

Review

Saturday 9 January 2021 - Issue Nº 155

The
Guardian



Dark genius

Patricia Highsmith at 100
by Carmen Maria Machado

Plus an unseen short story



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Review

Saturday 9 January 2021 - Issue N^o 155

*'When I saw my words
written down, I could look
back at them and see that
my voice was still there.
And it was such a powerful,
extraordinary thing to me.'*
— Jenni Fagan, page 22

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The week in books

9 January

And the Costa awards go to ...

The Costa prize is fortunate in being able to celebrate its winners not once but twice - first applauding its category winners, and then the overall book of the year. The 2020 victors in each category, announced this week, share powerful themes that speak to us all: the yearning to travel, race and racism, history, love, trying to build a new life, finding a home.

It is hard to believe that Ingrid Persaud's *Love After Love*, a vibrant, heartbreaking extravaganza of a novel, is a debut. The high-octane winner of the best first novel award is written in a prose that brilliantly captures the characters' dialect and creates a captivating picture of Trinidadian society.

DONALD MICHAEL CHAMBERS/THE GUARDIAN; GETTY

Natasha Farrant's children's winner, *Voyage of the Sparrowhawk*, is what you get if you take Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, cross it with Enid Blyton, add in contemporary sensibilities and some wonder. It's a fantastic, heart-thumping, big-hearted story: a modern classic.

In 1985 Cherry Groce was shot by police in a



house raid in Brixton. The injuries left her paralysed and led directly to her death, 26 years later. In *The Louder I Will Sing*, winner of this year's biography award, her son Lee Lawrence (right) offers a potent combination of childhood memoir and the tale of his pursuit of justice, reflecting movingly on how the incident emotionally damaged him, as well as the racist culture of the 1980s.

In *The Mermaid of Black Conch*, winner of the novel award, Monique Roffey asks what would happen if you introduced an ancient Indigenous woman - who just happens to have been for centuries a mermaid - to modern life in the Caribbean? It is an artful and evocative love story, with vividly drawn characters and a fantastically compelling plot, that I read in one sitting.

I could not help being drawn to a book called *The Historians*, Eavan Boland's winner of the



poetry award. But this achingly beautiful work presses on the limits of history: it reflects on life in the margins, the failure of memory, and the women whose ordinary lives have not been remembered. Boland died last year and we lost an important voice in Irish poetry.

My fellow judges and I now have the difficult but thrilling task of choosing between these marvellous books to crown an overall winner as the Costa book of the year. The announcement will be made on 26 January. **Suzannah Lipscomb**

Protection

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole



This year, if we are lucky, will be all about “protection”, specifically the amount of it we can expect to acquire against various strains of Covid-19 from various vaccines. Will it amount to a kind of universal shielding of people who are then allowed to go about their normal business?

The word comes from the Latin “protegere”, meaning “to cover in front”, like a defensive wall or **military shield**, and has since been adopted to describe other barriers, such as sun cream or contraceptives, that users hope will be reliable.

It has also been adopted as a threatening euphemism, as in the **mob concept** of “protection money”, or extortion, though to call the high prices charged for some of the Covid vaccines “protection money” would doubtless be too cynical.

In the old days, “protection” could also mean diplomatic rather than pharmacological **immunity** - exemption from arrest or other inconvenience on the orders of a monarch or other power. Perhaps in the post-Brexit world, those Britons who wish to travel abroad will need to carry, as medieval emissaries once did, a “letter of protection”, or vaccination certificate. No doubt it, like our new blue passports, could be printed in Poland.



'My earliest reading memory is of *Jaws*' Courtia Newland

The book I am currently reading

I'm in-between books, having reread James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, and in my opinion the man is a visionary. He is lauded for his fierce activism, but not enough is said about his fiction, which lifts the spirits and burns with honesty in equal measure.

The book that changed my life

I was introduced to *The Insult* by novelist and screenwriter Stephen Thompson, no relation to Rupert Thomson, its author. This novel made me want to mix realism with the surreal, which Thomson excels at.

The book I wish I'd written

So many! I don't exactly wish I'd written it but line for line *The Prophets* by Robert Jones Jr gave me the feeling that I need to up my game.

The book I'm most ashamed not to have read

I really have to get to *Moby-Dick* one day. It's on my shelf, waiting.

The book that had the greatest influence on me

To say I'm a fan of Percival Everett is like saying Dave Chappelle is slightly humorous. The one that started it off for me is *Erasure*, and although many writers

have influenced me during the years, this book feeds my writing to this day.

The book I think is most underrated

Sarah Hall's *Haweswater*. This pitch-perfect novel deserves a far wider readership and should have been made into a TV series or film ages ago.

The book that changed my mind

I'm awestruck by the sheer audacity of Steven Millhauser's *The Knife Thrower and Other Stories*, and it's definitely a book that shunted me into new possibilities for the short story form.

The last book that made me cry

Without doubt Roy Jacobsen's *The Unseen*: an absolute masterpiece. Packed with understated emotion, stunning from beginning to end.

The last book that made me laugh

Anything from the Julius Zebra series by Gary Northfield. They actually belong to my son, but I find myself sneaking them from his bookshelf while he's sleeping. Bad dad.

The book I give as a gift

Waiting for the Barbarians by JM Coetzee.

My earliest reading memory

I think that's Peter Benchley's *Jaws*, which I was way too young to be reading, actually.

My comfort read

Tracy K Smith's *Life on Mars* does it for me every time.

A River Called Time by Courttia Newland is published by Canongate.

There has always been something fundamentally difficult about Patricia Highsmith. And not difficult in the way that most people mean it: ironic, quirky, feminist (“Well-behaved women rarely make history”, and so on). I mean truly, legitimately difficult; a well of darkness with no discernible bottom.

Which is not to say that she wasn’t, in her own way, endearing. She was, after all, a genius, a bona fide eccentric. She loved animals, particularly snails, which she kept by the hundred as pets and took to parties clinging to a leaf of lettuce in her handbag. Writer and critic Terry Castle describes how she once “smuggled her cherished pet snails through French customs by hiding six or eight of them under each bosom”. She was famous for her wit and wicked sense of humour, and she wrote compellingly of loneliness and empathetically about disempowered housewives and children.

And yet she was a hateful person. She was shockingly, unrepentantly racist and antisemitic, even with respect to the era in which she lived. She believed gay people were essentially unfaithful and promiscuous and incapable of true sexual passion; she had a nasty habit of murdering versions of her ex-lovers in her fiction; she believed menstruating women should not be permitted in libraries. This mix of misogyny and homophobia coming from a gay woman might seem surprising; the truth was, while she didn’t like other people, she didn’t much like herself, either.

The Price of Salt (later reissued as *Carol*) - the

lesbian love story Highsmith published under the pen name Claire Morgan in 1952 - is curiously free of these pessimisms. There are no violent crimes, no sociopathic protagonists. Even though her reasons for distancing herself via a pseudonym have nothing to do with this fact - she didn’t want to be “labelled a lesbian-book writer” - it feels correct that she might also not want herself associated with such an optimistic book. Because it was the opposite - violence, torment, obsession, all bubbling beneath a cool veneer - that was the signature of her fiction.

Here, approaching the centenary of her birth - her canonisation cemented, her complete collected diaries on the verge of publication - readers grapple with this darkness. Perhaps they recognise that you don’t come to Patricia Highsmith for goodness or light or comfort. You come to her for uncanny observations about human depravity; you come to her because you’ve forgotten the sour taste of fear.

Highsmith is probably best known for her novels *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *Strangers on a Train*. And yet short stories, which she was writing at the age of 15, were her foundation, as well as her bread and butter. At the time of her death, she had published no fewer than seven collections, and there was ample material for a volume of uncollected stories to be published posthumously. “Short stories are absolutely essential to me, like poetry: I write a lot of both,” she told one interviewer. “Only a fraction of the stories I have written ever appeared in print.” (This prodigious output is at least partially a result of her surfeit of ideas, which occurred to her, she said, “as frequently as rats have orgasms”.)

In his introduction to her collection *Eleven*,

Forbidden desires, strange obsessions and a singular talent for suspense ... *Carmen Maria Machado* on the twisted brilliance of Patricia Highsmith in her centenary year. ¶ Plus read a newly discovered short story

The thrill of the chase

Graham Greene talks about the way in which Highsmith adapts to the short story: “She is after the quick kill rather than the slow encirclement of the reader, and how admirably and with what field-craft she hunts us down.” In her prickly, misanthropic stories, her obsession with obsession is on display, big feelings and bad habits redirected to gruesome ends.

Sometimes it plays out with her telltale violence. In “The Button”, a father’s disappointment in his life boils over into murder; in “The Snail-Watcher”, her beloved pets become an instrument of body horror and monstrosity. And elsewhere - as with the protagonists of “Not This Life, Maybe the Next” and “The Romantic” - her characters are besieged by a quiet misery; they have to learn to accept, if not prefer, their own company.

Rereading Highsmith’s work, I was struck by how much she reminded me of Shirley Jackson. Both wrote in a clean and economical style that often gave way to breathtaking flourishes; both wrote in genres (suspense, horror) in which their gender was a liability. Both wrote characters liberated by the deaths of their difficult mothers; both had cartoonishly challenging relationships with the same. (Having attempted to abort Patricia by drinking turpentine, Mary Highsmith would joke that her daughter loved the smell. She was “demanding, seductive, [and] catastrophically unloving”, according to Castle.) Loneliness was a shared theme; menace, claustrophobia.

