

## thisweek

Readings &amp; signings on LI

## Tuesday

Ronkonkoma resident **John P. Cardone** talks about and signs copies of "Waterviews: The Healing Power of Nature," part of the Long Island Authors Group series. At 6:30 p.m., *The Dolphin Bookshop & Café*, 299 Main St., Port Washington; 516-767-2650, [thedolphinbookshop.com](http://thedolphinbookshop.com)



## Wednesday

New Yorker magazine staff writer **John McPhee**, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for "Annals of the Former World," reads from and talks about his work, part of the Great Writers, Great Readings series. At 11:15 a.m., *Hofstra University South Campus, Guthart Cultural Center Theater, Axinn Library, Hempstead*; 516-463-5669, [hofstra.edu/gwgr](http://hofstra.edu/gwgr)



## Thursday

**Brooke Kroeger**, a professor at New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, talks about and signs copies of "The Suffragents: How Women Used Men to Get the Vote," part of the Book and Bottle series. Admission, \$5, includes wine and cheese and access to current exhibits. Register in advance. At 6 p.m., *Suffolk County Historical Society, 300 W. Main St., Riverhead*; 631-727-2881 ext. 100, [suffolkcountyhistoricalsociety.org](http://suffolkcountyhistoricalsociety.org)



## Friday

Rockville Centre resident **Edward T. Byrne** talks about and signs copies of his novel "Love's Not Over 'Til It's Over." At 7 p.m., *Turn of the Corkscrew Books and Wine, 110 N. Park Ave., Rockville Centre*; 516-764-6000, [turnofthecorkscrew.com](http://turnofthecorkscrew.com)



## Saturday

**Lisa Immordino Vreeland** talks about and signs copies of "Love, Cecil: A Journey with Cecil Beaton." Register in advance. At 5 p.m., *BookHampton, 41 Main St., East Hampton*; 631-324-4939, [bookhampton.com](http://bookhampton.com)

## reviews

## Dreamlike tales of identity

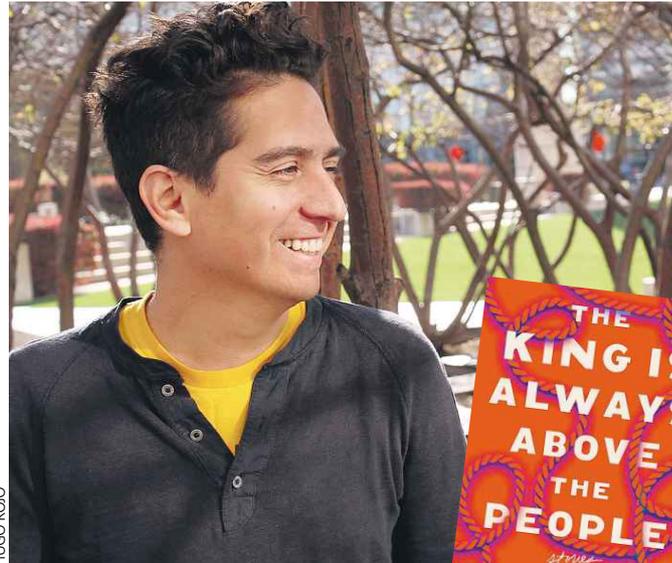
**THE KING IS ALWAYS ABOVE THE PEOPLE**, by Daniel Alarcón. Riverhead Books, 240 pp., \$27.

BY MICHAEL MAGRAS  
Special to Newsday

In his Nobel lecture, Mario Vargas Llosa wrote that good literature builds bridges between peoples and "unites us beneath the languages, beliefs, habits, customs, and prejudices that separate us." He could have added that they also highlight the difficulty of bridging those divides, and that among the biggest human struggles is the forging of connections with others and the attempt to reconcile one's own contradictions.

Daniel Alarcón returns to that theme throughout his new collection of stories, "The King Is Always Above the People." Alarcón's characters deal with questions of identity, most notably: How do people see you, and how do you see yourself? And what is your place in a world in which you don't feel you belong?

