



BASIC BOOKS

70 YEARS

of

PUBLISHING

EXCELLENCE

1950-2020

BASIC BOOKS

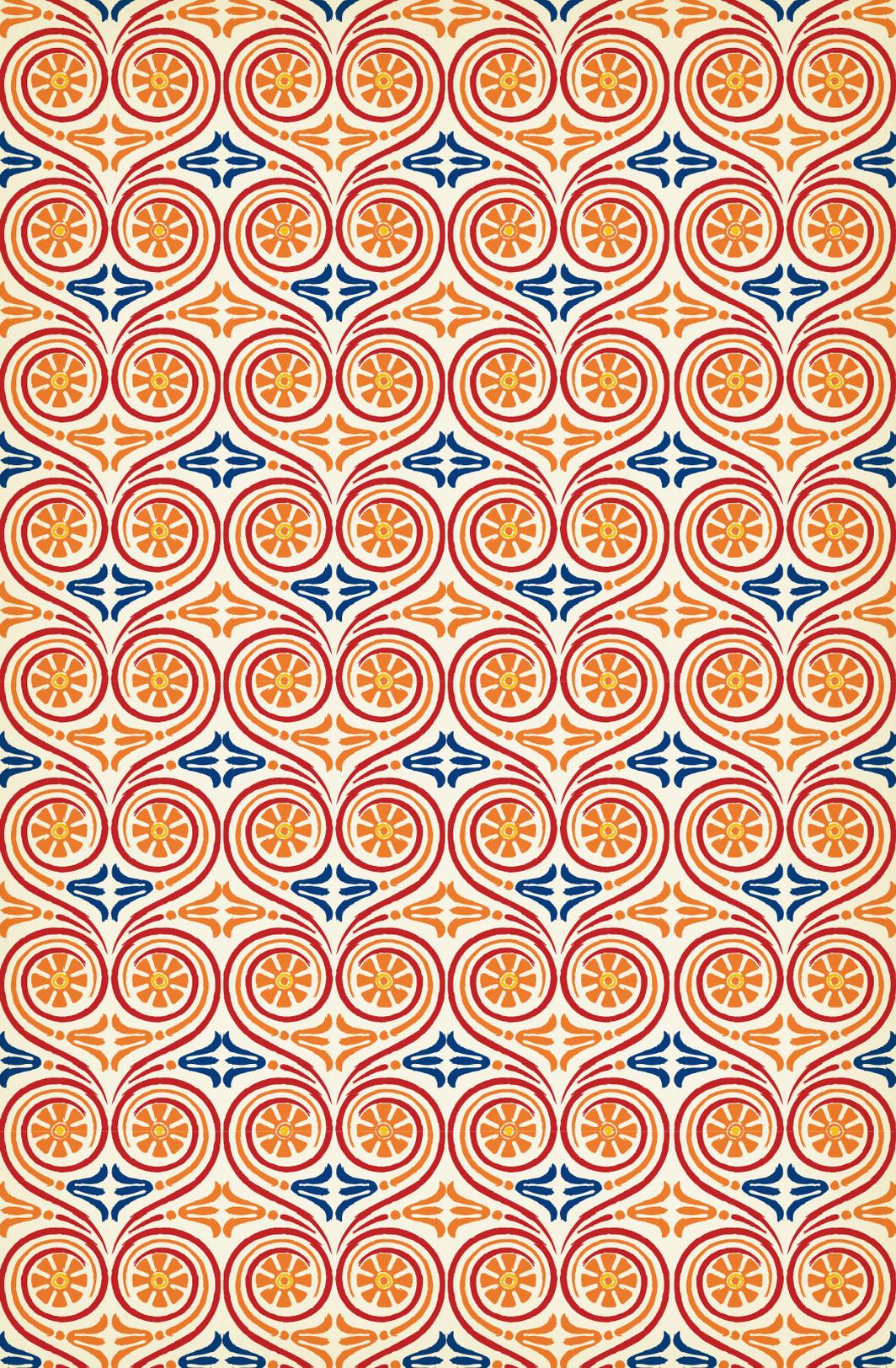
70 YEARS

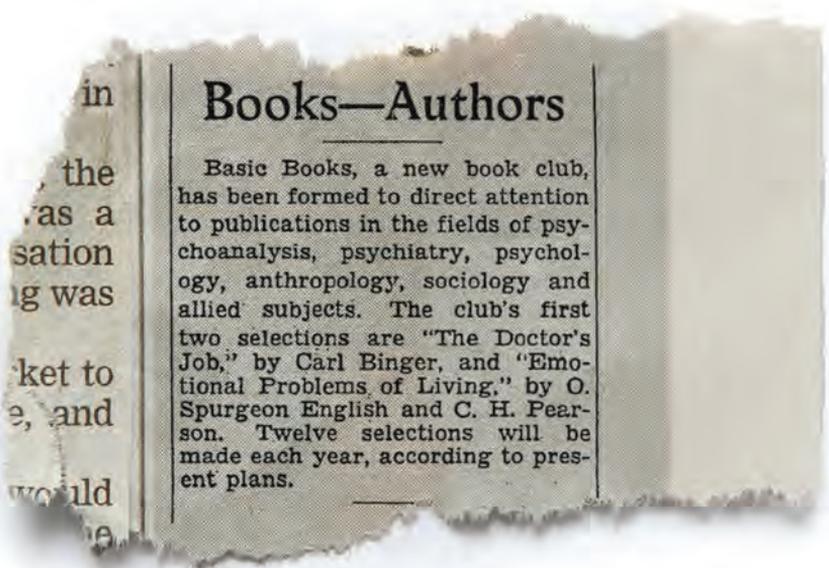
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Books—Authors

Basic Books, a new book club, has been formed to direct attention to publications in the fields of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, psychology, anthropology, sociology and allied subjects. The club's first two selections are "The Doctor's Job," by Carl Binger, and "Emotional Problems of Living," by O. Spurgeon English and C. H. Pearson. Twelve selections will be made each year, according to present plans.

Tucked on page seventeen of the *New York Times* on Thursday, May 17, 1945, was a brief notice: "Basic Books, a new book club, has been formed to direct attention to the publications in the fields of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, psychology, anthropology, sociology and allied subjects." Later that month, a column in the paper's *Book Review* also announced the club's debut, noting that Basic Books planned to present its members with two new books every two months—and "hopes also to become a clearing-house for new [manuscripts]."

That hope began to come to fruition five years later, when a Yale graduate named Arthur Rosenthal purchased

the book club's assets. Rosenthal had overseen press and propaganda operations for General Douglas MacArthur's forces during World War II, and had then worked as a special assistant to the US ambassador to Israel. In 1950, during a chance sidewalk meeting, a lawyer friend sought to interest Rosenthal in working for a client who operated a book club for psychoanalysts: Basic Books. Rosenthal was enthusiastic about the field; he was in analysis himself, and his mother had once been a patient of Otto Rank, a leading disciple of Sigmund Freud. He was less eager to work for Basic's proprietor. "We went down to have a look at the book club's office," he recalled in 2000. "It was in a room behind a bar in Greenwich Village. I said, 'I don't want to work for this lady, but I'll tell you what: How bad are the debts?'"

