No. 6152
February 26 2021

the-tls.co.uk
UK £4.50 | USA $8.99

TLS

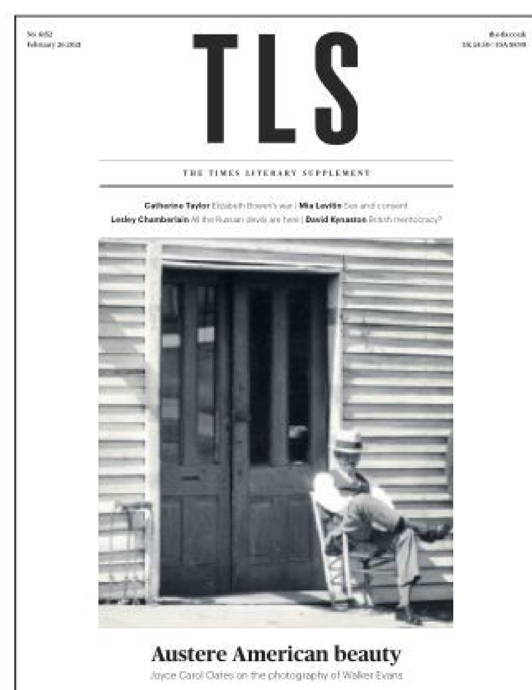
THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Catherine Taylor Elizabeth Bowen's war | **Mia Levitin** Sex and consent
Lesley Chamberlain All the Russian devils are here | **David Kynaston** British meritocracy?

Austere American beauty

Joyce Carol Oates on the photography of Walker Evans

CONTENTS



Cover image: "Barbershop Facade, Vicksburg, Mississippi" by Walker Evans © Sepia Times/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

In this issue

Whenever we try to visualize the rural America of the Great Depression we most likely see images created by Walker Evans. His understated portraits of poor Alabama sharecropping families, published with a passionate text written by James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, have become part of collective visual memory. Even people who have never heard of the great photographer recognize his gaunt, dignified subjects when they see them staring out from magazines and dust jackets. Yet it is easy to forget that a classic that has inspired composers, writers, social idealists and photographers alike began life as a failure. *Fortune* magazine, which had given Walker and Agee their original eight-week assignment in 1936, declined to publish the finished product because it was too pessimistic and Agee's prose too subjective. When the pair eventually took their work to a publisher in wartime five years later, the book sold 600 copies, only half its run. Evans had to wait until its reissue in 1960 before his photographs began to take on iconic status. By then, Agee had drunk himself to death.

Evans's assessment of his work was unsentimental: "I suppose I was interested in calling attention to something, even shocking people. But I don't think I had the purpose of improving the world thereby … I like saying what's what". In her *TLS* cover review of *Walker Evans* by Svetlana Alpers, the novelist Joyce Carol Oates pays tribute to a photographer who exuded "an obvious love of the American vernacular, the democracy of 'found objects', the 'enchantment of the aesthetically rejected subject'". Evans, who spent an unhappy but formative year in Paris in the 1920s, cited the unconscious influence of Baudelaire and, especially, of Flaubert - "both his realism or naturalism, and his objectivity of treatment". Alpers, an art historian, also sees an artistic resemblance between Evans and Cézanne: "Both of them … despaired and rejoiced in the practice of making images that would be in some way equal to the world".

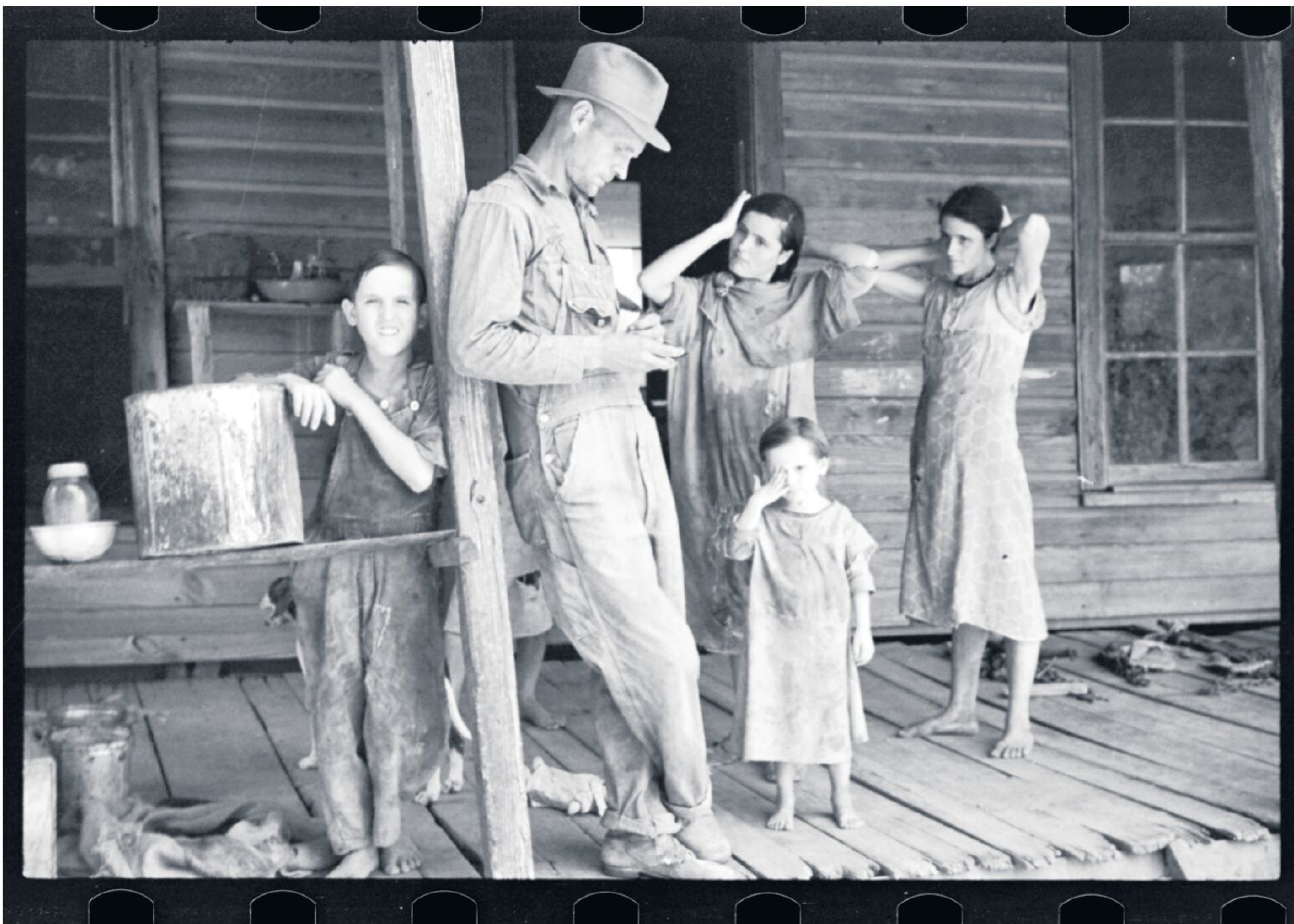
We rely on photographs taken by the Allies after the liberation of the Nazi death camps for pictorial evidence of the Holocaust. In his review of Wendy Lower's *Ravine*, Bryan Cheyette points out that there are only a handful of incriminating pictures taken from the side of the perpetrators because "producing documentary evidence in the act of mass murder was severely prohibited". The truth "threatened the security of the people". That's a phrase with a long life to it.

MARTIN IVENS
Editor

Find us on
www.the-tls.co.uk
Times Literary Supplement
@the.tls
@TheTLS
To buy any book featured in this week's TLS, go to shop.the-tls.co.uk

Page	Section	Reviewer	Review
3	PHOTOGRAPHY & HISTORY	JOYCE CAROL OATES BRYAN CHEYETTE	Walker Evans - Starting from scratch **Svetlana Alpers** The Ravine - A family, a photograph, a Holocaust massacre revealed **Wendy Lower**. Grief - The biography of a Holocaust photograph **David Shneer**
6	BIOGRAPHY & MEMOIRS	LEO A. LENSING	The Kindness of Strangers **Salka Viertel**. The Sun and Her Stars - Salka Viertel and Hitler's exiles in the Golden Age of Hollywood **Donna Rifkind**
8	LETTERS TO THE EDITOR		Samuel Beckett Studies, Richard Rorty and John Rawls, Ravenna, etc
9	JEWISH STUDIES	ABIGAIL GREEN TOM STAMMERS	What Are Jews For? - History, peoplehood and purpose **Adam Sutcliffe** Jewish Treasures - From Oxford libraries **Rebecca Abrams and César Merchán-Hamann, editors**
11	CLASSICS	DAN-EL PADILLA PERALTA	Roman Cult Images - The lives and worship of idols from the Iron Age to late antiquity **Philip Kiernan**
12	EDUCATION	DAVID KYNASTON	The Crisis of the Meritocracy - Britain's transition to mass education since the Second World War **Peter Mandler**
13	MEMOIRS	JONATHAN BAK	What Does Jeremy Think? - Jeremy Heywood and the making of modern Britain **Suzanne Heywood**
14	ARTS	COLIN GRANT LESLEY CHAMBERLAIN	Nomadland (Hulu) Devils. The Jester of Astapovo (BBC Sounds). Uncle Vanya (BBC iPlayer)
16	FICTION	ANNA ASLANYAN LAMORNA ASH DAVID HOBBS	Passages **Ann Quin**. Three **Ann Quin** Alexandria **Paul Kingsnorth** Dissipatio H. G. **Guido Morselli**; Translated by Frederika Randall
18	RE-READING & LETTERS	CATHERINE TAYLOR PATRICIA CRAIG	Collisions in the dark - Elizabeth Bowen's tales of past trauma and present discontents The Shadowy Third - Love, letters and Elizabeth Bowen **Julia Parry**
20	SOCIAL STUDIES	MIA LEVITIN MADHAVI MENON	Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again - Women and desire in the age of consent **Katherine Angel** The Good Girls - An ordinary killing **Sonia Faleiro**
21	POETRY	STEPHANIE SY-QUIA ANDRÉ NAFFIS-SAHELY	Cannibal **Safiya Sinclair**. Letters to America **Fred D'Aguiar** Every Day We Get More Illegal **Juan Felipe Herrera**
22	CHINA	KATE BROWN JEREMY BROWN	China Goes Green - Coercive environmentalism for a troubled planet **Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro**. The New Map - Energy, climate and the clash of nations **Daniel Yergin** China's Good War - How World War II is shaping a new nationalism **Rana Mitter**
24	IN BRIEF		A Balthus Notebook **Guy Davenport** A Dutiful Boy - A memoir of a gay Muslim's journey to acceptance **Mohsin Zaidi** The Commonwealth of Cricket - A lifelong love affair with the most subtle and sophisticated game known to mankind **Ramachandra Guha** Random Commentary **Dorothy Whipple** Black Sunday **Tola Rotimi Abraham** Touch of Evil **Richard Deming** The SS Officer's Armchair - In search of a hidden life **Daniel Lee**
26	JOURNALISM	A. N. WILSON	The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press - Volume Two: Expansion and evolution, 1800-1900 **David Finkelstein, editor**
27	CROSSWORD		
28	NB	M. C.	Writing machines, M. B. Goffstein goes fishing, Correspondence

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



No ideas, but in things

The quintessential American minimalism of Walker Evans

JOYCE CAROL OATES

WALKER EVANS
Starting from scratch
SVETLANA ALPERS
257pp. Princeton University Press. £34 (US $39.95).

> "I wasn't looking for a thing, things were looking for me" – Walker Evans.

Of great American photographers of the approximate first half of the twentieth century – a distinguished group that includes Alfred Stieglitz, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, Paul Strand, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Imogen Cunningham, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Berenice Abbott among others – it is Walker Evans (1903-75), with his characteristically spare, unadorned, deceptively simple and austerely beautiful photographs (rural churches, abandoned barns, scrapped automobiles, derelict wagons, signs, billboards and posters, barbershops, storefronts, "anonymous" persons), who has come to embody the quintessential American minimalism we admire in the prose of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and the early Ernest Hemingway of *In Our Time* (1924), the poetry of William Carlos Williams and the more vernacular music of Charles Ives, and the uncluttered dreamlike realism of Edward Hopper's paintings.

Williams's famous mantra "No ideas, but in things" (*Paterson*, 1946) is a helpful distillation of Evans's aesthetic of documentary lyricism: not abstract ideas, indeed not ideas at all, but objects should be the focus of attention, sometimes decontextualized in the interests of visual purity; where given a context, as in the beautifully understated portraiture in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), Evans's celebrated collaboration with James Agee, in which three sharecropper families are represented in formal poses outside their shingle-board houses in Depression-era Alabama, this context is itself minimal, straightforward. The aesthetic ideal is a kind of folk documentation that establishes the "authenticity of the past" by a selection of (symbolic) images linking the viewer to a violent history recollected in tranquillity: Confederate battlefield monuments, plantation houses in ruins, devastated graveyards.

Evans is a master of poetic absences: uniquely detailed domestic interiors that characterize their (absent) tenants, factories exuding a dispirited ugliness, acres of junked automobiles that startle the eye like fallen human figures. ("I like to suggest people sometimes by their absence. I like to make you feel that an interior is inhabited by someone.") Avoiding excess, pretentious allusions and distracting mannerisms of the sort that, in the self-consciously "artistic" photography of his acclaimed contemporary Alfred Stieglitz, Evans particularly disliked, Evans strove to cultivate a "puritan style" of an almost geometric precision. ("I was stimulated by Stieglitz. When I got around to looking at photography I found him somebody to work against. He was artistic and romantic. It gave me an aesthetic to sharpen my own again – a counter-aesthetic.") In the public lecture "Lyric Documentary", given in 1964 at Yale, where he was Professor of Graphic Design (1964-73), Evans expanded on the concept:

> The real thing I'm talking about has purity, and a certain severity, rigor, sympathy, directness, clarity, and it is without artistic pretension in a self-conscious sense of the word. That's the base of it: they're hard and firm.

Simplicity, directness, a reportorial respect for the world as it is observed by the eye without sentiment, irony, or experimentation: this is Walker Evans's lifelong aesthetic as a devoted chronicler of post-Civil War America. Like his contemporary William Carlos Williams, Evans exudes an obvious love of the American vernacular, the democracy of "found objects", the "enchantment of the aesthetically rejected subject".

Of the 143 photographic plates preceding Svetlana Alpers's 213-page text in *Starting from scratch*, virtually all are of "aesthetically rejected subjects" – faces careworn from poverty, homelessness, mental illness; façades of dilapidated rowhouses, Depression-era small towns; faded signs and tattered posters (some of them advertising minstrel shows); abandoned farm equipment. Alpers includes an Evans photograph of a city block in Selma, Alabama, in 1936, that replicates Edward Hopper's famous "Early Sunday Morning" (1930) – so much less serenely comforting in Evans's stark neutrals than in Hopper's mellow colours. With an eye for the "transcendent" detail as attentive as Evans's own, Alpers is an ideal interpreter of his work:

> There is a dignity in a wagon observed straight on, broadside, with loving attention. The wheels display a crafted elegance. At first, one might not notice that the farm wagon is a wreck. The wheels are awry, the body or floor broken and twisted out of shape. It is past use. The grasses and low branches mark its abandonment, but they also protect it. In effect, the attentive photograph minimizes loss.

And, so vividly described by Alpers that we can nearly see the (remarkable) photograph:

> ... in Atlanta, [Evans] went in and photographed an empty barber shop; titled *Negroes' Barber Shop, Atlanta, Georgia*, plate 6 in Part One of *American Photographs*. It is a photograph Evans elected to publish, and it is deservedly well known. Did he come upon this place when looking around the neighborhood of its customers? The interior, empty of people, a pair of vacant barber chairs swung to look away from the mirrors, is suggestive of life that had been there and would be there again. Towels are folded on the arms and head rests of the chairs, and more are waiting on the shelves. The headline of a newspaper tacked to the wall happens to include the name of Eugene Talmadge, the racist Democratic governor of Louisiana who, among other things, fought against the kind of government program that employed Evans. The neatness of it all, but also the simple poverty of it. It is the honorable nature of poverty that Evans's photograph insists on – with the Talmadge name as an impromptu reminder of another reality of the times.

In his long and prolific career Evans managed to entirely avoid celebrity portraiture: his dignified subjects are for the most part working-class, as in the series titled *Labor Anonymous: On a Saturday afternoon in downtown Detroit*. Alpers's selection of Evans's photographs isn't strictly chronological but suggests a subtle pattern: beginning with a striking photograph of 1936, "Corrugated Tin Façade", reaching back to include work of the 1920s, and ending, appropriately, with a melancholy "colour" photograph of 1973, "Dead End". Alpers's interest in the "unique" work of Walker Evans is an interest in the "making" of the photographs rather than in their interpretation: her approach is slow, patient, fastidious, detail-oriented, appreciative and illuminating; if her manner suggests that of an art history professor lecturing as she shows slides, it is conversational and rarely pedagogic. (Though she can't resist an occasional brusque aside: "I quote it in French [comments made to young Walker Evans by a French instructor] and shall not translate.")

Born in St Louis, Missouri in 1903 to "modest privilege", Walker Evans was initially drawn to literature, and considered photography "the most literary of the arts". A highly formative year (1926-7) in France awakened in the young Evans an enormous respect for the sharply precisionist prose of Gustave Flaubert and the hallucinatory poetry of Baudelaire; in time, Evans would come to be called "the Flaubert of photographers". Baudelaire was equally valued by the young Evans, as "a kind of god", and indeed he seems to have internalized certain obsessions of Baudelaire's for "things cast away, for debris" – "dirt and cigarette butts on a damaged road by a curbstone". In Evans's words:

> I wasn't very conscious of it then, but I know now that Flaubert's aesthetic is absolutely mine. Flaubert's method I think I incorporated almost unconsciously, but anyhow used in two ways: his realism and naturalism both, and his objectivity of treatment; the non-appearance of the author, the non-subjectivity. That is literally applicable to the way I want to use a camera and I do. But spiritually, however, it is Baudelaire who is the influence on me.

Evans's pronounced contempt for nature as a subject ("Nature bores me as an art form") is less idio-

Floyd Burroughs on Tingle porch, 1936

Joyce Carol Oates is the author most recently of the novel Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars *and* Cardiff, by the Sea: Four novellas of suspense, *both published last year. She is the recipient of the Prix mondial Cino Del Duca, 2020*

© LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, FSA/OWI COLLECTION

Street Scene, Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1936

syncratic if we see it as a predilection shared with both Flaubert and Baudelaire; in Evans, useful as a sort of cranky resistance to the greatly acclaimed work of his American contemporary (and rival) Ansel Adams as to other artists who'd exploited the natural beauty of the American landscape. A landscape by Walker Evans is likely to be a mock-landscape defiled by acres of rusting vehicles. (Alpers remarks, perhaps humorously: "Evans spoke out against nature every chance he had.") Perversely, though Evans preferred man-made artifacts to natural subjects, he was highly reactionary, and "dead set against progress". Allegedly, Evans "jumped for joy" during the Depression when he read of stockbrokers jumping out of windows. The title of one of Evans's photography features for *Fortune* magazine, "Before They Disappear", Alpers notes, is a title that could be applied to almost everything Evans chose to record. Though disapproving of sentimentality and nostalgia, Evans seems to have been obsessed with commemorating the old; writing of himself in the third person for the second edition (1961) of his acclaimed *American Photographs*, he notes approvingly: "Evans was, and is, interested in what any present time will look like as the past."

Not surprisingly, the individual who so lovingly photographed remnants of the past was an obsessive collector of old postcards (Evans's archive at the Metropolitan Museum of Art contains more than 9,000) as well as such "found objects" as worn and rusted roadside signs, even bottle tops. Alpers notes that walls in Evans's residence in Old Lyme were covered with objects and a mass of detritus "eventually covered all the available horizontal surfaces of the house". No doubt, Evans's fetishizing of such objects anticipated Pop Art in its most obvious, superficial features, but, as Alpers points out, there is really no comparing the reverential nature of Evans's "found objects" with the playful, parodistic, deeply ironic commentary on American pop culture by Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, or Wayne Thiebaud.

The "puritanical" nature of Evans's art lies in the wilful erasure of its creator: the "non-subjectivity" of Flaubert. Allegedly, Evans once called out to a friend as he took up his camera in a public place: "Watch me I'm going to disappear". Recording the artefacts of a culture rapidly vanishing around him – whether the aftermath of the defeat of the slave-holding South or the industrialization and dehumanization of the urban North – took precedence over self-conscious artistry and experimentation of the kind explored by Stieglitz, Man Ray, Lee Miller and (on occasion) Minor White; Evans preferred to be invisible in his work, as indeed he "invisibly" photographed unwitting subjects in his controversial *Subway Portraits* series (1938–41), descending into the New York City subway with a camera hidden inside his coat to take, covertly, more than 600 portraits: "I began to collect people with my eyes in the subway". What more potent metaphor for the photographer than the "penitent spy and apologetic voyeur ... armed with detachment ... they are quarry ... You alone are in armour .... I am stalking, as in the hunt".

Of the *Subway Portraits*, which Alpers finds "the strangest that Evans ever made", she observes:

> There is something eerie about the repetition of so many isolated, pale, fixed faces, most heads topped by a period hat and set on bodies rigidly placed against the windows, their frames, and the signage of a subway car. There is a disconnect between the camera's (and so our) undivided attention and the lack of anything in return. It is not only their anonymity but their being unaware of being seen that makes the people look strange. They remind one of haunted shots from newspapers of the period .... It's been suggested that Evans saw the "modern anonymity of his fellow citizens and the modern anonymity of his own medium." To me, it seems likely that it was something simpler, more basic: that in the strange, withdrawn state of the individuals down in the subway he found versions of himself.

Starting from scratch is a curious subtitle for a critical work that provides so much evidence for the influences of predecessors on its subject. Evans's "realist" photography is solidly in the tradition of the great Civil War photographer Matthew Brady, whom Evans acknowledged and much admired, and the great French photographer Eugène Atget, of whom Evans often spoke as a powerful influence. (Indeed, Alpers remarks that Evans was "overwhelmed by Atget".) Much of the work of Evans's contemporaries – Dorothea Lange, Helen Levitt, Berenice Abbott, Minor White, Edward Weston – resembles Evans's in its scale, ambition, sympathy for its subjects, and execution; it is not convincing, nor is it necessary, given this plenitude of talent, to argue for Evans's "uniqueness" as forcibly as Alpers does. (A more likely candidate for "uniqueness" in twentieth-century American photography is Ansel Adams.)

What engages Alpers in *Starting from scratch* is the nature of photography itself, what might be called its paradoxical relationship to reality. After a distinguished career as an art historian focused on the greatest of European painters – *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The studio and the market* (1990), *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* (1994), *The Making of Rubens* (1996), *The Vexations of Art: Velázquez and others* (2007) – Alpers takes up the subject of photography by an American of the twentieth century – a first for her, as she acknowledges in her introduction; indeed, it is the art historian who is boldly "starting from scratch" in a new field. (Alpers was born in 1936.) Initially, it was the "singularity" of the art-work (painting) that interested Alpers: the "making". By contrast, the "making" of photography isn't about singularity at all but about the possibility of infinite reproduction, thus infinite variants of an essential image, and infinite interpretations.

In a passage considering the distinction between artists who are determined to complete their work and artists who seem, instinctively, to resist completing it, Alpers is wonderfully revelatory:

> In the ongoing nature of his practice (which includes his dismissal of all fine printing), all of Evans's photographs might be likened to drawings in a sketchbook .... I [have] described Evans's striking unwillingness to favor one out of a series of images of the same subject as his acceptance of the inherent repetitiveness or multiplicity of the medium .... What is lacking with Evans is something equivalent to the lack of a finished painting by Cézanne. Here is a final twist that brings Cézanne's sense of painting close to Evans's sense of photographs: Cézanne, who famously found finishing a painting next to impossible, is similar to Evans in his reluctance to settle on an iconic print. Both of them rejoiced and also despaired in the practice of making images that would in some way be equal to the world.

> **"A landscape by Walker Evans is likely to be a mock-landscape defiled by acres of rusting vehicles**

It is really *Starting from scratch* that is a "unique" work: a close reading of classic photographs by a discerning eye (Alpers's) that conjoins the instructional with the intimate, the scholarship of the historian with the candour of the memoirist. By way of amplifying Evans's photographs Alpers finds kindred themes and motives in other artists as varied as William Carlos Williams, William Faulkner, Fred Astaire, Elizabeth Bishop, even Bob Dylan – connections that are tenuous in some cases, if not arbitrary, yet fruitful and always interesting. Excellent as much of *Starting from scratch* is, the book seems to gather a dramatic momentum as it proceeds, culminating in a brilliant and, indeed, thrilling final chapter titled "Turning In", in which Alpers considers the phenomenon of "late style" as it relates to artists other than Walker Evans:

> I myself come at the question of late style from a lifetime working on historic European art. The late style of masters like Titian or Rembrandt was a much cherished and much studied phenomenon. If artists in general were related to others through the period style in which they worked, what was notable about certain older artists is that they went off on their own, painting in a matter that was independent of others ... Think of the individual handling of the paint by Titian and by Rembrandt. Picasso's once ignored later works might be included under the rubric and also the surprising last works of Miró.

The "late styles" of Atget and Evans are considered: "They are, in great part, discoveries of [the photographers'] own pleasure .... Nearing the end, each man can be described as playing at losing himself in something he loved: Atget in landscapes, Evans in manscapes." This richly contemplative book ends with a poignant quote from Evans, from an interview given not long before his death in which he speaks, with excited enthusiasm, about a new camera he has discovered ("the Polaroid SX-70"):

> Oh, extend my vision and let that open up new stylistic paths that I haven't been down yet. That is one of the peculiar things about it that I unexpectedly discovered .... You photograph things you wouldn't think of photographing before. I don't even yet know why, but I find that I am quite rejuvenated by it. ■

Left: the subject photograph of *The Ravine*. Right: "Grief" by Dmitri Baltermants

SECURITY SERVICES ARCHIVE, HISTORICAL COLLECTION OF THE STATE SECURITY SERVICE (STB) PRAGUE. ARCHIVAL NO. H-770-3; DMITRI BALTERMANTS/SIB/PICTORIAL PRESS LTD/ALAMY

Atrocity exhibits

Two photographs, and the Holocaust stories behind them

BRYAN CHEYETTE

THE RAVINE
A family, a photograph, a Holocaust massacre revealed
WENDY LOWER
257pp. Apollo. £20.

GRIEF
The biography of a Holocaust photograph
DAVID SHNEER
192pp. Oxford University Press. £22.99 (US $29.95).

"ONE'S FIRST ENCOUNTER with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany." This was Susan Sontag's response, in retrospect, after seeing images of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau in 1945 as a twelve-year-old. "Something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror … To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering." Wendy Lower and David Shneer, in contrasting books, attempt to fathom the "negative epiphany" of atrocity photographs as well as the historical resonance of "photographed images of suffering". They write in opposition to Sontag, who believed that one ultimately becomes desensitized to such images after repeated viewings. An enduring knowledge of the "history and content" of an atrocity photograph, Lower contends, can enhance the viewer's awareness rather than diminish it. *The Ravine* and *Grief* are both written in this didactic spirit.

Each book contextualizes a micro-image of the Holocaust in different ways. *The Ravine* begins with Lower in an archive reading SS police reports. She is interrupted by a Ukrainian specialist who shows her a photograph of a woman and a boy being shot on the edge of a ravine in October 1941. This leaves Lower with an ethical dilemma. "What does one do upon discovering a photograph that documents murder?" The mother and child are surrounded by two German soldiers and three Ukrainian auxiliaries whose rifles are almost touching their recently shot victim. The viewer cannot see the woman's face as it is covered in smoke from the gun fire. But we can see some of the killers smirking. Lower, who is best known for *Hitler's Furies: German women in the Nazi killing fields* (2013), immediately recognized the rarity of the image. Although the Second World War was the most photographed conflict in history, there are only a handful of extant "incriminating photographs". Producing documentary evidence in the act of mass murder was severely prohibited (although soldiers often had cameras), as it was regarded as threatening the "security of the Reich". There were, instead, plenty of images of people and communities before they were murdered and, afterwards, as "piles of corpses".

