

Review

Saturday 20 March 2021 - Issue N° 165



Still waiting for change

—
Novelist Yaa Gyasi on BLM

The
Guardian



“Thank you, again, for everything you and Vitsoë have done for us over the years. If only each shelf could talk...”

So wrote Marta, a customer since 2004.

Her shelving system started out modest – and has grown over the years. It travelled with her across London (above), to Valencia, and now Amsterdam.

Every time she needs help, she speaks with her personal Vitsoë planner, Robin.

In fact, this is the fifth time she has bought from Vitsoë ... and we're fairly sure it won't be the last.

Marta has been able to buy an extra shelf or two when needed, while Robin has replanned her shelving to fit her Spanish walls and her Dutch huis.

He's even sent her more packaging to protect her shelves when moving to each new home.

You could say that over the years their relationship has become one of friendship. Marta knows she is valued as a customer and trusts the advice she is given.

If your shelves could talk, what would they say?

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Review

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'My personality was once completely shattered. I glued myself together again, but some of that is still there, and I do slip into the characters and feel like I'm hearing what they're saying.'
— Edward St Aubyn, page 16

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The week in books

20 March

Oscar origin stories

When her novel *A Lost Lady* was adapted into a forgettable and confusing film in 1934, Willa Cather was so furious that she added a condition to her will: all adaptations of her work were henceforth forbidden, even after her death in 1947. This was a shock to director Lee Isaac Chung, who hoped to adapt her 1918 novel *My Ántonia*. So instead, he took his inspiration from Cather's book to write and direct a film about his childhood: the much lauded *Minari*, which this week was nominated for six Oscars.

Hollywood has never seemed deterred by the age-old adage "the book is better" and this year's Oscars reflect literature's crucial role in inspiring cinema. *Nomadland*, also up for six Oscars,

is based on the 2017 nonfiction book of the same name by Jessica Bruder. Actor Frances McDormand acquired the rights to the book, and approached Chloé Zhao, who has made history as the first woman of colour to be nominated for best



The United States vs Billie Holiday

director. Glenn Close is nominated for best supporting actress in *Hillbilly Elegy*, Ron Howard's adaptation of JD Vance's best-selling memoir. And an adaptation doesn't even need a whole book: the biopic *The United States vs Billie Holiday* draws on a section from *Chasing the Dream* by Johann Hari.

Plays also feature heavily: *The Father*, based on director Florian Zeller's *Le Père*; *Pieces of a Woman* by director Kornél Mundruczó and his partner Kata Wéber; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* by August Wilson; and *One Night in Miami* by Kemp Powers all started life on stage. Jane Austen's work, a perennial favourite of the best costume category, appears yet again with Autumn de Wilde's adaptation of *Emma*. But this year, the only novel-based film that made the best adapted screenplay category is *The White Tiger*, based on Aravind Adiga's Booker prize-

winner. Judging by the good reviews so far, Adiga won't have to follow in Cather's footsteps just yet. **Sian Cain**

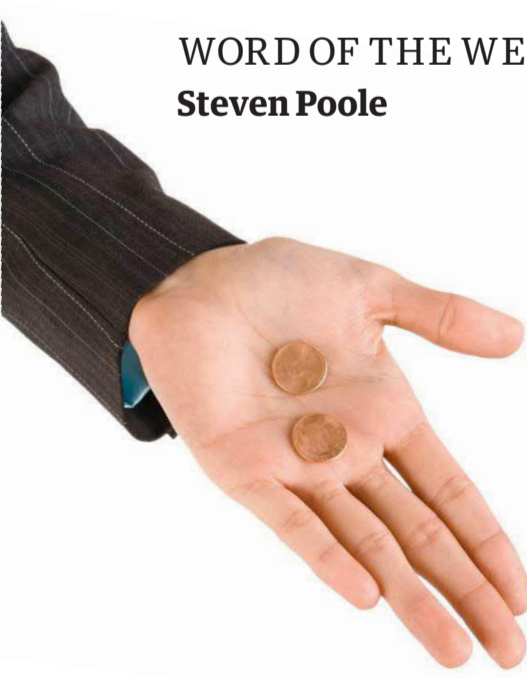
Queenie's heirs

Faithful readers of this page will remember the warm voice of Candice Carty-Williams, our former columnist and author of the bestselling novel *Queenie*. This week it was announced that her second book, and her first young adult title, *Empress & Aniya*, will be published on 7 October. Described by publisher Knights Of as "south London's answer to *Freaky Friday*", the novel is about two girls from very different backgrounds who magically swap bodies on their 16th birthday: *Empress*, who lives in a single-parent household on an estate; and *Aniya*, who often takes her good fortune for granted. *Queenie* was one of the biggest books of 2019 - let's see if *Empress and Aniya* take that crown for 2021. **SC**

TAKASHI SEIDA/HULU VIA AP/PARAMOUNT

Recovery

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole



It was recently reported that only half of the "arts recovery fund" has been given to arts organisations, which does not augur well for our entertainment options if the wider economic recovery we all hope for arrives later this year. But what is a "recovery" exactly?

Via the old French *recouvrer*, it derives ultimately from the Latin *recuperare*, from which we also directly take our word "recuperate". A "recovery" could also be a rally of forces in battle, but in early usage you could not simply "recover" from an illness, you had to recover (ie regain) something, such as your **health** or **happiness**.

The oldest English sense of "recovery" is legal: it is the regaining of some property or compensation through court action (to "recover **damages**" is still a current use). The long-suffering British public, having just learned that outsourcing outfit Serco's top two executives were paid £7m each for their hard work in 2020, might wonder whether the hoped for post-pandemic recovery will also include a recovery of some of the vast sums so generously awarded in Covid contracts, if not to troupes of actors and music venues.



'Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* made the world open up'

Jessie Greengrass

The book I am currently reading

Danielle Evans's *The Office of Historical Corrections*, which I'm reading for the second time, because it has haunted me since I read it for the first time a few months ago.

The book that changed my life

I can remember as a teenager reading Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, and feeling like the world had opened up - reading Doris Lessing's *Shikasta* and feeling extremely clever. I lay in the sun and read Agatha Christie novels and it was a kind of peace, because it let me out of my life for the duration. I read TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* and ached a lot about it and, at university, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, of all things, broke my heart. John Donne's sermons showed me what language can do when it is allied with thought. Kyril Bonfiglioli's Mortdecai trilogy made me laugh absolutely without restraint at a time when laughter otherwise was hard to come by, and when, in my 20s, I was too ill to do much else, I read Jilly Cooper's Rutshire novels and John Berryman's *The Dream Songs* alternately because they felt like counterweights, which might with luck allow me to cling on to the rope.

The book that changed my mind

Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* made me

realise that trying to pin down an exact aetiology for my unhappiness was not only futile but also a waste of the only life I was going to get.

The book I couldn't finish

I've never finished George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, despite enjoying it enormously every time I try, which just seems perverse.

The book I wish I'd written

The Owl Service by Alan Garner.

The book I think is most underrated

It mystifies me that Dorothy L Sayers's *Gaudy Night* doesn't have the status it rightly and truly deserves as one of the real greats of feminist literature. Also Mary Wesley's extraordinarily creepy, very weird children's novel *The Sixth Seal*. Everyone should definitely read it.

My comfort read

Detective stories. Christie and Sayers. Ian Rankin's books. Also, I was recently introduced to Sara Gran, who has turned out to be that rare thing, a writer of books to block out days for. It takes real talent to write a book that is both entertainment and challenge, and three out of these four authors are that. Christie just wrote really, *really* good mystery stories, but it's not like that's so easy, either.

The book I give as a gift

Frog and Toad Are Friends by Arnold Lobel: 100% joy 100% of the time. It also contains one of the best jokes ever written, which is to do with a poorly Frog who looks green.

The High House by Jessie Greengrass is published by Swift (£14.99).

Literature has the power to challenge and to change, but treating books by black authors as a kind of improving medicine is an impoverished response to centuries of physical and emotional harm. By *Yaa Gyasi*

Hard to swallow



In 2018, two other novelists and I were being driven back from a reception in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, to our hotel in downtown Detroit, when we saw a black man getting arrested on the side of the road. The driver of our car, a white woman who had spent the earlier part of the drive ranting about how Coleman Young, Detroit's first black mayor, had ruined the city, looked at the lone black man surrounded by police officers with their guns drawn and said: "It's good they've got so many on him. You never know what they'll do."

Two years before, I had published my first novel, *Homegoing*, a book that is, among other things, about the afterlife of the transatlantic slave trade. The book thrust me into a kind of recognition that is uncommon to fiction writers. I was on late-night shows and photographed for fashion magazines. I did countless interviews, very little writing. The bulk of my work life was spent touring the country giving various readings and lectures. I spent about 180 days of 2017 either at an event, or travelling to or from one. By the time that car ride in Michigan came around, I was exhausted, not just by the travel but by something that is more difficult to articulate - the dissonance of the black spotlight, of being revered in one sense and reviled in another, a revulsion that makes clear the hollowness of the reverence.

The next morning, I delivered my address to a room full of people who had gathered for a library



Yaa Gyasi
'The dissonance of the black spotlight means you are revered and reviled at the same time'

fundraiser, an address where I insisted, as so many black writers, artists and academics have before me, that America has failed to contend with the legacy of slavery. This failure is evident all around us, from our prisons to our schools, our healthcare, our food and waterways. I gave my lecture. I accepted the applause and the thanks, and then I got into another car. It was a different driver, but it was the same world.

I was thinking about that driver's words again this past summer as news poured in about the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. I was thinking about the way in which white people, in order to justify their own grotesque violence, so often engage in a kind of fiction, an utterly insidious denialism that creates the reality it claims to protest against. By which I mean that an unwillingness to see the violence actually happening before you because of a presumption of violence that *might* happen is itself a kind of violence. What exactly can a man with a knee on his neck do, what can a sleeping woman do to deserve their own murder? To make room for that grotesqueness, ➔

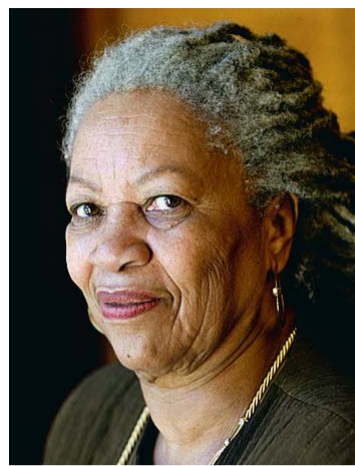
CHRISTOPHER MARK JUHN/ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY; LEONARDO CENDAMO/GETTY



that depraved thinking, to believe in any murder's necessity, you must abandon reality. To see a man with several guns aimed at him, his hands on his head, as the problem, you must leave the present tense ("It's good *they've got* so many on him") and enter the future ("You never know what *they will* do"). A future which is, of course, entirely imagined.

