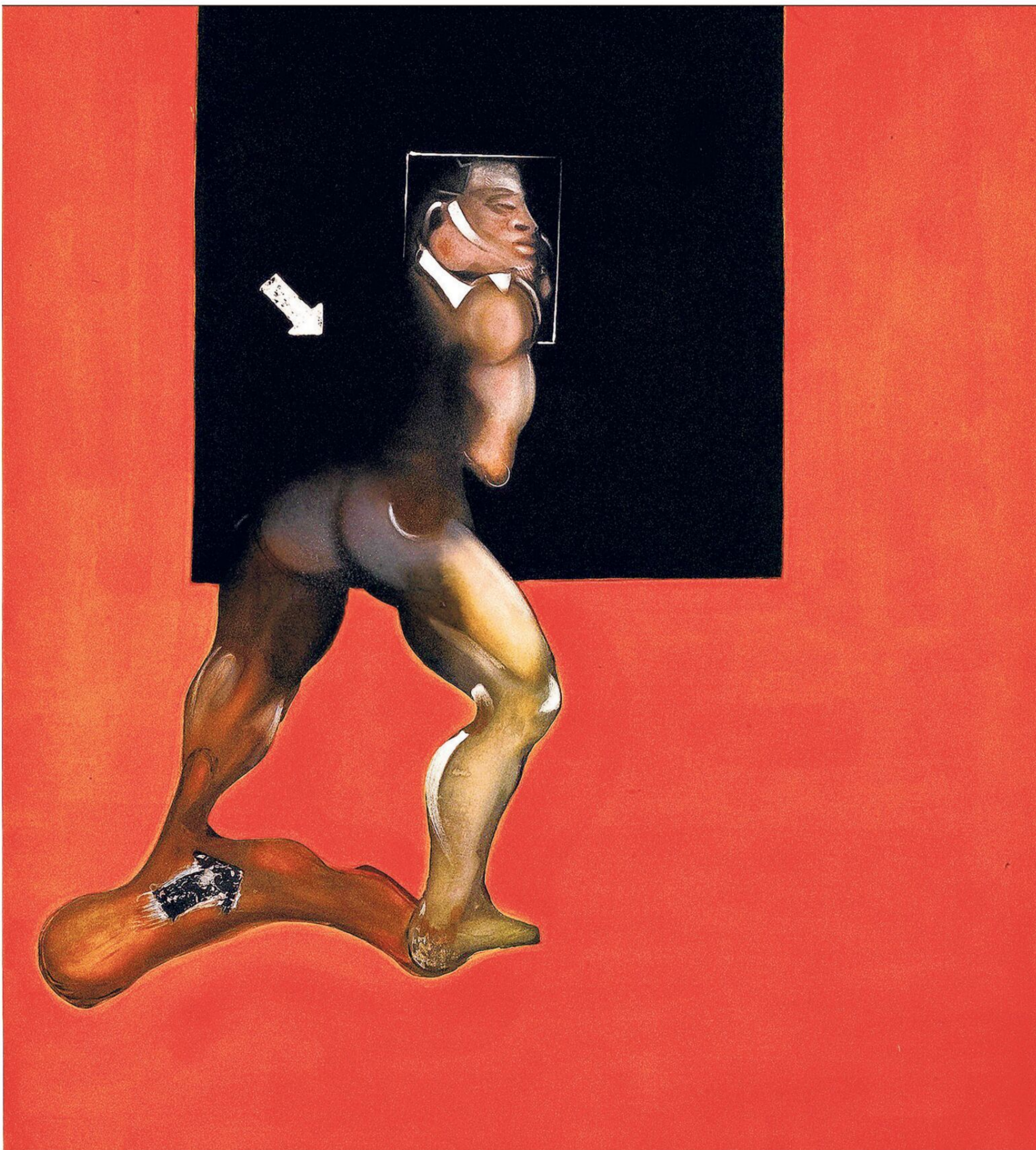


TLS

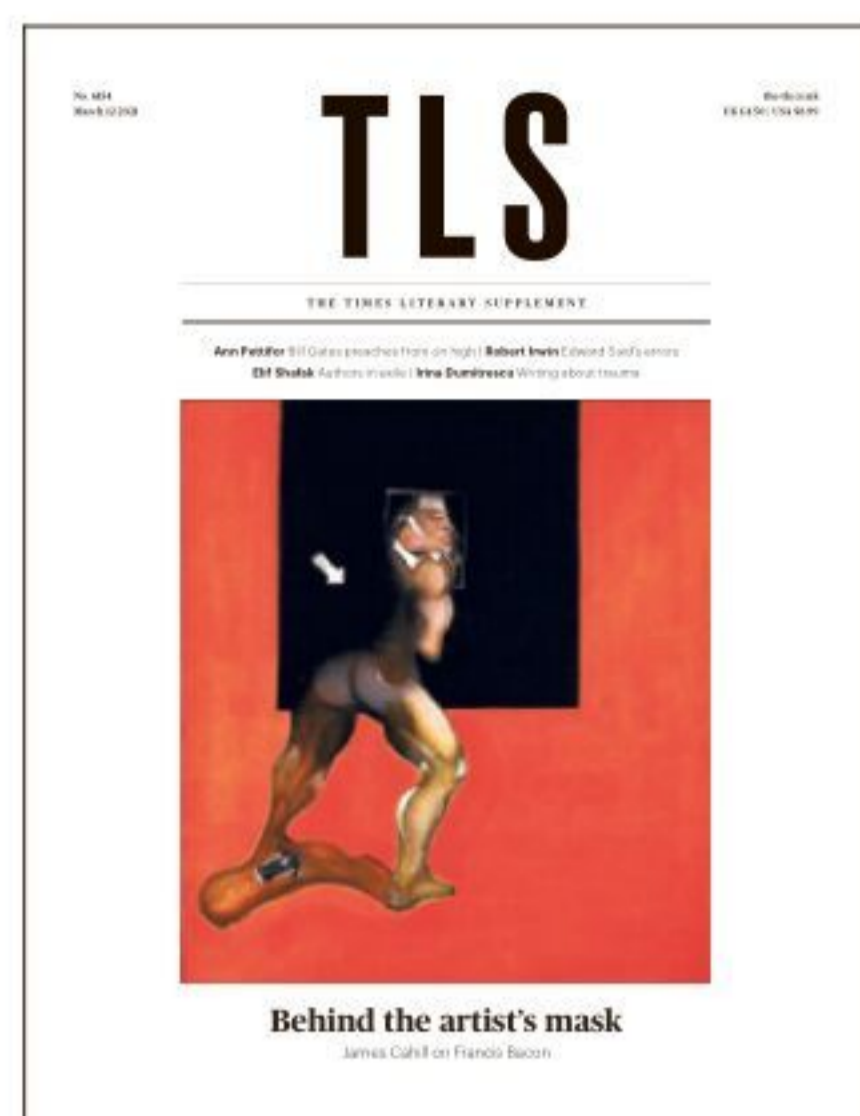
THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Ann Pettifor Bill Gates preaches from on high | **Robert Irwin** Edward Said's errors
Elif Shafak Authors in exile | **Irina Dumitrescu** Writing about trauma



Behind the artist's mask

James Cahill on Francis Bacon



Cover image: "Study From Human Body" by Francis Bacon, 1992 © The Artchives/Alamy

In this issue

Robert Hughes entitled his survey of western art *The Shock of the New*. Francis Bacon's work provided visceral shock after shock. "A thing has to arrive at a stage of deformity before I can find it beautiful", he declared. With *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, Bacon made his nightmare come true. In April 1945 the public display of his triptych of angry, screaming figures, part beast, part man, heralded the desolate, godless world revealed by newsreel accounts of the Nazi death camps. According to his mentor Graham Sutherland, Bacon made other artists "look whimsy or folksy or schematic or just simply dead".

For Bacon, all journalists were skunks and rotten to the core. That judgement hasn't deterred two *Time* magazine staffers, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, from writing his comprehensive biography. Reviewed for the *TLS* by James Cahill, *Francis Bacon*, optimistically subtitled *Revelations*, delves into the artist's troubled, Anglo-Irish boyhood "at once stilingly respectable and shot through 'with simmering violence and foreboding'". Bacon's relationship with his distant army major father (who kicked him out for wearing his mother's underwear) and his youthful, sado-masochistic experiences of homosexuality left indelible marks on his love life and feral existence. Still, there are many cheerful episodes culled from his bohemian Soho life, too. Bacon, for instance, booing Princess Margaret for her rendition of Cole Porter's "Let's Do It" at a private party. His friend Daniel Farson also tells of Bacon emptying a restaurant by shouting out that he wanted to be pleased by Colonel Gaddafi. The artist said that his ambition was to "make us see something we don't yet have eyes for". By that measure, he triumphed.

Ann Pettifor skewers Bill Gates for hypocrisy in her review of *How To Avoid a Climate Change Disaster*. It's a study in denial, she argues. His book fails to recognize that the top 10 per cent are responsible for more than 50 per cent of CO₂ emissions, and within that decile Gates and his fellow billionaires are more guilty than most with "their endless flights" on private jets. Elsewhere in Feuds Corner, Robert Irwin, our Middle East editor, casts a cold eye over *Places of Mind*, a "hagiography" of Edward Said by Timothy Brennan. Finally, Irina Dumitrescu looks at writing about art and mental health in her review of *Trauma*, essays edited by Sam Mills and Thom Cuell. The world keeps throwing up "more ways to suffer, and artists are left trying to find suitable shapes for their pain", she observes. This is Bacon country.

MARTIN IVENS
Editor

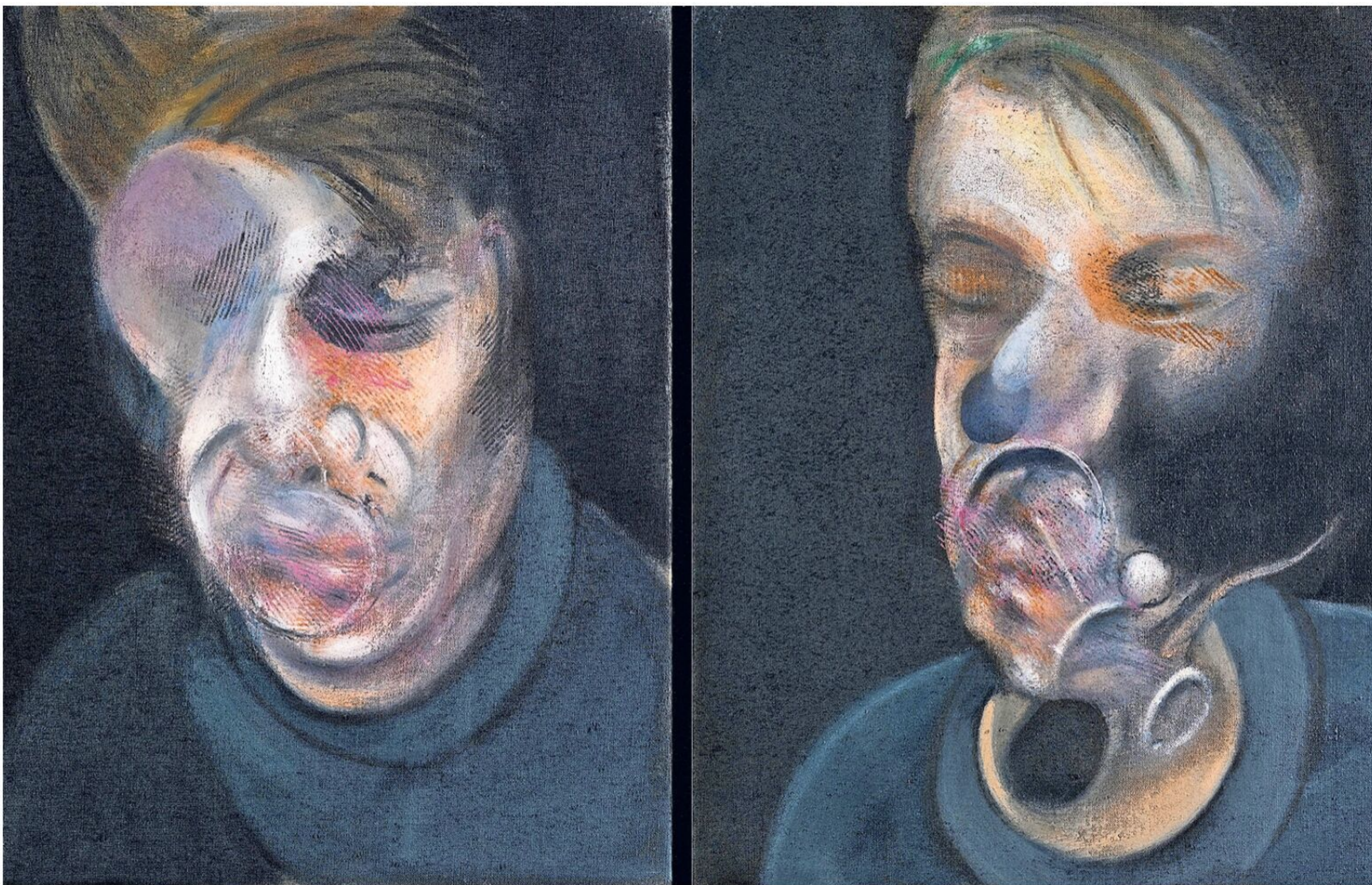
Find us on
www.the-tls.co.uk

Times Literary Supplement
 @the.tls
 @TheTLS

To buy any book featured in this week's *TLS*,
go to shop.the-tls.co.uk

3	BIOGRAPHY	JAMES CAHILL ANNA ASLANYAN	Francis Bacon - Revelations Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan . The Death of Francis Bacon Max Porter Journey through a Tragicomic Century - The absurd life of Hasso Grabner Francis Nenik ; Translated by Katy Derbyshire
6	LETTERS TO THE EDITOR		Jews, tradition and antisemitism, Universities and meritocracy, Katherine Mansfield, etc
7	ENVIRONMENT	ANN PETTIFOR BARBARA J. KING	How To Avoid a Climate Disaster - The solutions we have and the breakthroughs we need Bill Gates Bringing Back the Beaver - The story of one man's quest to rewild Britain's waterways Derek Gow . Otter Daniel Allen
9	MEMOIRS	IRINA DUMITRESCU	Trauma - Writing about art and mental health Sam Mills and Thom Cuell, editors
10	BIOGRAPHY & LITERARY CRITICISM	ROBERT IRWIN GEERT JAN VAN GELDER	Places of Mind - A Life of Edward Said Timothy Brennan 101 Middle Eastern Tales and Their Impact on Western Oral Tradition Ulrich Marzolph
12	CULTURAL STUDIES	MICHAEL SALER	Character - The history of a cultural obsession Marjorie Garber . Becoming Duchess Goldblatt Anonymous
13	POEM	LOUIS KLEE	Iconoclasm from Bed
14	ARTS	ADAM MARS-JONES ALICE WADSWORTH	Viy (Bluray, Masters of Cinema) Food 4 Thot. Wheels on Fire
16	FICTION	RICHARD LEA EMILY BERNARD DESIRÉE BAPTISTE STEPHANIE SY-QUIA	Transcendent Kingdom Yaa Gyasi The Rib King Ladee Hubbard Bright Burning Things Lisa Harding Acts of Desperation Megan Nolan
18	LITERATURE	J. MICHAEL LENNON C. K. STEAD	Robert Stone - "Dog Soldiers"; "A Flag for Sunrise"; "Outerbridge Reach" Madison Smartt Bell, editor The Gorse Blooms Pale - Dan Davin's Southland stories Janet Wilson, editor . The General and the Nightingale - Dan Davin's war stories Janet Wilson, editor
20	RE-READING	ANDREW MICHAEL HURLEY	Lost in translations - Teaching and re-reading <i>The Whitsun Weddings</i>
21	LITERARY CRITICISM	ELIF SHAFAK GILL PARTINGTON	Three Rings - A tale of exile, narrative, and fate Daniel Mendelsohn Further Reading Matthew Rubery and Leah Price, editors
22	HISTORY	ALEX BURGHART JANE KERSHAW	After Alfred - Anglo-Saxon chronicles and chroniclers, 900-1150 Pauline Stafford . Conquests in Eleventh-Century England - 1016, 1066 Lara Ashe and Emily Joan Ward, editors . Edward the Confessor - Last of the royal blood Tom Licence The Children of Ash and Elm - A history of the Vikings Neil Price
24	IN BRIEF		Luckenbooth Jenni Fagan November 1918 - The German revolution Robert Gerwarth The Joan Anderson Letter - The holy grail of the Beat Generation Neal Cassady ; Edited by A. Robert Lee The Oxford Book of Theatrical Anecdotes Gyles Brandreth, editor A Rainbow Palette - How chemical dyes changed the West's relationship with food Carolyn Cobbold The Berlin Shadow Jonathan Lichtenstein Spring Journal - After Louis MacNeice Jonathan Gibbs
26	CRIME	MICHAEL HUGHES RABEEA SALEEM	Anatomy of a Killing - Life and death on a divided island Ian Cobain Karachi Vice - Life and death in a contested city Samira Shackle
27	CROSSWORD		
28	NB	M. C.	Reviewing the Book Review, More editorial successions, Coleridge for sale

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



The face of an angel

Beyond the myth of Francis Bacon

JAMES CAHILL

FRANCIS BACON

Revelations

MARK STEVENS AND ANNALYN SWAN

880pp. William Collins. £30.

THE DEATH OF FRANCIS BACON

MAX PORTER

80pp. Faber. £6.99.

FRANCIS BACON WAS CROSSING the Channel from England to France in 1929 when he met a man called Eric Alden. Bacon was nineteen, Alden forty-two. “He told me he was starting a shop in London for ultra-modern furniture and was going to Paris to purchase samples”, Alden wrote in his diary. “His name was Francis Bacon and he had big childish pale blue eyes.” Alden, whose name is virtually absent from previous accounts of the artist’s life, was a diplomat and a member of the Tory establishment. He became Bacon’s first serious lover and mentor.

Alden’s diary is one of many new discoveries contained in *Revelations*, the first major biography of Bacon since Michael Peppiatt’s *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an enigma* in 1996. It is all the more potent for belonging to a phase of Bacon’s life - the young man before he was an artist - that he later tried to erase from the record. Bacon’s life has long been a kind of myth, structured around signposts - he was whipped as an adolescent by the grooms of his horse-trainer father; he never drew; he showed no emotion when his lover, George Dyer, died in a hotel in Paris in 1971. Now, over 700 lucid and engrossing pages, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan retrace and distil this myth, adding facets to a figure whose celebrity became, in his lifetime, a carapace and remained as a death mask.

Much of the early account is speculative - the young Bacon emerges in tantalizing semi-focus.

Bacon was cagey about his early life, in particular the long years of unsuccess that preceded *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* in 1944. But the authors alight on the facts that survive - Bacon’s aloofness as a boy with severe asthma in a horse-riding family, his lack of formal education (he attended Dean Close School in Cheltenham for a year and a half - claiming later to have run away), the shyness that slowly transformed into social flair. They also evoke the taut atmosphere of the Anglo-Irish society in which Bacon grew up - at once stilingly respectable and shot through with “simmering violence and foreboding”, as houses were burned and prominent families attacked.

Bacon’s father, an army major, is sketched as a remote and irascible figure - a man of hunting and horses, and a defective product of his parochial world. None of the photographs reproduced in the book includes him. But interviews conducted by Stevens with Bacon’s sister Ianthe Knott in 2008 (the year before her death) provide glimpses of the family dynamic. Knott remembered their mother saying, “I wish Francis would get married and settle down”. The word homosexual was never uttered - possibly didn’t exist for them. Even Ianthe, who moved to South Africa, was unaware of her brother’s sexuality until a trip to England in 1970, when her husband informed her of the fact.

The teenage Bacon’s main companions in Anglo-Irish society were girls - his cousin Diana Watson, for instance, and his tennis partner Doreen Mills Molony. One companion, Doreen Prior-Wandesforde, “played the piano, and because Bacon liked it, she used to jazz up the hymns for him”. Assisted perhaps by his vivacious grandmother and these friends, he developed a social facility - impeccably mannered, adroitly conversational. “He often used to say, ‘Well, I’m awfully glad I was brought up properly and I learned proper table manners’”, Ianthe said. “Not that he always used them, but that’s another thing.”

The authors tread carefully around the different versions of the story that Bacon was initiated into

“Two Studies for Self-Portrait” by Francis Bacon, 1977

“**His mind seldom moved from the facts of love, death, massacre and madness, in whatever form he could seize upon them**”

James Cahill is a writer and Research Fellow at King’s College London. His first novel, Tjepolo Blue, will be published next spring

sex by his father’s grooms: “What was certain was that some volatile sexual compound - father, groom, animal, discipline - gave Francis a physical jolt that helped make him into the painter Francis Bacon”. It is clear enough, too, that some kind of sexual awakening took place during his trip to Berlin in the spring of 1927 in the company of his cousin, Cecil Harcourt-Smith. But the details are irretrievable. Bacon claimed later that his parents had “sold” him to Harcourt-Smith, when really the Bacons had helped pay for the trip.

Bacon’s subsequent sojourn in Paris is another chapter of his life that he later excised. This includes the beguiling story of his friendship with Yvonne Bocquentin, a married woman of the haute bourgeoisie who took him under her wing, inviting him to stay for nine months at her house in Chantilly. Bacon became determined, during this time, to establish himself as a furniture and textiles designer (and also to speak French fluently). Bocquentin’s daughter recalls how Bacon and her mother used to retreat to the drawing room, often bursting into laughter together. Bacon’s round face and “big enormous eyes” reminded Anne-Marie Bocquentin of an angel. She remembers that he took drawing lessons in Paris (something he later denied) and brought home Cubist-style sketches. It was around this time that Bacon discovered Picasso, probably on the walls of the Galerie Rosenberg and in the pages of *Cahiers d’Art*.

But by 1932 “Bacon was swept up in a solitary dream of art”. Diana Watson, whom he met regularly at the Lyons tea shop in South Kensington, noted in her diary: “He never spoke of doing anything else”. The encouragement of an older painter, Roy De Maistre, was a vital catalyst. Watson’s observations suggest that Bacon’s imagination, if not his artistic confidence, had matured into something close to its defining form: “His mind seldom moved from the facts of love, death, massacre and madness, in whatever form he could seize upon them”.

Another key player in Bacon’s early life was Eric Hall, a wealthy married alderman in early middle age, “the kind of man invited to serve on boards”, who came to replace Alden as a lover and father-figure to Bacon well into the 1940s. The authors note that Hall “proved willing to risk everything - his political career, his marriage, his family, and his fortune - for the young artist”, and the corrosive effects on his family of his long affair with Bacon are deftly touched on.

The early 1930s were a moment of brief success - Bacon was included in the first exhibition at the edgy new Mayor Gallery in April 1933, and its *Art Now* show of October 1933, accompanying Herbert Read’s landmark book of the same title, in which Bacon’s “Crucifixion” of that year was printed opposite Picasso’s “Female Bather with Raised Arms” (1929). But then came a long downturn. His more lurid, violent works failed to find favour, and remained a covert enterprise. In early 1935, Watson recalled a visit to his studio where she saw “a bucket in the middle of the room, filled with wet, gleaming colour. Crimson was everywhere. He was stirring the slimy mass. Monstrous shapes on the canvas”.

These monstrous shapes finally sprang into public view with *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, shown at the Lefevre Gallery in April 1945 - three Aeschylean Furies screaming and writhing against a backdrop of lurid orange. Bacon later professed that “I began” with this work. Hall purchased the triptych before the show opened. Even as he rose to recognition, however, and despite Hall’s financial and emotional backing, Bacon increasingly lived “an almost feral life” - without money or a fixed abode.

Much of what follows, as we enter the main act of Bacon’s life, is familiar - the multicoloured settings and personae, the green-walled otherworld of the Colony Room Club (presided over by Muriel Belcher), the loyalty - gravitating finally into hostility - of friends such as Lucian Freud and Graham Sutherland. And yet the authors give the tale a fresh momentum, a feeling of life as it happened, rather

than the chiaroscuro *Life* that became the foundation of Bacon's persona and the mirror image of his art.

The women closest to Bacon emerge particularly clearly - among them Erica Brausen, his first dealer (a German émigré and lesbian whose "air of 'difference'" appealed to him), Isabel Rawsthorne and Sonia Orwell. When he moved to London in the summer of 1929, he brought his childhood nanny, Jessie Lightfoot, from Ireland. Nanny Lightfoot lived with him, or close by, until her death in 1951. She is evoked as a kind of Greek tragic nurse - ministering to Bacon's needs and presiding over his gambling parties, where she charged visitors to use the loo. In a rare moment of speculative caprice, the authors imagine her poring over classified advertisements, helping him to seek out wealthy men who wanted a little something on the side ("Well, Francis, look here...").

The oft-repeated gem that Muriel Belcher greeted Bacon as "Daughter" when he walked into the Colony is enhanced by a new coda (supplied by Bacon's Paris friends Eddy Batache and Reinhard Hassert). In 1979, shortly before Muriel's death, Bacon visited her regularly in a nursing home in Hampstead, where she was sharing a room with "a rather starchy, old-fashioned lady". At each visit, Muriel called out "Hello, daughter!", prompting the lady in the next bed to ask: "Are you a woman?" Bacon thought about it. "Sometimes", he replied.

Bacon's intelligence, charm, acerbity, nihilism and restlessness resonate throughout these pages and find harsh expression in his love affairs. After the two Erics came Peter Lacy - an outwardly charming, if louche, former pilot who played the piano (semi-professionally) and loved Fats Waller. Lacy was an alcoholic who had struggled since adolescence with "thwarted" desires. Part of his appeal was that he cared little or nothing for art, often



telling Bacon that he should get a regular job. The sadomasochism of their relationship unravelled into dangerous mutual dependency and violence, which didn't preclude acts of rape against Bacon - and, on one occasion, an attack in which Lacy hurled him from an upstairs window. For years, the pair strug-

Francis Bacon in his studio, London, 1974; photograph by Michael Holtz

gled to live either together or apart. When Bacon was holed up in a temporary studio in Henley in 1954, close to Lacy's house, he was visited by a local girl of thirteen - "a devout Catholic whose family was friendly with [the painter] John Piper's", accompanied by her father and Piper. They found Bacon sleeping on makeshift bedding, "out of his mind with drink, pee on the floor, hadn't changed for days". The girl recalled, however, that Bacon had "a beautiful voice" and rallied miraculously, engaging in a long conversation with the two other men about good and evil.

Lacy died on the day of Bacon's private view at the Tate Gallery in 1962. Bacon, fascinated as he was by chance and its capacity to spell out a formula of fate, must have been grimly alive to the coincidence of triumph and tragedy - which would be repeated when George Dyer died on the eve of his 1971 exhibition at the Grand Palais, Paris.

Much of the book's power is in inducing us to see again, from a new angle, what has previously appeared familiar. "The relationship with Lacy was long, desperate, and sharply lit, with tragic overtones", the authors conclude. "The one with George [Dyer] was more often absurdist: loving, bumbling, melancholy." In the end, however, Dyer, a small-time criminal from the East End, "developed the desolate anger of a man who has realized his dreams and found them wanting". In his graphic account of the events leading up to his discovery of Dyer dead from an overdose of barbiturates on the toilet at the Hôtel des Saints-Père, Terry Danziger Miles, the "driver" from the Marlborough gallery and a close friend, gives the episode a new tragicomic realism: having argued with Dyer the night before, who was "drunk and incoherent with an Arab rent boy", Bacon spent the night in Miles's room (the boy's feet, he said, had caused his own room to smell). It was Miles, together with Valerie Beston, Bacon's great confidant and support at the Marlborough, who found Dyer the next morning.

Like the Aeschylean tragedy that Bacon loved, the biography deals in two kinds of revelation - lightning flashes of information, and a more gradual realization that the facts as they exist are more complex than they perhaps seemed. Over the years of his growing success, Bacon cultivated what the authors call "a public mask for a mass audience". A desire to live up to a certain version of himself was reflected in his work. He liked to return to the same big themes. At the prospect of his 1962 Tate retrospective, he created *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* - a harrowing triptych of strung-up meat and sycophants in suits, to match his career-launching *Furies* of 1944. The work may have been prompted by long conversations with the Tate director John Rothenstein, a devout Catholic for whom great questions surrounding the decline of religious art in a secular world were irresistible. The triptych was produced in a two-week agony of heavy drinking - at points during the painting of it, Bacon could hardly stand. As Rothenstein gazed in horror and amazement at the completed work, Bacon told him: "You know, of course, where all this comes from - it's inspired by you".

This and numerous other paintings receive eloquent analyses - sometimes in the form of stand-alone chapter epilogues. Certain key works are omitted, including the *Triptych* of 1967 which was inspired by T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*. But whether dealing with "masterpieces" or more marginal creations, the authors display an eye for what might easily be overlooked - the small yet potent detail, such as the reaper's scythe of the bull's horn in Bacon's final painting. One of the strongest passages describes the "windtorn and furiously alive" grass of "Landscape" (1978), the first of a sequence of ten unpeopled landscapes that Bacon painted towards the end of his life.

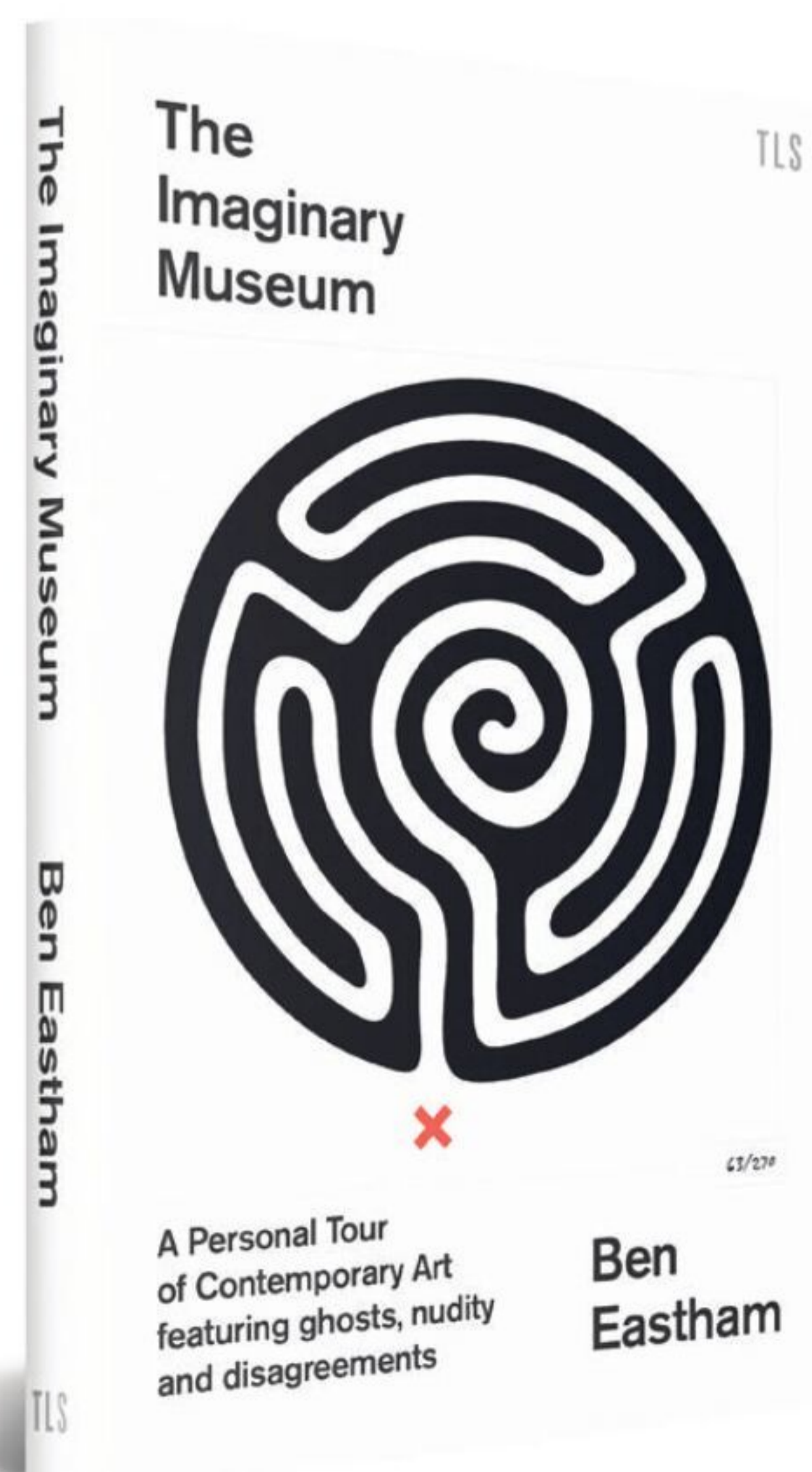
Revelations is not an art historian's encomium, however, any more than it is a hagiography. The authors are candid about the second-rate quality of

A gallery that never closes.

TLS

Join the art critic Ben Eastham on a private tour of an extraordinary museum.