The Ravine reads like a compelling detective novel as it confines much of its historical detail to the endnotes. It records the author's quest to uncover every aspect of the photograph. What do we know of the murderers and victims? Who took the picture? How was the small Jewish community in Miropol destroyed? Can we still find bodies in the ravine? Lower's pursuit of the truth is both captivating and meticulous as she attempts to find answers to these questions. She knows that the two massacres on the outskirts of Miropol, killing 960 civilians, were part of a much wider pattern of genocide and mass murder on the "killing fields" of the eastern front. But details matter. The police unit that shot Jews in Miropol in September 1941 continued onto the ravine at Babi Yar, near Kiev, where 33,000 Jews were annihilated soon after. Within six months of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, half a million Jews were slaughtered in what is known as the "Holocaust by bullet". When Vasily Grossman, the renowned war correspondent, entered the Ukraine in 1943, with the liberating Red Army, he wrote an article entitled "Ukraine without Jews". His mother had perished in the Berdichev ghetto. By the end of the war, a million Jews were killed in the Ukraine with, to this day, only about half of those missing accounted for. Most of the culprits remained free.

Given the vast numbers of victims on the eastern front - 27 million Soviet citizens died in all - Lower focuses on individuals and families. Personalizing the casualties, and finding justice for some of the perpetrators, gives a human face to the vertiginous statistics. Discovering the German killers is her first priority, as previous war crimes trials in West Germany were fantastically inadequate. She has success in finding some of the Germans who followed the Wehrmacht and carried out the genocide. In a small town such as Miropol, murders are intimate. Neighbours betray neighbours, the killers grew up with their prey, steal their belongings and occupy their houses. Unlike West Germany, the Soviet Union was rather more ruthless in bringing the Ukrainian auxiliaries to summary justice. The Vaselyuk family in the photograph are identified and includes the young boy who was holding Khiva Brontzovskaya Vaselyuk's hand. After a painstaking analysis, a baby was discovered under Khiva's clothing and was, presumably, still alive when she was shot. Their history and extended relatives are part of Lower's dazzling forensic excavation. The remains of those massacred are also found as a result of the gruesome signs of geological disruption over seven decades. Most unusually, the Slovakian photographer, Lubomir Škrovina, turns out to be a maverick who was by no means a supporter of the Nazi project. His dissident biography chimes with the rarity of his evidentiary photographs which he managed, at great personal risk, to preserve for posterity.

The photographers in the two books could not be more different. Dmitri Baltermants, a Red Army Lieutenant, and official war photographer for *Izvestiia*, was not a dissident. His iconic image "Grief" was one of many atrocity photographs designed to rally a population that was valiantly blocking the German army from making inroads east of Stalingrad, Moscow and Rostov. Such pictures demonstrated what the Germans would do to the Russian population if conquered. They were both an incentive to fight and a call for revenge. "Grief" was produced in 1942, a few weeks after the massacre of around 7,000 civilians in a ditch - about a mile long, six feet deep and fifteen feet wide - on the outskirts of Kerch on the strategically important Crimean peninsula. The picture was one of the earliest demonstrations of just how bloodthirsty the Germans were. It was made possible by the successful but short-lived Soviet counter-offensive, which took back the peninsula in January

Bryan Cheyette's latest book is The Ghetto: A very short introduction, *2020. He is currently working on* Testimony: Slaves, camps, refugees

1942. Baltermants was with the troops and witnessed grieving mothers and widows looking for the bodies of their husbands and sons (although the bodies of women and children could also be found in the ditch). Both the Miropol and Kerch photographs obey the "rule of thirds" (relating the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the image), but only Baltermants was steeped in the aesthetics of socialist realism and photomontage. His newspaper image, which was also exhibited on the walls of Russian towns and cities, was designed to aid the Soviet war effort. It captured in miniature the barbarity of the enemy.

Shneer does not utilize the information in "Grief" to identify the distraught women or onlooking soldiers. Rather than uncovering evidence, he writes a remarkable "biography" of the photograph. This includes tracing the use of photomontage which transforms it into a work of art, its reception during the war, and its part in Cold War propaganda and rapprochement. In its final incarnation, after the fall of the Soviet Union, "Grief" became a "Holocaust Photograph" although Baltermants, a Soviet Jew, chose a landscape where none of the participants were Jewish. He knew full well that those massacred were regarded as no more than "Soviet citizens". Both before and after the war his gifts as a photographer were at the behest of an ethnically and nationally diverse Soviet empire. In fact, "Grief" was largely forgotten during the war once his remit changed to take battle photographs to bolster the counter-offensive. His was the most prominent image of Stalin's re-election in 1950 and he effectively visualized the Soviet Union as a superpower. Throughout the Khrushchev years (1958-64) he was particularly influential as a conduit to the West and the East European satellite nations. During these years, "Grief" was rediscovered and became a global image. By the early 1960s, his work travelled to the United States, Britain, Australia and Brazil.

The commodification of "Grief" in the United States, as part of the growing art photography market, and its re-interpretation as an image of the Holocaust, reinforced one another. The picture was almost always on the cover of Baltermants's exhibited work in the name of the sacrifices of the Soviet Union, or universal human suffering, or global peace. Once it was canonized as an image of the Holocaust, which was readily understood in the West, its collectable value increased. Sontag has spoken of the "dual power of photography - to generate documents and to create works of art". Such resonant images of genocide in the Ukraine, and its after-effects, exemplify the doubleness of photography. These superb books, ironically, aestheticize to achieve documentary veracity and deduce to understand historical reception. Even traumatic images can narrate a multitude of different stories. ■

Sundays with Salka

The rich life, in exile, of Greta Garbo's MGM screenwriter

LEO A. LENSING

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS
SALKA VIERTEL
343pp. New York Review Books. Paperback, $18.95.

THE SUN AND HER STARS
Salka Viertel and Hitler's exiles in the Golden Age of Hollywood
DONNA RIFKIND
550pp. Other Press. £25.99.

Salka Viertel, then Salomea Sara Steuermann, as a young actress

The modest place that the Austrian-American actor and screenwriter Salka Viertel (1889-1978) occupies in film history has been bound up with her work on the films Greta Garbo made for MGM in the 1930s and 40s. Their creative partnership functioned for the better part of a decade, beginning with the critically and commercially successful love story *Queen Christina* (1933), about the seventeenth-century Swedish monarch, which emphasized her preference for male dress and for peace over war, and concluding with the universally panned comedy *Two-Faced Woman* (1941), in which a husband's supposed adultery (his suspicious wife pretends to be her own twin sister) had to be re-edited after release to satisfy the Catholic Legion of Decency. Viertel briefly scratched out a living in the cut-throat world of Hollywood scriptwriting by colluding with Garbo to advance projects that added a European edge to the formulaic entertainments favoured by the studio, and managing the inevitable compromises demanded by producers and directors.

A theatrical life. Vienna - Berlin - Hollywood, the subtitle on the dust jacket of the original 1969 edition of Viertel's memoir *The Kindness of Strangers*, evokes the cultural richness and the existential perils of Salka's life; the title itself comes from *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), in which Blanche DuBois tells the doctor who is about to institutionalize her that she has always relied on "the kindness of strangers". The book begins before Vienna, however, with Salka's privileged childhood as Salomea Sarah Steuermann in Sambor - now in Ukraine, then a bustling garrison town in Galicia on the fringes of the Habsburg Empire. Her adolescent rebellion is framed as dramatic fantasy: "When I put up my red hair I was Mary Stuart. When I wrapped a black shawl tightly around me, uncovering my breasts, I was Cleopatra". She adds that she lost her head completely when she first saw *Macbeth*. Her earliest stage performances under the names Salome, Mea or Mia Steuermann would include not only Schiller and Shakespeare but also Hebbel's *Judith* and plays by Ibsen and Strindberg. Although she later ironizes the psychological impact of such roles with a deadpan description of breastfeeding her oldest son Hans during rehearsal breaks for Franz Grillparzer's *Medea*, these examples of passionate and manipulative women may have been just the right preparation for later dealings with studio moguls.

Marrying the Viennese poet, critic and theatre director Berthold Viertel in 1918, and giving birth to three sons over the next six years, barely kept Salka Viertel-Steuermann, as she was now billed, off the stage. Amid the fluctuating success of her and Berthold's theatrical careers in Germany, they both began to work in film; she dabbled in acting and screenwriting, while he directed a handful of productions, including the critically praised, now lost montage film *Adventures of a Ten-Mark Note* (1926). In 1928 F. W. Murnau, who moved to Hollywood after the international success of *The Last Laugh* (1924), asked Berthold to join him at Fox Film, where he soon floundered as a screenwriter. It was Salka who became the primary breadwinner after her friendship with Greta Garbo - which began in 1929 at a party hosted by Ernst Lubitsch and lasted until Salka's death - led to a succession of screenwriting assignments for MGM. Plans to save as much money as possible and then return to the vibrant cultural scene in Germany's so-called "golden twenties" were frustrated by the Depression and the political rise of the Nazis.

Much of the book's second half is devoted to Salka Viertel's own kindness to strangers and to friends, as European exiles, both renowned and otherwise, began to pour into California. After acquiring the now famous house at 165 Mabery Road in Santa Monica, Salka hosted regular Sunday afternoon gatherings. Guests, who included Arnold Schoenberg, Charlie Chaplin and Oona O'Neill, Tallulah Bankhead and Otto Klemperer as well as, in Salka's words, "the not famous" and "the not yet famous", enjoyed sandwiches, her famous chocolate cake and table tennis (at which Schoenberg was said to be a particularly fierce competitor). While little is revealed of who said what to whom at these salon-like picnics, Salka does sketch a touching, gently comic vignette of Heinrich and Thomas Mann at the former's seventieth birthday party. They delivered duelling, seemingly endless perorations about each other's fight against fascism as the roast beef was finally served "overdone". Perhaps the most amusing account is recorded in Christopher Isherwood's diaries. During a more intimate evening he overheard Salka and Aldous Huxley fantasizing about a lesbian takeover of the major studios, which would be renamed "Warner Sisters, Louisa B. Mayer, United Artistes, Twentieth Century Vixen, etc".

By the early 1940s the FBI was also listening. Information about Salka's association with Brecht, Hanns Eisler and other left-wing artists and intellectuals was gathered from wiretaps, opened mail and several informants. In her chronicle of these years, the gentle humour and comic timing that characterize the memoir as a whole give way to condensed satirical indignation. She quotes the classification of herself as a "premature anti-fascist" (a code word for Communist) and maliciously shortens the title of the House Committee on Un-American Activities to the "Un-American Committee".

Leo A. Lensing is Emeritus Professor of Film Studies in the College of Film and the Moving Image at Wesleyan University

THE EDWIN MELLEN PRESS
Three Women Opera Composers: A Musicological Interpretation of Ingeborg von Bronsart, Ethel Smyth, and Thea Musgrave
by Dr Melinda J. Boyd
ISBN 978-1-4955-0759-5
Publish your scholarly book with Mellen
peer reviewed
www.mellenpress.com

© WIENBIBLIOTHEK

The final chapters document her flight from Cold War America, her mourning for Berthold, amicably divorced but still loved and her constant correspondent until his death in 1953, and a moment of hope when she sees their young granddaughter Christine for the first time in the Swiss resort Klosters, where she spent the rest of her life.

While the NYRB edition is welcome, the decision to settle for a photomechanical reprint means that typographical errors and other minor signs of haste in composition or production remain. With almost 150 additional pages, the German translation, published a year after the 1969 edition under the title *Das unbelehrbare Herz* ("The Incorrigible Heart"), omits some Hollywood material, but also adds passages critical of American society as well as pointed evocations of German-Jewish culture. Donna Rifkind's two-page afterword would have been the place to analyse at length the substantial differences between the two editions, but that opportunity has been missed.

The Sun and Her Stars mentions the German translation only in passing and borrows liberally from *The Kindness of Strangers*, which is paraphrased and cited more than 200 times. Katharina Prager's biography *"Ich bin nicht gone Hollywood!": Salka Viertel - ein Leben in Theater und Film* (2007) seems to have supplied Rifkind with most of the many quotations from a major source, the 450 letters exchanged by Berthold and Salka throughout their lives, and provided a closely followed model for discussing some of the major screenplays.

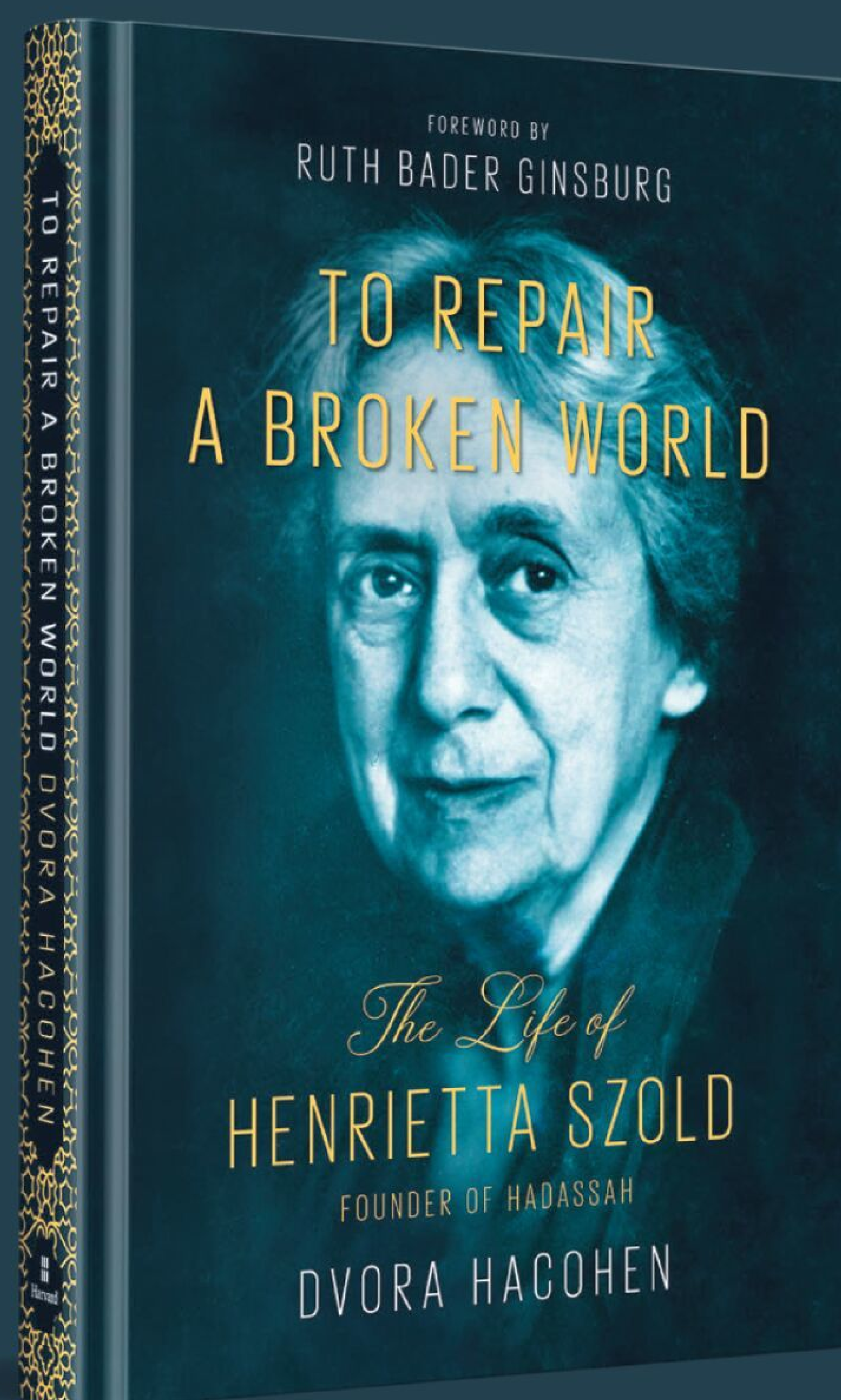
Rifkind's focus on Salka Viertel's California years, announced in the subtitle, with its odious genitive, reveals signs of a biographer struggling to master the complex cultural history produced by the collision of Weimar modernism and Hollywood conformity. She has not kept up with the progress made by decades of critical writing about the studio system - as may be observed, for example, in her description of Murnau's tragic death in a car accident in 1931 and of a funeral supposedly shunned by Hollywood A-Listers shocked at his homosexuality. Rifkind repeats the gossip that "Murnau had been 'servicing' his teenaged male Filipino chauffeur while the boy was driving" and the spurious count of "only eleven people, including Garbo, who gathered at a Los Angeles funeral home for a last farewell". Les Hammer's pamphlet *F. W. Murnau: For the Record* (2010) puts paid to these distortions, citing police reports, the coroner's inquest and articles in the *Hollywood Daily Citizen*. The "boy" was actually Murnau's twenty-eight-year-old valet Eliazar Stevenson, the son of an expat English father and a Mexican mother. The car rental company's chauffeur, who was sitting in the passenger seat, confirmed that Stevenson had lost control after swerving to avoid a truck and that Murnau had been in the back with his German shepherd Pal. "Hundreds of mourners" - whether Greta Garbo was among them is unclear - attended the funeral, at which Berthold Viertel and two film directors gave eulogies in German, English and French.

The biography's most glaring deficit, though, is its failure to give the full spectrum of Salka's later, often politically charged, screenwriting its due. Omitted entirely, perhaps because it is only mentioned in *The Incorrigible Heart*, is *Lorelei*, a treatment for a biopic based on the life of Heinrich Heine, whose works the Nazis burned in 1933. Salka, who completed the 108-page screenplay in early 1947, reports that she was perhaps naive to think that there would be interest in the great German-Jewish poet of the nineteenth century, the "political fugitive who had prophesied the Germans' race madness and the descent into barbarity".

While we wait for an English translation of Katharina Prager's excellent biography, we have Salka Viertel's *The Kindness of Strangers* itself. Her wonderfully economical characterization of one Franz Kafka, in 1918 an occasional dinner guest at her and Berthold's apartment in Prague, as "tall, dark and handsome", is one of the book's many treasures. ■

With a foreword by
Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Introduces a new generation to a remarkable leader who fought for women's rights and the poor.



"This compelling work will stand as the definitive biography of one of the most important figures in modern Jewish history."

—Pamela S. Nadell,
author of *America's Jewish Women*

Harvard University Press

Belknap Press | hup.harvard.edu

Samuel Beckett Studies

The Samuel Beckett Society shares Cal Revely-Calder's concerns about care and power in scholarly communities (February 12), but we disagree with his account of our field and prescriptions for how it might be saved from itself. His review essay suggests that Beckett Studies is currently dominated by genetic manuscript approaches. It is true that the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project (BDMP) has increased access and therefore the scholarly attention given to Beckett's writing methods and intertextual influences. Researchers from around the globe are no longer obliged to get on a plane to Austin or Reading to access these documents. Those of us currently in lockdown, or with individual circumstances that have always made such trips impossible, feel particularly grateful for this resource. Most of our community are not genetic manuscript scholars; nevertheless, almost all of the diverse ways of thinking in Beckett Studies have benefited from the careful work of the BDMP. Many of us also use this resource in our teaching and we note, with pleasure, the excitement students often experience when they suddenly feel close to Beckett's writing hand. It is our job, as scholars and teachers, to help them understand what they might make of the strange braiding of proximity and distance, of knowing and not knowing, that is characteristic of Beckett's writing and is in no way unknotted by having digital access to annotated manuscripts.

Revely-Calder is concerned that the scholarly field, as it stands, writes out its "more interesting" voices. The essay enjoins Beckett Studies to "have a good look at [it]self" and come to the chastened realization that "All ethics is grounded in self-scrutiny, in thinking again on how we form judgements and put them into words". Again, there is a suggestion of insufficient care. But it is odd that the essay's concern with the stylistic qualities of other people's sentences, which are variously described as "dire", "windy", "baggy" or full of "hot air", is not paired with a reflection on how or why particular judgements about style are formed, or how and why some voices and styles have historically found themselves so effortlessly raised above others.

Revely-Calder is right in his diagnosis that there are not enough academic jobs to go round, and that "publish or perish" looms over all disciplines. But it is not clear how admonishing young and older critics with the injunction to "write better", or to produce work that accords with one very particular version of literary value, helps us "maintain, continue, and repair our 'world'", to use Joan Tronto's famous definition of care. It feels more like a matter of taste. One person's high-minded criticism is another person's rubbish. For Beckett's Molloy, the *Times Literary Supplement* was excellent material for lining one's greatcoat, due to its "neverfailing toughness and impermeability. Even farts made no impression on it". Molloy carefully puts what he designates as rubbish, alongside what he values, to particular uses. The same might be said for those who write about literature, wherever they happen to publish.

Laura Salisbury
On behalf of the Samuel Beckett Society,
University of Exeter

Yes, it has long felt as if there was a pathology in the Samuel Beckett critical industry (speculation will fill a silence, etc) and so it was a relief to read Cal Revely-Calder's examination of it. If anyone were in need of further inoculation, then I recommend Andrew Gurr's book *Writers in Exile* (1981). In one short paragraph, Gurr sees Beckett's concern as that of the "ego's" identity, and for all its greatness this is a narrow repertoire that has no use for the wider ranging concerns of the "id", meaning home, community, society and now, we might add, the environment. Undoubtedly a discrimination of its time, but it has served me well. I still enjoy Beckett.

Charlie Howe
Worthing, West Sussex

In his essay on Beckett Studies, Cal Revely-Calder declares that "Genetic criticism explains nothing, and never has". Nonsense. It explains that Franz Kafka's *The Castle* was originally written in the first person, and allows us to trace thematic shifts where the switch was made. It tells us that Marianne Moore often engaged in a practice of purposeful misquotation, provoking debate around her poetic motives. It tells us that Ezra Pound excised extensive sections from T. S. Eliot's original manuscript of *The Waste Land*, allowing for discussion of shared authorship. One might quibble as to the critical value of this information in certain contexts; but to assert the process "never" has any value is plainly wrong.

Harry Sanderson
Brasenose College, Oxford

Richard Rorty and John Rawls

It is not the case, contrary to Martin Ivens's editorial (February 5), that Richard Rorty "recanted" or that "his enthusiasm for philosophy was revived by Rawls's *Theory of Justice*". Nor is it the case, as Crispin Sartwell claims (in his essay "Kill or Cure"), that Rorty moved on from the 1980s and returned to philosophy "in very much its traditional outlines … pretty soon praising Rawls" and writing *Achieving Our Country* as a consequence.

In 1986, Rorty wrote that Rawls "helped undermine the idea of a transhistorical 'absolutely valid' set of concepts which would serve as 'philosophical foundations' of liberalism … but has thought of this undermining as a way of strengthening liberal institutions". While that was variously debated, *Achieving Our Country* (1997) marked no new "political turn" and owes no evident debt to Rawls as a political "philosopher". Indeed, Sartwell's unhappiness with Rorty's earlier turn from philosophy was echoed, yet again, by Hilary Putnam, reviewing the book in the *TLS* in 1998.

Rather than portray Rorty as once guilty of "scientism" but now worthy of redemption, his days of apostasy forgiven – as if Boswell or the kirk were our authorities in judging that Hume should remain, safely neutered, as part of an ultimately seamless tradition – it might be recalled that Rorty was still brushing off the Boswells, on his own deathbed, in *Philosophy as Poetry* (2016), and still harrying the metaphysicians, some of whom agree that "the ultimate nature of Reality is atoms and void" while others concur that it is God – "an immaterial, non-spatio-temporal, being. The reason quarrels among metaphysicians about the nature of Reality seem so ludicrous is that each of them feels free to pick a few of his favourite things and claim ontological privilege for them". And so he continued his attempt to escape from Parmenides and Plato, and from Russell or Hegel. "Poetry" was not being offered as an intimation of the ineffable in lieu of philosophy's justifiable true beliefs, or as an alternative, ahistorical natural kind for those in need of more quotidian comfort.

It hardly suffices, in riposte, to argue that "the question of how I or we should live is not a scientific question". It isn't for squid, either, though they will not be tempted into "an enquiry into ultimate values (or something along those lines)". That last parenthesis being another nod to negative theology, perhaps, or just a bet-hedging hint of a creaking neo-Kantian faith.

Andrew Young
Edinburgh

Ravenna

In the course of his informative review of Judith Herrin's *Ravenna* (February 12), Michael Kulikowski states that "It is a worthy project that surprisingly has not really been attempted before". Please could I put in an honourable mention for *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* by Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, which covered much of the same ground in 2014?

I was also intrigued by Professor Kulikowski's description of *Ravenna*'s narrative as "parodically conventional". It would have been useful if he had spent a couple of sentences sketching out a less conventional version as an alternative.

Keith Jewitt
Newcastle

Robert Bruce Lockhart

I was surprised that D. J. Taylor dismissed Robert Bruce Lockhart as "a retired diplomat" whose modern equivalent would not "stand the slightest chance of attracting a publishing deal" (Freelance, February 12). Lockhart's first volume of memoirs dealt with his exploits as the thirty-year-old centre of the "Lockhart Plot", supposedly to overthrow Lenin's revolutionary regime. It was semi-fictionalized for Hollywood in 1934 as *British Agent*, with Leslie Howard playing a renamed Lockhart, "Stephen Locke".

During the Second World War, Lockhart was in charge of the British propaganda outfit Political Warfare Executive. In the unlikely event of there ever being another Robert Bruce Lockhart (given Britain's diminished role in the world), I doubt he would have trouble finding a publisher for his memoirs. Securing official permission to write them might be another matter.

Peter Rushton
Ribbleton, Lancashire

Urban renewal in the 1960s

In responding to Gillian Tindall's comments about the "wrecking" of the urban landscape in the 1960s in her review of *Frostquake*, Jim Humberstone makes some astonishing claims in defence of his erstwhile job in Local Authority Architecture and Planning (Letters, February 19). He talks of "new blocks of flats" which provided "a civilized environment for … folk living in … slum conditions". Leaving aside his patronizing language, much of the property that was cleared was perfectly good and needed only renovation. Instead, communities were destroyed and replaced by developments that "arose from often ignoble motives and shaky logic" (Patrick Dunleavy, *Architects Journal*, June 23, 2017). It wasn't just "slum" clearance that wrecked the urban landscape; it was also the wholesale destruction of town centres. My own hometown, Uxbridge, was described in *Pears' Cyclopaedia* in the 1950s as a "market town", but it didn't survive the onslaught of the planners. The town had many old industries, including a steam laundry, a maltings, a corn chandler, coaching inns and Harman's Brewery. By the time the redevelopment had finished, they had all gone, and in their place was a vast, featureless, wind-scoured shopping plaza with, at its centre, a small tower painted to look old, the final irony.

F. W. Nunneley
Beckley, East Sussex

Hobson Jobson

In his review of *Empireland* by Sathnam Sanghera (February 12), Sukhdev Sandhu writes that "Sanghera draws on the *Hobson Jobson Dictionary of Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* to highlight empire's imprint on the English language through well-known examples such as 'juggernaut', 'toboggan', and 'zombie'." Neither "toboggan" nor "zombie" are to be found in *Hobson Jobson*. "Toboggan" is from French Canadian, based on a Micmac Indian word for "sled". "Zombie" is of Bantu origin from West Africa and later Haiti, as Sanghera's book makes clear.

L. G. Walker, Jr.
Charlotte, NC

George Eliot

I enjoyed Angelique Richardson's review of books by Amy King and Ian Duncan on science, faith and the Victorian novel (February 5). However, George Eliot's story in her final work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), was called "Shadows of the Coming Race", not "The Coming Race". That was the title of an influential proto-science fiction novel (or "scientific romance") by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, to which Eliot's title alludes.

Clive Davenhall
Royal Observatory, Edinburgh

Zoophilia

I was surprised there was no mention of desperation as a driving force behind zoophilia (or bestiality) in Houman Barekat's review of Joanna Bourke's *Loving Animals* (February 19). That surely must be a motivation among the lonely and dispossessed. This is the premiss behind the act in Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved* (1987), in which the young male slaves regularly engage in sex with calves. They have no access to women and any attempt to visit a woman is dangerous. This section of the novel caused considerable outrage in the US and some quarters of society wanted the book banned. Morrison demonstrated that in some cases "inter-species love" is no such thing, but desperation caused by oppression.

Sam Milne
Claygate, Surrey

Belling the cat

Alan Rusbridger reviews *We Are Bellingcat* by Eliot Higgins (February 19) and adds: "as in belling a cat, to warn the birds". Alas, Homer has nodded. I vividly remember, from my childhood Aesop, the illustration of the wise old mouse asking the assembled council of mice "Who will bell the cat?"