I make my living off my imagination, but this summer, as I watched *Homegoing* climb back up the New York Times bestseller list in response to its appearance on anti-racist reading lists, I saw again, with no small amount of bile, that I make my living off the articulation of pain too. My own, my people's. It is wrenching to know that the occasion for the renewed interest in your work is the murders of black people and the subsequent "listening and learning" of white people. I'd rather not know this feeling of experiencing career highs at the same time as being flooded with a grief so old and worn that it seems unearthed, a fossil of other old and worn griefs.

When an interviewer asks me what it's like to see *Homegoing* on the bestseller list again, I say something short and vacuous like "it's bittersweet", because the idea of elaborating exhausts and offends me. What I should say is: why are we back here? Why am I being asked questions that James Baldwin answered in the 1960s, that Toni Morrison answered in the 80s? I read Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* for the first time when I was a teenager, and it was so crystalline, so beautifully and perfectly formed that it filled me with something close to terror. I couldn't fathom it. I couldn't fathom



Yaa Gyasi found her novel on a reading list alongside books by Toni Morrison

how a novel could pierce right through the heart of me and find the inarticulable wound. I learned absolutely nothing, but some minor adjustment was made within me, some imperceptible shift that occurs only when I encounter wonder and awe, the best art.

To see my book on any list with that one should have, in a better world, filled me with uncomplicated pride, but instead I felt

deflated. While I do devoutly believe in the power of literature to challenge, to deepen, to change, I also know that buying books by black authors is but a theoretical, grievously belated and utterly impoverished response to centuries of physical and emotional harm. *The Bluest Eye* was published 50 years ago. As Lauren Michelle Jackson wrote in her excellent *Vulture* essay "What is an anti-racist reading list for", *someone at some point has to get down to the business of reading*.

And it's this question of "the business of reading", of how we read, why we read, and what reading *does* for and to us, that I keep turning over in my mind. Years ago, I was at a festival with a friend, another black author, and we were trading stories. She said that the first time she did a panel with a white male

Why are we back here? Why am I asked questions that James Baldwin answered in the 1960s, that Toni Morrison answered in the 80s?

author she was shocked to hear the questions he was asked. Craft questions. Character questions. Research questions. Questions about the novel itself, about the quality and the content of the pages themselves. I knew exactly what she meant.

So many of the writers of colour that I know have had white people treat their work as though it were a kind of medicine. Something they have to swallow in order to improve their condition. But they don't really want it, they don't really enjoy it, and if they're being totally honest, they don't actually even take the medicine half the time. They just buy it and leave it on the shelf. What pleasure, what deepening, could there be in "reading" like that? To enter the world of fiction with such a tainted mission is to doom the novel or short story to fail you on its most essential levels.

I've published two books during particularly fraught election years and the general tenor of many of the Q&A sessions has been one I would describe as a frenzied search for answers or absolution. There's so much slippage between "please tell me what I'm doing wrong" and "please tell me that I've done nothing wrong". The suddenness and intensity of the desperation to be seen as being "good" runs completely counter to how deeply entrenched, how very old the problems are. There is a reason that *Homegoing* covers 300 years, and even that was only the shallowest dip into a bottomless pool. A season of reading cannot fix this. Some may want to call the events of June 2020 a "racial reckoning", but in a

country in which there was a civil war and a civil rights movement 100 years apart, at some point it would be useful to ask how long a reckoning need take. When, if ever, will we have reckoned?

And so where does all the "listening and learning" leave us exactly? In the early days of summer, as my dog barked at the protesters who flooded the streets outside my building, I tried to decide whether I wanted to join. When I finally did, I felt a million things all at once: moved and proud and hopeful and enraged and offended and hopeless. There was something legitimately beautiful about being in a multiracial, multigenerational, multiclass body of people who for months filled the streets, shouted and marched and defied.

And yet. To see white people holding up Black Lives Matter signs as we marched through a gentrified Brooklyn. To see white parents hoisting children up on their shoulders, chanting Black Lives Matter, when I suspect they've done as much as possible to ensure those same children never have to go to school with more than a tasteful smattering of black children. All of it brings up the dissonance again. The revulsion that makes clear the hollowness of the reverence. Black Lives Matter - a reverent, simple, true phrase - can only be hollow in the mouths of those who cannot stomach black life, real life, when they see it at a school, at the doctor's office, on the side of the road. Still, I marched. A few months later, I went back on tour for my second novel, knowing what I have always known. The world can change and stay exactly the same ●

JASON ARMOND/LOS ANGELES TIMES/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK;
JUSTIN LANE/EPA; MURDO MACLEOD/THE GUARDIAN

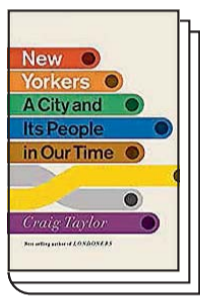


A memorial to Breonna Taylor, who was shot by police in 2020, and a protester after the death of George Floyd



Book of the week

{ Society } Voices from the Big Apple - extraordinary oral histories from cops, cleaners and thieves *Hari Kunzru*



New Yorkers: A City and Its People in Our Time
by Craig Taylor,
John Murray (£25)

When I first moved to New York in 2008, I asked someone how long it takes to become a New Yorker. Oh, she said. About six months? It was a flip answer, but it had a grain of truth. As a new immigrant you have an identity here, a role to play in the great polyphonic comedy of city life. Everyone hates tourists, which is why most

residents take elaborate precautions to avoid the area around Times Square, but the brand new New Yorker is a type, a tradition, and thus accorded a certain honour.

A more serious answer to the question of belonging was given by a former neighbour of mine, the novelist Colson Whitehead. “No matter how long you have been here,” he wrote in an essay published soon after 9/11, a moment when the city was in a state of traumatic shock, “you are a New Yorker the first time you say: ‘That used to be Munsey’s’ or ‘That used to be the Tic Toc Lounge’.” The pandemic has given those references a new poignancy, as thousands of shops and restaurants have been forced out of business, many of them the last hold-outs from a scrappier, more eccentric era. My melancholy personal geography of “used to bes” now includes the dim-sum hall where my wife and I had our wedding reception, the playspace where I took my son when he was a toddler, the East Village dive where I drank with some slightly random people when I’d just arrived and didn’t know anyone else.

Craig Taylor, a Canadian who lived for many years in Britain, arrived in 2014 to write *New Yorkers: A City and Its People in Our Time*, an ambitious and entertaining attempt to channel the city’s collective voice. It’s a collection of interviews, oral histories somewhat in the mode of Svetlana Alexievich, the Belarusian Nobel prize laureate and practitioner of what she calls “documentary literature”. Alexievich has gathered testimonies from people who

experienced the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the Afghan war and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Taylor’s style is gentler, and he’s not concerned with capturing the truth of a particular historical moment. In his previous books on London, and on the Suffolk village of Akenfield, he has established himself as a good listener, a pleasant companion for the reader and an astute but laid-back interviewer who knows how to put his subjects at ease. In some ways a closer comparison than Alexievich would be the poet Heathcote Williams, who in 1964 wrote *The Speakers*, which collected the voices of the eccentrics and ranters at London’s Speakers’ Corner.

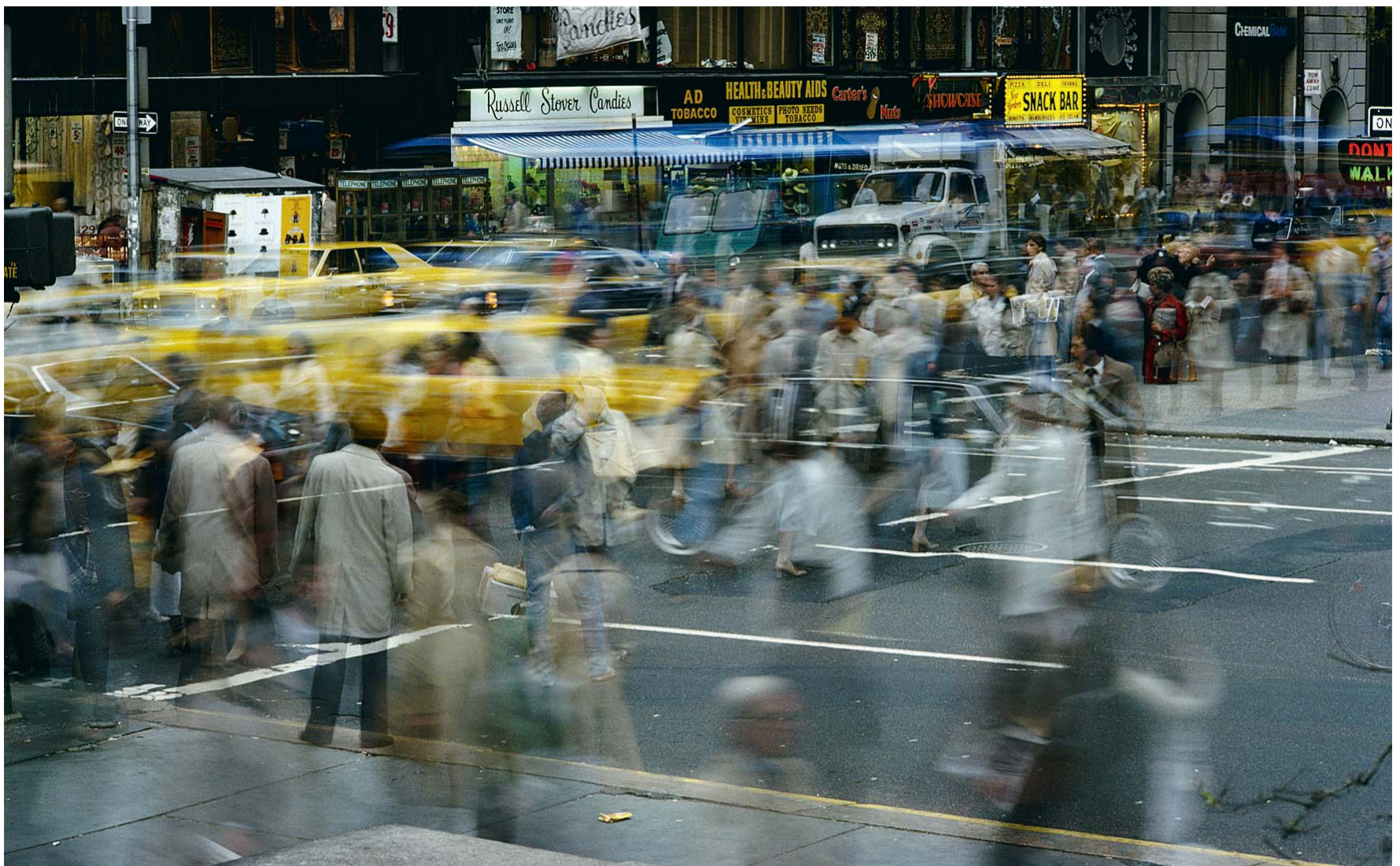
As you’d expect from a book about New York, Taylor introduces us to people who provide services to the wealthy - a dog walker, a therapist, a personal chef - and characters with colourful, quintessentially Gotham jobs such as the high-rise window cleaner and a man who wrangles balloons at the Macy’s Thanksgiving parade. Taylor leans in to the clichés, and usually manages to get beyond them, extracting some unexpected nugget of information, some gem of city wisdom. A cab driver explains how not to get mugged: “The thing about New York is the eyeballs. You have to make contact with people in New York. If you don’t they’re going to put one over on you. Why do people get robbed in New York? They turn away.” Among the most fascinating interviews is one with an elevator repair man who tells hair-raising stories about mummified mice and the appalling sludge that accumulates in housing project elevator pits, a toxic “golden” mix of oil and urine that has to be cleared with an ice scraper. He also shares details about the black market in elevator keys, which (perhaps inevitably) led me down an internet rabbit hole into the “elevator enthusiast community”.

