



BOOKFILTER'S SPRING PICKS FOR THEATER LOVERS

MICHAEL GILTZ | APRIL 22, 2019

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The savvy reader's favorite website BookFilter.com chooses the best theater books ready to take their bow, exclusively for Broadway Direct.

It's Tony season, when the best Broadway plays and musicals of the year are celebrated. Whether you're watching the Tony Awards on TV or crossing your fingers and hoping to hear your name called on the big night, it's a stressful and exciting time. Remember, it's an honor just to be nominated! Here are the hot-off-the-press theater books we nominate as worthy of your time this spring.

[On Streisand: An Opinionated Guide](#)

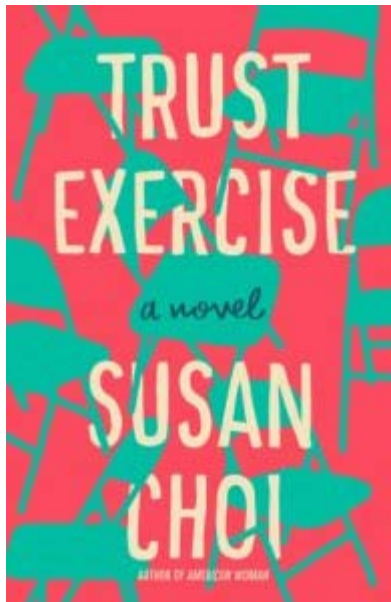


By Ethan Mordden

\$21.95, Oxford University Press

Barbra Streisand has never won a Tony! She's been nominated twice and been honored with a special Tony, but she's never snagged a competitive statue. Streisand was among the nominees twice: once for her breakthrough work in *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*, and a second time, of course, for *Funny Girl*. While Streisand's lifelong love of musical theater and landmark recordings make her a Broadway baby, we can only hope those competitive juices will convince her to return to Broadway someday. (Why not? It worked for Bette Midler!) And critic and historian Ethan Mordden agrees she's one of the greats. His impassioned book looks at Streisand's artistry and importance from every possible angle. He delves into the albums, the movies, the TV specials, and her early work in cabaret and theater. His book is subtitled *An Opinionated Guide*, and opinionated ain't the half of it. You start reading but Mordden is already galloping far, far ahead. He's so informed and enthusiastic and defensive and wide-ranging in his claims for Streisand's talent, artistry, legacy, impact, and all-around greatness that it's a pleasure just trying to keep up.

Trust Exercise



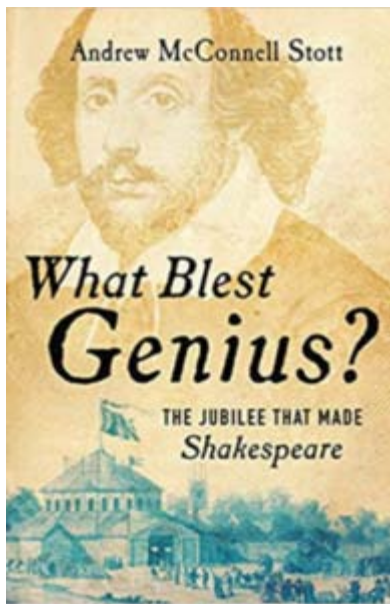
By Susan Choi

\$27, Henry Holt and Co.

The young people who watch the Tonys and listen to cast recordings and obsess over their favorite shows? If they're lucky, they have the talent to attend a performing arts school and devote every waking moment to what they love. That's the setting of Pulitzer Prize nominee Susan Choi's latest novel. Students Sarah and David fall under the spell of each other and their magnetic acting teacher, Mr. Kingsley. It's the Reagan era, and Sarah is the Molly Ringwald character, a poor-ish student with a white-knight boyfriend in David, who is almost embarrassingly wealthy. That difference hardly matters when Mr. Kingsley turns the lights off in the classroom and students crawl over and around each other with uncontained sensual glee. Sarah and David outpace the rest, not by having sex (no great marker in this world) but by the intensity of their unstable attraction/repulsion. Choi toys with our trust but it pays off in dividends. Certainly, fans of theater and serious fiction will relish how frustrating and rewarding and life-changing a drama class can be for adolescents, even if the closest they ultimately get to the bright lights of Broadway is a seat in the audience.

