

Review

Saturday 30 January 2021 - Issue Nº 158

The
Guardian



Patricia Lockwood

From Twitter joker
to literary star

Hadley Freeman



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Review

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'Our appreciation of literature is deepened when we understand the foundations from which each new generation creates literature anew.'

— Bernardine Evaristo, page 20

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The week in books

30 January

Bowled over

When I was 11, I won my only sporting trophy. I was Darfield Cricket Club's under-11's "Sportsman of the year", the culmination of a season in which during one unimpressive stint as wicket keeper I had let 100 runs go through my trembling adolescent legs. Language is important here; not "Player of the year", but "Sportsman of the year". But my grandma was thrilled, thinking it was something to do with prowess, rather than for turning up every Sunday; I got a beaming smile and a little bit of money pressed into my hand.

Maybe what I'm saying is, sometimes the name of a prize doesn't fully do justice to what it's for. The "TS Eliot prize for poetry"; that singular feels incorrect somehow. Having gone through a

process of judging this year, reading more than 150 books with my fellow judges Mona Arshi and chair Lavinia Greenlaw, and putting together a shortlist of 10, it feels like the prize would be better called the "TS Eliot Prize for Poetries". Our shortlist included long poems and sequences, eco poems, lyric poems, poems wrestling with language, poems wrestling with the self,



JAMIE CLIFFORD

from debut poets and mid-career poets and everywhere in between along that winding rope of what we think of as a writing career. Each book was entirely itself, which is perhaps all we can ever ask of art.

In the end, we unanimously awarded this year's prize to someone who does all of the above and more: Bhanu Kapil, left, for *How to Wash a Heart*. The collection is her UK debut, but only the most recent book of many in a long career, a poem about the potential and danger of language itself, of the uncertain and threatened self, one long extension of linguistic invention and a short sharp burst of gripping writing. Oh, and the publisher is called Pavilion. Insert your own cricket-based pun in here, I'm off to have some tea.

Andrew McMillan

Atwood's award

A major Canadian literary award is being renamed after Booker

winner Margaret Atwood and her late partner, the author Graeme Gibson, who died in 2019. Formerly the Writers' Trust fiction prize, the award, won in the past by Alice Munro, is now to be called the Atwood Gibson Writers' Trust fiction prize, with the winner to receive C\$60,000, an increase of C\$10,000. The Writers' Trust of Canada said that Atwood and Gibson were "known for their bold and original works of fiction and their unwavering commitment to supporting Canadian culture".

"The Writers' Trust is the quiet giant of Canadian literature, and Graeme and I often marvelled at how far it had come over the years," said Atwood. "We knew the role a major prize could have on a writer's confidence and career, not to mention their bank account. I can't wait to discover the new voices and new stories that this prize rewards."

Alison Flood

Rollout

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole

Authorities are cautioning against excessive optimism as the Sars-CoV-2 vaccines are rolled out. Actually rolling little glass vials of vaccine along the nation's streets would be a bad idea. So why does something get rolled out rather than shot out, trundled out, or slid out?

To "roll" in the sense of a rocking motion comes from the French *rouler*, and is applied from the 14th century to **ships and barges**, as well as to the action of flattening dough. A flexible verb, "to roll" has also meant "to stagger" (as one drunk), "to wind" (a watch or clock), "to rob" and "to have sex with", not all of which encourage faith in public health.

In business jargon, it seems likely that a product's "rollout" (often gradual) derives not from red carpets (as in an 1849 reference to one customarily rolled out for the pope), but more directly from the early **aerospace age** (c1947), when the rollout of a new aircraft was the moment it was literally wheeled out of the hangar. Let us hope the current rollout resembles that inspiring sight more than it does another old sense: the mast breaking off a ship.



'Monty Python taught me that comedy and truth are the same thing'

George Saunders

The book I am currently reading

Cervantes: *Don Quixote*. I've read it before but this time I'm in for the long haul. I'm alternating this with *Hot Stew* by the wonderful Fiona Mozley, and *A Christmas Carol*, by you-know-who.

The book that changed my life

There are so many but I'm inclined to mention my first read of *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison. Morrison's gaze in that book is so fair and curious and loving and seems to say, or underscore, that yes, we really are all brothers and sisters down here and it's only our limited vision that makes it seem otherwise.

The book that had the greatest influence on me

I think it might be the collected works of Isaac Babel, especially *Red Cavalry* and the cycle sometimes called the "childhood stories". These stories are wild in language but classic in form. That's something I aspire to. I'd also be lying if I didn't mention Monty Python - watching them was the first time I felt that comedy and truth were one and the same thing, and that truth didn't have to be expressed in traditional or linear or quotidian ways and, in fact, the great truths can't be.

The book I think is most underrated

Dead Souls, by Nikolai Gogol. I love the way the scope (grand) and the tone (comic) combine to make it feel just like real life. And especially so in these bleak, (post- and yet not) Trumpie days in the US.

The book I wish I'd written

A Christmas Carol is my favourite book of all time, in every season. It strikes me as a work that is more aspirational than true, but my reaction to it tells me that, at least for me, that may be the most high-level aim of fiction: to cause us to aspire.

My earliest reading memory

My aunt, in Chicago, reading me *The Poky Little Puppy* and a few other brightly coloured books from that old Little Golden Book series; the notion that the idealisation or exaggeration of the real world was a way of celebrating it.

The last book that made me laugh

The aforementioned *Don Quixote*. I was reading it, started laughing, my wife asked what was so funny, I read that part aloud, we both were soon in tearful irrational hysterics. And Cervantes did it, in that case, with understatement; he didn't go for the easy joke and that made us do the heavy lifting. So, it was the three of us - me, my wife and Cervantes, 400 years dead - working together to create the comedy.

The book I give as a gift

Well, I often "give as a gift", to my students, my recommendation that they read *Faithful Ruslan* by Georgi Vladimov. I find that this is less expensive than actually buying it for them.

The book I'd most like to be remembered for

I'd most like to be remembered for writing *Dead Souls*. But the world is harsh and has a short attention span and has begun neglecting books for movies and TV, so I doubt that will ever happen.

A Swim in a Pond in the Rain by George Saunders is published by Bloomsbury.

Extremely Online

The ‘poet laureate of Twitter’ and author of the acclaimed memoir *Priestdaddy* has written her first novel. She talks to Hadley Freeman about politics, finding her voice, and her experience of long Covid

The day before my interview with the poet, essayist, memoirist and novelist Patricia Lockwood, the attempted coup took place in Washington DC. She, like myself and millions of others, followed it online, scrolling for hours, watching as President Trump continued to incite his fans by posting untruths about the election. Whatever divide ever existed between the real and virtual worlds was as decisively shattered as the Capitol’s windows.

“WHAT A DAY TO BE SITTING ON YOUR BUTT IN FRONT OF THE COMPUTER, EH,” Lockwood emailed me from her home in Savannah, Georgia, using the all-caps and no-punctuation style that all of us who spend too much time online recognise as meta sarcasm: sarcasm but also sarcastically mocking the obviousness of the sarcasm.

I tell her that I’ve spent 127 hours on Twitter. Lockwood is often described as “the poet laureate of Twitter” and the 38-year-old originally made a name for herself with her joyfully weird tweets, such as her parodies of sexts (“I am a Dan Brown novel and you do me in my plot-hole. ‘Wow,’ I yell in ecstasy, ‘This makes no sense at all.’” And asking the *Paris Review*: “So is Paris any good or not” (no punctuation, of course). So I feel no shame in admitting my social media addiction to her.

“It was like every hour became somehow cubic and we were chained up in it like a murder basement,” she writes back, combining the punchy

hyperbole of Twitter (“murder basement”) with the lyrical originality (“every hour became somehow cubic”) that has made her a literary star. As well as two poetry collections (*Balloon Pop Outlaw Black* and *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals*), she has published a bestselling memoir, 2017’s *Priestdaddy*, about when she and her husband were forced to move back in with her mother and her raucously eccentric father, who became a Catholic priest after watching *The Exorcist* 72 times. She is also a contributing editor for the *London Review of Books* where she wrote about her recent experience with long-term Covid, which she caught when travelling to Harvard last year to give a lecture. She had a bad bout of it: “Everyone I know who had Covid says that at some point in the night they felt like, ‘OK, body, you had a good run, we’re over now.’ But so many

‘Everyone I know who had Covid says that at some point in the night they felt like, ‘OK, body, you had a good run, we’re over now’

people died who didn’t have to,” she says. Whereas she used to travel often, she has been largely housebound for the past year, partly due to the lockdown, but mainly because of her health. She still can’t type due to the arthritis she developed: “See how the joints are crazy prominent?” she says, holding up her palms, joints pressing through the flesh. So she largely dictates her



notes: “But I have to consider myself lucky, even though I can’t use my hands.”

When Lockwood was a young unknown, her poems occasionally getting plucked from the slush piles of literary magazines, posting online taught her how to let her personality shine through in her writing. She has always had an almost synaesthetic reaction to words: “When I read the words ‘moonlit swim’ I saw the moonlight slicked all over the bare skin. The word ‘sunshine’ had a washed look, with the sweep of a rag in the middle of it,” she writes in *Priestdaddy*, something she puts down to being, she says, “not a neurotypical person”. Whether she’s writing a poem about Shirley Temple (“Shirley Temple what makes you cry. What do / you think of to make you cry. Mommies stand / in a circle and whisper to her, ‘Shirley Temple / there will be war. Shirley Temple you’ll get no / lunch’”) or describing the decor of a restaurant in *Priestdaddy* (“a fake cactus threw up its helpless arms, as if my father were holding it at gunpoint”), there is the impression that Lockwood is getting as much of a kick out of her gleefully unique prose as the reader.


“Absolutely - I’m the Barbra Streisand of tasting my own voice. I don’t have any problems with procrastination where writing is concerned,” she says. Writing on the internet helped her to find that pleasure in her originality. But in around 2012, she noticed there was increasingly a conformity in online writing: the hyperbole, the all-caps, the meta sarcasm, the coining of a universal internet-speak.

Patricia Lockwood
‘Not a neurotypical person’

Her debut novel, *No One Is Talking About This*, published in the UK next month, has already garnered

praise from Sally Rooney and was extracted in the *New Yorker* last year. (“Now everyone is talking about this,” an American writer emailed me, deliberately evoking the excitement around the extract, and also, less deliberately, his jealousy of the size of the literary spotlight accorded to Lockwood.) The novel began as a diary in which she wrote about being on the internet and “the feeling my thoughts were being dictated”.

