

Review

Saturday 6 February 2021 - Issue N°159

Inside the second wave

**Dr Rachel Clarke writes about fear
and hope on the Covid frontline**

**The
Guardian**

Find clarity in our weekly magazine



In a chaotic world, clarity on global news can be hard to find. The Guardian Weekly magazine can help. Every week you'll enjoy handpicked articles from The Guardian and The Observer. Delivered to you, wherever you live in the world. What's more, you'll only pay £6 for your first six issues, and then enjoy a year-round saving of up to 34%.

Region	Retail price per issue	Subscribers pay	Saving
UK	£4.50	£2.94	34%

Try
6 issues
for £6



Subscribe now,
visit theguardian.com/weekly-magazine

The
Guardian Weekly

Offer is £6 for the first 6 issues (UK), USD\$6 (rest of world) and €6 (Europe), followed by quarterly (13 weeks) subscription payments of £37.50 (UK), USD\$81.30 (rest of world) or €61.30 (Europe), saving 34% off the cover price in the UK and 30% in Europe. Currency will vary outside these regions. Offer not available to current subscribers of Guardian Weekly. You must be 18+ to be eligible for this offer. Guardian Weekly reserve the right to end this offer at any time. For full subscription terms and conditions visit theguardian.com/guardian-weekly-subscription-terms-conditions

Review

Saturday 6 February 2021 - Issue N^o 159

'I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.'
— Joan Didion, page 25

Contents	
	The week in books04
	The books that made me by Jane Smiley05
	COVER STORY 'Our language is flesh and blood': Dr Rachel Clarke reports from inside the second wave06
	Book of the week: <i>The Assault on Truth: Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the Emergence of a New Moral Barbarism</i> by Peter Osborne.....10
	Nonfiction reviews
	<i>Frostquake: The Frozen Winter of 1962 and How Britain Emerged a Different Country</i> by Juliet Nicolson12
	<i>What Does Jeremy Think? Jeremy Heywood and the Making of Modern Britain</i> by Suzanne Heywood13
	<i>The Hidden Spring: A Journey to the Source of Consciousness</i> by Mark Solms14
	Fiction reviews
	<i>Asylum Road</i> by Olivia Sudjic.....16
	<i>Fake Accounts</i> by Lauren Oyler17
	<i>Hurdy Gurdy</i> by Christopher Wilson.....18
	Books of the month: Poetry, plus poem of the month19
	INTERVIEW Francis Spufford.....20
	BOOKS ESSAY Five decades of Didion: Alex Clark on the writer at 86.....23
	Sebastian Barry on writing <i>The Secret Scripture</i> , plus Tom Gauld.....26

The week in books

6 February

MKW and the LRB

A) Oh, no, it's the end of an era. B) I hope people aren't going to annoy her by saying "end of an era" and going on about it.

Mary-Kay Wilmers, who is stepping down as editor, has been at the London Review of Books as long as I've known her. I was nanny to her children from 1982 and we have been friends ever since.

At the interview (to be nanny) I could see she was very keen on books, so I said: "I love the classics such as Dickens and Herriot." And she replied: "That's good to hear", and I think that's what got me the job - that and not supporting Manchester United.

I tried to talk about books as much as possible, thinking it would give her ideas for

the LRB. I might begin on Virginia Woolf and she might say: "Sorry, I'm about to watch *Match of the Day*." One time I raved about *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* by the new writer Sue Townsend. And she said: "If you like it that much, review it for the paper?"

I declined, thinking: "Do your own homework!"

I once said to her I wasn't sure I'd ever make a novelist: "I don't have a fancy enough vocabulary," I told her.

"That's why you will," she said. **Nina Stibbe**

Merger moment

In November, it was announced that the corporate behemoth Bertelsmann, owner of the publishing colossus Penguin Random House, would be buying rival publisher Simon &

Schuster in a \$2.2bn deal. This week, the US writers' body the Authors' Guild sent a letter to the Department of Justice opposing the merger, arguing that concentrating more than half of US publishing in the hands of one corporation "poses a variety of potential threats to freedom of speech and democracy".

Some are worried that the deal will result in less competition and fewer opportunities for fewer authors. But in response to the letter, Bertelsmann argued that the merger would put it in a better place to bargain



Mary-Kay Wilmers

against another huge competitor, Amazon.

Sian Cain

Save the Wallace

More than 7,000 people have signed a petition calling for the library and archive at the historic Wallace Collection in London to be saved. According to the petition, senior management at the collection, which was built over the 18th and 19th centuries by the Marquesses of Hertford and Sir Richard Wallace, have taken the decision to close its library and archive to the public, and to make both staff members redundant.

The petition, which was launched by archive professionals and trade unionists working with the Wallace Collection staff to prevent the closure, says a consultation is running until 11 February on the plans, which would be put into effect three months later if approved. The petitioners say the move is "short-sighted and ill thought out". **Alison Flood**

ANTONIO OLMO/THE OBSERVER; JOHN SCOTT/GETTY

Jab

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole



While we are all waiting for our jabs, we might wonder why the government is so keen on calling any Covid-19 vaccine a "jab" in the first place. The usage seems at once chummy and **infantilising**, but why does it mean "injection" anyway?

The verb "jab" was originally a Scottish form of "job", an onomatopoeic word used since the 16th century to describe the pecking of birds, and then for any poking or thrusting action. (Romantically, "to job faces" with another meant to kiss them ardently.) Hence also the use of "jab" to mean a boxer's **straight punch** with the non-dominant hand. ("Jab him, if you can, with your left," advises a 1901 manual of self-defence by the British boxing champion Robert James "Bob" Fitzsimmons.) The additional sense of mockery or raillery (as in "verbal jabs") is inspired by this martial context.

The medical sense of "jab", meanwhile, has a rather less salubrious origin, as a 1914 dictionary of **criminal** slang introduces it: "Jab, current amongst morphine and cocaine fiends. A hypodermic injection." Even if we haven't yet had our healthier kind of modern jab, we might feel as though the government has repeatedly punched us in the face.



'My comfort read? Anything by Anthony Trollope'

Jane Smiley

The book I am currently reading

Safe from the Sea by Peter Geye is set near Duluth, Minnesota, but the scenery Geye gives the reader is the wilderness of Lake Superior. A father and son are trying to reconcile before the father dies. It is wonderfully evocative.

The book that changed my life

A lot of books made me want to be a writer, but *The Gourmet Cookbook* by Ruth Reichl made me want to be a cook, and I cook even more often than I write. I was living in a rural area of Iowa - not even a McDonald's in the neighbourhood - and my 6ft 10in husband needed to be fed. I would try out all kinds of recipes and enjoy just about every one.

The book I wish I'd written

I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem by Maryse Condé. I was amazed at Condé's insights into Tituba's life in Salem, Massachusetts, in the 17th century. It's a brilliant exploration of the cruelty of Puritan society.

The book that had the greatest influence on me

Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel is my own book; in order to write it, I read about 120 novels that I knew well (*Pride and Prejudice*), that I didn't know at all (*In Search of Lost Time*), that were old (*The Tale of Genji*) or contemporary (*Look at Me* by Jennifer Egan). I learned something from every one of them.

The book I think is most overrated

Atonement by Ian McEwan. When I got to the end, I could not figure out what had happened.

The last book that made me cry

The Broken Heart of America by Walter Johnson. It's a detailed history of the city where I grew up, St Louis, Missouri, and the cruel aspects of that history.

The last book that made me laugh

The Housewife Assassin's Handbook by Josie Brown - I taught it in a class about comic novels. My students were put off by the novel's bizarre mix of childcare and secretive violence, and they preferred *Love Among the Chickens* by PG Wodehouse.

The book I couldn't finish

As soon as the main character in *American Pastoral*, by Philip Roth, asked his daughter to kiss him in an erotic way, I tossed it.

My earliest reading memory

I loved Freddie and Flossie and Nan and Bert in *The Bobbsey Twins at School* by Laura Lee Hope, and since I was an only child, I thought life would be perfect if I only had a twin.

My comfort read

Anything by Anthony Trollope. No matter what I'm reading or rereading (right now, *Can You Forgive Her?*) I am intrigued and reassured by Trollope's insights into the minds of both men and women, as well as the undercurrent of good humour that runs through all the books (including one of my favourites, *He Knew He Was Right*).

The Strays of Paris by Jane Smiley is published by Mantle on 18 February.

As well as fighting to keep Covid patients alive, NHS staff are battling a surge in disinformation and denial. *Dr Rachel Clarke* on the power of words in a pandemic, the reality of life in the ICU - and what gives her hope

Please imagine it, for a moment, if you can bear to. Being wheeled from your home by paramedics in masks who rush you, blue-lit, to a hospital. Then the clamour and lights, the confusion and fear, the faceless professionals, gloved and gowned, who eddy and swirl past your trolley. Your destination is intensive care where too soon, or perhaps not soon enough, you will arrive at a point of reckoning. You will blanch when they tell you, because you've watched the news and know what it signifies: you are going to be put on a ventilator. You will understand, as clearly as they do, that your doctors cannot promise to save you.

Here, though, is the detail that haunts me. For every patient who dies from Covid-19 in hospital, from the moment they encounter that first masked paramedic, they will never see a human face again. Not one smile, nor pair of cheeks, nor lips, nor chin. Not a single human being without barricades of plastic. Sometimes, my stomach twists at the thought that to the patients whose faces I can never unsee - contorting and buckling with the effort of breathing - I am no more than a pair of eyes, a thin strip of flesh between mask and visor, a muffled voice that strains and cracks behind plastic.

'Our language is flesh and blood'

'We are drowning, drowning in Covid'
The sight of a doctor or nurse breaking down has become unremarkable



Of all Covid's cruelties, surely the greatest is this? That it cleaves us from each other at precisely those times when we need human contact the most. That it spreads through speech and touch - the very means through which we share our love, tenderness and basic humanity. That it transforms us unwittingly into vectors of fatality. And that those we love most - and with whom we are most intimate - are the ones we endanger above all others.

It's late January. The wards and ICUs are overwhelmed, awash with the virus. The patients seem younger, the new variant more virulent. We are drowning, drowning in Covid. The sight of a doctor or nurse breaking down has become unremarkable. Too close, for too long, to too many patients' pain, we have become - just like them - saturated. Behind hospital doors, tucked out of sight, we seem to suffer as one.

