

BOOKS

Flaming children fuel story of love

Kevin Wilson's 'Nothing to See Here' embraces the weird and wild.

By Suzanne Van Atten
For the AJC

Watching a child pitch a full-blown tantrum can be a spectacular thing to behold. The flailing limbs and crumpled face, the copious tears and ear-piercing howls.

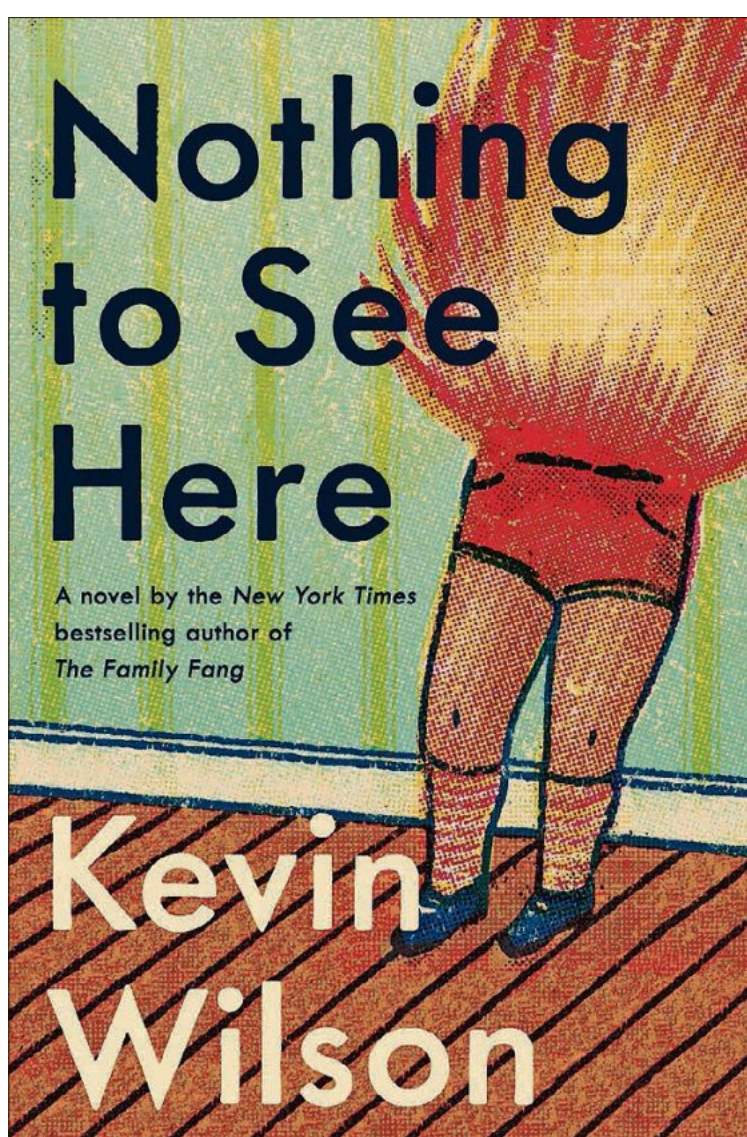
But imagine if instead of throwing a tantrum, a child expressed extreme agitation by bursting into flames. And what if that child had a twin, and they spontaneously combusted in tandem? That is the premise of Tennessee author Kevin Wilson's engrossing, darkly funny new novel, "Nothing to See Here."

If Anne Tyler ("The Accidental Tourist") and Chuck Palahniuk ("Fight Club") had a baby, the result might be Kevin Wilson, who first garnered critical acclaim with his 2011 literary debut, "The Family Fang," a New York Times bestseller that was made into a movie starring Nicole Kidman and Jason Bateman.

Like Palahniuk, Wilson's characters are flawed, edgy, marginalized and borderline misanthropic. But like Tyler, they ultimately redeem themselves by patching together alliances with other assorted misfits to create surrogate families.

In "Nothing to See Here," Lillian is a 28-year-old loner who works a minimum wage job and spends her spare time smoking pot in her mother's attic. But there was a time when she had dreams of escaping her dead-end existence dependent upon a resentful mother and her mother's rotating cast of loser boyfriends.

In her youth, Lillian earned a scholarship to Iron Mountain Girls' Preparatory School. But she was only there long enough to see what the future might have held for her before



she was expelled, betrayed by those closest to her and forced to take the fall for someone else's misdeed. The only good thing to come out of the experience was Lillian's unlikely friendship with Madison, her rich and beautiful roommate.