Read more: Broadway Direct April Pick of the Month

What Blest Genius?: The Jubilee That Made Shakespeare



By Andrew McConnell Stott
\$26.95, W.W. Norton and Company

Even the greats need a boost to maintain the fame they deserve. It's a little late to honor William Shakespeare with an honorary Tony. But back in 1769, the next best thing happened: Stratford-Upon-Avon held a festival to honor its most famous son and cement his legacy in the process. Author Andrew McConnell Stott tackles this near-disaster of an event in great detail, from the price-gouging inns to the wary locals and the intelligentsia who came to sniff at such a fuss. He offers pocket portraits of all involved, namely actor David Garrick, whose career revolved around promoting Shakespeare, and James Boswell, who knew a good party when he saw one and captured everything in precise detail. Endless rain, endless tributary poems, and endless crowds converged to praise and elevate the Bard. Genius, on the part of Shakespeare, and perhaps luck on the part of the organizers.

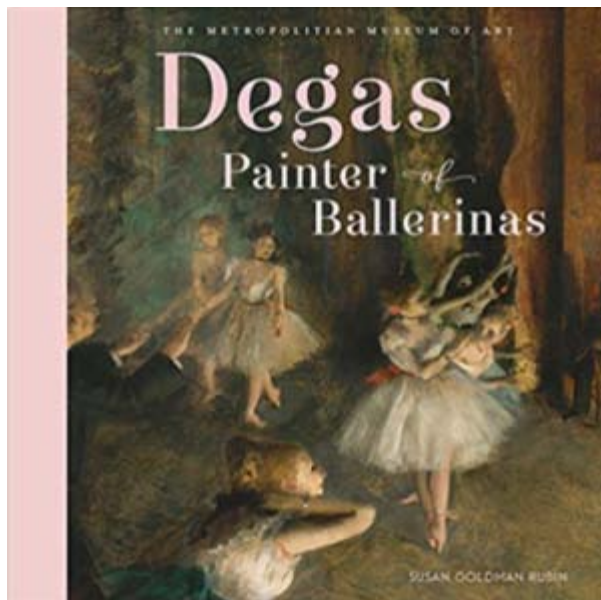
The Inheritance



By Matthew Lopez
\$19.95, Faber & Faber

The Tonys cap the theater season, coming on the heels of the U.K.'s Oliviers. At that theater-awards event, the big winner was the epic play *The Inheritance*. If you thought one massive six-hour show about AIDS in New York City was enough, well, think again. Matthew Lopez's universally acclaimed drama used E.M. Forster's novel *Howards End* for inspiration, cast the great Vanessa Redgrave in a key role (who needs an angel when you've got her?), and swept everyone in its path with the play's sheer ambition, heart, passion, and heat. If you can't wait for it to come to Broadway (and how could you?), you can start to connect with it right now by reading Lopez's play and using your imagination to cast, mount, and stage it.

Degas, Painter of Ballerinas

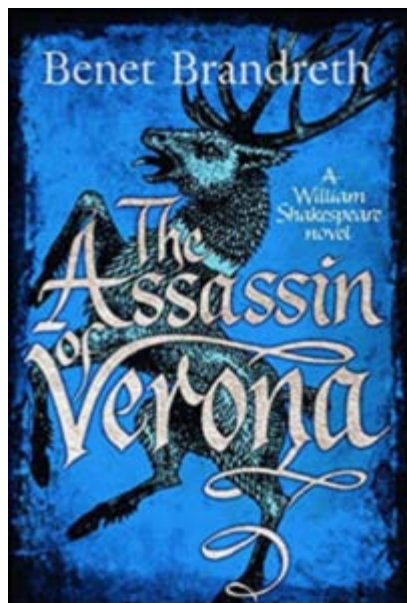


By Susan Goldman Rubin

\$19.99, Abrams Books for Young Readers

This delightful art book for preteens is a great way to introduce kids to two beautiful worlds: the world of classical dance and the world of classical art, typified by Edgar Degas's studies of ballerinas. Made in collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it includes a brief biography of the artist and gorgeous reproductions of these beloved paintings. Ideal reading before a child's first trip to the museum or the ballet — and just as ideal when they want to relive it.

