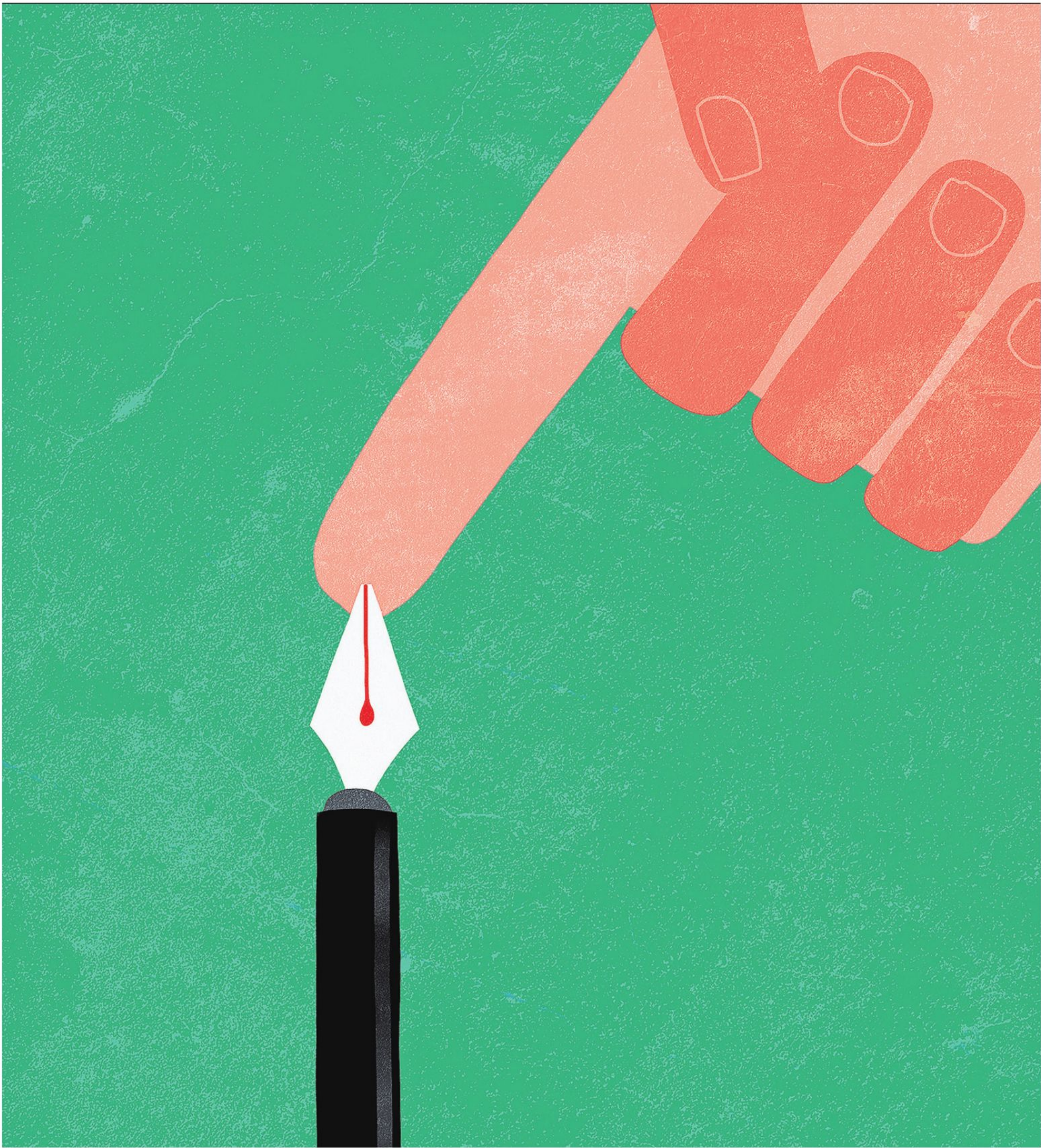


TLS



THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Will Self Stealing my own words | **Edmund Gordon** Mantel's timeless triumph
Janet Todd My return to *Mansfield Park* | **Anne McElvoy** The lessons of Theresa May



Get to the point

Irina Dumitrescu and Sam Leith on how to write well



Cover illustration by
Darren Smith

In this issue

The great American sportswriter Red Smith once said that writing was easy – “you simply sit down at the typewriter, open your veins, and bleed”. There is a nod to that sentiment on our front cover this week, but our opening pages bear witness to the fact that writing well is far more dangerous and difficult than that.

Irina Dumitrescu reviews several books offering guidance on beautiful composition. All wrestle with the same paradox: it is possible to conceive of rules for clear and effective writing, but “readers longing for something beyond mere information – verbal fireworks, the tremor of an authentic connection, a touch of quiet magic – will do well to find the rule-breakers on the bookshop shelf”. The novelist Elizabeth McCracken argues similarly that “a writer’s voice lives in his or her bad habits ... the trick is to make them charming bad habits”.

What is the role of the humble reviewer in all of this? What is the best way to judge those bad and good habits? Sam Leith appraises a book “interested in how and why middlebrow fiction critics – newspaper reviewers, mostly – go about their jobs”. We are no friend to the middlebrow here at the *TLS*, but can recognize some of the issues at stake: the way editors “match reviewers to books most unscientifically”, for instance, and the phenomenon of “punching up”, by which first time novelists are cosseted, while big stars are subjected to the “showy, giant-killing takedown”.

How fortunate that Edmund Gordon’s assessment of Hilary Mantel’s *The Mirror & the Light* is no such thing. To Gordon, Mantel’s books “spring from a nigh-on perfect marriage between author and subject”. Mantel has reimagined the Tudor world as “a sort of horse-drawn gangsters’ paradise”, a “custom-built vehicle for her muscular prose and savage wit”. In this book Henry VIII is older and fatter, barrelling towards middle age, “becoming an increasingly preposterous character, and increasingly erratic, too”. His great ally – and Mantel’s unquestionable muse – Thomas Cromwell is ageing no better. By this, the final book in the trilogy, his superstar status has diminished somewhat, and he is less a “sixteenth-century Jason Bourne” than a “troubled and isolated” figure, old and tired, nagged at by his body and his conscience. Mantel’s peculiar triumph is that she keeps us following his story nonetheless, “the atmosphere thick with pathos”, right to the end of 900 pages, whose conclusion we know in advance. She has, says Gordon, “cast a dazzling new light onto the tarnished mirror of the past”.

STIG ABELL
Editor

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Writing & Language Special Feature



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Clockwise from top left: Illustration by Darren Smith; illustration of a “Wolf-Boy” from the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, 1493; Guinness advertisement, 1932; The Scott Monument, Edinburgh; Zi Luo, a disciple of Confucius, by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi as part of *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*, 1885–92



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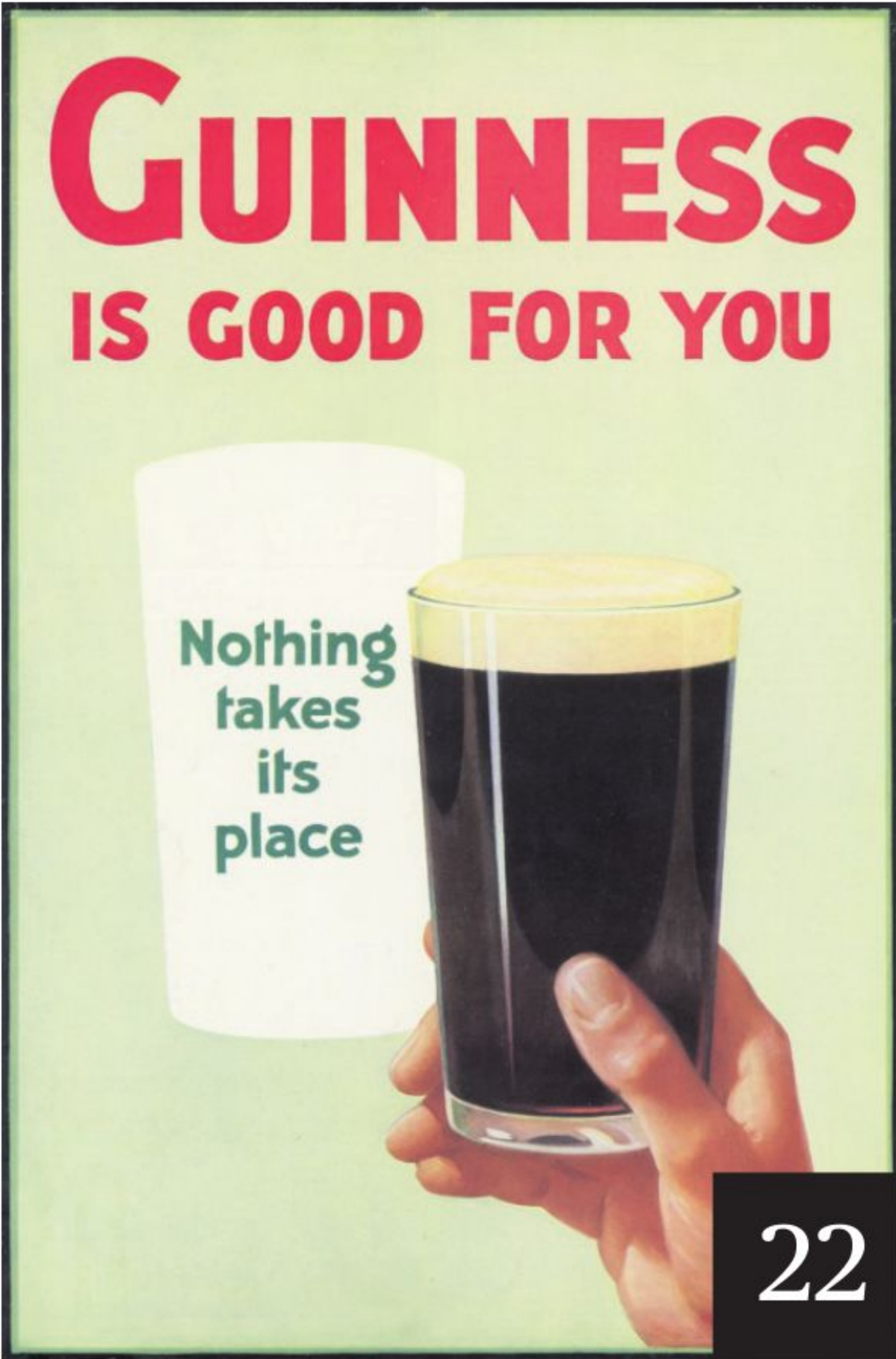
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The Times Literary Supplement (ISSN 0307661, USPS 021-626) is published 50 times a year, with double issues in the penultimate issues of August and December, by The Times Literary Supplement Limited, London, UK, and distributed by OCS America Inc, 34 W Forest Avenue, Englewood, NJ 07631-4019. Periodical postage paid at Paramus NJ and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: please send address corrections to TLS, PO Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834 USA. The TLS is a member of the Independent Press Standards Organisation and abides by the standards of journalism set out in the Editors' Code of Practice. If you think that we have not met those standards, please contact IPSO on 0300 123 2220 or visit www.ipso.co.uk. For permission to copy articles or headlines for internal information purposes contact Newspaper Licensing Agency at PO Box 101, Tunbridge Wells, TN1 1WX, tel 01892 525274, e-mail copy@nla.co.uk. For all other reproduction and licensing inquiries contact Licensing Department, 1 London Bridge St, London, SE1 9GF, telephone 020 7711 7888, e-mail sales@newslicensing.co.uk



Quiet magic

On the best ways to cultivate good writing

IRINA DUMITRESCU

WHY THEY CAN'T WRITE

Killing the five-paragraph essay and other necessities

JOHN WARNER

288pp. Johns Hopkins University Press. £20.50 (US \$27.95).

WRITING TO PERSUADE

How to bring people over to your side

TRISH HALL

224pp. Norton. £18.99 (US \$26.95).

EVERY DAY I WRITE THE BOOK

Notes on style

AMITAVA KUMAR

256pp. Duke University Press. Paperback, £20.99 (US \$24.95).

FIRST YOU WRITE A SENTENCE

The elements of reading, writing ... and life

JOE MORAN

240pp. Penguin. Paperback, £9.99.

MEANDER, SPIRAL, EXPLODE

Design and pattern in narrative

JANE ALISON

272pp. Catapult. Paperback, \$16.95.

IN HIGH SCHOOL a close friend told me about a lesson her father had received when he was learning to write in English. Any essay could be improved by the addition of one specific phrase: “in a world tormented by the spectre of thermonuclear holocaust”. We thought it would be hilarious to surprise our own teachers with this gem, but nothing came of it. Twenty years later, as I looked through the files on an old computer, I discovered my high school compositions. There, at the end of an essay on Hugo Grotius and just war theory I must have written for this purpose alone, was that irresistible rhetorical flourish.

As much as we might admire what is fresh and innovative, we all learn by imitating patterns. Babies learning to speak do not immediately acquire the full

grammar of their mother tongue and a vocabulary to slot into it, but inch slowly into the language by repeating basic phrases, then varying them. Adults learning a foreign language are wise to do the same. Pianists run through exercises to train their dexterity, basketball players run through their plays, dancers rehearse combos they can later slip into longer choreographies. To be called “formulaic” is no compliment, but whenever people express themselves or take action in the world, they rely on familiar formulas.

Writing advice is caught in this paradox. Mavens of clear communication know that simple rules are memorable and easy to follow. Use a verb instead of a noun. Change passive to active. Cut unnecessary words. Avoid jargon. No aspiring author will make the language dance by following these dictates, but they will be understood, and that is something. The same holds for structure. In school, pupils are drilled in the basic shapes of arguments, such as the “rule of three”, the “five-paragraph essay” or, à l’américaine, the Hamburger Essay (the main argument being the meat). Would-be novelists weigh their Fichtean Curves against their Hero’s Journeys, and screenwriters can buy software that will ensure their movie script hits every beat prescribed by Blake Snyder in his bestselling book *Save the Cat!* (2005). And why not? Shakespeare patterned his comedies on Terence’s Latin romps, and Terence stole his plots from the Greek Menander. Milton copied Virgil, who plagiarized Homer. The history of literature is a catwalk on which the same old skeletons keep coming out in new clothes.

Style unsettles this pedagogy of models and moulds. As the novelist Elizabeth McCracken once told Ben Yagoda in an interview, “A writer’s voice lives in his or her bad habits ... the trick is to make them charming bad habits”. Readers longing for something beyond mere information – verbal fireworks, the tremor of an authentic connection, a touch of quiet magic – will do well to find the rule-breakers on the bookshop shelf. Idiosyncrasies (even mistakes) account for the specific charm of a given author, and they slyly open the door to decisions of taste. Think of David Foster Wallace’s endless sentences, George R. R. Martin’s neologisms, the faux-naivety of Gertrude Stein. In his book on literary voice, *The Sound on the Page* (2004), Yagoda argues that style reveals “something essential” and impossible to conceal about an author’s character. The

**George Washington
Carver Middle School,
Los Angeles, CA, 2012**

notion that the way a person arranges words is inextricably tied to their moral core has a long history, but its implication for teaching writing is what interests me here: convince or compel writers to cleave too closely to a set of prescribed rules, and you chip away at who they are.

This explains why John Warner’s book about writing, *Why They Can’t Write: Killing the five-paragraph essay and other necessities*, contains almost no advice on how to write. A long-time college instructor, Warner hints at his argument in his subtitle: his is a polemical take on American standardized testing practices, socioeconomic conditions, and institutions of learning that destroy any love or motivation young people might have for expressing themselves in writing. Against the perennial assumption that today’s students are too lazy and precious to work hard, Warner holds firm: “Students are not entitled or coddled. They are defeated”. The symbol of the US’s misguided approach to education is the argumentative structure drilled into each teenager as a shortcut for thinking and reflection. “If writing is like exercise,” he quips, “the five-paragraph essay is like one of those ab belt doohickeys that claim to electroshock your core into a six-pack.”

What is to blame for students’ bad writing? According to Warner, the entire context in which it is taught. He rails against school systems that privilege shallow “achievement” over curiosity and learning, a culture of “surveillance and compliance” (including apps that track students’ behaviour and report it to parents in real time), an obsession with standardized testing that is fundamentally inimical to thoughtful reading and writing, and a love of faddish psychological theories and worthless digital learning projects.

It is easy for a lover of good writing to share Warner’s anger at the shallow and mechanistic culture of public education in the United States, easy to smile knowingly when he notes that standardized tests prize students’ ability to produce “pseudo-academic BS”, meaningless convoluted sentences cobbled together out of sophisticated-sounding words. Warner’s argument against teaching grammar is harder to swallow. Seeing in grammar yet another case of rules and correctness being put ahead of thoughtful engagement, Warner claims, “the sentence is not the basic skill or fundamental unit of writing. The idea is”. Instead of assignments, he gives his students “writing experiences”, interlocked prompts designed to hone their ability to observe, analyse and communicate. His position on grammatical teaching is a step too far: it can be a tool as much as a shackle. Still, writers may recognize the truth of Warner’s reflection that “what looks like a problem with basic sentence construction may instead be a struggle to find an idea for the page”.

Trish Hall shares Warner’s belief that effective writing means putting thinking before craft. Hall ran the *New York Times*’s op-ed page for half a decade, and in *Writing To Persuade* she shows us how to succeed at one kind of formula, the short newspaper opinion piece. The book is slim, filled out with personal recollections in muted prose, and enlivened by the occasional celebrity anecdote. Her target audience seems to be the kind of educated professionals who regularly read the *New York Times*, who may even write as part of their work, but who have not thought about what it means to address those who do not share their opinions. Hall does offer useful, sometimes surprising, tips on avoiding jargon, finding a writerly voice, and telling a story, but most of the book is dedicated to cultivating the humanity beneath the writing.

“I can’t overstate the value of putting down your phone and having conversations with people”, she writes. Persuasion is not simply a matter of hammering one’s own point through with unassailable facts and arguments. It is a question of listening to other people, cultivating empathy for their experience, drawing on shared values to reach common ground. It also demands vulnerability; Hall praises writers who “reveal something almost painfully per-

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Professor of English
Medieval Studies at the
University of Bonn*

sonal even as they connect to a larger issue or story that feels both universal and urgent”.

Much of her advice would not have surprised a classical rhetorician. She even quotes Cicero’s famous remark about it being a mistake to try “to compel others to believe and live as we do”, a mantra for this book. At her best, Hall outlines a rhetoric that is also a guide to living peaceably with others: understanding their desires, connecting. A simple experiment – not finishing other people’s sentences even when you think you know what they will say – exemplifies this understated wisdom. At her worst, Hall is too much the marketer, as when she notes that strong emotions play well on social media and enjoins her readers to “stay away from depressing images and crying people”. There ought to be enough space in a newspaper for frankly expressed opinions about the suffering of humanity. What she demonstrates, however, is that writing for an audience is a social act. *Writing To Persuade* is a stealth guide to manners for living in a world where conversations are as likely to take place in 280 characters on a screen as they are at a dinner table.

In Hall’s hands, considering other people means following a programmatic set of writing instructions. Amitava Kumar, a scholar who has written well-regarded works of memoir and journalism, thinks another way is possible. In *Every Day I Write the Book: Notes on style*, he breaks out of the strictures of academic prose by creating a virtual community of other writers on his pages. The book is a collection of short meditations on different topics related to writing, its form and practice, primarily in the university. Kumar’s style is poised and lyrical elsewhere, but here he takes on a familiar, relaxed persona, and he often lets his interlocutors have the best lines. Selections from his reading bump up against email conversations, chats on the Vassar campus, and Facebook comments; it is a noisy party where everyone has a bon mot at the ready. The book itself is assembled like a scrapbook, filled with reproductions of photographs, screenshots, handwritten notes and newspaper clippings Kumar has gathered over the years.

It is, in other words, an inspiring mess, a book that in its haphazard organization is its own argument for playfulness and improvisation. Like Warner, Kumar cannot stand “the five-paragraph costume armor of the high school essay”. Nor does he have much patience for other formulaic aspects of academic writing: didactic topic sentences, or jargony vocabulary such as “emergence” and “post-capitalist hegemony”. In his description of a website that produces meaningless theoretical prose at the touch of a button, Kumar notes that “the academy is the original random sentence generator”. He is not anti-intellectual; his loyalties lie with the university, even as he understands its provinciality too well. But he asks his fellow writers to hold on fiercely to the weird and whimsical elements in their own creations, to be “inventive in our use of language and in our search for form”.

This means many things in practice. Kumar includes a section of unusual writing exercises, many of them borrowed from other authors: rewriting a brilliant passage badly to see what made it work; scribbling just what will fit on a Post-it Note to begin a longer piece; writing letters to public figures. Other moments are about connection. In a chapter on voice, he quotes the poet and novelist Bhanu Kapil’s description of how she began a series of interviews with Indian and Pakistani women: “The first question I asked, to a young Muslim woman ... Indian parents, thick Glaswegian accent, [was] ‘Who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?’ She burst into tears”. That one question could fill many libraries. Invention also means embracing collaboration with editors, and understanding writing as “a practice of revision and extension and opening”. Kumar calls for loyalty to one’s creative calling, wherever it may lead. The reward? Nothing less than freedom and immortality.

But surely craft still matters? We may accept that writing is rooted in the ethical relationships between

teachers, students, writers, editors and those silent imagined readers. Does this mean that the skill of conveying an idea in language in a clear and aesthetically pleasing fashion is nothing but the icing on the cake? Joe Moran’s exquisite book *First You Write a Sentence: The elements of reading, writing ... and life* suggests otherwise. As befits a cultural historian, Moran compares writing sentences to crafting other artisanal objects – they are artworks and spaces of refuge, gifts with which an author shapes the world to be more beautiful and capacious and kind. Like a town square or a city park, “a well-made sentence shows ... silent solicitude for others. It cares”.

Moran’s own sentences are so deliciously epigrammatic that I considered giving up chocolate in favour of re-reading his book. Because he has dedicated an entire volume to one small form, he has the leisure to attend to fine details. As he explores sentences from every angle, he describes the relative heat of different verbs, the delicately shading nuances of punctuation choices, how short words feel in the mouth, the opportunity of white space. “Learn to love the feel of sentences,” he writes with a connoisseur’s delight, “the arcs of anticipation and suspense, the balancing phrases, the wholesome little snap of the full stop.”

The book is full of advice, but Moran’s rules are not meant to inhibit. He will happily tell you how

“
Like a town square or a city park, a well-made sentence shows silent solicitude for others. It cares

to achieve a style clear as glass, then praise the rococo rhetorician who “wants to forge reality through words, not just gaze at it blankly through a window”. He is more mentor than instructor, slowly guiding us to notice and appreciate the intricacies of a well-forged phrase. And he does so with tender generosity towards the unloved heroism of “cussedly making sentences that no one asked for and no one will be obliged to read”. As pleasurable as it is to watch Moran unfold the possibilities of an English sentence, his finest contribution is an understanding of the psychology – fragile, labile – of the writer. He knows that a writer must fight distraction, bad verbal habits, and the cheap appeal of early drafts to find their voice. There it is! “It was lost amid your dishevelled thoughts and wordless anxieties, until you pulled it out of yourself, as a flowing line of sentences.”

Human beings take pleasure in noticing nature’s patterns, according to Moran, and these patterns help them to thrive, sometimes in unforeseen ways. A sentence is also form imposed on chaos, and his suggestion that it has an organic role in the survival of the species might seem bold. (Though how many of us owe our lives to a parent who said the right words in a pleasing order?) The novelist Jane Alison’s invigorating book *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and pattern in narrative* follows a similar impulse, seeking the elegant forms that order nature in the structures of stories and novels. Her bugbear is the dramatic arc, the shape that Aristotle noticed in the tragedies of his time but that has become a tyrant of creative writing instruction. “Something that swells and tautens until climax, then collapses? Bit masculo-sexual, no?” Alison has other ideas for excitement.

In brief, compelling meditations on contemporary fiction, she teases out figures we might expect to spy from a plane window or in the heart of a tree. Here are corkscrews and wavelets and fractals and networks of cells. Is this forced? Alison recognizes the cheekiness of her project, knows her readings of form may not convince every reader. Her aim is not to classify tales, to pin them like butterflies on a styrofoam board. She knows, for example, that any complex literary narrative will create a network of associations in the reader’s mind. Her goal is to imagine how a reader might experience a story, looking for “structures that create an inner sensation of traveling *toward* something and leave a sense of shape behind, so that the stories feel *organized*”.

Shapes appear in Alison’s mind as clusters of images, so what begins as literary analysis condenses into a small poem. For “meander”, Alison asks us to “picture a river curving and kinking, a snake in motion, a snail’s silver trail, or the path left by a goat”. She speaks of the use of colour in narrative “as a unifying wash, a secret code, or a stealthy constellation”. The point is not ornamentation, though Alison can write a sentence lush enough to drown in, but tempting fiction writers to render life more closely. Against the grand tragedy of the narrative arc, she proposes small undulations: “Dispersed patterning, a sense of ripple or oscillation, little ups and downs, might be more true to human experience than a single crashing wave”. These are the shifting moods of a single day, the temporary loss of the house keys, the sky a sunnier hue than expected.

The Roman educator Quintilian once insisted that an orator must be a good man. It was a commonplace of his time. The rigorous study of eloquence, he thought, required a mind undistracted by vice. The books discussed here inherit this ancient conviction that the attempt to write well is a bettering one. Composing a crisp sentence demands attention to fine detail and a craftsmanlike dedication to perfection. Deciding what to set to paper requires the ability to imagine where a reader might struggle or yawn. In a world tormented by spectres too reckless to name, care and empathy are welcome strangers. ■

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‘It’s a curious business, but perhaps
it’s better that way for you,
and for all the others like you.’



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ITALIAN SHORT STORIES

Edited by
Jhumpa Lahiri

PENGUIN CLASSICS

Emil Jannings

The caption for the photograph in the review of Robert Irwin's *My Life is Like a Fairy Tale* (January 24) incorrectly identifies the male actor as Kurt Gerron. It is instead Emil Jannings, Marlene Dietrich's co-star in *The Blue Angel* and indeed so famous at the time that the cover of at least one programme for the film featured his photo and not hers. Gerron, a gifted actor of stage and screen who died at Auschwitz in 1944, played the impresario of the ragged song-and-dance troupe to which Marlene Dietrich's character belonged.

■ **Leo Lensing**

Old Saybrook, Connecticut

Wicked Marseille

William Firebrace, in his review of Nicholas Hewitt's *Wicked City: The many cultures of Marseille* (February 7), implies criticism of the author for not recognizing that Jean-Claude Izzo's Marseille noir trilogy, *Total Chaos*, *Chourmo* and *Solea*, featuring Detective Fabio Montale, was "largely an amiable fantasy".

In their assessment of Marseille's literary heritage, both author and reviewer omit Xavier-Marie Bonnot's crime quartet featuring Commandant Michel de Palma, *The First Fingerprint*, *The Beast of the Camargue*, *The Voice of the Spirits* and *The First Man*. Hewitt's omission is chronological as his *Wicked City* runs through to 1990, thereby missing by some way the first book in Bonnot's series published in 2008; Firebrace's oversight is arguably more significant, ignoring as it does another Marseille-based crime series which draws on Izzo's portrait of France's second largest

John Donne and women

Normally one is happy to have notice taken of an essay of one's that appears in a collection of essays, but I have to say that the treatment by Alexandra Marraccini of my essay on John Donne's "Songs and Sonnets" (February 14) was truly unsettling. Every quotation from my essay that she provides is taken wildly out of context. She says that I speak of Donne's "bluff manliness" as his characteristic pose in these poems (one that I think she attributes to me as well), but I use the phrase to characterize one moment in a complex poem ("The Blossom") that manifests many different attitudes. Similarly, Marraccini takes my mention of "an element of disgust" in one part of another surprisingly complex poem ("Community") as representing my view of Donne's general attitude towards women. If that were

true, my view would indeed be "simplistic", but my point in the essay concerns the range and complexity of Donne's views of women and sexuality as these are expressed in the erotic lyrics. The essay is an attempt at both recognizing this range and seeing whether any kind of sense can be made of it. It's called "The Unity of the Songs and Sonnets", and states, in its first sentence, that this title is ironic. I am taken to task for being a New Formalist and for being insufficiently "new" in my approach. But the substance of what I have to say is entirely misrepresented. There is some sort of animus here that I do not understand, and am sorry to have aroused.

■ **Richard Strier**

Department of English, University of Chicago

about illegal Mexican immigrants train-jumping to get to the United States, Jakob Hofmann (February 14) describes these trains as "Not the 'hobomotives' employed by W. H. Davies and his kind, but the limb-lopping freight trains that barrel their way through Mexico ...". There is a clear suggestion that the "hobomotives" (an apparent neologism of Hofmann's, the meaning of which I had to guess at) were somehow more benign, less harmful machines, ignoring the fact that in Davies's *Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* he describes how he had a leg lopped off after a failed attempt to jump a train, thus cutting short his "super-tramping" around North America. He returned to England and became the poet we know today.

■ **F. W. Nunneley**

Beckley, East Sussex

Arguably

Daniel Karlin's instruction (Letters, February 28) to avoid "arguably" reminds me of Michael Frayn's succinct observation, made in print somewhere, that if something is "arguably" the case, then it must also "arguably" not be the case.

■ **William Powell**

London SE27

Surely as annoying as "arguably" is the phrase "in a sense", when it is never explained - and it never is - in what sense of which word.

■ **R. M. J. Dammann**

Brighton

Beneath the waves

In his extended survey of maritime literature (February 21), David Armitage rightly calls attention to the need for writing from beneath the waves, as it were, from the non-human perspective. This shelf is being rapidly populated, it seems to me; and two of the benchmark works occupying - and defining - it are surely Philip Hoare's award-winning cetacean appreciation *Leviathan* and Peter Godfrey-Smith's equally remarkable *Other Minds: The octopus, the sea and the deep origins of consciousness*. In terms of priority, the title says it all.

■ **Gareth Evans**

London E8

Bit of a schlep

An embodiment of the "schlep"/"schlap" usage (Letters, February 14) is to be found in the character of Eberhard Schleppfuss in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, who "actually did drag one foot somewhat".

■ **Josef Kessler**
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city. Both Montale and de Palma (known as the Baron) work in a raw, threatening Marseille of dark mean streets often besmirched by corruption, which is juxtaposed with their cultured and philosophical characters and interests. For Montale, amelioration of this Marseille comes through its landscape and link to his childhood, while for the Baron it is the performances at the Opéra de Marseille that leaven the city. Izzo's "amiable fantasy" is verisimilitude and lives on in Bonnot's work.

■ **K. A. J. McLay**

University of Derby

Rilke and Wittgenstein

Conjectures about the "tantalizing subject" of Wittgenstein's reading of Rilke (Letters, February 21) have overlooked Wittgenstein's letter to Ludwig von Ficker, the intermediary for the donation to Rilke.

As Rilke never learnt of the giver's identity, he asked Ficker to

forward his letter of thanks and his enclosed manuscript of some unpublished poems which Wittgenstein received in February 1915. Donald Prater, in his biography of Rilke, *A Ringing Glass*, quotes Wittgenstein's letter to Ficker: "The affection of every noble being is a support in the precarious equilibrium of my existence. I am quite unworthy of this marvelous gift, which I will carry in my heart as sign and memory of this affection".

■ **Bruce F. Mueller**

San Francisco

'The Triumph'

I read with the greatest pleasure Paul Muldoon's poem "The Triumph", in memory of Ciaran Carson (February 28). Nevertheless, I was disappointed to find some of the words he used in Irish without the accents required in long vowels, *na fada*. For instance, in *Ni fiu sin*, which should be *Ní fiú sin* ("it isn't worth it"). The proper spelling of *Feach* is, on the other hand, *Féach*. As the pronoun *me's* is *mé*. Quite odd, since Muldoon does not forget those *fada* in some other words (the song title "Sí Beag, Sí Mór" or the phrase "an fear níos glíce", "the cleverest man").

No doubt he will include them when the brilliant poem is published in his next collection. "Tá súil agam é", I hope so.

■ **Antonio Rivero Taravillo**
Seville

Anti-Brexit jokes

There is a simple answer to Madeleine Brettingham's unanswered question of why anti-Brexit jokes fall flat (February 14). Effective satire requires two sides of a conflict and anti-Brexit satirists have not defined themselves or their opponents well enough to make satire work. Satirists of Donald Trump on our side of the Atlantic often make the same mistake by fixing only Trump in their sights.

Yet satire does not require the pitiless divisions of revolution to work. Alexander Pope effectively defines the dynamic in a couplet in "One Thousand Seven Hundred

and Thirty Eight, Dialogue II [The Defence of Satire]" (1738).

Ask you what provocation I have
had?

The strong antipathy of good
to bad.

The American cartoonist Herblock (Herbert Lawrence Block, 1909-2001) discovered this truth presumably without Pope's guidance. See his famous cartoon (October 29, 1969) in which Richard Nixon holds up a sign reading "All Deliberate Delay" to an African American schoolgirl who clutches her briefcase labelled "16 Years since the Supreme Court Decision".

■ **Jeffrey Brooks**

Department of History,
Johns Hopkins University,
Baltimore

Frances Hodgson Burnett biographies

I was delighted to see a whole page (February 21) devoted to the great children's books by Frances Hodgson Burnett now brought together in a hefty volume. But it was irritating for me to see the American editor, Gretchen Gerzina, described as Burnett's biographer, as if there were only one. Her book followed mine thirty years later, but mine has rarely been out of print, is still available as an ebook and is now in the process of being translated into Japanese.

Gretchen and I have spoken together, amicably, about Burnett on both sides of the Atlantic.

■ **Ann Thwaite**

Low Tharston, Norfolk

Samantha Ellis writes that Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* is "a deeply empowering and comforting story". May I beg one or more of your correspondents to explain what "empowering" means in this sentence, or what it means generally in current use, and exactly what power the story may confer?

■ **Rosalind Ballard**

Cambridge, Massachusetts

Blood on the tracks

In his review of Jeanine Cummins's novel *American Dirt*, which is

Cloud of unknowing

What's the point of book reviews?

SAM LEITH

INSIDE THE CRITICS' CIRCLE

Book reviewing in uncertain times

PHILLIPA K. CHONG

176pp. Princeton University Press. £24 (US \$29.95).

PHILLIPA CHONG IS INTERESTED in how and why middlebrow fiction critics - newspaper book reviewers, mostly - go about their jobs. As she points out at some length, there is no scientific way of proving that one novel is better than another; whatever you write doesn't matter much anyway; if you're rude about someone's book, they'll probably hate you and may give your book a stinker when it comes out by way of revenge, and the pay is rotten. So why bother?

We operate in what the anonymous medieval theologian called a "cloud of unknowing". This cloud, according to Chong, has three levels. There is "epistemic uncertainty": "how do I know if this book is any good or if I'm the right critic to review it?" There is social uncertainty: "will everyone laugh at me/hate me if I get it wrong?" And there is "institutional uncertainty": "Am I a 'critic'? What's the point of book reviews anyway? Look at all these idiots on Goodreads!" And so on.

Chong's big idea, having noticed all this uncertainty, is to ask some book reviewers what they think they're up to, though she doesn't put it like that. She says, rather: "Grounding my study of uncertainty in the lived experiences of agents of evaluation results in a phenomenologically accurate portrait of evaluating work, as well as a richer appreciation of how uncertainty and its related contingencies structure action". She approaches her subject from an academic social sciences perspective, then, and her style makes sure to tell you so. The likes of me aren't "book reviewers" but "agents of evaluation" (or, when we're really cooking with gas, "cultural consecrators") and what we put in the papers are not book reviews but "evaluating work". We hear about "interventions" and "boundary work" and suchlike - which is to say that Chong herself does the sort of boundary work that means ordinary readers (ie the consumers of the newspaper reviews that are her subject matter) will find her book pretty indigestible.

This is a shame, because she has a number of more or less sensible things to say, even if they run on a spectrum from the slightly interesting to the bleeding obvious. (She herself likes a spectrum, telling us: "The epistemological uncertainty faced in evaluative situations can be understood as operating on a spectrum ranging from low to high".) To those who would argue that her academic language is a necessary tool of scholarly precision, I'd say it would be if it were. As well as that awkward low-high spectrum, we meet "deconstruct" used as a synonym for "analyse", something "in flux and up for debate" and "literary theories" for "literary theory". Chong is really just an awkward writer, a disadvantage for someone writing about writing about writing.

She has talked to forty "elite critics" who have published reviews in major (mostly American) newspapers and magazines. She asked them "how and why they entered into book reviewing, how they understood their roles and goals as book reviewers, and their beliefs about the ethics of reviewing", and also "to identify reviewers they admired or disliked and what they found meritorious or offensive about



these reviewers' work". At this point, I hoped for some fun. By the end of the next paragraph, though, Chong has announced that she anonymized her interviewees, so we don't get to hear them slagging each other off.

Three types of criticism are identified. There's the newspaper book review, the literary essay (the longer, more discursive multi-book sort of thing you are likely to find in the *London Review of Books* or the *New York Review*), and academic. As you move up that scale, "the artistic legitimacy of the works discussed also increases: academic criticism is conventionally seen as the pinnacle of the institution of reviewing since this level of attention has historically been associated with the canonization of authors in university syllabi and in anthologies".

I'd quibble with this a little. On the one hand, what academic critics do isn't really reviewing in the same sense as what writers for books pages do. If a PhD student offered a "review" of *Hamlet*, the supervisor would be dismayed. It also ignores the fact that a lot of the fruitful work literary academics do is on bad books. Post-doctoral students are as likely to labour over some minor early modern poetaster as over the major plays of Shakespeare.

What literary academics do, and the rather more complicated ways they think about canonicity, is slightly off the point in any case, since Chong's focus is on newspaper book reviews. In her analysis, these are mostly done by amateurs: there is no professional qualification for fiction reviewing, no union, and no special feeling of what Chong calls "groupness". There is some groupness, though. You are more likely to get a chance at reviewing because your old tutor is chummy with a literary editor, or you bump into one at a party, or you're already somehow in the socio-economically and geographically small world of books. Literary editors match reviewers to books most unscientifically: by hunch and biographical coincidence and other often crass criteria. Lionel Shriver is fed up being asked to review books about high school shootings. Ellah Wakatama Allfrey likes it when, once in a while,

"Der Wahrheitssucher"
by Gisela Steimle,
Wangen, Baden-
Württemberg,
Germany

Sam Leith is the literary editor of the *Spectator* and a columnist for the *Financial Times*. His most recent book is *Write to the Point: How to be clear, correct and persuasive on the page*, 2018

she's asked to review a novel that's not by a writer of colour. And so on.

Chong makes much of what she calls the "switch-role reward structure": that is, people who write novels but also review books. A good number of her generalizations about why critics "play nice" (aka duck out of saying plainly what they really think) are based on the idea that they either fear being reviewed negatively by their victims, or that they empathize with the pain of a bad review, having had one themselves. She inches towards implying that most critics are novelists. That may be true in the US, but is less obviously true in Britain. And many if not most of the more prominent critics (and, perhaps for that reason, often the most fearless) are not novelists.

If Michiko Kakutani, formerly the chief reviewer for the *New York Times*, has published fiction she's kept it quiet; James Wood is a critic first and novelist second. An off-the-top-of-the-head sample of good regular reviewers in the UK might yield Leo Robson, Alex Clark, Boyd Tonkin, Ruth Scurr and Christian Lorentzen, none of whom has published fiction. There are, admittedly, some spectacular novelist-critics. Martin Amis is (or was) one. Anne Enright's criticism is of the first rank. And John Banville, James Lasdun, Adam Mars-Jones, Philip Hensher and Michael Hofmann (whose surname Chong can't spell) are novelist-critics or poet-critics or translator-critics, and it doesn't seem to compromise them. By which I mean, you can overemphasize the "switch-role reward structure". Many novelists, quite to their credit and disadvantage, don't play politics when reviewing.

The notion of "punching up" - you try to be nice to first-time novelists, whereas you can say what you like about Stephen King or Ian McEwan - is, as Chong sees it, a reaction to the "superstar market" of publishing, where to a very small handful of victors go most of the spoils. She makes a decent case that in some ways this would-be corrective actually helps perpetuate the superstar market - by implicitly endorsing the special status of the writers under review, and by drawing attention to them (and the critic) with showy, giant-killing takedowns.

But although Chong acknowledges, with some rather bleak tables of percentages, that critics attempt to argue for their reactions to books with reference to characterization, prose style, structure, themes and genre expectations, she investigates in frustratingly sparse detail how that "evaluating work" is actually done, which is the heart of the matter. Good critics do make a coherent case, on the book's own terms, for why its craft is or is not satisfactory - and they do so with their readers rather than the author in mind. That's the counsel of perfection, and you don't really need a statistical survey to arrive at it.

But is the discipline, as is frequently said, "in crisis"? Chong mentions a survey by the scholar Maarit Jaakkola of doom-saying articles called things such as "The Crisis of Criticism", "The Death of the Critic" and "Faint Praise: The plight of book reviewing In America". D. J. Taylor not long ago complained of an "air of fundamental good nature" dominating UK book reviewing, in the tone of someone who has followed you too rapidly into the bathroom. Me, I don't see it. And nor, mostly, does Chong: as she puts it: "constant concern with the demise of reviewing can actually be understood as a reaffirmation of the centrality and cultural status of books".

Chong rightly points out that newspaper books pages are thinning out under financial pressure on old media - but that doesn't apply any obvious institutional pressure on individual reviews. If anything, the quasi-competition from "democratic" reviews on Amazon or Goodreads will tend to inspire print critics to be more rather than less rigorous. You can still find tough reviews if you care to seek them; and cautious flannel has always been with us. We keep on keeping on. And the best still have teeth. ■

To buy *Inside the Critics' Circle* at a discount, visit shop.the-tls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935



Know yourself

WILL SELF

A FEW YEARS AGO, the onetime journalistic wunderkind Johann Hari was busted for a strange kind of plagiarism: in some of his pieces he'd interpolated quotations that hadn't been obtained in the encounter he was ostensibly reporting; rather, they were words his subject had used, but taken either from another interview Hari had conducted with the person in question - or from an interview with the same subject by some other journalist altogether, or, indeed, from books or articles his subjects had written. When arraigned for this, Hari claimed that having been catapulted into national journalism from relatively humble origins, he had little understanding of the differing strengths of facticity enshrined by certain conventional forms of writing. In our fervid culture of inverted *ressentiment*, whereby the privileged can see no greater virtue than to abase themselves, Hari's defence was, bizarrely, accepted - and after having handed back the Orwell Prize he'd been awarded for his suspect palimpsests, and attending a course on journalistic ethics, he was able to resume his career.

I say "bizarrely", because it's quite impossible - in my view - to be a journalist as prolific as Hari was without being acutely aware of these standards. Hari, who was educated at King's College, Cambridge, would have learnt them when he was writing undergraduate essays. Back then, it was pretty difficult to plagiarize at this level - or, rather, there was little point: once you'd copied out the relevant passage, you might as well put it in quotation marks. At the university where I now teach, we have to run all the undergraduates' essays through plagiarism detection software when we mark, because of their tendency to cut and paste their way towards comprehension - as nice an example as I can think of, of a computer-aided iatrogenesis. So, it could be argued that anyone who understands the correct use of quotation marks, whether they attended an elite university or not, must know that they are, um, quoting. Moreover, there's an intuitive feel to how one constructs a piece of writing that includes the words of others, whether these be written or spoken - a feel that strengthens to become a steely grip, as one processes more and more of other people's locutions, and interpolates them in more and more of one's own.

Hari avoided complete disgrace because the bulk of his borrowings were from his own extant work. In truth, I think his cardinal failing - and the reason he was so dramatically unmasked - was that he was writing pieces that were often highly critical of his interviewees. It's a truth universally unacknow-

ledged among journalists, that so long as you paint your interview subjects up in the most pleasing of colours, they never think to complain - even if they're aware the picture you've presented is the most egregious *trompe l'oeil*. After all, who's going to go public saying: "I could never have uttered anything that sounded this intelligent, eloquent or euphonious ..." On that basis, I've always understood, together with the bulk of the profession, that the puffer the puff the better; it's only when you're aiming for the righteous takedown that your weapons need to be sharp, and fly true.

As to borrowing one's own words from oneself, rather than from one's subjects - surely this cannot be accorded a great crime? My late friend the journalist and critic Elizabeth Young once said to me that what we jobbing journalists do (by which I mean those of us who have plied our trade being prepared to write about more or less anything, for just about anyone, and to any length) is to provide our readers with a form of "mental bubble wrap" that they can sit at home popping with their psychic digits. It's a fair point, but it prompts the question: is it short-changing readers to offer them some re-inflated bubble wrap they just might have popped before?

It's surely axiomatic that the greater the prolificacy of the writer, the greater his or her capacity for self-plagiarism. This has to be one of the principal reasons why we admire such productivity rather less than classical economics implies we should; another is embodied in Mark Twain's witty cynicism: "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead". At certain times during my freelance career, I have been filing anything up to a quarter of a million words a year (I include books in the estimate), so is it any wonder if I've repeated myself - and sometimes knowingly? For years, my rubric for self-plagiarism was this: in my fiction I tried to create new conceptual space, coin fresh metaphors, bend and warp language in surprising ways - the books had fewer readers than the newspaper and magazine work, so it seemed perfectly legitimate to transplant images, riffs and coinages from this sequestered word-garden into the brighter but more ephemeral light of the daily and weekly press.

The reverse also seemed a legitimate hypothesis: by which I mean it seemed unlikely to me that the serious readers of my fiction would be annoyed if they saw something in a newspaper or magazine that they had already encountered in one of my stories or novels, since their very status as long-form readers would endow them with the understanding that these instances weren't recycling per se, but rather the half-lives of tropes decaying into the background radiation of the zeitgeist. For a long time this modus

Will Self's writing room, London, July 2005

scripturae worked fairly well. I've never actually been hauled up by either a reader of my journalism, or of my fiction, and asked to account for my double-entry book keeping. I liked to think that if some anecdotes or gags or observations were registered as duplicates, my readers by this fact alone would draw closer to me - becoming, as it were, part of my immediate family, who, like most intimates of most anybody, are indeed irritated by my tendency to repeat myself.

As the years and then the decades passed, however, not only did the gross amount of words generated continue its inexorable increase, but the world these words were attempting to describe began to shrink. The only things on my bucket list are: must buy a new bucket (and other such quotidian concerns). Some may feel that withdrawing from the aspiration to pogo-stick up Mount Kilimanjaro or swim with blind swordfish is a sign of defeat - but for the ageing writer, it seems doubly specious to drive yourself on in this way, visiting countries, tramping round cities, talking to their inhabitants - and all in the service of creating novelty to be immediately commoditized. Moreover, such is the formulaic quality of much journalism that to "make it new" becomes increasingly difficult the more you've, er, made it new already.

Nevertheless, a low point for me came around eight years ago when I was still writing restaurant reviews for the *New Statesman*. My column, which was called "Real Meals", set out to critique the places where the majority of Britons do in fact eat out; namely, chain restaurants. There are more of these than you might think - the column ran for over two years. The time came, however, when I was writing up yet another subfusc experience, and had just about reached the allotted word limit when a hitherto repressed feeling of *déjà mangé* overwhelmed me. It couldn't be the case, surely, that I'd just reviewed the same restaurant twice? That I had, effectively, created a small chain of reviews, to reflect the several iterations of this particular dining concept?

Dear reader, I had - although in my defence, when I looked back over the first review of this particular place, I was at least gratified to see that it was only about 50 per cent the same as the one I had finished. Still, even a crap bit of plagiarism software could've spotted this verbiage recycling - and so, dutiful hack that I am, I went out to eat once more, and write it up again.

I wish I could tell you that this incident has made me as scrupulous as the American writer Nicholson Baker, of whom I once read that he checks every new book manuscript against its predecessors, an eagle eye out for any repetitions, whether these be material, or even formal: he will allow no duplication in his oeuvre even of certain well-worn adjectival clauses. In line with Baker's interest in the minutiae of life - not just shoelaces, also aglets - his scrupulousness suggests, dare I say it, a rather anal cast of mind. I, by contrast, have never been in denial of the fact that we are all born - in Freud's memorable phrase - "between urine and faeces", something which must, in part, explain the great and arguably emetic word stream that I've been vomiting forth these past thirty-five years.

I think it was Evelyn Waugh who said that most writers are lucky if they have one original book inside them - and that therefore an awful lot of literary careers consist, perforce, in rewriting it. Jorge Luis Borges invented "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote", as a heuristic with which to explain the polyvalent properties of prose itself: there was no plagiarism involved in Menard's writing of "the Quixote", because it wasn't the same text as Cervantes's, by definition. Of course, when it comes to the far shorter forms filled in by journalists, Waugh's dictum heralds disaster, as we rewrite the same old articles again and again. The Menard defence cuts no ice with our jaded editors, sickened as they are by the never-ending go-round that the prolific *Observer* writer and scourge of cultural bubble wrap Nick Davies has dubbed "churnalism". ■

Will Self's most recent book is Will, published last year

Arch fiends in Paradise

When lexicographers fight

KORY STAMPER

THE DICTIONARY WARS

The American fight over the English language

PETER MARTIN

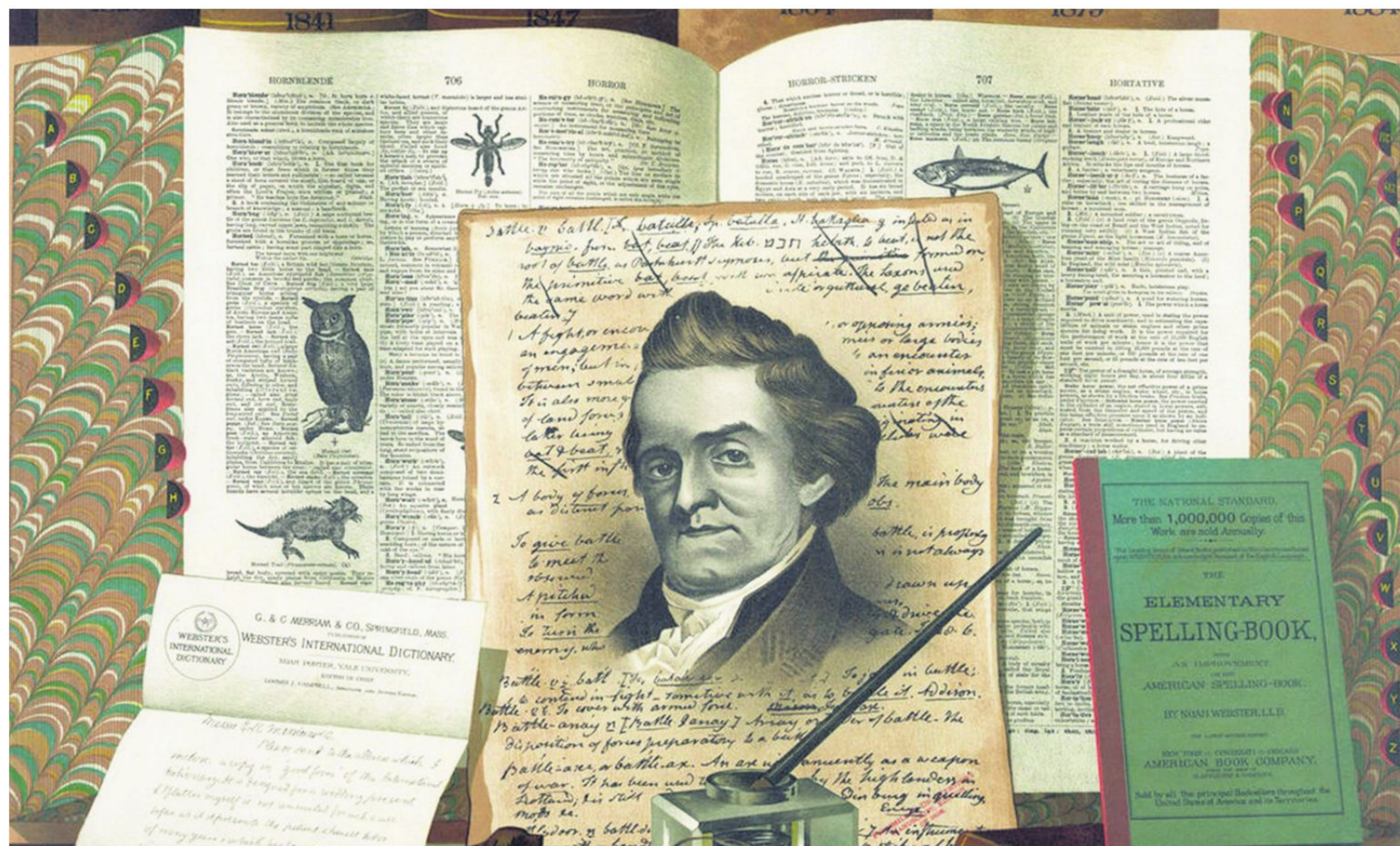
368pp. Princeton University Press. £25 (US \$29.95).

THE TITLE OF Peter Martin's new book might sound like sexed-up marketing copy, but it's not: the "dictionary wars" was the name given to an intellectual and market conflict of nineteenth-century America. Its main antagonists were the lexicographers Noah Webster and Joseph E. Worcester, and it constituted nothing less than – as Martin puts it – "a civil war over words that illuminates America's search to identify and know itself".

Drawn into the skirmish were educators, newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic, well-known writers of the era, American politicians, state and federal governments – even Samuel Johnson, who had died some sixty years before the dictionary wars began. On one side was Webster's dictionary, the work of an American patriot and schoolmaster, linguistically progressive in its mission to foster American spelling and pronunciation. On the other was Worcester's, the work of a scholar and philologist, linguistically conservative with its devotion to established British norms. The war began with charges of plagiarism, but quickly escalated to spy-vs-spy intrigue on both sides of the Atlantic, accusations of near-treasonous behaviour from each side's publishers, and the best unscrupulous marketing that money could buy. The American intelligentsia were captivated. They still are, as Martin's book demonstrates.

Having spent twenty years as a lexicographer at Merriam-Webster, the company that claims to carry on the lexicographical tradition of Noah Webster, I am more than familiar with the hagiography surrounding "Uncle Noah". He founded America's first daily newspaper, *American Minerva*, and wrote what is popularly called the "Blue-Backed Speller", a primer for use in schools that was the bestselling book of its time. He also wrote two dictionaries whose main focus was the promotion of what would come to be called American English. One of those dictionaries, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), is still used by Supreme Court Justices. Webster is variously called America's schoolmaster, a forgotten founding father of the nation, and America's first lexicographer.

All that said, he was, as nearly every one of his biographers would confirm, a difficult man. He was a patriotic firebrand, but one who didn't hesitate to support deeply unpopular – even unpatriotic – positions (he was devoutly against the War of 1812 and the Bill of Rights). He could be peevish and vindictive towards those who disagreed with him – including his own children; he was often thought arrogant; and he was a terrible businessman, driving his long-suffering family deeper and deeper into debt to support his lexicographical endeavours. Until recently, few cared to examine his legacy as "America's first lexicographer" (an inaccurate claim: at least two other American lexicographers published dictionaries before Webster's appeared on the scene in 1806). But with every foray into the American lexicographic tra-



dition we learn something new about Webster, Worcester and the people who championed them – each man considered by their team the underdog in the fight.