“You have to look for where the language goes crunchy, where everybody starts saying the same things and formulating their reactions in the same way - and step out of it,” Lockwood says. The result of this stepping out is an extraordinarily original novel about the interplay between the online and real worlds, one which would have felt biting relevant anyway, but now feels almost painfully so. On the day of our interview - which we, inevitably, conduct online - the newspaper headlines are that Trump will be banned from Twitter. In Lockwood’s book he is referred to ironically-but-also-not-ironically as “the dictator”.

“We could all see [how Trump used Twitter] and that lets people take a book about Twitter more seriously. But good luck describing the book!” she laughs. Here goes. The first half is about the unnamed and extremely online (“Extremely Online”, as extremely online people put it) protagonist’s life 

◆ on social media, where she communicates in memes (“SHOOT IT IN MY VEINS”), talks in “the new shared sense of humour” (ironic, doomy, deliberately exclusive) and makes herself care about the things that they care about (“Every fiber in her being strained. She was trying to hate the police”). She watches how people’s behaviour changes online, individually and collectively (“A man who three years ago only ever posted things like ‘I’m a retard with butt aids’ was now exhorting people to open their eyes to the power of socialism, which suddenly did seem the only way”). She also explains the reason for those changes in passages that evoke proper laughter as opposed to merely an emoji laughing face:

White people, who had the political educations of potatoes, were suddenly feeling compelled to speak about injustice. This happened once every forty years on average, usually after a period when folk music became popular again. When folk music became popular again, it reminded people that they had ancestors, and then, after a considerable delay, that their ancestors had done bad things.

The book is formatted into bite-sized paragraphs, so it feels as if you are scrolling down a social media timeline. It is also largely autobiographical and in the second half a devastating family tragedy occurs, and the protagonist mentally returns to the offline world. Whereas in the first half of the book the narrator’s biological sex is irrelevant, in the second half – the offline part – it is inescapable as she is forced to



confront issues such as abortion rights, pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. On the internet people send her memes, in the real world they ask her why she hasn’t had a baby yet.

“I’ve always felt like a grey alien who’s forced to wear a bikini in summer, and I don’t know if I’m capable of having children, which disqualifies me from traditional womanhood to a lot of people. I think that is what is so attractive about the internet to me and people like me: you can exist there as a spirit in the void,” Lockwood says.

The novel captures better than anything I’ve ever read what it’s like to be online, which is not a surprise, given how enmeshed Lockwood’s life is with the internet: as well as originally coming to prominence on Twitter, she met her husband Jason Kendall online (in a poetry chatroom – “so innocent”). Lockwood had no doubt that she could pull off this high-wire act of a book: “I have never

I think what is so attractive about the internet to me and people like me is that you can exist there as a spirit in the void’

experienced a lack of confidence, because I’m an extreme megalomaniac,” she says, ironically-but-not-ironically. “I think this is something I inherited from my dad. This is a guy who believes he has the vocation to be a Catholic priest, so maybe if you grow up seeing something like that you get weird ideas about what you’re set on Earth to do.”

As deeply enjoyable as *No One Is Talking About This* is, as I read it I wondered if this ephemeral thing – Twitter – was a worthy subject for Lockwood’s enduring talent. “So many people are spending all their time on it, and it’s a worthwhile topic just for that reason,” she says. Even politicians communicate in internet-speak now: Hillary Clinton tweeted the meme “Delete your account” at Trump and Barack Obama teases Joe Biden with visual memes. It is wallpapering the brains of those of us who use it too much, as much as it’s warping our politics, so Lockwood is right: it is absurd to treat Twitter as irrelevant. But was she worried that those who aren’t Extremely Online would be put off by the book’s Extreme Online-ness?

“I never thought about the non-Extremely Online reactions,” she says. “But yes, you want [the book] to stand up to the test of time, but also to preserve the vernacular, so that’s the line you’re walking.”

The internet can be a place where you hide yourself behind memes, or post your most intimate thoughts. Lockwood has generally taken the former approach, revealing little of her life online. But in her publishing career, she has gone the other way. In 2012 the website the Awl published her poem, “Rape Joke”, which was far sparser than her previous poems. It was also, unusually, autobiographical, describing when she was raped when she was 19.

“My work up to that point was so not autobiographical, I was like a little Wallace Stevens: ‘Look at this jar, it’s on a hill! I’m barely here!’ So maybe if you keep the autobiographical dammed up for so long, it emerges in something like ‘Rape Joke,’” she says.

After years of just scraping by, “Rape Joke” propelled her to literary celebrity, aided by Lockwood’s original support system, the internet, where the poem went viral, as poems rarely do. After that she published *Priestdaddy*, in which she described her peripatetic childhood in the midwest with her “charismatic but also batshit crazy a lot” conservative parents, her attempted suicide as a teenager and her adult writing career. She writes about her parents very fondly, but says if she was still living with them “I’d be back on the mental ward, because of [their] politics”. Her father was, she says, “an early inhabitant of the rightwing alternate reality” and is a fan of conservative figureheads such as Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter (but not Fox News: “Too liberal.”)

“One of the first experiences I had of someone whose language was going crunchy was when I’d hear him say something and think: ‘That’s not something he came up with himself, he’s repeating something that someone else told him.’ That struck me as strange,” she says.

On the one hand, Lockwood’s rise to fame looks like an eminently 21st-century story: she made her name on Twitter and she has now written two books that at least touch on the online world. But she also took a more traditional path, achieving literary acclaim by writing about her most personal experiences, something female writers - from Nora Ephron to Elizabeth Wurtzel - have done for decades.

“*Priestdaddy* came out at the height of the cult of the personal essay, when [publishers] were encouraging young women to write these books of hyper-revealing essays and not protecting them. With *Priestdaddy*, I recognised all that to be true and also I knew I could write a good book and that’s what I had to concentrate on,” she says.

Did she feel protected after “Rape Joke” came out? “I don’t think you can be protected, and I did feel vulnerable. Still now I’ll be caught off guard if I’m being introduced somewhere for a reading and the very first thing they say about me is that I wrote “Rape Joke”, and I’m supposed to get up there and make a funny joke. I’ll sometimes go completely quiet and you can see I’m experiencing something traumatic in real time. But it’s still a poem that I wrote,” she says.

Lockwood is currently working on a collection of short stories. I ask if she had always wanted to write stories and she says she doesn’t plan her books that way: “When I’m working on something, I like to use extremely wet clay rather than chipping from a block of marble. So I start a book by nudging my way into dark corners,” she says, taking palpable pleasure from each of the words, possibly picturing a woodland animal, or herself, burrowing through the mud. “Eventually, a path reveals itself,” she smiles ●

An exclusive extract from **No One is Talking About This** By Patricia Lockwood

What had the beautiful thought been, the bright profundity she had roused herself to write down? She opened her notebook with the sense of anticipation she always felt on such occasions – perhaps this would finally be it, the one they would chisel on her gravestone. It read:

chuck e cheese can munch a hole in my you-know-what

After you died, she thought as she carefully washed her legs under the fine needles of water, for she had recently learned that some people didn’t, you would see a little pie chart that told you how much of your life had been spent in the shower arguing with people you had never met. Oh but like that was somehow less worthy than spending your time carefully monitoring the thickness of beaver houses for signs of the severity of the coming winter?

Was she *stimming*? She feared very much that she was.

Things that were always there:

The sun.

Her body, and the barest riffling at the roots of her hair.

An almost music in the air, unarranged and primary and swirling, like yarns laid out in their colors waiting.

The theme song of a childhood show where mannequins came to life at night in a department store.

Anonymous History Channel footage of gray millions on the march, shark-snouted airplanes, silk deployments of missiles, mushroom clouds.

An episode of True Life about a girl who liked to oil herself up, get into a pot with assorted vegetables, and pretend that cannibals were going to eat her.

Sexually.

The almost-formed unthought, Is there a bug on me???

A great shame about all of it, all of it.

No One Is Talking About This is published by Bloomsbury Circus.

Book of the week

{ Biography } The rise and ignominious demise of the publishing tycoon makes for compelling reading

Ian Jack



Fall: The Mystery of Robert Maxwell
by John Preston,
Viking, £18.99

Soon after he took over the New York Daily News - his last and most foolish purchase - Robert Maxwell asked the tabloid's publisher, James Hoge, if he could do him a favour: "Would you mind," Maxwell asked, "if I stood here with the door open and shouted at you for a while?" Hoge had known worse requests;

the paper had recently emerged from a long and bitter struggle with the print unions, and its circulation was under the thumb of the mafia.

"I told him to go ahead," Hoge said, remembering the incident to John Preston. "Immediately, Maxwell started lacing into me, banging on my desk with his fist and saying how it was outrageous that I had an office that was larger than his. After about 40 seconds of this, he said 'Thank you' in a much quieter voice and went out."

Hoge later discovered that Maxwell had staged this little scene to impress the youngest of his nine children, Ghislaine, who had noticed the difference in office sizes and was now within earshot. But to impress her how, exactly? As he was about to make Ghislaine his "emissary" in New York, it may have been intended as a lesson in how to treat underlings. More likely, it was just Maxwell being Maxwell - showing off to his daughter, keen to attract attention to himself whenever a suitable moment arose.

His size alone made him hard to ignore - 22 stone in the lean years - but Maxwell added props to make his figure even more memorable. Cigars, dinner jackets, and a visit every week by the Savoy's head barber to dye his hair and eyebrows jet black. The voice - "Churchill's rumbling cadences [with] an extra helping of treacle", as Preston describes it - came out of his early encounters with the English language, listening to the prime minister's speeches during the war.

The effect varied according to the witness. To Clive James, spotting him at the Cannes film festival, he looked like "a ton and a half of half-cured ham

wrapped in a white tuxedo". To a print union negotiator in New York he seemed "like an English nobleman". To Rupert Murdoch, whose esteem he craved, he was never more than a crook and a buffoon.

The two media magnates had names with the same initials, the same number of syllables - they might have been invented for a Jeffrey Archer novel, but for the fact that they disobeyed a cardinal rule of popular fiction: in novels about rivals, the poorer must outsmart the richer because his wits have been honed by his early struggle. Murdoch edited the school magazine, went to Oxford, and inherited his dad's newspaper in sunny south Australia. Maxwell, born in Ruthenia, an obscure province in central Europe, had a father, Mehel Hoch, who traded in animal skins and toured the countryside with a mule to carry them between seller and buyer. The Hochs were Jewish. After Maxwell, then known as Jan Hoch, left his native town in June 1939 he never again saw his parents, his grandfather, his younger brother or three of his five sisters. Auschwitz claimed six of them; the seventh, his sister Shenya, disappeared after her arrest in Budapest. Jan Hoch, meanwhile, went through several changes of name and eventually reached Britain via Beirut and Marseille.

