

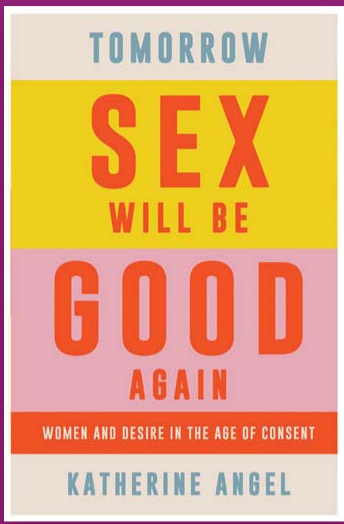
Review

Saturday 13 March 2021 - Issue N^o 164



**I'm a traveller who reached
the Land of the Dead.
I broke the rule that
said I had to stay.**

—
*Michael Rosen on surviving
Covid-19, plus an extract
from his new poetry collection*

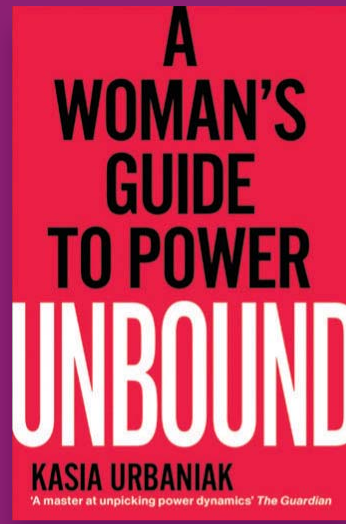


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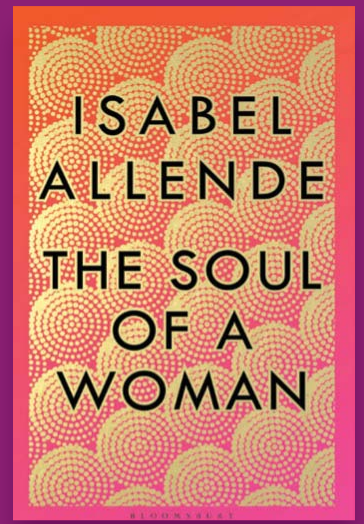


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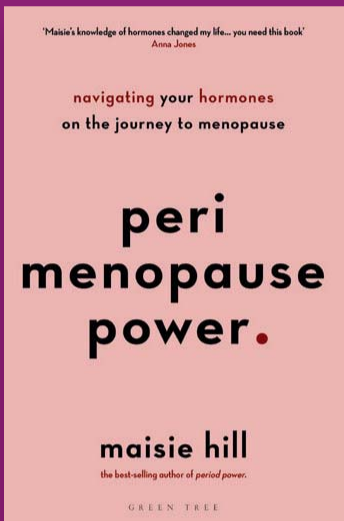
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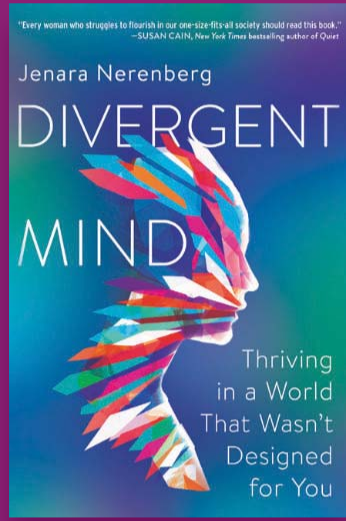
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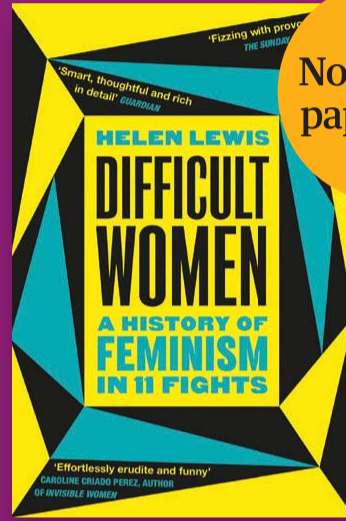
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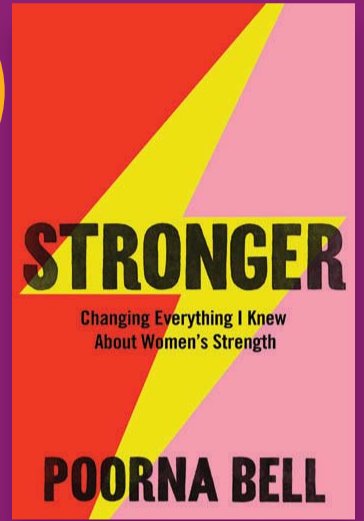


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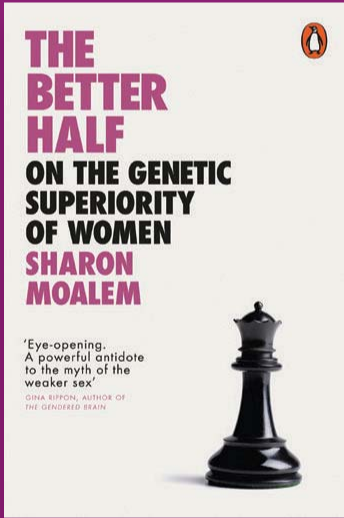


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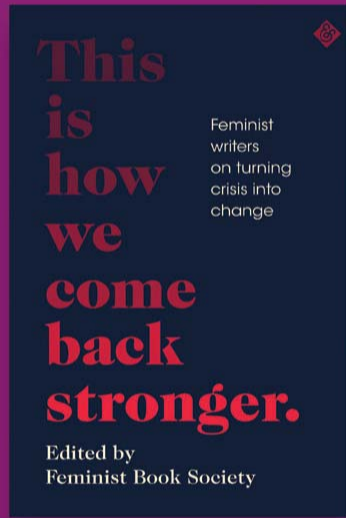
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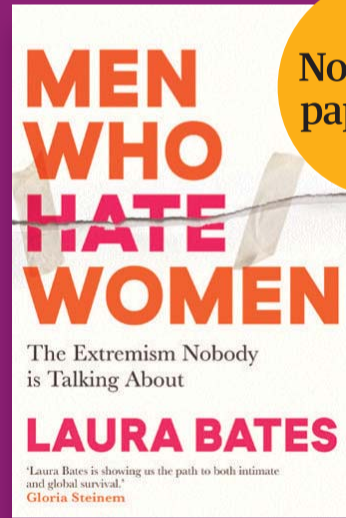
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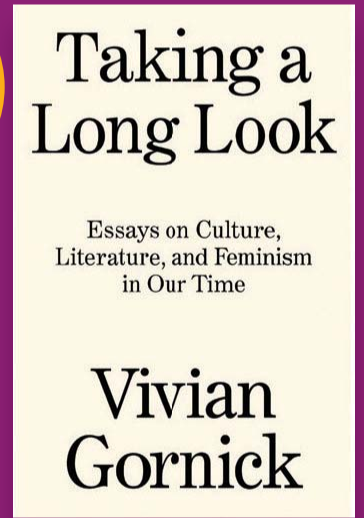


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'The very act of writing and reading horror seems to me recuperative. That's the experience people are looking for, a mutual moment of staring down the darkness.'
— Catriona Ward, page 19

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The week in books

13 March

Judging the Women's prize

Over the past few years, I have neglected fiction. It seemed indulgent, something to be relegated to entertainment once the business of nonfiction, of trying to understand the upheavals brought about by a pandemic, by Brexit, and by a global racial justice movement, was done. But that business is never done. And judging this year's Women's prize for fiction was a reminder that that business is the work of fiction too.

We rarely read, or indeed write, in a vacuum. And I felt the seriousness of our times bearing down, burdening the books with a purpose that they must fulfil to be considered a worthwhile contribution to the discourse. What I didn't expect was the emotional impact of reading

so much fiction. Whatever pressures I brought to the reading list fell away as books introduced me to worlds and lives that, in the loneliness of the past year, became so vivid that I often felt them crowding around in my head.

It soon became clear that the value of fiction isn't how specifically it has utility in explaining a world in turmoil, but in how it equips us to plot a course through that turmoil. Choosing the longlist then became



not a matter of simply running through a neat algorithm of taste and bias, but of weighing up the emotional impact of books that maintained the threads of our lives and relationships and imaginations. All collaborative judging processes are affairs of compromise. But in the humility of realising the limitations of my own first reading premise, that compromise was easier than I thought it would be. **Nesrine Malik** For more details of the longlisted authors go to [guardian.com/books](https://www.guardian.com/books).

Dear Diary ... the Olympic years

Volume eight of Alastair Campbell's diaries comes out on Thursday, with its publisher promising "some of Campbell's most poignant and thought-provoking writing so far". *Rise and Fall of the Olympic Spirit* describes the years 2010-15; volume one began in 1994, so with an average of 2.6 years per volume we can presumably

expect a few more 600-pagers.

This must put Campbell among the most prolific political memoirists in history - though Tony Benn is currently ahead, having managed nine volumes of diaries before he died. Anais Nin, Spike Milligan and Maya Angelou each published seven volumes. Churchill wrote six on the second world war and five on the first, though his most famous memoir, *My Early Life: 1874-1904*, fits 30 years into one book. Both Anthony Powell and Piers Morgan are on four volumes; Alan Clark and Anthony Eden left it at three; Margaret Thatcher and Barack Obama stopped at two.

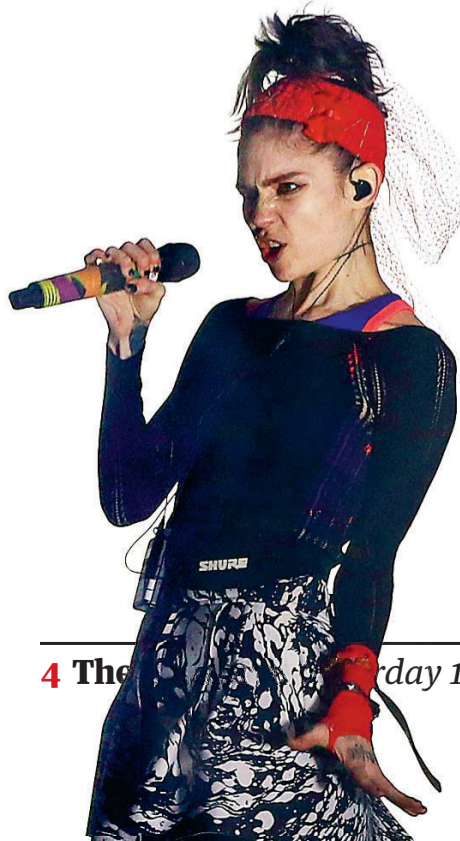
Campbell's boss Tony Blair has currently only published one memoir, *A Journey*, in 2010. So has David Cameron (*For the Record*, 2019) and so too did Clement Attlee, Alec Douglas-Home and one of the most famous political diarists of all time, Edwina Currie.