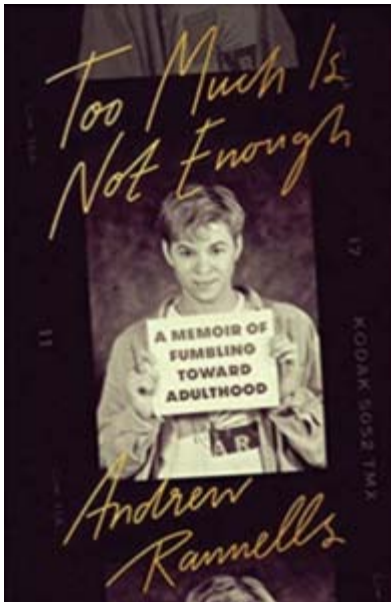
The Assassin of Verona



By Benet Brandreth
\$25.95, Pegasus Books

Why should Christopher Marlowe have all the fun? In the latest thriller starring a young Will Shakespeare, our playwright in the making also has the makings of a spy. The latest in the series finds Shakespeare disguised as a steward to the English ambassador and in possession of the names of English Catholics plotting against Queen Elizabeth. Deadly assassins sent by the Pope are tracking him down, so Will and his actor friends flee, paraphrasing famous Shakespearean lines and stumbling across incidents that would inspire scenes in his plays for years to come. Great fun.

Too Much Is Not Enough



By Andrew Rannells
\$26, Crown Archetype

Only a few, a happy few, ever experience what actor Andrew Rannells has experienced: starring in a white-hot Tony-winning Broadway smash like *The Book of Mormon* that makes history and makes you a star in the process. If you met him, how could you not ask what it was like? Or about his role on the Lena Dunham HBO comedy *Girls*? Or a thousand other details of his very public life? But the best stories happen before someone becomes a star. Rannells offers up just that with this memoir about the sexually confused kid who left Nebraska and came to New York City to follow his dreams. Heartbreak, romance, coming out, losing his dad, and climaxing with

his Broadway debut in *Hairspray* — it's all here and certain to inspire anyone daring themselves to take that chance of a lifetime.

Honey & Leon Take the High Road

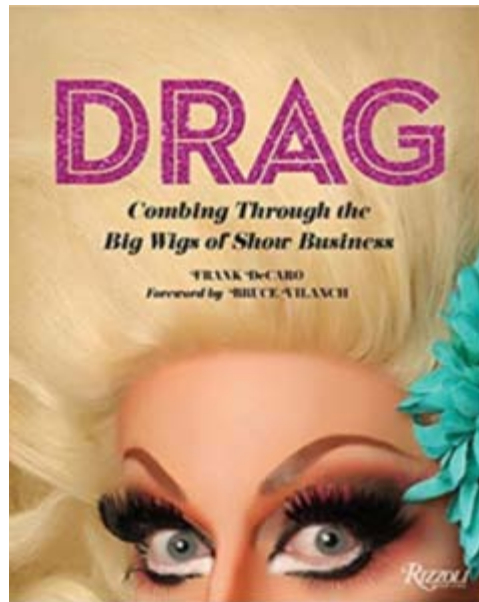


By Alan Cumming (words) and Grant Shaffer (illustrations)

\$17.99, Random House Books for Young Readers

Tony winner Alan Cumming knows how to share a stage — but sharing his life with two rescue mutts is more challenging. Especially when said dogs, Honey and Leon, won't leave him alone. Cumming and his husband, Grant Shaffer, head to Scotland for a vacation, but Honey and Leon worry the two don't know how to take care of themselves. In this sequel to their first picture book adventure, Honey and Leon don disguises, trace the footsteps of their beloved friends, fall in love (well, at least Honey does), and somehow hope to make it back home without being discovered. Cumming does the words, Shaffer does the illustrations, but Honey and Leon are the stars here.