Three weeks after D-day, he was back in France, first as a sergeant and then as junior infantry officer fighting his way east across Europe. For his "magnificent example and offensive spirit" in rescuing a trapped allied platoon, he was awarded the Military Cross. He read books constantly and excelled at languages. A fondness for disguise and what Preston calls "a natural flair for subterfuge" made him useful to British intelligence in ruined Berlin, which is where he met the publisher Ferdinand Springer, whose distinguished backlist of scientific books and journals lay heaped in a large warehouse 100 miles from the city, safe from British and American bombing. Industry and academia in allied countries had been cut off from German research since 1939 and they were keen to catch up on it. Maxwell set up a company, reached a worldwide distribution deal with Springer-Verlag, and arranged to have the stock - 300 tons of books and journals - transported to London by freight train and a convoy of lorries. The company was funded by MI6. It was the foundation of all Maxwell's later success.

To Clive James, spotting him at the Cannes film festival, Maxwell looked like 'a ton and a half of half-cured ham wrapped in a white tuxedo'

By the time he was 25, he had proved himself quick-witted, bold, clever, resourceful and ruthless. Cruel, too: in the last weeks of the war, he executed a local mayor in the square of a German town (not named) by shooting him through the head, and, later, allegedly killed a group of young German troops who had already surrendered. He married Betty, a French



STEVE WOOD/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Protestant, in Paris in 1945, and was quick to write down for her his six rules for a happy marriage, beginning: “1, *Don’t nag*, 2, *Don’t criticise unduly* ...”.

Murdoch was an opponent who had taken up residence inside Maxwell’s head. Preston contends that Maxwell’s obsessive interest in him - his need both to emulate and beat him - set in train a course of events “that would lead to his physical and mental disintegration, his downfall and, ultimately, his death”. Those events began in America in the late 80s, but the rivalry was 20 years older, dating to Fleet Street in the 1960s.

Newspapers fascinated Maxwell, as they do many egoists, but somehow Murdoch managed to outwit him whenever he tried to get his hands on a newspaper business. It happened with the *News of the World*, the *Sun*, *Today*, the *Times* and the *Sunday Times*.

But he continued the hopeless struggle. Not content with acquiring Mirror Group Newspapers and rigging the spot the ball contest, he looked west to the US, where Murdoch was emerging as a big player. Maxwell was a man without friends - sycophants were a different matter - but in the property developer Gerald Ronson he had someone who came close to an idea of one.

When Ronson heard of his American ambitions, he was discouraging. But Maxwell wasn’t to be put off. In 1988 he overpaid for Macmillan US (\$2.6bn) and the *Official Aviation Guide* (\$750m) in a spending spree that culminated in the tottering *New York Daily News*, for which any price at all was too much. To raise the cash, he borrowed from a total of 44 banks and financial syndicates, all of them anxious to lend as much as he wanted. The conclusion of the

From left: Ghislaine, Robert and Elisabeth Maxwell in 1987

Department of Trade and Industry’s 1971 report into Maxwell’s affairs - that he wasn’t fit “to exercise

proper stewardship of a publicly quoted company” - had been long forgotten.

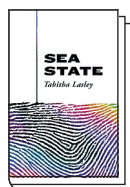
We know the rest. Profits fell, interest rates soared, a full-blown recession loomed. The banks wanted their money back and Maxwell’s share price needed support. Assets were sold - even Pergamon publishing, which had been the core of the business from the beginning. Eventually, his only solution was to rob the Mirror pension fund; and, when he knew that was close to discovery, to jump from the stern of his boat.

Preston’s biography is largely anecdotal, without too much concern for context. The stories are good and Preston tells them with his gift for the kind of wry comedy that suits English decline. The “mystery” in his book’s subtitle surely refers to his behaviour in life rather than the manner of his death - of his family only Ghislaine believes he was murdered (oddly, given that her last instruction to the yacht’s crew was to “shred everything”). The picture of Maxwell that emerges is vivid but familiar: bombastic, florid, devious, gluttonous, bullying, absurd. But why was he these things?

Ghislaine was his favourite child, but that hadn’t always been so. According to Preston, her parents had rather ignored her until, aged three, she stood before her mother and said simply: “Mummy, I exist.” Her father may have been trying to make a similar point, but to himself as much as to his audience.

To buy a copy for £16.52 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Memoir } Sex, drugs and oil rigs ... a journalist embeds herself and writes a startlingly original study of masculinity *Fiona Sturges*



Sea State
by Tabitha Lasley,
4th Estate, £14.99

Extracting oil offshore is a treacherous business, requiring grit and stamina from its workers, along with a willingness to be cut off from civilisation for weeks, sometimes months, at a time. When men come home from the platforms they are like returning soldiers, struggling to

acclimatise and communicate with their wives and girlfriends. Many will turn their phones off and spend the first few days in the pub. Gain the confidence of an offshore worker and he will probably tell you about the friend of a friend who filled his pockets with tools and threw himself off the rig.

The journalist Tabitha Lasley hears this suicide story over and over. She wonders if it's an urban myth, but is assured by different men that it really happens. One, who worked on a Brent field platform in the North Sea, says: "I saw him half an hour before. I passed him in the corridor and said 'Alright Jimmy, how you doing?' He never took me on, just walked right past."

Sea State was planned as a portrait of riggers, but soon turned into something else. It is customary for journalists to avoid inserting themselves into the story of other people's lives, but Lasley plonks herself, without apology, right in the middle. After leaving her boyfriend of five years, she begins an affair with one of her early interviewees, a taciturn, tattooed rigger called Caden who is married with children, and whose attitudes to women and immigrants leave much to be desired. After weeks of to-ing and fro-ing, she moves from London into a flat in Aberdeen to be nearer to him.

Sea State is part reportage, part memoir, and the collision of the two is initially discombobulating - one moment the author is reflecting on the grotesque failures that led to the 1988 Piper Alpha disaster, which killed 167, and the next she is trying to take a photo of her breasts to send Caden on his third week offshore. It nonetheless builds a grey-hued portrait of a ruthless industry, a dour city and a breed of man who

thinks nothing of calling a woman a whore for putting her hand on a man's arm in a pub, and is shocked when she tries to buy a round of drinks. These men, many of whom have girlfriends as well as wives, are not big on self-reflection, yet they talk of home "with an exile's longing, their perspective skewed by distance".

Lasley's methods for meeting her subjects are unorthodox, and her capacity for recklessness quite breathtaking. She changes her name and her backstory on a whim, accosts fierce-looking strangers and gets drunk with them, and takes drugs when they're offered. She inveigles her way into exclusively male social settings, shrugging off suspicion and shouting back at the men who are insulting or try to intimidate her. She meets Said, a driller who worked on an Algerian rig before moving to Aberdeen. He tells stories of Caspian rigs with no choppers to ferry the workers; instead boats drop them at the foot of the platform where they must scramble up netting to reach the deck.

On a train she meets a boxer-turned-rigger who worked on platforms in Saudi Arabia and the Falklands before moving to Piper Bravo in the North Sea. He says he gets scared lying in his bunk bed. "When they bring the [oil] containers on board at night, and you hear them: *boom!* You're working on a floating bomb. A floating bomb that's just waiting for an ignition source." Later, after a few drinks, he tells her he once killed a man. She's not sure whether to believe him but still lets him walk her home.

Lasley's capacity for recklessness is breathtaking. She accosts fierce-looking strangers and gets drunk with them

Insecurity and isolation do strange things to people, as Lasley herself learns. She finds herself cast adrift from her family and her procreating friends who call from London and ask: "What are you *doing* all day?" Her initial compassion towards her boyfriend's wife hardens into irritation and dismissal. She is exasperating, but you still worry about her throwing

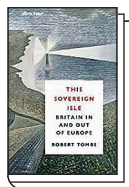
her lot in with a man who appears to be without conscience about the family he has abandoned. When he leaves Lasley too, she sees it coming but is still filled with loathing and despair.

Her research into offshore life continues, however, uncovering tales of cabin brawls, catastrophic safety lapses and 90mph gales that shake the rigs to their bones. In order to fit in and do her job, she says, she must become "a hybrid of sorts. The unthreatening looks of a woman. The impervious core of a man."

Sea State is, itself, a hybrid of sorts: an investigation that is also a confession but reads a lot like a novel. It is a startlingly original study of love, masculinity and the cost of a profession that few outside of it can truly understand. The cost to Lasley herself is yet to be revealed.

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

{ Brexit } Can an esteemed Leave-voting historian make a convincing case for the UK's departure from the EU? *Fintan O'Toole*



The Sovereign Isle: Britain In and Out of Europe
by Robert Tombs,
Allen Lane, £16.99

They may have triumphed in politics, but in academia, Brexiters are an embattled minority. Perhaps the most combative of their tribunes is the emeritus professor of history at Cambridge, Robert Tombs. Beyond the innate value of dissent, Tombs's own position is also intrinsically interesting. As a brilliant historian of 19th-century France, he

can hardly be written off as a Little Englander. As a French citizen by marriage, he presumably continues to enjoy the benefits of EU citizenship as well, so he has less skin in the game than most.

A punchy, eloquent statement from such a distinguished historian on the case for the kind of very hard Brexit that has now become a reality raises hopes for some genuine illumination. But *The Sovereign Isle* will, for varying reasons, disappoint both many of Tombs's fellow Brexiters and anyone looking for a cogent statement of what this great disruption means for the economic and political future of the UK.

In the first instance, Tombs is too true to his profession to peddle the Brexiter myth that continued membership of the EU was incompatible with the historic identity of "our island nation". He knows that other European countries have "histories of struggles for independence and democracy at least as proud as our own, but which so far they find compatible - if with some strain - with European integration".

There is an admirable lack of determinism in Tombs's framing of Britain's relations with Europe: "Is there a pattern in this long and complex story of the relations between our offshore islands and the

Continent? ... It is tempting to say that the pattern is an absence of pattern." So no Agincourt and no Dunkirk. A lot of his potential readers will be disheartened to find that "those who claim that history is on their side are abusing it".

The price to be paid for this honesty, though, is that for most of the book Tombs is writing less as a scrupulous historical scholar and more as a political polemicist. The difficulty is that the two sides of his persona never really cohere. He makes, for example, a good historical case that the declinist narrative of the 1950s and 60s that led Britain to see membership of the Common Market as its only route to salvation was exaggerated. But he then bases most of the book on a very similar trope of Europe as "a declining Continent". What the historian challenges, the polemicist embraces.

The contradictions multiply. Tombs is committed to the two central and intertwined propositions that have propelled Britain towards its deeply uncertain fate as a semi-detached adjunct to that continent. The first is that sovereignty is an absolute concept; it "can be given up, but not shared". The second is that "there was only one meaningful Brexit, which was to leave the Single Market, the Customs Union and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice".