Much of the pleasure of *New Yorkers* comes from a kind of sly parataxis, the rhetorical trope in which elements are placed side by side, without being overtly connected together. The cop speaks, then the trans social justice activist. The lawyer is followed by the car thief. The effect is like one of those high modernist paeans to urban life, John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* or Dziga Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera*, a narrative montage of faces and perspectives that is pressed into the service of - what, though? There’s an implicit idea of the cosmopolis,

A cab driver explains how not to get mugged: ‘The thing about New York is the eyeballs. You have to make contact’

the city that contains the whole world, and Taylor has certainly talked to a wide variety of people. With typical self-effacement, he uses someone else’s description of his project to explain how he chose his interviewees, not the “bold face names”, the famous people New Yorkers rigorously ignore when they’re seated next to them at a restaurant, but the “lightly

ERNST HAAS/GETTY



italicised”, the people he can use to illustrate some aspect of the New York experience, who occupy some narratively useful niche.

Running like a thread through the book is Taylor’s experience volunteering at a lunch programme in a church basement, and his friendship with a homeless man he meets there. Taylor is a humanist - both in the sense of wishing to be of service to others, and in the sense of seeing a city as fundamentally about people. In one sense, the point is inarguable. What else would a city be “about” but the people who live there? But cities also have a non-human life as well, a life that demands to be thought of in terms of systems - of sewers and power lines, transportation, communication. Cities are ecologies. They’re surfaces over which power and control are distributed with varying intensities. People are also members of populations, through which viruses are transmitted.

It’s not Taylor’s project to describe New York in this way, and the absence of this perspective isn’t necessarily a shortcoming of a book that admirably succeeds in what it sets out to do. It does, however, limit what can be said. Inevitably, in a book about New York, stories about development and gentrification loom in the background. We meet a real estate agent, and a downtown character who mourns the loss of the clubs and bars that defined his bohemian scene, but we don’t get a sense of the incredible speed and power of the processes that are transforming the city, the deals that are restructuring the Manhattan skyline and, increasingly, that of downtown Brooklyn. We meet the mother of an inmate at Rikers Island, but we don’t get a sense of the structural problems with crime and policing that sent her

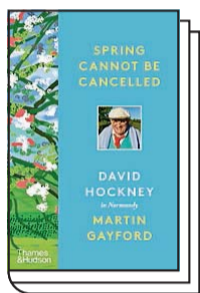
The great polyphonic comedy of city life ... New York

son to that dilapidated, violent place. We hear two bankers scratching their heads about how it could be possible to live here on under \$150k a year, but we don’t hear about the funds buying up empty properties in low-income neighbourhoods such as Brownsville and East New York, waiting for the right time to flip them.

History is absent, too, perhaps deliberately. There is an extraordinary story about the Rockaways peninsula during Hurricane Sandy, as a father and daughter battle to survive fire and flood, but 9/11 barely registers. Nor does Occupy, or Black Lives Matter. The pandemic creeps in around the edges, but by the time it’s under way, Taylor is moving on. His visa is up, and he’s on to his next project. He does a fine job of telling the New York story, but the place doesn’t get into his blood. He doesn’t dream the dream. There actually is a dream, not the metaphorical “American Dream” but a specific night-time dream shared by a very large number of New Yorkers. In the dream, you open a door in your cramped, absurdly expensive apartment, and find a room you never knew existed. This can be alarming, but for most people, it’s very exciting. Space is freedom. The possibilities! A work room! Somewhere for the baby! Then you wake up, and reality sets in again. You try to master your disappointment. You go out to face the city. If you dream that dream, and it doesn’t make you look at real estate listings in the suburbs, congratulations: you’re now a New Yorker.

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Art } Lockdown blossom ... an illustrated record of David Hockney's year in a Normandy farmhouse *Nicholas Wroe*



Spring Cannot Be Cancelled
by David Hockney
and Martin Gayford,
Thames & Hudson, £25

In the autumn of 2018 David Hockney made a brief trip to France. He wanted to look at art - paintings from Picasso's blue and rose periods and the great tapestries of Paris, Angers and Bayeux - and to enjoy "all that delicious butter and cream and cheese". (As well as a country "more smoker friendly than mean-spirited England".) While in

Normandy Hockney declared a desire to capture the northern French spring as he had done a decade or so before in east Yorkshire, producing work that became the focal point of his blockbuster 2012 Royal Academy show. "There are more blossoms there," he wrote to the art critic Martin Gayford. "You get apple, pear, and cherry blossom, plus the blackthorn and the hawthorn, so I am really looking forward to it."

In impressively short order a large half-timbered farmhouse 40 minutes from Bayeux was acquired. It was a bit like "where the seven dwarfs live in the Disney film", Hockney explained. "There are no straight lines; even the *corners* don't have straight lines." Set in four acres and surrounded by meadows, orchards and streams, it was quickly renovated and within just a few months Hockney was emailing out drawings from, and of, his new home to friends all over the world.

For someone so closely associated with his locations - the blue California skies and swimming pools early in his career, more recently the muddy lanes and hedgerows of the Yorkshire Wolds - Hockney rarely stays in one place for long. He has made work in China, Japan, Lebanon, Egypt, Norway and, of course, France. He lived in Paris for a couple of years in the mid-70s and, as Gayford points out, while the new house was bought, apparently, on the spur of the moment, "It was surely not entirely chance that an artist long admiring of French painting and the Gallic way of living, eating and smoking, with a French assistant, happened to find an ideal

resting point just where and when he did." It was time for a new venture.

Gayford has been a friend and sort of Boswell to Hockney for a quarter of a century and has written two previous books that were both with and on the artist. He visited Hockney in France during the summer of 2019 and it was assumed he would return the following year. Of course that was not to be. But what had begun as one type of project soon turned into a different and larger one as Covid-19 exerted its grip. Perversely, the new restrictions on movement had presented an opportunity for Hockney. One of the selling points of the house was that he wouldn't have to drive anywhere to find his subjects, as it was all there in the trees, streams and skies on his grounds. Now his patch of land became his sole focus, and his excitement at the arrival of the 2020 spring, one of the most abundant for decades, was palpable. "It's spectacular," he wrote to Gayford. "And I'm getting it down." Instantly, in those early days of the pandemic, the work became a source of hope and solace to a fearful public with his vivid iPad paintings of landscapes and still-lives from his garden, made as the world locked down around him, appearing on the front pages of newspapers and on the BBC news.

By now Hockney and Gayford's conversations had moved to FaceTime, Gayford with a glass of wine in Cambridge, Hockney with a beer in Normandy, happily intrigued by the weirdly distorting light effects a dodgy wifi signal could render on the screen. This book is Gayford's record of their exchanges placed within the context of a wider appreciation of Hockney and his work, of art history in general and of some pleasingly digressive musings on the "new things said and done by an old friend, and the thoughts and feelings they prompted in me". Gayford artfully deploys the notion of perspective, a longstanding artistic preoccupation for Hockney, as a recurring motif when examining the men's relationship as it evolves over time with their vantage points equally recalibrated by major events - the pandemic, Gayford having a minor heart attack in January 2020 which required a stent, as Hockney had 30 years earlier - and by small observations about gardens or sunsets or rain.

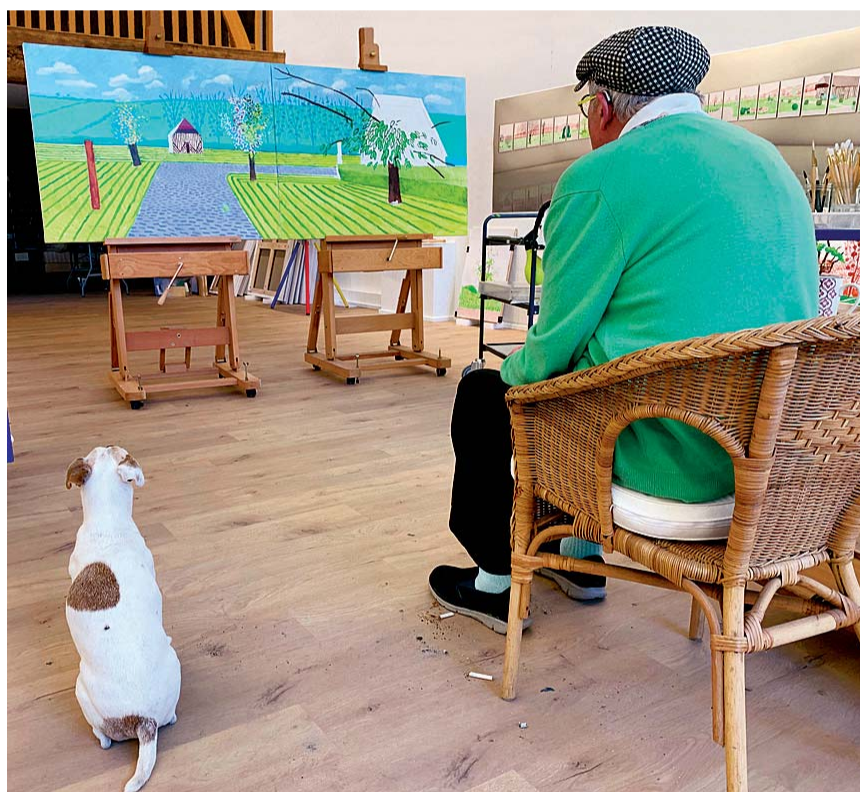
Gayford convincingly conveys Hockney's growing enthusiasm and energy for his task. When he alluded to Noël Coward's dictum that "work is more fun than fun", Hockney's rejoinder was to quote Alfred Hitch-

For someone so closely associated with his locations - blue California pools or muddy Yorkshire lanes - Hockney rarely stays in one place for long

cock's variation on the old saying "All work *made* Jack". Hockney's burst of productivity manifested itself in a constant stream of new images arriving in Gayford's inbox ready for distanced scrutiny. Some of this work will feature in a new Royal Academy show due to open this May. Examinations of Hockney's lines made with crayons, charcoal, pencils and the ultra-thin marks



Clockwise from left: iPad paintings No. 599 (1 November 2020) and No. 263 (13 May 2020); David & Ruby in the Normandy studio



© DAVID HOCKNEY; JEAN-PIERRE GONÇALVES DE LIMA

available via an iPad led Gayford to ruminations on drawings by Rembrandt and Van Gogh. Paintings of the garden expanded into thoughts on Monet. Mention of the work of Hockney's support team - Hockney often says "we" rather than "I" - spilled into assistants as a sub-genre of art taking in Velázquez, Tintoretto, Rubens, Warhol and Lucian Freud.

