



## thisweek

Readings & signings on LI

### Today

Author **Denise S. Evans-Sheppard** discusses "The Constant Struggle Within" (DS Publishing), the biography of a Civil War veteran, the author's great-great grandfather. At 2:30 p.m., Westbury Library, 445 Jefferson St., Westbury; 516-333-0176, westburylibrary.org



### Wednesday

Selden resident **Raina Angelier** reads her self-published book, "Bisbosishas, The Hot-Headed Penguin: A Tale of Learning to Keep Your Cool," at a program for children 3-5. Registration \$3. At 10:30 a.m., Ward Melville Heritage Organization Educational and Cultural Center, Stony Brook Village Center, Main Street, Stony Brook; 631-689-5888, stonybrookvillage.com

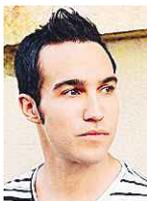


Alfred A. Knopf vice president and senior editor **Robin Desser** is interviewed by former New Yorker fiction editor **Dan Menaker**. At 7 p.m., Radio Lounge, Chancellors Hall, Stony Brook Southampton, 239 Montauk Hwy., Southampton; 631-632-5030, stonybrook.edu/mfa



### Friday

Fall Out Boy bassist **Pete Wentz** signs copies of his novel, "Gray" (MTV Books). At 7 p.m., Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com



### Saturday

Author **Michael Kanne-gieser** signs copies of his novel, "The Daddy Rock" (Decent Hill). At 7 p.m., Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com

## reviews

# Witty, gritty and weird: stories

**VAMPIRES IN THE LEMON GROVE**, by Karen Russell. Alfred A. Knopf, 243 pp., \$24.95

**WE LIVE IN WATER**, by Jess Walter. HarperPerennial, 177 pp., \$14.99 paper

BY MARION WINIK  
Special to Newsday

Usually treated as the runt of the fiction litter, the short story is having a turn on top. The year began with The New York Times' announcement of George Saunders' new collection, "Tenth of December," as "The Best Book You'll Read This Year." In its wake, Saunders appeared on "The Colbert Report" to explain why people would waste their time on an eight-page slice of narrative when they could read a novel and learn how it all turned out. "America likes big," protested Colbert.

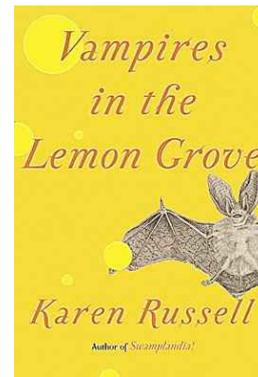
Perhaps America is reconsidering. To help us, the authors of two of last year's most popular novels have released collections, giving readers an opportunity to fall for what Saunders described as the form's "special beauty."

Karen Russell's trademark blend of dark whimsy, emotional realism and linguistic pizzazz was first showcased in "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves." While this debut brought her to the attention of the literati, her subsequent novel, "Swamplandia!" — an epic of family, capitalism, nature and the occult set in two South Florida theme parks — became a 2012 Pulitzer Prize finalist and a mainstream bestseller.

Russell has cited Stephen King as a major influence, and the stories in her new collection, "Vampires in the Lemon Grove," are full of spooky holes in reality that recall the master. In one story, a masseuse finds she can alter history by manipu-



PHOTO BY MICHAEL LIONSTAR



Karen Russell, a 2012 Pulitzer finalist, has a new story collection.

lating an Iraq veteran's huge memorial tattoo. In another, malign seagulls transport ferry tickets and loose screws through time, messing up people's lives. As in "Swamplandia!," the freakier narrative elements are anchored by a realistic adolescent protagonist and a distinctive geographic setting. The ornithologically beleaguered Australian kid of "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979" is equally tormented by his own self-consciousness:

"All day, he could hear the homunculus clacking in his brain like a secretary from a 1940s movie: Nal shouldn't! Nal can't! Nal won't! and then hitting the bell of the carriage return. He pictured the homunculus as a tiny, blankly handsome man in a green sweater, very agreeably going about his task of wringing the life from Nal's life."

In the middle of this Twilight Zone are two stories full of supersmart silliness, more Mark Leyner than Stephen King. "The Barn at the End of Our Term" features dead presidents who have been reincarnated as horses; "Dougbert Shackleton's Rules for Antarctic Tailgating" is just that. These blasts of nitrous oxide underline another general point in the story collection's favor: it can offer very distinct pleasures between one set of covers.

Prolific novelist Jess Walter has already shown

an amazing range — so much that it's hard to categorize him. While producing a body of work that includes the political mystery "Citizen Vince," the 9/11 thriller "The Zero," the social satire "The Financial Lives of the Poets" and last year's barn-burning movie-biz epic "Beautiful Ruins," he has also published many short stories, now collected in "We Live in Water." Though they don't lack for Walter's familiar wry wit, the stories are sadder than the novels, and ultimately more personal.

Walter is a kind of William Kennedy of the Northwest, training his eye on the forlorn locales and hard-luck losers rolled over by the American economy on its way down. "On any given day in Spokane, Washington, there are more adult men per capita riding children's BMX bikes than in any other city in the world," explains "Statistical Abstract

for My Hometown of Spokane, Washington," ostensibly produced by a chronically unemployed man who lives near a women's shelter.

Other stories feature cousins of this narrator — a homeless man raising cash to buy a Harry Potter book for his son in foster care, two tweakers trying to pawn an obsolete big-screen TV, a con artist who employs fresh-faced kids to collect "donations for Greenpeace," ha ha. "This was all a diversion from my real business, running bud down from BC," he explains. "[T]he key was my car. I had to be the youngest man in America in a loaded gray 2006 Buick Luzerne. Cops could pull me over blazing a spliff, coke spoon up my nose, syringe hanging from my tied-off arm, dead hooker in the passenger seat and still just tell me to ease off the gas and have a nice day."

If drug jokes aren't your thing, the collection offers other flavors of gritty wit, including a story about zombies called "Don't Eat Cat." Black humor is what we expect from Jess Walter. What is different is that the stories give us a sense of the writer's heart we haven't gotten from the parade of bright novels.

There are things a short story can't do, like give us a full-blown fictional world into which we lose ourselves for hours on end. But what it can do — a lot — is on impressive display in both of these collections. See, Mr. Colbert? Small is beautiful, too.

2013 is looking like the year of the short story.

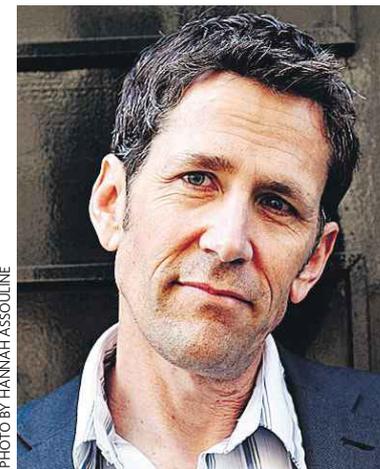
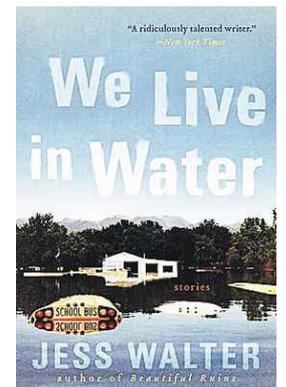


PHOTO BY HANNAH ASSOLINE



Jess Walter's stories are sadder than his novels.