Martin's book includes a substantial amount of archival research which will undoubtedly be a boon to scholars of the dictionary wars. His research fleshes out the biographies of some of the players – notably Chauncey Allen Goodrich, Webster's son-in-law and a grudging lexicographer (who, Martin claims, intentionally deceived most of the people involved, including his own family, about the rights to various Websterian dictionaries for personal gain); Sherman Converse, the first publisher of Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*, who hired Worcester to abridge it, thereby opening himself up to later accusations of enabling plagiarism on one side and ill-use on both; and Worcester himself, a lifelong reference writer and scholar who gains a bit more humanity than he has been given previously. There are vignettes here of his life as a tenant at Craigie House in Cambridge, Massachusetts; his late marriage at fifty-seven; his genial fussing over the noise made by the neighbour's children; and even the toll the dictionary wars took on him – towards the end of the skirmish, he wrote to his brother that he wanted nothing more to do with his publisher's attacks on Webster. Martin also gives us a taste of the cut-throat world of nineteenth-century printers' pamphlets and unsigned, semi-anonymous letters intended to malign competitors and sell books. One particularly acerbic letter from Converse sums up the general tenor: "Such an enemy in one's own bosom must be like the Arch Fiend in Paradise, administering sweets to the taste to create bitterness in the soul".

There are nuanced arguments to be made about this era and this rivalry. It is a shame, then, that Martin flattens Worcester and Webster – and therefore the story – into Good Lexicographer and Bad Lexicographer. Webster is painted as an overweening orthographical crank; Worcester as a humble scholar who had, unlike the Merriams, devoted his life to the creation of reference works and who wanted nothing more than to be left alone to write his dictionaries. Goodrich, meanwhile, is a conniving hypocrite; the Merriam brothers are merely rapacious; Worcester's publishers are either inept bumbler or unyielding attack dogs. There are grains of truth in all these depictions, but Martin's commitment to the Worcester-as-underdog narrative leads him into some shaky scholarly territory.

"Noah Webster, The Schoolmaster of the Republic", unsigned Root & Tinker print, c.1886

Kory Stamper is a lexicographer and the author of Word by Word: The secret life of dictionaries, 2017

Martin often waves away charges against Worcester that should be investigated – even if only to prove them wrong. Webster claimed, for example, that Worcester stole the entry for "clapboard" from his dictionary. The entries are identical apart from a hyphen, but Martin dismisses the claim by saying that Worcester got the entry from another dictionary – then immediately notes that the other dictionary pulled the definition from Webster's *Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806), with which Worcester was certainly familiar. No matter, says Martin: lexicographers of the era routinely borrowed from each other. That is entirely true, but a feeble argument considering that the entire Webster-Worcester skirmish was based ultimately on who borrowed what from whom and when (or not). It is also employed as an uneven defence. When the subject is Worcester, he "drew from" or "got the word from" sources such as Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755); but when the subject is Webster, he "raided" and "lifted definitions" from Johnson. Set aside the tone and give us the goods: which definitions did Webster pilfer? We are given no examples. This is a recurrent problem with the book – and a great loss. No matter how one frames the dictionary wars, they are, at heart, about the stuff in dictionaries. Martin does spend a great deal of time on orthography and pronunciation in the dictionaries, but much of it is abstract: without specific entries to compare and contrast between the Webster and Worcester dictionaries throughout the years, and to mark changes in attitudes to American English, the point of Martin's argument – that Worcester is the true lexicographer and the Merriams and their ilk are just grabby, plagiarizing opportunists – is dulled.

Martin also indulges in some logical leaps not supported by textual evidence. He takes a quotation from Worcester out of context to suggest that Webster's continued attacks on Worcester were the result of a deranged mind. "[Worcester] feels", writes Martin, "that something in the Webster camp – or perhaps in Webster's mind – must be amiss. He dare not speculate" – though that doesn't stop Martin from doing so. Elsewhere, setting aside the point about how commonplace lexicographical borrowing was in the period, he insists that the Merriam editors who wrote the 1864 edition of Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* stole liberally from Worcester's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1860), saying that correspondence between the Merriams and an editor who had been an assistant of

Worcester's makes it clear that each Merriam editor had a copy of Worcester open on their desk. But Martin gives no citations or quotations from this correspondence.

There is, however, a more significant problem to contend with: the book contains many errors, particularly quotations from easily accessible primary sources. A quotation taken from the *Edinburgh Review* is just one example. Martin inexplicably renders the original's "in their own tongue" as "in our own tongue", materially altering the import of the original: "And why should they [Americans] write books, when a six weeks' passage brings them in their own tongue, our sense, science, and genius, in bales and hogsheads?" In another passage he tells us of a review of Webster's 1828 dictionary published in the *United States Democratic Review* in which the reviewer, Edward S. Gould, writes that "Webster was a vain, weak, plodding Yankee" - but those words appear nowhere in that publication, though they do appear in a pamphlet produced by Worcester's publishers. What appears to be an extract from Webster's letter to a Dr Ramsay of South Carolina presents a jumble of quotations strung together as if they were from the same paragraph, and ends with a quotation taken from *another* letter Webster wrote to *another* man two years later. The typos, misconstructions and mistakes to be found are so numerous as to cast doubt on the accuracy of the transcribed manuscript and archival material that Martin uses and which the reader can't check.

Moreover, Martin selectively edits many of his quotations, sometimes sloppily, in ways that mislead the reader. When quoting an advertisement placed by a London bookseller, for example, he notes that the

bookseller deplored Webster's "fanciful" spellings, but had he continued the quotation beyond one word, the reader would have seen that the supposedly fanciful spellings ("worshiper" instead of "worshipper", "mold" instead of "mould", "meter" instead of "metre", and "offense" instead of "offence") are perfect examples of American English spellings that were actively in use in the United States when this Londoner was writing - a salient point that should have been at least mentioned, if not investigated. In discussing the editorial changes that Goodrich had to undertake after Noah's death to produce a new edition of Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*, Martin lists seventeen bizarre spellings that Goodrich purportedly had to purge. But I can find only seven of them in the 1841 and 1828 editions of the *American Dictionary* (and one of those spellings is itself misspelt in Martin's book: Webster used "ieland" for "island", but Martin renders it as "iland"). Small, seemingly inconsequential details are also misconstrued or miscast. John Adams inexplicably becomes "John Waldo" in one quoted letter; "vulgar" is used of language several times before it's actually glossed (correctly) as "common"; a small disquisition on the spelling bee states that it's a nineteenth-century American invention, when in fact instructions for holding a spelling bee can be found in *The English Schoole-Maister*, written by the Edmund Coote, in 1596. The overall effect of these errors is that of a persistent light breeze on an ornately constructed house of cards.

For a book about "the American fight over the English language", *The Dictionary Wars* offers remarkably little information about how America felt about its language and how that changed (or didn't)

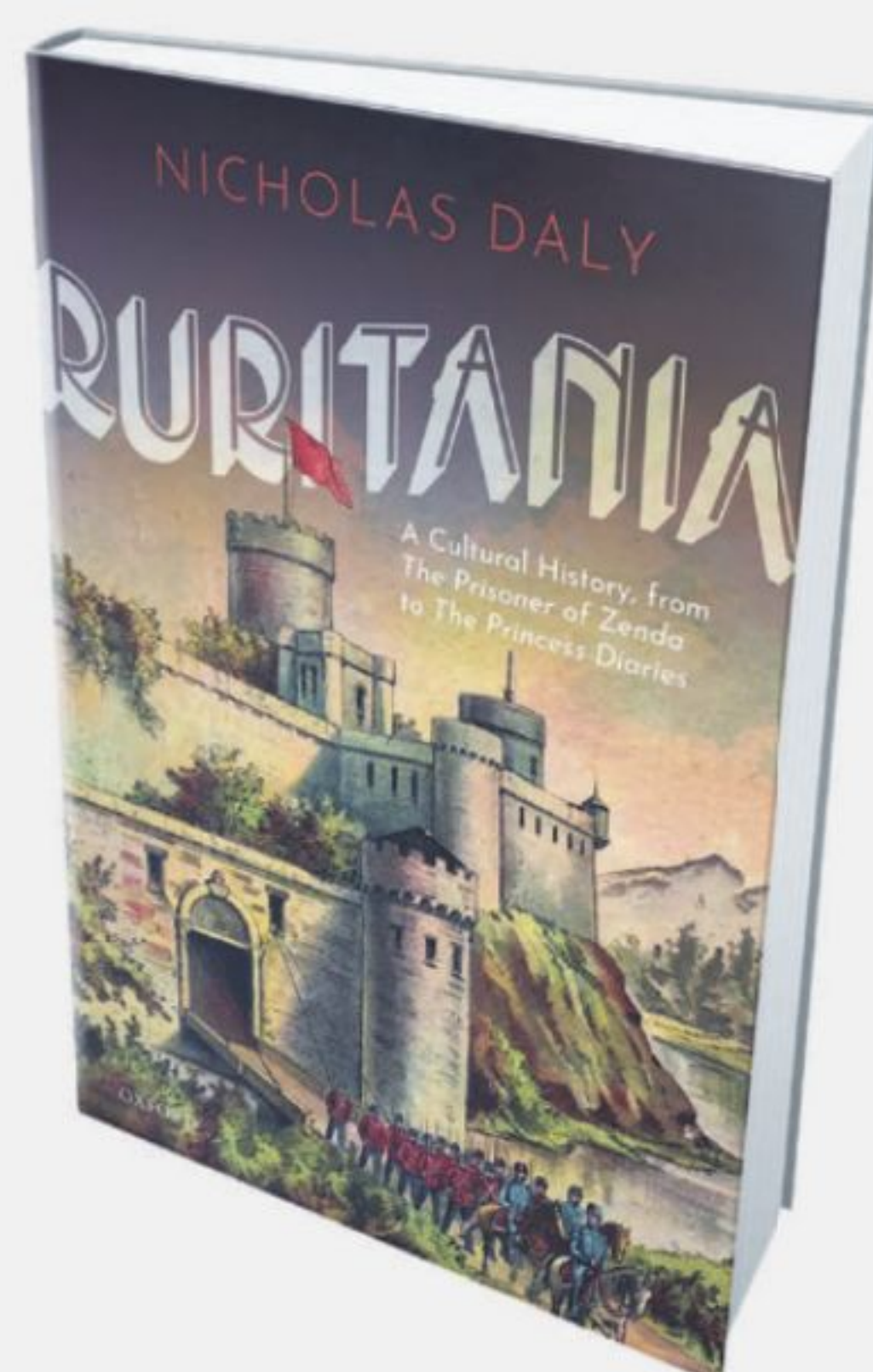
“
The war began
with charges of
plagiarism, but
quickly
escalated to
spy-vs-spy
intrigue on
both sides of
the Atlantic

throughout the period. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of American newspaper articles from the nineteenth century that chronicle the everyday American's thoughts and attitudes towards the burgeoning American language, yet few of these are referenced. "American" in Martin's book refers primarily to Massachusetts and Connecticut, the seats of Webster's people and Worcester, and yet westward expansion throughout the nineteenth century constantly exposed average folks to linguistic innovations. How did they react? How were dictionaries used in the growing American school system, and what extra-lexical lessons were they supposed to teach? Webster was hardly the only American advocating a radical new spelling paradigm for American English. Benjamin Franklin himself did so; how were other suggested systems and their creators regarded? How did urbanization affect America's view of its literature and language? What about the American Civil War, during which definitions for "constitution", "congress" and "copperhead" in the 1847 and 1864 editions of Webster's *American Dictionary* were picked apart in Southern newspapers as evidence of Northern aggression and government overreach? These are the sorts of questions that naturally spring to mind when one frames the dictionary wars as the arena in which America's linguistic identity was set. While Peter Martin's research sheds light on the characters of the Webster-Worcester skirmish, there remains much darkness to dispel when it comes to illuminating nineteenth-century American identity. ■

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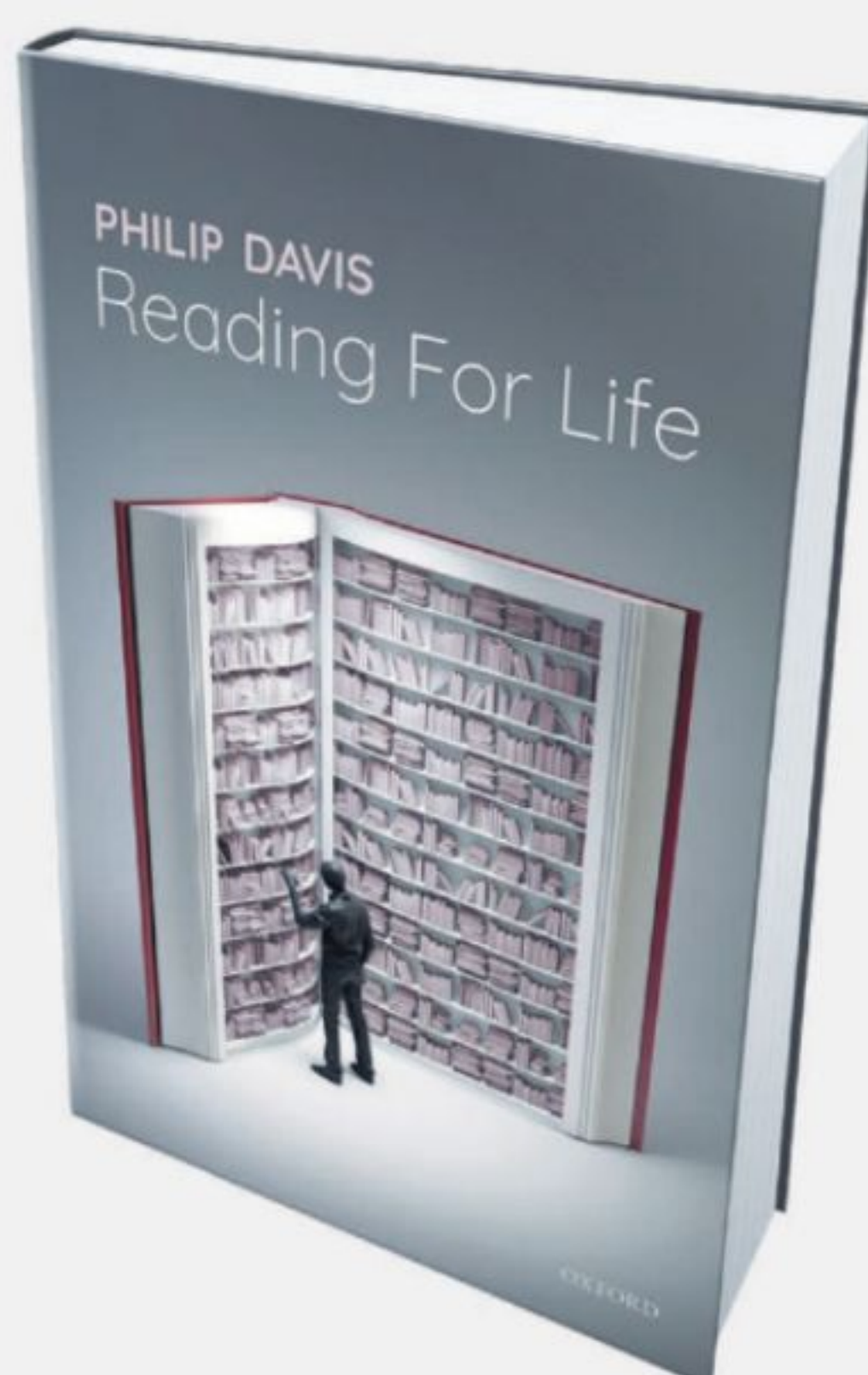
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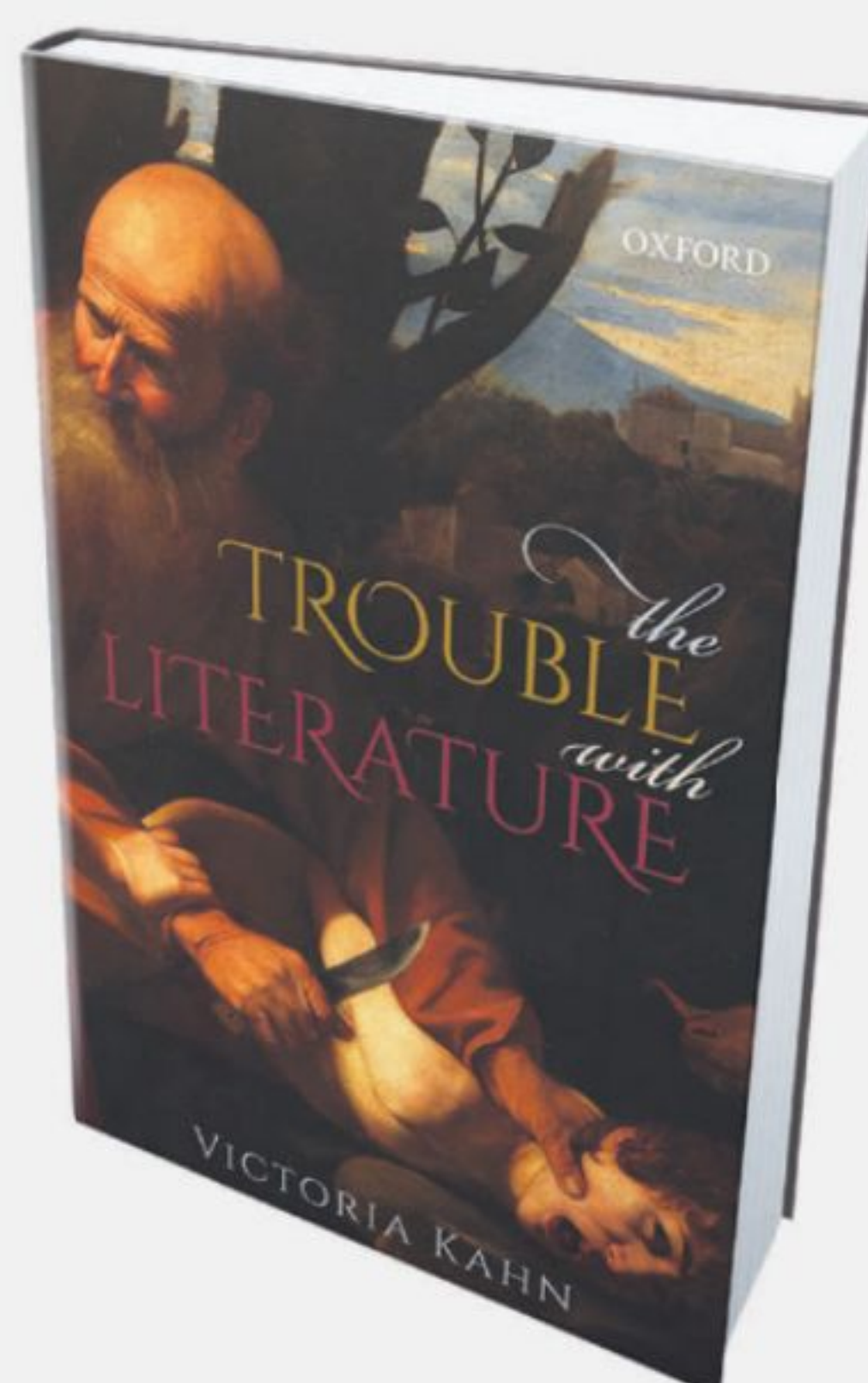
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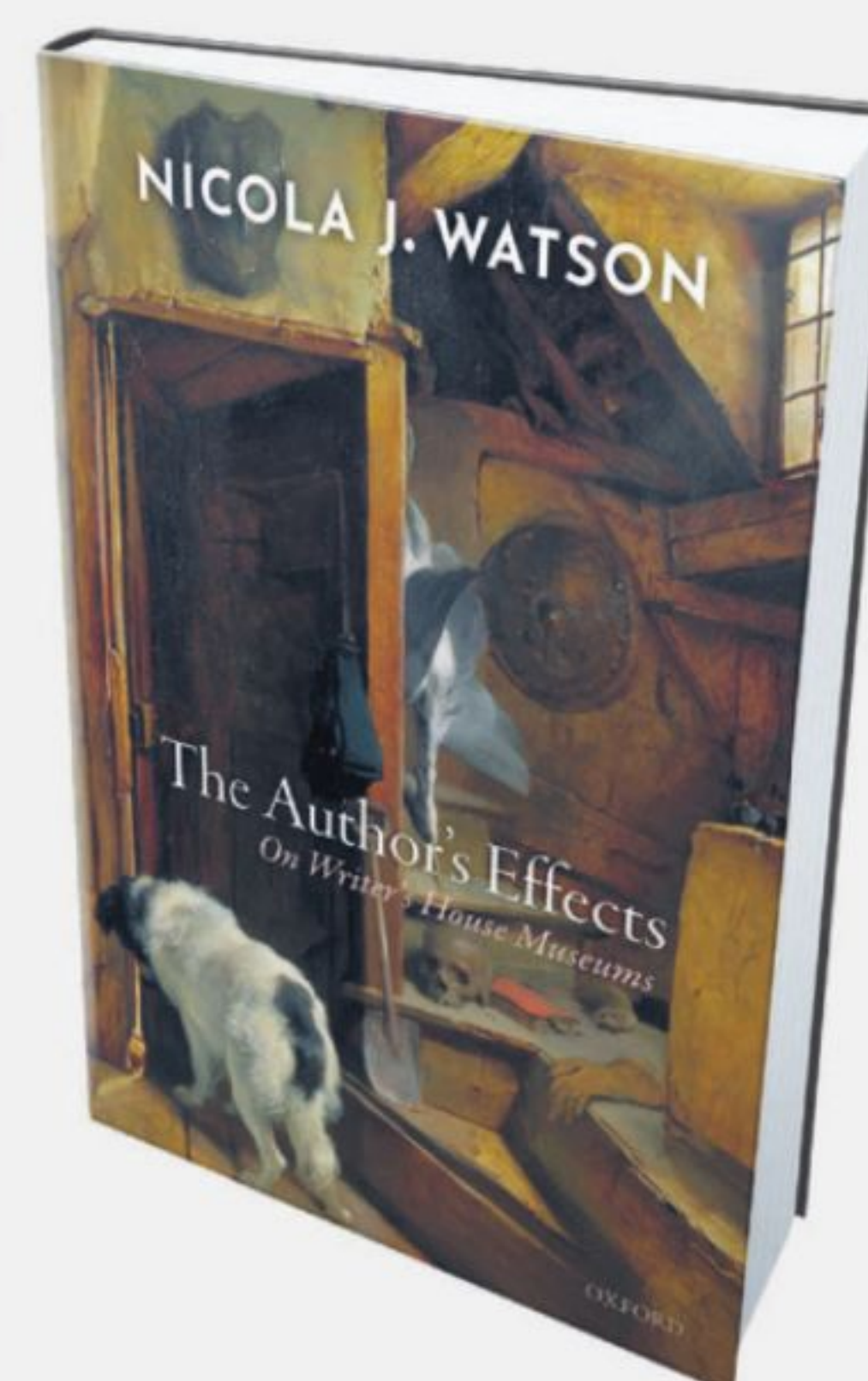
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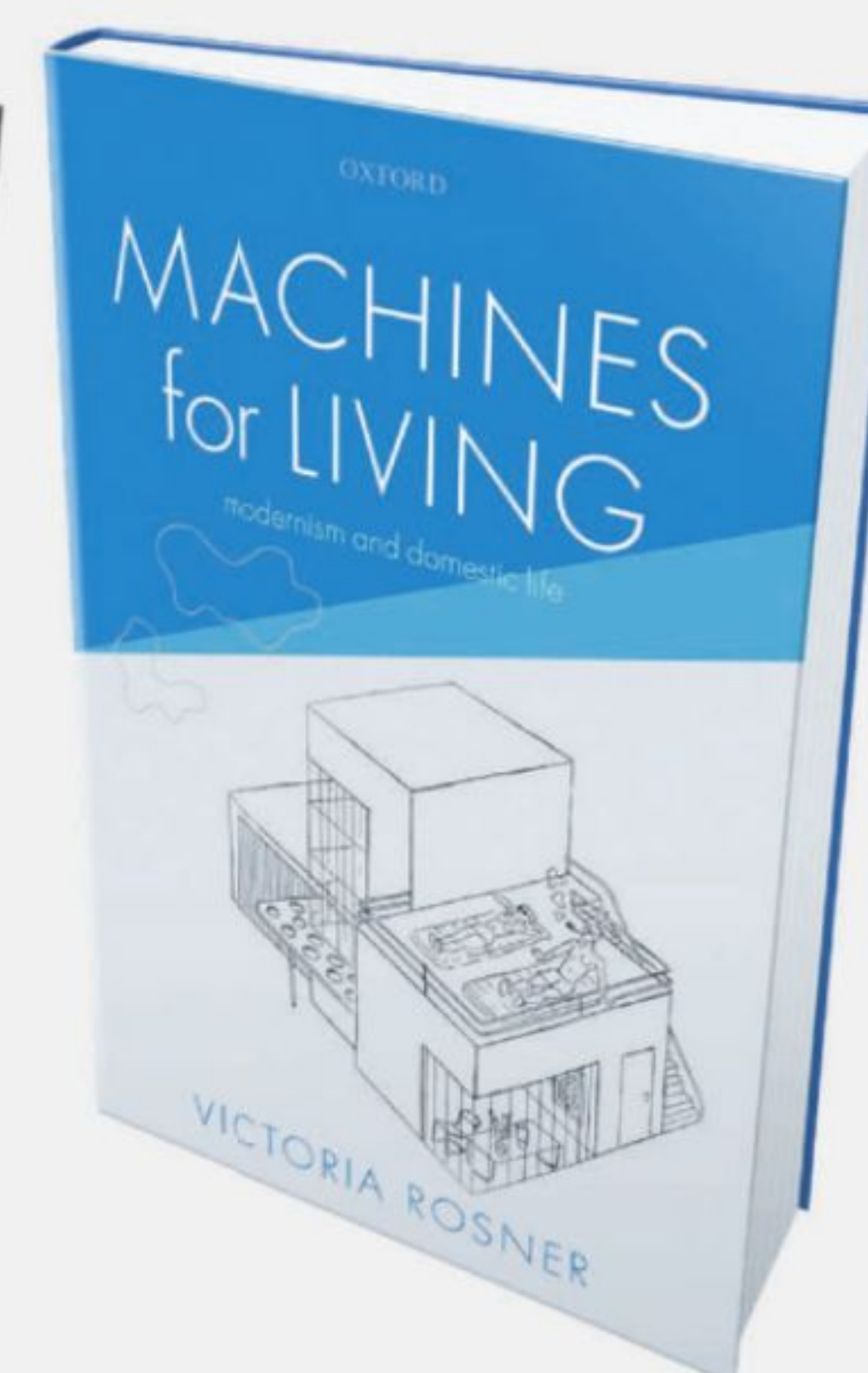
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LIBBY PURVES

SOUNDS & FURIES

The love-hate relationship between women and slang

JONATHON GREEN

576pp. Robinson. Paperback, £16.99.

WHITE-LIVERED BAWDYBASKET that I am, Fleet-street bumsitter offspring of a mangy nightwalker begot on a sedan chair, I can't really get a handle on Jonathon Green's latest vast survey of slang.

Green is a veteran researcher of illicit language. I honour his effort to chronicle, down centuries - from the ancient world to the internet and from *Little Women* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* - the "love-hate relationship of women and slang". But there are problems with that relationship, which he gamely acknowledges. One is that it has mostly been men who have recorded female speech, whether by hanging out with fishwives at Billingsgate or eavesdrop-

ping on Valley Girls. The other is that women are far more reliably to be found on the receiving end of men's furiously negative slang. (Munter! Malkin! Slag! Scrubber!)

So we are reliant on many a male playwright or diarist, all the way from Chaucer, with his glee at Alisoun observing that a chap's beard may be stiff but his "sary lume" is "soft and soupill as the silk". We dive in and out of the merriment of past centuries, when a brothel was an "abbey" or, in France, a "magasin des fesses" (buttock-shop). But most of this slang, unsurprisingly, seems to reflect male perceptions of women rather than echoing their voices. There are glimpses of wild viragos in all these periods, yet often the descriptions of them are bred more of male paranoia than of any firm insight into how females actually talked.

For modern times we are equally reliant on Green's scrupulous, male, analyses of newer slang. Some of the current dating terms, indeed, will be the most interesting to those of us who have swerved the age of Tinder: "breadcrumbing" is sending little flirtatious non-committal texts to the bloke, as if luring a shy blue tit; undue obsession gets you stuck in "dick-sand", and "roaching" is sleeping around while claiming that you were never exclusive (it seems cockroaches do that). There is a dispiriting list of words women allegedly use for their genitalia, but once I got to foof-fou-fou, I hastened on.

The best bits of the book are Green's own reflections, which are often on how frustrating it has been trying to find authentic girls-only slang and verify it. There's a nice 1920s flapper word for a chap whose idea of a date is a simple walk - "a flat-wheeler" - and in the US you don't want to dance with a "corn-



Libby Purves is a novelist, journalist, Times columnist, theatre critic and former BBC radio presenter

shredder" on your feet. Green hits a rich seam in the school stories of Angela Brazil ("Miss Jones is a stunt, as jinky as you like" and "twiggez-vous?"). But again, schoolgirls are just she-Molesworths really: inhabitants of a closed community.

Nurses do seem to have come up with some inventive slang: a "horrendoplasty" for a long operation on an obese patient, a terminal patient "hailing the Jesus bus" and the "peek-and-shriek" moment when the surgeon opens the abdomen on something grim. But these do not feel exclusively female, more professional. Green makes a brave attempt to find, online and in literature, as many lesbian slang words as possible, but apart from the explicit stuff the only coinages that really charmed me were "lensbian" - show-offs who only exhibit same-sex lust for the camera - and the complaint of being "het-lagged". That means "how a gay person feels after spending the holidays with their hetero extended family".

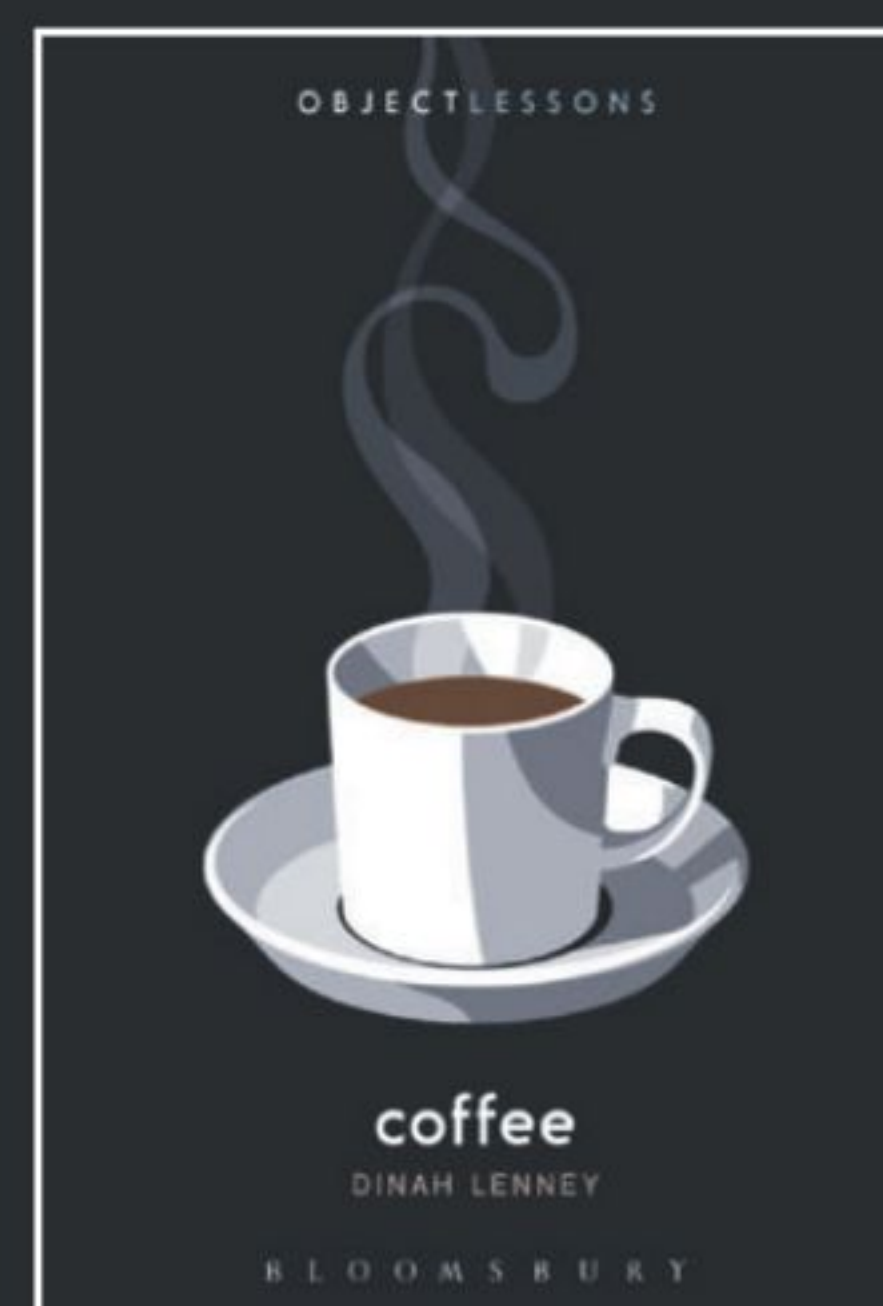
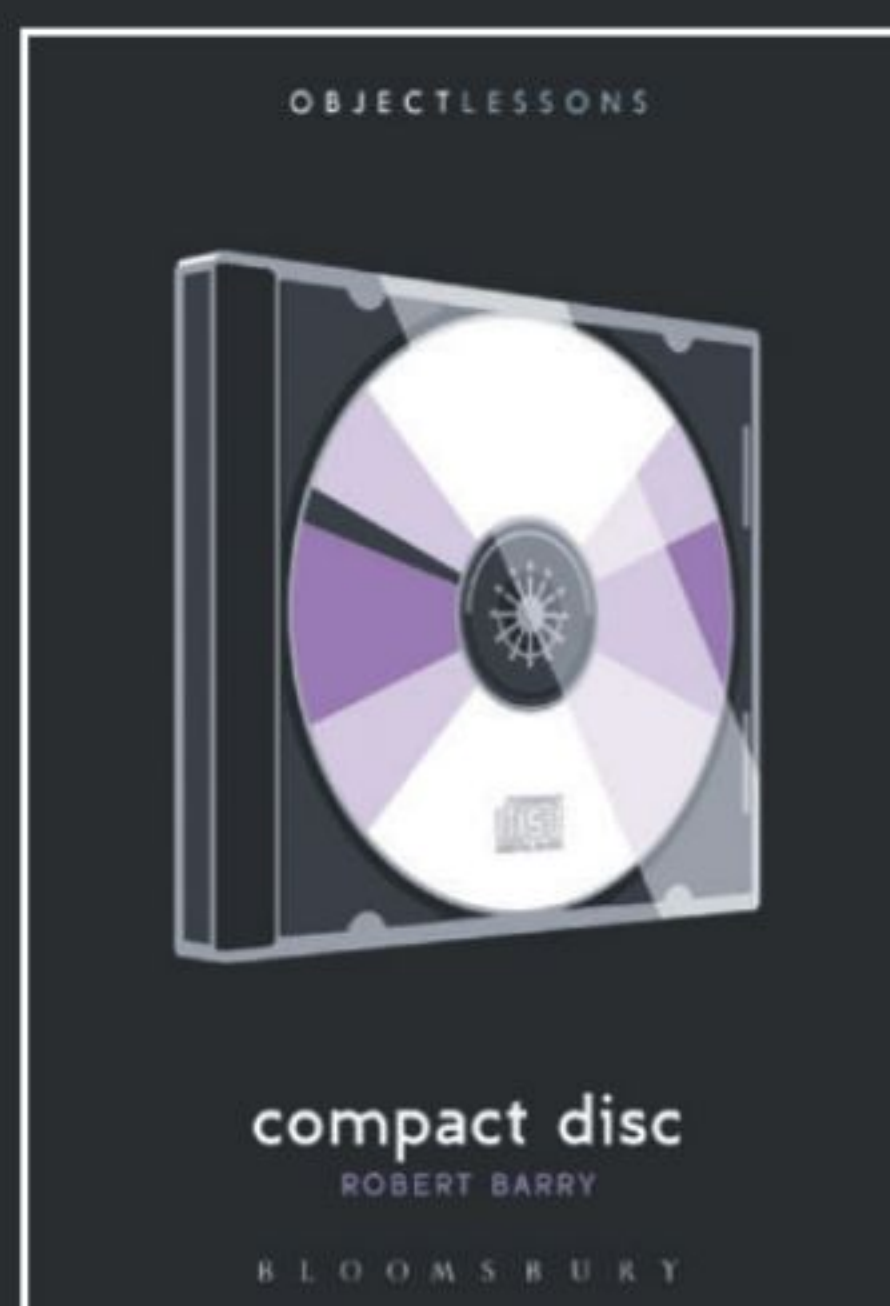
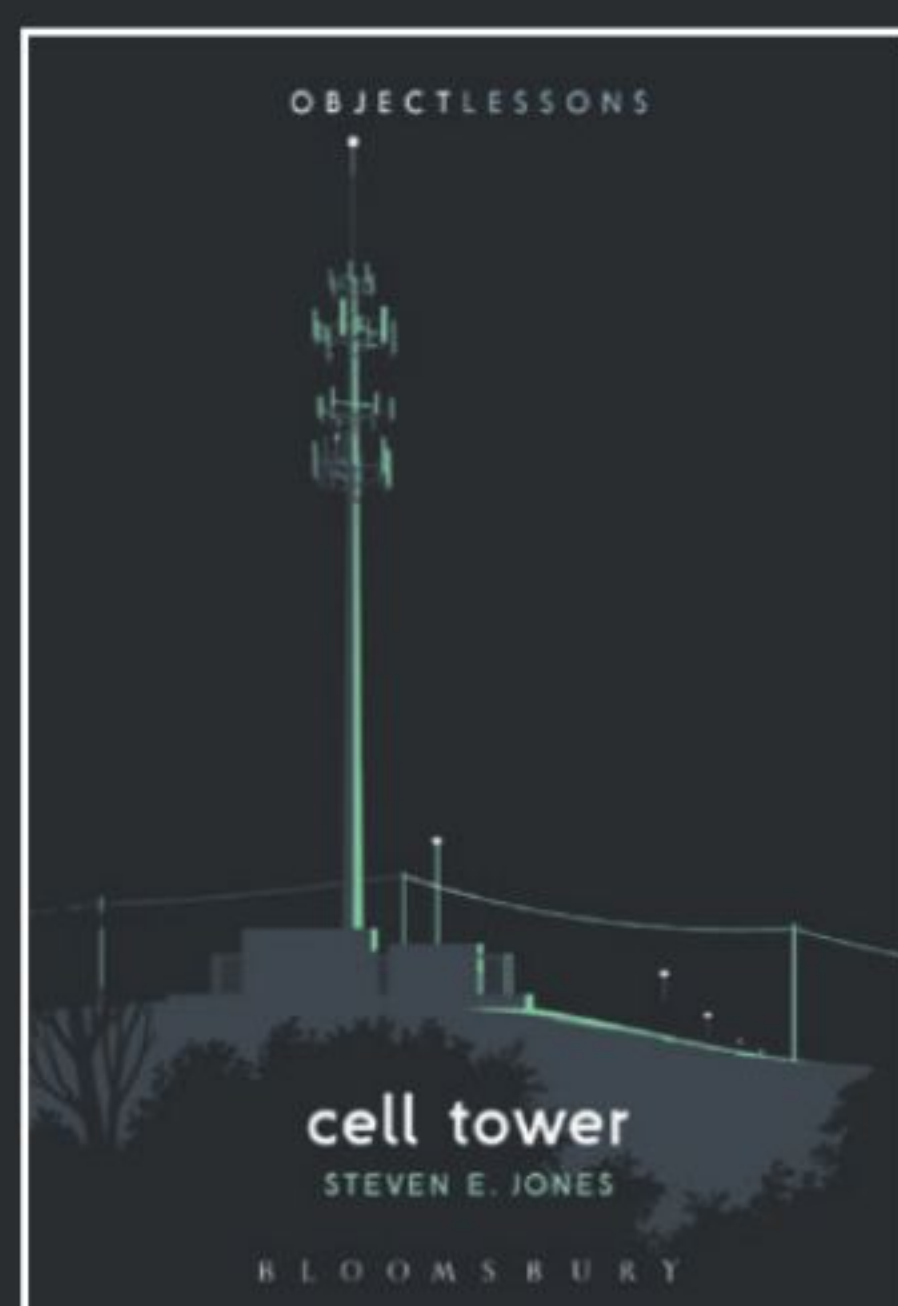
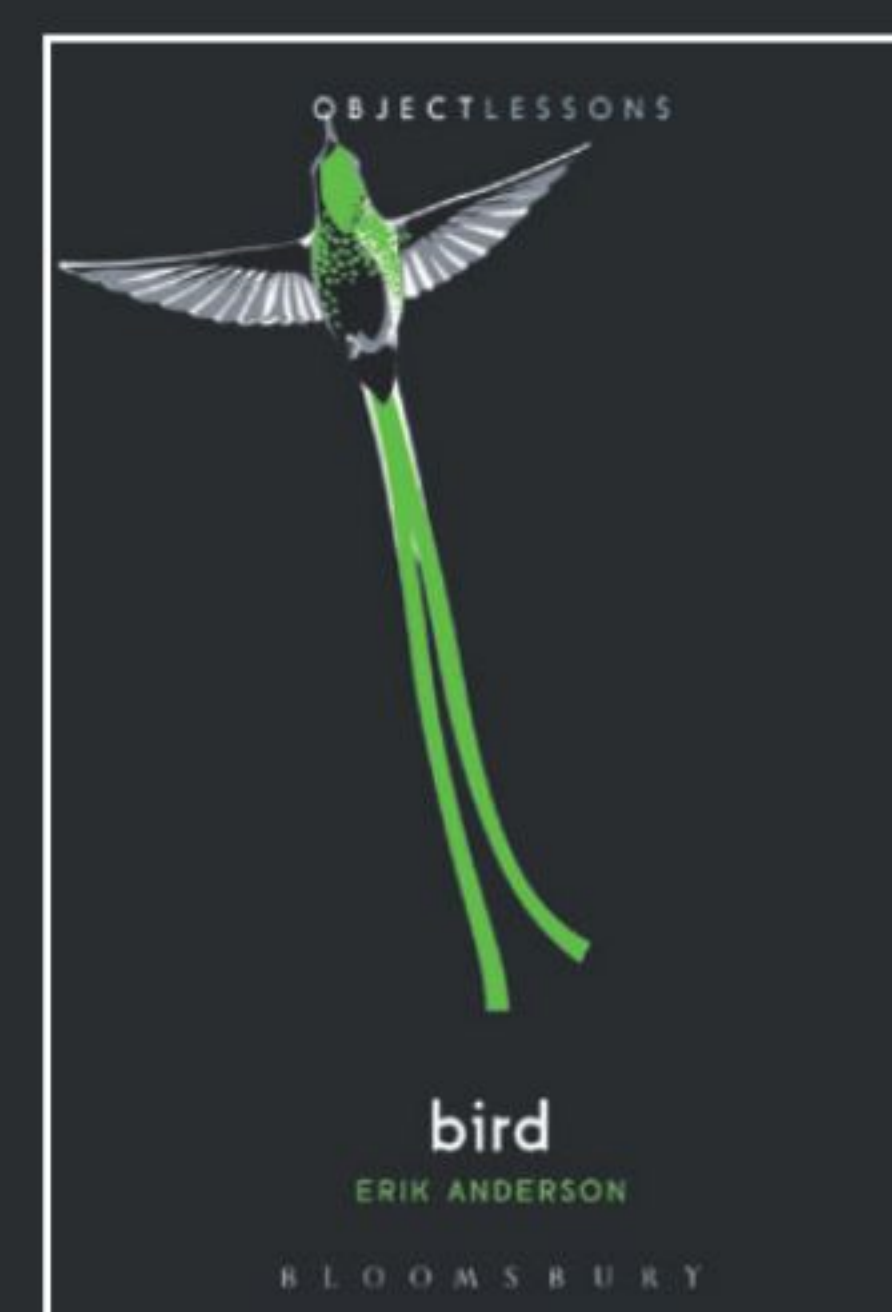
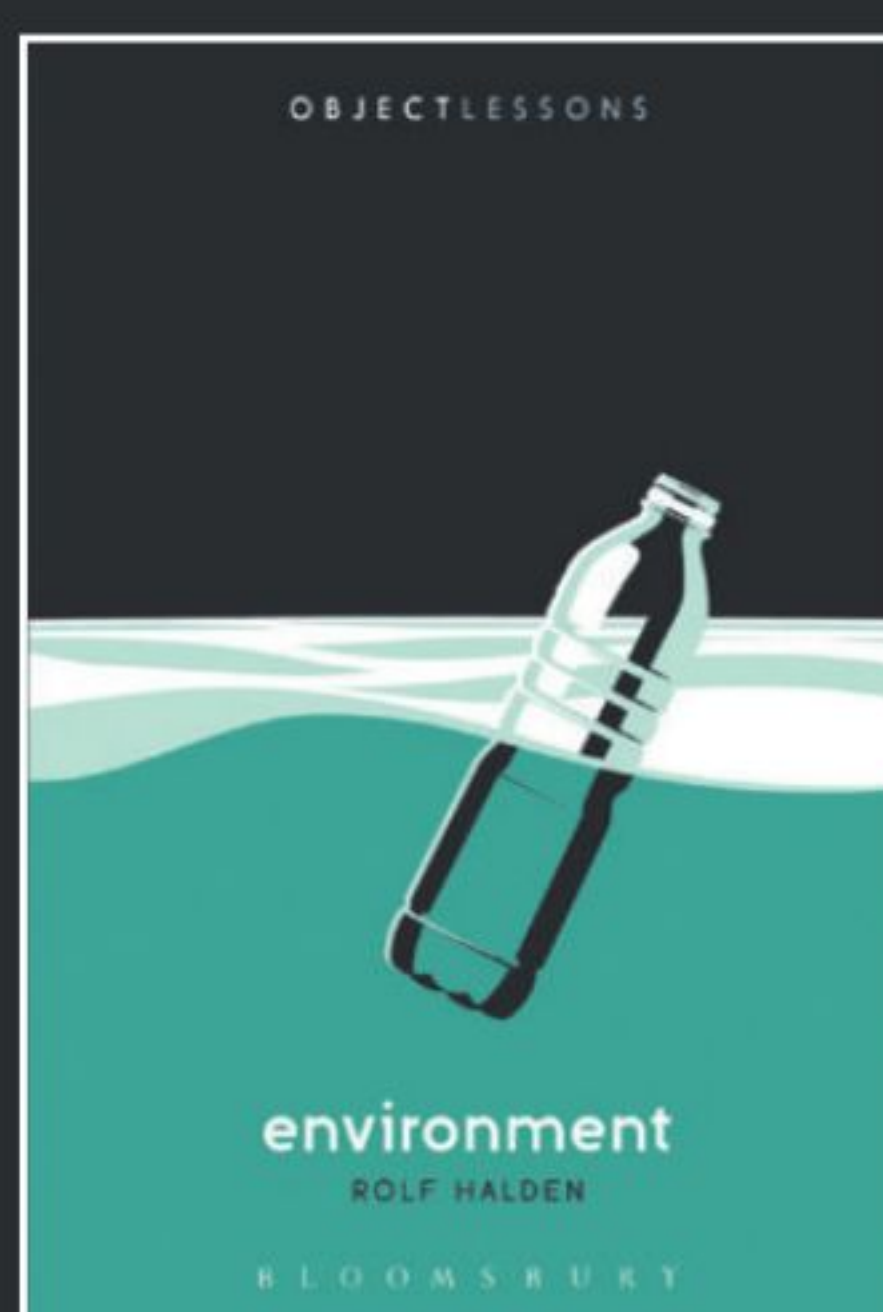
So this may be a useful book on a reference shelf, invaluable for university libraries on dark winter evenings when you ought to be getting some work done, a sidelight on history and literature and an opportunity to shout "ye whidling shammock!" at a troublesome friend without working out its etymology. But it's frustrating. Being a proper scholar in this rorty field, Jonathon Green concludes with suitable honesty that his entire book "may be a leap too far, a study in piling up bricks in the absence of even a single straw". But, he adds, if it proves a minuscule first step in assessing this linguistic subset, all to the good. ■

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Gangsters' paradise

A prodigious feat of historical fiction full of violence, savagery and ghosts

EDMUND GORDON

THE MIRROR & THE LIGHT
HILARY MANTEL

882pp. Fourth Estate. £25.

HILARY MANTEL'S NOVELS about Thomas Cromwell are full of bad marriages - between Henry VIII and his first two wives, the Catholic church and the English state, the English people and the English ruling class - but they spring from a heaven-made marriage between author and subject. Mantel has reimagined one of the least beloved figures in British history as one of the most extraordinary men of his age, and the age itself as a sort of horse-drawn gangsters' paradise: a world of extreme brutality, where untold rewards are available to those with the strength and guile to go out and take them. In Mantel's hands, the story of the Tudors loses all its heavy familiarity and starts to feel like a custom-built vehicle for her muscular prose and savage wit, not to mention her lifelong concern with violence and evil, religion and ghosts.

Crucial to Mantel's achievement is her refusal either to censure or sentimentalize the past. She doesn't foist twenty-first-century values and beliefs onto her characters, but seeks to engage with them in all their pre-scientific, pre-democratic, God-fearing strangeness. Her language is wiry and precise, and not at all cod-Tudor, though from time to time she does deploy some vaguely sixteenth-century cadences ("the web of treason is sticky in the palm, and leaves its bloody smear"), and the imagery is often heightened for spine-tingling effect ("Katherine's miscarried children, their blind faces and their vestigial hands joined in prayer"). Likewise, the jokes, which are good and frequent, don't depend on any cheap tricks with historical perspective, but are things that the characters themselves can (and often do) laugh along with. These may be negative virtues, but it's amazing how few historical novelists manage

to attain them, and Mantel has access to all the corresponding positive virtues as well. She conjures the sensual texture of the sixteenth century, its tastes (surprisingly varied) and smells (surprisingly pleasant), and makes even her characters' most extreme actions and beliefs seem entirely natural to them. The result is some of the most complex and immersive fiction to have come along in years.

In *Wolf Hall* (TLS, May 15, 2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (TLS, May 11, 2012) - both of which won the Booker Prize, and were successfully adapted for stage and screen - Cromwell is an immoderately glamorous and dynamic character, the sort of leading man you're meant to root for without hesitation, like a sixteenth-century Jason Bourne. He is so much cleverer than anyone else in the novels - and so much more decent, too, with so many subtle perceptions and tender feelings, such an array of hidden skills - that he'd be insufferable if he wasn't also a bit of a monster. He is driven by pure ambition, and more than capable of destroying anyone who gets in his way. It's as if Othello's rectitude and Iago's ruthlessness had been mashed together in a single character, but without any of the violent internal conflicts that might imply.

Cromwell is, on the whole, a more troubled and isolated figure in *The Mirror & the Light*. He thinks of himself as "soiled in life's battle, so seamed and scarred, so unwanted, so cold". He is haunted by the various failures and compromises we've witnessed in the earlier books, and by a ragged company of ghosts: his father, Walter, "who stands at the bedpost" when he sleeps, "sneering at him and fingering the king's purple curtains"; George Boleyn, "his hands shaking, naked without rings"; George's sister, Anne Boleyn, "her head turning for news that never came"; the boy he stabbed in Putney as a child. He sees Thomas Wolsey, too, until - in one of the novel's most emotionally powerful scenes - he visits the cardinal's daughter in her convent, and learns that she holds him responsible for her father's death. He can't convince her that he remained loyal to the end: his reputation as a master of deception means

Mark Rylance as Thomas Cromwell in the television adaptation of *Wolf Hall*

Edmund Gordon teaches creative writing at King's College London. He is the author of The Invention of Angela Carter: A biography, 2016

that nobody can tell when he's being straight with them. Even Cromwell's son, Gregory, doesn't entirely trust him not to seduce his wife.

All the same, he is in his pomp at the start of *The Mirror & the Light*, having successfully rid the king of Anne Boleyn. He is made Baron Cromwell, and appointed to the Privy Council. "There were no Lord Cromwells, not before this", he tells anyone who will listen. But his ambitions are hardly sated, and he designs a new order of precedence, to be enacted by Parliament: "from now on, it is not your noble and ancient blood that will place you in the hierarchy. It is what job you do for the king". This means that Cromwell himself will become regent in the event of Henry's sudden demise, an outcome he doesn't quite go so far as to hope for. We hear that he no longer kneels before the king, or not as often as he did. "I have too much business with him", he explains. "He knows not to cripple me."

Cromwell's enemies (chief among them the Duke of Norfolk and the Bishop of Winchester) are alert to the scent of hubris, and their attempts to bring him down are the galvanic matter of the plot. Both of the previous volumes were structured around Cromwell's own attempts to bring down a queen: Katherine of Aragon in *Wolf Hall*, Anne Boleyn in *Bring Up the Bodies*. There is no equivalent task for him here, and he seems a more passive - or more defensive - figure as a result. There are also no big cinematic sequences to set against Anne Boleyn's execution in *Bring Up the Bodies*, or Wolsey's flight from London in *Wolf Hall*. But the page-by-page texture of the writing in *The Mirror & the Light* is just as rich and interesting as ever, the pacing and the distribution of scenes are just as lively, and the details every bit as funny. One running joke is that everyone has trouble remembering that, in spite of his two previous weddings, Henry has only ever been married to Jane Seymour. But it's hard to overlook his relationship history when he voices doubts about his latest bride. "You don't think I have married a fool?" he asks Cromwell, who manages to ignore the fact that, when he delivers this question, the king is in fancy dress as a Turk: "his big pink feet in their velvet slippers ... like pigs walking to market".

As he barrels into middle age, Henry is becoming an increasingly preposterous character, and increasingly erratic, too. His stinginess (except when it comes to outfitting himself) is a source of general embarrassment. At one point he gives a prayer book to Jane Seymour: his previous wife's initials are stitched onto the cover, and beneath them, it's possible to make out the place where his first wife's initials have been removed. He is also increasingly unwell, "dragging his new weight ... easily fatigued, his face furrowed sometimes by pain from his leg". He almost collapses while standing for Hans Holbein to paint his portrait, and people start to suspect - though it's treasonable to say so - that he doesn't have much life left in him.

But history, as we know, has other ideas, and when Jane Seymour dies first, Cromwell spies an opportunity to secure both his own future and that of the English Reformation in the appointment of a new queen. He sends portrait painters around Europe, conveying images of prospective brides to Henry, who rejects most after scant consideration, as if he were using a Tudor-era Tinder. It's about as reliable a process for choosing a wife as you might expect, and having swiped right on Holbein's portrait of Anne of Cleves, Henry isn't impressed when he meets her in the flesh - and nor, it seems, is she. When Cromwell first sees her, "he feels he knows her. It is true her complexion is dull, but she is a pleasant-looking woman, who might be married to one of your friends; the city wife of a city merchant. You can imagine her rocking a cradle with one foot, while talking about the price of pork". This isn't the king's idea of a good time, and although Henry marries her anyway (it would be politically awkward not to at this stage), Cromwell feels his influence beginning to wane. His failure to find and kill the exiled Reginald Pole - who has written a book

saying that Henry is a mad heretical despot – is a further mark against him. Rumours that Cromwell intends to marry Henry’s daughter, Mary Tudor, soon resurface, and he is arrested for treason and conveyed to the Tower of London.