Where then does this indivisible sovereignty lie? Tombs rejects the notion that it belongs with the elected parliament in Westminster. He also disputes the right of the supreme court to find illegal Boris Johnson's attempt to prorogue that parliament in 2019. So, sovereignty can lie only with the people and can be expressed only by their vote in a referendum.

But if the referendum is the sacred moment of the exercise of sovereignty, why were the sovereign people not told in 2016 that, as Tombs insists, the only form of Brexit they were going to get was one of the most extreme imaginable? How can sovereign decisions be made in ignorance of their meaning?

The Sovereign Isle is much less a work of analysis than it is an expression of faith. It recites, albeit in mellow tones, the familiar Apostle's Creed of Brexit: the referendum was won by the votes of "the excluded, the unemployed and simply the less well off" (no mention of the very wealthy southerners who voted for it); the EU is doomed; the Irish border question was probably got up by the French; there is no economic downside; the "Anglosphere" and the Commonwealth will replace the European connection.

Even recited so suavely, these doctrines are no more convincing to the unbeliever. Given Tombs's genuine intellectual standing, this is probably as good as it gets. Brexit, like it or not, is a fact, and it would be a great service to us all if someone could set out a half-convincing case for why it makes sense. Since Tombs can't, maybe nobody can.

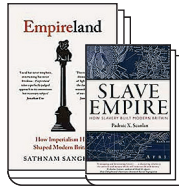
To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.



MARK THOMAS/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

{ History } Two fascinating journeys through Britain's imperial past and present suggest attitudes must change

Fara Dabhoiwala



Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain
by Sathnam Sanghera
Viking, £18.99

Slave Empire: How Slavery Built Modern Britain
by Padraic X Scanlan
Robinson, £25

In the endless catalogue of British imperial atrocities, the unprovoked invasion of Tibet in 1903 was a minor but fairly typical episode. Tibetans, explained the expedition's cultural expert, were savages, "more like hideous gnomes than human beings". Thousands of them were massacred defending their homeland, "knocked over like skittles" by the invaders' state-of-the-art machine guns. "I got so sick of the slaughter that I ceased fire," wrote a British lieutenant, "though the General's order was to make as big a bag as

possible." *As big a bag as possible* - killing inferior people was a kind of blood sport.

And then the looting started. More than 400 mule-loads of precious manuscripts, jewels, religious treasures and artworks were plundered from Tibetan monasteries to enrich the British Museum and the Bodleian Library. Countless others were stolen by marauding troops. Sitting at home watching the BBC antiques show *Flog It* one quiet afternoon in the early 21st century, Sathnam Sanghera saw the delighted descendant of one of those soldiers make another killing - £140,000 for selling off the artefacts his grandfather had "come across" in the Himalayas.

It's a characteristically instructive vignette in *Empireland*, Sanghera's impassioned and deeply personal journey through Britain's imperial past and present. The empire, he argues, still shapes British society - its delusions of exceptionalism, its immense private and public wealth, the fabric of its cities, the dominance of the City of London, even the entitled and drunken behaviour of expats and holidaymakers abroad. Yet the British choose not to see this: wilful amnesia about the darker sides of imperialism may be its most pernicious legacy.

Among other things, it allows the British to deny their modern, multicultural identity. Moving effortlessly back and forth between history and journalism, Sanghera connects the racial violence and discrimination of his childhood in 1970s and 80s Wolverhampton with the attitudes and methods previously used to impose empire and white

supremacy across the world - and still perpetuated in British fantasies of global leadership.

Along the way, he tackles the racist myopia that allows present-day Britons to fantasise that "black and brown people are aliens who arrived without permission, and with no link to Britain, to abuse British hospitality". On the contrary, imperial citizens have been enriching British life for centuries. William Cuffay, the child of a freed West Indian slave and a white woman, helped lead London's Chartist movement for greater democracy and then, after being transported, became a political organiser in Australia.

Millions of others fought for Britain - in the second world war alone, 200,000 Indian soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured while serving in allied campaigns. More than 10% of the UK's current population (including a staggering 44% of the NHS's medical staff) is non-white. All this is because for centuries white Britons colonised nations all over the world - proclaiming their intimate, familial allegiance while invading, occupying, plundering, humiliating and killing their peoples on a massive scale - to benefit British wealth and self-esteem. We are here because you were there.

Without getting bogged down in definitions, calculations or complicated comparisons, *Empireland* also manages to convey something of the sheer variety of imperial experiences over four centuries, and the limits of broad-brush explanations. Most of Britain's wealth probably came from non-imperial trade. Imperial control was made possible by the collaboration of indigenous rulers and groups. Other nations have similarly problematic histories. And there's a long history of Britons themselves criticising, not celebrating, the "full, gut-wrenching horror" of imperial violence and racism.

But to make too much of such qualifications would be to miss the essential point. Both deliberately and unconsciously, the empire was "one of the biggest white supremacist enterprises in the history of humanity", and it still corrupts British society in countless ways. Sanghera's unflinching attempt to understand this process, and to counter the cognitive dissonance and denial of Britain's modern imperial amnesia, makes for a moving and stimulating book that deserves to be widely read.



'The empire still shapes British society - and the dominance of the City of London'

So does Padraic Scanlan's engrossing and powerful *Slave Empire: How Slavery Built Modern Britain*, a detailed exposition of how Britain profited from slavery for 200 years, and then used its abolition to justify another century or more of imperial violence and capitalist exploitation. It's a different kind of book: straight history, no memoir, a scholarly rather than a journalistic argument. Yet it's propelled by a similar, urgent frustration with the amnesiac myths of Britain's supposedly glorious imperial heritage.

In the popular imagination, Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807, and of slavery itself after 1833, was a great victory of good over evil. By voluntarily casting off the sin of slavery, the empire was transformed into a beacon of righteousness, and flourished thereafter as a global leader of antislavery and free trade, not bondage.

In the age of Brexit, that's the proud, inspiring history that many Britons love to rehearse. As Scanlan shows, it's not a recent invention: it's rooted in the vision of the antislavery movement itself. But it's deeply misleading. Inspired by the classic West Indian critiques of CLR James and Eric Williams, and synthesising a mass of recent scholarship, *Slave Empire* presents a series of much more uncomfortable truths.

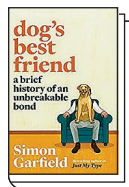
For one thing, the mass enslavement and exploitation of Africans by Europeans was never incidental or separable from the rise of global trade and empire: it was one of the central mechanisms through which these things were achieved. Nor did slavery die just because enlightened Britons turned against it. The abolitionist vision was deeply hierarchical, racist and paternalist - freedom was something to be earned by blacks and benevolently bestowed by whites. Enslaved people themselves had very different ideas. Long before white Britons took up their cause, they fought fiercely and unremittingly against their bondage.

What's more, ending slavery didn't stop the gigantic system of trade and exploitation it had spawned. On the contrary, it was meant to enhance it. The British government paid out colossal sums to compensate slave owners - but nothing to enslaved people themselves. Instead, the law abolishing slavery forced them to continue to labour for years on their existing plantations, as unpaid "apprentices".

As Scanlan points out towards the end of this rich and thought-provoking book, 19th-century British capitalists continued to invest heavily in slaveholding enterprises overseas. They funded and insured many of the banks, railroads, steamships, and plantations of the American south. Britain's cotton industry grew into its largest and most valuable industrial sector by processing much of the raw material produced by America's slaves. At one point, the livelihood of nearly one in five Britons depended on it. In almost every respect, the free trade empire was less a repudiation than a continuation of the empire of slavery. It's time to embrace a more honest understanding of its manifold legacies.

To buy *Empireland* for £16.52 or *Slave Empire* for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Pets } From Pompeii to Hampstead Heath, a lolloping romp through the canine world, written by a true enthusiast Sam Leith



Dog's Best Friend: A Brief History of an Unbreakable Bond
by Simon Garfield,
Profile, £16.99

Simon Garfield is a popularising writer with a light touch and a wide range of interests. His big hit was a charming and erudite book about fonts called *Just My Type*, but he has also written book-length studies of, among many other things, the Mini, stamp-collecting, wartime diaries, competitive wrestling, tiny things and the colour mauve.

Now it is the turn of dogs. This book is as amiable as you'd expect from Garfield, but it's also wearily disorganised. You could write it off as a rush job done as a publishing proposition - dogs sell - except it's odder and less cynical than that. Garfield clearly really does love dogs. Here, he writes like one. He woofs and bounds around the subject and frequently vanishes into the undergrowth in pursuit of phantom rabbits.

After a bit of introductory throat-clearing about Garfield's own dog, Ludo, the opening chapter sets out to survey dogs in art history. It starts by mentioning a couple of gimmicky modern exhibitions of art by or for dogs, then lollops back and forth seemingly at random. Here's a canine mosaic in the ruins of Pompeii; there's a stroll through London's National Gallery; here's an anecdote from the time Garfield visited David Hockney's studio in LA.

Anyway, woof, he's off again. There follows a chapter on names - labrador Ludo, we learn, is officially Greatcobwood Ulysses - where Garfield splatters statistics on to the page like muddy paw prints. In 2017 the most popular names for male British dogs were Alfie, Charlie, Max and Oscar. In 2016, there were 152 dogs called Biggie living in New York.

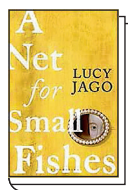
There are sections on dogs in literature, evolution and canine behaviour, what Darwin thought about them, and how they respond to music. By the time you get multiple pages transcribing imaginary conversations Garfield has invented between Ludo and other dogs on Hampstead Heath, you start to wonder if he has screwed the pooch. So to speak.

If you're in the market for 300-odd pages of mostly interesting things that Garfield has thought, invented or Googled about dogs, slapped down in no particular order, then *Dog's Best Friend* will be your jam. Me, I thought it was a bit of a dog's breakfast.

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

Fiction

This gloriously immersive escape from present times is based on a scandalous Jacobean murder trial *Justine Jordan*



A Net for Small Fishes
by Lucy Jago,
Bloomsbury, £16.99

Lucy Jago is an award-winning biographer whose richly imagined adult fiction debut is based around a scandal that rocked the Jacobean court. The poet and courtier Thomas Overbury was already in the Tower of London when he died, apparently of natural causes, in 1613; two years later, accusations that he'd

been poisoned reached King James, and suspicion settled on the king's favourite - and Overbury's close friend - Robert Carr, now Earl of Somerset, and his wife Frances Howard. Frances's companion Anne Turner, a doctor's widow, was also implicated; she was Frances's dresser and fixer, obtainer of both love potions and poisons, and much more vulnerable than the aristocratic Somersets to ruin and social censure. Justice, then as now, is the net for small fishes: "the great ones swim away".

