

Knowledge Matters

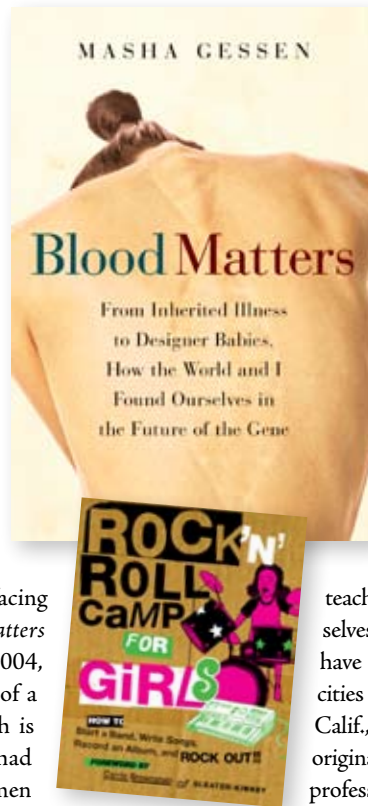
Books on knowing oneself and learning more. **By Rachel Pepper**

These books explore our quest for knowledge and our responsibilities to that information. Whether this is through journalist Masha Gessen's quest for understanding about her genetic heritage or Rock Camp's philosophy of empowerment for girls, these books will inspire and inform.

Blood Matters, Masha Gessen

(Harcourt): Masha Gessen has taken on a big topic in *Blood Matters*. This is evident in the book's subtitle, which touts nothing less than finding the whole world in a gene. Gessen is the author of several previous books and is an experienced reporter for the LGBT press. Currently, she lives in Moscow with her girlfriend and their children, and so is able to bring an international perspective to the genetic anxieties facing many Americans. The origins of *Blood Matters* reside in Gessen's own personal history. In 2004, a blood test revealed that she was a carrier of a genetic mutation known as BRCA1, which is common among Jewish women, and which had already claimed the lives of many of the women in her family. As Gessen writes, "I learned the basics of the story of my flaw. I carry a genetic mutation that kills women early—earlier and earlier with each generation—through breast and ovarian cancer."

In *Blood Matters*, Gessen is at her best when linking her own personal quest for information with a discussion of cutting-edge science. Indeed, casual readers with no scientific background will be quickly and gently educated about topics like "genetic drift," "founder effect," "cancer destiny" and the politics and history of eugenics. Gessen also captures the excruciating process women go through in deciding to have their breasts and ovaries surgically removed to avoid an almost certain diagnosis of cancer. Because of her own background, Gessen is most engaging in the book's early chapters, which function as a cultural history of illness and especially of illness specific to particular ethnic groups. However, Gessen starts to lose her stride midway. One can imagine a shorter, tighter book, focused on her own quest for diagnostics but interwoven with the history and medical issues of the Jewish people as a whole. That story is here, but it gets buried too quickly. This book had its origins in a series of online articles for *Slate*, which explains why the topics range so widely, but doesn't help the narrative. Indeed, the reader is expected to bounce from breast cancer to colon cancer, from Tay-Sachs to Huntington's



disease, from "designer babies" to a brief examination of people with intersex conditions. Entire ethnic and religious clans are discussed, including Jews, the Amish, and an extended family from Holland with extremely high rates of cancer. For those who want to learn as much about cancer and genetics as possible, this book may well be a feast. For all other readers, it will simply be too much to swallow. (harcourtbooks.com)

Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls, Ed.

Marisa Anderson (Chronicle

Books): This zine-inspired paperback

will appeal to two primary readerships.

The first is rocker chicks who want to see what their peers have to say about

teaching the next generation to empower themselves through music. The second is girls who have attended or may attend the rock camps, in cities like Austin, New York City and Oakland, Calif., all of which are modeled on the feisty original in Portland, Ore. In fact, there is even a professional organization, the Girls Rock Camp Alliance, that oversees this burgeoning phenom-

enon. Usually run by volunteers and operated on a sliding scale, these camps take a group of girls, ages 8 to 18, some with no musical experience whatsoever, and ensure that by the end of a week they can and will perform. The camps stress not only how to play basic instruments like drums and guitar, but also how to write songs and publicize a band, with some life skills like self-defense thrown in for good measure. Due to the overwhelming success of these camps, there are even offshoots: Rock Camp for Ladies caters to moms who are tired of sitting on the sidelines. With the growing notoriety—and enrollment—of these camps, it's not surprising that this book, edited by camp artistic director Marisa Anderson and with a foreword by Sleater-Kinney's Carrie Brownstein, has come out now. While some of the pieces are surprisingly elementary (does the target audience for this book really need a piece on why rock camps for girls might be necessary?), most—from how to set up a PA system, to how to keep the drummer happy, to how to promote on the Web while still "fending off the creeps"—will appeal. Inspiring advice from rocker babes like Kaia Wilson, Beth Ditto and drummer STS, as well as a scattering of photos and teen-friendly graphics, round out the package. Give this book to a young girl you know—then send her to rock camp to apply her knowledge. (chroniclebooks.com) ■

Contributor's Pick



Fool on the Hill, Morgan Hunt (Alyson

Books): I swallowed this second Tess

Camillo mystery whole, along with its predecessor, *Sticky Fingers*, in a mystery-reading binge when I should have been making noodles for my 5-year-old or spending quality time with my spouse.

What kept me glued to the page were the colorful descriptions ("the same puckish deity who designed scrotums graced me with fulsome curves"); the complicated character of Tess Camillo—San Diego lesbian computer jockey-cancer survivor-lusty lady on the verge of menopause; the tone—a balance of comedy and whodunnit combining quips, pop culture and queries on the nature of love, evil, cancer and casual sex; and of course, murder. Hunt's victims are killed by snakebites in *Sticky Fingers* and crucified in *Fool on the Hill*, a breath of fresh air for readers gun shy from too many shots in the dark. (alysonbooks.com) [BEREN DEMOTIER]