Katy Guest

IAN ANDERSON; SHUTTERSTOCK

Fungible

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole



When is an album not an album? Why, when it's a "non-fungible token", a new form of **digital swag**, related to cryptocurrency, being sold by artists and musicians such as Kings of Leon and Grimes, left. They are called NFTs for short, but why?

The Latin verb *fungi* means to discharge some office or perform some task, and so *fungibilis* means "useful", and English "fungible" describes **useful things** that are interchangeable. If I order five spoons of a certain design, it doesn't matter exactly which five of those spoons you send me.

The *OED* says the word was first used in English by the diplomat Anthony Ascham in 1649, though the citation it gives is actually, according to Early English Books Online, from a 1676 treatise on **maritime law**, *De Jure Maritimo et Navali*, by Charles Molloy and Robert White. Of money, they write: "Take away this fungible Instrument from the service of our necessities, and how shall we exercise our Charity?" Money is the paradigmatically fungible good, since one £10 note is as good as any other. Writers, though, are definitely not fungible.



'Toni Morrison blew away everything I thought I knew about literature'

Yaa Gyasi

The book I am currently reading

I've been shopping my bookshelves these past few pandemic months, trying to read some of the books I've owned for years but hadn't yet read, which is what led me to my current read, *Boy, Snow, Bird* by Helen Oyeyemi. It's just enchanting. Funny and lyrical with something sinister lurking.

The book that changed my life

I read *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison when I was 17 and it blew away everything I thought I knew about what literature was, what literature could do. I remember thinking that I wanted to feel like this every time I read: shaken and in awe.

The book I wish I'd written

Salvage the Bones by Jesmyn Ward. Just a perfect book. Only Ward could write it, but I can dream.

The book that changed my mind

Before I read *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* by Matthew Desmond, I didn't know much about the eviction crisis in the US. The book clearly, devastatingly shows how eviction itself can plunge people into poverty. I have thought of it almost daily as news of the pandemic evictions pour in. It has been said, but it still bears repeating: the failure of our government to meet this crisis will

have catastrophic and far reaching effects on all aspects of our lives.

The last book that made me cry

Memorial Drive by Natasha Trethewey. I've long known Trethewey for her poetry and so was eager to read her memoir. It is so beautifully written, so piercing, so tender and full of mourning. I cried and cried.

The book I couldn't finish

James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The book I give as a gift

The one I've given most often in recent years is *Her Body & Other Parties* by Carmen Maria Machado. It's such a singular book that I know that the recipient is not likely to have read anything like it. The stories are so shape-shifting that there really is something for everyone in it and I love to hear back from people after they've read it about what stuck with them. Usually, they're just gobsmacked by the whole thing.

My earliest reading memory

Once, when I was really young, my parents made me write a report on the children's book I was reading at the time. I think it was *The Rainbow Fish* by Marcus Pfister, but I'm not totally sure. At any rate, I wrote something to the effect of "This book is very good. If you'd like to learn more about it, read it yourself." I'm happy to say that was the end of the book reports but not the end of my love for reading.

Transcendent Kingdom by Yaa Gyasi is published by Penguin. The novel has been longlisted for the Women's prize for fiction.

**‘The book
is about
what
it feels
like to
nearly die’**



The poet, broadcaster and children's author contracted Covid-19 a year ago and spent 48 days in intensive care. His new collection of prose poems attempts to make sense of that time.
By Lisa Allardice

When people stop Michael Rosen in his local neighbourhood of Muswell Hill in north London to ask him how he's doing, which they do quite often these days, he replies: "Well, I'm not dead!" As is now well known, the former children's laureate spent 48 days in intensive care after contracting coronavirus almost exactly one year ago. He went into hospital at the end of March as one of the nation's favourite children's writers and emerged a national treasure: his poem "These Are the Hands", written to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the NHS in 2008, became an unofficial anthem for health-workers coping with the first wave of the pandemic; and, in a nod to his most famous book *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, teddy bears were placed in windows for children to spot on their daily walks during lockdown.

Rosen was completely unaware of these tributes, as he spent all of April and much of May in an induced coma, "a kind of pre-death that is similar, presumably, to when we go", he says now. "People were reading this poem by this dead bloke, but he wasn't actually dead, he was just lying like a cadaver up the road in the Whittington Hospital." He doesn't cry so much now, he says, but when he was first told about the public reaction to his illness (Michael Sheen read "These Are the Hands", "much better than me", on Jo Whiley's Radio 2 show on his birthday last year), "it was just, whoosh!"

The 74-year-old writer is very much alive on Zoom where, after a few technical hitches, he appears on screen seemingly as energetic as ever, his conversation an engaging ragbag of rants and anecdotes, ranging from *King Lear* to last night's football match, even if names escape him occasionally. In real life, as has often been remarked, Rosen resembles the BFG, or at least Quentin Blake's giant, all long limbs, extravagant ears and messy lines. "You'd have to ask Quentin. He's never said: 'By the way you are the BFG'," he says of the illustrator, with whom he has

collaborated since 1974. "I think he was partly inspired by Dahl himself."

Rosen's poems for children always see the world from their perspective and can be counted on to induce giggles - "'Don't throw fruit at a computer' / 'You what?'" - especially when performed by the poet himself: he doesn't have 98 million YouTube subscribers for nothing. He has written more than 200 books, including greedily devoured favourites *Chocolate Cake*, *Fluff the Farting Fish* and *Monster*. His most recent books for adults include *The Missing*, an investigation into the fates of his European Jewish relatives during the second world war, and his 2017 memoir *So They Call You Pisher!*, a lively account of growing up the son of Jewish communists in postwar Pinner: "Not the most encouraging place to start a branch of a political organisation aimed at world revolution." Then there are the two books he wrote in response to the death of his second son Eddie (he has five children, including Eddie, and two stepchildren) from meningitis when he was 18: *Carrying the Elephant*, a mixture of prose and poetry, and *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*, illustrated by Blake. "I loved him very, very much," Rosen writes, "but he died anyway."

His new collection of prose poems, *Many Different Kinds of Love*, with drawings by Chris Riddell, is his attempt to make sense of those missing weeks last year: "It's just gone. You can't quite deal with it." He felt as if he was in a "portal": his hospital bed liminal, like the train in *Harry Potter* or the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*, he says, his body "an unreliable narrator". It is about "what it feels like to be seriously ill, what it feels like to nearly die, and what does recovery mean?" He likes to say that he is "recovering" rather than "recovered". Covid has left him with "drainpipes" (Xen tubes) in his eyes, a hearing aid in one ear, missing toenails, a strange sandiness to his skin. He suffers from dizziness, breathlessness and "everything gets a bit fuzzy every now and then".

Many Different Kinds of Love follows a familiar Rosen format - an anthology of "Bits and Stuff". As well as the poems, there is a letter written by the GP friend who sent him to A&E, extracts from his "patient's diary" recorded by intensive care nurses, and messages from his wife Emma, who is very much the heroine of the story. The result reflects how being in hospital "jumbles up your memories and perceptions, there's no chronology to it", and also his habit of jotting things down "to have a conversation with myself on paper" as a way of coping with "strange and weird" events.

Rosen likes to say he is 'recovering' rather than 'recovered'. Covid has left him with a hearing aid in one ear, dizziness and breathlessness

He likes "writing fragments and then piecing it together as fragments", a process he compares to creating a stained-glass window or mosaic, "in which you make a picture out of different colours and shapes. When you stand back you can see it. It emerges." Light and shade play off ➡

↔ against each other, with Rosen’s trademark humour providing respite from the grim unreality of being in hospital, where “the nights are long and sad”: when a neighbouring patient is told his urine is dark, he deadpans “the times are dark”; on the next page comes the darkest of poems, “I know death”, in which Rosen unsparingly recounts his mother’s final moments, then discovering Eddie. “Later, they put him in a bag / I heard the zip / and they slid the bag down the stairs”.

Carrying the Elephant was written in the same fragmentary style. “What happened with Eddie was so traumatic I couldn’t make it a coherent whole, so I just sort of said: ‘Well, what am I thinking today?’ I scribbled that down and tucked it away.” The title was taken from a postcard of an 18th-century engraving by Jean-Baptiste Oudry illustrating an Aesop’s fable that he saw in a Paris bookshop shortly after Eddie died. “It felt like I’ve got this elephant that I’m going to carry for the rest of my life,” he says. “It’s not quite like that now, but it certainly felt like that then.”

Rosen appeared on the *Today* programme last year, around the time he contracted Covid-19, arguing that older people have as much right to live as anyone else. “Meanwhile, I was presumably sucking in the virus.” While “hurtful” on a personal level, the idea that some people “matter less” or are “more expendable” than others on the basis of age or any other factor is “a very dangerous slippery slope”, he says. And he has no truck with what he perceives as a pernicious rise in blame culture. “In a way we all have underlying health problems. It’s called life.”

He holds the government’s delayed response to the pandemic responsible for the fact that he was exposed to the virus. “What were they thinking in February and March? I was going around on tubes and buses, packed full of people. I was going into schools, kids coming up to me, signing books.” In a blog posted last month, Rosen created a timeline of those first two weeks in March, bringing together all the government’s statements on the virus, from Boris Johnson’s “boasting” about shaking hands with patients to talking about the need “to strike a balance” between intervention and a push for herd immunity. “Why would you balance it? Why wouldn’t you just dismiss it as lousy biology and incredibly dangerous?” he asks now. “It was a huge, huge gamble and, in a way, I’m a victim of it.” And he has no intention of letting the government off the hook: “Yes Rishi,” he writes in reply to the chancellor’s pre-budget tweet on 2 March. “One year ago, your government was still playing about with the idea of herd immunity without vaccination. The result is that tens of thousands of people have died and thousands more affected, some of us for life.”

Of the patients on his intensive care unit (filled to more than double its capacity) 42% died during the time he was there. Doctors and nurses were working in “nearly war conditions. They’d go and get a cup of tea or something and the person has died.”

Another example of the government’s “crazed incompetence” in his view has been the handling of schools and universities during the pandemic, in

particular the uncertainty surrounding exams. Both his parents were teachers, and he “imbibed” not just their socialist politics, but a passion for education (on which he writes regularly for the Guardian). He’s never been a fan of what he recently described in one of his columns as the “rigid, prescriptive, formulaic approach” of the primary school curriculum, and an “addiction” to exam testing. His youngest son Emile was due to be sitting his GCSEs this year and his daughter Elsie is in her first year at university, but had been at home until last month. “It is an awful situation for teachers, pupils and students to be in,” he says.

In 2014, when “homeschooling” still seemed mildly zany, Rosen published *Good Ideas*, a guide to educating your child at home. He’s also written a *Book of Play* for adults. But even he agrees it is “very hard. If you are stuck at home you’ve got no social motivation ... Young children need that social thing of sitting in a classroom and seeing how others are doing.”

