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[TOGETHER FOREVER]

Be a team player

Having been stuck at home for over a year, nobody needs a new reason to fight with the people they live with. Refresh your games cupboard with one of these co-operative board games, in which players work together toward a common goal



PANDEMIC

This classic offers an opportunity to save the world from uncontrolled viruses, at least in make-believe land. **The gist:** Hop around the world trying to find cures for infectious diseases before another brutal outbreak. Each player has a special ability—the medic, for example, treats illness the fastest—and helping teammates maximize their potential is essential to humanity's survival. **The learning curve:** Medium. It will take about three sessions to learn the rule sequence, and to remember to strategize and prioritize from the beginning. **Time commitment:** 45 minutes. **Overall:** Fast-paced and exciting, if a little too real. \$50.



BANDITO

Try to suspend your reservations about policing and join together to trap a convict digging tunnels to escape from jail. **The gist:** Players are dealt hands from a deck of cards that each show a section of the tunnels' twists and turns. Your job is to trap the bandit with dead ends or never-ending loops before the deck is done. **The learning curve:** Flat. Aimed at families, this is an easy intro to co-operative games. **Time commitment:** 15 minutes. **Overall:** Popular with littles and short enough for their attention spans. The deck is portable, but playing does require a fair bit of table or floor space. \$15.



CODENAMES: DUET

You're one of a pair of spies, trying to unearth informants before a sneak attack by an assassin. **The gist:** In front of a grid of 25 random words, players come up with one-word clues to help their partner pick out the good guys without accidentally choosing a killer. A limited number of turns means good wordplay is required—can you think of a clue that results in a guess of "ice" and "cold" but not "winter"? **The learning curve:** Medium. It takes practice to develop smart clues and to glean meaning from your partner's vague ones. **Time commitment:** 30 minutes. **Overall:** Great for fans of Scrabble, Boggle and Bananagrams, but it might frustrate those who aren't word nerds. \$19.



THE MIND

A deceptively difficult game using a deck of cards numbered up to 100. Players get one card in round one, two cards in round two, and so on up to round 12. **The gist:** The goal is for everyone to put their cards down in consecutive numerical order. There are no set turns: If 29 was just played and you're holding 31, you need to assess the chance of 30 being out there. If it is and you put 31 down, the round is lost. But the round is also lost if 30 wasn't dealt and 32 or higher hits the table while you're still holding 31. **The learning curve:** Medium. Passing round three requires serious concentration. **Time commitment:** 30 minutes. **Overall:** Fun, with plenty of opportunities to yell "Argh!" \$15.



Left to right: Allison Edwards-Crewe as Faith, Marcia Johnson as Mercy, and Geoffrey Pounsett as Talbo.

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[TRY AGAIN]

Reconsider the Crown, and *The Crown*

Written by CHRISTINE FISCHER GUY

JAMAICA-BORN ACTOR and playwright Marcia Johnson was looking forward to *The Crown* when it debuted. "They had a huge budget, and the cast looked fantastic," she says. But then not a single Black character had a line of dialogue in the second episode, during which then-princess Elizabeth becomes Queen after her father dies—while she's in Kenya. "They were filming in 2015, we were already talking about colonialism, we were talking about representation. It was too late in the day to make that kind of mistake."

The show's writers had erased African voices and identities just as colonial agents did, and Johnson intended to give them back. She rewrote the episode as a theatre piece, with a twist. Being staged in two locations this summer, *Serving Elizabeth* is a play within a play, in which a fresh take on that 1952 royal visit to Kenya unfolds alongside the story of a modern-day film student interning on a TV series about Queen Elizabeth. A few years ago, Johnson promised herself that, like her heroes—Arthur Miller

and Tom Stoppard—she'd have someone who looked like her in each of her plays. So as she began imagining the storyline, she asked herself, "What if a Black woman was asked to cook for the princess, and what if she was bitter with the Crown?" That woman is Mercy, an invented restaurant owner who is approached by the princess' envoy in the opening scene.