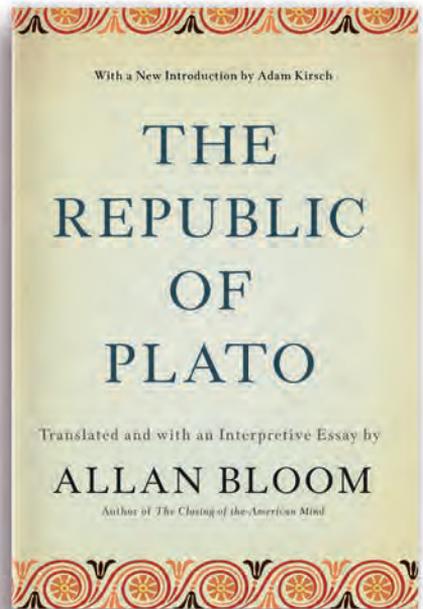
In short order, the thirty-year-old Rosenthal owned the book club, which at the time had four hundred members, and in May 1950, Basic Books Publishing Company, Inc., was incorporated in the State of New York. By year's end, Basic had published a book under its own imprimatur: *Sex in Psychoanalysis*, a new edition of a collection of essays by Sandor Ferenczi, Freud's early collaborator, that had first appeared in English in the 1910s.

The Ferenczi volume was "no book for the layman," one otherwise admiring review conceded. But Basic would soon broaden its reach considerably with the 1953 publication of the first of Ernest Jones's three volumes on *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*. On the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*, Lionel Trilling raved, "It would be difficult to say too much in praise of" Jones's book. "A momen-

tous event,” another columnist declared. Its success—and, in the years that followed, the publication of Freud’s collected papers and works such as *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*—earned Basic the nickname “the house that Freud built.”

But not Freud alone. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Basic also published books by Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, A. R. Luria, and numerous other foundational thinkers in psychology and the behavioral sciences. Basic became, in Rosenthal’s words, “the dominant publisher” in psychoanalysis, at a time when psychoanalysis itself dominated the intellectual scene. But Rosenthal also sought to diversify. In 1960, he hired the magazine editor Irving Kristol to oversee an expansion of Basic’s list, particularly in the social sciences; other authors in the house’s first two decades included Claude Levi-Strauss, Karl Popper, Oscar Lewis, Isaac Asimov, and Allan Bloom, whose translation of *The Republic of Plato*, first published in 1968, remains a perennial seller today.

In Basic’s early years, its editors focused on scholarly books that could appeal to readers outside the academy but that also



had strong potential for adoption in college courses—an approach that helped to create an enduring backlist. “Our policy,” Rosenthal recalled, “was to acquire a small list of distinctive books and to affirm that the academic market would buy good books beyond introductory texts.” Through the 1950s, the book club—up to forty-five thousand members by 1958—continued to offer another channel for distributing Basic’s titles beyond bookshops and universities.

But by the late 1960s, with Basic now publishing seventy-five books a year and maintaining a list of five hundred books in print, Rosenthal went in search of more distribution muscle. In March 1969, he sold Basic Books to Harper & Row. In a statement celebrating the acquisition, Harper president Melvin L. Arnold noted that “Basic Books—known as ‘the university press of the commercial publishing world’—has been one of the most sought-after properties in the American publishing industry.” Harper, he promised, would invest in Basic’s “substantial expansion,” but the house would retain its editorial independence, with Rosenthal and Kristol at the helm.

However, the turn of the decade witnessed not only new ownership for Basic Books, but also new leadership and a new editorial emphasis on political ideas. The same year Basic was sold, Kristol hired Erwin Glikes, an associate dean at Columbia College, into his first job in publishing; Kristol himself soon left Basic to teach at

New York University, and through his writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Public Interest*, and the *National Interest*, he would come to be known as the intellectual godfather of the burgeoning neoconservative movement. A few years later, Rosenthal departed Basic to become director of Harvard University Press, and Glikes was elevated to president and publisher.

Basic did continue to publish major works in the behavioral sciences in the 1970s, among them John Bowlby's trilogy *Attachment, Separation, and Loss*; the landmark textbook *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, by Irvin D. Yalom, who went on to become a major house author; and Silvano Arieti's *Interpretation of Schizophrenia*, which won a National Book Award in 1973. But under Glikes and senior editor Midge Decter, who joined in 1974, Basic also became known as the publishing home of numerous neoconservative scholars, and more broadly of critics of the collapsing postwar liberal consensus. Among Basic's authors in this period were sociologist Daniel Bell, legal scholar Robert Bork, and economists George Gilder—whose *Wealth and Poverty* was a *New York Times* bestseller—and Thomas Sowell, who remains a fixture of Basic's list today. In 1975, philosopher Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, the foundational text of modern libertarianism, won a National Book Award.

Another major editorial force within Basic in these years was Martin Kessler, a political economist by training who had moved over from the Free Press in 1967 and was subsequently promoted to editorial director and associ-

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD WINNER

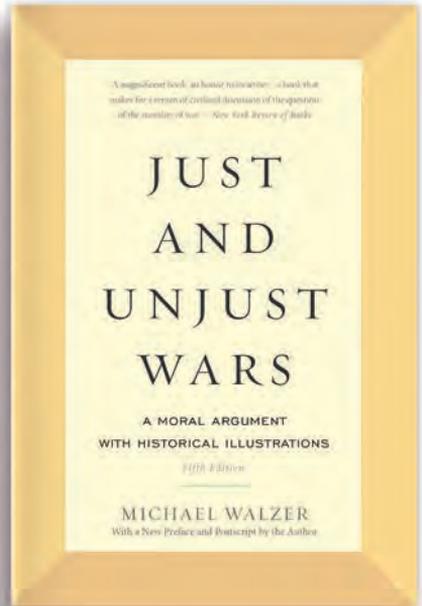
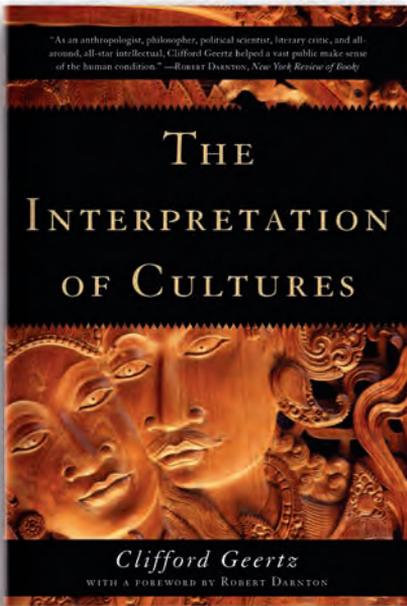
"A major event in contemporary political philosophy."
—PETER SINGER, *New York Review of Books*

