

An economic recession figures prominently in Gillian Flynn's skin-chilling *Gone Girl*. Nick and Amy are a sophisticated New York couple who fall victim to the financial downturn and move back to Nick's hometown in Missouri. Nick buys a bar with his sister and Amy stays home. Their marriage had been rocky when they left New York, and it worsens dramatically in Missouri. On their fifth wedding anniversary, while Nick is at work, Amy disappears.

In the investigation and media frenzy that follows, it emerges that Nick and Amy were keeping secrets from each other. Nick narrates the story and occasionally points out that something he tells the police is a lie. What we don't know is why he's lying or to what degree. Are his secrets trivial, to hide the fact that he was a negligent husband, or is he keeping secret the fact that he killed his wife?

The journal that Amy leaves behind is full of things Nick didn't know about—friends she made, trips she took, plans she had. If Nick and Amy no longer knew each other at all, is it possible for a detective to walk into their life and find the truth about

Amy's disappearance? More than a mystery, *Gone Girl* is a horrific reminder of how people are capable of deceiving those closest to them. The inner landscapes that Flynn's characters keep hidden from one another are bleak and dangerous places, and it takes years for the deception to be uncovered.

Another young connoisseur of bleak inner psychology is John Brandon. His first two novels, *Arkansas* and *Citrus County*, were about criminals and how they separate themselves from society. His latest novel, *A Million Heavens*, is about a piano prodigy who is in a coma and an array of characters loosely connected to him.

A group gathers every Wednesday night to sit in vigil in the parking lot outside Soren's hospital room, silently watching the boy's window. As the months go on, those holding vigil dwindle to a handful.

Everyone else in the novel is also deciding whether or not to give up on something. A thirtysomething woman begins to question her relationship with a younger man. An elderly mayor knows that his town is broke. A gas station owner takes a month off to wander the desert. College student Cecelia, the most dedicated of those keeping vigil, is grieving the loss of her bandmate and best friend, Reggie.

Reggie finds himself in the afterlife, which for him is a room empty except for a piano and a bar. It seems that the afterlife, or whoever controls it, wants him to keep writing songs. As Reggie composes songs in his heavenly piano bar, Cecelia begins to hear them on Earth. But eventually, when Cecelia does decide to give something up, it's Reggie she lets go of, renewing her dedication to Soren. God may show up as music, but some people listen, and some people don't.