Madison is now married to state Sen. Jasper Roberts, and they have a son "whom she dressed in nautical suits and who looked like an expensive teddy bear that had turned human." When Madison sends Lillian a request for help, Lillian jumps at the opportunity to change her circumstances

and to see Madison again after all these years.

Jasper's ex-wife has died and the children from their former marriage, 10-year-old twins Bessie and Roland, are being sent to live with the Roberts in Franklin, Tennessee. Lillian is hired as their full-time caretaker. It's not until Lillian arrives that she learns she and the twins will not be living with the family in their mansion, but in the cottage out back, and that the twins were born with a genetic condition that causes them to burst into flames when they become upset. That last detail

FICTION
"Nothing to See Here"
By Kevin Wilson
Ecco
253 pages \$26.99



Kevin Wilson

is to be guarded with secrecy so it doesn't complicate Jasper's political aspirations.

Lillian is mesmerized the first time she witnesses the children combust. "There were delicate waves of yellow flame moving up and down Bessie's little arms. And then, like a crack of lightning, she burst fully into flames, her body a kind of firework."

Just like parents whose children throw tantrums in public, Lillian goes into crisis mode when Bessie and Roland light up, doing everything she can to keep them calm. A peculiarity of the condition is that the fire doesn't burn the children or even hurt them, but their clothing catches fire and they risk torching their surroundings.

The irony of the situation doesn't escape Lillian. She never liked children or wanted any of her own, and yet here she is, spending her days trying to keep Bessie and Roland safe and entertained just so she can be close to Madison, who is rarely around. But when Madison and

Jasper increasingly treat the twins like an unwanted burden that doesn't fit in to their carefully curated lives, Lillian begins to identify with the twins, particularly Bessie, whose defiance burns as brightly as her flames.

"I remembered that feeling, driving down to the valley, no longer welcome at Iron Mountain. It had felt like my life was over. And it kind of was. I wouldn't let that happen to these kids. They were wild, like me. They deserved better, like me."

In the process of protecting the twins – from their own self-destructive tendencies, as well as whatever nefarious plans the Roberts may be cooking up for them – Lillian starts to develop feelings for them that confound her. After all, she confesses, "I was no real judge of love, having never experienced it, or even witnessed it a single time in my life."

Tensions begin to mount when Lillian tries to incorporate the twins into the Roberts' lives, just as Jasper's confirmation as secretary of state starts to ramp up. When a surprise twist throws everything into chaos, some painful realities are revealed and everyone goes into damage control in unexpected ways.

It's noteworthy that "Nothing to See Here" is set in 1995, before the dawn of social media, when everything we did wasn't captured on cameras and shared around the world in real time. The concept of keeping secrets still seemed possible back then. Were this story set today, the twins probably would have been trotted out as medical freaks in YouTube videos and ridiculed with memes on Facebook. But in 1995, with Lillian as their caretaker, they get to live in their own little bubble, where they are not only protected from the threat of fire, but they are safe to be their weird, wild selves. And in Wilson's world, that is just as valuable, if not more so, than wealth, beauty and power.

Sparks fly across the pond

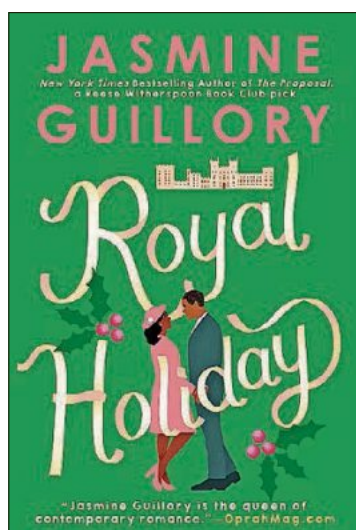
By Ellen Morton
Special To The Washington Post

After her much-lauded summer hit, "The Wedding Party," best-selling romance novelist Jasmine Guillory is sending some of those same characters on a "Royal Holiday" to Great Britain.

Just before she steps into a demanding promotion, social worker Vivian Forest seizes her chance to take a vacation with her daughter, "Wedding Party" protagonist Maddie. For Maddie it's a working holiday, styling an English duchess for the Christmas festivities at her country cottage. Vivian comes along to enjoy the trappings of the winter season among the gentry.

On her first day at the grand estate, Vivian meets Malcolm Hudson, private secretary to the queen. Malcolm and Vivian are instantly smitten. They explore their connection as they tour the grounds, and Malcolm introduces Vivian to the equestrian arts and quintessentially British meals.

Theirs is not so much a thrilling romance as a picture of effective communication and mutual understanding. Each helps the other with an important decision, providing a key emotional insight when it's most needed.



