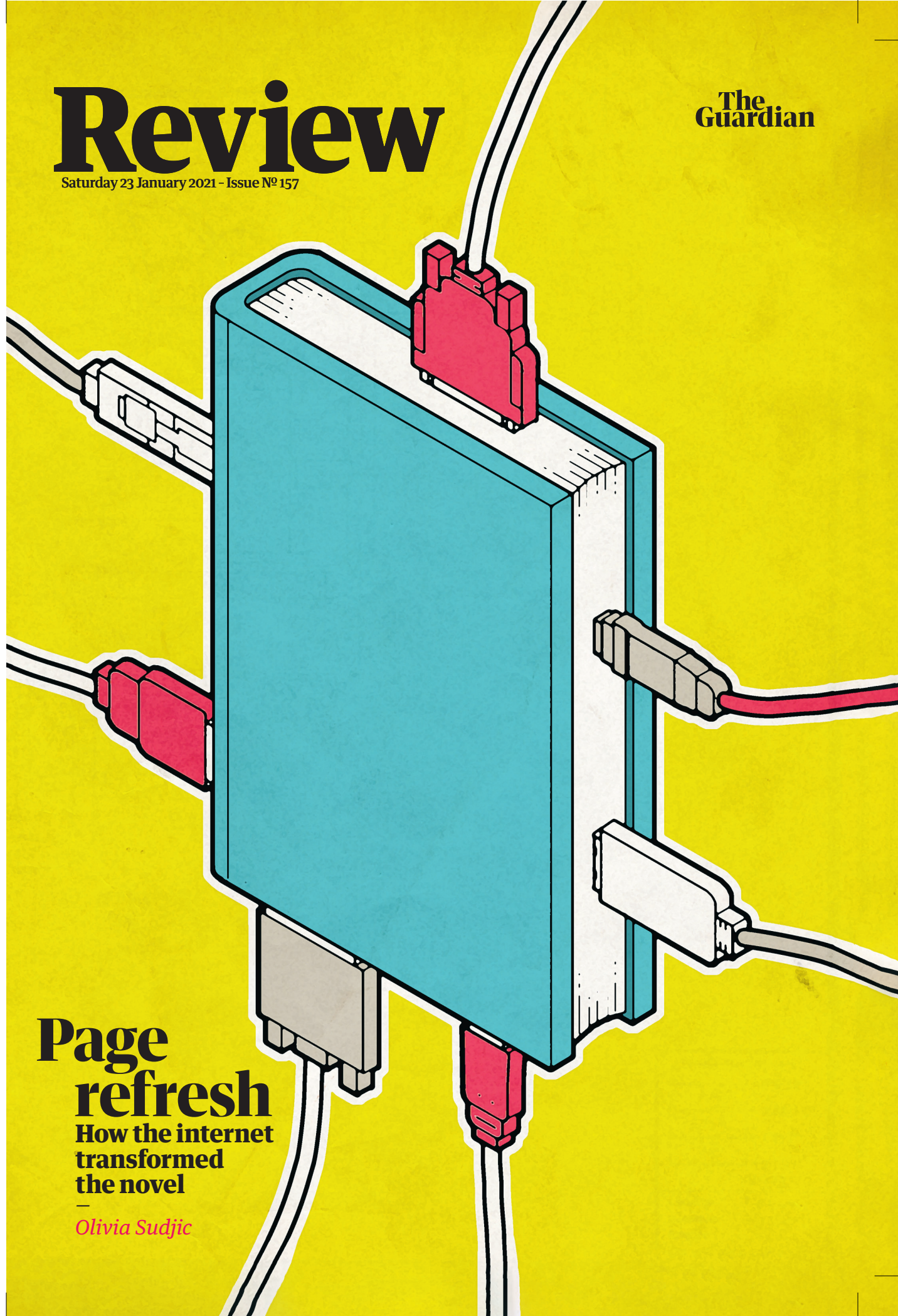


Review

Saturday 23 January 2021 - Issue N° 157

The
Guardian



Page refresh

How the internet
transformed
the novel

Olivia Sudjic



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Review

Saturday 23 January 2021 - Issue N^o 157

'As all art lovers know, deeper satisfaction is gained from longer looking, but also different types of looking, swivelling between bombardment, glance, immersion, way back, close up, from a room away, from a decade ago.'

– Max Porter, page 25

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The week in books

23 January

Opening a door to possibility

It is perhaps unsurprising for someone preparing to present Radio 4's *Open Book* programme that the sonic world has always offered me an entry point into literature. The architect Louis Kahn wrote: "A city is the place of availabilities. It is the place where a small boy, as he walks through it, may see something that will tell him what he wants to do his whole life." Growing up in a working-class area of Sheffield, any sense of literary possibility came more out of the great working-class and black traditions of oral storytelling - the soap-box orators of the Harlem Renaissance or the Griots of ancient west Africa - than the classroom. Toni Morrison meant little to me when I had to read

her at school, but when hip-hop artists Mos Def and Talib Kweli encoded the themes of her novel *The Bluest Eye* in "Thieves in the Night", I suddenly began to think of myself as a writer and, maybe more importantly, a reader.

That same creative energy that I responded to as a teenager can now be found in podcasts, such as that of George the Poet. I have likewise bought many books that I first heard mentioned on Laurie Taylor's *Thinking Allowed* and am currently excited by Broccoli Content, who not only produce their own shows by and for minority audiences, but also run a book club, complete with a podcast.

Such little moments of encounter, had they been around when I was young, would have

jolted me into the world of the mind at an earlier age, and so as I begin my time on *Open Book* my mission is to make it a place of availability, where someone from a place like the one I grew up in may hear something that will tell them what they want to do with the rest of their lives.

Johny Pitts

The first episode of Open Book presented by Pitts is on Radio 4 on 31 January.

A poem for the president

It's a rare poet who feels comfortable both writing

for, and reading at, public ceremonial occasions. Especially when they are only 22. But Amanda Gorman, below left, the poet and activist who read "The Hill We Climb" at Joe Biden's inauguration on Wednesday, is more equipped than most, having been America's national youth poet laureate in 2017.

The Harvard graduate joins a roll call of previous inaugural poets that includes Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, Elizabeth Alexander and Richard Blanco. Having a poet read is a recent addition to the ceremony, starting in 1961. It is, so far, an exclusively Democratic tradition, with only John F Kennedy, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama opting to have poetry as part of the oratory of the day. And this might not be Gorman's last trip to Washington. She has suggested she wants to run for president in 2036.

Rishi Dastidar



STOCKBYTE/AP; GETTY

Shanty

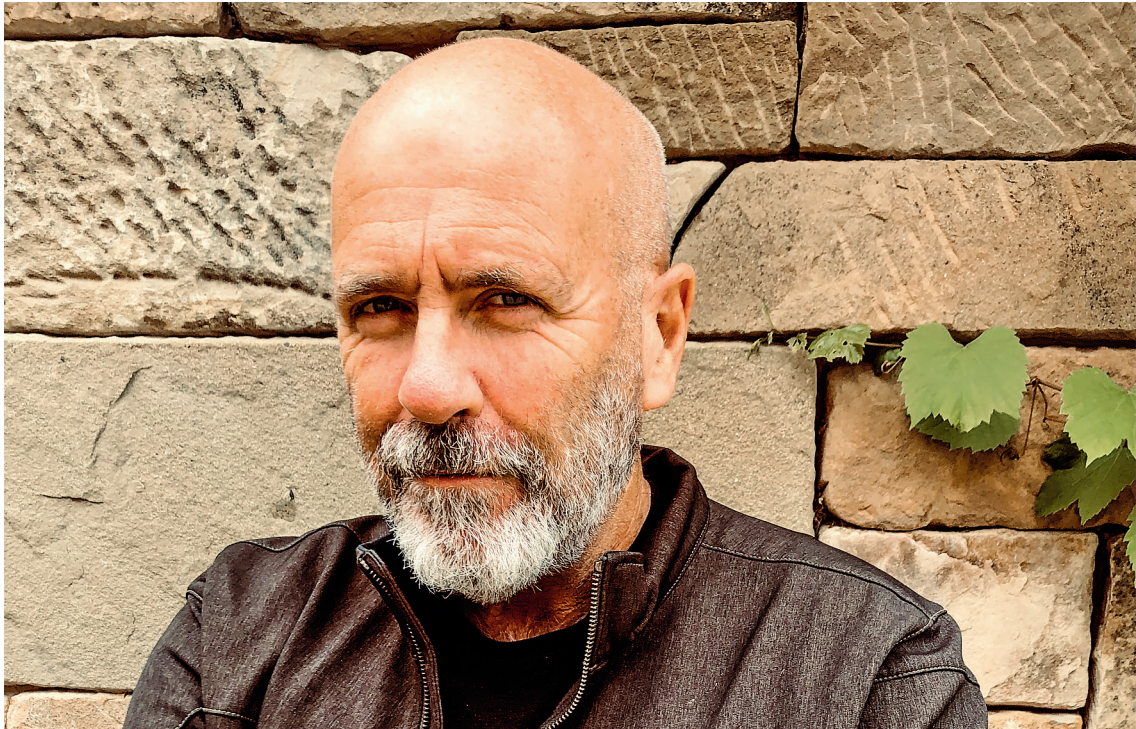
WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole



Some relief from the gloom was recently afforded by a sudden craze on TikTok for sea shanties, sparked by a Scottish postman named Nathan Evans. Perhaps, because Britain had finally wrested back control of her fish, everyone was planning to retrain for a life of **hard labour at sea**. But why are they called "shanties"?

The answer lies over the water in the perfidious EU, since "shanty" is a simple anglicisation of the French *chanter* (to sing) or *chantez* ("Sing!"), and began to be used thus in print in the mid-19th century. In his 1856 memoir of life as a **merchant mariner**, Charles Nordhoff says that the sailors' foreman was known as the "chanty-man" because he sang the verses alone while the rest of the gang joined in at the choruses.

Sailors had of course been singing work songs for centuries already, but before the term was regrettably **Frenchified** they had been known simply as "sea songs" (1659) or in Gaelic *jorrans* (1774), and for task-specific chants yo-hopes (1724). Those despairing of social-media fripperies, meanwhile, may wish to utter the prayer for peace that closes TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*: "Shantih shantih shantih."



'Jorge Luis Borges made me see all literature anew'

Richard Flanagan

The book I am currently reading

James Rebanks's marvellous and moving *English Pastoral*, along with Ayad Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies*, perhaps the best American novel I've read in several years. Akhtar, a Muslim Philip Roth, anatomises how the US, for some time the world's most successful third world country, came to be so unsuccessful.

The book that had the greatest influence on me

More a writer than a book: Jorge Luis Borges. He made me see all literature anew as a sort of guided dreaming - a joyful, comic, astonishing revelation. What changed was not so much my writing as my reading - and that, in turn, transformed my writing.