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



some of Bacon's work, particularly in later years when he ceased to edit his output so voraciously. His portrait, completed in 1957, of the French cabaret singer Suzy Solidor, probably a commission, is "uninspired". They are sceptical as to the merits of the highly polished "late style" of the 1980s, although they point out that this style engendered an air of detachment - a postmodern distance - that served as a powerful foil for the viscerality of earlier work.

Out of the glancing observations and countless episodes that make up a life, a shifting picture evolves. Bacon's solicitude for others was in stark contrast to his savage disregard for himself: even after breaking his skull in a drunken fall, he refused to go to hospital. On another occasion, he fell on some stairs and half "popped out" his eye - he simply pushed it back in. He had a powerful sense of propriety, and beneath it, a deep-seated conscience that ran contrary to his wayward and sometimes cruel behaviour. He was wracked with guilt over abandoning Erica Brausen for Marlborough Fine Art (when Brausen became ill in the late 1980s, he put £100,000 in her account for medical expenses). He disapproved of Lucian Freud's continual womanizing, especially where women in established relationships were involved. And he always held himself responsible for George Dyer's death.

Bacon's globetrotting gives the book much of its light and shade. In the 1940s and 50s, he lived a vagabond existence even as he became internationally successful. Money didn't always follow in the wake of acclaim - and when it did, he often gambled it away. Monte Carlo was a favourite destination. In Tangier in the 1950s, he chatted freely with William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg about art - more freely than with most. "He said so much of it is nothing, it's decoration, it's not painting," recalled Burroughs, "and as to what painting actually is, his views were hard to understand but very interesting to hear."

One of the many marvels of *Revelations* is just how present and immediate Bacon is made to seem (in contrast to William Feaver's monumental biography of Freud, in which the subject grows ever more remote and repellent). Even as he ebbs away, we see and hear him vividly. The writer Richard Shone observed at a dinner following the funeral of Rodrigo Moynihan in 1990: "F.B. in black zipper jacket; tawny to orange hair; those intense, staring eyes and two deeply furrowed lines between the eyebrows". By the end of the meal, he added, Bacon was "far gone, but with a clutch on the conversation around him that was both impressive and pitiable".

At the end, Bacon spoke often of going to Spain. "He wanted to die on the road south", Stevens and Swan write in the closing pages, "in search of love and surprise." The dispassionate account of Bacon's death, in a private hospital in Madrid, finds a strange, compendious counterpoint in Max Porter's *The Death of Francis Bacon* - a dramatic monologue in verse, arranged into seven "pictures" with titles and dimensions.

Porter's style is wryly arcane, like the work of a difficult Modernist. A vision of the photographer John Deakin as a monstrous taxi driver, the horror of a riding accident, a brooding contemplation of "shits who will write a god-awful hack-tosh-hagiography of me after I'm gone" - all well up and dispel again. Criticisms of Bacon are internalized as a sort of diabolical self-slandering, perhaps too severe to be convincing ("I am ever so sick of myself", he confesses, amid floating allusions to his market value). Visions of the hospital - the glimpsed profile and admonitions of Sister Mercedes (*Intenta descansar*) - sink into the artist's fitful imagination.

There are moments of glittering, imagistic power here as Porter imagines the disintegration of Bacon's life and mind. What *Revelations* leaves us with powerfully is Bacon's mercurial, electric character and a palpable sense of his body: his fluid gait, his "flutey" voice, and a face ever more asymmetrical as time progressed. ■

One-man awkward squad

The extraordinary life of Hasso Grabner, and its meticulous retelling

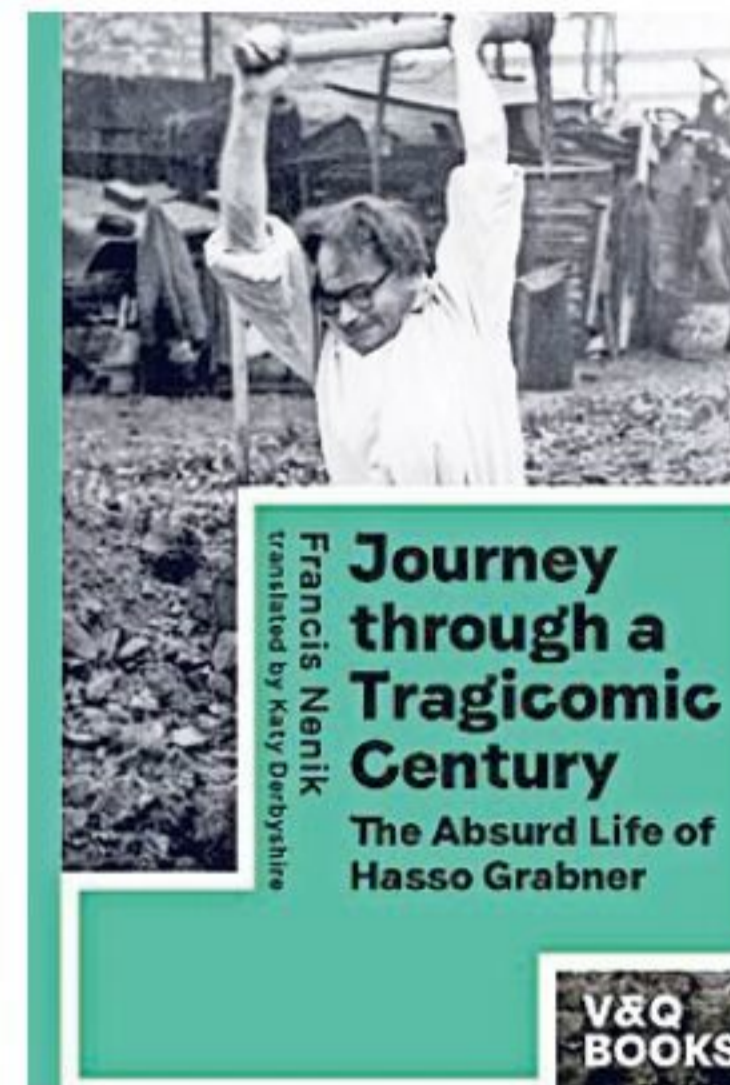
ANNA ASLANYAN

JOURNEY THROUGH A TRAGICOMIC CENTURY

The absurd life of Hasso Grabner

FRANCIS NENIK

Translated by Katy Derbyshire
192pp. V&Q Books. Paperback, £12.99.



FACTS, ONCE ESTABLISHED, can be more fascinating than anything imagination might conjure. Hasso Grabner's story is one such example. Born in Leipzig in 1911, he threw himself into the Communist movement as a teenager. After the Nazis came to power, he spent years in prison, where he began writing; in Buchenwald, where he was made a librarian; and in a Wehrmacht penal battalion,

Anna Aslanyan is a freelance writer and translator. Her popular history of translation will be published later this year

where he was decorated for killing a partisan. In the GDR, he oscillated between managing large industrial projects and working on the production line, at the same time becoming a prolific author. Too independent-minded and big-mouthed to toe the party line, Grabner kept ruffling feathers, while his detractors used every opportunity to accuse him of Nazi sympathies, anti-Communist views and other thoughtcrimes. Eventually, after a series of fallings-out with the authorities, they stopped publishing him. He died in 1976 and was soon forgotten by most.

On discovering such fascinating material in such small doses - documents scattered over archives, sparse oral testimonies - a novelist would have to fill in the gaps, inventing things the better to reflect on the human condition. Instead, Francis Nenek chooses factography. After years of research he tells Grabner's story in a way that turns the paucity of information about his subject into an advantage, using history to bring each discovered detail into focus. The resulting book is a triumph of reportage over commentary. When Nenek does allow himself to make a judgement - for example, calling his protagonist pragmatic or optimistic - it is derived from facts. Nenek also calls Grabner "the chronicler of the grotesque named history [who] always finds himself precisely where that grotesque is being made". The most signal instance of that is Buchenwald, a place about which Grabner usually told "unheroic or even funny stories". In the world where "some make history and others rewrite it" to produce an official version of the past, he didn't want to "be a pawn in anyone's game".

With mercifully little speculative discourse, what we get from Nenek in spades is metaphor steeped in irony. His punchy prose - Grabner "jacks through all trades" as his future "is gradually ticking away, attempting to tiptoe past him unnoticed" while "the whole socialising thing" is trundling along - is rendered with gusto by Katy Derbyshire, who also supplies her own notes. The breezy delivery works well for the most part, although the wordplay occasionally feels overwrought. An ordinary rope generates four puns on a single page, one per paragraph. Mock one-liners come thick and fast: "Feat-starters, not just seat-farters! Life, not just lyrics!" Perhaps this is irony raised to another level, employed to stress that the century in question was, after all, tragicomic and full of absurdity. If history is "a succession of banalities that escalates into a drama every time", what's the point of dramatizing it further still? Sending up grandiloquence is one way to make hard-won facts stand out more clearly from the text.

"Memory ... is the basis of history. Ideology ... is the form in which history is expressed." Reiterated throughout the book, these maxims underpin it. Freed from ideological demands and literary conventions, real people come alive before us: Young Communists distributing propaganda at the end of the Weimar era; prisoners reading Lenin in a concentration camp; Dresdeners contributing to postwar broadcasts in return for radio repairs. It is these vignettes that, ultimately, distinguish the book from "retrospective science fiction generally known as history writing".

Nenek's sources include Grabner's own writings: a poetry collection that sold nine copies, an industrial play ("a work of operative socialist literature in a state-owned production facility"), several novels, and so on. A typical description reads, "They are texts in which heads are made of quicksilver, bodies are state-owned, and stories are boiled down to chemistry". Why are we told so tantalizingly little about Grabner's works? Are they stuffed with ideological drivel, stylistically bland, insufficiently edifying or simply bad? Would they have turned out better had the author abandoned fiction in favour of fact? ■

Hooked

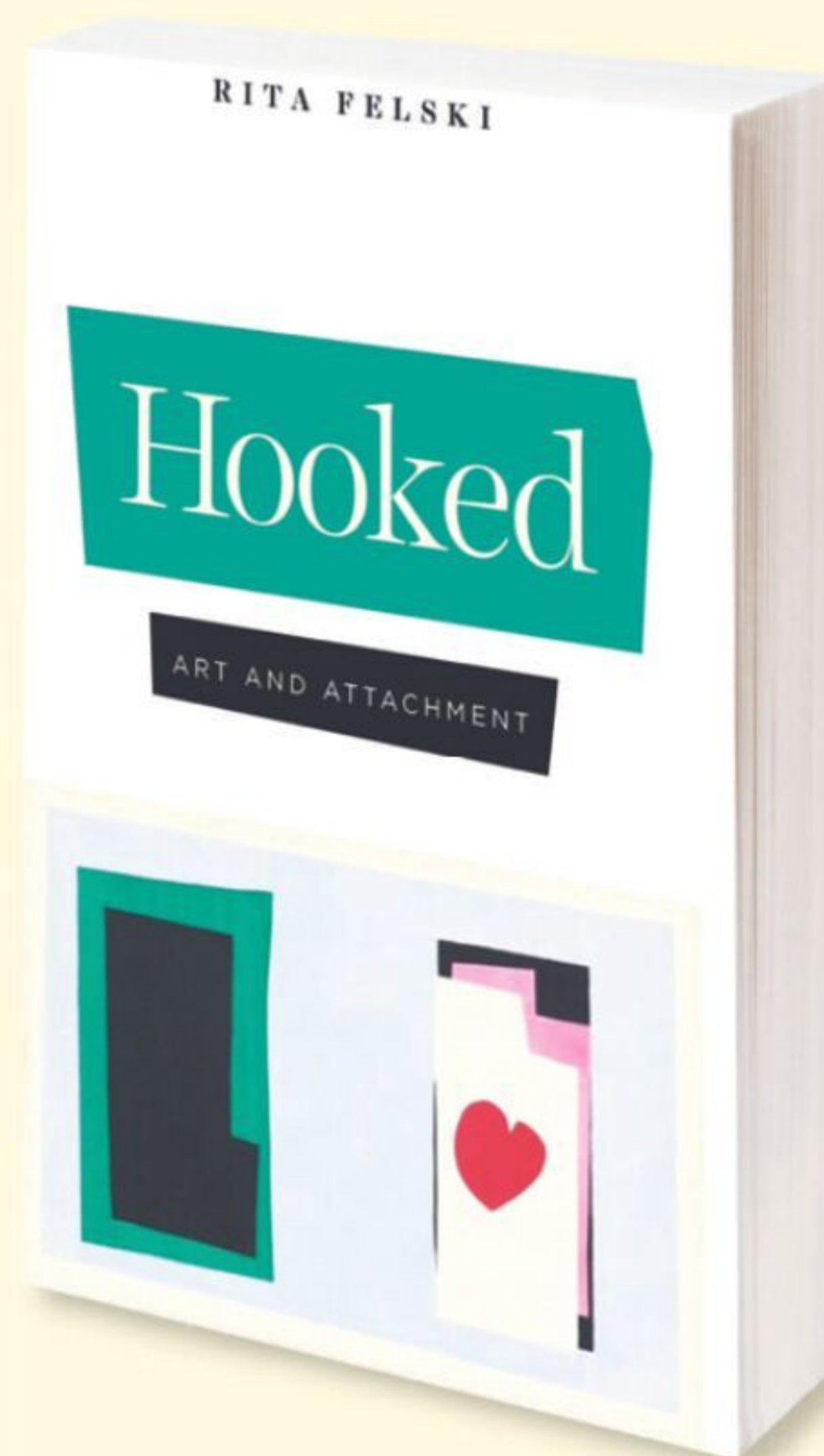
ART AND ATTACHMENT

RITA FELSKI

"Over the past decade, Felski has been a breath of fresh air. . . . She is one of the growing number of malcontents who merely want to discuss other ways in which people respond to art."

—Public Books

Paper £18.00



The University of Chicago Press www.press.uchicago.edu
Trade Enquiries to Yale Representation Ltd. yalerep@yaleup.co.uk 020 7079 4900

Universities and meritocracy

David Kynaston, in his review of *The Crisis of the Meritocracy* by Peter Mandler (February 26), recognizes that the biggest force for social mobility was the Robbins Report of 1963. During the 1960s and 70s, those going to university increased from 7 per cent to 14 per cent of school-leavers, but then the numbers stalled. When I became Education Secretary in 1986 it was still at that level. I persuaded the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, to increase the funding for universities and I urged students to make that choice. In the last speech that I made on Education, to the University of Lancaster in 1989, I forecast (not a target) that it would rise to 30 per cent by the end of the century. It is now over 50 per cent, but I forecast that we are likely to see a stall or even a reduction.

Graduate unemployment and graduate underemployment are now at significant levels, for many leave their university without the employment skills that industry and commerce need. Not enough students are choosing STEM courses. The reason for this is that secondary schools must follow the Gove curriculum of eight academic subjects. The result is that technical education is being squeezed out of our schools below the age of sixteen. We are the only country in the world that does that. So, a fundamental change is needed in the National Curriculum to insert a requirement for high-quality technical skills education.

I have been promoting University Technical Colleges for the past eleven years - there are now over forty UTCs with 16,000 students. They have many disadvantaged students, but by treating them as adults - having them spend two days a week on technical education, make and design things with their hands and work together on projects brought in by local employer supporters - UTCs have transformed their life chances. A young person attending a secondary school in Toxteth has a 15 per cent chance of going to university. Liverpool Life Sciences UTC, on the borders of Toxteth and specializing in Science and Health Care, had thirty students who came from Toxteth - 85 per cent of them went on to university.

Today the lesson is that high-quality technical education leads to social mobility.

■ **Kenneth Baker**

House of Lords, London SW1

Katherine Mansfield

Claire Davison and I were delighted by Beci Carver's very positive and engaging review of the first volume of our new edition of Katherine Mansfield's letters for Edinburgh University Press (March 5). However, we would like to correct two factual errors in her review. As we make clear in our introduction, little Hugh Jones was the illegitimate son of Philip Morrell, not

Jews, tradition and antisemitism

I was interested to read Simon Everett's concern that by using the term "Jew" he risked appropriating Nazi terminology (Letters, March 5). Oddly, this is not a concern I have ever encountered in Germany, where words like "Volk", "Nation" and "Deutsch" are also in common usage. Nevertheless, it underlines very well the heavy connotations this word retains in European culture - connotations which, like the word itself, long predate the Nazis. It is interesting to reflect that many nineteenth-century Jews sought to adopt a more dignified and "European" persona by referring to themselves as "Israelites" - a term unlikely to find popularity today. The comparison with slavery is, I think, misleading. Slaves, presumably, were not proud of being slaves and rejected their enslaved condition. Most Jews feel they are Jews and are proud to identify with the Jewish tradition.

In short, I would like to reassure Mr Everett that the word "Jew" is not a pejorative term, and I hope he will now feel comfortable using it. "The Jews", which implies a coherent entity and (perhaps) collective agency, is a very different matter.

■ **Abigail Green**

Oxford

Ottoline Morrell, as Carver erroneously asserts. And Ida Baker took on many roles during Mansfield's lifetime, but "lover" was never one of them.

■ **Gerri Kimber**

University of Northampton

Jorge Luis Borges

The story that Jay Parini recounts in *Borges and Me* is untrue and it should be understood as fiction. Borges made the trip to St Andrews with Norman Thomas di Giovanni and me, as David Gallagher accurately notes in his review of January 29.

■ **Maria Kodama**

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Longfellow's popularity

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst's excellent review of Nicholas A. Basbanes's biography of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (March 5) tends to give the impression that he is largely passé. But one poem, or, rather, one section of one poem, the allegorical "The Building of the Ship", remains in the American public consciousness. The whole thing is a colossal 2,473 words. It was famously quoted by Franklin D. Roosevelt in a note sent to Churchill on January 20, 1941, and there is a Churchill rendition of it, responding to the note, available on the internet. It is a species of didactic uplift - the equivalent, roughly, of Kipling's "If" - a poem convenient for people who know little about poetry, don't even like it particularly. So it was no great surprise when David Schoen closed his opening statement during the second Trump impeachment trial with a recital from Longfellow: "Sail forth into the sea, O ship! / Through wind and wave, right onward steer! / The moistened eye, the trembling lip, / Are not the signs of doubt or fear". He performed it lamentably badly. I don't recall our

Thanks to Leo Schulz for his letter about the extract from my book, *Jews Don't Count* (March 5). He makes a small error, which is imagining that I was suggesting that T. S. Eliot is a progressive, and that his poetry - like Alice Walker's, also quoted - is antisemitic only in what it leaves out. The error is imagining that I'm talking about either of them as the site of progressiveness in those examples. The site of progressiveness in each case is the world now, the discourse around offence now.

So in Eliot's case, it's the fact that his antisemitic poetry can be read out on Radio 4 in 2017 without reprisal; in Walker's case, it's that her antisemitic poetry also goes out into the world without a murmur, and despite someone from a production of *The Color Purple* being sacked for homophobia - in the modern parlance, cancelled. None of the progressive people who might be responsible for that thinks for a second about cancelling Walker for her anti-Jewish racism. I'm not by the way suggesting she should be cancelled: I'm just noting the disparity.

■ **David Baddiel**

London W11

media broadcasting this particular bit. The extract Schoen read did not contain the line "Sail on, O Union, strong and great!". Perhaps that would sit badly only a few days after a Trump supporter paraded the Confederate flag in the Capitol.

■ **Bernard Richards**

Brasenose College, Oxford

The history of photography

It may indeed be that the ambitious young photographer Walker Evans is purposefully mischaracterizing the work of his acclaimed elder Alfred Stieglitz in calling it "artistic and romantic". Evans's intention was to more clearly define his own, very different, spare and somewhat austere photography: "It gave me an aesthetic to sharpen my own ... a counter-aesthetic". As Anne Seiditz helpfully points out (Letters, March 5), Stieglitz himself had explored a more spare documentary type of photography, to which Evans does not refer, at a later date.

■ **Joyce Carol Oates**

Princeton, NJ

Frank Ramsey

Although agreeing in the main with Andrew David Irvine's review of Cheryl Misak's *Frank Ramsey: A sheer excess of powers* (March 5), I feel he has missed out on the important contribution Ramsey made in the area of time and causality. Misak raises this topic in chapter eighteen of her book, and Huw Price elaborates on it in his "inset piece" in the same chapter. These inset articles by leading specialists (unmentioned by Irvine) constitute one of the most fascinating aspects of the book.

Price argues that Ramsey rejected Russell's view that causality had something to do with memory and, by inference, Hume's idea that causality depends on the habit of association. Rather, Ram-

sey believed it was based on the psychology of agency. An action of ours, he argued, when observed externally (from the third-person view), will have been seen to have occurred in the past, while for ourselves (from the first-person perspective), the same action will be seen as a matter of future probability. Although Misak and Price do not say this, I think this stress on psychology touches on the question of the basis of consciousness, which some scientists (Roger Penrose among them) think may be determined by the probabilistic world of quantum mechanics. If Ramsey had lived, I think he might have added physics to his prestigious portfolio of intellectual achievements.

■ **Sam Milne**

Claygate, Surrey

German colonialism

Sukhdev Sandhu's review of Sathnam Sanghera's *Empireland* (February 12) mentions Germany's lack of confrontation with its colonial past. Readers may be interested to know of the repatriation to Namibia in spring 2019 of a bible and a cattle whip that formerly belonged to the Namaqua chief Hendrik Witbooi, who fought against German rule until he was killed in battle in 1905. Having been most likely stolen by German troops during an earlier attack in 1893, both the whip and bible were donated to Stuttgart's Linden Museum in 1902, where they were displayed for over a century.

These are the first African artefacts to have been repatriated by the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, but other decolonial initiatives are already underway. Last year the Linden Museum set up a new permanent exhibition *Wo ist Afrika?* ("Where is Africa?"), and has worked in collaboration with researchers in Cameroon, Mozambique, Nigeria and Tanzania to

trace as accurately as possible the names and origins of the objects in its collection, in an attempt to embrace greater accountability for the legacy of German colonial crimes. The German Literature Archive and the Museum of Modern Literature in Marbach am Neckar are also working with researchers at the University of Namibia to excavate colonial texts and artefacts from their holdings. The recent *Narrating Africa* exhibition comprises predominantly German narratives of Africa from the archive, including works by Friedrich Schiller, Theodor Fontane and Frieda von Bülow, as well as a Namibian mask from the collection of Norbert Elias. Further collaborations to include contemporary African voices responding to these artefacts and adding their own narratives in various languages have taken place online, and an online literature festival is scheduled for this summer, by which time the entire exhibition space will have been reconceptualized in response to these ongoing exchanges.

While negotiations between Germany and Namibia have resulted in the German government classifying the quelling of the Herero and Nama rebellion in which Witbooi was murdered as genocide, an official apology for German colonial crimes in Namibia has not yet been forthcoming. However, it is to be hoped that these initial acts of restitution and reconciliation may lead to further interrogation on the part of German institutions of their position as caretakers of non-Western objects so that more meaningful steps may be taken to tackle the widespread erasure of German colonial history.

■ **Ian Ellison**

Stuttgart

Open source intelligence

Ellis Wasson (Letters, March 5) refers to a CIA attempt to assess Soviet military capability using the Yale University Library, which demonstrated that the entire Soviet order of battle could be uncovered through publicly available print material.

In the early 1960s, the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory (a major defence lab in California) asked three recently graduated physics PhDs, none of whom had studied nuclear physics, to try to design a nuclear weapon using only the facilities of the UCLA Library. They succeeded in designing an implosion bomb, of the type that had been dropped on Nagasaki. This was known as the Nth Country Experiment. Details can be found on the website of the Atomic Heritage Foundation.

■ **Keith Smith**

London N1

CONTACT

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



Save the jetset

Bill Gates's self-serving instructions for avoiding climate catastrophe

ANN PETTIFOR

HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER

The solutions we have and the breakthroughs we need

BILL GATES

257pp. Allen Lane. £20.

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN to use computers in the 1980s, my techie friends in the open-source community were dismissive of Microsoft's "clunky", vulnerable software and advised me against using its products. But I disagreed. While the software may have seemed badly coded to them, it was accessible to me, a beginner. For each glitch I just hit "update" and everything was soon patched up. Bill Gates brings those breezy and approachable characteristics to his book *How To Avoid a Climate Disaster*. In explaining the technological solutions he believes necessary to tackle climate breakdown, he is careful to use laypersons' terms.

True to his original profession as a coder, Gates reduces the challenges the world faces to two numbers: 51 billion and zero; 51 billion tons, he writes, is the total annual emission of the flow of greenhouse gases - adding to the stock of emissions already out there. Half of emissions are captured by oceans and plants. The other half builds up in the atmosphere, hence the rising concentration of carbon. To avoid catastrophic weather events, and for humanity to survive on this planet, we need to reduce the flow of greenhouse gases to zero and tackle the concentration of CO₂ stocks - urgently.

In explaining what "zero" means, Gates offers an analogy. The climate, he argues, is like a bathtub

that's slowly filling up with water. "Even if we slow the flow of water to a trickle, the tub will eventually fill up and water will come spilling out onto the floor."

Gates avoids discussion on how to "pull the plug" on the flow of emissions by drastically cutting demand for fossil fuels. Instead, the book is mainly about the potential supply of technological solutions to "slow the flow to a trickle".

Gates examines each share of the world's total emissions - and finds that most are down to the way we, the people, plug in, make things, grow things, get around, keep cool and stay warm. His assumption is that it is almost impossible to expect us to change our habits. Instead, he offers alternatives and describes technological and potential breakthrough solutions to address those habits. In doing so, he puts his money where his mouth is and admits to having invested in many of the solutions outlined. The book can thus be viewed as a tour d'horizon of his own investment portfolio.

In a chapter on "how we grow things" Gates - the biggest owner of farmland in the United States - barely suppresses his excitement as he reports on a tour of the Yara fertilizer distribution facility in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, "the largest of its kind in East Africa". A photograph has him beaming, surrounded by bags of "magical" fertilizer. The caption reads: "I'm having more fun than it looks". In granting fertilizer "magical" powers, Gates pays homage to a breakthrough made in 1908 by two German scientists, Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch, who worked out how to make ammonia from nitrogen and hydrogen to produce fertilizer, thereby launching the Green Revolution in India. Gates argues that expanding the supply of fertilizer will create a Green Revolution in Africa, which will raise crop yields, earn farmers more money and ensure they and

Bill Gates at a fertilizer terminal in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 2017

“ This book is a study in denial of the climate impact of both Gates's own activities, and those of his fellow billionaires

Ann Pettifor's books include The Production of Money, 2017, and The Case for the Green New Deal, 2019

their families have more to eat.

Gates's enthusiasm for fertilizer sharply contradicts the experience of those who've lived through the Green Revolution. Vandana Shiva, a world-renowned Indian scholar and environmental activist, has harsh words for synthetic fertilizers, describing them as "war chemicals made from fossil fuels". She points out that the Green Revolution has faded in Punjab. Yields are declining. The soil is depleted of nutrients, and the water is polluted with nitrates and pesticides.

In the end Gates is obliged to admit that what "Haber-Bosch giveth, Haber-Bosch taketh away". Fertilizers were responsible for roughly 1.3 billion tons of GHG emissions in 2010 and expanding their use would defeat the goal he has set of getting to zero.

While enthusiasm for and investment in new technology may be profitable for Bill Gates, there are many who doubt that it could help drive down that 51 billion number. In a globally interconnected world of finite, scarce ecological resources can the constant expansion of old and new technology really save the planet? Most climate scientists think not. Without radical system change and drastic cuts in demand for fossil fuels, simply slowing the flow of emissions by deploying technological solutions, will, as Gates himself admits, take a very long time - time we do not have.

There are, however, more straightforward ways in which to rapidly shrink greenhouse gas emissions. Regrettably they are not tackled in this book. For while Gates is clear about the wider public's failings, he steers clear of the role played by the world's richest people and biggest corporations in leading us towards "climate disaster".

Global companies like Microsoft combine political lobbying and PR with monopolist practices like mergers and acquisitions to rid themselves of competitors, exert market power across the world and extract precious finite assets from countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo. They actively lobby for central bank protection from market forces yet avoid taxation and regulation; they use market power derived from state subsidies and guarantees to hike prices and crush their real opposition - new innovators and start-ups. Ironic, given Gates's love affair with innovation.

Finally, while operating at a global level, often beyond the reach of governments, Gates and other Silicon Valley billionaires directly benefit from government-granted patent and copyright monopolies over assets like software and apps, but also fruit cultivars, rootstocks, vaccines, oil and gas. As the economist Dean Baker argues in a paper titled "Is Intellectual Property the Root of All Evil?", "Many items that sell at high prices as a result of patent or copyright protection would be free or nearly free in the absence of government-granted monopolies".

For instance, multinational corporations use government-backed intellectual property rights to wield market power over seeds essential to the survival of poor country farmers. Shiva claims this has led to a new form of bondage and dependency for Indian farmers. They are trapped by rising debts to

Two fingers?

Churchill.
The Contradictions of
Greatness

W.D.Rubinstein

www.eerpublishing.com

pay royalties on something fundamental to their livelihoods.

Billionaires like Gates, enriched by the high prices that are a result of the system of patent or copyright protection, would be worth a great deal less if markets were genuinely free.

Today's rapacious capitalist system is simultaneously exploitative of labour and the ecosystem and parasitic on the public sector. With the active collusion of billionaires and global corporations, large amounts of taxation are diverted away from government treasuries by companies like Microsoft in tax havens like Ireland. We should not be surprised, therefore, that governments are plagued by the build-up of debts and deficits, which make the task of financing a transformation away from fossil fuels daunting.

Gates, who is honest enough to admit that he flew to Paris for the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in his private jet, displays a studied indifference to the role played by the world's billion-

aire class - the 1 per cent - in precipitating climate disaster.

Fortunately, climate scientists have no such blind spot. They are clearer about the facts of greenhouse gas emissions. As the physicist Kevin Anderson explains, globally about 50 per cent of all CO₂ is emitted, not by the average citizen, but by the top 10 per cent of the population. If that small group were to "reduce their carbon footprint to the level of the average European" the outcome would be an immediate one-third cut in global emissions. "We don't have to aim our policy at 7.5 billion people", Anderson argues; "we can tailor our policies towards the top 10%".

If we are to avoid a climate disaster, then governments must now focus on limiting the vast demand for, and consumption of, fossil fuels by the top 10 per cent of the population in rich countries. That means, among other things, curtailing the endless flights on private jets undertaken by billionaires like Bill Gates. It also means curtailing technological flights of fancy

and facing the reality of nature's finite ecological resources. As the physicist Richard Feynman argued when investigating the catastrophic explosion of NASA's space shuttle *Challenger* and its crew,

for technology to be successful, reality must take precedence over public relations, for nature cannot be fooled.

How To Avoid a Climate Disaster is a study in denial of the climate impact of both Gates's own activities and those of his fellow billionaires.

Gates's wealth commands deference from both governments and the media, so his book has been glowingly reviewed. As a well-financed public relations effort, it is designed to fool the people into accepting that billionaires must be allowed to carry on as before, because technological innovation will save us from disaster.

Given the influence wielded by his wealth, he will probably succeed in fooling very many of his fellow citizens. But after all is said and done, nature cannot be fooled. ■

Born to rewild

Bringing back the otter and the beaver

BARBARA J. KING

BRINGING BACK THE BEAVER

The story of one man's quest to rewild Britain's waterways

DEREK GOW

208pp. Chelsea Green. £20.

OTTER

DANIEL ALLEN

184pp. Reaktion. Paperback, £9.99.



A Eurasian beaver

AT LAST, BEAVERS AND OTTERS are rewilding Britain. Keystone animals in their ecosystems, these two hydrophilic mammals have seen similar treatment over their history: made out to be beloved characters in books and films, while in real life cruelly hunted, including for their pelts. In Derek Gow's *Bringing Back the Beaver* and Daniel Allen's *Otter* (an update of a volume from the Reaktion Books Animal series published in 2010), the reintroduction of beavers and otters to the wild is framed as a hopeful step in a natural world teeming with challenges.

The need for ecological restoration in Britain - on that "moor-burnt, deforested, compacted, silt slipping, deep-drained island" - is urgent, Gow writes. Beavers, with their enormous teeth and formidable work ethic, sculpt the land in just the right ways. If we humans could leave endless red-tape-based dithering, commit to beaver recolonization of the wetlands, and put more of these semi-aquatic rodents to the task, some of the grave ecological damage our species has caused would be repaired. Gow builds his case with both gentle humour and lacerating anger, a mixture often effective and occasionally off-putting.

Beavers are native to Britain. Prehistoric settlers "preferentially selected beaver-generated environments", but their populations were decimated by hunters and trappers. By around 1800, beavers existed in the region in extremely low numbers. In the past two decades, a coalition of beaver-restorers including Gow has become evangelical about reintroducing them to work magic on the land. Beavers create complex dam systems that "form absorbent wetlands full of the felled timber they discard". This in turn "slows the flow of flood-

waters". By creating dams, beavers also create natural-water-filter systems and healthy habitats for creatures ranging from frogs to butterflies.