But Jackson’s protagonists were predominantly women; Highsmith, on the other hand, preferred the voices of men. With Jackson, you get the sense

that she is twitching the curtain for you, the reader, allowing you to see something she can see. With Highsmith, there is a distinct feeling of being chased toward something near and terrible, and not being able to look anywhere but where she wants you to look.



In the last few years, the unbearable nearness of sex and death has blossomed into its own queer meme: “I would let Rachel Weisz run me over with a car.” “I want Sandra Oh to throw me off a building.” “Please, Cate Blanchett, step on my throat.” Jia Tolentino calls this “desiring a sensation strong enough to silence itself”, and with Highsmith this challenge is more literal than most. To read her is to access her desires, her darkness, her difficulties; her loneliness and self-loathing and terrible mother and love of snails.

It feels good to be hunted. If you read the genres of suspense - crime and mystery and horror in its many iterations - you know the sensation of allowing a master of her craft to pursue you through a maze; the tingly energy of the chase, the eroticism of encountering the end of the line. “Murder,” Highsmith wrote in her diary in 1950, “is a kind of making love, a kind of possessing.”

When you read one of Highsmith’s stories, you’ve given her permission to follow you, catch you, take you apart. Get ready to run.

Under a Dark Angel’s Eye: The Selected Stories of Patricia Highsmith is published by Virago on Thursday. To buy a copy go to guardianbookshop.com.

LISELOTTE ERBEN/SYGMA VIA GETTY



Patricia Highsmith
She had a nasty habit of murdering versions of her ex-lovers in her fiction

The world's champion ball-bouncer

BY PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

Ellie, eat your breakfast," Elspeth's mother said from behind her, in the kind of voice she used when she was thinking about something else. "Just look how thick the cream is this morning."

"Mm-hmm," Elspeth murmured politely. She wrung her hands in her lap and looked down at her oatmeal that was still steaming though surrounded by cream like a grey castle in a lake.

It was no use for her mother to pretend that the cream just happened to be thick this morning. It was thick because they were in New York. Everything they had this morning was boughten and very expensive. The coffee smelled shiny black, she could taste the bacon in the air. Yet beneath the breakfast smell was the smell of the room itself, an unfriendly and mixed-up smell of sweetness like ladies' perfume and powder, the clothiness of carpets and upholstery and the hot paint from the radiator. Elspeth could tell that many other people had lived here before them. It was not a definite smell such as she had noticed in certain people's houses.

"Mother, is this house a church?" Elspeth asked anxiously.

"No, darling. It's an apartment building."

Through her sleepiness last night when they arrived, Elspeth had remembered the coloured glass in the windows of a door downstairs.

"Not even *part* of a church?"

"No, Ellie. Where'd you get that idea? It's just a big apartment house. There are lots of big buildings like this in New York."

Elspeth turned back, quelled.

She remembered how the name of New York had excited her when she heard it at home. She had used to jump and yell, "I want to go to New York *now!*" like a silly thing whenever her parents had talked about going north. She had even boasted to Francey Pat and Jordy, her two best friends, that she was going north, where she would have all sorts of adventures and would see things they couldn't begin to think of. Now she felt old and ashamed of herself. Last night she had gone to sleep thinking of the Empire State Building, the tallest building in the world, and the trips she would make up and down in it. But now she did not want to go.

She pushed her clasped hands deeper into her lap and lowered her eyes. "Excuse me, New York. Excuse me." She did not even whisper, but her lips moved.

"You must write to Mrs Sears and thank her for

the pocketbook, Ellie. It was thoughtful of her to give you a going-away present."

"Um-hmm."

Her mother stood behind her, smoothing her limp yellow-tan hair that splayed over the round cotton collar of her dress. Fortified by her mother's hands, by the tuneless yet familiar tune her mother hummed as her hands slipped under her chin, Elspeth leaned back against her and surveyed the room in a slow worried manner.

The room had a strange public look. Her family's things just seemed to sit in it like bundles in a waiting-room. The walls were a cold grey-white and Elspeth was aware that their smudges and the worn spots in the carpet had been made by other people they did not know. There was a long tub with real legs in the bathroom and there were brown streaks below the faucets where the water kept running down with a spooky sound like people whispering excitedly. She had heard it last night from the cot in the corner where she slept. She could hear it now every once in a while when the coffeepot stopped chugging.

"Why did Daddy go out again?"

"He went out to look for a paper. He'll be back directly."

Their own clock ticked softly on a big bureau, telling a time that did not matter at all. Ten-thirty, it said.

At home, ten-thirty Sunday, she would be sitting up straight in the front porch swing so she wouldn't wrinkle her dress, while she waited for Uncle John and Aunt Lettie and her cousin Paully to drive up and take her to Sunday school. She would be reading the funny papers but with only half her eyes, thinking how much better they would be to read when Sunday school was all over.

"Don't they deliver papers up here?"

"Of course, when people have been here long enough. But we just came yesterday, Ellie. Do you suppose they know we want a paper?" Her mother bent down and laughed, trying to make her laugh too.

Elspeth's mouth was set in a short horizontal line. There was nothing funny to her in the fact that no one knew or cared whether they got the Sunday paper or not. Suddenly the scary feeling that had been crawling around in her sprang all over her at once.

"Mother, what is the matter with this house?" Her voice sounded as shrill as though she were crying.

"Nothing, darling! What do you mean?"

Abashedly Elspeth bowed her head, as though she had seen something she shouldn't have seen. In that instant she knew that her mother knew. There was something the matter with the house and with the whole morning. It was something they could feel, hear,



**There were brown streaks below the faucets
where the water kept running down with a spooky
sound like people whispering excitedly**

taste, smell - everything but see. Something that made her sit small and hold her breath, unable to find words to tell her mother the feeling. If her mother did not talk about it, maybe it was not to be talked about. Would the feeling go away, Elspeth wondered, or would something happen?

The light from the two tall windows was thin and glaring at once, reaching the farthest corners of the room. Elspeth's mother was still so pale from long protection against an impossible sun that the strange light seemed to pass through her as through a new blade of grass. She was in her late twenties and looked even younger.

She turned finally from her contemplation of the windows and lowered the fire under the bacon,

slipping the egg flipper beneath the five rashers and turning them neatly.

She felt again the sensation of solemn lonely commencement in what she did. She had thought, this was the first meal she cooked in New York, these were the first pieces of bacon. And now, absurdly, she thought, this was the first time she turned their first New York bacon. There was, in the simple things that each of the three of them had done that morning, a quality of drama and inauguration that would have made her laugh had it not borne also a sense of their aloneness. She would remember the feeling of this Sunday all her life. This room that was indifferent to their presence as the whole north was indifferent, the hum of outdoors raised to a climax now and then by a ➤

◆ rumble that she knew must be the elevated train, the sound of a phonograph down the hall playing a popular song over and over.

Incredulously she realised that all her senses told her of this morning and this city was destined to become so much part of her that what she knew of other mornings and another city would become unfamiliar, perhaps also tinged with fear. She would remember always, and the start in her heart as she remembered would always recapture precisely her consciousness of this instant in this room.

She turned the flame off under the coffee for the third time, then slowly relighted the burner because AJ liked it strong. This morning she had wanted to cook a real breakfast such as they would have had at home on Sunday. It had been so long since they had cooked for themselves, not since the big dinner at Mama's Thursday night before they caught the train. It seemed a long time ago that she had candied the carrots and carried them in to the table herself. And here they were in a New York apartment. They were lucky to have found it, dingy as it was, for they couldn't have afforded a hotel for long.

This morning the gas hadn't been connected and the superintendent had told her it couldn't be fixed until Monday. She had stood there, burning with shame at her own rude insistence, saying, "But I'd like it so much - if you possibly could." Until finally the superintendent, with an ungraciousness that was the last humiliation, had fetched the janitor and she had the gas connected just before AJ came back from the grocery store.

She did not tell AJ, though. There would be enough little difficulties later that both would know about. She felt proud of herself for succeeding with the superintendent. Everybody had told her that in the north you had to be persistent and finally northerners liked you for it. That was the way AJ would have to be tomorrow when he looked for a job. It was hard to imagine him being really persistent, but surely his samples would speak for themselves. If he was the best letterer in Birmingham, he was bound to be worth a job somewhere in New York. And all at once she realised her really limitless faith in him.

It was strange, but she had more faith now that they were in New York than she had known back home, when they had talked of coming up. So many times they had discussed it, whether to go, then when to go, frightened as birds about to take a first flight from the nest. "Anyone with real ambition," AJ had often said at those times, "wants to go to New York, Lei." But each new discussion had been followed by seconds of silence in which each of them, and even Ellie, had looked into a particular dream of New York composed of skyscrapers, multitudes and somehow a happier life for all of them, yet a dream that was frozen by the fear that somehow they might not be good enough to stay in New York once they got there. Yet now we are here, Leila thought, and the first hardship is over. The super-

intendent that morning, for instance, had not been the stone wall he seemed at first. All it would take was courage and perseverance, and she was sure all three of them had both.

She caught sight of the new sable fur piece that hung inside the closet door and a throb of another kind of remembrance went through her. Mama and Lettie and her brother Reeves had given it to her Thursday night. It was too fine for the rest of her wardrobe, as yet too new and too much itself to seem her own possession. They had given it to her as a kind of armour against the unknown north, an assertion to all strangers of her own and of her family's decency. The fur piece, unlike the room, would grow with her. She would never quite feel again, even the next time she looked at it, her own youth, and vulnerability and pride as she did at this moment.