The book I think is most underrated

Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude*. Written in the wake of the Prague spring, the saga of Hanta, a book compressor in an unnamed totalitarian country, is an exquisite tragicomedy, a meditation on the necessary futility of wisdom and futile necessity of love, that achieves more in its 98 pages than most writers do in a lifetime.

The book I'm most ashamed not to have read

I'm ashamed of how many I *have* read and didn't throw across the room at page 2 because I still too often feel it shameful to not finish a book, even a bad one. Somewhere in *Don Quixote* Cervantes says there is no such thing as a book that's all bad in a book that

is, in one sense, an immense joke about someone who believes too much in bad books.

The book that changed my mind

Isn't it more the case that in every book we love we recognise our own rejected thoughts? Thoughts that felt too shameful, too obvious, too stupid, too painful, too strange to admit to ourselves, far less others?

The last book that made me laugh

Jay Parini's *Borges and Me*, a road novel, partly true, in which the youthful, earnest would-be poet Parini has foisted upon him the aged, blind writer of whose works Parini is unaware and made to drive him around Scotland in 1969.

The book I give as a gift

Of late there have been two. Jenny Erpenbeck's *The End of Days* is a beautiful and innovative take on a woman's life and her multiple deaths over the course of the 20th century. A great writer. Stan Grant's *Talking to My Country* is part-memoir, part-meditation on growing up Indigenous in Australia. It is as compelling on race, identity and history as anything by Ta-Nehisi Coates - but more original.

The book I'd most like to be remembered for

Writers start with dreams of greatness and end grateful for news of payment. Pondering any future beyond that for even a moment is the path to insanity.

My earliest reading memory

My mother reading me *The Wind in the Willows* at bedtime in a tiny mining town in the remote Tasmanian rainforest, her voice soft against the rain thundering down on the low tin roof.

The Living Sea of Waking Dreams by Richard Flanagan is published by Chatto & Windus.

Towards the end of 2020, a year spent supine on my sofa consuming endless internet like a force-fed goose, I managed to finish a beautifully written debut novel: *Open Water* by Caleb Azumah Nelson, which comes out next month. And yet despite the entrancing descriptions, I could barely turn two pages before my hand moved reflexively toward the cracked screen of my phone. Each time I returned to the novel I felt ashamed, and the shame only grew as I realised that, somehow, though the story was set in the present, and involved an often long-distance romance between two young people with phones, it contained not one single reference to what by then I considered a hallmark of present-day humanity: mindless scrolling through social media.

There was something sepia-toned about the book thanks to this absence, recalling love stories from previous eras even as it spoke powerfully to more urgent contemporary issues. Azumah Nelson's narrator mentions phones in the context of calls and private text messages, but the characters are never sullied by association with Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Was this because they were too sensible, ethical or self-assured to use such things, or is the omnipresence of these platforms now so

implicit, in literature as in life, that they hardly seemed worth mentioning?

After an initial froideur, followed by some adolescent fumbblings, fiction's embrace of social media has now fully come of age. The success of outliers such as Tao Lin's *Taipei* (in which the internet is perhaps the most potent of all the many drugs its protagonists ingest) and Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (a dystopian exploration of big tech's assault on privacy), both published in 2013, paved the way for Jarett Kobek's *I Hate the Internet*, which riffed on the way the internet perplexes the literary novel, 2017's *Sympathy* (my debut, about the ways our identity and actions are shaped by surveillance in the internet age), 2018's Twitter refreshing *Crudo* by Olivia Laing, and Matthew Sperling's aptly named 2020 novel *Viral*, a satirical takedown of a social media startup.

It's clear that the digital colonisation of the literary world has not resulted in its predicted death, but an exciting evolution. We are hungry for writers who can parse our present, whether in essay form, in works such as Jia Tolentino's collection *Trick Mirror* (2019) and Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (2020) or the fiction about to hit our shelves (or Kindle screens) that put social media front and centre.

Characters in today's novels are more likely to surprise us if they *don't* use social media. This is

Doom scrolling, oversharing, a constantly updating Twitter feed ... social media shapes and filters how we see the world, and now it's changing the stories we tell. *Olivia Sudjic* puts down her phone to explore how the internet is changing the novel ¶

Compulsive reading

often put down to their age, or pious superiority, or eccentricity, or something very sinister in their past. In Raven Leilani's debut, *Luster*, the narrator's older love interest (met via online dating) uses "retired internet slang", and is "not even on Twitter". Unlike with men her own age, she cannot track his "formative development online", and this adds to his allure.

Similarly, in Lauren Oyler's forthcoming *Fake Accounts*, the narrator's boyfriend appears to have minimal internet presence (suspicious), then turns out to have a secret online avatar with a considerable Instagram following. A famous author in Rebecca Watson's *little scratch* who is not on social media is described as seeming like "a dead writer". In Patricia Lockwood's debut novel *No One Is Talking About This* (published next month) the protagonist knows only two living people without a digital trail - a former school friend, who seems to have escaped into a parallel universe offline, and her own newborn niece. It's a book Lockwood described (on Twitter) as "about being very inside the internet and then being very outside of it".

Working on my novel about social media (which I started in 2014), I remember receiving numerous comments to the effect that such superficial features of what I considered to be "real life" would render

The digital colonisation of the literary world has not resulted in its predicted death, but an exciting evolution

it unserious and obsolete. Now, social media has taken over our lives to the extent that references to it in fiction furnish contemporary characters with plausibility, even humanity.

While the internet and mobile phones initially posed problems for fiction writers - not

least for their potential to destroy traditional plots of desire and obstruction (chance encounters, missed connections, quests), the dangers of such instant gratification increasingly appear to spark the plot itself and offer novelists a natural home, so long as they're game for a little renovation. As Watson wrote recently: "When I started writing ... incorporating this digital compulsion was one of the first issues I ran into. I was writing a book that aimed to follow the mind of a woman in her 20s, non-stop, so ignoring it would be a plot hole. But quickly, I found that it opened up my protagonist, created a portal to others while still keeping her isolated. It inspired me to shake up form; the pressures of an age of



From left:
Jia Tolentino,
Dave Eggers, Tao Lin,
Raven Leilani and
Lauren Oyler



➔ distraction making me break up prose into columns and fragments.”

As with all renovations-in-progress, (and perhaps I use this metaphor as it seems to be a burgeoning genre on Instagram) alterations afford us a glimpse of how the novel works - which pipes go where, which walls are load-bearing - as both the structural elements and stylistic choices are rendered visible. Reading Watson's *little scratch* the reader must clamber over and around London Underground announcements, texts, TripAdvisor reviews, scraps of other people's writing, emails, snippets of conversation, unspoken thoughts, sounds and sensory impressions scattered across the page with little in the way of signposting.

With no predetermined way to navigate the text, the novel could be compared to the endless tabs and incongruous juxtapositions of digital life, or it could just be like living now, as writers such as Virginia Woolf (referenced repeatedly in both Oyler and Lockwood's novels) used a stream of consciousness to convey the experience of 20th-century living. These days, and especially post-2020, there is little meaningful distinction between digital life and life anyway. As Lockwood's narrator notes: "This did not feel like real life, exactly, but nowadays what did?"

That terms such as "real life" and "digital life" still exist in tension, despite the extent to which they overlap, is indicative of social media's contradictions. Connection and isolation, homogeneity and fragmentation, exposure and concealment, the order and simultaneous incoherence of the timeline ... the list is both familiar and endless. And yet our familiarity with social media can preclude critical understanding of it. Novels, by contrast, allow us to step outside our habitual experience and reflect on what it means that "real life" has been so swiftly overtaken by the virtual. Lockwood, for example, calls it "the portal" rather than the internet, to purposefully estrange the reader: "It was in this place

No other person, not even a husband, can know you as well as your phone. It even alerts you when 'You have a new memory'

where we were on the verge of losing our bodies that bodies became the most important. You were zoomed in on the grain, you were out in space, it was the brotherhood of man, and in some ways you had never been flung further from each other."

In Lockwood and Oyler's novels, the claustrophobia of being trapped in one's own head alternates with the agoraphobia and disorientation of being (trapped) online, immersed in the collective mind of everyone else. No equilibrium can be reached when the two scales are so vastly mismatched. Oyler's narrator is always conscious of performing for "an audience that might as well have been everyone in the world for all your brain could comprehend". Lockwood's protagonist lies "every morning under an avalanche of details, the world pressing closer and closer, the spiderweb of human connection grown so thick it was almost a shimmering and solid silk". Oyler's narrator suffers from the panic of sleep paralysis (mirroring her waking experience of scrolling). Even when she is awake, it is as though the body has become two-dimensional. The husband of Lockwood's protagonist comes up behind her "while she was repeating the words no, no, no or help, help, help under her breath. 'Are you locked in?' he would ask, and she would nod, and then do the thing that always broke her out somehow which was to Google beautiful brown pictures of roast chickens - maybe because that's what women used to do with their days."

These are scenes that do not typically lend themselves to fictional description or plot: a character who is outwardly inert, invisibly experiencing a kind of overload. Lockwood's protagonist's face has a "totally dead look", as her husband describes it, when engaged in "mortal combat with someone online, despite the fact moments like this are when she feels most alive". That her husband has such a different impression of this scene is emblematic of how characters in these novels, to varying, often darkly comic degrees, struggle to communicate and sustain intimacy. No other person, not even a husband, can ever know you as well as your phone. Your phone, in fact, knows you better than you know yourself and alerts you whenever "YOU HAVE A NEW MEMORY". It's not much of a stretch to say the phone could just as easily be the narrator.

Social media inflected novels are overwhelmingly narrated in the first person or the close third with relentless self-awareness, in the style of confessional essays and blogs. Their protagonists scrutinise themselves through the eyes of imagined strangers, pre-empting critique so that such hyper-connection actually breeds a particular brand of interiority. This is particularly true at the thriller end of the spectrum: husband and wife duo Ellery Lloyd's *People Like Her*, a cautionary tale of influencer culture, relies partly on multiple first person perspectives to drive the plot (see review, page 23).

In terms of form, social media has shaped contemporary fiction, even in novels that make scant mention of it. The dominant trend is to tell a story



SON OF ALAN

through fragments. Sometimes these make a point of concision - only a paragraph, or even one line, which of course makes social media comparison easy, while others may be the length of a blog. Each fragment possesses no obvious bearing on the next, juxtaposing random facts with news articles, wry observation of a stranger on a commute followed by an unrelated emotional confession, in the manner of one individual's Twitter timeline. It's that first person voice that has to do the work of holding these fragments together, but it also makes allowances for internet-eroded concentration spans, our inability to stick to linear paths of thought.

Oyler's narrator calls this "trendy style melodramatic, insinuating utmost meaning where there was only hollow prose in its attempts to reflect the world as a sequence of distinct and clearly formed ideas, it ran counter to how reality actually worked." She later switches to parodying the style herself, which did, at least, make it easier for me to check my phone between paragraphs. The other trend does not, demanding you read its long, run-on sentences without even stopping to breathe. This is a tightly controlled art form in *Luster*, which reminded me of the knowingly tl;dr (too long, didn't read) variety of Instagram captions.

