IN SHORT FICTION
REVIEWS BY CAMERON WOODHEAD

Egg & Spoon
GREGORY MAGUIRE
CANDLEWICK PRESS, $24.95

Gregory Maguire is best known for *Wicked*, the book that retold
L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* from the perspective of
the witches and inspired the musical that took Broadway by storm. In
Egg & Spoon he brings his whimsical subversion to a different kind of
fairy tale. It's a picaresque story set in Tsarist Russia: Elena is a starving
peasant girl living in a backwater, caring for her dying mother. By
chance, a train carrying vast wealth comes to the village, bearing with
it luxurious foods, treasure, and Ekaterina, a noble girl Elena's age. The
girls trade clothes and places, and Elena is soon on her way to the
Tsar's court, while Ekaterina has an encounter with the witch Baba
Yaga and her magical, chicken-legged house. Maguire composes
eccentric vignettes from the tissue of Russian folklore and history. The
story builds into an epic quest, dappled with offbeat humour.

Poisoned Ground
BARBARA NADEL
QUERCUS, $29.99

Barbara Nadel's crime series is tense and characterful modern
detective fiction. Private investigator Lee Arnold, a divorced ex-soldier
and recovering alcoholic, teams up with his assistant Mumtaz Hakim
– a Muslim woman who wears the veil – to solve cases in London's
crime-riddled and impoverished East End. In *Poisoned Ground*, Arnold
tracks down a missing person and shadows someone involved who
seems to be spending a suspicious amount of money in casinos.
Meanwhile, Mumtaz is engaged by the wife of a man accused of
making a home-made bomb to clear her husband's name. She
becomes convinced he is innocent of terrorism, but proving it takes her
into dangerous terrain. Nadel brings the East End to life with colour and
grit, and the interwoven plots keep you on your toes.

Gray Mountain
JOHN GRISHAM
HODDER & STOUGHTON, $39.99

The GFC strikes. Samantha Kofer, a young New York real-estate lawyer,
is made redundant. The one hope of being re-hired is if she takes on
work in the non-profit sector and waits out the recession. So she moves
from the slick, soulless world of fat pay cheques and faceless clients
to a small town in the Appalachians. It's a coal centre, and strip-mining
by large corporations has left many workers with health problems
(black lung, cancer from poisoning). There's also a case where children
were killed in an accident involving "mountaintop removal". Fighting
for the underdog against industry doctors and lawyers, insurance firms
and politicians, callous legal tactics turn to outright intimidation. And
perhaps even murder. This is the kind of issue-based legal thriller John
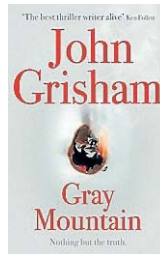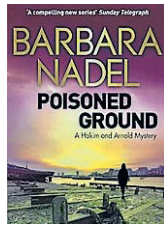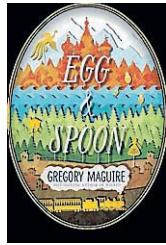Grisham built his brand on. It won't disappoint.

Wife on the Run
FIONA HIGGINS

ALLEN & UNWIN, $29.99

Wife on the Run is Fiona Higgins' follow-up to *The Mothers' Group*, a well-received novel in which a diverse bunch of characters confront parenthood. This one takes on the fraying boundary between public and private and the havoc it can cause. Paula's comfortable suburban life is about to face an assault from the internet. First her daughter is shamed on Facebook, then she discovers her husband has a shocking online secret. Her first instinct is to run away. She takes the kids on a road trip around Australia, no smartphones allowed. Avoiding marital problems and parenting challenges doesn't resolve them, but time out gives her the perspective and courage to face hard choices. Funny and sexy and briskly written, it's a page-turning domestic melodrama for the social media age.

PICK OF
THE WEEK