The elevator rattled shut in the hall and AJ's foot-steps sounded on the stone floor. Leila moved smiling toward them, smoothing her hair, and opened the door before he touched it. His thin rather serious face smiled suddenly. "Hello, Lei!" he said across an armful of newspapers. The freshness of the outdoors was in his topcoat and in his short straight fair hair, the scent of fresh ink in the papers he carried. "Breakfast smells good! Hi, Ellie. Waiting for us as usual, I see."

Elspeth twisted her hands, but now with pleasure.

"I really am!"

She was glad she had waited.

"Oh, you really are?"

he mocked her.

Leila followed him with her eyes as he hung his topcoat in the closet and adjusted his cuffs in the neat shy way she had noticed the first time she met him. She would never forget the way he had smiled just now when she opened the door. I have made this room a home for him already, she thought, knowing she would never tell him of her fear while he was gone that something might have happened to him.

"Had to walk a good ways to find a New York Times. I wanted it for the wart ads." He smiled as he sat down at the bridge table, careful not to bump the fragile legs. "And you know, Lei, the fellow in the grocery store didn't know what I meant by 'sweet milk'. He said, 'Wha-at?'" AJ stretched his neck toward Elspeth to make her laugh. "Oh, really!" Leila laughed, half closing her eyes and turning her head, as she often did when she was amused, but now mainly because AJ expected her to be amused.

"Finally he understood I wanted milk but he told me he didn't have any sweet. 'Then give me some butter-milk,' I said. 'We got no buttermilk either,' he said." AJ reached for a piece of toast, laughing, but with a shadow across his blue eyes. He remembered the three people who had come into the store after him, their impatient smiles to one another during his stumbling conversation with the counterman, his realisation that he spoke quite a different language from theirs. "Anyway," he finished, blushing a little, for he had not made Leila and Ellie laugh so much as he had hoped,

Elspeth bent her head lower. She did not know exactly what was the matter except everything

“there isn’t any sweet milk in New York. It’s either milk or buttermilk.”

Elspeth forced a little laugh for the first time. “How funny,” she remarked. And suddenly she sounded grown-up to herself, for she had said this just to be nice, knowing that in the store, her daddy had felt the very same scary feeling she and her mother had felt here in the room. Elspeth was embarrassed. She wanted to hang her head, to get up from the table and run outdoors. But here she could not go outdoors.

“Mother, may I have some coffee?” she asked recklessly.

“Of course you may, honey!” Her mother smiled and Elspeth watched the cup grow more than half full while her mother and daddy talked. Elspeth poured cream into her coffee from a little bottle shaped like a milk bottle, and watched as it swirled richly, making her coffee brown, then light tan. Slowly and guardedly she put three teaspoonfuls of sugar into it, expecting at each second to be challenged. But no one noticed. Elspeth stirred and stirred, then started to sip, but suddenly her mouth twisted up so she could not fit it to the cup. She began to cry, spilling the coffee as she tried to set it down.

“Elspeth!”

“What’s the matter, Ellie?”

Elspeth bent her head lower and lower. She did not know exactly what was the matter except everything. She did not want the coffee. At home she wouldn’t have been allowed coffee. It was one more proof.

“She’s tired,” her mother said.

“No, I’m not!” Elspeth protested, lifting her head as high as she had bent it low. She got up from the table with dignity and went slowly to the window, not making a sound, although she was crying. She wanted to say casually that she was simply not hungry, but she could not trust herself to talk.

“Come on back and let’s finish up,” her daddy called from the table. “Then we’ll all look at the funny papers together. Bet you never saw such a lot of funny papers as they have up here. I’ve got *three* papers with funny papers.”

Elspeth found she had not the least desire to read the funny papers. She began to cry again, silently, with a twisted turned-away face. Something really awful was wrong if the funny papers didn’t seem like anything. She heard her parents talking about her but she did not even care to listen.

She stood by the window gazing dully out at the dirty yellow-grey face of the building across the street. The sills of the windows were thick and made of a pinkish stone. There was a blue awning at the front door that came all the way down to the sidewalk on the sides.

She could see a door cut in each side, besides the opening at the end. She watched a fat man in a black suit walk through one side door and out the other, like a marble that rolled through a box with holes cut out.

She began to look at the street with more interest.

A little girl had come out of the apartment house and was bouncing a ball on the sidewalk near the awning. She threw one leg, then the other, over the ball at regular intervals. A man passed and jostled her, but she kept the ball bouncing without a miss. The little girl was just about her size, Elspeth thought, only plumper. She wore a green jumper dress and no hat, and her hair swung in beautiful dark braids. She began to bounce the ball against the house, making it hit the sidewalk on its return and land right in her hands as though it were on a rubber band.

Then she bounced the ball in front of her and threw *both* legs over! It occurred to Elspeth suddenly, with a feeling of awe, that the little girl might be the world’s champion ball-bouncer. The champion would certainly live in New York.

“Ellie?” her mother said slowly from behind her.

Elspeth twisted all the way around without moving her feet. “I’m watching out the window,” she said, not wanting to miss anything of the little girl. When her mother came over Elspeth said, “Look.”

“Why, she’s just about your own age. Maybe she’s someone for you to play with.”

“Yes,” Elspeth said, smitten with shyness. How could she ever play with the world’s champion ball-bouncer?

“Why don’t you go down and say hello to her,

Ellie? I bet she’d like someone to play with.”

“I don’t feel like it,”

Elspeth said quietly.

“Of course you do. Run

down and get acquainted with


her. She can tell you all about New York and you can tell her about home. Won’t you like that?”

Before Elspeth could say anything, her mother was brushing her hair, getting her hat and her red bolero from the closet. “You go down and look up and see if you can see us,” her mother said, patting her gently in the direction of the door. “We’re on the eighth floor. Be careful crossing the street.”

Elspeth walked sombrely toward the elevator and rang the elevator bell without even waiting to gather her courage. The elevator stopped almost immediately. “By-by, darling,” her mother called. Her voice sounded so sweet, echoing in the hall, that Elspeth did not want to leave.

In the elevator Elspeth’s lowered eyes saw, besides the elevator man’s uniformed trousers, the ankles and feet of a man and a woman. The woman had long thin feet in pointed black pumps. Elspeth thought she would never forget the look of those feet, the stiff staring faces above them that she could imagine and could not look at.

She walked straight through the lobby toward the coloured glass doors, one of which opened as a man came in. Everything happened fast, as though the whole world intended to get her outside with the world’s champion ball-bouncer. There was not even a passing car to delay her in crossing the street at the corner.

On the sidewalk, tossing one leg, then the other, then filling an interval with little dancing, mock 

The pattern of the rows upon rows of windows made her eyes swim and her heart beat violently

Covid is tearing a hole in young people's lives



Charity
appeal
2020

Can you help to repair it?

This year, The Guardian and The Observer's charity appeal is partnering with organisations that support young people in need. From building skills, confidence and career opportunities to fighting food poverty and isolation, your donation will have a real impact.

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YOUNGMINDS | UK YOUTH

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leg-throwing steps that kept in perfect rhythm with the bouncing ball, the plump little girl continued her wonderful performance and might not have stopped in all the time it took for Elspeth to be brushed and hatted and sent down to the place where she stood on the same sidewalk with her.

“Hello,” Elspeth whispered, trying her voice.

Then she sneaked close to the building against which the little girl bounced the ball. Elspeth pressed herself back against the yellow grey bricks and raised her eyes to the building where her parents were. The pattern of the rows upon rows of windows made her eyes swim and her heart began to beat violently. Somewhere up there her parents stood looking down at her. Then she brought her eyes down to the bottom, counted one, two, three, up to eight and swept her eyes across, almost losing the row.

There they were, at the window with the thin white curtains that looked grey. They were waving slowly, as though they had been waving a long while, waiting for her to find them. Elspeth started to wave, then brought her arm down hard at her side, not wanting to call attention to herself. They were waiting for her to make a move toward the world’s champion ball-bouncer. She *had* to.

Elspeth gathered herself and it was a pain when she began to move. She thought as she approached the little girl, her head hanging, that there was probably some place in New York that awarded prizes for various things and that surely this little girl had competed and easily won in the contest for sidewalk ball-bouncing.

Elspeth was only some ten feet away now and still the rubber ball bounced as though the little girl did not even notice her, her throat was dry again and she wondered if she could speak “Bok - bok - bok!” went the little rubber ball after a tiny hissing sound at the beginning of each bounce.

Elspeth stood still. She was so close she could see fine hairs coat the little girl’s plump legs. She was SO close, she had come so far, she felt it was the other girl’s turn now. She should stop bouncing and look at her, but she did not. Elspeth stood there as long as she could, doing nothing, then heard her own voice say: “Hello.”

The ball darted into the little girl’s hand and disappeared, as though it were hiding itself away at the mere sight of Elspeth. The little girl stared at Elspeth without any expression at all. Her eyes were dark brown and rather large, her mouth unsmiling, and there was neither curiosity nor hostility nor even a simple not-seeing in her face.

“How’re you?” Elspeth asked desperately.