Tried as "a whore, a bawd, a sorcerer, a witch, a papist, a felon and a murderer", Anne, who has appeared in fiction before, is a fascinating figure, and Jago makes her a brilliantly engaging narrator. A woman whose family has slid down the social scale but who is fighting valiantly to rise, through her flair for fashion and patent on saffron dye for yellow ruffs, she has a fond older husband who tolerates her lover, the father of her youngest three children. Frances is only a teenager when the two women meet, unhappily wedded to the teenage Earl of Essex, who whips her when he cannot consummate the marriage. In the bravura opening scenes, Anne dresses the weeping Frances for a court appearance, hoping that by making her splendid enough to inspire general respect she can fortify her against her husband's assaults. Clothes are a woman's armour; she may not speak out to assert her dignity and courage, so it falls to her dresser to "display these qualities on her body". Tipped into high heels, feathers pinned on top of her hair, Frances can literally walk tall before the king.

Jago is excellent on clothes: the "glittering husks of

power" that once belonged to Elizabeth, now waiting for the new queen to step into them; the "gold and silver constructions" that make the power-grabbing Howards seem "larger and, were it not a sin to say it, somewhat divine". Throughout the novel, surface detail is deftly handled to convey deeper anxieties and shifts in attitude. An era when rationalists believe in magic, this is also a time of uneasy change, with society worrying about a blurring of gender roles. "Womanish beauty" is fashionable in men, as the foreign king dotes on his male favourites, while women wear men's doublets and feathers. At court, one character is "keen to prove himself modern by not taking fright at a woman speaking in public". Frances, in her determination to escape her marriage and shape her own romantic destiny, is at the vanguard of modernity, even as her relatives follow the traditional route of placing her as the mistress of a powerful man.

Frances's love object and eventual husband, Robert Carr, is rather sketchily drawn, as is the stumbling block to their intimacy Thomas Overbury, who fawns on Robert while writing dangerously insulting verses about Frances's honour. This is partly a structural issue: we are firmly inside Anne's consciousness, and she has no narrative access to the men except through encounters with Frances. The "secret love" that both Overbury and the king bear for Robert is merely hinted at in passing, but a well-placed historical letter from James I conveys his shocking strength of feeling.

Ultimately, though, this is the story of a female friendship that transgressed moral and social norms in a misogynist society. Anne's account of their relationship nicely balances self-interest with sincerity;

Jago keenly conveys the peril of being a woman in the 17th century - how rapidly one could fall through bad luck or male whim

Frances looks like her route to advancement, until the gossip gathering around the aristocratic lovers threatens her own more modest hopes of romance. "You live above your station," says the family retainer who hopes to advance his by marrying Anne. "She is a dangerous friend." Jago keenly conveys the peril of being a woman of any class in the 17th century - how rapidly one could fall

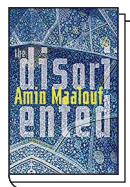
from "the ladder on which we all perched" through bereavement, bad luck or male whim.

Like all the best historical fiction, *A Net for Small Fishes* is a gloriously immersive escape from present times, but it's not escapism: the outrage with which Anne is told at her trial that "you have acted of and for yourself, which is itself against the proper bounds of womanhood" is a sentiment that echoes down the centuries. Shrewd yet impetuous, entirely without self-pity, Anne remains a lively companion for the modern reader throughout; her tragedy, Jago suggests, is that she was too good a companion to Frances.

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

A historian grapples with his conscience as he revisits his war-torn country and begins an affair with an old love

Maya Jaggi



The Disoriented
by Amin Maalouf,
translated by Frank
Wynne, World
Editions, £12.99

Amin Maalouf, winner of the 1993 Prix Goncourt, witnessed a slaughter at the start of Lebanon's civil war in 1975. Then a journalist fearful for his wife and child, he sensed that "if somebody had given me a weapon, maybe I'd have become a murderer". The realisation drove him as a refugee to Paris, where he was last year awarded the Order

of Merit for building bridges between east and west.

The Disoriented, published in French in 2012 and at last in Frank Wynne's assured English translation, is a profound reckoning with that existential choice, in the words of the protagonist, Adam, to leave a country in turmoil in order to "ensure my hands were clean". Alternating between a third-person narrative and Adam's journal entries and emails, this deeply engaging novel enacts through its characters Adam's "ceaseless dialogue" with his conscience. It follows Maalouf's superb memoir *Origins* (2008), and forms an enjoyable fictional counterpart to the essays of *Adrift* (2020) as its hero ricochets between nostalgia for a lost Levantine Eden and aversion to a world of ossifying divisions. Set with dramatic irony in early 2001, the novel is also partly an elegy for a world before September 11.

It spans 16 days as Adam, a historian aged 47 who is now "more French than the French", returns to his unnamed homeland after 25 years, a decade after the end of the civil war. He has been called to the deathbed of an estranged friend, Mourad. Arriving too late in the capital - recognisably postwar Beirut - he humours Mourad's widow, Tania, by orchestrating a reunion of their university friends. As they assemble

over mezze and champagne in a mountain hotel amid Aleppo pines, grudges resurface, ardour rekindles and bitterness erupts between those who left and stayed.

Adam judges his former friend to have betrayed the values of their youth. When Mourad's Ottoman mansion, where the students used to gather, was seized by the militia, he enlisted a rival warlord to recover it - a Faustian pact that sealed his "moral drift". Adam disdains Mourad's political ascent to ministerial status and self-enrichment in a government of reconciliation that pardoned the warlords. This happened in Lebanon, a "capital of amnesia" whose controversial postwar amnesty 30 years ago helped spur the October revolution of 2019. But the novel's dilemmas reverberate widely, from Spain to South Africa to Argentina - where Adam's partner, Dolores, is from.

For Adam, "impunity is as pernicious as injustice". Yet tensions between memory and forgiveness, justice and grace, run throughout the novel. Tania challenges Adam's claim to moral superiority. "Those who stayed got their hands dirty to preserve a country for you," she berates him at her husband's funeral. Adam wonders if he took the coward's way out. "After the first massacres, I left, I ran away," he notes in his journal. "From afar, it is easy to say no."

The moral maze becomes more complex as Adam has an affair with hotelier Sémiramis, whom he was too shy to court when they were students; a lifelong regret. This adultery has permission from the absent Dolores, the two women conspiring behind his back. When he learns of their pact he is unsettled. But as he and Sémiramis stray beyond these lines, their efforts to limit the pain caused by infidelity proving unequal to the passions unleashed, their foundering good intentions parallel wartime's slippery moral slopes.

Adam's nostalgia for his youth - for friends with a "glass in hand and revolution in our hearts" - is as much for his beloved Levant's porous borders and "subtle identities". His scattered friends, Muslim, Christian and Jewish, are a microcosm of the civilisation he mourns. Their lives reflect Arab history, from the Cairo-born war widow Sémiramis, and Bilal, a budding poet cut down by a shell, to Naïm, who

The friends reunite in a mountain hotel amid Aleppo pines

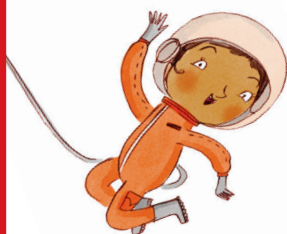
had the "misfortune to be born both Arab and Jew" and left for Brazil without telling his friends.

While the book's title alludes to being wrenched from the east, it also signifies the universal loss of a moral compass. For Adam, "principles ... are moorings; break them and you are free, but like a huge helium-filled balloon ... rising towards nothingness". A Parisian whose whispered endearments are still in Arabic, he finds on his journey that "every evening I rediscover the reason why I left my native land; but every morning I also rediscover the reason why I never truly abandoned it". The open ending suggests a world perilously poised between hope and doom. Yet, clinging to the "islands of Levantine delicacy" so beautifully captured in this novel affords Adam - and the reader - a fragile consolation.



STEVE TAYLOR ARPS/ALAMY

Books of the month



{ Children } Secrets in the second world war, great female scientists, a wonder dog ... and a slug in love *Imogen Russell Williams*

The year may be off to a dismal start, but January's best books for children are filled with adventurous magic. For readers of nine-plus, BB Alston's **Amari and the Night Brothers** (Egmont) is a Chosen One fantasy with a fabulous protagonist: a whip-smart black girl from the projects. Amari is convinced her brilliant brother Quinton isn't dead, but the police have given up investigating his disappearance. Stumbling across a mysterious briefcase and an invitation to try out for the Bureau of Supernatural Affairs, Amari discovers the everyday world's occult underbelly - and her own powerful magical gift. A splendidly imaginative debut, ideal for fans of the Percy Jackson or Nevermoor series.

Another debut, Lesley Parr's **The Valley of Lost Secrets** (Bloomsbury), follows Jimmy in wartime, evacuated with his brother to a Welsh mining village, as he slowly acclimatizes to his new surroundings. But when Jimmy finds a hidden skull, he unearths a secret

that has haunted the community for years. Atmospheric and gripping, with an assured narrative voice, this book is woven through with powerful themes: grief, belonging and making peace with the past.

Liz Kessler's **When the World Was Ours** (Simon & Schuster) is a more challenging second world war story, for readers who can handle history's most painful truths. Told from the perspectives of three children - Leo and Elsa, both Jewish, and misfit Max, their friend - it begins on a perfect day of celebration in Vienna. As Hitler rises to power, the children are wrenched apart; and as they travel to England, Czechoslovakia and Germany, they are changed by what they endure. Vital glimmers of hope enlighten this profoundly poignant book, chronicling just how easily the unthinkable becomes the everyday.

For confident readers of about seven-plus, there's enticing comic fantasy in Amy Sparkes's **The House at the Edge of Magic** (Walker), starring orphan pickpocket Nine, who steals a tiny house only to find that she must break the curse holding a flamboyant wizard, a lugubrious troll and a pugnacious sentient spoon trapped inside it. This energetic, inventive romp has a touch of the late, great Diana Wynne Jones.

Nonfiction lovers will plunge into **Fantastically Great Women Scientists and Their Stories**

(Bloomsbury), the first in Kate Pankhurst's new series of illustrated feminist biographies, now expanded for independent readers from her wildly successful picture books. Featuring Marie Curie, Mae Jemison, Tu Youyou and several others, it deploys just the right amount of lively detail to hook, inform and inspire.

For five-plus, Jion Sheibani's **The Worries: Sohal Finds a Friend** (Puffin) features Sohal, a small boy with a lot of worries. But what happens when Hurt, Alone, Fail and the rest of the worry-gang manifest as fluffy creatures and follow him to school? Funny, sweet and very useful for opening conversations with anxious children, it is great for reading aloud.