ANARCHY,
STATE,
AND
UTOPIA

Robert Nozick

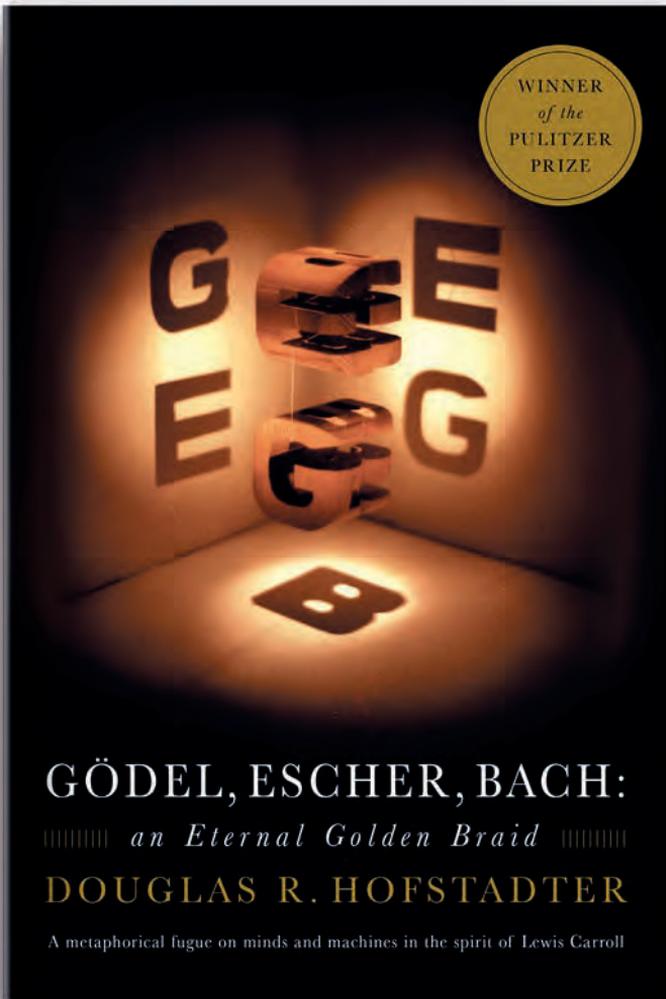
With a New Foreword by Thomas Nagel

ate publisher. Kessler built a diverse list, ranging from the political theorist Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Geertz's book, along with Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* and Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capi-*



talism, were later named by the *Times Literary Supplement* among the hundred most influential books since World War II—a testament to Basic’s central role in shaping the intellectual life of the 1970s.

Later in that decade, Kessler took a chance on an unusual manuscript by a young computer scientist named Douglas Hofstadter. Titled *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, it was sui generis, using narrative, dialogues, and puzzles to explore meaning, reduction, recursion, and other ideas at the heart of cognitive science; the cover bore the tagline “A metaphorical fugue on minds and machines in the spirit of Lewis Carroll.” Upon publication in 1979, the book became a cult classic, despite its nearly eight hundred pages and its high \$18.50 price tag. Basic soon



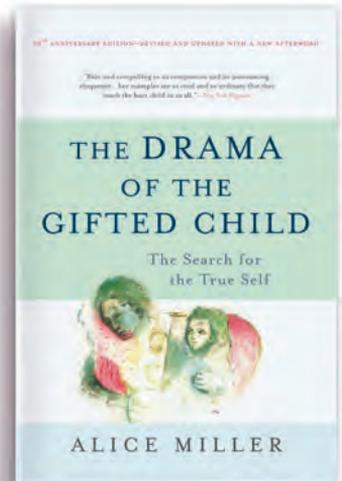
sold the paperback rights for \$200,000, its biggest rights deal ever at the time, and *GEB* received both the National Book Award and Basic's first Pulitzer Prize. The paperback rights have since been reclaimed, and *GEB* holds a place of honor on Basic's list, which now includes several

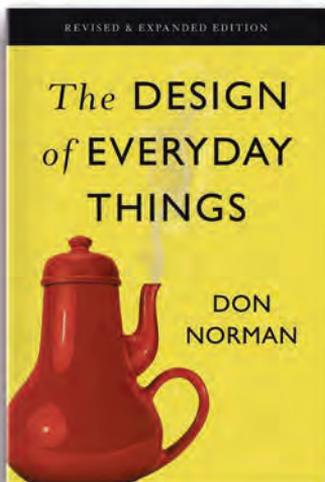
additional books by Hofstadter, including 2007's *I Am a Strange Loop*.

The success of *GEB* was an auspicious start to the 1980s, and to another editorially rich period for Basic Books.

Once again, the turn of the decade coincided with a changing of the editorial guard. In 1979, Glikes departed for Simon & Schuster and Kessler rose to publisher. Herb Reich, who had overseen the behavioral sciences list for much of the 1970s, left the same year, and Decter decamped a year later. Stepping onto the scene were several veterans of academic and professional publishing: Jane Isay, from Yale University Press, who served as associate publisher and then copublisher from 1979 through 1984; Jo Ann Miller, who had run the behavioral sciences book club at Macmillan; Judy Greisman, from Harcourt; and Steve Fraser, previously of Cambridge University Press.

Along with Basic's new personnel came a revival of its publishing program in psychology. Early in her tenure, Isay bought English-language rights for a book on childhood trauma by the Swiss psychologist Alice Miller. Published by Basic

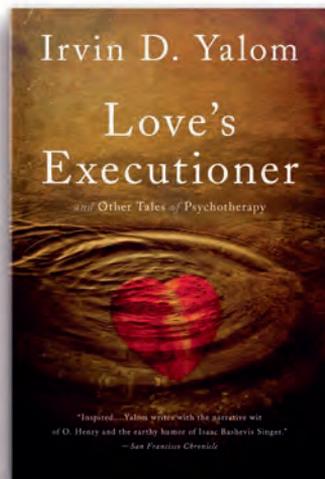




in 1981 as *Prisoners of Childhood*, the book was gradually finding an audience when, over lunch in New York, Miller asked Isay if it was too late to change the title. It remains a mainstay of Basic's backlist as *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. Don Norman's *The Psychology of Everyday Things*, published by Greisman in 1988, also outlived its original title, becoming a classic as *The Design of Everyday Things*. Other behavioral

science landmarks included Irv Yalom's *Love's Executioner*, which hit the *Times* bestseller list in 1990; Robert Jay Lifton's *The Nazi Doctors*; the feminist classic *Women's Ways of Knowing*; Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*; Mark Epstein's *Thoughts Without a Thinker*; and numerous books by the developmental psychologists Howard Gardner and Daniel Stern.

Meanwhile, Basic also developed for the first time a substantial, distinguished list in history. "When people thought of Basic" around the time he arrived in 1981, Fraser recalls, "they didn't think of history publishing." In the 1980s, that began to change. Kessler published Paul Starr's *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, which scored



"The definitive social history of the medical profession in America...

