



TARA JACOBY

By Kate Clinton

If you are looking for some new language to use to describe the current crisis of hope, read **Cruel Optimism** (Duke University Press) by University of Chicago professor Lauren Berlant. It is a wild, deeply witty examination of our attachments to food, love, politics, family, and pop culture. “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing,” Berlant writes. Her book describes the adjustments people, individually and collectively, make when they discover that the world can no longer sustain their fantasies of the good life. Berlant claims to be “pretty lame at imagining a repaired world,” but her efforts are in themselves an act of repair. Her feminist and queer activism also belie her claim.

For another book that forcefully imagines a repaired world, read **Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law** (South End Press), by Dean Spade, attorney, educator, and trans activist. He argues that too often movements, funded by foundations that want to maintain the status quo, get too concerned with legal reform or government recognition rather than actually trying to improve people’s chances at living. Spade’s book is personal, practical, and theoretical. It lays out a framework for a

critical trans politics, and gives fresh analyses of immigration, legal reform, wealth distribution, and lesbian and gay politics—all buoyantly and optimistically aimed at a repaired world.

And I would be remiss if I did not mention **Irresistible Revolution: Confronting Race, Class, and the Assumptions of LGBT Politics** (Magnus Books) by my dear partner in life, activist Urvashi Vaid. I’m sure *The Progressive* magazine’s editorial ombudsman would say my personal biases lead to inordinate kvelling, so I’ll leave it to your close review. Let me just say that it is a perfect holiday gift. For all the family. Each of them. And it’s a lovely book for the coffee table, if you ever get one.

Kate Clinton is a humorist who writes every other month for The Progressive.

By Ruth Conniff

In the latest installment of his great, multivolume biography of Lyndon Johnson, **The Passage of Power** (Knopf), Robert Caro covers the depths and heights of Johnson’s rise.

He starts by chronicling his humiliations as Vice President, when he was known to the glamorous Kennedy circle at Camelot as Rufus Cornpone, excluded from any meaningful role in the Administration, and reduced to the despairing decla-

ration, “My future is behind me.” Caro then takes us through the Kennedy assassination, Johnson’s eerie calm as he assumes the Presidency, and, finally, his brilliant achievements in passing his landmark War on Poverty program and the Civil Rights Act. You get the clear sense that Kennedy would never have achieved his own poverty and civil rights goals without Johnson’s unparalleled skill in getting bills through Congress (by putting into play advice the Kennedy people had contemptuously dismissed).

Johnson’s dramatic conflict with his nemesis, Bobby Kennedy, makes for fascinating reading. The whole book is full of great stories—tragic, outrageous, hilarious, and completely engrossing. Caro captures the mixture of light and dark in this towering political figure, and his portrait raises haunting questions about idealism, pragmatism, and Caro’s obsession: Johnson’s understanding of power and how he used it—to transform lives and elevate the powerless, as no other President has done ever since.

Our Divided Political Heart: The Battle for the American Idea in an Age of Discontent (Bloomsbury), E. J. Dionne’s exploration of the struggle between individual and communal interests in American politics resonates powerfully this year.

Reading it, you can’t help but be struck by how far the Republicans have removed themselves from any

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