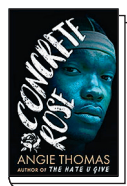
In picture books, the moving **I Talk Like a River** (Walker) by Jordan Scott draws on the author's own experience of stuttering; when a boy struggles to speak at school, a walk by the river with his dad helps him to find peace. Sydney Smith's glorious illustrations infuse the pages with glimmering, broken light.

Pure riotous nonsensical joy, **Slug in Love** (Simon & Schuster), from Rachel Bright and Nadia Shireen, is the story of a slug called Doug, who wants a hug - but who will reciprocate Doug's longing? Bright's spare, funny rhyming text marries perfectly with Shireen's bold, flat planes of colour.

Finally, **Fidget the Wonder Dog** (Puffin) by Patricia Forde and Rachael Saunders stars a scruffy, beloved canine adventurer who runs off and gets lost at sea before his eventual safe return. This bouncy odyssey, rich with the irrepressible feel of a child's wild imaginings, is vividly illustrated and full of warmth.



{ Teenagers } A father-to-be struggles to leave gang life, a date goes horribly wrong, and a best friend goes missing



Concrete Rose

by Angie Thomas, Walker, £7.99

Seventeen-year-old Maverick Carter is a “little homie” in the King Lords, selling drugs on the side to help tide things over at home. But his heart isn’t in it – and when he hears he’s about to become a father, he’s determined to extricate himself from the gang life that has claimed so

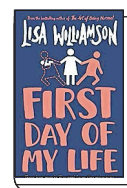
many of his family and friends. Walking away, however, is not so easy. Thomas’s prequel to the award-winning *The Hate U Give* investigates the pride and pain of being a black boy on the brink of manhood with humour, clarity and pathos.



The Humiliations of Welton Blake

by Alex Wheatle, Barrington Stoke, £7.99

For younger teens, or pre-teens, Alex Wheatle’s third book for easy-reading publisher Barrington Stoke features Welton, the 12-year-old hero, as he somehow manages to score a date with gorgeous Carmella McKenzie. Everything goes downhill from there, as Welton pukes over a classmate, discovers his mum’s superannuated boyfriend is moving in, and manages to catch the eye of the scariest girl in school. Wheatle’s characteristic lively language, impassioned references to *Star Wars* and colourful invented insults make for a brief but riotously relatable slapstick romp. *The Humiliations of Welton Blake* is ideal for reluctant readers.

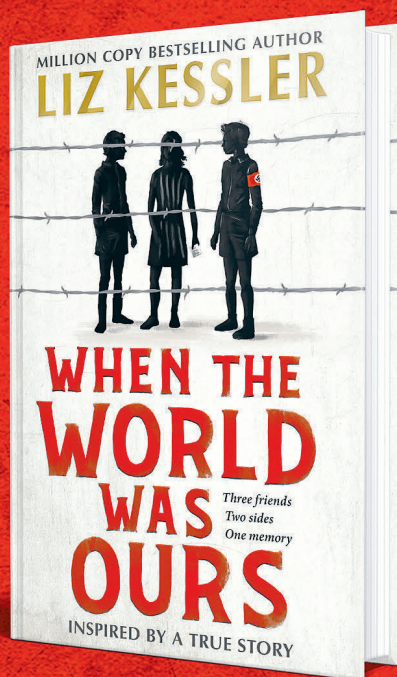


First Day of My Life

by Lisa Williamson, David Fickling, £12.99

It is GCSE results day, and Frankie is expecting her best friend, Jojo, to walk with her to school. When she doesn’t show, and a local baby goes missing, Frankie thinks nothing of it – until Jojo calls, and she hears crying in the background. With the help of her ex-boyfriend Ram, Frankie sets out on a journey to track Jojo down, but what they find at the end of it will change everything. Funny and poignant, Williamson’s third novel looks tenderly at friendship, first love and teen pregnancy. **IRW**

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ANTHONY MCGOWAN,
winner of the 2020 CILIP Carnegie Medal

‘A wonderful book, half tragedy, but told with such sheer, warm humanity that it leaves you with hope.’

HILARY MCKAY

Available from Waterstones.com



Treasure hunt

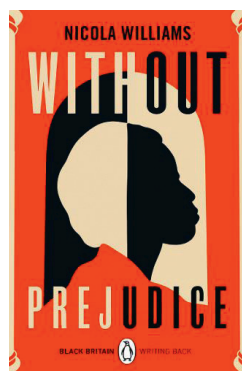
Bernardine Evaristo

Black British writing is riding a wave, so what better time to rediscover some neglected classics? The Booker-winning novelist picks her personal favourites

In today's culture, it's as though black British literary history began relatively recently, and new books are published without reference to or knowledge of what has gone before. This is not the case with white writers. Publishers, critics and readers will often understand where books sit within their literary contexts and cultural ecosystem. We can trace the literary lineage of Douglas Stuart's Booker-winning *Shuggie Bain* back to the works of James Kelman and Irvine Welsh. *Ghosts* by Dolly Alderton is in conversation with Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones series and all the novels that were published in its wake, just as Ali Smith's postmodern novels are descendants of Virginia Woolf's modernist oeuvre. And we know that today's historical novels have antecedents in their earlier counterparts.

Our appreciation of literature is deepened when we understand the foundations from which each new generation creates literature anew, but because so much of the body of black British literature hasn't been taught in schools or universities, or immortalised on television and film, or even been widely or seriously reviewed in the media and academia, it's as if each new book is published out of a void.

What began as a conversation with my publisher just over a year ago, and an idea to bring six books back into print, has evolved into a series called Black Britain:

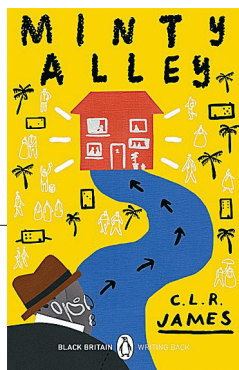
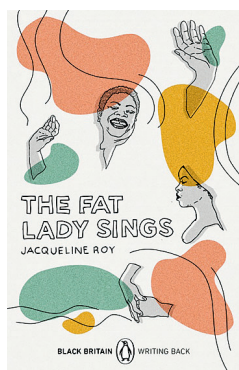


Writing Back, with the first set of titles about to be relaunched into the world. I spent the first half of last year working my way through stacks of novels that fit the bill - either out of print, or only available as print-on-demand. My goal was to find books that illustrated a variety of preoccupations, genres, styles and voices. Fiction that feels alive and fresh reveals itself almost immediately in spite of its vintage, and I believe that the novels I have chosen have withstood the test of time, even if they are of their time.

Minty Alley (1936) by CLR James was a great discovery, and I was surprised that I'd never come across it before. It's my proudest achievement of the series because James wrote it in 1928, nearly 100 years ago, and it's been a buried treasure ever since, known only to Caribbean literature aficionados. A captivating social realist novel, it is set in a boarding house in Trinidad, which was then a British colony - though the story isn't written in relationship to Britain or empire. Through the protagonist, Haynes, a young middle-class man, we witness the shenanigans of a lively household where small dramas simmer and explode. His hitherto empty life fills up with the subterfuge and entanglements that whirl around him, while he remains the still centre of the house, quiet and observant. Reading it is like eavesdropping on history, a sensation at once intimate and distant. It offers the contemporary reader a peek into a society of long ago, and shows us that, while the circumstances are different, our essential passions, preoccupations and ambitions remain the same.

James is better known for his nonfiction books, especially his history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins: Touissant L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938) and *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), which mixed memoir, sports commentary and social history. He moved to Britain in 1932, long before postwar mass migration, and became the cricket correspondent for the Manchester Guardian, which was an incredible achievement for a black man at that time. *Minty Alley* was his only novel.

Four of the books were published in the 1990s by writers I knew and admired on the literary scene back then, but whose work had long been out of print. At one event in a London library I met SI Martin, who had just published his first novel, *Incomparable World* (1996). Featuring three former African American slaves, the novel draws on the thousands of formerly enslaved Africans who, having fought on the side of the British in the

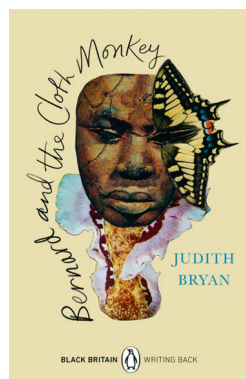
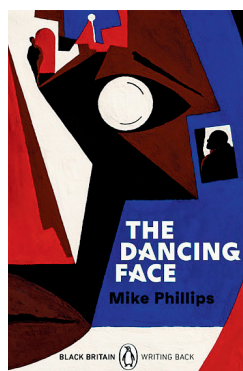
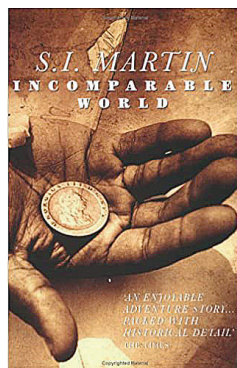


American Revolution, were offered their freedom in Britain and British territories, most of them ending up in London. His rich, sonorous voice boomed out into the room as he read of the struggles and escapades of these men in a multiracial, teeming, malodorous, criminal and dangerous late 18th-century London - bringing the past into our present.

At a time when the absence of the teaching of black history is high on the agenda, this historical novel shows readers some of what's been missing from the canon and the curriculum.

Nicola Williams's novel *Without Prejudice* (1997), a hugely impressive legal thriller, is as relevant today as it was when it was published. In its pages we find Lee Mitchell, a young woman of working-class Caribbean background, who is succeeding against the odds in a white and predominantly male and middle-class work environment. When the real-life black barrister, Alexandra Wilson, made the news last September because she'd been mistaken for a defendant three times in one day, it proved that the obstacles Williams was writing about more than two decades ago remain the same. Williams herself is a barrister, and currently the service complaints ombudsman for the British armed forces. Her novel gives us insight into the tenacity that would have been necessary to achieve this level of success.

The restitution of African artefacts procured through theft, war and exploitation, and lodged in British institutions, will be the subject of heated debate until they are returned. This controversial issue, which speaks to Britain's expeditionary, missionary and colonial history, is cleverly refracted through a thrilling storyline in Mike Phillips's crime novel, *The Dancing Face* (1998). It takes as its plot the re-theft of one such ancient mask by an idealistic young black Londoner called Gus. Stolen from Benin, the mask is about to be included in a British "African Art on Tour" exhibition. Phillips was one of the elders of black British literature in the 90s. His many books were published between 1982 and 2005, primarily crime novels that investigated important political and social issues, as well as nonfiction such as *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-racial Britain* (1999), co-written with his brother, the broadcaster Trevor Phillips, and one of the earliest, most substantial books capturing the Windrush generation and its descendants. Phillips forged new fictional pathways and deserves to be recognised as a pioneer.