A monumental achievement."—*New York Times Book Review*

The SOCIAL
TRANSFORMATION *of*
AMERICAN MEDICINE

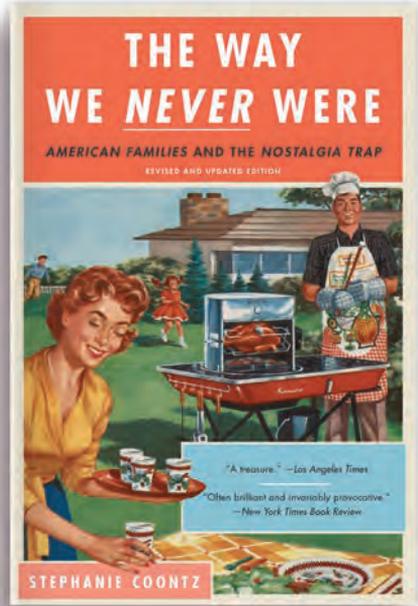
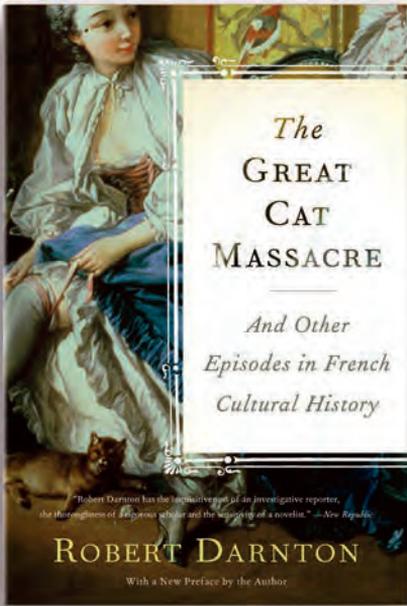
The Rise of a Sovereign Profession &
the Making of a Vast Industry

PAUL STARR

WITH A NEW EPILOGUE BY THE AUTHOR

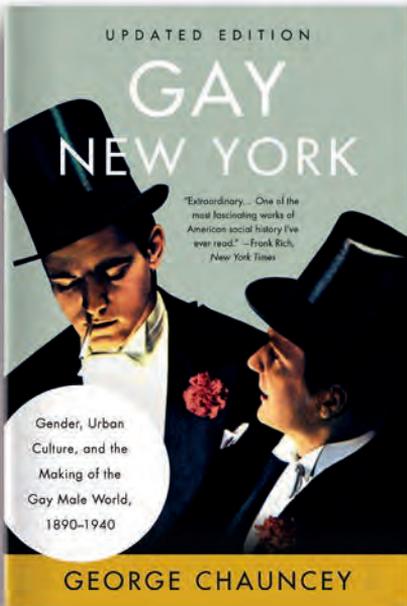
WINNER
of the
PULITZER
PRIZE

both the Pulitzer and Bancroft prizes in 1984. Fraser—who had completed a PhD in history before moving into publishing—further added to the trophy case in 1986: a Pulitzer for Walter McDougall's . . . *the Heavens and the Earth* and a Bancroft for Jacqueline Jones's *Labor of Love, Labor of*



Sorrow. Jones's book was also a Pulitzer finalist that year, as was Charles Rosenberg's *The Care of Strangers* in 1988 and Lawrence Friedman's *Crime and Punishment in American History* in 1996. Other field-shaping titles in history in the 1980s and early 1990s included Elaine Tyler May's *Home-ward Bound*, Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre*, Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were*, and George Chauncey's *Gay New York*.

All the while, Basic continued to publish influential—and sometimes controversial—books in political and social science, including Lester Thurow's *The Zero-Sum Society*, Robert Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation*, Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*, Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals*, and James Q. Wilson's *Thinking About Crime* and *Bureau-*



cracy. Notable among these were several books by African American scholars examining matters of race, including Derrick Bell, Stephen L. Carter, and Orlando Patterson, whose *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* won the National Book Award in 1991.

As publisher, Kessler didn't hold regular editorial meetings, and "he made his decisions under deep cover," remembers

Lisa Adams, who was Basic's business manager and then associate publisher in the mid-1980s. "When you wanted to propose a book you went head-to-head with him alone," Miller recounted in a 2000 history of Basic. "He would stare into the middle distance and then he'd ask The Question: Is this *the* Basic book on the subject?" (Kessler was sometimes persuadable, though. Fraser recalls that Isay helped convince Kessler to let him take a chance on Darnton's *Cat Massacre*.)

In searching out "*the* Basic book," editors haunted the halls of university departments in their chosen fields, seeking books by distinguished academics with strong adoption potential—much as Rosenthal and his colleagues had in the 1950s and 1960s—and remaining disciplined in

their focus. Basic's areas "were very clear to everyone," Adams says. And Miller recalls that editors were "very proactive" in seeking out scholars and their projects. "We had the field to play in," Isay remembers, with neither literary agents nor other commercial publishers having yet moved into the academy in force. There was, Fraser said in 2000, an "exhilarating feeling of working with books of such intellectual distinction." And there was, in many cases, a luxury of time as well: once under contract, many of Basic's top authors worked with Phoebe Hoss—a "brilliant developmental editor," as Adams puts it, who had been brought in to edit *GEB* and then stayed on full-time, working to shape manuscripts by Lifton, Derrick Bell, and Starr, among others.

"We were rambunctious underdogs," remembers Isay of her time at Basic. "The genius, naughty children of Harper's."

Basic Books was thriving editorially, but the ground was beginning to shift under the house and under the business of books as a whole. The years bracketing the turn of the millennium would prove to be some of the most unsettled in Basic's history, characterized by publishing triumphs but also constant flux.

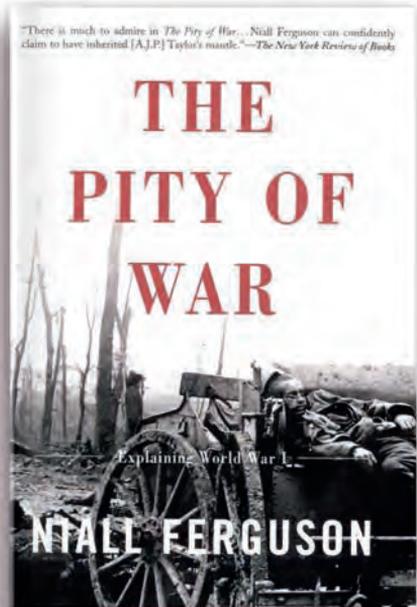
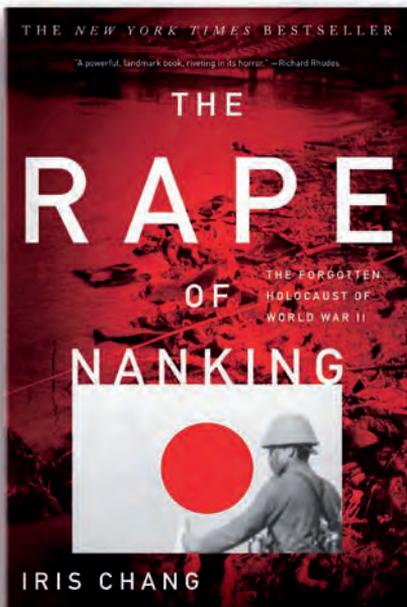
In the 1980s, Basic's large backlist of books for courses helped to keep the house profitable, as did its low advances (which were "a matter of pride," Isay recalls) and

