I’ve been meaning to tell you: a letter to my daughter (book review)

Kathleen McCallister
William & Mary, krmccallister@wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/librariespubs

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/librariespubs/10

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the William & Mary Libraries at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in W&M Libraries Publications by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
social sciences

BIOGRAPHY
Ahmadi-Miller’s debut memoir begins with her idyllic childhood in Kabul, Afg
istan, describing days filled with school, social activities, and the comforts of
a home with loving siblings and doting parents. Her life is upended during the
1980 Soviet invasion and the ensuing civil war that ultimately tears her family apart,
as her mother makes the difficult decision to leave Kabul for India, seeking urgent
medical treatment no longer available in Afghanistan. With the conflict at home
escalating, the remaining family members realize they, too, must flee to escape the
intensifying violence. Ahmadi-Miller details

the harrowing five-year journey to reunite
with her mother in India. Facing incred-
ible hardships, the family navigated brutal
terrain, often on foot, in punishing circum-
stances, frequently lacking basic necessities
such as food and water. Throughout the
odyssey, the author describes the physical
and spiritual growth she experienced as
a result of the astounding trek. VERDICT
The inspirational nature of this memoir
will appeal to readers desiring an uplifting
chronicle of the resilience of the human
spirit.—Mary Jennings, Camano Island Lib., WA

Chariandy, David. I’ve Been Meaning To Tell
$20. MEMORI
It’s difficult for any parent to discuss the un-
pleasants of the world with a child, and
harder still when those aspects include ra-
cial politics and prejudice that directly im-
pacts both their lives. Novelist Chariandy
(Brother, Soucouyant), the son of black and
South Asian Trinidadian migrants, makes
an elegant foray into that struggle in this
letter to his 13-year-old daughter. A memo-
or of the author’s own racial past as well as
a meditation on his daughter’s present and
future, this brief but powerful read conveys
the effects of bigotry on people and place
and the difficulties of navigating personal
identity. Chariandy’s lyrical prose heightens
and never masks the sharp punch of rac-
ism or the fragility of a father’s hope for
his children. VERDICT Slim but not slight,
this touching read will be valuable for all
parents, especially families with multiracial
children, as well as those interested in view-

ing the politics of race and racial identity
through a personal lens.—Kathleen McCallister,
William & Mary Libs., Williamsburg, VA

Farwell, Matt & Michael Ames. American
CIPHER: Bowe Bergdahl and the U.S. Tragedy
maps. notes. index. ISBN 9780735221048.
$28; ebk. ISBN 9780735221055. BIOG
In 2009, Bowe Bergdahl deserted his army
observation post in Afghanistan with the
intention of walking to a nearby base to
publicize the flaws of the war. He was soon
captured by the Taliban, imprisoned, and
tortured for five years in nearby Pakistan,
until in 2014, President Barack Obama
negotiated his release in exchange for five
Taliban prisoners. Farwell, a freelance
author whose army service included 16
months in Afghanistan, and Ames (con-
tributor, Newsweek; Harper’s) delve deeply
into Bergdahl’s complex relationship with
his parents, along with his psychological
disorders. The authors portray Bergdahl as
collateral damage, victimized by the media;
military, defense, and intelligence agen-
cies; and politicians. Dense accounts of the
wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would have
benefited from a glossary of names, dates,
and events, but the details of Bergdahl’s
court-martial trial are engrossing, elic-
ting sympathy for his life with schizotypal
personality disorder. VERDICT The authors
raise important questions about the psycho-
logical fitness of servicemen and—women
and the dimming chances for fair trials
and treatment in a nation as polarized as
ours today. This will resonate with read-
ers gripped by C.J. Chivers’s The Fighters:
Americans in Combat in Afghanistan and Iraq.—
Karl Helicher, formerly with Upper Merion Twp. Lib.,
King of Prussia, PA

Greenberg, Amy S. Lady First:
The World of First Lady Sarah Polk.
index. ISBN 9780385354134. $30;
ebk. ISBN 9780385354141. BIOG
With this highly readable biography,
Greenberg (George Winfree Professor of
History and Women’s Studies, Penn-
sylvania State Univ.; A Wicked War) tells
the fascinating and largely unknown story
of an unheralded presidential spouse and
provides an insightful analysis of gender
roles in 19th-century America. Sarah Chil-
dress Polk (1803–91) skillfully manipu-
lated cultural expectations for women of
her class while forging a companionate
marriage that was a true political partner-
ship. Throughout James K. Polk’s career as
Speaker of the House, governor of Tennes-
ssee, and U.S. president, Sarah served as his
communications director and managed his
correspondence. The author shows how the
politically engaged first lady deliberately
cultivated a deferential persona in order to
adhere to traditional values, and how she
served as an example to future conserva-
tive women with political power. Green-
berg astutely explains that Sarah failed to
attain recognition by distancing herself
from the emerging suffrage movement,
championing the deeply unpopular Mexi-
can War, and acting in the interests of the

80 | LJ | WINTER 2018