Publishing a new collection less than a year after nearly dying is impressive, but in prodigious Rosen fashion he also has three picture books in the pipeline: one, *Rigatoni the Pasta Cat*, about the neighbour’s cat

‘What were they thinking in February and March? I was going around on packed tubes and buses. I was going into schools, signing books’

was written while he was in rehab; *Sticky McStickstick*, his name for the walking stick he was given; and another inspired by his son’s football being mutilated by foxes. “I thought ‘Oooh, foxes playing football, there’s a story!’” He’s also working on an oratorio with Ealing Symphony Orchestra to mark its 100th anniversary and has recorded a series of his Radio 4 programme, *Word of Mouth*.

When he finally got out of hospital, small acts of independence, such as being able to make a cup of tea, were “just incredible”. He also really appreciated his home: “The corners, the light, the shelves, everything - just the sheer presence of the place,” he says, turning the computer for a glimpse of white walls, big windows. “It has been wonderful.”

An old friend asked him if he sees the world differently now. “The answer is yes, but I’m not quite sure how.” The most profound change is an increased sense of vulnerability; as he describes it in one of the collection’s earliest poems, he has gone from being “a certain person” to an awareness that “Now everything’s not certain”.

But despite coming so close to dying, it is still “very hard to think of yourself as part of the death gang”, he says. “If you do, do you become morbid and obsessed and miserable, or do you think: ‘Well, another day and I’m still alive - great?’” A trick he learned after Eddie’s death is to try to concentrate on doing one thing, however small, each day that makes him feel proud or good: he tries to “build optimism into every day”, such as planning a trip to the deli. “I can’t see any point in feeling hopeless,” he says ●

EXCLUSIVE EXTRACT

Many different kinds of love

By Michael Rosen

Day 12. The year's seasons roll by in a night: sweats, freezes, sweats, freezes. Wondered whose mouth I had: I didn't remember it as made of sandpaper. Water is as good as ever.

Tweet from @MichaelRosenYes, 27/03/2020

FEELING UNWELL

Get tested, says my friend John.

*The GP has closed.
A recorded message at the surgery
says to not come in
and not go to A and E.
If you think you might have Covid-19,
call 111, it says.*

I call 111.

*I get through to the Ambulance Service
and talk to a man
who asks me some questions.
No, I'm not coughing, I say.
No, I don't feel worse today
than I felt yesterday.*

*He tells me to keep taking the paracetamol
and ibuprofen.*

I do.

*In the spare room at home
I say to Emma
it feels like I can't get enough air.
There isn't enough air.
'I can't catch up,' I say.
There are moments I feel hotter
than I've ever felt before
and moments when I am colder
than ever before.
I shudder as if I am naked
out of doors.*

*We look at the instructions:
Don't call the GP
Don't visit the GP
Don't go to A and E
Ring the ambulance service.
I get through.
He asks me if I'm feeling worse than yesterday.
No.*

He asks me if I'm coughing.

No.

He says he thinks I'm fine.

Keep taking the paracetamol and Nurofen,

There isn't enough air.

I can't catch up.

The doorbell rings.

*Emma has asked our friend, a neighbour
who is a GP, to visit.*

She gives Emma

a contraption to check if

I'm absorbing oxygen and

waits outside on the doorstep.

Emma hands it back to her.

She calls out:

'You have to go to A and E right now,' she says.

*'I can't really walk,' I say, 'I get the shakes
just going to the loo.'*

*'You have to go now,' she says, 'bump downstairs
on your bum,' she says, 'I'll ring them to tell them
you're coming,' she says.*

Emma drives me to A and E

I am panting.

It's night.

The road is empty

The moment I go in

I am surrounded with people in masks.

They put an oxygen mask over my face.

MESSAGES FROM EMMA TO MICHAEL

05/04/20

10:31

It's a beautiful sunny morning. Today is Sunday, day 9 - you have got yourself through 8 days and nights Mick - I know how uncomfortable and scary that has been - but you have done it - brilliant - keep calm and keep taking it v slowly. There is NO RUSH - we r not going anywhere! Xxx Love e x

Just spoke to nurse v quickly. She said you r stable, calm and just having a wash - they had to increase your levels last night by the sound of it, but it also sounds like you have settled again this morning. These nights r very hard Mick, I know. Xxx e xxx

18:52

Dr told me you are all stable again and that you look better today - that you have been in a different position on your tummy which is helping. And you've been having something to eat. This all sounds v like progress to me & I want you to be encouraged and feel reassured that although it may feel v slow going & v hard work, you r going in the right direction. Melon fruit cocktail and Tango on its way tomorrow. Lots of love e xxxx



¶ Cover story

19:58

You know the shit has hit the fan when the Queen is making a speech and it's not even Christmas ... Xxx

In the early hours of Monday 6th April a doctor rang Emma to say that they were going to re-admit Michael to intensive care and place him in an induced coma on a ventilator, and that he had agreed to this.

06/04/20

00:52

We love you so much - have a good rest now and we'll see you very soon love you xxx e xxx

*A doctor is standing by my bed
asking me if I would sign a piece of paper
which would allow them to put me to sleep
and pump air into my lungs.*

'Will I wake up?'

'There's a 50:50 chance.'

'If I say no?' I say.

'Zero.'

And I sign.

RECOVERY

Very poorly.

It's something they say about me.

*Every so often a doctor or nurse
stands by my bed and says,*

'You were very poorly.'

I'm starting to expect it.

*They often seem pleased - surprised almost -
that I'm less poorly.*

*I get the feeling that some people
who were very poorly, died.*

I didn't die.

*I chew over the word 'liminal'
and remember how in the class I teach
at university we talked about how portals
in fantasy stories are 'liminal',
a space or moment 'in between worlds'
or on the edge of one world but not quite
in another,
where things are transient, temporary
or provisional
but it can be a moment full of promise
or it can be a moment of anxiety or danger:
think the Alice books,
Alice going down the rabbit hole,
and through a looking glass.
Or sitting in the waiting area at an airport.
I think of a train journey to a summer camping
holiday
when I was 8 years old, with the land one side
and the sea on the other.*



*I start to believe the edges of my body are liminal,
they are touching other worlds
sheets, blankets, the bed, the 'fence'
on the side of the bed, the pillows
and it is all this that stops me sleeping:
they are all edges.*

*So I bring my hand up to my face
and put it under my cheek.*

*It feels like I've found myself
something that's not on an edge
and I'm back with me.*

I sleep well that night.

The ward is dark.

*I can hear a metal purr
from the other side,
then a bubbling syrup.*

He coughs.

More bubbling.

It must be coming up from his chest.

The metal purr must be sucking it up.

*A light is on behind the curtains
over there.*

The nurse tells him to keep still.

REHAB

*They've been worried
about my low blood pressure
but they've brought me the Daily Mail
so it'll be fine in just a moment.*

I try to walk to the loo
without using Sticky McStickstick.
I stagger.
I think of:
M People, Heather Small:
I sing to myself
'Search for the hero inside yourself.'
When I get there
I sit on the loo
wondering how many people
have sung,
'Search for the hero inside yourself',
to get themselves to the loo.

GOING HOME

I'm a traveller who reached
the Land of the Dead.
I broke the rule that said I had to stay.
I crossed back over the water,
I dodged the guard dog,
I came out.
I've returned.

I wander about.

I left some things down there.
It took bits of me as prisoner:
an ear and an eye.

They're waiting for me to come back.
The ear is listening.
The eye is the lookout

Two physios come over.
They ask me to walk across the room.
They say that's very good.
They ask me to push my legs against their hands.
They say that's very good.
One of them asks me what are
my longterm objectives.
I stop and think.
What are my longterm objectives?
Do I have longterm objectives?
Should I have longterm objectives?
I would like to write a book
about a French dog called Gaston le Dog.
I don't say that.
I say that I would like to
be able to walk to the Jewish deli on the corner
and wheel the shopping back
in our trolley.
The physio smiles.
She writes it down in her book.
I'm trying to say that going shopping
and bringing it back
seems huge,
much bigger than anything I can do now.

It feels like a longterm objective.
Anything else? she says.
Live for a bit more? I think,
and I've never bothered to pickle cucumbers,
I just buy them,
but my mother made lovely pickled cucumbers,
I would like to try that one day.

You're doing very well, they say.

I am not who I was.
I am who I was.
This is not me.
This is me.

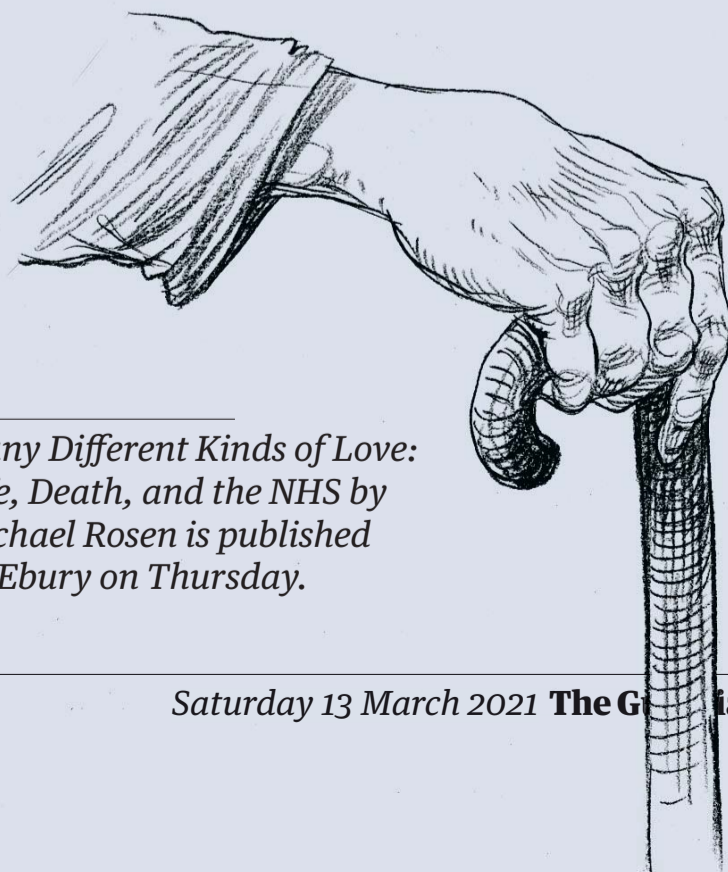
I am now the person
who had Covid:
the thing that came in March

I am now the person
who disappeared
in April and May

I am now the person
who peers into the mirror
hoping his left eye
will see what the right eye sees,
catching a glimpse of the blackness
of the big pupil
looking back at me in hope.

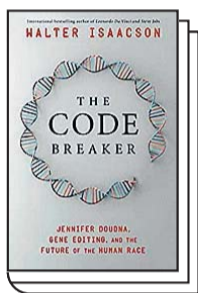
I am now the person
who hears the telephonic trebly sound
through the hearing aid
in his left ear,
that makes the sound of a kettle boiling
into scream.