Johnson had Mercy in mind as the play's lead, but it's Mercy's teenage daughter, Faith, who steals the show in the 1952 storyline, when the young woman defies her mother. Meanwhile, in London in 2015, Kenyan-Canadian film student Tia learns that there might be more to the story of that monumental royal visit than she'd been led to believe. Five actors play 10 roles in the production, one in each time period.

The play is funny and nuanced, as it encourages theatregoers to consider the influence of popular culture like *The Crown* on their understanding of history. It had its first production in B.C. in February 2020. "People in Kamloops said, 'I saw that episode of *The Crown* and it never occurred to me.' I loved that," says Johnson. "I could have written an op-ed or an angry letter to the producers. This was the best way for me to vent that frustration. The fact that it's landing like this, that's the success."

Serving Elizabeth is at the Stratford Festival in Stratford, Ont., August 24 to September 26, stratfordfestival.ca; and the Thousand Islands Playhouse in Gananoque, Ont., October 7 to October 31, with some shows livestreamed, 1000islandsplayhouse.com.

SERVING ELIZABETH PHOTO, BARBARA ZIMONICK.

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[BEACHY KEEN]

PICK UP A HOT BOOK

Another pandemic summer is here! We hate that sentence, but we love these unputdownable women-authored novels, which will make the dog days zip by

Written by CASEY PLETT



Probably Ruby by Lisa Bird-Wilson

Titular protagonist Ruby grew up an adoptee, with her new parents unfond of her indigenous roots. As she grows, she begins to discover her identity—and, as an adult, freely self-destructs on booze and men. It's a beautiful, hilarious novel that catalogues the relationships that weave in and out of Ruby's life. Out of it emerges one of the most winning, compelling fictional characters in recent memory. August 24. [📖] [📍]

The Startup Wife by Tahmina Anam

Asha Ray is a coding prodigy who developed the Empathy Module, a groundbreaking AI capable of kindness and love. Her husband, Cyrus Jones, brings couples together with the power of religion "without the baggage." Can Asha combine their powers to develop a new social media platform that will restore humanity's faith in itself? A delightful satire of start-up culture that fittingly reads at a blazing fast speed. July 13. [📖] [📍]

The Spectacular by Zoe Whittall

1997: Missy plays the cello in a budding indie rock band. Her mother, Carola, is finally leaving a cult. The two have not talked for years, a fact Missy's grandmother, Ruth, is determined to fix before she dies—which is going to happen soon. A gorgeous, aching family saga that sweeps through decades, this book touches brilliantly on motherhood, womanhood, family, singledom and every kind of aging. August 24. [📖] [📍]

Summer Fun by Jeanne Thornton

In 2009, a young trans woman named Gala who works at a hostel in rural New Mexico has one obsession: writing letters to B—, the reclusive, brilliant songwriter for the Get Happies, known as "the quintessential 1960s Californian band." This genius volcano of a novel builds to an ending no less than perfect, and each and every sentence of Thornton's writing is steeped in genuine grace. July 27. [📖] [📍]

The Most Precious Substance on Earth by Shashi Bhat

A sharp yet profoundly tender coming-of-age story about silence. Through high school, college and adulthood, Nina loses her best friend, encounters a bewildering grad school and returns to Halifax as her fretting Indian parents (attempt to) set her up with boys. Nina also shelters a dark secret about a teacher from long ago. This expertly written book will deeply move the reader. August 24. [📖] [📍]

Flight Night by Miriam Toews

Toews hasn't left the bestseller lists since 2004's *A Complicated Kindness*. This latest book, her ninth, is narrated by a nine-year-old child, Swiv, who's part of a ragtag family living in Toronto. Swiv's relationship with her joyously spitfire grandmother is at the centre of this blistering, breakneck-speed novel. As stunning a book as you'd hope for from a writer who's made us laugh and cry for decades. August 24. [📖] [📍]

Velvet Was the Night by Silvia Moreno-García

A hard-boiled, dreamy, steamy noir from the bestselling author of *Mexican Gothic*. During political unrest in 1970s Mexico City, an odd couple is destined for a fateful entanglement: Maite, a no-nonsense secretary and hopeless romantic, and Elvis, an enforcer with a heart of gold. The two of them become ensnared in a sinister web—and also, perhaps, each other? August 17. [📖] [📍]