ability to supplement revenue from book sales with income from the sale of translation rights. Still, Basic increasingly had need of people like Isay and Adams, tasked with mind-ing the business of publishing and maintaining good relations with Harper executives, who wanted Basic's sales and title count to grow. These pressures only increased when, in 1987, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. bought Harper & Row; in 1990, it also bought William Collins, and the two houses were combined as HarperCollins. The reorganization was part of a building trend toward consolidation and restructuring in the publishing industry as it confronted an array of challenges: the rise of chain bookstores, higher advances for star authors, and the looming digital revolution. Finally, in May 1997 came the most consequential shake-up yet. HarperCollins announced it was closing Basic Books as an independent imprint, folding the list into its trade program.

But Basic's death sentence was short-lived. In August of that year, HarperCollins sold Basic to Frank H. Pearl, the chairman and CEO of the Washington, DC, investment firm Perseus Capital. Alongside Counterpoint Press, PublicAffairs, and Civitas Books, Basic would be a cornerstone of a new independent publisher, the Perseus Books Group. Resuscitated, Basic now needed to rebuild. With the imprint's fate at HarperCollins uncertain, Kessler had departed in 1993, followed by Miller and Fraser two years later. Kermit Hummel and John Donatich followed Kessler with turns at the helm, and Susan Rabiner spent several years as editorial director in the mid-1990s, but when Basic

closed briefly in 1997, its remaining editors moved over to Harper. After the Perseus sale, Donatich, a veteran of the sales departments at Putnam and HarperCollins, returned to lead the new Basic Books. Miller rejoined the editorial staff, accompanied by Don Fehr and William Frucht.

Even as the Basic team got settled in new offices, Basic's books notched major accolades: Iris Chang's harrowing *The Rape of Nanking* hit the *New York Times* best-seller list early in 1998, and Edward Larson's history of the Scopes trial, *Summer for the Gods*, won the Pulitzer Prize for history later that year. The years that followed brought additional major works in Basic's traditional fields of strength. In history, these included Christopher Andrew and Vasili



"Nothing less than a masterwork of contemporary journalism. ... An angry, brilliant, fiercely useful, absolutely essential book."—*The New Republic*

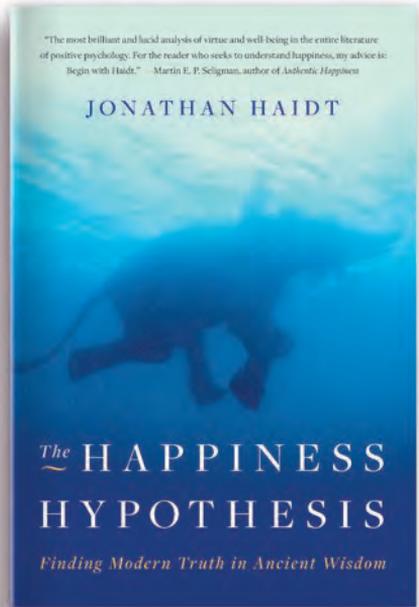
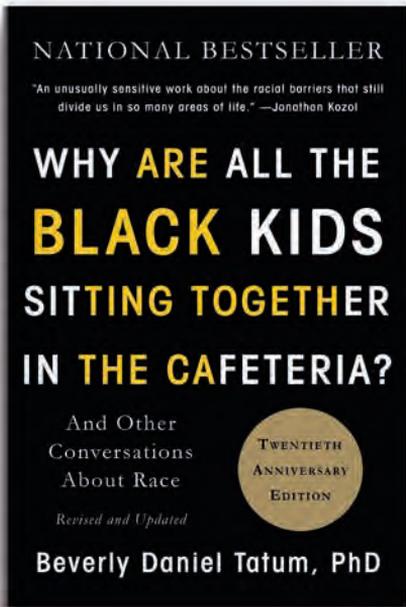
"A PROBLEM FROM HELL"

America and
the Age of Genocide

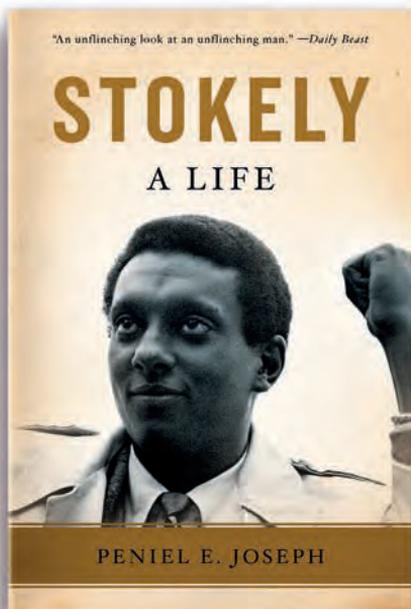
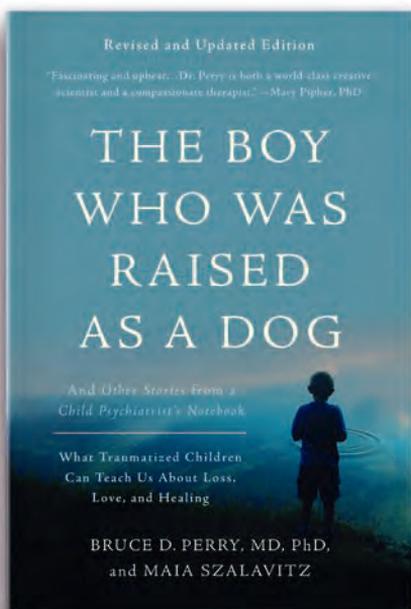
WINNER
of the
PULITZER
PRIZE

SAMANTHA POWER

Mitrokhin's bestselling *The Sword and the Shield*; Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War* and *Empire*; Brian Fagan's *The Little Ice Age*; and Samantha Power's Pulitzer Prize-winning "A Problem from Hell." In psychology, Beverly Daniel Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*,



Jonathan Haidt's *The Happiness Hypothesis*, and Bruce D. Perry and Maia Szalavitz's *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog* became classics in their fields and perennial sellers to this day. Experts ranging from urbanist Richard Florida to former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, and from Catholic theologian George Weigel to physician Leonard Sax to bankruptcy scholar (and later senator and presidential candidate) Elizabeth Warren joined the list. The series "The Art of Mentoring" brought to Basic titles by essayist Christopher Hitchens, psychologist Mary Pipher, and other bestselling authors. Civitas Books, focused on African American studies, moved under Basic's aegis and published books including Tricia Rose's *The Hip Hop Wars*, Peniel Joseph's *Stokely: A Life*, Adam Bradley's *Book of*



Rhymes, and *Holler if You Hear Me* and numerous others by Michael Eric Dyson.