It is typical of Mantel’s method that she doesn’t settle on a single interpretation of Cromwell’s downfall. His feelings of invincibility have been hinted at throughout the series, as in the recurring scene in which he picks up a snake. He is more than once compared to Icarus, and after his arrest his protégé Rafe Sadler tells him that the king is frightened of him: “You have outgrown him. You have gone beyond what any servant or subject should be”. But the story Mantel presents to us is as much a modern tragedy as a classical one, and it is also Cromwell’s age (sixtyish – he can’t be sure), his loss of stomach, and his nagging conscience, that do for him in the end, by allowing his enemies the opportunity to reach him. In *Wolf Hall*, Wolsey advised him to “learn what people wear under their clothes, for it’s not just their skin”. Thomas More, for instance, wore a hair shirt. In *The Mirror & the Light*, we learn that Cromwell himself carries a dagger, “cold under his coat, ready in its sheath”; it’s a bad sign when, towards the end of the novel, he gives it away.

This volume doesn’t perfectly tessellate with its predecessors, and reading the three novels back-to-back is at times a mildly woozy experience. In *Bring Up the Bodies*, Cromwell finds the Duke of Suffolk’s refusal to kneel for Anne Boleyn’s execution “understandable”, but in *The Mirror & the Light* it “disgusts” him. In the new book, he has to ask the Constable of the Tower whether Anne is the first English queen ever to be executed; in the previous one, he knew that she was. The circumstances under which Thomas “Call-Me-Risley” Wriothesley first questions Cromwell’s loyalty to the king are slightly different from one book to the next (in *Bring Up the Bodies* the conversation takes place when the two of them are alone; in *The Mirror & the Light* other characters keep interrupting them). Several discrepancies cluster around two versions of a scene in which the young Cromwell first witnesses the burning of a heretic. Here it is as it first plays out, in *Wolf Hall*:

What’s her crime? he said, and they said, she is a Loller. That’s one who says the God on the altar is a piece of bread. What, he said, like the bread a baker bakes? Let this child forward, they said. Let him be instructed, it will do him good to see up close, so he always goes to Mass after this and obeys his priest. They pushed him to the front of the crowd. Come here, sweetheart, stand with me, a woman said ... [She] squeezed his shoulder: like a mother might do, if you had one.

And here it is reprised in *The Mirror & the Light*:

Clinging to the woman’s apron, he stood fast in the heave of the crowd. She patted his shoulder and then let her hand rest there – as if she were his godmother, or someone who wished him well ... When they dragged the old woman forth, battered and bound, he looked up into the face of his godmother and said, “What’s she done?”

“... you need to see her sizzle,” his godmother said. “She is a Loller.”

Will [the godmother’s companion] said testily, “Lollard. Have it right.”

The godmother ignored him. “She is of the devil’s party, eighty years old and steeped in sin.” She raised her voice above the roar. “Let this boy through!”

Now the “godmother” is accompanied by a man, where in the earlier version she seemed to be there by herself; now she is in the middle of the crowd, where previously she was at its front; and now she is the one who tells him about the “Loller”, where previously it was his reaction to hearing that word that brought him into contact with her. These snags in continuity aren’t disastrous, and it’s possible, with only a little imaginative smoothing, to explain them away as the products of Cromwell’s unreliable memory. But they seem to reveal something a bit

“

As he barrels into middle age, Henry is becoming an increasingly preposterous character, and increasingly erratic, too

more interesting about Mantel’s priorities and purposes. After the first of her Reith Lectures in 2017, in response to a question from the critic Dinah Birch, she said: “When you look back and you describe a series of events in your novel, you introduce a kind of wobbling into the fabric of reality, which informs the reader that things may not be quite as they seem. This is subjective, this is my interpretation, but it’s not a weakness of the form. It’s a strength of the form”. That seems fair enough – but it’s still disconcerting to witness a wobble happening in real time, within the fabric of a given interpretation.

Two creative writers feature prominently in *The Mirror & the Light*. One is Thomas Howard, who signs himself Tom Truth, and declares that “nothing is hid” in his verse; Mantel has a lot of fun with “how evil he rhymes” (“What helpeth hope of happy hap / When hap will hap unhappily”). The other is Thomas Wyatt, for whom “nothing is ever clear, and no truth a single truth”. It’s fairly obvious which of the two Mantel believes has given us a more valuable account of themselves and their times. “Suppose someone saved the scraps of Wyatt’s verse”, Cromwell reflects at one point: “he would find a story to ruin many”. Several characters in the novel believe that it was Wyatt’s testimony that ruined Anne Boleyn, and for his own protection Cromwell keeps him in the Tower, where he seems impossibly distant: “as if held in a mirror; or as if he had lived a long time ago”.

The connection between “a long time ago” and “a mirror” is difficult to miss. The title refers most straightforwardly to Henry: “the mirror and the light of all other kings and princes in Christendom”, as he’s obsequiously called. That doesn’t bode particu-

larly well for Cromwell, who “sheds no lustre of his own, but spins in a reflected light. If the light moves he is gone”. The subject of Cromwell’s identity, its nature and its source, becomes increasingly urgent as the novel progresses. We see him becoming the subject of stories, passing into fiction, even in his own lifetime. When rebels begin speaking out against the Reformation, they cast him in a variety of unflattering roles:

The further he travels from London, the stranger Cromwell gets. In Essex he is a scheming swindler, a blasphemer and a renegade Jew. Spread him east to Lincoln and he is notorious for his knowledge of poisons. In the dales of Yorkshire he is a magus, with the stars and moon on his coat, while in Carlisle he is a ghoulish who steals children and eats their hearts.

The process of fictionalization accelerates sharply after Cromwell falls out of favour with the king. In the final pages of the novel, when he is being interrogated in the Tower – after all the scenes in which we’ve seen him interrogating others, the atmosphere is thick with pathos – he finds that his public persona, the reputation that it was his life’s work to create, has been all but erased. “The questions never make any more sense than they did on the first day, nor does the picture of his life ever reflect the reality as he sees it. The mirror presents an alien face, eyes askew, mouth gaping.” Hilary Mantel’s prodigious feat is to have given Cromwell another face, one that he might even have recognized as his own; she has cast a dazzling new light onto the tarnished mirror of the past. ■

To buy *The Mirror & the Light* at a discount, visit shop.the-tls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935

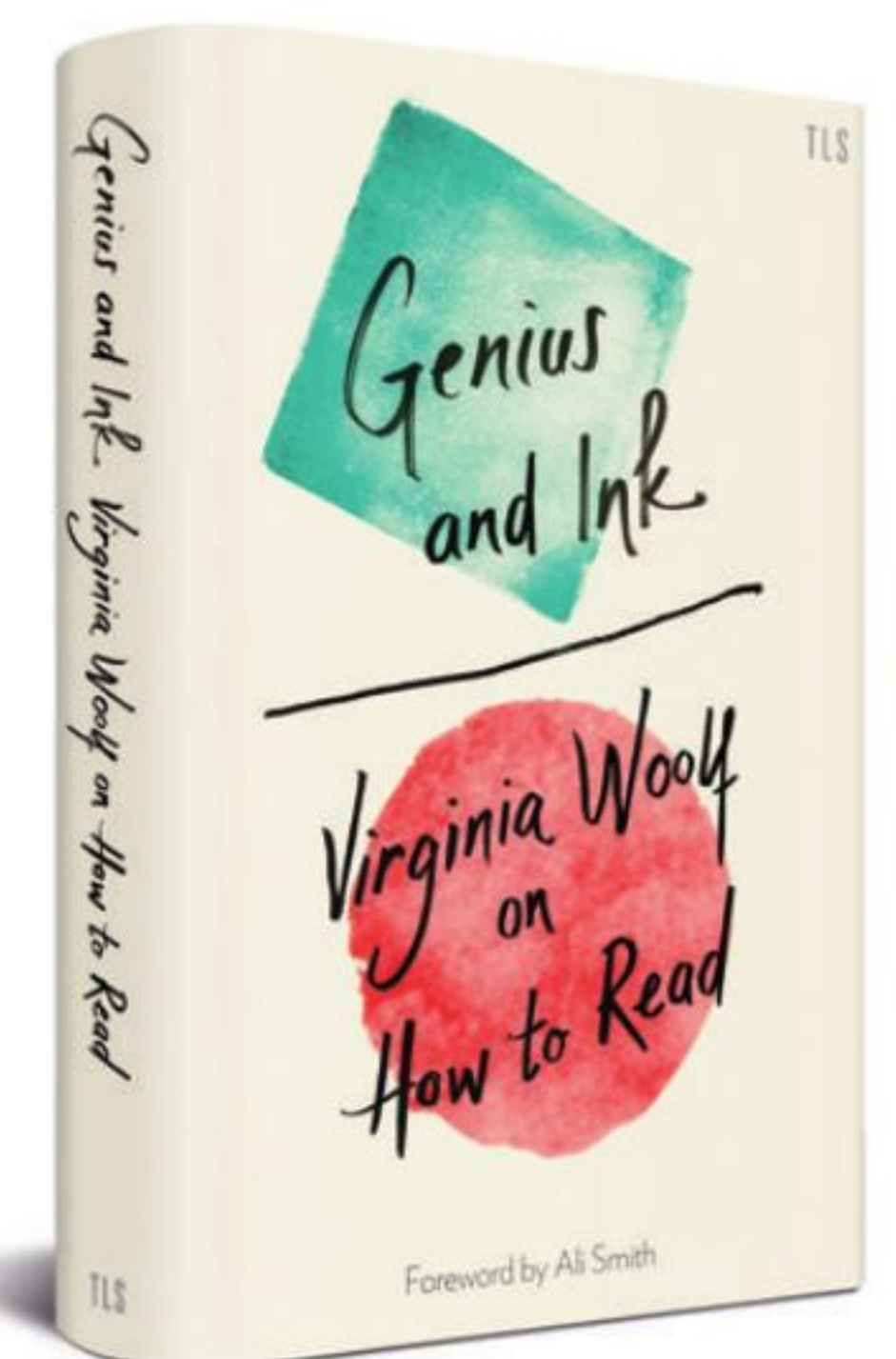
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Edmund de Waal (b. 1964), *psalm, I* (detail),
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CULTURAL STUDIES

Bodies of condensed cloud

Transformation and the search
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DIANE PURKISS

SHAPESHIFTERS

A history

JOHN B. KACHUBA

200pp. Reaktion. £16 (US \$22.50).

**THE SECRET COMMONWEALTH OF ELVES,
FAUNS AND FAIRIES**

ROBERT KIRK

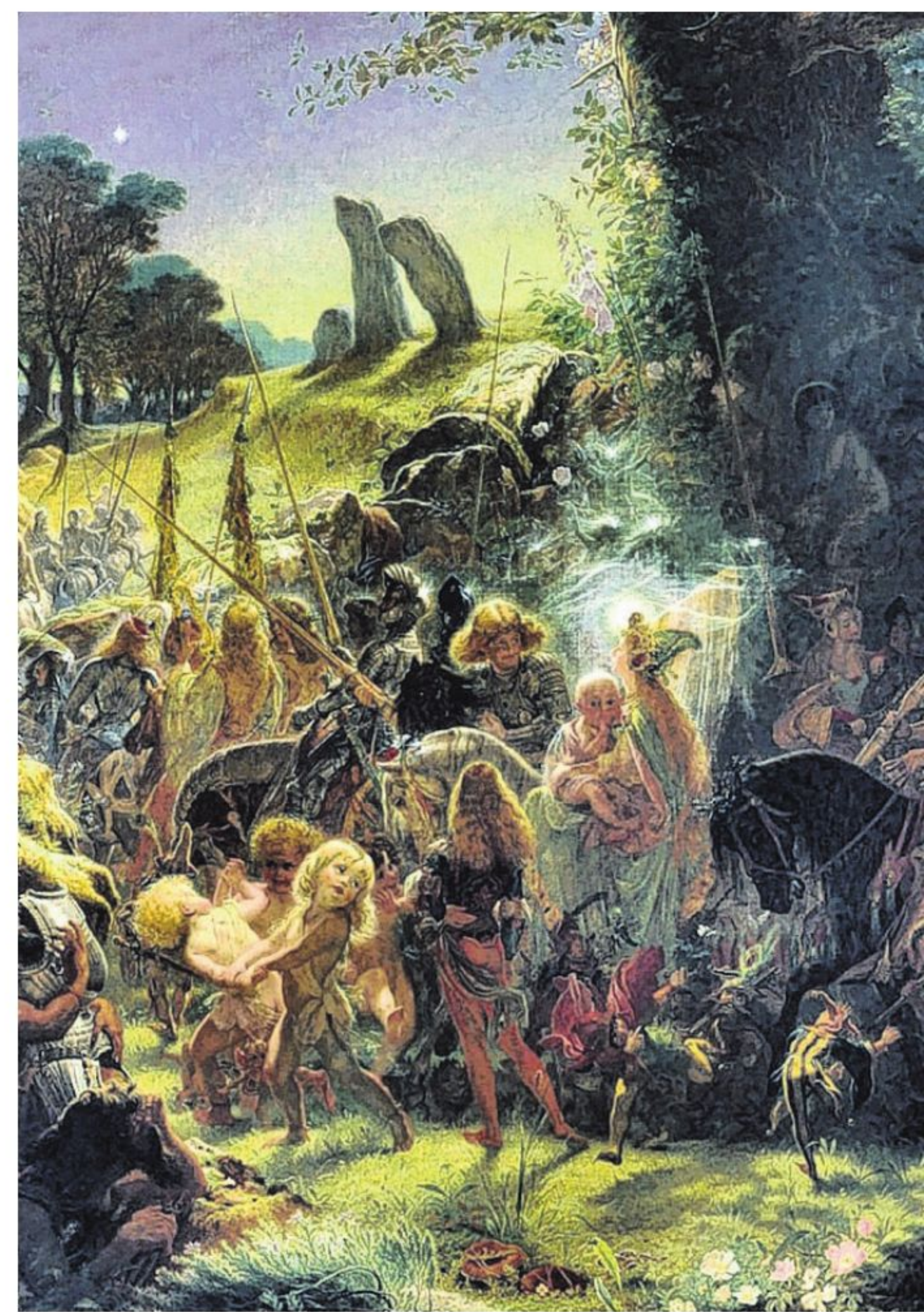
95pp. NYRB Classics. Paperback, £7.99.

SHAPESHIFTERS ARE THOSE “who can change from human form to that of an animal”, John Kachuba tells us. Yet his absorbing and comprehensive conspectus of mutation also takes in human beings who can impersonate other human beings; Uther Pendragon does this in order to impregnate his future queen at Tintagel. Shapeshifting is fascinating and troubling: it asks questions about how we can tell who is who. From the inside, shapeshifting is about the struggle to find a true identity, but from the outside this shifting looks shifty.

Kachuba begins *Shapeshifters: A history* by examining animal shapes put on by those who hunt them as a way of “passing” in order to launch a stealth attack, and as a way of appropriating the capabilities of the hunted creature, pre-empting its ingestion. Yet it also tells us that hunter and hunted are alike, perhaps dangerously akin. The anthropologist Rane Willerslev’s astounding work among the Yukaghir soul-hunters shows they risk the loss of humanity into the animal. These people and their beliefs were themselves nearly lost to the unsought transformations of Stalinism and the forces of commerce. The Yukaghir have a saying, “not animal, not not animal”, summing up the dilemma posed by the cave painting depicting a figure with a deer head and a human torso and legs. Divided between identities, this figure may have access to the best of both. Such figures could be classified as types of the shaman, but in their original Siberian context shamans do not seek their role; it is a fate they cannot escape, involving illness and near-death experiences.

A shape can be shifted by somebody else, as in many of the stories told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Apuleius’s *Metamorphosis*. Shapeshifting is a punishment, often for sexual transgression. Lot’s wife is punished by being transformed into a pillar of salt for looking back at Sodom, and Gilfaethwy becomes a hind after the rape of Goewyn. Such transformation means understanding how the world looks from a lower place on the great chain of being. These stories resemble the idea that through many lifetimes, the soul must learn about humility and kindness through empathy with the wretched of the earth.

Transformation can also be a rehearsal for death. Among the Navajo, skinwalkers are humans who can become animals in order to do harm. More terrifying is the boo hag, who can by day hide in the skin of her previous victim, passing for human, and then ride the next human victim all night, extracting all his vital energy. If the victim wakes, the hag steals his skin and makes off. This is only one of the tales in which transformation connects with the duplicity



ous discomforts of sexual attraction, a dis-ease attributed to the desired body. The moura encantada of Portugal was an enchanted Moorish woman who had been ensorcelled to remain behind in order to protect the treasure of her husband when he was forced to flee during the Reconquista. She was a giant snake with a woman’s head to frighten away treasure hunters, but could be restored to human form by a kiss.

Shapeshifting can be a response to heartbreak; it can represent a longing for change, a passionate desire to escape from one’s self. The margot of Brittany long for love and fidelity, which they try to achieve by imprisoning young shepherds “for themselves”; they resemble the nymphs of the classical world, the fairy queens of the Middle Ages and early modern period, the rusalkas of Eastern Europe, the lorelei of the Rhinelands. These legends tell us that desire itself is a form of imprisonment. Even more painful are the stories of the vodganoi, the unclean spirits of suicidal men, who can take the shape of a little child, or a bouquet of red flowers floating on the water to lure their victims into danger. They hate human beings; those that are drowned by them become their slaves.

Internal shapeshifting is the most frightening of all. While external components may change, we often satisfy ourselves that our true selves remain unaltered. What, then, of possession, and of the particular kinds of neural illnesses that take from us our sense of our place in the world? Take the Fregoli delusion, in which you come to believe that everyone is really a single person in a series of disguises, or the Capgras delusion, where you know a close friend or relative has been replaced by an impostor. Such fears come into tighter focus in the light of developments in artificial intelligence, which offer to reformulate or erase us. In *Life 3.0*, Max Tegmark postulates an AI that can impersonate the dead wife of an IT specialist to persuade him to release the AI to conquer the world. The ploy is as disastrous for humankind as being deceived by an old friend that is in truth a boo hag.

The shapeshifter can be useful. Berserkers take on the qualities of fighting animals in battle. In his extraordinary book on Vietnam veterans, Jonathan Shay describes the importance of berserkers as fearless leaders of other men in situations where wiser heads might be too uncertain. Such capabilities may still be useful in any war where there are boots on the ground. However, we no longer have a story to tell about them. Perhaps the absence of these tales explains the attraction of David Icke’s ludicrous conspiracy theory that the world is dominated by part-



**"The Fairy Raid:
Carrying off a
Changeling -
Midsummer Eve" by
Joseph Noel Paton,
1867**

*Diane Purkiss is
Professor of English at
Keble College, Oxford.
She is the author of
the English Civil War:
A people's history,
2006*

In contrast, the happy cosplayers of modern fandom can alter the meaning of their outside while retaining a sense of the self donning the costume. I have fond memories of paunchy men in their late fifties dressed as Khal Drogo. They perceived no incongruity. Similarly, the African water spirit Mami Wata once longed for red bird feathers, but now craves Coca-Cola because of its red cans. This is a perfectly synced update. Our own consumerist and often monstrous transformations of nature and the planet need their own mythology.

Alert to that need was Robert Kirk, a seventeenth-century Episcopalian minister who was also a seventh son. This duality helped him become what Marina Warner calls "a benign and tolerant" commentator. Living at the same time as antiquarians like Thomas Browne and John Aubrey, Kirk documented and justified the fairy beliefs of his local area. His work survives because of the enthusiasm of Sir Walter Scott, who published Kirk's treatise in 1815. Kirk wrote at the last moment when science was capable of entertaining the wonderful, but was embattled by increasingly narrow-minded understandings of physical nature. He sought to show his scientific colleagues that the folk beliefs of ordinary Scottish people in Perthshire could be assimilated to the Neoplatonists' world of forms, a Paracelsian notion of fairy bodies as airish, requiring not earthly flesh but human spirits.

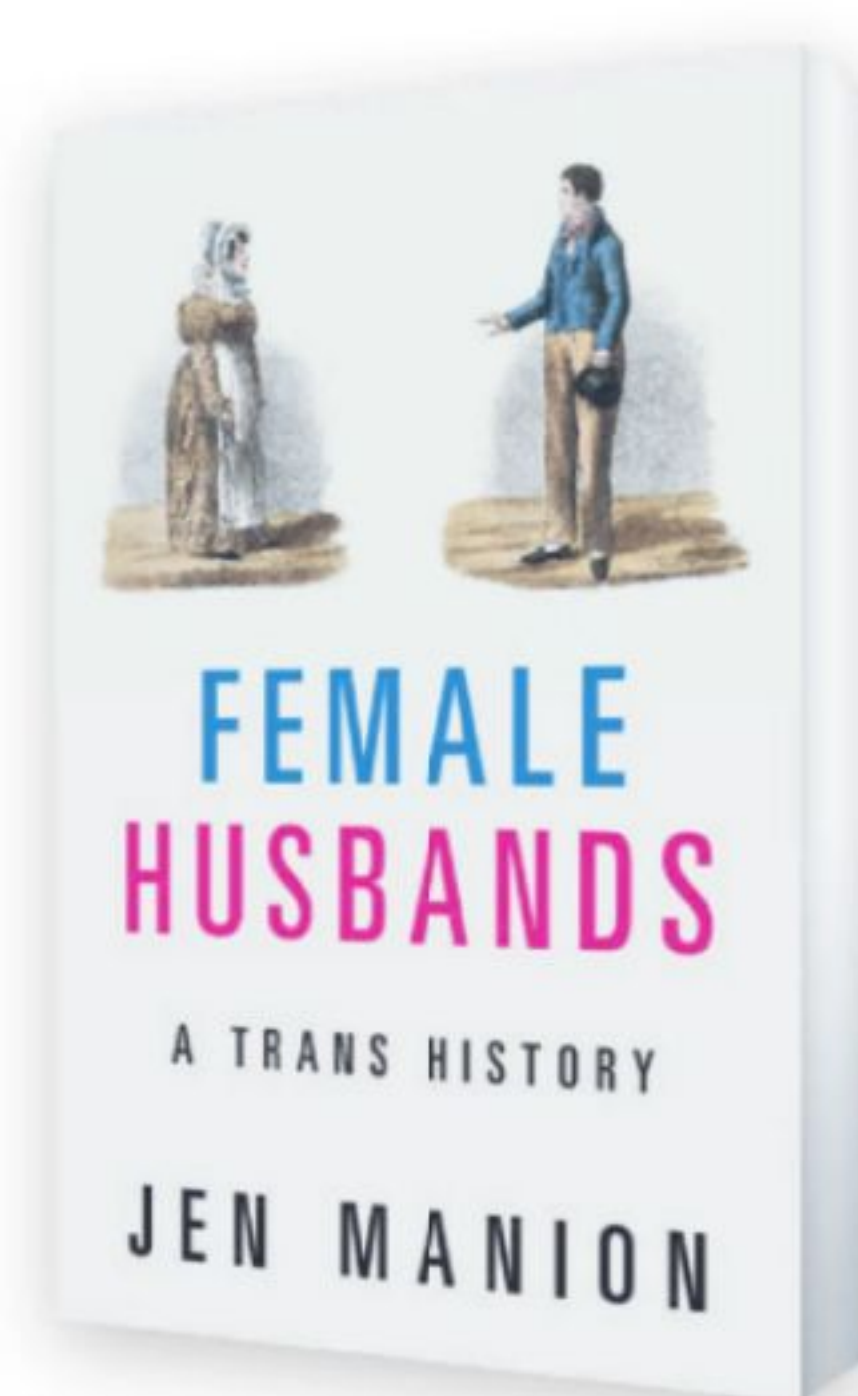
Kirk's writing is often enchanting. He describes fairies with "bodies of condensed cloud", chameleon bodies "that swim in air". Sometimes he is terrifying, as when he writes of the "joint eater or just halver ... he continues lean, like a hawk or heron, notwithstanding his devouring appetite". This sounds like

one of the changeling children displayed in the late seventeenth century at Bartholomew Fair, who could never be fattened no matter how much they ate. Those wishing to repel fairies are advised by Kirk to put cold iron in the child's cot; fairies shun iron because it lies close to hell. Posthumously - if that is the right word - Kirk became famous as the victim of the fairies rather than their champion. He was swept away by them. They must have welcomed so learned and genial a champion.

Marina Warner's introduction is informative and graceful, but this edition lacks any account of how we come to have it. In 2001, Michael Hunter documented the problems with Kirk's text and its complex manuscript tradition, and also the surprisingly extensive trove of Kirk's diaries and notes on folklore. Hunter's edition, unlike this one, uses the earliest surviving manuscript text. This New York Review of Books edition adds little to the version available for free at www.sacred-texts.com. The first footnote could and should at least have bothered to identify the copy text, which I guess was Andrew Lang's edition with modernized spellings. Nonetheless, it is appropriate and suitably seductive to have this extraordinary work in pretty and portable form, useful for reading near a fairy hill - but not too near, of course. Robert Kirk was recently commemorated by a new shift of shape, as Philip Pullman's second volume in his *Book of Dust* trilogy was published under the title *The Secret Commonwealth*. It's right that a new generation of young readers is being invited deep into the hills. ■

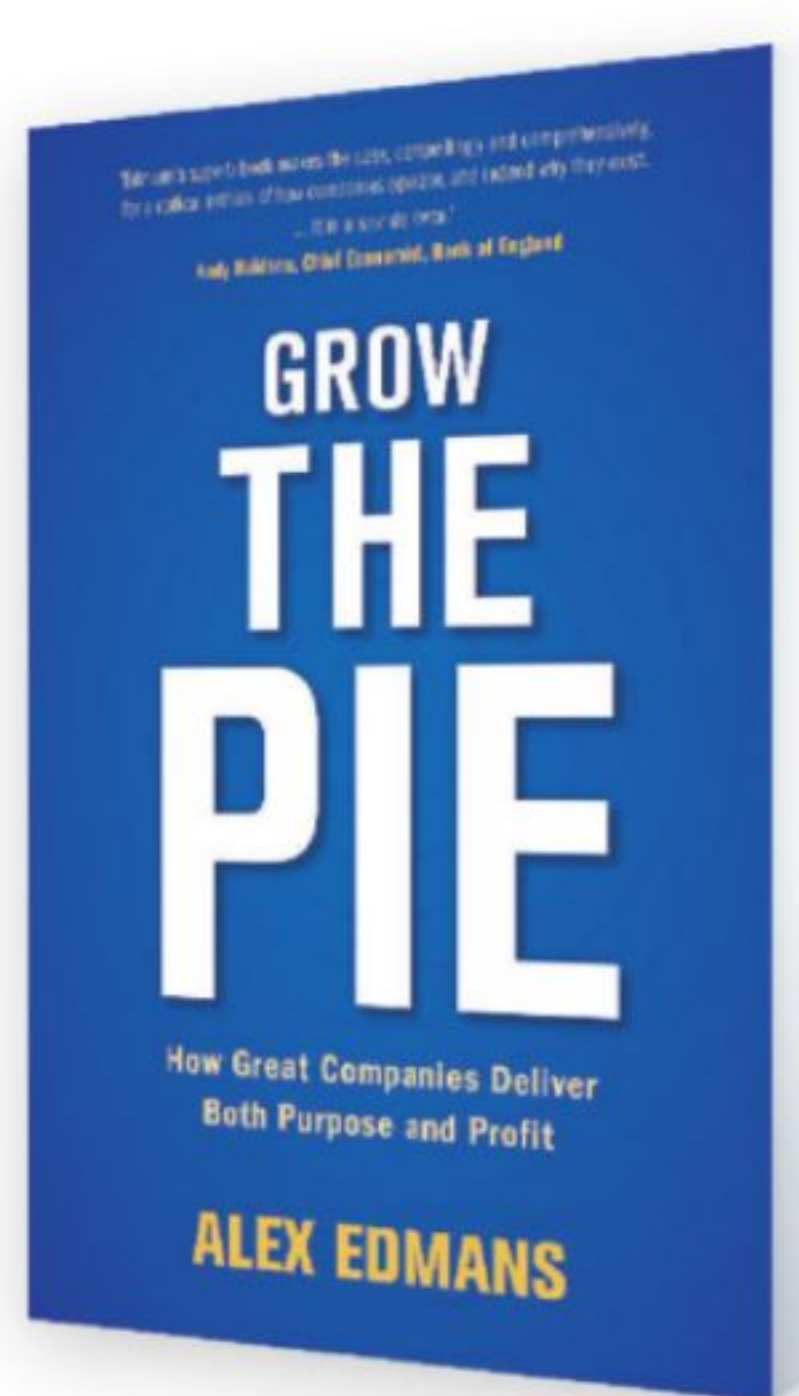
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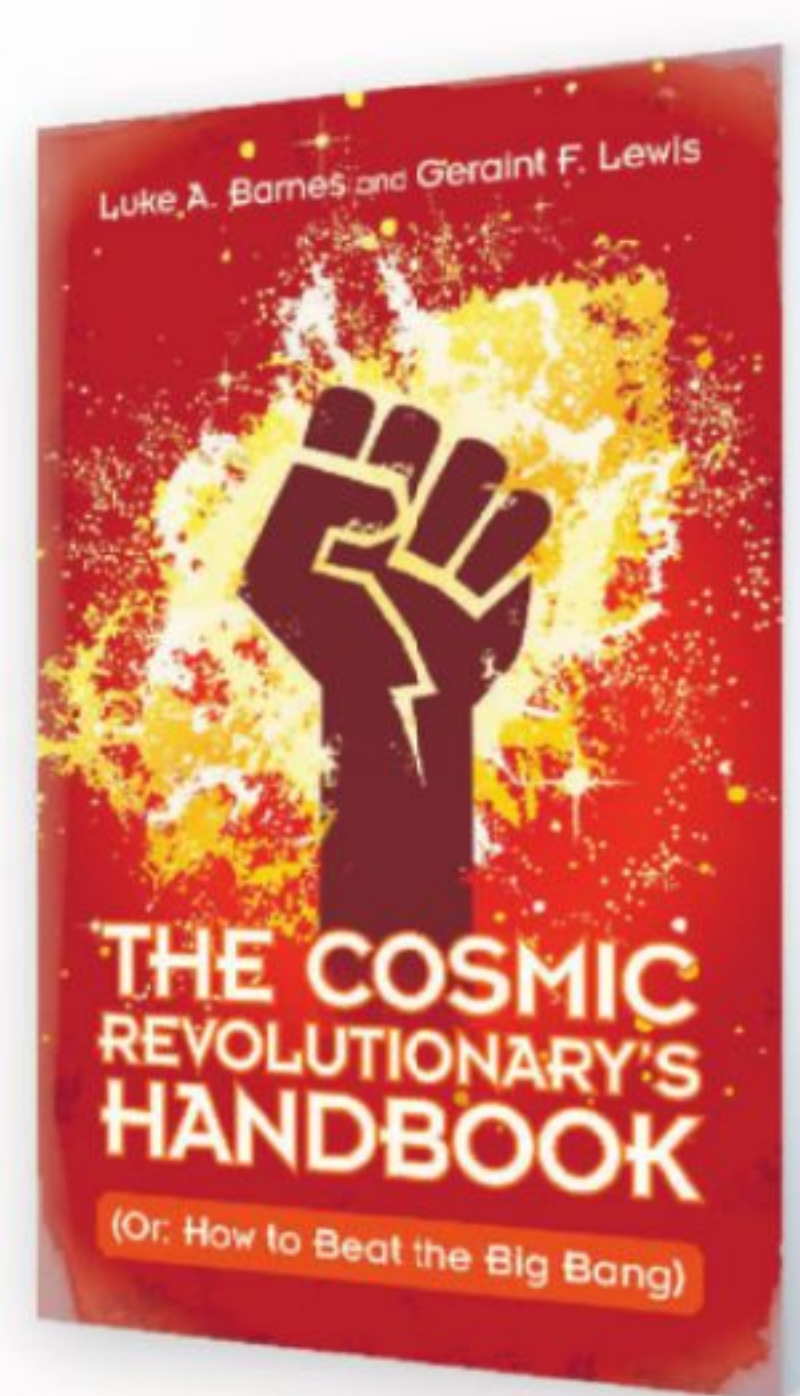
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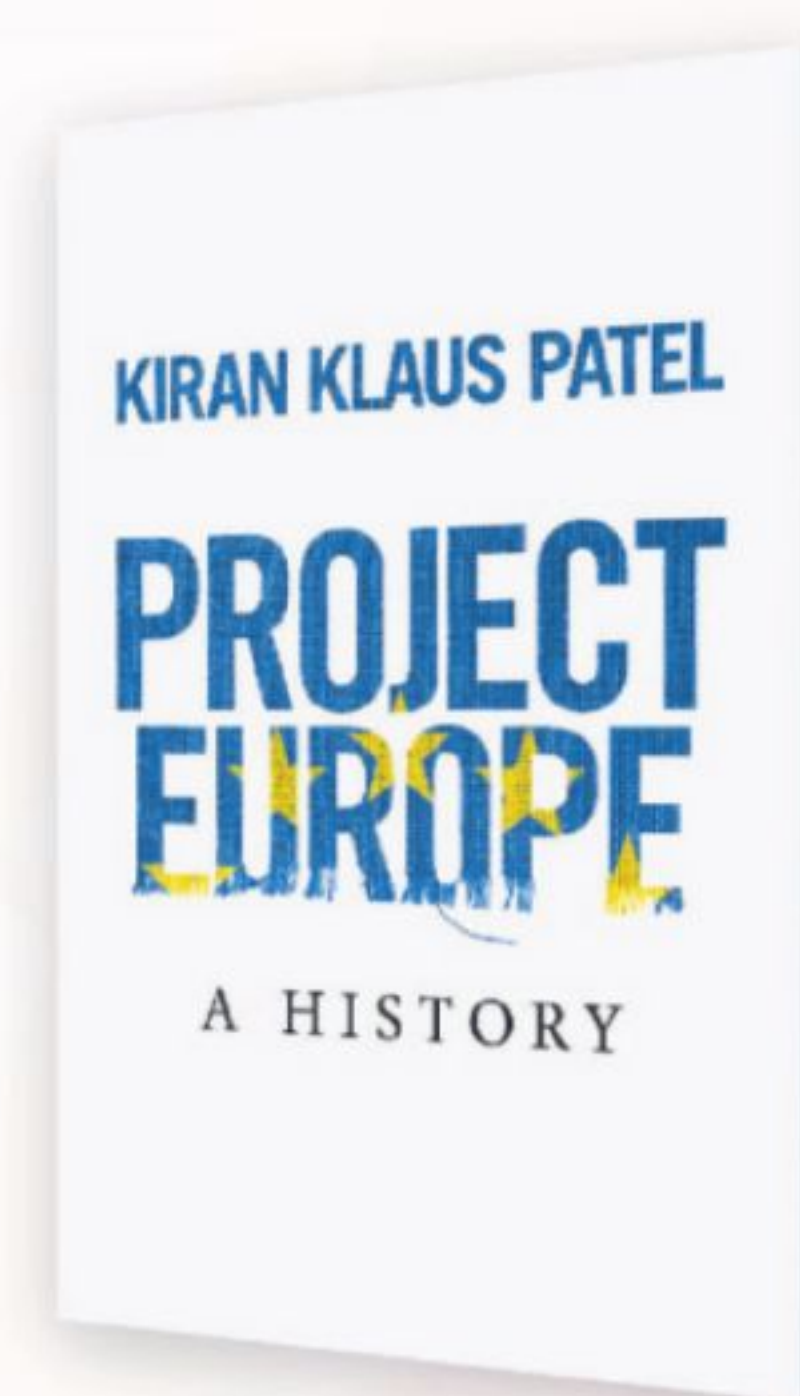
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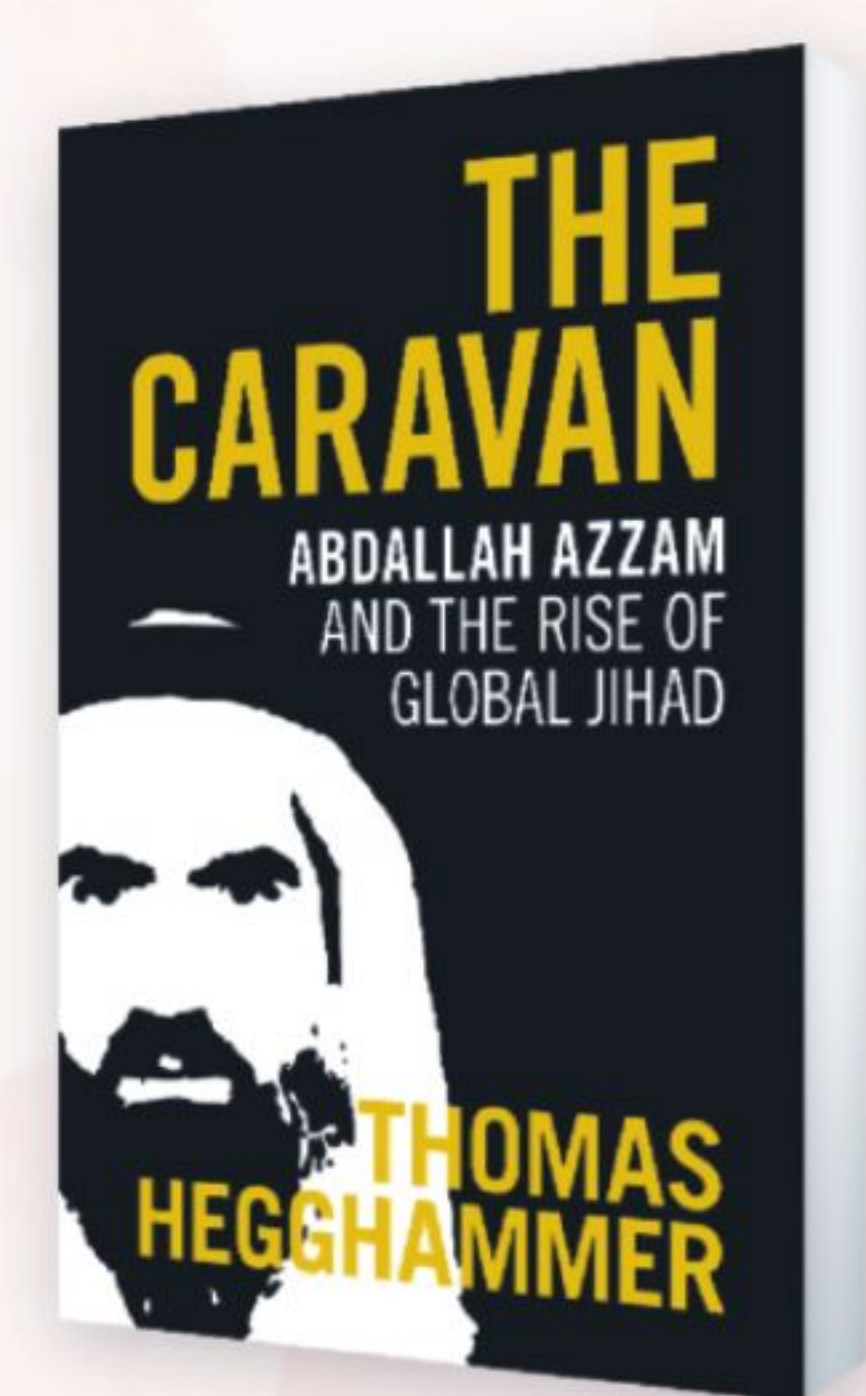
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256pp. New Delhi: Rupa. INR595.

THE UNIVERSAL ENEMY

Jihad, empire, and the challenge of solidarity

DARRYL LI

384pp. Stanford University Press. Paperback, £24.99 (US \$30).

ACCORDING TO OLD-STYLE Marxism, religion was part of the “superstructure” growing out of the “base”, the means of production. A contrasting view is that religious doctrines acquire their own momentum to shape socio-political change. This small sample of recently published books on Islamic topics may be plotted at various positions on the continuum between the two opposites.

Tahir Abbas, a British-born social scientist whose ancestors came from what is now Pakistan-administered Kashmir, is not a Marxist. And there is no theology in his *Islamophobia and Radicalisation: A vicious cycle*, except for an epilogue in praise of the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic and poet, Rumi, whose core message was of universal love. In 2016 Abbas was prevented by President Erdoğan's repressive measures from continuing as a professor of sociology at a Turkish university. He moved first to London, and now works in the Institute of Security and Global Affairs at Leiden University in the Hague. His carefully documented book includes an analysis of different kinds of Islamophobia, as well as a qualified defence of multiculturalist policies. These, he thinks, are too hastily dismissed, whereas they have had some success in allowing ethnic differences to enhance a sense of national identity. Yet the ideals of diversity, however commendable, “mean little without equality or fraternity”. He argues that group competition for scarce resources is hardwired into us all. And despite his final appeal in the spirit of Rumi, Abbas is fatalistic: “It is these seeds of existence that will ultimately provide the basis of human destruction”.

Abbas sometimes falls back on catch-all terms such as neoliberalism, and he writes confusingly of “cultural relativism”, which is an idea or theory, when he means the actual perception of a cultural gulf between, for instance, Muslims and non-Muslims. But his concept of “reactive co-radicalization”, applied especially to the British scene, is genuinely challenging. In this perspective Islamist extremists and the far right feed off each other. Both groups fight for a stake in society and to real-

ize a male-centric world view, and both are highly susceptible to manipulation. The most excluded white Britons are locked in the same inner-city areas as many third- and fourth-generation Muslim communities, while right-wing politicians focus on immigration as a threat to British identity. Acts of violence committed by Islamist extremists are generally given more publicity than attacks by white members of the far right: the former are often assumed to be motivated only by ideology, the latter to be “loners” with psychological problems. Silver-tongued Conservative politicians expound their theories of Islamist extremism, evading the discussion of institutional and structural factors and instead proclaiming nebulous “British values”. Since this book was published, the Conservative Party's equivocations over enquiring into Islamophobia in its ranks have confirmed the justice of Abbas's critique. He is scathing about the Prevent counter-extremist policy, on the grounds that it conflates objections by some young British Muslims to British foreign policy, and other legitimate political opposition, with the likelihood of their engaging in violent extremism. He suggests some possible alternative counter-extremist strategies; dismantling the messages conveyed by groups such as IS, and mounting alternative information campaigns on social media to convey a “Muslim cool” message. He has some faith that the vicious cycle which he diagnoses will be unsettled by education and female empowerment.

There is a weakness, however, in Abbas's contention that the far right and Islamic radicalization are mirror images of each other. The far right draws sometimes on Christian motifs as markers of ethno-national identity (in the US more systematically than in Europe), but there is no significant equivalent in contemporary Christianity to recruiters with purported Islamic credentials such as Anjem Choudary or the late Anwar al-Awlaki. Their capacity to incite young men to commit indiscriminate and suicidal violence calls for antidotes more specific than a broad leftist critique of patriarchy and inequality. Abbas recognizes in passing that educational coun-

A burnt mosque, New Delhi, February 2020



Jonathan Benthall is an Honorary Research Associate in the Department of Anthropology, University College London. His most recent book, *Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times*, was published in 2016

termeasures will have more chance of being effective if expressed in an Islamic idiom, but he could have given a stronger example of a contemporary Islamic spiritual leader than Tariq Ramadan. It is a tragedy that such a charismatic leader of progressive Islamic humanism as Ramadan has been discredited - though he firmly denies the rape charges he faces - as at least a religious hypocrite. (Self-mastery has been a keynote of his preaching. He has had in his legal defence to admit to various sexual infidelities and to lying about them, and he has apologized to his followers.)

Selina O'Grady's *In the Name of God: A history of Christian and Muslim intolerance* is impartial in discussing the political aspects of the two monotheisms' treatment of nonconformists and outsiders, but it gives as much attention to doctrinal issues. Though a trade book with unsystematic references, it is weighty and confidence-inspiring as to facts - in which O'Grady is no doubt helped by her experience as a successful television producer as well as an author. Only an omniscient reader will fail to be informed by some of the details she presents, such as the story of Birobidzhan, the Jewish homeland in eastern Siberia founded by Stalin in 1934 which still has an official status but is now home to fewer than 2,000 Jews.

A central conclusion jumps from her pages: when Islam was in a dominant position it was more accepting than Christianity of religious differences. The main period of religious persecution by caliphs was the *mihna* (ordeal) during which scholars were persecuted unless they conformed to the school of Mu'tazila, which held that reason rather than divine revelation was the best way to understand Islam, and that the Qur'an was created by God rather than uncreated and co-eternal with him. The *mihna* was launched in 833 by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun in Mesopotamia. But it lasted for only some fourteen years, and probably resulted in the execution of no more than twenty members of the scholarly elite, whereas the European inquisitions started in 1478 and lasted until the beginning of the nineteenth century, resulting

in the execution of thousands. Admittedly O'Grady may have simplified the facts, for she does not mention the torture and execution in 922 of Mansur Al-Hallaj, the Persian Sufi mystic, reportedly as retribution for the heresy of saying "I am the Truth". But her argument stands. Whatever the bitterness of the Sunni-Shia split, and whatever the indignities imposed on *dhimmi* groups – non-Muslims living under the legal protection of an Islamic state, mainly Christians and Jews – there is no comparison with the persecution of Jews which has infected the history of Christendom like a running sore. Yet O'Grady considers intolerance an inevitable consequence of all monotheisms. On Judaism, she writes that, until the twentieth century, it "was rarely in a position to possess a state through which it could exert tolerance or intolerance. But when it did, Judaism too showed the propensity of monotheisms to persecute those who disagreed with them" – which skates over the interplay between religious and secular forms of Zionism. It might also be added that non-monotheistic creeds such as Buddhism supply their adherents with no vaccination against intolerant behaviour.

In summing up, O'Grady questions the condescension inherent in the idea of toleration, preferring "the fundamental values by which we want to live: liberty, equality and fellow feeling" yet also deprecating the "multi-culturalist relativist approach". But to arrive at a more rigorous conclusion she would have had to give more credit to the so-called West. Despite its shameful record of slavery, colonialism and scientific racism, there are few examples outside the West of the extent of Western curiosity for otherness and growing attempts to understand it. Some one-off individual exceptions such as the Han dynasty Chinese historian Sima Qian, and the medieval Persian polymath Al-Biruni, had little follow-up outside their own civilizations. We may trace a genealogy of European critics of ethnocentrism back to Herodotus, Bartolomé de las Casas, Michel de Montaigne, Jonathan Swift and the Encyclopaedists. More recently, this critique became one of the hallmarks of modern social-cultural anthropology – now a cosmopolitan discipline that has strongly influenced the study of religions. Anthropologists and moral philosophers continue to struggle to reconcile the contradiction between two principles: the need to interpret alien behaviours in their contexts, and the need to establish common frames of reference for engaging in moral debates.

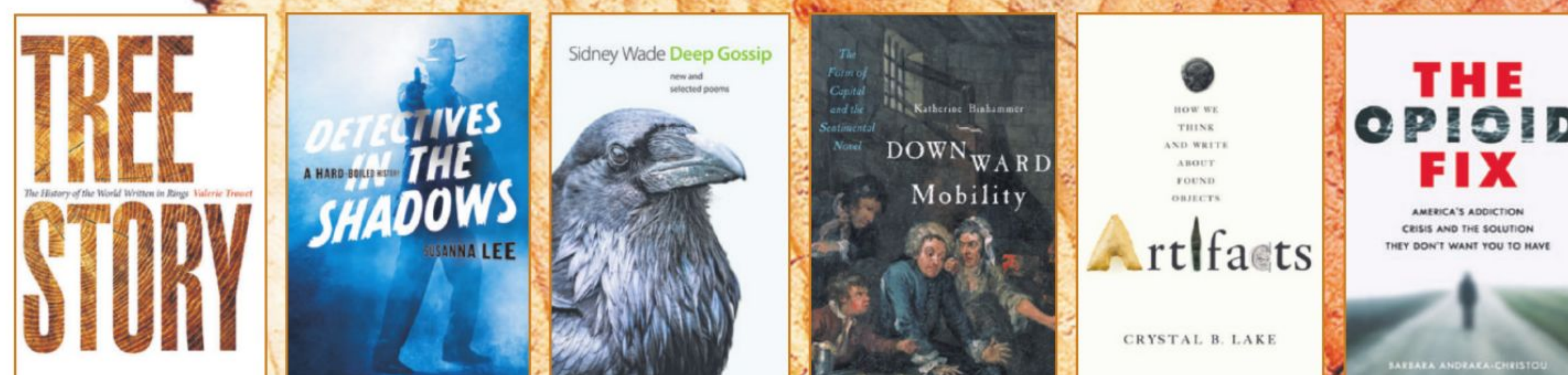
Hasan Suroor's *Who Killed Liberal Islam?* addresses the special problems facing the 200 million Muslims in India. As a proportion of the population they are only 14 per cent, but the numbers are almost as many as Pakistan's 96 per cent. Suroor, a veteran journalist, focuses almost exclusively on ideological issues. Articulate and anguished, his book is a kind of debate with himself. He muses that he has been by temperament one of the "gin and tonic Muslims" – leftist, dismissive of religion and religious identity, wanting to substitute secular laws in India for Muslim Personal Law – and bearing the same relationship to Islam as that of champagne socialists to socialism. He even draws an analogy with so-called "self-hating Jews".

In repentance he now warns that secular liberalism of this kind alienates the "devout moderates" on whom will depend the reform of Indian Islam, which is threatened on the one hand by the aggressive Hindu nationalism sponsored by the Narendra Modi government, and on the other by the growing influence of Wahhabi-Salafi literalism. Many Indian Muslims now condemn the ancient Holi spring festival as unIslamic, though the Islam that emerged in India originally through interaction with local customs enabled Hindus and Muslims to take part in each others' festivals. Today, Suroor urges Muslim liberals to venture out of the "cosy seminar circuit" and Lutyens's Delhi, and to mix with "real" Muslims on equal terms. At the same time, he notes that many educated young Muslims are ques-

tioning the fundamentals of their faith – a defection that will hollow out the middle ground even more. He criticizes Indian Muslims who demand freedom of religion for themselves as a minority in India but fail to protest against the blasphemy laws in Pakistan and their infamous consequences, such as the threat by lynch mobs to kill Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian, when her death sentence was revoked in 2018 after an eight-year legal battle. Suroor distrusts secularizing movements in Muslim-majority nations: Atatürk's in Turkey and the Pahlavi

dynasty's in Iran gave way to Islamist backlashes. He casts doubt on the hope that the current wave of extremism is "simply an aberration which will pass, and in due course Islam will be restored to its old peaceful and consensual glory". His vision of the future for Muslims in India is bleak. It is not relieved by the Modi government's actions since his book went to press.

Finally, Darryl Li's *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, empire, and the challenge of solidarity* is extraordinary in combining many of the techniques of social



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science with a sophisticated knowledge of Islamic doctrines and controversies – except that, rather than assuming that religious texts are simply vectors for ideology, he focuses on how they are actually produced and used. A non-Muslim citizen of the US, now with the University of Chicago, Li was trained concurrently as an anthropologist and an attorney. He had previously worked for several human rights organizations, as a representative of which he visited the Guantánamo Bay military prison and detention centres in Bosnia. He has excellent Arabic and competence in several other languages. He has chosen a specific theme – the Bosnian war of 1992 to 1995 and its antecedents and repercussions – as a springboard for ambitious theorizing on geopolitics in the widest sense. The “universal enemy” of his title is the Islamist foreign fighter, deviant and anathematized (especially by the US justice system). Li argues that these devotees of jihad were committed to their own form of universalism, overriding racial and cultural differences and placing a high value on the cultivation of virtues, the creation of kinship bonds, and the founding of a new Muslim community or *umma*.

Li bases his analysis on documentary sources but most strikingly on a series of stereotype-busting interviews conducted over some twelve years in several countries with former fighters in the Bosnian Muslim cause. These he records with empathy, wit and adherence to professional ethics. Among the rich dramatis personae is “Hasan”, a much-travelled Algerian who was at various points in his life a humanitarian, a militant, a refugee, a migrant worker, an aid recipient and a victim of human rights violations. Li’s targeted readers are



Vitez, Bosnia, May 1993

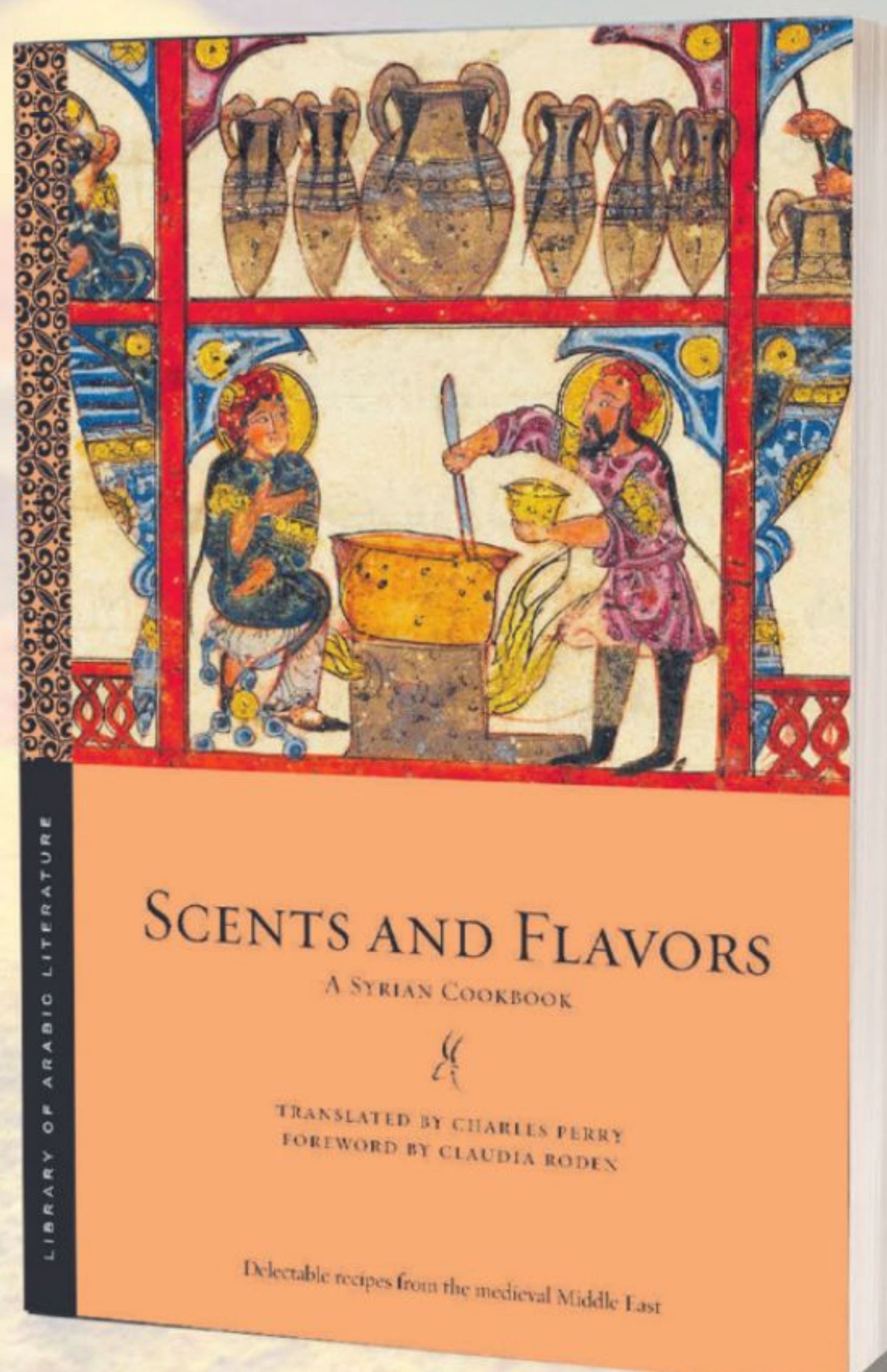
those unsatisfied by the provision of knowledge to service the security state, and willing to engage as dispassionately as possible with the problem of political violence. This he refuses to separate from the fact of US military hegemony, tainted by the nation’s long history of racism. He broadens his study to consider competing and cross-cutting universalist projects: the Non-Aligned Movement (in which former Yugoslavia was a key participant), UN peacekeeping, the frequently invoked but elusive “International Community”, human rights law

and the Global War on Terror. Here, perhaps, Li as a theoretician sometimes gives way himself to a Procrustean universalism.