I am now the person
who is alert to every twinge
or mark anywhere on me.
I am getting to know this person.
This is not me
This is me



Many Different Kinds of Love:
Life, Death, and the NHS by
Michael Rosen is published
by Ebury on Thursday.

{ Biography } Designer babies and ethical quicksand - a nail-biting account of the birth of gene editing *Laura Spinney*



The Code Breaker: Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race
by Walter Isaacson,
Simon & Schuster, £30

One of the most striking passages in Walter Isaacson's new book comes towards the end. It is 2019 and a scientific meeting is under way at the famous Cold Spring Harbour Laboratory in New York State, but James Watson, the co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, is banned from it because of the racist and scientifically unfounded views he has expressed on intelligence.

Isaacson, who is to interview Watson, therefore has to make his way to the house on the nearby campus that the scientist has been allowed to keep. When the conversation sails dangerously close to the race issue, someone shouts from the kitchen: "If you are going to let him say these things, then I am going to have to ask you to leave." The 91-year-old Watson shrugs and changes tack.

The voice from the kitchen belongs to Rufus, Watson's middle-aged son who has schizophrenia. "My dad's statements might make him out to be a bigot and discriminatory," he once said. "They just represent his rather narrow interpretation of genetic destiny." In many ways, Isaacson observes, Rufus is wiser than his father.

Genetic destiny is a central theme of *The Code Breaker*, Isaacson's portrait of the gene-editing pioneer Jennifer Doudna, who, with a small army of other scientists, handed humanity the first really effective tools to shape it. Rufus Watson's reflections encapsulate the ambivalence that many people feel about this. If we had the power to rid future generations of diseases such as schizophrenia, would we? The immoral choice would be not to, surely? What if we could enhance healthy human beings, by editing out imperfections? The nagging worry - which might one day seem laughably luddite, even cruel - is that we would lose something along with those diseases and imperfections, in terms

of wisdom, compassion and, in some way that is harder to define, humanity.

Doudna contributed to the identification of Crispr, a system that evolved in bacteria over billions of years to fend off invading viruses. Crispr-Cas9, to give it its proper name, disarms viruses by slicing up their DNA. Bacteria invented it, but the insight that won Doudna - a biochemist at the University of California, Berkeley - the Nobel prize in chemistry last year, along with French microbiologist Emmanuelle Charpentier, was that it could be adapted to edit genes in other organisms, including humans. The paper that sealed the duo's fame was published in 2012, when Charpentier was working at Umeå University in Sweden. By the beginning of 2020, two dozen human trials were under way for medical applications of the technique - for conditions from cancers to atherosclerosis to a congenital form of blindness.

The Crispr story is made for the movies. It features a nail-biting race, more than its fair share of renegades, the highest prize in chemistry, a gigantic battle over patents, designer babies and acres of ethical quicksand. It presents a challenge to a biographer, however, who has to pick one character from a cast of many to carry that story. Isaacson chose Doudna, and you can understand why. Having helped to elucidate the basic science of Crispr, she remains implicated in its clinical applications and in the ethical debate it has stimulated - unlike Charpentier, who has said that she doesn't want to be defined by Crispr and is now pursuing other science questions. Doudna is the thread that holds the story together.

Still, you can't help wondering how that story might have read if it had been told from the point of view of Francisco Mojica, the Spanish scientist who first spotted Crispr in bacteria inhabiting salt ponds in the 1990s. He intuited that it did something important, then doggedly pursued this line of research despite a lack of funding and the fact that everyone told him he was wasting his time. Another version might have been told via the two French food scientists who realised in 2007 that Crispr could be harnessed to vaccinate bacteria against viruses, thus securing the future of the global

yoghurt industry, or the Lithuanian biochemist Virginijus Šikšnys, who moved the story on again, but whose work was rejected by top journals.

Each one made an essential contribution, and it's difficult to say whose, if any, was the most important. A similar dilemma preoccupied Carl Djerassi and Roald Hoffmann in their 2001 play *Oxygen*, which asked



Jennifer Doudna
The American biochemist won a Nobel prize in 2020



AGEFOTOSTOCK/ALAMY

who should receive a “Retro-Nobel” for the discovery of the eponymous gas. Should it go to the scientist who discovered oxygen but didn’t publish his discovery, the one who published but failed to understand the discovery’s significance, or the one who grasped its significance but only thanks to the insights of the other two?

Focusing on Doudna also paints the Crispr story as more American than it was. Doudna herself acknowledged its international dimension, in her own account, *A Crack in Creation* (2017). “All told, we would be quite the international group,” she wrote of the team that produced the seminal 2012 paper, “a French professor in Sweden, a Polish student in Austria, a German student, a Czech postdoc, and an American professor in Berkeley”.

It was precisely because so many people contributed, and because they disagree about the significance and primacy of their contributions, that they remain entangled in a row over ownership. The Crispr revolution owes a great deal to the US and the premium it places on creativity and innovation, but as with so many scientific breakthroughs, there was an element of convergence - of people independently and more-or-less simultaneously arriving at the same insight. (Isaacson suggests radar and the atomic bomb were American inventions too, but radar was developed in many countries in the run-up to the second world war, while European refugees from that war helped build the bomb.)

It’s not only the discovery process that is collective. As soon as a discovery is made public an

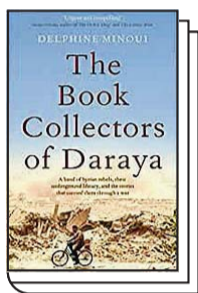
even wider circle of people will apply it, and they may not have the same priorities. It’s easy and right to condemn Chinese maverick He Jiankui for editing the genes of twins Lulu and Nana, supposedly to protect them from HIV infection, but in his impassioned reply to Doudna’s criticism there seems to be a buried grain of truth. “You don’t understand China,” he told her. “There’s an incredible stigma about being HIV positive, and I wanted to give these people a chance at a normal life ...” Genetic destiny means different things to different people, as Rufus Watson understands.

Isaacson, who is best known for his lives of Steve Jobs and Leonardo da Vinci, remains a consummate portraitist. He captures the frontier spirit of Harvard geneticist George Church in an anecdote about how, when Church was a child, his physician stepfather let him administer hormone injections to his female patients (Church has been testing experimental Covid-19 vaccines on himself lately). Isaacson also has a privileged vantage point, knowing the Crispr backstory and the personalities that shaped it. In 2000, as editor of *Time*, he put the two men leading competing efforts to sequence the human genome - Francis Collins and Craig Venter - on the cover. He understands the tensions that drive discovery and how flawed brilliant people can be. This story was always guaranteed to be a page-turner in his hands. It’s just that science has outgrown biography as a medium. His subject should have been Crispr, not Doudna.

To buy a copy for £26.10 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Biography } A library created during the siege of a town in Syria becomes a fortress and a haven amid the horror

Mythili Rao



The Book Collectors of Daraya
by Delphine Minoui,
translated by Lara Vergnaud, Picador,
£16.99

It begins with a photograph posted to the “Humans of Syria” Facebook account in 2015 - an image of two young men standing in a windowless room, surrounded by stacks of books. The caption reads: “The secret library of Daraya”. When she encounters it, Istanbul-based journalist Delphine Minoui is transfixed by the sight of this “fragile

parenthesis in the midst of war”. Who were these young men? What is it that they were seeking?

In 2012 Daraya, five miles from Damascus, began to be besieged by Syrian government forces. Over the next four hellish years, 40 young Syrian revolutionaries embarked on a remarkable project, rescuing books from the bombed-out ruins of their town. There is something seductive about the idea of knowledge as a bulwark against brutal force, and it’s an idea that immediately resonates with Minoui. “The library is their hidden fortress against the bombs,” she writes. “Books are their weapons of mass instruction.”

Minoui tracks down Ahmad Muaddamani, the photographer behind the Facebook image and one of the library’s founders. Their interviews take place online, and some of Minoui’s most arresting descriptions feature their jittery internet connection. “His image stretches and deforms like a Picasso portrait,” she writes of their first Skype call. Later, “whenever the connection is lost from the force of yet another explosion, his voice comes in jerks and starts, blanketing my desk in Istanbul with small, unstitched words.”

Minoui, who is French and Iranian, has won awards for her reporting from the Middle East, but for this story she is unable to travel to Syria. She makes up for the lack of access with an abundance of attention and empathy. And, over time, the war begins to feel not so far away. In November 2015 Minoui finds herself frantically calling friends and family in Paris after learning of attacks at the Bataclan concert hall and Stade de France.

She is shaken to realise that “violence has reached my home city”, the “invincible refuge, where I go to recharge between tough assignments covering wars, revolutions, and political crises. Suddenly, the lines are blurred.” Then, one morning in Istanbul, as Minoui and her four-year-old daughter Samarra are on their way to their weekly storytime session at the French Institute, a suicide bomber detonates a blast just outside the institute’s entrance. Minoui pulls Samarra inside, seeking refuge among books. The symmetry is uncanny.

Over many months of conversations with Muaddamani and his friends, Minoui’s initial hunch - that books offer them a vital form of spiritual escape - is confirmed. Before the revolution, Muaddamani studied engineering, played football and had little time for reading. The war changed all that. “Books are our way to make up for lost time, to wipe out ignorance,” library co-director Abu el-Ezz says. When Minoui asks another young man she speaks to, an armed rebel, why he turned to books, he says: “It was when I understood that the war could go on for years.” He is frank: “Reading reminds us that we’re human.”

Daraya never had a public library under Bashar al-Assad, so salvaging literature was also a political and civic act. After the first cache of books was discovered in the rubble of an obliterated house, dozens of volunteers pitched in to recover more titles. Within weeks, the library boasted 15,000 volumes. The librarians took care to write the name of each book’s original owner on its first page; they won’t rule out the possibility that someone might return to claim them one day.

The most popular titles range from self-help books to Arabic classics such as *Kitāb al-’Ibar (The Book of Lessons)* by the 14th-century Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldun, or the romantic verses of Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani. The library becomes a gathering place, too -



Delphine Minoui

for English lessons, for lectures and debates about democracy and revolution. It’s a vital barricade for these revolutionaries, but not an impenetrable one. When the siege intensifies, the book bunker is attacked. Wifi becomes a rarity, Minoui’s long calls are reduced to tentative WhatsApp messages, and she begins to detect

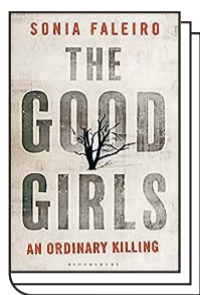
defeat and depression in the young men.