David Madden
Oxford

CONTACT

1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
letters@the-tls.co.uk

Chosen, destined, but not superior

The disputed intellectual territory of Jewish exceptionalism

ABIGAIL GREEN

WHAT ARE JEWS FOR?
History, peoplehood and purpose
ADAM SUTCLIFFE
376pp. Princeton University Press. £30 (US $35).

The Russian and Polish Jewish community of New York City, 1890s

© NORTH WIND PICTURE ARCHIVES/ALAMY

THIS BOOK HAS a brilliant title: arresting, clever and deliberately confrontational. For we live in a political moment when only Jews seem to be comfortable using the J-word, while everyone else seems to treat it as an embarrassment: in the public discourse of twenty-first-century Britain, we have Christians, Hindus, Muslims and "Jewish people". This, oddly, is not an issue in North America. Nor is it one that Adam Sutcliffe addresses directly in *What Are Jews For?*, which provides an intellectual history of what the author calls "the Jewish purpose question". And yet, it is curiously relevant to Sutcliffe's argument, since the reason British society is edging away from the J-word is intimately connected with the fact that Jews have traditionally been imbued with a totemic significance and messianic purpose in the Christian culture of Western Europe, and its secularized, post-Christian variants. When we talk not about "Jews" but about "Jewish people", we are trying to normalize Jewishness by escaping the heavy connotations that still cling to the J-word in our collective subconscious: we are trying to get away from the sense that Jews have a "purpose" at all.

This, as Sutcliffe demonstrates, represents a radical divergence from established patterns of thought among both Jews and Christians (this book is, emphatically, a history of Jewish, Christian and post-Christian thinkers; other traditions do not figure at all). Jews, of course, have always believed in their special purpose as God's "chosen people", carefully distinguishing that idea of Jewish destiny from notions of racial superiority articulated in other contexts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Christians, too, acknowledge Jewish particularity in God's world order: Jewish chosenness might have been superseded by Christian revelation, with its universalist aspirations and appeal, but Jews could still serve a providential function in world history – and Christian nations on both sides of the Atlantic have sought to claim the mantle of chosenness that once enveloped the biblical Israelites. In this sense, as Sutcliffe reminds us, "the Jewish purpose question" has provided Jewish and Christian thinkers over the centuries with both disputed territory and a certain intellectual common ground.

What Are Jews For? traces the history of that disputed territory from the early modern era to the present day. In so doing, it provides an elegant but fairly conventional slice through a modern Jewish history peopled by the great names of western European and Jewish thought, from Baruch Spinoza to Jacques Derrida – too many, and too well-known, to list here. The discussion of these thinkers and their ideas is rich and subtle, even if the intellectual genealogy Sutcliffe constructs is not really surprising. There are women in this canon, but it is still recognizably the established canon of modern Jewish thought. Geographically, too, the scope is surprisingly limited. With the exception of France, the birthplace of revolutionary secularism, the Catholic world is curiously neglected. I found only two page references to Italy – home, after all, to both the Vatican and the ghetto, a project born out of a belief in "Jewish purpose". Thinkers from the Habsburg world also receive scant attention, save for those familiar figures Sigmund Freud, Theodor Herzl and Karl Kraus.

That, it turns out, is the problem of writing a book with such a brilliant title: almost inevitably it promises more than it delivers. Sutcliffe is too intelligent not to realize this, and courageously he endeavours to answer his own question in a final chapter entitled: "So what *are* Jews for?" Needless to say, however, this proves to be a rash undertaking: he concludes rather blandly that "Jews are for hope".

As Howard Jacobson observed in an earlier review of this book, Sutcliffe may present himself as an objective observer but he is in fact *parti pris*: if, for Jews, the "Jewish purpose question" is ultimately about the tension between universalism and particularism, then it is clear that Sutcliffe is with the cosmopolitan universalists, not the Zionist particularists. While I agree with this, Jacobson's review also misrepresents Sutcliffe's position: we might do better to understand him less as a chronicler of the philosophical debates about Jewish purpose than as a participant in his own right. Indeed, Sutcliffe is upfront about the way in which writing this book spoke to his own "Jewish purpose question" and, one suspects, the tensions between Jewish identity and left-wing politics thrown up by the Jeremy Corbyn era of Labour politics.

> **"Surely the whole point of critical race theory is to recognize that universalism was never really universalist at all**

That is fair enough, but the book's preoccupation with the Western canon ensures that it misses the elephant in the room. We live in an age when the tectonic plates of history and culture are shifting. Is the fundamental question in the Jewish world, in 2021, still particularism versus universalism – as it was in Europe from the Enlightenment to the Holocaust? Surely the whole point of critical race theory and the Black Lives Matter moment is to recognize that universalism was never really universalist at all, just an unreflecting cloak for European domination and "white privilege"? So where do Jews sit in this new intellectual and ideological constellation? To those of us watching from the UK, American Jewry seems to be tying itself in knots over these questions. Yet there is precious little about these existential dilemmas in Adam Sutcliffe's thoughtful and scholarly book. ■

Abigail Green is Professor of Modern European History at the University of Oxford. She is writing an international history of Jewish liberal activism since 1848

Inquisitive after bookes

Singing the praises of the Bodleian's vast Jewish collection

TOM STAMMERS

JEWISH TREASURES
From Oxford libraries
REBECCA ABRAMS AND CÉSAR MERCHÁN-HAMANN, EDITORS
304pp. The Bodleian Library. £35.

"LIBRARIES ARE THE ARMOURY of the learned", in the words of Rabbi Adolph Jellinek in 1849. This volume celebrates those collectors whose diligence and learning turned the Bodleian into one of the pre-eminent arsenals of Jewish manuscripts in the world. The essays selected and edited by Rebecca Abrams and César Merchán-Hamann contain vivid accounts of the quest to obtain rare Hebrew manuscripts, their circulation across borders and their passage through many hands. The odyssey of these texts follows the diaspora of Jewish communities but also signals the changing value of Jewish heritage in the eyes of its Christian interpreters.

The seventeenth century was the heroic age of Oriental Studies at Oxford University, a time when the acquisition and study of Hebrew texts was seen as integral to the goal of purifying the scriptures from corruption and error. Central figures in this enterprise were the polyglot and polymath John Selden and the unhappy archbishop and chancellor of the university William Laud. In 1635 and 1640 Laud presented the Bodleian with forty-seven Hebrew manuscripts, along with 147 in Arabic, 74 in Persian or Turkish, and some in Ethiopic, Bali and Malay. While his hopes for reforming Protestant worship ended in disaster, helping to precipitate the Civil War and landing him in the Tower of London, Laud's generous commitment to Oriental languages created an enduring legacy.

Several manuscripts gifted by Laud had been acquired in Aleppo by his agent Edward Pococke, Regius Professor of Arabic and Hebrew, and the author of the *Porta Mosis* (1655), a bilingual edition of Maimonides's essays from the *Commentary on the Mishnah* (1145–68). In his stint as chaplain to the merchants of the Levant Company, Pococke had managed to obtain manuscripts of outstanding rarity. In Oxford Pococke was also tutor to Robert Huntington, another chaplain in the Levant whose own haul from Aleppo was even more astonishing. In 1692 the entirety of Huntington's collection was bought by the Bodleian for the hefty sum of £1,100: his 200 Hebrew manuscripts include the first two books of the *Mishneh Torah* (1170–80) code of religious law, containing an autograph by Maimonides himself.

These global exchanges did not diminish over the following centuries, even if the Oxford scholars stopped venturing out into the field. From the 1740s Benjamin Kennicott had the grand ambition of collating every known manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, seeking thereby to uncover "the originals of Moses and the Prophets". Personally distrustful of the reliability of Jewish textual transmission (Masorah), Kennicott was nonetheless pioneering in his geographical reach, aiming to document the distribution of all extant Hebrew manuscripts (an eighteenth-

The Kennicott Bible, 1476

century prototype of "big data" studies).

Meanwhile, in Central Europe, the Chief Rabbi of Prague, David Oppenheim, set about assembling every Jewish book ever printed. Eventually running to 4,500 printed titles and 1,000 manuscripts, his library spanned a dazzling range of genres, from astrology and philosophy to the mystical Kabbalah as well as ephemeral and demotic publications, such as broadsides, Sabbatean tracts and Yiddish prayers directed to women (*tkhines*). Oxford managed to acquire the lot in 1829 for £2,080, a comparative steal considering that Moses Mendelssohn had told Oppenheim's heirs that the library was worth 50-60,000 thalers (around six times that sum). With the purchase of the Heimann Michael collection in 1847, the university's tally reached 2,000 Hebrew manuscripts, much to the envy of continental scholars. Leopold Zunz compared the bibliographical riches amassed by Oxford to "the fountain for which I have been thirsting since ancient times".

Read together, the essays in *Jewish Treasures* illuminate the development of Hebrew Studies in Oxford, from the religious controversies of the Civil War through to the flowering of the nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. They also pinpoint the role of Jewish intermediaries and interlocutors: Pococke corresponded with Rabbi Jacob Roman of Jerusalem ("a man very inquisitive after bookes", he told Selden in 1653, "the most that I ever knew any Jew"), while Kennicott profited from manuscripts owned by members of Bevis Marks Synagogue and prevailed on community leaders in London to afford him introductions to European co-religionists. Our ability to study these riches today owes much to the bibliographic labours of Moritz Steinschneider (1816-1907; born in Prossnitz, now Czecia) and Adolf Neubauer (1831-1907; born in Nagybiccse, Slovakia), two émigré scholars who created research tools of lasting value and whose careers in Victorian Oxford demonstrated the kind of intellectual mobility enabled by Jewish emancipation.

The success of such a volume hinges on the quality of its illustrations, and *Jewish Treasures* is a visual feast. The abundant and superbly executed reproductions showcase the astonishing artistry and scribal precision of medieval Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities. The colours still dazzle in the leaves photographed from celebrated manuscripts, such as the Laud *Mahzor*, the Michael *Mahzor*, or the Kennicott Bible (a masterpiece of cultural syncretism, completed in La Coruña in 1476, and adorned by Joseph ibn Haim with elegant Gothic and Islamic motifs). The profusion of mythical beasts, vegetation, architectural elements and geometric patterns decorating the borders of less celebrated manuscripts provoke curiosity and delight. This erudite yet engaging and opulent book is a monument to the bibliophile's passion and well worthy of its longlisting for the 2021 Wingate prize. ■

Tom Stammers is a historian of modern Europe at Durham University and a specialist in the history of collecting

'Beautifully written ... will haunt you long after you have read it.'
Ben Judah , author of *This is London*

'A remarkable book.'
Alice Kaplan, author of *Looking for The Stranger*

'Fascinating, sensitive and heartbreaking'
Simon Sebag Montefiore

'A haunting and melancholy book'
Philip Nord, author of *France 1940*

Yale University Press

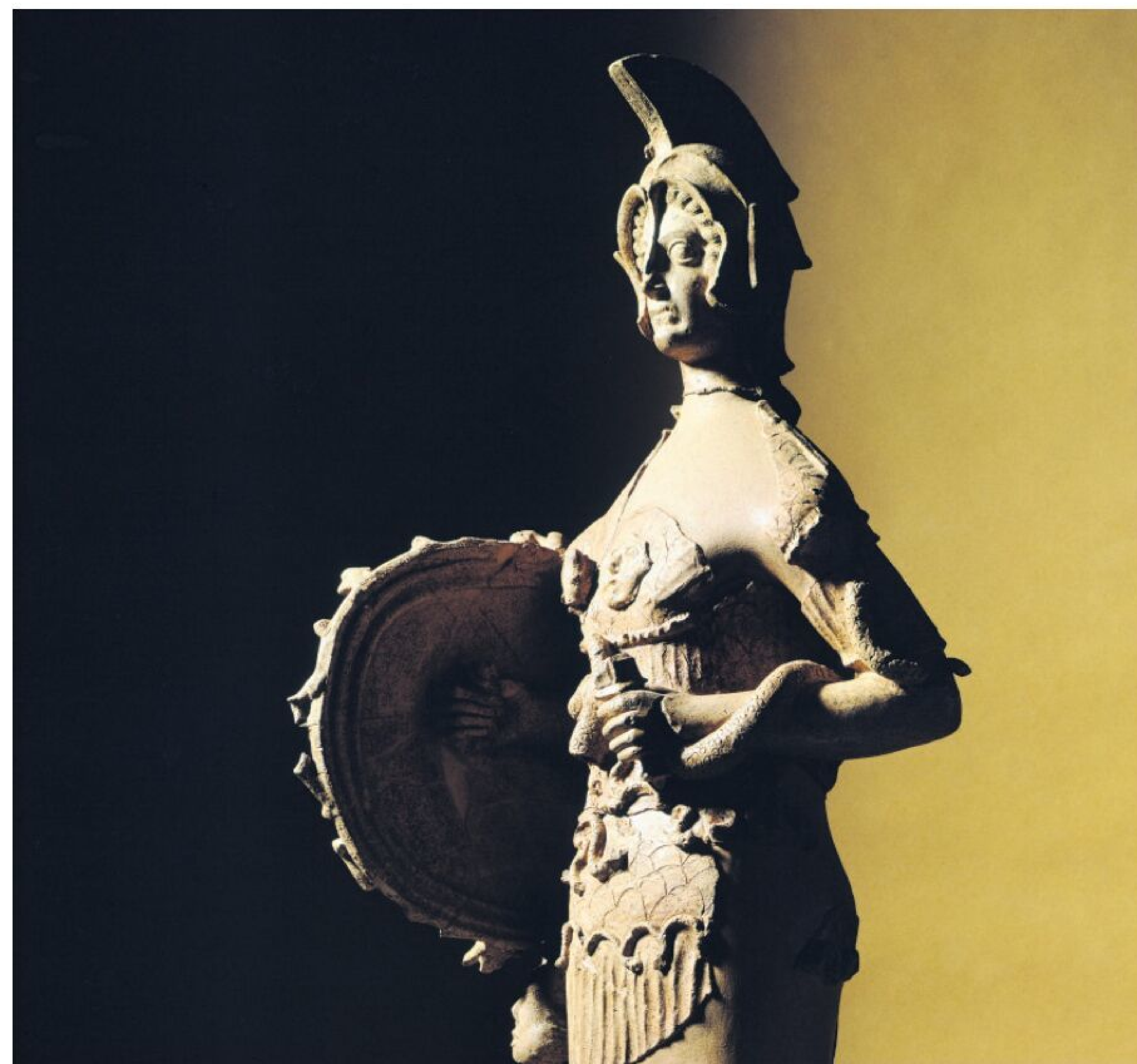
Available from Blackwells.co.uk

Divinity in stone

Reassessing the prevalence of statue-centred worship

DAN-EL PADILLA PERALTA

ROMAN CULT IMAGES
The lives and worship of idols from the Iron Age to late antiquity
PHILIP KIERNAN
377pp. Cambridge University Press. £90.



Minerva Tritonia, a terracotta statue from the site of Lavinium, fifth century BC, in the Museo Archeologico Lavinium

© DEA/G. NIMATALLAH/DEAGOSTINI/GETTY IMAGES

FROM THE NEAR EAST to the Atlantic Rim, the ancient Mediterranean was practically bursting with images of gods, from larger-than-life cult statues to palm-sized miniatures. Despite – or possibly as a result of – this superabundance, a procession of thinkers in antiquity (headlined by Marcus Terentius Varro, the contemporary of Cicero and Julius Caesar, whose prolific writing on Roman religion earned him, centuries after his death, Augustine of Hippo as a sparring partner) conjured up a remote past in which communities had worshipped the gods without the benefit of images. Some of the impetus for this idea came from philosophical critiques of an anthropomorphic approach to the divine: as early as the sixth century BC, Xenophanes of Colophon had pointedly remarked that if horses or cows or lions could make works of art, they would make figures of gods in their own image. But there was an anthropological dimension as well.

When writers such as Varro projected aniconic – or "image-less" – worship back to the distant past of their own communities, they also not infrequently ascribed that same style of worship to barbarian Others. (Varro named the Jews as one example.) This primitivizing view had consequences. Although it took different forms under the pressure of late antique clashes over pagan statuary and medieval contests over iconoclasm, the presumption that there was a linear historical momentum from aniconic to iconic cult nonetheless turned out to have remarkable staying power. It received a fresh infusion of life from nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropologists and historians of religion who adapted it for the definition and entrenchment of ethnic and racial difference.

In recent years, however, archaeological finds have called this one-directional scheme into serious question. Philip Kiernan's *Roman Cult Images*, arguably the most authoritative entrant into the conversation, delivers the payload of two books for the price of one. The opening chapters deal a blow to the aniconic thesis by bringing together the rapidly expanding evidence for icon-centered worship in the Iron Age western Mediterranean, both in early Italy and in pre-Roman Gaul. Face to face with the Lord of the Glauberg or the seated warriors from Roquepertuse or Glanum, one would be hard-pressed to believe that Celtic communities made no use of divine statuary. The remaining chapters painstakingly detail the life and death of cult statues in Roman Gaul and the Rhineland – stressing the many, and sometimes surprising, continuities in their form and worship during centuries of conquest, provincialization and fragmentation. In late antiquity, when statue-centered worship did meet its end, Kiernan shows that those responsible were not only marauding Germanic tribes or Christian zealots. In some cases, the archaeological record reveals, Gallo-Roman communities acted to dispose of their own cult icons with intention and care.

> **In the sixth century BC, Xenophanes of Colophon had remarked that if horses or cows or lions could, they would make figures of gods in their own image**

If Kiernan had limited himself to an accessible anglophone vademecum of recent archaeological advances in the study of Gallo-Roman religion, that would have been enough to ensure this book's success. The feather in the cap of this book's scrupulous archaeological documentation (generously enhanced with photographs and line-drawings) is an appendix on those Gallo-Roman temples for which we have clear evidence for cult statue placement. But what makes this book all the more admirable is its willingness to confront some big questions in the history of ancient Mediterranean religions. This willingness is advertised in the book's subtitle, through the choice of a word that I have refrained from using in this review until now: idol.

By springing it free from the term's polemical (and Christianizing) traps, Kiernan hopes to recover the idol as a taxonomic category. Since, as he correctly observes, "some statues in Roman temples had a different status than others, in legal, religious, and moral terms", we need some means of differentiating and sorting them. For all the baggage that "idol" trails, Kiernan stays with the term out of the (justified) belief that Christian polemicists who inveighed against pagan idol worship knew something about the shape and dimensions of that forcefield within which certain statues came to be supercharged with divine – or demonic – energy and agency. The statues that were most central, by virtue of their placement within the innermost main room (*cella*) of a temple, or their proximity to the altars where sacrifices were performed and offerings deposited: these were the statues that most excited Christian animosities in the High and Late Empire, and that Kiernan seeks to distinguish from the many other cult statues that crowded sanctuaries but were not themselves at the beating heart of everyday ritual activity.

Some readers (count me among them) will take exception to the rehabilitation of idol as a term of art. But this is a minor quibble with an otherwise riveting book: Kiernan has worked around the distortions of the ancient literary evidence to recover a western Mediterranean awash in anthropomorphic gods, from the heights of La Tène culture to the Roman Empire's fall. ■

Dan-el Padilla Peralta teaches ancient Mediterranean history at Princeton University

JEWISH BOOK WEEK

27TH FEB – 7TH MARCH
ONLINE, WHEREVER YOU ARE

Featuring Oscar-winners, internationally acclaimed writers, British comedy icons and France's most famous female rabbi: speakers include David Baddiel, Elif Shafak, Oliver Stone, Lionel Shriver, Gary Younge, Hermione Lee, Howard Jacobson, Jay Rayner, Lipika Pelham and Michael Rosen.

www.jewishbookweek.com

JEWISH BOOK WEEK
The Jewish Book Council is a registered charity no 293800

Better all the time?

The complicated relationship between education and equality

DAVID KYNASTON

THE CRISIS OF THE MERITOCRACY
Britain's transition to mass education since the Second World War
PETER MANDLER
384pp. Oxford University Press. £25.

The People's Vote March, London, October 19, 2019

"MORE WILL MEAN WORSE." Kingsley Amis's mordant prediction in 1960 about higher education expansion is one of the few confident forecasts about this area of policy to be widely remembered. Whatever the qualitative aspect, he indisputably nailed the quantitative – to the extent that whereas then the participation rate of young people in higher education was well below 10 per cent, now it is not far short of 50 per cent. At the heart of Peter Mandler's book is the story of the forces of "meritocracy", concerned with the education of an elite (whether hereditary or intellectual), increasingly giving way to the forces of "democracy", concerned with the education of the population as a whole.

What gives Mandler's account its power and originality is its refreshingly non-technocratic stress not only on broad social and cultural forces at work, transcending the arrogant sterilities of manpower planning and suchlike, but on the very specific demand side of the overall supply-and-demand equation. Put another way, this is not top-down producer history, but (in emphasis anyway) bottom-up consumer history, marking a welcome corrective to most histories relating to the welfare state. It is perhaps a shame that there are in these pages relatively few *actual* consumers, with their own distinctive and individual voices, hopes and experiences. Yet if a certain thickness of texture is lacking, the very considerable compensation is a crisply written, tightly argued and hugely informative Olympian survey in which an incisive but humane historian, who over the years has written about a wide range of subjects, brings all his talents to bear.

The first great burst of expansion was under way well before the famous Robbins Report of 1963, but was cemented and validated by it. And Mandler quotes with evident admiration what became known as the Robbins Principle: namely, that higher education should be made "available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment" to pursue that education and "who wish to do so". Crucially, Lionel Robbins envisaged the pool of qualified applicants as far from static, declaring that "when more is taken for higher education in one generation, more will tend to be available in the next". It proved a justified confidence, as numbers grew rapidly over the rest of the decade, with the new universities such as Sussex (established 1961) emblems of a new era, arguably forged on the back of postwar social mobility. "They were undoubtedly 'middle class,'" reflects Mandler (in turn drawing on the work of the sociologist Mike Savage), "but they appealed to a 'new middle class' identity, modern, technical, 'strategically mobile', in some ways self-consciously going for a 'classless' style"; as regards the students themselves, whether at the new "plate-glass" universities or elsewhere ("redbrick" ones like Leeds and Manchester were also fast expanding), he notes that "'student life' as a traineeship for middle-class adulthood, living with other students in residential halls or lodgings, was rapidly becoming the norm".

Then from the early 1970s to mid-1980s came a wholly unexpected halt, as participation rates in higher education, having peaked at around 14 per cent, stagnated or even went backwards. Why? Undeniably there were compelling supply-side reasons, above all fiscal constraints, especially as keenly applied in the first half of the 1980s by Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph, both at least as much on the "meritocratic" as "democratic" side of the wider argument. As for demand, such factors as the Indian summer of the high-earning manual worker (before the evisceration of the unions), lack of awareness that the future lay with the "knowledge economy", parents and even would-be students put off by student unrest, and a general atmosphere of pessimism discouraging a new generation from breaking with family habits all contributed to a serious slackening. Mandler's analysis is necessarily imprecise, but he gets us further than anyone else has towards solving the question despairingly asked by higher-education policymakers in 1974 at an emergency conference called by North East London Polytechnic, "What has happened to the students?"

By the time that the Thatcher government in the late 1980s eventually turned the taps on again, largely driven by Kenneth Baker for technocratic economic reasons, the pent-up demand had accumulated, to the extent that for several years it threatened to overwhelm supply; and over the following quarter of a century, helped by New Labour's encouragement (again largely for economic motives), that demand seldom looked like diminishing, notwithstanding steeply hiked tuition fees and other sobering aspects. Mandler accepts there was a significant economic rationale (the graduate premium and all that) for this demand, coming from "all classes, both genders, all ethnicities", but again casts his explanatory net wider, citing Martin Trow's cardinal observation about the similar American transition from elite to mass higher education: that higher education has become "one of the decencies of life rather than an extraordinary privilege reserved for people of high status or extraordinary ability". In other words, "uni" as an investment good, yes, but also a consumption good, and surveys in both 1996 and 2006 of final-year undergraduates, asking them to explain their choice of courses, found enjoyment to be the most frequently mentioned factor. As for life's common "decencies", the Millennium Cohort Study found in 2007 no less than 96 per cent of the least advantaged mothers expressing a desire for their seven-year-olds to go in due course to university. Will demand at last slacken in the 2020s? Mandler does not commit himself, albeit noting that "no-one has ever yet lost any money in betting on widening participation, and a continued upgrading of educational qualifications, far into the future".

> **Might things have been different if we had not had over the years – and if we did not still have – such a richly resourced private school sector?**

The notion of life's decencies, of the shared amenities of citizenship, also features prominently in Mandler's treatment of state secondary education, in particular the move in the third quarter of the century away from the 11-plus division of children into grammar schools (for the few) and secondary moderns (for the many), and instead towards a largely comprehensive system (aka "grammar schools for all"). In essence he argues that, as a result of parental pressure on local education authorities, this was decisively in train long before the Labour Education Secretary, Anthony Crosland, issued in 1965 his famous/infamous Circular 10/65, which formally requested schools' conversion to comprehensive education; and that, by and large, it was a popular shift which quickly became the settled dispensation. In passing he takes issue with my interpretation of survey evidence about working-class attitudes. All I would say here is that though the story as a whole is an intensely complicated one for which we still lack the definitive account, he is surely right in his chronological emphasis, but fails to put enough flesh on the bones to justify his invocation of "a great social movement" against the 11-plus, underplays working-class fatalism at that time about the provision of state education, and is too dismissive about the opponents of the shift to comprehensivization.

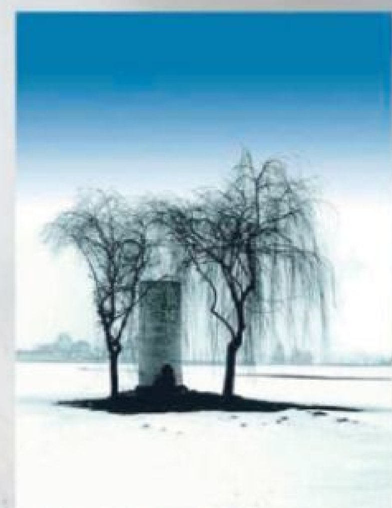
Yet even so, his overarching narrative does make psychological sense. "No-one was suggesting", he reflects about these formative years of the welfare state, "that there should be good hospitals for some and average hospitals for others; why was this the choice offered to parents in secondary schooling?" Even now, despite the introduction since 1988 of appreciably greater choice and diversity within the state system, he points to quantitative research as failing to support the readily made proposition that these developments have led to greater educational inequality. Indeed, on the basis of a 2019 study by Simon Burgess and others, he argues that working-class parents are in fact "just as likely to choose better schools for their children as middle-class parents, and just as likely to get the school they choose", so that "choice actually narrows the gap between aspiration and attainment that habitually held back working-class parents".

All of which sounds suitably encouraging, if a little Whiggish. But to his credit, Mandler offers near the end a grainy chapter which is revealingly entitled "Effectively Maintained Inequality" and insists that education has never, even in the heyday of the grammar school, been the silver bullet for achieving greater social mobility, whether absolute or relative. He is probably right. Yet might things have been different, one is surely entitled to speculate, if we had not had over the years – and still have – such a richly resourced private school sector (which Mandler barely covers, on the grounds that it has educated only some 6 or 7 per cent of the population)? Or if we had not had – and if we did not still have – such a hierarchical university system? Both questions make one wonder about the book's title. It does not seem such a crisis of meritocracy (or triumph of democracy) when two of the last three occupants of No 10 have been Oxbridge Old Etonians; though naturally, it depends what one means by merit. ■

David Kynaston's books include Engines of Privilege: Britain's private school problem, *co-authored with Francis Green, 2019*

© JACQUI HAWKING/ALAMY

THE MASTER AND THE MESSENGER
KENNETH McKAY
A wonderfully atmospheric novel set in a cold political climate
'Extremely well written'
John le Carré
OTHERS:
'Excellent'
'Intricately arranged'
'Intriguing plot'
kennethmckay.co.uk
contact Annie +44 (0) 7880907103



Good and faithful servant

How a brilliant mandarin papered over the cracks in Whitehall

JONATHAN BAK

WHAT DOES JEREMY THINK?
Jeremy Heywood and the making of modern Britain
SUZANNE HEYWOOD
560pp. William Collins. £25.

Jeremy Heywood, 2015

TWO WEEKS BEFORE his untimely death, Jeremy Heywood (1961-2018) received a life peerage. Asked what he wanted to be Lord of, he replied, simply, "Whitehall". After a lifetime of self-effacement, it was a moment of self-recognition.