Drag: Combing Through the Big Wigs of Show Business



By Frank Decaro
\$35, Rizzoli

Just as Broadway says goodbye to *Kinky Boots*, it says hello to the Tony hopeful *Tootsie*. While the term *drag* may change in import and meaning over the years, men dressing as women and women dressing as men and people dressing as their own true selves (or discovering them along the way) are as old as drama. Certainly Shakespeare knew a thing or two about the fun of cross-dressing. And here is Frank Decaro to look at drag throughout showbiz, from greats such as Divine to tourists like Katherine Hepburn and Dustin Hoffman. Genre-hoppers like *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Victor/Victoria* (films turned stage musicals) are covered alongside Milton Berle, right up to RuPaul. Great images feature the likes of everyone from Lypsinka to Harvey Fierstein, from Hedda Lettuce to Charles Busch, as Decaro celebrates more than 100 years of drag.

Mama's Boy: A Story From Our America

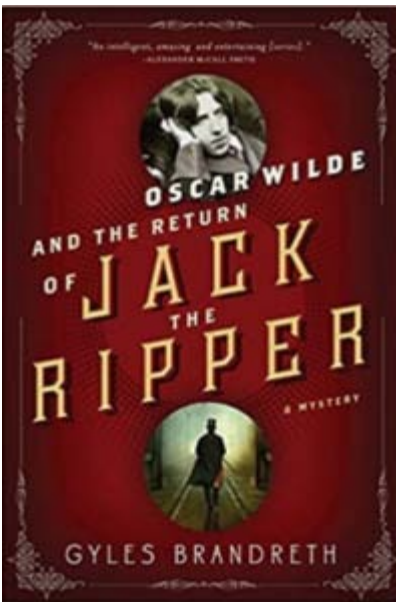


By Dustin Lance Black

\$27.95, Knopf

You may think of Dustin Lance Black as the Oscar-winning screenwriter of *Milk*. But he found his first home in the theater. In his memoir, Black describes growing up gay and Mormon, finding refuge during high school in places like The Western Stage and shows like *Bare*. In college, he apprenticed with stage directors, worked on lighting, and he even acted. When the antigay Proposition 8 gained ground in California, he took to the barricades. After a long battle led to the ballot measure being overturned in the courts, Black looked to the theater again. He wrote the play *8* to bring that legal fight to life since the courts refused to release any video recordings. Drawing on trial transcripts and interviews with the people involved, it debuted in New York City and was broadcast to the world on YouTube. Now married to Olympic diver Tom Daley, Black's story revolves around his mother, a woman abandoned by her first husband and fighting the ravages of polio while struggling to reconcile her deeply conservative faith with the man her son has become. Is it just us, or would their story make a great play?

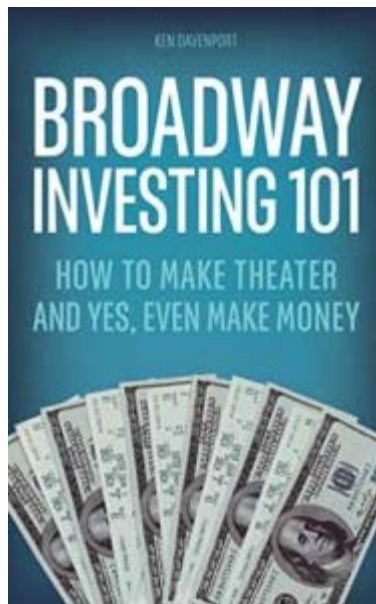
Oscar Wilde and the Return of Jack the Ripper



By Gyles Brandreth
\$25.95, Pegasus

You might think artists like Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde would be too busy to fight crime, but you would be wrong. The seventh Oscar Wilde mystery pairs that legendary wit with his sidekick, Arthur Conan Doyle, as they face the horrifying possibility that Jack the Ripper is back in action and ready to make fools of law enforcement yet again. Well, Oscar Wilde was anything but a fool, so you can be certain he'll have something to say about that, probably something pithy. Fans of the series will be relieved Gyles Brandreth has revived this franchise after a seven-year break.