Still the hole girl stared at her, her eyes moving slowly from Elspeth’s round-brimmed hat that sat on the back of her head down to her patent leather shoes with buttoned cross-straps, and up again to a point near her chin. She took a step back, then began to concentrate on her bouncing. The ball bounced down, down, as oblivious of Elspeth as before she had arrived.

“My name is Elspeth Levering,” Elspeth squeezed out. The name hung in the air like a delicate naked thing. Like *herself*.

The other little girl stopped, stared longer, then took another step back. Her arm moved as though she was about to throw the ball, then she looked at Elspeth once more. “You sure talk funny,” she said.

Elspeth started at the sound of her voice, feeling the unfriendliness before she made out the words. For the little girl had spoken so quickly, it took a moment for Elspeth to understand. Then Elspeth crumpled as though she were making a deep bow and fled.

She did not remember how she crossed the street or entered the red apartment house. She did not realise anything until she stood again in the elevator. She dashed down the hall and tapped on her parents’ door. She pushed her face into her mother, embracing her high around her waist.

“Ellie!”

“Back so soon, Ellie?”

Elspeth released her mother and swallowed. They expected her to have succeeded and she had failed. She had failed her parents.

“What’s her name?” her daddy smiled from the bed where he sat reading the papers.

“Is she nice?” her mother asked.

Elspeth nodded “Her name’s Helen,” she replied, looking around at the floor. Then she walked quickly to the closet, slipping the hat string from beneath her chin. “She’s awful

nice. Only she said she had to go some place right away, so I didn’t stay.”

“Well, that’s nice,” her mother said, so pleased-sounding that Elspeth’s fib hurt her deeply. “Are you going to see her again?”

“Uh-huh. Tomorrow. After school.”

The last word made Elspeth’s heart turn over and lie like a heavy thing. She stared straight ahead, wide-eyed. School tomorrow was a real something to be afraid of, an unknown school with unknown boys and girls. She would be really alone then, facing people like the world’s champion ball-bouncer multiplied a thousand times!

“Oh, Ellie!”

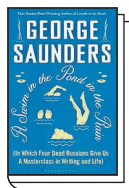
She felt her mother’s fingers in her hair, holding her head close against her. Elspeth could not press her face hard enough against her mother, for she could feel the tears running hopelessly out of her eyes now and she did not want her mother to see. She did not know why her mother held her so, but she knew she felt better because she had fibbed about the little girl across the street. Tomorrow, at the new school, she would make up for it by making friends with a lot of people, even if each one was twice as unfriendly as the world’s champion ball-bouncer. She felt her father pat her back and knew he had stooped down behind her too.

It was funny. Elspeth thought they were both as quiet as she during that long minute while she held her breath ●

She started at the sound of the voice, feeling the unfriendliness before she made out the words

Book of the week

{ Essays } More than rules for good writing ... A Booker prize-winning teacher dissects classic short stories *Tessa Hadley*



A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life

by George Saunders, Bloomsbury, £16.99

This book is a delight, and it's about delight too. How necessary, at our particular moment. Novelist and short story writer George Saunders has been teaching creative writing at Syracuse University in the US for the last 20 years, including a course in the 19th-century Russian short story in translation. "A few years back, after the end of one class (chalk dust hovering in the autumnal air, old-fashioned radiator clanking in the corner, marching

band processing somewhere in the distance, let's say)," he had the realisation that "some of the best moments of my life, the moments during which I've really felt myself offering something of value to the world, have been spent teaching that Russian class."

I love the warmth with which he writes about this teaching, and agree wholeheartedly that there's not much on Earth as good, if you're that way inclined, as an afternoon spent discussing sublime fiction with a class of eagerly intelligent apprentice writers, saturated in the story and greedy for insight and understanding (everyone saturated and greedy, the teacher along with the rest). He's right, too - as well as appealingly modest - in thinking that the best teaching is "of value" straightforwardly, as writing itself somehow can't be. You don't get up from your writing table believing you've done something "of value to the world".

Now Saunders has developed as essays some of the thoughts arising from those classes, and put them together into a book alongside the stories he is discussing - by Chekhov, Tolstoy, Turgenev and Gogol. These essays aren't anything like academic analysis. The questions that get asked in a reading-for-writers class are inflected differently from literary criticism - "Why did the writer do this?" rather than "How must we read this?" - even if they converge

finally on the same points of appreciation, and the same questions of meaning.

Saunders doesn't come from the end of a completed story but dives in at the beginning and into the middle, trying to experience it in the making, imagine why it unfolded the way it did. He takes Chekhov's "In the Cart", for instance, literally one page at a time, interrupting the text with his interrogations. Now, what do you know? And now? And what are you curious about? Where do you think the story is headed? Why did Chekhov go that way, and not this? So much for the death of the author. This kind of reading (one of the best kinds, I'm convinced) tracks the author's intentions - and missed intentions, and intuitions, and instinctive recoil from what's banal or obvious - so closely and intimately, at every step, through every sentence.

Marya, a thwarted, lonely schoolmistress is making her way home in a cart from the town where she's gone to pick up her salary, to the bleak village school where she works. "She felt as though she had been living in these parts for a long, long time, for a hundred years, and it seemed to her that she knew every stone, every tree on the road from the town to her school. Here was her past and her present, and she could imagine no other future than the school, the road to the town and back ... " Saunders begins to speculate forwards, as any reader is bound to. "The story has said of her, 'She is unhappy and can't imagine any other life for herself? And we feel the story preparing itself to say something like, 'Well, we'll see about that.'"

A less good writer than Chekhov might have worked with the grain of the expectation raised: something might happen to save Marya from her future. A love affair? As if on cue, one attractive and wealthy landowner appears alongside her in his carriage. But nothing doing: the landowner's a bit useless and ineffective, and anyway Marya's preoccupied by her problems with the janitor at school, who is rude to her and hits the boys. Good writing works in intricate relationship with a reader's expectations, raising them and leading them on, then sidestepping or surpassing them. Not merely disappointing them: the story can't do *nothing* with Marya, that would be cheating. We'd ask, what was it *for*, then? The writer has to find a sweet spot

Saunders doesn't come from the end of a story but dives in at the beginning and into the middle, trying to experience it in the making

between an implausibly happy resolution and a brute refusal of satisfaction. They have to find out what movement there is, and what freedom, inside the story's particular conditions - but without cheaply magicking them away. Being Chekhov, in this case he finds it. (Read the story.)

All this makes Saunders's book very different from just another "how to" creative



YURY YURIEV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

writing manual, or just another critical essay. In enjoyably throwaway fashion, he assembles along his way a few rules for writing. “Be specific! Honour efficiency! ... “Always be escalating,” he says. “That’s all a story is, really: a continual system of escalation. A swath of prose earns its place in the story to the extent that it contributes to our sense that the story is (still) escalating.” There’s truth in all of this, though I do wonder whether you can actually learn to write better by following these explicit prescriptions, or rules of craft, extracted from what you read. Perhaps.

It’s certainly true, in any case, that reading “In the Cart” or Tolstoy’s “Master and Man” with this rich, close attention will mulch down into any would-be writer’s experience, and repay them by fertilising their own work eventually, as they struggle with the words on their own page. Perhaps it’s less like applying a series of lessons and more like the training of an intuition that flashes between hand, eye, mind. That defining human transaction, teaching and learning through imitation, the master’s hand closed over the apprentice’s to guide it.

Saunders’s concentration is often on the forward dynamic of the stories, their “tight, escalatory pattern”. In “a highly organised system, the causation is more pronounced and intentional”. Good writing is “the cumulative result of all this repetitive choosing on the line level, those thousands of editing micro-decisions”. This focus on process can sound occasionally like a reductive functionalism – each detail is there because it makes the story work. In reading, though, don’t we feel it the other way round: as if the

Sublime fiction Chekhov’s ‘In the Cart’

story were only there so that for a moment we can contemplate the truth of the detail, of the experience?

At the climax of “Master and Man”, wealthy merchant Vasili Andreevich, lost in a snowstorm at night and imagining the reality of his death for the first time, sees tall stalks of wormwood sticking out of the snow, “desperately tossing about under the pressure of the wind which beat it all to one side and whistled through it”. The writing holds us still through its descriptive truthfulness, its miraculous verisimilitude. And the writer is not merely thinking how to entertain us more effectively. His effort at that moment of writing, in the midst of all his “repetitive choosing” (which *is* what makes the story work), is subordinated to the vision in his mind’s eye, which holds still for him even as he labours to bring it into being.

Saunders knows that too. One of the pleasures of this book is feeling his own thinking move backwards and forwards, between the writer dissecting practice and the reader entering in through the spell of the words, to dwell inside the story. He’s particularly good on the ending of Tolstoy’s “Alyosha the Pot”, burrowing into all the things Tolstoy chooses *not to say* about the death of its protagonist, and ending, after much discussion of the story’s point and its value, with his own “state of wondering”, every time he reads it.

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

{ Memoir } What happened when, to honour her father, a romantic journalist considered an arranged marriage *Sukhdev Sandhu*



How We Met: A Memoir of Love and Other Misadventures
by Huma Qureshi,
Elliott & Thompson,
£14.99

Huma Qureshi confesses early on in *How We Met* that she wasn't sure about whether or not she should have written this memoir. It's the tale of how she found and later married a white Englishman called Richard. It is, she worries, "unextraordinary and normal and therefore an unimportant story to tell". Self-chiding she may be, but her anxiety is not

entirely misplaced: at a time when public discussion about race and culture is often shrill and self-righteous, at once accusatory and defensive, full of ologies and phobias, the quiet tone of her book - to say nothing of its guarded optimism - is almost shocking.