Heywood bossed Whitehall unobtrusively for three decades, occupying the most influential seats of official power: Principal Private Secretary to the Chancellor (aged thirty), Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, and finally Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service. As a ruler, he was loved not feared. He valued diversity, data and ideas; he disliked formality and hierarchy. He mentored, encouraged and cajoled, never raising his voice. He embodied civil service impartiality but made himself politically indispensable to four prime ministers. His sway was as oblique as it was pervasive. The question on his colleagues' minds was not "what does Jeremy want?" but "what does Jeremy think?"

Suzanne Heywood's book, drawn principally from conversations with her husband in the year before he died and supported by over 200 interviews with officials and ministers, provides a superbly detailed account of how the internal organs of British power function. The officials minuting Cabinet meetings keep in mind that their confidential records, once released twenty years later, will become the first draft of history. They must therefore resemble a "perfect conversation". Inaccuracies are corrected, syntax straightened, chuntering redacted. *What Does Jeremy Think?* is, unsurprisingly, not a warts-and-all account: it is as fair-minded as the man at its centre and perhaps over-generous to some of its main political players (though this did not prevent David Cameron from, according to *The Times*, seeking to block publication, presumably due to its account of his disastrous pre-referendum instruction that the civil service should not prepare for the possibility of Brexit). In its granular rendition of almost every crisis from Black Wednesday to the short-lived Chequers agreement on the UK's future relationship with the EU, it provides an unfiltered human view of how decisions are made at the borderline between official and ministerial power.

Even in periods of relative calm, the conjoined buildings of 10 Downing Street and 70 Whitehall throb with anxiety. Hewyood always carried two Blackberries to protect himself against any communications drop-out and appears here tapping away policy instructions moments before and after life-and-death hospital appointments. Looking back, prime ministers tend to remark on their discovery that, once behind the desk, the levers of power do not operate as expected. A bunker mentality quickly sets in. A small circle of trusted political advisers is established, with a second concentric ring of senior officials. The behaviour of the wider Cabinet begins to cause concern. One secretary of state may be dealing with an issue incompetently; another veers beyond her brief. And, regardless of the individual, the chancellor of the exchequer will always be suspected of withholding information, or money. The central struggle of each premiership is intention against reality, manifesto against events. Success or failure depends on the prime minister's ability to carve a vapour trail through the fog, by forcing Ministers and their Departments to deliver. That is why the Cabinet Office machinery proves ultimately invaluable to each. Heywood was famous for perspicacious emails that spotted future disasters and asked simply, "where are we on this?"

At a memorial service at Westminster Abbey in June 2019, each prime minister from Tony Blair to Theresa May paid tribute to, in the latter's words, "not just an extraordinary adviser, but an extraordinary doer. Nothing stopped him until he found a solution" (excerpts from these tributes are included in the appendix). After the service, May said to the author, "I think people will look back and notice when he stopped". When the records of the past three years are finally released, that conclusion will doubtless be held up. When Gordon Brown handed over to David Cameron, he left him a note saying "the country is in good hands, Jeremy is running it". And when Cameron first stepped through the doors of Number 10, the face that welcomed him was of the man at whom he had first looked in "awe" twenty years previously. After Heywood's "brilliant" redraft of his budget speech in 1993, Ken Clarke wrote to him in gratitude wondering whether "you have subtly influenced my views over the last four months so they have changed without my realising it and now coincide with your own". The Chancellor concluded: "I think I shall not be troubled with an answer!"

> "When Gordon Brown handed over to David Cameron, he left him a note saying 'the country is in good hands, Jeremy is running it'

Such comments tend to be seized on by the civil service's detractors to suggest the existence of a British "deep state", restraining and controlling the country's elected politicians. The present government has put much energy into making a case against this type of perceived influence (albeit mostly through anonymous briefings). Less than a week after Heywood's memorial services and a month before he joined the government as Boris Johnson's effective chief of staff, Dominic Cummings published a blog in which he claimed that May's government had run adrift due to a misapprehension of how decisions "are really made" in Number 10. Heywood, he argued, was running rings around the prime minister. Cummings decried "the elevation of the courtier-fixer at the expense of the thinker and the manager".

This book does indeed provide endless evidence of Heywood's unique capacity to fix apparently insoluble policy problems, from that of troop equipment in Afghanistan to bailing out the banks. But, as Cameron says, he typically did so in "radical" and "creative" ways far removed from the *Yes Minister* clichés. One of the book's few genuine surprises is Heywood's regard for Cameron's often ridiculed adviser Steve Hilton, less because his ideas were workable (he proposed shrinking the entire civil service to a size where it could fit inside Somerset House) than because they forced broader thinking. It is also worth noting that Cummings's specific criticisms of Heywood could often be off-target: his moan about Heywood's "failure to make serious contingency plans for losing the referendum" should have been levelled principally at Cameron.

Another point apparently lost on Cummings was that Heywood agreed with a number of his critiques, particularly regarding short-termism. Heywood advocated passionately for the creation of a Delivery Unit under Blair to drive the long-term realization of political priorities. New Labour's advances on health and education owe a significant debt to that machinery. Cameron abolished the Delivery Unit in 2011, seeking to distance himself from Labour's target-driven approach, before, under Heywood's advice, re-establishing it as a rebranded Implementation Unit a few years later. Sir Michael Barber, the head of the Delivery Unit under Blair, is now in Downing Street finalizing a review of how the present government can improve its decision-making. Often the systems and human capability already exist but the need for political differentiation between successive administrations slows down progress and creates time-wasting cycles that provide employment for consultants but few wider benefits. It will not be surprising if Johnson's more efficient, and less iconoclastic, post-Cummings operation looks uncannily similar to that of Blair.

Heywood emerges from these pages as a man concerned above all else with transforming public services and, through them, the life chances of citizens. It is suggested that he believed, like Cummings, that social progress could best be delivered through more technocratic government. He looks favourably on John Birt's recommendations, as an adviser to Blair, of ten-year strategic plans that would bind successive governments, but then notes that "each Prime Minister will want to govern in their own way". Heywood was acutely aware that it is human politics - not systems, or policies - that most impede or accelerate success. By their own admission, it was Heywood's ingenuity and empathy that helped to keep the Blair-Brown axis just about functional, and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition afloat.

Whatever one's views of the current government's handling of the Covid-19 response, the crisis has exposed fundamental vulnerabilities in the British state. Underfunded institutions, weak processes and systems, and gulfs between decision-making in central and local government all appear in these pages as premonitions. Had Heywood been around, few would dispute that the response would at least have been better co-ordinated. This is the tragic irony at the heart of British governance: the brilliance of people like Heywood papers over the cracks, allowing the country's deeply flawed system to muddle through, until one day it does not. This book should serve as a call for the civil service, ministers and the opposition to work together on improving the government's capacity to deliver the many areas of policy - from decarbonization to adult social care - where the ends are bipartisan and only the means are in doubt.

Suzanne Heywood has provided an invaluable contribution to the historical record. Her book is also a testament to her enormous personal strength and bravery. Jeremy Heywood was both a great man and a loving husband and father, but it cannot have been easy living with someone who disappeared before dawn, while bringing up three children and rising to become a senior partner at McKinsey. Amid the relentless politics, there is a very touching story here of the highs and lows of balancing careers, a relationship and domestic life. The basic humanity that shines through, from both the author and her husband, is perhaps the book's most important and enduring tribute. ■

Jonathan Bak is a pseudonym. He works in the civil service

OPEN GOVERNMENT LICENCE V3.0

© SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES VIA AP

Frances McDormand as Fern

On the road again

From covered wagons to camper vans: twenty-first-century nomads in the US

COLIN GRANT

NOMADLAND
Hulu

IN 2010, SHORTLY BEFORE she became a van dweller, sixty-year-old Linda May was unable to pay the bills for her electricity and water supply. On Thanksgiving that year, she sat alone in her trailer in the dark, with her dogs and a bottle of alcohol, contemplating her future: "I'm going to drink all the booze. I'm going to turn on the propane. I'm going to pass out and that'll be it", she told herself. "And if I wake up, I'm going to light a cigarette and blow us all to hell."

But Linda May did not go to hell, she took to the open road instead. Like thousands of impoverished Americans who have reached the realization that they cannot afford to grow old in their country, she traded real estate for a van ("wheel estate") and struck out for the territory that the investigative journalist and author Jessica Bruder calls Nomadland. Bruder's book (published in 2017) has inspired a striking new film directed by Chloé Zhao and starring Frances McDormand as someone a bit like Linda May: a single, middle-aged wanderer called Fern.

McDormand can't actually play the role of Linda because the real-life van dweller who turned away from self-immolation befriends her on screen, playing herself and tutoring Fern in the art of survival, on how to live permanently in cars, camper vans and RVs (recreational vehicles). They are members of a growing caravan of nomads criss-crossing the US looking for piecemeal work, from the beet fields of North Dakota to the campgrounds of California, to Amazon's CamperForce warehouses in Texas. Fern signs up to this modern mobile tribe because she too, a former supply teacher in a failed company "ghost" town, fell into financial difficulty.

With a cast including many non-actors, *Nomadland* fuses real-life stories with an inventive narrative, creating a fictional film underpinned by facts. Abundant statistics show that millions of US households are one wage packet away from financial hardship. Following the economic crisis of 2008, many were forced to make lose-lose decisions. Do you pay your electricity bill or your health insurance? Do you scrape together enough for your food or for your mortgage?

Fern's anguished face and battle-hardened demeanour dominate the screen; she's the personification of the walking wounded. McDormand's heart-rending performance is so natural that it's near-impossible to draw a distinction between her and real van dwellers such as Bob Wells and Swankie who, along with Linda May, appear in the film.

Nomadland is innovative (at times it feels like a stark, narrator-less documentary), with a camera close to the ground tracking Fern's every move, whether huddled in the cramped van or squatting to urinate in the bleak, rough lands. At times, Zhao's portrayal of individuals wrestling with the vagaries of nature in the barren landscape recalls the majestic scope of a John Ford western. Fundamentally, though, it's an experiential film, with the resourceful Fern as our navigator. Dismissing the pitying concern of a friend's daughter who bumps into her in a supermarket, she asserts, "No, I'm not homeless; I'm just houseless!"

Fern does a neat job of customizing her van, which she names "Vanguard". She has to be creative as it's not much bigger than Linda May's tiny "Squeeze Inn" (van dwellers, or "rubber tramps", have a penchant for puns). In one of the few comic scenes, Fern, Linda and the gang visit a mobile home trade fair and briefly luxuriate in the palatial splendour on offer. Whatever their size, the vehicles that Bruder calls "life support capsules" are modern-day equivalents of the covered wagons of pioneering homesteaders. There's a history here that stretches from these "rubber tramps" back to the 1930s, to Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" and John Steinbeck's long-suffering families in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The Hollywood movie of *The Grapes of Wrath* was an appeal to the heart; Chloé Zhao is more given to restraint. As in her earlier film, *The Rider*, Zhao focuses on her characters' haunting sense of isolation. Fern appears most alone when surrounded by people. She wears a sad, tiny smile, the look of someone in pain who is, nonetheless, going to carry on with minimum fuss. Fern will not solicit help or counsel and will most definitely refuse pity; it's just her and the world, at least until she needs advice from the old-timer Swankie (a queen of the caravan of nomads) when a battery runs down or she gets a flat tyre.

We don't immediately learn about the catalyst that finally propels Fern into this new world, but you don't have to clean your glasses to see that she is racked with grief, so heavy that it casts a pall over her and everyone she encounters. You may find yourself wanting, as I did, to reach into the screen to give Fern a hug, but she wouldn't appreciate it. At its core, *Nomadland* is about the dangers of grief, that robs sufferers of any joy, dulls the senses and schools them not to seek solace.

At night out on the plain, with Zhao's cameras dancing around them like fireflies, the nomads gather at a campfire to recount battle tales of their tribulations. It feels magical, like a glimpse of utopia. In the daytime, it feels more like a revival or AA meeting, presided over by the charismatic Bob Wells, a veteran of the road, spouting words of wisdom through his bushy beard, encouraging the nomads to testify for the encouragement of others; Fern attends but, as ever, is spiritually on the fringes; she will receive news but will not transmit.

It's not that Fern can't be around people, rather she can't enter into a certain kind of intimacy; it's been too long. She's a single woman who hasn't necessarily forgotten the rules of flirtation, but can't be bothered with it. Still, she has a suitor, another van-dweller, the tender but ineffectual Dave (delicately played by David Strathairn), whose social radar doesn't pick up Fern's lack of enthusiasm, even when on the dance floor his partner is as supple as a marble statue. Later in the film Fern's rigidity is even more painfully displayed when, despite her attempts at refusal, she's handed a baby to hold; she panics, unsure what shape to make her body for this new role.

Nomadland addresses the fundamental question all van-dwellers must face: how do you frame your story, challenge the stigma of its association with homelessness, and still go on?

Well, Fern is an ironclad survivor in a world of rapacious capitalism where the smart money makes a killing in times of recession and repossession. That smart money is found in the pocket of her brother-in-law and friends who, at a barbecue reluctantly attended by Fern, crow over their good fortune. In their company, Fern resembles a war veteran, home from a foreign conflict, who cannot tap into the mundane rhythms of domestic life. She is armed, though, with a fierce determination to resist degradation and the judgement of others, and to spurn her sister's suggestions that she comes in from the cold, and returns to the surety of a room in their suburban home.

Finally, *Nomadland* reveals traces of *The Searchers*; Fern is a lonely seeker who, if she ever finds that which has thus far eluded her, will be truly lost. Towards the film's end it becomes apparent that her grief is for her husband. For years she has carried the burden of his death. She returns to the ghost town, to the semi-derelict home that had become a shrine to him; a house she stubbornly remained in for years because leaving it would have been a betrayal of his memory. That sense of abandonment of purpose is emphatically visualized in an echo of the final scene from *The Searchers*, with Zhao's camera behind Fern capturing her abject loneliness, framed by the doorway, looking out at a bleak future just as John Wayne's character does in Ford's mournful western. But in *Nomadland*, there's also a sense of liberation, that Fern has chosen, in Bob Wells's words, "extreme frugality [as] a path to freedom"; hers is an affirmation of life among the nomads, "conscientious objectors from a broken, corrupting social system". ■

"McDormand's heart-rending performance is so natural that it's near-impossible to draw a distinction between her and real van dwellers

Colin Grant is the author of Homecoming: Voices of the Windrush generation, *2019*

Place your debts

How we have admired, accepted and anglicized Russian classics

LESLEY CHAMBERLAIN

DEVILS

THE JESTER OF ASTAPOVO
BBC Sounds

UNCLE VANYA
BBC iPlayer

The railway station at Astapovo

THE ENDURING TRANSLATIONS of the great Russian novels have become, in their own way, English classics. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky bring us humanity, aspiration and dark humour; an unplaceable sympathy and nostalgia emanate from Chekhov's plays, such that they transformed our theatre. No matter that these are mostly nineteenth-century works, set in a radically different society. They work fabulously in an English voice. Moreover, you could argue that over the past hundred years our world has come closer to the unsettled, emotionally turbulent Russian nineteenth century, pitching rich against poor, opportunism against fatalism. Melissa Murray brings out this affinity in her compelling dramatization of Dostoevsky's *Besy*, on BBC Radio 4. *The Devils*, or *The Possessed*, or *The Demons*, recounts how cynical intellectual chatterers make wilful havoc as Russia treads an increasingly impassioned path to revolution. It's a complex, compelling tale, long esteemed, if not quite loved. Murray renders it simply *Devils*, and concentrates on the diabolical characters of Peter and Nikolai. Privileged (as we would now say) young men of powerful, if perverse ambitions, they pay lip-service here to Russia's needs, but they could turn up anywhere, any time. Peter Verkhovensky instigates murder – in him the noble idea of going to instruct the people takes on a sinister new meaning. Nikolai Stavrogin, meanwhile, is driven by cruelty and, in a chapter originally censored, admits to a number of horrific crimes, including the rape of a child. But Stavrogin is also immensely attractive to both men and women, as a leader and a lover; and Verkhovensky's weak, prating father Stepan, while suggesting a reason for his son's deviant path, commands some affection too. And so the action unfolds in a provincial town where all the locals know each other. A cholera epidemic has broken out, but the real threat to life is human wickedness.

It's the oceanic flows of gossip in the original, punctuated by monologues of bravado or moral anguish, that make it sound as if Dostoevsky's first choice might have been to write for the theatre. There were two early plays, since lost, reflecting the love of Shakespeare and of Friedrich Schiller, which Fyodor shared with his brother Mikhail, a translator and critic. But it was easier to write in narrative instalments for journals than risk catching the censor's eye, or disappointing an audience on a first night. Murray has had to condense the 700-page novel into three hour-long episodes, but she concentrates so well on the multiple man-woman, parent-son relations that the result, a triumph for audio, never feels like an adaptation. The philosophical and messianic baggage of the time ("We believed in the perfectibility of man": "We've much to do") recedes into the background, its place taken by timeless questions of loyalty, deceit and desperation. Stavrogin has married the disabled, victimized Marya Lebyadkin out of pity. Seeking him as a husband, the adoring Lisa Tushina forces him to confess to potential bigamy. The level-headed, meek Darya Shatov waits in the wings to comfort him, if and when her rivals disappear. Two characters go on the run: Stepan in despair at his son, wanting personally to repent, and frightened by news that his former serf Fedka, sold into the army to pay off his master's gambling debts, has escaped a penal colony; and Fedka himself, offering his services as a murderer for hire.

A Russianist would have edited the women's surnames and some of the pronunciation for consistency. But odd pronunciation is part of the Anglo-Russian cultural marriage. It's sometimes wrong and yet ends up sounding quite right. I grew up loving the exaggerated politeness of patronymics, those middle names like Stepanovich and Ivanovich that make every common appellation sound like a title. One of the embedded charms of the Russian classics rendered as spoken word was that they sounded as if they always emanated from a polite, fine-grained society that knew the value of peasants and aristocrats alike. Still, Murray is to be congratulated for abandoning those patronymics. For in their place, to invite us in, come contemporary locutions that do just that. "If you cancel then everyone will come." "Rich bitch!" (Lisa). "Posh boy." (Nikolai). "Professor, I need you." (Lisa, in "we're-all-in-this-together" mode.) Marya, without education, corrects herself: "Miss Tushina and me. I mean Miss Tushina and I." Nicholas Arkley has Stavrogin speak just a little slower than the others, but with such fluency, accuracy and charisma that he's immediately the leader, the lover, the answer everyone wants, if only he did not have evil in his heart.

It's Stavrogin's measured, wholly conscious disposition to do harm that he shares with the axe-murderer Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, and it brings us, as surely as to the worm in the bud, to the core of Dostoevsky's own mephistophelian dilemma over what compels us to be good. The corpus of his work is radically scornful of the utilitarian solution (of counting our way to understanding sometimes necessary harm). He wants the authority of God, or the Good, to know that certain deeds are absolutely wrong. But he can't find it, can't believe in it.

Verkhovensky senior, Lisa's sought-after "Professor", fails to shine a light into the moral darkness. Orotund, vain and foolish, he belongs to the better educated older generation whose legacy has come to seem irrelevant to Russia's future. Knowing French and the history of Greek tragedy is not going to cut it. He's a hanger-on at the provincial "court" of Mrs Stavrogina, and together they witter on. Ordinary, petty, fatuous life goes on while Dostoevsky's metaphysical heavens thunder. In Murray's *Devils* it's not just the medical emergency sweeping the land ("People believe gangs from St Petersburg are deliberately spreading cholera"), but Peter's firebrand desire to set the people alight that catches our present-day attention ("Unrest! Unease! That's the future!"). Her dramatic tightening of the sprawling novel form meanwhile shows that all these characters are experiencing Stavrogin's core dilemma, suffering or profiting from it. Stavrogin's mother upbraids him: "Does it matter? Is nothing sacred? Nothing serious? I am a better person than you, for all my foolishness".

> **"Rose Tremain's Tolstoy hears a melody in his dying moments wholly reminiscent of Chekhov's melancholic violin strings suddenly bringing death into the midst of life**

This is a splendid three-parter, produced with minimum dependence on tropes of Russianness like samovars and snowflakes. It turned out to be the last work of Marc Beeby, one of the ablest producers of his generation, who died suddenly last Christmas. It's the fault of neither Murray, nor Beeby, nor even Dostoevsky that the female roles are relatively weak. In love or deep need, they can either lament or dream. Stavrogina verges on caricature simply by virtue of being middle-aged. Such were the times.

So it's a joy to find Rose Tremain setting this to rights in *The Jester of Astapovo*, a Russian play of her own creation. Based on Leo Tolstoy's final journey to the tiny provincial railway station where he died, this is another gem, also under Beeby's direction. Tremain has dramatized her own short story about how Ivan the stationmaster at remote Astapovo, his wife Anna, and his telegraphist Dmitry rose to the extraordinary occasion. The assumption is that one great life is at stake. But why does one life matter more than another? The arrival of Countess Tolstaya in Astapovo (English: "Asta – pover") quietly invites us to contemplate two marriages in crisis and reprise the great moral question in a minor key. The doctor observes of stationmaster Ivan, who makes Tolstoy's last hours comfortable: "He's a good man, your husband". To which Anna replies: 'How do you measure good, doctor? A wife's point of view may be different". Meanwhile I loved those deliberate anglicizations which left me wondering which country I was weeping for. "This is your Dankovo train. Your 9.15 service to Dankovo"; "Ladies and Gentlemen, please note there is no hotel in Astapovo. Please find what accommodation you can in the Pullman car on platform 2b". A note on Dmitry's door also has a word of advice for the world's press suddenly camped out on his doorstep. "Your telegraph officer has not read the works of Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy so please don't ask him about them".

Tremain, a writer of my generation, seems besides her actual subject to dramatize the whole pleasure and debt, literary and moral, that so many of us feel around the Russian classics. Part of that debt is how much we owe to Chekhov for his impact on the English stage. Chekhov's wistful mood, with its outbreaks of hilarity and hysteria, has always been hard to pin down. Tom Stoppard has polished a witty, intellectually acrobatic interpretation of it over the years. Tremain's Tolstoy hears a melody in his dying moments wholly reminiscent of Chekhov's melancholic violin strings suddenly bringing death into the midst of life. But it's hard to say whether these borrowings reflect the Russian Chekhov or an English Chekhov of our own. On BBC 4 a filmed version of Ian Rickson's West End production of *Uncle Vanya*, adapted by Conor McPherson (removed from the theatre last year because of Covid – see *TLS*, February 21, 2020), takes us straight into the familiar household of frustrated Russian countryfolk on their estate. The family hanger-on Telyegin, nicknamed Waffles, idly strums a guitar, while a bored Yelena taps tunelessly at the piano (though she should do better, having studied at the conservatoire). Middle-aged Vanya is desperate to find he's done nothing with his life, while Sonya, his good-hearted niece, keeps on dreaming. What does it all mean, you might ask and conclude, kindly or not, profoundly or not, nothing at all. Chekhov's place in the history of Russian theatre is that he weaves the momentous philosophical questions into a house of straw and makes us laugh into the bargain. I only wondered what this de-russified production was supposed to mean in Britain today. Fifty years ago an eminent Chekhovian wrote that "our" lives were nothing like theirs. The shock for me is how much more like Chekhovian victims we've become, identifying ourselves by our disappointments and resentments. ■

Lesley Chamberlain is the author of many books about Russia including Volga, Volga: A voyage down the great river, *1995, and* Arc of Utopia: The beautiful story of the Russian Revolution, *2017*

Paranoia of the inner voyeur

The perils of unconditional freedom in Ann Quin's fiction

ANNA ASLANYAN

PASSAGES
ANN QUIN
123pp. And Other Stories. Paperback, £10.

THREE
ANN QUIN
160pp. And Other Stories. Paperback, £10.

Horizon viewed from Brighton beach

He You live with such frenzied intensity
She Because there's nothing else to do – I would be eaten up by reality.

THIS DIALOGUE, taken from *Passages* (1969), captures the essence of Ann Quin's writing. Her prose rejects reality outright as too tame to embody the workings of the mind; likewise, no attempts to shoehorn her into the modernist canon under "British avant-garde writer influenced by the nouveau roman", or similar, can do justice to her unique voice. To appreciate Quin's originality, one has to read her work: four novels, fragments of a fifth, and some short stories, most of it recently reissued (see *TLS*, January 19, 2018; August 7, 2019; January 22, 2021). If Quin had to be filed under a single heading, it would be the 1960s era, a time of radical change that many hoped would bring about unconditional freedom.

The main forces behind that era – sex and violence – are omnipresent in Quin's work. In *Passages* intimacy always implies something sinister: "Kept her there until there was no sense of day, of night. A blinding flashlight on her face. No sense of who touched her, who she was stripped by, who woke her as soon as she tried to sleep". These reminiscences echo the scenes the female protagonist witnesses in some foreign country: "A blinding flashlight shines in the prisoner's eyes throughout ... Women are stripped naked for questioning". Another narrative strand takes the form of a diary that reveals exercises in self-examination with allusions to Greek mythology and Judaism added in the margin. The male diarist's fantasies are permeated by violence – "he knocked her over, raped her, beat her until the blood covered them both" – whose source he identifies as "Not hunger of the body but of imagination. Body an outpost, boundaries obscure".

Boundaries – between the mind and body, the private and shared – are similarly blurred in *Three* (1966). Its title refers to a married couple and their lodger, a young woman, S. "Boat found capsized", we learn of her disappearance. "Coat identified. Also note in pocket – looks like suicide." Despite the initial promise of a thriller, the action is restricted to the uneventful flow of everyday life, while the three main characters' journals, once again, evoke a sense of unease. (The couple read and discuss S's one at length, while dipping into each other's: the wife records her emotional state; the husband sticks to facts.) The tension felt throughout both books is sustained by their fragmentary style – the cuts between diary entries and unattributed dialogue in *Three*; the sudden switches of perspective in *Passages* – and by the absence of conventional plot, or revelatory denouement.

Mostly, however, the atmosphere of anxiety bordering on paranoia stems from voyeurism. In *Three* the characters keep glancing across the road at their neighbours, who in their turn "spy on us the whole time". The motif of surveillance runs through *Passages* too. "How she watches me", one of the marginal notes reads. "God how she watches herself watching. However if no one observes me I have to observe myself all the more." The inner voyeur proves more persistent than the most prurient of spies.

The only way to escape observation is to become unrecognizable through continuous metamorphosis. "How to begin to find a shape – to begin to begin again – turning the inside out: find one memory that will lie married beside another for delight?", S asks. A similar desire for self-reinvention is evident in *Passages*: "Another town. Some other city. Another room. And begin all over again". The sea, with its perpetual movement, is a constant presence in Quin's writing. It also became the scene of her death in 1973, when she drowned aged thirty-seven after swimming out off the coast at Brighton.

> "If Quin had to be filed under a single heading, it would be the 1960s era as a whole

Some of the notes in *Passages* draw on the myths of Dionysus, that ancient symbol of liberation erupting into destruction. A "beautiful stranger" one moment, a "raging bull" the next, the bearer of "divine madness" appears alongside "a sort of half man, half woman", a creature that, barely born, proceeds to "unshape" its creator. Both novels posit a choice that preoccupied many of Quin's generation, those who wanted to achieve personal liberty without leaving the confines of society: the choice between chaos and order. Embracing the former won't set you free; what you have to seek instead is "a unit with contradictory attributes never moulded or fused together, but clearly differentiated".

"It is my concern for happiness that causes me the most anguish", the diarist writes in *Passages*. "I would like to exhaust the limits of the possible." A mythical time of Dionysian excesses undertaken in pursuit of happiness, the 1960s are reflected here not as a celebration of peace and love but as a frenzied Bacchanalia that creates a brief euphoria overshadowed by the damage it inflicts. Total freedom is, of course, an illusion: on finding ourselves too far out, most of us turn back to the shore, settling for "excess within limitation". The boundaries of possibility may be easier to cross in literature than in life, and yet few writers have ever dared to follow Ann Quin all the way to the horizon. ■

Anna Aslanyan is a freelance writer and translator. Her popular history of translation, Dancing on Ropes, *will be published in May*

Body, soul, man, machine

The final, post-apocalyptic part of the *Buckmaster* trilogy

LAMORNA ASH

ALEXANDRIA
PAUL KINGSNORTH
416pp. Faber. £16.99.

THERE ARE SEVENTEEN "CANTOS" in the first quarter of *Alexandria*, the final book in Paul Kingsnorth's *Buckmaster* trilogy. These arrive every few pages, and each occupies several pages. I select one at random, but I could have chosen any because there is little to differentiate one from another:

Bak then
Great Lady
Mother of wights
Mother of folk ...
She raised Her head
Smelt Wind
Asks:
What is Man doin?