Things reach their nadir in the summer of 2016, when the Assad regime escalates its assault. One book collector is killed, and after regime helicopters dump napalm on Daraya in August, the rest flee. It is not the story these men envisioned, or the one Minoui set out to tell. “Why write? To what end?” she asks. “If only I could anticipate what happens next, hoping it will be less tragic, and after some happy event place the final period.” Not all stories have happy endings, but we need them all the same.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Crime } Two teenagers are found hanged in an Indian village ... a shocking and mesmerising investigation

Nikita Lalwani



The Good Girls: An Ordinary Killing
by Sonia Faleiro,
Bloomsbury Circus,
£16.99

Two teenage girls go missing. They are discovered hanging from a mango tree. Sexual activity may or may not have taken place, prior to their deaths. Were they killed or did they kill themselves? There are eye-witnesses who may be the aggressors - their stories don't match up. To add to this, there is a defining visual image: the dead

bodies hang from the tree for days, knocking against each other in repetitive, heart-breaking camaraderie, while the grieving women of the village form a circle around the tree trunk, to prevent the girls from being taken down. If they come down, Padma and Lalli (not their real names) will be forgotten. As long as the corpses retain the power to horrify, they are protected from indifference.

“Place is the crossroads of circumstance,” Eudora Welty wrote in her 1957 essay “Place in Fiction” - “the proving ground of, what happened? Who’s here? Who’s coming?” In *The Good Girls*, the shifting answers to these questions form a morass of half-truths and lies, freighted the ancient fields of Katra Sadatganj - an “eyeblick of a village” in Uttar Pradesh, north India - with existential threat. This ancestral land, a marker of power and identity for those who work in it, “put dal in the *katori*, clothes on the back ... It made them cultivators. Without it they were landless labourers”. Those who inhabit it “believed they would sense if something was amiss, just as one can sense a change in the texture of one’s palm. But this was not the case.” What follows, in this shocking, mesmerising book by Sonia Faleiro, is an unravelling of shared hubris.

Faleiro uses the structures of a true crime narrative. The need in the reader to understand these painfully premature deaths and make sense of the world means that the real objective of *The Good Girls* - to turn and face the factual horror of inequality - is skilfully masked. “Journalists justify their treachery in various ways according to their temperaments,” was the verdict of Janet Malcolm in *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1989); “The more pompous talk about freedom of speech and ‘the public’s right to know’; the least talented talk about Art.” In this sense, Faleiro is a judicious writer: as with her nonfiction debut *Beautiful Thing* - a portrait of the table dancers of Bombay - the prose in *The Good Girls* is full of precise intention. Facts are presented without the electric burn of outrage.

The reader plays detective as the story unfolds, piecing together “evidence” that is remembered from earlier chapters - a phone call, a text, a snatch of overheard conversation, an admission that might later be denied. The author will not hold your hand as you navigate this mystery; instead you are encouraged to solve it yourself.

At the heart of the book, and crucial to an interpretation of events, is the question of consent - more specifically, of consensual desire. Padma and Lalli are referred to repeatedly by relatives and politicians as family assets - tangible, walking, breathing manifestations of family honour. There are multiple discussions as to whether they have been raped - at one point the media reports declare this to be incontrovertible, and yet the evidence does not support it beyond reasonable doubt. Vital evidence is tampered with, in the name of saving family honour: phone recordings are deleted, witnesses are told to revise their stories, and the number of potential rapists swells from one to five and back again. The idea that the girls might have had their own romantic lives with boys from the village is crushed in the white noise of gossip and misinformation.

Faleiro’s subjects are numerous and interconnected - from India’s corrupt politicians and media to the deleterious effects of caste prejudice and the systemic rot scouring its way through the police force. But her core subject is that of entrapment, and she returns

The mango tree where the two victims were found

again and again to the lack of agency that the girls have over their own lives, banned as they are from wandering freely around the village and

its environs. The author concludes that “an Indian woman’s first challenge was surviving her own home”.

The girls’ nightly journey to squat in the fields after dinner to relieve themselves emerges as the only gap in a system set up to put them under constant surveillance. And it is this gap of possibility, at Welty’s “crossroads of circumstance” that Padma and Lalli enter flushed with life, only to die hours later. *The Good Girls* is a beautifully calibrated book, suspenseful to the final pages, urging us to walk into that night and listen.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.



The horror author's audacious third novel tears up the rule book. She talks to *Justine Jordan* about cats, killers, gothic fiction - and the terror of Fawlty Towers

'I have a real affinity for the monster. Every monster has a story'

When Catriona Ward was about 13, she'd wake up each night with a hand in the small of her back, pushing her out of bed. "It was absolutely terrifying. I could feel that there was someone in the room." Had Google been around in the early 1990s, she might have found out sooner about hypnagogic hallucinations, intensely real sensations on the border between wakefulness and sleep. "But it doesn't matter whether it's real or not; the fear is real. And there's nothing else quite like it, that fear in the dark."

Fear in the dark is what powered her 2015 gothic horror debut, *Rawblood*, the follow-up *Little Eve*, and now her breakout third book, *The Last House on Needless Street*, published next week. Buzz has been building for months around a dark, audacious high-wire act of a novel that can be only tentatively

Catriona Ward
at her home in Devon





◆ described for risk of giving too much away. Whereas Ward's previous novels were historical chillers set in remote corners of Britain, featuring young women traumatised by cursed families and social oppression, the new book looks at first like a contemporary American thriller. There are horrors hidden in a rundown house on the edge of a forest; a spate of disappearing children; a vulnerable woman searching for answers. Ward introduces us to Ted, a bizarre, childlike loner who lives with his daughter Lauren and cat Olivia - and then pulls the rug, repeatedly, from under the reader's feet.

The book's starting point was the relationship between serial killers and their pets, the disarmingly upbeat Ward explains by Zoom from Dartmoor. What happens when those without empathy connect with another living being? As she points out in an afterword, Dennis Nilsen's dog, Bleep, "was the only creature he could be said to have had any functional relationship with". But the project wasn't getting anywhere, until seismic life changes - the end of a long relationship, leaving her job working for a human rights foundation and, at 38, moving back in with her parents - left her with "nothing to hold on to except the idea of this strange narrative about a cat".

"When you clear certain things from your life, you do leave a blank space, and all these thoughts started to emerge. A dam opened up and I realised what I had to do."

One of the book's many surprises is that it is partly narrated by Olivia, a fastidious, deeply religious feline who refers to humans as "teds" and gives us an exterior perspective on her unreliable owner. ("Ted is not a very clean ted. His bathroom does not look like the bathrooms on TV.") Olivia, Ward remarks, owes something to David Sedaris; she provides humorous respite from the otherwise harrowing narrative.

It is, she admits, difficult to write as a cat. "I started having fun with it when I realised that what a cat would *really* like to do is watch a television show of itself, describing different types of naps.

"What do people see in a cat? What do they need from them? It's quite a moving relationship. They're fulfilling our desire for something mystical and sphinx-like and unknowable, and yet slinky and friendly. There's a magic about a cat which we desperately need, in these times more than ever."

Setting the book in America opened up memories of a "very compartmentalised childhood". Ward's father was a water economist for the World Bank and the family spent stretches of time in the US, as well as Kenya, Madagascar, Yemen and Morocco, returning for a couple of weeks each year to an ancient house on Dartmoor, where *Rawblood* is set. Ward's mother taught English wherever they were posted, while Ward and her younger sister "didn't really take an exam" until studying for A-levels in the UK at Bedales. "I never felt I lacked in education because we just read all the time. All we did was read." Moving so often, sometimes without even a

working phone, it was impossible to maintain ties outside the family; "a guillotine comes down". She and her sister had "a very intense emotional relationship because there were only the two of us - we loved each other so much, but because there was nowhere else to put it, it becomes overwhelming. We looked very alike as well. You're in the process of becoming, growing up - and it's strange for your sense of identity."

Ward soon seized on gothic and horror fiction to contextualise her night terrors. "The first ghost story I ever read was 'The Monkey's Paw' - I remember thinking 'Ah!' I got the same thrill from *The Haunting of Hill House*. I thought: *this* is where you put that. This is how you rationalise and contain that feeling. By sharing it, by opening it to the light you kind of disempower it."

After studying English at Oxford, Ward trained as an actor in the US - "all I'd wanted to do, ever, since I was a little child" - but froze up in auditions. Now she links her theatrical ambition to the desire to tell stories: "I was such a massive inhaler, Hoovering up and consuming all the books I could." She worked on *Rawblood* as part of an MA in creative writing at UEA, but the book ended up taking her seven years. "I found it difficult to reverse the stream - from receiving words and stories to myself creating. It felt like a huge act of temerity."

A superbly achieved slice of gothic reinvention, *Rawblood* unfolds the story of a cursed family, trapped in an ancient house, whose generations are hunted down by a malevolent female presence: "a woman, or once a woman. White, starved ..." It explores psychological, social and body horrors, from the "ghastly kitchen" of Victorian dissection labs to the global carnage and existential devastation of the first world war, and on to the early 20th century's medical brutalisation of women. "I just wanted to write a proper gothic novel," Ward says now, describing it as a "kaleidoscope" of the genre, with nods to *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Woman in White*.

Little Eve, which won the Shirley Jackson and a British fantasy award, is set amid a cult on a tiny Scottish island after the first world war, with women and children held in thrall by the charismatic Uncle. Opening with a massacre, it intertwines the fates of two teenage girls - one the killer, one the survivor. The horror here arises from the sadistic control exerted by the damaged patriarch, who creates a toxic family that is also a prison.

Both *Rawblood* and *Little Eve* examine the idea of second sight, and in one agonising scene Eve's eye is removed as part of a ritual. Ward was born without sight in one eye,

'One of the first things my parents asked me after reading *Rawblood* was: 'It's not us?!'



Gothic reinvention
Shannon Beer as the young Cathy in Andrea Arnold's 2011 adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*

but it took a boyfriend to point out the connection. "It didn't occur to me, not once, that I was writing something from my own personal experience! The way you use yourself is so strange. Writing always happens off stage, in your peripheral vision."

Ward wanted *The Last House on Needless Street* to be a departure - "to write the mad and anarchic idea that came to me, as opposed to worrying too much about creating the platonic ideal of a gothic novel". (She also told herself: "I can't write another book about lonely abused girls on moors.") But it continues her fascination with how monsters are made, and how we recognise the monstrous within us. In *Rawblood*, the terror of "her" hovers between projection and self-recognition, while in *Little Eve* every character is warped by their abuse at the hands of Uncle.

"I have a real affinity for the monster," Ward says. "Every monster has a story. Empathy and monstrosity go hand in hand, you can't provoke horror in the reader without evoking an intensely empathetic reaction at the same time. More than the monsters, we fear becoming them."

Monstrous mothers, especially, rear up throughout her work. "I'm not a mother, and my own mother is not a monster. But one of the first things my parents asked me after reading *Rawblood* was: 'It's not us?!' Family ties are so primordial and atavistic, you can always imagine the power, what would you do if it went wrong - explore those relationships from a place of relative calm and ease."