Lockwood's narrator also uses and self-consciously notes the prevalence of this style: "Why were we all writing like this now? Because a new kind of connection had to be made, and blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote." This uniform way of speaking, as recognisable as those clapping emoji hands between words, illustrates how, as Lockwood writes, if the internet was once "the place where you sounded like yourself. Gradually it had become the place where we sounded like each other, through some erosion of wind or water on a self not nearly as firm as stone." Add to this homogenisation the sociological

phenomenon of "context collapse" (sharing everything online with everyone and without distinction), and the capacity to "break the internet" by going viral, and we are ourselves broken into pieces, flattened out, sprayed through an atomiser, losing our own specificity, our own voices.

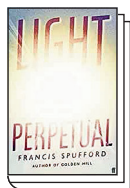
Emmy, the influencer at the centre of Ellery Lloyd's *People Like Her*, is accused by a formerly loyal friend of having become "2D" like her photos. Not a person anymore, "just a phony caption and a posed photo. A fucking invention." Emmy has crafted a persona, or a personal brand, that is the "perfectly imperfect" Instagram mother, "Mamabare", aiming for relatability rather than reality. It's a Faustian pact she has made, selling her own soul as well as those of her friends and family, so that when an Instagram "role player" begins to steal photos of her daughter and use them to craft their own fantasy life online, Emmy has little in the way of a moral high ground, or recourse. Even Emmy's furious husband admits this is a trap of his wife's own making, and that the role-player presents "a pretty convincing pastiche of the way that all Instamums, my wife included, write. The mangled metaphors, the breathless over-enthusiasm. The ingenuous clunkiness. The alliteration." Emmy has become so successful at influencing people to be *like* her, they have literally started to usurp her.

Plenty of social media novels explore the possibilities of pretending to be someone else, devising personas or even knowingly assuming someone else's identity, as in 2018's *Social Creature* by Tara Isabella Burton. This kind of thing is still considered extreme behaviour, but more recent novels such as *People Like Her* highlight how much that "personality" we think of as our own is being determined by algorithm and then harvested for data. As Lockwood's narrator puts it, this is "the stream-of-consciousness that is not entirely your own, that you participate in but also acts upon you". Participating involves a metastasis whereby "a person might join a site to look at pictures of her nephew and five years later believe in a flat earth."

Our offline lives turn out to be just as much of a lie as our online ones. Having discovered her boyfriend's deception online, Oyler's narrator agrees "manipulative insincerity was a fair response to the way the world was". She sets up a plan involving dating apps as "a purposeful critique of the system. I could be anyone I wanted (or did not want, as the case may be) and my deception would not be selfish, cruelly manipulative of innocents looking for love, but a rebellion against an entire mode of thinking, which was not really thinking at all, just accepting whatever was advertised to you." Because there is no way out, the characters of these novels usually decide it's better to be an agent of their own technodystopian futures than simply a victim of them. It's enough to make you put down your phone and read a book ●

Book of the week

{ Fiction } What if ... the Golden Hill author conjures miraculous, everyday life through London's postwar decades *Alexandra Harris*



Light Perpetual
by Francis Spufford,
Faber, £16.99

Five years ago, Francis Spufford took us leaping over the rooftops of 18th-century New York in his prize-winning fiction debut *Golden Hill*. The superb opening sequence of his latest novel involves a pile of saucepans and the slowing down of time, so that we can watch what happens in a

ten-thousandth of a second. It's November 1944 and a Woolworths store on a south London high street is busy this wartime Saturday because there are saucepans in stock for the first time in ages. Mothers have young children in tow and we see them in the crowd: Ben, spindly kneed Alec, sisters Jo and Valerie and chunky Vernon, who is caught there - at just this moment, as we peer into the "hairline crack" opening in the expanse of time - like a statue, with his finger up his nose.

Spufford is a tremendously varied and surprising writer whose work might turn up in any section of the bookshop, but a warmth of style and nimble dance of intellect travel with him across subjects and genres. There is a recognisable combination of elements here among the saucepans. The ordinary shopping scene is transfigured by the author's bold metaphysical engineering. History and fiction are clearly locking hands, though we don't yet know quite how. The notion of statues (and these children are to become the novel's heroes; the novel is to be their memorial) is immediately slanted away from grandeur towards the comical, real and humane.

In that split second, a V2 bomb explodes and the children are killed. The bomb is historically real: it killed 168 people in and around New Cross Woolworths, some of whom were buying saucepans. Spufford explains in an afterword that for years he has walked past a plaque that commemorates them. His response is a novel that imagines what might have become of five children - invented children - if they hadn't died that day: if they had grown up and lived through the 1960s, 70s, 80s, 90s. He follows

his characters from Woolies into the future: love, work, myriad troubles, the infinite complexity of being 10, or 40.

We meet them in 1949, lined up in a school singing lesson, mouths open in chorus; and then every 15 years - which means it's a bit like the *Child of Our Time* documentaries following millennium babies, but more like *The Years*, the novel in which Virginia Woolf took samplings of her characters' lives at intervals, each scene being a cross-section, too, of social history. Spufford's nose-picking Vernon becomes a wheeler-dealing property developer always ready with a new scheme, starting with bedsits, aspiring to glassy malls, in love with the brazen energy of London's self-reinvention. Alec is a Fleet Street compositor, out on the picket lines when digitisation starts to render typesetting redundant. Beyond them flicker whole changing labour markets and values, but Alec and Vernon are not blandly representative. They matter for themselves, always capable of surprising or disturbing us.

Songs and furnishings change with the decades. Social relations change too, in ways almost too faint to show up in a sentence, or exerting poundingly clear and horrible pressures. The novel registers the culture of casual misogyny in which the musician Jo, girlfriend of a rock star, never gets her own songs recorded. It looks hard and long (so long that you may find yourself crying "Stop!") at extremes of racist violence among the neo-Nazi groups that made their presence felt on London streets in the 1970s. This is a book willing to do things that hurt; to make us hear, for instance, the terrifying voices that talk on and on in Ben's mind, drowning out the rest of the world, holding him in the grip of schizophrenia. The ceaseless labour of mental illness is acutely evoked: the tip-toed surveillance of one's mind, checking for trapdoors and cracks. "So many days like this": the last, exhausted fragment of a line, as Ben retires to another comfortless evening.

Part of Ben's tragedy is that for 20 years he tells no one about his illness. Except for the psychiatric doctors, nobody has any idea of his daily struggles. Spufford attends closely to the impossibility of communication in this and many other, more ordinary, circumstances. It's an especially sad and striking part of the men's lives: both Alec and Vernon find themselves at insurmountable distances from their families, watching their children like strangers, signalling across gulfs to people who can't be

For all its intricate realism, this novel is questing for alternative histories, other futures

known. Sometimes the best one can do is a semaphore gesture - "a signal of goodwill sent clearly, from far far away, across a great distance of trouble".

Spufford has long been interested in the histories that fiction tells, and the shared territory of novels and narrative nonfiction. When he wrote about Soviet planning theory in *Red*



ROYSTON LEONARD/MEDIADRUML.COM

Plenty (2010) he wanted to get at “ideas in lives, muddy, murky, ambiguous, this-worldly”, and did it by inventing Bolshevik cyberneticists as characters talking and dreaming within touching distance of historical fact. *Golden Hill* tucked itself into the creases of history, and then shook the whole cloth into a new shape. Readers could find their way in colonial Manhattan from its precise co-ordinates should they ever need to, but the novel’s alternative history, its “what iftery”, made purposeful departures from the record.

“What if, what if”, people keep wondering in *Light Perpetual*; “Why this life and not the other?” The novel itself, for all its intricate realism, is questing for alternative histories, other futures. How can the loss of a life be measured, Spufford asks: “How can that loss be known, except by laying this absence, now and onwards, against some other version of the reel of time?” Once we’ve switched to this “other reel”, it comes as a shock to look back, to be reminded of the history that blew these children to dust. The novel is both a requiem and a giving of new life, fusing death and resurrection as they are fused in the Christian liturgy: “Let light perpetual shine upon them.”

Golden Hill took its stylistic cues from 18th-century novels, swinging out on *Tristram Shandy*-style digressions, dashing off epistles, pulling narrative tricks from embroidered pockets. *Perpetual Light* is entirely different in its affiliations. It’s not an allusive novel, but one feels strong currents beneath it. The *Joyce of Dubliners* is close. I thought often of Dickens, but more of George Eliot. Spufford is deeply concerned with the steady effort to understand people different from oneself. Alec watches in amazement the succession of figures lit up in train windows, each the protagonist of a

**Survivors
Spufford imagines
the lives of children
after the war**

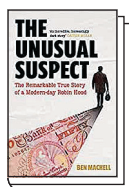
different story, “every single one the centre of the world, around whom others revolve and events assemble”.

The novel’s five particular centres of the world form a kind of music between them, audible to us as readers. Their parallel lives run like the five lines of a stave. Music matters to them all. Opera is the central passion of Vernon’s life; it’s the sacred thing he won’t defraud or joke about or do a budget renovation on, and in watching him listen, weeping, enraptured, we see a little more of who he is. Jo teaches her Year 10 class, with their errant teenage bodies, how to make themselves into instruments. They straighten their bendy windpipes and a minor chord emerges from 28 throats. “Can they hear the organ that they have briefly become?”

Sometimes I found that the wonder of life was being pointed out to me, with accompanying slow dances and city sunsets, rather more than I was being made involuntarily to feel it. It’s true I didn’t rejoice in this book as in *Golden Hill*. But (unless one is the age of Alec’s granddaughter, bouncing along to “Nellie the Elephant”) we mustn’t keep asking for variations of the same thing. *Perpetual Light* is something new and brave. With exceptional care, with a loving shrewdness that’s a little Hogarthian, Spufford catches the voices and hopes of five not-dead working-class south Londoners, and the people who shape them: evangelical pastors, footballers, lovers, exes, children, Miss Turnbull their first music teacher starting up the umpteenth rendition of “The Ballad of London River”.

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

{ Biography } A Robin Hood for our times? The bungling bank robber whose mission was to fight poverty and injustice *Blake Morrison*



The Unusual Suspect: The Remarkable True Story of a Modern-day Robin Hood
by Ben Machell,
Canongate, £16.99

The homeless man sitting with his dog on a cold December night in Sidmouth must have thought it miraculous when a passing stranger dropped a roll of £20 banknotes in his hat. The stranger didn't stop or say anything, just walked away. Even odder, every note had been marked with two letters: RH. The stranger wasn't acting out of Christmas charity but from a sense of righteousness: he saw himself as a 21st-century Robin Hood, duty-bound to rob the rich and give to the poor. To which end, a few hours before, he'd held up the Lloyds TSB bank branch in nearby Seaton and made off with nearly £5,000.