Outside, on the other hand, the virus has once again carved up the country into simmering, resentful, aggrieved little units. It's too old, too cold to be doing this again. One way or another, lockdown hurts us all. But instead of unity, community and a shared sense of purpose - that extraordinary eruption of philanthropy last springtime - we seethe like rats in a sack, fractious, divided.

GETTY

Of all Covid's cruelties, surely the greatest is this? That it cleaves us from each other precisely when we need human contact the most

During the first wave, I knew the public had our backs. This time round, being an NHS doctor makes you a target. For the crime of asserting on social media that Covid is real and deadly, I earn daily abuse from a vitriolic minority. I've been called Hitler, Shipman, Satan and Mengele for insisting on Twitter that our hospitals

aren't empty. Last night a charming "Covid sceptic" sent me this: "You are paid to lie and a disgrace to your profession. You have clearly sold your soul and are nothing more than a child abuser destroying futures. I do not consent to your satanic ways." A friend, herself an intensive care doctor, has just been told by another male "sceptic" that he intends to sexually abuse her until she requires one of her own ventilators. And this morning, another colleague, also female, was told: "You evil criminal lying piece of government shit. You need to be executed immediately for treason and genocide." ➔



◆ In short, we have reached the point in the pandemic where what feels like armies of trolls do their snarling, misogynistic utmost to silence NHS staff who try to convey what it's like on the inside. Worse even than the hatred they whip up against NHS staff, the deniers have started turning up in crowds to chant "Covid is a hoax" outside hospitals full of patients who are sick and dying. Imagine being forced to push your way through that, 13 hours after you began your ICU shift. Some individuals have broken into Covid wards and attempted physically to remove critically ill patients, despite doctors warning that doing so will kill them.

I well understand why they want to gag us. Our testimony makes Covid denial a tall order. We bear witness not to statistics but to human beings. Our language is flesh and blood. This patient, and then this patient, and then another. The pregnant woman in her 20s in the ICU, intubated and lifeless. The three generations of one family on ventilators, each of them dying one after the other. We humanise, empathise, turn the unfathomable dimensions of the 100,000 dead into mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers. Increasingly, speaking out feels like a moral imperative. Because perhaps - if we can only disprove enough untruths, if we can just slow the onslaught of disinformation - we may have fewer dying hands to hold in the future.

Please don't flinch. Please don't look away. The truth of conditions inside our hospitals needs telling. To dispel a few prime ministerial press conference myths, the NHS is not "close to" or "on the brink of" being overwhelmed. We are here and now in the midst of calamity. The Covid patients keep on coming, so unnervingly unwell, and we race to find space for them. But all the spare staff have already been snatched from their day jobs. Elective surgery has shut down, everything inessential postponed. ICUs are filled with obstetricians, paediatricians, psychiatrists and surgeons doing their amateur best to support the small pool of staff with proper expertise. On wards across the country, where Covid patients live and die in their thousands, the medics are stretched perilously thin. And still the new admissions come.

This week, a doctor friend in another trust sent me this, having been newly redeployed to her hospital's ICU: "The situation at work is just dreadful. Once I've donned PPE and gone into ICU, hours and hours go by. And it's just awful in there. It's not calm like the news videos, it's chaotic with alarms going constantly, patients being intubated and proned. Most of us are NOT trained to do this or deal with this. We are surgeons, anaesthetists, physicians, nurses, HCAs, porters etc. We are NOT ICU staff."

Newly qualified doctors with scarcely six months' experience sometimes struggle singlehanded on the Covid wards at night, their seniors unable to leave crashing patients elsewhere. Whoever deteriorates overnight may live or die according to whether a bed can be found in an ICU. This is rationing, without being named out loud as such. An unacknowledged peacetime form of battlefield triage: lives being lost

because there aren't enough staff to go around. No one here is being "protected", not the patients, not the nurses, not the doctors, not the families, and certainly not the NHS writ large.

Sometimes, colleagues confess that they feel suicidal. Sometimes, in the darkness, a patient pleads to die. They cannot take the claustrophobic roar of their CPAP mask any longer. The struggle to breathe is costing them more than they can bear. A student I used to teach looks close to collapse. "I feel as if it might be my fault when they die," he tells me in a monotone. "If I'd been a doctor for longer, I might know how to do something different. Maybe it's me - maybe I'm not cut out to be a doctor." I watch him wrestle to keep his tears at bay, unable even to reach out to give him a hug. The wrongness of it all constricts my chest until it hurts. He's too young, too green to be standing here like this, accusing himself of failing the pandemic dead, who themselves have been failed by so many in power above. At what cost do these night shifts worm into his soul?

The truth is, patients of necessity are falling through our cracks. We cannot hold them all, we're too few and too ground down. Rationing does not declare itself in a fanfare of noise. It sidles in, bit by bit, as the Covid cases rise. Intensive care nurses, used to working with a concentration of one nurse per patient, are asked to stretch themselves across four patients or more. Standards start to slip as battered, shell-shocked staff do their brave and hopeless best against the ever-surging human tide. The truth - and don't we know it, if we're honest? - is that doctors and nurses are neither angels nor heroes. We're human. Merely human. We can only do so much.

I can't sleep. I can't sit still. I feel sick. I want to scream. Something monstrous, like cancer, is twisting in my chest. One morning, on the way to work, the politicians and the trolls and the suffering

and the death become too much. All of a sudden, I'm unable to drive. In a layby I cringe, doubled up, fighting for breath. My body is in mutiny, it's overruled my head. You clench your teeth, wipe your cheeks, turn the ignition, set off again. You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.

A unity of sorts emerges with the stupefying news that in Britain, an island, the cumulative Covid death toll has surpassed 100,000. On the same day, we learn that our death rate per head of population is the highest in the world. As the country reels from these calamitous statistics, the prime minister insists that his



Rachel Clarke
'During the first wave, I knew the public had our backs. This time round, being an NHS doctor makes you a target'

JEFF MITCHELL/GETTY; ANTONIO OLMOS



'Human kindness will not be locked down'
People clap as a funeral cortege passes through Glencoe, Scotland

government “truly did everything we could to minimise loss of life”. Yet a quarter of those deaths have occurred in 2021 - during the last four weeks alone - making Boris Johnson’s words a patent lie. He didn’t lock down promptly, he didn’t close our borders, he didn’t protect care homes, he allowed tens of thousands of elderly and vulnerable residents to die. And then, instead of future-proofing Britain from a second surge last summer, he offered bribes for social mixing. But our eating out, far from helping out, sent Covid cases ticking hungrily upwards.

This second wave has been turbocharged by Downing Street’s procrastination. Putting off lockdown until the eleventh hour has - yet again - wreaked havoc. Urgent cancer surgeries should not be postponed. Covid patients should not be calling Ubers to rush them to hospital because the ambulances they need are nowhere to be found. Doctors and nurses should not be suicidal with stress, nor tended by their own as they suffocate and die on ventilators. It did not have to be like this. None of these horrors were inevitable.

How - from where - can we find cause for hope when our political leaders, despite a track record like this, insist they’ve behaved infallibly? Well, by early spring, the country’s most vulnerable citizens should be vaccinated, a prospect that makes me ecstatic. And lockdown has already sent new cases plummeting downwards. The deaths, we know, will follow. Momentum too is building towards a zero Covid strategy - the complete elimination of the virus - as demonstrated so successfully by countries like New Zealand, Taiwan and Vietnam.

But my main reasons for optimism lie closer to home, flickering and sparking amid the darkness. I turn my gaze from the dizzying statistics and look instead to the human beings around me. Their ingenuity and kindness give me the steel to go on. One day, for example, a peculiar procession outside the hospital turns heads on the high street. It is led by a strangely immaculate tractor, freshly waxed and wreathed with

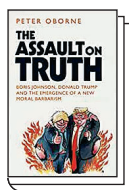
flowers, gleaming beneath the winter sun. The tractor is destined for a nearby village, hauling an agricultural trailer on which a coffin has been laid. Several cars follow, their stern-faced drivers dressed in black. It’s the funeral cortege of a larger-than-life farmer, known to all in his village and far beyond. Pre-Covid, hundreds of locals would have packed into the village church, eager to pay tribute to a man much loved. Now though, a virus dictates our forms of mourning. No large gatherings are allowed.

When the tractor arrives in the village, lumbering slowly towards the empty church, something magical and startling begins to unfold. Word of mouth and social media have told the neighbours when the cortege will pass and now, on their doorsteps and in porches, behind their gates, on garden paths, they assemble at a respectful social distance. As the tractor passes, so begins the applause. First a ripple, then a clatter, then a thunder, then a roar. In physical estrangement, a population finds its voice. This community, unbowed, celebrates a man they loved - and how. My heart lifts. I feel hope flicker. For however bleak the times, however grim our prospects seem, human kindness finds a shape and form: it will not be locked down.

All across the hospital, you see it. In the tiny crocheted crimson hearts, made by locals for patients and delivered in their scores so that no one feels alone. In the piles of donated pizzas, devoured at night by ravenous staff. In the homemade scrubs, whipped up by an unstoppable army of self-isolating grandmothers whose choice of fabrics is fearlessly floral. In the nurses and carers and porters and cleaners who keep on, despite everything, smiling. I may be tired and angry and sometimes mad with grief, but every single day at work, I see more kindness, more sweetness, more compassion, more courage, more resilience, more steel, more diamond-plated love than you could ever, ever imagine. And this means more and lasts more than anything else, and it cannot be stolen by Covid ●

Book of the week

{ Politics } A clinical and merciless account of Boris Johnson's lies - written by a former colleague *William Davies*



The Assault on Truth: Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the Emergence of a New Moral Barbarism
by Peter Osborne,
Simon & Schuster,
£12.99

In recent years, “keeping the receipts” has come to refer to a somewhat paranoid diligence, whereby someone mentally stores the evidence of another’s behaviour, should they ever need it in future. The phrase has particular bite in the context of social media and smartphones, which produce constant digital records that can be filed away for future reference. A society in which people hold “receipts” on one another can scarcely be a happy

one, and will eventually enter a vicious circle of suspicion, once it becomes clear that everyone is maintaining dossiers on everybody else. But when dealing with known liars and frauds, it would be remiss not to keep some kind of paper trail.