This is a fertile period for horror writing, from the success of Andrew Michael Hurley and Kelly Link to new voices such as Sue Rainsford and Lucie McKnight Hardy. It's a welcome resurgence for a genre that has been perpetually sidelined for a host of reasons, from the feminisation of early gothic to the infantilisation of Stephen King. "Some things are considered to be for kids because they've got big

archetypal shapes to them - they access fears that perhaps only children are supposed to feel." And perhaps, as such an intrinsic part of the oral tradition, horror is still seen as "a bit yokelly and countrified". "We have electricity and Bodum kettles now, we don't have to be afraid!"

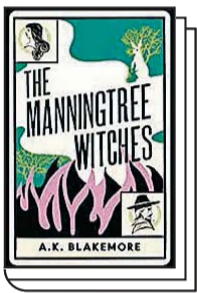
But as Ward points out, this is "a big, generously shaped genre that has room for all sorts of variations". Her novels are all survival stories, drawing on the conventions of gothic (fractured narratives, non-linear chronologies) to reflect the intrusive memories and jagged experiences of PTSD. But horror more widely can also be "very camp, in the Susan Sontag way", with tropes deployed to a knowing audience. "People know what it means when the reception dies on the cellphone, it's a familiar pathway. I always do try to subvert, not diminish, expectations. Suspense and horror readers really enjoy that reciprocity between the reader and author - you're playing an elegant game of tennis. Each of you knows what the signifier denotes."

And nearly all art borrows from horror, she points out. "All good writing has horror in it. I cannot watch *Fawlty Towers*, it arouses such innate horror in me - all the dread and anxiety of what will happen next! I feel about that what most people feel reading what I write."

In fact, Ward admits cheerfully that "I'm terrified of everything - very afraid of the dark, hyper-vigilant, easily startled. People think that because I write horror, I'm inured, but that would make me a terrible writer. Because I'm frightened, the reader is frightened."

"Horror is a reaching out through the page to the reader, saying I'm afraid of this too, but if we go through it together, you look the horror in the face. The very act of writing and reading gothic or horror seems to me recuperative. That's the experience people are looking for, a mutual moment of staring down the darkness" ●

The women persecuted in the Essex witch trials are brought to life in a poet's vivid, satisfying debut *Paraic O'Donnell*



The Manningtree Witches

by AK Blakemore,
Granta, £12.99

Essex witch trials, and though it brims with language of arresting loveliness, it speaks plainly when it must.

We meet the young Rebecca West in 1643, amid the early convulsions of the English civil war. Her mother, known as the Beldam West, is a doughty widow with a fondness for drink and confrontation. Rebecca must share her mother's mean lodgings and taint of disrepute, but though she chafes at the narrowness of her existence, she is not without resources. "I am useful," she says of herself. "I have taught myself to watch and listen."

And not for nothing, in a place where neighbourly bonds are now frayed by hunger and suspicion. Though she seldom finds a warm welcome, Rebecca has a way of putting herself in the right company, of catching the low talk or stray look that might warn of what is coming. At church she and her mother must take the back pew, but from there she can survey the townswomen who elsewhere disparage her, noting their "emanations of rosewater perfume, womb-clot, sweat and cinders". When a pale stranger named Matthew Hopkins arrives on unstated business, his fine garments and apparent learning draw general admiration. But Rebecca takes his measure more carefully: "There is something about him slant and insubstantial, as though all [his] dramatic outfitting houses none of the usual human meat."

She knows to keep these icily exact impressions to herself, but her instinct for self-concealment is tested by youthful desire. Though the fighting has left lean pickings, her attention settles - fatefully, it will turn out - on a mild-mannered young scholar named John

"There's men, and then there's people." So remarks one jaded widow to another, a little way into *The Manningtree Witches*. The two are merely gossiping, but the aside is slyly placed, for the man who afterwards happens into view will more than prove her point. AK Blakemore's first novel is a fictional account of the

Edes. Like Rebecca West, Edes is a documented figure in the archives Blakemore draws on, but their entanglement is among her inventions. It is rendered with sensuous precision, like so much of this novel, but its outcome is never really in doubt. Nor is it incidental: when cruelty is called for, few of the men here will be found wanting.

The conflagration begins with little kindling. A drunkard sees shapes in the dark. Cattle and horses are variously afflicted, and a young boy stricken by mania. Petty grudges are stirred and fingers readily pointed. Hopkins steps forward, no longer reticent about his purpose, and a willing band of inquisitors soon assembles. This inchwise slide into depravity is as compelling as it is queasily familiar. The townsfolk are not all fanatics, but they find fanaticism quite to their liking.

The Beldam is naturally among the accused and reacts with characteristic defiance. A witch, she says, "is just their nasty word for anyone who makes things happen". But it is their word, too, for any woman living as she pleases, or merely within easy reach. Hopkins, now styling himself Witchfinder General, soon ensnares Rebecca herself. He finds her worthy of special attention.

What follows must be hinted at with care, since Blakemore here spans a historical void, but it is persuasive and satisfying. Crucial to the proceedings



AK Blakemore

is a grimly fascinating depiction of Hopkins, and one that strips away the aggrandisements of popular myth to show us an etiolated zealot who can't decide what offends him most - the baseness of his own nature or the knowledge that a woman has seen and understood it. What he denounces as sin, Rebecca tells him at a climactic moment, is "the filth you like to play

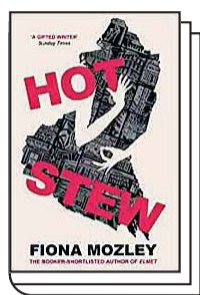
in". There are people, and then there are men.

The Manningtree Witches ventures into dark places, to be sure, but it carries a jewelled dagger. Blakemore is a poet, and readers given to underlining may find their pencils worn down to stubs. A black feather lying in the grass is "glossy and ideal"; a fall of sleet "rarefies into a silk mist". Her women are fiercely alive and, in the Beldam's case, often deliciously bawdy: "A man like that'd stick his thing up a haddock if a Bishop told him not to." Such sharp wit and rich textures would be welcome in any setting, but here they form what seems a fitting tribute. The persecutors in this tale are given close scrutiny, but the book belongs to the persecuted. And on these pages, in all their ordinary glory, those women are at last allowed to live.

To buy a copy for £11.30 go to guardianbookshop.com.

Can solidarity among the marginalised bring about social change? A dazzling, Dickensian Soho tale explores the answer

Lara Feigel



Hot Stew
by Fiona Mozley,
John Murray, £16.99

Soho remains tempting territory for novelists, with its brothels, sex shops and seedy pubs still nestling among the private members' clubs and sleek cocktail bars; it's an inspired choice as the setting for Fiona Mozley's second novel.

The Booker-shortlisted *Elmet* established her as a

writer of wildness, at home in the most remote of rural settings, whose characters lived off the land. The switch to an urban location is decisive, but she has brought her dispossessed cast along with her. The prostitutes and drug addicts and out-of-luck magicians who populate the Soho of *Hot Stew* are trying to get by, as the characters in *Elmet* were, without succumbing to the values of the rapacious capitalist world surrounding them. There is violence here, as there was there, but Mozley is interested in the idealism and adherence to principles possible at the margins. Together the novels ask us to envisage a society no longer defined by what happens at the centre, but where the types of solidarity modelled on the edges remake possibilities for everyone.

Hot Stew operates on a larger scale than *Elmet*, and Mozley navigates between the minds of about 20 characters with ease. This is the Dickensian sprawl, made more fluid by a cinematic sensibility. There's a dazzling panning shot at the start where she introduces us to almost all the major characters without pausing for breath. We meet the two prostitutes, Precious and Tabitha, who have a flat in a collectively run brothel, where they grow plants on the roof and sleep together in an ergonomic John Lewis bed. We meet the low-life magician known as Paul Daniels, and his drug addict

sidekick Debbie McGee, and the denizens of their favourite pub. We meet, too, the young property developer, Agatha, who wants to knock down the brothel and pubs. If these sound like caricatures, it's because they are. Like Dickens or Balzac, Mozley is interested in breathing life into clichés, using two-dimensionality to gain breadth and social reach.

As in Dickens, the sociological typology is turned into something more strange and satisfying through the visionary dimension of the scene-setting. Mozley's descriptions of locations are exuberant, whether focusing on the fabric-clad walls of the brothel ("the silk tendrils are the red of bull's blood. They are the red of sow's blood. They hang as if dripping") or the labyrinthine tunnels of the Crossrail building site that provides the setting for a brilliantly theatrical set-piece scene. The so-called Debbie McGee wanders away from her down-and-out friends to travel through tunnels of concrete and mud, tripping over the roots of trees, drinking the dripping water, until she finds herself in a millionaire's disused basement swimming pool ("a fevered Hollywood dream, a Kodachrome test-strip"). Filling her lungs with the "ersatz tropical air", she embarks on a kind of lone rehab there.

This could all have been too much, but it is grounded by the characters drawn from Mozley's own generation: five recent Cambridge graduates. Bastian, the public school-educated son of Agatha's lawyer, is oblivious to the poverty he unknowingly exploits. But a chance meeting with Glenda, a young woman he knew at Cambridge, introduces him to the precarious world faced by well-educated young people without family money. Glenda lives in a derelict room in Soho, getting by, unlikely to achieve her basic aspiration: to do a job she likes and live in a home she likes living in. Through Glenda, Bastian ends up questioning his own place in the world and his preparedness to perpetuate it.

Hovering throughout the novel is the question of whether change is possible. Certainly, the forms of protest attempted by the prostitutes are disastrous. Mozley's achievement is to create room for ambivalence and nuance. Are the police right to want to crack down so vehemently on sex trafficking that they end up destroying the lives of the women? And are they

West End ways
Soho, London

right to mock the feminists who urge them to protect their bodies from men?

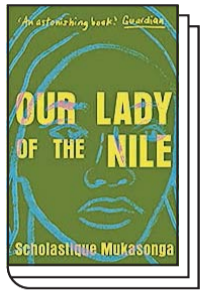
Sex workers turn out to be a good vehicle for the book's investigations, because their bodies remain determinedly individual despite their commodification, and because they are at once implicated in capitalism and remain outside it. Again, the connection with the Cambridge graduates adds complexity: Bastian's girlfriend at university was funding her studies by working as an escort, a choice that he now comes to accept. In an age when so many novelists of Mozley's generation take refuge in the dystopian, she has reinvigorated large-scale social realism for our times.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.



A girls' boarding school in Rwanda provides the setting for this ominous postcolonial satire

Sarah Moss



Our Lady of the Nile
by Scholastique Mukasonga,
translated by
Melanie Mauthner,
Daunt, £9.99

Our Lady of the Nile is a girls' boarding school high in the hills of Rwanda, very near the spring that is reputed to be a source of the Nile; there is a plaque announcing its "discovery" ("Cock Mission, 1924"), and a statue of the Virgin Mary, or possibly the ancient goddess Isis, erected by a Belgian bishop in 1953. In the 1980s the school is run by French nuns to

educate the daughters of Rwanda's elite, training them "not simply to be good wives and mothers, but also good citizens and good Christians ... to spearhead women's advancement".

