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The observation provided Tropper with more than just a celebrity story to tell his clients when he landed. It became the premise for his first book, Plan B (St. Martin’s Press), in which former college friends gather to help a movie-star classmate who is botching drugs. So one might partially credit (the future) Iron Man for Tropper’s certain had almost given up on writing as a career, until a fateful plane ride with actor Robert Downey Jr.
girl before he breaks into an impromptu song. Tropper calls the book "not just the blitzen work, because much of the emotional damage done by Silver is irreparable. But he believes that "with all the sadness and depression of being alone… there is a certain Zen that comes. I don’t know if you want to go to Buddha or Bob Dylan, but when you’ve got nothing, you’ve got nothing to lose. It can be liberating."

Tropper certainly had nothing to lose as a writing career stalled throughout his twenties. Fresh out of Yeshiva University in 1991, he enrolled in the creative writing MFA program at NYU while simultaneously holding down his first day job, as a PR man at Ketchum Communications, where he touted product ranges from Evian water to Chlor-Trimeton allergy medication. He soon found office culture "suffocating" and, in school, discovered that something was missing from his prose. "You need some life experience to inform your writing," Tropper says. "I didn’t really have anything to write about."

"There’s an element of wish fulfillment in writing about characters who get to say what they mean and break the rules."

Disenchanted with both pursuits, he switched gears after grad school and devoted himself to designing jewelry display cases, while continuing to seek more independence. He was also fairly certain by then that he would never earn a living as a writer. But it was after that fateful L.A. trip that he finally discovered his friend’s voice—that of a man, around his 30s, struggling writer hop a flight to Los Angeles, Jonathan Tropper (GSAS ’93) didn’t even talk to Robert Downey jr. He just noticed him from afar, which wasn’t hard to do. It was the late 1990s, and the actor’s struggle with drug addiction was a near-regular feature on the news. Throughout these six or so hours in the air, Tropper—who was working in the jewelry-display-case design business at the time—was mostly struck by how very alone Downey jr. seemed. He remembered, "It made me think, Where are his friends?"

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In his latest offering, humorist Dan Zevin chronicles the marry-and-occasional-misery of fatherhood. He begins his tour in Brooklyn, as a moderately hip stay-at-home dad of two, who finds the odd and ends of modern child rearing—the back packs, “schools of Pepperidge Farm goldfish,” and a king-size bed to fit the whole family—creep ing into his life. And he gives into its delights, eventually moving to the suburbs of New York like so many before him. (“I’d recommend the captain’s chair without hesitation,” he advises would-be buyers of minivans.) As with his previous books on life-changing events—writing college, getting married—Zevin r e l e a s e s pokes fun at his new reality, all while ad m i n i s t r a t i n g his van’s collapsible third row of seats.

—Nicole Pezold

In Ornamentalism: The Art of Renaissance Accessories (University of Michigan Press), Bella Mirabella turns her gimlet eye to that period, spanning the 14th to the 17th century, when a brooch or fan were not merely em bodied but rather essential cultural statements. Her gimleteye to that period, spanning the 14th to the 17th century, when a brooch or fan were not merely embodied but rather essential cultural statements. Her gimleteye to that period, spanning the 14th to the 17th century, when a brooch or fan were not merely embodied but rather essential cultural statements. Her gimlet eye to that period, spanning the 14th to the 17th century, when a brooch or fan were not merely embodied but rather essential cultural statements.

The portrait of Elizabeth I suggests that the accordion made a vir t u e ral appearance. It’s produced by reeds—metal tongue vibrators—not by a machine. And that feeling was refreshingly human in a way that techno music was not. Flogging Molly, a boisterous Celtic-rock group, really raised awareness of the accordion and its potential to be punk.

ACCORDIONIST DICK CONTINO HAD ROCK-STAR POTENTIAL. HE DREW DEAFENING SCREAMS FROM TEENAGE GIRLS WHEN HE WON THE RADIO TV TALENT COMPETITION THAT LAUNCHED HIS CAREER IN 1946. WHAT WENT WRONG? It’s such a tragic American tale. We were on the cusp of bringing out an accordion-playing sex symbol, but there were two major problems. The first problem was Dick’s draft record—his inelig i ble dodge from army service—during the Korean War. But he stayed on truck. I’m not sure that he would have crossed over into rock, because his repertoire— “Flight of the Bumble bee,” “Lady of Spain” —was the kitschiest, schmallistiest music. The criticalties have killed him, even if his army record hadn’t.

BEYONCE, for example. In fact, John Lennon played accordion on a rock ‘n’ roll era, Jacobson argues, the accordion didn’t die—it simply went off into a long hibernation.

The accordion is an instrument that many Americans recall from the TV impresario Lawrence Welk playing the instrument in a leisure suit, or Gary Larson’s Far Side cartoon with the cruel caption, “Welcome to Hell. Here’s your accordion.” But the much-maligned squeezebox wasn’t always so uncool—and, after decades of exile from American pop culture, it just may be making a comeback.

In Squeeze This! A Cultural History of the Accordion in America (University of Illinois Press), ethnologist professor of literature and humanities in the Gallatin (SCRIBNER) WAS READY TO START MY BAND. He found no remedy at a sleep lab—only more questions. He also examines a grisly murder where the defendant pleaded guilty by way of sleepwalking. He found no remedy at a sleep lab—only more questions. He also examines a grisly murder where the defendant pleaded guilty by way of sleepwalking. He found no remedy at a sleep lab—only more questions. He also examines a grisly murder where the defendant pleaded guilty by way of sleepwalking. He found no remedy at a sleep lab—only more questions. He also examines a grisly murder where the defendant pleaded guilty by way of sleepwalking. He found no remedy at a sleep lab—only more questions. He also examines a grisly murder where the defendant pleaded guilty by way of sleepwalking. He found no remedy at a sleep lab—only more questions. He also examines a grisly murder where the defendant pleaded guilty by way of sleepwalking. He found no remedy at a sleep lab—only more questions.

OKAY, I’VE GOTTEN A HAND-ME-DOWN ACCORDION AND AM READY TO START MY BAND. Chances are that the accordion in your uncle’s closet will not be in playable condition if it’s been out of use for more than 40 or 50 years old. The reeds tend to deteriorate. Accordions are quite weather sensitive. They don’t like humidity or moisture. That’s why you see so many beautiful vintage instruments out on the West Coast, because the weather is much more favorable there. That and vintage clothes—accordions and vintage clothing go hand in hand.

WHAT IS THE WORLD FINALLY READY FOR AN ACCORDION-PLAYING POP IDOL? There’s an accordionist out there named Cory Pesaturo who’s got all three plans to play with big stars like Lady Gaga. And he’s hand some, with that classic Italian-American look. Who knows?