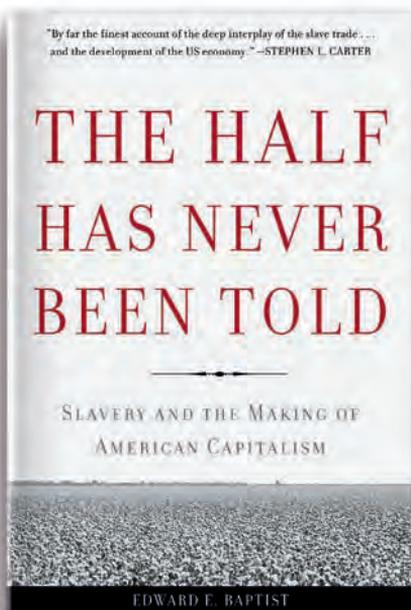
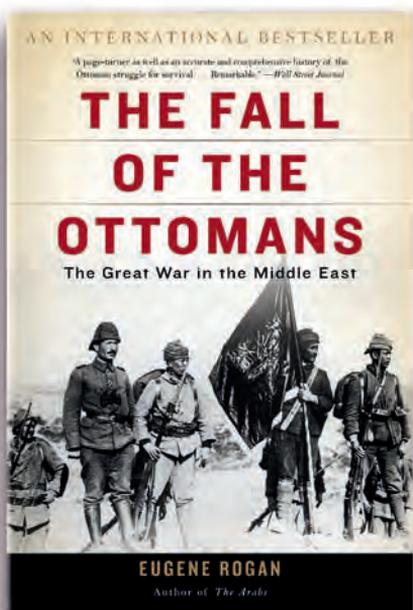
But the first decade of the 2000s was also marked by constant change and dimmed by tragedy. In late 2002, Donatich departed Basic for Yale University Press and was succeeded by editorial director Elizabeth Maguire, but in 2006 Maguire died suddenly of ovarian cancer at age forty-seven. Miller, Basic's longest-tenured editor, retired shortly thereafter. Alongside these and other shifts in personnel, Perseus continued to grow and evolve through the acquisition of additional publishers, and the publishing industry as a whole was buffeted by the growth of online retail, the rise of e-books, and, bookending the decade, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and a global economic downturn.

Ultimately, in the wake of Pearl's death in 2012, in 2016 the Hachette Book Group purchased Perseus's publishing business, and Basic changed hands once again, becoming part of Hachette's new Perseus Books division.

Amid the upheaval of these years, however, Basic Books flourished—first within the Perseus Books Group and then at Hachette, one of the largest publishers in the United States and a division of the third largest trade and educational book publisher in the world, Hachette Livre. After the pressures of the HarperCollins years, Perseus offered a more accommodating home for the sort of serious nonfiction that had traditionally characterized Basic's list, recalls Susan Weinberg, who was group publisher at Perseus and is senior vice president and publisher for Perseus Books at Hachette. "From the start, Basic was an essential part of Perseus's success, and Perseus created space for Basic to thrive," she says. And thrive it did, making a purposeful return to its roots under the stewardship of John Sherer—who served as publisher from 2007 to 2012 after earlier stints as marketing director and associate publisher—and especially Lara Heimert, a veteran of Yale University Press who joined Basic as an executive editor in 2005 and who has been publisher since 2012.

One crucial element in Basic's success over the past decade and a half has been careful and continual mainte-

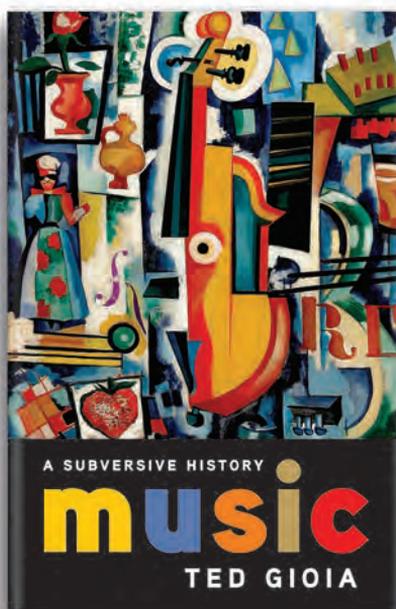
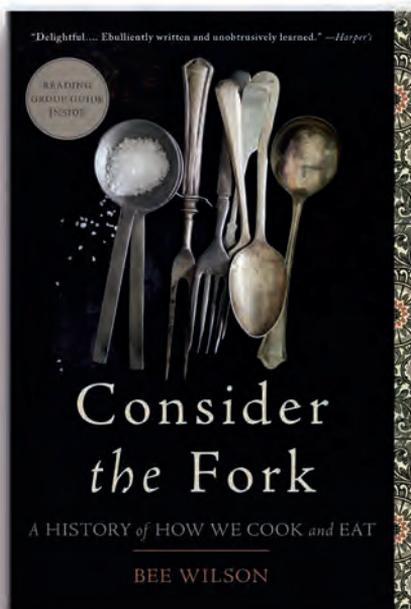
nance of its formidable backlist. Paperback rights to key titles including *The Rape of Nanking*, “*A Problem from Hell*,” and *Love’s Executioner* were reclaimed, while numerous major titles from the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond appeared in revised and updated editions over the course of the 2010s; more recently, many of these have debuted for the first time as downloadable audio books. Meanwhile, the backlist grew with the addition of books from other publishers acquired by Perseus, including Alfred Lansing’s classic adventure story *Endurance*, Ralph D. Sawyer’s definitive translation of Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, and the theoretical physicist Richard Feynman’s *Six Easy Pieces* and *Six Not-So-Easy Pieces*, two volumes of selections from his legendary lectures delivered at Cal Tech in the early 1960s. Later, Basic also acquired



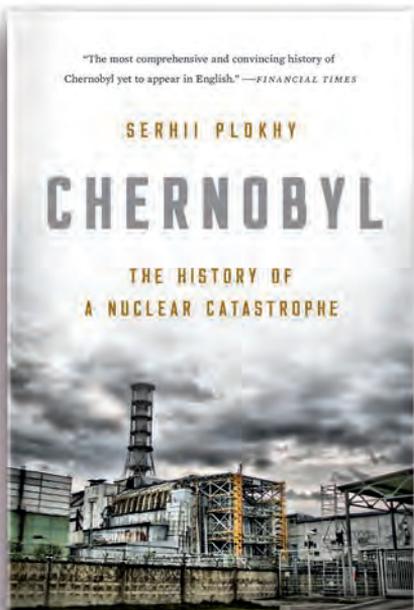
rights to the full *Feynman Lectures on Physics*, republishing them in a corrected three-volume boxed set in 2011.