The unabashedly nature-loving parts of the book are often charming, as when Gow describes first meeting and then holding on his lap a nursing black beaver at a farm in Popielno, Poland. She was "fragrant of wood and herbs ... She was love and warmth", Gow writes. "I have seldom known such rapture ... I have never forgotten her." He describes the devotion within extended beaver families, in which older siblings join the parents in caring for kits, for example by carrying the babies in their front paws away from danger and back to the lodge.

Thanks to dedicated beaver conservationists consulting with and convincing the right authorities over many years, breeding pairs of beavers, and kits, have been transported from European countries including Poland in order to rewild the waterways of England, Scotland and Wales one stream at a time. Good progress has been made - always though in the face of opposition. A British anglers' organization had fretted that beaver dams would obstruct the movements of migratory fish, an unfounded worry. DEFRA, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has been obstructionist throughout, and recently banned the import of beavers from Germany over a worry about a "nasty tapeworm" that can only be transmitted to humans by beavers if they are consumed, but are readily transmitted by a kiss from an improperly wormed family dog. Absurdly, DEFRA, "not wanting to be seen as anti-beaver", proposed a "compromise" that allows import from other countries, including Malta and Ireland - nations

inhabited by absolutely no beavers.

Anglers figure in the story of otters too. Unlike the vegetarian beavers, these aquatic animals eat fish, and, Allen writes, "in areas where fishing is important the animal is regarded as a destructive nuisance". Otters have paid the price for that, as well as for having evolved soft pelts thought suitable for fashion. They were also long a favourite prey for cruel extended chases by hunters with hounds; Henry II appointed the first King's Otter in 1157. Only in 1978 did it become illegal to kill, injure or seize an otter in England and Wales, with Scotland following four years later. Rewilding began in 1983.

Allen's writing is engaging, especially in describing otters' natural history and popular otters real and fictional, including Henry Williamson's famous Tarka. Gow's prose by contrast too often goes florid, with passages describing "fools" in power: "Their bell-bedecked headdresses ring forth quite clearly the emptiness of their minds". Worse is when Gow strays into language from another era. In speaking about populations that have faced discrimination, he lumps together "the Pieman River people, California grizzly, grey wolf, Zulu and bushmen". He insults those he might better persuade, referring to people who go into professional nature conservation only "to make their mums happy"; women are described variously as "pretty" or having "an ample front", professors as "be-sandaled and bearded".

Yet there's an urgent reason to keep reading about beavers and otters. The need to restore Britain's wetlands, indeed all wildlands, makes their stories a compelling part of conservation science, deserving of our attention. ■

Barbara J. King's *Animals' Best Friends: Putting compassion to work for animals in captivity and in the wild* is published this month

Let us now tell sad stories

Why we might write about trauma

IRINA DUMITRESCU

TRAUMA

Writing about art and mental health

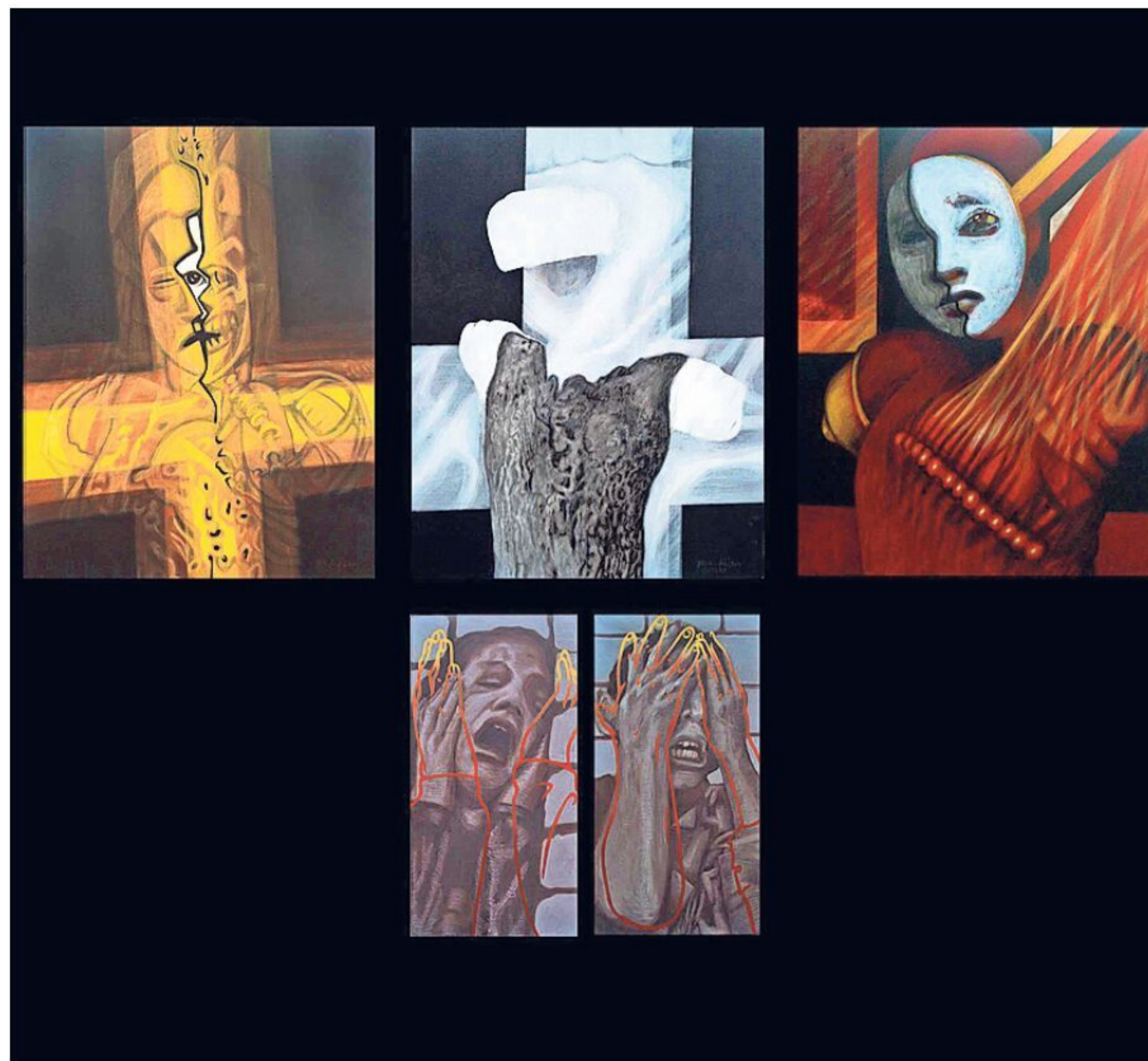
SAM MILLS AND THOM CUELL, EDITORS

416pp. Dodo Ink. Paperback, £10.99.

CONFESSIONAL WRITING IS nothing new. Augustine of Hippo did it, and so did the philosopher Peter Abelard. As a description of his unethical affair with Héloïse and subsequent castration, *The Story of My Misfortunes* (c.1132) might even be viewed as an early forerunner of the deliberately shocking essay that used to fill fly-by-night web publications, and is still not hard to find online. (“I slept with my student and lost more than my heart”, the headline might read.) About three centuries later, the mystic Margery Kempe described the visions, both heavenly and demonic, she experienced after a difficult childbirth. *The Book of Margery Kempe* was a “misery memoir” avant la lettre, though it enjoyed wide circulation only when the manuscript was rediscovered in the twentieth century. Old as the genre is, interest in true tales of sad and harrowing things seems to have grown in recent years, encroaching on domains previously ruled by fiction and journalism.

In the past decade, a wave of essays has lamented this trend in autobiographical writing. Some critics bemoan the way exploitative online magazines have encouraged novice writers, mostly women, to expose their most horrific personal secrets for pennies a word; paired with provocative headlines, these “personal essays” often go viral, earning the website advertising revenues and their authors little beyond a permanent reputation on Google. Others complain about the boom in book-length memoirs by authors who spend hundreds of pages rehearsing their own trials and tribulations without having had the good manners to become famous first: how dare completely ordinary people write about their ordinary lives? Never mind that commonplace events have long been acceptable fodder for novels, as long as the art was right: the claim of truth seems to change the resonance of a story. More reasonable critics take issue with how the experience of victimhood has become essential to an individual’s perceived authenticity. In an interview published by *Hypocrite Reader*, the writer and activist Yasmin Nair inveighed against what she sees as a growing requirement to “identify as a trauma victim in order to be considered ... a legitimate subject” in a neoliberal society.

And still, the world deals out more ways to suffer, and artists are left trying to find suitable shapes for their pain, or wondering whether it merits expression at all. *Trauma: Essays on art and mental health*, a new collection edited by Sam Mills and Thom Cuell in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, offers thirty-three answers. The contributions vary widely in form, ranging from straightforward memoir to series of fragments, dialogues and, in one



case, the same story told two ways in parallel columns. The voices in this book are melancholic, funny, sometimes detached.

There are downsides to the volume’s conception. Although it is more than 400 pages long, including so many authors means that each one has little space to unfold their story. Too many of the pieces end abruptly, either petering out or straining at a neat little moral. But the polyphony also serves to make anguish feel as normal as it is. Although the contributors speak about depression, addiction, child abuse, sexual assault and political oppression, the misery never seems overwhelming. If anything, it feels like a party where all the guests decided to reveal their hidden selves, and discovered that no one was unharmed after all. As Neil Griffiths puts it in a fragment written during a deep depression, “none of us is *well well*. None of us can be *well well*”.

“The traumatised live a double life”, writes Jenn Ashworth in the book’s introduction, pointing out that people who manage their everyday tasks capably may, at the same time, be fixed in a psychic drama, forced by the recursive quality of trauma to relive their most painful moments. How is someone living such a split existence to reconcile these two discordant realities? The answer proposed by a few of the essayists is a step away from reality altogether and into states of mind that are more playful and less rational. In her reflection on performing as a clown in a drama-therapy practice, Susanna Crossman notes that, because of the trauma they have experienced, some of the children she works with “cannot pretend a banana is a telephone, cannot play at being happy, sad or angry, or imagine a chair is a train. Everything is real”. When these children play along with a mimed gesture, accept an invisible gift and pretend to eat it, and laugh at the make-believe, it strikes her as “a miracle”.

Discussions of trauma and literature often focus on the challenge of representing inexpressible suffering in an inadequate medium. But art can also open spaces beyond pain, and not only by providing distraction. Rhiannon Cosslett describes the nightmares she had following a violent attack, and how she learnt a lucid dreaming technique to take control of the stories she was trapped in at night. In the imagery rehearsal therapy developed by the sleep researcher Barry Krakow, patients write out their nightmares, then give them a happy ending. Perhaps all writing is like lucid dreaming: sufferers of trauma may feel helpless, even voiceless, in the face of their memories, but as authors they are in charge of the narrative. Or maybe the answer is simpler and lighter. As Paul McQuade puts it, “what is magical about writing is that it always goes astray

“Trauma” by Yolanda Feindura, 2003

Irina Dumitrescu is Professor of English Medieval Studies at the University of Bonn

... It is free in a way that we are not”.

This is an argument for making art about pain, but not necessarily for publishing it. The contributors to this collection share their experiences with quiet assurance – it helps that most are established writers, therapists or both. But a few also make a case for the importance of reading about the travails of others, no matter how hard it may be. In an essay on denialism and the Covid-19 pandemic that might have served as the book’s justification, Thom Cuell outlines the dangers of populist politics that encourages people to “stop worrying and get on with enjoying themselves”. A refusal to acknowledge both widespread catastrophes and violence towards specific groups of people only prolongs suffering.

Cuell finds tools for thinking about denialism in the pedagogical research of Deborah Britzman and Alice Pitt, who distinguish between “lovely knowledge” that reinforces what we already believe, and “difficult knowledge” that is hard to integrate into our world view, but which is necessary for learning and growth. The individual who testifies to their pain confronts others with difficult knowledge, and is likely to be faced with rejection, even aggression. Without this reckoning, however, social progress is unlikely to happen.

Monique Roffey has a similar vision in her essay, which begins with the recollection of a sexual violation she experienced as a preteen, one that came to seem cruelly ordinary in hindsight. “Sexual trauma is everywhere and every day,” she notes, “we just don’t know about how common it is because of the shame.” Roffey remarks on the distance between the stories about sex she read in magazines, in which the main point was to learn how to please men, and the assaults and harassment most of the women she knows have endured. She teaches memoir for this reason, to fill in the gaps.

In a moving scene, Roffey describes an exercise she encountered in a group therapy workshop. The “fish bowl” begins with women taking spots on the floor and men sitting silently around them. The women talk freely about their bodies, rape, childbirth, ageing. Then the groups switch positions, and the men open up “very, very shyly” about their loneliness, insecurities, the pressures of masculinity, family violence. The participants listen to stories they have never heard before, take in the difficult knowledge of strangers. Roffey’s reflection on this therapy is a powerful defence of writing, and reading, about the pain of others: “We were so much more loving and careful with each other after the fish bowl!” ■

TLC The Literary Consultancy

TLC EDITORIAL

- Detailed critical assessments and services by professional editors for writing at all stages of development, in all genres
- Links with publishers and agents, and advice on self-publishing

TLC MENTORING

- Six one-to-one sessions with a professional editor
- Includes separate manuscript assessment
- Communication with your mentor via email so you can write when and where it suits you

TLC EVENTS

- One-to-one feedback via Zoom
- Online Writing Workshops

T 020 7324 2563

E info@literaryconsultancy.co.uk

W www.literaryconsultancy.co.uk



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Flawed secular saint

Edward Said was often cavalier with the facts

ROBERT IRWIN

PLACES OF MIND

A Life of Edward Said

TIMOTHY BRENNAN

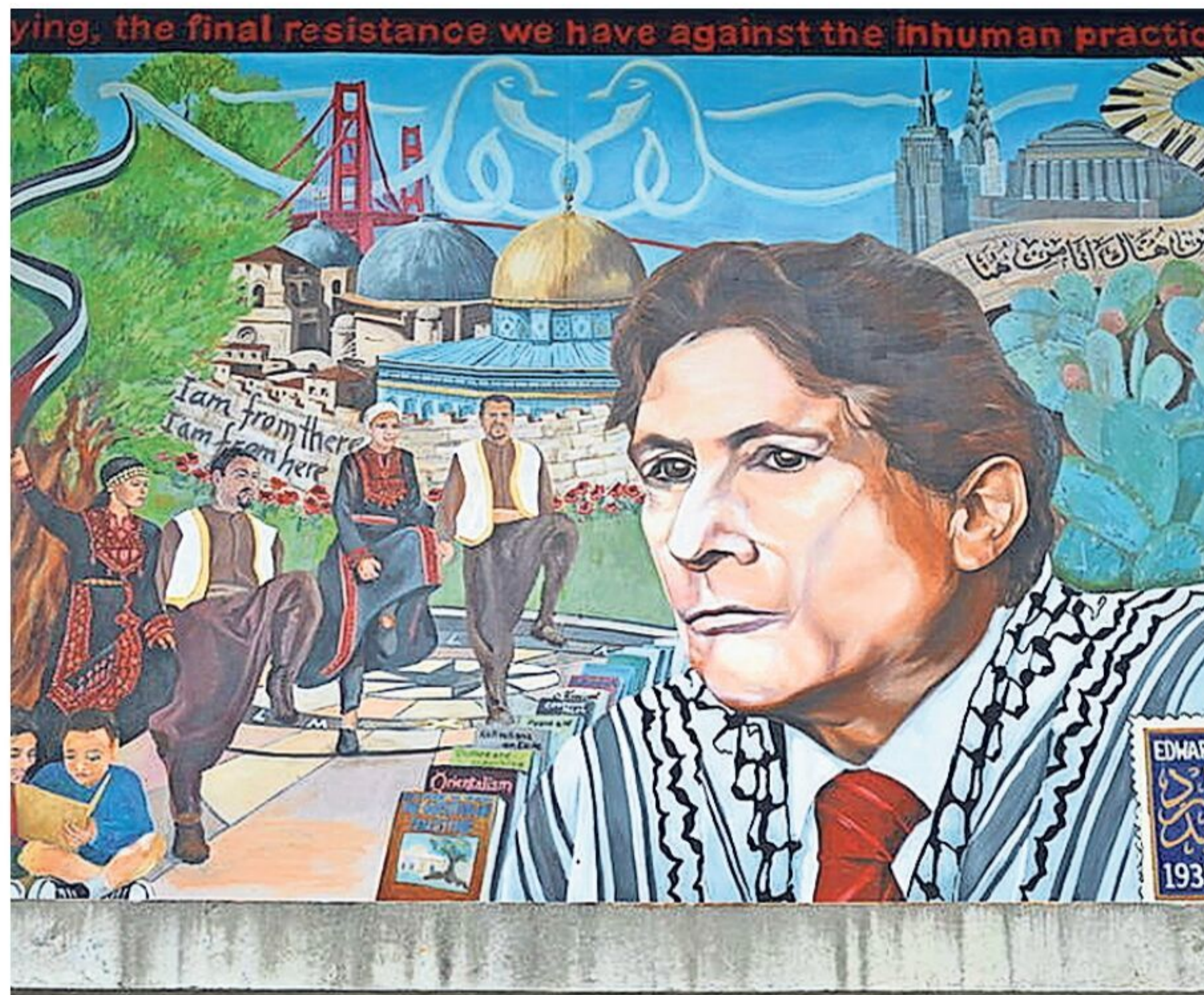
464pp. Bloomsbury. £25.

US: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$35.

TIMOTHY BRENNAN EVIDENTLY knew Edward Said very well and has conducted numerous interviews with others who knew him well, and he has had access to such fascinating unpublished documents as Said's unfinished novel. In *Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said*, while providing evidence of Said's many admirable qualities, such as his courage in speaking and writing for the Palestinian cause, his promotion of Arabic novelists in translation, his enthusiasm for engaging with challenging intellectual theories and his remarkable skill as a musician, Brennan repeatedly takes note of his failings. These include his vanity, his resistance to criticism, his impatience with students and his polemical rages. Yet Said's proneness to anger does not prevent Brennan from presenting him as a secular saint. (Saint Jerome, who was notoriously ill-tempered, might furnish a precedent.) It is interesting to note that Said had a particular detestation of two other secular saints, George Orwell and Albert Camus.

The book covers such matters as Said's childhood in Egypt, Palestine and Lebanon, his schooling at Victoria College in Cairo, his difficult relationships with his father, mother and sisters, the lifelong weekly sessions with a psychiatrist, the break-up of his first marriage and the subsequent marriage to Mariam; but Brennan does not dwell on these things, and there are two good reasons for this. The first is that Said covered many of these matters in his memoir of his early years, *Out of Place* (1999). The second is that *Places of Mind* is primarily an intellectual biography, and the writings of such diverse intellectuals as Michel Foucault, Erich Auerbach, Raymond Williams, Jacques Lacan, Giambattista Vico, Jacques Derrida, Ibn Khaldun, György Lukács, Noam Chomsky and Roland Barthes feature prominently. Brennan usefully draws attention to the important role of Arab intellectuals such as Charles Malik, Sadik al-Azm, Ghassan Kanafani, Constantine Zurayk, Abdallah Laroui, Anouar Abdel-Malek and others in shaping Said's thinking, even if that shaping sometimes took the form of his reacting against what they proposed, rather than agreeing with them.

Orientalism, the book for which Said is most famous or notorious, was published in 1978. I was pleased though mystified to find myself featuring in Brennan's book. Having numbered me among those critics of *Orientalism* who had "personal scores to settle" (but what "personal scores"?), Brennan continues "Irwin, for instance, left academia to write novels with titles like *The Mysteries of Algiers* and *The Arabian Nightmare*, and his profile was strangely similar in fact to that of Ernest Renan, who is unsparingly dealt with in *Orientalism* as a nineteenth-century popularizer and independent spirit with an unquenchable hunger for all things Oriental ...". I would have preferred to have been compared to one of the more widely travelled and flamboyant Ori-



A mural of Edward Said, Palestine

talist villains, such as Sir Richard Burton or T. E. Lawrence, and the comparison to Renan is disappointing. Renan never travelled in the East, his main expertise was in Hebrew studies and he held daft ideas about the semitic soul which were nevertheless of their time. Later in the book he is explicitly identified as a "villain". Why?

Later yet, Brennan writes about the responses to Said's *Orientalism* and his other books as follows: "The timing of the backlashes (Robert Irwin's *For Lust of Knowing*, for example) suggested cowardice, Irwin waiting thirty years to publish his remarks until Said could no longer respond to them". Brennan must know that this is not quite true. Edward Said died in 2003. I reviewed *Orientalism* in 1981 or 1982 for *I&C (Ideology and Consciousness)*. Said's incoherently vitriolic and lengthy letter in response is in my possession. It contains such words and phrases as "crudely ideological", "scarcely veiled innuendo" and "meretricious". (Brennan refers to Said's letter on page 203.) I also published a negative review of *Covering Islam* in 1981 or 1982. In December 2001 the *TLS* published my hostile review of Said's *Reflections on Exile* and *The Edward Said Reader*. ("*Orientalism*, a passionate work written in haste, can most charitably be described as an exercise in counter-factual history.") I am no coward, and during my travels in North Africa and the Middle East I guess that I have faced more life-threatening situations than Brennan ever has. More relevantly, in 2006 I was approached by the *London Review of Books* to take part in a debate on *Orientalism* to be held in the British Museum. I agreed on condition that there should not be three against one in this confrontation. When the debate in front of a large audience took place in July I found myself confronted by Michael Wood, Maya Jasanoff and Gabriel Piterberg. So it was effectively three against one and, faced with such odds, I could not win, but I did not back down. So how did Brennan think he could get away with this stuff? Did he assume I was dead? Other critics of *Orientalism*, including Bernard Lewis, Maxime Rodinson, Jacques Berque and Daniel Martin Varisco are given brisker shrift. Bernard Lewis's objections to Said's thesis, delivered in a debate in November 1986, are travestied by Brennan as nothing more than a series of lame jokes.

The failure of prominent academics and intellectuals to understand what Said had written is a leitmotif in *Places of Mind*. Said's former teacher Monroe Engel could not understand *Beginnings: Intention and method* (1975), and Tony Tanner wrote about it: "There are parts of the book which my Anglo-Saxon mind simply can't bend to even when it tries with all its might (or mightlessness)". Then when *Orientalism* was published in 1978, in Brennan's words: "Most failed to notice Said's genuine ambivalence towards Orientalists" and "Misunderstandings plagued the

Robert Irwin's most recent books are *Ibn Khaldun: An intellectual biography*, 2018, and the novel *My Life Is Like a Fairy Tale*, 2019. He is consulting Middle East editor at the *TLS*

book's reception". Said's old friend Sadik al-Azm totally failed to understand Said's theory of representation and al-Azm, "like the other social scientists who also missed the point", totally failed to understand Said's theory of representation. More generally *Orientalism's* detractors are shown to be puzzled by Said's theory of cultural space and preferred to stick with facts. "All seemed to misunderstand that *Orientalism* was about an interlocking system of images that made conquest easier by making the superiority of Europe seem natural."

Then when *The Question of Palestine* came out a year later "it was inevitable that some of its subtleties would be lost on its readership". With respect to *Culture and Imperialism* (1993): "Neither his general nor his academic audience picked up on his clear agenda in the book". The philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Gellner, who had opposed the wish of some in King's College, Cambridge to give Said an honorary degree, is described by Brennan as "his old nemesis ... who had trashed *Culture and Imperialism* in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1993 on the grounds that culture did not matter and that Western empires did more good than harm". That is a childish travesty of what Gellner actually argued. The author and intellectual Christopher Hitchens is said by Brennan to have been guilty of "the most dispiriting betrayal". Writing in the *Atlantic* on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Orientalism*, Hitchens "used the occasion to condescend, pretending to correct Said's 'errors'". Clive James was yet another villain, "who resorted to left-handed compliments, whittling away at his stature while laying a few verbal land mines on the way". Brennan is reluctant to accept that those who criticized Said might be writing in good faith. At best, his critics are accused of having failed to understand what Said had been arguing.

So the question arises, why are Said's writings so difficult to understand? Unlike certain other theorists (Homi Bhabha, for example) the meanings of Said's sentences are usually clear and often those sentences are even eloquent. The problems arise in his paragraphs, chapters or complete works, as Said regularly resorted to the stratagem of making an extreme statement in one passage and then withdrawing it in another. The Orient does not exist, since it is a Western construct. On the other hand, it certainly does exist, for otherwise it could not be misrepresented and oppressed. Another one is Said's recurrent creation of infernal lists of those he regards as villains, in which the innocent are mingled with the guilty and the relevant with the irrelevant. For a close analysis of these and other frequently repeated rhetorical tricks, interested readers should consult Daniel Varisco's *Reading Orientalism: Said and the unsaid* (2007).

Said, who was usually cavalier with facts, wrote this: "More often than not, a naive insistence on 'the facts' reveals a contemptuous dismissal of opinion and interpretation, usually favouring what already passes for fact in conventional wisdom, and is therefore part of a larger 'cult of objectivity' and expertise".

We all make factual mistakes. The problem with *Orientalism* and with *Culture and Imperialism* is not just that Said made so many, but that Said's errors, being ideologically driven, mostly tended in one direction. In *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their enemies* (2006), I noted a huge number of factual errors. Nevertheless, they were only a selection. Subsequently, I have turned up many more. To take just one example from among many, in 2013 I published "Flaubert's Camel: Edward Said versus the novelists" in which I demonstrated that almost everything Said stated about Flaubert, his sexual relationship with Kuchuk Hanem and his novel *Salammbô* was incorrect. Thus, in his account of Kuchuk Hanem, Said wrote the following: "Less a woman than a display of impressive but verbally inexpressive femininity, Kuchuk is the prototype of Flaubert's Salammbô and Salomé". But Salammbô was an aristocrat and a woman passionately in love. Kuchuk Hanem was neither. Kuchuk had no French and therefore did not speak to Flaubert, but it simply will

not do to present Salammbô as verbally inexpressive. In the novel she speaks frequently, eloquently and at length. Her eloquence enraptures crowds. Mattho is practically dumb before her. The conclusion is inescapable. Said had not actually read *Salammbô* (an omission which is only useful if one is playing the literary game known as “Humiliation”).

Throughout his career, Said was desperate not to be pinned down, and he was never going to be identified with the structuralist school, or that of the post-structuralists, or the postcolonialists. His successive enthusiasms for difficult thinkers and often subsequent disillusionments fuelled his ideological progress and facilitated the fabrication of an intellectual ancestry. He was most enthusiastic about the fourteenth-century historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun. Said praised Vico’s *New Science* and Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah* as “books of the millennium”. For Said, the chief message of the *Muqaddimah* (Ibn Khaldun’s prolegomenon to the study of history) was this: “Literary politics was ... to be understood in terms of the role of human eloquence in the formation of polities as well as the textual record of their rise and decline”. Said identified Ibn Khaldun as a literary critic who was primarily concerned with identifying rhetorical strategies in order to influence policy. This is an interesting reading, but also an eccentric one for it is not the way Ibn Khaldun’s treatise was understood by his Tunisian and Egyptian contemporaries, nor by the hundreds of modern scholars who have presented their readings of the treatise.

But I suppose Said thought that he was giving Ibn Khaldun a kind of promotion by awarding him the title of “literary critic” and he reconfigured the medieval Muslim in order to make him one of his distinguished intellectual precursors. Among other things, the *Muqaddimah* offered a fairly comprehensive and frequently brilliant account of the various branches of knowledge, and at the end both of this account

and indeed of the whole book some pages are devoted to poetry. But the section on poetry is hardly more than a florilegium of favourite passages of North African poetry which Ibn Khaldun happened to call to memory. Elsewhere there is a short section on “The science of syntax and style and literary criticism” (seven pages in Franz Rosenthal’s English translation). The discussion offers no support to Said’s idea that the chief function of rhetoric and literary criticism was to influence policy. Instead, the main value of rhetoric was to deepen one’s understanding of the Qur’an.

Said’s attempt to turn Ibn Khaldun into a man who sought to influence public policy through literary criticism is of a piece with the high status he accorded to literary criticism in general. This was a creative activity which, in Said’s eyes, was superior to the writing of novels, since the literary critic is better placed to put his skills in the service of revealing political and social ills. “It is not the auteurs who bring these matters to our attention”, is how Brennan summarizes Said’s position, “much less the way out. It is the intellectuals as diagnosticians, political analysts, catalysts and interpreters”, and of course public intellectuals speak truth to power (but do they always speak the truth?). Said enjoyed and was interested in popular culture. He enjoyed the novels of Robert Ludlum. I wonder if the idea of reading Jane Austen for pleasure ever occurred to him. But the primary aim of writing serious novels should be an act of political resistance, and in *Culture and Imperialism* Said argues that Austen’s *Mansfield Park* tacitly endorsed sugar plantation slavery, while at the same time acknowledging that Austen disapproved of slavery, as, by implication, Fanny Price also did. The Nobel prizewinning Naguib Mahfouz is first praised for serving as an inspiration to other novelists, and then denounced as (again, in Brennan’s words) “too often lofty and serene, an insufficiently critical fellow traveller of Nasserism. And one of the first public

“
Said regularly resorted to the stratagem of making an extreme statement in one passage and then withdrawing it in another

intellectuals to support the Egyptian-Israeli peace pact (for which he was in Said’s view rightly censured in the Arab press)”.

Whatever reservations one may have about Said’s readings of orientalist scholarship and of classic works of literature, it must be conceded that, with his death, the Palestinians lost the ablest and most articulate advocate of their rights and polemical scourge of their persecutors. But when Said wrote or spoke about Middle Eastern political issues, he was yet again prone to be misunderstood. Various Palestinian factions mistakenly believed that he was actually opposed to their armed struggle. But it seems to have been the case that he preferred to concentrate “on winning the ethical high ground rather than focussing on doomed military campaigns”. So it was that he fell out with George Habash of the PFLP, as later and for different reasons, he fell out with Yasser Arafat. Said described *Peace and Its Discontents* (1993) as the “first of my books to have been written start to finish with an Arab audience in mind”. If that was the case, why did he not write it in Arabic? As far as I can tell, that book has never been translated into Arabic. Setting this niggle aside, that book provided a cogent and hostile account of the Oslo negotiations and what is called the Peace Process. As he foresaw, the treaty was a surrender which would establish Bantustans in the Middle East and it would prepare the way for the further erosion of the territories and rights of the Palestinians. His eventual advocacy of the “One-State Solution” was not popular with most Palestinians during his lifetime, but it may be the only way forward. Brennan usefully chronicles Said’s sometimes fraught relations with other Palestinian spokesmen and negotiators. But, though *Places of Mind* is a valuable guide to Said’s career and style of thought, the hagiography is consistently unreliable when it deals with those whom Said wrote about or who wrote about him. I leave it to other reviewers to praise the book more wholeheartedly. ■

Family tree of tales

The ‘Oriental’ origins of Western stories

GEERT JAN VAN GELDER

101 MIDDLE EASTERN TALES AND THEIR IMPACT ON WESTERN ORAL TRADITION
ULRICH MARZOLPH

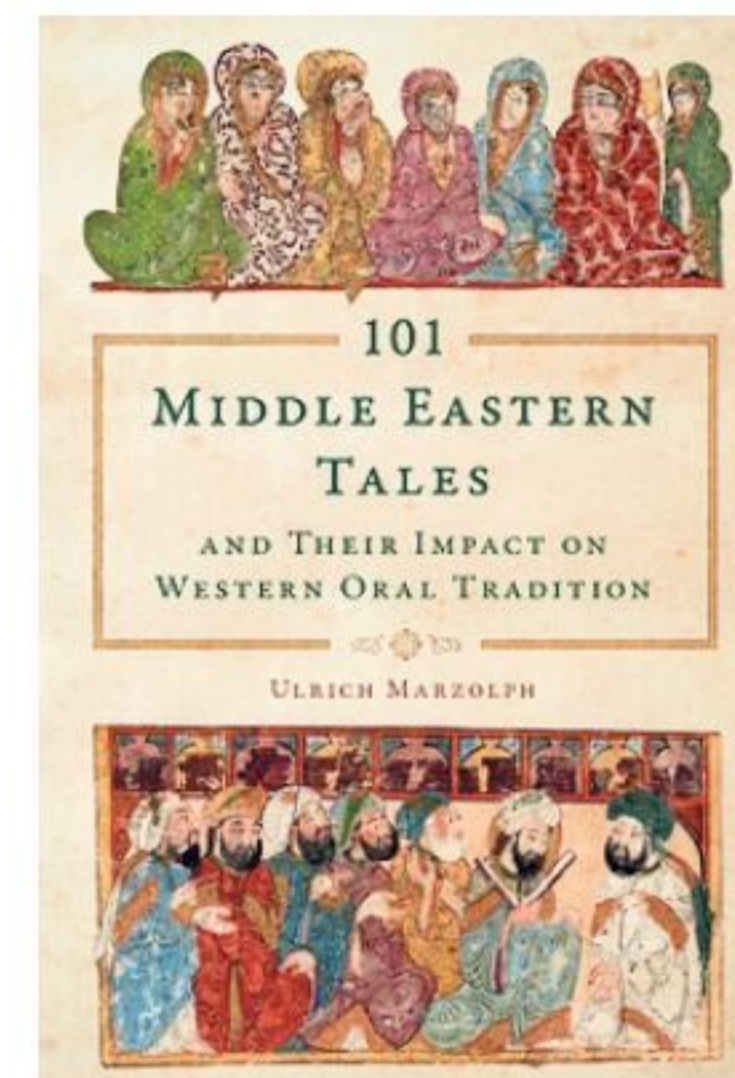
720pp. Wayne State University Press. \$99.99 (paperback, \$49.99).