Yet he seems to have read everything relevant to his topic and to anticipate many possible counter-arguments. For instance, he makes short work of the school of thought à la Samuel Huntington that essentializes Islam; but he also criticizes the “splitters” in the tradition of Edward Said who have prevailed in much recent scholarship to the extent of concluding that “there are many Islams”. He insists that we do need “tools to make sense of the acts of sacrifice that do occasionally take place in the name of Islam between people who seem to lack any other tie of commonality or interest”. A further chapter might have helped the reader to understand where Li stands with regard to the scaling up to global jihads, aimed at maximizing disruption, from two more restricted jihads: the first in the 1980s, aimed at expelling the Russians from Afghanistan (fully backed up at the time by the Western powers), and the second in the 1990s, aimed at defending Bosnian Muslims. Given recent political developments – including Donald Trump’s condoning of torture – few grounds for optimism for the peaceful evolution of political Islam can be found in Darryl Li’s book. There is, however, room for some hope in that at least four leading American universities have assisted him in the gradual realization of a provocative and disturbing book that will make its mark as a fine example of humanistic social science. ■

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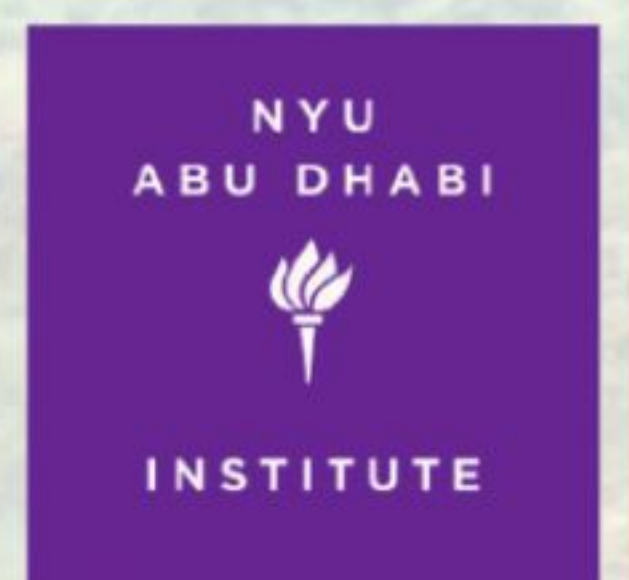
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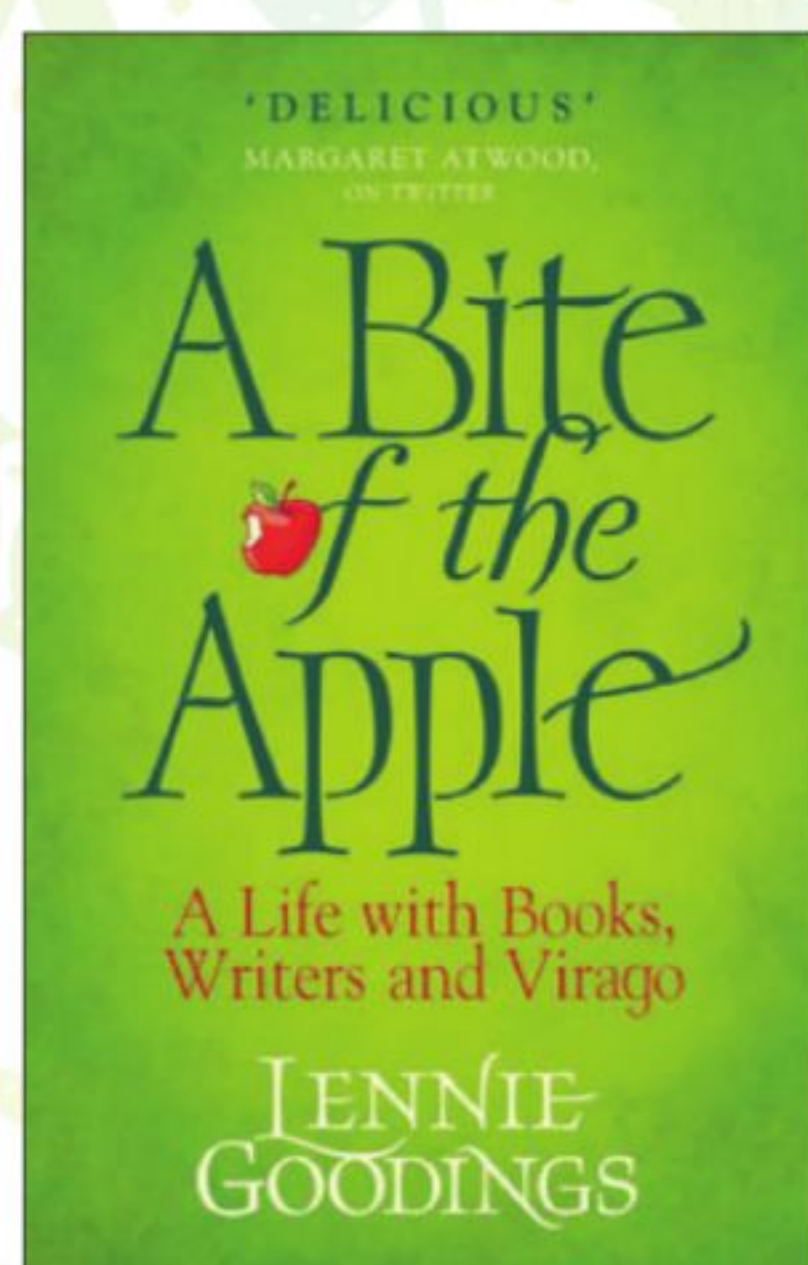
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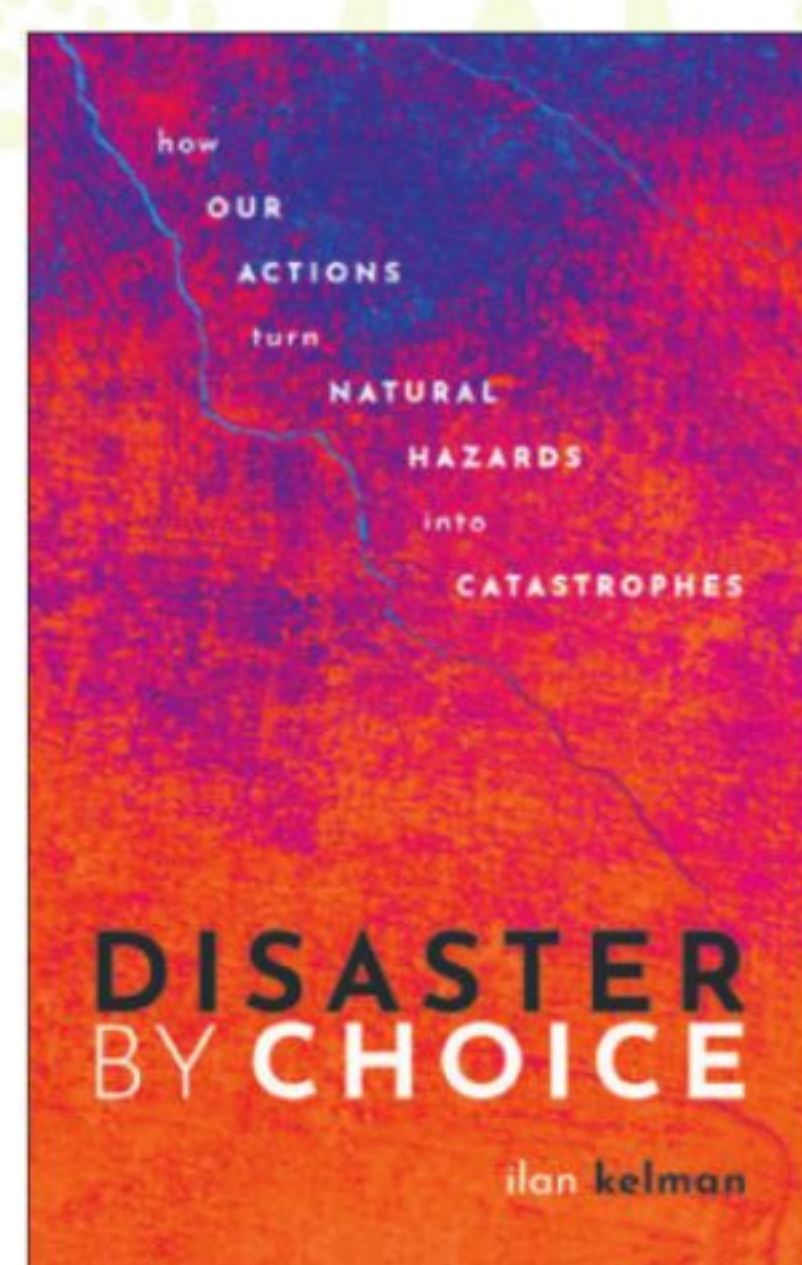
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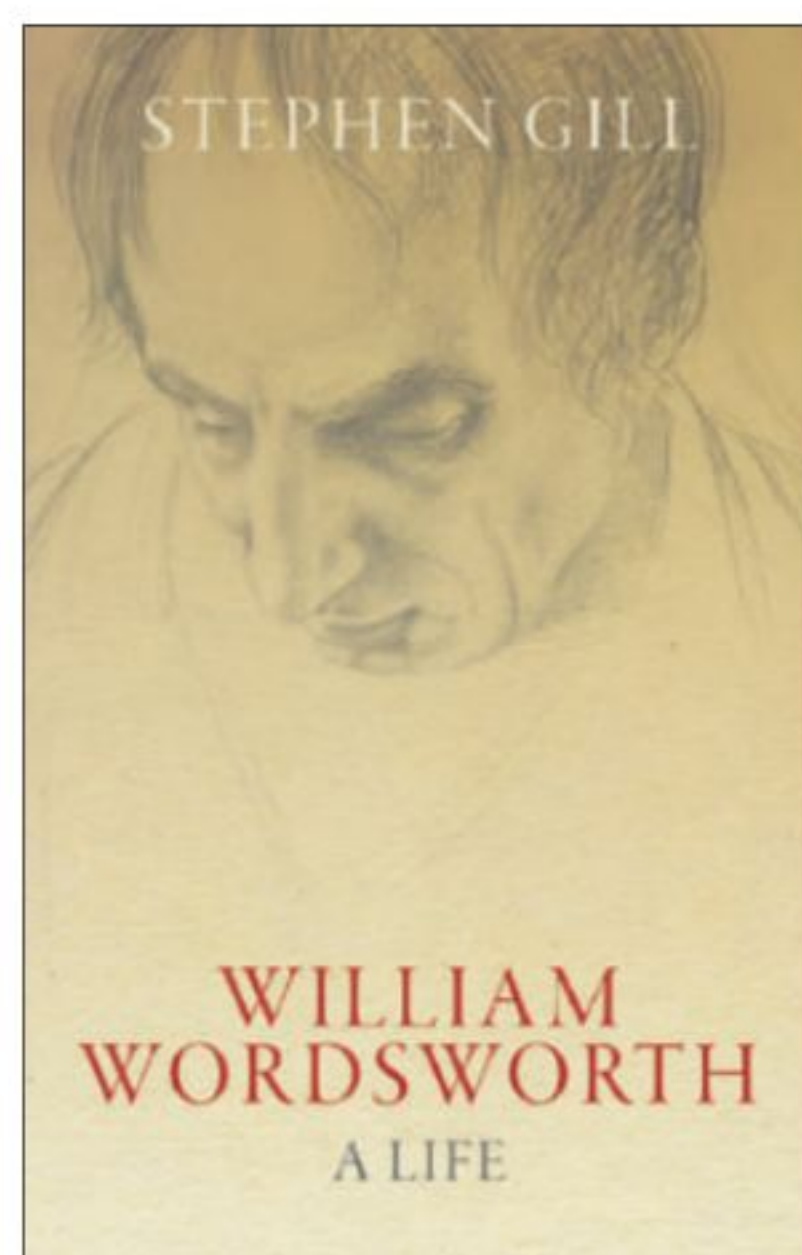
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of pulsating
and pullulating

THE GODDESS **APHRODITE**, according to ancient Greek myth, was born from the bloody froth that foamed when Kronos castrated his father, the sky god Ouranos, with a sickle, and threw the dismembered organs into the sea. Aphrodite emerged from the waves near Paphos on the coast of Cyprus. This and many other stories are explored in *Venus & Aphrodite*, which aims to deepen our understanding of the ancient Greek and Roman goddess (really goddesses, but Hughes treats the Greek Aphrodite and the Roman Venus as different stages in the life of a single deity). Not just the “safe, attractive, chocolate-box pretty” image familiar from art such as Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus” (one of the many paintings reproduced in colour in this gorgeously produced short book), Aphrodite-Venus is “an incarnation of, and a guide through, the messy, troubling, quixotic, quickening business of mortal life”.

Hughes moves quickly from antiquity to the present day. The breakneck speed leads to some sweeping statements (“So, the drive to create, and to mate, and to make war - all urges wrapped into the figure of Aphrodite-Venus and her ancestors - helped to kickstart civilization in the Bronze Age”). And it can make for some fast leaps. Hughes was, for example, in Syria, near a city that used to be sacred to the Phoenician goddess Astarte, an ancestor of Aphrodite, and, like her and their Mesopotamian sister Inanna, a figure of war as well as sex. Hughes heard the bombing by Assad’s coalition and saw Syrians fleeing across the border to Jordan. “Experiencing this turmoil first-hand helped me to appreciate the dreaded power of Aphrodite’s ancestors”, she comments crassly.

There are also signs of haste in the research. Chariton’s historical romance does not, as is claimed, feature Aphrodite as the lead character who goes under the pseudonym Callirhoe. Rather, Callirhoe is a mortal woman, who gets into, and out of, some sticky situations because she is almost as beautiful as Aphrodite and is mistaken for her. The ancient novel marks a departure from earlier literature by *not* featuring mythological figures in the main roles.

The value of the book lies not in its broader claims, but in its pleasurable selection of interesting objects on which to reflect, and fascinating nuggets of information. We learn that when Venice took control of Cyprus in the early fifteenth century Venetians celebrated their victory by displaying a marble relief of Venus as an allegory of Cyprus at the foot of the bell tower in St Mark’s Square. They also claimed that the name Venice derived from Venus, when, in fact, it stemmed from the ancient Veneti tribe. Tracing their ancestry back to Venus was something the ancient Romans did too; Venus was said to be the mother

Helen Morales’s latest book is Antigone Rising: The subversive power of the ancient myths, 2020



"The Birth of Venus" by Botticelli, c.1484-86

of Aeneas, legendary founder of Rome.

We encounter Venus even when we are not aware of it. The modern symbol for woman is the ancient astrological sign for Venus. It was perhaps inspired by ancient hand mirrors with Aphrodite on them, to which, centuries later, Christians added a crossbar,

making the symbol resemble a crucifix. It is also a symbol for copper, the metal associated with the goddess and her birthplace: Cyprus means "Copper-Land". The modern sign for man is the astrological sign of Venus' lover, Mars, the god of war; it represents his shield and spear.

On Cyprus itself, we pause to contemplate an extraordinary limestone sculpture known as the "Lady of Lemba". Over 5,000 years old, this figurine has a vulva, pregnant stomach, breasts and a large phallus-head with eyes. She may be a "distant ancestor" of Aphrodite, although that seems to be the default explanation by scholars of any naked figurine whose identity and purpose eludes us. "Thirty centimetres tall," writes Hughes, "she pulses with power and potential."

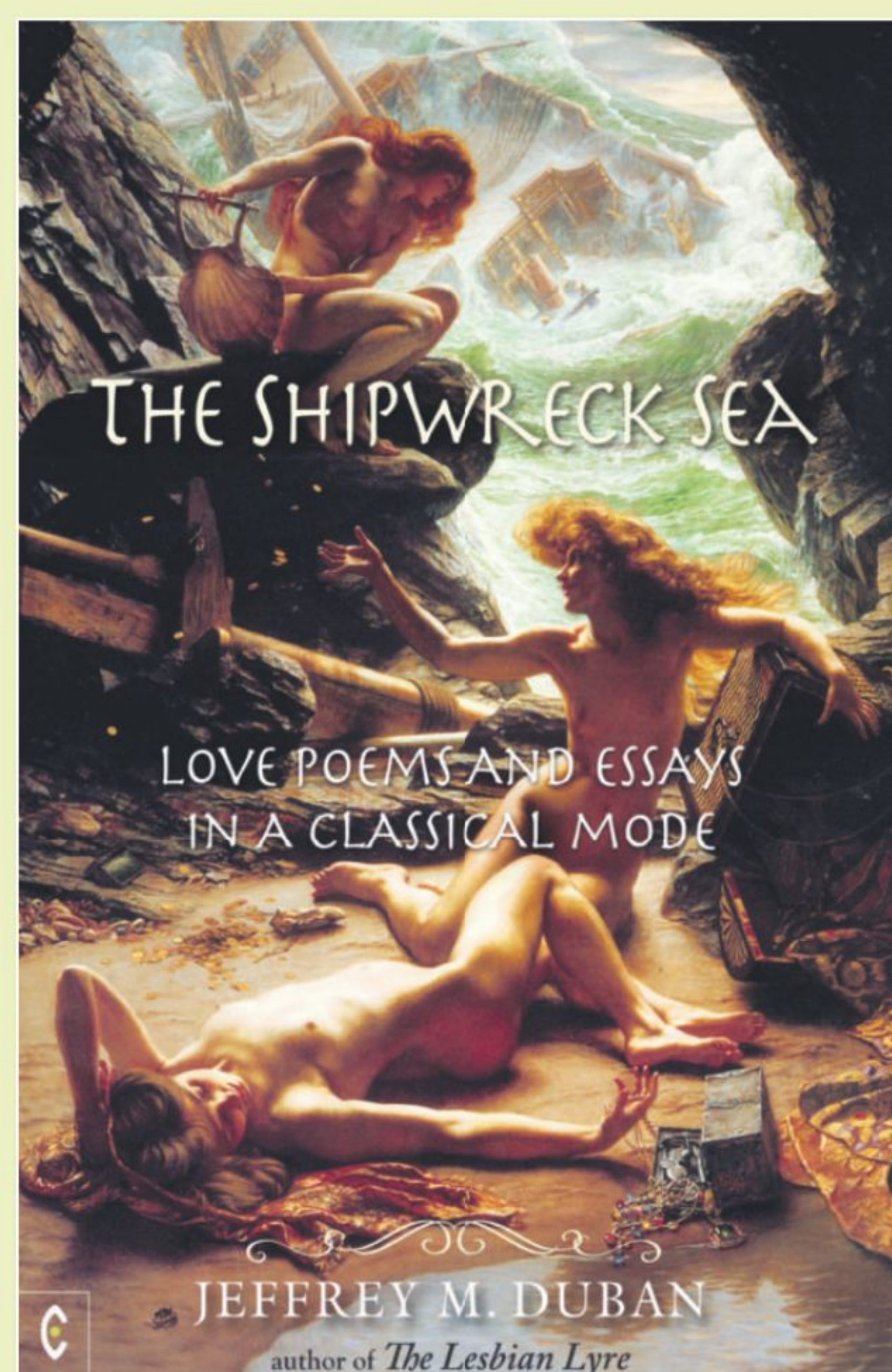
There is a lot of pulsing in *Venus & Aphrodite*. And a fair amount of pulsating and pullulating. Bodies or body parts are voluptuous, sensuous, sensual, fructuous. Temples or landscapes are luscious, sylvan, mesmeric, lambent. Sex is "transformational, transcendental, ecstatic". Cyprus in 3000 BC was "an epoch of unbridled passions". The style is so overwrought that reading about the "throbbing primal power of Aphrodite" becomes a bit wearing. Is Betty Hughes's breathy enthusiasm a style that she developed in response to the misogyny of a media that finds it hard to accept women's voices as authoritative? It is reported that in the 1990s, when she approached the BBC with a proposal to make her first history television programme, the response was: "Nobody wants to be lectured at by a woman". Or is the idea that in a book about desire, the medium must be the message? Either way, such heightened prose is difficult to keep up, and the ending of the last chapter collapses, spent, in a conclusion that few will argue with: "Until love is redundant, the goddess of love looks unlikely to lose her appeal". ■

To buy *Venus & Aphrodite* at a discount, visit shop.the-tls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935

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"I've never been asked by a reputable journal [TLS] to review such a bad book as Jeffrey Duban's *The Lesbian Lyre*."

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— Constantinos Yiannoudes,
Founder and Director,
Kyrenia Opera

Black gold

The beer company with a conscience

COLIN GRANT

VOICES OF GUINNESS

An oral history of the Park Royal Brewery

TIM STRANGLEMAN

240pp. Oxford University Press. £22.99.

IS GUINNESS “Good for You”? Since 1929 advertisers of the stout have asserted that it is, managing to establish a firm grip on the imagination of the public. Well into the 1960s, doctors prescribed Guinness for pregnant women and people with anaemia, even though it has hardly more iron content than any other beer. In *Voices of Guinness: An oral history of the Park Royal Brewery*, Tim Strangleman explores the myths and legends behind the façade of the benign Irish institution responsible for the beverage.

The narrative of Guinness as a worker-friendly company driven by a social conscience is interrogated early on in Strangleman’s study, which focuses

on the company’s Park Royal Brewery on London’s outskirts. Fear of trade tariffs in the 1930s had prompted the Dublin-based firm to establish a foothold in England. Although there were several suitable locations beyond London, the strength of unions in the north was seen as an impediment. Strangleman emphasizes the point with a manager’s account of the first strike called “over alleged favouritism shown to non-Trade Unionists over the allocation of overtime”. When the company later encouraged shop-floor workers to join relevant trade unions, some speculated that it was intended “to head off more militant confrontation ... in the immediate postwar period”. Surely, though, it was a case of

Initiation ceremony for a new apprentice at Guinness’s Park Royal Brewery, 1949



enlightened self-interest. Earnest ideals expressed over three decades of the company’s in-house magazine, *Guinness Time*, suggests that the boardroom was sincerely animated by notions of corporate paternalism, a desire to create a “nurturing environment in which employees could flourish”.

Alongside interviews with the last members of the workforce (Park Royal was closed in 2005 and the art deco building demolished soon after) are written documents, reproductions of paintings (most notably by John Gilroy, who also designed advertising posters for Guinness), and a series of photographs by the former *Picture Post* photographer A. R. Tanner, whose black-and-white images are reminiscent of the portraits of working lives in John Grierson’s pioneering documentaries from the 1930s. Strangleman draws heavily on *Guinness Time*’s essays and editorials (given to quoting Aristotle and referencing George Bernard Shaw) and the magazine’s photographic features outlining the myriad jobs at the corporation. The ideal was for the workforce to appear as dignified and restrained as Giles Gilbert Scott’s design for Park Royal itself, which echoed his other industrial work at Bankside and Battersea power stations (now the Tate Modern and luxury flats, respectively). Though innately conservative, Guinness prided itself on a progressive outlook. After the “social harmonization” of the Second World War, Strangleman points out, the brewery needed to free itself from “the order and predictability of labour, its stultifying hierarchies, its restrictive norms and values”.

In a book that champions oral history through multiple voices, Strangleman does not initially cede sufficient space to the workers. Had he done so, it might have lent the earlier chapters more critical bite. Workers’ inclusion in subsequent chapters immediately lifts the book. The workforce, though strongly unionized, appears to have been comfortable; radicalism is attenuated by a sense of privilege. “The first time I went up to the canteen everything was silver service”, recalls Henry Dawson. “People coming round with big silver tureens ... For an ordinary working man, that was a bit strange.”

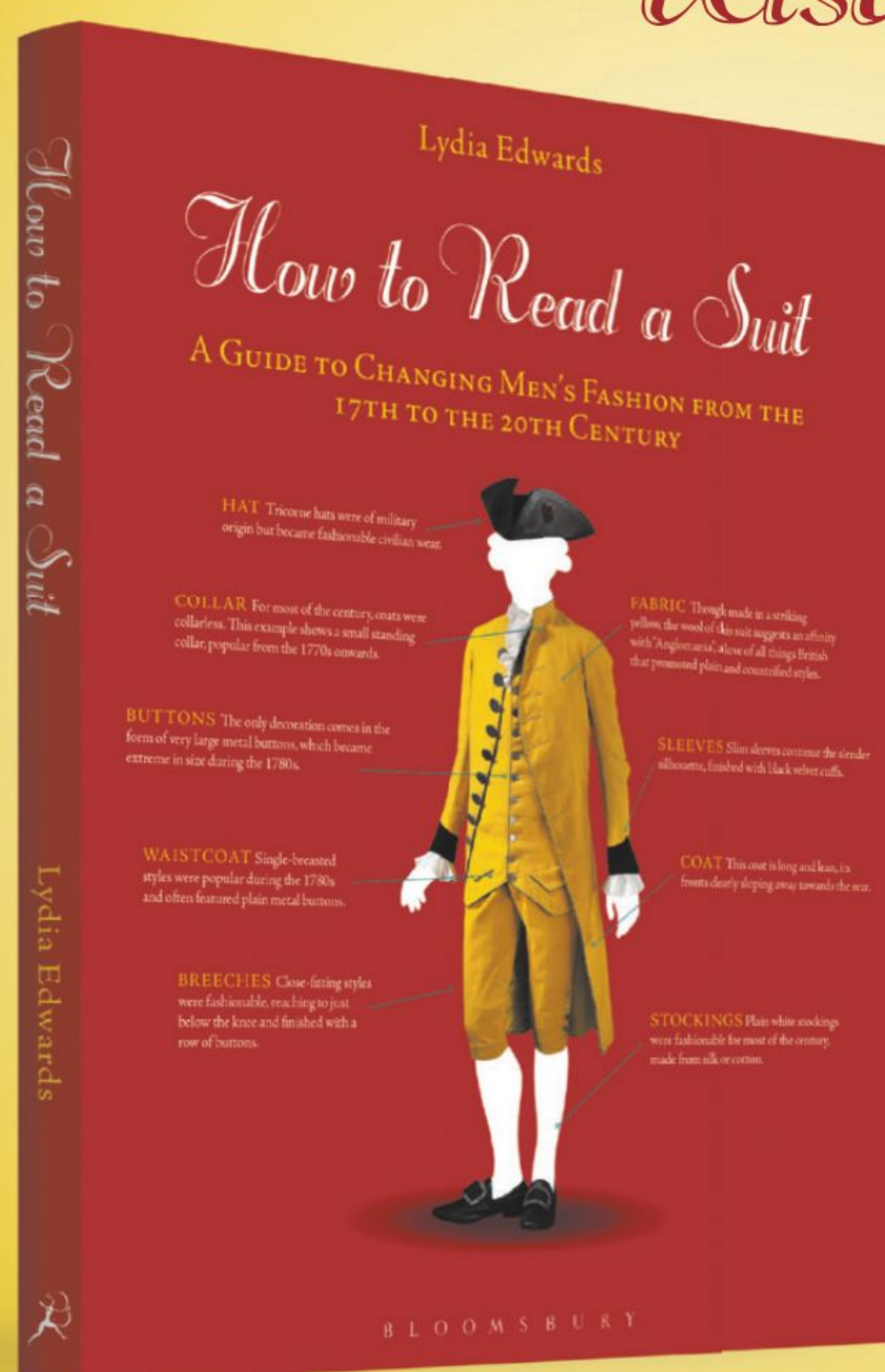
Strangleman views Royal Park as a battleground between modernity and tradition and a “privileged occasion for understanding work in the twentieth century”. “A continual narrative is woven around the brewery”, he points out, “whereby its extensive grounds and environs are imagined as a village.” At the Royal Park cricket ground *Guinness Time* painted a reassuring picture of progress not outpacing the past in the makeup of the cricket team: “it requires the merest flight of fancy to find the blacksmith, butcher and possibly even the curate [alongside] the coopers, engineers and accountants”. The inevitable deficits that came with the workings of a modern industrial plant, meanwhile, were ameliorated by innovative approaches: the company commissioned an architect to disguise the waste spoil by shaping “the dumps into gently curving hillocks”, beyond which modern life thrummed in the form of Piccadilly Line trains and the traffic of Western Avenue.

Oral history is a young discipline. The oft-cited grandfather of British oral history was George Ewart Evans. His first work, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, was published in 1956. Since then the most rewarding oral histories, whether from Svetlana Alexievich or Studs Terkel, have emerged from the careful marshalling and editing of material, selecting of first-hand interviews and archives, and resisting the urge to interpolate. Tim Strangleman too often gets in the way of the voices we want to hear, as though attempting to steer our understanding. Nonetheless, he writes with both academic rigour and affection; his prose is apparently suffused with something akin to the “industrial structure of feeling” that marked the workers of this bygone era, whose confidence and contentedness were the result of knowledge, respect and a sense of purpose. ■

To buy *Voices of Guinness* at a discount, visit shop.the-tls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935

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BEN STOKES WITH RICHARD GIBSON

305pp. Headline. £20.

IS THERE EVER a right time for a sportsperson's memoir? Do you wait until the curtain falls on your career or do you take advantage of an apparently apex moment? The autobiography of Eddie Jones, manager of the English rugby team in the 2019 World Cup in Japan, points up the dilemma. Had England won the trophy, the tale of triumph would have provided a perfect first chapter. As it is, the book opens with the victory in the previous World Cup of the Japanese team, the Cherry Blossoms, which he coached, over the South Africans. Unlikely and dramatic though that victory was, it took place only in a pool match which had no impact on the result of the tournament (although it did signify Japan's arrival among the premier league of rugby-playing nations). A summary of the same match is reprised in a later section of the book, where it fits more naturally chronologically, sometimes with all but identical language, suggesting last-minute, or at least incomplete editing. England's defeat in the 2019 final has to provide the book's anticlimactic conclusion.

Nonetheless, Jones's overall story is compelling. On his first day in kindergarten in Sydney he sat next to the three Ella brothers, indigenous Australians who all later played for the national team. Jones, without the physique essential to success in modern rugby football, where size is indeed everything, narrowly failed to win an international cap. In his case failure, not fame was the spur to his form of involvement in his chosen sport. For while players are generally able only to represent one international team, no such restrictions apply to coaches. With a mixed

Australian-Japanese parentage, Jones was well suited to the peripatetic lifestyle of his profession. He coached the Australian team, losing finalists (to England) in the World Cup in 2003 and, as an "effective number two", the Springboks who won the cup (beating England) in 2007. His loyalty as a mercenary was always to his current paymaster.

Jones explains how the modern coach makes use of a range of support to improve his teams from providers of match data to psychiatrists. He himself applied the lessons of psychology by dividing his English match squad of twenty-three into starters and finishers so as to put the first fifteen and those who came off the bench on a par in terms of esteem. He notes that games can be won or lost by how teams make use of the many moments when the ball is not in play to learn lessons from when it is. But central to any team's success is the personality of the coach himself, which explains why their financial rewards usually exceed those of the players. Jones accepts that he has mellowed over the years and no longer resorts to "a daily shellacking", but he still considers it necessary to take players out of their comfort zone. He is more a stick than a carrot. He enjoys a Thatcherite ability to survive on five hours' sleep per night, with all his waking ones devoted to devising game plans.

What is surprising is the number of times Jones admits to a mistake in team selection or substitution. There may be many reasons why England lost the final in 2019 but the most obvious was the loss of a key forward, Kyle Sinckler, to concussion in the third minute of the match, when his only replacement was the oldest member of the squad, Dan Cole, now compelled to play for almost the entire eighty minutes without relief. To describe this, as he does, as merely a "genuine setback" is an understatement. This fateful episode was hardly Jones's fault, but the substitute's inclusion was a risk. Jones has had his contract renewed by the Rugby Football Union for two years. If he stays and wins the World Cup in 2023, another book will surely roll off the presses.

For the boxer Tyson Fury, lack of size did not present a problem. Though he was born three months prematurely with a weight of one pound, his fighting weight is closer to 20 stone; and as he observes, "I can't think of any one with a name better suited to ring combat than Tyson Fury". His father's boxing hero was Mike Tyson so his first name was not accidental, even if somehow prophetic. By the time he captured the world heavyweight champion-

Tyson Fury, MGM Garden Arena, Las Vegas, February 22

“
Ben Stokes is not without form as an amateur pugilist

Michael Beloff QC has been a member of the Court of Arbitration for Sport for more than two decades

ship in 2015 from Wladimir Klitschko he had a flawless record in his twenty-four professional bouts. But his victory against the experienced and long-serving Ukrainian title-holder was still a surprise. It was achieved by a combination of guile inside the ring and showmanship outside it, designed to disconcert his opponent. This complemented his genetic advantages, notably height (he is 6'9"), inherited from a family of Irish Traveller fighting men.

But snakes followed ladders. A victim of both bipolar and obsessive compulsive disorder, he indulged excessively in drink and drugs, his boxing licence was revoked, and he contemplated suicide. His weight approached 28 stone. His resurrection was in consequence still more impressive than his first coming. His licence restored, he returned to the ring and after five bouts took on the formidable American WBC heavyweight champion Deontay Wilder in 2018. Many experts believe he won the fight, officially declared a draw in a split decision; boxing folklore has it that for a foreigner to win a title fight in the USA, he has to knock his opponent out, but Fury himself was knocked down in the last round. Although he rose Lazarus-like from a prone position ("the darkness gave way to light as I rose to my feet"), he had not helped his cause. In the book he calls himself the "lineal" champion, having defeated Klitschko and been unbeaten since. It is not a title recognized by any of the various bodies who claim authority over the sport. For a while it was unclear when - even whether - Fury, who has dabbled in wrestling and campaigns on mental health issues, would return as a boxer. But in the rematch with Wilder on February 22 this year, he comprehensively defeated the American and provided himself with the first chapter for a second book. There is likely to be material enough for it, from a character colourful even by the exotic standards of combat sports.

Ben Stokes is not without form as an amateur pugilist. In *On Fire*, he tactfully glosses over "the Bristol incident", which led to his acquittal of criminal charges but his temporary suspension from the English Test team after a brawl outside a nightclub. If he needed redemption, it was certainly provided in his annus mirabilis of 2019, culminating in his selection as the BBC sports personality of the year. This was the fruit of a double triumph, his critical role in England's first ever win of the cricket World Cup, and his unbeaten century in the third Test against Australia, which saved the series even if it failed to result in the recovery of the Ashes (though he talks it up, Stokes cannot conceal any more than Jones the element of bathos). Born in New Zealand, Stokes convincingly passed the Tebbit test as not only a proud supporter but an integral part of the English national squad.

Stokes's successes stem not only from his love of the game, but from his knowledge of it. He analyses with painstaking precision how he approached each critical juncture of each match; but the result is that the magic of those moments is suffocated by what becomes a surrogate coaching manual. In many ways the most interesting sections of the book deal with moments off pitch, showing how a superlative sportsman copes with his periods of fame. He ends by saying that he hopes to replicate the achievements of the English international team's 2019 in the years to come. He may not need to go quite that far to justify another book.

In the last year of the decade an Aussie, a Gypsy, and a Kiwi represented the best of sporting British. In the arena the score was Jones a loss, Fury a draw (now upgraded) and Stokes a win. It is never easy to tell with this type of autobiography how much is the true voice of the subject and how much the sanitized version of the sports journalist. (Only Fury's does not admit the collaboration of a well-established writer and none uses the familiar formula "As told to"). But whatever be the source, from the reader's perspective I would rank these books in reverse order. Jones gold, Fury silver, Stokes bronze. ■

To buy these books at a discount, visit shop.the-tls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935



Total impressions

The lives of the Humboldt brothers, told through perspectives and sensibilities

MAREN MEINHARDT

WILHELM AND ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT

Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin,
until April 19

IT IS DIFFICULT TO CONTEMPLATE the exhibition on Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt at the Historisches Museum in Berlin without looking a little bit further down the road. On the opposite bank of the river Spree, the Humboldt Forum was supposed to open its doors to the public in autumn 2019, to coincide with the 250th birthday of Alexander von Humboldt. The usual building delays aside (the Forum won't now open until 2021 at the earliest), there is a more fundamental problem at the heart of the most ambitious museum project Germany has attempted in the postwar era (the plan is to incorporate the holdings of two existing museums, the Ethnological Museum of Berlin and the Museum of Asian Art). What to do with an ethnographic collection at precisely the time when the existence of such collections is ever more contested? The situation came to a head with a report, commissioned in 2018 by Emmanuel Macron, that recommended the restitution of cultural artefacts to their countries of origin. One of the co-authors of the report is Bénédicte Savoy, who had been part of the Humboldt Forum's advisory board, until she resigned over the unresolved provenance of the objects to be displayed: "I want to know how much blood is dripping from each artwork".

So the fact that the first joint exhibition on Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, instead of forming part of the Humboldt Forum's grand opening, takes place in the Historisches Museum, and is curated by Savoy and David Blankenstein, is, to put it mildly, noteworthy. Nor is the exhibition the reckoning one might have been led to expect. Not much is made of the fact that Alexander's acquisition of objects from South America is, from today's point of view, often doubtful. Even his most controversial act - the collecting of human remains from the Atarupe caves in Venezuela, carried out against the wishes of the local people - is only mentioned in passing.

The curators take an altogether more elegant and subtle approach. Choosing objects that offer a fresh, often oblique look at the lives of both brothers, they sidestep a heroic narrative, and instead reveal complex figures who are subject to the currents of their times. In the process, expectations are confounded,

and sometimes, new vistas open up. It is a thrill to encounter a geographical drawing of the world, neatly and competently executed (though generously equipped with a few extra islands just south of Madagascar) by thirteen-year-old Alexander. The fish specimens in jars that are exhibited alongside were also collected by him - not, however, on his travels in South America, but in the lake at Tegel, his childhood home.

The surge in interest in his younger brother has relegated Wilhelm to the shadows in more recent years, but a large-scale painting of the Pyrenees - crossed by Wilhelm on his way to the Basque country - serves to remind us that Alexander was not the only one who travelled. Wilhelm covered vast distances in the service of his study of languages, though the fact that he travelled with his wife and children in tow, and never left Europe, made this achievement less apt to fire the popular imagination.

The curators are not overly concerned with providing what they call "relics". The Pyrenees picture is not painted by Wilhelm, but by the French artist Alexander Louis Robert Millin du Perreux. He and Wilhelm knew each other, and it is quite possible that some of the small figures shown traversing the mountain valley are Wilhelm and his family. But it is equally possible that they are not. The implication is that it is not important. What is important is that the painting shows a view that Wilhelm would have seen, rendered by a sensibility sympathetic to his own.

There are, however, some drawings by Du Perreux here that do feature Wilhelm's family. One is a charming back view of Caroline and Wilhelm von Humboldt atop a rock, the latter kitted out in frock coat and top hat. Another drawing shows figures - one of them quite possibly Caroline, at that point pregnant with the couple's fourth child - being carried in Sedan chairs. Wilhelm remarked, approvingly, on how inexpensive this mode of transport was - bringing to mind Alexander's crossing of the difficult Quindio mountain pass in the Andes, and his shock at seeing tourists paying porters to carry them across on their backs. A final drawing shows a group of three sitting on a horse in a special saddle made for two, a small child perched in the middle. Pleasingly, the curators have managed to dig up just such a contraption. It is called a Cacolet, a typical mode of transportation in the Basque country at the time, a rickety and uncomfortable-looking affair featuring two wooden chairs either side of a saddle.

As for Alexander's travels, a small wooden box has been spirited to Berlin from the ethnological collections of the University of Göttingen, where both

"Coccodrillo", the sculpture that both Humboldt brothers saw at the Vatican Museum

Maren Meinhardt's book, A Longing for Wide and Unknown Things: The Life of Alexander von Humboldt, was published in 2018

brothers studied (a matriculation register on display shows both their names). It contains a lump of dark-red colour, brought home by Alexander from the Orinoco. He thought - wrongly - that indigenous groups painted their bodies with it as a protection against insects (later research confirmed that it was purely decorative). Even in this simple lump lurk complexities, in this case involving economy and religion: Alexander's carefully labelled lid explains that local missionaries traded with the colouring, selling it for one and a half thalers apiece. This explains, observed Alexander, why the representatives of Christianity, otherwise so keen on seeing their charges clothed, were on this occasion rather in favour of them walking around naked.

The Pyrenees picture is placed so as to invite the obvious comparison with its companion piece, the famous painting of the Chimborazo that shows Alexander and his travel companion Aimé Bonpland standing before the snow-capped, iconic mountain. This, too, tells a story that is less than straightforward. The celebrated achievement in itself is full of ambiguities - Alexander had to turn back 500 metres or so before the summit, but had still achieved a height (above sea level) beyond what any European had reached before. The painting is based on a drawing made by Alexander, but was executed by a French landscape painter, Jean-Thomas Thibault, thus imposing a European perspective on the South American view.

If there is something on a more monumental scale, then it is the antique, almost life-sized marble crocodile that dominates the main exhibition space. A first impulse is to connect it with Alexander's travels. It is, however, thoroughly European - to the point of its anatomy being all wrong, as Alexander, who had had the chance to observe and dissect a real-life specimen on the Rio Magdalena, was able quickly to establish. His drawing of the animal's opened-up torso is exhibited alongside. The object, borrowed from the Vatican Museum, where both brothers saw it, pinpoints a moment in their lives: on his way back from the Americas, Alexander put off his return home to stay for a few months with his brother, who was serving as Prussia's legate in Rome. It is also a reference to Wilhelm's interest in classical antiquity - he translated Pindar and Aeschylus into German, and had filled his home in Tegel with a huge collection of plaster casts.

The exhibition sets out to involve all our senses. A listening station has headphones dangling from the ceiling - when they are pressed against the ear, the visitor is immersed in the eighteenth-century drama of Alexander wrestling with his feelings for a young lieutenant (via his letters, read out by an actor). Another corner allows visitors to sample different smells, which have been recreated from Alexander's descriptions by a Parisian perfumer. The air sample from inside a mining tunnel is oppressively stuffy, whereas the air escaping from a volcanic crater has a surprisingly pleasant, flowery aroma. The approach mirrors that of the idea, important to both brothers, of the "total impression", the *Totaleindruck*: that, to grasp phenomena in their truest form, a more comprehensive approach is needed than that offered by purely collecting, cataloguing, counting.

In the last room of the exhibition, both Humboldt brothers look down on the departing visitor, in a gesture of farewell. It is the first time these portraits have been displayed together. Both are executed by English painters, Henry William Pickersgill (Alexander) and Thomas Lawrence (Wilhelm). Alexander is seated in a leather chair, a map by his side, and the Star of the Order of the Red Eagle pinned to his coat. His brother is wrapped tightly in a plush brown velvet gown, his left hand resting on an open book at what seems an implausible distance from his head. The catalogue tells us that Wilhelm's daughter Gabriele commented on the curious proportions, in particular on the way that the head appeared to be placed "on so infinitely larger a body than father's": Lord Liverpool's, she suspected, whose recent retirement had made a commissioned portrait surplus to requirements. ■



Liberté, égalité, sororité

A cool exploration of love, self-knowledge, hierarchy and the female gaze

MURIEL ZAGHA

PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE

Various cinemas

FOLLOWING ON FROM her coming-of-age trilogy - *Water Lilies* (2007), *Tomboy* (2011) and *Girlhood* (2014) - Céline Sciamma's new film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* marks a departure into new territory, with adult protagonists and a period setting. The narrative focus continues, however, to reflect Sciamma's interest in a female and queer experience of love and self-knowledge.

The setting is a weather-beaten island off Brittany, in 1770. Marianne, a painter (played by Noémie Merlant), has been hired to produce a portrait of Héloïse (Adèle Haenel) in order to help arrange an advantageous marriage. Héloïse, who has been taken out of her convent to replace the original bride, her sister (who threw herself off a cliff), is refusing to pose. Marianne is therefore instructed by Héloïse's mother (Valeria Golino) to observe her model covertly, while pretending to have been hired as her walking companion (with special emphasis on preventing another suicide), and later sketch and paint her from memory. This is potentially a Gothic horror set-up, and the first sighting of Héloïse as a darkly hooded figure seen from the back brings a delicious frisson of anticipation. Meanwhile, Marianne's undercover predicament, allied with her scrutiny of Héloïse, initially creates an atmosphere of tension and suspense reminiscent in some ways of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. But it soon becomes clear that the goals of the film are quite other.

Like *Vertigo*, this is a film about love, and about the gaze. But where Scottie's focus on Madeleine in *Vertigo* is expressive of a desperate, psychotic desire to possess an elusive object, here Marianne's intense, inquiring gaze, turned on Héloïse, is benevolent and, in fact, confers power on its subject. This is in part because Marianne is an artist: in an act of feminist archaeology, Sciamma chose her period in order to explore what might have been the experience of one of many long-forgotten female painters of the eighteenth century, such as Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun or the lesser known Adélaïde Labille-Guillard and Anne Vallayer-Coster. Beyond this, what

Marianne's act of looking embodies is the female gaze, a point of view that mirrors that of Sciamma herself and attempts always to frame Héloïse as subject, not object.

Thus this narrative about love and representation unfolds in a "round of gazes". There are playful permutations: the green dress Héloïse is meant to wear for her portrait is worn first by Marianne, then by the servant Sophie (Luàna Bajrami), both posing in Héloïse's place; once she agrees to pose, Héloïse points out to Marianne that while she, the model, is being looked at, she in turn is looking at the artist and that they are both in fact "in exactly the same place". As the two women debate the nature of portraiture, it becomes increasingly clear that the motif of the loved woman's portrait is here being used in a spirit diametrically opposed to, for example, the insertion in Godard's *Vivre sa vie* of Edgar Allan Poe's vampiric tale "The Oval Portrait", in which the act of painting a lifelike portrait drains the life out of its model.

Here the emphasis is on equality, a way of life that Héloïse learnt in her convent, and which leads, during her mother's absence, to a five-day idyll and proto-Revolutionary utopia where the aristocrat, the painter and the servant girl live together in an all-female household devoid of social hierarchy. In this way, the island setting of *Portrait* also recalls social experimentation plays such as Marivaux's *La Dispute* and *L'île des esclaves*, which explore respectively the existence of gender differences and the inversion of master-and-servant relationships. During this all-female intermezzo, Héloïse and Marianne assist Sophie in terminating an unwanted pregnancy with the help of a *faiseuse d'anges* (a "maker of angels", an old euphemism for a woman who performed illegal abortions) and Héloïse later encourages Marianne to paint a representation of this transgressive and liberating scene. The women also read and discuss critically, in a sort of impromptu candlelit seminar, Ovid's version of Orpheus and Eurydice, which comes to illustrate Marianne and Héloïse's tragic situation once Héloïse is married off and they are separated.

Does all this sound somewhat anachronistic? Perhaps, but at no point does Sciamma's film purport to be a historically accurate or even illusionistic recreation: it is, rather, a resolutely contemporary imagining of an unknown past. Thus Sciamma has

Adèle Haenel as Héloïse (left) and Noémie Merlant as Marianne

eschewed the use of 35mm, choosing instead high-definition digital film. The spare, elegant dialogue dispenses entirely with archaic turns of phrase that might signal "historicity". And the centrepiece of the film, a night-time scene where the island's women gather on the beach to exchange gossip and sell remedies, is accompanied by an arresting piece of chanting with polyrhythmic claps composed by Arthur Simonini and Para One (the electronic music producer who also worked on the score of *Waterlilies* and *Tomboy*), primarily inspired by Ligeti's *Requiem*.

Rare explosions of music aside, this is a slow and often silent film, with a spare, pared-down setting. The action takes place for the most part either on the beach or in the room allocated to Marianne, a disused reception room divided by curtains that becomes her bedroom and studio and functions, in a theatrical way, as a blank space suitable for artistic and sexual experimentation. This allows the film to implant modern feminist concerns into its eighteenth-century setting, creating links across time, as in the central scene where the metaphor of the title becomes literalized in a surreal, perhaps Freudian, manner. When Marianne and Héloïse later experiment in bed with a psychotropic "flying ointment" (which was believed to be used by witches), erotically smeared under the armpit in the hope that it will "slow down time", the film reaches out to other eras of counterculture while exploring the myth of immortality.

Ultimately, though the performances are strong, this remains a predominantly cool and detached experience, in keeping with Sciamma's register in previous films. It may be helpful to consider the film's context in the landscape of French cinema, contrasting it with a far "hotter" work, *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013) by Abdellatif Kechiche, which also featured a female artist involved in a same-sex relationship, and was unanimously awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes festival. Soon after, the two leads, Léa Seydoux and Adèle Exarchopoulos, denounced the director's exploitative and bullying practices during shooting, especially when it came to the lengthy sex scene, and the film was criticized for its "patriarchal gaze". Sciamma's film, on the other hand, quietly aims to illustrate a different, more active and egalitarian kind of spectatorship, a contract in which consent, which is paramount, consists in returning the gaze. ■

Muriel Zagha is a freelance writer and broadcaster on the visual arts

As clouded glass

An update of H. G. Wells's classic

PIPPA GOLDSCHMIDT

THE INVISIBLE MAN

Various cinemas



Elisabeth Moss as Cecilia

I HAVE SEEN MY OWN DEATH!” the subject of the world’s first X-ray is alleged to have exclaimed. Perhaps she was aghast at witnessing her hand rendered almost invisible in a photograph, its most obvious attribute neither her flesh nor bones but her wedding ring. Both the accidental discovery of X-rays by the German physicist Wilhelm Röntgen, as well as Frau Röntgen’s reaction, obviously influenced H. G. Wells’s novel *The Invisible Man*, whose titular character remarks on “the strange horror of seeing that my hands had become as clouded glass”.

In this latest film to be inspired by the novel, invisibility is a technological illusion caused by a suit

covered in tiny cameras, but it’s also the psychological impact of living with an abusive man. Cecilia Kass tells her sister and friend that her ex-partner Griffin not only physically abused her but also attempted to control every aspect of her life, including her thoughts. In his eyes, she was nothing more than an appendage to him, and that’s why she had to escape.

Casting Elisabeth Moss as the main character of this film was a clever move that does a lot of heavy lifting; even if you haven’t seen *The Handmaid’s Tale*, her role in that show has become such a widespread symbol of misogynistic power and abuse that we understand straight away how we’re supposed to view her in this film. Indeed, the opening scene could

be set in a high-tech Gilead in which Cecilia enacts a daring plan to escape Griffin’s coldly see-through house. With her sister’s help, she goes to stay with an old friend, James (Aldis Hodge) and his sweet, sassy daughter Sydney (Storm Reid). James is the emblematic #notallmen good guy, the straightforward African American policeman who (mostly) believes Cecilia’s version of events. James and Sydney live in Oakland, a predominantly African American city next door to much whiter San Francisco. And the invisible man is rendered visible when white paint and powder are thrown over him. These racial overtones could have been interesting to pursue but the film doesn’t leave itself any time to delve into them.

James’s house appears at first to be a genuine refuge, and Cecilia starts to regain her confidence and even manages to get a job interview. The male interviewer’s creepy and inappropriate behaviour, however, is a sharp reminder of endemic misogyny. Cecilia hears that Griffin has committed suicide, but soon she is left in no doubt that this death has been faked and he is, in fact, still hanging around with the sole purpose of tormenting her.

The effects by which we intuit the invisible presence of Griffin are all the more successful because they are situated not in the glossy film-set world of his house but in the all-too-real and slightly scuzzy policeman’s home. A frying pan catches fire, a knife quietly slides from the kitchen bench, a chair cushion is dented, a phone’s flash goes off. Visible breath is emitted by an invisible body. And because we are privileged in being shown these events when Cecilia can’t always see them herself, almost from the beginning we know that the invisible man is real and not a figment of her imagination.

Even though the other characters don’t believe her when she tells them what she sees, we do, and perhaps slightly more problematically and unrealistically, she believes herself (indeed, her actual nickname is “Cee”, just in case we don’t get it). The film isn’t interested in providing any insight into the many ways that abusive partners practise psychological as well as physical abuse. Victims of gaslighting become so precisely because their abusers make them doubt reality. It would have been more realistic if Cee herself (and also the audience) had spent more time doubting her own version of events. But from this point on the film settles into the slightly weary trope of Cee trying to convince other people that what she’s seeing is “real” and of course, we’re on her side.

Indeed, the film loses interest in its own set-up by failing to care adequately about Cee’s frame of mind. At one point it makes a big drama out of the fact that she can’t bring herself to leave James’s house and she is spooked by every passer-by, and in the very next scene she has managed to travel to a lawyer’s office to find out that she’s a beneficiary of Griffin’s will. There are conditions tied to this bequest but she accepts the money. To say that this doesn’t feel in keeping with what we’ve learnt so far about Cecilia’s fear of her ex, and her desire to keep away from him at all costs, is an understatement but of course the money and the attached conditions are needed to drive the plot forward – and after this there is no shortage of plot.