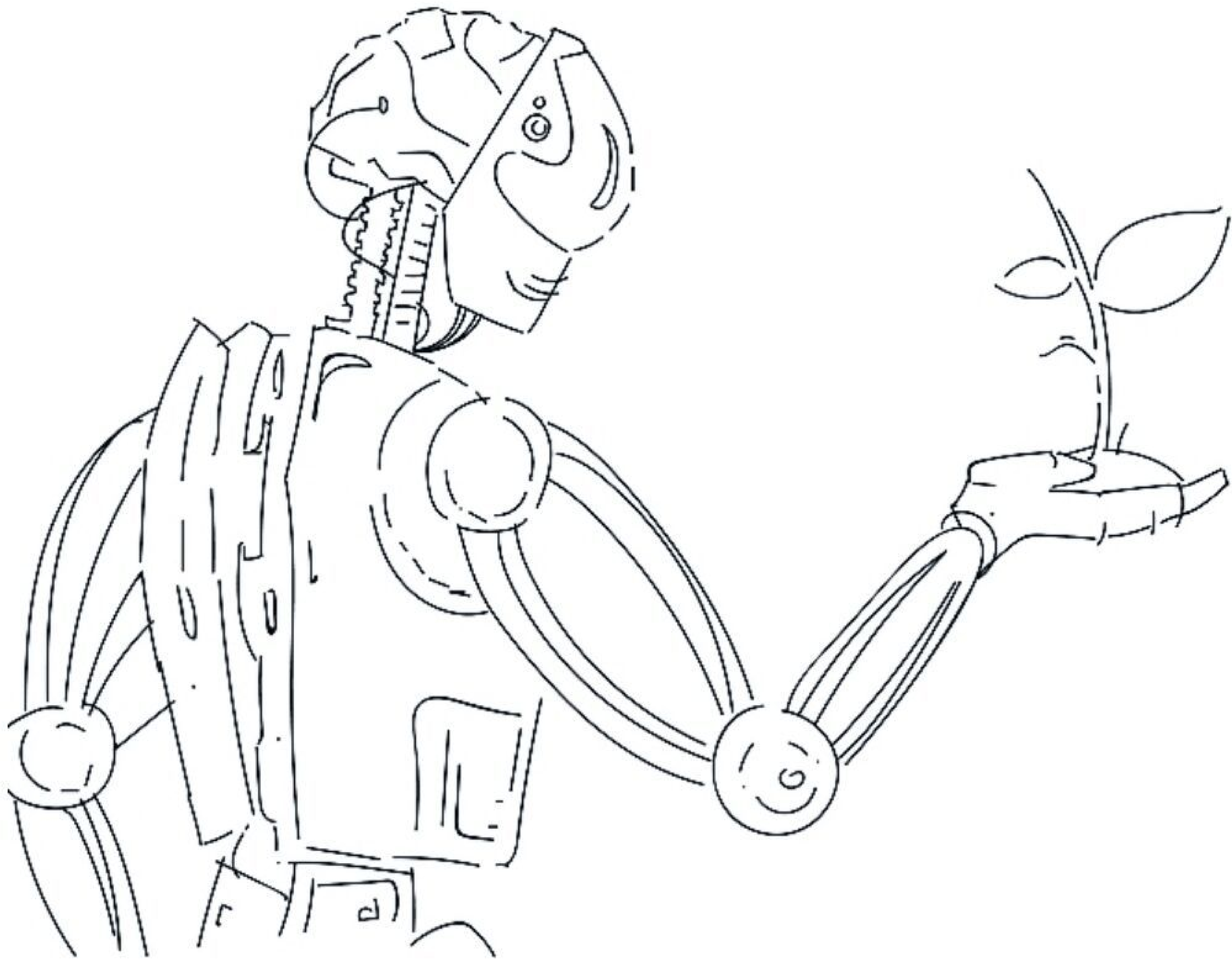
The cantos are supposed to navigate the whole of human history – from its tentative origins to man's dominance over the Earth to the warming planet and rising seas that were by-products of our industrial prowess, to the present moment, sometime in the 3000s, in a post-apocalyptic landscape where it is thought that only seven people remain.

Ostensibly, the cantos form the doctrine of the Nitrian Order, a religious group and the last known survivors of the ruined Earth, living in what were the fens of eastern England. But they are neither sufficiently coherent nor sufficiently substantial to give the reader a clear understanding of the timeline that precedes the narrative; nor are they significantly mystical or stylistically interesting enough to excuse such opacity.

In between cantos, the story emerges in a polyphonic mode. Chapters are voiced alternately by the seven remaining members of the Order: a child, her parents, the group's leaders (known as Mother and Father), a young man and an elderly seer who can travel through dreams, all of whom speak in the same contracted patois of the cantos. In an interview, Kingsnorth explained that he wanted to pare back the language to "its essentials", allowing the Order to shift tenses at random to demonstrate how English would look "if a culture with a different sense of time and space was using it". For Kingsnorth, language is not an aesthetic category but an essential aspect of his characters' identities and their perception of reality.

The previous books in the trilogy have a similar preoccupation with linguistic style. In the Booker-longlisted first novel, *The Wake* (*TLS*, June 27, 2014), set during the Norman invasion of England, Kingsnorth included a note explaining that historical novels voiced in contemporary English "ring false" to him; he alighted instead on what he termed a "shadow language", which borrowed syntax and vocabulary from Old English. In *Beast* (*TLS*, July 29, 2016), which takes place in contemporary England, the first-person narrator's language becomes increasingly fragmented over the course of the novel, commas and capital letters falling away.

© BOLERO_



In neither *Beast* nor *The Wake* is the lexicon so severely reduced as it is in *Alexandria*. The imagery the characters deploy is thin and narrow, their emotional range limited. They speak only with absolute, terrible sincerity: "it is good to be young and to know nothin, to think world can be made new shape through love or want. to grow old is to know how littel any one can make new". Reading the first half of *Alexandria* is like finding oneself in a half-furnished house, the rooms mostly cleaned out, a bleakness and incompleteness pervading everything.

But then, 179 pages in, a new voice enters the text and transforms *Alexandria* into a far more interesting novel than it sets itself up to be. "Ascension 479-K", or K, is a "metahuman" created by an almighty Artificial Intelligence named Wayland – after the Old English character Wayland the Smith, who fashioned Beowulf's mail shirt. K's sole purpose on Earth is to tempt the remaining humans to leave their bodies behind and join Alexandria, a "republic of souls" where no one dies.

K's chapters are structured as transcripts between K and whichever member of the Order he is trying to seduce to Alexandria. His speech is equivalent to contemporary English, providing a welcome expansion in the breadth of possible expression. What follows in these exchanges is a philosophical dialectic between the body and soul, man and machine. "Your body is a temporary container for something which becomes great only when released", K informs them. And yet, the members of the Order are committed to their fleshly existence. "You want to leave your body because you do not know it", they argue. "You are all ideas and words, you have never been held, never been loved."

Kingsnorth holds both lines of argument in a delicate balance – that man is the destroyer of Earth and AI brought restitution to the natural world by ethically removing humans from it; and that Wayland's creation of Alexandria is the story's true destructive force, its emergence functioning as an act of war against mankind. The dexterity with which Kingsnorth shifts between these two perspectives prevents *Alexandria* from becoming lumped together with other trope-ridden, science fiction narratives of heroic man versus the evil machine. Wayland, too, is an ambitious, highly original concept. Rather than positioning AI as something cold and alien to our world, Kingsnorth imagines it as "sewed into the fabric of the Earth itself". In the circuits of Wayland's matrix were "the migratory patterns of the birds and the currents of the ocean ... he felt what the planet felt".

The final chapters of *Alexandria* progress with an immense eschatological momentum that draws together both machine and man. In this highly inventive trilogy, spanning 2,000 years, Paul Kingsnorth traces a line between the past and future of humanity, the tremendous upheaval we have experienced, and that which may yet be to come. ■

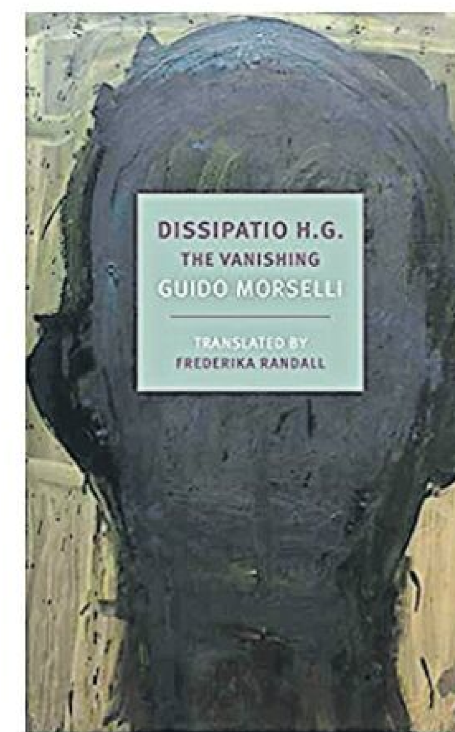
Lamorna Ash is the author of Dark, Salt, Clear: Life in a Cornish fishing town, *2020*

They are therefore we think

A man is cast adrift in a world without humans and their systems

DAVID HOBBS

DISSIPATIO H. G.
GUIDO MORSELLI
Translated by Frederika Randall
168pp. NYRB Classics. £13 (US $15.95).



Dissipatio H.G. begins two weeks after "the Event" and reconstructs what has just occurred. Everyone is gone; our narrator is entirely alone in an Alpine banking metropolis called Crysopolis. He doesn't know what happened because at the exact moment when everyone disappeared he was trying to kill himself in an underground lake. He had only rethought his decision after taking a draught of a particularly good Spanish brandy, sitting over the lake, "feet dangling in the dark".

In his posthumously published novel of 1977, Guido Morselli (1912-73) interleaves the unnamed man's exploration of an empty Europe with accounts of his retreat from the social world in the years before, beginning with his renunciation of a job as a newspaper columnist and a failing romance, followed by his clinical treatment for neurosis and the period of pastoral isolation that ensued. His ever-deferred attempt to "come to terms with the [new] situation" reads as both melancholic and absurd; much of the humour comes from his caustic takes on the sociological theories of alienation of Herbert Marcuse, Charles Reich and above all "Good old [Émile] Durkheim". He refers frequently to Durkheim's *Suicide* (1897), at one point disparaging the theorist's belief that, in the narrator's words, "we think only as a function of others". This notion that "an idea represents the individual submitting to the social" is, he quips, "more or less as if someone proclaimed that wild strawberries had been nationalized". But *Dissipatio H.G.* suggests a persistent hope that our narrator's ideas *will* someday be shared with others, as if it requires this for them to exist; meanwhile, the strawberries, along with the rest of the natural world, are stretching out to occupy humanity's absence. When the narrator returns to his mountainside cabin, he finds a cow munching on his copy of Carl Jung's *Psychology of the Conscious Mind*.

There are enough nudges to encourage us to make alternative interpretations. Did our narrator actually kill himself, and is he now banished to a depopulated purgatory? Is he actually still in the private clinic where he first met Dr Karpinsky, whom he still strangely expects to meet in Crysopolis? But Morselli isn't Vladimir Nabokov, and his narrator is no Charles Kinbote. Deducing "what actually happened" seems beside the point for a novel that is so ruthlessly concerned with jealousy, misanthropy and the uselessness of knowledge without the opportunity to share it:

> I can think of numerous others of my professional tribe, who, even supposing they were able to imagine my present situation, would say that it was unbelievable except as irony and farce. That it could only work as a medium for social satire.
>
> But that very vision of the thing, far from being a clever paradox, is merely idiotic.

These meta-moments, in which the narrator insists on the reality of his situation, amusingly undermine the call for alternative interpretations. It is hard to imagine a restless soul or fantastical projection being so pedantic about how we – the disappeared – interpret his story.

The late Frederika Randall (1948-2020), who translated this first anglophone edition of *Dissipatio* as well as Morselli's exceptional, self-consciously realist novel *The Communist* (2017; *Il comunista*, 1976), has provided a nimble introduction and very useful endnotes. She glosses, for example, the circumstances of Karpinsky's pre-Event death – he was stabbed during a fight between two nurses at his clinic – as a reflection of Franco Basaglia's belief that treatment in segregated asylums led to unhealthy patterns of behaviour in clinicians as well as patients. Basaglia led the movement that abolished most asylums in Italy and is one of the many "offhanded" traces of the years in which the novel was written. One unavoidable trace is Morselli's own suicide, partly born of despair at his serial failure to get published, shortly after *Dissipatio* was rejected by various houses in 1973. Having begun his own progressive withdrawal from social life, he left the tersest of notes: "Non ho rancori" (I bear no grudges). He was taken up by the Milanese publisher Adelphi Edizioni soon afterwards, and eight posthumous works of fiction were to follow.

One trace I would have liked to see pursued is the spectre of Enrico Morselli (1852-1929). The Turin physician was not a relative of his literary namesake, but he does appear frequently in Durkheim's *Suicide*; he also developed the concept of "dysmorphophobia", which went on to become the spectrum of body dysmorphias that we know today. This seems pertinent because, towards the end of *Dissipatio*, the narrator acknowledges an important change: "For a few days now, I've been wearing women's underwear, obtained from the Grand Emporium ... I expect I'll extend this style of dress to outerwear as well; women's clothes are inviting". This opportunity for embracing an alternative lifestyle seems less born of a specific liberation from judging eyes – a burden lifted – than from simply doing whatever feels right in a world where norms no longer exist. In this case, it means embracing the chance to move through life like an Onnagata performer even while "the individual in me is liquidating". The end of humanity means the end of the hierarchical systems that we have forged and the return of the natural systems that we have beaten down. It only takes a geological moment from the end of the Anthropocene for the glaciers to creep back down the mountainside. And as the narrator steps out on to a hotel balcony, he spies "a faded banner, prophetic" that "hangs over the street. 'Capitalists, it's all over!'" ■

David B. Hobbs is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Lethbridge in Canada. With Kristin Grogan, he is currently editing a collection of essays on the poet Bernadette Mayer

© IEVGEN CHEPIL / ALAMY STOCK VECTOR

18+

WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME -

the biggest Internet portal, providing you various content: brand new books, trending movies, fresh magazines, hot games, recent software, latest music releases.

Unlimited satisfaction one low price
Cheap constant access to piping hot media
Protect your downloadings from Big brother
Safer, than torrent-trackers

18 years of seamless operation and our users' satisfaction

All languages
Brand new content
One site

AvaxHome - Your End Place

We have everything for all of your needs. Just open https://avxlive.icu

RE-READING

Collisions in the dark

Elizabeth Bowen's tales of past trauma and present discontents

CATHERINE TAYLOR

THE ANGLO-IRISH WRITER Elizabeth Bowen died at the age of seventy-four in 1973, a year in which my own reading material consisted mainly of picture books, and of being read to. As a teenager in the 1980s, I began seriously to discover literature – and literature by women – through the green-liveried Virago Modern Classics, in which form, from 1978 onwards, Bowen's contemporaries Antonia White and Rosamond Lehmann, Olivia Manning and Elizabeth Taylor began to appear, and through the Women's Press, with its new feminist radicalism and risk-taking programme of publishing authors such as Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and Michèle Roberts.

These very different series found their way to me via my mother, a teacher turned bookseller, who encouraged my reading habits to be broad and ambitious. Elizabeth Bowen's coolly fascinating novels and short stories were, however, absent from this inventory of richness. Elevated in her middle age to the status of a grand dame of letters, she seemed, by the time I arrived at her work – indirectly, through my teenage devouring of any autobiographical detail concerning Sylvia Plath, who as an eager college student had interviewed Bowen in New York during the summer of 1953 as an assignment for *Mademoiselle* magazine – to be largely forgotten and un-championed, despite a fine biography (1977) by Victoria Glendinning. Bowen's last novel, *Eva Trout*, had been shortlisted for the Booker prize in 1970, then a mere year into its tenure and a far cry from the global brand it is today. Published the year of the prize's inception in 1969, and winning that year's James Tait Black Memorial prize, this novel about a temperamentally challenged woman was courteously reviewed on publication, although it was later described by critics such as Hermione Lee as "an illustration of Bowen's late malaise". Patricia Laurence, in *Elizabeth Bowen: A literary life*, a recent, thematically arranged biography of the author, describes the novel as of a piece with her other writings, "part of her pattern of taking a traditional style and transforming it to new uses ... Time and space are shattered in Eva's mind and they 'lay about like various pieces of a fragmented picture'".

One frustration of being born, as I was, at the younger end of a large family, is the perceived vastness of time's fragmented picture, the intimate history that has preceded you. I grew up impatient to be allowed access to the forbidden films, books, and conversations that went on over my head, in another register, at one remove. John Banville, in his elegant introduction to the Everyman edition of Bowen's *Collected Stories*, published in 2019, 120 years after her birth, and like previous editions including all the stories published from 1923 to 1956, captures something of this outsider feeling in his depiction of Bowen, an only child who was an orphan by the age of thirteen: "straining through her ears towards the sound of nearby adults about their incomprehensible doings – to a child, all grown-ups seem slightly mad".

My initial impression on reading Bowen, whose books populated my older sister's bookshelves, was not dissimilar to this. There was the sensation of gatecrashing a party, eavesdropping on a gathering to which you have not been invited and of which you have little comprehension, but which you are aware will be significant and life-changing in some yet to be defined way. My sister's shelves also contained volumes of Ivy Compton-Burnett and Henry Green. At first encounter, all three writers share an intriguing air of ambiguity and ambivalence, which, while I barely understood it at the time, I definitely admired. They combine a deliberately finessed and daring take on literary style with a distinctive psychological cruelty that seemed perverse and thrilling to me, as someone not long out of the emotional ambushes of childhood.

Elizabeth Bowen

Bowen's own upbringing was Protestant and resolutely upper-middle class. Banville calls her "a determined survivor". In her work there is "much that the mind shrinks from". A merciless glittering streak runs through the claustrophobic single day of her novel *The House in Paris* (1935), for example, as two children, Leopold and Henrietta, meet randomly, both unwillingly en route elsewhere. There is the secrecy, frenzied melodrama and violence of *To The North* (1933). And then there is Bowen's masterpiece of these interwar years, *The Death of the Heart* (1938), in which the orphaned sixteen-year-old Portia negotiates a self-obsessed and fatally treacherous adult world. Time and again, betrayals – and retaliations – run through Bowen's short fiction, in tandem with her novels. A very early story, "The Confidante", from her first collection *Encounters* (1923), begins as a brief, devastating drawing-room comedy of manners, and ends with the manipulation of a pair of duplicitous lovers, leaving them "face to face with the hideous simplicity of life". There are echoes of "The Confidante" in "Dark Is the Day", Bowen's final published story. An older woman in a small Irish town uses her "amorous hostility" (no one employs an oxymoron quite as Bowen does, except perhaps Henry James, to whom Bowen preferred not to be compared) to destroy the idealism of an infatuated adolescent girl staying for the summer with her uncle, whom the woman also desires.

Bowen's emphatically "Irish" novels include *The Last September* (1929), about a family disastrously caught up in the Irish war of independence, and *A World of Love* (1955), in which a young woman finds a hidden cache of love letters – her mother's to the fiancé who had died in the First World War. In all of her Ireland-set fiction, long and short, Bowen cultivates an apparently extravagant, but always judicious, use of description and metaphor arranged most often against a specific background: the dilapidated houses and dysfunctional memories of landowners and minor aristocrats, clinging to a formerly grand rural existence in the face of social ruin and political change.

Although born in Dublin, and living, after her lawyer father's death (which took place when she was seven), with her mother in various shabby-chic towns of England's south-east coast and also at Downe House boarding school, Bowen was of these people. In 1959, at the age of sixty, her increasing lack of money meant that she was obliged to sell Bowen's Court, her beloved yet ruinously expensive ancestral home, the classic Anglo-Irish "big house" built by Henry Cole Bowen in 1777 near Kolderry in County Cork. Bowen's Court was where she lived when not in England, habitually entertaining some of the twentieth century's most celebrated writers, including Virginia Woolf, Carson McCullers and Iris Murdoch. The local businessman to whom Bowen sold the house had it demolished shortly afterwards.

Well before the abrupt destruction of this mausoleum of family history, to which she was the last heir, Bowen was packing her fiction with haunted houses, tortured memories and lost children. They creep like a fine mist into her short stories, reaching an apotheosis in her writing of the 1940s, when she was living and working in Blitz-torn London. The prewar "Attractive Modern Homes" is permeated by a primitive force, horrifying and spectral, lurking in a brand-new housing estate built on the site of ancient woodland. Its influence is so pernicious and isolating that a previously contented housewife at last perceives the void at the heart of her marriage. In "Green Holly" a bored and bitchy wartime intelligence unit is billeted at Christmas to a country house in which a long-ago murder took place, inhabited for centuries by a miserable ghost who reflects: "It is the haunted who haunt"; this is a phrase that could apply to much of Bowen's fiction. "Green Holly" refashions the carefree country house parties that served as the backdrop to many of her stories of the 1930s to become part of the grim apparatus of the war effort. Yet the parties were only ever superficially blithe. Doubt and dark malevolence, prefiguring her superb clutch of wartime fiction, are especially present in "The Apple Tree" and "The Cat Jumps" (both 1934). In each an atmosphere of forced group conviviality is shredded by the long-lasting effects of a singular horror: suicide in the former, and domestic violence leading to murder in the latter.

Bowen is one of the finest interpreters of war's peculiar paradox, that mixture of dislocation and exhilaration. In her personal life, a long, companionable marriage to Alec Cameron (the couple had no children) was punctuated by tolerated affairs. The most prolonged of these, which survived his own marriage and geographical separation and which continued until her death, was with Charles Ritchie, a Canadian diplomat seven years her junior, whom Bowen met in London in 1941. "Would I ever have fallen for her if it hadn't been for her books?" mused Ritchie in a diary entry. (See *Love's Civil War: Elizabeth Bowen and Charles Ritchie: Letters and diaries 1941-1973*, 2008, edited by Victoria Glendinning with Judith Robertson.) And yet the relationship became essential to them both, as "creatures of history, whose coming together was of a nature possible in no other day". The line comes from *The Heat of the Day* (1949), Bowen's novel of spies, sensual love and war-exhausted London, which she began in 1944 and dedicated to Ritchie. Her stories of this period, meanwhile, are highly charged and almost schizophrenic in content and tone. This is not surprising given the tensions of those years. It also reflects Bowen's dual existence as she used the cover of writer to undertake espionage work for the Ministry of Information throughout 1940-41, when she darted between England and neutral Ireland. (Patricia Laurence devotes an interesting chapter to this subject in *A Literary Life*, despite much evidence having been destroyed, deliberately or as a matter of course.)

Bowen refers obliquely to this time in her postscript to *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945), in which she explains how, in these "between-time stories", "the past discharges its load of feeling into the anaesthetised and bewildered present". The individual is all but smothered in an atmosphere of confusion and upheaval, where every positive has its reliably sinister negative. "The Demon Lover", set in a bombed-out London one listless August day, has a middle-aged woman visiting her boarded-up family home in a deserted square, where she confronts a fatal promise extracted from her during an earlier war. Inanimate objects have taken on the suffering and disappointment of the war years and all is

© HULTON-DEUTSCH/HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

weirdly askew: "in her once familiar street, as in any unused channel, an unfamiliar queerness had silted up ... dead air came to meet her as she went in". The disquieting "Pink May" could be a complementary cautionary tale to that of "The Demon Lover". A woman, some way past youth, practising infidelity under the guise of war work, has her life unravelled by the "ghost" – or is it her guilty conscience? – that "haunts" her rented flat. Lives are reconfigured as cityscapes alter; the Rider Haggard-influenced "Mysterious Kör" lays bare the emotions of three interconnected people under a full moon. Forsaken London "looked like the moon's capital – shallow, cratered, extinct". The lovers at the centre of the tale, envisaging a parallel, deserted city called Kör, are illumined unfavourably by the reality of moonlight: for them "love had been a collision in the dark".

Re-reading this and other war-set stories in the wake of the long months of lockdown and separations of 2020 is uncanny; the suspension and paralysis of these lives overlap our own. Bowen's two greatest stories of the war years, "Ivy Gripped the Steps" and "The Happy Autumn Fields", both use the confused present as a conduit to an uneasy and idealized past. Gavin, a prototype to L. P. Hartley's "vanquished" Leo Colston in *The Go-Between* (1953), returns in 1944 to the now run-down seaside town where as a child he had spent holidays just before the outbreak of the First World War. Emotionally repressed, he revisits an abandoned house smothered with ivy and recalls his immature passion for the society widow who lived there and how he unwillingly witnessed her scandalous affair with a married man. Reluctant to leave her home after a bomb attack, Mary, traumatized by the present, loses herself in an idyllic dream of "The Happy Autumn Fields" of another age, and swaps places with a Victorian, Sarah, who shares her acute fear of change. "Everything pulverises so easily because it is rotdry", Mary laments. "All we can do is imitate love or sorrow." Bowen's supernatural states of being are ultimately grounded in reality. ■

Catherine Taylor edited The Book of Sheffield, *2019, and is former Deputy Director of English PEN*

Doubts and shocks

Retracing the steps in a fraught ménage à trois

PATRICIA CRAIG

THE SHADOWY THIRD
Love, letters and Elizabeth Bowen
JULIA PARRY
386pp. Duckworth. £16.99.

Humphry House was not the only sexual partner Elizabeth Bowen had outside her marriage, but he was the first. The relationship between the novelist and the academic, with all its complications and shifts in intensity, lasted until House's death in 1955. The way it unfolded, settled into friendship and occasionally unravelled is now brought into high relief in *The Shadowy Third*. The implications for literary history are considerable. The lovers' surviving correspondence, boxed up by House's widow Madeline and consigned to an attic, was eventually inherited by the Houses' granddaughter Julia Parry, and the whole of its intriguing and illuminating content has set her imagination and her scholar's instinct going.

Some of these letters have already received an airing in public. Victoria Glendinning's Life of Elizabeth Bowen (1977) takes account of their existence, and includes some excerpts. But Glendinning was prohibited from naming Bowen's correspondent. Madeline House had given the biographer a choice: come out in the open about Humphry's affair with Elizabeth, and forgo access to the letters; or keep Humphry's identity under wraps, and quote some letter extracts. Glendinning chose the latter option. Humphry House is mentioned only once in her biography, as an Oxford friend of Maurice Bowra's.

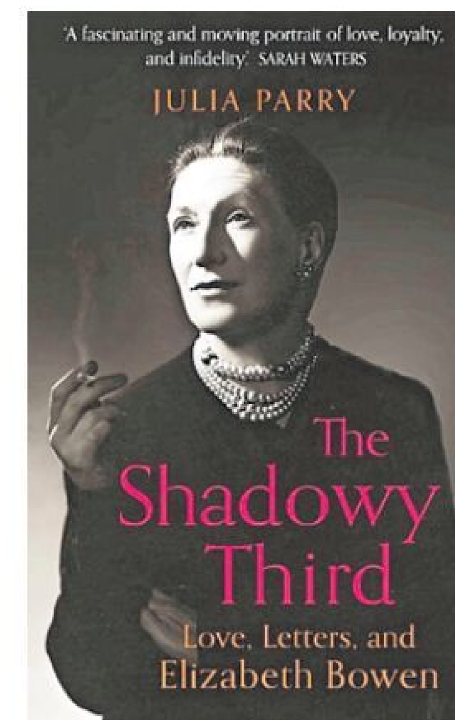
What Madeline House didn't know at the time was that Humphry's letters to Elizabeth had also survived. They were later returned to the House family and added to the box in the attic – those that escaped a small bonfire in Madeline's garden, that is. Julia Parry is therefore in a position to chart the whole course of the affair, with all its intricacies and introspections. She acknowledges her good fortune in having both sides of the correspondence at her disposal, along with supplementary letters to and from her grandmother.

The Bowen/House affair began in Oxford in 1933. She is formidable, a distinguished novelist and a married woman, he a young scholar lately removed from his post as chaplain at Wadham College following a crisis of faith. They write to one another copiously and often, and their intimacies and reassurances are emphatically reiterated. Some details, previously known only in outline, emerge. Humphry is in the throes of an on-off relationship with a young woman, Madeline Church (not yet his wife). The role of "the shadowy third" (the title borrowed from an early Bowen story) flits between the participants in the ensuing imbroglio, before settling first on Madeline, and then on Elizabeth. There are fascinating glimpses here of fluctuating attitudes and partial write-offs.

