

Grant’s ‘I Am the Cage’ gives a resounding voice to the voiceless

By **DONNA EDWARDS**
The Associated Press

We’re taught from earliest childhood that doctors are trustworthy healers, so there’s a special sense of betrayal when they inflict pain. Young adult debut novel “I Am the Cage” by Allison Sweet Grant — author of two picture books — tells of the crimes committed against Elisabeth’s body and psyche by the medical community, and by those who stood by while it happened. But it also tells of survival, grace and self-discovery.

Elisabeth’s past is nothing short of agonizing. It’s only slowly, through panic attacks and flashbacks, that we learn what it takes to regain a sense of self and purpose after surviving trauma.

Readers must take the passenger seat and yield to the protagonist’s pace as Elisabeth reveals her scars and the stories behind them. When a snowstorm bears down on the quiet little Wisconsin town Elisabeth has run away to, cutting the power and straining her meager supplies, the agoraphobic young woman finally allows herself to do the forbidden: Ask for help. Her handsome neighbor Noah is quick to answer the call.


But this isn’t your typical tale where the girl who’s been hurt falls in love with a guy who “fixes” her, or shows her how to love again.

Although it’s mainly set in 1999, Sweet Grant takes a more modern approach by keeping Noah strictly as a support character. Told in present-tense first person, readers must keep their attention on Elisabeth. It’s a fittingly singular spotlight to shine for two reasons: It reflects the main character’s extreme isolation, and it gives a resounding voice to the voiceless. The story itself acts as a step toward righting the injustices that Elisabeth faced — and many readers will resonate with — in not being heard by cold, busy, or otherwise inattentive medical professionals.

In contrast with the heavy subject matter, the writing is simple and easy to digest. In between the occasional poems, the narration is heavy on similes, metaphors, and understatedly dazzling descriptions.


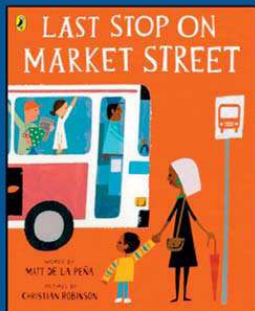
Sweet Grant writes in enough hope and happiness to make Elisabeth’s plight bearable, while slowly building up her past to give the ending the weight it deserves. Still, don’t expect flowers and rainbows. There are some magical moments, but “I Am the Cage” is steadfastly tethered to the harsh reality of our painful, beautiful world.

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‘Disease X’ concept taken from the World Health Organization

“Disease X: Are You Prepared?,” by Philip McMillan and John McMillan. Covent Garden, London, UK: Lumienta Publishing, 2024. 348 pages, \$18.99 (paperback).

“The Covid-19 pandemic, caused by a previously unknown virus, changed the world in ways most of us could hardly have imagined,” Philip McMillan and John McMillan observe near the beginning of “Disease X: Are You Prepared?,” their instructive new explanation guide, road map, and survival handbook. “In early 2020, experts writing in the journal Cell even suggested that Covid-19 could be the first Disease X.”

“The idea isn’t taken from a science fiction novel or a doomsday scenario — it’s an actual concept proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2018,” the authors continue. “Disease X refers to the possibility of a global epidemic caused by an unknown virus, one for which no treatment or vaccines exist. The idea sounds frightening and should inspire reflection, but isn’t meant to predict doom; instead it’s a call to action.”

And “a call to action” is an apt description of this deceptively complex exploration of a reality of the modern world that most of us never contemplated with any real seriousness until those fateful first few months five years ago. The McMillans take us on a fascinating journey that could also serve as a short course covering everything you need to know about viruses and the dangers they pose to our collective survival in the 21st century. But instead of dwelling on the negative aspects that often permeate these kinds of efforts, their tone is decidedly optimistic.

“Disease X” is comprised of an introduction and 13 relatively comprehensive chapters that cover virtually every aspect of viral infections, from individual strategies for prevention and treatment to policy recommendations aimed at keeping the public as safe as possible from future outbreaks, which are seen as inevitable.