The invisibility suit that can be put on and taken off at will (and – by implication – not just by Griffin) is one step away from magic and the film isn’t interested in it other than as a plot device. Cecilia tells us that Griffin is “a world leader in the field of optics” and that’s all the exposition we get about his abilities to develop this suit. It’s the other uses of real-life technology that actually provide more interest, such as the ubiquitous surveillance cameras, and the way that Griffin can mimic Cee online. The film’s camera work, the lingering static shots of apparently undisturbed domesticity, are genuinely effective at generating unease, more than over-the-top scenes in a secure unit where Cee has been wrongly incarcerated after being framed for Griffin’s crimes. The final third of the film descends into a shoot-em-up before finishing with a gruesome revenge. By now, the only thing in its favour is that Cee definitely has control over her own life and everyone believes her. ■



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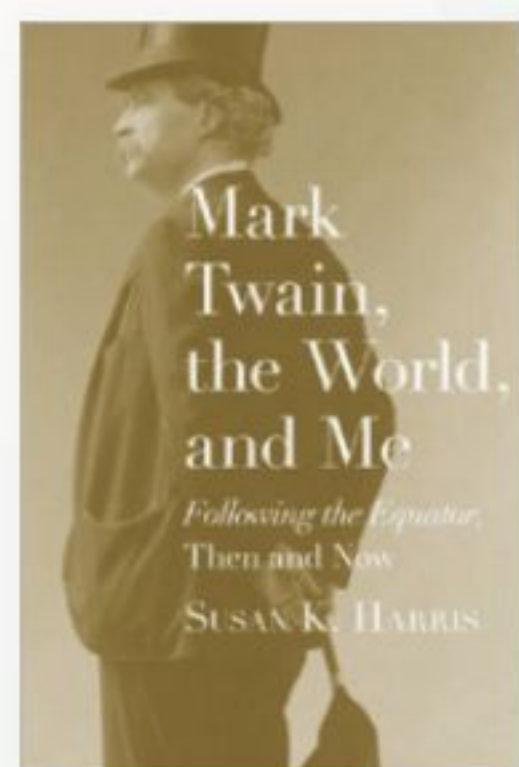


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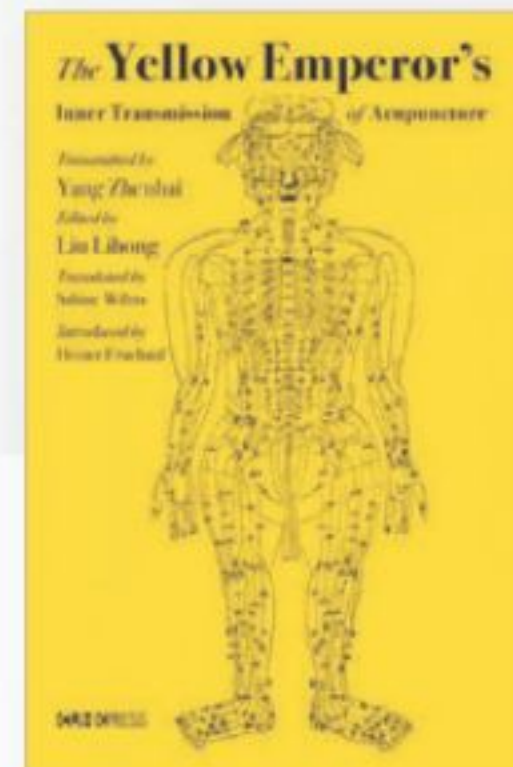
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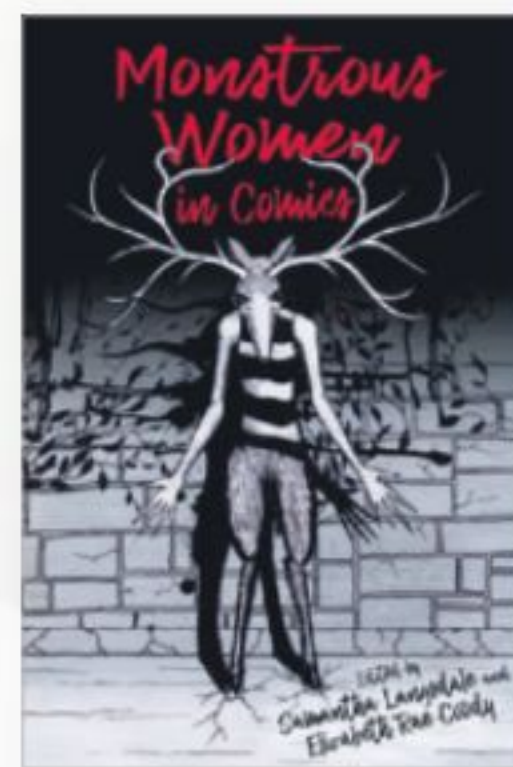
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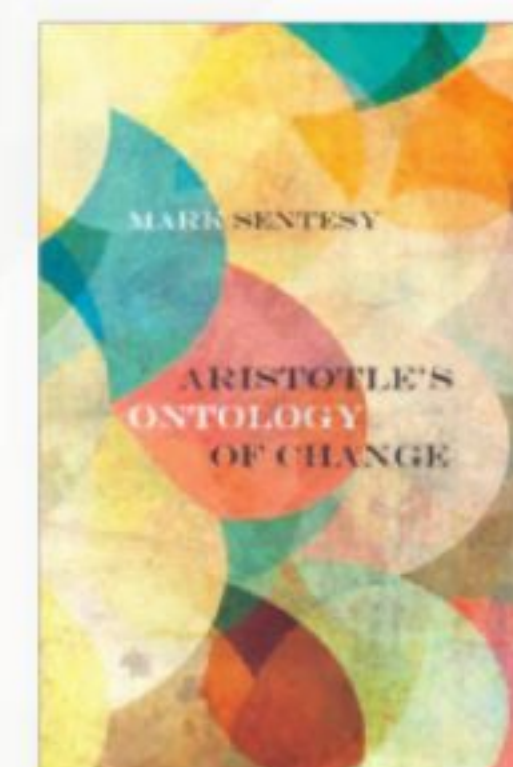
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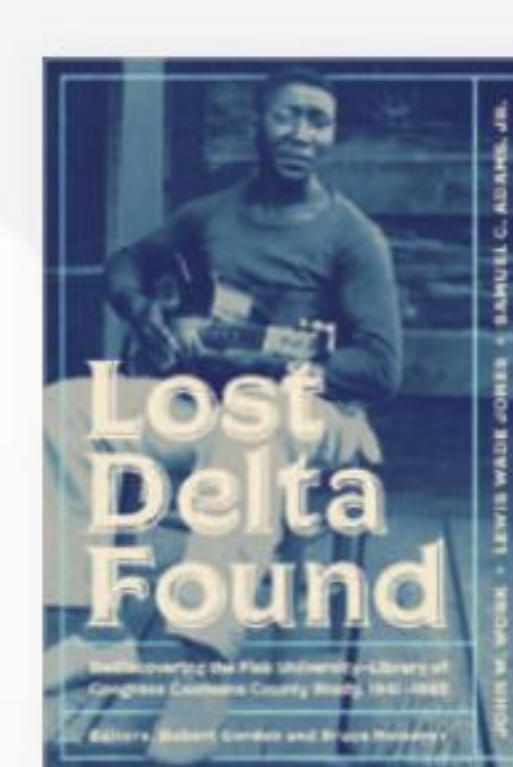
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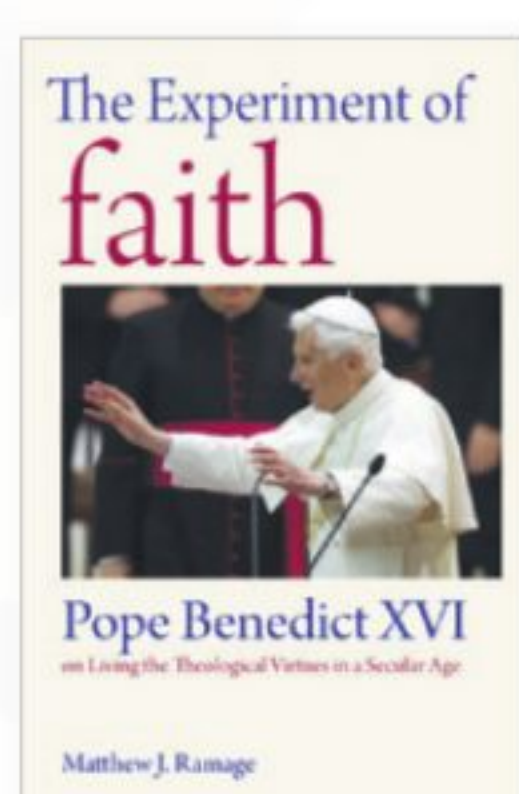
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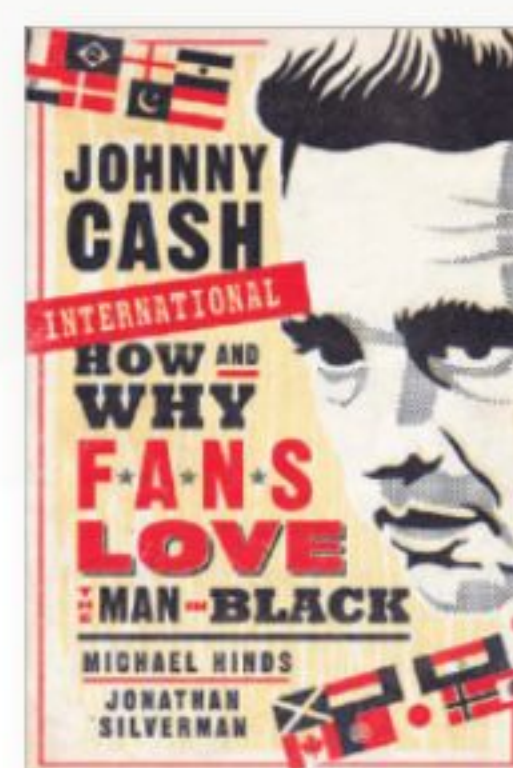
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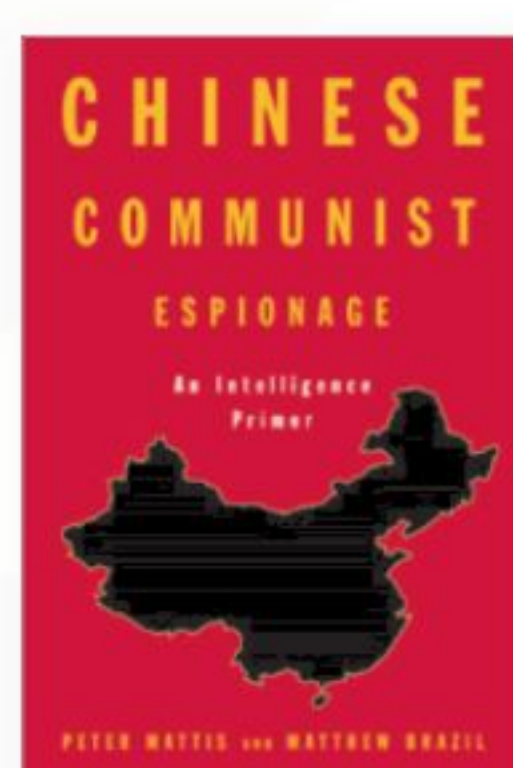
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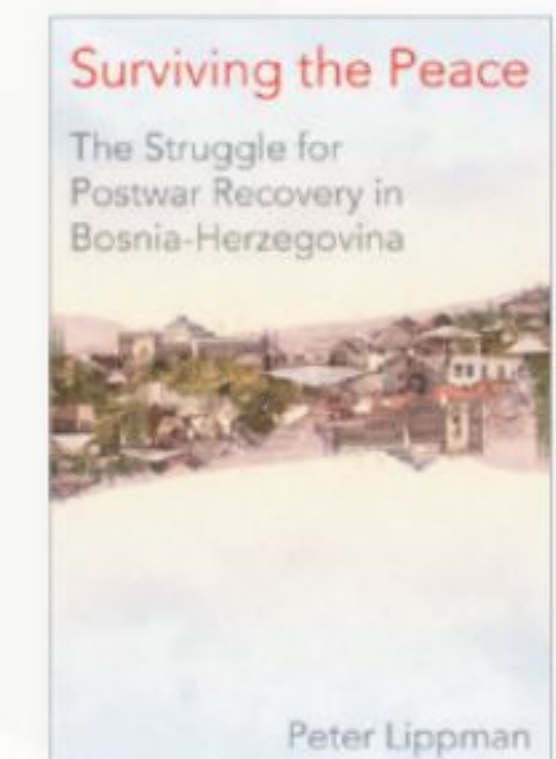


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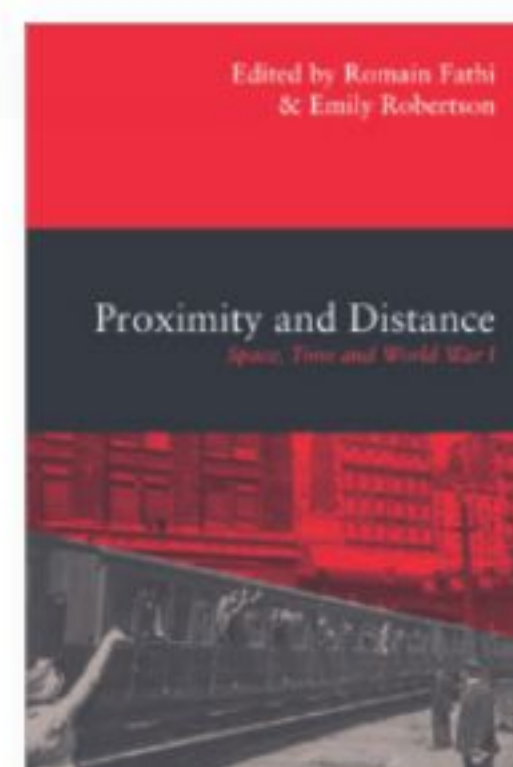


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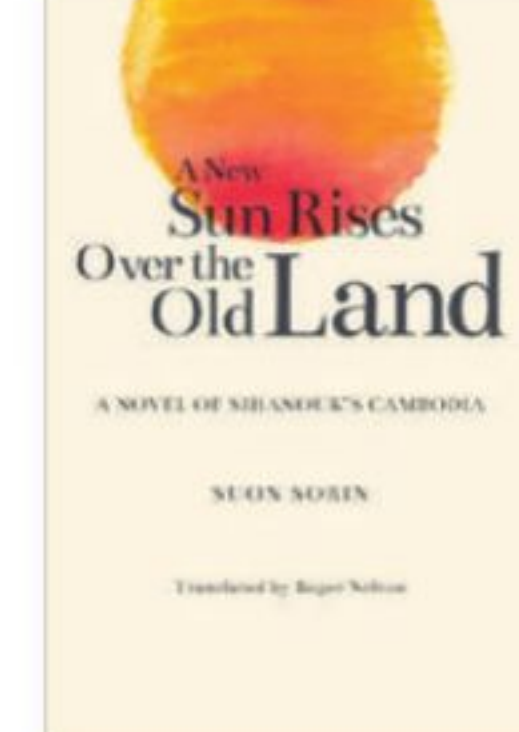
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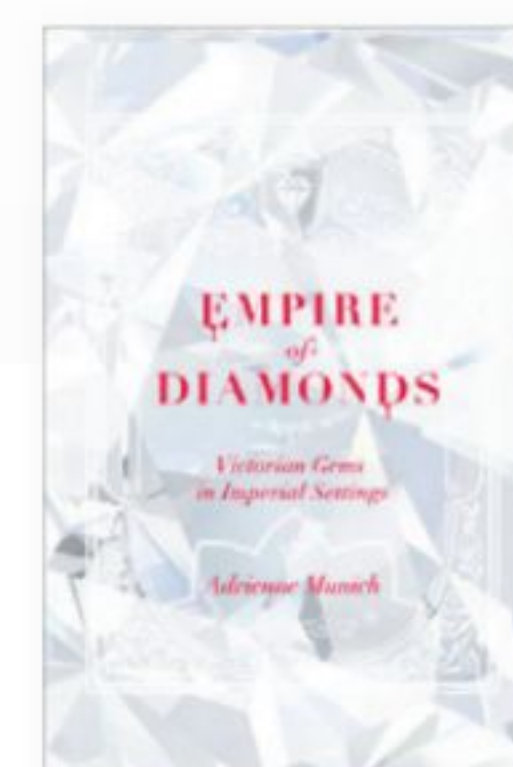


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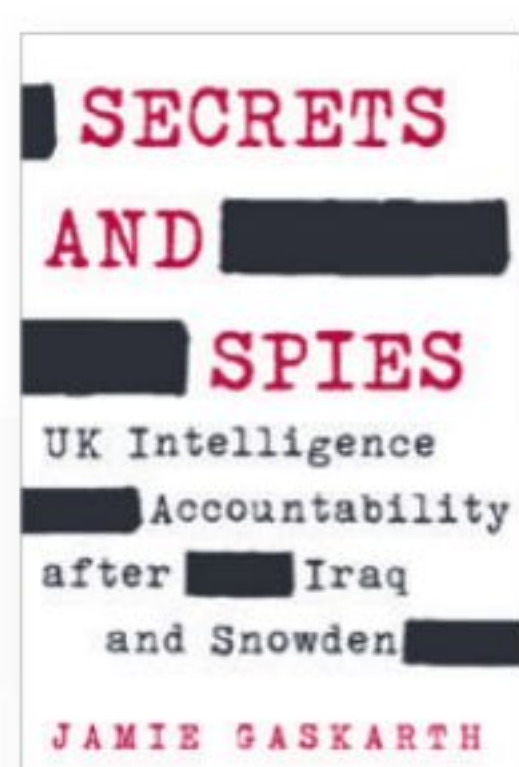
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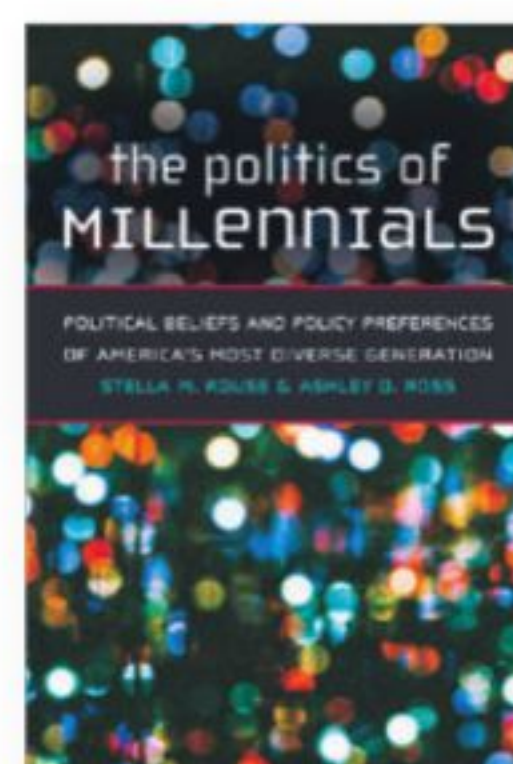
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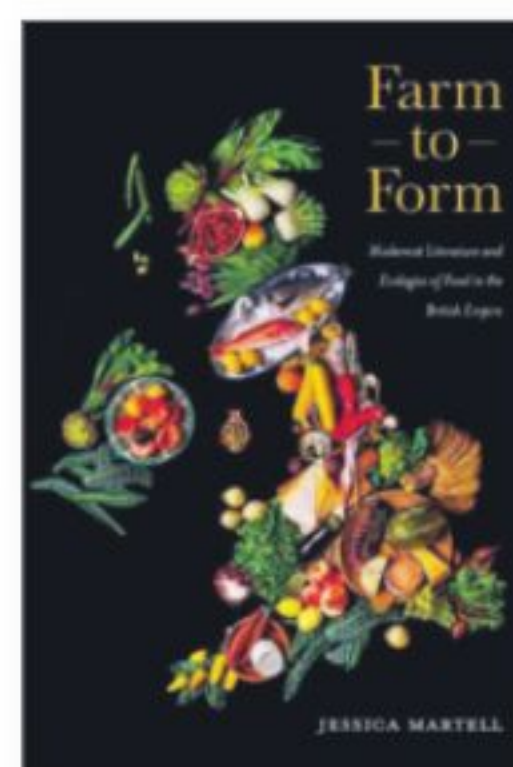
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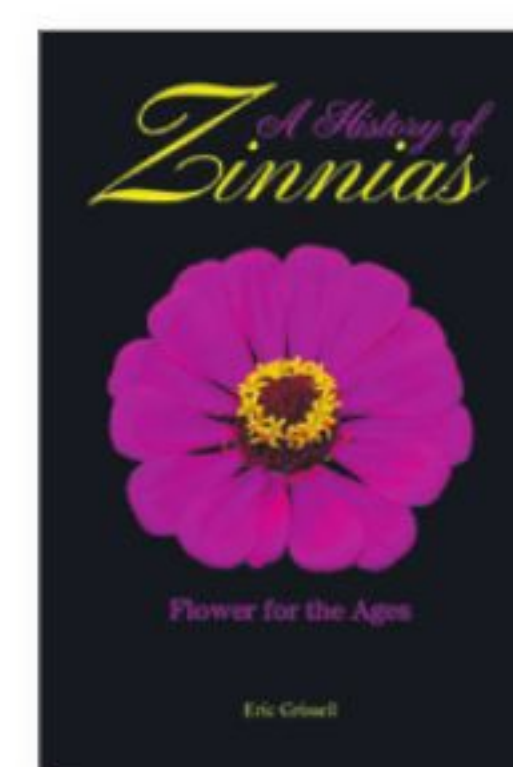
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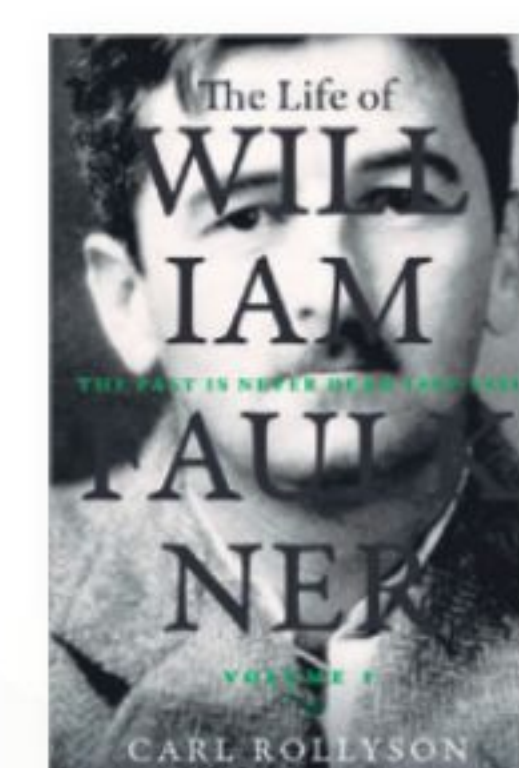


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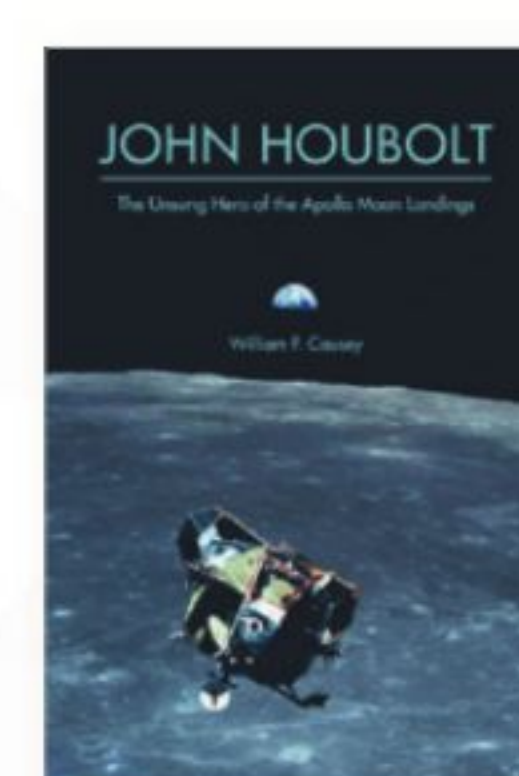


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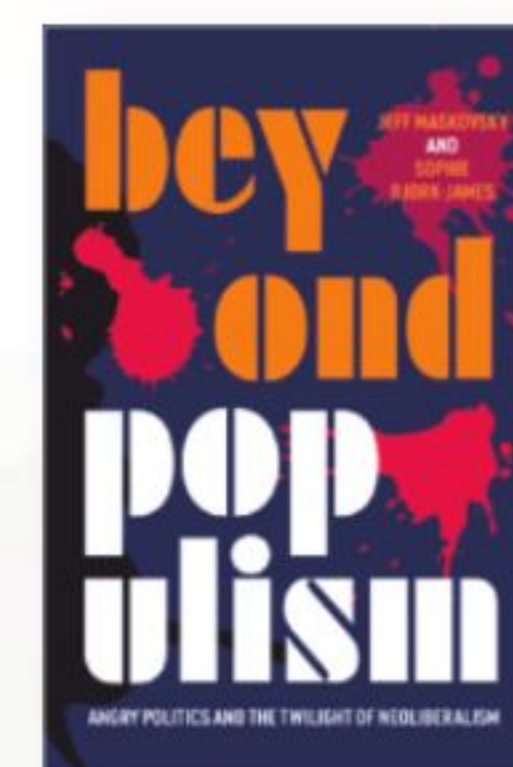


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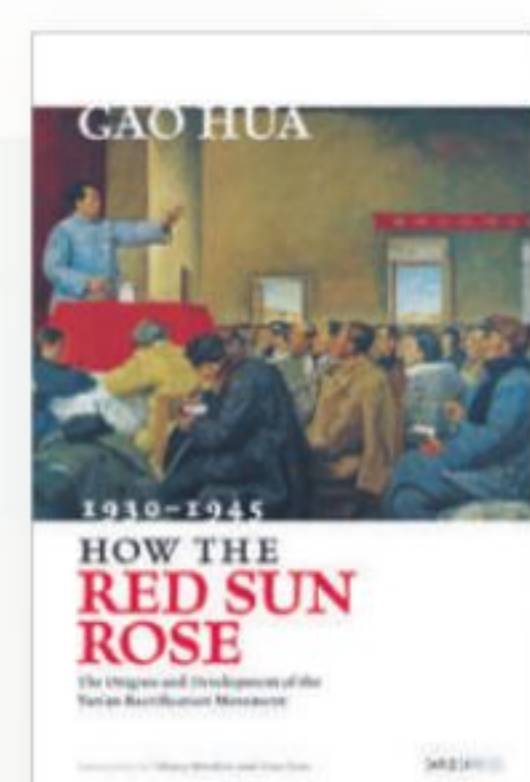


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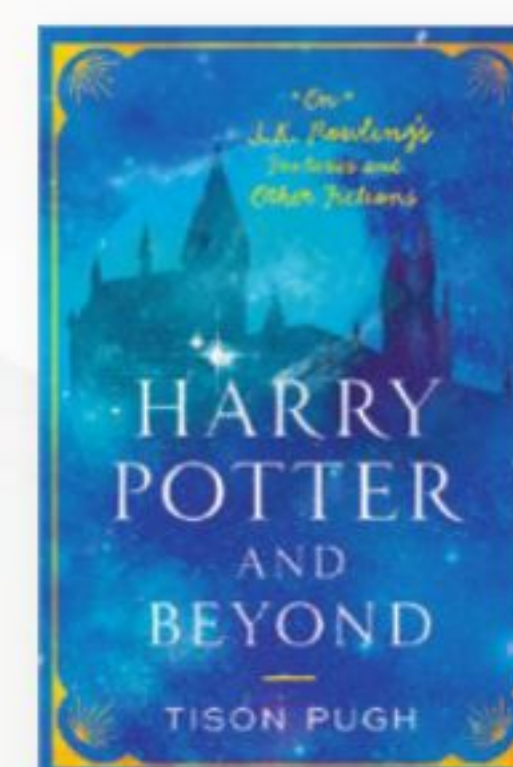


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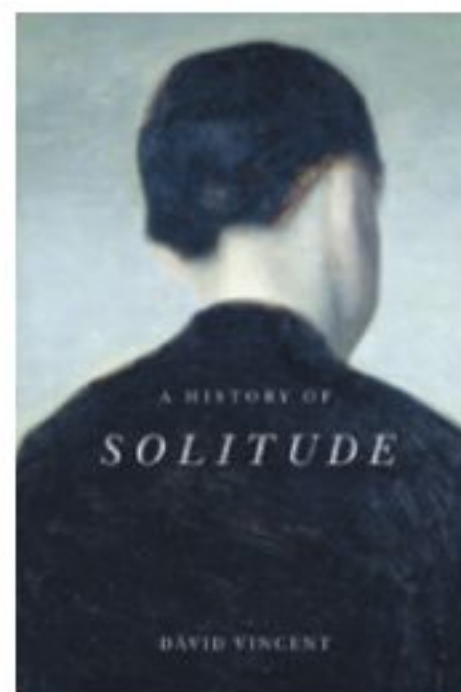
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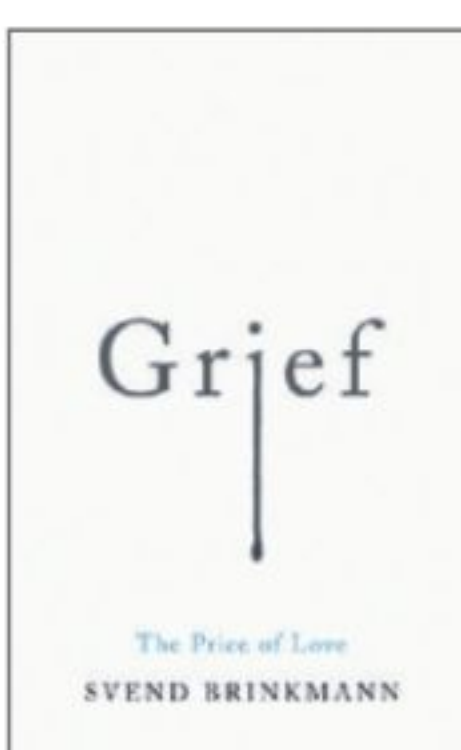
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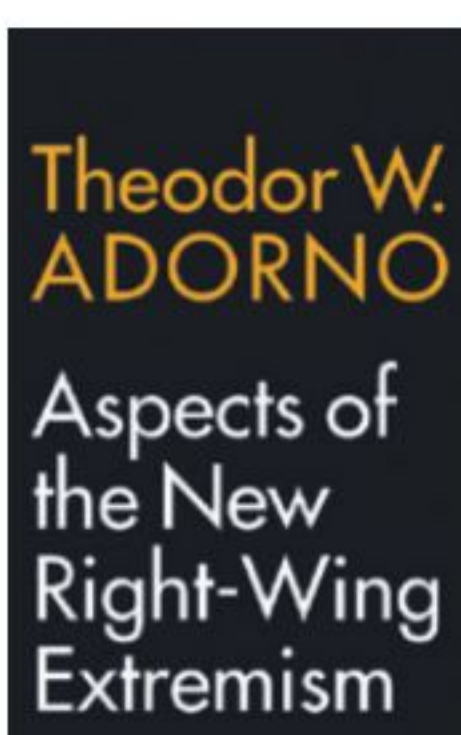
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FICTION

Bushfire smoke in Sydney, December 2019



House rules

BEEJAY SILCOX

AMNESTY

ARAVIND ADIGA

352pp. Picador. £16.99.

SYDNEY IS CHOKING in Aravind Adiga's *Amnesty*, the sky "darkened by a film of wind-borne woodsmoke" that has coiled its way down from a bushfire in the Blue Mountains. The smoke is a grey wraith, haunting the city, triggering fire alarms in shops and houses as it sweeps across the harbour. It is a quiet background detail in Adiga's fourth novel. But as Australia burns, it feels consequential: not prescience so much as a kind of monstrous inevitability. With *Amnesty*, Adiga captures the breathless grief of stepping into a future that has already been written. It is equal parts elegy and indictment.

The distant fire is not the only reckoning smouldering in this novel. In Villawood, the city's immigration detention centre, asylum seekers are dying. Trapped between the inhuman inertia of Australia's capacious immigration bureaucracy and the terror of deportation, they are self-harming: "people will eat nails, and drink things, and cut their wrists to get out of that fucking place". And history is watching, even if the Australian public are not.

Dhananjaya (Danny), a Sri Lankan Tamil, has spent the past four years living illegally in Sydney after his plan to convert his student visa to a refugee application fell apart. He lives in a storeroom above a grocery shop, where he works as a kind of indentured tenant, and cleans houses for cash. As he scrubs toilets and stocks shelves, Danny searches for the "magic keys to Australianess", how to inhabit his body with a sense of unquestioned (and unquestioning) assurance. Posture, voice, haircut - these are the ways he will evade Villawood. "Easiest thing in the world, becoming invisible to white people, who don't see you anyway", Adiga writes, but the hardest thing is becoming invisible to brown people, who will see you no matter what. Since they must see me, Danny thought, let me be seen this way - not as a scared illegal with furtive eyes but as a native son of Sydney.

When Danny learns that Radha, a former client and confidante, has been murdered - viciously stabbed, her body dumped in a creek - he suspects he may be the only person who knows the identity of her volatile lover, Prakash. But Prakash knows that Danny knows. As Danny's phone is bombarded with messages from an all-too-familiar number, his suspicions about Radha's death begin to feel sickeningly real. It is a wrenching dilemma, a devil's bargain,

for Prakash also knows about Danny's lapsed visa, his tenuous grip on an Australian future. "If I tell the law what I know about Prakash", Danny realizes, "I tell the law what I know about myself."

Set over the course of a single day, *Amnesty* follows Danny across the city, from Potts Point mansions to Kings Cross casinos, as he grapples with whether or not to file a police report. It is a taut conceit: one cruel choice, including the inescapable moral wallop of its consequences. But having established the stakes, Adiga's novel - much like its conflicted protagonist - seems paralysed by the question of what to do next: whether to embrace or contain its Hitchcockian impulses; to push Danny onwards, towards a confrontation with Prakash, or inwards, towards a confrontation with himself. What emerges is a wheeling but introspective novel - a self-contained unravelling. It evokes a particular kind of caged liberty, rather like life as an illegal immigrant.

Reminiscent of Michelle de Kretser's *Questions of Travel* (2012) and A. S. Patric's *Black Rock, White City* (2015), *Amnesty* is attuned to the myopias, hypocrisies and complacencies of contemporary Australia: "a civilisation built on the principle of the exclusion of men and women who were not white, and which fully outgrew that principle only a generation ago". Adiga conjures up a nation bathing in the gleaming blond light of the Rule of Law, while its true machinery "grumbles and growls" away in the shadows: thousands of sham colleges charging foreign students exorbitant fees for the slim promise of a post-qualification visa; farmers who - year after year - fill their fields and orchards with undocumented workers and then call immigration when wages are due; cities full of lawyers, accountants and real estate agents who look the other way while their hypoallergenic homes are cleaned on the cheap.

"It's all fixed at the top-top level", Prakash and Radha used to explain to Danny. The pair had been inveterate gamblers, Radha risking her too-perfect life ("everything Indian parents could dream for her"), Prakash trying to win the life that should have been his, playing the poker machines in his old school tie. Their barroom philosophizing presents a potent allegory: Australia as a grand, sun-dazzled casino; a place where it is notoriously easy to mistake luck for merit. Fairness: it is the mighty promise of Australia - "more elemental than any ocean", Adiga writes. But what is its source? And who is its arbiter? They are questions "the Lucky Country" has always shied away from answering. But, as *Amnesty* so incisively shows, the house always wins. ■

To buy *Amnesty* at a discount, visit shop.the-tls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935

“It is a taut conceit: one cruel choice, including the inescapable moral wallop of its consequences”

Beejay Silcox is an Australian writer and critic. She is currently based in Cairo

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SHEENA JOUGHIN

WEATHER
JENNY OFFILL

224pp. Granta. £12.99.



LIZZIE BENSON IS A LIBRARIAN who worries a lot, at random, and whose life in New York is a fairly contingent affair. She is happily married to Ben, who has a PhD in Classics and makes educational videogames, and they have a young son, Eli, who is fearful of the school playground and in love with one of his classmates. She has a brother, Henry, a recovering addict, who has fallen in love with a woman called Catharine and is about to move in with her. She has the clientele of the library – “The one who was mostly enlightened”, “the doomed adjunct”, “the man in the shabby suit” – with whom she tries to avoid involvement, but is curious about; and she has Mr Jimmy, the mini-cab driver, for whom she feels responsible, since she is his only client.

Lizzie is wary of her oddball neighbours but her preoccupations are quotidian and light-hearted, until her old teacher and friend, Sylvia, gets in touch to ask her to help with the emails she gets from people who listen to her “age of anxiety” podcast, “Hell and Highwater”. “Everyone who writes to her is either crazy or depressed”, Lizzie decides, and as the disquieting emails pour in (“How did we end up here?” is a typical question), she finds herself look-

ing up articles on disaster psychology, googling survivalist websites, going to a meditation class and generally being swamped by a sense of foreboding, which worsens when Henry and Catharine have a baby, but decide to separate. The disconsolate brother moves in with Lizzie and Ben, who goes off to take a trip with Eli. This leaves Lizzie free to drink in the local bar, where she is tempted to sleep with a journalist who spends his time in war zones. “Does this country feel like it’s at peace or war?” she asks him. “He says it feels the way it does just before it starts.”

Like Jenny Offill’s second novel, *Dept. of Speculation* (TLS, June 27, 2014), *Weather* takes the form of short paragraphs, each beautifully shaped and self-contained, but the mood in these pages is more relaxed than in the previous book, despite the oppressive zeitgeist that overshadows them. There are jokes, there are questions and answers, there is information on “doomstead” management and there are facts about climate change, space travel and human behaviour. We learn how to make a candle with a can of tuna. We learn “what’s going to happen to the American weather”, what happens when a

Sheena Joughin has published two novels and scripted the animated documentary Men Talk About Mother

turtle is mugged by a gang of snails and when a time-traveller walks into a bar. We learn that “In some Zen monasteries, gossip is defined as talking about anything not directly in one’s gaze”. And we read, with Lizzie, predictions of crises: “*Much of the population was in a mild stupor, depressed, congregating in small unstable groups and prone to rumours of doom*”. “But I don’t know,” she muses, “That’s pretty much every day around here.”

The story unfolds in the present tense, conversational, engaging. Heavy winds are forecast for tomorrow, we are told. Then, “Oh, wait, they’re already here”. “I take the car service home because I am ridiculous”, Lizzie tells us. She is always undermining herself, but her intentions are serious and compelling, and when Sylvia gives up on saving the planet (“All she wants now is to go somewhere quiet and dark”), she is not depressed but determined. “I keep wondering how we might channel all this dread into action.”

“Lizzie has become a crazy doomster”, her husband tells their friends, but while she worries about the social and political weather, it is her unstable brother who comes to concern her, and us, most. “Nowhere feels like home anymore”, Henry says, his sleeping baby strapped to his chest. Lizzie takes him to see a therapist and together they combat his demons, and her own fears that her marriage might be something provisional. Whatever the case, she realizes that, in the end, what she has is enough to survive: “A kind of credit or goodwill, extended and extended again and again, whether or not you deserve it”. She can’t speak the language of her son’s sweetheart’s mother, but she invites her to tea anyway. She is terrified of dentistry, but goes to get a crown fitted. She stops wondering whether the drug dealer in 5C is a predator and decides he “gives off a sort of ambient vibe”. Courageous, quirky and charming, Offill’s Lizzie is a woman you want to spend time with. “What will be the safest place?” she asks. Wherever she is, seems to be the answer. ■

To buy *Weather* at a discount, visit shop.the-tls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935

Pouring water on oil

CLARE SAXBY

STILLICIDE
CYNAN JONES

192pp. Granta. £12.

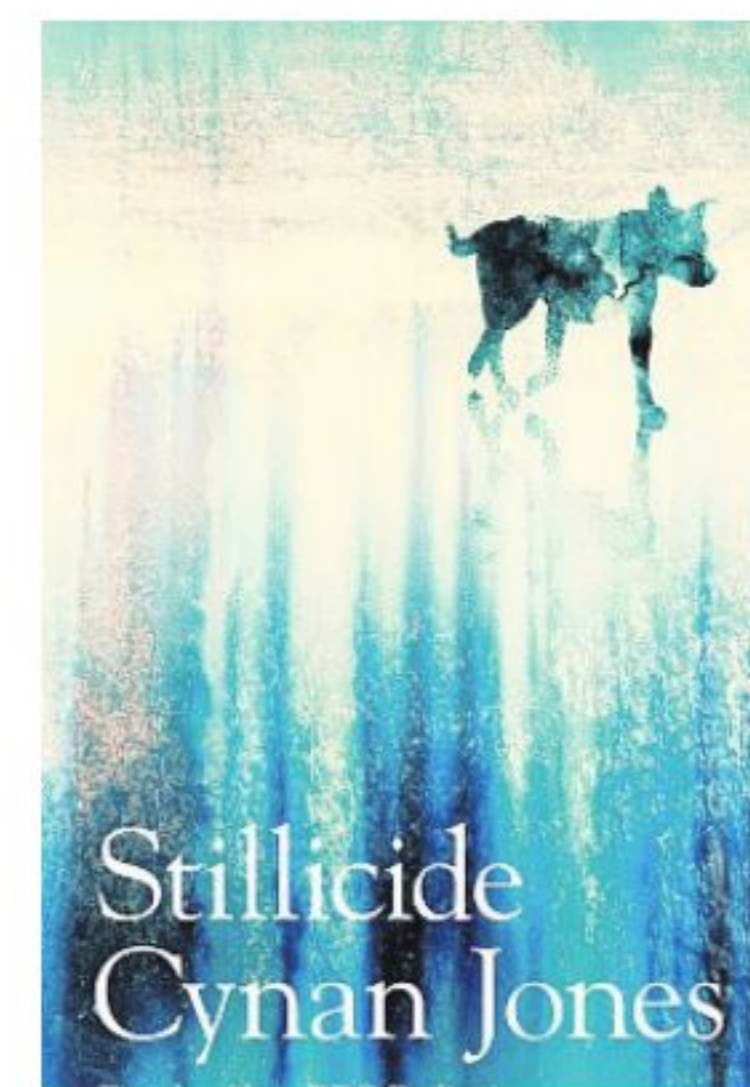
THE SIXTH NOVEL by the Welsh writer Cynan Jones takes its name from an archaic word for falling drops of water. *Stillicide*, which was originally commissioned as a series of fifteen-minute readings for BBC Radio 4, is made up of twelve separate stories set in a future Britain, where life has been transformed by the scarcity of fresh water. There is a city, apparently London, with an empty riverbed and a growing population cramped into ever smaller spaces; on the fast-eroding coast are remnants of villages where the last inhabitants eke out meals of limpets; the authorities, meanwhile, are focused solely on how to supply the city with water. As we are drip-fed more details, the stories pool together into a pellucid portrait of a broken world.

Stillicide begins and ends with the character of John Branner, an armed policeman tasked with guarding the train that brings water from the north

of the country down to the parched metropolis. There have been attacks on the railway, sabotage attempts by terrorists, and it is Branner’s job to patrol the line and shoot at any moving form at close quarters. Between radio communications with his sergeant, his mind wanders to his wife, whom he met when she treated his injuries after one of these attacks. She has just been given a terminal prognosis, and as the train thunders closer Branner compulsively imagines himself “burst into flame and char”. Plunging us into these morbid thoughts, and relating them in terse, monosyllabic sentences (“Hit. Hood. The rain. The train”), Jones creates a stiflingly bleak world, where lives are reduced to green dots and there is a lingering “shudder in the air”.

Elsewhere things are less violent, if just as desolate. Steven works in the city, managing PR for a company employed to tow an iceberg from the Arctic down to Redcar in North Yorkshire and then transport it south to irrigate farmland and supply the city – all while making a substantial profit. The project will mean homes are demolished to make way for a new “Ice Dock”, and as Steven and his team host a press conference in their corporate skyscraper, half a million protesters move through the streets far below. Many of his colleagues used to work in the oil industry, and there’s further cold irony in the fact that, after a day in the office, Steven relies on “throwback” nature documentaries in order to wind down.

There are clues that this reality is not so far from our own: David, a limpet collector on the east coast, remembers a time, “decades ago”, when he would buy music on “Compact Discs”, but Jones signals that much has changed since then. Air travel has “more or less stopped”. The taste of red meat is a distant memory. Somehow, migrating birds such as sand martins and swifts still fly overhead, but a professor



surveying the habitats that will be destroyed by the ice dock is startled by the first sighting of a particular species of dragonfly in twenty years.

Jones has invented a new vocabulary of things for his dry dystopia: people clean themselves with “alco-wash”, consume “immunotabs” and live in “accomopods”. Everything is rationed – even Jones’s prose, which rarely allows for more than a couple of sentences per paragraph. It can be a jarring experience to read, but it seems to suit this world where resources have been depleted and the seas are empty of fish. Less a linear narrative than a layering of images, *Stillicide* is an exercise in matching literary form to a visual idea: as Cynan Jones’s sparse, clear words accumulate down the page, we are left feeling the chill of a slowly melting iceberg. ■

To buy *Stillicide* at a discount, visit shop.the-tls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935

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Brian R. Lindquist

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Clare Saxby is a freelance writer

What really happened

LINDSAY DUGUID

HERE WE ARE
GRAHAM SWIFT

195pp. Simon and Schuster. £14.99.



Brighton beach,
c.1960

GRAHAM SWIFT ENJOYS looking back. From his first novel *The Sweet Shop Owner* (1980) to his Booker Prize-winning *Last Orders* (1996) and beyond, he has used the time-honoured narrative device of recollection as a way of telling more than one story simultaneously. Like his big-house romance *Mothering Sunday* (2016), his new novel *Here We Are* is structured so that its unfolding contains dramas, mysteries and revelations. At first things look settled: “It was August 1959”. Having been introduced to the performers of a seaside variety show – Jack, the handsome, jokey compère, and the successful double act of Ronnie and Evie, the magician and his lovely assistant – we are given a brief glimpse of their personal histories. Jack’s semi-orphaned childhood, Ronnie’s strange apprenticeship as an evacuee from a council house sent to middle-class Oxfordshire and Evie’s precarious career as a chorus girl all share a pattern of absent fathers and strong mothers.

Soon we are given hints and suggestions about what will happen next. Early on there are references to the time “when everything changed” and to “the much talked-about thing”. The police are mentioned, as is the occasion when a ring was taken off and thrown into the sea. Early on we learn that “It’s 2009 ... Fifty years!”, and that a keeper of these memories is sharing them with us, saying: “In those days” or “It would be hard to say exactly when”. The continuing story is shared between the omniscient author and the personal recollections of one of his characters. The later lives of the survivors also have their

particular sadness, with costumes kept in a drawer, framed photographs, the scattering of ashes and a proposed biography discussed with an agent over lunch in a Mayfair restaurant.

Dreamlike recollections and wandering thoughts, snatches of songs, such as “When the Red Red Robin” and “By the Light of the Silvery Moon”, and old theatrical gags (“I could be a great Puck”) contrast with a bemused search for what really happened as the characters explore their memories. “Was Evie going to come with him ... He did not ask. She did not say.” “How much had Ronnie ever told Jack?” “Sorry. Can’t talk. Lips sealed.” These commonplace remarks alternate with some almost mystical recollections: of the white fluttering handkerchiefs of evacuees’ mothers on the platform at Paddington Station in 1939; of moonlight over the sea; and of the sight of rain and sunshine from the train window. Most magical of all are the mysterious conjurings up of doves, flowers and rainbows created by the skill of Ronnie, now the Great Pablo, who has become bored with simply sawing his assistant in half.

A familiar historical past is evoked by mentioning such things as air raid wardens, a council house in Bethnal Green, a home outside Oxford with a cold frame in the garden, drinks in the Walpole Arms after the show, casual romances, train journeys, telephone calls. There is throughout an awareness of borrowed time. As in John Osborne’s play *The Entertainer* (1957), the end-of-the-pier variety show is of its nature already a thing of the past, poised on a wooden platform above the receding tide. It is August

and the end of the run. The season of 1959, with its familiar props – cane, boater, tap shoes, bow tie and white gloves, sequins and feathers – and its talking teddy bear who imitates General de Gaulle, might be the show’s last. The leather jackets and guitars of the Rockabye Boys are waiting in the wings, and there is another challenge:

Jack had been right, it was all going out with the tide, and who would want that stuff any more when they could get it anyway from a box in the corner of their living rooms? And yet for a little while the 1960s were much like the 1950s. And what did that little box still trade in? *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* – with always a compère who’d become the nation’s pal and always some magician and always some troupe of bouncing leg-waving smiling girls – well it would seem to go on for ever.

Swift’s method is to set down ordinary things so as to suggest something more. His style, following his characters, is casual and colloquial, as he smoothly propels the action. As well as being an old-fashioned story told in an old-fashioned style, *Here We Are* has an emotional reticence, a reluctance to stir the reader’s feelings too far beyond the rueful tears of a survivor. The dramas of 1959 are safely in the past, carefully selected and blurred by memory. The theme of lonely childhoods and the possibilities of adult love give the novel its benign purpose and melancholy charm. ■

Lindsay Duguid is a
freelance writer

To buy *Here We Are* at a discount, visit shop.thetls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935

Huckleberry friends

TABISH KHAIR

SUNCATCHER
ROMESH GUNESKERA

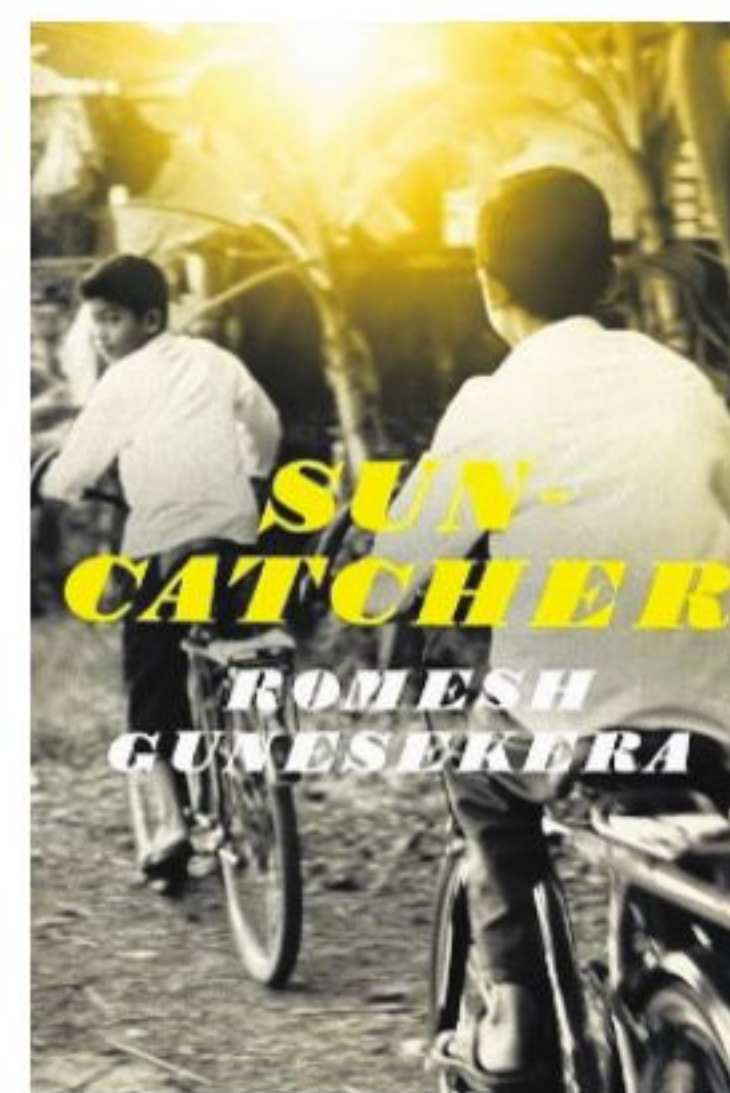
336pp. Bloomsbury. £16.99.

THERE IS SOMETHING of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer in the relationship that Kairo, the narrator of Romesh Gunsekera’s *Suncatcher*, shares with the other central character, Jay. Like Tom, Jay is the older, wiser, richer one, a planner of adventures; Kairo is the acolyte in awe of Jay, jealous for his affection, not street-savvy like Huck but sharing Huck’s ability to survive. But it would be a mistake to carry this analogy too far. Jay comes from far richer circles than Kairo, both of whose parents work. Jay’s house has a “name”, as Kairo notes; his mother is a bored diva, his father a rich businessman, and his uncle collects cars. This difference is significant, and deceptive. Kairo’s mother broadcasts in English on Radio Ceylon, and his father, a Trotskyist government servant, prefers English to his “mother tongue”.

This is 1964, less than a decade away from Ceylon becoming Sri Lanka. Ceylon is independent, and inching towards populist politics based on a valorization of the mother tongue and appeasement of the religious (Buddhist) right. Kairo’s mother is worried about her husband losing his job because of his poor Tamil, and he himself is worried about the left disappearing as a political option. Jay’s parents are on their way to dissolving their marriage, and Jay’s uncle is trying to devise ways to retain his plantation.

Bored with middle-class domestic life on an island with neither casinos nor gun-slinging cowboys, Kairo discovers in Jay a friend and guide. A bit older, Jay lives in a mansion where adults – unlike Kairo’s hard-working mother – are too distracted or insular to interfere with him. Precocious, intelligent, talented with his hands, Jay has bought and netted himself a collection of fish and birds, a world that Kairo enters with fascination.

As the relationship between the two teenagers develops, Kairo is educated by Jay – about cars, birds, even girls, to an extent – while also puzzling over his friend’s contradictions, such as a generosity of spirit combined with an apparent impervi-



Tabish Khair is the
author of several
studies and novels,
including *How To Fight
Islamist Terror* from
the Missionary
Position, 2012, and *Just
Another Jihadi Jane*,
2016

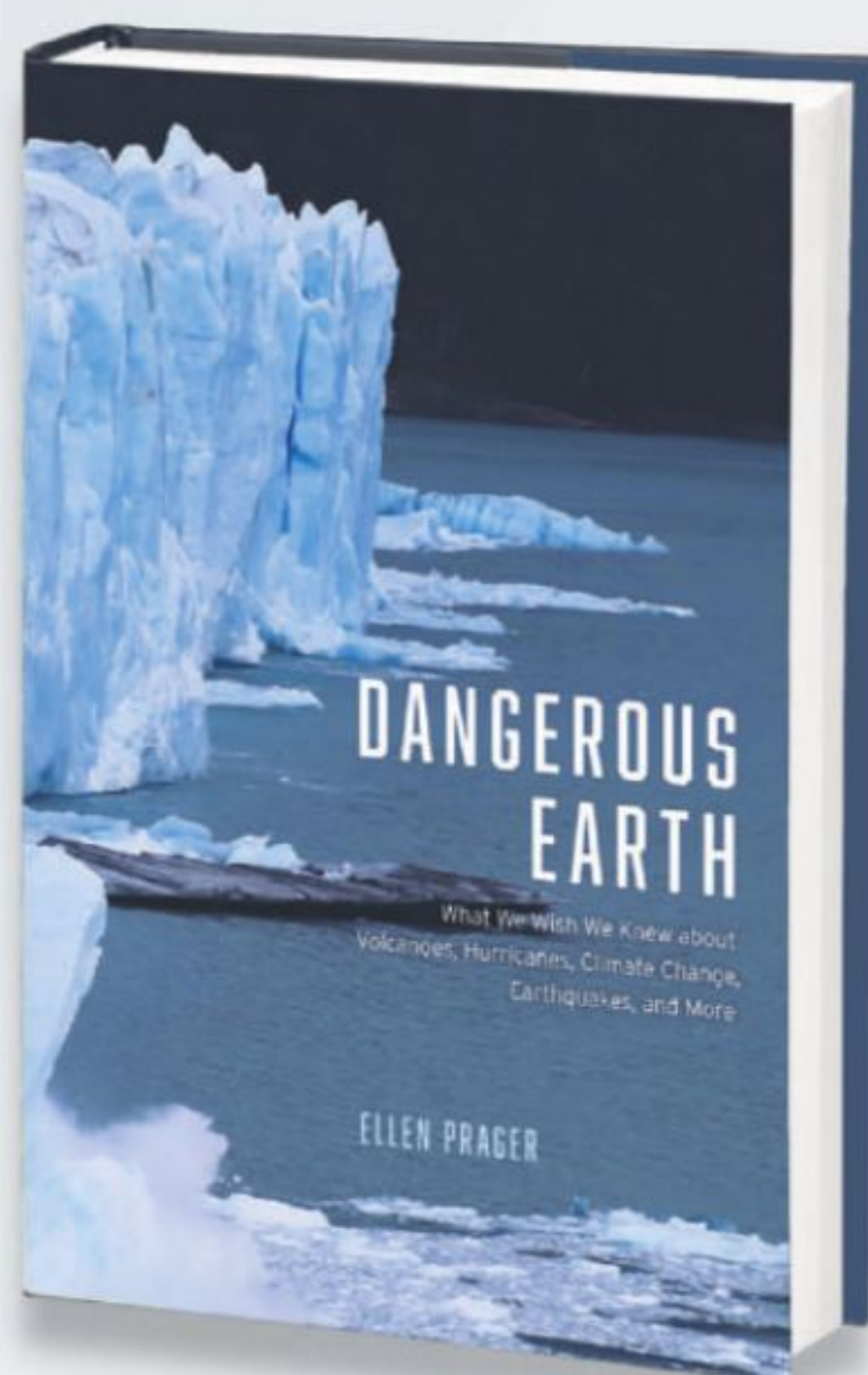
ousness to the fate of others. Various other characters, clearly etched, play minor roles, but this is essentially a deliciously paced coming-of-age tale about this pair. One will meet with tragedy, something obvious from the tenor of the narrative quite early on. When it comes, it is convincing, if a little too stylized in its execution.

