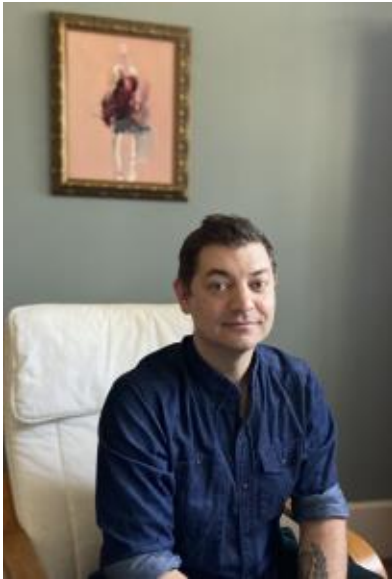


## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Kevin Wilson is the author of two collections, *Tunneling to the Center of the Earth* (Ecco/Harper Perennial, 2009), which received an Alex Award from the American Library Association and the Shirley Jackson Award, and *Baby You're Gonna Be Mine* (Ecco, 2018), and three novels, *The Family Fang* (Ecco, 2011), *Perfect Little World* (Ecco, 2017) and *Nothing to See Here* (Ecco, 2019), a *New York Times* bestseller and a Read with Jenna book club selection. His fiction has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Southern Review*, *One Story*, *A Public Space*, and elsewhere, and has appeared in *Best American Short Stories 2020* and *2021*, as well as *The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories 2012*. He has received fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, and the KHN Center for the Arts. He lives in Sewanee, Tennessee, with his wife, the poet Leigh Anne Couch, and his sons, Griff and Patch, where he is an Associate Professor in the English Department at Sewanee: The University of the South.

Authors Website.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Zeke and Frankie are so drawn to one another, and bond so quickly? Their relationship ultimately ends very abruptly; are these related?
2. This novel is firmly set in the 90's. Did the elements of nostalgia draw you further into the story or detract from it?
3. This book brings up some big questions about who is the owner of an artistic work. How do you feel about the ownership of art? Does it belong more to the artist, or the consumer of the art?
4. What is it about the poster that captures the public imagination? Can you think of a similar phenomenon in contemporary culture?
5. Why is Frankie so concerned that someone will discover she and Zeke created the poster? Is her fear a realistic one?

6. How does the secret of the posters affect Frankie throughout her adult life? Are you confident that she will be able to move forward after the book's conclusion?
7. What parts of Frankie and Zeke's teen experience are universal? Is there anything that is completely unique to their coming-of-age experience?
8. This book contains a lot of traumatic events for the main characters. How did you feel about the way the author narrated those traumatic events? Did you think the character reactions to those events were realistic?
9. Did the additional information you learn about the characters in their adult lives affect the way you perceived them as teens? Why or why not?
10. How are the adults in the story represented? Do you see them from a different perspective than the novel characters do?
11. What did you think of the writing style? How would you characterize it? Did the writing style affect your experience of the story?
12. This story is a departure from Wilson's usual surrealism. Does the book feel similar to his previous works? Does it feel like a complete departure?
13. Wilson has shared that part of this book's plot is autobiographical. Do you think that lends more or less credibility to the story overall?
14. One of the major themes in this novel is the way in which our young adult experiences become formative in our minds. Do you think this book accurately represents the way that teen memories carry forward into adulthood?
15. Frankie and Zeke's identities are tied up in the art that they made, just like Wilson's novel is tied to his own identity. Do you think art can be separated from the artist? Is art more or less meaningful when you do not know who the artist is?

Original.

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Booklist

If the Coalfield Panic were to happen today, it would dominate the news cycle for 10 minutes before it got subsumed by another, more sensational story. In middle-of-nowhere Tennessee in 1996, Frankie Budge and her new friend, Zeke, create a poster and plaster it all over town as performance art. Unfortunately, the poster catches people's imagination for all the wrong reasons, and it stays in the larger public consciousness for longer than Frankie and Zeke ever wanted. The signature slogan is Frankie's, "The edge is a shantytown filled with gold seekers. We are fugitives, and the law is skinny with hunger for us." To the two teenage misfits in Coalfield, the writing sounds subversive yet safe. But once the narrative gets out of control, it creates serious and lasting damage, enough to cast a long shadow

on Frankie's adult life. Wilson (*Nothing to See Here*, 2020) has developed a story that is a precise capture of adolescence and of two vibrant teens whose everyday dilemmas, weaknesses, and triumphs are utterly endearing. If the denouement feels a little pat, it is more than made up for by the crisp dialogue and the zipping story line that takes us there.

### **Publisher's Weekly**

Wilson (*Nothing to See Here*) spins a delightful story of two aspiring artists in small-town Tennessee. It's 1996 when Frankie Bulger, an outcast who dreams of becoming a writer, meets Zeke, also 16, who is new to town. Together they make a poster with the cryptic line "The edge is a shantytown filled with gold seekers. We are fugitives, and the law is skinny with hunger for us." Thrilled at their creation, Frankie and Zeke make hundreds of copies of it on a photocopier stolen by Frankie's triplet brothers, then post them around town. Copycats begin doing the same, and before long, local and national newspapers report on the panic caused by the posters, fashion brands reproduce the slogan on T-shirts, and tourists arrive in droves. Frankie and Zeke keep their involvement a secret until 22 years later, when a journalist finds out Frankie's role. Confronted with the possibility of her secret coming out, Frankie goes on a quest to come clean with her family and reconnect with old friends. Wilson ably captures Frankie and her peers' adolescent confusion and the creative power of like-minded teens, and his coming-of-age story is ripe with wisdom about what art means in the modern age. It adds up to a surprisingly touching time capsule of youth in the '90s. Agent: Julie Barer, Book Group. (Nov.)

