



INTO AFRICA

The Soweto uprising, gold mines, a white orphan with a black nanny named Beauty—these are among the motifs and characters of Bianca Marais's radiant *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* (Putnam), set in turbulent 1970s Johannesburg. While much of the debut novel is an exploration of racial tensions and a girl's coming-of-age, it's also a stirring ode to a country's painful maturation. In Beauty's words: "When I struggle to see the stars, I also struggle to hear the voices of the ancestors. I think it is the same for all my people and that is why we are letting go of the old ways."

—LEIGH HABER

Blackish

▶ An of-the-moment novel **tackles identity and infatuation.**



DANZY SENNA'S *New People* (Riverhead) is slender but powerful, as seductive and urgent as a phone call from an old flame. At first

blush, the book seems like a straightforward love story—the saga of an engaged couple, Maria and Khalil, in mid-1990s Brooklyn—but it's more complicated than that.

Maria, who's writing her dissertation on Jim Jones's Peoples Temple cult, is biracial, while Khalil, a computer whiz who's launching his own business, is black and Jewish. The two are appearing in a friend's documentary, also called *New People*, about society's multiracial future.

That film title could also describe what's on Maria's mind. She's



ILLUSTRATION BY Marcos Chin

become fixated on a member of the couple's circle—"the poet."

Maria's preoccupation with the poet occasions an exhumation of boyfriends past. As Senna takes us to Crazytown, she shows how profoundly Maria's interracial status has affected her sense of self, her choices. Maria ponders whether to go for it with the poet (no spoilers here), then succumbs to near insanity, her attachment to the poet leading

her to take mind-boggling risks. Senna writes about that descent with admirable control; even as her protagonist faces truly dangerous and deranged circumstances, the writing remains crisp and sharp.

This is not a book about race disguised as a romance, nor is it a love story saddled with a moral. Senna's achievement is that she interlaces both threads in one ingenious tale.

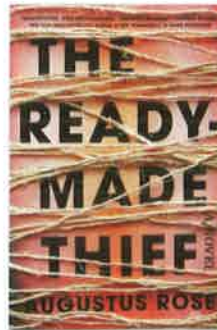
—RUMAAN ALAM

THE COGNOSCENTI

▶ A literary thriller pits a **badass heroine** against sinister savants.

ANYONE WHO BECAME addicted to the roiling emotions, betrayals, and violent showdowns of *Breaking Bad* will be seduced by Augustus Rose's debut, *The Readymade Thief* (Viking). In this enigmatic novel set in a shadowy Philadelphia underworld, art is a drug that hooks the unwary, though the harder stuff comes into play, too. How are they related? Rose's heroine, a resourceful teenager named Lee, must find out before she's drawn into a cabal of ruthless aesthetes—nine men obsessed by Marcel Duchamp. This band of highly educated goons believes that his *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, exhibited in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, contains secrets to wealth and power only Lee can unlock—secrets they believe will "alter the very fabric of space-time."

As the novel progresses, we learn that Lee—neglected by her



mother, left by her father, and on the run—is living in a junkyard. Longing to feel "singular, chosen," she shows up at a trendy rave in an abandoned missile silo, organized by the mysterious Société Anonyme. When a hostess in a flapper dress welcomes her, Lee reacts to her warmth with gratitude, "like a dog rolling belly-up in hopes of a rub." Then she spots the Duchamp brigade and realizes she's walked into a trap: She'd been engaged in "a game with an opponent who was moves ahead of her." Fiendishly intricate and relentlessly suspenseful, *The Readymade Thief* stretches the reader's intellect and empathy,

accompanying Lee not only into the dark labyrinths of Philly's art world demimonde and the fervid imagination of a visionary, but also into the deep, protected channels of a young woman's heart.

—LIESL SCHILLINGER