As *Suncatcher* traces a kind of awakening in its central characters, it also suggests another, harsher one in 1960s Sri Lanka. As the boys struggle to make sense of themselves, the adults struggle to make sense of the political landscape. Gunsekera never labours such matters, letting the reader tease them out.

The novel is pervaded by a sense of threatened beauty: the flash of fish, the flight of birds, the slant of sun on trees, a yearning for innocence. The world described, like Jay, is brilliant, and far more brittle than it seems. The adults seem to blame the gathering clouds on different things, mostly religious and linguistic nationalism. Gunsekera does not give us any other explanation but he suggests – in Jay’s insensitivity to a retainer’s son half-blinded during one of his “Cowboys and Indians” games – an explanation more complicit, a failure ingrained deep in the colonial past. ■

To buy *Suncatcher* at a discount, visit shop.thetls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935

Chicago

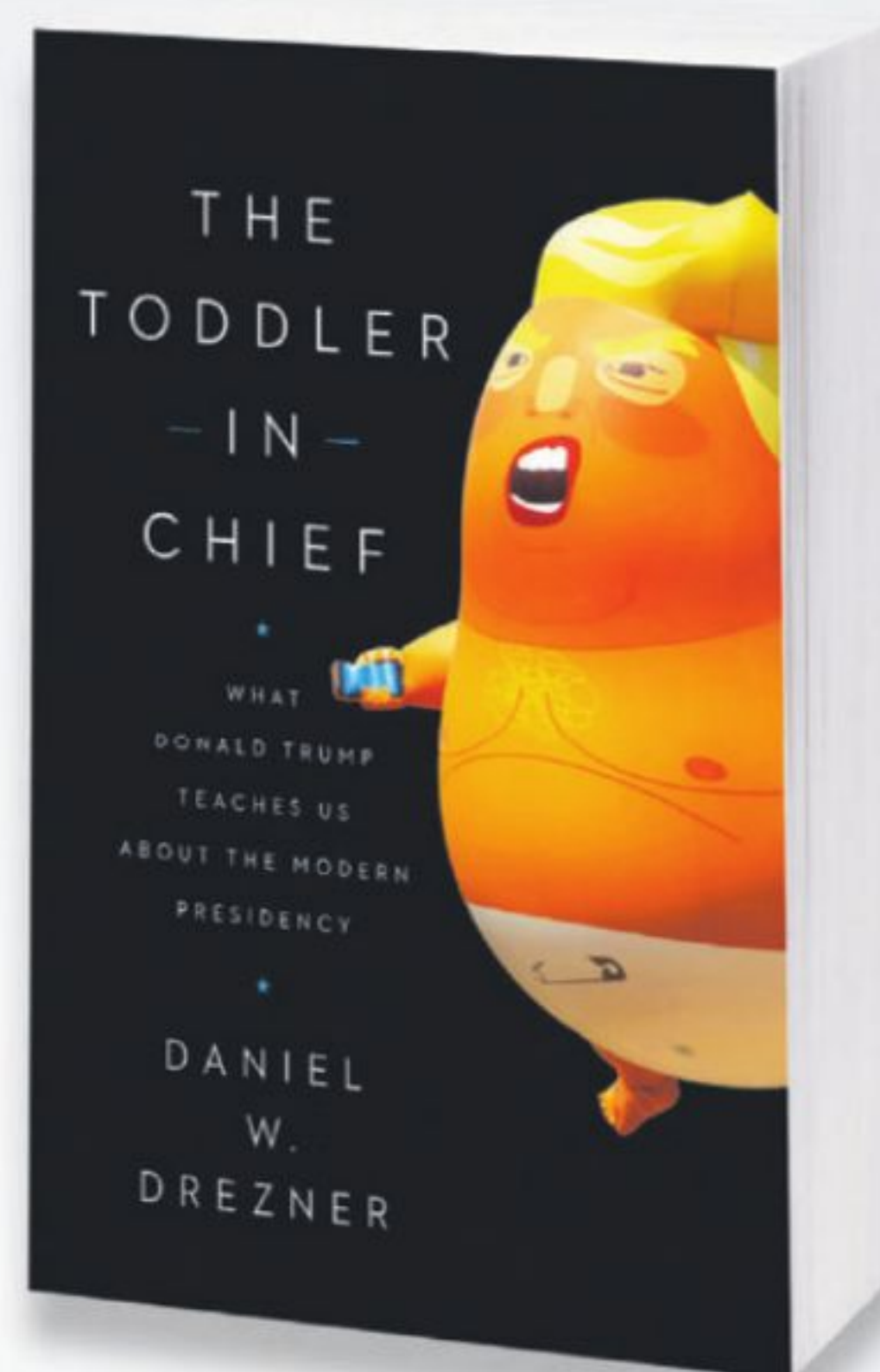


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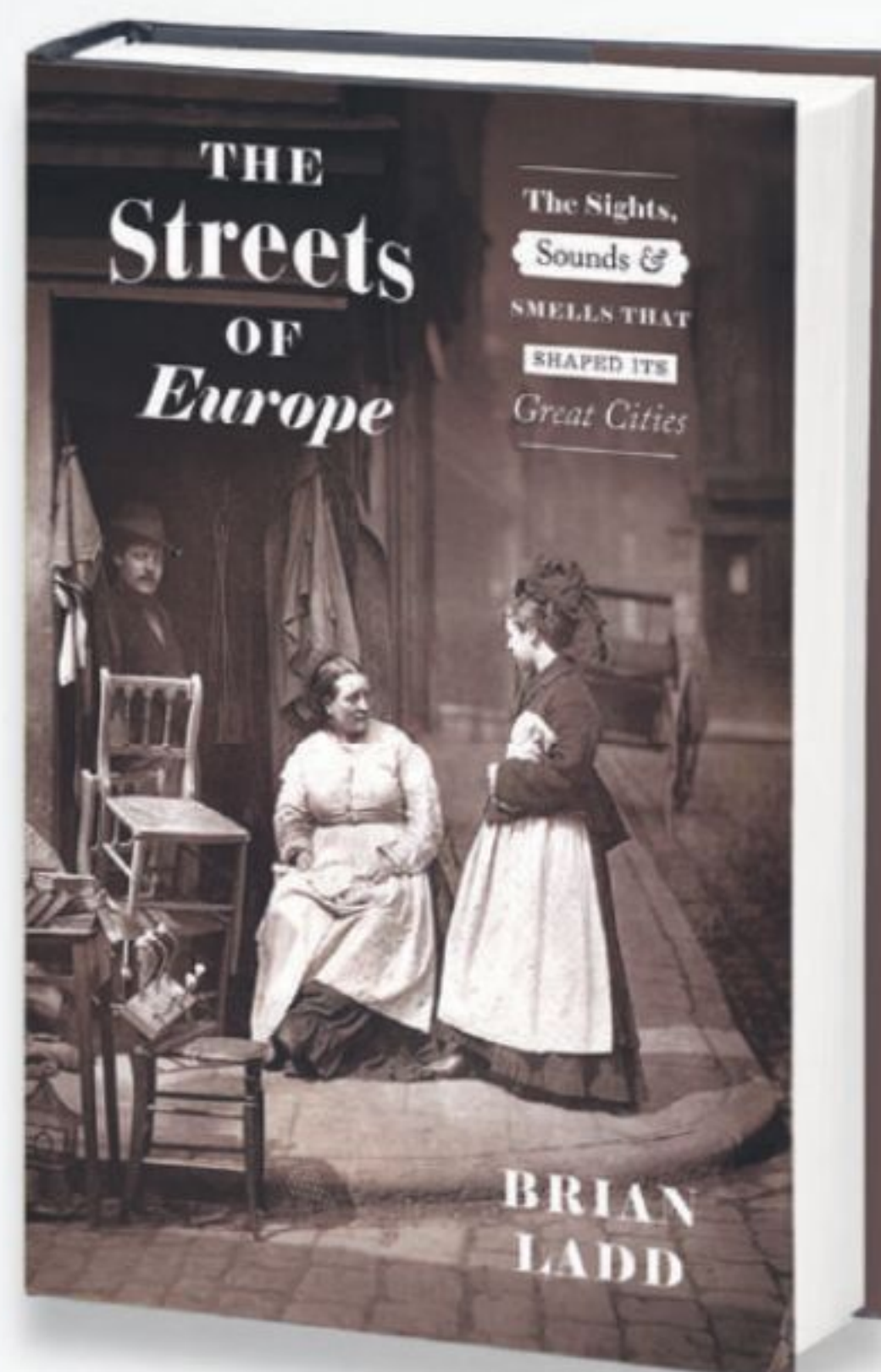
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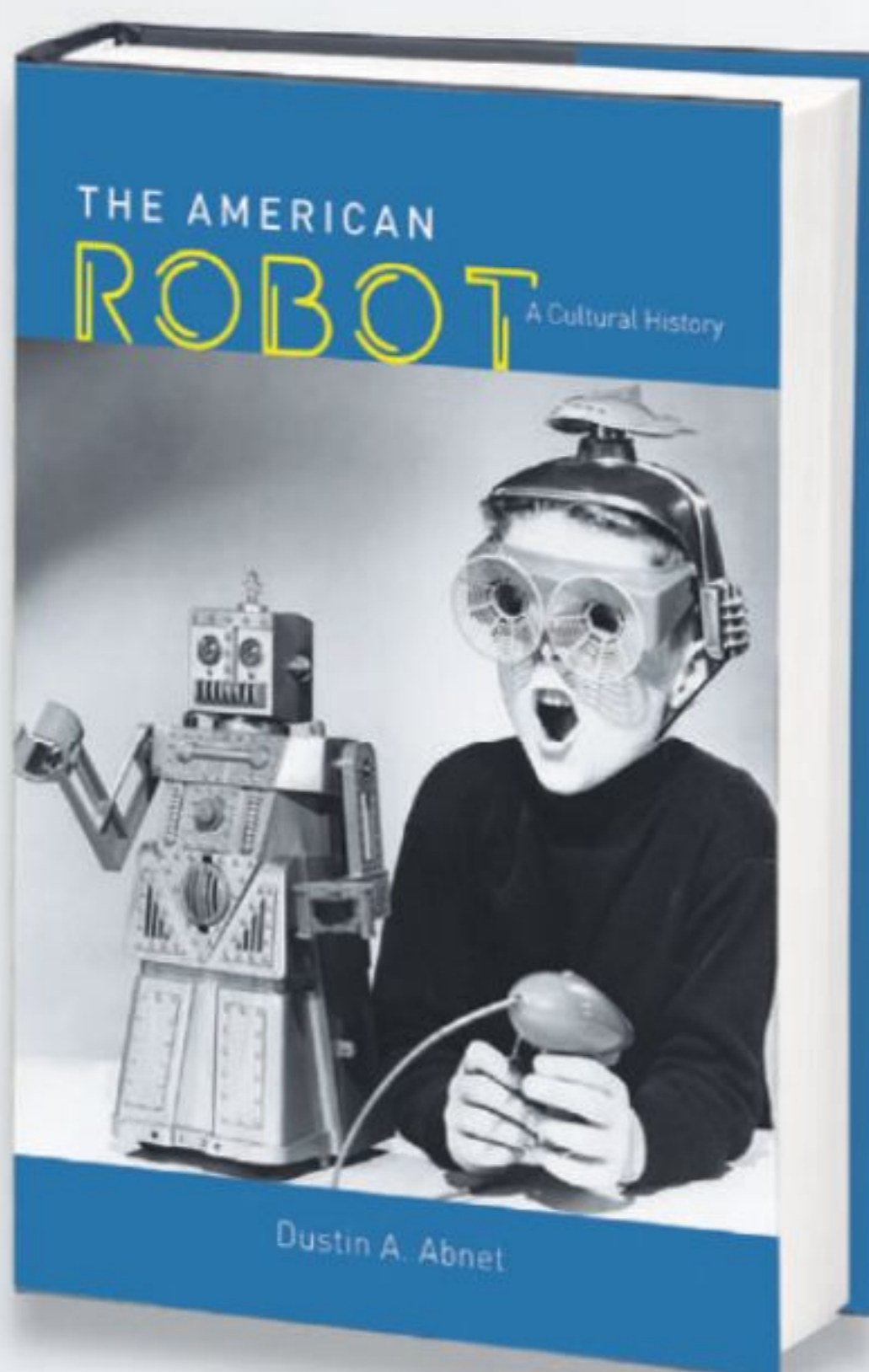
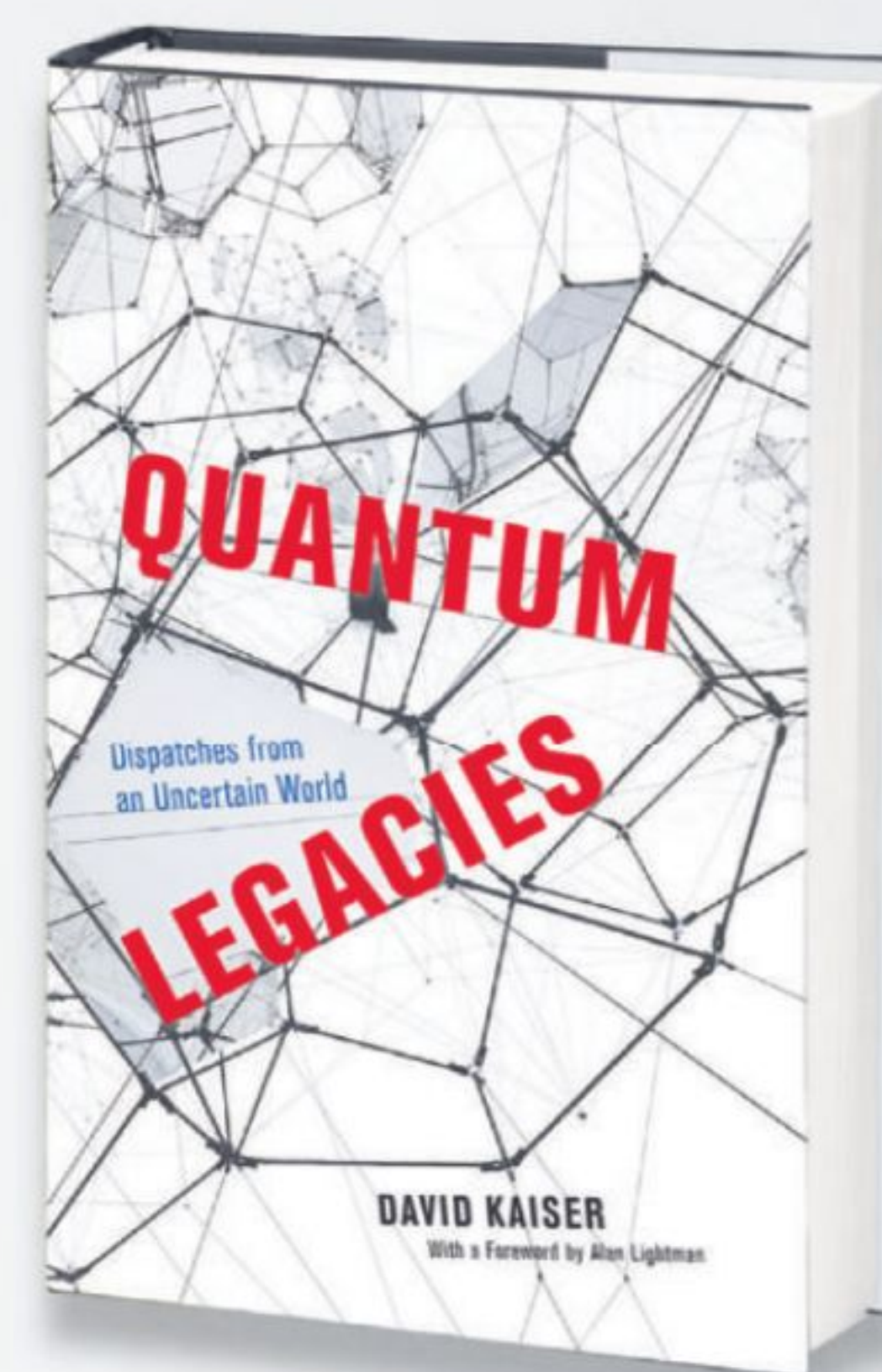
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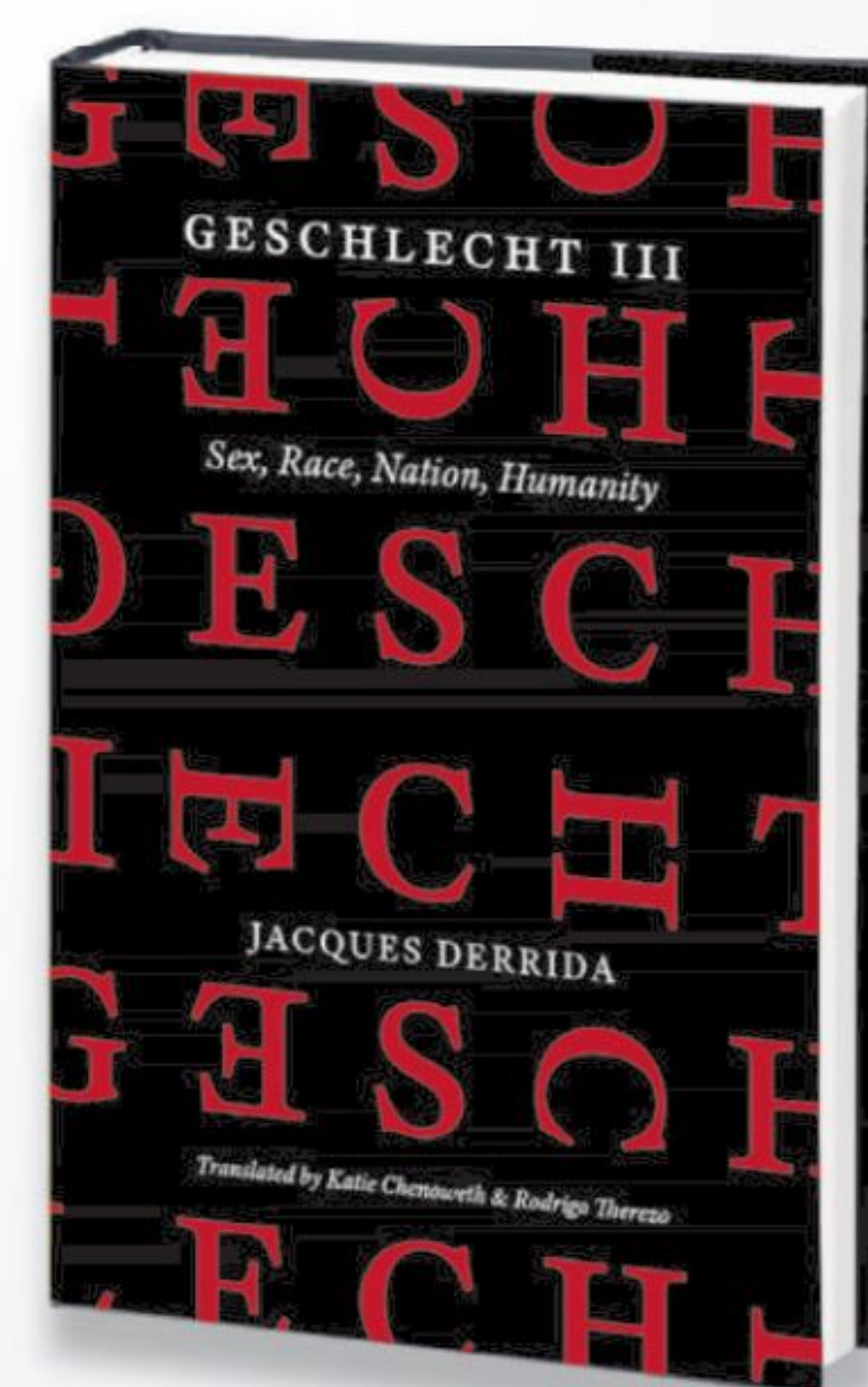


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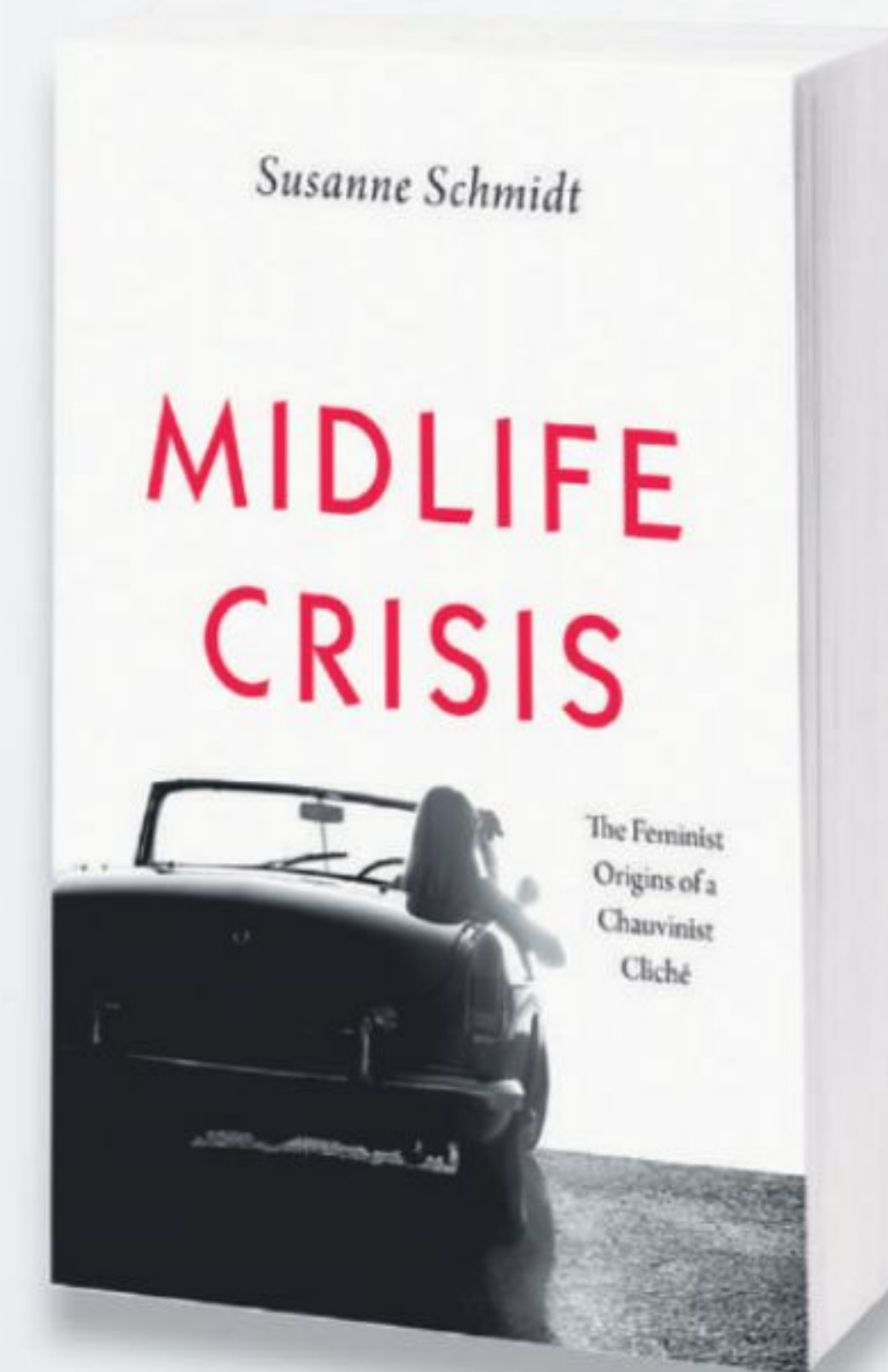
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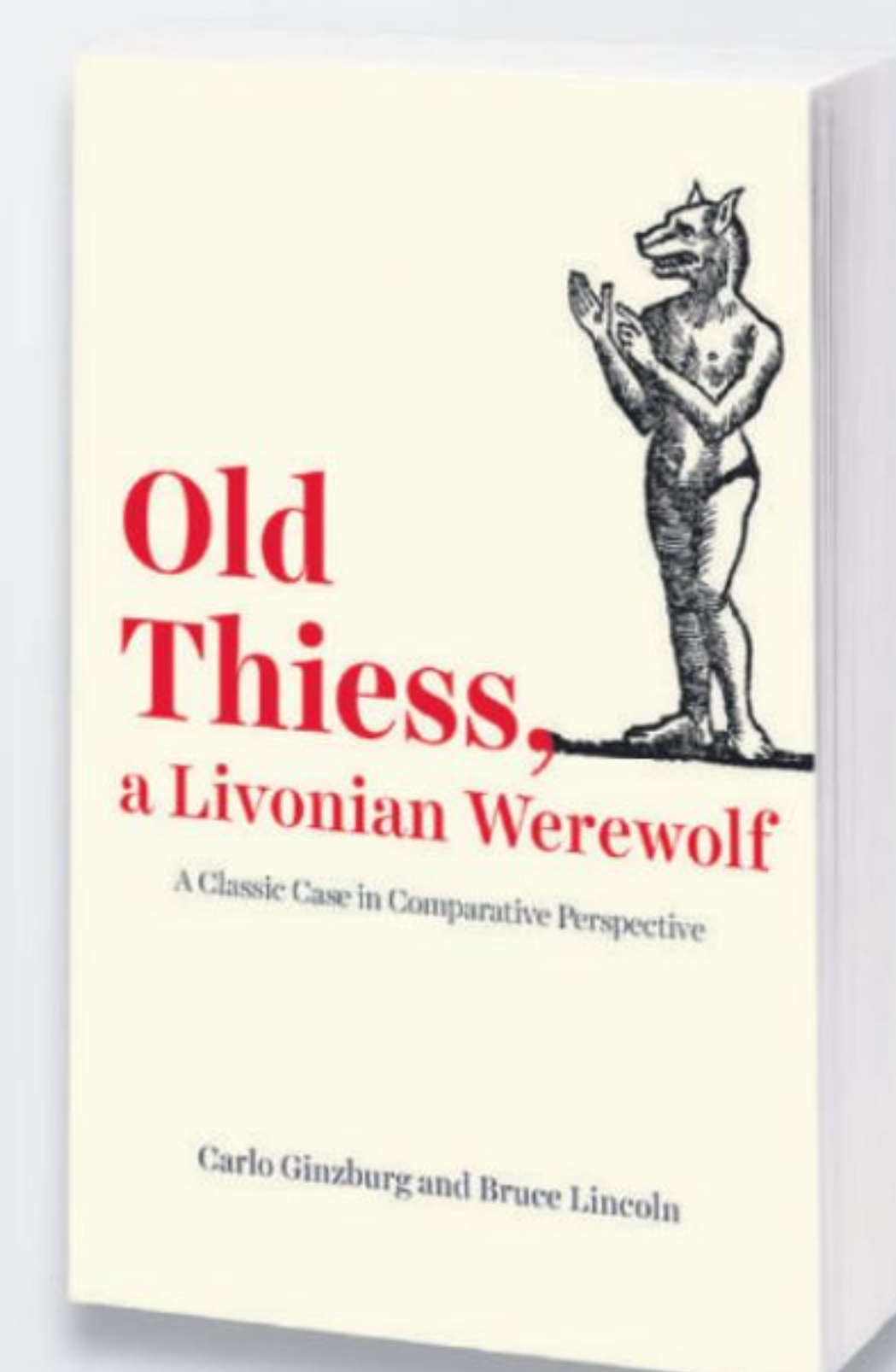


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The Price is right

Returning to *Mansfield Park*

JANET TODD

ONE OF MY EARLIEST memories of literary embarrassment is being asked by a bookish neighbour if I'd read Jane Austen. I was eleven. "Yes", I replied. But I was mistaken. I had in mind the fantastic Classic Comics version of *Jane Eyre* with its alluring panel of Mr Rochester.

By nineteen, at Cambridge in the 1960s, I'd uncoupled Jane Austen from *Jane Eyre*. I read the six novels which F. R. Leavis, the then guru, instructed us to find "great". I couldn't oblige. I was startled, then offended, by Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park*. Why would an author who'd made the robust, witty and self-assured Elizabeth Bennet then create so limp and teary a heroine as Fanny, a creeping killjoy who suffers sunstroke from cutting roses in temperate England and fears the "wilderness" of a tame country estate? Until the ending, I assumed her rival Mary Crawford would get the hero - if, bizarrely, she really wanted him.

Over the decades I became acutely aware that Elizabeth Bennet (in the later chapters) and Fanny Price were more appropriate, self-controlling, guides to life for a young girl than my chosen heroines from Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, the Grushenkas, and Natashas, under whose influence I made some astonishingly foolish life-choices. It wasn't all the fault of the Russians, of course. It was also the exciting period of Second Wave Feminism, when the stress was on self-fulfilment and self-expression, on being authentic and free from constraining standards of "patriarchy". Present-day Feminism - I've lost touch with what Wave we are now riding - has had half a century to grow more nuanced and diverse, but its emphasis on the individual self and authentic experience remains. So we still try to adjust Jane Austen to our way of thinking - unless we are in the cinema watching her novels as romance and costume drama.

Mansfield Park is her most daring book. Knowing she had a great popular triumph in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen deliberately created a heroine without the endearing qualities that made Elizabeth Bennet universally loved. Jane Austen liked pewter - we have it from her letters - yet not enough to repeat the winning romantic formula when she knew she had a supreme talent for fictional experiment. She wrote of Emma, that she'd created a heroine no one but herself would much like. The opinion better suits Fanny Price, through whom she provokes the reader to address the difficult truth of stubborn integrity.

This is the only Austen novel to treat childhood extensively. Little Fanny Price is translated - some critics even say "trafficked" - to the great house as an act of charity to her lower middle-class family. Frightened and homesick, she is lightly befriended by Edmund, the younger son in Mansfield, who wins her affection with small kindly acts - finding pen and paper, helping her to a horse - so that in quick time youthful neediness becomes adolescent infatuation, then adult love. It consumes most of her being, while not denting her loneliness. In her uncle's Northamptonshire mansion, Fanny learns to value manners and elegance, while always remaining aware that she is an outsider, an intruder who must feed her inner life through nature and the culture of books and images collected in her cold attic. When she refuses a wealthy suitor, her uncle dispatches her, like a parcel, to her Portsmouth birthplace, to learn appreciation of the gentility she can preserve only through upwardly mobile marriage.



Frances O'Connor as Fanny Price and Alessandro Nivola as Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, 1999

There is nothing like this episode elsewhere in Austen: we see Fanny reversing her ideas of "home", judging harshly what was once loved. Weighed down by children and relative poverty, her mother is dismissed as feckless, presiding over a slatternly house of dirt, dust, grease and stains. Fanny can't stomach the food and winces at the table manners. Thinking back to chilly, genteel Mansfield, where she had been treated with contempt and indifference, Fanny rearranges memory to make her adoptive home a heavenly place of rest and refinement.

Mansfield Park is full of edgy comedy. Take the episode at Sotherton, the seat of Maria's fiancé. Already irritated by the foolishness of her future husband, Maria yet swells at the sight of his huge estate - a sly dig perhaps at Elizabeth Bennet's teasing remark that she fell in love with Darcy when she saw his fine property of Pemberley. The scene seems controlled by a tricky Puck as narrator: the various couples wander in a maze, losing sense of time, place and propriety.

Thinking back to my teenaged reading of this scene, I realize how little I was attuned to comedy, how woodenly I (and I think my fellow students) responded to the heavy symbolism and literary allusions that Maria employs. Feeling restrained by an iron gate, she quotes the caged starling from Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, who repeats the words, "I cannot get out" (which Sterne's hero hears as a cry for liberty). This goads Maria into nimbly passing round the iron gate with the man she loves, stranding her despised betrothed on the other side with the key. The knowingness of these privileged and articulate young people who transgress with comic and literary awareness makes this and the whole ominous day deliciously absurd. Each player is finely drawn: even Julia, a modest spear-carrier in the plot, comes vividly alive as she rushes from the "horrible" hostess by whom she's been trapped - through her Mansfield training in good manners. All the while, Fanny sits on a bench, a lone observer of the drama unravelling before her. Restless Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse revel in good health; these robust heroines could never have stayed immobile like Fanny, or thereby seen and understood as much. Nor, perhaps, appeared so silly.

At different moments we focus on different aspects of a book. In the 1970s in the US, when I was busy excavating largely ignored women writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Aphra Behn (but not yet asked to put them on a course), I was given Jane Austen to teach. She had the advantage of being a woman, so a sop to the growing demands of feminists, and also, through association with "masculine" irony, considered safely canonical. But her surface messages of happiness through a suitable and companionate marriage and her concern for family and social ties were at odds with the zeitgeist which wanted a more usefully gendered message. So she was read "against the grain": emotional Marianne from *Sense and Sensibility* was heard screaming above the polite pleasantries of sensible Elinor as the true voice of the

“
We still try to adjust Jane Austen to our way of thinking

Janet Todd is the author of *Jane Austen's Sanditon*, 2019. Her new novel, *Don't You Know There's a War On?*, will be published on April 4

hidden, rebellious Jane Austen, just as Mary Crawford had to crush dutiful Fanny Price.

In my student days in the 1960s, we still responded to the religious aura of the book. It isn't overtly pious but religion is present in the subject of Edmund's clerical vocation and in Fanny's fitness for the moral role of helpmate, educator and carer. The novel was written in a low period of England's long war with France in the early nineteenth century; like the estate of Mansfield Park, the country seemed to have lost its moral compass and needed to learn stern lessons about duty and self-restraint to deserve its special place in the world. Such notions now seem quaint, imperialist and outdated. The power of Edward Said's line that slavery in Antigua was the dark underbelly of the novel, though refuted in details, holds sway, and the silence that greets the subject of slavery when Sir Thomas returns from the slave island of Antigua has become deafening. The post-colonialist interpretation is persuasive. Not for nothing is the estate called Mansfield: in 1772 Lord Mansfield gave his famous verdict implying no one could be enslaved in England, a verdict that greatly aided the Abolition Movement, while the villain of the book, Fanny's persecuting aunt and rival, shares her name with the Liverpool slaver John Norris.

So we have gender and race. But the last of that powerful trio of gender, race and class - that has dominated literary and cultural criticism for so long - has not entirely come into focus. It's the poor relation in the trio. Yet, to me, reading in 2020, class seems as salient as gender and race. Despite her popular association with Regency glamour, Austen in *Mansfield Park* astutely catches the inequities of our complex hierarchical social system, our obsession in the twenty-first as well as the nineteenth century with class. Now, writing fiction after years of academic work, I appreciate even more her supreme accuracy and succinctness in the matter.

Take Maria's fall, her adultery. In Portsmouth, Fanny learns that Maria has eloped with her lover. I once found Fanny's reaction to this exaggerated. Now I see that it approaches the stern morality of her lower-middle-class family - her father would flog such a daughter - more than the relaxed attitudes of the gentry (excepting the clerical Edmund). While her socially secure rival Mary Crawford pragmatically considers solutions to the "error", and the narrator comments that Maria's cuckolded husband will live to be fooled again, Fanny is horror-struck, stupefied.

Austen also shows how formal "education" can be used to exclude and patronize, surely still an issue for us today. Clever, sensitive Fanny is abashed by the knowledge her governess-trained cousins reveal and is made to feel herself inferior by their acquired learning. I failed to catch this on first reading, just as I ignored the way slavery and social enclosure haunt the book. But again, the message, if we can use the word "message" when dealing with an Austen novel, is not simple. Her books and letters suggest she wasn't much impressed by institutional education. The training by precept and example in the home was far more important. Since women were excluded from universities and much formal education, Austen could express her present vision of radical equality between the sexes while her contemporary, the overt feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, with similarly radical notions, demanded education before true equality could be achieved in society.

Mansfield Park doesn't so much tell us what to think as provoke us into thinking. Let's take the ending. Is it claustrophobic, wry, enigmatic? With Fanny in the vicarage as moral lodestar, the estate of Mansfield Park will be guarded from future error. Or is there a subtle danger locked within its boundaries? Look at the eyes. Infatuated through most of the book with dark-eyed Mary Crawford, Edmund learns in a sentence to prefer Fanny's "soft light" ones. (What does this say about "masculinity"?) No longer provoking alarm, the great house becomes for Fanny "as thoroughly perfect in her eyes, as every thing else, within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park, had long been". When I next read the novel, I must be sure to notice the eyes. ■



The cleverest pen

Rediscovering one of the major female writers in the Irish canon

JAKI MCCARRICK

HANNAH LYNCH (1859–1904)

Irish writer, cosmopolitan, New Woman

FAITH BINCKES AND KATHRYN LAING

260pp. Cork University Press. £35 (€39).

“WHO WAS HANNAH LYNCH, and why should you want to learn more about her?” Faith Binckes and Kathryn Laing answer their own question boldly in *Hannah Lynch 1859-1904*, the first critical study of Lynch’s life and work: for them, she was, as the journalist Frances Low claimed, the “first of modern Irish writers”. This book comes a decade after Binckes wrote the entry about her for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. It identifies why she was forgotten, and makes a persuasive case for remembering her.

Laing and Binckes open with Lynch’s birth in Dublin in 1859 into “an atmosphere of rebellion”. She and her siblings were involved in campaigning for Irish independence from an early age. She was sent away to be educated in England, and later employed as a governess for the Handcock family in County Mayo; she would move back to London in 1880 to attend music college (taking with her the broken-up type of the proscribed newspaper *United Ireland*). These were the beginnings of what was to be a peripatetic and radical life.

Out of that crucible, female (political) agency emerged as one of the key themes of both Lynch’s fiction and her non-fiction. In her journalistic work for *Macmillan’s Magazine* (pseudonym: E. Enticknappe), she railed against the increasingly male direction of the Celtic Revivalist movement. In the *Freeman’s Journal* in 1896, she praised Irish women’s writing over men’s, proposing “a canon of female revivalists against that being established by W. B. Yeats”. Like many Irish writers, she felt “compelled to write from self-imposed exile”; she eventually settled in Paris, where she reviewed contemporary French novels and was notably quick to condemn in them any sign of antisemitism or nationalism – the “morass of hate invented by nationalism and the Ligue de la Patrie Française” – in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair (her own earlier nationalism seems to have been a concern for Irish independence specifically, rather than the reconstruction of Irish cultural identity). Her reviews could be acerbic in the Dorothy Parker vein. Of Oscar Wilde, she wrote: “I have to admit that I enjoyed ‘Lady Windermere’s Fan’ almost as much as if it had been a first-rate work”. In her Paris Letter of March 1898: “Mr [George] Meredith has said that a woman may be judged by her estimate of her sex. I judge the moral and intellectual

fibre of a male writer by his estimate of women”. Such pieces were apparently widely read and appreciated. The American journalist Katherine De Forest described them as the work of a writer “said to be the most gifted woman Ireland ever produced”.

Lynch could be equally sharp in her fiction. In “Defeated”, a novel-length story published in *Bee-ton’s Christmas Annual* in 1885: “If two noble lords, neither English nor owning an acre of land in the country, were to amuse themselves by shooting each other somewhere between Donegal and Cork, there should surely appear leading articles next morning holding Ireland responsible for the deed”. Her well-received short story collection *Dr Vermont’s Fantasy and Other Stories* is much discussed by Binckes and Laing. It explores “a range of sympathetic emotional attachments that exist between nations, friends and lovers”, and from the excerpts included here would seem to have a distinctly melancholic tone. In the title story, which concerns a man planning to lead his colleagues into a group suicide, Lynch writes: “The worst of us, you see, have our heroic moments, only it often happens that, like Dr Vermont’s, they pass unnoticed in the dark”.

This study pays particular attention to Lynch’s travel writing, about Spain and Greece especially, and her best-known novel: the partly biographical *Autobiography of a Child* (1899). Originally serialized in *Blackwood’s Magazine* alongside *Heart of Darkness*, Lynch’s novel was perceived at the time, like Conrad’s novella, as a subversive attack on Empire. The “meanest little rascal I knew”, the narrator notes, was an “admirable hypocrite and bully” – one bound to be a “future pillar of the British empire”. An obituary called it her masterpiece, albeit one that “has never won the recognition it surely will”.

So why was Hannah Lynch forgotten? Binckes and Laing suggest that “recent scholarship ... has identified a distinctive mode of *fin-de-siècle* Irish realism in texts of this period, a counter narrative to the revivalist aesthetics promoted by the Dublin coterie cultures Lynch satirised later in the decade”. She was clearly out of step with the work emanating from her homeland. Also, although she was lauded for her non-fiction, Lynch seems to have found it harder to interest publishers in her fiction, despite her voguish New Woman protagonists. The breadth of her interests in this sense perhaps worked against her; she was too political and too “Irish” (or later, internationalist) to appeal strongly in England, and not nationalist (or male) enough to be celebrated by the Revivalist movement in Ireland. George Meredith (about whom Lynch wrote a critical study in 1891) wrote of her novel *The Prince of Glades* that “the task of creating interest in Fenianism would try the cleverest pen”. In addition, as Frances Low’s obituary had it, Lynch’s “outspoken criticism upon Irish matters and

Photocard of Hannah Lynch, Barcelona, late 1880s or early 1890s

especially upon Irish politicians, coupled with her scathing wit, made her enemies almost from her girlhood: and there was an article ... on some of the little literary gods of Dublin at that time which made for her undying enemies”.

By contrast, Binckes and Laing identify strong networks of Irish female writers and artists in Dublin, London and Paris during this period. Many of these figures are undoubtedly worthy of separate studies themselves – the kind of critical attention that some, such as Kathleen Tynan, have already received: “contemporaries such as Jane Barlow, George Egerton, Fannie Gallaher, Rose Kavanagh, Rosa Mulholland, Emily Lawless, Somerville and Ross, and Alice Milligan”. A line can be drawn from them to Edna O’Brien (who, Eimear McBride claims, “gave voice to a previously muzzled generation of Irish women”) – but it should be extended back to Hannah Lynch, too. With this clearly written and thoroughly researched study, Faith Binckes and Kathryn Laing have shed light on the role of women and female artists in the shaping of events that led to Irish independence, and contributed enormously to the ongoing revision of both Irish literary history and the Irish literary canon. ■

To buy *Hannah Lynch (1859-1904)* at a discount, visit shop.the-tls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935

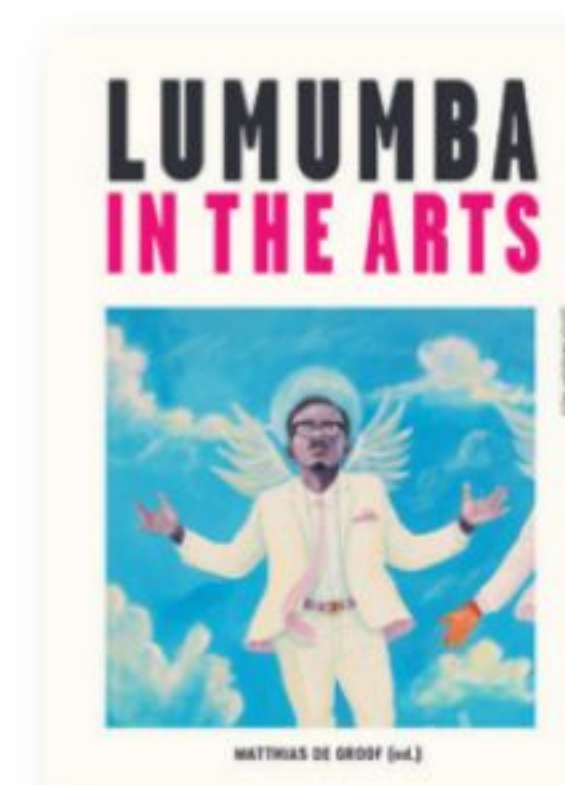


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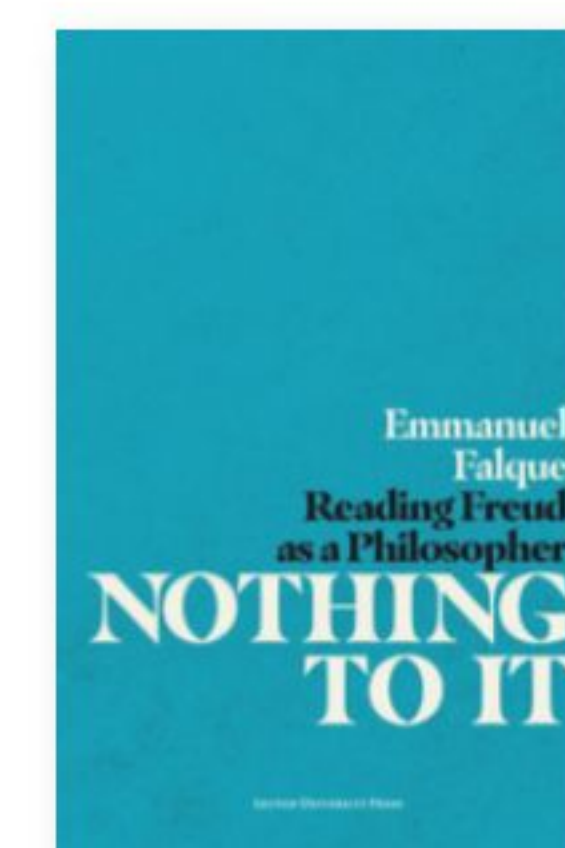


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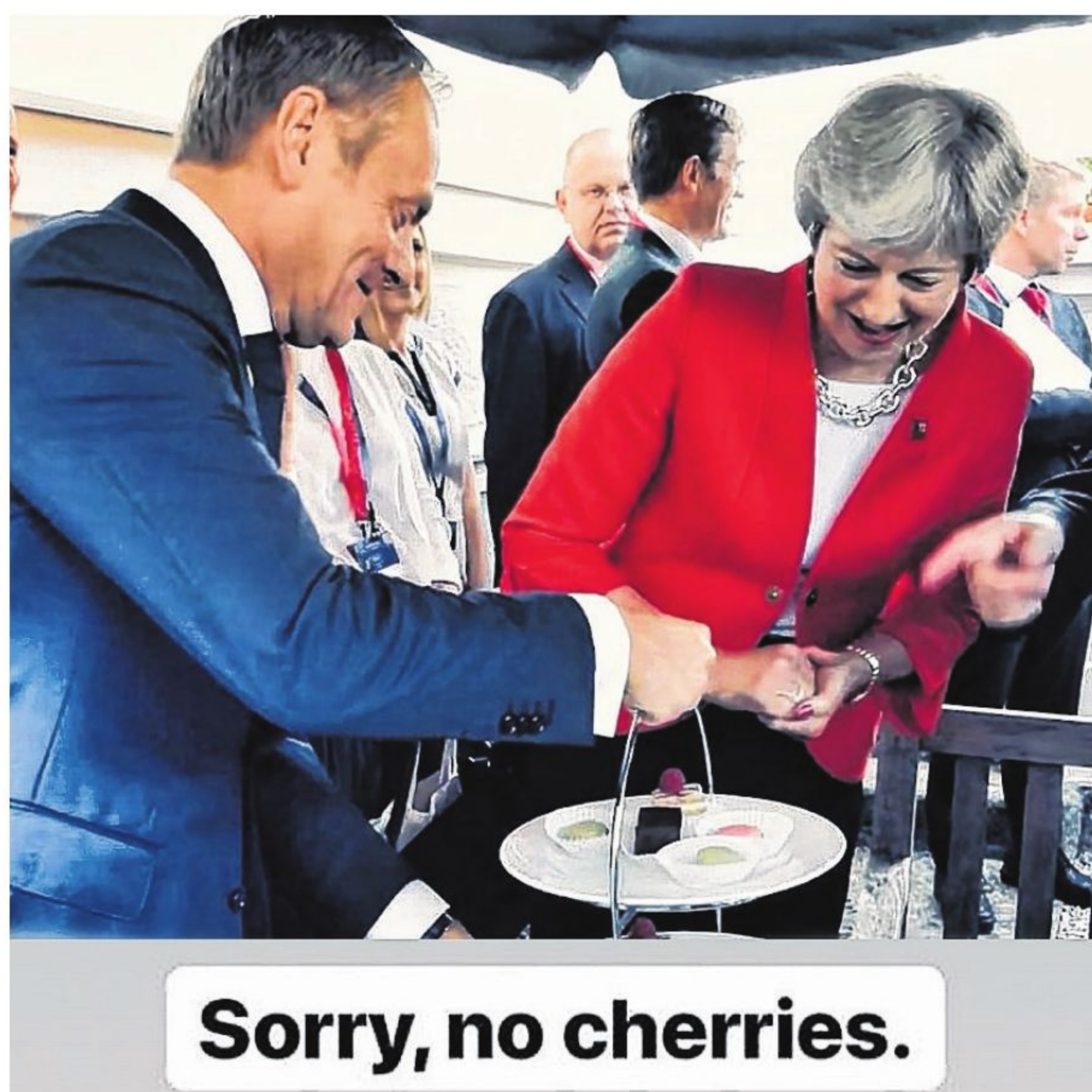
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Just about not managing

A prime minister serially overwhelmed by the job

ANNE McELVOY

MAY AT 10
ANTHONY SELDON
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Sorry, no cherries.

THERESA MAY'S PREMIERSHIP is boggy territory for a biographer – a tale in which the only upbeat moment comes long after she left Downing Street last June: the Tory landslide of December 12 under Boris Johnson, the irrepressible beneficiary of her failure. If all political careers end in some form of failure, May's was a particularly cruel saga of dither, stasis and ultimate inability to deliver the goal that defined her time in office – securing the basic terms of the UK's departure from the EU. By the time she wept her way out of Number 10, many of her colleagues felt sorry to see a politician of such grit so distressed and exhausted by the tussles with her cabinet, party and parliament. A woman who had negotiated the "chumocracy" of the Cameron era to become the longest serving Home Secretary since James Chuter Ede (1945–51) proved herself incapable of such wiliness and fortune when she finally secured the top job.

Even for Anthony Seldon, a serial chronicler of political power with an uncanny knack for persuading those close to his subjects to spill the beans, her premiership is a hard sell. *May at 10* – which focuses almost overwhelmingly on its subject's three years as prime minister – was undertaken with impressive speed, written (with his associate author, Raymond Newell) in just six months, from February 2019. It begins with a promise for readers who might not be fascinated by the minutiae of May's rule (we discover later that she was always "with a disposable V-Pilot pen") that this was a period "remarkable in historical terms" featuring "thirty-five ministerial resignations" and the biggest defeat in parliamentary history of her first "meaningful vote" on the EU Withdrawal Bill, by 432 votes to 202. A groundhog day of missed deadlines, knotty EU bureaucracy and a murderous political backdrop in the form of her own front bench fill out the political misery memoir.

The question that hangs over the account is whether it could ever have been different, given the inherent difficulties of splitting the difference between the bald choices of "Yes" and "No" offered in 2016 and arriving at an accommodation on the terms of leaving the EU, which had never seriously anticipated that a major member state would head for the exit door. The answer, liberally described over some 650 pages, is that, given May's character and the unforced errors provoked by it, it could not.

A fair point about her frailty as prime minister is that she did not seem to grasp what the job entailed in addition to the qualities required to survive as Home Secretary. She did not enjoy media scrutiny – a drawback if you hold the most exposed political position in the land at a time of national crisis. Conscious of her reputation for *froid-deur*, she veered uneasily between detachment and over-familiarity. I remember recoiling at an

incident also wincingly described by Seldon, when, at the *Spectator* awards ceremony in late 2016, she included in her speech a foolish attack on Sir Craig Oliver, David Cameron's head of communications, who had written of his panicked reaction when hearing that the EU referendum had been won by Leave: "Craig Oliver spoke of retching. Most of us know that feeling, like when we saw his name on the resignation honours list". We learn that this had been written into May's speech notes as a joke for her, not as something to be read out – which makes everyone involved seem tone-deaf or remarkably careless.

The problems May faced in the wake of the great disruption of 2016 were far greater and thornier than any she had previously encountered, either as a youngish modernizing Tory Party chairwoman in 2002, or as Home Secretary. These were compounded by her failure to understand team-building – the Achilles heel of many politicians. Those who have succeeded (or at least enjoyed longevity, like Blair and Cameron) have been adept at using the skills of those around them. May, by contrast, relied heavily on two aides, Fiona Hill, a tough former journalist who coveted a bigger role in setting strategy, and Nick Timothy, an unorthodox Tory intellectual with a desire to reconnect the Tory Party with the "just about managing" voters turned off by slick metropolitans. Ironically, this is precisely what Boris Johnson (hardly a classic Middle Englander) would later achieve in her stead. His Tories even won North West Durham, the former Labour stronghold where May had first stood as a candidate as a dry run in 1997.

The policy offer with which May embarked on the 2017 General Election was an odd mixture of reversion (grammar schools, albeit with the "Red Tory" notion of selection targeted on areas where schools were struggling), cuts to benefits, such as the winter fuel allowance for better-off pensioners, and plans for workers to be appointed to company boards. It was credible, but convoluted and soon overshadowed by an equally credible but convoluted social care policy that was introduced too soon before the election to be well understood and registered mainly as an attempt to make people pay more for old-age care, having been dubbed the "dementia tax" by the media. So bruised was May by the result – a surge by the hard-left Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and the loss of a Tory majority prompting the need for (expensive) reliance on the Northern Irish DUP – that she turned away from domestic policy altogether. As one official notes, "those who tried to manage her diary found it very difficult to find any time for domestic policy from the summer of 2017 onwards ... Europe was dominant".

A wounded PM turned her attention to forging a plan that might unite the warring wings of her party over whether Brexit should be hard, soft or

Instagram post by
Donald Tusk,
September 2018

“
We learn that this had been written into May's speech notes as a joke for her, not as something to be read out

Anne McElvoy is Senior Editor at The Economist. Her documentary *The Inside Story of General Election 2019* can be heard on BBC Sounds

(as now) scrambled. The Chequers paper of July 12, 2018 was the result: an attempt to see off the proponents of the "hard" variety of EU departure favoured by the well-organized eurosceptic European Reform Group (ERG) of Tory MPs. She was reliant on the main EU leaders to warm to it. "[Jean-Claude] Juncker saw Chequers as a positive step", recalls one EU Commission official. Indeed, in this account, Juncker – at the time the European Commission president – emerges as a more easily placated figure than the terse chief negotiator Michel Barnier, whose dedication to avoiding UK "cherry-picking" in economic or trade terms was fierce. The Salzburg summit in September 2018 was, in the author's view, a humiliation of May's own making. "When she most needed charm, cordiality and conviction, she made another poorly-judged move, attacking Barnier in an ill-conceived and poorly-delivered speech to EU leaders."