### **Library Journal**

Wilson (*Nothing To See Here*) has been carefully building his literary cachet over the past decade, and he's produced perhaps his most emotionally nuanced and profoundly empathetic novel yet. It tells the story of a 1996 Ohio summer during which two teen outcasts produce a mysterious work of art that instigates a Satanic Panic--style mass hysteria in their hometown simply by virtue of its poetic inscrutability. Wilson appropriates the absurdist foundation of 1980s/1990s moral panic phenomena to cushion his cultural critique, and there's a baked-in nostalgia to the book's aesthetic as he demonstrates a keen understanding of the fickleness of adolescence--how "[we] talked about what we always talked about...trying to adequately explain ourselves to another person"--and particularly how we alternately seek to preserve our formative years in amber and to fast-forward toward their expiration. But rather than leveraging any of this toward shallow buzzword topicality, Wilson meaningfully crafts formed characters, allowing his work to register as a universal document of teenage turmoil as blessedly compassionate as it is cunning. VERDICT Highly recommended as a sincere, sometimes brutal, but always sturdy study of the burden of both art and adolescence and a wonderfully evocative treatise on how we imprint ourselves on the world and learn to survive in that tumultuous wake.--Luke Gorham

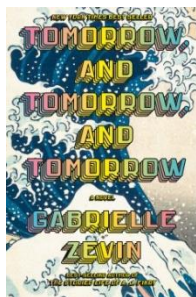
### **Kirkus Reviews**

The irrepressible Wilson presents a grunge-era fable about a pre-internet mass-hysteria incident and the alchemy of art. Family dramas and short stories are the author's sweet spots, but for this emotionally acute peek into the inner life of the artist, he's turned to the uncomfortable exile of adolescence. Coalfield, Tennessee, circa 1996 is as remote (and boring) as any rural American outpost, so budding teen writer Frances "Frankie" Budge is intrigued when Zeke, a strange boy from Memphis, shows up at the public pool. "This town is weird," the stranger observes. "It's like a bomb was dropped on it, and you guys are just getting back to normal." In the grip of summer's dog days, Frankie and Zeke pursue their artistic outlets elbow to elbow, hers the written word, his visual arts. Joining forces, they make a poster emblazoned with a throwaway couplet about outlaws on the run: "The edge is a shantytown filled with gold seekers. We are fugitives, and the law is skinny with hunger for us." Soon, they commandeer an old copy machine and plaster the town with their anonymous manifesto, punctuated by inevitable adolescent canoodling. What follows

is a rough approximation of the "Satanic panic" of the Reagan-era 1980s, as the media labels the work "troubling street art" before it snowballs into a national hysteria that fortunately exists mostly on the periphery here. Wilson ignores the low-hanging fruit--Frankie and Zeke's relationship is fundamentally a coming-of-age tale, but not in the way you might think. Instead, he focuses on the wonderful, terrible, transformative power of art. The catalyst for Frankie's reluctant confession, 20 years later, is a visit from a New Yorker art critic convinced that Frankie wrote the infamous, trouble-causing line. In a world where art is often dismissed, Frankie will learn whether the line she created still holds the power she'd thought long since lost. A warm, witty two-hander that sidesteps the clichés of art school and indie film and treats its free spirits with respect. Copyright (c) Kirkus Reviews, used with permission.

## SOLITO READALIKES - FOOTNOTES

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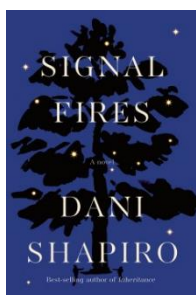
### ***Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* by Gabrielle Zevin**

Spanning thirty years, from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Venice Beach, California, and lands in between and far beyond, this is a dazzling and intricately imagined novel that examines the multifarious nature of identity, disability, failure, the redemptive possibilities in play, and above all, our need to connect: to be loved and to love. Yes, it is a love story, but it is not one you have read before.



### ***Ask Again, Yes* by Mary Beth Keane**

You could call Peter Stanhope naive. Or you could call him optimistic. After all, as he tries to escape his traumatic childhood punctuated by his mom's mental illness and a violent incident during his teenage years, he reasons that his family's history might not matter in the long run. But of course, it does. The long shadow cast by his loneliness, the struggle to put a name to his mother's suffering—these exact a toll not just on Peter but on his close childhood friend and neighbor, Kate. As their love blossoms, the couple realizes that a parent's imprint might be more lasting than either could ever have imagined.



### ***Signal Fires* by Dani Shapiro**

From Waldo Shenkman's premature birth under the care of Dr. Benjamin Wilf to Mimi Wilf's poignant death in Waldo's arms 11 years later, the lives of these neighboring families in a stolid upstate New York community are not as close as such events would suggest. When the Wilfs' teenage children, Sarah and Theo, cause an accident that takes the life of a classmate, their world understandably constricts as each teen moves as far away from Avalon as possible.