Broadway Investing 101

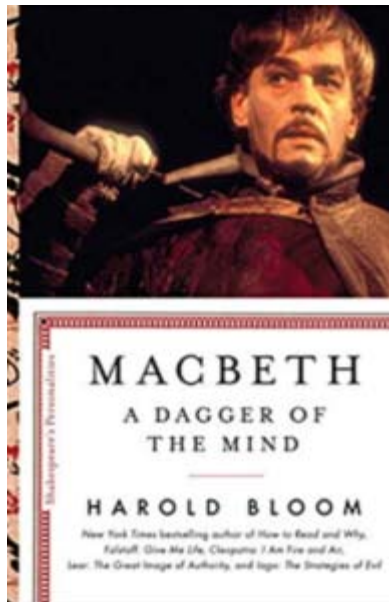


By Ken Davenport

\$9.99, Amazon Digital Services

Well, yes, everyone wishes they had invested in *Hamilton*. Actually, what you *really* wanted to do was invest in the musical *In the Heights*. A new Broadway-bound show by a talent who had yet to break through? That's where you can help work be mounted, get tickets to the Tony Awards, and be *this close* to the spotlight. Oh, and perhaps make a financial killing in the process. (You're not going to get good terms as an investor when putting your money on established artists.) Ken Davenport has been there. He's been involved with everything from Alan Cumming's one-man *Macbeth*, *Kinky Boots*, and the just-closed comedy hit *The Play That Goes Wrong*, to Off-Broadway's *Altar Boyz* and the gorgeous Theater Deaf West revival of *Spring Awakening*. His ebook guide to investing offers up tips to newbies and veterans alike, demolishing some myths and pointing the way forward for those who have money to lose on a gamble and prefer to gamble with something they love. It's more fun than betting on black at the roulette wheel — and lasts longer too.

Macbeth: A Dagger of the Mind



By Harold Bloom

\$24, Scribner

Speaking of Macbeth, who better than critic Harold Bloom to illuminate one of the greatest villains in all of theater? This is the fifth and final volume in Bloom's series sharing his thoughts on the characters in Shakespeare who have consumed his thoughts. Bloody Macbeth follows on the heels of Falstaff, Cleopatra, Lear, and Iago. Developed from his work as a teacher of the classics, Bloom offers erudition, context, performance history, and a personal perspective, revealing how his attitude toward Macbeth has shifted throughout a lifetime of theatergoing and careful reading. Sharp, to-the-point, and illuminating.