Gayford is a thoughtfully attentive critic with a capacious frame of reference and his brief excursions into houses in art, Hockney's reading (Flaubert, Proust, Julian Barnes), his musical tastes (Wagner), and that almost definitive Hockney subject, the depiction of water - described by Hockney as always a "nice problem" for an artist - consistently illuminate both Hockney's work and the other artists his work brings to mind. (It should be added that the reader can see in the comprehensive illustrations almost everything Gayford mentions.)

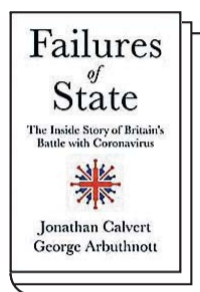
While Picasso is the artist Hockney most often talks

about, Gayford cites more often another favourite, Van Gogh, who liked to attach little sketches to his letters much like Hockney does with his emails. Living in the scruffy outskirts of Arles, and somewhat isolated as no one much liked him, Van Gogh just got on with making memorable and beautiful art with what was around him. The unprepossessing flat farmland of Hockney's Yorkshire and now Normandy would similarly be seen as not obviously ripe locations for such close inspection, but as Gayford says, the moral is that "it is not the place that is intrinsically interesting; it is the person looking at it". Following the spring Hockney continued to capture his four acres through the summer and the harvest and the glimpses of autumn moons in anticipation of this year's spring, for which he was intending to ban visitors to his home from March to May, lockdown or not.

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Politics } A damning assessment of the British government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic

Jonathan Freedland



Failures of State: The Inside Story of Britain's Battle with Coronavirus by Jonathan Calvert and George Arbuthnott, *Mudlark* (£20)

right. At this moment, polls suggest a nation grateful to be vaccinated efficiently and at speed, with case numbers and deaths falling daily, schools open once more and the first sound of the key being turned on a lockdown that has seemed to last for ever. Spring is in the air and people are itching to break free. Those chunky Tory poll leads do not suggest a public eager to immerse itself in the horrors of the last year and work out what went wrong and who to blame.

That time will come, however, and when it does, this book will serve well as the charge sheet. More than that, it reads like the first draft of the report that will one day be delivered by the inevitable public inquiry, even if it is balder and more scathing than those texts, written in mandarin English - indirect, coded, implied - usually dare to be. If you've ever wondered what an actual catalogue of disaster might look like, look no further. *Failures of State* is a Christmas-at-Argos sized catalogue of the government's errors, filled with its mistakes, misjudgments and its possibly actionable crimes (it quotes lawyers who believe Johnson could be charged with "gross negligence manslaughter").

The authors are Jonathan Calvert and George Arbuthnott, investigative journalists and custodians of the storied Insight brand at the Sunday Times. There might be the odd Guardian reader who assumes the Murdoch press would never lay a glove on this Tory government. They should have been parted from that misconception when Calvert and Arbuthnott published last April what they tell us is the most read story in the online history of the Times or Sunday Times, an evisceration of Johnson's pandemic response that was headlined "Coronavirus: 38 days when Britain sleepwalked into disaster", revealing among other things that Johnson had failed to attend the first five Cobra

Publishing, like politics and comedy, is all about timing. The timing is not right for this book, which is a damning assessment of how the UK government of Boris Johnson mishandled almost every aspect of the coronavirus crisis, so that Britain suffered both the highest death toll in Europe and an economic slump more devastating than in any other G7 nation. The timing is off because of the one thing the government got

meetings called to marshal the UK's response. But *Failures of State* surely settles the matter.

Some acts of negligence are, like that serial Cobra truancy, already well known. Still, there is a value in having laid out before you just how costly, for example, Johnson's repeated delay in introducing lockdown proved to be. Three times it was screamingly obvious that the public would have to stay at home if the virus were to be reined in, and three times Johnson waited and waited.

There is poor judgment wherever you look, leaving the reader by turns baffled and furious all over again. We read of the cabinet row in late March, when the first lockdown had already begun, over whether to close the country's borders to flights from known virus hotspots. No, said the Foreign Office: that would complicate efforts to bring home Brits stranded abroad. All right, thinks the reader, then surely the government would close the borders once all returning Brits were safely back. But no. The flights kept coming.

There are lesser-known horrors in the catalogue too. The authors are keen to explode the comforting narrative that the NHS coped with the pandemic even at its peak, and that everyone got the care they needed. They report that some hospitals were forced to ration treatment according to guidelines that struck doctors and nurses as "Nazi-like", denying intensive care to those who scored too high on three metrics: age, frailty and underlying conditions. Whole categories of people - the old, the weak, the disabled - were denied the critical care that might have saved their lives.

Incredibly, the guidelines were so rigorously enforced that in one Midlands hospital, dozens of intensive care beds lay empty, kept free for younger,

Three times it was screamingly obvious that the public would have to stay at home if the virus were to be reined in, and three times Johnson waited

fitter patients, while those over-75 were left dying on regular wards, without even being offered non-invasive ventilation. It meant that of the patients who died at the height of the pandemic in April, just 10% had received any intensive care.

Calvert and Arbuthnott have exposed the failings of the PM, his ministers, advisers and many others.

What, perhaps, is missing - besides a fuller look at the scandal of test and trace, with its indefensible £37bn price tag - is the larger accusation hinted at in the title: the failures of the state that made this disaster likely, regardless of who was in charge. Is there a more deep-rooted arrogance and complacency, a lack of care, that went beyond, and predated, Johnson and Dominic Cummings? That question might have to wait. For now, this is the book to throw at those who were meant to protect the public and failed. This vaccine spring may not be the moment for that reckoning. But it will come, one day.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.

'I'm easily crushed'

Edward St Aubyn tells *Hadley Freeman* about friends, enemies and trying to escape 'Planet Melrose'



Most interviews in the lockdown era are conducted by video, but the novelist Edward St Aubyn and I are talking by old-fashioned telephone because, his publicist warns me beforehand, “Teddy doesn’t do Zoom.”

Of course he doesn’t. In truth, it’s a surprise that Teddy does telephones, because he often gives the impression that his presence in prosaic 21st-century London – as opposed to early 20th-century Russia alongside his great-uncle Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich, or 19th-century Britain with his great-grandfather, the Liberal MP Sir John St Aubyn, first Baron St Levan – is an administrative error shortly to be rectified.

His novels satirise the foibles of the world around him with the savagery of a true insider, such as when he takes on the petty snobberies of social climbers, and the bemusement of one who finds the modern world a frequent source of frustration. *Mother’s Milk* – the fourth book in his Patrick Melrose series – was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 2006; it didn’t win, but he metabolised the experience into 2014’s *Lost for Words*, in which he described literary prizes with the horrified amusement of an alien gazing upon bizarre human rituals. (Alas, not even mockery could save him from being subjected to such indignities again: *Lost for Words* won the Wodehouse prize for comic fiction.)

His accent out-poshes the royal family: “house” is “hice”, “haven’t” is “huffn’t”, as in “I huffn’t got a second hice to escape to,” which he says to me, twice, when discussing his experience of lockdown. He says this with the wistfulness of one who lives in a milieu in which multiple homes are the norm, but also with the self-mockery of a man burdened with the kind of painful self-awareness not usually associated with his class. Judging purely from his background (aristocratic) and schooling (Westminster, Oxford), St Aubyn should wholly be a paragon of privilege and entitlement. But appearances are deceptive. He has a habit of hesitancy that I initially mistake for aloofness but turns out to be anxiety: “I’m always so nervous in interviews because I assume I’m going to make a fool out of myself. It’s odd, it hasn’t got any better since we last spoke. Yah! You would have thought that my paranoia would get eroded over time, but it remains defiant,” he says with an embarrassed laugh.

This is the second time I have interviewed him, and although he sweetly pretends to remember our encounter 14 years ago (“But of course!”), he didn’t read the interview. “I never read things about myself. Not because I’m so lofty – on the contrary, it’s because I’m so easily crushed,” he says, and I believe him. Behind the plaster prestige is a fragile core that he works very hard to stabilise. He used to do this by alternately injecting speed and heroin, but he’s been clean since 1988 and so now relies on coffee “to try to be intelligent” followed by beta blockers “which then make me feel stupid”, he sighs.

Edward St Aubyn

His novels have a similar push and pull dynamic. Alongside the outwardly directed satire, the writing plunges inwards and excavates wounds, not least in the Melrose series, in which he fictionalised his own life, from being sexually abused by his father, to extreme drug addiction in his 20s, to anxious but loving fatherhood (St Aubyn has two children from previous relationships). But his books are not navel-gazing and the perspective often swoops between the characters, creating a mosaic of voices.

“That’s probably due to the disastrous plasticity of my personality, which was once completely shattered,” he says. He depicts this shattering in *Bad News*, the second Melrose book, in which Patrick, strung out on drugs, is tormented by dozens of internal voices. “I glued myself together again, but some of that plasticity is still there, and I do slip into the characters and feel like I’m hearing what they’re saying.”

St Aubyn is talking to me from his home in west London. He is especially nervous today because he is promoting (“defending”, as he puts it) his new novel, *Double Blind*, which he sweated over for seven years. “There’s a danger of my other books getting ignored because the five Melroses have such a gravitational field to them. I knew *Lost for Words* and *Dunbar* wouldn’t achieve escape velocity from Planet Melrose,” he says, referring to the books he’s written since publishing the final part of the Melrose series, *At Last*, in 2012. “But I hope that *Double Blind* will.”

I hope so too: writing about his past helped to free St Aubyn from it, but he did it so well that he doomed himself to being asked about it for ever by journalists and fans, especially since “Planet Melrose” was turned into a Bafta-winning TV series for Sky Atlantic in 2018, starring Benedict Cumberbatch and written by David Nicholls. Like the Melrose books, *Double Blind* features elements from St Aubyn’s own experiences (“What else have we got to work with?”), including a character undergoing treatment for a brain tumour, just as St Aubyn’s girlfriend Sara Sjölund did, and he captures the terror of hospitals, the uncertainty of the future. “I was in those rooms with her,” he says simply.

Double Blind is a book of big ideas, in which the characters experiment with medicine, psychology, narcotics, religion and meditation to understand themselves and find peace.

‘There’s a danger of my other books getting ignored because the five Melroses have such a gravitational field to them’

He tells me several times that *Double Blind* is very different from the Melrose books, and it is, but all of St Aubyn’s novels are ultimately about the desire to break beyond the prison of one’s own subjectivity. He once described his mind as “a nest of scorpions” and the only drugs he feels nostalgia for – and he writes about them fondly in



Double Blind - are “ones from the psychedelic realm, because they’re the quickest way to dissolve the subject/object division: you imagine the racing heart of the bird on the branch and you flow into the bird and the bird flows into you,” he trails off wistfully. These days, instead, he flows into his novels’ characters and the characters flow into him.