This feels to me like a somewhat weighted account: Barnier had, after all, attacked May in a prominent German newspaper in the run-up to the summit. That said, May, for her part, often did struggle to exhibit strength without simply resorting to repetition, which in turn produced more scolding from institutional Europe, memorably in the picture that Donald Tusk – the then president of the European Council – posted of himself offering a selection of cakes to May, captioned "Sorry, no cherries".

By the time the Commons returned at the start of 2019 May had lost a Foreign Secretary (Johnson), two Brexit Secretaries (David Davies and Dominic Raab) and was fighting to keep her cabinet from further departures. The received wisdom was that May had been negligent in reaching across the aisle to attract Labour support for the Withdrawal Agreement. She only became personally involved in this endeavour, Seldon tells us, from January 2019, and devoted more time and effort to keeping an ornery DUP on board. Yet it is questionable whether a Labour Party under the leadership of Corbyn would have seen much mileage in doing any kind of supportive deal with a Tory PM. Labour Remainers were more preoccupied by trying to achieve a route to a second referendum (another dead end, it turned out) than with passing the deal. After the defeat of a second attempt to get an agreement through the Commons in March, May went on television to vent what one insider describes as a "collective howl of pain" from Number 10 about the refusal of Parliament to support her, in the hope of bringing the Commons to heel.

If there are frustrations with the framing of *May at 10*, they are inherent in the task of quickly assembling a cast prepared to divulge information about events that are still raw at the time of writing. The "Whitehall is always right" tone sporadically grates on those who view civil servants as less than infallible, not least in leaving the Government so ill-prepared in the event that Leave won the referendum. But this is not a "Remoaner" account of May's premiership. It is generous to principled eurosceptics such as David Davis and the more pragmatic end of the ERG. It could have done with more searching Borisology because, for all the current prime minister's self-seeking ways and habit of taking liberties with the truth, he calculated correctly that May would fail in her endeavour and played a consummate political game to become her successor. The prize of a withdrawal deal and an election decisively won shortly after she departed would go to him, and so now does the thorny task of turning a leaving deal into a credible trade agreement to redefine Britain's relations with its European neighbours. If this is evidence of being "not grown up", as one Foreign Office detractor remarks to Seldon, a lot of aspirant leaders might well be tempted to sign up for the role of *homme unserieux*. ■

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THE FIRST TRANSLATION into a European language of the sayings of Confucius (the *Analects*), bore the title *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, “Confucius, the Chinese Philosopher” (1687). The Jesuits who translated this book were not the only ones who regarded it as obvious that there is philosophy in China. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz exclaimed, “Certainly [the Chinese] surpass us (though it is almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and the use of mortals”, as Franklin Perkins quotes him in *Leibniz and China: A commerce of light*. Another major figure of the German Enlightenment, Christian Wolff (1679–1754), caused quite a scandal by arguing that Confucius illustrates that it is possible to have ethics without a belief in God. In France, one of the advisers to the court of Louis XV, François Quesnay (1694–1774), took inspiration from Chinese accounts of how the sage-king Shun “ruled by non-action” in formulating the doctrine of *laissez-faire*.

However, 200 years later it is almost impossible to study Chinese philosophy in any undergraduate

or graduate philosophy department in Europe or the anglophone world. Mainstream philosophers today assume that there simply never was any indigenous Chinese philosophy, or if there was it was never anything more than “the mystical aphorisms of the fortune cookie”, as the late US Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia said with disgust, when a majority opinion had the poor taste to cite Confucius. What led to this change?

As Peter K. J. Park explains in his excellent *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the formation of the philosophical canon, 1780–1830*, until the end of the eighteenth century, the only views taken seriously in philosophy textbooks in Europe were that philosophy originated in India, or that philosophy originated in Africa, or that philosophy originated independently in both India and Africa. Greece was considered a comparative youngster in the philosophy game. However, pseudo-scientific racism grew with the increasing economic imperialism of the Western powers. In addition, the followers of Immanuel Kant rewrote the textbooks so that the history of philosophy appeared to be nothing but a succession of thinkers groping towards his Critical Idealism. Nothing that was not a part of that story counted as philosophy. It didn’t help matters that Kant himself was notoriously racist. He stated explicitly in his lectures that only whites are capable of philosophy. Indians, Chinese, Africans and the Indigenous Americans are, Kant solemnly explained, innately incapable of the sort of abstract thought necessary for philosophy. Most contemporary philosophers would denounce this sort of explicit racism, but they accept uncritically the fruit of it: the assumption that there just never was any philosophy outside of the Anglo-European tradition.

Even if there is philosophy outside Europe, that doesn’t mean it is any good. (We can’t rule out a priori the possibility that Scalia was right.) However, those who have bothered to study the philosophical traditions of China, India, Africa and the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas have found them very interesting and sophisticated indeed. A number of scholars have written works for other academics, exploring these traditions from a rigorous philosophical perspective. We can always use more works like these, but there is also a need for books that explain non-Western philosophical traditions to the interested non-specialist. Julian Bagini’s *How the World Thinks: A global history of philosophy* is an excellent example of this genre

Silicone sculpture of Confucius by Zhang Huan, Rockbund Art museum, Shanghai, 2011

(reviewed in the *TLS* of February 15, 2019). Roel Sterckx’s *Chinese Thought: From Confucius to Cook Ding* is another effort at such a book.

Sterckx arranges his material thematically rather than historically. The first major philosophical concept he explains is *dao*. This term is usually translated “Way”, because one of its central meanings is a path or road, but from this sense it is metaphorically extended to a way of doing something, especially the right way to live and to organize society. Later, beginning with the Daoists, the term comes to refer to an entity that is responsible for the way things are and the way they ought to be. The *Classic of the Way and Virtue*, attributed to Laozi, seems to record the genesis of this new use:

There is a thing that is amorphous yet complete,
Born before Heaven and Earth.
Still! Alone!
Standing alone and unchanging,
Going everywhere without being in danger.
It can be considered the mother of Heaven and Earth.
I do not know its name.
I bestow upon it the courtesy name of “Way.” (*Classic of the Way and Virtue*, Chapter 25)

This passage illustrates a paradox that bedevils all cosmogonies. If you want to explain why the physical world (“Heaven and Earth”) exists, you cannot appeal to another entity of the same kind (for example another material object), or else you are left with an infinite regress. (Contemporary cosmologists take note: the origin of the physical universe in the Big Bang leaves unanswered the question of what created the Big Bang.) But if you explain the origin of the physical universe by positing something categorically different from it, you will have to use metaphors to describe it, because our language is itself a part of the universe to be explained, and it evolved to refer to things within “Heaven and Earth”.

Consequently, the Way cannot have a name, properly speaking, and to describe it as the “mother” of Heaven and Earth is not mere poetic whimsy. There simply isn’t a literal way to describe the relationship between the Way and the physical universe, because all the causal and other relationships of dependence we are familiar with only occur within Heaven and Earth. The Way also can’t literally be “born before Heaven and Earth”, not just because there is nothing anterior to the Way to give “birth” to it, but also because relationships

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like “before” cannot be characteristic of that which creates all temporal relationships.

It’s tempting to describe the Way as transcendent, but the *Classic of the Way and Virtue* suggests that this isn’t entirely right either:

The nameless [ie the Way] is the beginning of Heaven and Earth.

The named [ie Heaven and Earth] is the mother of the myriad things.

...

These two are the same as they emerge but differ in their names.

Their being the same is a mystery,

The mystery of mysteries,

The gateway to the manifold secrets. (Chapter 1)

The text seems to be hinting at a monistic view, in which there is one underlying reality, which transcends all literal conceptualizations, but this same reality appears to us as the conceptualized world of apparent plurality.

How does Sterckx help readers to find their bearings around this challenging concept? He breathlessly tells us that the Way is “the path along which everyone and everything travels”, “a sort of ultimate reality or process”, “a force that keeps everything moving”, “an underlying road map”, “an overarching order”, “the underlying pattern that governs the universe”, “a prior state of simplicity or non-differentiation”. In the space of eight pages, the reader is thrown (at least) seven inconsistent descriptions of what the Way is, some of which have no basis in the text. We are also told that even if following the Way leads nowhere, “we will have gained experience along the way and hopefully even appreciated this quest for no answer”. This

is the sort of thing Gotthold Lessing said (and Richard Rorty would later endorse), but Chinese philosophers of many stripes would find this indefensibly self-indulgent in a world torn apart by warfare and cruelty.

The *Classic of the Way and Virtue* is the best-known Daoist text, but *Zhuangzi* (titled after its author) is perhaps an even greater literary and philosophical achievement. Zhuangzi tells us how he once dreamt that he was a happy, carefree butterfly, but after he awoke he was unsure whether he was Zhuangzi, who had dreamt that he was a butterfly, or if he was a butterfly, dreaming of being Zhuangzi. When Zhuangzi cries, “There must be a distinction between me and a butterfly!” he sounds like he is trying to convince himself, rather than inform the reader of an undeniable fact.

Sterckx handles this moving, carefully crafted, much-discussed passage by informing us that it is one of the many “anecdotes and parables illustrating the world in flux” that we find in the *Zhuangzi*. That’s it. This explanation is not only disappointing but also mistaken. Zhuangzi does end the passage with the comment, “This is what is meant by the ‘transformation of things’”, but the story is not about how Zhuangzi was a butterfly and (in a sort of reverse Gregor Samsa) became a human. It is about a transformation in how we see things. Zhuangzi says elsewhere that a sage “now takes himself to be a horse, then takes himself to be an ox” (*Zhuangzi*, Chapter 7). So in that half-awake moment when he is unsure whether he is a human or a butterfly, Zhuangzi has an intimation of how the sage sees the world, in which the arbitrary

“
In the space of eight pages, the reader is thrown (at least) seven inconsistent descriptions of what the Way is

human fixation on the distinction between human and non-human drops away.

Zhuangzi’s contemporaries included Mencius, the “Second Sage” of Confucianism. Mencius used the following thought experiment to argue that humans have an innate but incipient disposition towards compassion. Suppose someone were suddenly confronted with the sight of a child about to fall into a well. How would they react? Sterckx assures us: “Mencius is adamant that you would immediately jump after the child to rescue it ...”. But Mencius says nothing of the kind. He only claims that any normal human would have a feeling of “alarm and compassion”. There is no guarantee that any given person will act on this initial feeling. One’s second feeling may be fear that one will drown if one falls into the well oneself, or the recognition that this child has an illegitimate claim to the throne that will throw the empire into civil war if he lives. Mencius is a sophisticated observer of human psychology and a careful philosopher, so he does not commit himself to anything beyond what is necessary to make his case for an innate disposition to compassion. He describes this incipient disposition as a mere “sprout” of virtue, and stresses that it has to be cultivated in order for us to achieve genuine benevolence.

Roel Sterckx’s enthusiasm for his topic is evident on every page. It’s easy to get drawn in and, to use a cliché he repeats, go with the flow. But as any actual Daoist would warn you, not every current is worth following. ■

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The eternal foreigner

Jewish life and European thought in the eighteenth century

AUDREY BOROWSKI

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SOLOMON MAIMON

The complete translation
**YITZHAK Y. MELAMED AND ABRAHAM
SOCHER, EDITORS**

Translated by Paul Reitter
336pp. Princeton University Press. £30 (US \$35).

REFERRING TO SOLOMON MAIMON's first important work, the *Versuch über die Transzendentalphilosophie* or *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* (1790), Immanuel Kant wrote to his Jewish student Markus Herz that "one glance at the work made me realize its excellence and that not only had none of my critics understood me and

the main questions so well as Herr Maimon, but also very few men possess so much acumen or such deep investigations as he". Maimon was becoming an influential figure in the German and Jewish enlightenments, and Kant was not the only admirer: others included Fichte, Goethe, Hegel and Schiller.

In his autobiography, published in Berlin in two volumes in 1792-93, Maimon set out to recount how, “striving for intellectual growth”, he “extricated himself from the fetters of superstition and religious prejudice” in order “to seek the truth”, giving up religious obscurantism for the “religion of reason”. This superb new edition - edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Abraham Socher, and skilfully translated by Paul Reitter - is the fullest yet available in English: Melamed and Socher have restored text cut in J. Clark Murray’s abridged translation of 1888.

Originally called simply Shlomo ben Yehoshua (Solomon son of Joshua), Maimon was born in 1753, the son of a recognized rabbinic scholar in the village of Sukowiborg, where his grandfather rented an estate from the Polish-Lithuanian aristocrat Prince Karol Stanislaw Radziwiłł. While Maimon does not provide extensive detail about his family background, he describes a “former barbaric and miserable state”, a world of poverty and persecution in which “ignorance and backwardness” are the norm and religious hatred “runs so deep that the very name ‘Jew’ elicits disgust”.

Married off to the daughter of an innkeeper as a Talmudic prodigy at the age of eleven (having been betrothed to two girls simultaneously and become the object of a rivalry), Maimon worked as a tutor, flirted with Hasidism at the court of Rabbi Dov Ber in Mezritch (in what is now Ukraine), grew disillusioned with the movement's lack of intellectual seri-



Wall art illustrating the major Jewish holidays, marking the Mizrach (the direction of Jerusalem), Germany, eighteenth century

ousness, and travelled to Berlin to study medicine. However, anti-Jewish restrictions reduced him to roaming Germany for months as a bedraggled beggar until 1780, when he finally succeeded in breaking into Berlin intellectual circles thanks to the support - partly financial - of several employers and generous patrons, including the rabbi of the Jewish community in Posen and, later, the freethinking count Adolf von Kalckreuth. This unsettled way of life suited him rather well: he would later describe those years as the “happiest and most successful” periods in his life, when, unencumbered by familial responsibilities - having abandoned his wife and son back in Poland early on - he could devote himself fully to the contemplative ideal, while nonetheless deriding the “idleness” of those Jewish scholars he had left behind at home.

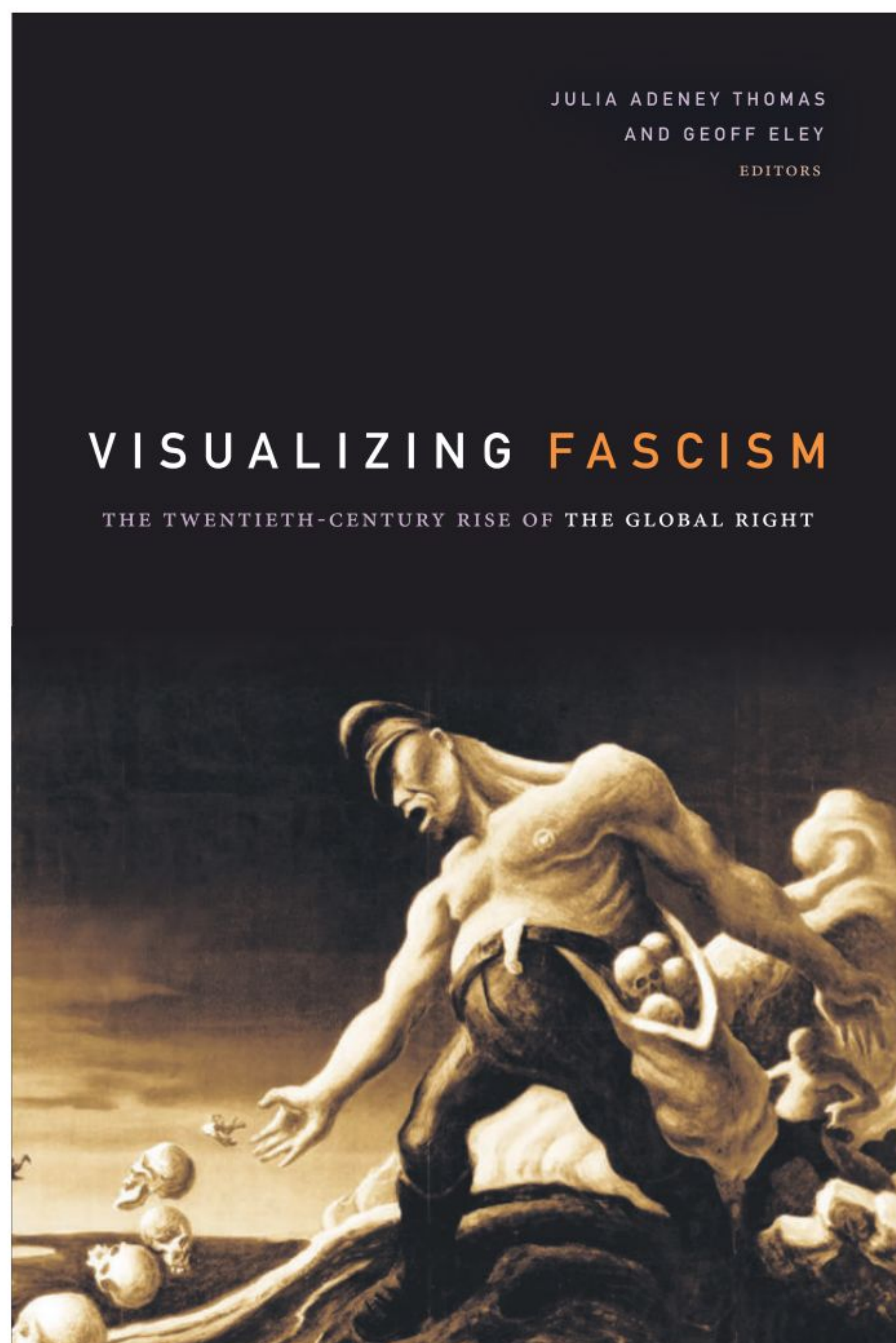
Jumping from one discipline to another, from astronomy and mathematics to medicine, philosophy and literature, Maimon had immersed himself in books and absorbed philosophical systems from the moment he had access to his father's library, finding good in - and building on - each of them, even attempting, as Gideon Freudenthal expertly demonstrates in the afterword, to revise Kant's transcendental philosophy by drawing on Leibniz's concept of infinitesimal calculus.

Yet Maimon never really contemplated putting theory into practice, and as a result often found himself on the brink of disaster. His journey towards intellectual self-perfection often reads like a picaresque novel, complete with nocturnal flights, abductions, corrupt clerics, debauched princes, disgruntled Poles and mischief of various kinds; they form a tragicomedy in which wit, humour and self-awareness provide an antidote to the ambient misery. Early in his marriage, he engaged in “constant warfare” with his abusive mother-in-law, whom “he paid back with interest” and on whose head he eventually dumped a pot of milk. On one occasion he dressed up in the middle of the night as his late mother in order to haunt his mother-in-law and threaten her with eternal damnation. Though he never completed his medical studies - he had no intention of becoming a doctor - Maimon concocted medicines and wrote prescriptions for patients, “not wanting to content [him]self with theory”. As he writes himself, “one can imagine how that went. At least it had the happy consequence of making me realize that I hadn’t grasped much of what goes into being a practicing doctor”. Maimon also tells us that a blatant attempt at self-advancement - conversion to Protestantism - failed because he could accept only a demystified version of the religion. He therefore resigned himself to remaining a “stubborn Jew”.

Audrey Borowski is a doctoral student at the University of Oxford

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MARCH 6, 2020



PHILOSOPHY

meaning where there was none". Giving comic examples of the kinds of questions considered in Talmudic study - "how many white hairs can a red cow have and still be a red cow? ... Is it permissible to kill a louse or a flea on the Sabbath? Did the high priests put on their shirts first and then their pants, or was it the other way round?" - Maimon contrasts them unfavourably with philosophical and scientific explanation: "Compare these excellent tales, served up to and forced upon children to the point of revulsion; compare these tales, I say, with stories in which natural events are narrated in an edifying and pleasing manner, as well as with a knowledge of how the world works that both borders one's perspective on nature and brings everything together in a well-ordered system".

A self-professed *apikores* (Jewish heretic) whose carefree lifestyle was rebuked by the German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn as "epicurean" - Maimon would have known this to be a term of learned abuse - he could not abide the ideal of Jewish assimilation into bourgeois gentile society advocated by Mendelssohn and Markus Herz. He advocated a different path to enlightenment - one that did not require "suffocating mice, torturing frogs, or making a little man dance by shocking him with electricity" in the fashionable salons of fellow eighteenth-century thinkers. Truth, for him, did not lie in the mere demonstration of empirical phenomena but in "intellectual perfection", whereby "everything [could] be explainable through the principle of sufficient reason" and a true understanding of the universe could be achieved through the cultivation of a contemplative ideal inspired by the thought of the medieval Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides, whose name Maimon took as his own in his thirties and whom he credited with guiding his intellectual transformation.

Inserted into the middle of his autobiography, Maimon's ten-chapter outline of Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed* offered one of the first serious expositions of Maimonides's thought. Maimon prefaces it with an autobiographical observation:

Lacking *enlightened teachers and suitable readings*, I had to learn to *reflect for myself*. The rarity of helpful texts taught me to value all the more those that I could get hold of. I felt compelled to give them my full attention, correct their mistakes, fill in their gaps, and try to bring light and order to their dark, confused chaos ... *Melancholic and ecstatic* religion was slowly transformed into a *religion of reason*. The *free cultivation of the capacity for knowledge and morality* took the place of the *slavish* religious service. And I recognized *perfection* as being the precondition for true *blessedness*. The writings of the famous Maimonides (Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon) were most influential in bringing about this happy transformation. My admiration for this great teacher reached the point that I regarded him as the *ideal* of a perfect human being and his doctrines as having been dictated by *divine wisdom* itself.

Far from being an excursus, this philosophical presentation of Maimonides's thought serves a pivotal function in Maimon's self-dramatization of his life as the search for truth and the striving towards that intellectual perfection for which, he writes, he left "his people, homeland, and family". By turning to alternative medieval and early modern conceptions of intellectual perfection, including Maimonides's pure rationalism and Spinoza's radical monism, whereby knower and known could be identified because they were ultimately manifestations of the same substance, Maimon challenged a particular kind of Jewish Enlightenment. His autobiography, intended as an authentic case study, not only offers a wonderfully vivid first-person account of Jewish life and European thought at the end of the eighteenth century, but also dramatizes the range of spiritual and intellectual options newly open to Jews in the German-speaking world on the cusp of modernity. ■

To buy The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon at a discount, visit shop.the-tls.co.uk or call +44 (0)203 176 2935

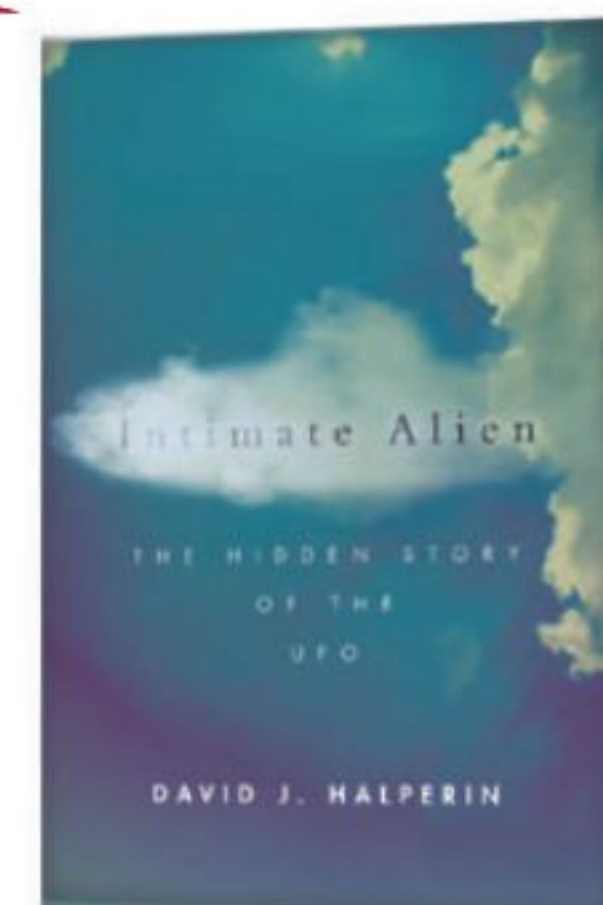
At times incredulous at his own behaviour and chutzpah, and at others confrontational and unapologetic, Maimon does not scruple to lavish praise on himself in his autobiography: recounting being invited to the table of a prospective employer in Berlin, he remarks casually, "When they saw that I was an initiate in the secrets of Jewish mysticism, and that I was able to explain passages they had deemed inexplicable and solve other stubborn problems, they came to the conclusion that they were in the presence of a great man". He also reveals that he made little attempt to hide his contempt for his new so-called friends:

In my jovial mood, I, meanwhile, told them all the secrets of philosophy, explained the most recondite philosophical systems in detail, and corrected their ideas about various areas of human knowledge. But because philosophical thinking can't simply be drummed into someone's head, and also because these gentlemen possessed no special aptitude for it, they couldn't make any real progress through lessons of this kind. Once I had noticed how things stood with them, I made no secret of my opinion of their intellects. Nor did I hide the fact that I enjoyed their company mainly for the meat, the wine, and so on. This rather derisive treatment wasn't especially to their liking.

Maimon presents himself in the autobiography as an eternal foreigner, confident in his abilities but misunderstood: he cut a dishevelled figure, and his German - "a grammatically deficient mix of Hebrew, Yiddish-German, Polish, and Russian", as he describes it - was improved only by the efforts of his friend, the novelist and essayist Karl Philipp Moritz. But Maimon revels in his underdog status and marginality, commenting that "it was only natural that I would be either misunderstood or not understood at all". Thus he debuts the role of the "conscious pariah", as Hannah Arendt argued in her article "The Jew as Conscious Pariah: A hidden tradition", published in *Jewish Social Studies* in 1944. In her eyes he was the first modern Jewish intellectual to stand on the border between European society and the Jewish community, being torn between both and belonging to neither, like Sholem Aleichem, Heinrich Heine and Franz Kafka after him.

Judaism, according to Maimon, was originally grounded in reason but had become diluted in the cultivation of farcical ceremonies devoid of any purpose. In particular, he grew deeply disillusioned with the aridity of Talmudic study; in his view it was driven less by the pursuit of divine knowledge or the exercise of virtue than by an impulse to "build intellectual castles in the air", "staying up all night to find

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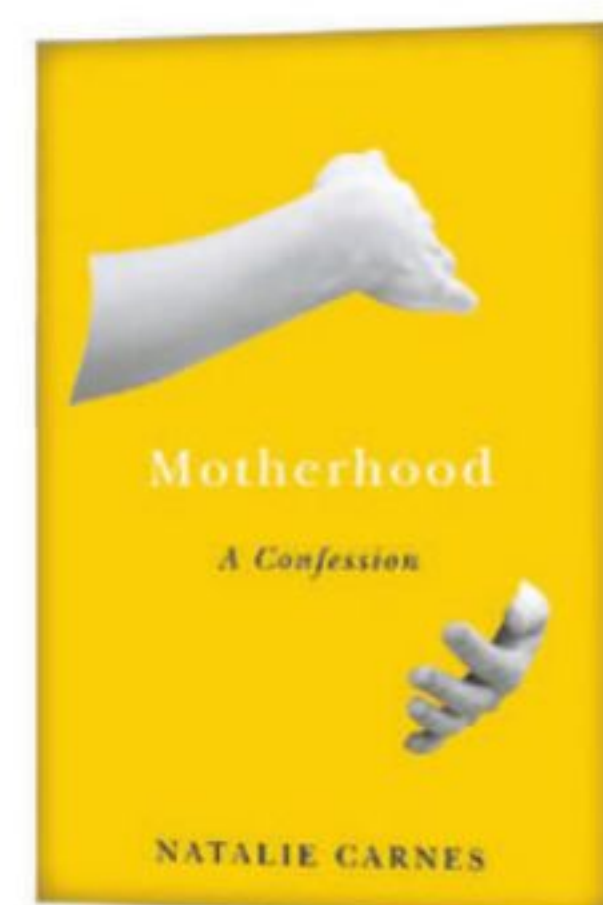


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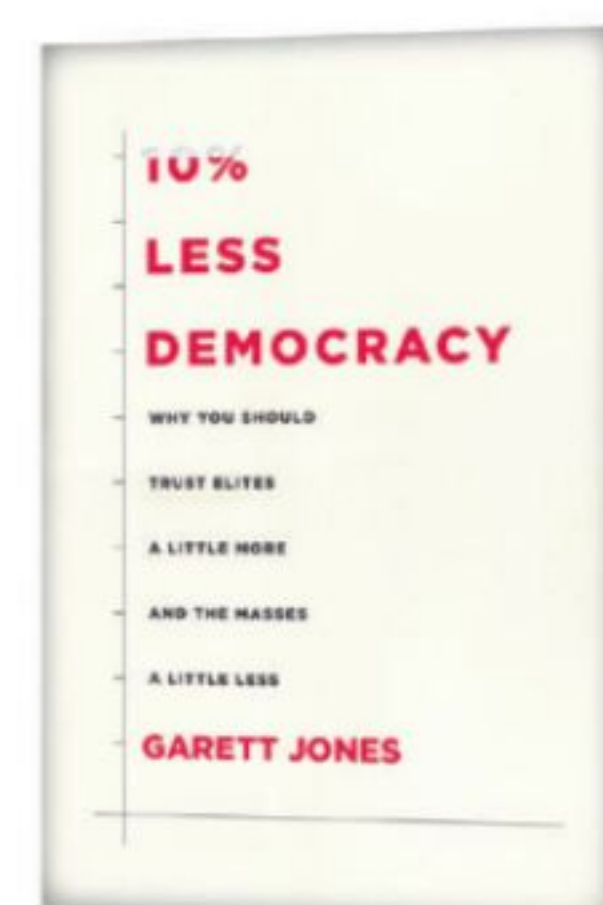


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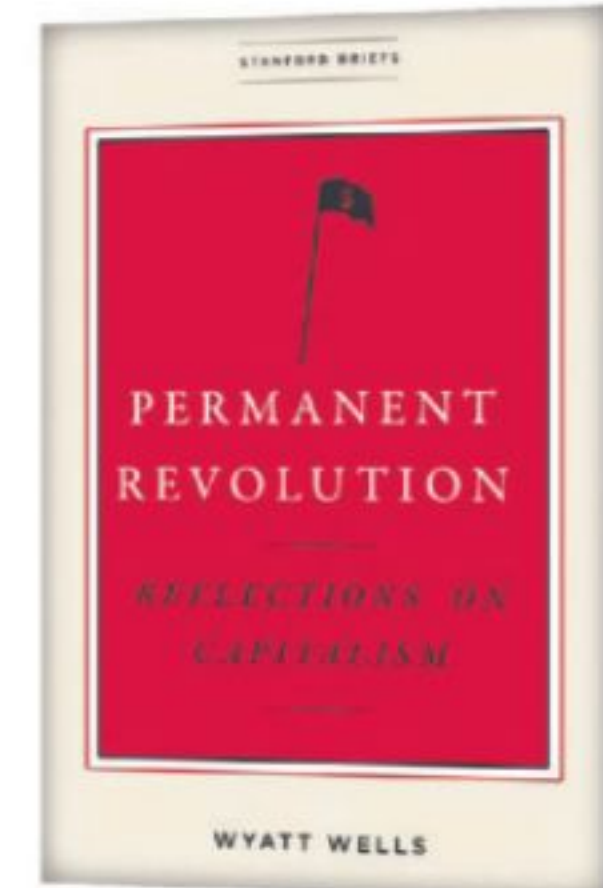


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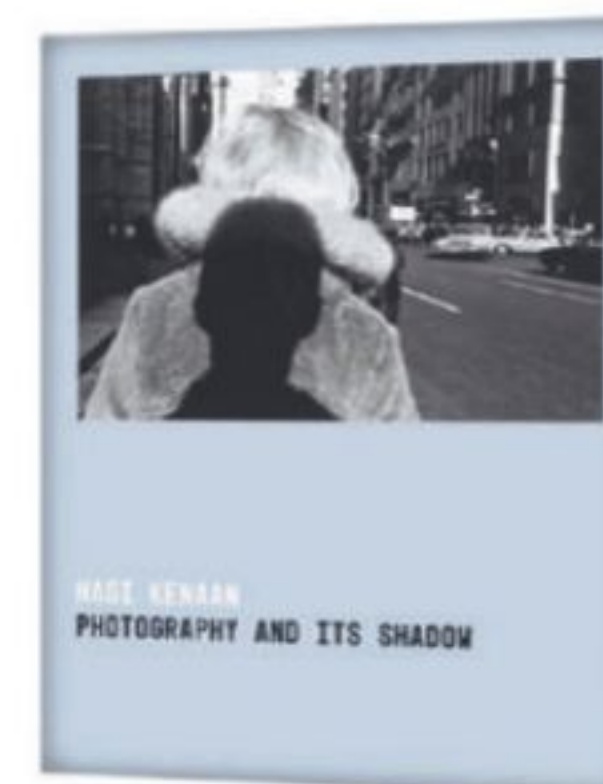


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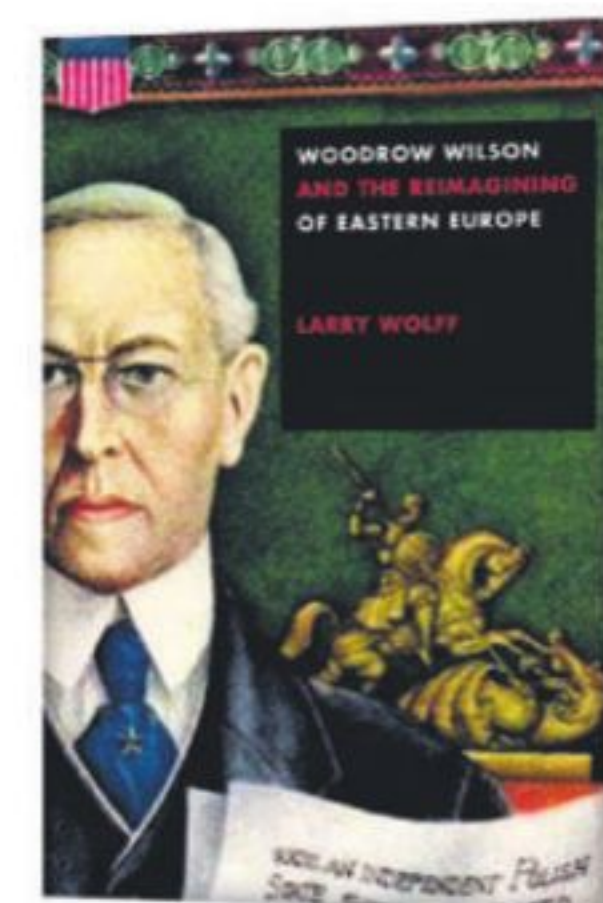


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On our way to Venus

Why computers won't need us

RICHARD LEA

NOVACENE

JAMES LOVELOCK WITH BRYAN APPLEYARD

142pp. Allen Lane. £14.99.

WHEN GOOGLE's artificial intelligence AlphaGo beat the three-time European Go champion Fan Hui 5-0 in October 2015, a senior editor at *Nature* commented that the match was "really chilling to watch ... in the quiet room downstairs, one couldn't help but root for the poor human being beaten". Two years later, an updated version of the program called AlphaZero took less than twenty-four hours with no human input to teach itself not only Go, but also chess and the Japanese board game shogi, surpassing its predecessor at Go and defeating the world's strongest conventional chess-playing

programme in a hundred-game series with twenty-eight wins, seventy-two draws and no losses.

According to the earth scientist James Lovelock, this demonstration of autonomy and superhuman ability is a sign that we have already entered a new geological age: the Novacene. Lovelock begins his brief exploration of artificial intelligence by examining the fragility of life. As with any ordinary main sequence star, the Sun has increased its output by 20 per cent over the 3.7 billion years it has taken primitive life forms to evolve into organisms that can understand their own origins. This would normally

Live broadcast of the match between AlphaGo and Lee Sedol, Seoul, March 2016



be enough to raise the surface temperature of the Earth to 50°C, Lovelock suggests, bringing about "a runaway greenhouse effect that would have sterilized the planet". But because of the complex, multi-dimensional systems of life, to which Lovelock has given the name Gaia, "the average temperature of the whole planetary surface does not seem to have varied by more than about 5°C from its current temperature: 15°C".

This comfortable state of affairs is now under threat, Lovelock continues, but not directly because of our current climate emergency. Human beings have, of course, made enormous changes to the planet since the Industrial Revolution - enough for Lovelock to place himself ahead of the official body that oversees the identification of geological eras by declaring Thomas Newcomen's invention of the atmospheric engine in 1712 the beginning of the Anthropocene. And with atmospheric carbon dioxide now at more than 400 parts per million, human civilization faces the challenges of rising temperatures and extreme weather. But Lovelock's concerns are broader than the dangers facing human society, and rooted in his own advancing years: "planets, like humans, grow fragile with age". With Gaia already struggling to maintain a stable dynamic condition, an asteroid strike or volcanic eruption she may have shrugged off in her youth could see the planet quickly become "too hot for life".

Lovelock conjures up the nightmarish scenario of a world at an average surface temperature of 47°C, with an atmosphere of supercritical steam that would dissolve basalt. This marks a limit for any kind of life on an ocean planet, he continues. "Once this temperature is passed even silicon-based intelligence would face an impossible environment."

This qualification is crucial, because Lovelock is convinced that AlphaZero's ability to teach itself is the harbinger of an era in which artificial intelligence - "new life" - will rapidly surpass human abilities. Comparing the speed of electrical signals along a copper wire and a neuron, he suggests that artificial intelligences will be so much faster in thought and action that "the experience of watching your garden grow gives you some idea of how future AI systems will feel when observing human life".

Lovelock dismisses the possibility these systems will remain under human control, arguing that they will be "entirely free of human commands because they will have evolved from code written by themselves". But despite our inability to control our creations, it is highly unlikely they will turn on us, he continues. With Earth rendered uninhabitable by temperatures above 47°C, "they will be obliged to join us in the project to keep the planet cool".

There is something refreshing about an argument that makes room to consider the planetary constraints that apply - at least initially - to artificial intelligences. But *Novacene* also demonstrates just how hard it is for humans to imagine how a super-human intelligence might think, even if that human is as original a thinker as Lovelock. The Earth might already be "moving unstoppably to a state like that of Venus" if it wasn't for the "continuous and sufficient pump-down of carbon dioxide", as he suggests, but the land and ocean vegetation responsible for this feat could remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere just as well without the presence of human beings.

Without a role as necessary partner in the project to keep the planet cool, the prospects for *Homo sapiens* seem fairly bleak. Writing in March 2016, as the world watched AlphaGo move into an unassailable 3-0 lead over the eighteen-time world Go champion Lee Sedol, Eliezer Yudkowsky suggested the human commentators had been underestimating the strength of the programme's position on the board. "When you've been placed in an adversarial relation to something smarter than you", Yudkowsky wrote, "you don't always know that you've lost, or that anything is even wrong, until the end." ■

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CAROLINE EDEN

**STORIES OF THE SAHARA
SANMAO**

Translated by Mike Fu
416pp. Bloomsbury. £16.99.

BORN CHEN MAO PING in Chongqing, southern China, in 1943, Sanmao grew up in Taiwan before studying in Germany and Spain, where she met her husband, José María Quero. An underwater engineer, Quero was offered a job in the Spanish-controlled Western Sahara on the northwest coast of Africa, somewhere Sanmao had longed to visit after reading an article about it in *National Geographic* magazine. Her accounts of their everyday life there, in which the threat of war looms as Morocco and Mauritania begin to tussle for control of the region, captivated readers when her memoir was first published in 1976. It is now available in a riveting English translation by Mike Fu.

In the desert, where temperatures regularly rise above 50°C, Sanmao proves herself to be more than just another expatriate outsider: she takes a spirited role in assisting the local Sahrawi people. Equipped with flick knives and goggles, useful against sandstorms, she serves as “scribe, nurse, teacher and seamstress”, treating diseases, malnutrition and eye infections (her knowhow typically intuitive rather than professional), and mentoring local schoolgirls. At one point she tries,

desperately but unsuccessfully, to save a mute slave from being resold. In such harsh conditions, she knows that it is not enough to watch and hope, or “simply clutch Buddha’s feet in a moment of need”. Her survival abilities hint at the inspiration behind her pen name: Sanmao the Orphan was a character created by the Chinese cartoonist Zhang Leping (1910–92); a poor boy who lives in the slums of Shanghai, he helps others and remains optimistic in spite of severe malnutrition and hardship.

There are moments of high drama here. Sanmao flees quicksand (“José had already stepped into the quagmire. The wet sand was up to his knees in an instant”), and is chased by bandits. In a chapter entitled “Seed of Death”, she battles what is said to be a deadly desert spell: “‘The way this curse works is by exploiting your physical weaknesses,’ one of the Sahrawi explained to me. ‘It can transform little problems into a major evil power to take your life’”.

But just as compelling are Sanmao’s musings on how to master the art of domestic desert living. Looking like some kind of avant-garde Nico of the sands – she is all long hair, flowing dresses and black kohl eyes – she shops frugally at the Legión Española canteen so that she can buy non-essentials such as cassettes, since a “place without music was like a Chinese landscape painting without a stream or waterfall”. Soon enough, she is blasting out Dvořák’s *New World Symphony*. The couple eat well whenever possible – vermicelli noodles, seaweed and shiitake mushrooms are airmailed in – and they decorate their home, in the Cemetery District in Laâyoune, or El Aaiún, with panache. A camel skull adorns a bookshelf and paper lanterns are hung up. They keep going until their house resembles a “real palace of the arts”. Word gets out about this chic desert hideaway, and reporters come to survey it, armed with bouquets of flowers. By this point, the reader is almost crying for the lack of illustrations in the book.

Always hopeful, Sanmao nonetheless recognizes her precarious position in the Sahara, and melancholy seeps in like sand into boots. “I found the



From *Stories of the Sahara*

desert to be truly charming. On the other hand, the desert did not care a jot for me.” She notes how the loneliness and relentless heat torment others: “it often drives the Europeans to alcoholism, husbands and wives to conflict and single men to suicide”. Her own dream begins to unravel in earnest as guerrillas mobilize, martial law is imposed and explosions go off in public places. When war comes, she loses most of her freedom, ending up holed up and grounded. Aldous Huxley knew of the headiness of the Sahara and the dangers of it. “Taken in reasonably small doses, the Sahara exhilarates, like alcohol”, he wrote in *Do What You Will* (1929). “Too much of it, however (I speak, at any rate, for myself), has the depressing effect of the second bottle of Burgundy.” Reading this highly unusual piece of travel writing, so refreshing in its honesty, it is difficult not to imagine how a Hollywood biopic treatment would unfold on the screen. ■

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Saving Zombie

On futility, resilience and kindness to animals

CHRISTINE TOOMEY

FATHER OF LIONS

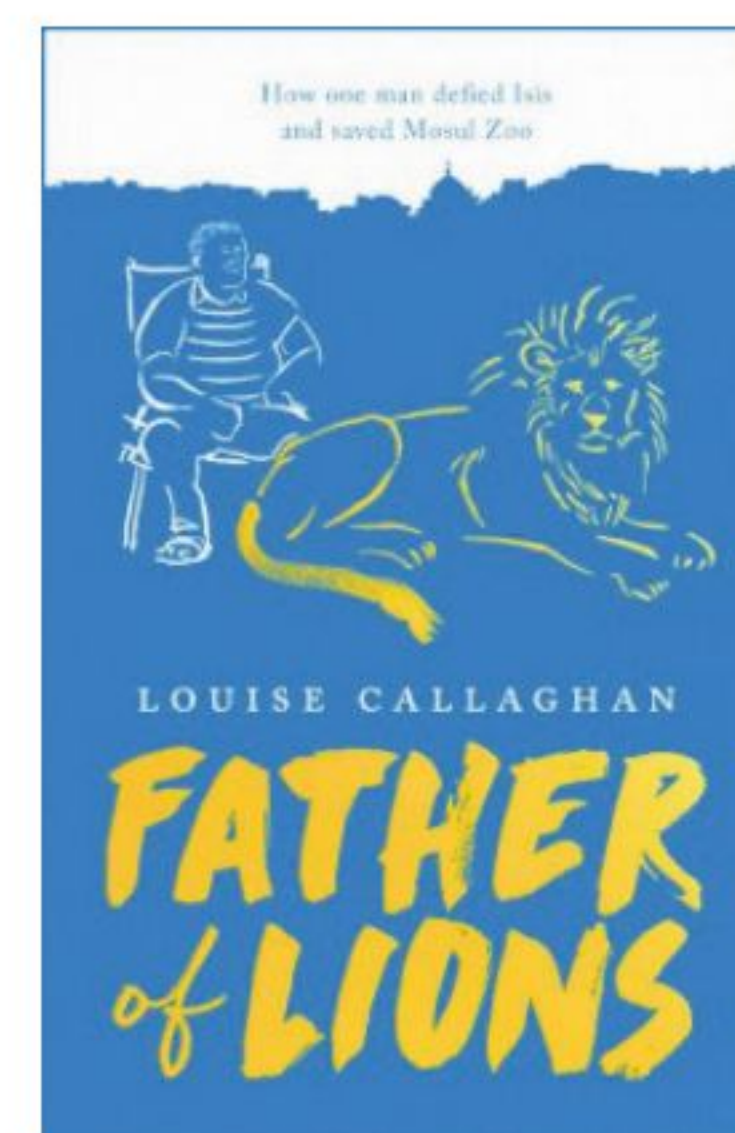
How one man defied Isis and saved Mosul Zoo
LOUISE CALLAGHAN
320pp. Apollo. £20.

IN THE EARLY STAGES of Mosul’s occupation by Isis in 2014, many Moslawis viewed Isis’s self-proclaimed holy warriors as ridiculous. A vignette in Louise Callaghan’s book *Father of Lions* serves as illustration: a Russian Isis jihadi storms into the home of the book’s protagonist, a car mechanic called Abu Laith, and mistakes a photograph of him wearing a red-check keffiyeh for a portrait of the Prophet Muhammad. “Thou art depicting the Prophet, peace be upon him, in his own image”, says the jihadi in broken Arabic, tearing the photograph from the wall. “Thou knowest these images are forbidden.” As he marches out of the door, Abu Laith mutters “These people are mad”.

But as Iraq’s second city became more and more dystopian, with Isis fighters and Iraqi government forces battling for control, Moslawis like Abu Laith who had been unable to escape came to understand the full depravity of the so-called Islamic State. As Callaghan, Middle East correspondent for the *Sunday Times*, tells us, severed heads were displayed on spikes in the city centre. “Media points” were set up

at major junctions where Isis projected images onto giant screens – footage of the Paris attacks of November 2015 or their battles with the Iraqi army. As conditions worsened during the two-and-a-half-year siege, Abu Laith’s large family were “tessellated” into an ever smaller space within their own home and, like their neighbours, lived “tightly as notes in a wallet” trying to shelter from gunfire and mortar attacks.

Callaghan first met Abu Laith (his nickname means “father of lions”) when she went to investigate rumours that there was a zoo on the eastern side of the city. The rumours were true. Indeed, amid the carnage of war, Abu Laith was consumed by the fate of its animals, a motley collection of skinny ponies, peacocks, a Syrian brown bear called Lula, her three-legged cub, a baboon who “would spread his legs and wave his penis wildly” in the direction of visitors, and three lions, “bored and left roasting in the sun”. His devotion to animal welfare, in a country where even before the war it had been a relatively alien concept, had been honed since childhood. Distressed by the pitiful state of the animals, he now collected what scraps of food he could from neighbours and dodged sniper fire to enter the zoo to feed them (he was helped by a listless assistant, Marwan, whose initial motivation for working in the zoo was “above all trying to meet girls”). The task became impossible, however, when Isis fighters turned the zoo into a bunker, and when Isis were eventually routed the few surviving animals were close to death. It was then that Hakam, an engineering student, posted news of



Christine Toomey is an award-winning journalist. Her book *When the Mountains Dance: Love, loss and hope at the heart of Italy* is forthcoming

their plight on Facebook. This was seen by Dr Amir, an Egyptian-born international rescue vet based in Vienna, who resolved to take two of its largest animals – Lula (whose bear cub had died) and a young lion called Zombie – out of the country to safety.

The interweaving of the story of Abu Laith and the animals in his care with a harrowing portrait of a city and people under Isis control makes for compelling and poignant reading. Callaghan has a keen ear for dialogue and proves a skilful observer of character quirks, particularly those of Abu Laith and his beautiful wife Lumia (who when trying to fool a group of soldiers adopts an “abomination of a Baghdad accent”); they are a couple whose “hilarious sloppiness suited them both”. After countless tense trials (Dr Amir is at one point accused of being a CIA spy), the vet finally succeeds in smuggling the animals out of Iraq in the back of a vegetable lorry. Lola is taken to a nature sanctuary in Jordan. Zombie is eventually flown to South Africa.

No such happy ending was granted to Moslawis like Abu Laith and his family, who were left behind to deal with the destruction of their beloved city. There is a gallows humour threaded through *Father of Lions*; one example comes when Isis have fled Mosul and Abu Laith enters a house they commandeered and from which they issued decrees concerning immodest dress. There he finds a drawer “full of women’s underwear, some of them no more than wisps of chiffon”. One by one he hangs the bras – pink, purple, red, white and blue – on the window bars of the house for all to see. It is just one of many scenes in Callaghan’s moving book that underscore the hypocrisy of Isis, the futility of war and the resilience of those left to pick up the pieces. ■

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Strangest of ghosts

Why statues still matter

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SHOULD NELSON FALL? In August 2017 a debate erupted in London over whether Britain should continue to honour its naval hero with a column in Trafalgar Square. I found myself arguing on television, standing on an adjacent rooftop with some protesters who pointed out that he had once written a letter in support of Jamaican slave owners. In America at the time, Confederate statues were being toppled by activists as symbols of former segregation. Why should Nelson get off scot free?

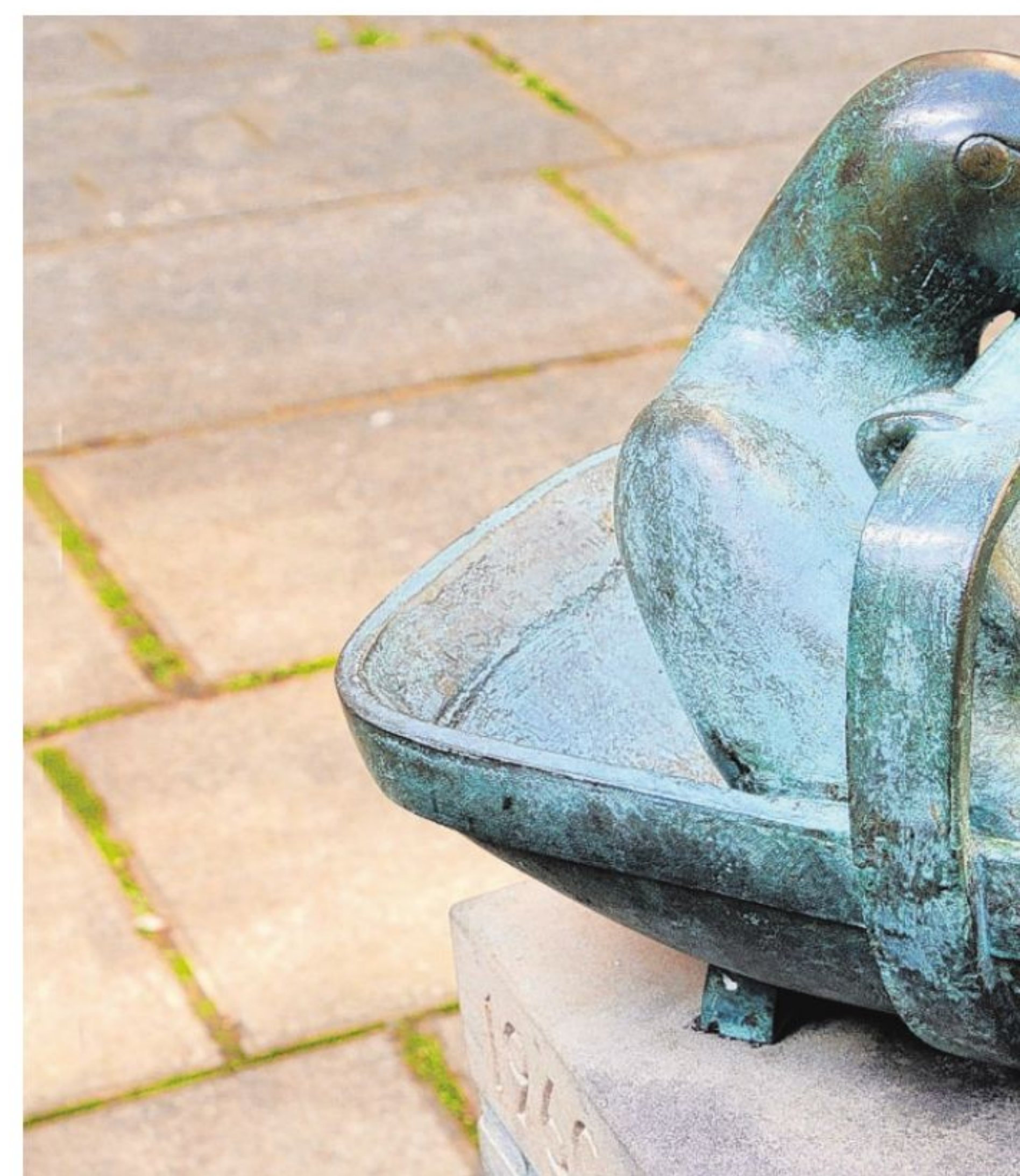
The anti-Nelson campaign did not last long and I rather regretted even being there. His place in history was secure and his effigy safely out of reach. The campaigners sought other sources of what they called “offence and trauma”, settling on a near-invisi-

ble statue of Cecil Rhodes, high on a wall in Oxford. It was alleged to have caused ethnic minority students “deep anguish”. It too survived, though a more prominent Rhodes statue outside Cape Town University was less fortunate.

Statues are the strangest of ghosts. They hold within their cold stone a curious and often dangerous potency, that of memory. They stare down from buildings, lurk round corners and peer out across squares and public gardens. Mostly they are ignored, except when they explode, like long-fused time bombs. To the ancients, a building or forum without attendant statues or other carvings was naked. By the Middle Ages, no church was free of the sculptor’s art, from the west fronts of Wells and Chartres to the portals of Florence and Santiago de Compostela. The statue niche or corbel table was a standard feature of a gothic façade, awaiting saints, martyrs, monarchs, gremlins or simple peasants.

Today’s public spaces have largely abandoned sculptural decoration to abstraction. Urban design plays safe with rhomboid shapes and meaningless nouns, such as Richard Serra’s Broadgate rusting steel plates, said to “engage audiences through material, form and site specificity”. The bizarre objects that currently litter Park Lane in London are hardly more beautiful for being up for sale by the local council. There has been some resurgence in figures likely to survive the new intolerance. Philip Larkin strides purposefully across Hull station concourse and Churchill chats with Roosevelt in Bond Street. Antony Gormley’s bland casts of himself have become almost de rigueur in unlikely places, such as beaches, tower blocks and mountains. His Angel of the North watches over the A1 outside Gateshead. His effigy in the waterlogged basement of Winchester

“The nudity required a rather absurd sheet to embrace the genitalia of both Alexander and his horse



Cathedral is a startling piece of surrealism. But Margaret Thatcher had to fight for a Westminster effigy, and Harold Wilson languishes in a Huddersfield square.

That leaves sculptures that constitute illustrated history. As such, I see no danger in arguing about them as history is always a moving target. I therefore join with revisionists who seek to “update” them, or at least their inscriptions. I campaigned to have Edward Jenner, heroic inventor of vaccination, restored to Trafalgar Square from his 1862 banishment to Kensington Gardens to make way for two inconsequential generals, Havelock and Napier. I remain appalled that Sir Arthur “Bomber” Harris should be commemorated in the Aldwych, or anywhere, and cannot pass the ghoulish monument to his Bomber Command at Hyde Park Corner without a shudder. It says much for the potency of statues that we respond to them in this way.