Many of his protagonists (they're all male) are unnamed, and Alarcón never explicitly identifies the Latin American countries in which these pieces are clearly set. These absences may seem affected, but they underscore his thesis: that people constantly assess their person-



HUGO ROJO

ality, and the challenge of doing so affects everyone and happens everywhere.

Alarcón employs a remarkable range of styles in the book. In only 10 pages, the second-person narrative of "The Ballad of Rocky Rontal" takes its main character, "a poor boy growing up in a poor city in a poor region of a very rich country," from a childhood of petty larceny to a 32-year prison sentence for murder to his post-incarceration struggle to maintain the equanimity he thought he had learned.

"The Provincials" is a long piece in which a would-be actor pretends to be his more

highly regarded brother living in the United States as the actor and his father tend to the details of a great-uncle's death. Part of the story is written in the form of a play. This passage is clever rather than enlightening, but the story gains power from its recognition that constructs such as nationality and identity are difficult to define.

The theme of bridges is most explicit, not surprisingly, in "The Bridge," in which a truck driver crashes into a bridge, kills the narrator's blind uncle and blind wife — both of them translators, another form of unification — and sparks a

mystery about their deaths.

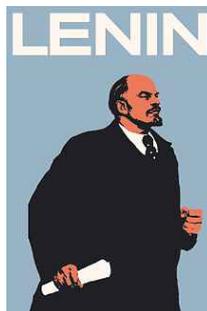
Other stories also feature characters plagued by confusion and desperation: "República and Grau," with a 10-year-old boy forced by his father to help a blind man solicit change from motorists; "The Auroras," where an academic leaves his university, his wife, and her son and meets a married woman who lures him into her peculiar schemes; and the title piece, with its 19-year-old protagonist trying to forge a new existence in a new city, only for his girlfriend to find him and try to entice him home to a life he wanted to escape.

A couple of stories misfire, but the majority brilliantly evoke their characters' feelings of displacement. And Alarcón's poetic prose gives his work a dreamlike quality, as when Hernán, the academic from "The Auroras," notices clouds that are "high, white ornaments, like the ribbon adorning a woman's Sunday hat."

Near the end of that story, Hernán imagines his wife's son returning to his neighborhood as an adult, walking among the cobblestone paths and eucalyptus trees and recalling his youth. The strongest bridges of all, Alarcón suggests in this haunting book, are cherished memories and the places that evoke them. That's the gift that memory — and literature — can provide: the assurance that one is not alone, and the hope that one's fortunes are safe from imminent collapse.

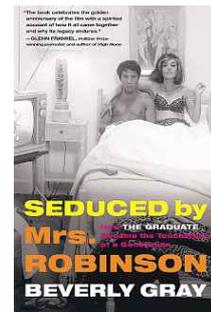
## what's new

**LENIN: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror**, by Victor Sebestyen. As the author notes at the beginning of this clear-eyed biography, Russians still line up by the thousands to see the embalmed body of the father of the Russian Revolution, more than 25 years after the collapse of communism. Sebestyen paints a multidimensional portrait of the private man and the public revolutionary. (Pantheon, \$35)



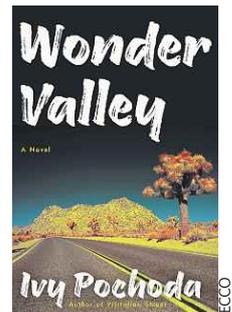
PANTHEON

**SEDUCED BY MRS. ROBINSON: How the Graduate Became the Touchstone of a Generation**, by Beverly Gray. Fifty years ago this December, Mike Nichols' film with Dustin Hoffman, Anne Bancroft and Katharine Ross hit theaters. Conceived as a small art-house comedy, it became a cultural landmark that epitomized the 1960s generation gap. Here an entertainment journalist looks at the making of the movie and its influence on Hollywood and beyond. (Algonquin, \$24.95)



ALGONQUIN

**WONDER VALLEY**, by Ivy Pochoda. The third novel by the author of "Visitation Street" opens with an arresting image: a naked jogger dodging in and out of a Los Angeles traffic jam. Pochoda scrolls back to show readers how he got there, and the result is a noir tale that reveals the seamier side of sunny Southern California, including a ranch-commune in the desert and a series of criminal drifters. (Ecco, \$26.99)



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— TOM BEER