

V LIFE

Tales of the City

New York stars in the summer's hottest reads.

BOOKS The trio of sometimes-friends in *Vogue* contributor Lauren Mechling's precise and of-the-moment **How Could She** (Viking) are wandering their way through adulthood. There's Rachel, a part-time editor at a high-minded glossy who desperately wants to break through in the YA-novel scene; the congenitally lucky Sunny, who has married rich and deems herself "a proper artist"; and poor Geraldine, getting over a devastating breakup and floundering in her career. As successes ebb and flow and alliances strain and stretch, Mechling zooms in on the constrictor knot of adult female friendships, offering a delectably uncomfortable time capsule of our post-aughts selves and the honest struggles that lurk inside the hearts of women everywhere.

Farther uptown, the titular Dr. Toby Fleishman in Taffy Brodesser-Akner's **Fleishman Is in Trouble** (Random House) is a middling hepatologist, recently separated from his wife and suddenly caring for his nine-year-old son and tweenage daughter. Thanks to the wonders of dating apps, he's also (happily) drowning in offers of casual sex. For weeks, Toby alternately celebrates his newfound autonomy and rages over the mess his spouse has left him. Brodesser-Akner is a master of Zeitgeisty pith, and Toby, while occasionally too saintly for realism's sake, is a delightful mensch. But the real standout is Brodesser-Akner's often hilarious grasp on what makes a certain kind of Upper East Side Manhattanite tick.

A midtown landmark gets its own biography in **The Plaza: The Secret Life of America's Most Famous Hotel** (Twelve), by real estate reporter Julie Satow. Along with the legends of Capote and Eloise, Satow's book tells of Betty Friedan's all-female lunch in 1969 (an event that caused the flustered maître d' to order the table removed from the premises) and shows it's always been an establishment in flux: What began as a restaurant underneath the lobby was soon intentionally flooded and turned into a frozen ice-skating rink in the summer months; a lower level became a racetrack for the owner's nephew to race his miniature electric car.

Told through the eyes of ex-Vassar coed Vivian Morris (she's kicked out of the liberal-arts institution for devoting more time to her hairstyle than her studies), Elizabeth Gilbert's lively latest, **City of Girls** (Riverhead), takes place in World War II-era New York, where the nineteen-year-old lands at her estranged aunt Peg's failing theater. The sociable showgirls quickly resume Vivian's education, bringing her up to speed in all neglected areas.

A bit farther north, in Mary Beth Keane's patient, powerful **Ask Again, Yes** (Scribner), two families live side by side in a leafy, middle-class bedroom community—the Gleasons and Stanhopes, uneasy Irish-American neighbors whose two young children become close friends, then as they grow older something more. A shocking tragedy turns what had been a portrait of domestic tension into a profound story of trauma and blame. Keane's gracefully restrained prose gives her characters dignity, even as they mistreat one another and let their lives fall apart. The novel spans decades and shows how difficult forgiveness can be—and how it amounts to a kind of hard-won grace. □

