

# WHICH IS SCARIER: CHARMING SNAKES OR WRITING A MEMOIR?

WHEN IT COMES TO playing with fire, sideshow alumna Tessa Fontaine says fire-eating has nothing on writing a memoir.

“Fire-eating is ultimately within my control,” says the author of *The Electric Woman: A Memoir in Death-Defying Acts* (May 1). “I can be unafraid. I can take an actual element of the earth and master it in some way, or have a relationship with it....A memoir is way more frightening.”

That may be because her memoir exposes far more than she originally intended. *The Electric Woman* begins as an immersive journalistic account of Fontaine’s five-month tenure as a bally girl, a fire-eating, snake-charming, escape-artist magician in sequined short-shorts with America’s famous last traveling sideshow, World of Wonders.



Photo courtesy: Claire Markta

Tessa Fontaine

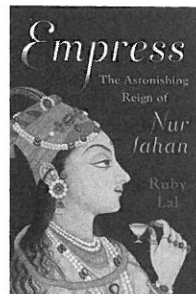
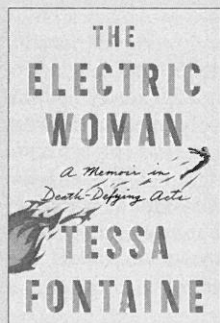
“On my seventh day with the World of Wonders crew,” she writes, “all my fellow performers’ eyes are on me, the new snake charmer, to see what I do with this beastie around my neck. I will be bold. I touch the snake’s body with my hand. My eyes crest with tears. My chest heaves. I can hardly breathe. I’m trying to tell myself not to be scared, that there is no reason to think the snake might hurt me, that people look far greater terror in the face every day, people who are even at this minute standing very close to me.”

But two and a half years earlier, a great terror befell Fontaine’s family: Her mother suffered a massive, debilitating hemorrhagic stroke. Her stepfather, Davy, became his wife’s primary caregiver.

“When I started writing the book,” Fontaine says, “it was a shock to me how infected it was—and my [sideshow] experience was, and my ideas of fear and bravery were—by what was happening with my parents. At first I was resistant to sharing their story, but I began to understand the parallels

in terms of what it means to take big risks, live boldly, and decide to seek adventure.” —M.L.

Megan Labrise is a staff writer and the co-host of the *Kirkus* podcast, *Fully Booked*. *The Electric Woman* was reviewed in the Mar. 15, 2018, issue.



## EMPRESS The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan

Lal, Ruby  
Norton (320 pp.)  
\$27.95 | Jul. 3, 2018  
978-0-393-23934-8

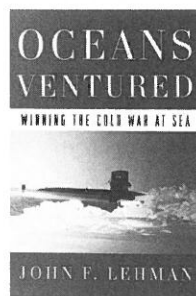


Lal (South Asian History/Emory Univ.; *Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness*, 2013, etc.) shines a light on Nur Jahan

(1577-1645), who ruled as co-sovereign in the Mughal court, taking her husband’s place without actually usurping him.

Before she ascended, her husband, Jahangir, had fallen victim to overindulgence in drink and opium, and she slowly assumed duties with his full support. Jahangir was mercurial, ill-tempered, but he loved the signs of royal power. His traveling procession consisted of hundreds of tents draped in velvet and brocade, an audience hall of more than 70 rooms with 1,000 carpets, a harem, and stables. He inherited none of his father’s empire-building drive, but he was a patron of the arts, hunter, naturalist, mystic, and book lover. He loved statistics and traveled mainly to make measurements of flora and fauna and catalog the characteristics of his country. He saw his wife as highly intelligent, talented, and politically savvy, which was due in large part to an aristocratic upbringing in her Persian parents’ household. Rather than serving as a quiet counselor and smoothing relations between the emperor and his sons, Nur took direct action. She was an accomplished adviser, hunter, diplomat, and aesthete. She designed her parents’ tomb in Agra, anticipating the Taj Mahal, which was built by her stepson, Shah Jahan. Agra was also home to her designs for her and Jahangir’s tombs and her famous Light Scattering Garden. The author’s descriptions of Agra are superb, and her detailed explanations of Nur’s upbringing reflect her long study, deep understanding, and modern take on a little-explored subject. When the emperor was kidnapped by his son’s ally, it was Nur who led an army to attempt his rescue. She must be held as one of history’s great independent, powerful women.

A page-turning, eye-opening biography that shatters our impressions of India as established by the British Raj.



## OCEANS VENTURED Winning the Cold War at Sea

Lehman, John  
Norton (352 pp.)  
\$27.95 | Jun. 5, 2018  
978-0-393-25425-9

Former Secretary of the Navy Lehman (*On Seas of Glory: Heroic Men, Great Ships, and Epic Battles of the American Navy*, 2001, etc.) unfolds the Ronald Reagan-era strategy to reclaim United States dominance on the high seas and contain the Soviet fleet.