Peter Osborne is a consummate receipt-keeper. His efforts to hold political elites to account go well beyond those of regular reporting, and have snowballed over the last 20 years into a one-man moral crusade against lying in public life. He tackled the issue head-on in 2005 in his book *The Rise of Political Lying*, the same year that he presented a Channel 4 documentary *Why Politicians Can't Tell the Truth*. He reveals in his new book that “by the time the Blair premiership ended in 2007, I had got into the habit of keeping a file of political lies”. The figure who has come to dominate that file during the past five years is our current prime minister.

The Assault on Truth may sound like another study of “post-truth”, “fake news” or the threat posed by French philosophers. But make no mistake: this is a book about Boris Johnson. Osborne is clinical and merciless in his account of Johnson’s mendacity, building up his case item by item, footnote by footnote. The forensic nature of the task leads him to adopt an entire new citation system, such that the bottom third of a page is often made up of URLs, dates and textual references. The book it most reminded me of was

Christopher Hitchens’s *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*. In a sane world it would be a political obituary.

Osborne is precise, sober and occasionally repetitive. He rehearses the plain facts of Johnson’s lies, over the course of his journalistic and political careers. Some of these are well known, such as those that led him to be sacked from the Times aged 23 (fabricating a quote) and later the shadow cabinet (falsely denying that he’d had an affair with a Spectator colleague). He also details the serial lies told about Jeremy Corbyn, Labour and the impending Brexit deal over the course of the 2019 election campaign, a time when Osborne maintained a purpose-built website to keep track of all the falsehoods. “I have been a political reporter for almost three decades,” he writes, and “I have never encountered a senior British politician who lies and fabricates so regularly, so shamelessly and so systematically as Boris Johnson.”

What makes Osborne’s dossier so gripping is that he and Johnson share the same cultural and professional milieu, or at least they did. Johnson hired Osborne as political correspondent for the Spectator, and Osborne is occasionally overcome with praise for his moral nemesis. He describes Johnson as “by some margin the most brilliant political journalist of his generation, with a talent that at times crossed over the line to genius”, and as “a joy to work for, a fine editor and a loyal colleague with the quickest mind I’ve ever encountered”. Yet he blames Johnson personally for a dramatic deterioration in the credibility of public life and the legitimacy of institutions. Britain has entered a “nightmare epistemological universe”, and the key moment in this transition was 24 July 2019, the day that Johnson entered 10 Downing Street.

Osborne thus elevates Johnson to a Dionysian status in British politics, trampling gleefully over everything that Tories have held dear for more than 200 years, leaving a wreckage in his wake. He accuses Vote Leave (especially Dominic Cummings) and its financial backers of launching a “reverse takeover” of the Conservative party, preying on the fact that the party’s membership and innate respect for tradition had long been falling. Cummings et al “despised the Conservative party and hated British institutions”. For Johnson, they offered him a path to power, and that was enough.

Osborne’s moral compass is that of traditional, pre-Thatcherite conservatism: Edmund Burke, Michael

The book it most reminded me of was Christopher Hitchens’s *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* - in a sane world it would be a political obituary

Oakeshott and the rules that emerged over time to govern the conduct of parliament and civil service. For a Tory such as Osborne, the public record is, or should be, the final word. His faith in Victorian norms of bureaucracy and parliament sometimes borders on the quaint, but is clearly authentic. For an example of where his more dull and worthy brand of conserva-



YUI MOK/PA

tism survives, he turns repeatedly to Angela Merkel.

It's not just the contemporary Conservative party that appals Osborne, but developments in his own profession. Newspapers, their owners and their staff have colluded with politicians to smear and fabricate without fear. Osborne's efforts to expose these practices have not been without personal cost. Finding no mainstream media outlet that was willing to publish him on the topic of journalistic malpractice around Johnson, he took his evidence to openDemocracy, who published his article "British journalists have become part of Johnson's fake news machine" in October 2019. Sombrely he reports that, since the piece appeared, "the mainstream British press and media is to all intents and purposes barred to me".

Johnson, Vote Leave and Rupert Murdoch are roundly condemned. Donald Trump, despite featuring in the subtitle of the book, performs more of a cameo role, serving as the comparator to Johnson and his partner in epistemological crime. But the underlying conditions of these phenomena get off too lightly, perhaps because - as a Brexit-voting Tory - Osborne is unwilling to fully confront the role of the market and of nationalism in the dethroning of the liberal ethic of public service. It is impressive, moving even, to witness Corbyn being defended so staunchly by someone who no doubt disagrees with everything he stands for. But Osborne cannot help but blame the left for an underlying malaise, of which Johnson is the most aggressive symptom.

From Rousseau through to Tony Blair, Osborne sees the left as making greater use of mendacity than the right, as the former is more confident of its ultimate

'I have never encountered a senior British politician who lies so regularly, so shamelessly' ... Osborne on Johnson, left, with David Cameron in 2012

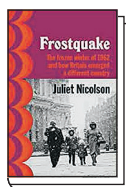
moral goals. If the end justifies the means, then the means can include lying. This, Osborne argues, is what gradually corroded the compact of conservative institutionalism, creating the space for showmen such as Johnson to exploit

the vacuum. He and Trump "combine rightwing political instincts with progressive methods". The dogma of Thatcherism goes unmentioned.

It is a relief, in many ways that social media features so little in a book on political lies. There is something determinedly analogue about Osborne's mission, and the faith he places in official documentation such as Hansard. And yet it becomes hard to explain the rise of Johnson's (or Trump's) brand of free-wheeling political entertainment without at some point addressing changes in the technologies and funding of our media. Johnson's lies are no secret, though they have rarely been as well documented as they are in *The Assault on Truth*. The question is why they - and books such as this - do him so little harm. In a world of peer-to-peer surveillance, where our honesty and character are constantly being tracked by managers, credit-raters, customers and one another, there is a certain relief in the spectacle of the outrageous leader who seems immune to this collection of "receipts". In the meantime, Osborne offers a stirring rage against the dying of the establishment light.

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

{ History } The Beatles, the pill, the Profumo affair ... how British morals thawed as the snowdrifts got higher *Kathryn Hughes*



Frostquake: The Frozen Winter of 1962 and How Britain Emerged a Different Country by Juliet Nicolson, Chatto & Windus, £18.99

On Boxing Day 1962 it began to snow and didn't stop for the next 10 weeks. In effect, Britain had entered its own little ice age. There were drifts 23ft high on the Kent-Sussex border, while Stonehenge was buried so deeply that it was almost invisible when viewed from the sky. Icebergs entered the River Medway and, inland, icicles hung from the trees. The upper middle classes dug out their skis, while everyone else

experimented with bits of corrugated iron strapped to their feet. A milkman died at the wheel of his float in Essex, while indoor laundry froze before it could dry, so that next week's vests and pants stood rigidly to attention before the kitchen fire. Someone had calculated that the last time it had been this cold was 1814, the year before Napoleon met his Waterloo.

Meanwhile eight-year-old Juliet Nicolson divides her time between the King's Road, where she lives with her unhappy parents, and Sissinghurst, the Kentish stately home recently bequeathed by her grandmother Vita Sackville-West. Vita's widower, Harold Nicolson, haunts the beautiful old place in his own cloud of freezing damp, alternately sobbing aloud

and snubbing his grandchildren. Back in Chelsea there is the excitement of having to queue at the standpipe for water, since all the indoor pipes have burst.

In *Frostquake* Nicolson aims to do much more than present a charming word picture of the freakish winter of 1962-63, when Britain entered a state of suspended animation. Beneath the chilly stillness, she argues, the country was getting ready to be modern. With the March thaw came newly loosened attitudes to class, sex and politics. Entrenched hierarchies that had endured since the Victorian age, and resisted even the ruptures of two world wars, were finally melting. By way of evidence Nicolson counts off the usual suspects: the Profumo affair, the pill, the Beatles, the Cuban missile crisis and *That Was the Week That Was*.

While it's true that many of these set pieces happened around that time, it is hard to see how they are related to, let alone were caused by, 10 weeks of bad weather. John Profumo didn't sleep with Christine Keeler in the summer of 1961 because he needed to keep warm, and the resulting parliamentary scandal didn't unfurl until June 1963, by which time everyone had thrown open the windows again. Likewise, the pill was legal for married women from 1961 and everyone else from 1967. So the winter of 1962-63 was part of a long period of squalid subterfuge, when single girls put a curtain ring on their finger and lied to their doctor: there's no reason to think that the winter temperatures had anything to do with it.

One of the few cases where you might be able to make the case for causation is with Sylvia Plath, who killed herself on 11 February 1963 in her flat in Primrose Hill, London. It is true that the girl from Massachusetts had never really come to terms with Britain's lack of mod cons, including decent central heating. Many have speculated that the freezing cold tipped her over the edge after a winter of flu and infidelity. There's also a good chance that the cold weather was responsible for starting the move from stockings to tights. Previously the costume of ballerinas and toddlers, tights made sense in this mother of all winters.

Where *Frostquake* triumphs is as metaphor - a network of images that describes how Britain was beginning to unfreeze from the 50s. Nicolson does best with anecdotes

that lie far from the beaten track. Grace Coddington, still at this point a model rather than a Vogue editor, is photographed in the *Daily Mirror* demonstrating how, by wearing a polo neck under your woolly jumper, you could be both "with it" and warm. Bob Dylan, singing at the Troubadour that Christmas, is heard later explaining that one of the benefits of having long hair is that it keeps you toasty. And down in the depths of Hampshire, there are the New Forest ponies that have given up being picturesque and are holding up stray humans to demand their food.

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



EXPRESS/GETTY

{ Biography } A portrait of a charming and empathetic man, who quietly bent all of Whitehall to his will

Jonathan Portes



What Does Jeremy Think? Jeremy Heywood and the Making of Modern Britain

by Suzanne Heywood, William Collins, £25

The shaping and reshaping of the modern British state, told through the eyes, words and private thoughts of the ruler's closest and most trusted counsellor. Dialogue-driven scenes, from formal committee or cabinet meetings to one-on-ones, punctuated by internal monologues ...