The manuscript is appropriately researched with eight pages of references at the conclusion of the main narrative and illustrated with numerous diagrams and drawings that help the reader get a better grasp of the concepts and ideas being articulated. The prose, which integrates biology with psychology, is readily accessible to a general audience, which is one of the book’s most appealing features.

The first five chapters are devoted to getting the reader up-to-speed on the lessons we learned from COVID-19, the mechanisms involved when viruses infect and subsequently spread throughout the population, and how physicians in conjunction with medical researchers attempt to combat the deleterious effects that are often precipitated when these kinds of diseases are encountered.

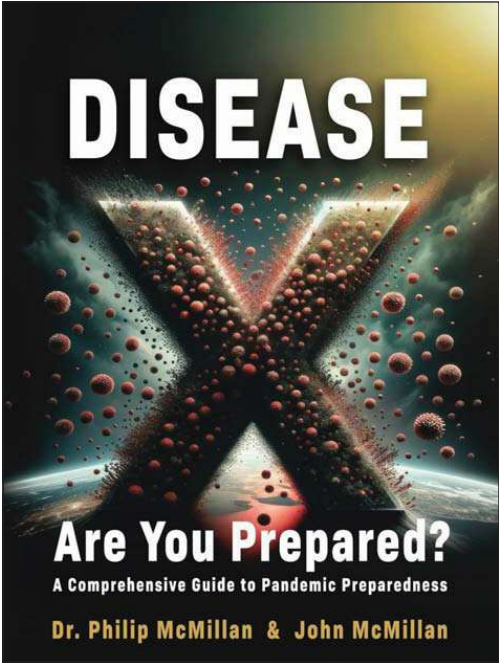
The next two chapters are centered on individual as well as collective prevention, after which the McMillans focus their attention on response planning and post-infection treatment options. Finally, they conclude the book by panning out to the larger implications.

As I made my way through this highly revealing volume that should interest us all, I was struck by the deep understanding of their subject matter the authors consistently exhibit. Moreover, the connections to the proverbial real world we increasingly live in were unmistakable. Witness the following from “The Power of Community,” the tenth chapter and one I found particularly applicable and intriguing:

“A key aspect of managing such crises lies in reliable information. Misinformation thrives during moments of uncertainty. Long-standing community figures like family doctors, teachers, and local leaders will help separate fact from fiction, creating clarity amid the chaos. These moments of truth-telling will empower individuals to make informed decisions and combat fear. Older generations, too, are likely to play a significant role.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many grandparents became virtual tutors, helping children navigate remote learning. Imagine their influence this time around as they support communities through tasks like mentoring, virtual planning, or even correspondence that reminds others they’re not alone. Their wealth of experience is a resource too valuable to ignore.”

There’s a lot to unpack there, but the potential payoff is well worth the investment. Our ultimate survival is closely related to our ability to acknowledge and deal with reality, something that has been somewhat lacking lately in our approach to decision-making and problem-solving. Keeping politics out of science will be



essential if we are to overcome the challenges that will inevitably come with Disease X. The importance of intergenerational families is also evident in many of the strategies outlined in the book.

A physician in the UK with over 20 years of medical expertise, Philip McMillan is a 1994 graduate of the School of Medicine at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. He is an international authority on dementia, having presented in Singapore, Japan, Italy, Ireland, UK, Canada and China. John McMillan is an editor with Lumienta Publications and the technical director with Skymap Survey; he studied at University of the West Indies, Sessions College, New York, and the University of Edinburgh.

As the McMillans astutely observe, in the final analysis, we truly are all in this together. No superficial barriers or isolationist strategies will succeed in containing the next pandemic. And as always, it will be those who are least prepared who will suffer the most.