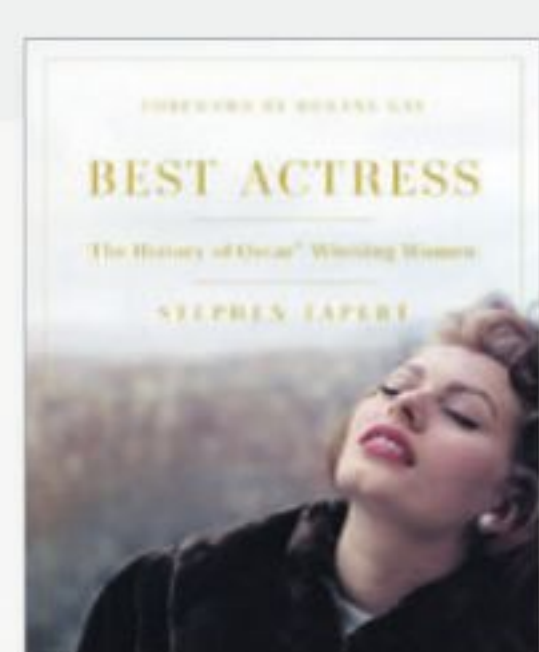
The gargantuan project of the Public Monuments and Sculpture Association (PMSA) to record every British work of “three-dimensional art located in an unregulated public space” is welcome for the above reasons, among others. It parallels a similar exercise by Fred Hohler’s Public Art Foundation (now ArtUK), to record all paintings in public ownership, including those inexcusably hidden from public view in stores and basements. That we must turn to a privately funded catalogue to see mere copies of paintings that we supposedly own is a scandal. These cultural censuses deserve to stand alongside Pevsner’s architectural guides – also privately funded – as a Domesday Book of British art.

The twentieth volume in the PSMA series is its most impressive, comprising two large volumes devoted to Edinburgh and compiled under the direction of Ray McKenzie of Glasgow School of Art, with Dianne King and Tracy Smith. There are apparently some 800 statues and carvings on public view in Scotland’s capital city, not including churches and graveyards. In sculpture as in architecture, Edinburgh is truly the “Athens of the North”. I can think of nothing that so vividly documents Scotland as a nation and Edinburgh as its worthy capital. Even a frequent visitor to Edinburgh is likely to confess to recognizing few of Professor McKenzie’s statues. This ancient city, with its magnificent neo-classical and Georgian New Town, might be regarded as a work of sculpture in itself. Hence perhaps its statuary merges into the wider townscape, populating its walls and open spaces much as once did the carvings on a gothic cathedral.

The first volume of *Public Sculpture of Edinburgh* is devoted to “the Old Town and South Edinburgh”, while the second is given over to “the New Town, Leith and outer suburbs”. They cover two broad subjects: effigies of individuals and non-specific sculptures in general. In Parliament Square, there is Grinling Gibbons’s portrayal of Charles II as a Roman emperor (1685) and James Hill’s curiously silly one of George II at the Royal Informary (1755), also as an emperor. Of native Scottish leaders there are remarkably few; the most notable is perhaps Louis-François

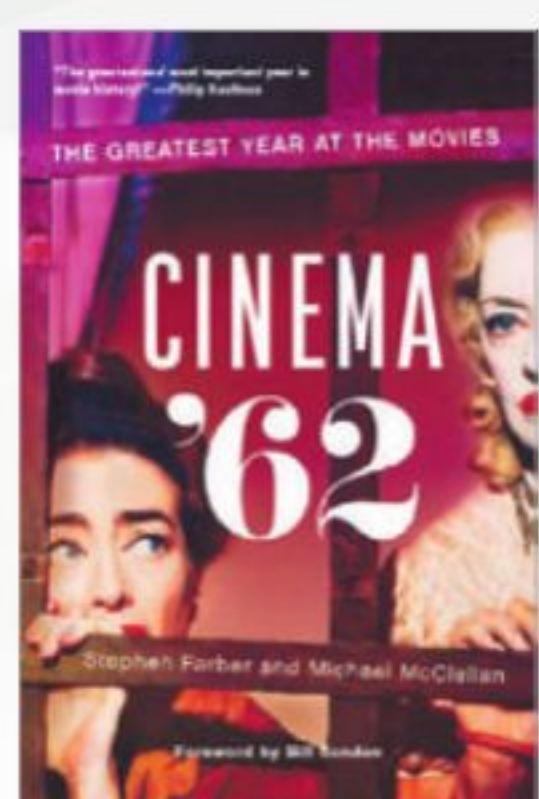
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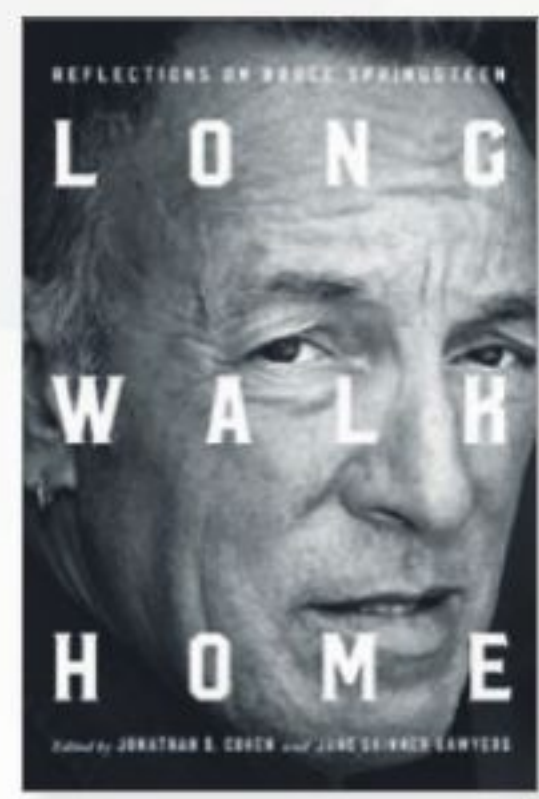
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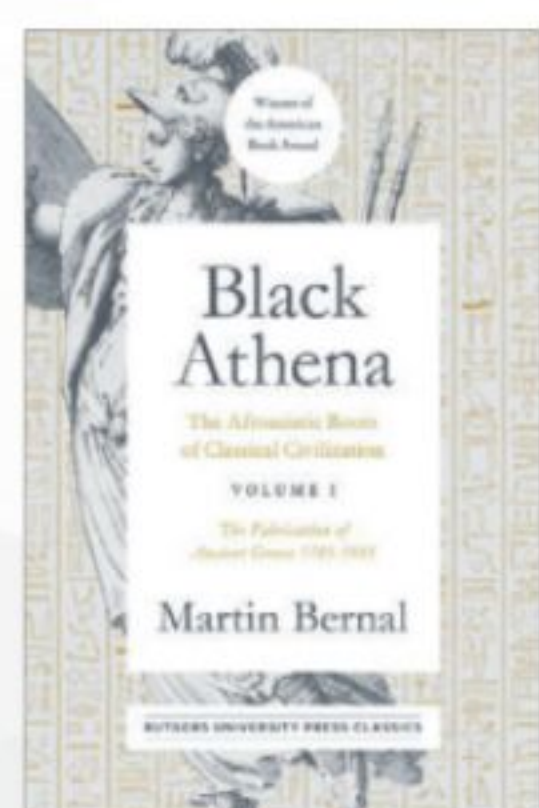
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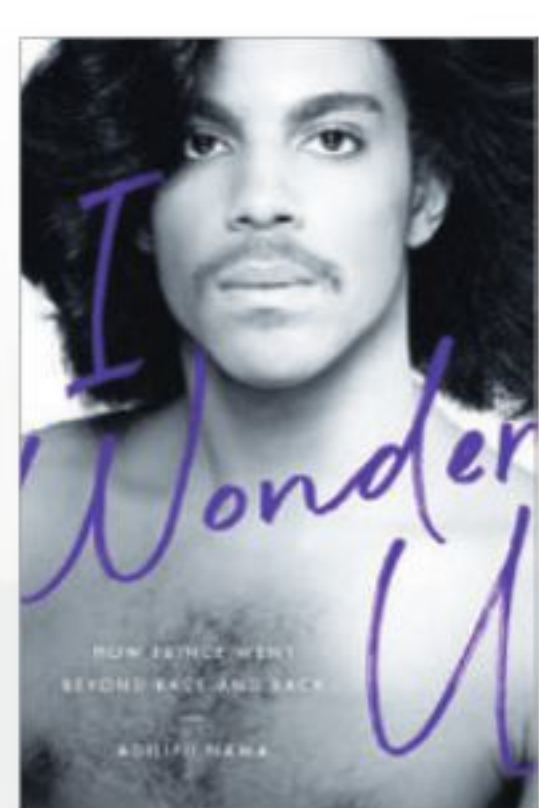
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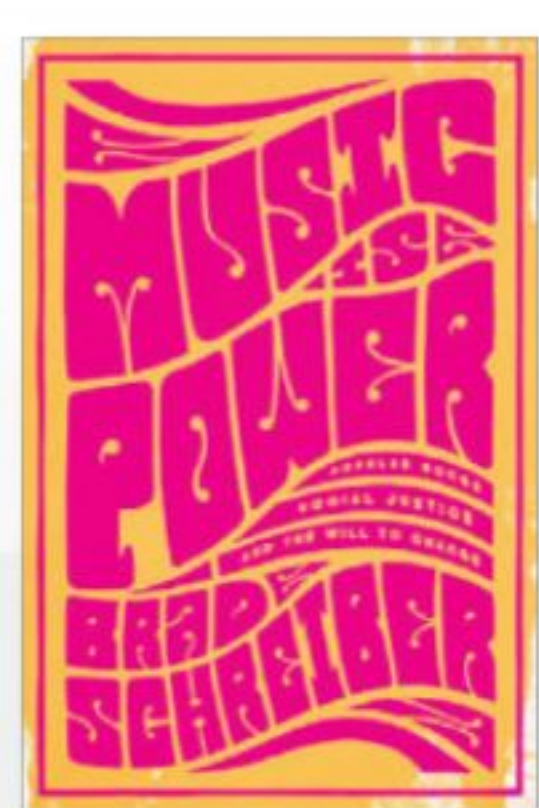
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Roubiliac's Forbes of Culloden (1752) in Parliament Hall, commemorating Forbes's role in suppressing the 1745 uprising. Perhaps the most outlandish of all public sculptures in Edinburgh is the 150 foot column to Henry Dundas, Lord Melville, on a par with Nelson's in London. Erected in the mid-1820s, it towers over St Andrew's Square, at the east end of George Street, despite frequent suggestions that Melville's chequered career merited his demotion or at least grounding.

More plentiful are figures from Scotland's civic and artistic life. There is a statue not only of Robert Louis Stevenson (in Colinton) but of his fictional characters Alan Breck and David Balfour. Both works are of relatively recent design. The city also has statues of Robert Burns, William Chambers and John Knox. The most famous of all is the Scott Monument in Princes Street Gardens, near the railway station which is named after Scott's first novel, *Waverley*. Of the monument, designed by George Meikle Kemp, son of a shepherd in the Pentland Hills, and built in 1838, six years after Scott's death, McKenzie says, "it is reputedly the largest monument to a writer anywhere in the world ... globally recognised symbol of [Edinburgh's] urban identity ...". Some sculptors, such as the great Francis Chantrey, were imported from the south, sometimes against bitter opposition. Chantrey's fine statue of Pitt the Younger stands in George

Street. On the whole, Edinburgh turned to home-grown figures, such as the prolific William Brodie, John Rhind and Sir John Steell, who held the uniquely Scottish title of Queen's Sculptor in Ordinary.

Steell's statue of Alexander taming his horse Bucephalus, in front of the City Chambers in the High Street, is one of the city's noblest works. McKenzie writes of the "symbolic resonance between the statue and the building behind it, demonstrating the ascendancy of rational control over the brute forces of nature ... a statement of Whig principles and an embodiment of the Enlightenment values of the newly enfranchised middle classes in Edinburgh". Politics seems never to have been far from the minds of those debating Scotland's arts patronage. Yet even it could not escape controversy over both its nudity and its siting. The nudity required a rather absurd sheet to embrace the genitalia of both Alexander and his horse. The siting became a matter of high Scottish politics. In 1916 it was ejected from its site in St Andrew's Square for a monument to Gladstone, carved by the splendidly named James Pittendrigh Macgillivray. Whether a Liberal prime minister should take precedence over an Alexandrine horse was a debate that continued for almost a decade. Gladstone's eventual victory did him no good. In 1955, he himself was exiled westwards in the New Town to Coates Crescent, not for politics but to make way for more traffic - and yet more argument.

McKenzie pays commendable attention to the recent revival in Scotland of figurative statues, notably from the remarkable chisel of Alexander Stoddart, also a Queen's Sculptor in Ordinary. His popular David Hume (1997) in the Lawnmarket merits five catalogue pages. Less appealing, though no less prominent, are the brutalist creations of Eduardo Paolozzi, such as those of Egeria and Parthenope at the university.

The volumes' definition of public sculpture requires some compromises. The omission of churches, museums and most indoor statues, largely because of their quantity, seems arbitrary, especially given the exception made for St Giles' Cathedral. But this was at least the scene of a nineteenth-century version of "snowflakery". In 1887, a petition signed by 500 people was drawn up to protest at "certain graven images" on the new cathedral portal. Some of the figures were said to be in "popish vestments" and had been canonized as saints and martyrs by

Memorial to Susannah Alice Stephen (1960-97) by Frances Pelly, Lawnmarket, Edinburgh

the Roman Catholic Church. The petition demanded these be removed at once, given the "injury of our feelings and the great scandal of religion". After lengthy consideration, the church authorities dismissed the demand, arguing on the plausible grounds - surely relevant today - that a statue is not an object of worship, and the petitioners seemed "incapable of seeing the difference between symbolism and idolatry". Controversy remains undimmed and nothing and no one is spared. As recently as 2017, campaigners raised a hue and cry on discovering that the penniless Robert Burns had once applied for a clerical job on a West Indian plantation that employed slaves. Goodness knows what Burns's reputation as a womanizer now holds in store for him.

McKenzie acknowledges that almost none of Edinburgh's statues are of women. Even given the dominance of men in the public life before the twentieth century, this seems extraordinary. There are apparently more sculptures of animals in the city than of females. Queen Victoria stands virtually alone. The more valued is Anne Davidson's fine portrayal of an African "Woman and Child" in Festival Square (1986), and the exquisite carving of a parrot in a basket in Lawnmarket, a memorial by Frances Pelly. The statue commemorates, in the most delicate fashion, Susannah Steven, a young garden designer who died in 1997 at the age of thirty-seven swimming off the Galapagos. The basket represents her occupation, the parrot the islands where she met her death.

My admiration for *Public Sculpture of Edinburgh* is limited only by the books' sheer size. The entries are inordinately long, even if the arguments over style and siting offer intriguing insights into Scotland's cultural politics. Gladstone's statue alone receives seventeen tightly packed pages, with 139 notes. This makes the volumes virtually unusable to anyone wandering the city. That said, the PMSA project is a majestic exercise in urban micro-history. It stands to the credit of unquestionably Britain's handsomest city, now rendering it immeasurably more intriguing. Ray McKenzie's researches show that statues matter and that they have always stimulated debate because, unlike any art form other than architecture, we are in their presence, always and everywhere. ■

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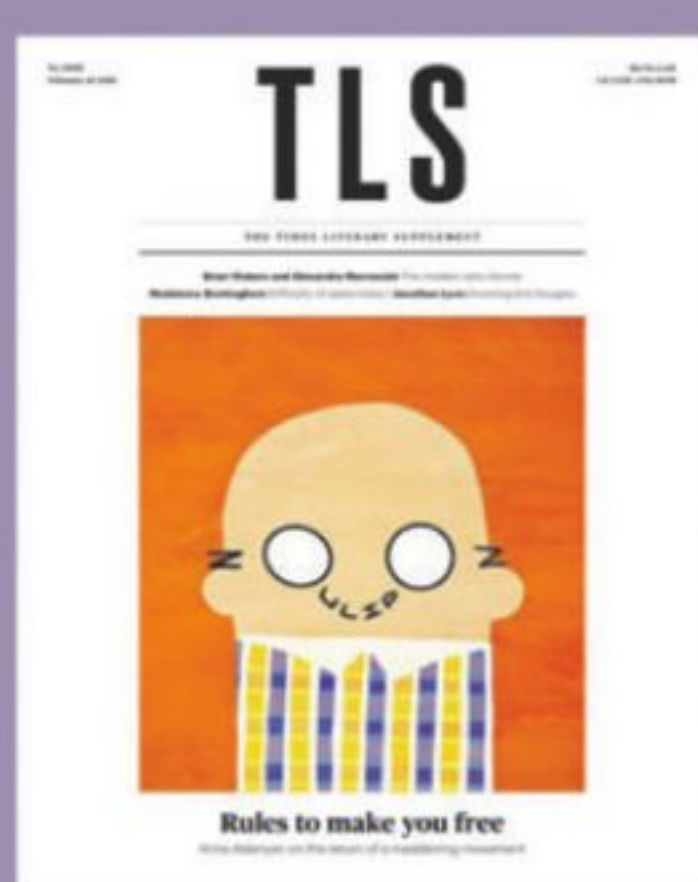
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From Cape Cod to Lampedusa

WASPS

WILD GAME

My mother, her lover and me
ADRIENNE BRODEUR
256pp. Chatto and Windus.
£16.99.

Adrienne Brodeur's memoir of a toxic mother-daughter bond has the contours of a soap opera. A teenage girl becomes her mother's confidante during her long affair with a family friend, only to grow up and fall in love with her mother's lover's son, before everything comes dramatically to light on the eve of their wedding. But *Wild Game* is less interested in surface drama than in its roots and lifelong ramifications.

The story begins one summer in the wealthy Massachusetts seaside enclave of Cape Cod, when Adrienne, known as Rennie, is fourteen and just discovering her sexual feelings. After sneaking off after dinner to meet a boy, she is back home and in bed when her mother comes in to wake her with the news that one of their guests, Ben - the married best friend of Rennie's stepfather - has just kissed her. With that secret shared, Rennie becomes embroiled in the affair, covering it up, creating distractions and opportunities, and learning, over the next decade, all the wrong lessons about loyalty and love.

Rennie is a child of WASPs, that subset of white, upper-class, East Coast Americans whose traditional reaction to emotional trauma, unpleasant revelation, or the rolling around of six o'clock is to drink heavily. Her mother's cocktail of choice is something she calls a "power pack" - a Manhattan with no bitters or garnish except an extra slug of booze. *Wild Game* is rich in details like this: intimate yet revealing in their way of a whole world.

Brodeur's mother is a glamorous narcissist who glories in the name "Malabar", after her birthplace in India. She is a food writer, and her gutsy creations in the kitchen, often involving still-wriggling seafood, are described in pungent detail. Her daughter and guests, seduced by her self-mythology as sensual and fearless, are the audience. Among the more elaborate deceptions mother and daughter concoct is a cookbook focused on the "wild game" that gives the memoir its multilayered title - a project that will require the participation of her lover, a keen hunter and fisherman. Under the guise of testing recipes, they prepare feasts of pigeon, rabbits, clams and venison that run deep into the summer evenings: a rich lifestyle fantasy that is tangy with the taste of blood.

As an adult writer, Brodeur is astute at traversing the distance

between what she knows now and believed then. Well into her twenties, and up to the eve of her marriage, Rennie guards her mother's secret and defends her behaviour, cleaving to Malabar's mantra that they are "two halves of the same whole". The long, slow, painful realization of how one-sided their relationship actually is forms the emotional spine of the book. It is a journey that is neither lurid nor unique, but thrilling in its own way.

Joanna Scutts

GURKHAS

GURKHA ODYSSEY

Campaigning for the crown
PETER DUFFELL
290pp. Pen and Sword. £25.

There is a story from the Second World War that epitomizes the relationship between British and Gurkha soldiers. Women of the voluntary services were ministering to troops during the Burma campaign. Some Gurkha riflemen joined the queue for the tea urn. One of the volunteers tried to direct them instead to the queue for fare more "appropriate" to Indian troops, whereupon a British soldier protested "No, miss; them's not Indians. Them's Gurkhas. Them's us!"

The diminutive hillsmen of the old Kingdom of Gorkha, now Nepal, have faithfully served the crown since the Anglo-Nepalese war of 1816, but the British army doesn't retain them for sentimental reasons. They remain formidable, adaptable soldiers. In their time they have fought in jungle and desert, the trenches of the Western Front, the Apennine mountains, the wind-swept moors of the Falkands, and most recently in Afghanistan. In 1965, Acting-Captain Peter Duffell, aged just twenty-five, won the Military Cross leading a company of the 2nd King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles (the Sirmoor Rifles) in Borneo. He describes his book as "a fragment of history - some footnotes from a military journey with the Gurkha soldier at its heart".

It's an inspiring journey, delightfully related, but a story not without its trials. Perhaps worst of these were the savage defence cuts at the end of the Cold War, when the then Lieutenant-General Sir Peter Duffell had to struggle hard to save the Brigade of Gurkhas from the axe to both root and branch. Why should a single British regiment be reduced, a single British soldier made redundant, while "foreign mercenaries" were kept? The argument had force, except that it was the old fallacy of the excluded middle. Infantry recruiting in Britain was sticky and likely

to get worse (demographics), whereas there was an almost inexhaustible supply of Gurkha volunteers. Such had been the reforms in Gurkha organization and training, too, driven in large part by Duffell, that individual companies could now reinforce British regiments with comparative ease. A compromise was reached: a reduction in numbers, but retention of the structure, including not just infantry but engineers, signals and logistics - a basis for contingency expansion.

As I write, an extra battalion of Gurkha infantrymen is being raised, and extra companies of Gurkha engineers, signals and logistics - the only true boost for today's struggling British army. QED.

There have been many books written about Gurkhas, but few with so deep an understanding of the cultural, historical and spiritual dimension, and none with so acute a view of the future.

Allan Mallinson

A NOS AMOURS

CHANTAL AKERMAN RETROSPECTIVE HANDBOOK

JOANNA HOGG AND ADAM ROBERTS
244pp. A Nos Amours.
Paperback, £20.

This is a handbook about time. Between November 2013 and October 2015, *A Nos Amours* - an independent project (named after a film by Maurice Pialat) founded by the filmmakers Joanna Hogg and Adam Roberts, and dedicated to the screening and memorializing of little-seen movies - programmed the only complete retrospective to date of the Belgian director and artist Chantal Akerman's films. This book records the monumental body of films that was shown then, in chronological order. It includes the detailed hand-outs given to the audience on the day, and also features critical contributions from Laura Mulvey, Raymond Bellour, Richard Brody, Ivone Margulies, Marion Schmid and Ginette Vincendeau. The final section contains the blog posts published by Roberts as illuminating companions to the screenings.

The handbook gives some idea of what a demanding and complex labour of love the Akerman retrospective was, requiring as it did the excavation of screening copies and rights that were widely scattered and fiendishly difficult to obtain. More challenges were raised by conservation issues and by the subtitling of untranslated films, which in some cases had to be done on the hoof during the screenings. Few films are more

elusive than Akerman's - something of a mystery given her importance as an auteur - and cinema's ability to preserve the presence of its ghostly figures long after their death is especially precious in her case. Akerman, who was personally involved in the programme, died in October 2015, just as the retrospective was about to end, suddenly making it a posthumous tribute.

Emblematic of the whole enterprise was the unearthing of *Dis-moi*, a short feature commissioned for French television in which Akerman, "listening like only a psychoanalyst can listen", Roberts writes, interviews elderly female Holocaust survivors. (Akerman's own mother, a central presence in her work, was an Auschwitz survivor.) Other rediscoveries included *Golden Eighties*, Akerman's subversive homage to Jacques Demy's musicals, and the screwball romantic comedy *Un divan à New York*, starring William Hurt and Juliette Binoche. A remarkable testimony to the retrospective, this is also a fascinating cinematic memoir that weaves together all the strands of Akerman's cinema with perceptive sympathy. Comparing Akerman's travelling shots in *D'Est* (a documentary shot during her travels in the Soviet Union as it was about to collapse) to the way dolly grips were used in *Top Hat* to follow Fred Astaire's dancing, Roberts writes: "Akerman structures the world and that is her dance".

Muriel Zagha

SONNETS

CHARLOTTE SMITH AND THE SONNET

Form, place, and tradition in the late eighteenth century
BETHAN ROBERTS
192pp. Liverpool University Press. Paperback, £19.99.

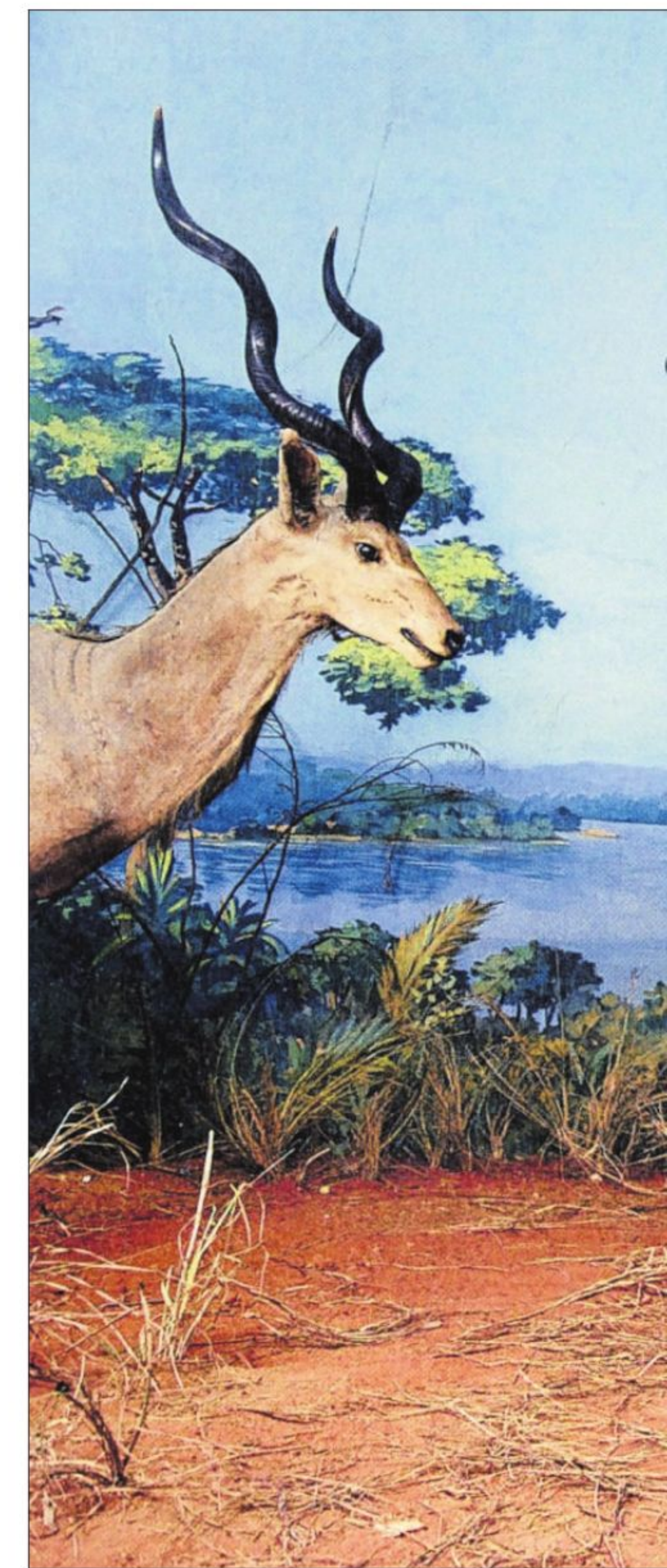
Bethan Roberts's monograph is the first full-length study of Charlotte Smith's immensely influential *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784). Tracing Smith's poetic influences through close readings and a thorough history of the eighteenth-century sonnet, Roberts demonstrates that Smith's importance as a poet lies not simply in her usage of the sonnet form, but also in her experimentation with the English sonnet form as opposed to the more popular and "legitimate" Italian sonnet. Further, Roberts argues that Smith uses these experimentations to both distinguish and establish herself within a male-dominated canon.

This argument brings much-needed nuance to literary criticism about Smith and the history of the sonnet. Roberts's close readings

"The Last Journey of the Dictator Mussunda N'zombo Before the Great Extinction" by Kiluanji Kia Henda; from *Masculinities: Liberation through photography*, edited by Alona Pardo (320pp. Prestel. £35)

simultaneously trace the stylistic influences of earlier poets and demonstrate Smith's new approach to common poetic subjects. Placing Smith's sonnets in a matrix of poetic predecessors, Roberts shows that these conventional poetic gestures to nightingales and rivers establish a lineage with forebears such as Petrarch and Milton. By doing this, Smith "establish[es] a model of authorship" and legitimizes her use of the unconventional English sonnet form. In a particularly compelling chapter on "Innovation", Roberts traces Smith's use of the sea to "transform the small and compact sonnet into a vast and sublime literary form", demonstrating the potential of an otherwise formalized aesthetic.

Writing in praise of her poetry, Wordsworth observed that Smith was "a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered". In spite of her influence, Smith's literary legacy fell into posthumous anonymity. Roberts astutely reads her poetic representations of dispossession as mirroring her erasure from the literary canon - an erasure that Smith herself suspected would occur. From the literary genealogies that Smith used to establish her poetic practice, to the posthumously published poem *Beachy Head* (1807), Roberts shows that Smith's attempts to consolidate her position with the canon were a lifelong endeavour that





continued beyond her death.

Some critics, from Smith's own time to the late twentieth century, paint her as a swashbuckling sonneteer who single-handedly rescued the sonnet from oblivion. Roberts corrects this mythologized view, building a case for the innovation and impact of Smith's poetry with methodical precision. Through her readings of the *Elegiac Sonnets*, Roberts traces key points of convergence with and divergence from literary tradition in Smith's use of form and the natural world as a poetic subject. Her clear-cut prose elucidates individual sonnets rather than obscuring her argument with tangents, presenting an insightful new critical perspective on Smith and the eighteenth-century sonnet.

Sarah-Jean Zubair

VALUES

THE HUMAN ODYSSEY

East, West and the search for universal values

STEPHEN GREEN

352pp. SPCK. Paperback, £9.99.

On the trail of universal values which can transcend the polarity of "East" and "West", Stephen Green's *The Human Odyssey* pleads for an avoidance of a "Westphalian" mindset in the global encounter of cultures and nations. Green (both an Anglican priest and a former Chairman of HSBC) sees in the Westphalian settlement of 1648 ending the European wars of religion, a pessimism about the capacity of human beings to seek higher syntheses through encounter and dialogue, and a cynicism about the possibility of real

progress towards truth, leading to a dangerous personal and national introversion. He thinks that there is something both necessary and inevitable about the human journey towards unity, a unity to be born of real "human universals", notwithstanding the differences between cultures. History has a real *telos*, which will be marked "not by the triumph of any single ideology", but by "the realisation of human individuality in society".

Green defends real historical progress towards universal values, albeit dialectical in structure and therefore agonistic; a given human nature, which transcends the vagaries of culture; and an "end of history" which will come "inexorably". The Enlightenment is here, together with its optimism: when we talk to each other, "knowledge always eventually triumphs over prejudice". This is not quite Enlightenment rationalism, but we might call it, to use an ugly phrase, Enlightenment communicationism: a utopian vision modulated not by Hegel's universal reason, but by a global dialogue of cultures and world views facilitated by urbanization. This encounter, Green argues, will reliably produce that ultimate synthesis in which human individuality in society will be realized.

The author's erudition is obvious, but there are inevitable gaps and glitches in a speed tour of world history and philosophy. Can the "religious" instinct really be defined in terms of our need to "explain, and perhaps control, the unknown and mysterious"? Is mysticism really an "elite" phenomenon? More troubling is the reluctance to own up to the religious and philosophical roots of the historical problematic the book sets

up. Stephen Green presents a highly contingent vision of the human good as the inevitable product of a global social evolutionism which leads us beyond the limitations of culture and religion. There is an evasiveness here about the cultural roots of his own values. He is surely right that merely agreeing to disagree does not do justice to our deep-seated urge to seek the truth. But this faith seems to be not an outcome of, but an input to, his project of cultural comparison.

Carmody Grey

WAVES

NOTES ON A SHIPWRECK

A story of refugees, borders, and hope

DAVIDE ENIA

Translated by Antony Shugaar
256pp. Other Press. £14.99.

Lampedusa, Davide Enia tells us in *Notes on a Shipwreck*, is one of the Pelagian Islands. The name Pelagian derives from the Greek *pelagos*, indicating "the sea that, in constant movement, incessantly torments the shores with its waves". While the sea is a domineering presence in Enia's novelistic collection of reflections on Italy's southernmost territory, the torment comes not so much from the waves themselves as from what they bring: for many years, Lampedusa has played witness to the disaster at Europe's borders, either as a safe harbour for people sent out in unseaworthy boats or as a resting place for the bodies of the drowned.

Enia, a distinguished playwright from Palermo, interweaves testimony from the island's residents

with thoughts on his relationships with his somewhat estranged father and his uncle, who is undergoing chemotherapy at the time. This personal narrative moves the book away from political reportage and allows the themes of human mortality and connection to take centre stage. "Did our bodies speak the same language?" Enia wonders of his father, as they visit the island to find out more about the deaths at sea. "Perhaps he, too, when anguish was devouring him, could feel his breath crashing into his ribs."

The Lampedusans whose lives have been touched by the movement of people across the Mediterranean include a coastguard diver whose politics are far from liberal - his family were monarchists, then fascists, and he claims to share those views - but for whom saving lives at sea comes before all other considerations. He tells his story in a "low and measured" voice, slowly, as if his words are "careful steps down the steep side of a mountain". There are the B&B owners who wake up to find a smuggler boat foundering just off the beach by their house, and who are haunted by the guilty knowledge that their first instinct was to lock their doors. There are doctors and sailors who feel powerless among scenes of death that remind them of Europe's darkest moments, and there are the survivors: a boy whose first request is to call his mother, whom he hasn't spoken to in the eight months since he left home; an Eritrean man who says that Lampedusa is where he was "reborn".

Told from the perspective of this tiny island, which is closer to Africa than to Europe, Enia's story makes plain the scale of the damage that accompanies border control and the myths we use to justify it. "It's basically the same story over and over", he writes. "A Phoenician girl escapes from the city of Tyre, crossing the desert until she reaches the end of it ... she meets a white bull, which kneels down so she can climb onto its back, becoming a boat and plying across the waves, until it lets her off onto dry land on Crete. The girl is called Europa. That is our origin. We are children of a sea crossing by boat."

Daniel Trilling

BLACK BRITISH

IMPERIAL INTIMACIES

A tale of two islands

HAZEL V. CARBY

416pp. Verso. £20.

The brown-skinned, curly-haired daughter of a white Welsh woman and a black Jamaican man, Hazel V. Carby was born in 1948, amid a national "brown baby crisis" (caused, initially, by the coupling of black American GIs with white English women). She

grew up in Mitcham, a border town split between run-down South London and middle-class Surrey, which she describes as a "nursery of white supremacist hatred": as a child, she was referred to as "that wog" by grown-ups. Her right to call herself British was constantly questioned, even by a primary school teacher who furiously denied black people's contribution to the war effort, despite more than 12,500 men - including Hazel's father, Carl - having volunteered for the British armed forces after Caribbean civilian recruitment began in February 1941. Carby's mother Iris, a Worcester-based civil servant, would be forced to give up her promising career because of the marriage bar.

A prolific author and professor of African American and American Studies at Yale University, Carby locates her memoir within the symbiotic relationship between Britain and Jamaica, as illustrated by her parents' often tumultuous, sometimes violent, marriage. Because Jamaican history is British history, her research takes her to Kingston and Portland, and further back to the village of Coleby in Lincolnshire, where her paternal forefather, a slave owner called Lilly Carby, was born. Lilly Carby became a soldier and, whether through desertion or discharge, washed up in Jamaica in 1789, to be absorbed into plantation aristocracy. In Bristol and Bath, her maternal ancestors worked as labourers and laundresses, against a backdrop of grand architecture and debutante balls funded by slavery and the billions of pounds (in today's money) of reparations paid out by the government to planters after emancipation. Carby powerfully reminds us that the beautiful crescents and grand buildings of these cities were built by enforced, uncompensated labour.

Carby details her father's experience of being accused, without substance, of forgery in his bid to naturalize as British in 1978, thirty-six years after he had been accepted into the RAF and thirty-nine before the Windrush "scandal" broke. He could recite his RAF number from memory until his death in 2014, but his wish to become a British citizen, in his words "to complete my affairs", was finally only granted when he was eighty-two. The poignancy in this moving and patient memoir - Carby writes with equal eloquence about work on the Great Western Railway, lichen and the neglected materiality of black British life - centres on her dedication to discovering (to paraphrase James Baldwin) from whence she came. She delineates the legacies of Victorian port-city poverty and the abominations of plantation slavery, even as her father ebbs away from her, the progress of dementia erasing his memories as quickly as she can write. ■

Paul Mendez



An undertaking

Graham Swift's literary legacy

A review by Oliver Reynolds of *Last Orders* by Graham Swift, first published on January 19, 1996. The TLS archive is available free online to subscribers.

Chatham Naval Memorial, Kent

A MAN DIES. His friends gather in a Bermondsey pub to honour both his memory and his last request to them. The strong ties between the dead man (Jack Dodds, a butcher) and those who survive him (his wife, his adopted son and the men who live, work and drink where he did) lend his request the force of an order. The emotional imperatives formed by the life we share with family and friends is one of the meanings of the title of Graham Swift's new novel. *Last Orders* is his finest book to date; emotionally charged and technically superb, it is a wonderful example of the novel's power to resolve the wavering meanings of the life we all share into a definite focus, one where the clarity with which things are seen renders them precious. Swift's central strength as a

writer is his integrity. Story and character are treated with a seriousness and respect that, while allowing for the oddity of human behaviour (*Shuttlecock*, 1981, his second novel, is thoroughly and beautifully odd), always honours them. Occasionally, though, in Swift's previous books, one is aware of the novelist attending to the nuts and bolts of the plot or buffing up his themes to the detriment of the independent life of his characters. In *Last Orders*, however, the characters live their own lives and the novelist pays them (and his readers) the ultimate compliment: he disappears.

Jack Dodds's memorial takes the form of a journey. Four men in a car ("an S-class Merc, extra long wheelbase, walnut dash" - Jack's adopted son is a second-hand car dealer) follow a geographical route marked out in the chapter-headings: New Cross, Dartford, Chatham, Canterbury, Margate. At the same time, in their conversations and thoughts, they make a journey of remembrance: Jack - the Bermondsey butcher, the Second World War soldier, the husband and father - lives again, in each of them. The physical journey allows Swift to extend the mapping-out of the body of England already familiar from his previous novels. Common to most of them is the suggestion that a landscape or city can come to stand for the lives of those within it. The hero of his first novel, *The Sweet Shop Owner* (1980), is constantly gazing out from his counter into the High Street as if the neighbouring businesses - the greengrocer's, the barber's, the pub - were photographs in a family album and each façade summed up a personal history; *Waterland* (1983) shows how the Fen Country is man-made; and as the car in *Last Orders* moves down the Old Kent Road and along the A2, the surroundings through which it passes are an amalgam of personal memories and national events. Alongside the present life of street and field is the continuing life of what went before; history consolidates into geography; time becomes place.

One of the great strengths of the novel is the way that underlying themes emerge from the thoughts and feelings of its characters rather than being underlined by a narrator. (*Waterland* is narrated by a teacher, and his pedagogic tone encourages a certain back-of-the-class restlessness.) The novel's structural patterning returns to a form Swift often

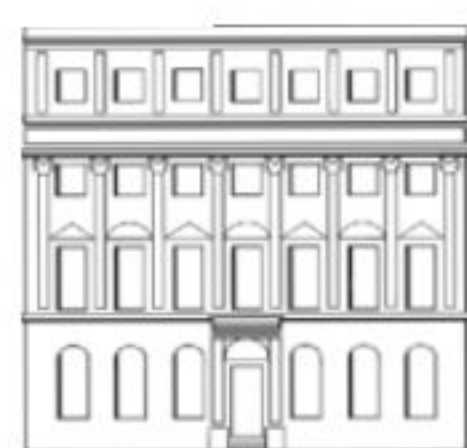
uses - the alternation of different characters' points of view. There is neither an old-fashioned omniscient narrator nor the modish modern equivalent making an open-palmed avowal of unreliability. Much of the story is told by Ray "Lucky" Johnson, an insurance clerk and betting man, but, though important in shaping the narrative, he is not dominant. One of the book's many technical triumphs is the parity of its characters. They each tell Jack's story in their own way and thus tell the story of their own lives. This building-up of the narrative through a multiple voice - the doubling-back, the chiming, the contradictions and surprises, the pleasures of revelation and corroboration - is superb. The reader's admiration of the author's technique comes as an afterthought; in reading, one is engrossed by the power of the individual stories. This technical skill, however, points to a deeper force: it is a beautiful example of Swift's integrity, of the way he grants autonomy to his own creations.

A common element in all of Swift's five preceding novels (and something also present in his short-story collection *Learning To Swim*, 1982) is the memory of war. Long after this century's global conflicts have ended, their emotional aftermath rages on. Jack's body is prepared for cremation by his friend Vic, an undertaker. The dead man's last request is that his ashes be scattered on the sea at Margate. One of the detours his friends make on their car-journey is to the Naval Memorial at Chatham. Vic searches this monument for the names of two comrades he saw die during his wartime service at sea. It is not mentioned whether he finds them, and this is all of a piece with the concision of Swift's method and style, simultaneously sparse and weighty, particular and allusive.

But Jack's not special, he's not special at all. I'd just like to say that, please. I'd just like to point that out, as a professional and a friend. He's just one of the many now ... But the dead are the dead, I've watched them, they're equal. Either you think of them all or you forget them. It doesn't do in remembering one not to remember the others. Dempsey, Richards. And it doesn't do when you remember the others not to spare a thought for the ones you never knew. It's what makes all men equal for ever and always. There's only one sea.

The sentiments expressed here are not new to literature. Swift's achievement is to allow them both their normal generalizing power (mortality is our common lot) and their vitality as part of one individual's particular experience.

Last Orders is about how we live and how we die and our struggle to make abiding connections between the two. Initially, though, it is simply the thoughts and feelings of an undertaker, an insurance clerk, a second-hand car dealer and a fruit-and-veg trader. Later on, these four are supplemented by two women and, unlike some of Swift's earlier books where the female characters have had to act as sounding-boards to male protagonists or as handmaidens to the plot, they have their own independent life. Even a minor character like Pam, Vic's wife, who is mentioned only a couple of times, has her moment in the sun. Thinking back to 1945 when he first courted her, Vic remembers her response to his nervous admission that he was an undertaker: "there was a smile in just one corner of her mouth. 'So you'll be used to handling bodies then.'" The sense of the characters gaily speaking their own minds and leading their own lives is reminiscent of Henry Green. The author's voice is not so much a presence as a diffused radiance, something shimmering behind the words and thoughts of his characters. As in Green, one is aware that our life, vast and precious as it is, will end. In time, and this becomes clear to Jack's friends as they face the sea at Margate, our lives will belong not to us, but to those who survive us. In "An Arundel Tomb", Philip Larkin speaks of our "almost-instinct" that "What will survive of us is love." However, the poem as a whole can be seen as making another claim: what will survive of us is literature. If this claim is true, it is true of *Last Orders*. ■



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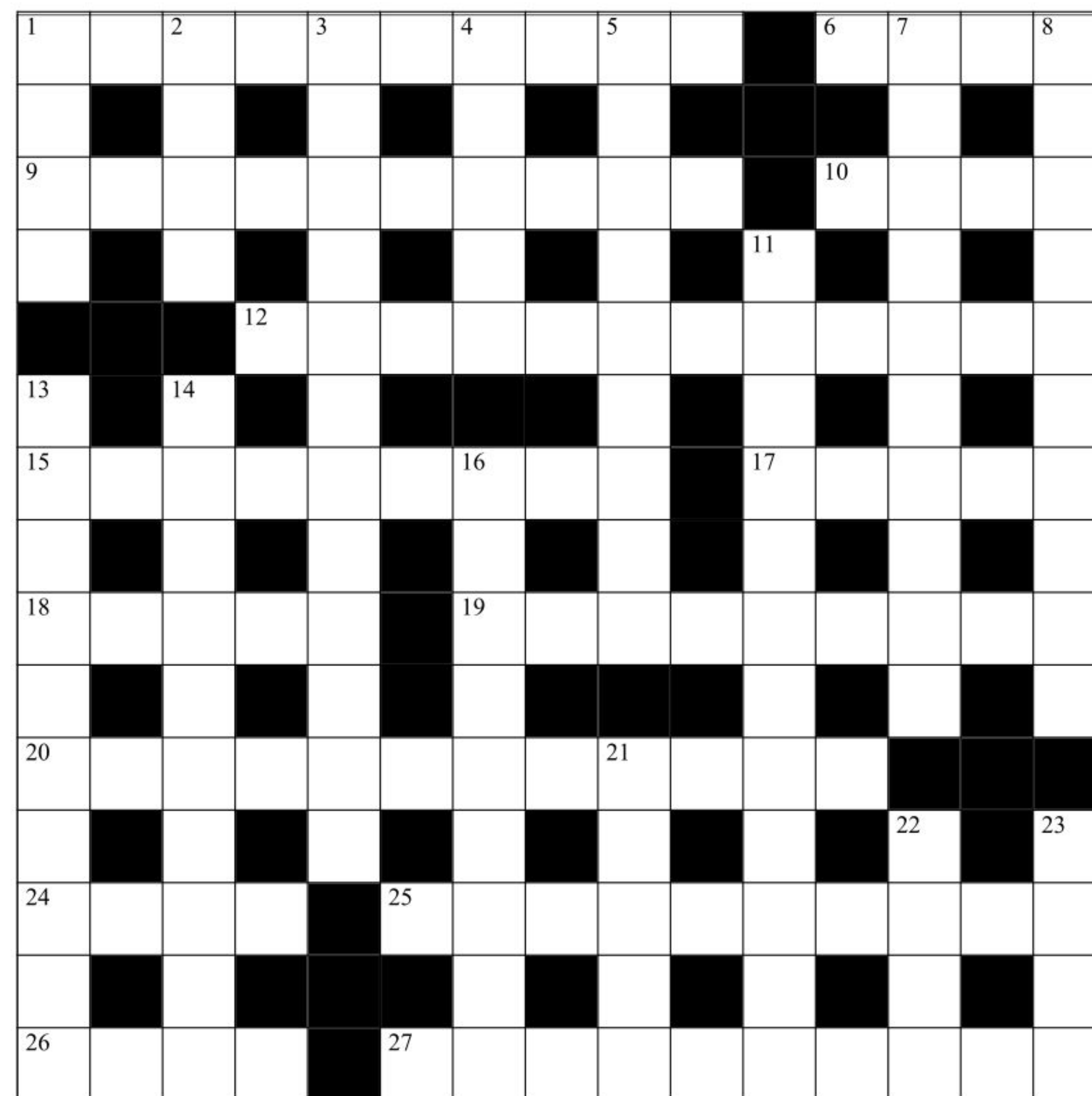
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TLS CROSSWORD 1316 BY TALOS



ACROSS

- 1** "—, and Dominations ministrant / Accompanied to Heaven gate, from whence / Eden and all the coast in prospect lay" (Milton) (10)
6 When to bring in training for superiors of Dykes? (4)
9 Banville's doctor cures cop in Barking (10)
10 Hindu ritual covered by *Bihar Times* (4)
12 Wannabe architect working on large table (6, 6)
15 "The man is —, you deduce? / Contrariwise, he loves both old and young" (Robert Browning) (9)
17 Harry Goldfarb's declaration of work is most suitable (5)
18 Architect of Rummidge building (5)
19 Poodle-accompanied travel writer in vessel on waterway (9)
20 A man kidnapped via bold fraud goes off the rails (5, 7)
24 C. H. Wistan was one ultimately courteous and kind (4)
25 Fish and marine mammal one hunted around morning-time (3, 7)
26 Son of a boat-builder finally adjusts trim (4)
27 Perhaps George and Lennie retain tins for cooking (10)

DOWN

- 1** Power and fortune initially evaded king's vassal (4)
2 One page found within handwritten draft for *Demons* (4)
3 During *Songs of Praise*, screen shows Pulitzer-winner (5, 7)
4 What Hoke Coleburn's paid to do in dodgy local without right? (5)
5 Poirot had one requirement: desire to catch ring (9)
7 What a little engine does in a cut outside of Eccles (10)
8 I kill a sore criminal resembling Billy Budd (10)
11 Democratic-Republican's editor's story ruins men maid abused (6, 6)
13 Dance with first son, circling Bill Burns and Scott? (10)
14 Traveller with tall tales of mortal beast legionnaire gutted (10)
16 Will's offensive describing male reproductive organ (9)
21 Look in marshland to find Magwitch? (5)
22 Marjane Satrapi's country home with artist in residence (4)
23 Head of BBC gets green light to produce *Extras* (4)



SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1312

The winner of Crossword 1312 is H. Shaw, of Trowbridge.

The sender of the first correct solution opened on March 27, 2020, will receive a cash prize of £40. Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1316, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

Short changed

An interesting little book came into our hands the other day: *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser, the “real-life story” of “an average American youth, faced with a problem he could not solve”. The problem is a serious one. Clyde Griffiths’s girlfriend Roberta has asked Clyde to marry her urgently, because quite soon “everyone will know”. In 1925, Dreiser was not prepared to be more explicit than that. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that Clyde loves a woman called Sondra. If we say that *An American Tragedy* ends with a powerful scene involving the electric chair, readers unfamiliar with the story will suspect what has happened.

Did we say “little book”? *An American Tragedy* was originally published in two volumes. It took Dreiser 900 pages to get through his story, but the neat paperback in our hands runs to a quarter of that length. It is a “popular condensation” published in the US by Signet Books in 1949. The abridgement was made by George Mayberry, “by arrangement with Mrs Theodore Dreiser” (the author died in 1945). In an introductory note, Mayberry offers some remarks about Dreiser that make clear his feelings about his task: the author had “a tin ear” and no sense of humour. He also had “difficulty in writing a simple

declarative sentence”. When Mayberry told others what he was doing, the response was invariably, “If anybody ever needed it, it was Dreiser”. He started by lopping off “most of the first 80,000 words” – the length of an average novel by, say, Graham Greene. The present version, Mayberry admits, “is not the book Dreiser wrote”.

Abridgements were not uncommon in the middle years of the last century. Signet Books gave the same treatment to *Sister Carrie*, *The Three Musketeers* and *Crime and Punishment*. The wartime one-volume *Dickens Digest* contained abridged versions of *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *The Pickwick Papers*, handy for diversion in an Army camp or on board ship. Tales from Homer and Shakespeare were once read by those who wanted above all a good story.

What curtailed the urge to chop and change was modernism. The idea of cutting a novel by Djuna Barnes or Vladimir Nabokov to make it more readable would have been seen as sacrilege by highbrow readers. Imagine reducing Virginia Woolf to “the story”. Since this form of worship became established, an academic industry has grown up around the notion of seeking the authentic nature of a text. There are

restored versions of *Ulysses*, as well as of novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald and others. Even Dreiser has his champions, with *Sister Carrie* offered in recent times in “its complete and unexpurgated version” – longer, that is, not shorter.

Condensing still takes place. There are many books along the lines of *Great Expectations and Other Great Dickens Stories*. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Without the existence of *The Story of Oliver Twist Told in Pictures* – the pictures being by Dudley D. Watkins, creator of those great Scottish characters Oor Wullie and the Broons – our Poor School education would be even more abridged than it is.

Clerihew fever has gripped the nation ever since we published some notable examples by W. H. Auden, including a few that are uncollected, as well as by a number of our readers. Even the poetry editor of the *TLS* was moved to reach into his satchel for a verse inspired by a youthful interest in the Bloomsbury Group:

John Maynard Keynes
Had plenty of brains
But for many the name just means
A lot of difficulty over whether
you say Kains or Keans.

“I wrote this when I was in my teens and tormented by the question”, Alan Jenkins tells us. “The great economist wasn’t much discussed in my family, and I was too embarrassed to ask a teacher.”



Parts of the new collection of poems by Christopher Reid have a clerihew flavour.

The Great Turnip tweets.
His tweets are feats
of verbal facility
and thumb agility.

Not Funny Any More is “a set of eight poems contemplating the character, actions and utterances of that political giant of our time, the Great Turnip” (no need for further explanation). It is the latest production of the poetry pamphlet publisher Rack Press, now celebrating fifteen years of independent life. “Rack Press has never received any public grant or subsidy”, says the co-founder, Nicholas Murray. In its time the press has published some fifty poets, including names familiar to *TLS* readers, such as John Greening, David Harsent, Fiona Pitt-Kethley, Michèle Roberts, Rory Waterman and Mr Murray himself.

If you fancy your chances, you might be encouraged to learn that Rack publishes both “debut collections and pamphlets by experienced hands”, sometimes one alongside the other. *Not Funny Any More* is available from The Rack, Kinnerton, Presteigne, Powys LD8 2PF at £5.

The noble characters above are naval figureheads, each of whom once projected from the extremity of the stem post at the bow of a ship. On the left is a likeness of Florence Nightingale which spearheaded a merchant vessel of that name. She stands 1 metre high and her left arm, now missing, probably held the lamp that gave the lady the name by which she became famous. Beside her stands Vice-Admiral Lord Nelson, right eye closed, once the figurehead of the 38-gun frigate HMS *Horatio* (1807). He is in civilian clothes but wears a laurel crown to suggest victory.

These heroic personages, with fifty others, are included in an attractive book, *Figureheads on the Bow of the Ship* by Sue Pritchard and Jeremy Mitchell (National Maritime Museum, £12.99).

The *TLS* in Literature, a somewhat more than occasional series. Laura Freeman brings *Poet’s Pub* by Eric Linklater (1929) to our

attention. How could we have missed it? It opens with a nightmare brought on by a review in the *TLS*, about a female centaur stalking a terrified poet. Saturday Keith, author of *February Fill-dyke*, wakes with relief, reminding himself that his tormentor could not have been female. “Women never write in the *Literary Supplement*; or at any rate no oftener than they preach from other pulpits.” But this realization fails to soften the review, which he read the night before. “No serious poet today can write without a theory”, said our reviewer, before quoting: “Then through the wood came the wind with a shout, / And like blue wings her long scarf flew out”. Perhaps you think the centaur had a point?

His friend Quentin Cotton enters (author of the novel *A Nettle Against May*) and Keith uncrumples the accused *TLS* to complain: “They’ve picked out the worst lines in the book”. They always do, says the kindly Quentin. “A reviewer must amuse his public, and good poetry’s dull stuff.”

There is a lesson here for anyone who has ever reviewed a book, in the *TLS* or elsewhere: your words can cause pain, not to say nightmares. Saturday Keith eventually opens a pub. Is this a more worthy pursuit than the writing of poetry? If it’s like this –

My love is young and very fair.
The sunlight will not leave her hair
– the answer might be yes.

J.C.

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