Suzanne Heywood's account of the life of her late husband Jeremy, cabinet secretary and confidant of

four prime ministers, does not match Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell novels for length or imagination. But I don't make the comparison of the Lords Heywood and Cromwell lightly. Not only did the two men occupy similar positions, but in many respects they shared an approach to governing, blending the personal and the political, their analytical intelligence with their understanding of human nature. And so this book should be read in a similar spirit to Mantel's masterpieces - as a portrait of an exceptional man who was always at the centre of events.

This is at least half a memoir, as it is based on Heywood's own recollections, notes and conversations with his wife, as well as her extensive interviews with former colleagues and political masters. But there are few revelations about recent events - the global financial crisis, Brexit - and little salacious gossip about politicians. The most dramatic moment is personal, when Heywood threatens to resign after "Theresa May narrowed her eyes and accused him of conspiring with the French". If you're after sex or scandal, you'd be better off with Sasha Swire's *Diary of an MP's Wife*.

Where the book succeeds is in conveying the atmosphere of life at the centre of a succession of crises. Whether it was coordinating Gordon Brown's nationalisation of much of the UK banking system, or in watching and rewatching security camera footage to establish whether Andrew Mitchell said the word "pleb", Heywood threw himself entirely into his work. In that respect *What Does Jeremy Think?* will be invaluable as a source for scholars and historians as to how, when, why and by whom certain decisions were taken.

Suzanne is true to her husband's generous spirit and habit of looking at people in the best light. David Cameron reportedly tried to block this book's publication, but it's hard to see how he thought it would further

damage his tarnished reputation. For example, the fact that he - not Heywood - took the irresponsible and self-interested decision to stop the civil service preparing for a leave victory in the Brexit referendum is already well known. In general, politicians here, of all parties, are honest and well intentioned, and it is a welcome contrast to the cynicism and contempt with which they are generally portrayed in the media.

But sometimes this takes the edge off. David Davis's work ethic and approach to the Brexit negotiations are described as "less exhaustive" than Theresa May's. By contrast, Dominic Cummings calls him "thick as mince and lazy as a toad". No necessary contradiction here, but Cummings's words are rather more revealing for those who want to understand the Brexit process. And Suzanne's approach does on occasion result in air-brushing Heywood's views and his mordant wit. I knew him well, and while he would rarely, if ever, talk down ministers, his views on the competence and character of some of May's and Cameron's advisers were considerably more trenchant than implied here.

The real challenge Suzanne sets herself is to convey what made Heywood so unusual - not least his empathy, both personal and political. On a personal level, it made him charming and attractive, as much so when listening as when talking. And when it came to policy, it gave him an unparalleled ability to convince people that they should do what he wanted them to do.

Put together, these gifts allowed him to bridge the gaps between Blair and Brown at their most antagonistic, and stitch together seemingly impossible compromises that left everyone thinking they had "won". It's perhaps best captured by Ken Clarke's note to

Heywood bridged the gaps between Blair and Brown, and stitched together compromises that left everyone thinking they had 'won'

Heywood, saying "I don't know if you and I are completely agreed; if you have set out my views more clearly than I could do so myself; or if you have subtly influenced my views so that they have changed without my realising it and now coincide with your own."

For me, the most difficult question raised by Jeremy's life and career is his legacy.

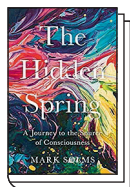
It's hard to argue that the last few years, and in particular the handling both of Brexit and the Covid pandemic, reflect well on the British civil service and the state. While politicians must take much of the blame, Heywood would not have excused the failures of the Home Office over Windrush, Public Health England over test-and-trace, or the Department for Education over exams.

I can't help thinking that while one test of a leader is how he performs in a crisis - a test Heywood never failed - another is how the organisation and people he led perform after he's gone. In that respect, history may be less kind. I hope that I am wrong.

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Neuroscience } Is the answer to the mystery of consciousness to be found in feelings?

A fascinating exploration
Oliver Burkeman



The Hidden Spring: A Journey to the Source of Consciousness

by Mark Solms,
Profile, £20

that science has no clue how the spongy physical stuff of your brain could produce something as radically non-physical as your mind. Attempting to solve this puzzle leads respectable scholars to surprising places - for example, to the baffling claim that consciousness is an illusion (even though consciousness is the very thing that experiences illusions); or that everything in the world - sofas and table lamps included - might in some rudimentary sense be conscious.

Entangled with the mystery of how consciousness happens is another: *why* is it there at all? It's unclear why evolution bothered to make it feel like something to be you, given that, to paraphrase the philosopher David Chalmers, it seems feasible to imagine a "zombie" version of yourself who could complete your daily to-do list just as successfully, but with no inner experience, only darkness inside. When I accidentally plunge my hand into boiling water, what matters is that my brain and limbs are wired to get my hand out as fast as possible, a straightforward engineering challenge. The fact that I also have an experience of hotness seems like an extravagant metaphysical extra, a flourish of nature that would be inexplicable even if we knew how it worked. Which, as mentioned, we don't.

Nobody bewitched by these mysteries can afford to ignore the solution proposed by Mark Solms. A professor of neuropsychology at the University of Cape Town, Solms's hard-science credentials are impeccable, but he is not among those neuroscientists who seem untroubled by the enigma of first-person experience, glibly confident that more lab work will clear things up in the end. On the contrary, he interrupted his work on the brain, and risked his reputation, to train as a psychoanalyst, attracted by the Freudian refusal to treat individual subjective experience as inferior to standard scientific data. The subject is personal, too: the book opens with a childhood mem-

In a crowded field, consciousness has a strong claim to being the strangest thing in the universe. The feeling of being aware is the most fundamental and familiar aspect of anyone's existence: you can know, with rock-solid certainty, that you're conscious right now, even if literally all else might be a hallucination brought on by mind-altering drugs. Yet it's widely held

ory of the day his older brother fell from a three-storey building, sustaining lasting brain damage. Afterwards, he writes, "it felt as if Lee were simultaneously there but not there ... If Lee's mind was somehow reducible to a bodily organ, then, surely, mine was too. This meant that I - my sentient being - would exist only for a relatively short period of time. Then I would disappear."

One starting point for Solms's "journey to the source of consciousness" is that we speak too loosely when we ask how the brain *produces* it, as a chocolate factory produces chocolate bars. Instead, we need to remember that the brain in the scanner and the experience of awareness are two different perspectives - the third-person viewpoint and the first-person viewpoint - on one and the same thing. So the puzzle is why it feels like something to take the first-person viewpoint of a human brain, when the first-person viewpoint of a mountain or a filing cabinet feels (presumably) like nothing at all.

The book's most arresting claim is that the answer is to be found not in brain functions such as visual perception or hearing, the usual focus of inquiries into consciousness, but in feelings. On close inspection, feelings, including emotions, don't seem to be susceptible to Chalmers's zombie objection. It's easy enough to imagine a mindless version of me that could detect the presence of a red apple without literally seeing redness. But the idea of a zombie being scared or happy or regretful without *feeling* scared or happy or regretful makes no sense. "If you do not feel something, it is not a feeling," Solms notes. Emotions are intrinsically

Solms seriously considers how it really feels to be human, instead of reducing experience to a soulless sequence of perceptions

conscious in a way that sensory perceptions aren't. Using poignant case studies of neurology patients - including children born with brain damage, yet plainly still capable of sadness and joy - he argues persuasively that consciousness ultimately arises not in the cortex, the seat of advanced intelligence, but in the more primitive brainstem, where basic emotions begin.

This shift of focus also promises to resolve another oddity of the way consciousness tends to be discussed, which is that the details of what we experience can seem curiously irrelevant. The "problem of inverted qualia" refers to the fact that the experience you call "seeing green" could be identical to the one I call "seeing red", and vice versa, and we'd never have any way of knowing. We'd both still stop and go at the same traffic lights, despite experiencing them in opposite ways to each other. By contrast, the specific content of a feeling matters greatly: if you feel lust where I feel disgust, we might react very differently when meeting Nigel Farage. Taking emotions seriously means taking seriously how it *really* feels to be human, instead of reducing experience to a soulless sequence of perceptions of traffic lights and apples.

ED JONES/AFP/GETTY



Solms's challenge, then, is to show that emotions are essential to humanity's material existence: that a zombie couldn't be wired to mindlessly handle all the tasks our emotions let us navigate. This he attempts in the book's densest chapters, an uphill climb from the free energy principle in neuroscience, via advanced information theory, to the role of the cortex in the generation of memory, featuring phrases such as "we can now formalise a self-evidencing system's dynamics in relation to precision optimisation". To the best of my understanding, the gist is that feelings are a uniquely effective way for humans to monitor their countless changing biological needs, to set priorities for action and make the best choices so as to remain

within various bounds - of hunger, cold and heat, physical danger, social isolation, etc - outside of which we can't survive. Doing all that without feelings would take so many computational resources that it would lead to a "combinatorial explosion", demanding levels of energy a human could never muster.

So, feelings are necessarily conscious; and feelings are essential to human survival; so when you take the first-person perspective of a human system - in other words, you or me, inside our own heads - it makes sense that it would feel conscious to be there. Has the riddle of consciousness thereby been solved? "I must admit to a residue of discomfort," Solms writes, with admirable candour. Me too. What still baffles me is the very idea of first- and third-person perspectives. What

Hooked on a feeling Fans at a K-pop concert in Seoul

on earth is a point of view, scientifically speaking, and what place does it occupy in reality? What makes me able to take a first-person view of my own brain, but not of a filing cabinet - and isn't *that*, in some sense, the remaining conundrum of consciousness?

But perhaps this is to say no more than that this fascinating, wide-ranging and heartfelt book does not succeed in dumping cold explanatory water on every last mystery of human existence. And I confess I would be lying if I said I thought that was a bad thing.

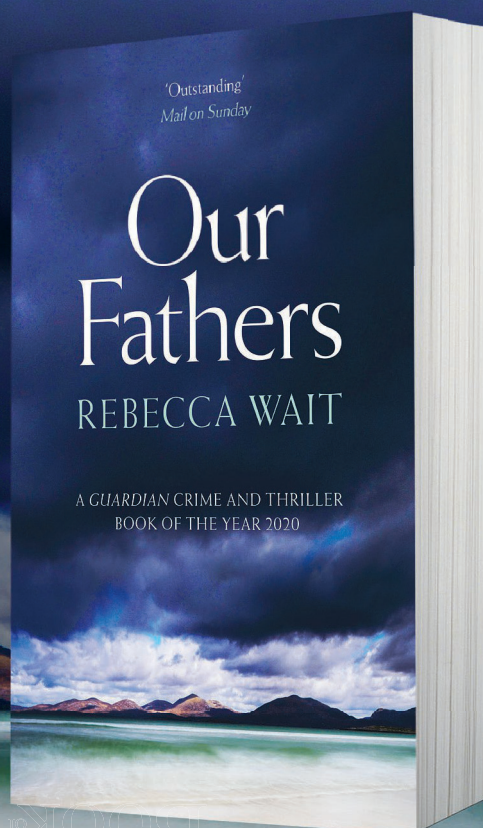
To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.