A hard-up geography student at the University of Worcester, Stephen Jackley was the unlikeliest of bank robbers. It's not just that he wasn't out for personal gain (though he enjoyed using some of his winnings to travel). He also acted entirely alone, albeit after learning from the methods of illustrious peers such as the American Carl Gugasian, whose example taught him the importance of meticulous planning, physical disguise and how to escape and hide your loot in woodland areas. From his first, botched attempt to rob a bank in Exeter the police had a record of Jackley's DNA. But because he didn't graduate to bank robbery through petty thieving, they had no match for it on their files and assumed the culprit must be a foreigner, perhaps part of a criminal gang. Undetected, he continued towards his goal of raising £100,000 for what he called the Organisation, his one-man mission to save the planet from poverty and injustice.

He had grown up fairly poor himself, in a series of small Devon towns. Cramming his journal with science, philosophy and poetry, he was a neglected and lonely child, born late to parents who'd met while patients on a psychiatric ward. His mother had further psychotic episodes throughout his childhood and

sometimes the police would come to remove her - the pleasure he later took from outwitting them had an element of revenge for that. His father was domineering and when he died in 2008 Jackley was seemingly unmoved, though it may be no coincidence that his Robin Hood adventures became increasingly erratic thereafter.

A bigger factor than parental neglect - and one of the strengths of Ben Machell's compelling book is its unearthing of the various motivations for his subject's behaviour - was the trip Jackley made to Thailand and Cambodia two years earlier, where he saw, for the first time, what real poverty looked like. He learned about Buddhism, too, and later spent time in a Buddhist retreat in France, where he questioned a monk about the ethics of doing wrong for the greater good.

The end to his spree was banal. He had become obsessed with acquiring a gun - if the people he'd held up weren't scared enough to hand over their money, he reasoned, they must have twigged that the pistol he carried was a toy. Scammed while trying to buy a gun in Birmingham, and arrested while smuggling another through customs in Istanbul, he flew to Vermont, allegedly the easiest state in the US to get yourself a firearm. But the ex-cop working at the gun store spotted his fake ID.

In the journal he sometimes spoke of himself as a "we", a trait (so Machell reports) that's common to people with Asperger's. That Jackley was on the spectrum is something readers will quickly infer but which

He spent time in a Buddhist retreat in France, where he questioned a monk about the ethics of doing wrong for the greater good

Machell delays discussing - aptly so, since it wasn't put forward as a defence at his trial and was only diagnosed halfway through his 13-year jail sentence.

Collaborations between journalists and criminals often end badly, with the former either being duped by the latter (as Norman Mailer was by Jack Henry Abbott) or "gaining their trust and betraying them

without remorse" (Janet Malcolm's description of Joe McGinniss's treatment of the murderer Jeffrey MacDonald in his book *Fatal Vision*). Machell's book is an honourable exception. He has had considerable help from his subject and explains but doesn't exonerate. The string of robberies left innocent victims traumatised, something Jackley, devoid of empathy, couldn't see at the time and now deeply regrets.

Released from prison on probation in 2015, Jackley is a contradictory figure: on the one hand an oddball outlaw who acted foolishly, on the other a youthful idealist whose battle against poverty, injustice and the climate crisis many others in his generation are fighting too. This splendid book - less true crime than biography - does full justice to his complexity.

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

{ Economics } From climate crisis to health, an 'Operation Moonshot' that tackles the challenges we face globally

Tom Kibasi



Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism

by Mariana Mazzucato,
Allen Lane, £20

The charge sheet against 40 years of British capitalism is as damning as it is familiar. Most people have experienced stagnant wages and seen no improvement in living standards; a wealthy elite has accumulated more and more while helping to destroy the planet. The bungled response of the government to the pandemic - from the failure to enforce lockdown early enough to the test-and-trace debacle - has exposed the depth of the rot. It has also demonstrated the power and importance of the state in a crisis.

Mission Economy offers a path to rejuvenate the state and thereby mend capitalism, rather than end it. The case for a new approach is overwhelming and Mariana Mazzucato's project is ambitious. By focusing on the immense power of governments to shape markets, she argues that capitalism itself can be remade. Mazzucato aims to infuse capitalism with public interest rather than private gain.

In her landmark 2014 book, *The Entrepreneurial State*, she invited us to rethink the role that the state could have in the creation of wealth. This was followed by *The Value of Everything* in 2018, which demolished the widely held belief that a narrow economic elite was the wealth creator. The traditional framework confuses prices with value, meaning social goods are only examined for their costs rather than their social benefits.

Mission Economy takes the argument forward. It is styled as a "how to" guide for policymakers who want

to unleash the full potential of the state to solve some of the great challenges of the 21st century. Mazzucato invites us to imagine government that "bears the greatest level of uncertainty and reforms ... itself to take risks". From confronting the climate crisis to improving health and wellbeing, the book offers a method to tackle the challenges facing societies globally.

It is inspired by President John F Kennedy's mission to send a man to the moon and back: *Mission Economy* tells the story of Nasa's Apollo programme and the lessons it teaches us. "To carry out the Apollo mission," Mazzucato explains, "hundreds of complex problems had to be solved. Some solutions worked, many failed. All came out of a close partnership between government and business: a partnership with a purpose."

But this is not a nostalgic account of a better yesterday. Mazzucato systematically dismantles the arguments used to defend the broken status quo and then offers the pillars of a new approach. It is governments rather than businesses that take the big risks in the development of new technologies. Markets aren't some kind of celestial creation but a set of rules that can be rewritten. A strict focus on the economic benefits is counterproductive. As the Apollo example showed, spillover benefits will come by concentrating on what matters, not some narrow demand for short-term commercialisation

Mazzucato makes a persuasive case. But the correlation between technological challenges - "big science meets big problems" - and systemic ones is imperfect. The importance of political stability in democratic politics is underplayed. There are times when Mazzucato sounds rather too like the management consultants she derides as she co-opts their language proposing "mission maps" and "indicators and monitoring frameworks". She is at her most compelling when encouraging the reader to look up to the stars not at a PowerPoint presentation.

But there is no perfect form to policymaking, and to focus on the limitations is to miss the broader point. *Mission Economy* injects the kind of vision and ambition so desperately missing from government today,

Timely reflections A polar ice cap melts in the Arctic

especially after a decade of "can't do" austerity.

For nearly half a century, progressives around the world have been locked in

a miserable cycle of defending the gains of the post-war era while lacking a positive agenda for the 21st century. Meanwhile, it is conservatives who have become the revolutionaries: from tax cuts for the already extremely wealthy and the mass sell-off of public assets, to the unchecked rise of finance and Britain's exit from the EU, they have not shied away from their exploitative dreams. Mazzucato offers a call to big, bold, collective action. All those in favour of a better future - of prosperity that is broadly shared, first class public services to be enjoyed by all, and a solution to the climate crisis - should read this book.

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



IAN JOUGHIN/IMBIE

{ Memoir } Two doctors on the frontline against Covid-19 are enraged at politicians but witness kindness every day

Madeleine Bunting



Breath-taking: Inside the NHS in a Time of Pandemic
by Rachel Clarke,
Little, Brown, £16.99

Intensive Care: A GP, a Community & COVID-19
by Gavin Francis,
Profile, £16.99

In early April 2020 when lockdown was still a novelty, and the search for bread flour dominated my street's WhatsApp, we set off on a 30-minute bike ride across east London to a warehouse in Newham where a French bakery was selling flour. The queue snaked down the otherwise deserted street and I got into conversation with the woman behind me. After we chatted about bread-making, she said she was a social worker in the area, charged with overseeing several care homes that had been in special measures long before Covid-19 struck.

"The residents are all dying," she told me, "we can't go into the homes and I can't tell if it's Covid or poor care or both." It was at least another week before the media caught up with the care-home crisis, by which time it was too late. Thousands had died.

Many people who were bumbling along with their lockdown lives can now recount vertiginous moments when novelty became nightmare. We still struggle to comprehend the full implications of this pandemic. Self-protective mechanisms kick in: some people have decided that they already have enough on their plate, and don't want to know more. If this is your disposition, look away now: Rachel Clarke and Gavin Francis, two of the very best doctor-writers to emerge within a rich new seam, spare us no pain in their compelling but tragic accounts of working in the first wave.

Reading their descriptions now, while we are in the grip of a third wave, is close to overwhelming, and several times I was in tears, their words haunting me in the early hours. In *Breath-taking*, Clarke is describing hospitals close to breaking point last April; in *Intensive Care*, Francis writes of the GP surgeries struggling with a surge in mental health crises. God help them both now.

Susan Sontag opens *Illness as Metaphor* with the idea that everyone has dual citizenship "in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick". For many people, the latter is alien territory until we are forced to emigrate there, but for those who are curious, Clarke and Francis act as foreign correspondents or cartographers.

Clarke quotes Zadie Smith's comment about a "global humbling" and Camus's *The Plague*: "The pestilence is at once blight and revelation." For doctors, the sheer lack of knowledge was terrifying, let alone the shortages of PPE and ICU beds. In many circumstances, Clarke and Francis found themselves with nothing to offer patients but compassion; paradoxically, this helps to make their books powerful, uplifting and even reassuring.

Francis brings in some useful science and medical history as befits an Edinburgh doctor; the city was, after all, the cradle of public health inventions that have saved far more lives than any surgical wizardry. He offers a few pointers to the history of pandemics from Hippocrates to Daniel Defoe and Laura Spinney's influential study of 1918 Spanish flu, *Pale Rider*. That sets the context for his descriptions of his patients in a city surgery, on secondments in Orkney, and among the homeless. He offers vivid detail on how this pandemic has affected different communities - from islands dependent on helicopters for healthcare to the fragile marginalised of the inner city.

Clarke's tone is more intimate, much of the book written at night when she couldn't sleep for fear, fury and frustration - the last two she attributes largely to the inadequacies and lies of politicians. Rage lurks beneath many paragraphs as she lambasts the delays in decisions, and the "number theatre" of statistics. You get the sense of someone trying to remain calm and reasoned, often on the verge of being overcome.

These busy, exhausted doctors took time to write because they have an argument to make; they are passionate advocates for how the "kingdom of the sick" should be governed. On many of the key details they concur. Both work in branches of medicine that are not about hi-tech fixes - no miraculous heart surgery here - but centre on everyday patients facing unavoidable suffering and death. On every page, they are in effect arguing that strong relationships - trust, warmth and kindness - are not pleasant extras, but absolutely essential to healthcare.

Clarke and Francis refer frequently to their colleagues' professionalism, dedication and care. Nurses,



receptionists, healthcare assistants, fellow doctors, porters, paramedics: all come in for lavish praise as they struggle against the odds to give every patient attention and kindness. Clarke describes the ICU crammed with machines, beds jammed close together, bodies prone, festooned with tubes, and patients known only by numbers; yet even in this dehumanised environment where no faces are visible, staff did all they could to connect relatives, and offer comfort.

