

BOOKS

Best title of the month: *If You Liked School, You'll Love Work* (Norton), *Trainspotting* author Irvine Welsh's new story collection

Hearts of Darkness

THE FIRST NOVEL IN ALMOST A DECADE BY A WRITER OF **BLEAK POETIC VISION** IS AN EPIC OF SINS PAID IN FULL

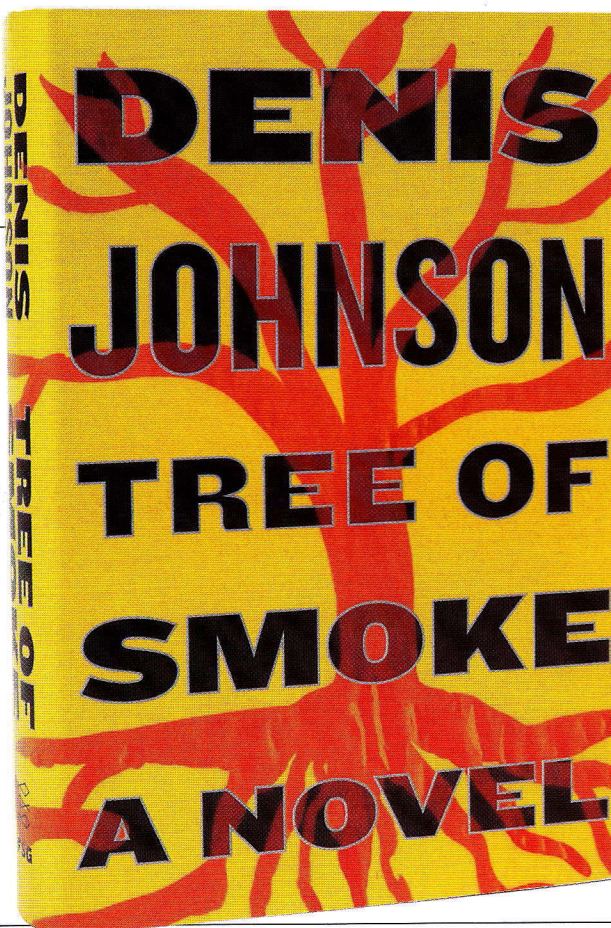
Tree of Smoke (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) is a brutal beauty of a book by the incomparable Denis Johnson, the prize-winning novelist (*Fiskadoro*, *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man*) and poet (*The Incognito Lounge*) revered for his iconic best-seller *Jesus' Son*. That slim book reputedly has the distinction of being one of the most shoplifted titles of all time. At 614 pages, *Tree of Smoke's* heft makes for a trickier heist, but the visceral, poetic writing is unmistakable, and unforgettable.

While the novel spans 20 years, beginning with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, the heart of the story takes place during the Vietnam War. William "Skip" Sands works in psychological operations (psyops) tracking Vietcong; his uncle is a longtime CIA operative who goes by the moniker "Colonel"; and two young soldier brothers, James and Bill Houston, undergo a dirty baptism into the war's free-for-all trade in sex, death, drugs, chaos, and disillusionment.

Johnson captures the moral low ground facing each of his high-wire characters in his darkly dreamed, powerhouse prose: "You're sad about the kids, sad about the animals, you don't do the women, you don't kill the animals, but after that you realize this is a war zone and everybody here lives in it. You don't care whether these people live or die tomorrow, you don't care whether you yourself live or die tomorrow, you kick the children aside, you do the women, you shoot the animals."—LISA SHEA



Johnson



Love and Battlefields

Land of Rising Sons

AS THE AMERICA-BORN DAUGHTER of a Chinese mother from Hong Kong and a Japanese father from Hawaii, Gail Tsukiyama has found rich material for her novels in her cultural

history. Her latest, *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms* (St. Martin's), follows two orphaned Japanese brothers for almost 30 years

through the throes of war and modernization. Sheltered by their grandparents in a section of Tokyo full of cherry trees and temples, they

survive World War II and the city's horrific (and vividly depicted) firebombing. As their defeated nation struggles with Western ways, confident Hiroshi becomes a sumo wrestler, and pensive Kenji masters the art of carving masks for Noh dramas. Tsukiyama's own art doesn't quite match that of Arthur Golden in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, but her Zen-like telling of the brothers' dramatic stories infuses this poignant tale with the essence of Japan.

—CORRIE PIKUL



Tsukiyama

While the existence of feminine intuition may be debatable, there's no question that the women in *Trespass* (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday), the latest novel from Orange Prize winner Valerie Martin, possess heightened perception. Chloe Dale, an illustrator and mother to college junior Toby, fears that her son's new girlfriend, Salome Drago, will drive a wedge between Chloe and her only child (self-fulfilling prophecy, or just a good guess?). As for Salome, she tells Toby of his mother, "She thinks you're too stupid to know what's good for you. She thinks...you can't resist me because you're just too weak and you need to be protected.... She has complete contempt for you, actually."

When Salome, a Croatian refugee from the 1990s Balkan wars, tracks down her own mother in Italy, she sets in motion a profound and disturbing transformation of Chloe's entire family. As Martin shows through the passionate, twisting story of these two women, love alone is not enough to change a person—no matter what we may hope.

—MEGAN DEEM



Martin