A desire to escape oneself begins with a desire to escape unhappiness. “Obviously if you think: ‘It’s absolutely great being me and there’s no room for improvement’” - he laughs at the thought - “then there’s little incentive. But that’s not been my problem.”

St Aubyn grew up in London and France. His mother, Lorna, was an American heiress whose maternal skills he describes as “incompetent”, and his father, Roger, was a frustrated musician and a rapist. The first time he raped his son, St Aubyn was five years old. He describes this in *Never Mind*, the first Melrose book, and young Patrick imagines he is a gecko climbing the wall, “watching with detachment the punishment inflicted by the strange man on a small boy”. Patrick’s sense of self shatters, and in *Double Blind* St Aubyn looks into the connection between childhood abuse and schizophrenia. His father continued to abuse him for years.

As a child, St Aubyn dreamed of being the prime minister, “now rather a discredited ambition”, because he wanted to make speeches that would change the world. “I suppose that has an obvious psychological origin, in that I so much wanted to persuade everyone around me to behave radically differently,” he says. When he realised he had “a mortal terror of speaking in public”, he focused instead on writing. But he did make one monumental speech: when he was eight he told his father to stop

assaulting him, and he did. “It was a short speech. But it changed the world.”

It has long been rumoured that St Aubyn wrote another world-stopping speech: the eulogy read by his friend Charles Spencer at Princess Diana’s funeral. In the past he’s refused to comment on this but today he asks to go on the record: “I’m really bored on Charlie’s behalf that that rumour has gone around and I’d like it firmly denied by me. Before I thought I shouldn’t speak because it was unfair on Charlie to have such intrusive press in his life, but I think that was wrong. Charlie’s an excellent writer, he didn’t need me to write that speech,” St Aubyn says, and for the first time I catch a glimpse of something close to imperiousness.

Most of St Aubyn’s books include a thank you to the writer Francis Wyndham, who died in 2017 and was one of many quasi-paternal figures in his life. “I think inevitably someone like me who had an unsatisfactory relationship with their father will look for benign adults who do things normal fathers do,” he says. Other father figures included the director Mike Nichols and artist Lucian Freud, and the quality that united them was their “unalloyed

Benedict Cumberbatch in Patrick Melrose

support and enthusiasm” for St Aubyn (his own father, of course, gave him neither). “Being admiring is always a sign of strength,

whereas other people feel they’re losing something if they admire someone else,” he says.

One person who perhaps demonstrates the latter tendency is St Aubyn’s former friend, Will Self. In Self’s 2018 memoir, *Will*, he writes about a man called “Caius” who bears an unmistakable resemblance to St Aubyn. When Caius eventually tells him that his father sexually abused him, Self’s response is to sulk: “[Caius] got everything, whether they be material things and even these extreme experiences, which, self-annihilatory or not, would undoubtedly make good copy.”

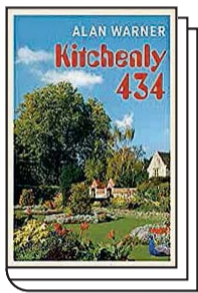
I tell him that it was the most bizarrely bitter thing I’d ever read.

“What a pity. He’s an odd person. I think he’s very unhappy and I’m sorry about that, but he certainly doesn’t go to any trouble to disguise it,” he says.

St Aubyn is currently enduring the enervating effects of long Covid, “which have certainly gone on long enough for me”, yet our conversation continues long past our allotted time slot, and the more we talk, the less anxious he sounds. Before I leave him to recuperate I ask why his parents gave him the cuddly nickname “Teddy”, given how uncuddly they were. “It came about because the ancestor I’m named after was known as Teddy, so there was that. It is a cuddly name but it’s not a guarantee of cuddliness: Teddy Roosevelt used to go off shooting elephants! But I hope I make the grade,” he says, and he gives another self-mocking laugh, but this time it’s shot through with something that sounds almost like optimism ●

Narrated by a rock star's odd job man, this gleeful satire on 1970s England concentrates 20 years of cultural change

M John Harrison



Kitchenly 434
by Alan Warner,
White Rabbit, £18.99

Kitchenly Mill is the idyllic East Sussex retreat of Marko Morrell, guitar hero with 70s rock band Fear Taker. It is a seriously moated Elizabethan mansion, with Arts and Crafts restorations and contemporary architectural additions. It's a work of love, and clearly an object of love for Morrell's pre-fame side-

kick, Crofton Clark, who narrates. Alan Warner's ninth novel, like his earlier work in *Morvern Callar* or *The Sopranos*, layers together music, culture and individual psychology so they seem to become a single, composite material; and it does so under a biblical epigraph - Luke 16.2: "Give an account of thy stewardship."

If Crofton loves Kitchenly, he worships Morrell, whose Fender Strat makes the "mighty noise of consequence and of economic empowerment". He's been around Fear Taker since the beginning, deriving his entire identity from the association. Just what his place in the Kitchenly world might be these days - well, that's the meat of a novel that begins in a kind of English uncanny valley, moves through an unforgiving comedy of errors, and culminates in fierce acts of realism. It's 1979: record sales have dropped. Accountants and record company suits hover like exterminating angels over the wreckage of the rock project.

Crofton is the only one who doesn't get it. He trudges around the house and grounds, stiltedly laying

out his days for us in a mixed language deriving from architectural heritage journalism and music-mag hagiography. ("Like a leaking nuclear power station," he tells us, "the radiation of Marko's vast talent, his mystique, settled and shimmered like dusk on the tops of telephone wires ...") He's obsessed with boundaries and trespass, and a silent intruder he keeps glimpsing in the grounds. He senses something out of joint, but at night, when his rounds are done, he'll put on his *Magic Roundabout* slippers as usual, set his Mickey Mouse alarm clock, reread his collection of Creem magazines.

By the time you've heard all this you are beginning to tire of his odd-job life, his misogynistic, unproductive fantasies about women and his comically failed outings in His Master's Ferrari, with its deliciously "curved, bulbous rear". He has too many memories of triumphs not his own, while all you want to know is what - if anything - is going to happen next. How will his confinement be broken open? But Warner is a merciless jailer and *Kitchenly 434* a gleeful satire about owning and being owned - by places, people, ideas and economic systems. Crofton must serve his full sentence before the author reluctantly releases him.

Meanwhile, perhaps not content to be seen solely as the metaphor of Marko Morell's waning cultural influence, Kitchenly Mill develops a rich character of its own. Warner's quiet parodies of heritage writing are abetted by Mark Edward Geyer's illustrations of the building, and include an extended "quote" from Nikolaus Pevsner himself, that obsessive recorder of the English country house, who in his classic *Buildings of England* described the house as "a summation of England's history in solid form". In the end, Kitchenly Mill is almost exactly that - a late-70s version of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*, a sardonic mirror of the historical entrapment of its inhabitants in which the character of Flay the butler has been reimagined by a team including Jonathan Meades and Will Self.

This is a gristly, enjoyably intractable book, which concentrates 20 years of cultural change. As well as drugs and rock'n'roll - and, perhaps more importantly, money'n'status - it covers everything from sexual politics to the curious asexual male-groupie syndrome

A late-70s version of Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast

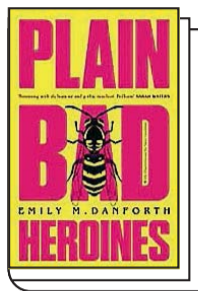
that reached its peak in the figure of the 70s roadie. If you want to know anything, indeed everything, about the general history of the

music, *Kitchenly 434* is your manual. But one of its most interesting features is the way in which Warner uses the image of the house itself as a bridge between the cultural hollowness of the pre-Thatcherian interlude and the retrofitted fantasy of England that would soon emerge: Albion as a sort of giant walled garden littered with unachieved futures and the beautiful houses of the past.

M John Harrison's The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again is published by Gollancz. To buy a copy of Kitchenly 434 for £16.52 go to guardianbookshop.com.



{ Horror } Hauntings, destructive passions and killer wasps in a delicious doorstep of super-queer terror *Sarah Ditum*



Plain Bad Heroines
by Emily M Danforth,
Borough, £14.99

“I wish someone would write a book about a plain, bad heroine so that I might feel in real sympathy with her,” wrote the North American memoirist Mary MacLane in 1902. *Plain Bad Heroines* wears its debt to MacLane on its sleeve, starting with an excerpt from her teenage con-

fessional *The Story of Mary MacLane*, and then repaying that debt with not one, not two “plain bad heroines”, but a whole cast of them, scattered across the 20th and 21st centuries, doing their bad deeds from Rhode Island to California and back again.

Why those places? Because they are the twin capitals of American horror, birthplaces respectively of HP Lovecraft and his nightmare derangements, and the slasher movie. And *Plain Bad Heroines* is a horror novel, a proper one: a big fat doorstep of super-queer terror that never runs out of ways to keep you deliciously disturbed.

In the early 19th century, MacLane’s (real) book reaches Rhode Island’s (fictional) Brookhants School for Girls, where its scandalous mix of sapphism and ego inspires the formation of a Plain Bad Heroines Society. But then two of the club’s members are killed by a freak swarm of yellowjacket wasps, one of their admirers dies strangely, and after that things get weirder still at Brookhants (pronounced “Brookhaunts”, a pun which the unnamed and omniscient narrator disowns with winning chutzpah: “I cannot help that the school’s name is Brookhants and that it’s said to be haunted”). The relationship between principal Libbie Brookhants and her dear companion Alexandra Trills is tested beyond natural limits.

Those events entangle three more Plain Bad Heroines in the present day. There’s Merritt Emmons, a one-time wunderkind who wrote a dazzlingly successful book called *The Happenings at Brookhants* when she was 16, and has entered her early 20s with nothing more to show but writer’s block. The book is now being turned into a film, produced by and starring the world’s hottest “celesbian” Harper Harper (her name is explained but I won’t spoil that here); the descriptions of Hollywood presumably draw on the adaptation of Danforth’s 2012 bestselling YA debut *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*.

And cast alongside Harper, there’s Audrey Hall, a young actor following unsteadily in the footsteps

of her scream queen horror-star mother. This is Audrey’s chance for a big break, so when the director explains that he wants her to conspire in creating a behind-the-scenes found-footage movie in which Merritt and Harper will be unwitting co-stars, she reluctantly agrees.

That brings our trio to Brookhants, and this is where things start to get really creepy. Which events are being orchestrated by the director, and which are legitimately supernatural? Could there really be a curse on Brookhants, and if so, when did it begin? With the deaths of the girls, with the tensions between Libbie and Alex, or with MacLane’s book, which seems to leave a trail of destructive passions wherever it’s found? Perhaps the trouble started earlier, when the Brookhants family home was built around an old folly known locally as “Spite Tower”, after a legend that it was erected to settle a score between two brothers by blocking a favoured view.