"Perhaps my story isn't quite as dramatic as you'd hoped it would be," Qureshi ponders. "Maybe you were expecting a story of oppression, repression, my personal trauma neatly spilled to fit a familiar-feeling narrative." Her father was from Lahore, her mother from Uganda; both were graduates, and she grew up in Walsall, where even the most eventful weekend involved nothing more than relatives descending on their house, "cars parked up the road for miles occasionally annoying the white neighbours because of someone's Mercedes half-blocking a pavement or a drive, the air thick with the smell of kebabs and biryani".

Qureshi studied at Warwick and then in Paris, but returned home suddenly after her father had a stroke. She finds him unable to speak and tends to him for days and weeks (he eventually died after 18 months in hospital). Thinking of ways in which she can honour him, the journeys and sacrifices he has made, his achievements as a doctor, she starts to listen to her mother and aunts all of whom believe she should be getting married soon. Her dreams had been of independence, big cities, becoming a journalist; now, to feel less broken, to affirm she's her parents' child, she agrees to meet a sequence of suitable boys.

They are anything but. One guy with potential (he liked reading Chekhov's short stories and watching old episodes of *Party of Five*) chastised her for not living with her mother. Another looked like "Saddam Hussein in a lemon V-neck sweater. He rushed to tell me I was prettier than he thought I would be, given how old I was, and then, as though it were an afterthought, he mentioned he needed an extension on his visa and oh, could I help?" What makes the situation so galling is the endless enthusiasm of her aunts, one of whom prints out and sends her Arabic prayers: read these seven times a day for three months and you'll be bound to find someone.

Qureshi sees the humour in these episodes, but she is mostly attuned to her own hurt. The *Sad Girl Years* is how she describes the period when she's living in London and working at the *Observer*. Friends of hers have places they have bought, far better salaries, a sense of direction; she has a room not far from Beckton Sewage Treatment Works, feels undervalued by her bosses, and is being eaten up by grief. At work events, "I frequently felt as though I was looking in from the outside, a moth batting against a window before falling away." Fearful of messing things up in the office during the day, microwaving baked potatoes alone in the evenings, feeling at once blurry and raw, "my reflection a weird stranger on the Tube": many readers will recognise their twentysomething selves in these passages.

Qureshi says quite a lot about being insufficiently pretty or tall or successful. Her descriptions of married life are rosy: "Richard is a brilliant father.



Huma Qureshi

He is patient and loving and he always gets up in the night before me if ever one of the boys wakes up." More surprising is that her father's presence is elusive: the only times he feels palpable are when he's described standing on the landing singing "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go", or coming into the kitchen "from the garden after having mowed the

lawn in his vest, smelling like the earth, the fresh air".

I'm glad that Qureshi seems, via an online dating site, to have found happiness. The latter parts of the book describe how and why Richard, whose grandparents were strict Methodists, converted to Islam even though Qureshi herself rarely attended mosque - and her anxiety about introducing him to her mother. But I wish that she'd discussed in greater depth why her younger self bristled when her parents invoked "our culture". And about the value - or otherwise - of growing up "learning how to self-edit because it's what so many of us second-generation types had to do". These are complex, resonant issues: *How We Met* offers hints that Qureshi could, in the future, tackle them without pieties or platitudes.

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

{ Philosophy } Keep life simple, be moral and pursue tranquillity – the advice of Epicurus on how to be happy Edith Hall



The Fourfold Remedy: Epicurus and the Art of Happiness

by John Sellars,
Allen Lane, £9.99

Last year inflicted ill-health, death, bereavement, unemployment and poverty on some, and led others to look inwards and re-evaluate lifestyle and priorities. Many have sought therapeutic remedies as well as advice on how to feel happier. As a new year begins with problems everywhere, some ancient Mediterranean answers can perhaps be found in John Sellars's little

book. It explores the ideas of the Athenian philosopher Epicurus, born in 341BC, 19 years before Aristotle died. Epicurus taught that the most important factor in achieving happiness is mental tranquillity. Epicureanism can ease contemporary worries, Sellars believes; in some ways it resembles cognitive behavioural therapy.

In 307BC, Epicurus founded his community at a site he called the Garden, near the Academy that Plato had founded 80 years before. It offered a private, secluded space for Epicurus's calm followers to assemble (they included, ancient tradition held, both women and slaves). Epicurean pleasure was not defined as the gratification of fleshly desire. Rather, pleasure was simply an absence of distress or disturbance (*ataraxia*). This tranquillity could be achieved by withdrawing from public life into the company of like-minded friends, and using philosophy and physics to minimise fear of pain and death by proving that gods did not involve themselves in human affairs and that there was no afterlife in which humans could suffer retribution.

Sellars, a professor of philosophy, is known as a proponent of neo-Stoicism. (Stoics advocated suppressing emotions while Epicurus recommended avoiding them altogether, even to the extent of avoiding marriage and parenthood.) Documentable Epicurean ideas, especially on friendship and pain, are expertly expounded here, and he knows Greek and Latin Epicurean texts thoroughly. Not that they are voluminous. Any attempt to revive Epicureanism is hampered by the dearth of textual evidence. Of Epicurus's own 300 or so works, only three substantial letters have survived, reproduced by his unreliable biographer Diogenes Laertius, and two collections of aphorisms. Sellars handles these adroitly, and chooses some inspiring individual

sayings that reward contemplation: "Friendship dances round the world, summoning each one of us to waken our blessedness."

Epicurus's natural philosophy of atomist materialism, later admired by Galileo, Newton and Marx, was presented in the magnificent Latin epic of Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*. There are also the invaluable charred papyrus fragments of works by the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus. Sellars's title derives from Philodemus's precious summary of Epicurus's ideas as a "fourfold remedy", *tetrapharmakos*. This only survives because an English clergyman named John Hayter drew a sketch of one crucial papyrus in the 1790s before it crumbled into illegibility. It reads: "Don't fear God. / Don't worry about death. / What's good is easy to get. / What's terrible is easy to endure." The third remedy may provoke a cynical snort in any reader struggling to make ends meet. Most Epicureans seem to have been prosperous enough to fund a life of seclusion and extended leisure.

Sellars, while regularly comparing Epicurean beliefs with Stoic ones, largely overlooks what *all* the major schools had in common: disdain for excess worldly goods and pursuit of physical pleasures for their own sake; the assumption that virtue, justice and happiness were causally interrelated; a questioning drive to uncover the truth about the human condition.

He adds little to the story of Epicureanism's impact on the Renaissance, told influentially by

Stephen Greenblatt in *The Swerve* (2011). And women seeking *ataraxia* might regret his neglect of the several significant female writers who have expounded Epicureanism (for example, Margaret Cavendish, a mid-17th-century royalist leader of *avant garde* aspiring female intellectuals).

Despite Sellars's insistence that Epicurean-

ism anticipates CBT, he offers scant practical advice on how to integrate Epicurean practice into modern life. Perhaps some people still allow superstitions and fear of vindictive providential deities to wreck their peace of mind. But I suspect there are far more people who are dealing with real hunger, fear of unemployment and physical pain. Fortunately there is a Greek philosopher whose substantial surviving works *can* supply concrete help with real-world problems relating to analysing and working with painful emotions, work, politics, the environment, family, parenthood and friends. His name is Aristotle.

Edith Hall's Aristotle's Way is published by Vintage. To buy The Fourfold Remedy by John Sellars for £9.29 go to guardianbookshop.com.

A brutal tale of extinction focuses on a dying woman's family amid Australia's ecological meltdown

Beejay Silcox



The Living Sea of Waking Dreams
by Richard Flanagan,
Chatto, £16.99

Australian Booker winner Richard Flanagan has described his eighth novel - a magical realist tale of ecological anguish - as "a rising scream". *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* combines the moral righteousness of a fable, the wounded grief of a eulogy, and the fury of someone who still reads the news. And

smouldering underneath it all is the red memory of the terrible bushfires during Australia's last summer.

When 87-year-old Francie is admitted to a Hobart hospital with a brain bleed, her children assemble at her bedside: there's rock-star architect Anna, trawling Instagram while the doctors prognosticate; unyielding Terzo, a wealth manager with an iron-clad sense of certainty; and failed artist Tommy, the sibling punching bag ("that most bourgeois of embarrassments: the lower class relative"). Death is waiting in the wings, and there are decisions to be made.

Tommy is ready to let Francie slip away, but to Terzo, it smacks of spineless defeatism. Tommy's kindness has always irked Anna, proof somehow of her own deficiencies. She sides with Terzo, and their mother is whisked into surgery. For Francie, here begins a cruel half-life of "tubes and torment" - elaborate, high-risk interventions and ratcheting misery. "She had not understood her children's resolve that she should live. If she had, she might have feared it more than death itself."

The Living Sea of Waking Dreams follows Anna as she battles her mother's decline, insisting on last-ditch therapies in the way only those with power and money can. Are her actions a ferocious form of love, sublimated guilt, or a fearful evasion of love's most intimate and painful obligations? Anna does not know. What she does know is there is an intoxicating calm - a kind of existential grace - to be found at her mother's bedside.