National tensions are rarely explicitly addressed in the business of school life, but a sinister dynamic unnerves the reader from early on with the arrival of Gloriosa, who "stepped out of a black Mercedes with tinted windows, preceded by her mother". The mother has to rush back to the city for dinner with the Belgian ambassador, but "Gloriosa announced that she would stand with Sister Gertrude at the gate, beneath the national flag, to greet the other seniors and let them know that the first meeting of the committee she chaired would take place the following day". Gloriosa's rival Goretta "also made a grand entrance, perched on the back of a huge military vehicle whose six thick tyres took the spectators' breath away", alongside soldiers in camouflage fatigues. Against the background of

landscape description and a playful postcolonial history of the school, these two cars are enough for us to understand that something darker lies beneath the comic accounts of adolescence that follow.

The girls, given unfamiliar food by a French cook, bicker over treats brought from home for midnight feasts: "Beans and cassava paste, with a special sauce ... bananas slowly baked overnight ... red gahungezi sweet potatoes; corncobs; peanuts; and even, for the city girls, doughnuts of every colour under the sun." They take walks in the long rainy season, compare their growing bodies, tease and boast about boy-friends, make fun of "Mr Hair", a young French maths teacher on voluntary service overseas. They are, perhaps, more realistic about their own future prospects than their teachers are: "We were already fine merchandise," says Immaculée, "and a diploma will inflate our worth even more."

For a while, the spats between girls who take the convent ideology seriously and those who regard the routines of study and prayer as an inconvenience seem as serious as those between the daughters of Hutu "majority people" and the two girls who constitute the required quota of Tutsis. These two, Veronica and Virginia, take to sneaking off into the forest to visit the Parisian Monsieur de Fontenaille, who in youth "set off for Africa to seek his fortune" and is now a kind of heart of whiteness, Conrad's Kurtz replayed as farce. Monsieur de Fontenaille has developed an obsession with painting the portraits of Tutsi girls, convinced that he alone can restore to the Tutsis the ancestral memory of their heritage in "the empire of black pharaohs". He wants to paint Veronica as the goddess Isis and Virginia as Queen Candace, apparently believing them to be descendants or even reincarnations of the ancient rulers of his fantasies. "I don't think he even sees the same landscape as we do," says Veronica. "It's like a movie playing in his head, but now he wants flesh-and-blood actresses, and that's us." He drugs the girls, not primarily to assault them but to dress

High in the hills of Rwanda

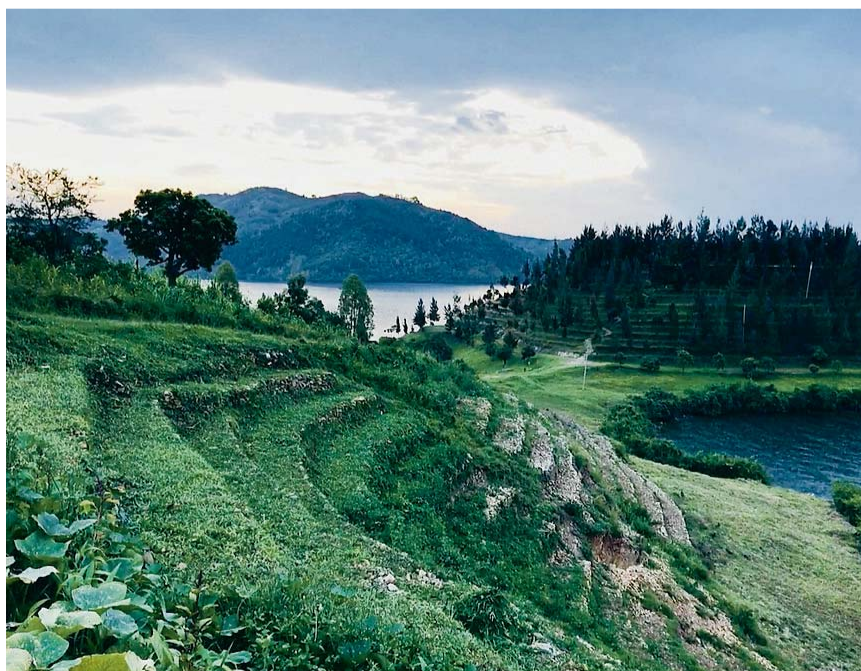
them in the costumes and masks of his pharaonic/Tutsi myth of origin.

Veronica knows perfectly well what's going on, but the money she finds in her bra is useful.

This postcolonial satire is the background to Virginia and Veronica's more acute danger, which comes from Gloriosa, the society waiting to believe her lies and the thugs at her father's command. The ending is violent, bleak and wholly believable.

Melanie Mauthner has made a perfectly pitched translation of the original French, which is eerily laconic, both comedy and tragedy hauntingly understated. The novel reminded me of Magda Szabó's brilliant *Abigail*, another school story for grownups that is also a book about our inability or refusal to protect children from history.

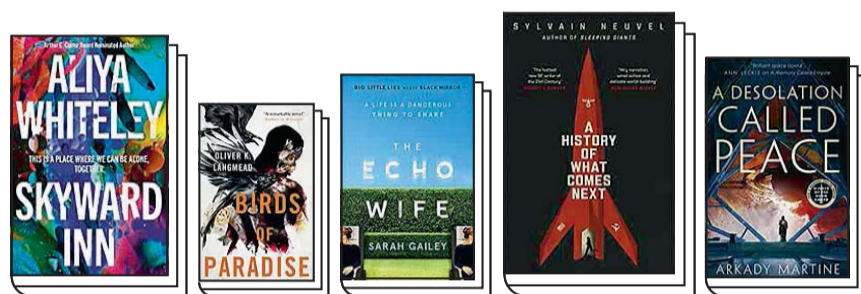
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STOCKIMO/ALAMY

Books of the month

{ SF and fantasy } A pub with drinks from another planet; biblical Adam in present-day Britain; and Aztecs in space
Lisa Tuttle



Skyward Inn by Aliya Whiteley (Solaris, £14.99) combines an intriguing, character-driven plot with great splashes of science fictional weirdness. The novel grips from the start, exploring with deceptive simplicity issues ranging from the difficulties of communicating with the people we love to colonisation on a planetary scale. It opens in a traditional English village pub, run by Jem, who has returned home from a 10-year posting to the planet Qita with a Qitan called Isley. Although there is a spaceport nearby, the villagers have nothing to do with it; they belong to the Western Protectorate, a region of Britain that chose to divorce itself from the complications of the modern world and adopt a simpler way of life. But even they cannot escape the consequences of humanity's contact with aliens, who only appear to be human, as the truth about the Qitan lifecycle, and the imported psychedelic brew served by Jem from under the bar, is gradually revealed. I was reminded of the authors who first got me hooked on science fiction: writers such as Theodore Sturgeon, Kate Wilhelm and Ursula Le Guin. *Skyward Inn* feels like an instant classic of the genre.

Adam, the biblical first man, "created before death" and therefore immortal, is the hero of **Birds of Paradise** by Oliver K Langmead (Titan, £8.99). By the 21st century, he has little affection for his many descendants, preferring to spend his time with other immortals: the original creatures he had the privilege of naming. Crow, Magpie, Raven, Owl, Butterfly and Pig generally hang out with him in human form, but occasionally find it useful to revert to type. He thinks about Eve, but not until the end of the book does he remember why she is no longer beside him. There is a plot about the search for immortal plants, and competing attempts to recreate the original Garden in present-day Britain,

and it is all very vividly written - but I couldn't help feeling it would make more sense as a graphic novel: fantastic and colourful, but lacking depth. I could also have done without Adam's shooting spree: the old western trope of the good man driven to pick up his guns should have been put to rest long before now.

Sarah Gailey has been nominated for Hugo and Nebula awards; her domestic thriller **The Echo Wife** (Hodder, £17.99) begins as scientific superstar Evelyn discovers that her husband has been cheating on her ... with her own clone. Evelyn has come up with a way to grow adult clones, capable of speech and understanding, from a DNA sample, the original's personality imprinted on their brains. Legally they are not people, merely disposable tools. The horror of a society that would allow this is never touched on, nor are there any moral or economic arguments made for their use. The plot is even more full of holes: Evelyn is a genius, yet her husband (a mere academic) not only runs with her idea, he manages to secretly produce her clone in his spare time. Gailey's main concern is showing how people are shaped by others, so Evelyn often recalls her cold, brutal father, and hates her clone for being the softer, gentler version her husband wanted, yet the novel doesn't rise above the banal.

Sylvain Neuvel's **A History of What Comes Next** (Michael Joseph, £14.99) is alt-history with a difference. It basically traces the true story of the development of rocket science, namechecking

This is alt-history with a difference, bringing an edge of alien conspiracy theory to the development of rocket science

the real people involved in the days before the space race, but adds an alien-conspiracy-theory edge in the shape of a fictional team of mother-daughter clones, reborn through the ages with three imperatives: "Preserve the knowledge; survive at all costs; take them to the stars". Along with the usual problems faced by women trying

to change the world (or at least get men to listen to them), they are threatened by a mysterious "Tracker" who has spent centuries trying to kill them. All good fun, and since this book takes us only up to 1961, we can expect more to come.

Arkady Martine's debut, *A Memory Called Empire*, won the Hugo award for best novel last year; **A Desolation Called Peace** (Tor, £16.99) is the sequel - and obviously not the best place to start. At the same time, new readers will be plunged, unprepared, into the strangeness of a space-faring empire somehow grown out of the ancient Aztec culture - a fascinating creation that soon had me hooked. This is first-class space opera, with added spycraft, diplomatic intrigue and scary aliens, along with interesting explorations of perception, ways of communicating, and what makes a person.

A new groove *Hanif Abdurraqib*

From Josephine Baker to the Soul Train line, we should recognise the triumph and the joy in black performance and free expression

When I began *A Little Devil in America*, I was thinking about Josephine Baker. The title of the book comes from Baker, from her speech at the March on Washington in 1963. It is a speech that is often overlooked. The legacy of the march so often centres on its male speakers (Martin Luther King Jr, A Philip Randolph), and Baker was well past her most notable prime. At 57, she chose to return to the US from France and make a small speech - but also to confront the country she'd left and vowed not to return to. The speech is at times tender, at times funny, at times teeming with rage. There was a fullness to it; Baker considering the vastness of her life and the many lives she'd lived. Her speech is defiant and brilliant, punctuated by Baker aligning her experiences with the national plight of black people in America:

You know, friends, that I do not lie to you when I tell you I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of presidents. And much more. But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee, and that made me mad. And when I get mad, you know that I open my big mouth. And then look out, 'cause when Josephine opens her mouth, they hear it all over the world.