Danforth braids the layers of narrative together with expertise. She’s clearly a horror buff: besides Lovecraft, there are explicit nods to *Blair Witch*, Peter Straub, *Berberian Sound Studio*, M Night Shyamalan, *The Omen* and innumerable others. Another writer might have let the metatext choke the dread, but Danforth uses it to thrillingly corrode the reader’s own sense of reality: a recurring night-

While horror has historically drawn its evil life from repressed sexuality, Danforth wants more than frustration for her heroines

mare theme has the characters discover, or maybe hallucinate, that solid objects are made of the wood-pulp substance of the yellowjackets’ nest. Made of paper, in fact.

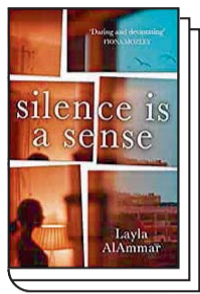
MacLane aside, there’s perhaps no writer with a stronger presence in *Plain Bad Heroines* than Shirley Jackson. Malevolent tower in sinister mansion? Fraught intimacies between

women? Hello, *The Haunting of Hill House*. But while horror has historically drawn its evil life from repressed sexuality, Danforth wants more than frustration for her heroines. Merritt laughs at Harper for suggesting Brookhants was “planet lady love” - these girls, explains Merritt, got a brief season of fooling around before being forced into straight society as wives.

What if that wasn’t inevitable? Death and misery were once the only imaginable outcomes for a lesbian or bi woman in fiction, but that isn’t so today. What if she could create her own world? *Plain Bad Heroines* is that creation: in this novel, everything that happens, happens between women. I’m not even sure there’s one conversation between two male characters - whatever the reverse of the Bechdel test is, Danforth defiantly flunks it. Her novel is beguilingly clever, very sexy and seriously frightening.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.

A refugee's traumatic memories mingle with shrewd observations about Britain and immigration *Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett*



Silence Is a Sense
by Layla AlAmmar,
Borough, £14.99

The unnamed narrator of *Silence Is a Sense* is a Syrian refugee who has been so traumatised by conflict and her perilous journey across Europe that she no longer speaks. Living in a nameless English city, she spends her days watching the residents of the estate she has come to call home, and writing

columns for a news magazine from a “refugee perspective” under the pseudonym “the Voiceless”. Her editor keeps pushing her for more memories, but she is unable to “stitch it all together into a coherent pattern”.

Layla AlAmmar understands trauma, how it fragments the memory and turns people into startled animals. The narrator recognises this in those around her: “the guy in the shop holding himself a little too rigidly ... the young mother whose eyes are constantly scanning the street”. Trauma rejects conventional narratives, a fact Home Office interviewers fail to understand. To be granted asylum, migrants must unfurl their horror for inspection; like our narrator, many are unable to stitch it into a coherent pattern.

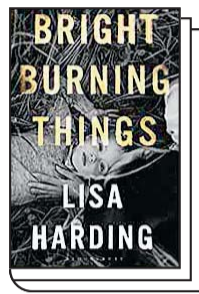
At times, the reader shares the editor’s feelings of frustration: just tell us what happened, you want to say. AlAmmar offers threads of information that hint at the terrors of war woven in with shrewd observations about Britain and immigration. Some people respond to the narrator with kindness, including the bookshop owner who lets her take books for free. Others are racist and aggressive. She feels the pressure to be a “good” immigrant. “Everyone here wants a story,” she says, “a nice little packet of memories.”

AlAmmar is pursuing a PhD on “the intersection of Arab women’s fiction and literary trauma theory”. This and other theoretical threads can be traced through the novel, and at times it feels as if it is responding to theory, rather than trauma itself. To readers, this may manifest in a certain failure of characterisation. The picture of this woman, like her memories, is cloudy.

Despite this, several clichés and some dialogue that doesn’t ring true, I admire this book. It is an intelligent, insightful novel that asks vital questions about how we can begin to express trauma, and in what form. It faces up to its linguistic challenges. It doesn’t quite meet them, but perhaps no words truly can. That, after all, is the nature of trauma.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.

A gripping quest for self-knowledge: a mother battles alcohol dependency in this raw and ferocious Irish novel *Jude Cook*



Bright Burning Things
by Lisa Harding,
Bloomsbury, £14.99

Like Masha in *The Seagull*, Sonya, the heroine of Lisa Harding’s intense and unnerving second novel, is in mourning for her life. Her Chekhovian name seems apt when we learn that “failed actress, failed mother” Sonya once triumphed in productions of Chekhov and Ibsen on the London stage, before finding herself single-

handedly bringing up her four-year-old son Tommy in the Dublin suburbs, battling alcohol dependency. There’s a lot to lament, and even more to rail against, in a novel that becomes a ferocious jeremiad against life’s suffocating forces.

After an eye-watering opening scene in which Sonya leaves her son while she takes a swim in her underwear, then returns home to sink a bottle of wine before blacking out while cooking fish fingers, her father stages an intervention. The result is a stay in rehab, and a heart-wrenching separation from Tommy, with no guarantee she’ll regain custody. While resisting the 12-step programme, she’s forced to reflect on how complicit she’s been in her own catastrophe: “I think of all the tall tales I spun in school ... Was I, even then, destined for this?” Later, there’s the poignant admission: “I just wish I could do life, in the ordinary sense.”

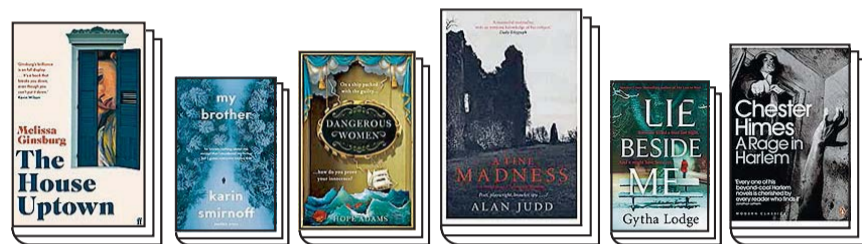
Only the appearance of David, a solicitor, counsellor and ex-addict, offers her any hope of rising from the ashes of her life into a future that might contain love and family. Yet she’s only too aware, to use Larkin’s phrase, that man hands on misery to man. Observing her fellow recovering addicts, she notes with a shiver: “These men, their lives seemed inevitable, their destinies charted from the moment they were born to their crackhead fathers, criminal mothers, junkies, alcos, selfish, stunted, addled parents. Like me. These men were born to mothers like me.”

It’s moments like this, and their hint of a redemptive ending, that carry the reader through harrowing pages of self-evisceration. Comparisons have been made between Sonya and Agnes, in Douglas Stuart’s *Shuggie Bain*, but Sonya is a singular creation: complex, contrary, drily funny in a characteristically Irish fashion. Written with energy and generosity, *Bright Burning Things* is the raw, emotional story of a woman’s search for self-knowledge; one that grips from the beginning.

To buy a copy for £12.74 go to guardianbookshop.com.

Books of the month

{Crime and thrillers} Feuds and family secrets in New Orleans; murder at sea; and the mystery of Christopher Marlowe
Laura Wilson



The titular dwelling in Melissa Ginsburg's second novel, **The House Uptown** (Faber, £12.99), is the New Orleans home of boho artist Lane. Her slow drift into dementia on skeins of marijuana smoke is interrupted by the arrival of her granddaughter Ava, whose mother, Lane's daughter Louise, has just died. The resourceful 14-year-old soon begins to wonder not only about the cause of the long estrangement between her mother and grandmother, but also about the behaviour of Lane's assistant, the apparently loyal Oliver. Told as a time-slip - the roots of the alienation date back to 1997, when teenage Louise witnesses the 2.30am arrival of Lane's local politician lover, blood-covered teenage son in tow - this is a superbly written, intriguing character study of how the past impacts on the present.

The sins of the fathers are visited appallingly on the children in the first book of Karin Smirnov's Jana Kippo trilogy, **My Brother** (Pushkin, £12.99, translated by Anna Paterson). When Jana returns to her childhood home in northern Sweden, she finds her twin brother Bror drinking himself into an early grave. It's hardly surprising: their father beat his family and raped his daughter, and their religious mother accepted their fates as the will of God, and relieved her feelings by embroidering doomy biblical messages, while the neighbours looked on and did nothing. Jana's lover John may have killed his wife, and most of the villagers seem as harsh and merciless as the weather, harbouring grudges and helpless in the face of each other's cruelty and betrayal. There's no conventional investigation here, but chinks of light appear as secrets are revealed and Jana begins to come to terms with the past. *My Brother* is challenging, certainly, but the fragile, sardonic Jana is a distinctive narrator, and if you can relax into the writing style (no capital letters except at the beginnings of sentences and the running together of words), it's well worth the read.

There's more embroidery, this time a neatly sewn death threat, in **Dangerous Women** (Michael Joseph, £14.99). Author Hope Adams has skilfully patched a murder mystery into a historical event - the 1841 voyage of the convict ship *Rajah* from London to Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania), during which the cargo of female prisoners created a quilt for the governor of their new home. The narrative tacks between past and present as we learn about the lives of the (fictional) transportees, the majority of whose crimes have been committed out of dire necessity, and of the (real) matron, idealistic young Kezia Hayter, who presides over the sewing and, when one of the women is stabbed, helps to find the culprit. Masterful plotting, well-drawn characters, and a plausible balance of despair for what was left behind and optimism for what lies ahead add up to an immensely satisfying read.

Alan Judd's latest novel, **A Fine Madness** (Simon & Schuster, £14.99), is another well-researched splice of fiction and historical fact, focusing on playwright Christopher Marlowe, whose death in 1593 - a stabbing in a Deptford tavern - has been the cause of much speculation, as has the extent of his work for Elizabeth I's spymaster, Francis Walsingham. Here, Thomas Phelippes, a real codebreaker and sometime right-hand man to Walsingham, is languishing in prison 30 years later when he puts quill to parchment at the request of King James, who - for reasons unknown to Phelippes - has asked for an account of the dead man. There follows a vivid tale of espionage, dissent and intellectual discourse, with the past brought to teeming, pungent life at a time when religion loomed large and the threat of death, from both humans and nature, was ever present.

Gytha Lodge's third DCI Sheens novel kicks off with the blackout drunk's worst nightmare: waking to find a stranger's corpse in your bed

Gytha Lodge's third DCI Jonah Sheens novel, **Lie Beside Me** (Michael Joseph, £12.99), kicks off with the blackout drunk's worst nightmare: waking to find a stranger's corpse in your bed. Louise Reakes remembers going to a club, but most of the evening is a blur; now she has a blood-soaked mattress and a dead man on her hands as well as a thumping hang-over. By the time Sheens arrives, the body has been relocated to the front garden, but although Louise is the prime suspect, it soon becomes clear that her best friend Amber and her husband Niall have things to hide, and the dead man isn't quite what he seems, either ... Secrets and self-sabotage abound in this gripping psychological thriller.

Lastly, Penguin Modern Classics is reissuing five novels by black American writer Chester Himes (1909-84) featuring hard-boiled detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones. Starting with **A Rage in Harlem** (£9.99) from 1957, these wholly original, disorienting and sometimes surreal books are a must for all crime fiction aficionados.