Outside the air-con cool of the hospital, Australia is burning. The reef is bleaching and the bees are dying

and the sky is black with pyrocumulus terror. "It was like living with a chronically sick smoker," Flanagan writes, "except the smoker was the world and everyone was trapped in its fouled and collapsing lungs." It's a desolation so immense that it's possible for Anna to lose her own pain inside it. Doom-scrolling on social media, she finds "perverse comfort" in watching the sixth extinction wreak its oblitative carnage - a kind of grim companionship.

A vanishing world; a vanishing mother. At home in Sydney, Anna's possessions are vanishing, too - hocked, she thinks, by her sullen, cash-strapped son. When she realises that one of her own fingers has disappeared - a painless victim to some mystical "silent leprosy" - Anna is oddly unflustered. "The only surprise to her was how little she felt about feeling so little." She is a middle-aged woman, after all, and inured to social invisibility. But then another body part follows, and another.

Flanagan's extinction metaphor is not subtle, but the fiction of the Anthropocene cannot afford to be gentle; summer is coming. "Summer was frightening. Smoke was frightening. Having children was frightening ... Today was frightening. Tomorrow was terrifying, if we made it that far."

Flanagan's novel may be brutal, but unlike Terzo and Anna - so ferociously determined "to save their mother from her own wishes" - it is not wilfully cruel. Francie's decline is rendered as a slow motion horror,

The Booker winner's novel mixes the moral righteousness of a fable with the fury of someone who still reads the news

but she is never the monster. Dying can be an undignified business, but it is apathy that Flanagan finds grotesque. Mollified by social media ("blessed Novocaine of the soul") and peak time TV ("bedtime fairytales for adults"), his disappearing populace resign themselves to fading away. For confronting the lost noses, fingers, breasts and eyes would mean finding a way to speak

to each other about everything else that is missing.

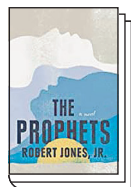
Flanagan understands the textures of silence: what is unsaid, unsayable and unheard. He depicts a world drowning in opinion, jargon, small talk and noise. There's stammering Tommy, whose grief has trapped his words in his throat; Francie, whose post-stroke utterances are "adrift and broken", filling notebooks with undecipherable symbols; and lonely Anna, who wonders if the act of naming feelings destroys them.

"Is translating experience into words any achievement at all?" Flanagan asks. "Or is it just the cause of all our unhappiness?" Writers the world over are grappling with a version of this question: in the face of so much devastation, so much terror, what can fiction possibly achieve? *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* is his emphatic, wrenching answer.

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

This virtuosic debut set on a deep south plantation celebrates the forbidden love between two enslaved boys

Novuyo Rosa Tshuma



The Prophets
by Robert Jones Jr,
Quercus, £18.99

It is not hyperbole to say that *The Prophets*, which explores black queer lives on a Mississippi plantation known among the enslaved as “Empty”, evokes the best of Toni Morrison, while being its own distinct and virtuosic work. It is hard to believe this is a debut: where it falters, it does so

in the way of ambitious novels – in a bid to innovate.

The story pivots around the love between Samuel and Isaiah, two enslaved boys aged 16 or 17, “one black, the other purple; one smiling, the other brooding”. Growing up on Empty, the two have been inseparable since childhood, blooming into lovers whose romance upsets the running of the plantation. These two characters are captured with clarity and lyricism on the page, and their love is elevated to a powerful symbol that not only illuminates the workings of slavery, but forces others into action, in this way unveiling deadly secrets, desires and follies.

To Paul, the slave owner, the pair are “young bucks” fit for breeding more slaves to work on his plantation. They refuse to do so, instead finding refuge and pleasure in their romance, which inspires in them a delightful if heartbreaking joy. Impatient for results, Paul rapes a slave named Essie whom Isaiah has failed to impregnate. The encounter produces Solomon, which numbs Essie and angers Amos, a slave who loves her. Amos tries to protect her from further assault by ingratiating himself with Paul; he becomes his protégé and begins to preach the Christian gospel to the enslaved. Little by little, Amos succeeds in turning the slave community, which has been protective

of Samuel and Isaiah and their love, against them.

The novel has an impressive cast of characters. There are the prophets of the title, who communicate from the world of the dead and try to offer the enslaved some guidance. The story goes back in time to explore the genealogy of Samuel and Isaiah, who are descended from the Kosongo people in an unnamed part of Africa. The Kosongo are notable for their fluid notions of gender: we meet Kosii and Elewa, male lovers whose spirits, like Samuel and Isaiah, were bonded from birth. The slave trade demolishes the Kosongo, some of whom are taken on a brutal journey across the Atlantic. In this way, the book examines the rupture of genealogies and the creation of the American slave, contrasting different worlds and belief systems.

Then there is the ethereal Ruth, Paul’s wife, who lives amid her own delusions and turns against Samuel and Isaiah after a perceived slight. There is Tim, Paul’s son, a painter with abolitionist sympathies who is drawn to the two boys in the way that a sinner is drawn to forbidden fruit. There is James, the overseer, who is not much better off than the slaves and deeply resents them. There are the slave women whose voices help to drive the novel, and who are each tied, whether through love, motherhood or envy, to Samuel and Isaiah.

At the heart of the narrative is a tremendous generosity of spirit; each character, slave and enslaver, “half-caste” and overseer, is richly evoked, capturing the complexity of their desires and deprivations. It seems at once terrible and mundane to follow Paul as he surveys his plantation, revelling in the legacy left to him by his parents. Samuel and Isaiah’s love affair reveals Paul’s own contradictions, manifest in the character of Adam, “the coach-Negro” who resembles Paul and is sometimes mistaken for a white man. During a drunken night out, Paul shares an intimate moment with Adam. Adam wonders, with a pained yearning, whether Paul finally acknowledges him as his son.

This then is a novel wedded to its period but also of our time, exploring the pressing questions that

A plantation house in Mississippi, where *The Prophets* is set have plagued the US since its founding. It manages to be many things at once, stirring both the heart and the intellect in an exploration

of human desire and depravity. A trenchant study of character, it is refreshing in its portraits of the daily negotiations of humanity under slavery, practised by both the enslaved and the enslavers. It is an ode to an enduring love between two black boys.

Black queer love is at its most radical here. It represents a non-utilitarian love, a love that resists debasement. It delights and rages. Through it, the human demands to be seen. It becomes, in this magnificent novel, synonymous with freedom.

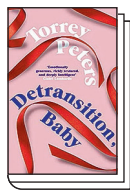
*Novuyo Rosa Tshuma’s House of Stone is published by Atlantic. To buy *The Prophets* for £16.52 go to guardianbookshop.com.*



REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

An irresistible comedy of manners insists on the psychic and social commonalities of cis and trans experience

Grace Lavery



Detransition, Baby
by Torrey Peters,
Serpent's Tail, £14.99

If the title of Torrey Peters's irresistible debut novel *Detransition, Baby* sounds to you like a seductive invitation to slip back into a previous gender identity, you will be ill prepared for an altogether more uncanny seduction: the calming whispers of bourgeois realism.

Perhaps *Detransition, Baby* is the first great trans realist novel? Witty, elegant and rigorously plotted, Peters's book breezily plays with the structural conventions of literary realism. The title is not so much an invitation to rechange one's gender, as a brutally condensed summary of the novel's plot, which concerns Ames (formerly "Amy"), who has detransitioned, and Reese, a trans woman who wants a baby. The two of them enter into a compact with Ames's pregnant partner, Katrina, who initially doesn't know about her husband's history as a trans it-girl, to conceive and raise a child.

After setting up that comedy of manners, the novel then moves back and forth in time as we learn the romantic and especially the sexual histories of Ames and Reese. Here we find typifying vignettes that will be familiar to readers of contemporary trans writing, especially as its protocols were thrashed out on Tumblr and WordPress in the 2000s. Trans characters try on different modes of characterisation as the novel rotates through its different time frames. One character, Iris, "had a doll's eyes and a practised Marilyn Monroe giggle"; her goal is to "get discovered and be a movie star, become a Lana Del Rey song personified".

These sexually peppery clichés, though also casually self-instrumentalising, may or may not charm the reader - they did this one - but Peters's remarkable skill is to divert our attention from the cliché to the mode of self-narration in which it moves and has its being. So, the narrator continues: "In the post-meth lows, she spoke in other images, laced with serotonin-depleted terror and an almost prideful insistence on describing her own actions in the passive voice: *being pimped; having my pussy pledged; spending days in addled semi-captivity among faceless men who made me addicted, who owned me ...*"

Peters walks us through the fantasy of sexual powerlessness, lingering on its paradigmatic gram-

mar, its impressionistic flit from one passive sensation to the next. In other hands, a character like Iris might be merely a stereotype against which to develop the more playfully independent Reese, and the more thoughtful Amy/Ames. Yet here Iris, as representative of an undifferentiated mass of Lana wannabes, enables a reflection on the forms of self-description with which all of us build ourselves. *Detransition, Baby* draws a parallel between the thirtysomething transitioner and the thirtysomething divorcee: both find themselves in a position of newfound sexual independence; both are responsible for building new relationships to sex and to womanhood.

The portrayal of detransition itself is tender, rather than mawkish, and Ames's motivations are admirably ambivalent. *Detransition, Baby* makes a careful distinction between "being trans", which it treats as a condition of desire, and "doing trans", a set of actions and protocols that have simply become too exhausting for Ames to continue. In that sense, though Peters is not inviting the reader to detransition, baby,

Is this the first great trans realist novel? Witty, elegant and rigorously plotted, it breezily plays with structural conventions

she nonetheless depicts the way a transphobic world erodes the commitments and saps the resources of trans people, until it can seem like our only option.