Baker was important for me when thinking about this book, because what is it to honour a life, if you do not attempt to honour the completeness of a life? What is a life - particularly a black life - in a moment that is not desirable to the constructs of whiteness, or a life that must exist and live on even when the limited imagination of whiteness is done with it. What was most gratifying about Baker's speech, looking back on it now, is how it uses her personal history to clarify for

the crowd that the America they're living in isn't that different from the America she felt compelled to escape. The America where she was kicked out of hotels she was later asked to perform in; the America where she would light up a stage but not be able to get a drink at the bar. Because *Little Devil* centres on black performance as it relates to America and the American memory, it felt vital to understand Baker's Washington speech as an indictment of the US's obsession with forgetting and reframing its histories, in the hopes that it will never be found out. But the thing is that a great many of us have found it out already.

The spirit of Toni Morrison hovers over the book, even though she is not in it. My first impulse was to write a different book. I was interested in the appropriation and transformation of legacies. I had spent some time in Memphis in 2015, and while there, I'd been in the old Stax building, now a soul music museum. I saw the custom Cadillac Eldorado that Isaac Hayes loved so much. He had received it as part of a deal in 1972, but then went bankrupt and lost it years later. And now it sits in a museum, detached from the artist who loved it, a somewhat comical artefact. I began to think about the legacy and treatment of black artists in a place like Memphis, where people line up to get into Graceland, to revel in the safe and sanitised legacy of Elvis Presley.

And so I set out to write an account that was initially propelled by a rageful curiosity. About what can be taken, and what was owed. Americans love to ask questions about the separation of artists from their art, as though it is the great complex inquiry of our time, but the country has extracted black art from black artists without honouring the humanity of the art-makers for years. I thought, initially, that if I set out on a scorching path to unearth the core discomforts I had with this dynamic, something would be revealed that might allow me to make peace - with what, or whom, I wasn't sure. I was seeking a broad, vague comfort.

And then Morrison died, when I had pretty much a draft of the book that I felt fine with, but wasn't entirely in love with. It was a book of inquiries that felt braided together in a kind of infinity loop of noise, and when I came out the other side of it, I was hungry for more noise. It was occurring to me that all of the answers I needed were already embedded in America's history and relationship to black people, and that all of my digging, while not entirely futile, was not serving my actual interests.

Morrison often spoke of black writers detaching themselves from an investment in whiteness, and the ideas of whiteness; to ask the question of how the work might be better served if it was not catering to even the presence and potential presence of whiteness. I'd realised that so much of the book, then, was operating in fear. It was using the ominous nature of what could be uprooted and repurposed as a tool of propulsion, and that isn't what I thought was most fascinating about my pursuits in the moment.

What also happened around this time was that I had been sent a hard drive from an old pal. It had an

immense archive of *Soul Train* episodes from the 1970s and 80s. I hadn't asked for this, I'd just told my friend that I thought I needed to take the work in a more celebratory direction, and this is what he sent. For weeks, I spent hours watching clips. The ecstasy that poured over a room when a performer hit a good groove, or when an interview went in an especially salacious direction. And yes, of course, the beauty of the *Soul Train* line in all of its glory - dancers showing off their moves as they strut towards the camera - specifically in the 70s, when the construct of the line could be overburdened with joy and come apart, despite itself, flowing bodies on top of bodies for the sake of fighting for a little dance floor to move upon.

It was there, my nightly baptism in the glow of a television screen carrying me back to a place of pleasure, that I decided what I was actually aching for was a book about celebration, about revelling in the many revelations I came towards while watching black people move. Or when thinking about the joy in black people throwing down playing cards on a flat surface. Or when thinking about the moment during "Gimme Shelter" when Merry Clayton must have felt touched by God, entirely invincible. This was what my actual interests were reaching towards. The idea of celebration without consequence. The type of small performances that, even if they could be mimicked, could never be rightfully done by anyone but us.

It was good, for example, to also consider the funeral. A point of grief that I had known many black people to turn into a celebration. To manipulate the idea of loss into something immensely fluorescent and immediately joyous. I had so loved witnessing Aretha Franklin's funeral and this idea that love means fighting to keep someone alive. The funeral that turns into a concert, into a dance party, into a revelation.

I loved Aretha Franklin's funeral and the idea that love means fighting to keep someone alive. The funeral that turns into a party

There are those who might call my book an archival project, and I think that is generous but also would maybe do a disservice to archivists, who dedicate entire lifetimes to this type of work. I think, instead, the book is a catalogue of excitements - Beyoncé's Super Bowl Show, Dave Chapelle's standup. I allowed myself the freedom to jump from place to place,

from idea to idea, from emotion to emotion. I wanted to populate these essays with as many people as I could, as many images, as many magazine covers and songs and music videos and dance moves as I could.

In the end, I return to Josephine Baker, as I did when I'd changed the direction of the book and had to decide how to shift the tone of some of the pieces I'd already written. I thought the best story to tell about Baker was the story of her coming home, which to me also is the story of what it is to love a place that was not constructed with the interests of serving you. Some might say there is a triumph in overcoming that set of circumstances. But I came to understand the triumph in losing interest in the serving of circumstantial geographies, and instead finding some ground on which you can perform in whatever way serves you, serves your people, serves the terms you wish to engage with ●

A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance by Hanif Abdurraqib is published by Allen Lane.

SOUL TRAIN/GETTY; ESTATE OF EMIL BIEBER/KLAUS NIERMANN/GETTY; REX; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES



Clockwise from above: Soul Train, Josephine Baker, Beyoncé, singer Merry Clayton

Books about vaccines

Eula Biss



Exactly one year ago, I searched my bookshelves for Daniel Defoe's **A Journal of the Plague Year**. In 1665, the narrator wanders the empty streets of London, where quarantines and curfews have been imposed. He tracks the numbers reported by the weekly bills of mortality and witnesses a mass burial.

All this now feels eerily current, but I first read that book to learn about what life was like before the advent of vaccination. It was published in 1722, long before germ theory was validated. The narrator mentions a curious rumour that disease might be caused by tiny dragons visible only through the lens of a microscope.

A Planet of Viruses, Carl Zimmer's slim collection of essays, offers an edifying tour of the

improbable world of viruses. They endlessly match the strategies our bodies have devised for survival, and over the past year, their ability to reinvent themselves has heightened the suspense around developing new vaccines against Covid-19.

Patenting the Sun, Jane S Smith's lively account of the first vaccine against polio, provides a history of success. She was among the millions of US children volunteered by their parents to be test subjects for the programme.

Vaccines predate penicillin, X-rays and most of the advances of modern medicine. Scepticism of them is as old as vaccines themselves. In **Bodily Matters: The Anti-Vaccination Movement in England 1853-1907**, Nadja Durbach details widespread

refusal to take part in the campaign to eradicate smallpox. Some fears seem comical now, such as the belief that vaccination could cause you to grow horns. But others remain familiar - fear of bodily pollution, doctors and the medical system, and opposition to the government's role in public health.

The anti-vaccine pamphlets of that time compared doctors to vampires, but the vampire hunters in Bram Stoker's **Dracula** include two doctors who "sterilize" the count's coffins so he cannot rest in them. Germ theory was widely accepted by 1897, when *Dracula* was published, and the novel's drama is driven by contagion. Dracula's bite infects his victims, making them vampires too. In this horror story, disease, not vaccination, is terrifying.

The smallpox inoculation was more dangerous than any modern vaccine, but it wiped out the disease. In theory, other diseases could be eradicated too, though

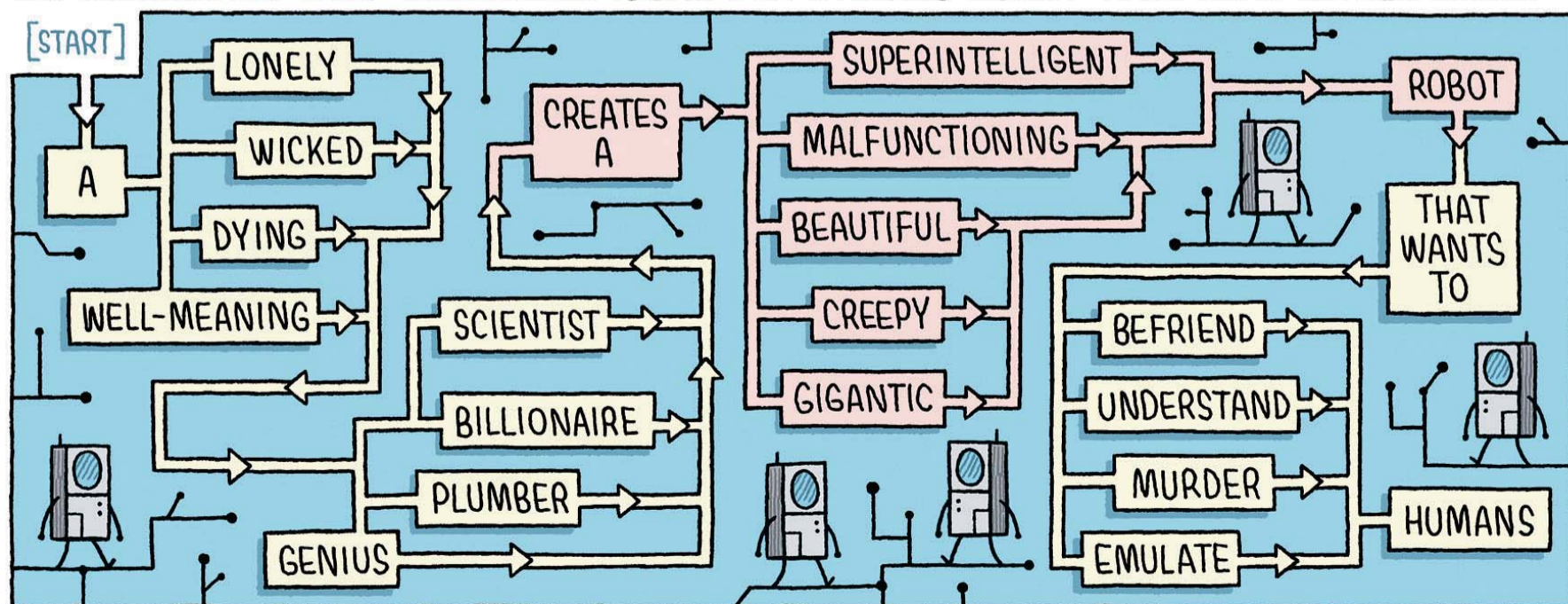
vaccine refusal has led to outbreaks around the world. In the US, well-educated white women are among the demographic groups most likely to refuse vaccines for their children. **For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts' Advice to Women** by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English explores the fraught history of women's health and why some are reluctant to accept expert advice.

Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present by Harriet A Washington offers context for the lack of trust some black people feel towards a system that has failed to offer them the same standard of care as that received by white patients. If we want to restore trust and promote widespread vaccination, we will have to address these inequities.

Having and Being Had by Eula Biss is published by Faber.

Tom Gauld

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