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READ IT by John Lewis

John Bricuth

As Long As It's Big (Johns Hopkins)

This narrative poem by John Bricuth—pen name of John T. Irwin, former Hopkins Writing Seminars chair—veers from farcical wit to nuanced drama with bravado and charm. Set in a divorce court, it's about the implosion of a couple's marriage following the suicide of their child. A good bit of the narrative is absorbing and sensitive, especially the wife's testimony, but that melancholy is offset by infused caricature and ribald commentary by the judge and attorneys. Although tonal shifts can be jarring, the poem unfolds in a lively way that's hard to resist.

Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby Smartbomb (Algonquin)

I wouldn't think a 30-year history of video games would make a particularly compelling read, but Baltimore native Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby prove otherwise. Punctuating its sweep with insider-ish profiles of the \$10-billion-a-year industry's influential personalities, the book moves at a brisk pace. The account of innovations, from the birth of Pong to the explosive expansion of Nintendo, is rich in detail and observation. The authors wisely bracket their chronology by visiting Cliffy B, the savvy co-creator of the Unreal game franchise. With a decade of experience, the 26-year-old qualifies as a bonafide star in an industry making a major splash into mainstream. With annual sales of video games topping movie box office receipts, more stars like Cliffy figure to emerge. Smartbomb heralds their arrival and documents the significance of their predecessors.

Elizabeth Skurnick Check-In (Caketrain)

Baltimore poet Elizabeth Skurnick writes like Tom Waits trapped inside the body of a desperate housewife. Full of wry humor and libidinous musings, the poems in Skurnick's Check-In are both sharp and sly. "My Husband is a Broker at Bear, Stearns,"

"My Husband is the Husband of Five Other Women," and "My Husband is a Dermatologist" cut through domestic trappings to explore murkier, more philosophical, matters, while "Numbers" mixes numerological wordplay with an Enneagram-ish worldview. Best of all, "Check-In" flashes a wicked grin before ending on a more pensive note. . . .

My love for you is 5 o' clock
In the morning, two sheets
Of paper crumpled at the bottom of the can
Someone left a bathing suit on the hook.
The air conditioner is turned up to high.
A car is pulling away from a door left wide open.

Skurnick's book beckons readers through that open door, into a world of familiar mysteries.

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