'An astonishingly powerful story of toxic masculinity, regret and the possibility of redemption'
The Guardian

Discover the Waterstones
Thriller of the Month

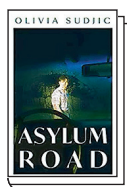
OUT NOW

Waterstones Thriller
Book of the Month



Fiction

A young woman is haunted by memories of Sarajevo in this powerful study of trauma and psychological disintegration *Clare Clark*



Asylum Road
by Olivia Sudjic,
Bloomsbury, £14.99

In 2018, Olivia Sudjic spent two months alone in Brussels. Her debut novel, *Sympathy*, had been published to critical acclaim and she hoped to make progress with a second. Instead, she found herself in the grip of an agonising spiral of anxiety and self-doubt, unable to write, unable almost to

think. She later wrote about the experience in a long-form essay, *Exposure*, a scrupulous examination of the pressures of social media and the personal scrutiny to which she believes female writers are particularly subjected. In that essay Sudjic argues that her periodic episodes of anxiety, while agonising, are necessary to her writing: the writer's duty, she contends, "is to seek out chaos, or the very thing of which she is most afraid".

In *Asylum Road*, she appears to have done exactly that. Anya, a twentysomething PhD student in London, grew up during the brutal siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s. The siege, lasting three and a half years, was the longest in modern history. Snipers surrounded the city, picking off targets; buildings were shelled daily. There was little food, water, no electricity or heat. Residents burned furniture to keep warm and foraged for wild plants including dandelion roots. By the time the siege was finally lifted, nearly 14,000 people were dead.

Asylum Road alludes only glancingly to these grim facts. Instead Sudjic takes us inside Anya's head, to the psychological effects of profound childhood trauma. When Anya remembers, she does so not as a journalist or historian but as a survivor,



'Sudjic has a preternatural sensitivity to the crackling electric currents beneath the surface of things'

in elliptical fragments that expose only the edges of a chasm of memories too raw and terrifying ever to revisit. The extent of her psychological damage surfaces in deep, barely explained terrors: tunnels, for example, and soft fruit, whose multiplicity of textures - "seed, liquid, flesh, skin" - hint unsettlingly at death and putrefaction.

Anya is living in her boyfriend's flat, working - or not working - on her PhD, failing to take her driving test. When Luke proposes, she accepts. She has a desperate yearning for happy-ever-after, which she thinks of as a physical place, "a place where I could unpack, lie down and never have to move again, and the future became an ending".

Anya manages to cling to her stillness - just - as they visit Luke's ghastly parents in Cornwall, but when they fly to Split so that Luke can finally meet her "distended" family, Anya leaves her passport and her PhD notebook on the plane. It is a loss not only of the documents that define her adult self but of the rigid defences that have maintained it. As they travel from Croatia to Montenegro and on to Sarajevo where Anya's mother, gripped by trauma-induced dementia, is convinced the siege is still going on, Anya's past thrusts itself into her present, destroying any pretence that she can keep it under control.

In taut, jittery prose, Sudjic maps Anya's disintegration. For readers of *Exposure*, her symptoms are familiar and frightening: the disembodiment, the nausea, "the unrelenting sensitivity as if my skin had peeled right off". Alone and afraid in Brussels, Sudjic returned again and again to her "talismans", the six books she took with her, among them works by Rachel Cusk and Jenny Offill. She is neither - or not yet - as ruthlessly perceptive as Cusk nor as exquisitely profound as Offill. But at her best Sudjic shares with both a preternatural sensitivity to the crackling electric currents that run beneath the surface of things. Her writing, like theirs, is marked out by its precision, not just in the words that she chooses but in the many she leaves out. She sees what they see, that it is often in the passages of greatest restraint that a writer finds her greatest power. She is funny, too. Piercing the uneasy atmosphere are some bracingly sharp flashes of dark humour.

Asylum Road explodes the comfortable myth that we can shut ourselves down, that narrowing our emotional register will allow us to escape our memories. It is not a novel that is easily forgotten. Sudjic is not herself a survivor of Sarajevo - she was born in London - but by compelling us to feel as Anya feels, to bear witness to the harrowing legacy of a war that dominated our television screens but not, perhaps, our hearts, she incriminates us all. As one character angrily demands: "We're supposed to be grateful that they tuned in to watch us dying?" Those of us who can remember watching are left with an uncomfortable feeling of complicity, our own survivor's guilt.

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

SOPHIA EVANS/THE OBSERVER

Conspiracies, secrets and lies in a brilliant debut that explores the merging of online and IRL experiences

Kevin Power



Fake Accounts
by Lauren Oyler,
4th Estate, £12.99

Speaking at an event in 2016, Sally Rooney said: “I don’t know how I could possibly make literary the time I waste on Facebook. It’s possible that a really good writer could actually make that very interesting. But for me, the endless scroll [...] it’s really difficult to elevate that to something beautiful.” We have been waiting for the novel that makes literary the endless scroll. With Lauren Oyler’s *Fake Accounts*, we may have found it. It’s a brilliant comic novel about the ways in which the internet muddles all of our interior rivers while at the same time polluting the seas of the outer world, and about how these processes might be one and the same thing. Arriving in the same month as Patricia Lockwood’s *No One Is Talking About This*, it might just help to usher in the Age of Actually Good Novels About the Internet - and not a moment too soon.

The narrator of *Fake Accounts* is female, millennial, Brooklyn-based, admitting to an “embarrassment of privileges”, avowedly “teetering [...] on the border between likeable and loathsome”. She is very aware of her status as the narrator of a novel. Sections are called things like “Beginning” or “Middle (Something Happens)”. There is an imagined audience of ex-boyfriends. I’m making it sound cutesily postmodern, or emptily parodic, but it’s neither.

For one thing, it’s very funny. There are two sex scenes (each labelled “Sex Scene”); in one of them, mid-blowjob, the narrator writes: “I became sad.” Meeting a project manager: “I asked about project management as if I did not know it was totally bullshit.” Also, the descriptive prose is casually great. On Berlin: “The light turned everything an eerie slate, no matter the time of day, like it had always just rained, or you had just cried.”

Plotwise, the book is about what happens when the narrator, spying on her boyfriend Felix’s phone, discovers his secret life as an online conspiracy theorist. Shortly thereafter, Felix dies in a cycling accident. It’s 2016: Trump, pussy hats, the Resistance. The narrator moves to Berlin, where she cultivates fake accounts of her own, this time on dating websites. She makes up new identities (filling out “the eugenicist sidebar about my height,

body type, eye colour, ethnicity”), and tries them out on dates with men. This might teach her (and us) about herself and her place in the world, or it might not. What does it mean, to give a fake account of yourself? Is there any difference between doing it online and doing it IRL? Felix’s death has caused scarcely a blip on the radar screen of the narrator’s self-analysis - and yet something is definitely up.

Fake Accounts is Oyler’s first novel; hitherto she has been known as the sort of combative literary critic whom writers hate and readers love. Her perceptiveness and bracing disregard for the niceties of literary politicking hark back to the criticism of Elizabeth Hardwick or Mary McCarthy. She is a gifted cultural analyst, and her debut novel is, among other things, a fascinating work of cultural analysis. Every sentence tells. In a Berlin bookshop, the narrator meets an artist from Los Angeles called Nell, who describes her “artistic concerns” as “refraction”. A jab at hipster pretension? Partly, but refraction is Oyler’s artistic concern, too. She’s writing about the strange, refractory continuity between IRL and online that marks the present moment: the way we ping-pong between offline and online experience; how these two worlds bleed into one another, and shape our interior lives, even as we shape our exterior lives using online tools.

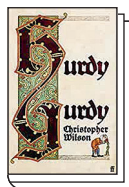
Fake Accounts is built on the insight that, in the online era, all projects of interpretation (of the self, of the world, of the motives of other people) exhaust themselves almost instantly, leaving only irresolvable ambiguity behind. There are too many takes. There are too many fake accounts. “I’m always proposing too many possibilities,” the narrator says, “which makes it seem like I’m lying.” This is, of course, precisely the effect produced by hot-take culture. Because every event now immediately germinates, via social media, into a trackless jungle of hot takes, no true insight is possible, and everything ends up feeling like a bait-and-switch. As Oyler knows, this is also frequently how consciousness can feel now. What does it mean when the self is the web is the world? Are the accounts we give of ourselves to ourselves in this context ever really “real”?

A final plot twist shoves us abruptly outside this closed loop, and presents us with a world that is ever more (to borrow a phrase from Joseph Conrad) an “enigmatical spectacle”. *Fake Accounts* is a novel about the enigmatical spectacle of our extremely online world that is itself both enigmatic and spectacular - a dark comedy about a dark time, and a prismatically intelligent work of art.

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

Fiction

A naive young monk leaves a trail of destruction across plague-struck England in this medieval black comedy *Christopher Shrimpton*



Hurdy Gurdy
by Christopher
Wilson, Faber, £14.99

If you see Brother Diggory coming, head in the opposite direction. For he brings the good Lord's word and also the plague. It is 1349 and the Black Death has reached Britain and Ireland. Brother Diggory is a 16-year-old novice who, on losing his brother monks to the

pestilence but mysteriously surviving himself, sets forth into the world to see what he has been missing.

Like Christopher Wilson's previous novels such as *The Ballad of Lee Cotton* and *The Zoo*, *Hurdy Gurdy* is a black comedy narrated by a naive outsider. We follow Brother Diggory over the course of a year as he journeys across England attempting to help those he meets. Disasters accumulate. "I think myself a fortunate man," he says serenely. And it's true that

while he is ill treated by his fellows - robbed, assaulted, imprisoned - they tend to come off worse from the meeting. Even his pet rat, Brother Rattus, doesn't survive the friendship.