Peters's novel takes on the well-trodden topic of baby fever, and although it renders the specificity of trans community and subjectivity in vivid, electric prose, its real appeal is much wider. *Detransition,*

Baby insists on the psychic and social commonalities of cis and trans experience, a message shaped particularly to pull the trans community towards universal experiences revealed in concrete particulars, and away from the separatism Peters rhapsodised about in her 2016 novella, *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones*. In that cult classic of queer apocalypse lit, Peters imagined a world in which everyone had become trans due to the universal blocking of endogenous hormones. Such a devastated world engenders - so to speak - a utopian experience of human relations, by grounding each individual in a volitional form of embodiment.

The world of *Detransition, Baby*, however, is both complicated and enriched by the presence of cis character Katrina, whose relation to sex and gender is neither volitional nor utopian. Reese understands the complexity: "Yes, go ask this other woman, Katrina, to split her unborn child with a transsexual. I fully expect that she will murder you for the suggestion, for which I will take a portion of the credit without having to risk jail. If you are still alive in a week, we'll take it from there."

That "we" might be limitless.

To buy *Detransition, Baby* for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.

Poetry

The Freud family, art, translation and endnotes in a richly unconventional and multitextured collection *Fiona Sampson*



Hiddensee
by Annie Freud,
Picador, £10.99

Painter, retired civil servant and the eldest child of Lucian, Annie Freud launched her poetry career with funny, often highly sexualised light verse. Now at 72 she has published her fourth collection, *Hiddensee* – a book that locates her quite differently, as a former student of comparative liter-

ature whose imagination is furnished with European high culture and who is, it turns out, a highly accomplished literary translator.

Hiddensee is named after the sandy Baltic island that has been a traditional resort of German writers and artists. In English it's also of course a richly suggestive compound: poetry, after all, tries to perform acts of divination on the unseen. There is a suggestion of hide-and-seek, the *fort-da* game her great-grandfather famously analysed. But the book makes sure you know all about the actual island, and what it represents to the author, because Freud has provided us with an endnote. In fact, this book has a total of 18 endnotes, and superscript numbers are sprinkled across the poems in a way that's either irritating or refreshingly unexpected, depending on your taste.

Personally, I'd have preferred them more concise and unnumbered. But they do play an important poetic role, adding further texture to a work that is fundamentally multitextured, and the richer and more unconventional for it. After a frontispiece oil by the poet herself, *Hiddensee* is divided into three sections: New Poems, Cancer Poems, and 13 poems in French by Jacques Tornay, with Freud's English translations, and her afterword introducing the distinguished Swiss poet and his work. More unusually still, the book's first two sections are bilingual. Two of the three Cancer Poems, for example, are written twice over, in French and in English. This section also includes a found poem of Sigmund Freud's diary extracts from the last months of his life. Or are they compiled? Reconstructed, even? Here's

one place where a note by Annie Freud would really help the reader: the cause and date of her great-grandfather's death are well known, so what is she showing us here? Genius at bay? Graceful understatement? The velocity of tragedy?

It would help, too, because the poet also evinces graceful understatement in her own poems about cancer – and throughout the darker shadowed pieces in this collection. “On the Shortness of Life” closes: “In days to come, be there, be there, / put your sweater on against the cold. / We'll get there step by step.” This is modest, gentle; and, though addressed first of all to a partner, universal in its embrace. We'll all “get there step by step” together, as the pandemic has shown. The tercet is, in its ability to tell us something by going in several apparent directions, a small masterclass in the art of synthesis. Likewise “The Lions of Chemo”, which ends: “At one / moment the field of my entire vision / was filled with a lion's yellow skin.”

Synthesis and transformation: poems about difficult experiences turn them into art. Other poems in this collection transform family members – “Uncle Marcel”, her mother-in-law – and even the poet's self into characters; and memories into stories. Amid all this putting in order, one poem in particular stands out. “Why I Am a Painter” is a profession of vocation that could speak just as well to poetry: “I'd be unfaithful / to everything that's dear / for [its] sake [...] I love the infinite pains / the near-madness it takes [...] the feeling / of intoxication.” This sophisticated book speaks to its maker's “infinite pains” and – I hope – to her intoxication too.

Fiona Sampson's Two-Way Mirror: The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Profile) will be published in February.

Poem of the month

How to balance law books on your head
by Holly Hopkins

The problem isn't how, I absolutely know
the answer is to go to a Main Street
some town I don't live and find a stranger
who hates me, and my clothes, and my voice
and who (while they would never dream
of hurting me in person) suspects
the world would be better with me dead,
and persuade her that she wants to stand
so close my greasy nose presses into hers
and, recycling each other's soupy breaths,
balance the books between us on our foreheads.
My only problem is how to do *that*.

*From New Poetries VIII edited by
Michael Schmidt and John McAuliffe
(Carcenet, £14.99).*

'I understand crisis - I grew up in an extreme way'

From childhood in care to finishing a PhD and a third novel, Jenni Fagan tells *Claire Armitstead* about finding her voice, channelling rage, and why now is a pivotal moment for us all

For all that she was laid low early in the pandemic, and then spent months trying to home-school her nine-year-old son as a single parent, the last year has been far from a write-off for Jenni Fagan. Her third novel is about to be published, she completed her PhD.

And on the day she speaks to me from her Edinburgh home, she is hours away from finishing a memoir of her life up until the age of 16.

For most people, that would amount to a very thin book, but not for Fagan. As a child growing up in the Scottish care system, those first 16 years involved some 29 different placements, under four different names. The only thing she knows about her birth was that it took place in a Victorian psychiatric hospital in 1977. Perhaps, she muses, it has helped her to cope better than most with the events of the last months. "You know, I kind of understand crisis. I grew up in a very, very extreme way, and the idea that bad things happen to *other* people was never my reality. I always knew they happen to you. And sometimes they happen over and over."

Her new novel, *Luckenbooth*, is driven by a slow-burning rage that set in four years ago when Donald Trump was elected to the White House, and she spent three weeks driving across the US, gathering material for a long poem, *Truth*. Published in a limited edition in 2019, it was her version of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, she says. "I was very disturbed by watching the public appreciation of men in positions of power who are very openly narcissistic, sometimes even sociopathic."

Her response was to build all her rage into an

ancient Edinburgh tenement building, where the ghosts of murdered women wander up and down the stairs, waiting to avenge the sins of their fathers, while a century of tenants live out their lives from 1910 to the turn of the millennium. But if *Number 10 Luckenbooth* is intimate with hell, it has also known gaiety. On the second floor, in 1928, there is a glamorous drag ball, which involves "dresses and suits in bags. Sparkly headbands. strapon belts. Nipple tassels. Stockings and fishnets and hats and eye masks and whips." On the sixth floor, in 1963, William Burroughs expounds his theory of language as a virus, while shooting up with his young undertaker lover.

Burroughs, who arrived in the city as part of a celebrated 1962 writers' conference at the Edinburgh book festival, is among a colourful array of characters plucked from history. With its mixture of the physical and the spectral, of real-life characters and fictitious ones, the novel is a psychogeographical portrait of Edinburgh itself, as perceived by a writer who has loved it since she first arrived there as a little girl of around three years old. "It's a very dark city. And it's a very light city. It's a very wealthy city. And it's a very poor city. It's a very beautiful city, but it's a place of extremes."

In common with her two previous novels, *Luckenbooth* holds close to its heart characters who are socially and sexually marginalised. Her debut, *The Panopticon* (2012) told of a girl growing up in a care system that, for all its monumental pretensions, abandons its young wards to appalling abuse and exploitation; her second, *The Sunlight Pilgrims* (2016), plunged a transgender teenager into a global catastrophe in what was then a futuristic 2020.

The Sunlight Pilgrims didn't envisage a pandemic but huge icebergs breaking free of continental shelves. Days before we talk, just such an iceberg was reported to be heading for the Antarctic nature reserve of South Georgia, where it is expected to wreak environmental havoc. Was this a surprise to her? "Not really," she says. She's a devotee of *New Scientist* magazine. "I love science. I study the planet, and I study people. That's what I do. And ... and then I create work out of it."

Fagan traces her love of learning back to the age of seven, when she was "a very voiceless child" in the care system. "I was living in a caravan park at the time. And this library van used to come around once a week. I would read all of their books. And I was

'I was living in a caravan park and a library van used to come around once a week. I would read all of their books - I was saved completely in return'

saved completely in return, because I was able to see that there were other worlds, and then I could come back to my own world and look at it slightly differently," she says. At the same time she began to write poetry. "And when I saw my own words written down, I could look back at them and see that my voice was still there. And it was such a powerful, extraordinary thing to me."



She quit school at 15 with no qualifications, and the following year left the care system for homeless accommodation. At 18 she enrolled for a course in film and television. For a while Fagan thought she might be heading for a career as a playwright. She was mentored at Edinburgh's Traverse theatre and was shortlisted for a project run jointly by Film4 and the touring company Paines Plough, who called her down to London for an interview. "And when I arrived, they said: 'We had 1,000 entries and yours was unlike any other. We've been arguing all day about whether you're a playwright or a novelist.'" On the train home, she received a call saying they'd decided she wasn't a playwright. "I cried the rest of the way, and then I looked out the window and thought, well, I was always going to be a novelist."