THE EXPRESSION “A POUND OF FLESH” will make most readers think of *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare specialists will know that it is found in a sixteenth-century Italian source, that it is encountered in a fifteenth-century German tale about Charlemagne, or even, as was noticed over a century ago, that the motif goes back further, to Ottoman Turkish and possibly other Middle Eastern languages. That many everyday English words (coffee, alcohol, magazine, orange) derive from Arabic or Persian is common knowledge. It is the same with many an expression or tale. Ulrich Marzolph, the leading authority on premodern Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish popular tales and jokes, has selected 101 tales that are originally “Oriental” (always provided with scare quotes, ever since

Edward Said’s *Orientalism*), but became part of Western oral tradition in being often told and retold. Originally the tales may have been part either of oral, popular culture or of elite, written discourse, the boundary not always being clear. Among the stories are “Belling the Cat”, first found in a sixth-century Syriac translation of the lost Middle Persian version of the Indian *Panchatantra*, then in Arabic proverbs and tales; “The Foolish Couple Waste the Three Wishes They Have Been Granted”; “The Imaginary Tissue”, best known as Andersen’s “The Emperor’s New Clothes”, traced back to eleventh-century India via fourteenth-century Spain, with Persian and Ottoman versions; and “The Treasure Finders Murder One Another”, as in Chaucer’s “Parson’s Tale”.

The Arabic narrative tradition was often believed to be a mere intermediary between India and the West. Johannes Østrup wrote in 1913 on *The Thousand and One Nights* that “the intellectual horizon of the true Arabs being rather narrow, the material for these entertainments was mainly borrowed from elsewhere, from Persia and India”. Stith Thompson, revising Antti Aarne’s *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen* as the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1955-8), incorporated material from pioneering studies of Arabic folk tales by Victor Chauvin (d. 1913) and René Basset (d. 1924). Marzolph’s massive production over the past forty years or so includes his many contributions to the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, a fifteen-volume handbook of comparative folk narrative research, and his two-volume *Arabia ridens*, on jokes in Arabic, which traces jokes in the East and from there into the Western traditions.

The Western reception of “Oriental” tales began during the Crusades and took place in the Levant, the Iberian Peninsula, Sicily and Byzantium, and in the Ottoman period also in North Africa and the Balkans. The Andalusian Petrus Alfonsi collected material in his *Disciplina clericalis* in the early twelfth century. That there are Eastern tales in Boccaccio and Chaucer is well known. Tales were often



Geert Jan van Gelder's most recent book is an edition and translation of Prominent Murder Victims of the Pre- and Early Islamic Periods by the ninth-century Muhammad ibn Habib, and was published in January

adapted and adopted, assimilated to their new environments without leaving obvious traces of their origin. Especially when dealing with oral tradition in the past, which can only be studied through written sources, one is confronted with the possibility that similar tales may have originated independently in two or more cultures, for some themes are universal and archetypal. The problem is hinted at in Chapter 63, “The Exigent Dreamer”, on dreaming of rejecting a ready offer, eg of a drink or money, and asking for more but ending up with nothing. It is found in China as well as the Middle East and the West, and as Marzolph says it is strongly suggested that the two major strands are independent, since dreaming is a universal human experience.

Each tale is presented in an essay that discusses the tale’s occurrence in the Western and Middle Eastern traditions, and other traditions if present, such as Indian or Greek. As the author says, there is no need to read the book from cover to cover; the essays can be read independently. This is wise advice, because one runs the risk of becoming dizzy by being tossed between countless languages, countries, centuries and subtly differing storylines. With a bibliography of some seventy pages and extensive indexes of motifs and names, this is a book of impeccable scholarship and vast learning and at the same time a wonderful treasure trove to dip into at random. It is also a useful reminder that it is misguided to believe that collecting popular tales in one language or country can serve to prove the existence of a national identity or nationhood, as was done, for instance, in Nazi Germany. In Chapter 74, “The Inanimate Object Allegedly Gives Birth and Dies”, Marzolph traces a German version involving copper and silver kettles, once deemed to be firmly rooted in German or Germanic tradition, to Arabic sources, including an anthology by Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi composed between 961 and 986, where a credulous and greedy woman readily believes that a gold dinar gives birth to several silver dirhams but then has to accept that, sadly, it died in childbirth. ■

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



AVXLIVE **ICU**

AvaxHome - Your End Place

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

Making something of ourselves

The history of character, and how we shape it

MICHAEL SALER

CHARACTER

The history of a cultural obsession
MARJORIE GARBER
464pp. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$32.

BECOMING DUCHESS GOLDBLATT

ANONYMOUS
240pp. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
£18.99 (US \$24).

HERACLITUS PROCLAIMED THAT character is destiny, but does “character” have a destiny of its own? In her wide-ranging cultural history of the term, Marjorie Garber wonders if it is merely “a quaint survival from a more naïve, more ethical, or at least less brazen past”.

Yet this noted Shakespeare scholar demonstrates that the term remains a prominent point of reference today. From the Classical period on, character was understood as the pith of human identity, a set of essential traits expressing not just abilities but moral compass. This idea has been widely questioned in the West since the late nineteenth century, but character talk continues to thrive, at times through related words such as “personality” and “temperament”. Garber finds that the concept of a “core” character is also invoked implicitly today. The popular apology “This is not who I am” suggests an enduring self from which the person has deviated.

Ironically, character as an idea lacks any determinate essence, which is why it has persisted over time in different guises. The word derives from the Greek *χαρασσειν*, to engrave, traits being seen as deeply etched into one’s being. Garber shows, however, that the term was always less stable than that etymology suggests. Classical writers allowed that character traits could be forged through habitual practice, and guidebooks illustrating character types and role models have been popular ever since. These include Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* and Emily Post’s *Etiquette*, as well as related



“character education” programmes, such as the Boy Scouts. (The movement’s founder, Robert Baden-Powell, preferred this punchy name to “Society for the Propagation of Moral Attributes”.) Garber demonstrates that the concept of character has always been riven between being inborn on the one hand, and culturally acquired on the other. This duality led to various unresolved issues. If character consisted of essential traits, how were they to be identified and measured? If socially constructed, how were they to be sanctioned and challenged?

Garber approaches these questions thematically for much of her overview. Her topics include the idea of character in politics (she seizes on President Trump’s invocation in 2017 of “National Character Counts Week” as an example of how the term has become debased in recent years, although his flagrant hypocrisy also gave substance to Joe Biden’s election slogan in 2020, “Character is on the ballot”). She writes about character’s gendered dimensions (with masculinity, not surprisingly, being normative: a “bold” man is deemed brave, whereas a “bold” woman may be deemed shameless); and the question of “national character” (a perennial topic since antiquity, and one that Garber finds accentuated during periods of national crisis: “Sometimes it is a regressive move, and sometimes a call to remember our better selves”). She also writes about efforts to represent character scientifically, including not only the sober statistics of social scientists but also the extravagant fancies of phrenologists, who read character traits such as “Amativeness” and “Philoprogenitiveness” in the contours of a person’s cranium. She has perceptive things to say, too, about how character has been shaped by the example of literary characters - especially those of Shakespeare, who provided “the blueprint ... that taught us how to be us”.

Garber has unearthed fascinating material and is a convivial, stimulating critic. At times, however, her thematic arguments can become diffused amid a fog of examples and lengthy quotations that cry out to be paraphrased. Her narrative becomes more cohesive when she discusses the rise and apparent fall of character since the nineteenth century. Garber focuses on Britain and North America, where the concept reached its apogee during the mid-nineteenth century. It provided a useful replacement for the “soul” in a secularizing age, although for many it continued to have religious and moral

“Portrait of an Elderly Lady” by Frans Hals, 1633, the Twitter profile photo of Duchess Goldblatt

“Openness’ and Neuroticism’ suited a scientific age better than ‘The Grumbler’, ‘The Gossip’ and ‘The Coward’

Michael Saler is Professor of History at the University of California, Davis. He is writing a history of the interplay between reason and imagination in modernity

implications. Character formation also became the primary aim of the English public schools, supplanting scholarship, yet its centrality was not restricted to the elite: popular works such as Samuel Smiles’s *Self-Help* (1859) presented good character as an egalitarian passport to social advancement.

John Stuart Mill’s insistence in the mid-nineteenth century that individuals fashion their characters, rather than passively succumbing to external pressures and inward predispositions, indirectly encouraged more idiosyncratic expressions of character. Garber neglects the late nineteenth-century aesthetic turn - an important development - that contributed to “character” being eclipsed by “personality”. By the end of the century, philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde (neither mentioned by Garber) went well beyond Mill by advocating perpetual self-creation, even at the expense of public morality. Because “character” still connoted a relatively fixed and moral centre, “personality” became the preferred way to capture this aesthetic understanding of the self. Stemming from the Latin “persona”, meaning “mask”, personality accorded with the new theatrical presentation of the self, often upstaging character during the fin de siècle.

Twentieth-century social scientists also preferred personality as a term, not for its exhibitionist connotations but for its value neutrality. As Garber shows, psychologists offered “personality traits” as objective replacements for the moralistic “character types” common in western literature. “Extraversion”, “Openness” and “Neuroticism” suited a scientific age better than “The Grumbler”, “The Gossip” and “The Coward”. She observes that the widespread acceptance of “personality disorder” in popular discourse further sidelined the term character, as did the rise of celebrity “personalities” as cultural heroes.

Garber focuses on the role literary creations have played as exemplars; while acknowledging the social dimensions of character construction, she preserves the distinction between human character and fictional characters. Yet today, many consciously view their own character to be fictional to greater or lesser extents, and construe their lives in narrative terms, reflecting the broad shift in Western culture from metaphysics to metafiction.

This practice first assumed momentum in the late nineteenth century. While Wilde is often cited as the

THE EDWIN MELLEN PRESS

The Literature of Northern Ireland:
A Reinterpretation of the Poetry and
Prose of Northern Ireland

by

Dr James Mc Elroy
University of California
ISBN 978-1-4955-0768-7

Publish your scholarly book with Mellen
peer reviewed

www.mellenpress.com

poster boy for self-invention, there were numerous others who exceeded him in their zeal to become fictional. Alfred Jarry, for example, emulated his grotesque character Père Ubu, at times losing himself in the role entirely by speaking in a staccato voice and referring to himself in the third person. At the same time, Frederick Rolfe (aka “Baron Corvo”) aspired to become a priest and acclaimed artist. When neither dream came true, he weathered his disappointment by living audaciously as if they had. (He signed his letters “Fr. Rolfe”, which conveniently signalled “Father” as well as “Frederick”.) He also revised his real life to his liking by writing brilliant - and frequently libellous - romans-à-clef. In his masterpiece *Hadrian the Seventh* (1904), he made himself Pope, cheerfully excommunicating others who were thinly disguised enemies from his real life.

Rolfe’s example casts in relief some of the problems and possibilities that come with living as a fictional character. He is likely to have been a sociopath, engaging in fraud and self-deception. Yet his fictionalizing was not solely pathological: it permitted him to reframe his setbacks and remain open to new opportunities, not all of them criminal. His endless reinvention enabled him to write brilliant works under adverse conditions until his death.

Becoming fictional also empowered the novelist Helen Emily Woods. In 1938 she changed her name to “Anna Kavan”, the name of a fictional character from two of her previous novels. She changed the cut and colour of her hair too, but the most profound transformation was to be found in the style and content of her fiction. Anna Kavan’s works were boldly experimental, expressing a hidden store of creativity that the capable Helen Woods only suggested. Alice Sheldon (1915–87), a part-time writer, likewise experienced a surge of inspiration when she secretly adopted the pen name and persona of “James Tiptree, Jr.”, but when Tiptree was publicly exposed as Sheldon, her muse largely disappeared along with the enabling character she had created.

Many others have openly fictionalized their lives to some extent since the advent of the internet. Curating one’s character online is commonplace, and “story” has become a master metaphor for how people interpret their experience. This fictionalist moment has demonstrable dangers, including the spread of misinformation and scepticism towards science, expertise and well-established facts. Yet there are distinct benefits. To assess the potential gains and pitfalls, we can learn from those who have tried it - among them the author of *Becoming Duchess Goldblatt*.

“Duchess Goldblatt” is a popular figure on Twitter, one of the few to openly proclaim her fictional status and age (eighty-one). She is a famous author, having written a family chronicle, “An Axe to Grind”; an account of mother-daughter relations,

“Not if I Kill You First”; and the unclassifiable “Feasting on the Carcasses of My Enemies: A love story”. The hint of anger in these titles may reflect the agonized state of mind her creator was in when she conceived of the Duchess. She relates in this book that she had recently undergone a painful divorce, resulting in her being abandoned by in-laws and many so-called friends; in short order she also lost her job and her home. Now a single parent living in uncongenial surroundings, she created the Duchess on social media to distract herself from desolation. It was sufficient that the Duchess amused her, and she was surprised to find that the Duchess appealed to strangers as well.

This was partly due to the Duchess’s surreal sense of humour. She had a knack for creating incongruous juxtapositions that stood out from ordinary Twitter fare: “I spilled a bag of ellipses all over the floor. Now I don’t know where anything begins or ends”. And she provided unique perspectives on being fictional: “People often ask me what fictional people see in their dreams. We dream of you”.

The Duchess also became a secular saint. Empathizing with correspondents who were lonely or in pain, Anonymous had the Duchess extend solace. Anonymous assumed that she was simply channeling her father, a seminarian who preached unconditional love. She found this difficult to practise, but the Duchess exuded compassion. “Fictional or not,” wrote one acolyte, “you are a beacon of kindness.” Another described the Duchess in religious terms, praising “her faith, her words, her friendship, her insistence I not surrender - she had made a miracle”. Fans created Duchess reliquaries, or at least tchotchkes, and met each other in person, united by their devotion. The Duchess didn’t take herself too seriously, although she was happy to advise, “Don’t let anyone shame you for your love of an imaginary friend. Religions have been founded on less”.

The Duchess’s public profile expanded when writers and celebrities, themselves adherents of artifice, accepted the rare opportunity to chat with someone fictional. When the singer Lyle Lovett joined the conversation, the Duchess revealed her real identity to him, confessing that he was one of her idols, and they soon became friends. She credits him for helping her to regain her self-confidence, which also came from the virtual community she established via the Duchess. Included here are some of her exchanges with Lovett, which should reassure those wondering if this entire account might be fictional. As a work of non-fiction, *Becoming Duchess Goldblatt* belongs under Autobiography if not Duobiography, but it also aspires to be a self-help book. The tone can shift from sharp cynicism to treacly sentimentalism; like all of us, Anonymous is complicated.

Anonymous not only regained companions and self-esteem: her own character merged with that of her creation. The Duchess would console and bol-

ster her at stressful moments. At her lowest ebb, Anonymous had trouble concentrating and remembering, yet she focused with ease on composing the Duchess’s tweets and recalled minute details about the Duchess’s many correspondents. She attributes her gradual recovery to the existence of her fictional persona. Anonymous landed a good job that involved distilling information and encouraging clients - skills she had honed as amanuensis to the Duchess. She also became more assertive. She recalled being timorous during a job presentation, when suddenly “Duchess came flouncing through the door ... and pushed me aside. She grabbed the mic”.

Anonymous appears possessed by the Duchess. By the end of her memoir, though, she realizes that it was actually self-possession. Her epiphany arrived via a relative who had read an early draft of her book, and insisted that she was wrong to attribute the Duchess’s admirable character traits to the saintly father. “It’s your voice. It’s your ideas and your humor. ... You give him all the credit for Duchess ... but honey, she’s you.” By merging with her fictional character, Anonymous discovers the character that she always had, and finds the life she was meant to live. She attained integrity - a trait associated with undeviating character - by becoming a fiction. ■

Louis Klee is a writer, essayist and poet. He studies at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, where he is the 2018 John Monash Cultural Scholar



From
ASIA INK
PUBLISHER OF INNOVATIVE BOOKS

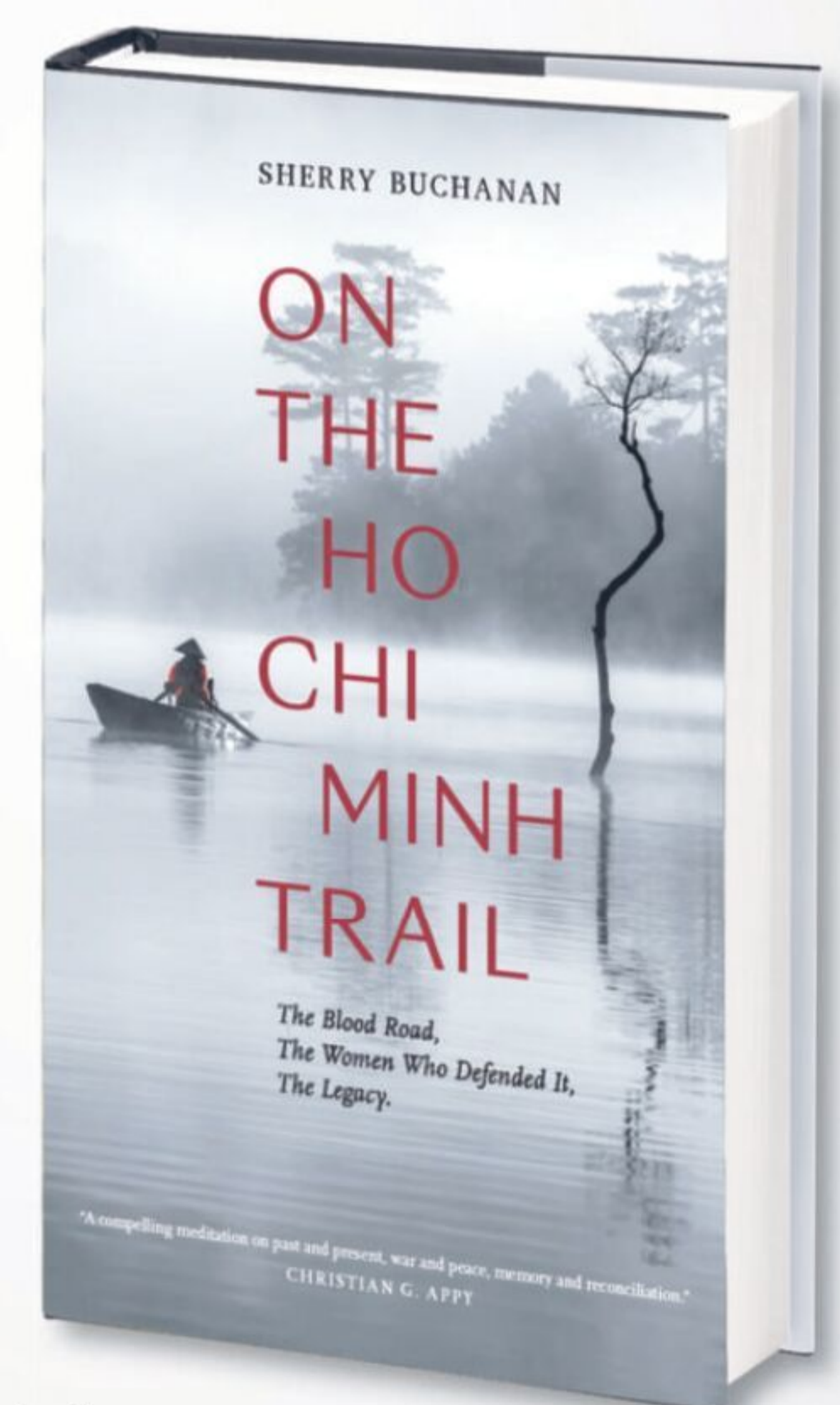
ON THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

The Blood Road, The Women Who Defended It, The Legacy

SHERRY BUCHANAN

“A riveting read of a hidden history. Sherry Buchanan reveals the untold story of the women soldiers in Vietnamese war drawings who patriotically defended the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the Vietnam War (1965–75). This book is essential reading for anyone wishing to understand Asian history from new perspectives.”

—Jessica Harrison-Hall, British Museum curator and author of *Vietnam Behind the Lines*



Cloth £20.00

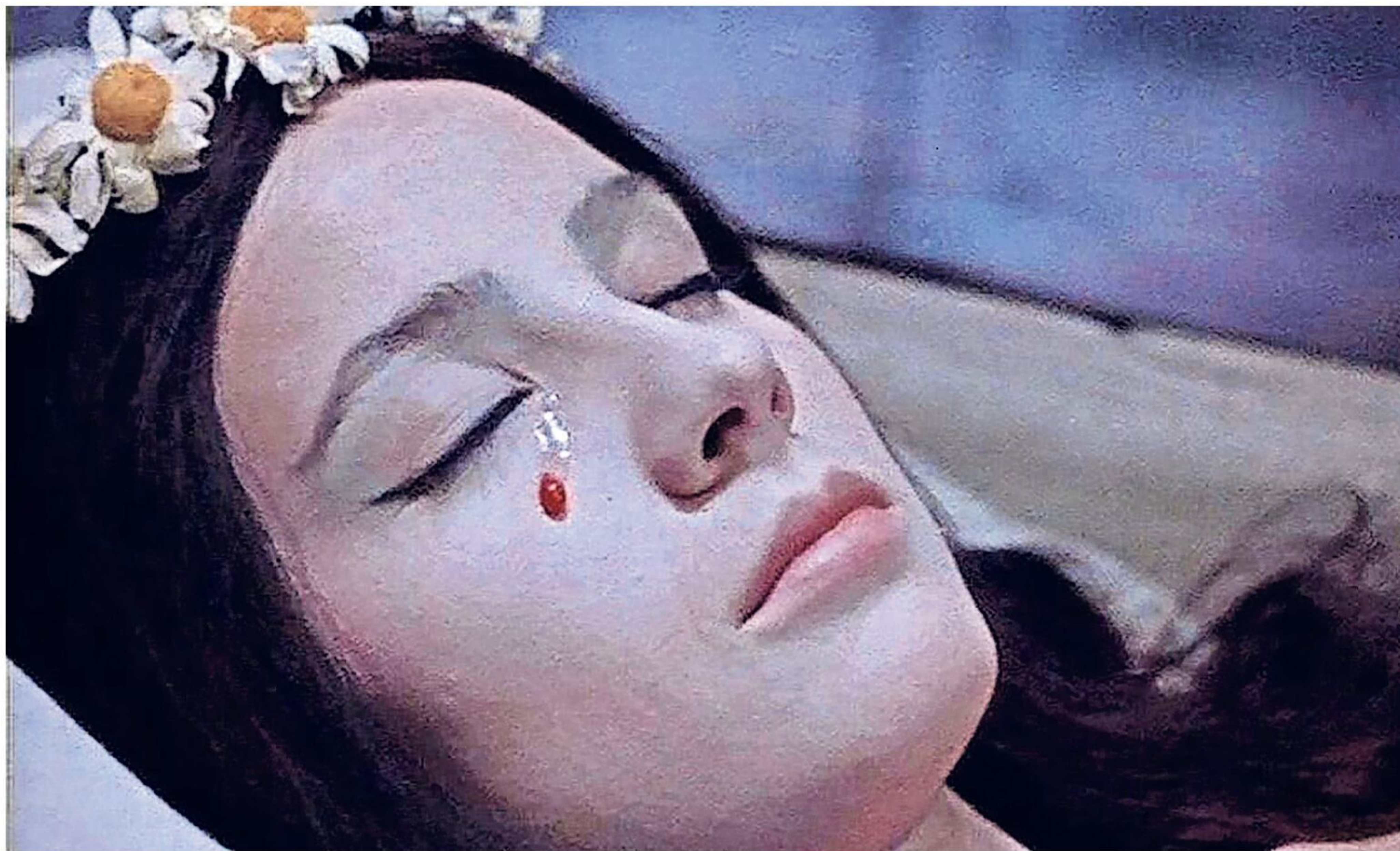


The University of Chicago Press www.press.uchicago.edu
Trade Enquiries to Yale Representation Ltd. yalerep@yaleup.co.uk 020 7079 4900

Iconoclasm from Bed

I heard you have intelligent dreams
the sort that are upfront about what
they are about and not just a feeling, bug weather
and the smell of batter from shuttered pubs, a thread
of something, snits of it, gnats or someone
kicking a ball against a wall, useless
and fun. These dreams have plot and end
on an edifying question, breaking off at the cusp
of the answer so you can answer them yourself.
The last was of an oracular woman
alcoholic cowboy, smoking on the acropolis.
You only had to sit at her feet and wait.

LOUIS KLEE



Stop-motion tingles

Soviet and Eastern bloc pioneers of horror and special effects

ADAM MARS-JONES

VIY

Bluray, Masters of Cinema

A SOVIET-ERA ADAPTATION (it dates from 1967) of a Gogol story, *Viy* has been issued on Bluray in a series called Masters of Cinema, which is pushing it a bit. You wouldn't know from this very conventional-looking piece of work that Soviet film-makers pioneered one of the crucial elements that made early film so exciting, treating the juxtaposition of images as the supreme generator of cinematic meaning. Cutting in *Viy* is purely a matter of convenience. The film is routinely described as belonging to the horror genre, which also raises the wrong sort of expectation (it was the Soviet Union's first venture in that genre, only made possible by Gogol's status as a classic writer). The effects it produces are low on the Richter scale of horror-film tremors, a tingle, perhaps even a shiver, but no jolt, let alone gasps of shock. "Supernatural fable" seems closer to the mark. Overenthusiastic marketing will only disappoint audiences by spoiling the real but modest frissons to be had.

Tim Lucas, in the booklet that accompanies the release, makes a strong case for the film's nominal directors, Konstantin Ershov and Georgiy Kropachyov, having little to do with the film's authorship, which he assigns to Aleksandr Ptushko despite his relatively lowly credits as co-writer, art director and designer of special effects. Apparently Ptushko was known as the Soviet Walt Disney, though the stop-motion specialist Ray Harryhausen (*The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad*, *Jason and the Argonauts* with its spectacular sword fights with skeletons) would make a better comparison.

The Russians were the kings of early stop-motion animation, or rather one Russian was the king. Ladislav Starevich got his start when he was the director of a natural history museum in Lithuania and was trying to make an instructional film of stag beetles fighting. He was forced to resort to models because

the real insects died under the intensity of the lighting required, and the results were so successful that he changed careers and returned to Moscow as an animator. After the Revolution, most of the film industry sided with the Whites rather than the Reds, and Starevich ended up in France, where he made such charming films as the 1930 *Roman de Renard*. So there was a tradition in Moscow, and a vacancy at the top.

Ptushko's greatest successes were in the 1950s, with live-action extravaganzas based on folk tales whose special effects have worn well. They had limited releases in the US until a pair of enterprising American producers had the idea of re-editing Ptushko's *Ilya Muromets* with English dialogue and a new framing narrative. That became *The Sword and the Dragon*. Roger Corman got in on the act, realizing that the liveliness of Ptushko's work could survive a fair amount of chopping about. He hired the young Francis Ford Coppola to write new dialogue for Ptushko's *Sadko*, which became *The Magic Voyage of Sinbad*, though Sinbad had not featured in the original. Finally Ptushko's *Sampo* had a lot of music removed and became *The Day The Earth Froze*. These travesties did better business in America than the originals.

Viy was a different sort of project for Ptushko, its source material only posing as folk tale (Gogol made it all up). Three Kiev seminarians on their summer holidays take shelter with a crone who turns out to be a witch. She rides on the back of one of them, Thoma (Leonid Kuravlyov), taking off into the air. His prayers weaken her enough to force a crash landing, and Thoma beats her. Gravely injured, she turns into a lovely young woman. He runs away.

Later he is summoned by the rector of the seminary and learns he has been asked for by name to say prayers for the soul of a young woman who is dying on a country estate some way away. When he arrives the woman is dead, but he recognizes her as the witch. To oblige her father he must say prayers next to her coffin in the village church for three nights in a row.

Gogol ballasts the fantasy elements of the tale with plenty of earthiness, which Ptushko is careful to

Natalya Varley in *Viy*

“Ptushko unleashes wave after wave of grotesque creatures that move across the floor or down the walls, and eventually the ‘Viy’ ... is led into place like some piece of heavy demonic artillery

Adam Mars-Jones's new novel *Batlava Lake* will be published in June

respect. The seminary students are no angels - they drink and take snuff. Thoma in the film crosses himself rather awkwardly, as if he didn't have the habit. His escorts on the way to the estate quiz him about his studies - what are they really learning? They're reluctant to accept that it's not so very different from what they hear in church. The film's atmosphere is well maintained, with landscapes that look like Isaac Levitan paintings. Though Levitan died in 1900 when there was barely such a thing as cinema, his influence on the look of Russian films was recognized by an exhibition in Moscow in 2018.

The special effects in the film form a satisfying crescendo, with some tidying up of the source text. In Gogol's original, for instance, the witch's coffin floats into the air on the first night of Thoma's vigil, but on screen this treat is properly deferred until the second, when she balances on one end of it as if she is surfing, spiralling high above Thoma as he cowers inside a magic circle drawn on the floor. For the third night's vigil Ptushko unleashes wave after wave of grotesque creatures that move across the floor or down the walls, and eventually the "Viy" of the title itself is led into place like some piece of heavy demonic artillery. The film can hardly build up the suspense of the Viy's entrance when the creature only appears at the very end of the story, but Gogol himself can indulge in a little teaser on the first page: "The 'Viy' is a monstrous creation of popular fancy. It is the name which the inhabitants of Little Russia give to the king of the gnomes, whose eyelashes reach to the ground. . ." (This is Claud Field's translation - "Little Russia" was the name for what is now Ukraine, and Gogol himself was perceived as a Ukrainian writer.) The best the film can do is to have some lesser demons flinch when Viy's name is mentioned. If such ghastly entities are scared, how will Thoma cope?

Gogol describes the Viy in contradictory terms, as a stumbling human figure, entirely covered with black soil, its hands and feet resembling knotted roots, but its face somehow made of iron and now it seems to be the eyelids rather than the lashes that are enormously long. Ptushko presents the creature as a squat golem shrouded in grey cloths, whose eyelids must indeed be raised by others in order to unleash the full baleful force of its stare. In this climactic passage of special-effects bravura, there is just one slip-up, the inclusion of an ambling skeleton that wouldn't meet the standards of any self-respecting small-town ghost train, let alone the great Ray Harryhausen.

The limited edition of *Viy* on Bluray includes a bonus disc of the Serbian director Djordje Kadijevic's film *A Holy Place* (1990), another version of the Gogol tale. Kadijevic's screenplay does some neat darning of holes in the story. Gogol starts off with three seminarians taking refuge with the witch but never explains what happened to the other two - proof that a piece of literature can enter the canon while still in need of a rewrite. Kadijevic fills in the gap with a short scene, the briefest possible exchange of dialogue. He also gives the witch some welcome motivation, or at least a reason to focus on one victim rather than another, with a scene in which she drives lingeringly past Thoma (as he is spelled in this version) in her carriage, though his companions further up the road neither see nor hear her pass.

The Serbian landscape is dusty rather than lush, and the director, in search of authentic locations, was lucky enough to find an old farmhouse with conservation status not far from Belgrade. The neglected church that is the setting for the scenes of spiritual battle even had the cross on top of its steeple suitably tilted already. (After the shoot the bell tower collapsed.) In every department *A Holy Place* is a stronger piece of work than *Viy*, though of course it can't challenge the older film's impact in its original context. Kadijevic greatly enlarges the theme of sexualized evil, and in the process moves away from explicit horror. The special-effects budget on *Viy* must have been the film's major expense. Its equivalent for *A Holy Place* would hardly buy an ice cream.



Lidia Vertinskaya as the Bird Phoenix in *Sadko*

Djordje Kadijevic, who worked largely in television during the 1970s and 80s, is clearly a director worth exploring. Dejan Ognjanović in his booklet notes particularly praises one TV film, *Leptirica* or *The She-Butterfly* from 1973. As the first Serbian horror film to be made (in either film or television)

it occupies a similar foundational role in what was then Yugoslavia as *Viy* did in Soviet Russia. As with *Viy*, the venture was protected by the classic status of its source material, the most famous short story ("After Ninety Years") by Milovan Glišić, who not only translated Gogol but was described as the "Ser-

bian Gogol" himself. Ognjanović is keen to point out that the story, though published after Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, precedes *Dracula*, and in a similar mildly nationalistic spirit describes *Leptirica* as more disturbing than comparable efforts of the period in Britain (he mentions the BBC's Christmas ghost stories based on M. R. James). *Leptirica*, viewable online with English subtitles, lives up to his praise as an immaculately controlled and ominous pastoral. Again the director has shaped the material to his needs, darkening the ending and borrowing a touch (the piggybacking witch) from *Viy*. As for what disturbs on the screen, it may be that clarity of genre (in this case folk horror) is actually less disorienting than the shifting between modes displayed, say, by David Rudkin's *Penda's Fen* from 1974, directed by Alan Clarke for the *Play for Today* slot.