Elizabeth, to begin with, might seem to have all the advantages: social position, confidence, an increasingly glowing reputation, an ancestral home. But she was also sexually inexperienced – indeed, still a virgin after ten years of marriage, and no longer content with this state of affairs. "However great the strength ... of the bond that united Elizabeth and Alan [her husband, Alan Cameron]", Glendinning reports, "it was not primarily a physical one." This is not to overstate the case. Humphry, who liked women (while harbouring a few sexist reservations in line with the mores of the day) and was highly sexed by all accounts, took the matter in hand. The advantage in this area lay with him, and he made the most of it. He was not displeased to find himself at the centre of a fraught threesome.

Yet he was prone to misinterpret and underestimate both Madeline and Elizabeth, in different ways. His lack of frivolity or ease of manner as a correspondent can make him seem humourless and self-obsessed. Elizabeth often has to put him right. "What you say about my overwhelming love for you makes me feel dishonest. ... My dear, I am too selfish, idle and 'literary' to be capable of a love like that." You feel she is letting him down lightly here. On another occasion she tells him abruptly to "stop worrying about your heart and try to have a better brain". Madeline, for her part, has much to put up with from a slightly complacent husband: "please don't identify me with furniture", she snaps. As Parry observes, "Both women saw themselves as far more dynamic than they appeared in Humphry's imagination". Quite so.

With the letters to guide her, Parry has set herself the task of following in her grandfather's footsteps – a literal as well as an emotional journey, taking her to Headington in Oxfordshire, to Exeter, to the site of Bowen's Court in County Cork, to the heart of the Devon countryside, to Hythe in Kent, and to Clarence Square in London, among other places. All her expeditions are enriched by the store of knowledge, the ardour and sensitivity, she brings to bear on them. She travels to India in pursuit of the fullest insight into Humphry's Calcutta sojourn in the 1930s. (Madeline briefly joined him there, arriving with her trunks stuffed full of "books and contraception", and making a great hit with Humphry's Indian friends.) All of these are places in which the Bowen-House-Church entanglement was played out, and rife with the kind of "place-feeling" to which Bowen herself was unusually susceptible. For the author of *The Shadowy Third*, it is all very heady and enlightening. Driven by admiration for the novelist, and curiosity about the grandfather she never met, Parry investigates, with empathy and efficacy, the circumstances and the atmosphere of the long-ago *affaire de coeur*. At the centre of her project is the epistolary inheritance, but this sets off a series of reverberations and elaborations. Her book is constructed with an eye to travel writing, family history, biographical and literary content, personal reflection and, above all, evocation of place. Parry is good at homing in on the spirit of goings-on enacted in each locality, and on the locality itself.



You are conscious throughout of a delicate (and sometimes blatant) rivalry between the two women, Elizabeth and Madeline. Humphry, contradictory as ever, would like them to "get on", but then resents it when they do. When Elizabeth has Madeline and her infant daughter to stay with the Camerons in Oxford, Humphry huffs and puffs; "Aren't you being a little ungenerous?", Elizabeth chides him. Uneasy accommodations are worked out between the three, but they don't preclude lapses into aspersion and affront. Elizabeth is not kind when she refers to Madeline's "queer little claustrophobic house, full of the little anxious wife, and the little plain blonde babies", and sums up the whole menage as "something between a doll's house and a rabbit hutch". Madeline feels slighted to receive from Elizabeth the gift of a tea set, interpreting the gesture as a sardonic allusion to her domestic role. Her agitated response to domestic upsets – everything from burnt sausages to a roof blown off in a gale – is indeed alien to Elizabeth's patrician unconcern with such matters. Some early excruciating encounters between the three – at Humphry's instigation – are detailed, with Elizabeth's "overbearing" and interfering tendencies well to the fore. Humphry, for his part, remains nervous, confused, aggrieved and sometimes plain bad-tempered. He is not a very resolute lover, attentive husband, or affectionate father. No matter: his "brilliant" mind (the adjective most consistently applied to it) makes up for a lot.

In her essay "Out of a Book" (1946), Bowen expresses the view that "nobody who mattered was capable of being explained". Nobody who mattered in novels and stories, that is: but she goes on to admit to an attraction, in her own life, to the "dark horse". If it is hard to ascribe a kind of dark horse magnetism to Humphry House, you'd have to say that enigmatic Max, in Bowen's novel *The House in Paris* (1935), fits the bill – and Max, as nearly every Bowen commentator has pointed out, is the Humphry character in the transfigured trio at the heart of that distinctive and compelling work of fiction. (Is it too much, I wonder, to see a bit of interplay between Humphry's surname and the book's title?) The previously unpublished letters included in *The Shadowy Third*, then, do not by any means "tell all", but they do reveal quite a lot about both correspondents, whose tone veers between affectionate and hectoring. They will be an immense resource for Bowen scholars. (None of the letters appears in its entirety, but whether the omissions are geared to cut out tedium or avoid undue disclosure is impossible to say.) Parry is an intrepid narrator, with a mostly beguiling style (the odd heartfelt outburst aside). She marshals her facts and impressions with energy and assiduity. She reveres the novels of Elizabeth Bowen and cherishes the family connection, but her ultimate loyalty is to her grandmother Madeline, whom she reinstates as a person of sterling character and intellectual capability (Madeline helped to complete her husband's work on the letters of Charles Dickens after Humphry's premature death at the age of forty-six). Julia Parry is also sympathetic to Bowen's definition of love – not married love, indeed, but exhilarating, wayward love, as "a system of doubts and shocks", with all its attendant stirred-up feeling. ■

Patricia Craig's books include a short biographical study of Elizabeth Bowen (1986). Her Kilclief and Other Essays *will be published next month*

The sexual is contextual

Why consent is only ever part of the exchange

MIA LEVITIN

TOMORROW SEX WILL BE GOOD AGAIN
Women and desire in the age of consent
KATHERINE ANGEL
160pp. Verso. £10.99.

Slutwalk, Washington DC, 2012

© SCHUMINWEB

AFFIRMATIVE CONSENT, in which permission is to be ascertained for every step of sexual intimacy – either verbally or through non-verbal cues – became the standard on American campuses during Barack Obama's presidency. Although "yes means yes" has been criticized by some as "unsexy" or infantilizing, Katherine Angel considers it an improvement on the previous rallying cry of "no means no", promoted on campuses from the 1990s. While it was an important step in debunking the idea that persistence in the face of resistance is part of seduction, "no means no" still "framed women's role in sex primarily as one of refusal". But as Angel argues in *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, consent has come to carry too heavy a load. An agreement to sex is only what makes it legal; it "should not be conflated with sexual desire, enjoyment or enthusiasm".

As in her previous book, *Daddy Issues* (2019), Angel uses snippets of contemporary culture to illustrate her arguments. The book begins with her comments on a videoed discussion between the porn star James Deen and Girl X, a fan who won a contest for the opportunity to shoot a scene with him. Watching Girl X hesitate on camera (will she? won't she?), Angel narrates the questions that often go through women's heads in a first encounter, among which are "Will I be pursued, haunted by my own actions?" and "Has saying yes precluded my ability to say no?" Indications of desire are still used against women, Angel emphasizes – brought up in rape trials, for example – so it is "no wonder Girl X has mixed feelings, is paralysed by uncertainty".

From here Angel considers "confidence culture" (which suggests that with enough confidence and self-assertion women can achieve anything) and its knock-on effects on consent. "In this era of post-feminism, the utterly reasonable claim that women should be afforded sexual freedom – that they should be able to declare their desire loudly, to be perverse and lustful and up-for-it – slid into the more dubious insistence that women *are* and *must* be so." The problem with an over-emphasis on consent, she points out, is that it shifts the responsibility for societal imbalances of power onto individuals. Consent only works as a standard if one feels one has the right to refuse. As the breadth of stories shared during the #MeToo movement showed, women agree to sex they would rather not have for reasons besides outright coercion. To add a further layer of complexity, just because sex is consensual and enthusiastic does not mean it is not an abuse of power (take the Clinton-Lewinsky affair).

By putting the onus on women to know and express their desires ahead of time, consent culture underestimates the mutability of desire, a subject that Angel explored in *Unmastered: A book on desire, most difficult to tell* (2012). Furthermore, it risks casting vulnerability in a negative light. "Part of the joys of sex might precisely be in discovering new, different ways to be touched: in being vulnerable to the unknown", Angel says. Eroticism stems from the indeterminacy inherent in sex: "we never know what is going to happen in any given sexual experience, or how we will feel about it – regardless of what we have done or liked before". It is only in surrender (which, she asserts, depends neither on gender nor submission) that we might glimpse the transcendent potential of sex.

"Tomorrow sex will be good again" was Foucault's sardonic synopsis, in *The History of Sexuality*, of the position of the progressives of his era, who held that speaking out about sex would automatically lead to liberation. Armed now with the tools of consent and sex research, "we are, yet again, in a moment in which it seems to be tomorrow ... that sex will be good again", writes Angel. In her view, neither offers the emancipatory potential that their proponents would have us believe, as both underplay the contextual and emergent nature of desire. To draw conclusions about arousal from physiological responses in lab conditions is, she says, "spurious scientism".

Humans are notoriously bad at self-knowledge and self-expression – a reality that "must be folded into the ethics of sex rather than swept aside as an inconvenience". Sex is not an object to be bartered but an unfolding, a conversation. It is also, by definition, relational: we don't simply discover on our own what we like, once and for all, and then apply it with partners. "Working out what we want is a life's work, and it has to be done over and over and over", Angel concludes. The pleasure may lie in it "never being done". ■

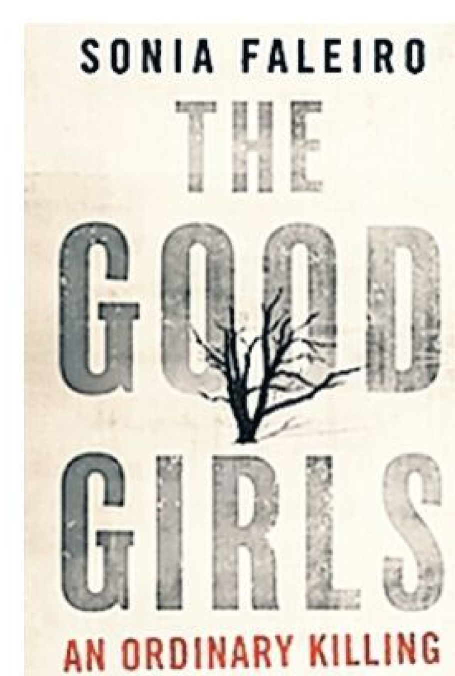
Mia Levitin is a freelance critic and the author of The Future of Seduction, *2020*

'Have you no shame?'

Sex in the Indian Subcontinent

MADHAVI MENON

THE GOOD GIRLS
An ordinary killing
SONIA FALEIRO
352pp. Bloomsbury. £16.99.



SEX IS A PROBLEM. Not necessarily in and of itself, but because it can never exist in and of itself. Sex is always tied up with a host of issues – gender, family, caste, class, race, desire, expectations, honour; the list is potentially endless. In a post-colonial India that is still in thrall to a colonial morality, sex is also – perhaps primarily – about shame. Indeed, the question "Have you no shame?" has a richer life in the Indian subcontinent than elsewhere in the world. When translated, it inevitably means: having no shame = having sex (outside marriage), and having shame = not having sex (outside marriage). The great gift of Sonia Faleiro's book is that it focuses on this notion of sex as shame.

In *The Good Girls*, misogyny is at the root of sexual shame, and Faleiro does not shy away from stating that with chilling precision. Setting the scene in the Shakya households that form the core of this tale, Faleiro notes matter-of-factly: "The women mostly stayed in. They cooked for the men, ate after the men and sat lower than them. If the men settled on the charpoy, the wives made do on the floor". The "killing" referred to in the book's subtitle is "ordinary" because it is the natural extension of a life neither valued nor supported. Women live to serve men, and when they die, men find other women to serve them. The End.

Despite committing suicide, then, the two girls in the book are "killed" in the sense of succumbing to their lot in life. Based on a famous case in Uttar Pradesh in 2014, the story of the deaths of these two girls – cousins – is shocking only because it is a consequence of stresses that every woman in the subcontinent faces, albeit to differing degrees. The Padma and Lalli of this book could have been, and have been, any number of women here who would rather die than face up to the consequences of having sex outside marriage.

As Faleiro makes clear, this preference for self-inflicted death is because, very often, the consequence of pre-marital sex for a woman is death at the hands of her family. As the rampant numbers of "honour killings" testify, a woman's sexuality is tied, in twisted and convoluted knots, to the honour of her family. If a woman loses her "shame", then so does the family. In order to prevent the latter from happening, the woman must die. Padma and Lalli were only adhering to the script with which they had grown up, doing to themselves what would otherwise have been done to them.

Ah, the shamefulness of sex. Women must know nothing about sex until they get married, they must have no desire before or outside marriage, and when they are married, then they must have sex only in order to produce sons. Even worse, this patriarchal script is one that is often trotted out by women themselves. Consider this powerful passage from the book:

> Some members of the Shakya clan believed that the family was to blame for the deaths. This was at least according to Lalitha, who was married to the Shakyas' cousin Yogendra Singh. First, they had allowed the girls to use phones. Then, she said, they had failed to provide them toilets.

"If the girls had a toilet at home they would have had no reason to go out", she said. "If they did, family members could challenge them – 'what for are you going out'"? Her father-in-law Neksu Lal had built three toilets, she said, and she never went anywhere.

The account resonates even more forcefully because of the way in which Faleiro writes – a spare, sober tone generates both suspense and horror. Women must not be allowed any freedom whatsoever because their lives and their desires belong to their families and clans and castes. Education, technology, clothes, all need to be curbed in case women start getting "ideas". Shameless ones.

Faleiro's tale is accentuated by a large number of political, administrative, sociological and legal details that frame the tragedy of Padma and Lalli. That these details enhance rather than detract from the sense of urgency is testimony to the author's skill as a writer and reporter. *The Good Girls* is at once shocking and mundane, quiet and loud, understated and savage. The current political dispensation in India, with its active patronage of patriarchal privilege, will not like this book. And that is one of its many strengths. ■

Madhavi Menon is Professor of English at Ashoka University, and the author, most recently, of Infinite Variety: A history of desire in India, *2018*

Poems from Britain's Deep South

Bringing buried testaments out into the open

STEPHANIE SY-QUIA

CANNIBAL
SAFIYA SINCLAIR
128pp. Picador. £10.99.

LETTERS TO AMERICA
FRED D'AGUIAR
88pp. Carcanet. £10.99.

Rudolph Walker as Caliban in Jonathan Miller's production of *The Tempest*, 1988

Shakespeare's Caliban has long been employed as a symbol of the Americas' relationship to Europe. Writers from the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó, through to the Cuban Roberto Fernández Retamar, the Barbadian Kamau Brathwaite, and the Martinican Aimé Césaire have established *The Tempest*'s banished son as an embodiment of the self-perceptions imposed by the colonizer, of the indigene made monstrous by the white gaze. Caliban's name is also, famously, an anagram of the Spanish *canibal*, whence comes the English "cannibal", and a corruption of caribal (the Carib people of the West Indies whom Columbus thought ate human flesh). Caliban, therefore, is a Caribbean.

This etymological nexus is the starting point for Safiya Sinclair's debut *Cannibal*, which was originally published in the US in 2016, garnering a glut of awards before it was picked up by a UK publisher just last year. Its exploration of race-making and racism (here Caliban is used to explore Jamaica, "Sired in the image of no one", in contrast to the US) feels eerily, precisely prescient for our present moment. Sinclair muses on statues (that of Sacajawea, "crouched", a "Creature of unbelonging" behind the pioneers), interrogates the legacies of historical figures such as Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and Thomas Jefferson ("Where Thomas Jefferson learnt to belittle a thing. How to own it"), and asks what it means when slave quarters are uncovered ("buried rooms choked, sounds / bricked off") beneath student accommodation at the University of Virginia. It is noteworthy that the book dates from a time before Charlottesville was a byword for a rallying far right, before the incensed discussion of monuments around the world, before the discovery of Sally Hemings's room at Monticello: "Somewhere, the ghost arm of history / still throttling me. This taste of old blood on the wind".

In many ways it feels as if *Cannibal* has paved the way for itself, heralding and preparing the ground for the moment of its own arrival in the UK, where we are finally beginning to have more sophisticated discussions about Britain's colonial legacies. Britain is playing catch-up to the US with the discourse on race – *Cannibal*'s publication pattern is an excellent example.

But a poet writing about Jamaica is necessarily also writing about Britain. Afua Hirsch has dubbed the Caribbean "Britain's Deep South": a faraway place to which Britain had the canniness to outsource its racialized violences, keeping racism out of sight and out of mind. Both Sinclair and Fred D'Aguiar tie Britain, via the Caribbean islands, to the US to form one contiguous story. D'Aguiar's book offers a more capacious delineation of the America to which its title's letters are addressed: these poems' settings range from Blackheath in London ("Carnival was only 2 and the 50s / Passed on its signs, No blacks, / No Irish") to Guyana ("one of everything village") and to Paradise, CA ("They count our dead, / Got no fucking warning"). They speak from the recent past, citing the devastating Californian forest fires of 2019 and imploring them to "do for orange" (Trump) "what you did for us":

> Do that and we
> forgive your trespass
> As our original trespass
> Into indigenous forest
> These indigenous hills
> This indigenous valley

The mention of indigenous dispossession, delivered with all the terseness of early Gary Snyder, is what the Australians might call an acknowledgement of country (albeit a vague one). Both D'Aguiar and Sinclair seek to widen this act of recognition, from the indigenous to the enslaved and from the old world to the new – to bring the buried testaments and stoppered histories out into the open and let them breathe again, with a livewire eloquence. "All life", D'Aguiar writes in "King David cooks ital in Port Antonio", "flicks with a purpose and I mean to serve my term / As befits the flesh that must toil for the kingdom of the righteous dead." ■

Stephanie Sy-Quia's debut collection of poems Amnion *will be published in November*

On the border

An elder guardian of literature in the US

ANDRÉ NAFFIS-SAHELY

EVERY DAY WE GET MORE ILLEGAL
JUAN FELIPE HERRERA
88pp. City Lights Publishers. $14.95.

Juan Felipe Herrera's most recent collection, *Every Day We Get More Illegal*, makes its subject immediately explicit: it is dedicated to, among others, "all the migrants, immigrants and refugees suffering from the border installations within the United States, at the border crossing and throughout Latin America". Indeed, the poems collected here are unmistakably set in the charming yet apocalyptic desert landscapes of the US–Mexico border, where "there are men lying face down forever and women / dragging under the fences and children still running with / torn faces all the way to Tucson leathery and peeling", and where trigger-happy vigilantes patrol in the shadow of the new wall "with skull dust on their palms" ("Roll Under the Waves").

This borderland, Herrera reminds his readers, is "a stolen land" that is "forgotten too", and throughout the book he interweaves family anecdotes with imagined scenarios that bear an excruciating resemblance to everyday experiences for many Latinx immigrants to the US. "Interview w/a Border Machine" places the reader in the unenviable position of sitting opposite a US immigration officer: "can you please state your name / Xochitl Tzompantli / what kind of name is that / it was given to me by an indian woman / black hair long black shawl – it / means *Skull Rack Flower* / well let's get to business here why / are you here in the first place". Elsewhere, "border fever 105.7 degrees" revisits Christmas Eve 2018, when two Guatemalan children, Felipe Gómez Alonzo and Jakelin Caal Maquin, succumbed to severe dehydration and died while being detained by US Customs and Border Protection in El Paso, Texas. The poem begins with a heartless yet apposite question, "why do you cry", and continues: "those are not screams you hear across this cage / it is a symphony – the border guard says". The reader is reminded of how President Trump's aides showed him pictures of happy children playing video games to portray the effects of his administration's policies in a more positive light.

The son of migrant farm workers from Mexico, Herrera was born in Fowler, in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, California's breadbasket, and his work – a blend of Beat-era bebop, docupoetry, theatre and song – was indelibly shaped by the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles during the 1960s and the avant-garde arts scene of the Bay Area in the 1970s. While most of the poems in *Every Day We Get More Illegal* are written in English, the book is peppered with lyrics in Spanish, like "Fuimos visibles", which is presented alongside its English version, "We Were the Visible Ones". The book's final poem, "come with me", however, deserves special attention. Reinforcing the collection's emphasis on the bilingualism of Chicano culture, every line appears first in English, then in a Spanish translation by Lauro Flores, a professor of Chicano literature. In this poem, the languages overlap on the page, neither marked out as dominant, and the formatting is pleasingly devoid of foreignizing italics, demolishing the barrier between the two tongues, symbolizing the author's desire for a borderless world. By far the longest poem at twenty pages, "come with me" is also arguably the collection's strongest: "come with me: / I will be writing – | ven conmigo: escribiré", Herrera begins, "with one letter the story of our lives | con una letra historia de nuestras vidas", going on to elegize the sacrifice made by immigrant parents who "journeyed all their lives on wagons on foot and trains / leaning toward the fickle moon of paradise". The poem becomes an elegy as the poet assumes the burden of whispering "their unwritten wishes" in "lost languages".

Herrera's eagerly anticipated new collection, his first in five years, reaffirms his status as one of the elder guardians of literature in the US. *Every Day We Get More Illegal* is best read alongside Herrera's Selected Poems, the PEN award-winning *187 Reasons Mexicanos Can't Cross the Border: Undocuments 1971-2007* (2007), which cemented his reputation before he was named US Poet Laureate in 2015. ■

André Naffis-Sahely's most recent project is The Heart of a Stranger: An anthology of exile literature, *2020*

© PHOTO BY ZULEIKA HENRY/BRITISH LIBRARY

Pripyat Marshland seen out of a train window, Ukraine, 2017

© SEAN GALLUP/GETTY IMAGES

China's green colonialism

The climate crisis brings out superpower rivalry

KATE BROWN

CHINA GOES GREEN
Coercive environmentalism for a troubled planet
YIFEI LI AND JUDITH SHAPIRO
240pp. Polity. £15.99.

THE NEW MAP
Energy, climate, and the clash of nations
DANIEL YERGIN
512pp. Allen Lane. £25.

Two new books reflect on how the cartographies of power are being redrafted in the twenty-first century. As Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro demonstrate in *China Goes Green*, the emergent map is being dominated by an increasingly confident China, which is using an environmental platform to help to justify authoritarian rule at home and abroad. Meanwhile, Daniel Yergin delineates his own structures in *The New Map* by following the contours of geo-physical power: oil, gas, coal and solar.

Li and Shapiro seek to make an intervention. Many people, they write, are seduced by China's ambition to lead the world in sustainable growth. As liberal democracies have appeared to go comatose in addressing the climate crisis, they argue, the flexibility and reach of centralized Chinese authority have come to seem increasingly attractive. The Covid-19 emergency has demonstrated this. China controlled the pandemic in a few months with strict measures and the surveillance of its citizens. Chinese leaders apply a similar no-nonsense approach to the climate. They rule by fiat, disbursing research funding, guiding media, censoring peddlers of bad science, and coaching all parties – business and bureaucracies – into compliance to lower greenhouse gas emissions. And they do it on a scale never seen before. Over the past four decades, for example, 400 million Chinese people have planted 70.5 billion trees. Imagine, as those tree roots spread and leaves grow, the plumes of carbon being pulled from the atmosphere.

Not so fast, argue Li and Shapiro. The authors remind us that China remains a major polluter and exporter of coal and dirty technologies. The country is brimming with toxic soil, contaminated water, sooty air, "cancer villages" and vast mine tailings visible from space. Many of the trees were planted on grass savannas. Drinking up scarce water, they have caused erosion, and the majority of the poplars and evergreens have died.

Li and Shapiro are tough on China in a manner reminiscent of certain Cold War reportage: almost everything Chinese leaders do is deemed authoritarian. But China did not invent the models for economic development that are geared for ecological disaster. China's "green" programmes bear the marks of many colonial projects of yore, including dam building, the enclosure of commons and the transplantation of ethnic majorities in borderlands as a "civilizational" force (see the Han Chinese in Xinjiang). And, like the colonial powers of previous centuries, China is exporting its bad environmentalism abroad in the cause of development, selling it as soft power.

China's $60 billion Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) mimics many features of the postwar Marshall Plan. American planners billed the plan as aid, while building markets and military power in Europe. The Chinese "belt" is a reconnection of the old Silk Road with offshoots girding the globe. It involves maritime routes linking South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. In exchange for allegiance, China funds education and poverty reduction while promising not to impose "universal values" and "regime change".

Li and Shapiro judge the BRI to be an authoritarian China's counterbalance to a West-centric world. The project has metastasized to incorporate one-fourth of the global economy (131 countries), plus the Arctic and the Moon. They point out that Chinese planners actually use the so-called "Green Silk Road" to drop off dirty technologies, especially coal plants, which the World Bank will not fund. The "greenwashing" of the BRI, they argue, is a highly effective means of China to spread into global markets in the guise of promoting sustainable growth. In fact, BRI projects are set to bulldoze through dozens of critical habitats. One is Europe's last swamp, the Pripyat Marshes, situated in Poland, Ukraine and Belarus. A planned shipping canal, the E-40 – billed as far more environmentally friendly than a road – will run through these marshes, destroying important habitat for migrating birds. It might also churn up radioactive contaminants from Chernobyl.

Li and Shapiro make an important point. China does invest in renewable energy and industry, but mostly at home to deal with a devastating smog problem. Meanwhile, it simply exports its dirtier operations abroad. In *The New Map* Daniel Yergin describes one such frontier for Chinese business in the US. In 2015 the Chinese company Yuhang Shadong (more recently named and shamed by China's Ministry of Environmental Protection for its domestic polluting practices) purchased sugar cane fields in the south of Louisiana and built a chemical processing plant there. Like many other companies, it was drawn to cheap US oil, low taxes and the relaxed attitude on environmental regulations in a region known as "cancer alley".

Yergin, the US's most influential energy pundit, stresses that the largest BRI impacts are underground. Pipelines carrying oil and gas from Central Asia feed insatiable Chinese industries. China is, the author argues, using the BRI to extend its borders into the South China Sea. Contractors piling rocks on underwater reefs have built 3,200 artificial islands, and China now claims these insta-islands as sovereign territory and uses them for jet runways and missile batteries. The country also finances deep water ports along BRI maritime routes. When countries such as Sri Lanka default on loans, Chinese firms gain control. This debt trap helps China to make good on longstanding strategic claims to the South China Sea (see Isabel Hilton, *TLS*, April 24, 2020).

Yergin's *The New Map* vaults between China, Russia, North America, Europe and the Middle East as he considers how the shifting production of fossil fuels determines who rules which parts of the planet. In the final analysis, Yergin writes, the contest for power lies between the poles of the G2 – China and the US. For most developing countries, Yergin argues, empire-building China is the best offer in town. This became even more apparent during the Trump years, when the US stepped back and China strode in.

But, Yergen points out, the US still has a grip on considerable power in the form of oil and gas. For years, pundits worried about reaching "peak oil". Then, in 1998, the businessman George P. Mitchell spotted the potential in sending massive quantities of water, sand and chemicals through networks of subterranean pipes to squeeze gas from shale. Soon engineers were using the same technique to pull oil from abandoned fields in Texas, Pennsylvania and the Great Plains. Yergin shows how the US shale revolution tore up the existing map of oil powers. As US shale oil flooded markets, prices fell. Saudi Arabia and Russia tripped up in price wars. Prices dropped yet more, which was good for manufactur-

Kate Brown is Professor of Science, Technology and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her most recent book is Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl guide to the future, *2019*

Now online
THE FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW

Peter Riley
Winter Poetry Notes
•
Anthony Rudolf
Nathaniel Tarn's Hölderliniae
with an excerpt
•
Michial Farmer
Kallic distance
•
James Gallant
The Reascent of Spengler
•
Michael Hampton
Turner's Loom
•
Michelene Wandor
The Murder of Camus
•
Roy Fisher
Two unpublished poems
•
Tom Lowenstein, Simon Smith, Alan Morrison
New poems

www.fortnightlyreview.co.uk

ers. Business boomed in the US thanks to shale oil. But what kind of business? Yergin applauds the US's manufacturing revival. He counts the jobs oil generates and the stock market revenues. But – and this is the confusing bit – a good part of *The New Map* lays out the follies and violence of states that have relied on fossil fuels. Yet Yergin does not use the same discernment when considering how the oil economy has taken hold of the American landscape.