As she turned 30 it all started to pay off. A bursary for exceptionally talented but impecunious students enabled her to move to London for a degree at the University of Greenwich. A scholarship followed for an MA at Royal Holloway, by which time she was pregnant with her son; she decided to move back to Edinburgh and "go all the way", signing up for a PhD at Edinburgh University.

While she was in London she began to make a bit of a name for herself performing poetry in little venues around Soho. Two collections were published in limited editions by a small artisan press. Then the novelist Ali Smith got in touch to say she'd heard Fagan was writing a novel and could she read it, "and she gave me the most amazing feedback". Around the same time she won a couple of competitions, and suddenly found herself besieged by agents.

The Panopticon won her a place on Granta's 2013

'I was always going to be a novelist'

Jenni Fagan

list of best young British novelists, and Fagan went on to adapt it herself for the National Theatre of Scotland in 2019, all the while "walking around with *Luckenbooth* in my head and nobody seeing a word of it". During the time she was writing it, she says, she and her son moved house four times, and in each new home she had the entire building in the novel planned out from floor to ceiling on her bedroom wall. "I had to know what was going on in each decade culturally, musically, in fashion, but also who the characters were and how they interacted with each other, and I lived next to it and had nightmares every night. And my little boy said: 'Mama, how come you get to write on the walls?'"

For all the difficulties of the last few months, she is now becoming comfortable with who she is - not least after confronting the big absence at the centre of her identity by taking a DNA test. It revealed a heritage that straddled Europe: "Dashes of French, Scandinavian, Iberian, a little bit of Ashkenazi Jewish, a little bit of eastern European, 40% Irish and only 7% British. I've never even seen a photograph of my biological family, so it was quite nice to find out a little bit more."

Now, she believes, it's "time to really slow down", both generally and personally. "I think we're at a pivotal moment for women, and for children and for society full stop, and we need to seize that opportunity, because otherwise ... Well, otherwise the consequences are unthinkable." But that doesn't mean letting up on the writing. Our interview ends at 3.30pm. At a little after midnight, she fires an exhilarated, very Scottish, tweet into hyperspace. "104,953 words. Full stop. A very solid draft one done. OOTLIN" ●

Here's to a year of reading dangerously

Megan Nolan

Comfort reading helped the author make it through the last 12 months, but now it's time for a return to ambition, challenge and hard-won reward

I don't set myself quantitative reading targets. I read as I live, compulsively and without much planning, which means that I average about a hundred books a year, mostly fiction. In terms of sheer mass I do fine, it's just that I often remember almost nothing about them once I've finished. I read a lot, but very poorly. This has never been more evident than in 2020, when my tendency to either read nothing or to binge thoughtlessly was crystallised.

Almost two months went by in which all I could read were tweets, the news and despairing emails from friends. I could not listen to music or watch films with any focus, either. By the time summer came I had begun to read again, in fitful jags and a spirit of mania rather than relaxation or contemplation. I read dozens of thrillers in one particularly stressful week, completing the back catalogues of some fairly prolific authors, and could not have told you much about them by the following morning.

My literary comfort food is fat novels about families and marriages, the more domestic and low-stakes in terms of material drama the better. I like squabbling and almost imperceptible emotional vagaries and unrealised infidelity. I read dozens of these this year too, again in the slippery rush of pure consumption with which I absorbed the interchangeable thrillers. Some of these books were artfully constructed and stylistically impressive and



emotionally insightful, and some of them were the equivalent of a more anodyne Nancy Meyers film, all empty middle-class malaise and loud chatter about nothing much. It hardly mattered to me which kind they were in my undiscerning haze. I just wanted to be calmed, to feel passive and sated and safe, and sometimes I did. My reading, no matter how superficial and rapid and lacking in reflection, was a method of coping and I don't regret it.

In 2021, however, I intend to leave these habits behind and begin a reading life that has more ambition. I've been thinking about a practice my father had when I was a child. He bought me a book every week or so - he said if there was anything we should be profligate about it was that - and it worked out roughly that for every three bits of frivolous reading he funded, there was one more difficult book added to my library. If I read serialisations of Nickelodeon shows for three weeks, then on the fourth I would try my hand at Dickens or whatever else in the classics and literature sections caught my eye.

When I grew into a teenager, just before the internet was totally ubiquitous, my cultural habits were excitable and hungry. I stumbled on things I liked and used them as a basis for digression. I read blurbs on the back of *The Virgin Suicides* and then sought out the authors to whom Jeffrey Eugenides was being compared. I read reviews in broadsheets and wrote down the references I didn't understand and tried to catch up. I bought something randomly from the "new in" section of my local bookshop every few weeks. This meant that I read things I found perplexing and hateful

As an adult I became lazy. I learned what kind of book it is that I derive pleasure from most easily and I read a thousand more like them

and boring, but rarely did I find that I regretted having done so.

As an adult I became lazy. I learned what kind of book it is that I derive pleasure from most easily and I read a thousand more like them. There is nothing wrong with reading for pleasure of course, but there is some balance between entertainment and enlightenment to be had, one I did

strike briefly in my youth, when I was reading widely and challenging myself regularly. Back then, I didn't consider a book that refused to bring me comfort to be a failure. I often read words and ideas that were unfamiliar to me and which I needed to work hard to elucidate for myself, and once I found my way into whatever they had led me to, there was further reward.

Now is not the time to chastise ourselves, and I'm not engaging in self-recrimination when I say that I want to expand my repertoire this year. We have lost not only emotional peace and comfort through the Covid-19 catastrophe, but also excitement. We have



ALLSTAR

The Virgin Suicides
'As a teenager,
my cultural habits
were excitable
and hungry'

stress, certainly, and anxiety, but no dynamism, no movement. I believe that trying to read with a renewed openness will be not a punishment but something to assuage, just a little, the loss I feel from having no colour in my life. The notion of self-care can sometimes be recast as strictly indulgent behaviours to the detriment of the self who is supposed to be cared for; having a bottle of wine and a takeaway pizza to relax is great, but taking care of yourself also means doing the dishes and going for a walk and having a shower.

When I was a kid I was more open to trying anything at all because I didn't know who I was going to be yet. I was always angling at becoming, and it was for this reason I was greedy to read everything. Even the stuff I hated had value because it gave me new information about myself. There comes a point for most adults when they believe they have stopped becoming, but we never really do. There's always more change to come. I want my reading life to reflect this as we try to bear a time in which stagnation is unfortunately mandatory. I'll be taking my dad's three parts pleasure one part challenge approach to try to get there ●

Acts of Desperation by Megan Nolan will be published in March by Jonathan Cape.

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'Call Me by Your Name was just a distraction' André Aciman



I started writing *Call Me by Your Name* as a diversion. I had absolutely no idea it was going to be a story, much less a novel. One April morning I was dreaming about being in an imaginary Italian villa overlooking the sea. It was a real-estate fantasy: a swimming pool, a tennis court, wonderful family and friends, plus the attendant personnel: a cook, a gardener and a driver. I had even picked the house from a painting by Claude Monet.

All I was doing that morning was scribbling away in my journal before picking up where I'd left off working on an ambitious and challenging novel that I had promised my publisher I'd deliver by 31 December of that year. It was just a distraction. It didn't "count". I certainly wasn't going to give it a second thought past breakfast.

All of it has to do with my personality: I lack the self-confidence that allows so many artists to take themselves and their work seriously. Instead, I am by temperament irresolute. I allow my mind to skid away from demanding projects in search of pleasure, any pleasure, partly because I can't believe I am actually working on anything *that* meaningful. No wonder then that, while pursuing an ambitious novel, I should dabble with a few sentences about a house in Italy overlooking the sea. Just a few sentences, maybe a couple of paragraphs, maybe even a touch of romance, but certainly not more.

And yet I found myself writing not a paragraph or two, but four pages that morning. This was fun. Usually, I fuss over every sentence, every clause, every

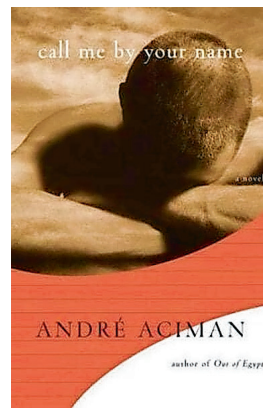
jolting cadence. But here I didn't have to answer to anyone. All I had to do, which I always loved doing when we rented a house in Tuscany, was imagine lying at the very edge of a swimming pool, one foot dangling in the water, listening to classical music on my earbuds, and quietly allow myself to drift away. Just a few paragraphs, nothing more – I promise.

But as I kept writing about Italy I was not unaware that I was basically turning back the clock by more than three decades to my own childhood in Egypt. Without an Egypt transposed on

to the Italian shore, none of *Call Me by Your Name* would have been possible. The pages I was writing were letting me take my family's beach home in Egypt, and everyone in it, to Italy. My difficult parents, slightly altered now, were shipped to Italy as well. My late adolescence, which bristled with so many unfulfilled desires, also landed on the Italian shore.

At some point that morning I knew I was on to something. True, I was on a deadline for another novel, but this was irresistible because it was exactly like love. I fell in love with Elio, I fell in love with Oliver, fell in love with their love and with this whole new world I was cobbling together minute by minute. That morning, after showering and getting dressed, I emailed the pages I'd written to my computer at work. I couldn't think of anything else. I'd give this three, maybe four months, not a day more.

Find Me by André Aciman is published by Faber.



Tom Gauld





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