A good story is unkillable, a vampire made of words, and cinema was not finished with *Viy* in 1990. In 2014 Jason Flemyng starred in *Forbidden Kingdom* ("be afraid of the eyes of *Viy*, the ancient god who dwells in the eternal darkness of the cave ..." as the trailer puts it), supposedly "based on the acclaimed novel by the legendary poet". Hold on - didn't Gogol destroy all copies of his only (self-)published poem and vow not to write a line again? An adaptation that makes Roger Corman's hacking about of Ptushko's adventure films look like a model of tact and taste, almost every frame churning with emptily amazing special effects, it was the highest grossing Russian film of its year. ■

Bad dates and fab villains

Communities, fandoms and frank conversations

ALICE WADSWORTH

FOOD 4 THOT

WHEELS ON FIRE



Joanna Lumley and Jennifer Saunders in *Absolutely Fabulous*

FOOD 4 THOT describes itself as a "roundtable discussion podcast wherein a multiracial mix of queer writers talk sex, relationships, race, identity, what we like to read, and who we like to read" (or, with tongue in cheek, "the lower back tattoo of the podcast world"). ("Thot" stands for "that hoe out there", a now reclaimed term for someone promiscuous.) Hosted by Tommy "Teebs" Pico (the author of, most recently, the poetry collection *Feed*, 2019), the writer and editor Fran Tirado, another author - and ex-figure skater - Dennis Norris II and the scientist and memoirist Joe Osmundson, the podcast grew out of a discussion on how literary spaces rarely allow for conversations about things considered not to be intellectual. In between filthy jokes and bad date stories, the hosts delve into deeper topics including self-worth, searching for meaning and creative discipline while casually weaving in literary references and queer theory.

They kick things off with an "amuse bouche" - often a game, such as homonyms or, most recently, listing "things that are both gay and homophobic" - before getting to the "meat" of the discussion (sometimes called "unsolicited advice"), where they address a wider theme (mother issues, the ethics of writing, anger). Dessert is "an offering" of something light-hearted (a look into the "heterosexual

propaganda" of *Bridgerton*; a rundown of Tommy's new plant obsession), or a round of book recommendations. The hosts' excited discussions and close readings can give the feeling of a particularly good seminar or well-chosen book group. There is a sense of queer community, as they create a space where each subject is unspooled from various directions and given serious analysis. Despite their shared interests, the hosts come at many subjects from wildly different perspectives and disagreement is common - as is holding one another to account. When discussing body image and the toxicity of beauty ideals, Pico invokes his upbringing (growing up on the Viejas Reservation of the Kumeyaay nation, near San Diego) to consider how this led him to idealize body types usually ignored or even maligned by mainstream Western beauty standards. While this may have afforded him less internalized racism in relation to dating and his body (something the hosts talk about with refreshing candour), he is keen to point out that any beauty ideal is problematic. These nuanced and frank conversations feel intimate, even when the themes are wide-ranging. Previous episodes have looked at death, poetry (a particularly rich episode, given the panel's literary backgrounds, as they cover accessibility, elitism and formal experimentation as reclamation) and villains

Alice Wadsworth is the Deputy Fiction editor of the TLS and co-editor of the Brixton Review of Books

(delving into fandoms surrounding certain "queer coded" villains, such as Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*).

Further making the case for the cultural importance of something not usually deemed to be high art - and also revelling in its own beloved villain - the *Wheels on Fire* podcast nostalgically looks to the 1990s sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* for lessons on fashion, friendship and a perhaps surprising amount of social and political commentary. Our guides to Edwina Monsoon's world are Cooper, Peter and Leo, who get together monthly to drink prosecco and slip into the protective "bubble of *Ab Fab*", a world where the banality of everyday life is to be avoided at all costs.

Each podcast episode focuses on a different episode of *Ab Fab* (so far, they've reached Series Three, Episode Two, "Crappy New Year"), going through the raucous comedy, bonkers outfits and quotable gags, and also the show's character development, social commentary and the reasons for its devoted following. *Ab Fab*'s popularity with fans (particularly those in the LGBTQ+ community) seems to lie in its mix of escapism, criticism of puritanical culture and Eddie's more relatable insecurities around weight, popularity, success, ageing and more.

They delve into not only the many tropes of the 1990s fashion industry that *Ab Fab* skewers, but also the - surprisingly frequent - political and social details: despite Patsy and Eddie's evident love of capitalism, and the moneyed bubble they inhabit, Eddie claims "I've always voted Labour, darling" and she teases her daughter Saffy about the conservative nature of her beloved New Labour (I never previously noticed the framed photograph of Cherie Blair on Saffy's nightstand). The traditional family structure is also roundly mocked: Eddie and Patsy's mothers are shown as perhaps the greatest contributors to their insecurities, relationships are set up to fail and *Wheels on Fire*'s hosts surmise from the episode "New Best Friend" that "kids ruin your life". (Saffy is accused of this constantly, although of course she has the opposite effect.)

"Is this podcast the gayest thing that ever existed?", ask Cooper, Peter and Leo, and their messages do feel particularly relevant to the LGBTQ+ experience - though not always entirely seriously. As they conclude from Eddie's arrest for stealing champagne (after Saffy takes her credit cards), drink-driving and assault: "know who you are and live your life accordingly". ■

Calloused, not callous

Healing the scars of displacement

RICHARD LEA

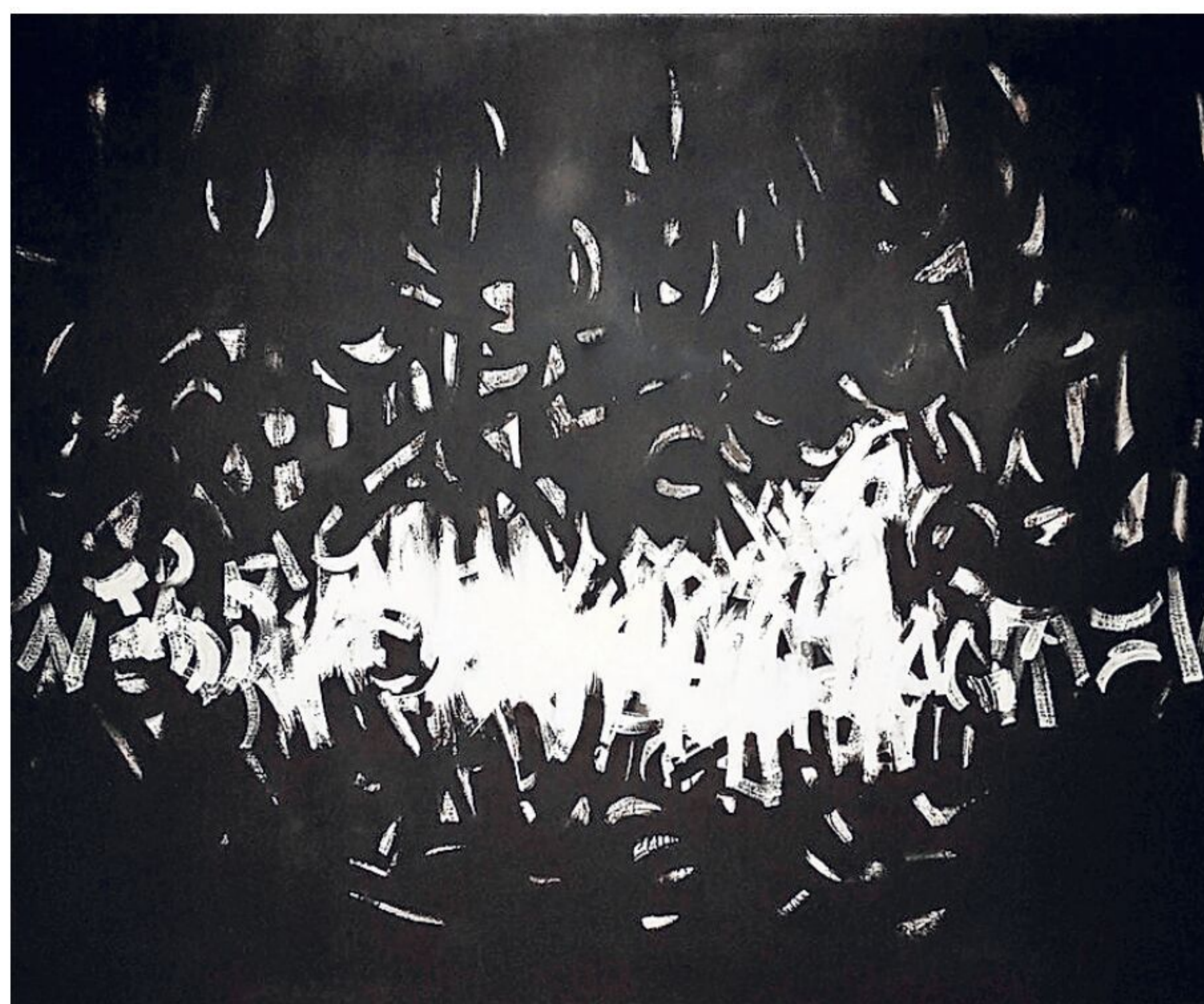
TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM
YAA GYASI

256pp. Viking. £14.99.

YAA GYASI'S ACCLAIMED DEBUT, *Homegoing* (TLS, January 27, 2017), follows a Ghanaian-American family across three centuries as it explores the horrors and painful legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. In her second novel, *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gyasi tackles racism and displacement on a more intimate scale.

Drawing on her own experience as the daughter of Ghanaian migrants to the US, she tells the story of a family torn apart by the distance between Kumasi, Ashanti Region and Huntsville, Alabama. The novel circles around two episodes of depression that leave the narrator Gifty's mother laid out in bed, unable to function. Gifty anatomizes the prejudice and hardship of her childhood in the American South and charts how her mother lost her husband, her son and her mental strength.

Gifty's mother is thirty when she meets her husband, "already an old maid by Ghanaian standards", and when her prayers are answered with an angelic son, Nana, she decides he needs "room ... to grow". She applies for a green card and settles in Alabama, making \$10,000 a year as a home health aide to an octogenarian with Parkinson's who "can't believe my shithead kids stuck me with a nigger". Her husband loses his own job at the home health service after



"too many people" complain, and he is repeatedly accused of shoplifting in Walmart. Homesick and humiliated, he compares the hardscrabble life they endure in America with the easygoing warmth of the country they have left behind. When he eventually visits "home", he never comes back.

By this stage, Gifty has been born. "If I've thought of my mother as callous, and many times I have", she confesses, "then it is important to remind myself what a callus is: the hardened tissue that forms over a wound. And what a wound my father leaving was." With his father no longer watching from the touchline, Nana despairs of soccer and eventually takes up basketball, becoming his high school team's star. But a ligament injury brings a prescription for OxyContin, opening up a spiral of addiction that soon leaves him dead in a parking lot. This second trauma triggers a bout of depression in his mother which ends in a suicide attempt, the eleven-year-old Gifty arriving home from school to find her mother submerged in the bath next to an empty bottle of sleeping pills.

These moments of drama play out against a steady accompaniment of racism: there is the parent of the opposing team who loudly tells his son, "Don't you let them niggers win"; the classmates who call Gifty "charcoal", "monkey", or "worse". In episodes that

"Alabama" by Norman Lewis, Cleveland Museum of Art, 1960

Richard Lea is an editor and writer who lives in London

Black skin, black masks

A novel of art and ethics

EMILY BERNARD

THE RIB KING
LADEE HUBBARD

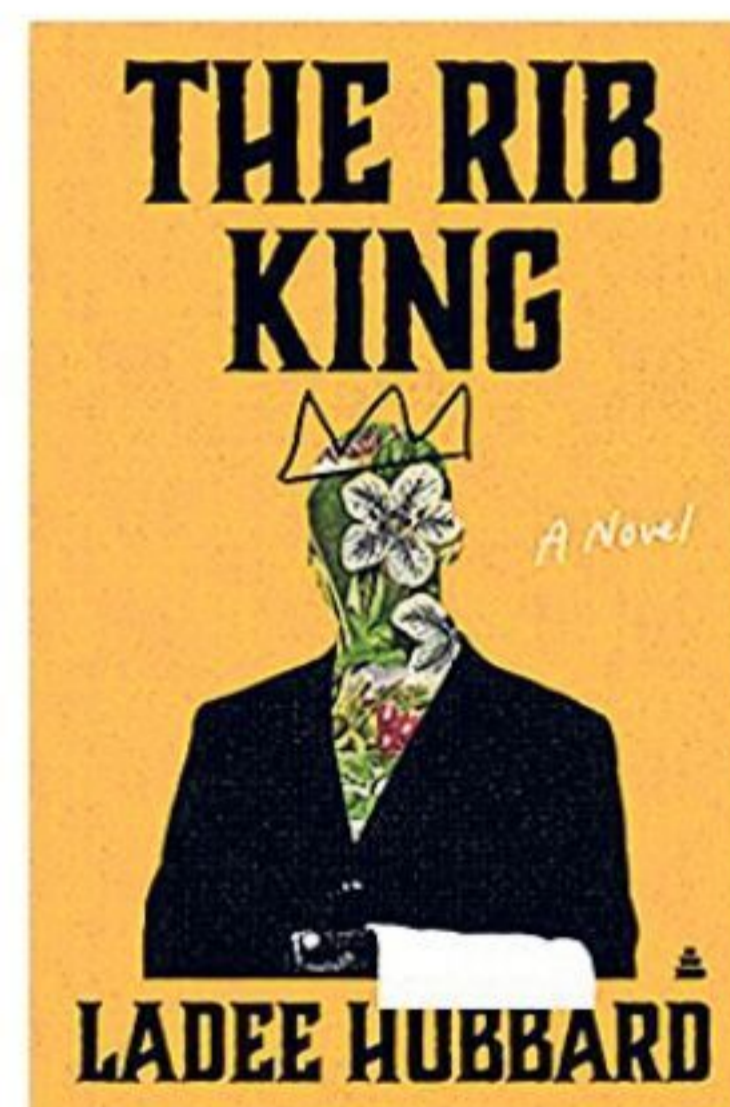
384pp. Amistad. £20.

"NOTHING SEEMED MORE ABSURD than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself." The words of George Walker serve as a portal into the world of *The Rib King* by Ladee Hubbard. Walker was half of the wildly popular vaudeville duo, Williams & Walker (his partner was Bert Williams), who advertised themselves as "Two Real Coons" and popularized the cakewalk. Williams & Walker were imaginative and inventive, but a certain script had already been written for them, steeped in the vocabulary and values of American racism. Is it, asks Hubbard, possible for Black people living in white supremacist culture to choreograph their own acts, and to author their own stories - or are they still only revising the narratives written by others? To answer these questions, Hubbard takes us into the story behind a grinning black face on a label for meat sauce.

The first half of *The Rib King* belongs to Mr Sitwell, a servant in the home of the Barclays, a well-established white family in decline. It is 1914, and Sitwell has been with them for twenty years. When we first meet him, he is a groundskeeper, but his role in the house is much more complex. He is a mystery, a kind of trickster figure, much like the other Black people who run the house, such as Mamie, the cook, who was "often called upon to interact with the guests, to become part of the entertainment. Smiling and bowing in the front of the house was just another part of the job". To be Black in this world is to be a performer. For Sitwell, self-composure is a talent and a superpower, along with his uncannily precise sense of smell. He is taken completely by surprise when Barclay forces an impossible choice on him early in the story - but he cannot let it show.

That choice is to separate three boys who work in the household, orphans selected by Mrs Barclay, to, among other things, fulfil her "sense of charitable obligation". Good-natured and eager to please, the boys, like Sitwell, have survived horrible pasts about which they do not speak. "I remember", one of them, Bart, tells Sitwell. "Just don't like talking about it." His body tells the story, though; Bart is missing the toes of his right foot. The boys are so identified with one another that Sitwell finds "the easiest way to distinguish between them was to look for their scars". Something then cracks inside Sitwell when he discovers Frederick, another of the boys, with a novel that he recognizes as the story of his past - a story recast in lies.

If Sitwell's sense of smell is a superpower, his illiteracy is his Achilles heel. He pays Billy, a young man who works in his rooming house, to read the novel, a story about a massacre in the Floridian village of his childhood, a place that "twenty-five years



Emily Bernard is the author of *Black Is the Body: Stories from my grandmother's time, my mother's time, and mine*, 2019

mirror Gyasi's own experience of religion in a predominantly white area of Huntsville, even the Pentecostal church that becomes a "second home" for Gifty's mother offers no relief. When Nana asks what would happen to people living in an African village so remote they have yet to hear the gospel, the groovy youth pastor smirks and says, "Yeah, they're going to Hell". After Nana's addiction becomes common knowledge, Gifty overhears a deacon declaring, "their kind does seem to have a taste for drugs. ... That's why there's so much crime".

Gifty weaves scraps from her childhood diary and an account of her mother's second bout of depression, sixteen years later, into her patchwork recollections of this difficult upbringing. As she cooks for her inert mother and reads to her from the Bible, Gifty reflects on losing her own faith and turning towards science. She explains how the research she is conducting on the neural circuits of reward-seeking behaviour might one day answer the most urgent questions of her own life: "Could it get a brother to set down a needle? Could it get a mother out of bed?"

When Gifty tells another researcher about her brother's death, her colleague exclaims, "This would make such a good TED talk" - an observation that may leave some readers nodding at Gyasi's deft plotting and others wondering if her elegant symmetries are just a little too neat. Caught between Ghana and the US, between rationality and god, Gifty suggests that while both science and religion are "valuable ways of seeing ... both have failed to satisfy in their aim: to make clear, to make meaning".

With her brother dispatched two-thirds of the way through and her mother's first depression reaching its point of crisis just twenty pages later, the novel's final quarter drifts quietly towards the muted climax of the second maternal breakdown and Gifty's gradual realization that, "At some point I had to ask for, to accept, help". The forces that drive her mother's relapse are left unexamined as Gyasi considers the mysteries of the brain and the challenges of adult relationships for those who have suffered adversity in childhood, and then pivots to an unexpectedly hopeful coda. If only the scars of racism and displacement were always so straightforward to transcend. ■

before he'd been forced to stand and watch [burn] to the ground". In the novel's version of this history, the white people are the heroes, not the villains. "It was time to wake up", thinks Sitwell, who swaps his old mask for a new one, committing his considerable talent for pretending to settling old scores.

By the time the novel's second half begins, Sitwell has disappeared behind the servile, grinning face on a meat sauce label. Now the focus is on Jennie Williams, a former maid at the Barclay home and, in a previous life, a "cakewalk delineator", a dancer, like Aida Overton Walker, George Walker's wife, whose words frame Jennie's part of the story. Ten years later, Sitwell has become something of an albatross for Jennie, who used to fancy him when they were at the Barclays. Jennie has gone on to become her own boss, an entrepreneur, a creator of a healing salve for ladies, called Mamie's Brand Gold, in honour of the Barclay cook. Jennie is just as ingenious as Sitwell, but in her attempt to secure financial backing for her product, she must navigate a world circumscribed not just by racism but sexism, too. The pair are brought together in a satisfying reunion replete with revelations delivered in Hubbard's consistently measured, atmospheric prose.

"We wear the mask that grins and lies", wrote the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar in 1895. Ladee Hubbard's deeply affecting and absorbing novel is about Black performance, entrepreneurship and authenticity; freedom, art and ethics. It is rich in irony: a story for our time set early last century; a novel about an illiterate whose life is upended by a book. It is about the cost of freedom, and what it takes for prevailing narratives about power and identity to be revised, reinvented, or undone. It shows us that, when it comes to race, we must look behind the headlines and underneath the masks. ■

Core issues

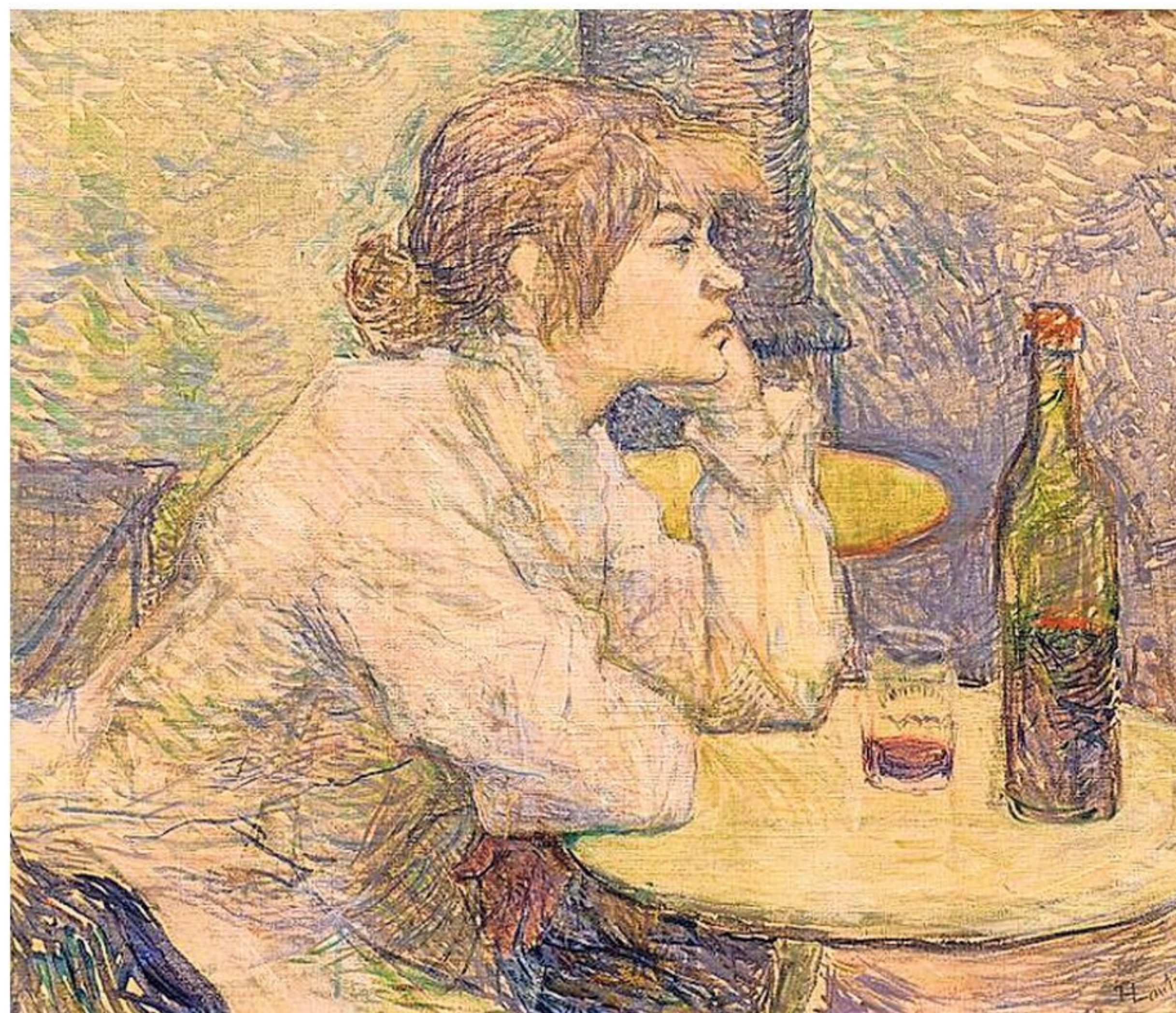
The cycle of trauma, addiction and intergenerational pain

DESIRÉE BAPTISTE

BRIGHT BURNING THINGS

LISA HARDING

320pp. Bloomsbury. £11.99.



"The Hangover (Suzanne Valadon)" by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, 1887-9

SONYA, THE DUBLINER NARRATOR of Lisa Harding's new novel *Bright Burning Things*, is hard to like. With her four-year-old Tommy and rescue dog Herbie ("my boys") in tow she speeds recklessly home from the beach, thinking only "of the promise waiting for me in the fridge". She polishes off her first bottle of the evening with a side plate of self-deception: "I'll make sure he eats later". Tommy doesn't.

It is hard to like a dog-kicking, shoplifting, almost-accidental arsonist, jilted out of a booze coma by "black smoke ... billowing under the kitchen door". But Sonya, a former actress, now a single mother, is caught in what Leslie Jamison, in *The Recovering* (2018), calls the "reductive and recycled core" of alcoholism: "Desire. Use. Repeat". It is no fun rub-bernecking at this car crash of a woman.

There is also no guarantee that the bright, burning first stage of the addiction-recovery narrative arc will hold an audience rapt. Jamison recalls being rudely shot down in AA when she first spoke of her drinking ("This is boring!", shouts a fellow attendee). Her later memoirist self was "wary" of "trotting out the tired tropes of the addictive spiral", "the tedious architecture" of the "redemption story".

But Harding avoids cliché through her skilful

deployment of a very non-tedious stream-of-consciousness. From our passenger seat in Sonya's mind, the view is panoramic. There is the familial back story, which unfolds incrementally; the anti-social displays ("other people, fuck them"); the flashes of self-awareness which trigger empathy: "You are not safe with me as I am", she whispers to the sleeping Tommy and Herbie. The dissonance we experience, the push-pull of revulsion and compassion, mirrors her conflict ("a feeling that I should stop, but I'm not able I'm not able I'm not able"). Sonya, up close, is as dazzling to us as her "demented imp", temptation, is to her ("There She is, in her full technicolour glory"), a heady mixture of heartbreak ("I swallow, I soothe, I sleep") and hope, that the cycle will break: "tomorrow - there's always tomorrow".

Tomorrow is bluntly enforced when Sonya's estranged father intervenes after a neighbour, Mrs O'Malley, calls the Guards, and Sonya submits to a twelve-week stint in a Catholic rehab centre two hours from Dublin. Thus we are treated to the spectre of patriarchal authority delivering the errant Irish daughter to an institution. This nod to the not-too-distant past, from the vantage point of a modern, globalized Ireland, recalls *Harvesting* (2017), Harding's debut novel, which concerned

Desirée Baptiste is a writer and researcher based in London

trafficked minors trapped in the Dublin sex trade. Here, the author transformed survivor statements into powerful fiction, exposing a shocking underworld, just as the testimonies of survivors of child sex abuse in Catholic institutions, aired in TV documentaries in the 1990s, exposed an epic crime.

Once Sonya is in rehab, her bumpy ride becalms and flattens - but the story doesn't, largely because we are wholly invested in Sonya and her recovery (Tommy is with social services, so the stakes are high). A romantic prospect, in the form of a counsellor, adds a frisson. But there are frustrations. There is little sense of place, or of people. The rehab building is "grey, institutional", the attending nun "rosy-cheeked", Sonya's tattooed friend Jimmy a "small and burly" man who "tells the best stories" (we hear none of them). The dinner lady has a "small, blanked-out face". The vision of Ireland, too, is hazy. The most vivid description is of the motorway into Dublin, a liminal "space" that Sonya merely passes through. This is doubtless all deliberate, an indication of the effort Sonya has to make to "feel the ground beneath my feet ... to really see", and of the unanchored sense, evident throughout the book, of her own primal lacunae: the death of her mother when she was eight and "the lies ... the omissions, the silences" around the circumstances (relating to alcohol, it is hinted) that fuelled, from youth, her "free-floating anxiety", the root of her "stealing and glugging". For the reader, however, this lack of mooring can be estranging.

Bright Burning Things alerts us to the cost of familial silences, and it is here that the novel's landscape rises into view. "In Ireland", Colm Tóibín once wrote, "what happens within the family remains so secretive, so painfully locked within each person." Even while Sonya demands the truth, sealed inside her father, she upholds a lie to Tommy, "the kindest of lies", that his own father (who abandoned a pregnant Sonya) is dead. In an early scene, we see Tommy "crying soundlessly"; later, Tommy, who is becoming "increasingly withdrawn" away from his mother, "wears his silence like a shield". Trauma, Harding implies, has been locked in for another generation, the recycled core of familial relations: unconscious, universal and, perhaps, inevitable. ■

About a boy

The dominant narrative of a toxic relationship

STEPHANIE SY-QUIA

ACTS OF DESPERATION

MEGAN NOLAN

288pp. Cape. £14.99.

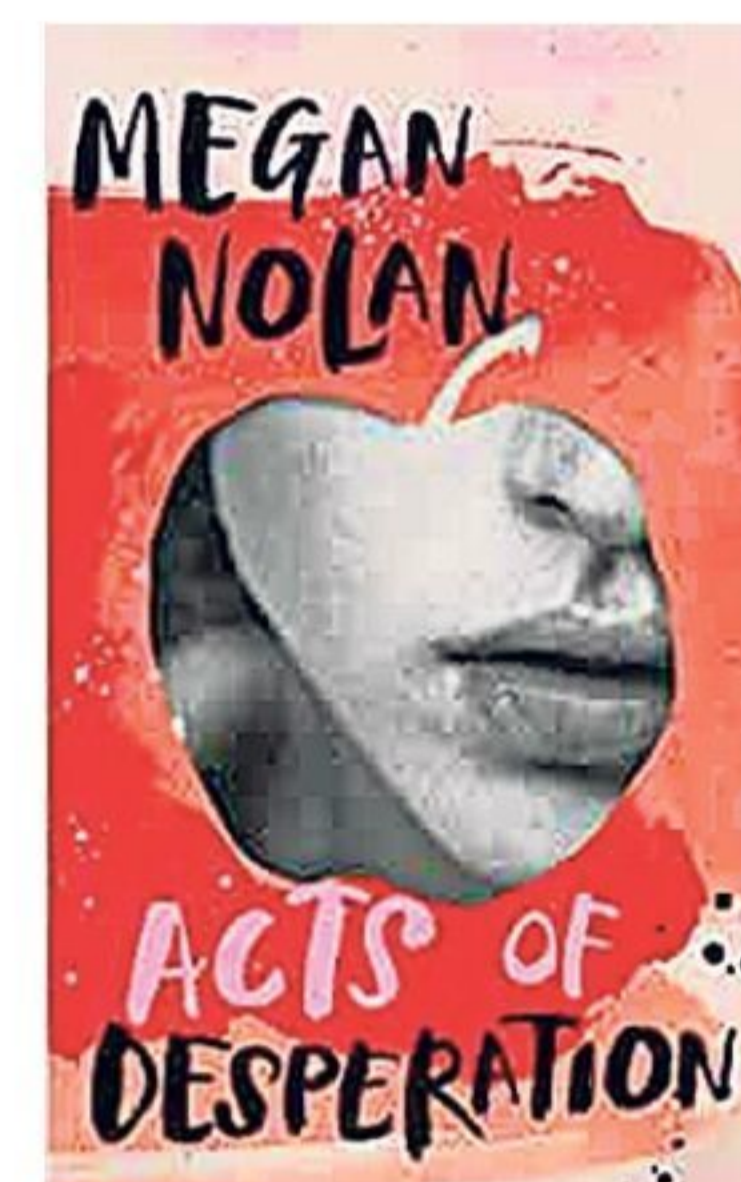
THE BUILDING BLOCKS of Megan Nolan's debut novel will be familiar to many: pretty girl meets pretty, petty boy, and then regales us with all the details of the sorry saga, complete with a revisionist history over months and even years, until she comes to her senses. She, our narrator, is unnamed; he is called Ciaran. She immediately devotes herself to making his life a "lively play of domesticity", with "no life" (including her own) "coming in at the edges". "I wanted more than anything to present him with the products of my labour", she tells us. "I thought that my subservience could be ironised and eroticised out of reality." So it begins. Ciaran doesn't like "your little" friends, so she stops spending time with them. He swings through moods, holds grudges, ignores her; there is an ex-girlfriend perpetually hovering somewhere in the wings. Our narrator leaves work early to shop at expensive food halls she cannot afford, for venison and crab - acts of solicitude made all

the more wanton for the fact that Ciaran has very little sense of taste or smell.

There are flashes of brilliance throughout, reminiscent of John Berger. Early asides recall the free-wheeling aplomb of *G.*:

The thing to understand about Ciaran is not only that he was exceptionally beautiful, but that there was an immense stillness radiating from his body. The stillness was beneath every gesture, his glances, his laughs. He sought nothing from his surroundings ... What must it feel like to be beautiful but also invisible whenever you choose to be? To be a beautiful man?

Berger's iconic quip in *Ways of Seeing* that every woman "comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements [of her gender]" could be the basis for Nolan's book. "Female suffering is cheap and is used cheaply by dishonest women who are looking for attention", the narrator tells us; she combines a bald awareness of her hold over men ("Being young and beautiful felt like a lot sometimes") with a deep and violent self-loathing, resulting in the divided persona of a caustic ingénue who surveys her peers with acerbic wit: "She was the kind of person who ran dinner events full of the best looking people you'd ever seen in your life, in bogs and old vacant military barracks, using only what



Stephanie Sy-Quia's debut work of poetry, *Amnion*, will be published in November

she had foraged in a 50-foot radius to cook with".