Both authors remind the policymakers and politicians that the quest for efficiency, improved productivity and an audit culture has too often destroyed relationships. What management tool can measure the value of kindness? Both lament the underinvestment that has left them on a battlefield, woefully underequipped.

In particular, they highlight the yawning gap between the frontline experience and the political narrative. While Boris Johnson fumbled through one inane superlative after another, Francis put on his PPE to visit isolated elderly patients and fielded endless desperate phone calls, and Clarke, swathed in plastic, laboured on the wards. Instead of honesty and humility, Johnson offered false hope (12 weeks to see off Covid) and slow, faltering decision making. The frustration at the litany of his mistakes is part of what prompted these books. If the prime minister won't treat us with respect and level with us, these doctors will.

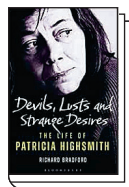
Covid is a disease of peculiar cruelty; to some extent the selection of victims most viciously attacked seems arbitrary. But the wider tragedy is that the vectors of the disease are the ways human beings connect - through speech and touch. Those who love us most can unwittingly be the means of our death. The fallout for families has been devastating, with burdens of grief, guilt and mourning unshared.

Clarke describes hospitals close to breaking point
An intensive care unit in April last year

A Fortunate Man. Berger, having observed a succession of patients in a GP surgery, concluded that what most impressed him was “their everyday bravery and tenacity” and that “the notion of endurance is fundamentally far more important than happiness”. These superb books make clear that the revelation of this plague has been twofold: our hubris has been shattered, yet there remains a staggering human capacity for bravery, courage and endurance. Clarke and Francis witness it daily in the kingdom of the sick. From it, they take heart, and urge us to do the same.

Madeleine Bunting's Labours of Love: The Crisis of Care is published by Granta. To buy Breathtaking for £14.78 or Intensive Care for £14.44 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Biography } When friends mean less than plots – a portrayal of the noir novelist as emotional vandal
Kathryn Hughes



Devils, Lusts and Strange Desires: The Life of Patricia Highsmith
by Richard Bradford,
Bloomsbury, £20

In middle age Patricia Highsmith perfected a particularly ghastly party trick. Invited to a swanky London dinner, she arrived with 30 “pet” snails in her handbag, which she proceeded to tip out on to the table. The snails immediately started their determined looping across the linen tablecloth, leaving behind a lattice of silvery slime. Everyone, including

Highsmith herself, pretended not to notice.

If Highsmith were simply a sociopathic alcoholic, and there's plenty of evidence to suggest that she was, then this anecdote would be picturesque but not important. What makes it matter is the way it captures the uncanny menace at the heart of her most successful novels, *Strangers on a Train* (1951) and *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955). There's nothing intrinsically evil about snails, handbags, linen tablecloths or even swish dinner parties. But put them in the right, or rather wrong, order and you have the kind of insidious nightmare that becomes impossible to shake off. Graham Greene, an early fan of Highsmith's, described her as “the poet of apprehension”. You could not read her, he said, without constantly checking over your shoulder.

It was Greene who also said that thing about writers needing a splinter of ice in their hearts, by which he meant the willingness to cannibalise real life, real relationships, real pain in the service of one's art. Was he thinking of Highsmith? Certainly, on the evidence that Richard Bradford sets out here, Highsmith was an “emotional vandal”, who went out of her way to ruin the lives of her many lovers in order to generate ideas for plots.

All of this is fascinating, but it is not really new. Andrew Wilson wrote the first big biography of Highsmith in 2003, buttressed by interviews with surviving lovers, many of whom have since died. Quite what Bradford brings to the table is unclear. Wilson worked hard to show how Highsmith's psychic fractures were a consequence of being a clever, gay woman in postwar America. Bradford is much less interested in this sociological approach, preferring to pathologise Highsmith instead. The result is a biography that manages to be both plodding and salacious at the same time.

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

The novelist and editor tells *John Self* about talking to his children about racism, the highs and lows of comfort eating, and coming to terms with the loss of his mother in his family memoir, *Brown Baby*. Plus read an extract

‘This book had to be about the stuff that keeps me up at night’

In July last year, Nikesh Shukla tweeted a photograph of 11 books, captioned: “This is a decade’s worth of work.” At the top was his debut novel *Coconut Unlimited*, and at the bottom his latest book, *Brown Baby: A Memoir of Race, Family and Home*. It was supposed to come out in June, but the pandemic pushed it back, by which time - everyone supposed - bookshops would reopen and live events would return. Instead, we are back in lockdown and Shukla and I are peering at one another down the barrels of our laptop cameras to discuss *Brown Baby*.

The book’s title comes from the beautifully sober 1960s ballad by Oscar Brown Jr, expressing hopes to his son (“When out of men’s hearts all hate is hurled / You’re gonna live in a better world”) and Shukla’s *Brown Baby* is addressed to his own two daughters, who are now six and three years old. “I love the tradition of writers writing letters to their children,” he says. “James ➤

A belief in community
Nikesh Shukla





Shuggie Bain
DOUGLAS STUART

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN
SAYAKA KURATA

POETRY

SCI FI AND FANTASY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
CATCH AND KILL
LIES, SPIES & CONSPIRACY TO PROTECT HONORS
RONAN FARROW
WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

WILL DEAN
BLACK RIVER
POINT BLANK

WILL DEAN
RED SNOW
POINT BLANK

JOHN leCARRÉ
CHRISCAPEL
GALLERY 131

KATE
TUMOR

HUNTING PARTY
FOLLY

JOAN DIDION
THE YEAR OF MEDICAL THINKING

Grace Deane
THE YEAR OF MEDICAL THINKING

Carrie Fisher
The Princess Diarist

JOLLY LAD
JOHN DORAN

I FEEL BAD ABOUT MY NECK
ROSE

THE YEARS
ANNE HATFIELD

NOBODY'S FOOL
NICK DRAYSON

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NOBODY'S FOOL
NICK DRAYSON

◆ Baldwin writing to his nephew [“My Dungeon Shook” in *The Fire Next Time*], Ta-Nehisi Coates [in *Between the World and Me*]. I didn’t want it to be an overly intellectualised book about race and all the other things. I wanted it to be someone not quite having the answers, manoeuvring in that way that when you’re a parent, your opinions on things change all the time.”

What Shukla shares with his daughters, and the reader, in *Brown Baby* is sometimes funny, often moving and regularly upsetting. His accounts of racism and abuse, from being called “shit-skin” to an abusive email naming his daughters (“how did they know your names?”), are hard to read. “This book had to be about the stuff that keeps me up at night,” he says.

As well as race and reflections on parenting (“Nobody,” he points out, “ever says it’s going to be really boring!”), one of the most striking elements of *Brown Baby* is the open discussion of Shukla’s relationship with food – compulsive snacking, comfort eating – which is unusual and refreshing to read from a man. “Part of me really just wants to bleed on the page. If I’m writing for my daughters, I want them to know who I am.” The book shows Shukla lying to his wife (and his calorie counter app) about snacks at home, snacks at work, snacks on the way to the shop to buy more snacks. “I eat my feelings,” he says, “and immediately feel completely ashamed. And I knew if I put that out there I wouldn’t be alone.”

But this chapter also grows into an affecting exploration of food and memory, communing with the person who features most prominently in the book, as both a presence and an absence: Shukla’s mother, who died in October 2010 at the age of 59 (“She turned 59 in the hospital, I remember taking her a cake”). In *Brown Baby* he tries to recreate her recipes, is transported by nostalgic smells when cooking the last meals she left in the freezer: “Some bhajias. And another container, this one has sweetcorn kadhhi in it ... The smell is so soothing. I can practically feel the coarseness of a



‘My mum really wanted me to be a lawyer – the thing that cut me up for a while was that she never got to see that I was OK’

cumin seed between my front two teeth. I don’t know what to do. There I am, in her kitchen, holding her food, clutching it like a second chance.” And reflects on how eating to assuage his grief means “my stomach may feel full but something else in me is empty”.

His mother’s death coincided with the launch of Shukla’s career as a writer: she died 10 days before his debut novel came out. “I had this really strange time where I had this thing that I’d wanted to happen my entire life, but at the same time, one of the worst things that could possibly have happened was unfolding.” And some of the publicity ahead of the novel led to an argument with his mother, which turned out to be the last time they would speak. “Everything I do is almost to seek forgiveness for upsetting her.”

Did writing about it help him grieve? “I wrote the first draft really quickly and then realised my grief wasn’t complete, I’d put it on hold to be there for my dad. Editing the book I suddenly felt I was confronted by the ghost of my mum again. When I handed over the book it felt I’d finally had that moment to say goodbye.”

Brown Baby enabled closure in more ways than one. “It was my 10th year of being a published author. I had this body of work that felt very circular, starting with a fictionalised account of my teenage years [*Coconut Unlimited*], and ending with where I am now. It was really exciting for me to feel I’d completed something and could free myself for what I wanted to do next.”

Thinking about what to do next seems characteristic of Shukla’s busy and multifaceted approach to his work: he is a central figure in the wider British literary culture, having done so much to highlight diversity in publishing. (This is an apt accolade for a writer whose first book was rejected by an agent who “didn’t feel my characters were authentically Asian”.)

Shukla has written novels, screenplays and political commentary on social issues; he has worked as an educator, talking to schools about masculinity in connection with his young adult novel *The Boxer*; he has co-established the Jhalak prize for writers of colour and a literary agency. He’s a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and has been awarded honorary doctorates from Roehampton University and Bath University (“the stuff my dad can tangibly see!”).

In 2015 he edited the groundbreaking anthology *The Good Immigrant* (published the following year) on race in Britain, featuring contributors who have since become famous, including Reni Eddo-Lodge, Nish Kumar, Riz Ahmed and Musa Okwonga. Is he remarkably prescient at talent-spotting, I wonder? “Definitely not,” he says

Shukla with his mother in 1988

firmly. “Most of the people in that book are my peers. I was doing gigs with Salena Godden and Inua Ellams and Musa. Riz I’ve known since school. Salena was one of my first ever mentors.”

In fact mentoring new writers, as he had been mentored by Godden, is another way Shukla has paid his success forward. “I take on 10 writers every six months.” But he realised recently that “I can’t do this by myself, so I did sessions to train different writers to become mentors”.

What energy, I wonder, drives the impressive scope and scale of his interests? Would Shukla be happy being “just” a novelist? “I do it because I feel a responsibility. I’d be nowhere without the people who took time out to help me. I don’t believe in the writer as the strong, silent type. I believe in community and I’m here because of the community.”