Make Music! A Kid's Guide

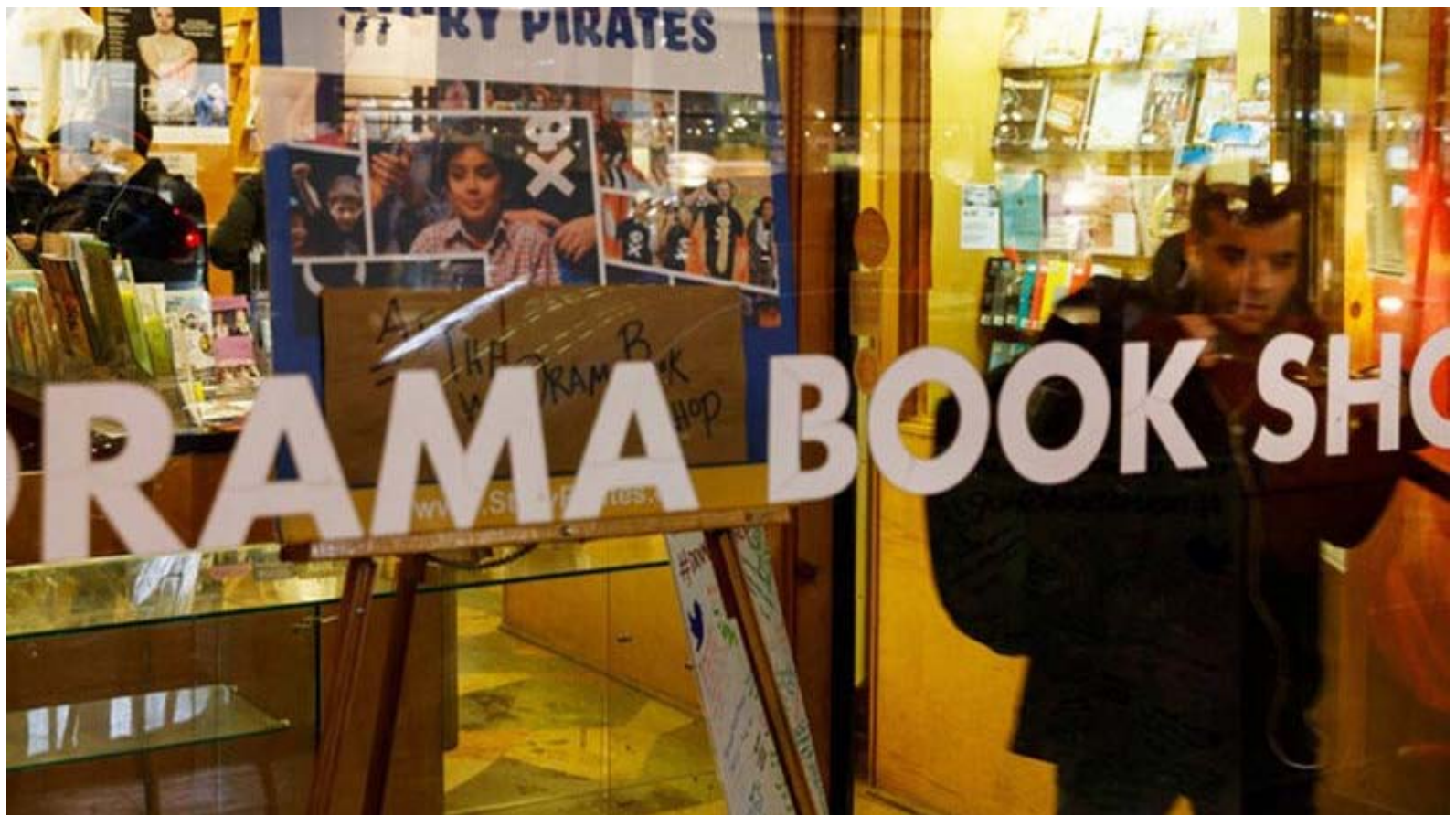


By Norma Jean Haynes, et al.
\$26.95, Storey Publishing

This guide to making music is not about learning an instrument (which everyone should do), and you don't need to be a trained musician to explore the fun of music. Step by step, you'll work with kids as young as 5 to start making music, or at least a musical noise, right away. You'll bang on pots and pans, put water in glasses and rub the rims, even yank on the Velcro of sneakers. I'll be music to your ears as you watch kids realize there are sounds and rhythms and, yes, music all around them, ready for the making. Reading this book with them will lead to pleas to start making any of the 35 different instruments you can craft from household items. They'll be slapping out rhythms on pans and their bellies and having a blast. Just don't say we didn't warn you!