“The burden of Disease X, as with previous health crises, is likely to fall hardest on the most vulnerable,” the authors surmise in “Health Strategy, Regulatory Roles and Compliance,” the concluding chapter. “Those living in underserved communities, dealing with pre-existing conditions, or working on the front lines will need targeted support. Combating the virus cannot simply mean stopping its spread; it must also address the economic, social, and emotional toll that health emergencies bring. Relief measures such as financial aid and accessible care services will be critical for preventing the collapse of already fragile systems and ensuring that on one is left behind.”

If you are one of those readers who has always felt that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, you’ll definitely want to pick up a copy of “Disease X.” You won’t be disappointed. Highly recommended.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.

‘Universal Language’ needs to be seen to be believed

By **JAKE COYLE**
AP Film Writer

It’s not unusual for a city to double for another metropolis in movies. New Yorkers have long been able to spot when Toronto has been substituted for the Big Apple. Matthew Rankin, though, has gone more than a step, or maybe 85 steps, further.

His “Universal Language” takes place in Winnipeg, Manitoba, but the culture is entirely Iranian. Farsi is the spoken tongue. At Tim Hortons, tea is served from samovars. It’s as if we’ve been knocked over the head and woken up in some snowy, Canadian version of an Abbas Kiarostami film.

And in Rankin’s surreal and enchantingly discombobulating film, that’s more or less the case. No reason is ever stated for the strange, deadpan fusion of Winnipeg reality and Iranian New Wave cinema. But there’s that title. If cinema is a universal language, it’s never been more elastically employed, bridging worlds 6,000 miles apart for a singular kind of movie dream, like what Rankin might have spun in his head while drifting off to sleep on a Manitoba winter night while Kiarostami’s “Where Is the Friend’s House?” played on TV.

It’s both an extremely exact homage to the films of Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi and other Iranian masters, and a comic lament for how distant their movies might feel for a Winnipegian director. Rankin has joked that “Universal Language” brings together the rich poetry of Iranian filmmaking and a Canadian cinema that emerged “out of 50 years of discount furniture commercials.”

The gags start immediately, with an opening title logo for “A Presentation of the Winnipeg Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young People” — a twist on the Iranian institute that produced ’70s classics, like Kiarostami’s Koker trilogy.

Like those films, Rankin’s is framed with kids. In the first scene, a displeased French teacher (Mani Soleymannlou) chastises his young students for speaking Persian. One child, an aspiring comedian, is dressed as Groucho Marx. Another says a turkey stole his glasses. Another wants to be a Winnipeg tour guide. The teacher asks them all to read from their book. In unison they read: “We are lost forever in this world.”

“Universal Language,” scripted by Rankin, Ila Firoozabadi and Pirouz Nemati, lightly juggles a handful of characters we intermittently check in with. That includes an adult tour guide (Pirouz Nemati), whose attractions include the site of “the Great Parallel Parking Incident of 1958.” There are also two girls (Rojina Esmaeili and Saba Vahedyousefi) who find a banknote frozen in ice. A character named Matthew Rankin (played by Rankin) is traveling to Winnipeg by bus to visit his ailing mother after departing his bureaucratic job in Montreal. Oh, and there are turkeys. Lots and lots of turkeys.

Rankin’s film, his second following the also surreal “Twentieth Century” (2019), is propelled less by narrative thrust than the abiding oddity of its basic construction, and the movie’s slavish devotion to seeing it through without a wink. As the movie moves along in formally composed shots, something wistful takes shape about the possibilities of connection and of insurmountable distances.

I’ve twice now seen “Universal Language,” a prize-winner in Cannes’ Directors Fortnight last year that was shortlisted for the best international Oscar, and I still barely believe it exists. Rankin’s movie, in melding two worlds, risks taking place in neither, of letting its cinephile concept snuff out anything authentic. But while I’m not, at the moment, begging for a subsequent French New Wave movie set in Saskatchewan, I’ve not gone long without thinking about “Universal Language.” I guess Rankin’s movie dream has filtered into those of my own.



OSCILLOSCOPE LABORATORIES VIA AP

This image released by Oscilloscope Laboratories shows a scene from the film “Universal Language.”