He feels a sense of responsibility too, from his private education: he attended Merchant Taylors’ school in Liverpool, the only child of his family to do so. “I understand that I had that privilege,” he says,

“but it’s what you do with it that really counts. My mum and dad really struggled in order to send me there, thinking I’d end up with a job and the networks to make everyone comfortable.” But looking out for others, making a difference, is in his blood. He comes from “an activist family”; his uncle, who in 1968 sued a company that refused to sell a house to “coloureds”, said “they keep telling us the laws are here to protect us. But no one is doing anything to change people’s hearts and minds.” And, Shukla adds: “I thought as a writer I can do something to help shape people’s hearts and minds.”

In *Brown Baby* he writes about how his mother wanted him to write only as a hobby: “Be comfortable first, don’t struggle like we do.” “Yeah,” he says, “my mum really wanted me to be a lawyer, and I think the thing that cut me up for a while was that she never got to see that I was OK. But I look back at all the stuff that I’ve achieved over the years...” – he pauses, then nods – “I think she would have been proud” ●

‘I don’t want you to ever consider yourself white. Is that bad?’

Nikesh Shukla

I don’t know how to make you proud of your skin colour. I figured it would be something we would talk about later, when you were older and starting to become more shaped by external factors. I didn’t want it to become an issue so early.

Sadly, this is the reality of raising a child of colour in an institutionally racist country, where being white is seen as default. You see it in boardrooms and you see it on screens and you see it in the plasters we use to cover our skin when it tears. When I look at you, I think perhaps you might end up passing for white. I don’t want you to. I don’t want you to ever consider yourself white. Is that bad?

It’ll probably never happen, though. You will be mixed race and you will be brown and no matter how you shape yourself, the moulds society present for you to fit into are fixed and immovable.

I don’t want to have this conversation so early, Ganga. I don’t want for me to make decisions about your identity before you’ve even considered it. I have to manage my feelings and expectations and let you find your own way. But I know, that however you choose to self-identify when you’re older, the world will see you as a person of colour and treat you accordingly.

Once, you told me that you were a mix. You were a bit brown and a bit white. You wanted to be our Venn diagram. You wanted to be the bridge between us. You didn’t want to be more one than the other.

A consistent thing you said throughout your entire childhood was that you didn’t like the colour brown. It was too dark. Another time you told me it was dirty.

Recently, you told me you wished I was white.

“Then I will be white,” you said.

“Why?” I replied.

“I want to be like Mummy,” you said before disappearing into another room, as if that was that and there was nothing more to say.

You prefer bright colours, you say. You like pink and red and orange and yellow. The darker colours are not your favourite. You hate brown. Context weighs heavily on situations but so does history. Societal norms pervade in ways we cannot always see. You may be talking about felt tip pens. But you are also talking about the last two hundred years of history. You may be four but you are perpetuating tropes you are yet to even comprehend.

One evening, we’re reading a book together. Mumbi, the doll a friend brought back from Sri Lanka, sits in my lap next to you. You pick Mumbi up and throw her to the floor.

“Why don’t you want her?” I ask. “Do you not like her?”

“I do like her,” you say. “I do. She has a nice smile and she has pretty black hair.”

“And gorgeous brown skin,” I say.

“I don’t want to be brown,” you say, and look at me. You’re trying to work something out, and I don’t know how to help you through it. “I want to be like Mummy.”

“You are brown. And that’s a good thing,” I tell you, before returning to the book.

“Okay,” you sigh, with the air of a teenager whose embarrassing dad has just told them he will drive them to the school dance.

We carry on reading. Your resignation is heavy in my chest.

This is an edited extract from Brown Baby, published by Bluebird on 4 February.

Fiction

This moving first novel investigates intimacy and estrangement within marriages in crisis

Lara Feigel



The Art of Falling
by Danielle
McLaughlin, John
Murray, £16.99

“She used to think that if she lost in love, it would be – on a scale of one to ten – to an eight or a nine. Cora Wilson she would put as a four.” Thus Nessa reflects on her husband Philip’s adultery with the bothersomely dowdy mother of their daughter’s best friend. This is the mood of half-bitter, half-spirited

humour familiar from the previous work of Irish writer Danielle McLaughlin.

In the short stories with which she made her name McLaughlin wrote, as many of her compatriots do, about the cycle of boom and bust that has left a generation in Ireland untethered. McLaughlin is in her 40s, half a generation older than Sally Rooney or Naoise Dolan, and her stories are about people who have gained money and then lost it. As they fall financially, they find themselves in freefall in their personal lives as well. It’s not surprising that she likes to use the word “falling” in her titles. There was her 2015 New Yorker story “In the Act of Falling”, republished in her collection *Dinosaurs on Other Planets*. And now here’s her first novel, titled *The Art of Falling*.

Is there an art to falling? Parachutists are trained not so much in falling as in landing; in falling over safely. It’s this, perhaps, that Nessa must learn as she attempts to regroup herself following her husband’s affair. When the book begins, she has been summoned to the school of her adolescent daughter, Jennifer, over concerns that she is bullying her former best friend. Nessa must steer her daughter to safety while learning to forgive her husband, all while her job as an art historian involves her in long discussions with the widow of an adulterous sculptor, Robert Locke, whom she has long



**Celebrated
short story writer
Danielle McLaughlin**

admired. The narrative threads about the marriages twine against each other and it turns out there’s a third marriage in the mix. Nessa’s best friend killed herself in her 20s, shortly after Nessa had an affair with her husband. Suddenly, the affair threatens to be exposed, depriving her of the moral high ground.

In the wrong hands, this book could feel over-determined: three marriages, and rather a complex plot involving Locke’s famous model of a pregnant woman, *The Chalk Sculpture*, which a woman who may have slept with him now claims to have made herself. McLaughlin’s writing is so dry and understated, though, that there’s a sense, even while the tightly packed plot neatly unpacks itself, that these are haphazard incidents in an unfurling life. What images there are tend to come through anecdotes recalled – Nessa imagines herself as one of the dogs she’s heard about whose impoverished families abandon them in a part of the city – so that even at its most reflective, the book has an unfussy, spoken quality. Deft description takes the form of casual observation: the sculptor’s daughter wears “the kind of clothes that elicited politeness from shop assistants”.

The result is that there are fewer fireworks, fewer set-piece scenes than we get in the stories. The strength of the novel lies in its slow-building picture of the way that intimacy and estrangement can coincide. McLaughlin has always been good at writing alienated sexual encounters, and we have several between Nessa and Philip that show them to be at once intensely connected and terrifyingly separate. At one point, in bed with her husband, Nessa has “a sense of being utterly alone and unreachable”. Yet this remains a marriage that we can believe in. The same is true of Nessa’s youthful friendship, movingly recalled in flashbacks, and her relationship with her daughter, who hovers rather frighteningly between being an ordinarily disgruntled teenager and something more disturbed and vindictive.

Some of the most powerful scenes portray arguments where each side feels that it is impossible to be heard. Truths are taken to be lies, lies left as lies despite the desire for truth, the good within both people somehow obdurately unseen. Faced with the paralysis within her marriage, Nessa can feel as though the fall will have no safe landing. Yet what is revealed is that there are forms of communication more trustworthy than talking, that the accrual of time matters, that love may, curiously and inexplicably, be revealed as a given.

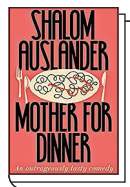
It can be hard, now, to make a case for the old-fashioned middle-class novel of adultery, though a lot of readers are still middle-class and married. But McLaughlin reminds us that the novel remains a good mode to investigate our relationship to truth, in part because as a made-up form it remains flexible in its idea of truth. The opening sentence of *The Art of Falling* is the motto from Jennifer’s school: “To be rather than to seem”. Being and seeming are both put brilliantly in question in this moving and quietly uplifting book.

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

CLAIRE O’RORKE

A man comes to terms with his Cannibal heritage in an outrageous satire on identity politics

Sam Leith



Mother for Dinner
by Shalom Auslander,
Picador, £16.99

In his new novel, Shalom Auslander applies his satirical scalpel to the delicate issues of identity politics. And anyone who has read Auslander before will know that when I say “applies his satirical scalpel”, I mean something more like “tosses a hand-grenade and runs away laughing”.

The protagonist of *Mother for Dinner* is Seventh Seltzer: loving husband, father of a young daughter, and a publisher’s reader in New York who is weary of the cynically pious turn in his industry towards foregrounding marginal voices. The manuscripts he sifts through are all, he complains to himself, “another tedious version of what he had taken of late to calling the Not-So-Great Something-American Novel. It was all anyone wrote these days, and all Rosenbloom, his boss, cared to publish.”

For Seventh, “identity had always been a prison he longed to escape – white, black, brown, American, European, Russian, male, female, straight, gay, They, Them, atheist, monotheist, polytheist – the ever-growing lists of cellblocks from which there was no release. And yet lately, all around him, the prisoners were proudly raising their shackles overhead and cheering their own bondage.”

Seventh has a hyphenated identity of his own. He’s Can-Am, or Cannibal-American. Now *there’s* a disenfranchised minority if ever there was one. Their most sacred rites are proscribed by law (the first rule of Cannibal life, we’re told, is “NO COPS”), the media stereotypes them with comical images of bones through noses and bubbling pots, and their history is one of persecution, marginalisation and pursuit by torch-wielding mobs.

Seventh has his unusual name because his mother (known to all as Mudd) was an identitarian fanatic determined to give birth to 12 sons through whom the fading Cannibal nation would be reborn. Most of her children disappointed her: assimilating or, like Seventh, marrying out. Seventh’s psychiatrist refuses to take seriously his claim that he’s an ancestral cannibal. But like all monstrous mothers, Mudd is impossible to fully escape. Seventh hasn’t been home in years, but then the call comes: Mudd is on her deathbed. The children convene at the family home in Brooklyn to say goodbye. And, as semi-assimilated Cannibal-Americans, that means

more than just a clasped hand, a whispered word and a silent tear: they’re supposed to eat her.

Having decided somewhat prematurely that her death was approaching, Mudd has been fattening herself up for the Consumption by eating nothing but Burger King Whoppers, 12 a day, for years. She’s enormous. When she croaks, her fractious group of grownup children are going to have to chow down if they’re to honour Cannibal tradition and her final wishes; and, more prosaically, if they are to inherit the proceeds of the sale of her house.

Auslander’s previous books were deeply involved with Jewishness, and for all Mudd’s antisemitism (she calls Jews “Sherwoods” after the hated creator of *Gilligan’s Island*, which portrayed cannibals unsympathetically), this is a very Jewish tribe of cannibals. There’s a positively rabbinical exchange, for instance, between Seventh and a sibling who turns out to be vegan over what counts as “eating”: “There,” says Seventh, having consulted Siri on his iPhone, “If you spit it up you’re not absorbing. If you’re not absorbing, you’re not ingesting. If you’re not ingesting, you’re not eating.”

The novel’s most peculiar and most delicate turn is that Seventh – who begins by wanting nothing to do with his heritage – finds himself starting to feel responsible for the fragile chain of culture and tradition that connects him to his ancestors. He starts to, well, digest Mudd’s point of view.