Meanwhile, Diggory takes his pleasures where he can. Meat, drink, female company - he resolves to sin now in order to have something to repent later. *Hurdy Gurdy* is never so enjoyable as when indulging in earthly pleasures. "Have you not tried gobbledegoo?" asks one lady of the bedchamber. "Or the deed of deepest darkness?" He has not, but is eager to try.

Hurdy Gurdy bubbles with a convivial, earthy humour and Brother Diggory is an amusing antihero. The prose is highly evocative, full of flesh and blood: "I swear nothing better had ever passed my lips than that moist, fat-dripping, gravy-bleeding, flame-licked, smoked roast hare." In style the novel resembles an unappealing diagnosis or macabre sermon, the speaker happily listing as many ailments or sins as come to mind. Words pile up, like bodies in a plague pit.

This is an entertaining and atmospheric picaresque - though in the midst of our own pandemic, Wilson's satire of misguided churchmen and unscientific plague doctors feels somewhat quaint: our own leaders appear far more monstrous. Still, it is often ingenious and frequently hilarious. Brother Diggory kills many, yet survives to tell the tale. I for one am glad.

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

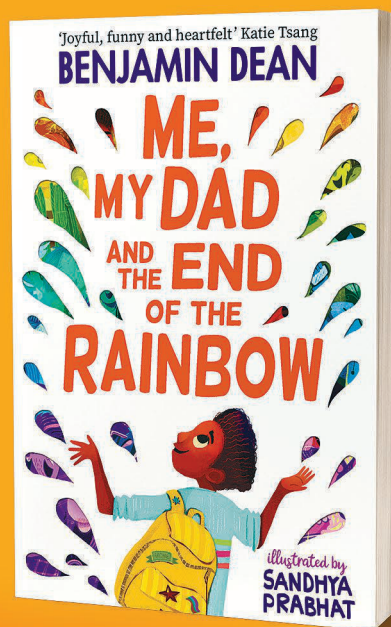


Waterstones **Children's**

Book OF THE Month

'A BRILLIANT BOOK ...
IT'S LIKE A WARM HUG'

DANNY WALLACE

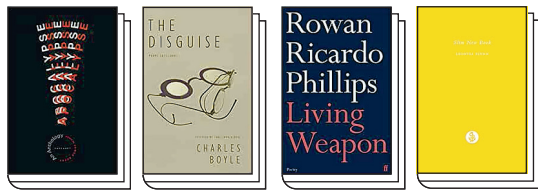


February just got a
whole lot **BRIGHTER!**



Poetry

A litany of lost poets; formative works from a great prose writer; a bold new American talent; and vital translations of Catullus
David Wheatley



Poets are first hypotheses, then facts, then values, said Randall Jarrell. The great mistake we make with poets of the past is to assume their current reputation equals stage three of this paradigm. In reality, it is never too late to adjust the canonical standing of the dead, as **Apocalypse: An Anthology** (Carc Janet, £19.99), edited by James Keery, reminds us. His title references the *New Apocalypse* (1939) anthology edited by JF Hendry and the successor he co-edited with Henry Treece, but the focus of *Apocalypse* goes well beyond wartime.

Gamel Woolsey, Rhoda Coghill, Freda Laughton, Randall Swingler, Sheila Legge: *Apocalypse* is a litany of the lost, and offers up various and distinct categories of the poetic undead. There are the once-famous (Nicholas Moore) and the never-famous (passim), hotly tipped also-rans (Rayner Heppenstall) and burnouts (David Gascoyne). *Apocalypse* redefines modern British poetry with panache.

Sometimes lost poets hide in plain sight. Best known these days as a publisher and prose writer, Charles Boyle published six slim volumes before giving up poetry. Twenty years later **The Disguise: Selected Poems** (Carc Janet, £12.99) appears from out of the blue, like the Stendhal novel in his poem “A Respectable Neighbourhood” thrown from a window by a woman screaming abuse. Boyle’s early poems breathe an atmosphere of knowing exoticism very much of their time (the 1980s) and strike a rich vein of form from his 1993 collection, *The Very Man*, onwards. Dry philosophical humour alternates with cinematic imagery: Bohumil Hrabal meets Krzysztof Kieślowski. A chess player dreams of guiding a woman across a courtyard “before the city lies in ruins”, the stones “so perfectly cut / a knifeblade couldn’t come between them”. Boyle the prose writer may be indispensable, but he couldn’t have done it without the poems of this welcome *Selected* behind him.

In “November Nocturne” Rowan Ricardo Phillips

speaks of being “the wine-tonned mouth swollen with the last words / of Spring or April or Night or The Plain / Sense of Things”. The allusion to Wallace Stevens, and the echoes throughout **Living Weapon** (Faber, £10.99) of Hart Crane, place Phillips squarely on the Romantic modernist wing of American verse. With its riff on a John Donne “Meditation”, “Who Is Less Than a Vapor?” is stalked by the horror of police violence, while the flâneur of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” comes to a grisly end. “The Köln Concert” finds joy through music in the face of ageing. Phillips’s determination to push beyond irony into affirmation is an audacious gesture - “resilient as bioluminescence”, these poems of “song and pain” announce a bold new talent.

No Venn diagram of poets who combine urbanity and caustic wit would be complete without Catullus and Leontia Flynn, which makes for a serendipitous pairing in Flynn’s free translations in **Slim New Book** (The Lifeboat, £6.50). Like Peter Reading in his prime, Flynn-Catullus emits castigation with the aplomb of a semi-housetrained polecat: “Unspeakable sexual insults to you both”, begins a poem addressed to a pair of critics (“one a suck-up, one an asshole”), and as for anyone aspiring to the “professional classes”, “What blots on humanity. May they rot in hell”. It’s not all fusillades of gossip and abuse though. Also present is a tender version of Catullus’s elegy for his brother (“my brother gone - God - stolen completely away, / while I go through the motions for form’s sake”). Never marmoreal or effortfully contemporary, Flynn’s Catullus is a boisterous production, or as the man himself might say: “Vermin! Our Age’s New Poetic Voices!”

David Wheatley’s Stravaig is published by Broken Sleep.

Poem of the month

Serenity Prayer
by Brian Bilston

Send me a slow news day,
a quiet, subdued day,
in which nothing much happens of note,
just the passing of time,
the consumption of wine,
and a re-run of *Murder, She Wrote*.

Grant me a no news day,
a spare-me-your-views day,
in which nothing much happens at all -
a few hours together,
some regional weather,
a day we can barely recall.

From Alexa, what is there to know about love?
(Picador)

Francis Spufford kills off all the protagonists of his new novel in the first chapter. “I want the reader to be looking at life as you do when you are aware that the alternative is death,” he explains of *Light Perpetual*, the follow-up to his award-winning debut, *Golden Hill*. “I want life and being in time to be less taken for granted than it usually is when we are making our way through the middle, when it is easier to forget that we didn’t exist once and that we won’t exist again later,” he continues cheerfully. “I wanted it to be a picture with death as the frame.”

For many years Spufford steadily worked away as one of the UK’s most respected nonfiction writers, with titles including *I May Be Some Time*, a cultural history of polar exploration; *Backroom Boys*, charting the overlooked achievements of British scientists; the “strangely noveloid” *Red Plenty*, about postwar Soviet economics; and *Unapologetic*, his lively apologia for religion and riposte to the “new atheism” of Richard Dawkins and co. If such an eclectic writer could be said to have a niche, it was to make nerdishness interesting. Then at 52 he published *Golden*

Hill, a glittering take on the 18th-century novel, set in New York, which was the surprise hit of 2016, winning him a Costa first novel award and an enthusiastic new readership. Now *Light Perpetual*, after that explosive beginning, follows the lives (had they lived) of five Londoners from the second world war to 2009 – it looks set to be one of the standout novels of this year.

What took him so long to come to fiction? “Cowardice,” he says simply. “I revere fiction writing and I didn’t want to do it badly. There is something uniquely self-exposing about fiction.”

Spufford is just back from taking the dog for his morning walk in the Cambridge countryside. We are talking, of course, on Zoom, with just a glimpse of his bookshelves in the background. But when he turns his computer the screen is filled with a postcard-like view of Ely cathedral. His wife Jessica Martin, a former Cambridge academic, is a canon of the cathedral, which has been shuttered up for longer in the past 12 months than at any time since the 17th century. He says he is longing for cafes to reopen as he “can’t work if it is too quiet”; too much solitude and his thoughts “hide like mice under furniture when you turn the light on”.

Anglican in his beliefs and catholic in his interests,

‘I’m still angry about what has been done to this country’

The award-winning author of *Golden Hill* talks to *Lisa Allardice* about family tragedy, his love of music – and why it was essential to write about politics in his latest novel

Spufford talks with the free-wheeling, high-octane loquacity you'd expect from his books. "I like stuff. I like the complicated fractured broken-up difficult surface of the real world. I like things that resist being written about," he says of his passion for nonfiction. "I'm interested in how the world works and what people do in it."

Fortunately, "there was a lot of stuff to be mastered" in writing *Light Perpetual*, a polyphonic novel that begins in the pots and pans section of a Woolworths in south London in 1944 and continues to take in the 60s music scene, working on the buses, fascism in the 70s, the Wapping dispute, the property boom and crash, and the rising cost of a cappuccino. Spufford brings the same vibrant attention to London in the postwar years as he did to pre-revolutionary New York in *Golden Hill*. Where that first novel saved the narrative pyrotechnics until the final pages, here he uses the whole box at the beginning: the German rocket blowing the fourth wall (and Woollies) apart, before painstakingly rebuilding it by telling the stories of Jo, Val, Alec, Vern and Ben with as much realism as possible. He was not interested in "meta-fictional pissing about" for the sake of it, but to get to

'I like the complicated fractured broken-up difficult surface of the real world - I like things that resist being written about'

some sort of emotional truth about "the dailyness of real lives", he says.

Light Perpetual recalls the inventiveness of Kate Atkinson's wartime novel *Life After Life* and the social acuity of John Lanchester's *Capital*. There are also borrowings from science fiction writers, in particular Ursula K Le Guin, and he still bears "the watermarks"

of an early immersion in Italo Calvino and Angela Carter. As a "writer who happens to be a Christian", as he puts it, he always writes "with the ghost of CS Lewis on one shoulder" - he recently finished a sequel to the *Chronicles of Narnia*, which can't be published for copyright reasons.