Meanwhile, Basic's frontlist publishing program was characterized by a renewed focus on publishing innovative and enduring books by the top intellectuals, scholars, and journalists in a few core areas of strength.

One of these was history, where Heimert engineered a significant expansion of Basic's list, making it home to an unparalleled collection of the best academic historians in the United States and the United Kingdom. "When I joined Basic in 2005, the history list had lain fallow for a few years," Heimert remembers. "It was great fun resuscitating it. Many of the scholars I had gotten to know during my time at Yale University Press were now tenured and

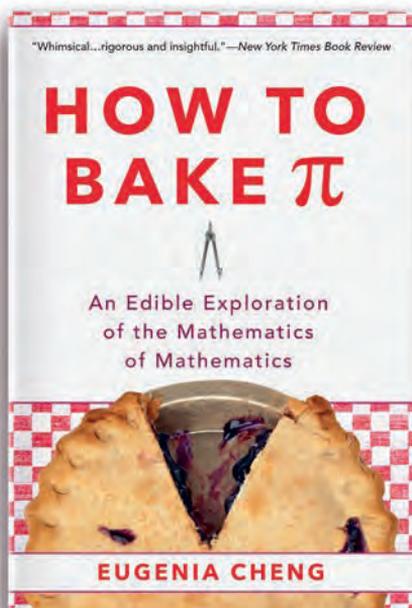
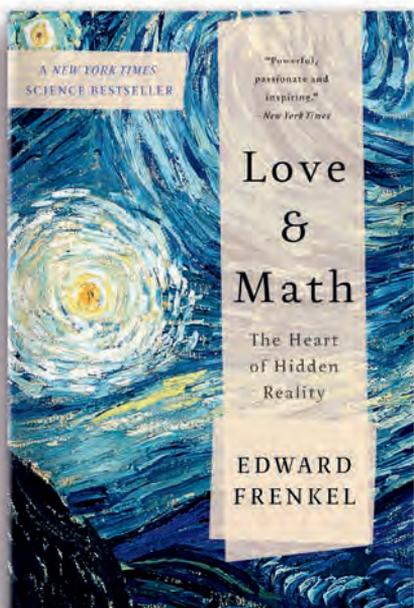


ready to write big trade books, and many were excited to work with a house with such a long history of academic distinction.” Some of the list’s many highlights are the international bestsellers *Bloodlands*, by Timothy Snyder, and *The Fall of the Ottomans*, by Eugene Rogan; conversation-shaping works in American history including Edward Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told* and Kevin Kruse’s *One Nation Under God*; revelatory military history, including Nicholas Stargardt’s *The German War* and Victor Davis Hanson’s *The Second World Wars*; and irresistible cultural history, including Bee Wilson’s *Consider the Fork* and Ted Gioia’s *Music*. Among the scores of accolades for Basic’s history books of the last decade and a half are Bancroft Prizes for Allan Brandt’s *The Cigarette Century*

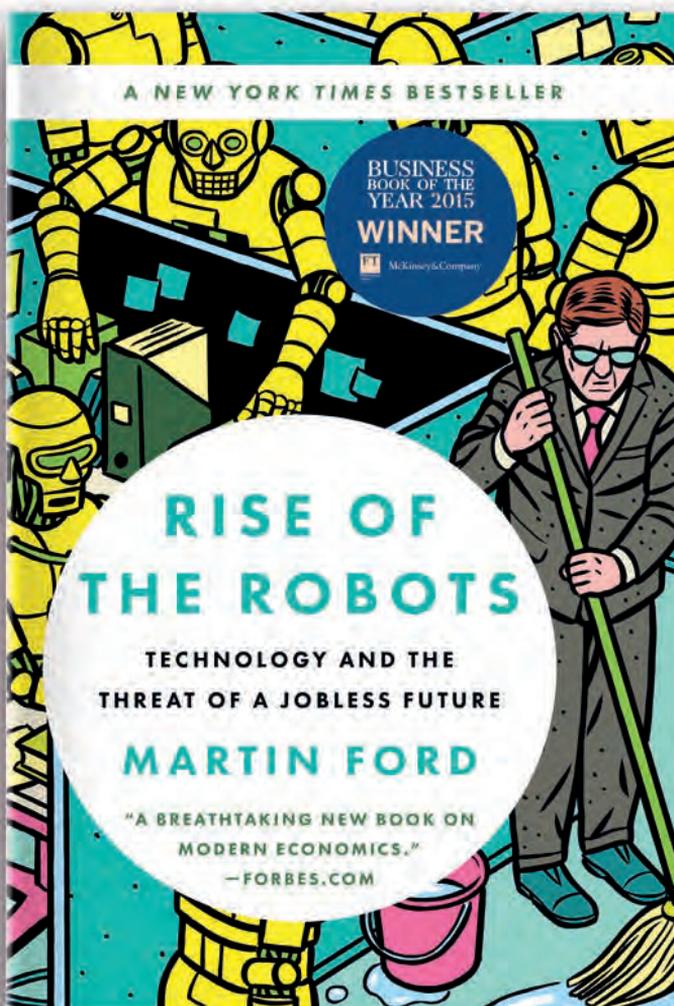


and Louis Warren’s *God’s Red Son*, the Baillie Gifford Prize for Serhii Plokhy’s *Chernobyl*, the Wolfson History Prize for Alexander Watson’s *Ring of Steel*, and the Hessell-Tiltman Prize for Stargardt’s *The German War*.

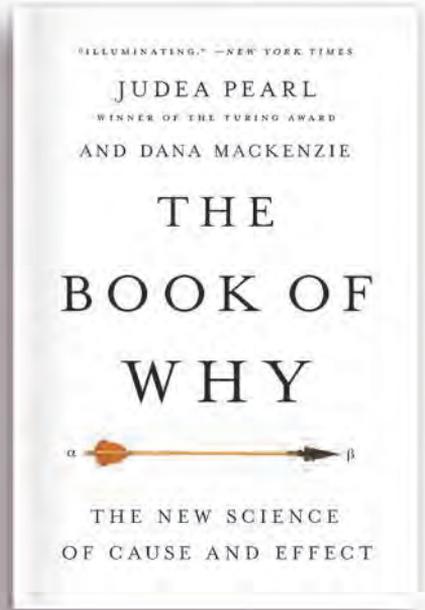
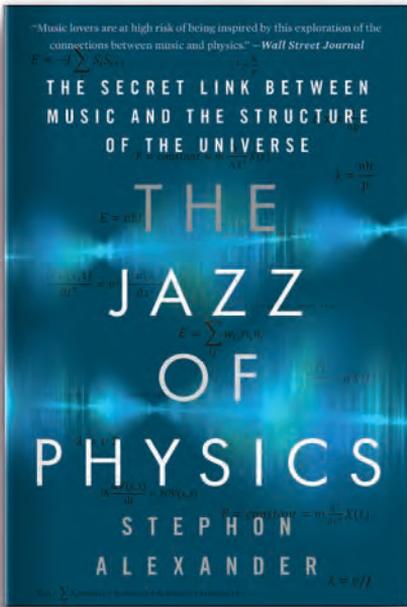
A second was science, where T. J. Kelleher—who arrived in 2009 and is now associate publisher and editorial director for sciences—developed a dis-