All this bad taste is to a purpose. Auslander is pursuing the weight of history, and the individual’s rage to throw it off

What follows is grotesque, extremely funny, weirdly touching and acute about families – and contains a thread of sensitive exegesis of Michel de Montaigne as well as some highly questionable aspersions both on the memory of Henry Ford and the still living person of Jack Nicholson (who,

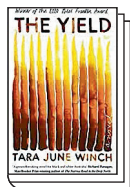
it’s claimed, is a Cannibal-American who betrayed his people by failing to thank them when he won an Oscar).

All this mugging and clowning and ferocity, all this bad taste, is to a purpose. Auslander’s last novel, *Hope: A Tragedy*, had its protagonist discover a foul-mouthed and geriatric Anne Frank hiding in his attic in New England. In this book, he pursues another version of the same theme: the intolerable weight of history, of its deadening solemnity, and the individual’s rage to throw it off. And you know what? Auslander’s resolution is of such life-affirming sweetness that – never mind that the word “asshole” appears eight times in a single short paragraph – you could almost call it sentimental.

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

An Australian prize-winner reclaims Indigenous history and language with subtlety and strength

Erica Wagner



The Yield
by Tara June Winch,
HarperVia, £14.99

Tara June Winch's moving novel begins with an invitation to take her language into your mouth. Poppy Albert Gondiwindi, of the Wiradjuri people of what is now called New South Wales, begins the story in the present day. "I was born on Ngurambang - can you hear it? - *Ngu-ram-bang*.

If you say it right it hits the back of your mouth and you should taste blood in your words." He is making a dictionary of Wiradjuri, a task which will have greater import than he will live to realise, for he is dying of pancreatic cancer. He knows his endeavour is urgent: "I'm taking pen to paper to pass on everything that was ever remembered. All the words I found on the wind."

This is Winch's second novel: she is herself of Wiradjuri heritage, and an afterword makes clear how significant it is for her to give that heritage a place in wider culture. It is an effort that is being recognised; when *The Yield* was published in Australia in 2019, it won the Miles Franklin award, Australia's most prestigious literary prize. Poppy's dictionary runs through this novel, with English words given their Wiradjuri translations; after each translation comes a brief glimpse of how the word links to family, to land, to story. There is suicide - *balubuningidyilinya*; house or dwelling place - *bimbal, ganya*; eternity, things to come - *girr*.

Laced into this rich catalogue of words, each one offering a glimpse of a civilisation that the colonisers of the land worked so hard to eradicate, are two other narratives. August is Poppy's granddaughter, "about to exit the infinite stretch of her twenties" with "nothing to show". She has left Australia for England

but decides to return for his funeral; when she arrives, she finds that their community is under threat. There is a proposal to build a tin mine, two kilometres wide and 300 feet deep, another scar on a land already scarred for centuries: it's enough to know that August and Poppy's hometown is called Massacre Plains, named after reprisals against the Indigenous people who attempted to defend their land.

One way to keep the mining company away would be to prove the current residents' "cultural connection" to the local area. Poppy's dictionary may hold the key, and August is drawn into the local resistance, experiencing a growing sense of reconnection to the place in which she grew up.

The third narrative is provided through letters written by the Reverend Ferdinand Greenleaf in 1915. Greenleaf is a missionary working among the people of Massacre Plains who sees that his presence is not benign. Though for three decades he has laboured "to ameliorate the condition of the Native tribes", he comes to perceive that government policy - to eradicate native languages, to separate children from parents and worse - visits evil on the people he came, as he believed, to serve. He determines, at the end of his life, "to tell how wrongs became accepted as rights".

Taken together, these three narratives offer a layering of time. In Poppy's dictionary the reader is allowed to glimpse the deep time that, for tens of thousands of years, fed and nourished the lives of the Wiradjuri. August has an older sister, Jedda, who is a ghostly presence in the novel: she disappeared while still a schoolgirl. No trace of her has ever been found. It is a mystery unresolved, and purposefully so: Jedda's vanishing is a symbol of the price the people of Massacre Plains still pay for the history inflicted on them.

In Wiradjuri the word for "yield" is *baayanha*. But as the reader learns throughout this book, translation is far from simple. "Yield in English is the reaping, the things that man can take from the land, the thing he's waited for and gets to claim," Poppy Gondiwindi writes. In Wiradjuri, "it's the things you give to, the movement, the space between things". This is a novel full of the

Bathurst Plains, New South Wales, where Wiradjuri people were massacred in 1824 spaces in between. Much of the brutality is revealed glancingly: we learn, for instance, that Poppy and his sister were separated, taken to live in institutions designed to sever them from their cultures, but the reader must imagine the true cost of that for herself. Yet when August and her aunt Missy visit a museum exhibition of Aboriginal "artefacts", Missy's rage is blunt. "They should work out how many of us they murdered and have a museum of tanks of blood," she says.

The line has all the more power to shock because Winch has built her novel with subtlety and strength. This is a complex, satisfying book, both story and testimony. *The Yield* works to reclaim a history that never should have been lost in the first place.

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



ALETHEIA CASEY/THE GUARDIAN

Books of the month

{ **Crime and thrillers** } A kindly murder suspect, an imprisoned mail-order bride, and a warning for the Instagram age
Laura Wilson



Belinda Bauer's *Snap* was longlisted for the Booker prize; in her follow-up, *Exit* (Bantam, £14.99), Felix Pink is a courteous elderly widower who facilitates the suicides of the terminally ill. When an assignment goes awry, Felix, now a murder suspect, tries to find out whether he is at fault or whether something more sinister has been going on. Meanwhile PC Calvin Bridge, relieved to have given up being a detective for the easier work of small-town policing, is dragooned by his boss into finding some answers. The process proves gainful - a new lease of life for Felix, confidence for Calvin, and the possibility of romance for both - and this intriguing, tender, funny and sometimes (in the best possible way) farcical novel about life and death is a sheer delight.

There's nothing to laugh about in Will Dean's standalone departure from the Sweden-set Tuva Moodyson series, *The Last Thing to Burn* (Hodder & Stoughton, £12.99). In an isolated farm amid the fens of East Anglia, Leonard imprisons the Vietnamese immigrant wife he purchased. In constant pain from the injury he inflicted on her ankle, Thanh Dao is kept under surveillance in a cottage surrounded by a vast expanse of flat, muddy fields, with only memories of her family and her few remaining possessions to keep her sane. The misery becomes even more tense and claustrophobic when a well-meaning neighbour gets involved, and the tone remains unremittingly grim throughout, but this is a true nail-biter; you'll be rooting for the astonishingly resilient heroine all the way.

Abigail Dean's superb first novel, *Girl A* (HarperCollins, £14.99), also deals with captivity. Lex is the eldest daughter of religious fanatics who create their own version of reality, cutting themselves off from the world and eventually chaining their children to their beds in what inevitably becomes known as the "house of horrors". Years later, when she returns to

the UK from New York to oversee her childhood home's conversion into a community centre, Lex is forced, in a series of encounters with her siblings, to confront their shared past. All the more powerful for being unsensational, and at its best when detailing the impossibility of explaining such experiences to an outsider and the coping mechanisms required to live in a state of "brokenness", this debut is authentic, humane and full of hope.

Australian bestseller Jane Harper's latest novel, *The Survivors* (Little, Brown, £14.99), is set in the Tasmanian beach community of Evelyn Bay, a place that only comes alive during holiday season. The title refers both to a statue that memorialises a shipwreck and to the stoic citizens whose lives were disrupted by a fatal storm 12 years earlier. Kieran, who feels responsible for two of the deaths - including that of his own brother - has returned to Evelyn Bay to help his mother move house, but when the body of a young woman is discovered on the beach, people start wondering whether there might not be a connection to the earlier tragedy. The ending doesn't entirely convince, but it's both a solid mystery and a compelling study of the corrosive effects of grief and guilt.

People Like Her (Mantle, £14.99), the first novel from husband-and-wife writing team Ellery Lloyd, is a cautionary tale for the social media age. Instanum Emmy Jackson, whose "Mamabare" account offers a purportedly unfiltered view of life with three-year-old Coco and newborn Bear, is adept at keeping the brand relatable while plugging her sponsors' products. Not everyone is happy: the performative motherhood is starting to grate on husband Dan ("Papabare"), but his last novel was published eight years ago and Emmy pays the bills so he's forced to play along - and now somebody seems determined to undermine their carefully curated public lives by posting stolen photos. Sharp observation, well-drawn characters and cleverly ramped-up paranoia more than make up for the rather hammy ending.

Set in 1932, *One Night, New York* (Virago, £14.99) by Lara Thompson is the story of farm girl Frances, who escapes the Kansas dustbowl in order to join brother Stanley in the big city. The novel begins on 21 December, with Frances and her lover Agnes at the top of the newly erected Empire State Building, preparing a terrible revenge on a man who has wronged them both. The action then rewinds to September, when it gradually becomes clear to newcomer Frances that Stanley, into whose dilapidated tenement flat she has moved, has changed. Thin now, and furtive, he refuses to explain what he does for a living or allow her to go out by herself. Her attempts to discover what is going on lead her into a maelstrom of corruption and violence. From the destitute war veterans who inhabit the shanty towns to the ritzy nightclubs selling illegal booze, this is an atmospheric portrait of a city in the grip of the Great Depression as well as a compelling crime story.

Under the skin

Max Porter

The writer reflects on how his long obsession with Francis Bacon inspired his latest book – a poetic reimagining of the artist’s final days in Madrid

If I were to visit a floor plan of my artist obsessions and wander from room to room, there would be artists I will always have deep feelings for, the ones who provoke or engage especially, some for whom my affections have cooled, some I ought to revisit, some whose work is sewn to life experience and therefore exerts a nostalgic tug and some I’ve gone right off. Deep in this imaginary place is a bloody chamber, a dimensionless room full of bodies. A place I want to escape from, and a place I yearn to be back in. This room is my long and uneasy obsession with the paintings of Francis Bacon.

I can’t resist the urge to ruffle the feathers of another baggage-heavy dead icon and re-examine his screaming masterworks. Gorgeous, horrifying images ripped from the unspeakable book of 20th-century brutality. Maybe it’s to try to remind myself that it’s not over, that he was on to something, that the clock is nearer to midnight now than it was then, and in some ways we seem past caring. Behind our wipe-clean screens the snarling reality of ecological collapse, exploitation, injustice, the human tendency towards industrial violence and cruelty is bloodier than ever. More than ever, despite our futile efforts, as Bacon says: “We are all meat.”

I was a slightly death-obsessed child. I read Raymond Briggs’s nuclear war fable *When the Wind Blows* again and again and couldn’t see any of us making it far into the 21st century. I was a committedly death-obsessed teenager, discovering shame, rage, seeking out work that acknowledged or interrogated abjection. This is normal, surely? Straight-off-the-shelf guilty middle-class teenager of the almost *Donnie Darko* days. I was finding out about the western world, about colonialism, torture, the

Holocaust, the Inquisition, so Bacon was my guy.