Lessons from literature

Josh Cohen

As an analyst I know that characters such as Jane Eyre, Clarissa Dalloway – and even Alice – can teach us a lot about relationships in lockdown

As my virtual consulting room reminds me hourly, listening feels like a precious commodity at the moment, when our curiosity is perpetually drowned by fear. When the first lockdown began, it struck me that the people I listened to in analysis sessions would often sound locked down imaginatively, pinned to the spot by the force and immediacy of their worries.

And the pandemic hasn't been the only thing menacing our capacity to listen. Toxic political divisions, stoked by demagogues and amplified in media bubbles, have turned those who think differently into the deadliest of enemies. The willingness and courage to listen to other voices can rarely have seemed in such short supply. This may be one way in which fiction can help. Think of Alice, wandering through the anarchic and disturbing dream worlds of *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* with such easy curiosity.

The boundary separating reality from illusion is much more porous for a child than an adult. Alice's favourite phrase, "Let's pretend!", is one most of us abandon somewhere on the road to adulthood, and some are deprived of the chance to utter in the first place. For the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, this is a source of many of the malaises of adult life; if we've not known what it is to pretend we cannot feel properly alive.

Alice offers us a kind of masterclass in aliveness. An expansive imaginative life like hers is rooted in the inner security that comes from being loved from birth, as another great fictional girl, Jane Eyre, confirms. At the point *Jane Eyre* begins, Jane has been stranded in the hostile confines of her Aunt Reed's home. Charlotte Brontë takes pains to let us know that this hasn't been her only emotional experience, that baby Jane's arrival was received with

joy by her parents before they succumbed to typhus, implanting in her a belief in her right to life and selfhood and a fierce protectiveness towards her own imaginative freedom.

After suffering public humiliation from the sadistic headmaster Brocklehurst, she tells her friend Helen Burns: "to gain some affection from you, or Miss Temple, or any other whom I truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest -".

Jane is effectively saying that the worst imaginable pain is preferable to the void of lovelessness. She makes an interesting contrast with Frances, the protagonist of Sally Rooney's *Conversations With Friends*. Both as a couple and as parents, Frances's mother and father are defined by a kind of emotional evasiveness, an inability to show the love they feel. Their withholding tendencies come to shape Frances's conception of herself as "emotionally cold", too distant from herself to know how or what she feels.

From the beginning of the novel, Frances lets us know just how much energy she invests in not giving herself away. Watching a shirtless Nick, the older man soon to become her lover, act on stage, she feels "a sting of self-consciousness, as if the audience had all turned at this moment to observe my reaction". Frances can access her inner self only through the eyes of others.

Perpetually at war with her own feelings, Frances gives us insight into sexual love as a region of danger, raging with volatility and turbulence. Unable to bear the sheer intensity of her emotional life, she obfuscates her own feelings, deceiving herself as much as others. She is a fine companion for our own feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt.

Such ideas have been particularly on my mind lately, as I've listened to men and women tell me of their marital struggles in lockdown. How are they to bear the unbroken intimacy enforced by their confinement, they ask, channelling Dorothea Brooke's lament in *Middlemarch*: "Marriage is so unlike anything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings."

This experience of marriage is brought to distressing life in countless great novels: *Middlemarch*; *Anna Karenina*; or the experimental writer Chris Kraus's 2006 contribution to the genre, aptly titled *Torpor*.

Torpor follows its couple – protagonist Sylvie and her partner Jerome – around Europe in 1991, as they bicker with a kind of genial sado-masochism, all the while pursuing a doomed plan to adopt a Romanian orphan. Kraus brings out the comedy of the "awful nearness" of coupledness, the way it traps its participants in torturous and oddly gratifying loops of the same arguments and resentments. The members of a couple are liable to obtain obscure gratification from their awful nearness to one another, to relish getting stuck in the torpor of their life together. So what would it mean to make that nearness less awful?

Few writers have thought about this question

more deeply than DH Lawrence. One chapter of *The Rainbow* begins with the extended voluntary confinement of a young newlywed couple, Anna and Will Brangwen, in their cottage and, for the most part, their marital bed.

The problem is that the couple can't be forever immune to the encroachments and pressures of the world outside. Anna feels a sudden and irresistible urge for "a real outburst of housework", which transforms Will at a stroke from languid love-god to nuisance: "'Can't you do anything' she said, as if to a child, impatiently. 'Can't you do your wood-work?'" leaving Will furious at his sudden superfluosity.

What could be more ordinary, banal even? Versions of this row are repeated in households everywhere, all the time. Lawrence's brilliance lies in his revelation of this little scene as a skirmish in an ongoing war of unconscious forces.

It's not about the feet getting in the way of the vacuum cleaner. It's more that the resulting twinge of irritation touches the edge of something bigger and much more frightening: all my external and internal space is shared with this person. Everything that happens to them happens to me. Everywhere I turn, they're there.

But this is the essential paradox of intimacy: in intensifying our closeness to another, we not only make them more familiar to us; we come alive to their strangeness and irreducible difference. Real closeness must involve the recognition of the other's need for separateness or else be mired in tragicomic torpor. This is the substance of Lawrence's dark and risky optimism about love and marriage, and it strikes me as holding special resonance for couples living through lockdown.

But if some people complain of the claustrophobic intimacy of marriage, others, perhaps especially if

Real closeness must involve the recognition of the other's need for separateness or else be mired in tragicomic torpor

they are older, will speak of a gulf in contact, of a loneliness that their partner's presence only amplifies. How do we live with such emotional disappointment?

Few novels offer a richer response to this question than Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, her account of a sunny day in the life of the disappointed wife of a Tory MP. Long past childbearing,

celibate and cloistered in a single bedroom, Clarissa experiences "the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown". She is fearfully attuned to "the dwindling of life".

But the paradox of *Mrs Dalloway* is that it is in precisely this unpromising inner landscape that we can find remarkable experiential riches. The desperate, inchoate "unhappiness" Clarissa feels is only the warp to the weft of the overwhelming "love of life" that can just as easily overwhelm her. Even her loss of youthful energy and hope becomes an eerie kind of joy. What Clarissa means by the joy of "having done with the triumphs of youth" is a sense of happiness no longer being projected into an endlessly deferred, elusive future; suddenly, fleetingly but unmistakably, it's right here, waiting for us in the faces of the people and things around us.

This strikes me as a fitting wisdom for our current confinement. There is no comfort for the lives and material security and freedom lost to the pandemic. But buried in these losses is a gain of sorts: the chance to stop searching frantically for meaning and pleasure everywhere else and find it where we are ●

Clockwise from main: Mia Wasikowska as Alice; Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*, the 2002 film based on *Mrs Dalloway*; Ruth Wilson as Jane Eyre



The sound of silence

This week's protests against sexual violence have seen women sharing stories of harassment and assault. It's time that men spoke up, argues *Anne Enright*

Rapists are not a talkative lot. They don't discuss the deed much, after they have been caught. And you might think this is because they feel remorseful, but often they don't seem to know that they have done something wrong. Or they know that they have done something illegal, but the act itself is fine by them. They admit to nonconsensual sex "but not rape". They admit to rape but not to blame: "I felt I was repaying her for sexually arousing me," a man in one of the few studies says.

On a Reddit forum where, at the onset of the #MeToo revolution, my soul went to die, men wrote "from the other side" of sexual assault. Their accounts implied covert participation - "She just had this unusually sexual way of carrying herself" - or active reciprocation: "In my mind, at the time, she wanted it." This man looked at the woman's face and realised he had been mistaken.

A few things are striking about the comments: one is that desire - and I think this is true for women also - turns the sexual object into a fragmented object. When people are having sex, they can get a bit lost in it. We do not always look into our lover's eyes, not all the time, so yes it is a good idea to check back with the entire person to see if your needs are still aligned. The sense of entitlement is, with the vengeful or narcissistic types, always breathtaking. This is something society does not encourage or allow in women, for which you might almost be grateful. Who wants to be like that? There is also the mechanism of blame, that magical projection machine. These men speak as though arousal comes



DAN KITWOOD/GETTY; FRAN VEALE/GETTY

from somewhere outside the self, and that it, even more strangely, continues to happen outside the self. There is no reality check. She started this. She wants this. It comes from her.

The courts don't laugh at these projections, they magnify them. We have all seen women destroyed by a justice system that puts them on trial for being attacked. The courtroom discussion becomes all about the victim, her clothes, her "mistakes", while the perpetrator remains a blank.

This gap in the argument is an odd absence that requires a lot of energy to maintain. This is why strange things happen in court: why a woman's thong is waved by the defence, as in a case in Cork last year; or a woman's silence during a gang rape is taken as a sign of her enthusiasm, as happened in a 2019 trial in Pamplona, Spain. A good part of female outrage, the years of #MeToo, has been taken up by raw disbelief. These courtroom arguments are a bit mad. They are also a distraction from the man in the dock. There is a kind of trick happening here.

Men do not just disappear in court, they disappear from the discussion, they disappear from the language we use. Rape is described as "a women's issue". We speak of "women's safety concerns", not "concerns about men's violence". We call it "an abusive relationship" as though the relationship were doing the abusing, or an "abusive home" as though the walls were insulting the occupants for fun. The notorious line "she was asking for it" is not so different to "a woman was raped"; both take the rapist out of the sentence.

Male agency is routinely removed from descriptions of male violence, and this helps men get away with it. I still can't figure out the contradiction, though, that the violent assertion of male potency also involves a kind of vanishing act. It seems very self-defeating.

The American theorist and activist Jackson Katz is one of the few men who states the obvious fact that men's sexual violence is first of all an issue for men. He also says male silence about this so-called "women's issue" is a form of consent. His remarks about the use of the passive voice hit Twitter in a week of renewed social unrest about sexual crime. "When you look at that term, 'violence against women', nobody is doing it to them. It just happens. Men aren't even a part of it!"

In his popular TED talk Katz describes men's ability to go unexamined as "one of the key characteristics of power and privilege". We do not talk about men, because that is the way they like it. For Katz, a tendency to blame the victim is not about sex or even gender, it is just what humans do. "Our whole cognitive

structure is set up to blame victims," he says. Katz teaches a bystander programme, in which he urges men to interrupt other men

Tributes to Sarah Everard on Clapham Common, London; Anne Enright, above



who talk abusively about women. He wants us to know that this is not a call for greater sensitivity, however - he seems to realise how sensitive men can get when you ask them to be "sensitive" - no, this is a leadership thing, "because the typical perpetrator is not sick and twisted. He's a normal guy in every other way, right?"

Well, how would I know? I can't say if a perpetrator is a "normal guy" because I am not a guy, and the men who do know are saying nothing. I do think misogynists are "twisted" because of the way they twist the truth of their own psychology and I think

If I were a man I wouldn't be writing this because writing about rape, protesting against rape, and being raped are all women's work

some men are aware of this and some men are not.