tinctive list of books that are at once highly sophisticated and commercially successful. In building the list, Kelleher took as inspiration Hofstadter's *GEB* and the work of Feynman, which he led the way in shepherding back into print. He sought out books that did not simply popularize science but offered something "weird, interesting, or idiosyncratic," he says, and authors who felt both compelled to write and were unconstrained by genre or academic discipline. It wasn't easy: one sales rep's reaction to an early book on string theory, *The Shape of Inner Space*, was to declare, "I can't think of a single store where I can sell this book." (It has since sold nearly thirty-five thousand copies.) A breakthrough came with Edward Frenkel's *Love and Math*, which wove together personal narrative and



high-level mathematics and was a *New York Times* science bestseller. In its wake have followed Martin Ford's *Rise of the Robots*, another *Times* bestseller and also a Financial Times/McKinsey Business Book of the Year; Eugenia Cheng's *How to Bake Pi*; Stefon Alexander's *The Jazz of*



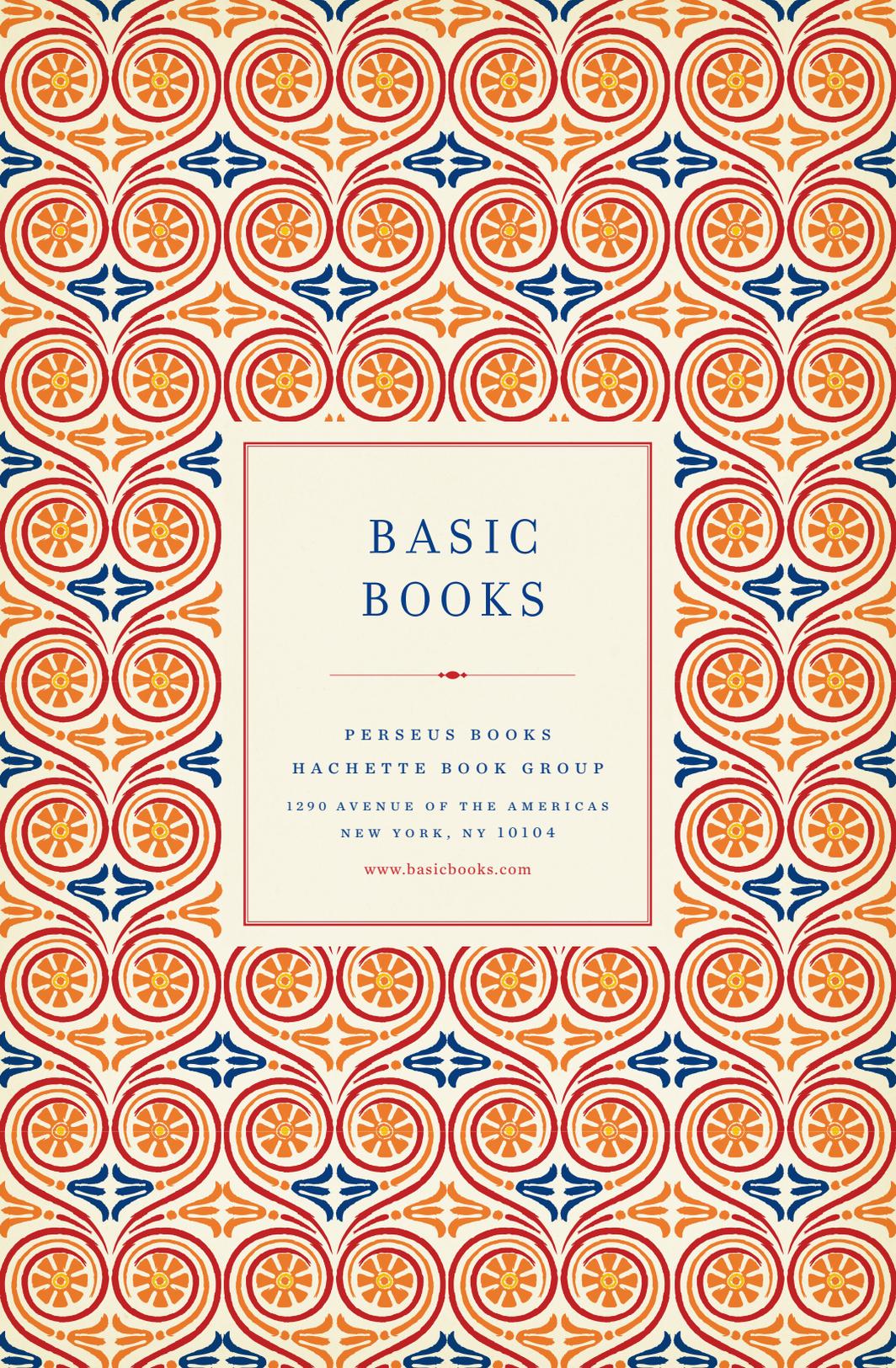
Physics; Judea Pearl and Dana Mackenzie's *The Book of Why*; and other modern classics.

Complementing its list in history and science, Basic has continued its decades-long tradition of significant books in social science and politics that span the ideological spectrum: Diane Ravitch's *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, which described the author's volte-face on questions of education reform and was a national bestseller; Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein's bestselling *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, on the dysfunctions plaguing American democracy; William Easterly's *The Tyranny of Experts*, on the failed fight against global poverty; Moises Naim's prescient *The End of Power*; and Jonathan M. Metzler's *Dying of Whiteness*, examining the

politics of racial resentment and its mortal implications for public health in America's heartland.

Now, as Basic enters its eighth decade, its talented and close-knit team of editors, publicists, marketers, and designers stands poised to uphold a proud tradition of seventy years of essential reading by extending its core strengths in history, science, and politics and building on them in exciting new ways. In 2018, Seal Press—founded in 1976 and now one of the most enduring feminist publishers to emerge from the women's press movement of the 1970s—became an imprint of Basic, with a mission of publishing radical and groundbreaking books that help readers to see the world in a new light. And toward the end of 2019, Basic Books announced a partnership with John Murray Press, a division of Hachette UK, to create a London-based division of Basic Books. “I am so proud of Basic's long history of publishing books that push knowledge forward,” says Heimert. “I can't think of a better way to celebrate our seventieth birthday than by extending that tradition internationally. Our list has always been global in scope—we publish authors from all over the world. I want our business to be global as well. Good ideas matter everywhere.”





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