Music plays throughout the new novel, partly because of its preoccupation with time, "from whole lifetimes to phases of a life, all the way down to the four intensely structured minutes of a song", he explains. But also just because he loves it: "It is the pervasive ➡➡"



Anglican in his beliefs and catholic in his interests
Francis Spufford

◆ art of our times. It's the thing which you don't have to be push to be either receiving or making."

Just as you can't write about London without writing about music, so you can't shy away from politics or race: "Thinking politically is part of thinking about the great big collective human ant hill that is a city," he says. "Of how the people get along with each other within the ant hill and how the politics of the different decades change the ant hill." There's no mistaking that his sympathies lie more with socialist (smart) Alec than Thatcherite Vern (redeemed only by his love of opera, of which Spufford isn't a fan). The author is particularly proud "to lay claim to have written the second British novel in which plastering plays a major role" and, in so doing, surely also the first to include a joke about *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*. "Just to be clear," he says, leaning into the screen for emphasis. "I'm a middle-class socialist, I always have been a middle-class socialist."

Just as he didn't want to push any political message, he is at pains to "scuff back off" the "beautifully realised period glow" of historical fiction. He doesn't want the reader to think "it is 1979 - it must be Thatcher. People don't think 'Here I am living in History', people think 'Ah, it's Wednesday'." As for his own history, Spufford spent his rather "melancholy" 20s and early 30s as a freelance writer in south London. Although he was born 20 years after the novel begins, "the trashing of various public things I cared about a lot has been one of the major features of my experience of my own times," he says. "And yes, I'm still angry about some of what has been done to the city of London and the larger country."

He grew up in the Midlands, his parents both history professors at the University of Keele. "Intelligent wallflowers", they were so unbothered by popular culture they didn't know who Elvis Presley was. But they unwittingly provided a progressive example, taking it in turns to write books and his father doing all the cooking. Theirs was not so much an ivory tower as a 1960s concrete one: but just outside the campus on which they lived, Keele woods began, Spufford's very own Hundred Acre Wood leading to Middle-earth as his reading grew.

In his 2002 memoir *The Child That Books Built* Spufford sees his obsessive withdrawal into fiction as an escape from the painful reality of a childhood shadowed by the rare genetic disease from which his younger sister Bridget suffered. "Still, when I reach for a book, I am reaching for an equilibrium. I am reading to banish pity, and brittle bones. I am reading to evade guilt and avoid consequences," he writes.

"I think being next to somebody else's tragedy is a very angry-making thing," he says now. When it was discovered that he spent every school break-time pacing round the playground on his own, his parents sent him to a choir school, which was "slightly traumatic" but where he found his role as

the clever kid: "I could be Brains in *Thunderbirds*, I could be Q in *Live and Let Die*."

It is no coincidence, he believes, that he started writing seriously in 1989, the year his sister died, aged 22. "I suspect that there is an uncomfortable truth there," he reflects. "About being freed into writing by it becoming a past-tense sorrow rather than an active and dominating present-tense sorrow."

He met his wife at Cambridge, in what was otherwise a largely "shy miserable time" (there's a theme) at university. Although they didn't marry until many years and several breakups later. A personal crisis - triggered by what in *Unapologetic* Spufford calls the Human Propensity to Fuck Up (sin for short) - led him to rediscover the faith that he had abandoned as a teenager. If the book is "extremely careful" not to spell out his misdemeanour he's not telling now: "Just the usual kind of human male heterosexual fuck up," he says. His "sense of guilt" is the point, "not what I was guilty of". He was forgiven: "Mercy turned out to be available," and not only his marriage but his belief was restored.

'Christianity seemed to me to pass the test of being true to the grimy, partly glorious, partly awful, nature of experience'

"Christianity seemed to me to pass the test of being true to the grimy, partly glorious, partly awful, nature of experience."

This idea of redemption is central to the novel.

"Mercy is the most important thing there is. And not to be taken for granted," he says. "Sorry, now I'm becoming pious." Goodness, like happiness,

is "a tough proposition" for a novelist. "A gaze that wants to look for goodness, is also a gaze that needs to register as much as possible everything that is there, including the really ugly stuff. Goodness makes sense because cruelty exists." The rocket is not there at the beginning just as a metal memento mori or to perform narrative tricks with fate and time. "The background is supposed to be eternity as well as death," he explains. "It's either a black frame or a very blazingly white frame around this particular picture."

He is "watching the world begun anew" for his 15-year-old daughter, the eldest of two. Many of the things he has cared about deeply have been lost or "carelessly damaged" in his lifetime: "the idea of a public good, the eco-system, the NHS, public bloody libraries", he says with feeling. "Basically things to do with trust. Things to do with public goods that don't profit anybody. That stuff has been systematically looted, vandalised, asset-stripped and neglected for most of my adult life." Yet despite this "extraordinary mess", he can't do without hope. "I think that redemption is always an option," he says. "Light will continue to shine in darkness in various ways," which sounds rather like the title of a novel ●



JULIAN WASSER/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY

Moving on *Alex Clark*

Joan Didion, novelist, essayist and author of *The Year of Magical Thinking* brings a spirit of restless inquiry to all her writing

To think about Joan Didion, you have to confront two things before you get to the words: the pictures and the anecdotes. If you're interested in certain aspects of the culture - American counterculture in the 1960s, California, female writers - the pictures are familiar, if not ingrained. There's Didion in her long dress with long hair, smoking, leaning against her Corvette Stingray; standing up in its sunroof; lolling out of the driver's window, in Julian Wasser's 1968 shoot; inside, pictured with her daughter Quintana on her lap (her favourite of that day), or staring straight at the

camera. Wasser remembers her as "a very easy person to talk to. No Hollywood affectations" - but the photographs themselves had such star quality that the fashion house Céline not only recreated one in its 2015 ad campaign, but also featured the then 80-year-old writer herself, in black sweater and enormous sunglasses.

And the stories: the parties at the same rented house, on Franklin Avenue, to which Janis Joplin might turn up, asking for a glass of brandy and Benedictine (musicians, Didion noted, never wanted ordinary drinks); the Malibu beach house she later lived in, where the carpenter was Harrison Ford; the first assignment the neophyte writer did for *Vogue*, a piece on self-respect that only came to her because the original journalist failed to deliver and they'd already put the strapline on the cover.

The issue with the anecdotes is that they are both diverting and revealing. *The Center Will Not Hold*, the 2017 documentary made by Griffin Dunne, the nephew of Didion's late husband, John Gregory Dunne, is a particularly rich fund. We discover from her literary agent that Didion puts her manuscripts in the freezer if she needs to let them settle, and from her friend Susanna Moore that, back in the day, Didion would silently descend in the morning, crack open a Coca-Cola and a tin of salted almonds and get to work. Griffin recalls meeting her for the first time

**Star quality
Didion in her
Corvette Stingray**

as a child in bathing trunks and being mortified that a testicle had emerged from his costume; all the



◆ adults roared with laughter except Didion, for which he has always loved her. He also asks her about the experience, famously recounted in Didion's piece about 1960s Haight-Ashbury, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem", of coming across a five-year-old girl who had been given LSD. Didion leans towards the camera, as if suddenly animated out of her frailty and replies, with due drama: "Let me tell you - it was GOLD."

"Slouching Towards Bethlehem" became the title piece of Didion's first essay collection - her debut novel, *Run, River*, had appeared a few years earlier - when she was 33; a couple of years later, she had added another novel, *Play It as It Lays*, which she adapted with her husband into a film. The couple had already written the screenplay for *The Panic in Needle Park*, and would go on to do the same for Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson's 1976 iteration of *A Star Is Born*. She was, in other words, busy, and increasingly successful. But in terms of her writing, it is not clear at all that she was satisfied.

The essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* - often cast into the New Journalism pot alongside Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese, though they feel far less certain and declarative - played with the tension between detachment and immersion; Didion was observing this world, that much was evident, but how far was she a part of it? She threw parties, but she was not a hippie; her relationship with her conventional Sacramento upbringing was not one of rebellion but a more complicated, long-term acceptance, and she found that, after a while, endless tales of acid and the concept of universal love "all sounded like marmalade skies to me". David Hare, who worked with her to bring her memoir of grief, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, to the stage, describes her as having "a horror of disorder".

Eleven years after *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, the title essay of *The White Album* (1979) added some context to Didion's earlier writing. "We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience," she wrote. "Or at least we do for a while. I am talking here about a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself, a common condition but one I found troubling. I suppose this period began around 1966 and continued until 1971."

The word "phantasmagoria" is striking; Didion also described the experience of living in Hollywood as following a kind of dream logic, suggesting that she recognised the tendency of external reality to blend with mental imagery. "All I knew was what I saw," she continues in the essay, "flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no 'meaning' beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience."

"The White Album" is an extraordinary essay; Didion's reflections on writing yield to a description of her mental health and its treatment, and recollections of meeting Black Panther leaders Huey Newton and

Eldridge Cleaver, student protests in San Francisco and the murderers of the Manson family. "A demented and seductive vortical tension was building in the community. The jitters were setting in," Didion writes, and she seemed, in the years that had elapsed, to have examined the question of whether simply recording them was a sustainable way of writing.

Subsequent work shows a shift, a greater emphasis on reportage - as in her analysis of the trial of the Central Park Five and the dispatches from El Salvador on which she worked in concert with New York Review of Books editor Bob Silvers, whom she described as her "baffle", the layer that shut out extraneous noise as she was attempting to hone her thoughts and perceptions. In "Why I Write", a 1976 essay, its title borrowed from Orwell, which appears in *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*, Didion has also begun to wrestle with the idea of the writer's power, and with her belief that asking for a reader's attention is "an aggressive, even a hostile act ... there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an

She threw parties, but was not a hippie, and she found that endless tales of acid and free love 'all sounded like marmalade skies to me'

imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space".

The memoirs that followed the deaths of her husband and her daughter, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011), would at first appear to counter that view; they are testaments to the utter disorientation that grief brings, its power to derange thought and emotion. But

the phenomenal popularity of the first book - in which Didion recounts feeling that she should keep her husband's shoes safe not out of sentiment but in case he needs them when he returns from the dead - derived, of course, from the writer's laser-like success in capturing the universal madness of mourning, and of, indeed, mounting "an invasion" of that space.