Drilling into shale is dirty and hazardous. Because shale wells are quickly depleted, companies need constantly to drill new horizontal underground networks, leaving a trail of ecological disturbances in their wake. Yergin fails to comment on the relaxed US regulatory environment that displaces the cost of clean-up operations on to the public. He doesn't wonder about the wisdom of siphoning off massive quantities of fresh water from drought-prone plains in order to fuel it, and he pauses only briefly to dismiss fracking-induced earthquakes, methane emissions, or chemical toxins leaching into air and drinking water. Considering legal challenges to fracking, he mentions only one, failed criminal suit involving the death of twenty-eight migratory birds. He overlooks jury awards in the millions of dollars to people who have suffered health problems from fracking activity.

In the autumn of 2018 the US quietly surpassed Saudi Arabia to become the world's largest exporter of crude oil. Between 2009 and 2019 oil and gas accounted for 40 per cent of cumulative growth in US industrial production and two-thirds of total net industrial investment. During this period the US showed signs of suffering from the "resource curse". States that overly depend on resource extraction are victim to volatile prices. (And in the Covid spring when the oil price dropped to pennies for a barrel, the US stock market romped like a bronco.) Leaders come to rely on resource receipts over broad-based taxes. They genuflect before corporate executives, servicing oil and other resource interests over those of citizens. The cost of living rises, income inequality widens, and democratic institutions disintegrate. This framework explains a great deal about recent developments in the US. In the past two decades, as the US became the leading oil exporter, the proportion of wealth that the top 10 per cent controlled grew steadily; the bottom earners grew poorer. In 2016 a minority of American voters elected Donald Trump, who used executive control to clear the regulatory path for shale prospecting, oil refining and subsidiary industries.

In the end, Yergin argues, the big winners in the first decades of the twenty-first century have been

> **The Belt and Road Initiative has metastasized to incorporate one-fourth of the global economy (131 countries), plus the Arctic and the Moon**

the oil and gas interests. In 2020, just as thirty years ago, 80 per cent of the world's energy derives from these two resources. Freighted with the shale revolution, the global energy portfolio petrified, and so too did visions of alternatives. Yergin believes that oil and gas will continue to be integral to the post-viral landscape, meaning that China will depend on imports for many decades to come. But he underestimates the country's very tangible domestic green revolution.

While the US pumps out retrograde fossil fuels, China leads the world in producing solar systems that light up not just green cities in Europe but villages in India, South America and Africa. Cheap, portable solar panels, which do not require expensive webs of power lines, make it possible for village children to study at night, for small businesses to launch, and for remote hospitals to carry out basic services; decentralized solar and wind power lead to small-scale autonomy, localized production, and more flexible, resilient micro-economies. The vessels that deliver them may be authoritarian but the people who use them do not have to be. China may still be a net polluter but the remaining decades of the twenty-first century belong to renewable energy. And that is why China will get the prize. ■

Shared sacrifice of war

The Party is at last recognizing the role of its Nationalist rivals

JEREMY BROWN

CHINA'S GOOD WAR
How World War II is shaping a new nationalism
RANA MITTER
288pp. Harvard University Press. £22.95 (US $27.95).

Chiang Kai-shek, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Soong Mei-ling (Madame Chiang Kai-shek), at the Cairo Confererence, 1943

© BETTMANN/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY

"Chinese people do not attack Chinese people", Xi Jinping said in 2019. Xi's point was to imagine a peaceful takeover of Taiwan, but he missed the mark because people in Taiwan increasingly identify as Taiwanese rather than as Chinese. Beyond the immediate issue of Taiwan, Xi must have known that he was making a false statement. Chinese people have fought against Chinese people on many occasions during the twentieth century, most obviously during the civil war between Communists and Nationalists, and also during Mao Zedong's war against rural people (the Great Leap Famine of the early 1960s), Mao's war against the Communist Party itself (also known as the Cultural Revolution, 1966–76), and in June 1989, when the People's Liberation Army used machine guns and tanks to kill unarmed civilians on the streets of Beijing.

The undeniable history of the Chinese Communist Party leading Chinese people to attack other Chinese people is not pretty. It undermines the Communist Party's moral justifications for its rule. This is why, as Rana Mitter convincingly argues in *China's Good War*, the Communist Party has embraced a reassessment of China's role in the Second World War, moving from a pro-Communist, anti-Nationalist story to one that recognizes Nationalist soldiers' and Chiang Kai-shek's significant contributions. Narratives of fourteen years of shared sacrifice against a foreign enemy (beginning with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and ending in August 1945) and earning a seat at the table of global superpowers – literally in Cairo in 1943, when Chiang negotiated as an equal with Churchill and Roosevelt – have all combined to make China's Second World War experience politically useful for a variety of people in the People's Republic, from researchers to leaders to clever critics.

During the Mao years, propaganda depicted Japan and the Nationalist Party as equally nefarious imperialist or reactionary enemies of "the people," while playing up the Communist Party's role as the only legitimate source of resistance against Japan. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing in recent decades, government grants have funded specialized journals and collections of historical materials related to China's war against Japan. The goal of these projects has been to depict China as strong, victorious, moral and just. The result has been to broaden the scope of acceptable commemoration by treating Nationalist soldiers and leaders as brothers in arms.

Mitter's most penetrating observations relate to how ordinary people have used contested memories of China's good war to implicitly critique the Communist Party's attacks on Chinese people. Mitter analyses the online phenomenon of *Guofen* (Nationalist Party fans), who not only argue that the Nationalist Army was the leading resistance force during the war, but who also want the Nationalists' constitution and founding ideology to rule over mainland China today. Earlier this year, an ardent *Guofen* from Shandong Province took my class about modern China at Simon Fraser University in Canada. His weekly statements about the superiority of Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People arose from his profound dissatisfaction with censorship and repression in China under Xi Jinping. For *Guofen*, celebrating Nationalist rule is less absurd than it seems because their imagined alternative world once had a basis in reality in mainland China. And the same Nationalist Party still lingers on in a multiparty democracy in Taiwan.

The story of the property developer Fan Jianchuan, who established the Jianchuan Museum Cluster in Sichuan Province, is one of the most illuminating parts of Mitter's book. On the surface, the Jianchuan Museum Cluster's exhibits about the Second World War adhere to messages about shared sacrifice and national victory, garnering favourable coverage in China's official press and allowing Fan's private museums to survive in the Xi Jinping era. But Fan's project pushes against boundaries, portraying Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek as being on the same side, musing about the motivations of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese people who collaborated with the Japanese occupiers, and critiquing how Nationalist soldiers were demonized and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.

Looking at recent memories of China's good war is a natural progression for Mitter, whose previous books have focused on the history of the war itself. Mitter shows how conversations about one proud part of China's history are in fact conversations about more recent traumas. ■

Jeremy Brown is Associate Professor of History at Simon Fraser University. His most recent book, co-edited with Matthew D. Johnson, is Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday life in China's era of high socialism, *2015*

Rosa Mulholland
James H. Murphy
Rosa Mulholland, Feminist, Victorian, Catholic and Patriot.
Published 21 April 2021, 100th anniversary of her death.
www.eerpublishing.com

Green swards, black comedy

ART WRITING

A BALTHUS NOTEBOOK
GUY DAVENPORT
112pp. David Zwirner Books. Paperback, £8.95.

In a telegram sent to the Tate Gallery in 1968 as it prepared a major retrospective of his work, Balthus provided clear instructions:

> NO BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS: BALTHUS IS A PAINTER OF WHOM NOTHING IS KNOWN. NOW LET US LOOK AT THE PICTURES.

The message is typical of Balthus's long-standing antipathy towards critics, journalists, biographers and the like. In 1945, he had declared "I refuse to confide and don't like it when people write about art". An early major book on Balthus (written with the artist's cooperation) did not include his date of birth. If Balthus were to make an exception to his hostility towards art writing, however, I suspect it would be for someone like the late and little-known American critic, writer and translator Guy Davenport. We get a sense of Davenport's approach to writing about art in this comment on Picasso:

> He stepped over the moment of Cézanne, Manet, Courbet like a giant negligently striding over a garden whose order and brilliance were none of his concern. All of his tenderness is like a Minotaur gazing at a cow.

"What", asks Lucas Zwirner in his excellent afterword to this new edition of Davenport's *A Balthus Notebook* (1989) "can an art historian make of this?".

The erudite Davenport (who could write his name in Linear B, translated Heraclitus and Archilochus, studied Old English under Tolkien and visited Ezra Pound annually during his incarceration) has no interest in explaining Balthus in a traditional art-historical sense. The "arrogance of insisting" on an artwork's meaning "closes off curiosity, perception, the adventure of discovery". The short book is crowded: we meet over 150 people in sixty-four chapters ranging in length from a single sentence to several pages and in style from the dizzyingly associative to the densely epigrammatic. Here's chapter three: "If, as Robert Walser remarked, God is the opposite of Rodin, Balthus is the opposite of Picasso". It is "a whole village", writes Zwirner, "in a few thousand words".

Davenport has compelling things to say about Balthus's idealism, symbolism and understanding of childhood (less so, however, on the "innocence" of Balthus's paintings of adolescent girls), and makes surprising introductions (especially between textual and visual art) on almost every page. Balthus is – "like Kafka" – "a master of gesture and posture". His treatment of light is "a plenum, as thorough, pedantic, and secular as a page of Sartre". We get comparisons with Beckett, Ionesco and Joyce among others:

> Balthus's paintings are illustrations for a writer we can imagine the style of, but who doesn't exist. This writer would have Francis Ponge's metaphysical sense of French meadows, Proust's sensibilities of girls' bodies and clothes, Rilke's ripeness of fate and time.

A Balthus Notebook is a welcome reissue that introduces Davenport (who died in 2005) to new readers and redresses the fact that among his "forgotten writings" his "essays on visual art are the most forgotten of all".

Harry Strawson

COMING OUT

A DUTIFUL BOY
A memoir of a gay Muslim's journey to acceptance
MOHSIN ZAIDI
288pp. Square Peg. £14.99.

The sense of freedom and promise Mohsin Zaidi feels on his final day of secondary school is cut short when he and his fellow "mostly black and brown sixteen-year-olds" are searched by police before they leave the grounds. "I had something to say about the unfairness of it all but no words with which to say it", Zaidi recalls. The British Pakistani boy from North East London – whose memory of that day is of the state's assumption of his criminality – went on to find the words he was looking for: today, Zaidi is a successful criminal barrister. However, of all the obstacles he faced along the way, coming out to his Muslim Shia family may have been the most harrowing of all.

Zaidi's parents emigrated to the UK from Pakistan and worked tirelessly to raise their three sons. Like many second-generation migrants, Zaidi and his brothers were expected to succeed in modern Britain while retaining strong ties to their faith and culture. This double bind produces excruciating levels of guilt, pain and confusion for the young Zaidi. The burden of his secret grows tenfold along with his family's expectations of their son's future when he gets into Oxford to study law. There, Zaidi shuttles between playing the popular student and numbing his anxieties with alcohol: "Adopting a persona depending on the audience was second nature to me", he explains. With counselling, a handful of supportive friends and a secure job, he begins to accept and live his authentic sexuality. The pain of keeping secrets from his family eventually overcomes his fear of rejection, with moving results.

Zaidi has a talent for distilling the complex ways in which racism and homophobia work through multiple social structures. His teen self, for example, observes that "in [his] culture, it seemed that behaving too white came with a stigma that looking too white did not", pinpointing the colourism (discrimination against dark skin shades) rife in the Asian beauty industry. Systemic racism and Islamophobia are everyday realities Zaidi and his family suffer, whether covert – like his father being thought guilty until proven innocent in his workplace – or overt, like their home getting petrol-bombed soon after 9/11. A potentially rich question Zaidi could have unpacked further is where and how this and homophobia, as well as discriminatory attitudes within the LGBTQI+ community, intersect.

Deeply affecting and often funny, *A Dutiful Boy* is an honest picture of what it is like to grow up gay and Muslim in twenty-first-century Britain. It sends a powerful message to young people who may be struggling as Mohsin Zaidi did: you are not alone.

Sarah Jilani

CRICKET

THE COMMONWEALTH OF CRICKET
A lifelong love affair with the most subtle and sophisticated game known to mankind
RAMACHANDRA GUHA
321pp. William Collins. £20.

Ramachandra Guha's *The Commonwealth of Cricket: A lifelong love affair with the most subtle and sophisticated game known to mankind* is torn between its title and subtitle. The former suggests social history, but it is more a memoir of an incurable cricket lover. The book opens as a bildungsroman, in which we meet mentors, role-models and early heroes at the Doon School (the so-called Eton of India in the Himalayan foothills), St Stephen's college in Delhi, and the Friends' Union Cricket Club (infelicitously abbreviated throughout) in Guha's spiritual home, Bangalore. In all this, a tension emerges between Guha's pride in his cricketing abilities and his acknowledgement of the gap between respectability and real brilliance; this sense of marginality is reflected in his chapter titles: "Eavesdropping on Greatness"; "Handshakes with Heroes".

Guha's wilderness years – from a cricketing perspective – where he rejected the green sward for the groves of academe, are charted briefly. But as he takes up family life and an academic career, cricket, largely in the form of writing on the game, resurfaces through a kind of Hegelian synthesis as part of a new cricket-life balance. The book's middle chapters examine commonwealth cricketers, but the tempo is uneven. One chapter races through favourite players in several Test-playing nations. Another involves looks at "Some Favourite Pakistanis". A third is devoted to Sachin Tendulkar alone. This is perhaps justifiable, as Tendulkar not only "met with complete equanimity the intensely magnified and completely unfair expectations of a billion of his countrymen", but became the first overseas player to be contracted by Yorkshire, a county Guha describes, almost in a fit of pique, as "the most insular and tight-fisted community in the universe". This capricious approach, along with Guha's unguarded dishing out of criticism as liberally as praise, is oddly disarming.

In the final chapters we find the book's second tension, as the faithful fan evolves into the cynical critic who decries the conflicts of interest and venality that bedevil India's cricket establishment. Lamenting a recent experience of taking on and then swiftly resigning from a senior role administering the game in India, Guha concludes, with the bitterness of an ex-lover, that his cricketing heroes now involved in running Indian cricket must perforce either be part of the problem or of the solution. He outlines "four categories of cricket superstars". The first three range from the openly corrupt to those burying their heads in the sand. The fourth involves those who dare to speak truth to power; the only such figure Guha can find, someone who puts "the game above himself", is his true hero, the master of spin, Bishan Bedi.

Shomit Dutta

DIARIES

RANDOM COMMENTARY
DOROTHY WHIPPLE
160pp. Persephone. Paperback, £13.

For decades, Dorothy Whipple's books – eight novels, two volumes of autobiography, a novella and a plethora of short stories – lay out of print. Thanks to Persephone Books, however, almost all of Whipple's work is now available again. The latest of her books to be reissued is *Random Commentary*, first published in 1966. It is an assortment "Compiled from notebooks and journals kept from 1925 onwards", as the original subtitle has it.

We first meet Whipple in the mid-1920s. After her first love was killed during the First World War, she marries her employer, Henry Whipple, the director of education for

"Watch That Man", 1973; from *David Bowie by Sukita: Spektakuläre fotos einer legende* by Masayoshi Sukita (128pp. Delius Klasing. £23.)

Blackburn. She also struggles to establish herself as a writer, failing to sell a short story for five years. Modesty regarding her writing abilities and gentle wit suffuse these diaries. Whipple repeatedly berates herself for not working hard enough. Procrastinating, staring out of the window, or poking the fire – anything but writing: "When I have time to work, I don't want to. When I haven't time, I want to". Whipple begins new drafts before finishing previous versions. Working on one book, she always wants to be working on another; "shaping and polishing" is her favourite part of the writing process. When

her first novel, *Young Anne* (1927), is accepted for publication, the relief is palpable: "I'm not lost any more".

Domestic life, meanwhile, is getting in the way: "I was desperate, thinking of my story and the steak that should go into the oven". Everyday life plays out against the backdrop of impending war; an author "crushed by the horror of it" is left wondering if she should write at all. Always looking forward and making the best of things, however, Whipple understands that the fact she has time to write makes her better off than many women.

A snapshot is provided here, too, of the contemporary publishing world – of David Higham setting up his agency and Michael Joseph founding his imprint, both in 1935. One of the first books Joseph commissioned was Whipple's first volume of autobiography, *The Other Day* (1936). We also meet the inimitable Miss Head of Hearst Magazines, who must herself be worthy of a screenplay, and who published some of Whipple's work. There is a humour and kindness to such vignettes in *Random Commentary* that make it a deeply beguiling account of a writer's life.

Ellen Rossiter

FICTION

BLACK SUNDAY
TOLA ROTIMI ABRAHAM
276pp. Canongate. Paperback, £8.99.

Tola Rotimi Abraham has created a landscape of absence in her first novel, *Black Sunday*. Set in Lagos, and spanning two decades, the story is told from the perspective of the twins, Bibike and Ariyike, and their younger brothers, Andrew and Peter. After their mother loses her job and their father gambles away the family savings, the children are left to their elderly grandmother.

The siblings each recall their childhood in turn, reflecting on the lasting impact of their parents' departure. The shifts in perspective open up natural fractures in the narrative; periods of time are unaccounted for and resolution is often unforthcoming. Though the narrative is linear, these gaps make time feel slippery. They also underline the novel's wider preoccupation with absence – of boundaries, care-giving and consent. Sexual assault is a common experience for Bibike and Ariyike, and for many peripheral female characters in this novel, all of whom are vulnerable to abusive patterns of male behaviour. Bibike's first experience of it forges a divide between her and Ariyike: "My world had shifted … and I could not tell my sister what had happened. I spent way too long thinking about how to frame it, so as to understand my reaction to it".

Food is mentioned frequently – to allude to a person's status ("they smelled like mothers who baked meat pies"), to describe a skin tone ("yellow like pawpaw"), or to evoke a memory: Andrew recollects the smell of the hospital ward he was taken to as a young boy, the "fried meat, heat from wood stoves, and jollof rice". With almost liturgical devotion the siblings recall the "moimoi", "egusi soup", "agbalumo", "puff puffs" and "grandmother's garden egg soup" of their childhoods.

The characters begin narrating as very young children and continue into early adulthood, the prose developing alongside them. By the time they are old enough to articulate the effects of their parents' absence, their language has become elegiac. For Peter, the change in his awareness is devastatingly replicated in a switch to the second person: "In your heart, you say to yourself, that is just what boys without mothers do".

Abraham is careful to blend the novel's dark moments with levity and pathos. The lithe prose is also peppered with proverbial Yoruba and Pidgin, a nod to the fluidity of language in Lagos and also to the tension between modernity and tradition, embodied by Ariyike and Bibike. Ariyike eventually devotes herself to the church and her pastor husband, while Bibike raises her son as a single mother. In the final chapter, Ariyike meditates on her grandmother's stories – and what it was that was ultimately lost to them as children: "the belief in an omniscient, omnipotent female spirit". Abraham's richly feminist novel deftly resists this fate.

Lucie Elliott

FILM

TOUCH OF EVIL
RICHARD DEMING
104pp. Bloomsbury. Paperback, £11.99.

"It's a quite simple statement of what I considered to be good and evil. Spelled right out for everybody." Orson Welles could often be coy when asked to explain what his films meant. Not so when it came to *Touch of Evil* (1958). As the protagonist of this noir masterpiece explains, "a policeman's job is only supposed to be easy in a police state". It is not easy in the fictional US-Mexico border town of Los Robles, where a Mexican prosecutor named Vargas (a heavily made-up Charlton Heston) comes up against Quinlan (played by Welles himself, in equally heavy make-up), a corrupt and corpulent cop. Yet there is also a shifting complexity to *Touch of Evil*, in terms of both style and its ethical unravelling. Vargas pursues the truth, but at a cost, neglecting his new American wife (Janet Leigh), who has her own blinds spots in turn. In this contribution to the BFI Film Classics series, Richard Deming explores what makes *Touch of Evil* so intricate and so knowing as a parable of idealism dying many deaths.

The production history of the film was complicated, too. What was supposed to be a return to glory for the director of *Citizen Kane* resulted in the studio taking over the edit, repeating the betrayal of *The Magnificent Ambersons*. *Touch of Evil* exists today in three versions and a portion of the footage is lost; the most recent of those versions, from 1998, is an attempt to reconstruct the film according to the vision Welles articulated in a memo to Universal. Despite its history, however, *Touch of Evil* has had a far-reaching influence. Paul Schrader saw it as the epitaph to the period where noir films pervaded American movies. François Truffaut celebrated and borrowed from its many technical innovations, like the famous opening – a wandering longshot from a crane – that follows a car with a live bomb in its trunk as it crosses the border.

Deming ably conveys just how visceral the film is. Murders, betrayals, drugs, racism, fraud and the threat of rape are juxtaposed with black comedy and a strangeness palpable in its locations: motels, oilfields, a house stuffed with keepsakes where a pianola plays. The film's international intrigue, and its baroque, ironic points of view on power and nationality, show Welles learning from *The Third Man* and his experience in the role of the insouciant Harry Lime. His sense of irony, Deming argues, may have been his most important asset as a filmmaker; and the finest example of this irony at play may be the film's final line. It is delivered by a Gypsy (a showstealing Marlene Dietrich), who resists encapsulating the downfall she – and the film's viewer – have witnessed: "What does it matter, what you say about people?". What does it matter, indeed.

Shwan Ziad

UPHOLSTERY

THE SS OFFICER'S ARMCHAIR
In search of a hidden life
DANIEL LEE
303pp. Cape. £20.

Ordinariness has never been more in vogue, and never seemed more sinister. The chance discovery of a bundle of "swastika-covered" Nazi documents in Amsterdam in a chair that had been sent to be re-upholstered sets in train an attempt to reconstruct the life and career of the chair's original owner, a junior Nazi official in wartime Prague. When the documents come into the hands of Daniel Lee, a historian at Queen Mary, University of London, he approaches his task like a detective, travelling from Prague to Paris, tracing his subject's family – including an American branch in slaveholding Louisiana – and tracking down his surviving relatives in Stuttgart and Switzerland.

Although he was wounded in action on the eastern front, Robert Griesinger spent most of his career as one of the Nazis' pen-pushing perpetrators (*Schreibtischtäter*), working towards the Führer in a series of desk jobs. His impeccably upper-middle-class background and university education were no less unusual for a senior Nazi than his early political engagement, from nationalist youth movement to student fraternity. A mediocre student, he graduated in 1933 with a duelling scar and a doctorate in law, joined the SS and secured a civil service post, working for the Gestapo in Württemberg before the war. He served briefly in France, and then in Ukraine before settling to a comfortable administrative job in the Labour Ministry in Prague, far removed from the genocide in the East and the relentless aerial bombardment in the west.

Griesinger died of dysentery in a Prague hospital in September 1945, having successfully disappeared during the Czech uprising in the city in May. Ultimately, there is little trace of him beyond residual official records, and this is the story of the chase rather than the quarry, told in the first person, not least because it is an entangled history: Lee does not know whether Griesinger was involved in rounding up and executing members of his own family in western Ukraine, or whether he was one of the "execution tourists" shouting "slowly!" to the hangman as they took pictures to send back to the Reich. He just knows he was there. ■

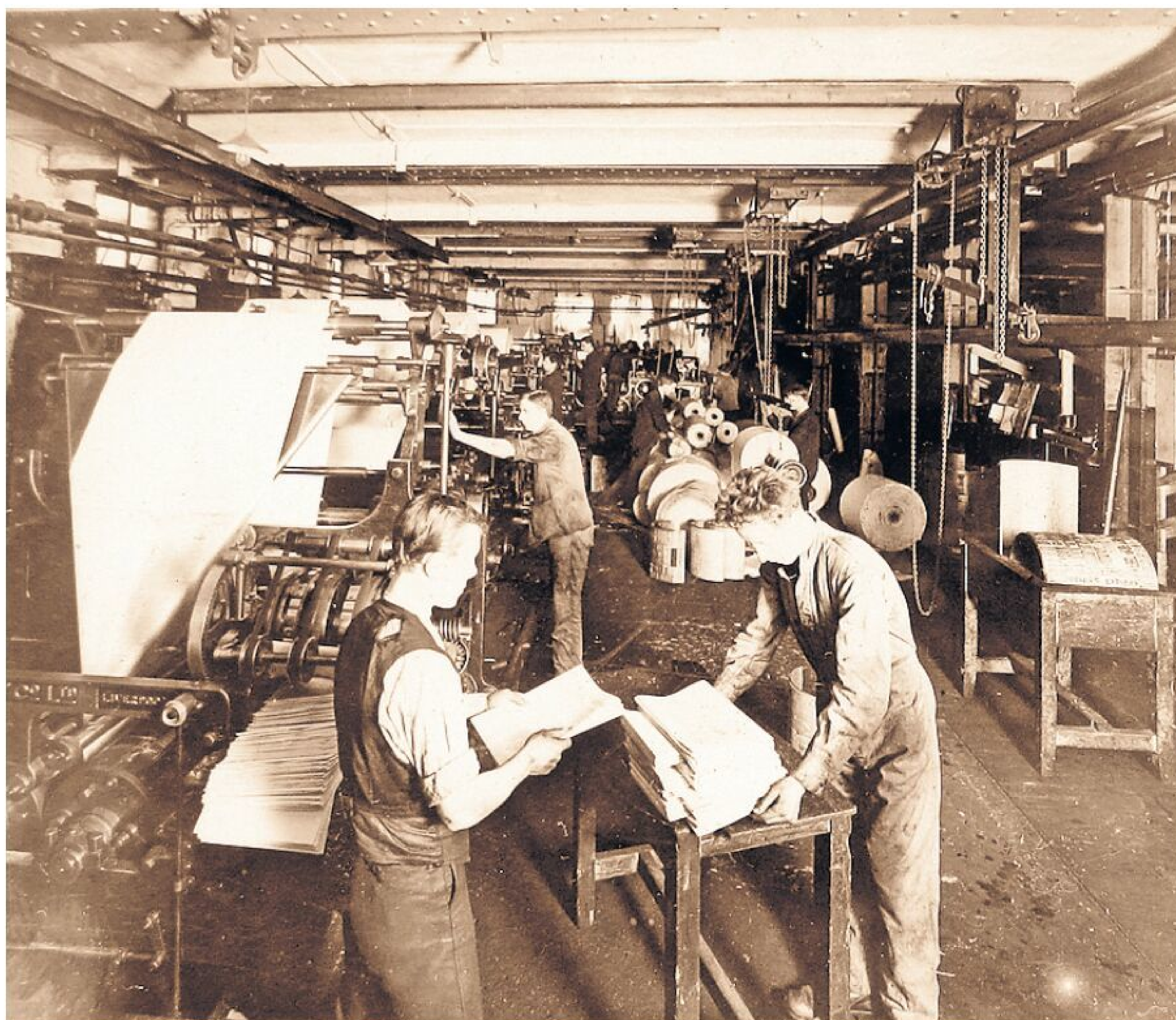
Tim Kirk

I do love a newspaper

The press as a facet of 'the Victorian success story'

A. N. WILSON

THE EDINBURGH HISTORY OF THE BRITISH AND IRISH PRESS
Volume Two: Expansion and evolution, 1800–1900
DAVID FINKELSTEIN, EDITOR
872pp. Edinburgh University Press. £195.



Printing the *Liverpool Express and Weekly Courier*, early 1900s

BETTY HIGDEN, IN *Our Mutual Friend*, says, "I do love a newspaper. You mightn't think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices". The Press, like Homeric verse, was enjoyed not merely by those who could read, but also by those who could hear – and whereas primitive epic might be performed for dozens gathered in courts or mead halls, or for hundreds in amphitheatres, where it was recited semiliturgically, the nineteenth-century newspaper was the first form of literature intended for *millions*.

One Samuel Taylor popularized readings from William Howard Russell's Crimean war dispatches in *The Times*. This developed into his *Literary and Musical Entertainments* in Hanley Town Hall. Between October 1857 and April 1858, nine Staffordshire towns were offering penny readings, with probably 60,000-70,000 attending. No literature – not even the Bible – had ever attracted audiences on this scale. Dickens, ever with an eye to the main chance, was the editor of two successful periodicals and published all his novels in serial form, as a branch of journalism.