From the mid-80s to the mid-00s, there was a tendency for novels by black British women to focus on coming-of-age tales that touched on difficult childhoods and the trials of early adulthood. I chose *Bernard and the Cloth Monkey* (1998) by Judith Bryan for the series because it is a quietly outstanding novel along these lines, with a slow, atmospheric build up to

devastating revelations. It's a family psychodrama in which a young woman, Anita, returns to her family home where secrets lie buried, tensions are palpable and betrayals need a reckoning. The novel is a rebellion against silence and a testament to women's capacity for survival, and it shows the transformative power of literature at its best. I can't wait for women in particular to read this novel.

The Fat Lady Sings (2000) by Jacqueline Roy completely passed me by when it was first published. Two women, both diagnosed with mental illness, end up in beds next to each other on the ward of a psychiatric hospital and as their friendship develops, we come to understand why they've been incarcerated. This is the kind of novel where the reader has to relinquish the expectation of a straightforward plot and succumb to the propulsion of its experimental, parallel narrative structure and impressionistic writing. It's a novel of daring, not only stylistically but thematically, because discussions of mental health were a lot more taboo 20 years ago. One of the women is also a lesbian, disrupting the heteronormativity of black British fiction. Roy herself spent time in a mental institution when she was younger, and this emotionally intense and brave book feels as if written from inside the experience.

I've often talked about the lost generations of significant black writers whose books have disappeared, but I never imagined I'd be given the opportunity to resurrect some of them. These novels are my personal choices, determined by my literary values and how I perceive the creative and cultural significance of the work. Other than James, who died in 1989, all the writers are very much alive and most of them are writing or have written new novels. The reception our books receive today is very different from that of yesteryear, even though the themes are as topical now as then, although ultimately it's the quality of the writing that counts most. Our writers are currently riding the crest of a wave and building appreciation in greater numbers than ever before. Black Britain: Writing Back aims to fill in some of the gaps in the foundations of this exciting cultural moment ●

The first six books of the Black Britain: Writing Black series will be released on 4 February.

Vita, Virginia and me

Alison Bechdel

The US graphic novelist reflects on how Vita Sackville-West's affair with Virginia Woolf inspired a great literary work - and her own outlook on relationships

When I was an undergraduate and just coming out as a lesbian, I slunk to a dimly lit, out-of-the-way place where I knew I would find other people like me - the stacks of the library. Vita Sackville-

West was not the first companion I encountered there, but she was certainly the most indelible one.

I found her in *Portrait of a Marriage*, her son Nigel Nicolson's 1973 book about his parents' enduring and open relationship. I learned that both Vita and her husband, the diplomat Harold Nicolson, had numerous affairs, mostly with people of their own sex, while remaining otherwise devoted to one another, their children and their famous garden.

Towards the end of the book, the author provides a brief account of his mother's affair with Virginia Woolf. I hadn't yet read any of her work, but many of my friends had a postcard of her on their walls - the Beresford portrait taken when she was 20. Her fragile beauty fitted the narrative of the tragic and doomed feminist heroine that was cohering at this time.

I learned a bit in *Portrait of a Marriage* about how Vita and Harold weathered Vita's relationship with Virginia, but I found myself longing for more of a window into what had gone on between these two redoubtable women. I wanted the details.

My wish was granted a few years later, when an edition of Vita's letters to Virginia was published. I had read some of Virginia's books by then, so it was all the more rewarding to observe these two writers pushing and pulling their way to a profound intimacy - the kind of intimacy I hoped to have with someone one day. Their passion for one another felt bound up for me with the new ground they were staking out for all women: Virginia in her work, and Vita in the world.

In middle age, I read the letters again. If I had had

any doubt as to their continuing relevance, it would have been dispelled during one thorny patch of my own intimate life, when I found myself having passages quoted to me by two different women. This time though, the thing that impressed me most was how Vita and Virginia juggled all the elements of their fantastically busy lives - public demands, creative work, family and social obligations, other relationships, including those with their husbands - while still maintaining their own intimate connection.

Now at the age of 60, a year older than Virginia was at her death, and 10 years short of Vita's age when she died from cancer, I am struck by another aspect of the letters: the dogged fortitude of these women as they kept on going in the face of loss, illness, disillusionment and change. But they are also a tribute to how intrepidly Vita and Virginia cast off the old forms and traditions of relationships to improvise something new.

When Vita and Virginia met at the end of 1922, Vita was 30 and already a famous writer. Virginia was 40, and just beginning to get recognition for her novels and essays. Vita was an aristocrat and a socialite, Virginia was a shabby inhabitant of Bloomsbury. Vita is better known now for her lovers and her garden than for her books, while Virginia has entered the canon. But at the time, Virginia was thrilled to learn that Vita had even heard of her. As the two women progress from "Mrs Nicolson" and "Mrs Woolf" to "darling" and "dearest", and thence to a menagerie of nicknames and avatars, one of the great literary love affairs unfolds.

From the outset, there's complete clarity on each woman's part about what she desires in the other. Virginia loves Vita's body, and Vita loves Virginia's mind. Virginia writes in her diary, "She is stag like or race horse like ... and has no very sharp brain. But as a body hers is perfection." By "body" Virginia means not just Vita's actual body, but, as she will later articulate, "her capacity I mean to take the floor in any company, to represent her country, to visit Chatsworth, to control silver, servants, chow dogs; her motherhood (but she is a little cold and offhand with her boys), her being in short (what I have never been) a real woman."

Vita records her first impression of Virginia in a letter to Harold. "At first you think she is plain; then a sort of spiritual beauty imposes itself on you..." She reports delightedly to him that conversation with Virginia made her feel "as though the edge of my mind were being held against a grindstone".

From the outset, there's clarity on each woman's part about what she desires in the other - Virginia loves Vita's body, and Vita loves Virginia's mind

While Virginia makes a few private digs about Vita's writing in her diary, Vita has nothing but admiration for Virginia's work, and one of her more laudable traits is her ability to appreciate Virginia's superior talent without envy. In fact, she would devote herself, along with Leonard Woolf, to protecting and nurturing it.



She writes to Harold that Virginia “inspires a feeling of tenderness, which is, I suppose, owing to her funny mixture of hardness and softness - the hardness of her mind, and her terror of going mad again”.

It’s this dynamic of tenderness and the need to be cared for that is the real core of Vita’s and Virginia’s connection. Both women are expert, actually, at calibrating just the right amount of distance to maintain. When Vita makes an offhand remark about Virginia using people for copy, Virginia takes great exception, and it’s only after a few letters that Vita manages to smooth her down again. Yet using Vita for copy is precisely what Virginia would proceed to do, in the most flagrant and fantastical way imaginable.

“... a biography beginning the year 1500 and continuing to the present day, called *Orlando*: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another. I think, for a treat, I shall let myself dash this in for a week.” Although Virginia began writing *Orlando* in an intense, almost automatic burst in the autumn of 1927 after Vita had taken up with another woman, the book seems to have begun gestating the moment the two of them met five years earlier. Fascinated by Vita’s aristocratic lineage, Virginia had requested from her a copy of *Knole and the Sackvilles*, a history of her ancestral home. A few weeks later, after Vita and Harold dined for the first time with Virginia and Leonard, the bohemian Virginia writes in her diary: “Snob as I am, I trace her passions five hundred years back, and they become romantic to me, like old yellow wine.”

The phantasmagorical portrait that is *Orlando*, the romp through English history and literature in the form



of a biography that is fictional, yet true, and whose subject is fixed in neither time nor gender, defied categorisation. It was Virginia’s bestselling book to date, no doubt due in part to the gossip factor - Virginia dedicated it to Vita and even included photographs of her, so there was no secret as to who it was modelled on. But also due to the fact that it was so good, so different, so new. It’s hard to fathom how Virginia could play so freely with sexual identity in that more conservative era, but play she did, inventing her way into the future.

Orlando can be read as a lesbian love story, but one so ingeniously involute that it escaped the fate of *The Well of Loneliness* - which, published in the same year, was tried and found obscene. Perhaps Virginia’s biggest triumph with *Orlando*, though, was the fact that Vita loved it. Despite the fact that it was motivated to a certain extent by jealousy, and that it ruthlessly penetrates to the heart of Vita’s personality, it also reflects her as the heroic nobleman Vita had always felt herself, on some level, to be. If she’d been born male, she would have inherited Knole. With her father’s recent death, the house and title had officially passed to her uncle. But in the pages



Vital connections
Clockwise from
main: Alison
Bechdel, Virginia
Woolf and Vita
Sackville-West

of *Orlando*, Virginia gloriously restored them to her.

Film and television portrayals of Virginia and of Vita have proliferated over the years, each capturing certain attributes of their models. But of course even the most brilliant performance can’t convey the minds and souls of these remarkable women the way their own words do. It would be remiss of me not to observe that letter-writing, with its friction of nib on paper, its pace slow enough to allow for the formation of actual thoughts, has fallen out of fashion. If Virginia and Vita had had smartphones, what a stream of sexting acronyms, obscure emoji (Scissors?) and endless snapshots of alsatians and spaniels would sift through our fingers in lieu of this magnificent paper trail. But fortunately for all of us, they wrote, and wrote, and wrote, even as their feelings shifted over the years from passion to something quieter. Their letters are ardent, erudite, moving and playful. They are filled with gossip, desire, jealousy and tips on craft. And perhaps most delightfully, they are frequently laugh-out-loud hilarious. Virginia wonders in her diary, “Am I in love with her? But what is love?” In these letters, both those questions are answered in dazzling, digressive detail ●

This is an edited extract from the introduction to Love Letters: Vita and Virginia, by Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, published by Vintage on Thursday.

All tomorrow's parties

The Great Gatsby is out of US copyright and fans of Fitzgerald's classic novel have rushed to pay tribute with gay and vampire retellings, prequels and even a Muppet version ...
By Alison Flood

On 2 January this year, the day after *The Great Gatsby* entered the US public domain, *The Great Gatsby Undead* was self-published on Amazon. Like F Scott Fitzgerald's hallowed novel, it is narrated by Nick Carraway, but in this version of the story, "Gatsby doesn't seem to eat anything, and has an aversion to silver, garlic, and the sun". Gatsby, you see, is a vampire.

More than 25m copies of *The Great Gatsby* have been sold since its story of an enigmatic millionaire pursuing his lost love was first published in 1925, and the expiration of copyright, 95 years after it was released, opens the door to anything and everything fans might want to do with it. The start of the year also brought the release of *The Gay Gatsby* ("Everyone's got something to hide, but the secrets come out at Gaylord Gatsby's parties - the gayest affairs West Egg ever had ..."), and *Jay the Great*, a "modern retelling" of the story. On the fan fiction site Archive of Our Own (AO3), someone has uploaded a version of the novel that search-and-replaces Gatsby with Gritty, the name of the furry mascot for the Philadelphia Flyers ice hockey team. As one Twitter wit put it: "*The Great Gatsby's* out of copyright? Sounds like we've been given the green light."