At times, Nolan has a regrettable tendency to labour her point. We are told that Ciaran "looked like an illustration of superiority, like propaganda for the idea of a man", when that second clause alone would have been more effective. The élan of the Ciaran chronicles is sullied by the uneven interjections of non-linear chapters that add differing levels of value: a friend's suicide is mentioned but is neither fully explored nor reprised, serving only to muddy the waters. Early on, a single short chapter is cramped into doing more than its fair share of expository legwork, as we are told in short order of a domestic arrangement BC (Before Ciaran) with a female friend, Lisa ("We cooked meals with tinned pulses and wilted greens ... We cracked an egg into more or less anything"), and of the narrator drunkenly sleeping with a mutual friend's boyfriend. Lisa alone "could see the reservoirs of need that existed in me and would never stop spilling out, ruining all they touched, and she didn't hate me for them, but felt sorry for me". This seems to be one of the novel's meatier relationships and it is a shame that it is given a mere cameo.

Elsewhere, there is an excellent, essayistic exploration of "rape" as a loaded term, an arch and intelligent interlude that is one of the best moments in the novel. This is telling. At its inception, Nolan has said in interview, *Acts of Desperation* was a work of narrative non-fiction exploring various different sorts of relationships - and it shows. Reincarnated as a novel, it has allowed itself to be dominated by a toxic relationship, leaving other ideas underdeveloped but still visible, like vestigial limbs. Toxic relationships have a habit of dominating like that. ■

A mistake 10,000 miles long

Robert Stone's best work was inspired by the Vietnam War

J. MICHAEL LENNON

ROBERT STONE

"Dog Soldiers"; "A Flag for Sunrise";
"Outerbridge Reach"

MADISON SMARTT BELL, EDITOR

1,223pp. Library of America. \$45.



Nick Nolte in *Who'll Stop the Rain*, 1978

IN INTERVIEWS TWO DECADES APART (1985 and 2006) Robert Stone recalled what happened after finishing a difficult section at the end of his second novel, *Dog Soldiers* (1974), while working in the basement of a university library. He staggered out of his carrel, crying and talking to himself, and "ran right into the security guard. He almost went for his gun because it's the middle of the night, and I looked completely demented. You can get very, very affected". Stone (1937-2015) equated his passionate immersion in the lives of his characters with that of Charles Dickens.

The section that triggered Stone's emotional upheaval is a magnificent passage describing the last hours of Ray Hicks, a Nietzsche-reading ex-Marine who acts out a samurai fantasy in the California desert just south of Death Valley. Three years earlier during the Tet Offensive - the novel is set in 1971 - Hicks lost six of his comrades in Hue City and now, back in the States, he sees himself as a species of enlightened desperado. Bleeding steadily, and burdened with an M60 machine gun and a backpack of pure Vietnamese heroin, Hicks sings Marine cadence calls as he marches, observes hawks gliding in the wind, mentally chants lines from the Buddhist Heart of Wisdom Sutra ("Form is not different from nothingness. They are the same"), and remembers his mother washing pots in a Chicago Salvation Army shelter. At the base of his skull he erects a psychic triangle of dark blue, encases within it a circle of bright red, and then impounds his pain inside the two perimeters. When the pain throbs too much, he titivates the triangle, hones the edges. This extended, wrenching depiction of Hicks's ebbing consciousness is rendered with hallucinatory power.

Hicks's spiritual guru, an-ex Jesuit named Dieter, describes him as "a natural man of Zen ... there was absolutely no difference between thought and action for him".

In the end there were not many things worth wanting - for the serious man, the samurai. But there were some. In the end, if the serious man is still bound to illusion, he selects the worthiest illusion and takes a stand. The illusion might be of waiting for one woman to come under his hands. Of being with her and shivering in the same moment. If I walk away from this, he thought, I'll be an old man - all ghosts, and hangovers and mellow recollections. Fuck it, he thought, follow the blood. This is the one. This is the one to follow till it crashes.

The Dog Soldiers of the title refers to the Cheyenne warrior bands who were the point of the spear in the battle against white encroachment before and after the Civil War. Dog Soldiers were expected to fight as if already dead: in compensation they were deemed holy warriors. Although the central action of the novel follows the violent struggle over the smuggled heroin, it is the intense inner life of its major figures,

including the horrid crew of miscreants who pursue Hicks, that is of paramount interest. In addition to Hicks, the novel's roster includes Dieter, the drunken *rōshi*; John Converse, Hicks's feckless Marine buddy; Converse's plucky wife, Marge, who flees with Hicks and the drugs; and a rogue federal drug official and his two sadistic sidekicks, who torture Converse to extract information on the whereabouts of Hicks and Marge. All are complicit in placing themselves in situations not unlike those of the Dog Soldiers; all are on a pilgrim's journey. Stone put it best in his description of the characters in his next novel, *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981): "They're always getting little glints of what may or may not be God. All of them are pursuing something beyond themselves ... everybody's after a new morning".

Outerbridge Reach (1992), the story of a solo, round-the-world sailing race, is the third novel in the Library of America volume edited by Stone's biographer, Madison Smartt Bell. Like the other two, it calls to mind the novels of Graham Greene set in Africa, Mexico, Cuba and Vietnam. Stone dismissed claims of influence, however, and was negative about Greene in several interviews, claiming that their concerns were quite different, but his comments probably should be chalked up to what Freud called "the narcissism of small differences". In their presentation of memorable characters receptive to the numinous, susceptible to godly glints, their novels are damnably congruent. Both authors explore the same kind of existential sinkholes in deftly plotted, character-driven action narratives set in a mixture of cosmopolitan and remote settings. Both suffered the same kind of bullying as adolescents, and both were sympathetic to the tenets of Catholic eschatology on the importance of the moments before death. Stone claimed that one of the key characters in *A Flag for Sunrise*, the drunken Father Egan, did not derive from the unnamed whisky priest in Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940), but readers might remain unconvinced.

What distinguishes Stone's work from Greene's is his belief that American politics, at its best, has been a means of carrying out the moral ideals of the Enlightenment enshrined in the Constitution. This idealism, of course, was severely damaged by the nation's Vietnam involvement, which Stone called "a mistake ten thousand miles long", referring to the military supply chain that also returned 50,000 American corpses, some of them sharing a coffin with smuggled drugs. But the fact the peace party ultimately triumphed and the soldiers came home partially justified Stone in his belief. Greene's indictment of America's blind arrogance in Vietnam, as displayed in incipient form in his novel *The Quiet American* (1955), was more unforgiving. He didn't see anything exceptional about American politics or morality - far from it. Stone, who spent a couple of

months in Vietnam in 1971 as the Americans were handing over the fighting to the South Vietnamese, had a more complex view. On the one hand, he decided that the North Koreans and Viet Cong were not as virtuous as he had previously supposed, but on the other he concluded that "America is a state of mind that you can't export".

The central character in *Outerbridge Reach* is Owen Browne, a fortyish salesman of fancy sailboats. After valorous service in Vietnam, he feels spiritually empty. When his tycoon boss disappears in a financial scandal, Browne embraces the chance to replace him in a globe-girdling race, sailing south from New York via Outerbridge Reach to the South Atlantic on an untried 45-foot sloop built by his company. Another Vietnam veteran, Ron Strickland, a filmmaker, is documenting Browne's single-handed effort (he gives Browne a camera). Stone admitted that his novel was based in part on Donald Crowhurst's fraudulent, fatal, one-man circumnavigation attempt in 1968-9. Browne, however, is a more complex figure, who recalls both Lord Jim and Bill Budd in his psychic dimensions. T. S. Eliot's line about risk-taking sums up Browne's psychological stance on the eve of his departure: "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go".

The long novel moves sluggishly (enlivened mainly by the seduction of Browne's wife by Strickland), until its final 100 pages, when Browne gets underway on the *Nona* and the novel begins to amass force in its adroit intercutting between the filmmaker's venality and the disintegration of Browne's mind as he moves through forty-foot waves in the Roaring Forties. After he destroys the transponder signalling his location and cuts off contact with his handlers in the US, his only link to humanity is Mad Max, a blind ham radio operator who sends him riddles in Morse code. Intermittently, his dilemma begins to cohere: continuing the race will lead to insanity, but discontinuing it and returning ignominiously to New York will lead to ruin. And so, like Crowhurst, he begins to create a detailed false log of his positions, with appropriate wind and weather notations, as if he is sailing east towards the Cape of Good Hope, rather than moving in circles beneath the Southern Cross off the coast of Argentina.

All three novels unfold in the long shadow of the Vietnam war. Most of the major characters spent time there, and were alternately beguiled and scarred by their experiences. And the sociopolitical effects course through the narratives. The drug epidemic and a loss of faith in government lead the list; also high is the apparently undiminished American appetite for intervention in underdeveloped countries. Frank Holliwel, a leading character in *A Flag for Sunrise*, gets enmeshed in a failed revolution after a former CIA colleague in Vietnam inveigles him into investigating a medical mission in Central America. The mission is run by the sodden Father Egan and a nun-nurse, Justin Feeney, both of whom are sympathetic to leftist revolutionaries. Holliwel's blundering implicates Feeney and leads to her capture by the reactionary government supported by the US. Stone has been praised for his portraits of women, and the portrayal of Feeney may be his finest. None of the Americans' efforts succeeds, and the government, with the few nudges from the CIA, brutally quells the revolt. Towards the end, the novel's half-cynical, half-hopeful observer, Holliwel, reflects on heroism:

Apparently it was his fate to witness popular wars; Vietnam had been a popular war among his radical friends. As a witness to that popular war he had seen people on both sides act bravely and have their moments. Popular wars, as thrilling as they might be to radicals, were quite as shitty as everything else but like certain thrilling, unperfected operas - like everything else in fact - they had their moments. People's moments did not last that long.

In a career spanning half a century, Stone wrote eight novels and two collections of short stories, a memoir and a collection of non-fiction essays, as well as several screenplays, including the one for the film version of *Dog Soldiers* starring Nick Nolte as Ray

“
What distinguishes Stone's work from Graham Greene's is his belief that American politics has been a means of carrying out the moral ideals of the Enlightenment

J. Michael Lennon teaches in the Maslow Family Creative Writing Program at Wilkes University. He edited the Library of America two-volume set, Norman Mailer: The Sixties, 2018

Hicks, *Who'll Stop the Rain* (1977). The novels collected here are advertised as his "three greatest", and it's a fair claim. The editor has wisely skipped over Stone's first, immature effort, the hallucinatory *Hall of Mirrors* (1966), which deals with the counter culture in New Orleans, and also his least successful novel, *Children of Light* (1986), a Hollywood story of drugs and schizophrenia. Stone taught creative writing for decades at Yale University and several other schools, and he drew on his experience in two novels with academic settings, *Bay of Souls* (2003), which was not well-received, and *Death of the Black-Haired Girl* (2013). The latter, published a year before his death, concerns an adulterous, deadly love affair between an unsteady, brilliant professor at a small

college and his extraordinary and beautiful student. Like all Stone's best efforts, it is propelled by paranoia and fear. More than one critic has pointed out that *Black-Haired Girl* explores the same web of lust, religion and guilt to be found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

The only novel excluded from this collection that does rank with the "three greatest" is Stone's longest and most ambitious, *Damascus Gate* (1998), a reflection of his long-standing interest in the existentialist tradition of an absconded God. This passion led him to make a serious study not only of the Old and New Testaments, but also of the Qu'ran, the Kabbalah and the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Gospels. All come into play in this book that links Stone's absorp-

tion in the religious traditions and texts of the three Abrahamic religions with his abiding interest in international intrigue and violent revolutionary schemes.

The range of Stone's accomplishments notwithstanding, it is likely that his reputation will endure as one of the finest American writers of the Vietnam War. In his punctilious depictions of the conflict and its aftermath (Stone once referred to himself as "a slothful perfectionist"), he stands in the company of Tim O'Brien (*The Things They Carried*, 1990), Larry Heinemann (*Paco's Story*, 1987), Philip Caputo (*A Rumor of War*, 1977) and Michael Herr (*Dispatches*, 1977). What Herr wrote of himself, applies equally well to Stone: "I went to cover the war, and the war covered me". ■

Never the same again

A New Zealander's view of Second World War horrors

C. K. STEAD

THE GORSE BLOOMS PALE

Dan Davin's Southland stories

JANET WILSON, EDITOR

314pp. Otago University Press. NZ \$45.

THE GENERAL AND THE NIGHTINGALE

Dan Davin's war stories

JANET WILSON, EDITOR

364pp. Otago University Press. NZ \$45.

THE IDENTITIES THAT WERE IMPORTANT TO Dan Davin were Roman Catholic (though he had lapsed), New Zealander (though he had left it behind) and soldier (though the war was over). There was about him a feeling that the good times, and the significant and sometimes terrible times, were all behind him, and he was living out his professional life in a senior position at Oxford University Press as a long retrospect, a good deal of it passed in his favourite Oxford pubs. During this period he was a frequent reviewer for the *TLS*, often of work by New Zealand writers. He continued to write fiction, however, and Janet Wilson, New Zealand-born and a friend of the Davin family, has edited two volumes of his short stories: *The Gorse Blooms Pale*, his stories of childhood in Southland; and *The General and the Nightingale*, based on his experience as an officer in the New Zealand army during the Second World War. The first have the vividness and accuracy of childhood memory, the second an over-arching sense that this is history that is happening, the events so life-and-death real as to be never entirely comprehended by those who have to live through them.

In the childhood stories, life and death are also vivid: a dog that bites someone must be shot, a calf is killed with a hammer blow to the head because it is not a heifer. In both cases the killer is the father, the "strong" male, head of the house. But there is also a story about a strong, fastidious woman who shoots her insensitive and brutal husband and makes it look like an accident. The accuracy of memory is impressive and moving; the interactions of warring boys between two kinds of Irish, Catholic and Protestant, have sometimes a whiff of Richmal Crompton's William about them, but even-handed and with a straight face.

Davin had, for me, the special authority of one who had fought in a war I was old enough to be keenly aware of and remember vividly, but had been too young to take part in. These stories confirm that authority. Janet Wilson's editing is meticulous. In the Southland stories it is perhaps more detailed than necessary, somewhat overloaded with footnotes to matters either self-evident, or too minor to warrant explanation. The war stories, on the other hand, are

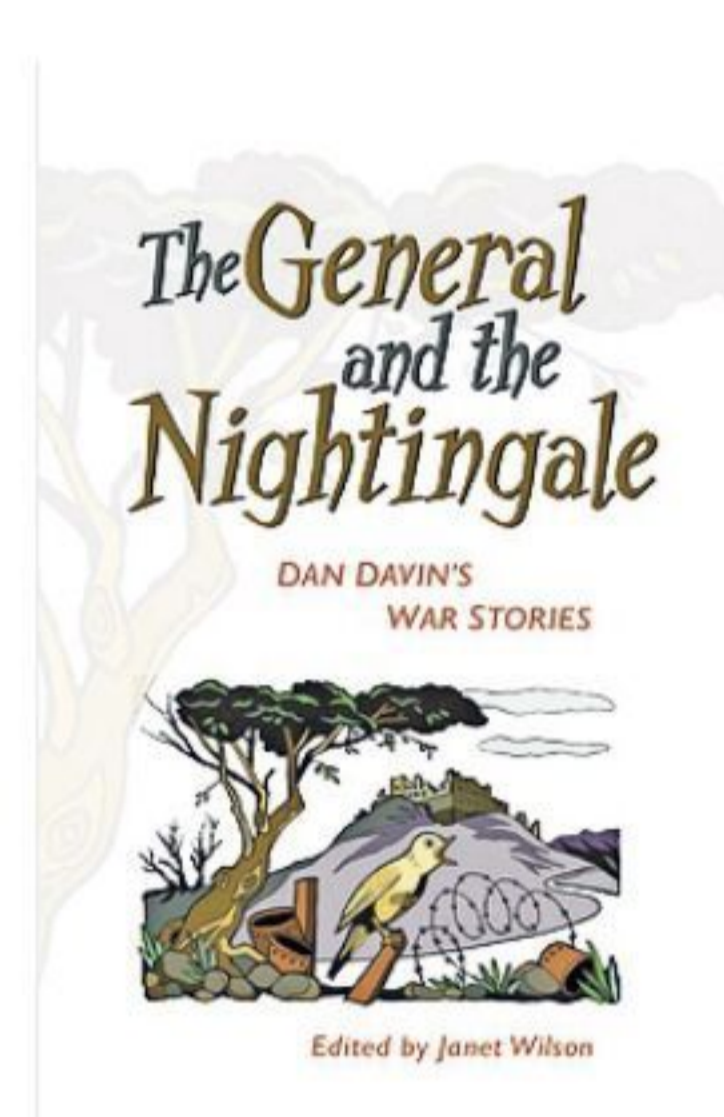
more in need of the detailed editing they get, partly because much soldiers' slang is long gone and largely forgotten, and in one or two of the first-person narratives Davin crams in the Kiwi vernacular to a point that seems more like a bid for the picturesque than authentic speech. The footnoting of these stories is also important because the battles often do need explanation - and Wilson's command of military detail, as well as her use of Davin's diaries, and her grasp of the geography of the Desert Campaign and the battles of Crete and Monte Cassino, is impressive.

Davin had just completed his Oxford degree as a Rhodes Scholar when the war broke out. He enlisted first for the British army but then had himself transferred to the New Zealand one. After the war, he returned to Oxford and remained there, with only two or three visits home, until his death in 1990 at the age of seventy-seven.

The dating of the war stories is revealing. Some were written while Davin was still engaged in the war as an active soldier, though most of his writing at that time was looking back to Southland and childhood. One of the war stories, "Danger's Flower", which must have been written soon after the Battle of Crete, is about waiting, wounded, to be evacuated, and feeling that he must shake off the dependence of a younger soldier whose terrified eyes constantly follow him. He is pleased with himself when he decides to do this bad thing ("The boy would devour him. He needed what little strength he had") - and then, contrary to his own resolve, he puts the young man's arm over his shoulder, hoists him to his feet, and they limp on together towards rescue. There is another written at this time about a Maori soldier whose brother has been shot after surrendering, and who consequently hates "the Ites", but is moved in ferociously cold weather to find clothing for a shivering Italian boy. These two stories are not dissimilar to one written almost forty years later, "The Dog and the Dead", about events following the second Battle of Alamein, won by the Allies, when the number of prisoners has become inconveniently difficult to manage. The narrator, an officer, is told by his batman that one grenade would rid them of the half-dozen miserable Germans in their charge. In the night he wakes to hear the batman taking something from their truck. Challenged to explain what he's up to, the batman reveals he has been taking blankets to the prisoners he had suggested they should be rid of. "It's a bloody cold night boss. You wouldn't put a dog out tonight." In each case, humanity overrules pragmatism.

Another, "Jaundiced", again about Davin's wounding in the Battle of Crete, reflects his rejection of his childhood faith. He expresses pity for the "poor padres" ("purveyors of a commodity as useful as holy water at a soup kitchen"), and for one Catholic chaplain in particular, "hatred and contempt".

But these seemingly random responses to the experience of the war are pulled into a more com-



plete picture by the addition of stories written decades later. I remember trying and failing to find good new war stories by Davin for an anthology to be published in 1966. It was as if, with only a few exceptions, he was observing the silence "returned men" are famous for - but then emerged out of it with a new collection of stories, *Breathing Spaces*, in 1975, and one specifically of war stories, *The Salamander and the Fire*, in 1986. In one of these later stories the narrator observes, looking back, "once you've been in a serious war there's never really peacetime for you again". There are still brutal truths about pain, ghastly wounds and sudden death; but there is now more about the psychological effects of trauma. The soldier who is wounded but on his feet, knows that his feeling of desperate need to get back to his company is irrational and more dangerous to him than his wound, but still escapes from the hospital tent at night and is found dead in a shell-hole next morning. The officer who deserts his men in fear during the Battle of Crete is dishonourably discharged and shoots himself rather than face the shame of being sent home as a coward.

When Davin returned to the subject of the Italian campaign and the struggle to get through or around the German's "Winter Line" at Monte Cassino, the fiction is more leisurely, more expansive, with time for the older man's reflections - including on their mysterious and much-admired General, Bernard Freyberg, VC, for whom Davin worked as Intelligence Officer, and whose biography he once thought of writing. The general worried constantly about the losses among his valued company commanders, and seemed obsessed and tormented at this time by news of spectacular Russian advances in the east while he was held down, unable to make the breakthrough. The emotional attachment of Freyberg to his officers was close, and in one or two of the stories we catch a glimpse of Davin trying to take the older man's recognition and affection away from a rival. And Freyberg's fearlessness (or recklessness) is the subject of Davin's title story, in which the general, ignoring the alarm of fellow officers with him in the jeep, orders his driver to stop in an area often targeted by German artillery so he can listen and confirm that it was indeed a nightingale he had just heard singing.

But it was in a story written just after the war was over that one of Davin's first-person narrators reflects

We'd never give anything again what we'd given to the Div. We'd never bring the same energy to anything that we'd brought to things like the breakthrough at Minqar Qaim or the assault on Cassino. And we'd never be able to make friends in the same way or drink and laugh and die the same way.

It is clumsy but deeply felt, and Janet Wilson, quoting it in her introduction, calls it a "concluding requiem for his generation, reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', on how war determined their finest moments, their closest friendships, yet robbed them of their best years".

These stories are uneven in quality; but together with his novels *For the Rest of Our Lives* (1949) and *The Sullen Bell* (1954), and his authorship of the official New Zealand war history of the Battle of Crete, they confirm Dan Davin's pre-eminence as the recorder of a significant episode in New Zealand's twentieth-century history. ■

C. K. Stead's books include *The New Poetic*, 1964, *Sister Hollywood*, 1989, and *Kin of Place: Essays on twenty New Zealand writers*, 2002



Another country?

Teaching and re-reading *The Whitsun Weddings*

ANDREW MICHAEL HURLEY

OPENING UP MY OLD COPY of *The Whitsun Weddings*, I find that Philip Larkin's words are almost drowned out by my finicky pencil annotations. When I scribbled them down almost twenty years ago, I was in my first year of teaching, over-preparing for each class and anxious to pass on the "correct" interpretations to my students. I had it in my head that, to them, poetry was a foreign language and I was there to provide translations. When it came to their exam, that meant they might be able to write, *When Larkin says x, he means y*.

Of their essays - to quote Mr Irwin in Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* - it's safe to say that their "sheer competence was staggering". At the end of the course, they could identify satire, oxymoron or internal rhyme and make a number of sensible suggestions about what they allowed Larkin to express. But whether the poems meant anything to them, I don't know. And if they didn't, then was all they got from reading them a grade on results day? Who could tell? But as the exam board assessed the worth of the students (and their teacher) by attainment, I was probably more concerned at the time that they'd met predicted targets than how deeply the literature we'd studied resounded in their souls.

Now I wonder why, as a department, we chose Larkin at all from the options on the syllabus. I suspect it was something to do with his poems being more "accessible" than those of, say, W. H. Auden or T. S. Eliot. Being judged on results, who wouldn't take the path of least resistance? But if the study of poetry becomes merely an easy stepping stone to a certificate, then is one of its fundamental reasons for existing diminished? Explaining a poem and feeling it resonate aren't quite the same thing, and, reading *The Whitsun Weddings* again, I find myself questioning the logic of teaching a collection of poetry (published in 1964) the content of which was often completely removed from the life experience the students had. As one of Hector's pupils complains elsewhere in *The History Boys*, "most of the stuff poetry's about hasn't happened to us yet".

Not everything that we read necessarily needs to be familiar in order for it to mean *something*, of course, and a well-written piece of fiction, in any form, can enable us to feel as if we have lived the

emotions of the characters. But Larkin's poems arrive at the "big themes" - love, death, fear, time and so on - via very specific adult experiences. The joylessness of married life in "Self's the Man"; the terror of purposelessness in "Toads Revisited"; the suspicion in "Afternoons" that for the young mothers in the park, fear or expectation has chosen marriage and domesticity *for* them and "Something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives".

Many of these poems are riddled with a characteristic cynicism that was always quite alien to my students. They hadn't yet encountered the things at which the personae of the poems had failed. They simply didn't have the neuroses of adults. If, as Larkin says in "Dockery and Son", "Life is first boredom, then fear", they were generally in the boredom stage (especially on Friday afternoons).

While the emotional textures were unfamiliar to them, the postwar world that Larkin depicts in his poems must have felt even more remote. To me, it was at least half-known. This was the world my grandparents had inhabited and in which my parents had grown up. I knew the kind of "red kitchenware" Larkin alludes to in "Here" and could picture exactly the "saucer souvenir" into which "Mr Bleaney" once "stubbed his fags": my grandparents' house was full of them. And in the title poem of the collection, the wedding parties with their "girls / In parodies of fashion, heels and veils", "The nylon gloves and jewellery substitutes / The lemons, mauves and olive-ochres", might have been at any of the family nuptials I was dragged to as a child.

But if that world was fading when I was young, then it had vanished completely by the time I started teaching. The first A-level students I tutored were born in 1985, the year Larkin died, and the last were children of the new millennium. Between the two cohorts, the way we live changed profoundly. In a manner reminiscent of the global upheaval suggested in "MCMXIV", the old dispensation went and a new one emerged in a form that no one could have imagined. In the age of Facebook, Instagram and Uber, how distant even simple things like postcards and Pullmans seemed, how archaic the courting rituals in "Wild Oats", with its narrator who "Wrote over four hundred letters, / Gave a ten-guinea ring".

Alan Bennett calls the recent past the "most remote of all periods", and as each academic year passed, I found that my job as translator was

Philip Larkin by Martin Jennings, Paragon Station, Hull

“
In the age of Facebook, Instagram and Uber, how distant even simple things like postcards and Pullmans seemed

Andrew Michael Hurley is a novelist and short story writer. The paperback of his latest novel, Starve Acre, was published last year

focused on explaining the *things* in the poems as much as the words and images. What the hell was a "guinea"? Or a "porter"? Or "Bri-Nylon"?

The importance placed on this contextual knowledge by the exam boards came and went like fashion, but in those years when it was imperative that the students could make connections between the writer and the work, they were appalled by some of Larkin's personal views.

His private attitudes to "foreigners" are now well known, and while there is nothing xenophobic expressed in *The Whitsun Weddings*, his correspondence is peppered with a casual Little England racism. That being the case, it's valid to ask how (and if) we should teach the work of a writer who remarked "I always feel London is very unhealthy - I can hear fat Caribbean germs pattering after me in the Underground"? We could think of his bigotry as simply a product of a less enlightened era, but that gifts our age with a progressiveness it doesn't always have, and perhaps it just lets him off the hook. Intolerance is always a choice, after all. So, what to do?

The conundrum is hardly new. Writing in the *TLS* in 1992, Tom Paulin famously described the poet's then newly published letters as "a revolting compilation which imperfectly reveals and conceals the sewer under the national monument Larkin became". And Larkin remains a contentious figure today, not least when we consider him in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement which has rightly made us think again, and more urgently, about who we put on pedestals, literally and literarily. And it is this enquiry into the attitudes of those who create, or created, the art which comprises the literary establishment that prompts a further discussion about how far we can admire the writing but not the writer, and whether to venerate a piece of work is to give credence to the political attitudes of the person who produced it.

There is no simple answer to any of these questions. Take Larkin's adoration of Margaret Thatcher, his racial prejudices, his contempt for trade unions: he and I couldn't be further apart in our views. Yet his poems speak to me profoundly, and as a writer I've learnt a great deal from him.

I don't deny that that's problematic. For me to enjoy Larkin's work is to engage in a kind of uncomfortable, unsatisfactory doublethink, being simultaneously aware of his unpleasant private opinions and yet allowing myself the freedom to be moved by his writing.

But as paradoxical as it may be, that freedom has to be available to us, at least. Otherwise we dismiss the power that art has to transcend the singularity of the artist and become a separate entity capable of expressing universal truths. There is often no clear mechanism by which we can dovetail the words we read and the true feelings of the writer who set them down. To a large extent, the act of writing fiction or poetry is an act of separation. And also illumination, of the world and of the self. No writer puts pen to paper deliberately to thicken the walls of their psychological prison (which might include their own narrow-mindedness) but to make some attempt to scale them and see them for what they are from the outside.

Re-reading *The Whitsun Weddings*, I'm reminded how many of the poems are about the desire to escape, physically and emotionally, from places, people, politics, marriage, sex and all the other things Larkin considered to be spuriously upheld as the apogees of happiness and personhood. He never quite reaches the "unfenced existence" glimpsed at the end of "Here", but it is in the struggle to see things differently that the futility of human experience is ever more accurately and beautifully observed.

I think again of those first students I taught. They'd be the age now that Larkin was when he wrote many of the poems that found their way into the collection. I wonder if they were to read them again as I've done, they might at last see something of themselves in these pages. ■

A stranger even at home

Three exiled writers show how we are haunted by the past

ELIF SHAFAK

THREE RINGS

A tale of exile, narrative, and fate
DANIEL MENDELSON
128pp. University of Virginia Press.
£17.50 (US \$19.95).

ALL STORIES ARE ABOUT OTHER STORIES, all writers in silent conversation with other writers, including those who are no longer alive. That is what came to mind as I read Daniel Mendelsohn's spectacular new book, *Three Rings: A tale of narrative, exile and faith*.

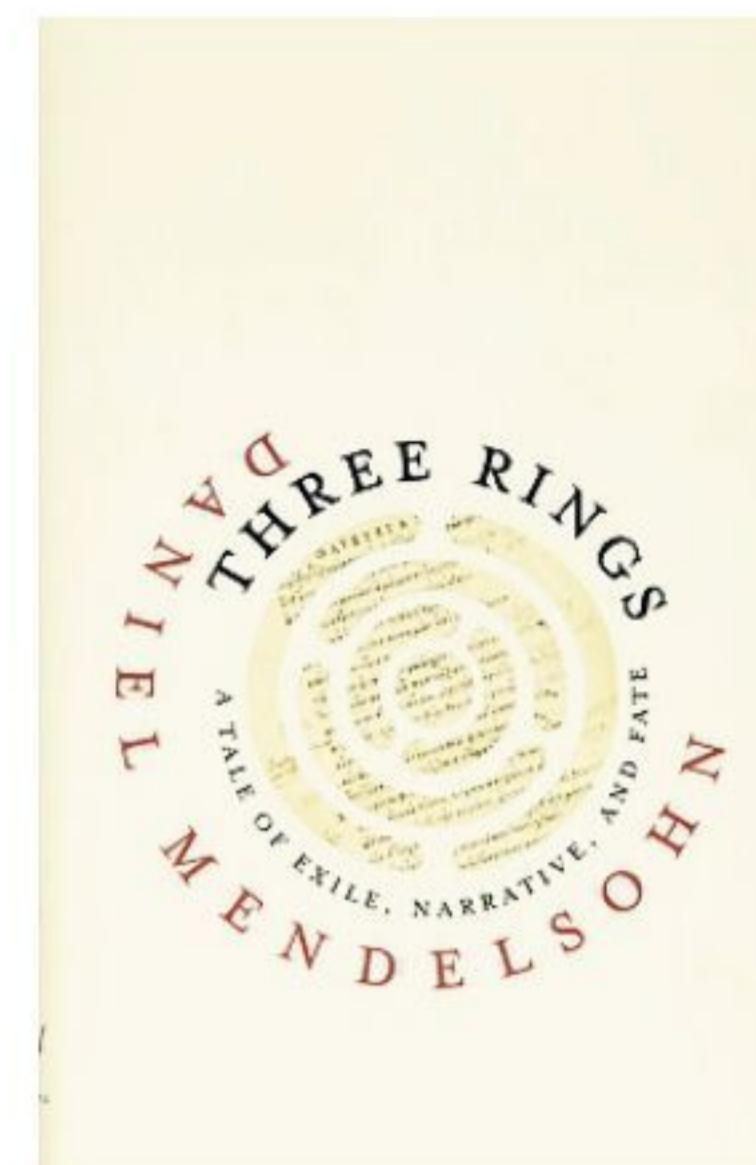
Mendelsohn is a memoirist, essayist, columnist, cultural critic and classicist. He says he was a fervent model-maker in his early youth, and that passion perhaps expresses itself in this book, which is built like an intricate model with multiple doors. But whereas a model would be solid, with hard edges and set corners, Mendelsohn's style is

more liquid. The reader feels the flow of a strong narrative, trusts the author's seafaring skills and embarks on a brilliant journey.

This seemingly slim volume about belonging, non-belonging and displacement starts with the story of the writer's Jewish ancestors, many of whom were killed during the Holocaust. But this is a book about travels as much as it is about memory - individual and collective - and how the past continues to chase us, haunt us, even when we think we are miles and decades away. Mendelsohn shies away neither from being intellectual nor from being sentimental; *Three Rings* has echoes of Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt. He is one of the very few male scholars and critics who put almost equal emphasis on knowledge and feelings. The result is a book that is as nuanced, insightful and well informed as it is honest, raw, painful and touchingly human.