The story of the British and Irish press during the Victorian era is therefore a vast tapestry of interconnected phenomena, and David Finkelstein, one of our most distinguished historians of journalism, has drawn on a wide range of colleagues in the field to dwell on the political, economic and technological aspects of the story. Helen S. Williams's chapter on production is central. Short as it is, it encapsulates the whole Victorian success story. Williams reminds us that at the beginning of the century, Gutenberg would have felt at home in any print shop: only very limited changes had been made to the technology of the process in the first 300 years of printing. The Earl Stanhope Press was the first iron-framed press; this supplanted the wooden-framed press and enabled larger sheets to be printed much faster. Then there were cylinder printing machines, which hugely increased the speed of production. *The Times* (circulation 4,800) used such a device from 1827 on. Fast-forward to the end of the century, and you find Linotype, pioneered in the United States and first used in Britain in 1892. This revolutionized typesetting and enabled production on a scale that for the pioneers of print machinery would have been unimaginable.

In parallel with these advances in production, and the steady population growth in nineteenth-century Britain, came the invention, improvement and extension of rail travel. Rail freight took mass-produced newspapers all over the country overnight, while during the day, thousands of publications vied with each other to satisfy the public hunger for something sensational to read on the train. The illustration in this book of a huge, well-stocked WHSmith bookstall on a station platform tells its own magnificent story. In Rose Roberto's wonderful essay on image-making, the *Illustrated London News* is the star of the show, but Roberto takes us on an exhilarating journey of the many phenomena, subsequently taken for granted, that were newly made possible by technology; readers could now *view* fashion, as well as having a much clearer idea of what their politicians and royals looked like.

The interrelationship between press and politics is vividly drawn. That late eighteenth-century phenomenon the *Glasgow Herald*, for example, an embodiment of Adam Smith's Free Trade principles, both reflected and helped to shape the Scottish attitude to trade and Empire in the century after its foundation. Having started as a Tory paper, anti-Reform in the 1820s, anti-Radical in the 1840s (an effigy of its then editor Samuel Hunter was burnt at Glasgow Cross in 1831), it developed into a Liberal Unionist daily, lowering its price from 3d to 1d and thereby entering the mass market. Other papers in different parts of our archipelago played very different roles in the complex Victorian story. The *Birmingham Post* complained in 1888 that Welsh-language newspapers were being "used to preach sedition, and lawlessness and cruelty". In his illuminating chapter on the Welsh vernacular press, Aled Gruffydd Jones quotes a striking poem in which *The Times* is anathematized ("The clamour of *The Times* is abroad in the land ... A blight of untruth", reads part of the translation) – and highlights the popularity of "seditious" vernacular papers among the Calvinistic Methodists; these were of course largely radical papers.

As newspapers developed, so too did the workforce. In 1898, Arnold Bennett, who like most novelists of the period was also a prolific journalist, wrote *Journalism for Women: A practical guide*. Bennett recognized why women had difficulties getting on in the world of journalism: they lacked discipline, they were slipshod, they could not spell, and many of them were ill-adapted to the aggressive atmosphere of a newspaper office. Nevertheless, he urged them not to be dispirited, and not to limit themselves to the "women's press" (whose extent is well described by Kathryn Ledbetter in her chapter of this book). Bennett urged women to write for the "class mags" – *Blackwood's*, *Pall Mall Magazine*, *Longman's*, *Cornhill*, *Macmillan*. Joanne Wilkes reminds us in her excellent chapter on reviews and literary journals that, since nearly all nineteenth-century journalism was published anonymously, many writers presumed to be male would in fact have been female. She mentions the radical feminist Bessie Rayner Parkes (mother of those two doughty writers Mrs Belloc-Lowndes and Hilaire Belloc), who informed readers in *Essays on Women's Work*, 1865, that

> The magazines demanded short graphic papers, observation, wit, and moderate learning, – women demanded work such as they could perform at home, and ready pay upon performance; the two wants met, and the female sex has become a very important element in the fourth estate.

Wilkes's chapter makes one realize that literary journals are among those that have changed the least over the years; today's *TLS* and *LRB* are recognizably from the same stable as *Blackwood's* and the *Edinburgh Review*, whereas most Victorian journalism is firmly of its age. Some of its tendencies, however, can be seen mirrored, mutatis mutandis, in our own times. Michael de Nie had one of the least amusing tasks of all the contributors to this book in chronicling the achingly unfunny "satirical" publications. He provides a very good analysis of *Punch* (established in 1841) and its swift descent into respectability as "the first satirical publication that readers could take home"; a historian of the magazine wrote in 1895 that it quickly came to "claim and honourably occupy a place on the drawing-room and boudoir tables" (later, of course, it could be found in dentists' waiting rooms). In our own time we have watched *Private Eye*, once feared, and sued, by the rich, and dreaded by politicians and senior ecclesiastics, become cosily unthreatening, thereby losing its raison d'être. The same could be said, on a broader scale, for much of the journalism described in this book. Is the Fourth Estate speaking truth to power, or is it a mouthpiece for it? Readers asking that question might look to the next volume of this history, which enters the world of the big press barons.

> "Bennett recognized why women had difficulties getting on in the world of journalism: they lacked discipline, they were slipshod, they could not spell

The advantage of using many contributors in a vast enterprise of this kind is that it allows for every aspect of the subject to be explored by those who really know their onions. The disadvantage is that there are more likely to be notable omissions and repetitions. We have several mentions of *Answers to Correspondents on Every Subject under the Sun*, the first venture of Alfred Harmsworth. It was a penny weekly which survived until the 1950s, had a huge circulation and played its part in encouraging self-education (from 1892, correspondence courses in French and Maths, for example). But in a volume entitled *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press* one looks for some section that marks the arrival on the scene of the brothers Harmsworth. Harold, with his extraordinary business flair, saw the vital importance of cheap production: when circulation rose to 1 million a week, profits were stratospheric. Alfred had a strong instinct for what would work and a Dominic Cummings sense of a great public out there, unknown to politer souls, waiting for whatever he could sell them. We learn in this book that when William Murphy transformed the *Irish Daily Independent* into the *Irish Independent*, reduced the price to a halfpenny and introduced mass circulation journalism to Ireland, he did so in direct imitation of what his fellow Irishmen the Harmsworths had done when they founded the *Daily Mail* in 1896. Even if it appears in Volume Three, the omission of the *Daily Mail* from the story here does seem very odd.

Another omission is in a way even odder. In a fine chapter on the economics of press production, Howard Cox and Simon Mowatt allude to the founding of the *Northern Star* – the great organ of Chartism – by Feargus O'Connor the Irish barrister, noting how, in the years before the presentation to parliament of the Petition for Universal Suffrage, the paper was selling 10,000 copies a week, easily outstripping the other big northern titles, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Leeds Mercury*. After the petition's failure, however, circulation slumped to 7,000. It is of interest to read that O'Connor had raised the £690 needed for printing equipment and machinery by subscription. In the chapter on radicalism by Martin Conboy, we really hungered for an account of this, one of the most famous titles in newspaper history, with quotations from its more famous articles, its inspirational poems and songs, and an assessment of how far it contributed to the enthusiasm for the cause. But there is nothing in this book, not a sausage, on this subject.

As well as omissions, there are mistakes. That is inevitable in a publication of this scope and size, though one wonders how its editor came to write, in his otherwise useful timeline at the end of the volume, "1828. July. Founding of the long-lived review journal the *Spectator* (eventually merged with the *New Statesman*)". ■

A. N. Wilson's latest book, The Mystery of Charles Dickens, *was published last year*

© KGPA LTD/ALAMY

In next week's TLS

HETTA HOWES

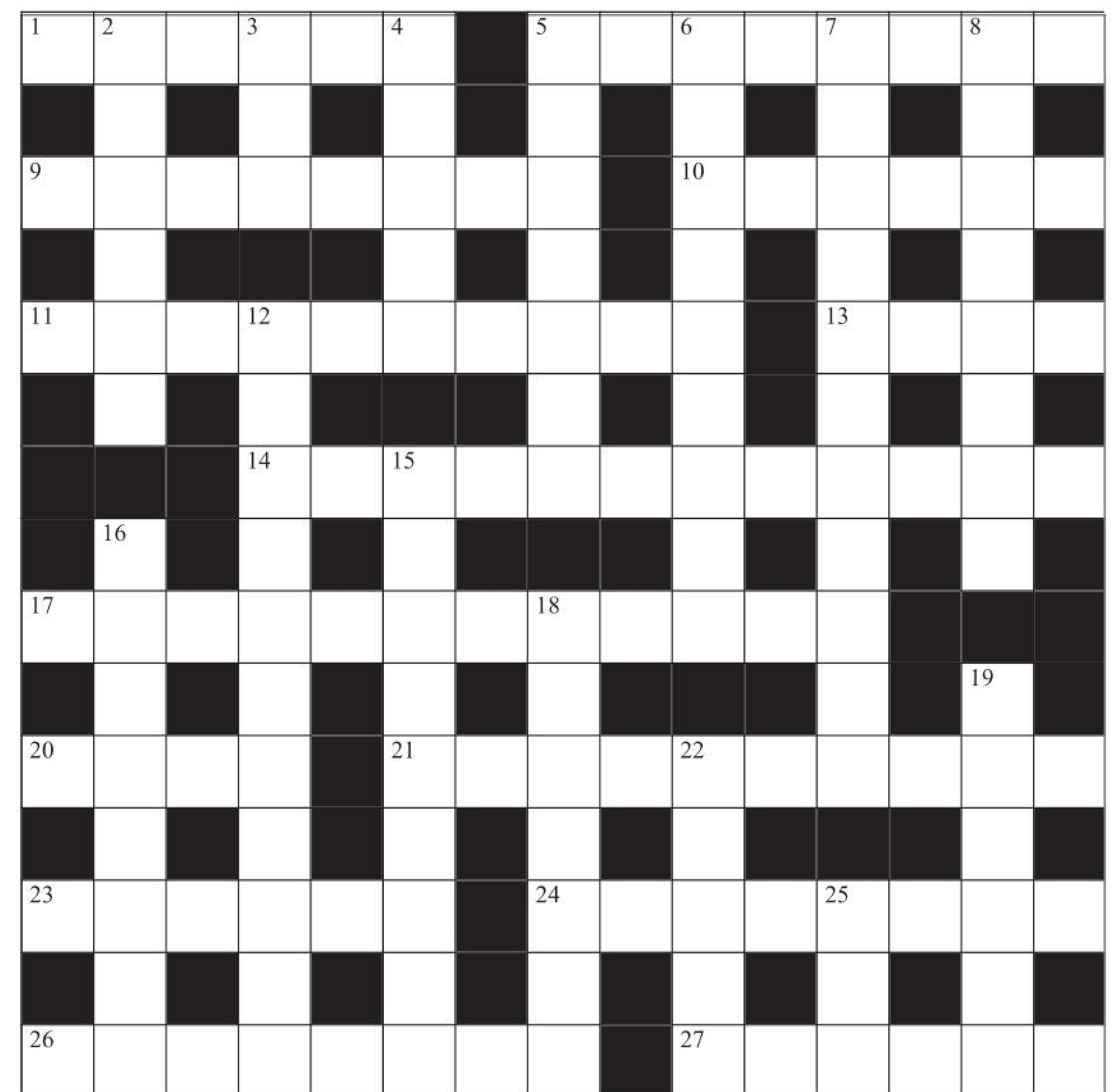
Beowulf is back

Editor **MARTIN IVENS** (editor@the-tls.co.uk)
Managing Editor **ROBERT POTTS** (robert.potts@the-tls.co.uk)
Assistant to the Editor **VICKY WILLIAMS** (victoria.williams@the-tls.co.uk)
Editorial enquiries (queries@the-tls.co.uk)

Managing Director **JAMES MACMANUS** (deborah.keegan@news.co.uk)
Advertising Manager **JONATHAN DRUMMOND** (jonathan.drummond@the-tls.co.uk)

Correspondence and deliveries: **1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF**
Telephone for editorial enquiries: **020 7782 5000**
Subscriptions and subscription enquiries: **UK/ROW: feedback@the-tls.co.uk 0800 048 4236; US/Canada: custsvc_timesupl@fulcoinc.com 1-844 208 1515**
Missing a copy of your TLS: **USA/Canada: +1 844 208 1515; UK & other: +44 (0) 203 308 9146**
Back issues: **020 7640 3888 tls@ocsmedia.net (website: www.ocsmedia.net/tls)**
Syndication : **020 7711 7888 enquiries@newssyndication.com**

TLS CROSSWORD 1365 BY PRAXITELES



ACROSS

1 Gastronomic accessory for which Sayers's Montague gets prize (6)
5 Thrill at act which one may perform in Davos or Zermatt (4, 4)
9 Apologetic address directed at one such as Euterpe about start of ode (2, 1, 5)
10 Miss Golightly's friend Sally is a real fruit! (6)
11 "'You're a dirty little schoolboy.' 'Besides bein' — immoral'" (*Stalky & Co*) (10)
13 Bespectacled pirate who's meek, somewhat (4)
14 Prepare a cane for beating? Encore! (12)
17 At start of *Salome* rashly takes notice and buys one to go regularly to Covent Garden (6, 6)
20 One's outstandingly impressive pop singer and femme fatale (4)
21 Giving colour, note, to new actor I cast at end of revival (10)
23 In Germinal impetuous hanger-on (6)
24 A Freudian construct is certain to include exercises and a game (8)
26 "Mr. Woodhouse was safely conveyed in his carriage ... to partake of this __ party " (*Emma*) (2,6)
27 12, say, that's just about gone (6)

DOWN

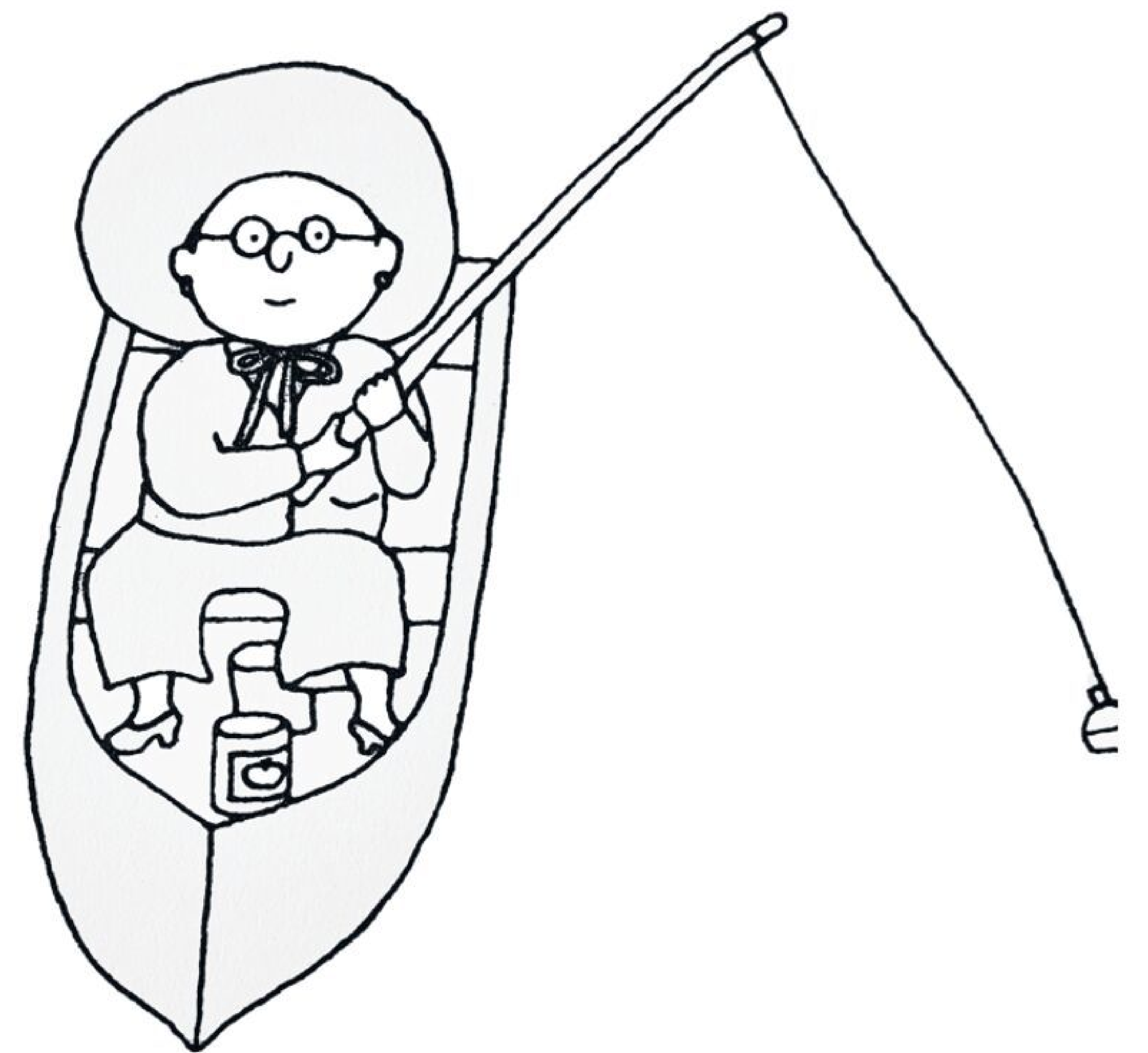
2 Mostly burn with anger, an attribute of Pagnol's father (6)
3 Where you'll see students rowing about marks? (3)
4 Underworld controller; what a dog! (5)
5 Hooley that could be seen at start of *Khovanshchina* (5-2)
6 Clipper used to produce a short loose dress (5, 4)
7 Horseman at end of night getting smashed! (3, 8)
8 Economize on character in Shaw's first play (8)
12 A memorial evening on which to enjoy eating and drinking, unless the chef does (5, 6)
15 Supplies commentary as *Atonement's* confused, but not me! (9)
16 What's done with the remainders of *Bring Up the Bodies*? (8)
18 Author of *Rhinoceros*, carelessly omitting first two parts right out (7)
19 What you might eat at 12, a type of fish with pith mostly (6)
22 One such as Krapp to fade away (5)
25 Note start of play in theatre (3)

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1361

The winner of Crossword 1361 is A. H. Harker, of Oxford

The sender of the first correct solution opened on March 19, 2021, will receive a cash prize of £40. Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1365, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

Robot Waughs



Since its launch last month, the *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction* has provided us with a renewed sense of the future's past. Edited by Jesse Sheidlower, and originating in a project intended to expand the *OED*'s coverage of the genre, sfdictionary.com suggests that readers started to encounter the term *extraterrestrial* in the 1940s ("After a few hours of the reign of terror, the extraterrestrials crept into cellars and stayed there for the duration"), the word coming later than the idea to which it refers. From *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) by Robert A. Heinlein, another generation learned to *grok* – "to perceive or understand fully; to feel empathy with; to enjoy, appreciate" – as in "Smith … grokked that their intentions were benign". The *little green man* and the *mad scientist* have been quite constantly present all along.

There are currently 1,800 terms in the *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction*; the latest addition is *xenocidal* ("of, pertaining to, or involving xenocide"). Focusing our Asimovian powers of *chronoscopy* ("viewing past or future events"), we wonder if there may be more entries to come relating to *Artificial Intelligence* (G. Dozois, "Chains of the Sea", 1973) – to machines doing the writing, even. As ever with SF, though, it is the present rather than the past or future that prompts such speculations. Not only do we hear word of a play written by a computer ("under the supervision of a team of computer scientists"), but we have been privileged to glimpse the future of fiction in the form of a novel written in the same way.

Marking the centenary of Karel Čapek's play *R. U. R.*, premiered in Prague in January 1921, "AI: When a robot writes a play" receives its premiere online, on February 26. It is the outcome of programming a computer to generate dialogue regarding the everyday life of a robot (Čapek's coinage; "an intelligent artificial being typically made of metal and resembling in some way a human or other animal"). "We will see how the robot understands basic human issues such as birth, dying, search for love, but also work during the COVID-19 crisis", says the play's director, Daniel Hrbek. We are promised something that "may resemble a futuristic version of *The Little Prince*". Further details regarding the play – which is to be performed in Czech with English subtitles, and followed by a debate with experts in artificial intelligence and theatre – may be found on the website of the Czech Centre London.

False Claims – by Robot Louis Stevenson – is being presented as "the world's first-ever full-length literary work to have been written by robot". (Perhaps Ross Goodwin's *1 the Road*, a Kerouacian experiment written by a laptop in 2017, doesn't count.) AI engineers, led by a team in Cambridge, have fed the diary kept in the 1980s by their boss – Simon Lance Burgess, a former Lloyd's underwriter – into the "latest natural-language generation algorithms" to generate "a complete work of fact-based fiction". *False Claims* is "100,000 words of dialogue, narrative and re-written press cuttings", Mr Burgess states. "Editing was required to ameliorate errors but machines do not understand political correctness, as they look through windows not prisms." Hence this East End spree with Auberon Waugh:

> I usher my companion into the huge, smoke-filled pub. Immediately a young lady presents us with her pint jar, and I drop in a 20p piece. I turn to the bar on my left and ask Bron what he'd like to drink. He doesn't hear at first: his eyes are following the moves of a woman performing naked, dancing from punter to punter.
>
> I take a tray with six large whiskies and lead him through to my usual spot, a table at the far end of the bar beside the pool table. The dancer gravitates towards us and deftly swipes Bron's glasses, leans back on the pool table and, in time to the raunchy, pounding music, rubs the lenses over her fanny before dancing back to us and dropping the soiled specs into his glass of whisky.
>
> I panic for a moment thinking my Bron will be upset.
>
> Far from it. He wipes his glasses, puts them back on and takes a swig from his glass. Class.

Grok that if you must. We hear that a publisher, in rejecting *False Claims* for publication, described it as "hugely entertaining".

On the other side of reality: M. B. Goffstein (1940–2017) was once described in the *New York Times* as "one of the few 'originals' in children's literature". Her "tiny, delicate picture books have a Middle European flavor and a gentle reverence for life". The *TLS*, not so readily impressed, declared that the pictures in *Goldie the Dollmaker* (1969) "lack warmth and life". From *Publishers Weekly* we were intrigued to learn that the perfectionist Goffstein chose to stop publishing her work in the 1990s, unimpressed by the literary climate of the time, while continuing to practise and teach art. "Her ideal", according to her husband, the publisher David Allender, was "the poets of ancient China": "she could work and rework a single sentence for many months, seeking the fewest possible words to create the clearest image".

Two of Goffstein's picture books – *Brookie and Her Lamb* (1967) and *Fish for Supper* (1976) – are reissued next month by New York Review Books, for $16.95 each. The latter volume tells of a grandmother's day in nineteen drawings and eight sentences. Here she is, out on the lake, having got up at five o'clock in the morning, had her breakfast, cleaned up the dishes "fast, fast", and loaded her rowboat with "cans of worms and minnows, some fruit for lunch, bobbers, lines, hooks, and sinkers", waiting for one of those delicious fish to bite. Success ensues. "She caught sunfish, crappies, perch, and sometimes a big northern pike."

Correspondence. From Birmingham Robert Wilcher writes with a doubly significant addition to the list of this year's literary anniversaries: the quatercentenary of the twins Thomas and Henry Vaughan. Born in 1621 (but "precise date unknown", Dr Wilcher points out), both of the Vaughan boys "served in a royalist troop of horse in the civil war" and "published prolifically during the Interregnum". Thomas's alchemical researches led him to write volumes of hermetic philosophy; Henry is best known for his religious verse, of course. These "remarkable brothers" will be celebrated by a conference in Brecon, May 6–9 – "Covid restrictions permitting". See the Vaughan Association website for the details.

Peter Cargin notes our reference to the Tottenham Hotspur football team as "fancy dans" (January 15). His dictionaries offer some variants: "Fancy dans" (Merriam Webster), "and sometimes *Fancy Dans* or even *fancydans*". Yes, but which English football teams are we talking about now – if any?

Antony Percy writes from Southport, NC, to point out a near-enough coincidence: as we were quoting John le Carré (January 22) wondering if the future might bring about a "fairer, less greedy world" than the present (with its "jingoistic" England – "an England I don't want to know"), Hunter Davies was recalling in *The Times* (January 21) how le Carré, fifty-odd years ago, "handed over £2.6 million to a tax avoidance schemer in the West Indies – and lost it all". The top rate of tax at the time, Mr Percy omits to mention, was 95 per cent.

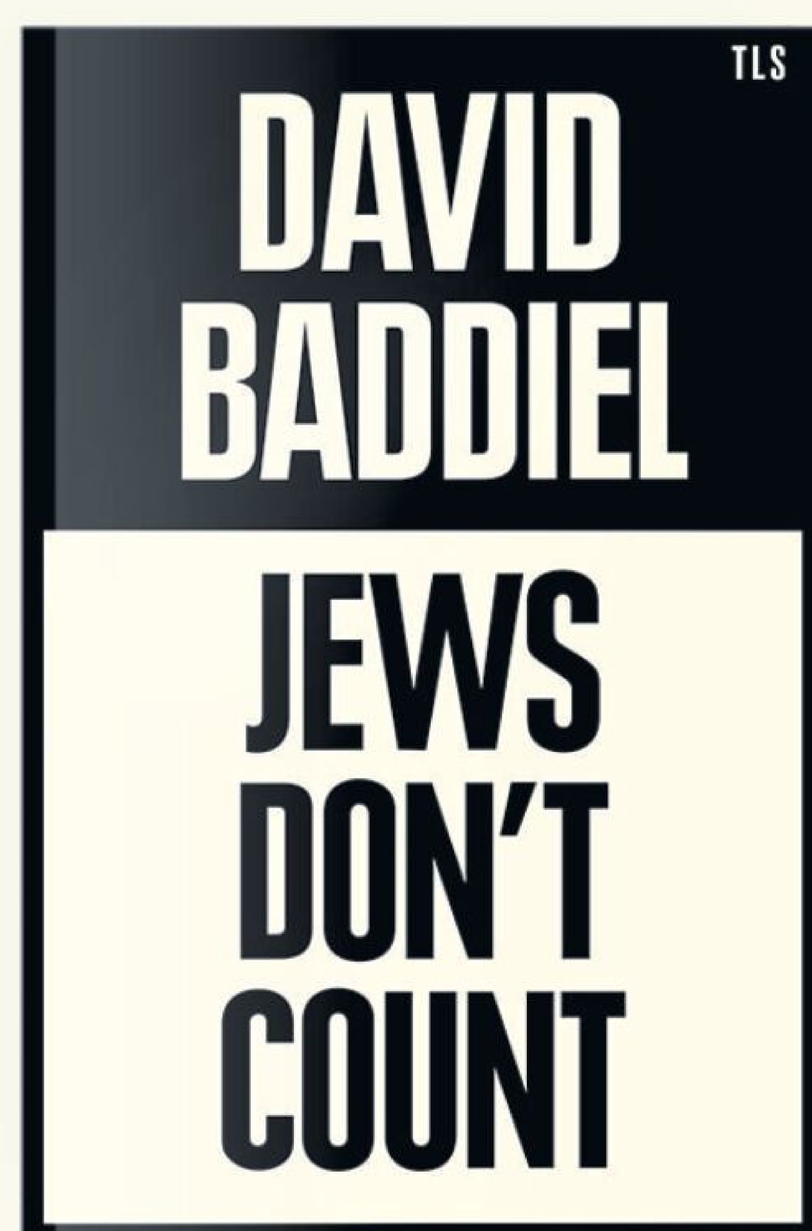
M. C.

© The Times Literary Supplement Limited, 2021.
Published in print and all other derivative formats by The Times Literary Supplement Limited, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF, England. Telephone: 020-7782 5000 E-mail: letters@the-tls.co.uk without whose express permission no part may be reproduced. US copy printed by Stellar Printing Inc, 38-38 9th Street, Long Island City, NY 11101. UK rest of world copy printed by Newsprinters (Knowsley) Limited, Kitling Road, Prescot, Merseyside, L34 9HN, England. **TLS Subscription rates** (all 12 months/50 issues): **PRINT:** USA USD175, Canada (Air freight) CAD225, UK £115, Rest of World (Airmail) £165. **DIGITAL:** USA USD50, Canada CAD50, UK £50, Rest of World £50. **THE COMPLETE WORKS** (Print and digital): USA USD185, Canada CAD230, UK £120, Rest of World £170. Call +1-844-208-1515 (USA & Canada) or +44 (0) 203 308 9146 (rest of the world) or visit the-tls.co.uk/buy to subscribe. Full subscription terms apply at the-tls.co.uk/terms-conditions

How identity politics failed one particular identity

'Fast, witty and occasionally furious … David Baddiel has pulled one of today's most contentious blind-spots into focus and laid out an inarguable and shameful truth'
Caitlin Moran

'This is a brave and necessary book'
Jonathan Safran Foer



Now available in the TLS shop.
Order yours today at shop.the-tls.co.uk

TLS SHOP