FICTION
"Royal Holiday"
By Jasmine Guillory
Berkley, 304 pages, \$20

Meanwhile, Malcolm courts Vivian with champagne toasts and kisses under the mistletoe. He arranges enchanting surprises for her and gives her the VIP treatment at some of the city's most famous landmarks.

Vivian is exhilarated by it all,

"her eyes full of wonder." Her openhearted joy in these new experiences invites the reader to appreciate the sights, sounds, tastes and smells of England with the delight of a newcomer. For an American reader, the foreign country feels magical during the holiday season, and through Vivian we get to revel in the charms without suffering the chilly weather.

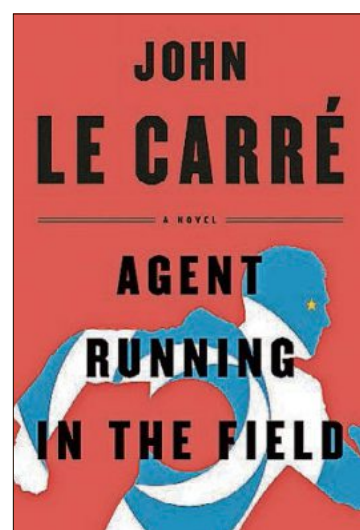
Malcolm and Vivian are people of color and heroes in their mid-50s, making them anomalies in the romance genre. "Royal Holiday" gives positive representation of a mature, respectful, sex-positive couple of a certain age, but without much specificity. Malcolm and Vivian are broadly drawn characters, without the quirks and idiosyncrasies that would make them singular. As a result, some of their interactions feel superficial, like an amiable portrait whose subjects we can never fully know.

Even so, it takes courage to open up one's life to love, so it's impossible to resist empathizing with the characters as they embrace their vulnerabilities and give each other the ultimate holiday gift: a love that feels too good to be true and the vow to try to believe in it together.

Opening Lines

'Our meeting was not contrived. Not by me, not by Ed, not by any of the hidden hands supposedly pulling at his strings. I was not targeted. Ed was not put up to it. We were neither covertly nor aggressively observed. He issued a sporting challenge. I accepted it.'

"Agent Running in the Field" by John le Carré. Viking, 288 pages, \$29



Best-sellers

HARDCOVER FICTION

1. **Blue Moon** Lee Child
2. **The Guardians** John Grisham
3. **The Night Fire** Michael Connelly
4. **The Lost Causes of Bleak Creek** McLaughlin/Neal
5. **The Dutch House** Ann Patchett
6. **Find Me** André Aciman
7. **The Institute** Stephen King
8. **The Water Dancer** Ta-Nehisi Coates
9. **The 19th Christmas** Patterson/Paetro
10. **The Deserter** DeMille/DeMille
11. **The Testaments** Margaret Atwood
12. **The Giver of Stars** Jojo Moyes
13. **Olive, Again** Elizabeth Strout
14. **Agent Running in the Field** John le Carré
15. **Cilka's Journey** Heather Morris

HARDCOVER NONFICTION

1. **The Pioneer Woman Cooks: The New Frontier** Ree Drummond
2. **The Beautiful Ones** Prince
3. **Blowout** Rachel Maddow
4. **The Plot Against the President** Lee Smith
5. **Me** Elton John
6. **Half Baked Harvest: Super Simple** Tieghan Gerard
7. **Catch and Kill** Ronan Farrow
8. **The Book of Gutsy Women** Clinton/Clinton
9. **Talking to Strangers** Malcolm Gladwell
10. **The American Story** David M. Rubenstein
11. **Dumpty** John Lithgow
12. **I Really Needed This Today** Hoda Kotb
13. **The United States of Trump** Bill O'Reilly
14. **Connect First** Melanie Katzman
15. **Three Days at the Brink** Bret Baier

PAPERBACK

1. **Every Breath** Nicholas Sparks
2. **The Great Alone** Kristin Hannah
3. **Redemption** David Baldacci
4. **Open Borders** Caplan/Weinersmith
5. **The 18th Abduction** Patterson/Paetro
6. **Of Blood and Bone** Nora Roberts
7. **The Overstory** Richard Powers
8. **Before We Were Yours** Lisa Wingate
9. **Nine Perfect Strangers** Liane Moriarty
10. **Little Fires Everywhere** Celeste Ng
11. **Ravenous** Helen Hardt
12. **Doctor Sleep (movie tie-in)** Stephen King
13. **A Well-Behaved Woman** Therese Anne Fowler
14. **A Spark of Light** Jodi Picoult
15. **There There** Tommy Orange



Two friends discover the evil truth behind the creepy reform school in their Southern town



Music superstar Prince began writing this memoir before his death in 2016



An economist makes a case for unrestricted immigration