Mendelsohn focuses on three exiled authors. There is Erich Auerbach, a German Jew who found shelter in Istanbul in 1936. (Hard though it is to believe now, Turkish universities once offered refuge to intellectuals persecuted in their motherlands.) Then there is the German writer and academic W. G. Sebald, the author of *The Rings of Saturn*, who lived in self-imposed exile in the UK. Perhaps most surprising, however, is the third figure: the French theologian, poet and author François Fenelon (1651-1715), who wrote about the adventures of Telemachus in search of his father Ulysses. Fenelon himself was exiled because his writing offended those in power.

Les Aventures de Télémaque (1699) was once the most widely read French book in the Ottoman Empire. It is a little known fact that French translations had a huge impact on Ottoman intellectuals from diverse backgrounds (Muslim, Christian and Jewish), shaping not only their literary and artistic



Elif Shafak's new novel, The Island of Missing Trees, will be published later this year

quests but also social and political queries, at the tumultuous moment when the empire was coming to an end. Mendelsohn reminds us of how strong and elastic the bonds once were between East and West. "Fenelon's adaptation of the *Odyssey* was able to flourish in the very land where, as Homer recounts, the wealthy and exotic eastern city of Troy once flourished and where today the ruined remnants of that lavish capital ... are to be found." Hence the *Odyssey* has not only preoccupied countless authors across centuries of Western literature but also had a strong impact on non-Western cultures; Mendelsohn deftly connects the dots.

By following the stories of three exiled writers, and linking centuries and cultures, Mendelsohn uses circles, or rings, as an ingenious narrative technique which dovetails neatly with his own memories of reading the *Odyssey* with his elderly father. One of his main points is that you can write about your culture only if you dare to step outside it. Leave and return, only to leave again. Throughout *Three Rings*, this pendulum keeps swinging, enabling us to see two ways and transcend dualities of East and West, past and present, insider and outsider. It is as if the author is holding two prisms in his hands.

At a time when we are systematically reduced to singular identities and clashing certainties, *Three Rings* is a glorious celebration of multiplicity, diversity, journeys, transformations and our common humanity. It is also a dose of sanity. The author sees the dangers of ignorance, hatred and xenophobia, and shows that history does not necessarily always move forward in a neat linear way. And finally, there is a calm acceptance here that, for the traveller who is trying to get back home, knowing that home has changed in his absence, home is no longer what it used to be, and therefore, the traveller will always remain in exile, even when he is finally back - especially then. ■

Close, distant, surface, hyper

On reading and being read

GILL PARTINGTON

FURTHER READING

MATTHEW RUBERY AND LEAH PRICE, EDITORS

432pp. Oxford University Press. £100.

READERS OF THIS NEW ANTHOLOGY might find themselves oddly conscious of what they're actually doing with it. They could be engaged in what Deirdre Lynch's chapter calls "assigned" reading - studying it because they have to (if, for example, they need to review it for a literary newspaper). They might be going about it in a non-linear fashion, skipping some parts and returning several times to others, a mode of "repeat" reading analysed by Christina Lupton. They may recite sections out loud to someone else which, as Joseph Howley shows, was standard practice in Ancient Rome: "reading" actually meant being read to by one's slave. If they are handling and turning the pages of a physical copy, they will experience the book in what Gillian Silverman calls

a haptic mode - although maybe not quite so much as readers of Marcel Duchamp's "Prière de toucher" (1947; Please Touch), which had a foam rubber breast on its front cover. They may also suddenly realize that they are "subvocalising", which, as described by Christopher Grobe, is the mental sounding-out of written syllables.

Readers might also end up wondering what on earth reading is, which is precisely the point of this fascinating collection. It has become a hot topic in academia in recent years, as witnessed by an increasingly complicated taxonomy of its different modes: close, deep, distant, surface and hyper. But rather than dutifully map out the state of the field, *Further Reading* pushes at its boundaries and makes new connections, as its title suggests. The concept of "distant" reading - usually associated with Franco Moretti's idea of big data about books - shifts sideways here. In Elaine Treharne's essay, it's a way to think about medieval "readers" experiencing the book from afar (illiterate people listening to a book being read aloud, for instance, or venerating its image in depictions of the saints and apostles). Moretti himself, meanwhile, makes an appearance in Lisa Gitelman's chapter, in which his statistical approach is considered as a kind of "not reading". Garrett Stewart's teasingly titled chapter on "actual" reading doesn't give us any easy answers either, but is all about the difficulty of defining it, as it slips into the cracks between the senses, between written mark and imagined sound.

This book is a substantial contribution to the study of reading not because it delivers a definitive picture of its subject, but because it delivers a sprawling and heterogeneous one. Its thirty-one snappy essays, many of them by well-known academics, span different disciplines and diverse angles: disability studies, computation, neuroscience and psychology, as well as bibliography. One overriding theme emerges. The norms of reading are thrown into question and the kind of misty-eyed sentimentality that often surrounds it is bracingly dispelled. As the editors write, "you won't find any breezy assertions here



Further Reading

Edited by Matthew Rubery and Leah Price

Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature

that reading stories makes us better people". The conventional picture of reading as silent and solitary immersion in literature is consistently chipped away. As Steven Connor and Johanna Drucker show, we are reading all the time, whether we choose to or not. The world is constantly assailing us with signs, billboards and scrolling, flashing and ephemeral messages of all kinds.

The contents are arranged not chronologically but in categories such as "Scenes", "Styles", "Senses" and "Brains", roughly corresponding to questions of where, how and with what we read; the disciplinary joins start to show a little when it comes to "Brains". If literary studies is occupied with dislodging literature as the focal point of reading, neuropsychology seems to be just as busy reinstating it. In this collection at least, the likeliest place to find someone reading poetry or Jane Austen is in a brain scanner. A final section, "Futures", is more speculative, exploring reading's outer reaches. Here the focus shifts from what is being read to the stranger question of who - or what - is doing the reading. Stephen Ramsay argues that, in the era of machine reading, it is we who are "read by the minute", by algorithmic technologies. Whitney Trettien likewise highlights how our media have turned the tables on us: a Kindle reads us as much as we read it, tracking our progress and recording our favourite passages.

Trettien shows how artists' books, too, play with this idea: Heather Weston's heat-sensitive pages respond to the touch of a reader's hand to reveal hidden text. Jessica Pressman goes one stage further. Yes, reading now routinely done in collaboration with "non-human actors" (machines, screens and software); but Jose Alburto's self-animating electronic poetry, she suggests, works in ways that don't require the involvement of an external reader. It effectively reads itself. Once that most defining of human inventions, reading might soon, in some contexts at least, become something to which humans are no longer central, or even necessary. ■

Gill Partington is an academic who researches and writes about unconventional books and reading practices



A rush of blood

How the Danish invasions paved the way for the Normans

ALEX BURGHART

AFTER ALFRED

Anglo-Saxon chronicles and chroniclers,
900–1150

PAULINE STAFFORD

400pp. Oxford University Press. £75 (US \$100).

CONQUESTS IN ELEVENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

1016, 1066

**LARA ASHE AND EMILY JOAN WARD,
EDITORS**

440pp. Boydell. £70.

EDWARD THE CONFESSOR

Last of the royal blood

TOM LICENCE

384pp. Yale University Press. £25 (US \$35).

ENGLAND HAS NOT been conquered very often. How peculiar then that in the eleventh century it was conquered three times in fifty-three years: once in 1013 by the Danish king, Swein Forkbeard, once in 1016 by his son, Cnut, and finally, and most famously, by William of Normandy in 1066. What makes these conquests odder still is that historians have come to see eleventh-century England as a precociously sophisticated state - its shires, law, currency and powers of monarchical patronage components in an exceptionally capable early medieval machine.

The lead engineers of this administrative contraption were the family of Alfred the Great (d. 899), whose progeny conquered the Danelaw and imposed a new political geography on it - one that focused power squarely on the king. Just as the dynasty built its own institutional buttresses, so they built intellectual buttresses - among which was a set of Old English annals that came to be known as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the initial version of which appears to have been written at Alfred's court. In *After Alfred*, Pauline Stafford's superb new history of the several vernacular chronicles (emphasis on the plural) spawned by Alfred's, she shows how

these copies and continuations were embellished and edited in different times and places over the following 250 years. Stafford has acquired a depth of knowledge that allows her artfully to fathom the dark waters that crash about her material. Hers is a reminder - of major significance - of how these unutterably complex manuscripts should be read: with caution and context in equal measure. Although there are reliable modern editions of the extant manuscripts, the best translations often make it hard for the reader to disentangle the chronicles' differing constructions and concerns. To tackle this, Stafford treats each recension in turn (along with some of their lost but resurrectable antecedents) and so reveals their separate preoccupations and purposes.

Although these were many, a central thread was the ongoing legitimization of Alfred's dynasty. There are, for example, continuations which promote the cause of his daughter, Æthelflæd (d. 918), and his grandson, Athelstan (d. 934), from the perspective of the Mercians whose kingdom was absorbed into Wessex. Likewise, as Stafford unpicks, vernacular chronicling was used in the late tenth century by Southumbrians appointed to the archbishopric of York - apparently to make the case for the wide rule of southern kings while weaving northern history into that story. And, similarly, after 1066, one chronicle showed an interest in the last descendants of the old English royal house roving in exile. Through such entries one can, Stafford suggests, hear the voices of groups deeply involved in the events recorded: regional members of an elite wired into the royal national grid.

Audiences are harder to identify but they presumably hailed from the same learned, literate, well-connected set - those with a vested interest and belief in England and its rightful kings. It is possible that access to chronicles was, in some sense, open; the Anglo-Norman historian Gaimar wrote of "a big book called *Chronicles* ... at Winchester, in the cathedral ... King Alfred had it in his possession. And had it bound with a chain. Who wished to read might well see it, but not remove it from its place". Such annals were, as Stafford puts it, part of the "confirmatory telling of the past to ourselves"; a sort of conversation with past and future which started up whenever it had something to say.

Edward the Confessor, as shown at the beginning of the Bayeux Tapestry in a nineteenth-century reproduction

“**While they ruled, the conquerors were praised by their countrymen and despised by the English**”

Alex Burghart is MP for Brentwood and Ongar

If this was part of the art of artificing legitimacy, there were more brutal means available. Some of these are the subject of an excellent new collection of essays edited by Laura Ashe and Emily Joan Ward comparing the conquests of 1016 and 1066 (an introductory essay to tie them all together would not have gone amiss). In the case of both invasions, Bruce O'Brien spells out, "a less sophisticated, less politically centralized kingdom or duchy ... conquered its more sophisticated, more developed and richer neighbour". Their ability to do so exposes just how susceptible the machinery of state was to being administered by outsiders once the system had accepted them. As Rory Naismith argues, one of the finest insights into this co-option of Anglo-Saxon structures is the English coinage, which was already highly regulated and receptive to royal demands, but which both conquerors could exploit for their own ends; Cnut to support a massive extraction of tribute, William by taxing the moneyers and employing more of them. Indeed, it was orderly systems such as these that explain England's susceptibility to conquest - if an invader could achieve military supremacy and seize the controls he could drive the kingdom wherever he wished.

None of this excluded the need for softer diplomacy and divine support. Both conquerors, as Sarah Foot shows, championed the established cult of the great St Cuthbert but also rapidly promoted that of the king-saint Edmund of East Anglia, elevating him from regional to patron saint in a few decades. A profound difference between the two kings, however, is highlighted by John Gillingham in a fascinating essay on a major cultural contribution of the Normans: their abolition of slavery. This, Gillingham argues, was due to their code of war - rather than their religion - which had come to see the enslavement of Christians as barbarous.

Neither Cnut nor William was popular with the conquered during his reign. Elisabeth van Houts sagely makes the point that, while they ruled, the conquerors were praised by their countrymen and despised by the English. Subsequently their reputations were reassessed; Cnut's reign ultimately benefiting from comparison to the atrocities of William's, which saw the wholesale obliteration of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy. To be sure, Cnut had brought in Danes, but there were still enough powerful Englishmen around in 1042 to make plausible the succession of Edward the Confessor (1042-66), the son of Æthelred the Unready (d. 1016) whom Swein and Cnut had defeated.

When Edward died, it was a different story. The heir to the line of Alfred the Great, Edgar Ætheling, great-grandson of the Unready, did not inherit. Instead a man with no blood claim, Harold Godwinson, gained the crown. It has often been argued that this was because Edgar was just a boy but, as Emily Joan Ward shows in her deft essay on child kings, this need not have been a barrier; in 1066, France and Germany both had minors on the throne. The barrier was, as ever, other people. A point well made by Charles Insley is that a consequence of the age of Cnut was that, even before William arrived, England's elite - being already part English, part Danish, part Norman - was no longer wholly dedicated to the Alfredian project as their tenth-century predecessors had been.

Tom Licence's brilliant new biography of the Englishman who regained the kingdom from the Danes is an exceptional history - a more than worthy successor to Frank Barlow's great *Life of Edward the Confessor* some fifty years ago. Its huge success is to disentangle the sources and rebuild Edward's story from first principles. Whereas Barlow's *Confessor* was a weak man, Licence's is shrewd, ambitious and assertive - a king who, determined to escape his childhood exile in Normandy and reclaim his throne, presented himself as a quasi-divine figure and purposefully and successfully engaged in cross-Channel and trans-European politics, and whose survival and twenty-four-year reign stand in contrast to the assassination of his uncle, Edward the Martyr (d. 978), and the defeats of his father,

Æthelred the Unready, and his brother, Edmund Ironside (d. 1016).

In recent years, many assumptions about late Anglo-Saxon England have been questioned. Stephen Baxter has undermined the “overmighty subject” theory by showing how Edward commanded considerably vaster estates and powers of patronage than anyone else in the kingdom. George Garnett has convincingly demolished the post hoc claims of both Harold Godwinson and William the Con-

queror that Edward had promised them the throne - these were simply opportunists who seized their day. Licence’s revitalized Confessor belongs to this world: one in which Edward was no patsy but a keen and clever deployer of his considerable power, who did not offer the kingdom to those who had no right to rule it. Licence builds the case that Edward deliberately brought Edgar Ætheling, his brother’s grandson, back from exile so that he could succeed to his blood right.

But legitimacy was changing - poetic notions of English royal blood were losing their potency. No doubt they mattered to Edward and those who thought like him. To those who supported Cnut’s sons in 1035 or Harold in 1066 they mattered less. The kingdom’s movers and shakers had seen that the Anglo-Saxon state was robust enough to function without its Anglo-Saxon founding family - the spell cast by the old kings and their chronicles was being broken. ■



“
The Vikings cared about hairstyles, had nine different types of bread and practised a shamanistic sorcery

A Viking re-enactment group on Lindisfarne

Longships and short tempers

A reassessment of the Vikings and their world

JANE KERSHAW

THE CHILDREN OF ASH AND ELM

A history of the Vikings
NEIL PRICE

624pp. Allen Lane. £30.

ARGUABLY, THE TRUE FACE of the Vikings is hidden behind trowelfuls of historiographic concealer (in fact, the Vikings did wear eyeliners). We all think that we know them: weaponized, pagan, male maritime aggressors, leaving Scandinavia in longships to raid for treasure (and don’t forget the strong, independent women they left to run the home farm). This reductive image fits, more or less, with written descriptions left behind by the Vikings’ victims, and is perpetuated across modern cultural media. Since the medieval period, the Viking stereotype has been appropriated to serve different agendas, particularly by those promoting right-wing ideologies. At times, as Neil Price writes, “it can seem that the actual people have almost disappeared under the cumulative freight they have been made to bear”.

These freighted stereotypes are blown out of the water in Price’s enthralling new history. This is a comprehensive, lyrically told and personal account

of the Viking Age, the product of more than thirty years of experience as a leading archaeologist and researcher. Many books assess the “Viking achievement”. *The Children of Ash and Elm* examines instead who the Vikings were, how they saw themselves and why they did what they did.

It’s surprisingly rare in syntheses of this period to look back into the deep history of Scandinavia. But Price argues that it was in the fifth and sixth centuries, and the instability caused by the demise of the Roman Empire, that the seeds for the Viking Age were sown. Controversially, he suggests that a sixth-century climate disaster caused by two volcanic eruptions created a dust veil, prompting years of successive winters and a potential halving of the population. A new class of “violent chancers” seized land, creating a patchwork of small, militaristic kingdoms financed by the exploitation and trade of domestic resources: tar, animal skins, iron (for weapons). Here, then, we have the basic ingredients: competing kingdoms, long-distance trade, structural violence.

Price devotes half the book to life at home in Scandinavia, for it is here we meet the Vikings on their own, culturally rich terms. The Vikings cared about hairstyles; had nine different types of bread; practised a shamanistic sorcery; and many were able to carve and read runes. Surviving inscriptions (arguably an underused source) testify to everyday concerns. In Bergen, just after the Viking Age, someone received the instruction: “Gyda tells you to go home”. The scrawled, perhaps drunken, reply is unfortunately illegible. But these are people we can relate to.

Yet this relatedness is superficial. The Viking mind, Price stresses, is not a familiar place. The people of Viking-Age Scandinavia shared their physical landscape with many others - a multitude of gods, giants, spirits, all spanning different worlds connected by the Great Ash, Yggdrasil, from whom they were descended. Their bodies (*hamr*) were shared too, with separate mind (*hugr*), luck (*hamingja*) and guardian (*fylgja*) beings. Disconcertingly, they could act on their own.

This strangeness lies at the heart of Price’s reading of the Vikings. It is perhaps most tangible in

Viking approaches to death. Burials are diverse, often macabre affairs which, Price suggests, reflect the final stage in a performance of ritual theatre, referencing Norse myth. In one, a pair of horses lies bisected, the halves swapped. It is no exaggeration that “one could fill a book with things like this”.

Price also explores the rationale for the Viking expansion. He roots it in internal Scandinavian developments: endemic warfare between small, maritime polities, now with greater access to international markets (imagine a “muddy, riverine Deadwood, with greater ethnic variety, plus swords”), coupled with “clear notions of preordained fatalism”, another aspect of the Viking mind. Price is laudably unafraid of controversy, and some interpretations here may ruffle academic feathers. He argues that many Viking-Age marriages were polygynous, seeing a shortage of women at home as a causal factor of the Viking raids. Yet many scholars would question whether polygyny was practised below the level of the elite. Similarly, Price’s treatment of gender as a fluid concept in the Viking Age may be true in some aspects of life, such as ritual practice. But there is plenty of evidence that most lives were lived within plainly patriarchal structures.

Viking armies, large and mobile, had a devastating impact on the places they raided; Price likens them to pirate polities. They also brought about a transformation within Scandinavian society, as the economy was reorganized towards the large-scale production of timber for ships and woollen textiles for sails: the Viking Age, writes Price, was the “Age of the sheep farmer”. Importantly, such production was supported by slave labour, with women in particular (captives of Viking raids?) working in dim, dank, sunken huts at the loom.

Here, then, are the Vikings in full colour. The lived reality may sometimes have been more monotone, but no other history of the Vikings is as vibrant or expands the scope of the Viking world to encompass not just landscapes, but mindscapes. ■

Jane Kershaw is an archaeologist of the Viking Age at the Institute of Archaeology, Oxford. She currently leads an ERC research project, *Silver and the Origins of the Viking Age*

THE JAMES JOYCE QUARTERLY

is the leading forum for research and debate around one of the world’s most influential authors.

JOIN US IN PRINT OR ONLINE:
JJQ.UTULSA.EDU

THE UNIVERSITY of TULSA
TU is an EEO/AA institution, including Disability/Veteran.

Corpsing, drying and fluffing

FICTION

LUCKENBOOTH
JENNI FAGAN

338pp. Heinemann. £16.99.

“Where id was, there ego shall be.” The construction of an orderly and open New Town down the hill from Edinburgh’s dark and ancient heart might be seen as the city’s attempt to psychoanalyse itself. If an impressive “Scottish Enlightenment” ensued, so did an enduring cautionary significance. The narrow closes and towering tenements of the Old Town remained - no longer homely and familiar but frightening and alien. Generations of writers have found in Edinburgh a ready-made metaphor for the discontents attendant on civilization; the repression on which modernity was built.

No novelist has registered the impact of this cruelty on the life of the individual more forcefully than Jenni Fagan, in *The Panopticon* (2012), *The Sunlight Pilgrims* (2016) and several collections of poetry. An audacious statement and a terrific read, *Luckenbooth* asserts her right to participate in this most central of Scottish traditions while reinventing it for the twenty-first century.

The original luckenbooths were lockable market stalls on the Old Town’s High Street. Here the name belongs to a single, shabby tenement building which - in the wondering eyes of one resident - “stares down the city day after day like a slutty girl with a God complex”. The novel traces its fortunes - and those of a succession of its occupants - through eight decades. Among others, we meet a transwoman who comes to “drag parties” here in 1928; a young African American man working in the “bone library” of the veterinary college in 1939; a girl preparing to carry out special operations in occupied France; a professional medium in the 1950s and a young artist-outcast squatting here in 1999.

There is both community and separateness around this stair. The comings and goings of tenement life bestow a special relationship with time. Much of Edinburgh’s earlier history finds its way in - the conventional, the “unofficial” and the downright folkloric. The result is a kaleidoscopic scene: an oppressive normality constantly jarred and jostled by acts of individual rebellion and of love.

Arcing over all is the story of Jessie MacRae, a poor servant-girl and “devil’s child”, who in 1910 arrives in a city she sees is ruled by a sinister patriarchy, whose members are as menacing in their familiar manner as their tyrannical authority. “They sit in courtrooms. Deal out judgement. Turn up to football games. They turn a red leather barber’s chair and welcome

your child with a lollipop and a wide reptilian smile. They act in theatres. Teach in schools.”

The narrative that follows is at its core what R. L. Stevenson self-deprecatingly called a “crawler”, with all the unabashed sensationalism that implies. But also with its suggestion of a civic respectability dogged by a deep malevolence which is, at bottom, all its own. For Fagan, we are haunted not just by the dead but by those whose gender, sexuality, race or class has meant their marginalization, their exclusion from the life of society at large.

Michael Kerrigan

HISTORY

NOVEMBER 1918

The German revolution

ROBERT GERWARTH

368pp. Oxford University Press.
£20 (US \$25.95).

Condemned on the right as treasonous and subversive, and on the left as preferring compromise with the old order; associated with a humiliating defeat and social and economic chaos: the German Revolution of 1918 and its product, the Weimar Republic, suffered greatly from a lack of political legitimacy. Historians, too, have linked the flaws of the revolution to the failed “republic without republicans” and its inglorious end with the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Revolution and republic have had their defenders, particularly among Social Democrats. During the 1970s, some authors, inspired by the 1960s New Left, emphasized the participatory democracy of the revolution’s workers’ and soldiers’ councils. These positive voices have never been in the ascendancy, however, and the few centenary commemorations in 2018 paled before the 1998 sesquicentenary of another German revolution, that of 1848.

Employing two new perspectives, Robert Gerwarth aims to provide a more positive evaluation. In his book, the revolution of 1918 appears in the light of the centenary re-evaluations of the Great War, which have emphasized its global features, the profound socio-economic upheaval occurring in its wake, and the continuation of wartime violence for a good half-decade beyond the armistice of 1918. Another new perspective is a more positive appraisal of the Weimar Republic, stressing its emancipatory potential for women and for gay sexuality, and its periods of success during the mid- and later 1920s.

There are lively and knowledgeable descriptions of the classic set pieces of the revolution: the sailors’ mutiny in Kiel which began the uprising, the Kaiser’s abdication, the proclamation of the republic in Berlin and Munich, the armistice,

the National Assembly in Weimar and the constitution it wrote, newly enfranchised women’s political enthusiasm, widespread hopes for a moderate peace, the great disappointment with the harsh Treaty of Versailles, the murder of the communist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, the creation of a communist regime in, of all places, Bavaria, and its violent suppression. The promised new perspectives, though, are missing or fragmentary.

The global approach appears in a brief comparison of the Versailles Treaty with those imposed on Germany’s wartime allies, showing that the former was noticeably less severe. The book pulls up short in 1919, so that the whole era of open or latent civil war lasting until 1923, about which Gerwarth himself has done some interesting work, is not incorporated. A brief description at the end of the book of the many virtues of the Weimar Republic does not make clear what these features had to do with the revolution. Gerwarth’s discussion of potential problems for the Republic after 1919, including the rise of the Nazis, or the complex question of war reparations and the loans to finance them, is even briefer. *November 1918* is readable and informative, but it does not deliver the promised new perspectives, or reappraise the revolution in the context of the centenary of the First World War and its aftermath.

Jonathan Sperber

BEATS

THE JOAN ANDERSON LETTER

The holy grail of the Beat Generation

NEAL CASSADY

Edited by A. Robert Lee
190pp. Black Spring Press. £20.

Neal Cassady was the muse of the Beat Generation. He emerges as Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, the car-stealing, fast-talking “new kind of American Saint”, while Allen Ginsberg extolled Cassady as the “secret hero” of *Howl and Other Poems*. As A. Robert Lee explains in a detailed and lively introduction to *The Joan Anderson Letter*, Cassady, an autodidact who read voraciously in prison, didn’t see himself as a writer. The poet and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti agreed, remarking on the “home-spun primitive prose” of Cassady’s off-key memoir, *The First Third*. As a letter writer, however, Cassady made his mark. Kerouac acknowledged the influence of his singular epistolary style - “all first person, fast, mad, confessional ... all detailed” - on the spontaneous writing style he developed in *On the Road*.

In December 1950, Cassady wrote a 16,000-word letter to Kerouac, which became known as “The Joan Anderson Letter”. Snippets of the letter appeared in print over the years, but the original missive was thought lost or purloined - until it emerged, a decade ago, in an office clear-out. The letter recounts Cassady’s adventures in Denver, where he meets the eponymous Joan, who is five months pregnant, and who attempts suicide. The letter is picaresque and at times poetic: “I awake to more horrors than Céline”, Cassady writes, “I am fettered by cobwebs, countless fine creases indelibly etched on the brain”.

Although it was Kerouac who craved literary recognition, telling the literary agent Malcolm Cowley that he wanted to be “a Running Proust”, it is Cassady’s letter, febrile and vital, that quivers with what Lee calls “living detail”. The letter is peppered with asides to Kerouac - “got that old man?” - as well as instructions to the “gentle (or otherwise) reader” on when to slow down and read more carefully. “I must cut this to the bone from here on out because I haven’t got the money for stamps”, Cassady writes, quickly adding, “Ah bullshit, what’s another few lines”. Cassady’s paragraphs dart from comic set pieces to dark musings of the soul with the grace of an experienced car thief changing gears. Melville, Dickens and Wilde rub shoulders with motley Denver characters, among them an unnamed sailor and a kind dwarf, in what could be the cast of an early Tom Waits song. And while Cassady, as Lee points out, was a “veteran chauvinist”, he is capable of tenderness and introspection, whether reflecting on his time in jail (“There is a quality of calm, a collected coolness, a careful restraint that is in the foremost feature of the mind when in jail”), or on Joan’s suicide attempt. This handsomely produced edition, which includes a facsimile of the letter, is an exciting new addition to Beat Studies, and a reminder of the fading art of letter writing.

Douglas Field

ACTORS

THE OXFORD BOOK OF THEATRICAL ANECDOTES
GYLES BRANDRETH, EDITOR

797pp. Oxford University Press.
£20 (US \$27.95).

The impression left by these 771 pages of stories about actors is of a centuries-old cult with established rituals and beliefs. The titles of the books Gyles Brandreth has selected as sources have a typical solemnity - *Confessions of an Actor*, *Blessings in Disguise*, *Beaten Paths* - and their many examples of upstaging, corpsing, drying and fluffing



“The Death of Lady Macbeth” by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, from *Pre-Raphaelites: Drawings and watercolours* by Christiana Payne (240pp. Ashmolean Museum. £25)

rely on a certain familiarity, like that of a long-running show. An opening flourish (“It is said that”; “The story has frequently been told”) introduces a complex tale of onstage mishaps and ends with an elaborate punchline: “He did the first act and then passed on, quietly, with his shoelaces still done up”; “The injury was repaired, but the story of Simkin’s small clothes was for a time repeated as against my impetuosity”.

The structure is chronological, beginning with John Aubrey’s story about Shakespeare, the butcher’s son, speechifying while killing a calf and ending with Brandreth himself backstage in June 2000, complimenting Barry Humphries on a successful performance as Dame Edna Everage. There are sections on players, playwrights, producers and directors, audiences and critics. Classic descriptions of eighteenth-century performers seem to inform the rich material from the late nineteenth century, just as the many theatrical disasters lead to the heroic “going on” during the Blitz. Among the generous name-drop-



ping are recurring larger-than-life characters from the past which include Beerbohm Tree, Sarah Bernhardt, Lillian Baylis, Donald Wolfit, Joan Littlewood and Binkie Beaumont. Judi Dench, who makes ten appearances, is the star of the later sections, supported by Nigel Hawthorne and Martin Jarvis. There are excursions to Stratford-upon-Avon and New York but the setting is mostly London's great theatres - the Haymarket, the Aldwych and the Old Vic - while the venues where the anecdotes were polished may include the Garrick Club, the Café Royal, the Ivy and Joe Allen. Legendary successes, such as *The Bells*, *School for Scandal* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are here, as are Samuel Johnson's *Irene*, Pinero's *The Squire* and Lady Barker's *Last Appearance*. We are informed of the origin of the term "luvvie", the introduction of the matinee, the invention of the stalls to replace the pit, the luxurious nature of private boxes and the tradition of the green room. Various accounts of audience rebellion - hissing, booing and orange-throwing - culminate in the Old Price Riots of 1809 when violent protests against the increased price of admission to the newly rebuilt Covent Garden Theatre stopped the show.

There is a strong feeling that the stories would have been funnier

told rather than collected along with many similar tales in an Oxford volume. However, the mixture of solemnity and humour is perhaps a suitable homage to a great industry now in danger of dying, leaving in its wake only anecdotes about old times.

Lindsay Duguid

FOOD

A RAINBOW PALATE

How chemical dyes changed the West's relationship with food

CAROLYN COBBOLD

288pp. Chicago University Press. £32 (US \$40).

Coal tar, that thick dark liquid that is a by-product of coke and gas manufacture, is not something we generally associate with visual pleasure. Yet from the 1850s it was responsible for turning black-and-white Victorian Britain into a joyous riot of colour. The chemical dyes extracted from the sticky black pitch painted the world in rich new tones: purple was the first aniline dye to emerge, followed by many other rainbow shades. Where once women had worn muted, blotched colours derived from natural ingredients such as indigo and

cochineal, now they were able to strut around like Birds of Paradise. It didn't stop there. Soon the look of nearly every aspect of industrialized domestic life was transformed, from the curtains at the window and the toys in the nursery to the meal on the table.

In this elegant and insightful book, the historian of science Carolyn Cobbold charts the process by which dyes that had been developed for the mass production of textiles came to be used in manufactured food stuffs from pickles to porridge oats. As early as 1854 the *Lancet* ran a series of articles warning that the most tempting and up-to-date looking items in the larder might in fact be deadly dangerous. The Venetian red added to anchovies, the chromate of lead used to enhance the colour of custard powder, and all the iron, copper and chromium found in confectionery might delight the eye and tempt the stomach, but they were also pure poison.

By way of public relations push-back, major food manufacturers started to employ "analytic chemists" - an entirely new professional category - to tinker with their formulae and insure themselves against legal charges of harm. Consumers with sufficient time and money, meanwhile, explored vegetarianism as a way of managing

their intake of highly processed - for which read: coloured - food. These kinds of pragmatic responses and accommodations meant that Britain did not introduce a Food Dye Act until 1925. This was decades after America and Germany, both of which took a more centralized and protectionist attitude to the business of keeping its citizens safe from their own degraded appetites.

What is stunning is how pertinent the book is to our own times. You will find here a rehearsal for everything we are facing today - the fads, the fears, the government interventions that are either too late or too rushed, and the nagging sense that the food that most delights the eye may not always be the food that serves us best.

Kathryn Hughes

KINDERTRANSPORT

THE BERLIN SHADOW JONATHAN LICHTENSTEIN

320pp. Scribner. £16.99.

A father and son sit in a Berlin café. The son is ill at ease, and marvels at the confidence with which his father occupies the *konditorei*. "How did you know this was here and what to order?", he asks. "Isn't it obvious?", his father replies. It isn't obvious: only later will the father reveal that he used to come to this café as a child with his family, and that their old apartment block is visible from the table he has chosen.

This strained exchange is one of the many conversations that punctuate *The Berlin Shadow*, Jonathan Lichtenstein's moving account of his father Hans's life and improbable survival, "a non-story", as Hans puts it. He was among the 10,000 Jewish children saved from certain death in Nazi Germany by the Kindertransport. In the UK, Hans became a doctor and settled in Wales with his family; he was appointed MBE for delivering medicine to Bosnia during the Bosnian War. He adopted what his son calls "the casual wardrobe of a fictional Englishman who belongs to a certain class and is a certain age. For him this is a meticulous costume and these are the garments of disguise". Hans spoke as little as possible to his three children about his past life in Berlin, about the suicides on both sides of the family, about the Jewish holidays he used to observe.