Is that why society maintains a silence about rapists, because we secretly think that they are just "normal" guys, they are just "male"? It is possible that men worry this is the case and Katz wants to reassure them that their fantasies, their swagger do not automatically turn them into monsters. He is, very cannily, working with

and not against male bonding, which has a big role in the formation of male sexuality. But he is also accurate to the fact that most rapists do not commit other crimes. In social terms, they can be anybody.

Most rapists do not end up in jail. The rapists who do end up in jail, according to one American study, are also more likely to have committed non-sexual crimes. Work within this cohort shows that convicted rapists tend to start young, have female-hostile peer groups, like rape-pornography (which is more than 80% of pornography), often report feeling rejected in some way and suffer from a lack of empathy.

The vengeful sentence "I felt I was repaying her for arousing me," feels very familiar to women, who are long tired of the weirdness it contains. But the man who said it also seems to consider arousal to be a kind of punishment. It is not pleasant. It is unfair. The man who says, "This is her fault, she did this," feels as though he has been acted upon. He is passive, perhaps unbearably so. This man is taking himself out of his own desiring; you might say he is obliterating himself.

If I were a man, I might want to put my self back into the discussion, I might want to do a reality check. But if I were a man, I wouldn't be writing this because writing about rape, talking about rape, protesting against rape and being raped are all women's work. This despite the fact that the weekend of protests in London was also a weekend during which footage was circulated online of an RAF recruit being sexually threatened by a group of his peers brandishing a piece of military hardware. In America the figures show that one in six men has been the victim of sexual violence of some kind, as opposed to one in three women, and that 99% of the perpetrators are male. The difference between the victims, sadly, is that society has long been happy to blame the women ●

Books to help and inspire children

Katherine Rundell



This is a hard time to be a child. The world is already so painfully opaque for children; a pandemic is a bitter addition. There are, though, books that will help. There are books that will teach children the world is enormous, that history is still alive.

We're in, I think, golden times for children's fiction - there are books being published every year that tell children, loudly or quietly, through good jokes or wild escapades: *dig for the bravery that you did not know you had: reach for your edges and push. Archimedes yourself.*

Catherine Johnson is the master of historical fiction for children; her prose is warm and wise and utterly gripping. I love her **Freedom**, about Nat, born into slavery on an English-owned

plantation in Jamaica, and his journey to London - and **Race to the Frozen North**, an account of Matthew Henson, an African American who was among the team of Americans at the pole in 1909. The latter is published by Barrington Stoke, which specialises in dyslexic-friendly, short texts.

For children whose passion is the environment, **The Last Bear** by Hannah Gold, with illustrations by Levi Pinfold, is a lovely thing: the story follows April, who travels with her father to an Arctic outpost and meets a polar bear. What child does not long to do that? And, another kind of escape: EL Norry's **Son of the Circus** is a fictionalised account of Pablo Fanque, the first black circus proprietor in

Victorian Britain.

A Kind of Spark by Elle McNicoll is set in contemporary Scotland, and tells the story of Addie, an 11-year-old who, on hearing about the witch trials in her town, campaigns to establish a monument to their memory. The intensity of Addie's feeling for the persecuted women stems in part from her autism, in a beautiful and fiery debut from a writer who is herself autistic.

For sharp wit and sheer delight, Sharna Jackson is one of the most brilliant children's fiction writers in the country. I haven't yet met a child who has not loved her murder series, which begins with **High Rise Mystery**; and she is also the author of the **Tate Kids Modern Art Activity Book**: make your own Matisse snail, paint the shadows of a Turner sunset.

I love **The Lost Words**, by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris, a book of acrostic spell-poems

summoning up the natural world. Morris's art is alchemic; a golden, shining thing.

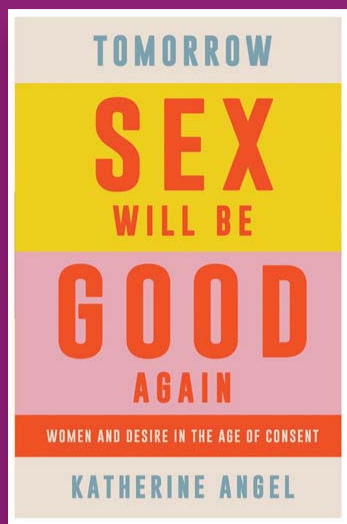
Finally - for children in need of a shot of raw hope - during lockdown I edited **The Book of Hopes**, a collection of work from 132 writers and artists. It has non-fiction writing by Piers Torday (author of the magnificent *Last Wild* - another book, with talking animals and a bossy cockroach, perfect for lockdown); fiction by Frank Cottrell Boyce; art by Axel Scheffler ...

It's a one-book cornucopia. Proceeds from the hardback go to NHS Charities Together. These are hard days to be young in, but there are books that will make the days feel shorter and the world larger, and that is wildly worth having.

The Book of Hopes: Words and Pictures to Comfort, Inspire and Entertain, edited by Katherine Rundell, is published by Bloomsbury (£12.99).

Tom Gauld



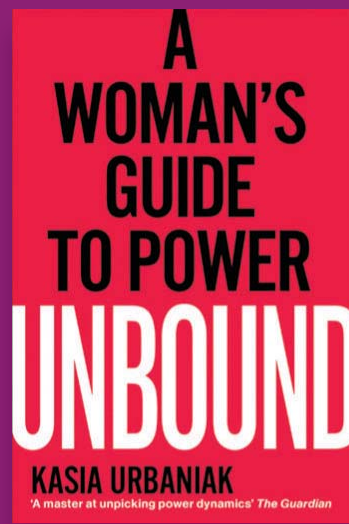


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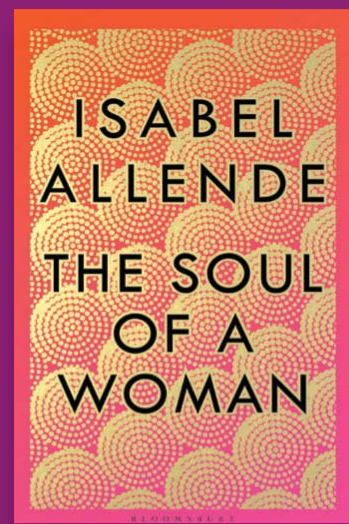


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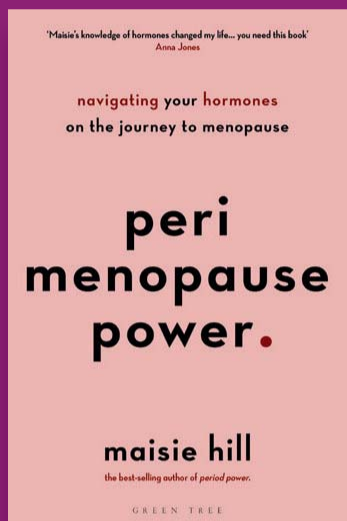
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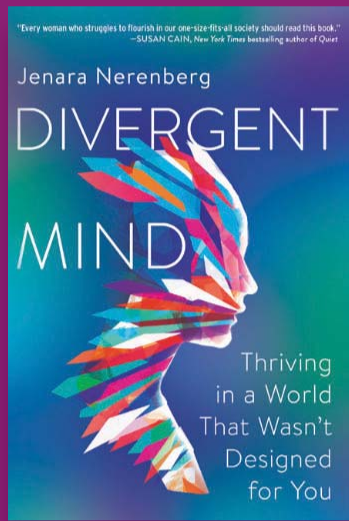
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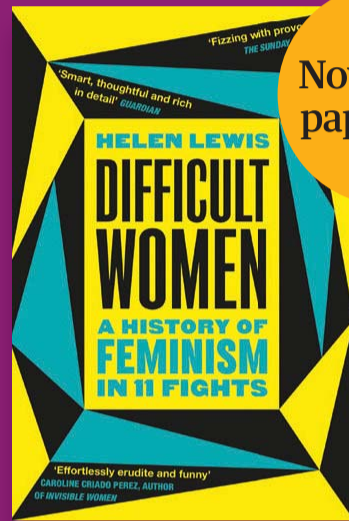
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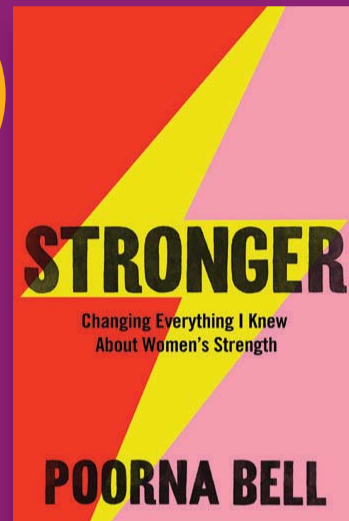


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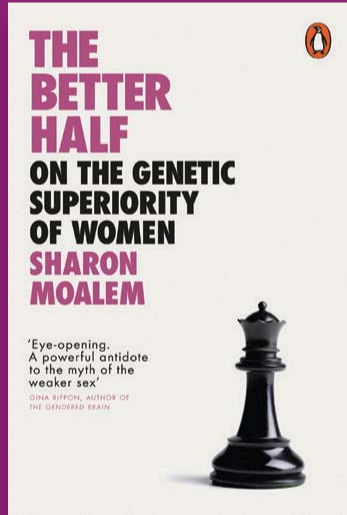


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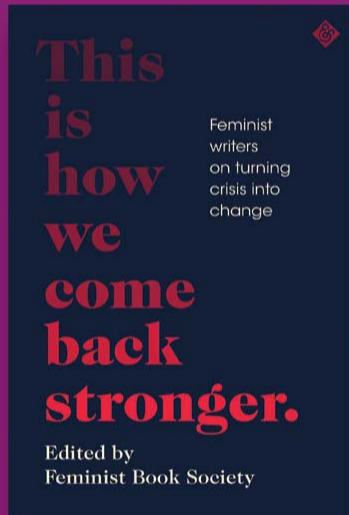
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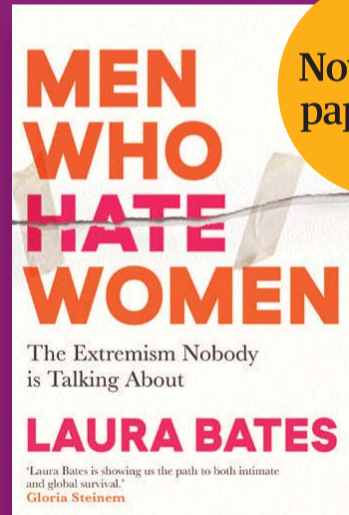
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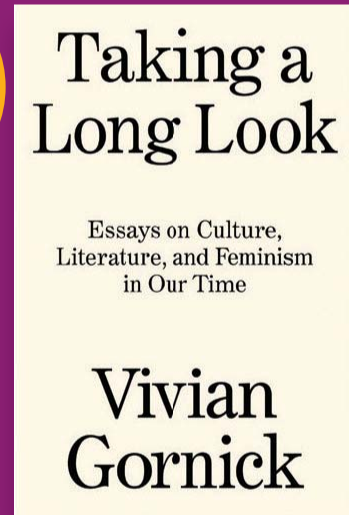


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