Bacon’s paintings seemed more honest, that was all (and I’ve wrestled with that, given the various forms of representational dishonesty that are at work). They pushed through the artifice or fakery that I felt was prevalent, inherent, in the great grinning and shopping and jogging industry of denial. The pictures seemed, more than anything else, to be telling the truth about the brief ludicrous reign of animal terror, human life. Bacon was ripping the artificial skin off things. He knew – as an interiors man – how to make a scene pop, how to drag a viewer in, how to go from calculable damage on the surface to inexplicable lushness in the depths.

I remember a snooty someone saying, “Of course you’re into Bacon”, as if it was an excruciatingly basic position, to be *into Bacon*. I flinched for the first of a countless thousand times at cultural snobbery even as I relished the wings of my own snobbery unfolding (very Bacon-esque, this blend of revulsion and egoism), equating taste and intelligence and reconciling them with passion, with pain. The comment also nudged me even further *into Bacon*, into the loneliness of being misunderstood, the uncoolness of being into the most famous painter working in England. This led me to read books about Bacon, obsessively, to wallow in the company of other obsessives, and of Bacon himself, a great talking orchestrator of his own myth. Of course he has attracted extraordinary writers, perhaps more than most painters, but I found I was losing not gaining ground on the paintings the more I read about them, as if explanation was bleeding them dry.

One morning in the first lockdown, I sat down and thought I’d try to write about Bacon in a way that replicated, or approached, the complexity, sudden grandeur and grisly corporeality of the paintings. I started by setting aside some of the familiar ways in which his work is discussed or contextualised, but I didn’t bin them altogether (you can’t with a self-made saint like Bacon, because they are accurate, they’re right there, shallow, naked in the repetitions, meaning just what they mean). I wanted a kind of ecstatic democracy of ingredients (art, accidents, interruptions of illness, materials, practicalities of making, noise, sex, gossip, myth, daydream and so on, infinite in every direction just as looking at a painting can be) and I wanted it fractured by the dying mind failing, grabbing at things, a sort of image maker’s requiem.

My book *The Death of Francis Bacon* has an acceptance of its own hybridity built in, because we all know a painting is a painting and a book is a book. We all know what artifice is, from syntax to brush-stroke, but we are still committed to truth and feeling. So the book is an essay, a poem, a fantasia, a dinner party skit, a play for two actors, a high camp polyphonic attempt at translation, a love letter to this most European of artists. Fidelity to the original, or to any official agreed “meaning” in Bacon’s work, would be a futile (although pleasingly masochistic)

*Study for a
Portrait March 1991*
by Francis Bacon



ALAMY

ambition. It is designed to slip in and out of different registers, which is likely to enrage some readers, but I hope this gets it slightly closer to looking than reading. As all art lovers know, deeper satisfaction is gained from longer looking, but also *different types* of looking, swivelling between bombardment, glance, immersion, way back, close up, from a room away, from a decade ago. From remembering and misremembering, letting images plant themselves in the water table of your consciousness to take root over time.

Many better writers than I have written about the mysteries of art and seeing. I think it's fair to say that some of the best writing ever has been about art. My book doesn't claim to add anything to that, rather it uses fiction as mongrel accomplice to barge over the line and jump in, like Katie in James Mayhew's picture books for children where a child goes into famous paintings and the paintings also spill out

into her world. What would it smell like, tiptoeing between the taut skin-panels of one of those big triptychs? Can prose be more painterly than literary, at what cost, and how? What would it be like to lie underneath one of those weird unfolded, spilling sofas and feel the weight of the figure, the gaze of the painter? What would it sound like? What is the squirming unpicked body doing while the background is being filled in? What is the chat, the image-pulse, the residue of a Bacon painting's inner energy? At what speed does a magpie recycler and virtuoso handler of pigment attack or quote himself? Who is in there with him? Or is it terribly lonely? These are the questions I wanted to wrestle with, and the death bed seemed the perfect scene. A famous painter in a clinic. Madrid. Unfinished. Man dying ●

The Death of Francis Bacon by Max Porter is published by Faber.

'Sobhraj's creepy emissaries would arrive at all hours'

Julie Clarke



It was 1977 and my boyfriend and I were working as journalists in New York. I was 23 and Richard Neville, who later became my husband, was 33. Richard, who had already achieved notoriety in the UK with his anti-establishment Oz magazine, was offered a contract to write a book about Charles Sobhraj, a young French Vietnamese man who had just been arrested for murder after an international manhunt. Forever enterprising, the first thing Sobhraj had done after his arrest was sell the rights to his life story to a Bangkok businessman, who sold them on to Random House, who asked Richard to immediately get to Delhi. The case would become a sensation, involving trickery, drugs, gems, gun running, corruption,

dramatic prison escapes and a glamorous female accomplice who was photographed wearing big sunglasses and holding a fluffy dog. "Death Stalks the Hippy trail!" read one headline.

It was our connection with the so called hippy trail that had landed Richard the contract; the fact that crime reporting, and indeed the world of crime, was alien to us had seemed of no consequence. We bundled ourselves off to Delhi and landed ourselves in a moral quagmire.

In our hotel room we met with scar-faced crims bringing messages from Sobhraj in Tihar prison. Richard speedily learned the arts of bribery and corruption and arranged regular access to interview him. The first time we met Sobhraj he was chained

to a guard and shackled, but he welcomed us graciously. (Did we really have to shake hands with him? Those hands had snapped necks.) And so began our immersion in his psychopathic world.

In private, we called ourselves "Bungles and Mishap, News Sleuths". We needed our little jokes because actually we were a long way out of our depth. Sobhraj was now in full flow, describing each murder in detail. It was a bizarre situation. We were both having nightmares that Sobhraj was chasing us, or suddenly appearing in our room. It didn't help that Sobhraj's creepy emissaries would arrive

at all hours with handwritten missives. One night a drill bit appeared through the wooden door of our room. Not subtle, but clearly we were under surveillance.

When we flew out of Delhi I had never felt so relieved. We then continued our all-consuming research into the murders. Our friends thought we had gone nuts. They were working on serious matters: politics, saving the world. I felt a little ashamed of our obsession with a crime story, but we had to keep going and we had to get it right. Finally we did. Richard died four years ago and it's now been more than 40 years since Bungles and Mishap, two amusingly naive youngsters, got to write a classic true crime book, about which in retrospect, I now feel enormous pride.

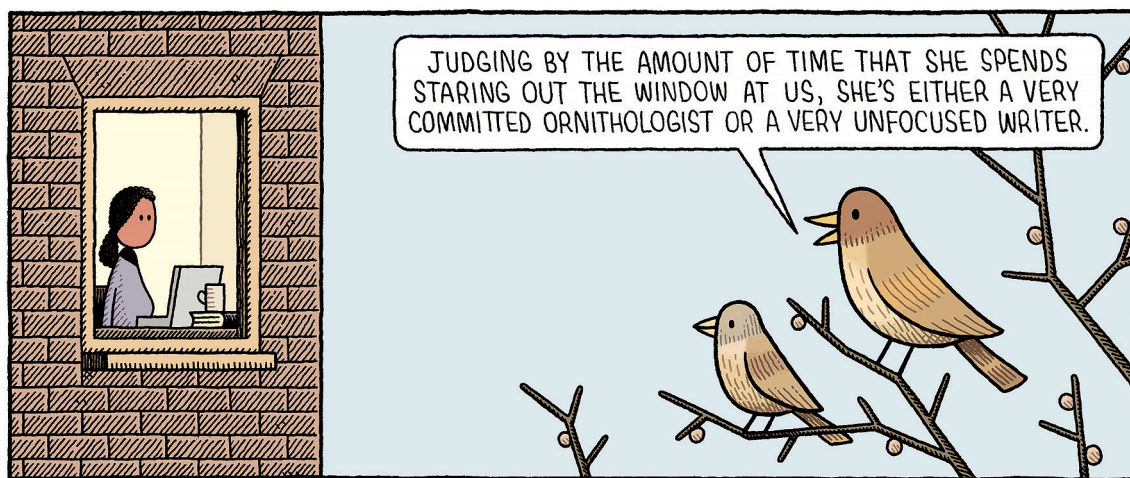
The Serpent Tahar Rahim as Charles Sobhraj



BBC

On the Trail of the Serpent by Julie Clarke and Richard Neville is published by Vintage. *The Serpent* is on BBC1.

Tom Gauld

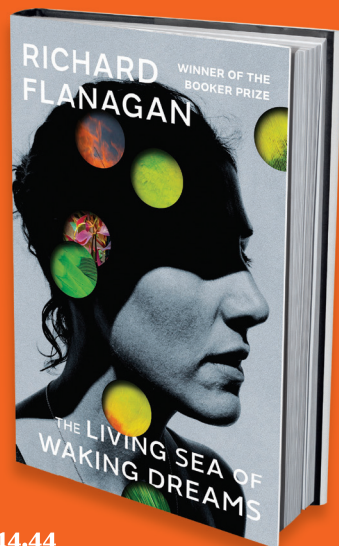




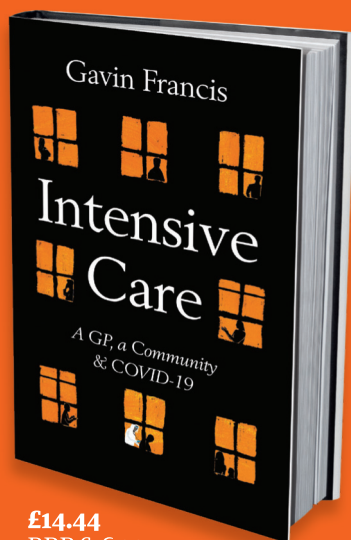
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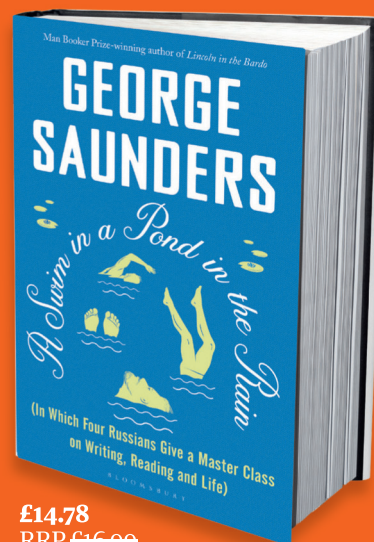
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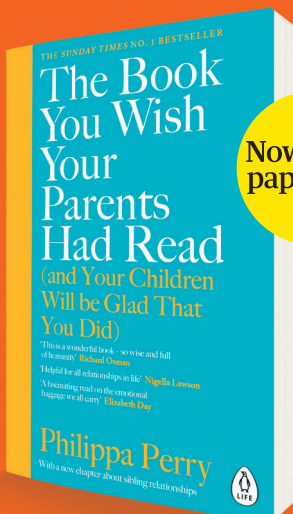
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