The development of her writerly tactics gives the lie to the pictures that would fix Didion in Stingray mode, or partying with the Doors - or even as grieving wife and mother. She is, to some extent, still in "secret bully" mode, playing her cards close to her chest. Much amusement ensued recently over her taciturnity in a Q&A with Time (Sample: "Do you fear death?" "No. Well, yes, of course"), but my own email exchanges with her in the past couple of weeks led me to empathise with rather than laugh at the interviewer. Might she consider writing about Trump, I asked? "My sense is, no." Was it tough to examine her mental health in "The White Album"? "Not very." What impact does she think social media and the internet more generally have had on our conceptions of truth? "I don't know." She didn't even want to talk about the 80s TV show *Tenko* (she is, or was, a fan). But I guess, after all those words, she's earned her right to a little quiet time ●

'Why I write'

Joan Didion

Of course I stole the title for this talk, from George Orwell. One reason I stole it was that I like the sound of the words: Why I Write. There you have three short unambiguous words that share a sound, and the sound they share is this:

I
I
I

In many ways, writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions - with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating - but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space.

I stole the title not only because the words sounded right but because they seemed to sum up, in a no-nonsense way, all I have to tell you. Like many writers I have only this one "subject", this one "area": the act of writing. I can bring you no reports from any other front. I may have other interests: I am "interested", for example, in marine biology, but I don't flatter myself that you would come out to hear me talk about it. I am not a scholar. I am not in the least an intellectual, which is not to say that when I hear the word "intellectual" I reach for my gun, but only to say that I do not think in abstracts. During the years when I was an undergraduate at Berkeley I tried, with a kind of hopeless late-adolescent energy, to buy some temporary visa into the world of ideas, to forge for myself a mind that could deal with the abstract.

In short I tried to think. I failed. My attention veered inexorably back to the specific, to the tangible, to what was generally considered, by everyone I knew then and for that matter have known since, the peripheral. I would try to contemplate the Hegelian dialectic and would find myself concentrating instead on a flowering pear tree outside my window and the particular way the petals fell on my floor. I would try to read linguistic theory and would find myself wondering instead if the lights were on in the Bevatron up the hill. When I say that I was wondering if the lights were on in the Bevatron you might immediately suspect, if you deal in ideas at all, that I was registering the Bevatron as a political symbol, thinking in shorthand about the military-industrial complex and its role in the university community, but you

would be wrong. I was only wondering if the lights were on in the Bevatron, and how they looked.

A physical fact.

I had trouble graduating from Berkeley, not because of this inability to deal with ideas - I was majoring in English, and I could locate the house-and-garden imagery in *The Portrait of a Lady* as well as the next person, "imagery" being by definition the kind of specific that got my attention - but simply because I had neglected to take a course in Milton. For reasons which now sound baroque I needed a degree by the end of that summer, and the English department finally agreed, if I would come down from Sacramento every Friday and talk about the cosmology of *Paradise Lost*, to certify me proficient in Milton. I did this. Some Fridays I took the Greyhound bus, other Fridays I caught the Southern Pacific's City of San Francisco on the last leg of its transcontinental trip. I can no longer tell you whether Milton put the sun or the earth at the centre of his universe in *Paradise Lost*, the central question of at least one century and



a topic about which I wrote ten thousand words that summer, but I can still recall the exact rancidity of the butter in the City of San Francisco's dining car, and the way the tinted windows on the Greyhound bus cast the oil refineries around Carquinez Strait into a grayed and obscurely sinister light. In short my attention was always on the periphery, on what I

could see and taste and touch, on the butter, and the Greyhound bus. During those years I was travelling on what I knew to be a very shaky passport, forged papers: I knew that I was no legitimate resident in any world of ideas. I knew I couldn't think. All I knew then was what I couldn't do. All I knew then was what I wasn't, and it took me some years to discover what I was.

Which was a writer.

By which I mean not a "good" writer or a "bad" writer but simply a writer, a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper. Had my credentials been in order I would never have become a writer. Had I been blessed with even limited access to my own mind there would have been no reason to write. I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. Why did the oil refineries around Carquinez Strait seem sinister to me in the summer of 1956? Why have the night lights in the Bevatron burned in my mind for twenty years? What is going on in these pictures in my mind?

This is an extract from Let Me Tell You What I Mean by Joan Didion (4th Estate). To read the full essay go to theguardian.com/books.

'The Secret Scripture was my great-aunt's story'

Sebastian Barry



My first intimation of Roseanne McNulty came when I was driving with my mother through Strandhill in Sligo. We were passing the ruins of a little hut by the road, engulfed in an enormous rose bush.

"That's where your woman was put," my mother said.

"What woman?"

"Uncle Pat's first wife."

The tone suggested the deepest disapproval. I think she said a few more things about this nameless great-aunt. That she had been the piano player in my great-uncle's band. But not much else. Something had happened, something dark and irredeemable, and she had ended up being put in the Sligo Lunatic Asylum.

In the following years I wondered what she was supposed to have done. But wondering

and writing are two different things. In 2001 I wrote a first chapter. It was just about how much Roseanne loved her father. Then the impulse vanished and there was nothing for two years.

At that point the working title was *The Hammers and the Feathers*, and I wrote a chapter to explain it. Something in that section, which recounts her father and herself going up into a tower so he could prove Galileo's theory, that all things fall at the same rate, seemed to suggest the presence of the book beyond it. Like an edifice standing off in the mist.

I began to feel Roseanne's presence keenly. I was supposed to be writing the book but it didn't feel like that. I had the odd feeling of standing at her shoulder, watching her scratch out her story. In the

beginning, she only mentioned her psychiatrist Dr Grene when he came to visit her in her room. Then I began to alternate sections between him and Roseanne - or rather, he did, because he is writing his own account in his commonplace book.

I was about two-thirds into the draft when I heard my mother was in hospital. We had been at loggerheads the last two years and had not been in touch as much as we should have been. It was a great shock. I found her in dire straits. My first thought was, I can't write the book now. But Roseanne wasn't interested in stopping again,

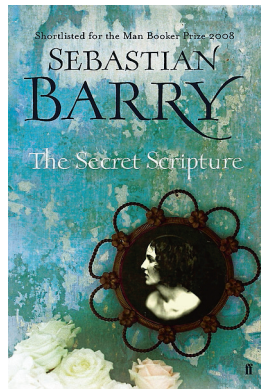
so I wrote in the gaps.

The actual nature of the story, the elements of it, what happened in it, seemed to me to be fully decided by Roseanne. It was her story. Her voice was strong and confident. I couldn't interfere with it.

The book seemed to go on of its own accord. Which was just as well, as I was so distracted at the time. Washing my mother's clothes, folding them, ferrying them back to her. When did I write the book? I barely remember.

By the spring of the next year, *The Secret Scripture* was drafted, and Roseanne had told her story, and Dr Grene had completed his. The ending was a sort of chastened tribute to my own realisation that, no matter what trouble there might be between you, there's a cable connecting a mother and a child laid so deep that not even ordinary life can disturb it.

Sebastian Barry's *A Thousand Moons* is published in paperback by Faber.

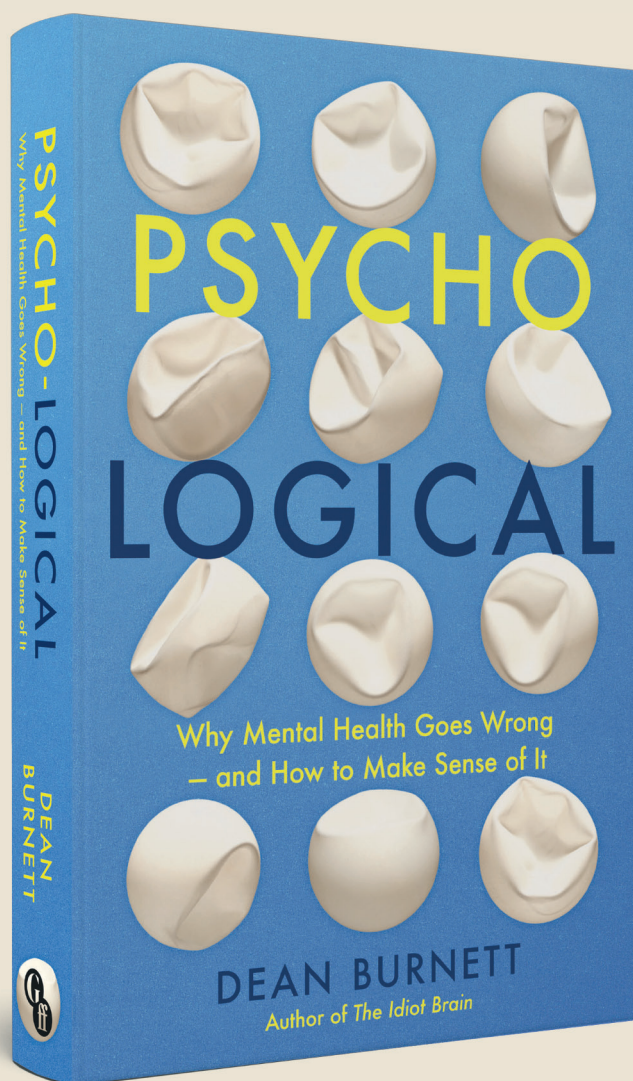


Tom Gauld

CLASSICS REISSUED WITH LOWER STANDARDS



One in four of us experience a mental health problem each year. **But what is actually going on when our brains misfire?**



Save
20%
£7.99
(RRP £9.99)

Honest, entertaining and reassuring, neuroscientist Dean Burnett helps us make sense of anxiety, depression and addiction.

Order your copy now to save 20%
Visit guardianbookshop.com

*Get free UK p&p on online orders over £20.
Promotional prices valid for a limited time only

**The
Guardian
Bookshop**


David Salisbury



- AWARD WINNING ORANGERIES & GARDEN ROOMS -

ORANGERIES | GARDEN ROOMS | CONSERVATORIES | OAK BUILDINGS

Call for our inspirational brochure or book an expert design consultation

01278 764444
dauidsalisbury.com