But in his old age, he permits his son to accompany him on the reverse journey of his flight from Berlin, to see the site of his father's old shop, which was destroyed on Kristallnacht, and to visit his father's grave. His son hesitantly documents this journey, needling his father with questions and dramatics. The younger Lichtenstein is a playwright, and his prose can feel slightly overwrought, better suited to the stage than the page. He is preoccupied by how much trauma he has inherited from his

father's family; he asks his father if suicide is "carried in the genes", and receives a harsh response. Still, the author cannot shake the feeling of being surrounded by the ghosts of his father's past. *The Berlin Shadow* is an affecting attempt to free himself from their presence, and to capture his father's discomfort and sorrow.

Linda Kinstler

POETRY

SPRING JOURNAL

After Louis MacNeice

JONATHAN GIBBS

82pp. CB Editions. £8.99.

May saw Don Paterson's pandemic-inspired rhymed polemic "Easter 2020" do the rounds on Twitter; June brought Stephen Sexton's lament for a locked-down pool hall, in the *Daily Telegraph*; July, Paul Muldoon's corona of coronavirus sonnets in the *TLS*; August, Glyn Maxwell's "The Strain", the viral fable that opens his collection *How the Hell Are You*. There was also the novelist Jonathan Gibbs's *Spring Journal*, first tweeted in four-line instalments from March to August and now collected between hard covers.

For Gibbs, the sense of being "becalmed in a hellish present" recalled Louis MacNeice's enduringly popular portrait of thumb-twiddling in a world on the brink, *Autumn Journal*, published in 1938. Any attempt to recreate its success is likely to disappoint - as MacNeice himself learnt with his far less celebrated *Autumn Sequel* (1953).

And yet, aiming somewhere halfway between cheap pastiche and serious homage, Gibbs hits his mark. He nails *Autumn Journal*'s casual, yawning metres and late-to-the-party rhymes, its balance of didacticism and doubt. Embracing MacNeice's dictum that "the poet's first business is mentioning things", Gibbs mentions it all. Every headline of 2020, serious and trivial, is here, from George Floyd's death to the mountain goats that descended on Llandudno.

In places he updates MacNeice line-by-line ("And the growth of vulgarity, cars that pass the gate-lodge" becomes "And the growth of vulgarity, electric scooters on the pavement") or image-by-image (the silent figures who haunt the revelers in *Autumn Journal* have nooses around their necks; in *Spring Journal*, they wear oxygen masks), but his ventriloquism is more impressive when wandering further from his source.

Along the way he finds time to mimic Henry Reed's "Naming of Parts", Larkin's "Trees", and, in this poem's most successful canto (a gently worried portrait of the poet's marriage), Dante's *Inferno*. Lost in mid-life, Gibbs calls on MacNeice as a guide, but he demurs: "Noticing, not guiding, is what I did." ■

Tristram Fane Saunders

At close range

An assassination, the IRA and Northern Ireland

MICHAEL HUGHES

ANATOMY OF A KILLING

Life and death on a divided island

IAN COBAIN

304pp. Granta. £18.99.

WHAT STORIES ARE LEFT to tell about Northern Ireland, a century after its foundation? As the reality of Brexit looms, can the place have a future that isn't defined by the violence of its past? There is no shortage of writers lining up to answer both questions. In fiction, Wendy Erskine, Jan Carson and Stuart Neville are among those who have recently been playing with form and genre to reveal the contours of post-conflict society. In non-fiction, popular microhistory is reshaping familiar narratives, and, following Patrick Radden Keefe's hugely successful *Say Nothing* (TLS, February 1, 2019), Ian Cobain's exceptionally compelling reconstruction of an IRA murder in 1978 can now lay equal claim to being one of the best accounts of the everyday lived experience of the conflict, and the political dynamics that shaped it.

The facts are easily stated. One Saturday lunchtime, the thirty-six-year-old Millar McAllister was at home with his two young sons when a pair of strangers called at the back door, asking about pictures of pigeons. A keen photographer and well-known pigeon fancier, Millar was a policeman by profession, and so naturally suspicious of unexpected callers; but



Bobby Sands mural in Belfast

the two men were well dressed, and offered a phone number to confirm their bonafides. When his eight-year-old went off to get a pencil and paper, one of the men produced a revolver and shot McAllister several times at close range, then fled to a waiting car. The older boy called an ambulance, but it was too late. Their mother Nita, out shopping since early morning, arrived home a few minutes later to find her husband lying dead on the kitchen floor.

Most striking in Cobain's choice of material is how unremarkable this was at the time. Around 500 police officers and local part-time soldiers were killed during the conflict, many while off-duty at home, in similar attacks meticulously planned by a sophisticated clandestine network who felt themselves to be participating in a historic struggle for self-determination. Cobain's book takes McAllister's killing as an exemplar of IRA activity, but also as a nexus of contingent particulars, the result of a series of decisions by various individuals, locally and nationally. The implicit promise of *Anatomy of a Killing* is to tease out the evidence to find some lasting significance in what otherwise appears to be just one more pointless soft-target murder, which only served

Michael Hughes's most recent book is Country, 2018

to harden popular attitudes against political compromise and so prolong the conflict.

Through the book, Cobain's focus is on the IRA members responsible for McAllister's death; his interviews with their mature selves provide the book's most compelling insights. At its centre is the fascinating figure of the gunman himself: Harry Murray, a rare Protestant member of the IRA, apparently driven by bitterness at how his own community rejected him when he married a Catholic. Drawing together an impressive range of research, Cobain skillfully illuminates the organization's tactics, procedures and capabilities, and exposes the currents of local history beneath its choice of target, patiently unpacking the symbolism of attacking McAllister's hometown of Lisburn, where savage riots, after the murder of a policeman in 1920, triggered a Catholic exodus that had polarized the area ever since.

Though scrupulously even-handed, Cobain doesn't shy away from telling a good story, using deft lyrical flourishes and narrative teases, and he expertly marshals both quotidian detail and the broad social backdrop as he builds up to the shooting itself, three-quarters of the way through the book. Much of its remainder is devoted to the arrest and interrogation of those directly responsible, and for all Cobain's studied neutrality, he leaves a strong impression of outrage and disgust in his detailed accounts of police torture at the notorious Castlereagh Holding Centre.

Only the final section is puzzlingly thin. More than once, Cobain dangles the hugely significant suggestion that security forces had inside information on the attack, but he leaves the reader with little help to make sense of this. After a few standard where-are-they-now updates, the narrative drifts to an inconclusive halt. A closing note suggests that key players withdrew their co-operation during the writing process, and in the end it is difficult to avoid disappointment, even frustration, that the book falls short of its implicit promise to honour the man's death with some wider meaning. But perhaps that's a proper response to the conflict itself, and the best Cobain can do is to leave us to consider a bleaker vista: that Millar McAllister's brutal murder was, and remains, a meaningless act. ■

A waterfall of screams

Overlapping lives in a lethal urban environment

RABEEA SALEEM

KARACHI VICE

Life and death in a contested city

SAMIRA SHACKLE

272pp. Granta. £14.99.

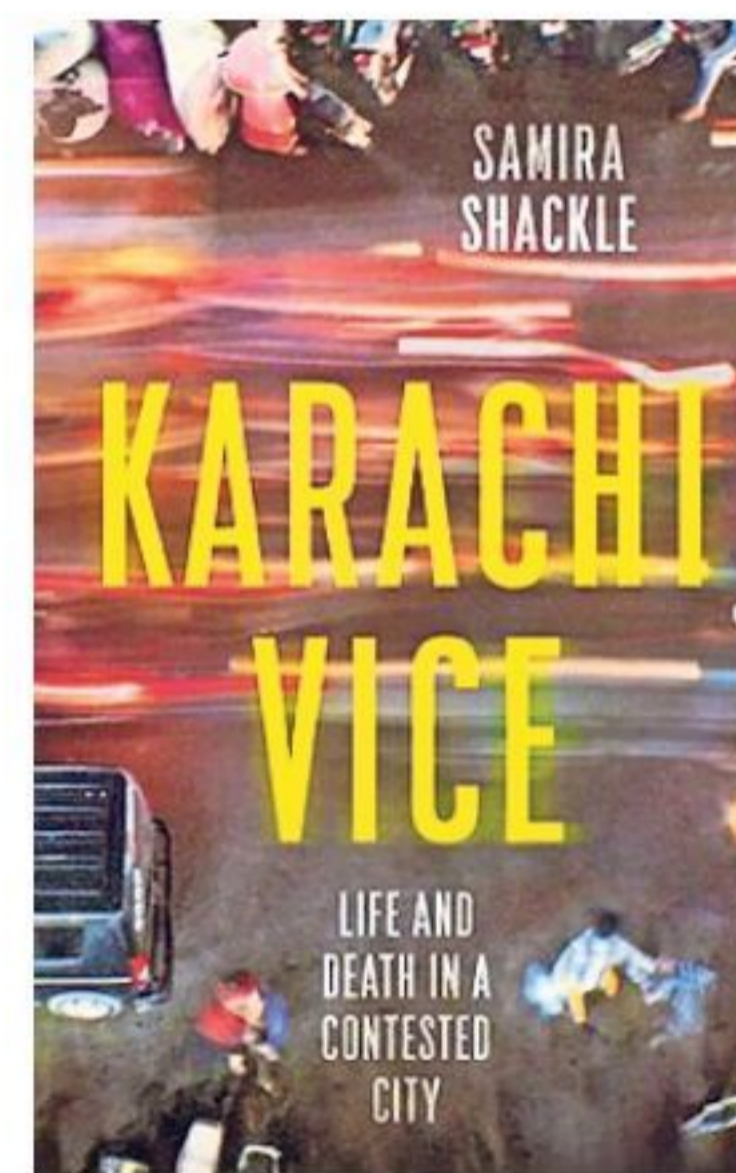
RESILIENT IS A WORD commonly associated with Karachi. Despite its positive connotations, it also serves to paper over the injustices the city faces. Encumbered by a volatile law-and-order situation, and wrecked by ethnic, political and sectarian pressures that came to a head during the past decade, the megalopolis bears the burden of 20 million people and operates as Pakistan's economic hub. Can it afford to be anything but resilient?

Karachi Vice by Samira Shackle chronicles the city's recent past, portraying a place beset by rising organized crime, gang wars and the corruption of a mafia-like political party, the MQM (who were a national government coalition partner for a spell). A stringent, city-wide operation was carried out by paramilitary forces in 2013 to curb the violence. This operation resulted in the city going from the sixth most dangerous city in the world to the ninety-third by early 2020. But while Karachi has gradually returned to a semblance of normality, its fate still hangs in precarious balance.

Karachi Vice originated in two newspaper features that required Shackle, a British journalist, to visit this, her mother's birthplace in 2012 - a time when mugging, targeted killings and shoot-outs were rife. The book profiles, with great vividness, five individuals who serve as narrative linchpins in a tale of a city hurtling from one crisis to the next. Their lives intersect in various ways at one or other of the city's key crime hotspots: Lyari, Orangi Town and Sohrab Goth.

There is Safdar, a valiant ambulance driver for Edhi Foundation, the largest non-profit welfare organization in Pakistan. His job includes expertly manoeuvring through busy streets to scoop up the injured and the dead. Parveen, an activist from Lyari, repeatedly lands in trouble for her outspoken views. Zille, an ambitious crime reporter in thrall to television ratings, is disappointed when the city's crime rates drop.

At one point Shackle claims that she found herself unable to escape Karachi's orbit. The same could be said for much of the rest of Pakistan. Migrants flock to this melting pot, attracted by the "sometimes arrhythmic but perpetually beating heart of economic promise". Karachi also houses up to 400,000 Rohingyas and around 50,000 Afghans. Disoriented by the city's size, Shackle navigates not just the physical streets but the "second layer of geography" - the blocks where warring parties exist side by side and the street corners where allegiances switch. It is safe to assume that the majority of Karachiites,



Rabea Saleem is a Karachi-based critic. She writes for the Spectator, the Irish Times, Bookanista and the National UAE, among others

including me, have never visited these areas: a testament not only to the city's class divide but also to its magnitude.

The relentlessness of the violence described by Shackle is both sobering and gripping. Parveen recounts visiting the opulent home of the local kingpin Uzair Baloch, in Lyari, to ask for funds for social work. She hears screams emanating from behind a lavish waterfall in what she assumes to be a torture cell. (Baloch is currently serving twelve years in prison.) One of the most terrible events we encounter is the Baldia Town Fire of 2012, in which a textile factory went up in flames. All the exits had been locked by the factory bosses to prevent workers from stealing garments or taking breaks. Over 260 people were burnt alive inside. Safdar, who was present at the scene, claims that the real number were far larger.

Another of Shackle's subjects, Siraj, worked at the community-owned Orangi Pilot Project (OPP), designed to map out Orangi Town, one of the world's largest slums. The aim is to give the locals the social and technical guidance they need - with some basic infrastructure. Many people associated with the project received multiple threats. Perween Rahman, an architect whose reports had exposed the criminal water mafia swindling people of at least 50 billion rupees annually, was shot in cold blood. Rahman had also documented the encroachment on state land by mafia in cahoots with the police.

Karachi Vice meticulously constructs a vibrant mosaic of a city's underbelly, while disentangling the ways in which Karachi is enmeshed with crime lords, gangs, political interests and militants. Samira Shackle's prose is nimble and propulsive, as she expertly combines interview, anecdote and reportage with in-depth sociopolitical analysis. ■

In next week's

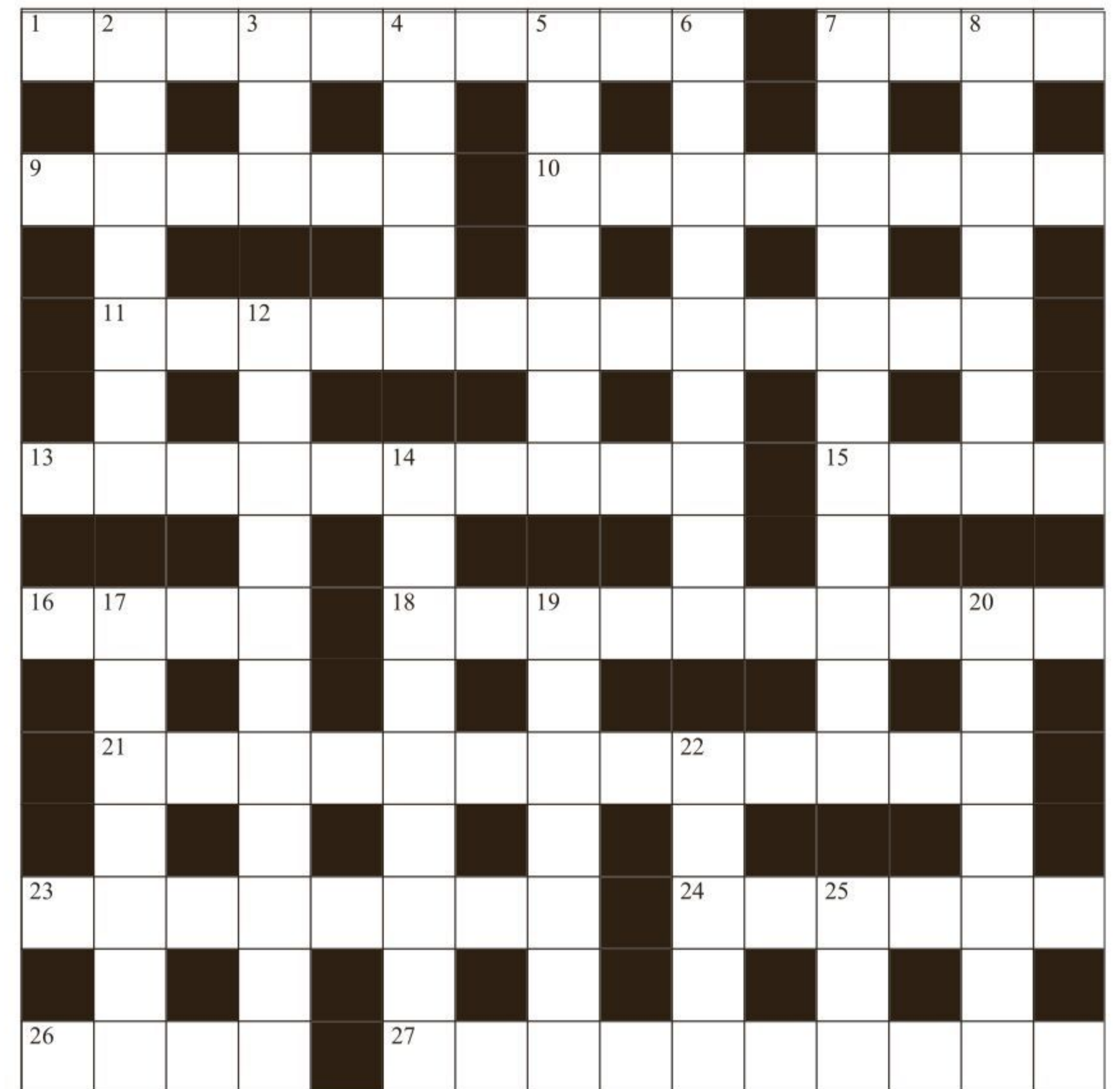
TLS

PAUL MENDEZ

The histories of Black British writing



TLS CROSSWORD 1367 BY BROTEAS



ACROSS

- 1** A playing surface for those using cues, in the past or present (5, 5)
- 7** "Fools may our scorn, not — raise, / For — is a kind of praise" (John Gay) (4)
- 9** Type of book with notes, almost entirely on nothing (6)
- 10** They make clots drive in rollers in Barnet (8)
- 11** Basic English educator going along with honest writer about school life (5, 8)
- 13** Understandable reservation reportedly went away (7, 3)
- 15** Prison in Rome where detention's beginning (4)
- 16** American city in British hands? That's nonsense (4)
- 18** Yeats played with Derry in a naive way (6-4)
- 21** British agent sent perky cable to French military leader (5, 8)
- 23** Some criticism of personal stories by an extremely literary relative (8)
- 24** Python's film, a modern retelling of a knightly story (6)
- 26** Bliss is brief according to a Stan Barstow novel (4)
- 27** Rambling Gus's sonnet, a Scottish classic (6, 4)

DOWN

- 2** Barrack fully occupied by a large number (7)
- 3** Little singer's part in Wagner's comedy (3)
- 4** Live with a queen in Windsor Castle, in Victorian times? (5)
- 5** In Italy, one embraced by devious macho Shakespearean seducer, apparently (7)
- 6** Mushroom in ground steak starter, followed by large slice of flan (9)
- 7** Detective Terry's comprehending tricky query on drug (6, 5)
- 8** The true style of Italian opera (7)
- 12** Lady at harem manipulated the hero of a Scott chronicle (4, 7)
- 14** Authority in English school is Eliot Arnold Russell? (9)
- 17** The French play a significant part in the history of naval warfare (7)
- 19** Everyone is supported by Drummond the war poet (7)
- 20** It's heavenly to see a Welsh lady (7)
- 22** Oxford priest announcing important papal decree (5)
- 25** Jenny's a singer with no book (3)

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

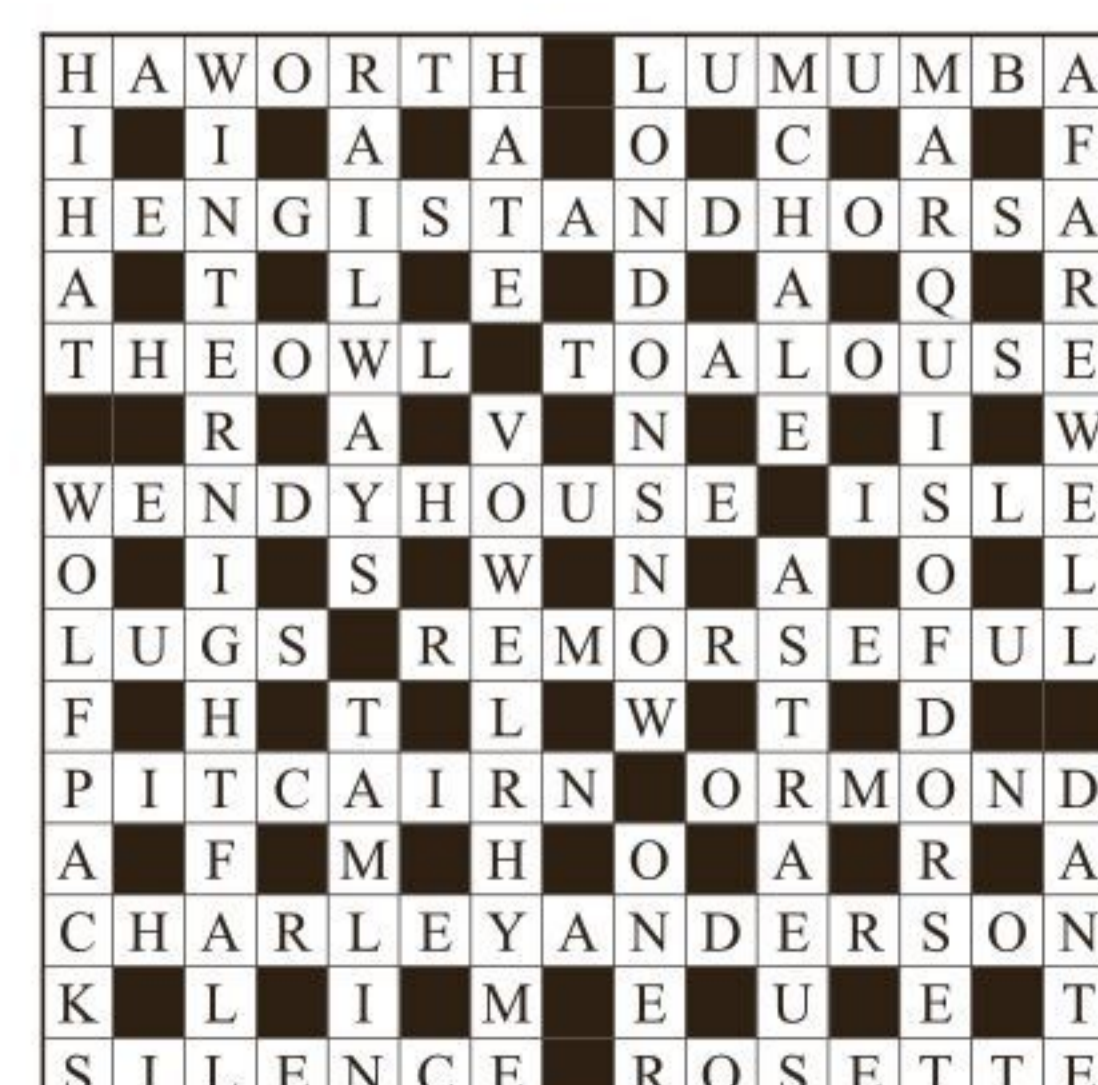
Managing Director **JAMES MACMANUS** (deborah.keegan@news.co.uk)
 Advertising Manager **JONATHAN DRUMMOND** (jonathan.drummond@the-tls.co.uk)

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@ocsmmedia.net (website: www.ocsmmedia.net/tls)**
 Syndication : **020 7711 7888 enquiries@newssyndication.com**

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1363

The winner of Crossword 1363 is Liberty Brignall, of Gloucester

The sender of the first correct solution opened on April 3, 2021, will receive a cash prize of £40. Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1367, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF



Little words

Congratulations are due to the *New York Times Book Review*, which has just reached its 125th anniversary. To mark the occasion, the *NYT* unleashed on its archives Parul Sehgal (formerly a *Book Review* editor, and now a staff critic). What Sehgal found there – and reported last week in a piece called “Reviewing the Book Review” – was less cause for “celebration” than “challenging introspection”. Yes, there were the astute reviews by John Leonard (one of Sehgal’s predecessors as both editor and critic), and those of notable “artist-practitioners” (Ford Madox Ford’s term) of more recent years, such as Lucy Ellmann and Meg Wolitzer. But there were also early issues of the *Review* that were “lively with alarm” about women’s writing (“Why do women novelists think they can assume the masculine character and maintain it through a long story?”). There was the barely disguised revulsion in the face of, say, Gore Vidal or Truman Capote (“an extended shudder” is how Sehgal describes Carlos Baker’s review of Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms*). Of the “saucy, defiant” Zora Neale Hurston, meanwhile, John Chamberlain could write that she was “born with a tongue in her head, and she has never failed to use it”.

The *Gray Lady’s* readers are said here to have been more open-minded than its cranky reviewers – although Sehgal might have acknowledged that Chamberlain was, in his way, trying to praise Hurston (“*Dust Tracks on a Road* is a book among a hundred for you to read”), that the same autobiography received a second positive review in the same month (in the language of its time, of course: “Any race might well be proud to have more members of the caliber and stamina of Zora Neale Hurston”), and that this was hardly exceptional for the *NYT’s* treatment of Hurston’s books (*Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, her first novel, was “the most vital and original novel about the American Negro that has yet been written by a member of the Negro race”). Never mind: with a little selectivity, as above, contemporary readers may enjoy what Sehgal calls “the pleasant and dubious satisfactions of feeling superior to the past”.

But perhaps there is less to enjoy, in this superior regard, than might be desired. For the chief villain, Sehgal finds, in her excoriation of her own paper’s critical record, is the paper itself. “These reviews were commissioned; they passed through multiple layers of editing.” A paper that, until 1987, refused to deploy the word “gay” where

“homosexual” was deemed to do perfectly well was a paper that “institutionally mandated” its reviewers to adopt the blinkers. Well, unless the *NYT* (or any newspaper) has ceased to commission or edit, and has embraced some other system of publication instead, institutional mandating, for good or ill, remains an intrinsic part of the business. Who knows what gory prejudices still stalk the pages of the *NYT’s Manual of Style and Usage* – not to mention the bright corridors of its editors’ minds?

“Reviewing the Book Review” most amused us when it came to Sehgal’s digs at the paper’s former preference for “magisterial” first person plural over the “discouraged” first person singular. No

consideration is given here to the possibility of, say, the word’s ironic usage. “We”, we are told, can be a “coercive little word”. It “presumes consensus” (we had no idea). It presumes that “we” are the same (are we?). Yet we learn, later, that there are certain, acceptable reviewers – V. S. Pritchett, Elizabeth Hardwick, Margo Jefferson et al – for whom the term “we” was “expansive and frequently full of playful provocation”. We like the sound of that.

Not so long ago (February 5), we mentioned the editorial successions under way at the *London Review of Books* and the *White Review*. In both cases, leadership has been divided between two or more editors. “See how well such an arrangement works for the *LRB’s* foster parent, the *New York Review of Books*”, we almost added, “with its youthful editorial dummvirate of Gabriel Winslow-Yost and Emily Greenhouse (with Daniel Mendelsohn as the *NYRB’s* editor at large).” Two weeks later, via her rarely used Twitter account, Greenhouse announced that she had been appointed sole editor (Winslow-Yost remains on the staff).

Such changes to a publication may sometimes seem, from the outside, to make little difference; on the other hand, many readers of the *NYRB* will recollect another double act, Robert B. Silvers and Barbara Epstein, and how they ran that same literary paper for over forty years. They “raised book reviewing to an art”, the National Book Foundation could claim in 2006, bestowing on them an award for “Outstanding Service to the American Literary Community”.

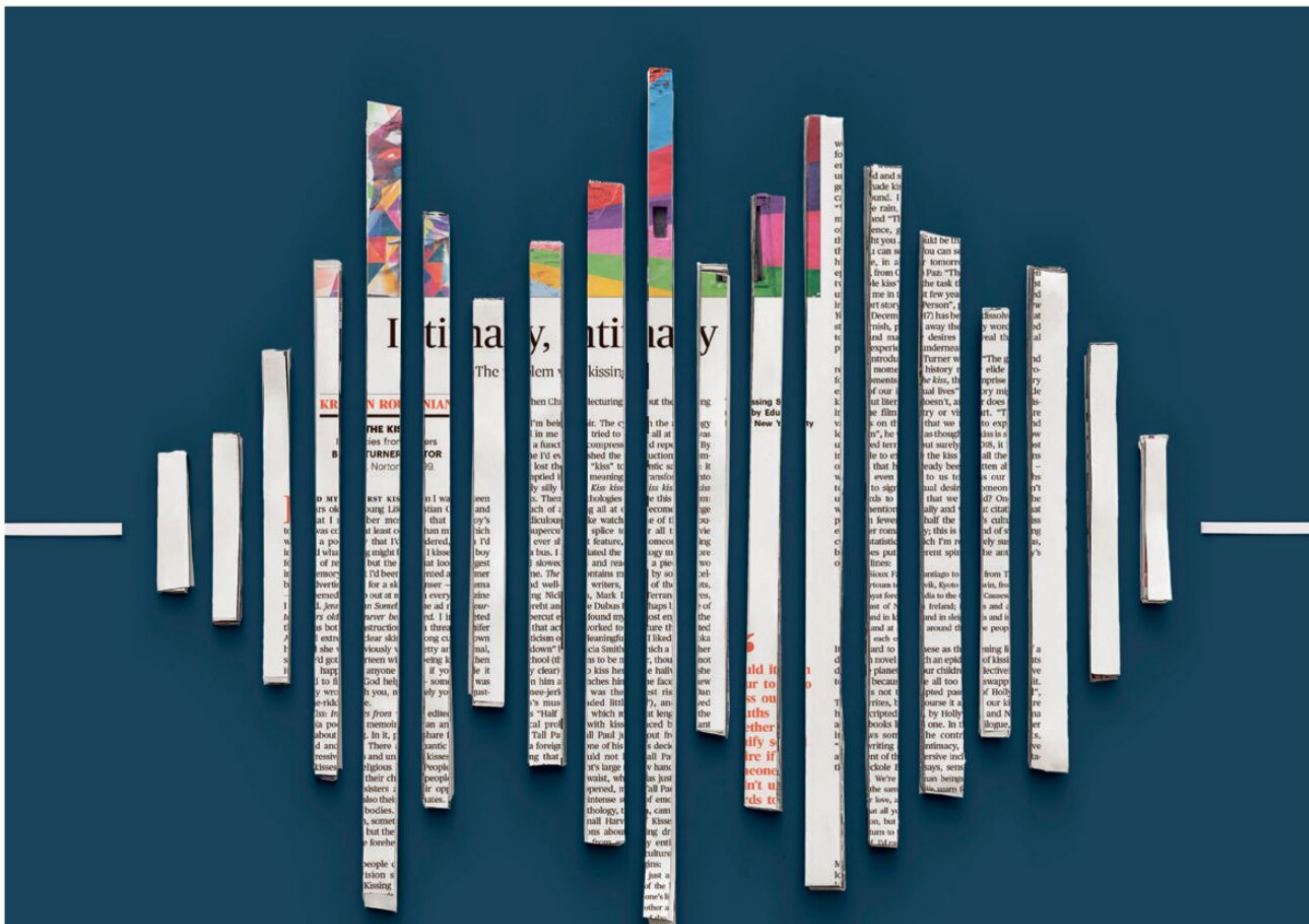
While Silvers and Epstein were doing their thing at the *NYRB*, the *Paris Review*, founded a decade earlier, was thriving under the singular editorship of George Plimpton, which lasted from the magazine’s founding until his death in 2003. The *Paris Review* then saw off a further three editors in quick succession; and it has now done for a fourth. Emily Nemens, appointed in 2018, announced last week that she was stepping down to get on with writing her second novel. We look forward to hearing who succeeds her, and how numerous an entity they may be.

Wanted: a millionaire who digs Coleridge. Pictured above is the library of the Chanters House in Ottery St Mary. This is the Devonshire village where Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in 1772, his father being vicar there, and headmaster of the King’s School. (See “Frost at Midnight”: “I dreamt / Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower, / Whose bells, the poor man’s only music, rang / From morn to evening ...”). The smitten *Rare Book Monthly* drew the house to our attention. “In 1760, John Coleridge moved his family into the home. Among his children who lived there was his son, the renown[ed] poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge.” In the same spirit, the *Daily Mail*, in 2018, didn’t know whether to be more excited about the “indoor swimming pool, billiards room, tennis court and 21 acres of sweeping grounds”, or that this “sprawling 10-bed mansion” was “once home to one of the key figures of the Romantic Movement”.

It was Samuel’s elder brother James who purchased the house, in 1796; the Victorian architect William Butterfield remodelled it for John Duke Coleridge, the Lord Chief Justice of England, including a library for his collection of 18,000 books (now 22,000). According to the estate agent Knight Frank, this library is, at 70 feet in length and 30 feet in height, “the largest west of Salisbury”. It is not yet known, if Chanters House ever comes near its asking price of £7 million, what will become of the collection itself.

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, Kitting 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



The addition to your edition

Complement your copy with the weekly podcast from the TLS. Thea Lenarduzzi is joined by a variety of guests, from novelists to philosophers and poets to cultural commentators.

Subscribe to the podcast today at the-tls.co.uk/podcast