***Michael Giltz** is the creator of the website **BookFilter**, a book lover's best friend. He has written for *Huffington Post*, *New York Post*, *New York Daily News*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Advocate*, and many other publications, profiling talent, covering the theater business, and reviewing shows in *New York City* and *London*. When he's not attending the theater, he's reading about it.*

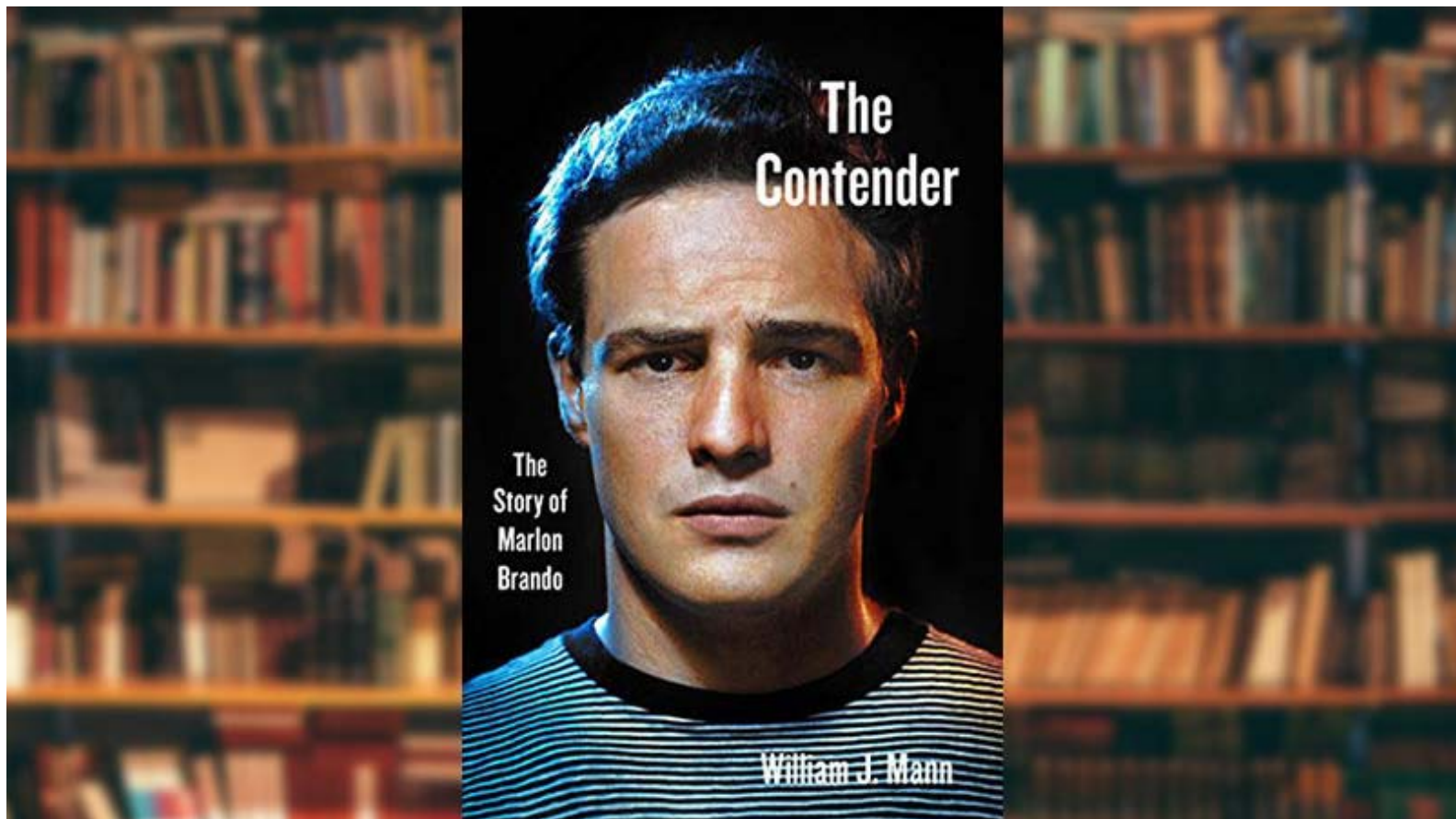
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Bookfilter's November Book of the Month

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