"Here we go with the Gatsby carousel, the Gatsby carnival," says Anne Margaret Daniel, a Fitzgerald scholar. "Probably some of it is going to be good fanfic, and some of it could be really interesting. Surely [Fitzgerald] is sitting on a cloud somewhere, those sea-green eyes flashing, laughing about all the Gatsby-generated gazillions to come."

Alongside multiple new editions of the novel, and a graphic novel adaptation from K Woodman-Maynard, fans are also calling for a Muppet version. "Picture this: Kermit in 1920s dress, playing the mysterious host to a huge party in West Egg," dreamed the Verge website. "Or Miss Piggy, decked out in flapper regalia, in an abusive relationship with Fozzie Bear as her cruel, philandering husband, Tom Buchanan." One fan has gone so far as to pen a (rather wonderful) screenplay: "Nick Carraway: 'I wonder what kind of a man Mr Gatsby is.' Gonzo: 'Technically he's a frog.'"

Daniel would like to see a writer delve further into the character of Catherine, Myrtle Wilson's younger sister. "She's just so fascinating and so obviously New York bohemian, with her pottery bracelets and eye-brows that have been plucked off and drawn on again," she says. She is also keen to read a take from the perspective of Jordan Baker, who is beautiful, mysterious and dishonest. "I knew now why her face was familiar - its pleasing contemptuous expression had looked out at me from many rotogravure pictures of the sporting life at Asheville and Hot Springs and Palm Beach," Carraway says when he first meets her. "I had heard some story of her too, a critical, unpleasant story, but what it was I had forgotten long ago."

As Daniel says, Fitzgerald "withholds letting us hear from her. It's all just descriptions of her from Nick. And then all of a sudden we sit down to tea, and are told, from Jordan's consciousness, the entire backstory of Daisy and Gatsby. It's one of the best parts of the book, that one moment where we actually hear Jordan's voice."

Daniel won't have to wait long: Nghi Vo's *The Chosen and the Beautiful* tells the story from the perspective of a Vietnamese-American version of Jordan in 1920s America. It will be published in June. "She has money, education, a killer golf handicap, and invitations to some of the most exclusive parties of the jazz age," according to the publisher Tor. "She's also queer and Asian, a Vietnamese adoptee treated as an exotic attraction by her peers, while the most important doors remain closed to her."

Another character readers will be able to hear from imminently is Fitzgerald's narrator, Carraway, thanks to Michael Farris Smith, an American author whose previous novels have made him a finalist for the Gold Dagger award in the UK, and the Grand prix des lectrices de Elle in France. Smith

Smith's novel shows Carraway before he enters Gatsby's world, moving through rat-infested trenches during the first world war

reread *The Great Gatsby* in 2014 for the first time in years, after living in Europe. This time round, it wasn't the "glitz and the glamour" that struck him; it was "the detachment, the loneliness".

"I was thirty. Before me stretched the portentous menacing road of a new decade," Carraway says in Fitzgerald's novel. "Thirty - the promise of a decade of



The changing face of Gatsby
Film adaptations
 have starred
Leonardo DiCaprio
 and **Carey Mulligan**,
 left, and **Robert**
Redford, below



loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair.”

“That was exactly how I felt,” Smith says. “I was 29 or 30 when I came back to the States - I felt like an alien. My friends had all had kids or gotten married. That was the line that got me - I realised I didn’t know anything about Nick. He’s so slippery, and he tells us almost nothing about himself.”

That was when Smith had the thought: wouldn’t it be interesting if someone were to tell Carraway’s story? “And in that moment, I just knew that I would be the one to do it,” he says. You put a target on your back if you do this, but I was so drawn to it emotionally, I couldn’t not do it.”

Smith’s *Nick*, which is out in the UK in February, shows Carraway before he enters *Gatsby*’s world, opening with him in Paris during the war, moving through the rat-infested trenches to New Orleans, where he arrives “sunkeyed and deranged”.

Smith set out holding “very tightly to those crumbs of information Nick gives us about himself” in Fitzgerald’s novel. “I was amazed that there was so little,” he says. “I realised, let’s put him in the war, and see what happens. Because then you’ve got that experience, the PTSD, all those things he’s going to carry with him the rest of his life. And to me, that’s the logical place to begin.”

He wrote the novel in 2014 and 2015, “and I never once considered the copyright issue”. Once he showed it to his agent and editor, “they were like: ‘I can’t believe you’ve done this.’ When they started to get into publishing mode, the lawyers realised: ‘No, we can’t do this now, we need to wait till the copyright

expires.’ So we just put it on the back burner and it sat there for five years.”

Despite the sacred status of *Gatsby* in the literary canon, *Nick* has been well received in the US. “In all the ways that really matter, *Nick* is an exemplary novel,” the New York Times declared. “Smith delivers a moving, full-bodied depiction of a man who has been knocked loose from his moorings and is trying to claw back into his own life.”

Daniel, who has yet to read *Nick* when we speak, points to a line scribbled in one of Fitzgerald’s notebooks: “Nostalgia or flight of the heart”. “Anybody who comes up with a successful *Gatsby*-derivative novel has got to have that same sense of flight to the heart or else they will just be turning everything to straight parody,” she says. “If there is a *Wide Sargasso Sea* out there for *Gatsby*, I would welcome it with open arms. But it would take a writer like Jean Rhys to have both the imaginative capacity and the literary grace to do it. The novels coming out that are derived from *Gatsby*, the good ones, will have to be written by people who not only love Fitzgerald and love the book, but who are able to at least approach his writing style, and I can’t think of many people who can touch that.”

Smith, though, says he knew from the start that he wouldn’t be trying to mimic Fitzgerald’s voice in any way: *Nick* is written in the third person, “so I could be myself”. “There are obviously people who think I’m committing some literary sacrilege, but if I was worried about those people, I wouldn’t have written it in the first place,” he says. “I truly feel like I don’t know how I could have paid a greater homage to *Gatsby* and Fitzgerald and the lost generation” ●

Poetry to inspire change

Rishi Dastidar



The ecstatic response to Amanda Gorman’s “The Hill We Climb”, the poem she wrote for Joe Biden’s inauguration, was a reminder of the power of poetry to inspire change – within individuals, and then outwards, into communities. What writer doesn’t hanker to be “the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel the world over”, as Walt Whitman put it in “**To a Foil’d European Revolutionaire**”?

Any change starts with resilience, and knowledge that many things can be borne. The Italian poet Patrizia Cavalli shows us this: “I fall and fall again, stumble and fall, get up / then fall again, relapses are / my speciality.” And while she claims that **My Poems Won’t Change the World** they show us that you have to keep going, to stay in the game; and

maybe you can even find joy as you do so.

Resilience by itself doesn’t change a thing; what’s needed next is defiance, to communicate that your belief won’t be beaten. The late poet and essayist Audre Lorde provides us with the analysis and tools to do this. In **Your Silence Will Not Protect You** she tells us: “Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.”

Of course defiance needs a focus point for its anger, an object that needs changing – such as an administration lacking any talents. From 2011, Emily Berry’s “**Bad New Government**” is as relevant now as then in

its skewering of “the worrying new developments” and its commingling of the personal and political.

The work of change can and often does feel lonely, which is why inspiration needs to be drawn from those who have made similar efforts before, such as can be found in the anthology **The Mighty Stream: Poems in Celebration of Martin Luther King**. Poets including Claudia Rankine, Grace Nichols, Sarah Howe and Imtiaz Dharker connect the dots between his words.

As much as movements of people drive progress, individuals also need to be able to see themselves as potential protagonists in history. Two recent poems that bring this to life are “**Cork Schoolgirl Considers the GPO, Dublin 2016**” by Victoria Kennefick, where the protagonist feels her way into Ireland’s 1916 Easter Rising, and Danez Smith’s “**Dinosaurs in the Hood**”, a plea to destroy the racial stereotypes of storytelling.

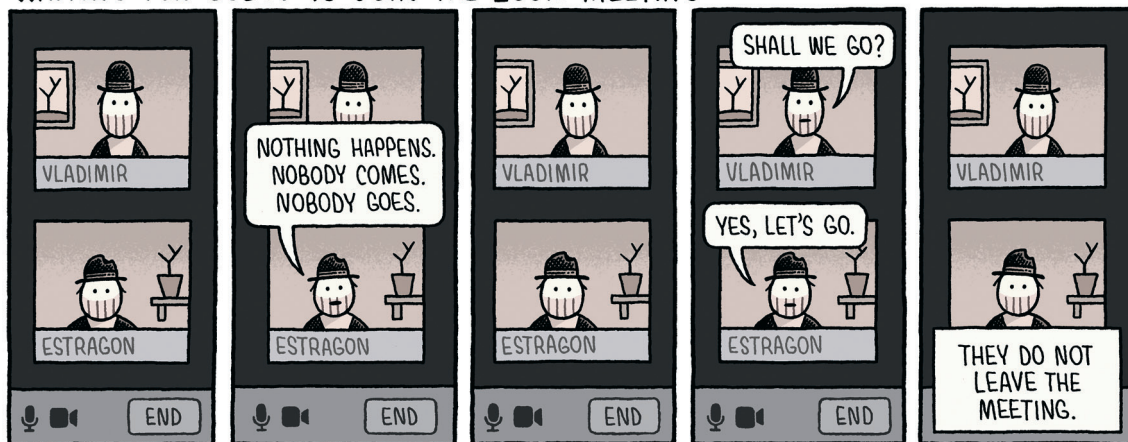
But nothing happens without the belief that something better is possible. This could be a personal and hazy chimerica, as Roger Robinson movingly describes in the title poem of his TS Eliot prize-winning collection **A Portable Paradise**: “And if I speak of Paradise, / then I’m speaking of my grandmother / who told me to carry it always / on my person, concealed, so / no one else would know but me.”

Or it can come from acting positively and rallying people to do likewise. Our current laureate of optimism for the future is Salena Godden. Her **Pessimism Is for Lightweights** is a call for courage, wonder and love – the stuff of hope. She reminds us that progress, while never linear, is still worth pursuing: “There is no straight white line / It’s the bumps and curves and obstacles / That make this time yours and mine”.

Rishi Dastidar’s latest collection, *Saffron Jack*, is published by Nine Arches.

Tom Gauld

WAITING FOR GODOT TO JOIN THE ZOOM MEETING



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